

Université de Montréal

The Big Deal: Card Games in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Fiction

par

Joyce Goggin

Département de littérature comparée

Faculté des arts et des sciences

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présentée par:

Joyce Goggin

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Thomas M. Kavanagh, examinateur externe

Walter Moser, directeur de recherche

Johann Villeneuve, présidente du jury

Marie-Claire Huot, membre du jury

, représentant du doyen

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## SOMMAIRE



Cette thèse interroge le concept de jeu en son rapport au discours dit littéraire. Pour préciser cette problématique, j'ai choisi d'analyser le jeu de cartes en tant qu'objet ludique privilégié, de même que sa représentation à l'intérieur de trois romans du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle : *Der Zauberberg* de Thomas Mann, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* de Vladimir Nabokov et *The Music of Chance* de Paul Auster. Il s'agit, en outre, de comprendre le jeu de cartes comme métaphore de la production de sens dans le texte littéraire, ainsi que la relation entre un récit de jeu et le contexte textuel de ce récit. Cette stratégie permet l'étude de deux objets, le jeu de cartes et le roman du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle, aussi bien que l'interaction existant entre ces deux domaines spécifiques.

L'échange d'argent qui accompagne les parties de cartes racontées dans les trois romans du corpus, repose sur l'aléa et le risque. Une réflexion théorique sur la dimension économique à l'oeuvre dans le jeu comme dans le texte littéraire donne l'occasion de mettre l'accent sur les notions centrales de pari, d'aléa et de risque. Il sera démontré comment le pari induit une économie textuelle radicalement 'autre' au sein de l'économie plus ou moins générale du roman. Il s'agit en fait d'une économie de l'excès, irrécupérable à l'intérieur même du roman, et qui déplace la notion de clôture textuelle. Le concept de pari permet par ailleurs d'analyser le mode de fonctionnement du discours littéraire dans sa spécificité par rapport à l'ordre discursif général. De la même manière que le pari impose une économie différente dans le déroulement du jeu, le texte littéraire se distingue en fonction de l'excès de sens qu'il mobilise, entraînant par là un surplus du langage littéraire et l'aléa qui est à la base de sa production.

Cette thèse comporte aussi une investigation historique des origines de la carte à jouer depuis son introduction en Europe au 13<sup>ème</sup> siècle jusqu'à nos jours. Cette partie

sert de toile de fond historique pour établir des liens forts entre les cartes à jouer et les principaux éléments de cette étude. Depuis le moyen âge, on attribue aux cartes le statut et la valeur d'un langage codifié, système sémiotique spécifiquement destiné à livrer le secret des existences humaines. Véritable livre des âmes, elles étaient d'ailleurs assez régulièrement publiées sous forme de livre jusqu'au 17<sup>ième</sup> siècle.

Les cartes à jouer et leur ancêtre le tarot, ont également joué un grand rôle dans l'introduction en Occident du système oriental d'annotation mathématique. L'adoption des chiffres arabes (y compris le zéro) a permis l'émergence d'une comptabilité plus efficace. D'autre part, l'importation de cette mentalité 'autre' qui favorisait le pari occupe une place de choix dans l'économie occidentale moderne, notamment dans le phénomène des crises.

En tenant compte des considérations théoriques et historiques tracées ci-haut, j'étudie le jeu de cartes comme métaphore de la production littéraire sur le plan philosophique, linguistique et économique. Comme les romans du corpus sont écrits à trois moments distincts du 20<sup>ième</sup> siècle les parties de cartes qu'ils racontent, servent à des fonctions artistiques différentes, mais cependant liées. Sur la question de l'écriture et de l'économie, la partie de cartes romanesque met en circulation un système qui se distingue du contexte dans lequel il est représenté. Une telle rupture permet au lecteur de discerner comment le texte se situe vis-à-vis la représentation, et ses ramifications dans le contexte économique et philosophique plus large.

Cette thèse constitue une toute nouvelle approche à trois problématiques majeures dans la discipline de la littérature comparée, soit la définition du discours littéraire par rapport au concept de jeu, la composition linguistique du texte littéraire et la ludicité intrinsèque du langage, ainsi que le lien entre économie et textualité. En abordant ces questions d'une manière concise et originale par l'objet clé du jeu de cartes, je contribue à renouveler le champ des études sur le roman du 20<sup>ième</sup> siècle.

## RÉSUMÉ



Cette thèse interroge le concept de jeu en son rapport au discours dit littéraire. Pour préciser cette problématique, j'ai choisi d'analyser le jeu de cartes en tant qu'objet ludique privilégié, de même que sa représentation à l'intérieur de trois romans du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle : *Der Zauberberg* de Thomas Mann, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* de Vladimir Nabokov et *The Music of Chance* de Paul Auster. Le but de ce travail est d'étudier le rôle des cartes à jouer quand elles font partie d'une narration fictionnelle. Il conviendra d'abord, de démontrer que les cartes à jouer ont un rapport avec la notion de jeu, tout comme avec cette vaste catégorie que l'on appelle la 'littérature'. C'est ainsi que le premier chapitre a pris la forme d'une discussion du concept de jeu dans les principaux discours philosophiques et littéraires modernes. Ayant comme sujet *le jeu de cartes* au sein du texte littéraire, cette étude nécessite une analyse de l'interaction entre le domaine du jeu et le champ de la textualité. Le deuxième chapitre traite des théories linguistiques qui présupposent une analogie entre le langage et le jeu. Finalement, comme les romans du corpus contiennent des scènes où les personnages jouent aux cartes pour de l'argent, il est apparu urgent de procéder à une réflexion théorique sur la dimension économique à l'oeuvre dans le jeu comme dans le texte littéraire. L'arrière-plan conceptuel de la présente thèse s'articule donc autour des trois champs d'investigation théorique suivants: la notion de jeu, la nature ludique du langage et la question de l'économie textuelle.

L'essai de Huizinga intitulé *Homo Ludens* et l'étude de Caillois *Les jeux et les hommes*, constituent le point de départ d'une enquête approfondie sur les théories du jeu en tant qu'activité humaine. Ces deux textes reposent sur une conception néo-kantienne de l'activité ludique, cette dernière englobant à la fois l'économie, le sport et l'écriture des textes. D'après Huizinga et Caillois, le jeu se distingue des autres activités comme le

travail: nécessairement gratuit, il se détache du quotidien par son côté ‘amusant’, atemporel et autotélique, en ce sens qu’il n’a aucun but hors-soi. Une telle définition permet de procéder à des catégorisations plus précises. Chez Caillois, par exemple, quatre catégories (*agon*, *illinx*, *mimicry*, *aléa*) servent à cerner le jeu alors que deux modalités permettent de caractériser l’attitude ludique du joueur (*paideia*, *ludus*). Ainsi, on doit classer le jeu d’échecs sous la catégorie *agon* par sa nature compétitive, et sous celle de *mimicry* parce qu’il requiert l’imitation de certaines procédures ludiques. On ne peut, par contre, considérer l’*aléa* puisque les échecs sont strictement déterminés par des règles qui éliminent, à peu de choses près, le hasard. D’autre part, l’attitude du joueur appartient à *ludus*, le jeu rationnel dans le plus grand nombre des cas, plutôt que *paideia*, le jeu irrationnel chez Caillois.

On ne saurait toutefois appliquer une telle classification à l’étude du corpus. En dépit de leur utilité, les théories de Huizinga et Caillois ont l’inconvénient de vouloir circonscrire un phénomène fluide par une approche trop rigide. De plus, Jacques Ehrmann, entre autres, a critiqué ces auteurs pour être restés à l’intérieur d’une épistémologie ‘eurocentriste’, en ignorant l’idéologie qui informe leurs projets.<sup>1</sup> D’après Ehrmann, Huizinga n’écrit que sur la culture et la civilisation occidentales en tant que manifestations du jeu, en prenant celles-ci comme ‘naturelles’ ou ‘transparentes’. Ces catégories sont plus qu’une simple méthode car elles procèdent d’une pensée hiérarchique qui classe le jeu sur une échelle verticale qui débute en bas dans les cultures primitives et culmine en haut dans la civilisation européenne. Il y a également un problème en ce qui concerne la distinction nécessaire entre *play* et *game*. Huizinga et Caillois perçoivent les éléments structuraux des *games* comme des règles régissant le *play*, et cela s’accorde mal avec la définition néo-kantienne du jeu à la base du concept (que le jeu soit au-delà du quotidien, divertissant, atemporel et autotélique). Les règles servent à bien des fonctions qui, pour la plupart, ne sont pas gratuites. En assimilant les règles entre autres, comme éléments ludiques au *play*, on masque la distinction importante entre le *play* et le *game* et on ne perçoit plus aisément la différence entre le

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ehrmann, “*Homo Ludens* revisited. Game, Play, Literature”, *YFS*, 1969, p. 311-68.

jeu et le travail ou encore, celle qui existe entre le fait d'écrire une thèse sur le jeu de cartes, activité non gratuite, et le fait de jouer aux cartes, activité souvent gratuite.

Pour éviter ce genre de problème j'ai établi, suivant la définition proposée par Gadamer dans *Verité et Méthode*, que le jeu (*play*) était en soi un mouvement de va-et-vient qui anime les structures ludiques.<sup>2</sup> Au lieu d'insister sur la gratuité et sur la nature autotélique absolue du jeu, Gadamer propose un concept de jeu ayant une imminence ni objective ni subjective. En même temps, Gadamer décrit la capacité du jeu à capter entièrement le sujet de sorte que celui-ci risque la perte complète de son agencement. Mais en même temps, ce que propose Gadamer repose largement sur une vision eurocentriste, surtout en ce qui concerne la formation du canon littéraire ou celle de l'oeuvre d'art institutionnelle. En privilégiant une notion de jeu séparée de l'intérêt subjectif, il propose un canon formé par le jeu qui serait donc advenu sans aucune intervention subjective. Pour Gadamer, le canon des oeuvres d'art (et il parle surtout de l'Europe) reconnu par l'institution a été mis en place indépendamment de tout intérêt idéologique, économique ou politique.

Dans "La structure, le signe et le jeu", Derrida formule sa notion du 'libre-jeu' qui anime, qui déplace les éléments structuraux et qui déstabilise les structures telles que le canon.<sup>3</sup> Ce concept de libre-jeu derridien est bien approprié à mon projet car il n'a pas été élaboré à partir d'une notion néo-kantienne du jeu, donc il n'exclut pas les modalités du jeu qui ne sont pas nécessairement divertissantes ou qui impliquent les échanges d'argent. De plus, dans le modèle du libre-jeu proposé par Derrida, on distingue bien entre le jeu dans le sens de *play* et le jeu comme *game* ou structure ludique. Cette définition nous incite à voir le libre jeu comme un mouvement de va-et-vient qui active les structures ludiques et les éléments du jeu tels que les règles, sans nécessairement en faire partie.

Ayant désenchevêtré le libre jeu du jeu pour arriver à un modèle plus approprié à mon objet d'étude, je peux procéder à l'analyse du langage, et des produits du langage comme étant ludiques eux-mêmes. Mon hypothèse de travail pour le deuxième chapitre

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen J.C.B. Mohr, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil, 1967.



est que le jeu apparaît comme une configuration de règles qui régissent le mouvement du libre-jeu, ainsi que l'interaction entre les joueurs et le jeu. Dans les théories qui définissent le langage comme jeu, et en particulier celles de Saussure et de Wittgenstein, le langage est en rapport analogue (Saussure) ou identique au jeu (Wittgenstein) et peut se diviser en parties qui le composent, c'est le cas des règles. En outre, d'après Wittgenstein le langage est un vaste jeu divisible en jeux langagiers tels que promesses, les hypothèses, les thèses, les poèmes et les romans.

S'il est possible de conceptualiser le langage comme un jeu divisible en plus petits jeux, il reste à déterminer le genre du jeu que constitue le roman. L'étude des principales théories sur le rapport entre le jeu et le langage me permettra d'arriver à une méthode bien adaptée à mon objet : le jeu de cartes littéraire. Cependant, parmi tous les ouvrages traitant de la dimension ludique du discours littéraire et même spécifiquement du roman, il n'y en a aucun qui offre une explication quant à la manière dont le lecteur et l'auteur jouent ensemble à travers le texte. Je conclus donc que l'analogie texte-jeu devrait être maintenue comme métaphore exemplaire et non comme analogie concrète. Ce n'est qu'à cette condition que l'on peut comprendre la nature ludique d'un projet littéraire comme le roman. On pourra alors saisir comment le jeu de cartes agit comme une métaphore ou mise en abyme du texte et donc comme outil d'interprétation.

Le troisième chapitre interroge la dimension économique du jeu et de la littérature. Comme Huizinga l'indique dans *Homo Ludens*, il y a une ludicité intrinsèque à l'économie, comme témoigne éloquemment l'expression "jouer à la bourse". Bataille, Derrida, Goux et autres ont avancé la thèse selon laquelle les textes gagnent à être analysés sous l'angle de leur modalité économique, chaque texte constituant de la sorte une économie de signification spécifique. Dans le cas du roman, l'application de ce genre d'analyse est complexe dans la mesure où plusieurs économies sont en cause. On doit distinguer l'économie externe dans laquelle le texte est mis en circulation, l'ordre économique du discours, et l'ordre économique fictionnel qui est représenté dans le roman. Tout comme les oeuvres d'art qui n'ont pas de prix, le discours artistique se distingue des textes non-fictionnels qui visent un but positif et qui sont largement utilitaires. Par conséquent, on associe le texte dit littéraire ou l'écriture artistique à un

‘coup de dés’, c’est-à-dire à un produit de l’aléa et d’une dépense qui ne vise aucun but utilitaire.

Il est également possible d’analyser dans le cas du roman en question, les échanges de biens entre les personnages fictifs. Mon hypothèse de travail à ce propos se résume comme suit : la spécificité des échanges entre les personnages romanesques reflètent le contexte plus large d’une économie textuelle d’ensemble. Par exemple, quand un personnage fictif ouvre un compte en banque ou perd de l’argent en jouant au poker, les deux activités économiques sont d’un ordre différent et relativement compatible ou incompatible à l’économie textuelle qui constitue le roman. C’est donc en examinant les transactions qui ont lieu autour des parties de cartes que j’explique la modalité économique en place au sein de la narration, à l’intérieur de la structure même du texte, et dans le contexte historique de production de chacun des textes.

Dans le quatrième chapitre j’élabore une discussion historique sur les origines de la carte à jouer. L’argumentation de ce chapitre sert à mieux fonder les liens établis au préalable entre la carte à jouer, le jeu, le texte et l’économie. Comme les cartes à jouer n’ont à peu près pas changé depuis leur arrivée en Europe au 13<sup>ème</sup> siècle, chaque jeu de cartes constitue une manière de petite archive des développements de la conscience européenne à travers les siècles. Pareillement, l’histoire de leur réception en Europe sert à apporter des précisions sur les attitudes dominantes envers le hasard et envers les pratiques économiques aléatoires telles que le pari. De plus, les cartes à jouer et leur ancêtre le tarot, ont également joué un grand rôle dans l’introduction en Occident du système oriental d’annotation mathématique. L’adoption des chiffres arabes (y-compris le zéro) a permis l’émergence d’une comptabilité plus efficace. D’autre part, l’importation de cette mentalité ‘autre’ qui favorisait le pari occupe une place de choix dans l’économie occidentale moderne, notamment dans le phénomène des crises.

Les trois derniers chapitres de la thèse, offrent enfin une lecture de *Der Zauberberg* de Thomas Mann, *Ada* de Vladimir Nabokov et *The Music of Chance* de Paul Auster, à la lumière de l’arrière-plan théorique et historique élaboré dans les chapitres précédents. Cette section me donne l’occasion d’analyser à fond les parties de cartes romanesques dans trois contextes fictionnels différents. En effet, ces moments

textuels révèlent des conceptions particulières du pari, du sujet et du discours littéraire spécifiques à l'époque où chaque texte a été écrit. Outre ces particularités, il faut également établir des similitudes en ce qui concerne le contexte fictionnel et la fonction sémantique de ces parties de cartes romanesques.

Cette thèse constitue une toute nouvelle approche à trois problématiques majeures dans la discipline de la littérature comparée, soit la définition du discours littéraire par rapport au concept de jeu, la composition linguistique du texte littéraire et la ludicité intrinsèque du langage, ainsi que le lien entre économie et textualité. En abordant ces questions d'une manière concise et originale par l'objet clé du jeu de cartes, je contribue à renouveler le champ des études sur le roman du 20<sup>ième</sup> siècle.

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*To Vera*

## INTRODUCTION



As the title indicates, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role that card games play when they are included in fictional texts as an element of narration. In the preliminary phases of researching and unpacking this problem, it became evident that several factors are at play, and the process of sorting through them has informed the structure of this thesis. First, it is clear that the act of playing cards has something to do with play, as does that nebulous class of discourse referred to as ‘literature’. It became immediately apparent then, that the thesis should include a discussion of the concept of play, and this, indeed, is the subject of Chapter 1. Moreover, because the present work is also about card *games*, it was equally necessary that the dissertation include research on games and game theory, particularly as games relate to texts. Hence, the second chapter of this thesis is a discussion of theories that understand language and discourse as being, in some respect, a kind of game. And finally, in the works of fiction from which serve as exempla for the methodological and theoretical concerns of this thesis (Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*, Nabokov’s *Ada*, and Auster’s *The Music of Chance*) the characters not only play cards, they also gamble. Because the gambling in each of these texts involves money, it became evident that a chapter on gambling and the economic exchange entailed in gambling, would also be necessary. In short then, these three areas of investigation—play, language and game theory, the economics of gambling—form the theoretical grounding for the present dissertation.

The first chapter contains a survey of some prominent texts written on play in this century. Beginning with Huizinga’s watershed essay *Homo Ludens* and Caillois’ *Les jeux et les hommes*, I investigate what play might mean as a human activity.<sup>1</sup> As I

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, and, Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1958.

explain, in both of these texts a neo-Kantian approach is adopted to cover a broad spectrum of play, including sports and games, as well as products of language such as philosophical and literary texts. What is meant by 'neo-Kantian', is that play is thought to be necessarily and entirely gratuitous and therefore 'fun', as well as atemporal, and 'autotelic', in that it has no goal outside of itself. If this definition holds then, play would be readily distinguishable from other modes of activity such as work, quite simply by virtue of its gratuity and disengagement from temporal determination.

Further, once play has been defined and delimited in this way, both Huizinga and Caillois attempt to break down ludic phenomena into various classifications and categories. It is Caillois who goes about this in the most programmatic fashion, by suggesting that there are four principle categories of play (*agon*, *illinx*, *mimicry*, *alea*) which are subtended by two basic attitudes or modes of being (*paideia*, *ludus*). The motivation behind this method is that, based on the rules and behaviors informing various types of play, one could demonstrate to what extent these forms participate in Caillois' categories, and then neatly classify them. Chess, for example, would belong under *agon* because it is competitive, and *mimicry* because it involves imitating certain ludic procedures, yet it would have little to do with *alea* or chance, because chess is stringently regulated by rules which virtually exclude the involvement of chance.

Obviously, objections have been raised to both Huizinga and Caillois' work on play. Jacques Ehrmann, for instance, has suggested that what is at stake in such arguments is ideological, and that indeed, both of these authors could be accused of taking a 'eurocentric' approach to play.<sup>2</sup> Huizinga, he argues, directs a great deal of attention to notions of culture and civilization as manifestations of play ultimately in favor of Western European values, which he takes for granted as being unmotivated and natural. Likewise, Caillois' categories are more than just a method for sorting out play. Indeed, the French anthropologist's categories turn out to be rather a means for creating a hierarchy of play from advanced to primitive, with Western play forms coming out, quite predictably, on top.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens revisited Game, Play, Literature", *YFS*, 1969, p. 31-58.

For my part, while I agree with Ehrmann's reservations regarding *Homo Ludens* and *Les jeux et les hommes*, my principle objections are centered on what is included in their global definitions of play, and what they tend to mask. While the theories of Huizinga and Caillois introduce tantalizing notions of ludic buoyancy, and appeal to play as a refreshing hiatus amid quotidian drudgery, their base definitions of play are vague and appear at turns to be somewhat exclusive, or too inclusive. For example, because it is maintained that play is necessarily autotelic, gratuitous, and atemporal, questions concerning material gain and what may be defined properly as play become an issue. However, discounting play for money as not belonging to 'proper play' which answers all of the neo-Kantian stipulations, raises the question of morality because gambling is understood as play tainted by material interest. Consequently, if play must be entirely gratuitous and disengaged from pecuniary concerns, then a wide variety of card games played for money cannot be defined as play. I would object, therefore, that a definition of play which excludes gaming from proper play is too narrow, since people are at play when gaming even if it involves money.

Furthermore, both Huizinga and Caillois want to include structural components of games such as rules in their definitions of play, by referring to them as 'play elements'. I would argue, however that rules serve many functions, most of which are not gratuitous in nature. What this effectively does is mask the distinction between play and game, since any configuration of rules forming a game is reduced to a play element. This is important if one is to understand why some rule bound activities, which may be defined as play or play elements if one takes Huizinga and Caillois' at their word (writing a thesis on the subject of play, for example) are certainly not possessed of 'ludic buoyancy', disinterestedness, or gratuity, nor are they 'fun' which is one of Huizinga's prime criterion for identifying play.

In *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer defines play as a kind of *va-et-vient* or oscillation which sets game structures in motion.<sup>3</sup> Rather than arguing for the absolute gratuity of play, Gadamer describes play as a middle voice phenomenon, that is, as being

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<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Wahrheit und Methode* Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1960

detached from either subjective or objective imminence. Hence, one may say that ‘something is playing somewhere’, for example, without implying the direct participation of a subject or object. While this is the case, Gadamer also discusses the capacity of play to completely involve the subject when at play, in such a way that it becomes extremely difficult for the playing subject to disengage. However, if Gadamer’s treatment of play as movement provides answers to problems which Huizinga and Caillois left unsolved, or perhaps did not anticipate, it is nevertheless not devoid of eurocentricity. For example, in arguing the disinterestedness of play, and then further the role of play in the formation of the canon of Western literature, Gadamer assumes that the category of institutionally agreed upon ‘high literature’ arose naturally through the movement of play, and is therefore, completely divorced from ideological, economic or political considerations.

Probably the happiest solution to the problem of defining play is outlined by Jacques Derrida in *L’écriture et la différence*, in “La structure, le signe et le jeu”.<sup>4</sup> Derrida proposes that free play is an animating movement that engages, and is capable of destabilizing, elements of structure which are often taken to be stable or immutable. Derrida’s version of play is well-suited to my task in this thesis first, because it does not begin with a neo-Kantian notion of the ludic, which excludes play that is not particularly ‘fun’, or involves monetary exchange. So, rather than dismissing so-called ‘corrupted’ forms of play as not being properly ludic, such forms are readily accommodated within Derrida’s ‘free play’. In the present case this is significant because, as I stated above, the card playing that goes on in the novels analyzed in the three final chapters of this thesis would not be considered play in most of the definitions I have mentioned. A further attraction of Derrida’s model of play, is that it appears to distinguish between games, as particular configurations of structural elements, and the play which animates and destabilizes these elements.

Having identified play and games as two different concepts I turn my attention, in Chapter 2, to games as they relate to language, and more specifically, to products of

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida. *L’écriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil, 1967

language such as novels. My working hypothesis is that games may be roughly defined as sets of rules which regulate and define the movement of play within specified parameters, as well as the subjective interaction that takes place with the game, and between players. In theories that describe language as a game, in particular those of Saussure and Wittgenstein, language is understood as being analogous to games (Saussure) or as being a game (Wittgenstein), and therefore, as being divisible into components such as rules. Following Wittgenstein then, language is understood as an game, which may be broken down into various subcategories of language games, like making promises, writing thesis, and telling stories.

So if it is possible to understand language as a game which may be subdivided into smaller games, the kind of a language game which the novel constitutes remains to be determined. I address this question in Chapter 2, with the goal of describing how novelistic card games work if, ostensibly, they are one kind of game represented through the medium of another game (the novel), which is a part of the much larger game of language. In the hopes of finding an answer this question, a good deal of the second chapter is devoted to exploring theories of games and texts. Here I discuss recent studies which analyze texts, and particularly 'literary' or non-expository texts, in terms of game models. Among the most helpful of these are Susan Stewart's *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, and Peter Hutchinson's *Games Authors Play*, in which both authors attempt to classify games as they appear in fictional and artistic writing.<sup>5</sup> Hence 'literature' is divided into novels, poetry, and short stories which are then further classified in the service of clarity, according to categories that closely resemble the ones proposed by Caillois' in his model of play. Such operations, however, shed little light on how card games in texts might actually work in fictional contexts, that is, how they communicate specific information to the reader about how the text signifies.

Moreover, within the context of this thesis the problem becomes manifold, since there are many kinds of novels in which many kinds of card games could be represented.

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart's *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979 and Peter Hutchinson, *Games Authors Play*. New York: Metheun, 1985.

One possible solution is to first break card games down into categories and subgenres, which David Parlett has attempted to do in his *History of Card Games*. By using Caillois' categories as Parlett has done, one could then classify poker under 'agon', and perhaps 'illinx' or 'vertige' when it is played as a drinking game, and war under 'mimicry'.<sup>6</sup> However, this contributes little to solving the problem of how to read fictional card games, for even in the restricted case of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel, there are practically as many possible categories of card games as there are novels. As a possible response to the question of what to do with the novel, Iser has proposed the application of Caillois' categories once again. Using this method then, stream of consciousness novels might be classified under the heading of 'agon', because they pose considerable readerly difficulty, and tend to interpolate the reader as a competitor.<sup>7</sup> However, while the question of how to deal with the novelistic card game is raised and possible solutions are discussed in Chapter 2, this question is ultimately suspended until the final three chapters of the thesis, where I have occasion to address the issue within the specific context of three novels.

Economy, which is the subject of Chapter 3, is raised implicitly in the first two chapters. Economic practices have been described by Huizinga and others as ludic phenomena, based principally on the element of chance involved in many economic practices, hence the expression 'playing the stock market'. Further, it has more recently been put forward that texts may be read as, in many respects, analogous to economic modalities, so that each text could be said to constitute, or possess, a specific economy of signification.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the novel, this problematic is particularly dense first, because there is a certain economic order to the way in which the text communicates

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<sup>6</sup> David Parlett, *A History of Card Games*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jean-Joseph Goux's *Les monnayeurs du langage*, Paris: Galilée, 1984, and Marc Shell's *Money, Language, and Thought*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, and *The Economy of Literature*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, also by Marc Shell.



meaning to the reader. Therefore, to apply economics to texts one must identify the way in which a given text dispenses information and the value given this information, in so far as this is possible.<sup>9</sup> For example, the novels of realism may be described as largely utilitarian: they are often well-regulated in the way in which they dispense information as they provide virtually expository descriptions of external non-fictional elements, while tending to guide the reader to an understanding that leaves little to chance. Postmodern fiction, on the other hand, is often confusing and asks the reader to fill in a great many gaps, so that it could be characterized as aleatory in its approach to disseminating information, and therefore, as being something of a gamble.

Furthermore, if it is possible to read a novel as belonging to a particular economic paradigm, then exchanges transacted by the characters populating the narrative must certainly be significant. One might conclude, for example, that the monetary behaviors of a particular fictional character are germane or contrary to the circulation of wealth narrated in the text. Moreover, the nature of the transactions made in life as well as in texts are specific, and this specificity should not be overlooked. It is clear, for example, that if a fictional character loses money playing poker, or opens a bank account, she is making a monetary transaction in each case, yet of a different order. Furthermore, gambling is a particularly sensitive issue and as a mode of exchange has been encountered with enthusiastic support or political suppression at turns throughout history. Because gambling is a subject on which few are indifferent, it is rarely narrated just 'in passing', as an insignificant detail. My hypothesis is, therefore, that understood correctly, fictional gambling can provide the reader with a particularly expressive index of the generalized economic mode and concomitant attitudes toward gambling which informs the text.

Finally, it is evident that subjective interaction is essential to most play and games, as well as to economic exchange. In light of this, I have concluded each of the first three chapters of this dissertation with a discussion of how the subject is constituted

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<sup>9</sup> Obviously, this begs such questions as *who* is reading, and *when*, however, such questions belong to the area of reception aesthetics and another thesis could be written on the subject. I am taking the liberty in the present document, of assuming that one may make some very rough generalizations about types of novels, such as 'stream of conscious', 'modernist', 'postmodernist', 'espitolarly' and so on.

in play, in games and through economic practices. Hence, in the first chapter which deals with play, I discuss play in terms of subjective involvement which is, quite evidently, a prime element of play. When subjects are engaged in play, moreover, they tend to ‘drift off’ or disengage from the external, non-play world. As a consequence, the subjective experience of ‘play time’ is distinct from perceptions of temporal reality outside of play, which is one of the reasons why it is possible to suspend time in sporting events. Subjective involvement in play entails this kind of temporal disjunction so that we loose ourselves when absorbed in play, and indeed, people often play to pass the time.

The disjunction between play time and ‘real’ time explains why, for example, the poker players in Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* suddenly realize that it is dawn when they first become aware of the actual time. However, the playing in Auster’s novel is gambling, a play form to which many lose themselves entirely, and suffer from an addiction to transactions conducted on the basis of chance. While the gaming narrated in the three novels I discuss in the final chapters of this thesis is not in each case addictive, it is clear that gaming is a specific kind of play and that subjective interaction with gaming would, in some regard, follow suit. For this reason, I have concluded chapter two with a discussion of how subjectivity is constructed, or rather, de-constructed in the process of gambling.

This leads quite naturally to the question of how subjects are constituted in economic exchange, since gambling is a mode of play that centers on the exchange of wealth. Economy then, and particularly gaming, are types of play, and subjectivity is defined in relation to it variously from one historical juncture to the next, given the dominant economic mode in place. For example, gambling and gamblers will be perceived quite differently in an economic paradigm that favors utilitarianism, as opposed to one which is predominately capitalist. Hence, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a rather dim view was taken of gamblers, while the current global economy is based on practices which closely resemble gambling and indeed, the casino has become an important element in the generation of public funds. It is evident then, that subjectivity will be

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constructed differently in relation to gambling, as it is viewed from within a given economic context.

The fourth chapter, in which I discuss the possible origins of playing cards and their entry into Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, provides the historical grounding for the thesis. The focus of this chapter is to strengthen certain connections that I made in Chapters 2 and 3 between cards, writing, texts and economics.<sup>10</sup> These connections have also been seen by Katherine Hargrave who, in her *History of Playing Cards*, outlines the role that cards have played in the rise of printing and trade in the following passage:

The history of playing cards is not only the record of the persistence of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century craft, practically unchanged in its essential aspects, but the story of the universal trait of human nature, the allure of chance, which is as characteristic of years ago as it is today. And for its gratification throughout the centuries it has employed the artists and craftsmen of all lands and times. Painters and makers of missives and beautifully illuminated manuscript, workers in wood block and engravers of metal and stone and finally the printer and his press; so that its story embodies the romance of all of those, and makes them intimate and understandable things which bring the old past very, very near.<sup>11</sup>

Playing cards have indeed remained remarkably unchanged since their entry into Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and since the rise of modern printing techniques, their form and design have been stabilized still further. Moreover, because cards have retained so much of their original form, each deck of cards constitutes, in many respects, a compact archive of the shifts that have taken place in European consciousness over the last seven centuries. Hence, the history of the playing card's reception on the European continent may be understood as an index of how chance has been conceptualized, and of how subjects have been constituted with regard to aleatory practices.

One important aspect of these considerations is the role playing cards have enjoyed in making popular certain accounting practices, which were introduced into Europe with some difficulty. As I explain in Chapter 4, playing cards may well have

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<sup>10</sup> In using both 'economy' and 'economics' I am distinguishing between a particular system to which we may refer (economy) and the practice thereof (economics).

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Perry Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards and a Bibliography of Cards and Gaming*, New York: Dover, 1966, p. 1.

been essential to the shift from premodern to modern economics, just as they are an important factor in the current trend to casino economics. While this may be true, cards have also met with considerable resistance at various historical junctures as they brought with them a subjective ‘mind set’ which has been seen as being capable of destabilizing and undermining dominant ideologies. Indeed, although cards were imported from the orient, they became an aspect of the ‘real’ in the West, yet as an aspect which has persistently and obstinately asserted itself as a manifestation of Europe’s ‘other’. Hence, over their long history playing cards have been understood as a real object in an anodyne and trivial pastime, while they have equally been associated with ‘inauthenticity’, the esoteric, the mystic, in short, with the ‘unreal’.

In the final three chapters, I read Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*, Nabokov’s *Ada*, and Auster’s *The Music of Chance* from the theoretical and historical framework which I described above. In these chapters, I have occasion to fully explore what novelistic card games signify in three very different fictional contexts. In part, I have found that these literary card games reveal dominant attitudes towards gaming, and communicate a good deal of information concerning the constitution of subjectivity at the time each novel was written. However, while these card games communicate different information in each novel, there are also, as I will show, similarities in how the games are framed, and perhaps in their semantic functions.

Before finally directing my reader’s attention to *The Big Deal: Card Games on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Fiction*, I would like to discuss some of the formal considerations which inform this thesis. First, an object such the playing card to which the adjective ‘trivial’ is often attached, may seem an unlikely topic for an academic thesis. As I point out in Chapter 4, however, the playing card forms a nexus where play, language and economy meet, and these three fields of investigation are seminal to the formal study of literature. In the first three chapters, therefore, I situate my project within current debates on literature, language, and economic theories of discourse, as these are related to the philosophical concept of play. In thus doing, I establish the pertinence of the literary

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card game as a object of study within the discipline of comparative literature, as well as within the larger context of related analytic theory.

By placing the investigation of theories of literature, play and economics before the final three chapters which are constructed as practical applications of my thesis, I have arguably subscribed to the standard academic format. While following theory with practical application maybe a somewhat hackneyed approach, a clear exposition of the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis is necessary before proceeding to the literary corpus of the dissertation. Indeed, because the topic may, on first observation, appear to be a minor element in literature, if not entirely eccentric, it is important that the reader be made aware of its pertinence to issues in literary studies which are at the forefront of the discipline of comparative literature. Moreover, without establishing the relationship in which cards and card games have stood, over history, to language and economy, as well as their role as randomizers in play, it would be difficult to comprehend the importance of the card game in the study of literature. Hence, in order to best elucidate the importance of the object whose representation in the novel is at the center of the present work, I have chosen to first construct my analytical apparatus, before proceeding to the texts discussed in the concluding chapters.

Finally, I have adapted no single formal method for this thesis, but rather have attempted to approach my objet of study by assembling a textual apparatus which embraces play as a philosophical concept, as it relates to literature, linguistics and economics. I have also studied this problematic from an historical perspective, in order to ground the origins of the deck in the book and in the rise of printing, as well as in economic exchange effected through gambling. This approach arises from my belief the application of 'scientific' methods to 'literary' objects, results in findings which are limited in scope. One of the reasons for this is that taking a strict methodological approach to the study of a novel assumes a certain objective and subjective stability, which is an untenable claim where literary discourse is concerned. Indeed, were I to make any claims to objective methodological rigor given the literary object I am studying here, the thesis would be limited in scope to the case of a specific reader at a specific moment in time, and it would assume that the novels I read are fixed, well-

defined, entities. In other words, the strict application of a method to the novelistic card game constitutes unyielding approach to an 'object' which by nature has a great deal of semantic and historical fluidity. So rather than calling on one methodological approach to accommodate all of my finding in this dissertation, I have chosen to situate the literary card game within an epistemological and historical framework. This was undertaken in the hope that my work will shed new light on a fascinating and important element of 'literature', in the broadest sense, and more specifically, on the novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*CHAPTER 1*  
*Play and Games*



**1. Introduction**

The role of play as a human activity, and the relationship of play to discourse, has attracted increasing interest in literary studies, and other disciplines over the course of this century. To those who work in the area of literary studies, the analogy which has long been made between play, or the ludic, and 'literature', 'poetic discourse' or 'fiction', presents an attractive solution to some of the problems involved in thinking about literature.<sup>2</sup> For example, this analogy permits us to conceptualize literary (fictional, poetic) discourse as being playful in function and intent. This is interesting, because the term playful and ludic have perhaps less negative connotations than 'nonserious', an expression that has also been used to describe literature in opposition to more 'serious' discourses.

Indeed, there has been a tendency to place literature on the side of the non-serious since Plato banished the poets from his republic, for writing fictions that lie artfully like truths. In the allegory of the cave, Plato explains that literary discourse tells artful lies, because it is the writing of poets who merely represent shadows projected on the walls of the cave, so that their writing 'stands at a third remove from the truth'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, poetic or literary discourse is not necessarily 'serious' in the same way as philosophical discourse was thought to be, because philosophy is the writing of men

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<sup>2</sup> Mihai Spărosu has written an extensive and detailed historical study of the relationship between literature and play in *Literature, Mimesis and Play*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1982. Such a study is, however, not the object of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, X.

who, according to Plato, are permitted to leave the cave and contemplate the true light. Because of this, literature has not been read with the same earnestness as philosophy and other discourses, which we have been taught to accept as serious or factual representations of reality, and therefore, truthful. Hence, as third-rate mimesis in the order of discourses literature has been assigned a place of relative importance, and as such, it has not been taken too seriously.

Given the inferior standing to which literature has often been relegated since Plato, the association of literary discourse with play by virtue of its ludic mimicry of 'reality', or its playful exuberance and capacity to entertain, is certainly not unappealing. To equate literature with play is to invest it with a salutary buoyancy, and the special status of a pleasant distraction or hiatus from quotidian drudgery, regardless of its truth value. While this does not attribute the same 'seriousness', 'rigor' or 'importance' to literature that has been imputed to other discourses such as philosophy, it nonetheless attaches value to literature in aesthetic terms.

However, to posit an analogy between nonserious or fictional discourse and play, in order to assert that the history of literature is tantamount to a play of fictions, or that literature is merely mimetic play, is problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is the vagueness of the analogy. For example, what does literary play look like? A novel? A poem? And how does one account for various genres of literary discourse from within a ludic<sup>14</sup> model of 'literature'. If one is to assert, moreover, that 'literature' is 'ludic discourse' and intrinsically playful because it is fictional, then one must also inquire into the nature of fiction. For example, is fiction always entirely 'playful', or even entirely fictional? Certainly genres of fiction, for example the historical novel in which 'real' characters like Queen Victoria or Napoleon make appearances, would suggest that fiction is not, of necessity, pure invention. And what *is not* fiction—Plato? mathematics textbooks? To what extent may 'serious' or 'factual' texts contain elements of rhetoric such as metaphor, allegory or parable, which are most often taken to be techniques of storytelling germane to fiction?

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<sup>14</sup> I define 'ludic', when used as an adjective, as being synonymous with 'playful', and 'the ludic' with 'play'.



Furthermore, in analyzing the concept of play it is obvious that one will inevitably run into the game, for indeed we most commonly *play* at *games*. This in turn raises questions concerning the nature of play and games, and how the two are related. Are the games, for example, a form or manifestation of play and, therefore, subsumable under the concept of play? What part of play are games if indeed they are a part, and do games at some point disengage themselves from play? Likewise, if we speak of play in general terms as a concept or category to which both games and literature belong, we must inquire as to how games and literary texts may be analogous to one another. Preliminary queries such as these into the nature of play and game demonstrate that simply stating that literature is a form of play is nebulous, ambiguous, and does not address the specificities of various kinds of discourses which might be considered literary.

Since it is my purpose to analyze the relationship between play, games and the literary text by focusing on the specific example of card games played in novels, my first task is to address these questions in the chapters which follow. As I will argue, much has been written on the relationship of play to literature which considers games as a sort of subcategory of play. This in turn gives rise to some of the problems inherent to thinking about play, games, and literary discourse, for reasons which I shall make clear. Therefore, because my focus is plainly card *games* in the novel, it is necessary to posit a preliminary working definition of games, in order subsequently to explain their relationship to play, and ultimately to 'literature', more specifically the novel.

In the most general terms, a game is a procedure for arriving at a specified end by means of a routine, or set of arbitrary rules, which will put forth certain strategies and moves as being more favourable than others for the purpose of obtaining a specified goal or result.<sup>15</sup> Games are constructed as a function of certain arbitrary rules which

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<sup>15</sup> In *The Field of Nonsense* Elizabeth Sewell defines the game as "the active manipulation, serving no useful purpose, of a certain object or class of objects, concrete or mental within a limited sphere of space and time and according to fixed rules, with the aim of producing a given result despite the opposition of chance and/or opponents" (27).

While I find this definition useful and for the most part acceptable, I take issue with the opinion that games 'serve no useful purpose'. First, I object to the term 'usefulness': by whose criteria is a thing useful or not and within what context? Furthermore, this proposition is contradicted by the other terms of Sewell's definition such as the limitation of space and time, fixed rules, and the necessity of an aim which produces a given result. As

constitute a specific order or configuration defining a particular game, and delimiting its objectives. Moreover, games may involve varying degrees of difficulty and are not necessarily ‘fun’ and ‘gratuitous’, the two qualities which are often cited as the basic tenets of play and games in many of the theories which I will discuss below. Furthermore, although games are intimately linked to play because they are animated by it, games are not necessarily a permutation of play, but rather constitute their own order of activity. However, because the relationship which obtains between play and games is generally taken to be self-evident, uncomplicated, and not particularly in need of explanation, this relationship is frequently misunderstood giving rise to confusion.

## 2. *Homo Ludens*

Many contemporary theories of play and literary play begin, either by opposition or concurrence, with Huizinga’s comprehensive and influential essay *Homo Ludens*.<sup>16</sup> Although this is probably the most frequently cited work on play of this century, the treatment of play and game set down in *Homo Ludens* may well have engendered confusion in thinking about the relationship which obtains between the two, so this text presents itself as the logical place to begin my inquiry. Moreover, it is important to investigate Huizinga’s concept of play and ultimately games, in order to understand how this seminal text has informed works which specifically address literature as a manifestation of the ludic.

Huizinga’s first move in *Homo Ludens* is to posit the preeminence of play over culture: “Play is older than culture”, or again “In the twin union of play and culture, play is primary” (1, 46). Therefore, according to Huizinga, play precedes and gives rise to

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I will again have occasion to argue, the aim of producing a specific result is purposeful in itself, just as the adherence to fixed rules and limitations of time and space suggest a dedication to purpose. That Sewall later goes on to discuss language as a game, further brings into question the ‘no useful purpose’ clause of her definition, unless of course we are willing to agree that language is, in essence, useless. For more on this see “Systems: Geometry, Logic, and Language and the Mental Treasure of Certainty” in Kathleen Blake’s *Play, Games, and Sport*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974, p.64-76.

<sup>16</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955. Importantly, this is Huizinga’s own translation of the text he wrote in Dutch and published in 1938.

culture, so that manifestations of culture such as games and institutions, are essentially ludic.<sup>17</sup> Having once established the primacy of play, Huizinga then goes on to define it as gratuitous, autotelic, above and beyond quotidian experience, and possessed of its own unique temporality. Further, by Huizinga's definition, play is rigorously regimented by the rules in which it consists, rules which belong to the primary qualities of play, so that play expresses, signifies, or means perfect order. Hence, all play *means* something supposedly because it "transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to action" (1). Moreover, according to Huizinga, play is identifiable as a function of its essential disinterestedness and its fun-element. In fact, he writes, "it is precisely the fun-element that characterizes the essence of play" (3). Finally, by virtue of these essential qualities, play is defined as a 'higher order' phenomenon which transcends what Huizinga calls 'ordinary life'.

While this would appear on the surface to be an acceptable definition, the elements of Huizinga's play concept prove, on closer examination, to be self-contradictory. For example, meaning is not necessarily disinterested or gratuitous: meaning is frequently an interest and an objective in itself. The "something" that play always "means" is often its goal, and actions directed at a goal are not disinterested. Generally speaking, moreover, rules and order do not commonly serve the purpose of 'fun' (which by Huizinga's definition is the principle element of play) but are rather regulatory. Likewise, rules are often indicative of interest or intention, rather than disinterest and gratuity on the part of the person or institution having imposed them. In other words, regulated order is not often established in the service of gratuity, disinterestedness, and fun which are the essential elements of Huizinga's definition of play. These contradictions, as I will argue, give rise to subsequent problems in the broader application of Huizinga's concept of play.

Another of the difficulties in Huizinga's definition is his insistence that play is susceptible to being contained and arrested in structures to which he refers alternately as game—or play-forms. In fact, Huizinga conflates the terms game-form and play-form

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<sup>17</sup> "Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their *origin*: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play", Op. Cit., 5.

throughout the text, and this I believe, represents more than a slight confusion of semantic nuance. For example, when he delineates the nature and significance of play, Huizinga refers to contests, races, performances, exhibitions, pageants, tournaments, card games and chess. However, he states that these are play-forms, rather than games or game-forms, which segregate and contain play, yet which are also transcended by play, because play is at once all of these things *and* a phenomenon of a higher order (7-10). According to Huizinga, play is spatially circumscribed by the card table, the stage, the arena, the tennis court, and the court of law. Likewise, play is temporally fixed and confined; it does not go on indefinitely, because in Huizinga's definition, play is of necessity called to a halt, yet it is also infinitely repeatable.

Hence for Huizinga, there exist structures called play-forms, which parcel out play both spatially and temporally, and segregate it from ordinary life. These play-forms which regulate play could easily be described as games, but Huizinga is insistent that they fall under the heading of play.<sup>18</sup> In the same moment however, because play is disinterested, autotelic and constitutes a "higher unity" it transcends the real and the ordinary world, to which play-structures like card games belong. Needless to say, it is difficult to comprehend how play is to be all of these things at once; how it is to come to rest in concrete structures or forms of which it is a part, and then to simultaneously rise above itself as a unity of a higher order.

If, by Huizinga's definition, play is a "higher unity" which transcends "ordinary life", it is consequently and paradoxically separate from elements of the quotidian. Hence, various card or board games are, according to Huizinga, play-forms which

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<sup>18</sup> The confusion of play and game in *Homo Ludens* is particularly in evidence in the following passage: "Though *play* as such is outside the range of good and bad... he [the player] must still stick to the rules of the *game*. These rules...are a very important factor in the play-concept. All *play* has its rules. They determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by *play*. The rules of a *game* are binding and allow no doubt...as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole *play-world* collapses. The *game* is over...the spoil-sport shatters the *play-world*...by withdrawing from the *game* he reveals the relativity and fragility of the *play-world* in which he had temporarily shut himself with others", Op. Cit. 11.

Evidently, Huizinga does not employ a great deal of precision here as elsewhere in his use of the terms 'play-concept', 'play-world' and 'game', in fact these terms appear to be fundamentally interchangeable. The most bothersome aspect of this conflation of terms, is deciding where to place the rule. If, according to Huizinga, we may talk about play-rules, it is difficult to understand how these rules relate to the game when play is to be understood as occupying a 'superior sphere' to or transcending the constraints and limitations of the game.

although they are also mundane, are somehow distinguished as elevated, rising above our experience of the ordinary. To further complicate matters, these “play-structures” writ large, become cultural institutions, and Huizinga subsequently proposes to “consider play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction” (4). First, one may well object, social constructions are part of culture which, according to Huizinga’s very first definition is *preceded* by play, so that social constructions would result from play and not the reverse. Once again, this formulation of the relationship of play to social constructions asks one to accept that play is of a piece with the things it transcends. That is to say, under Huizinga’s definition, play is at once a ‘higher unity’ and a constituent of structures which are very much a part of ‘ordinary life’.

Furthermore, what Huizinga calls “the great instinctive forces of civilized life”, that is, law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science are “rooted in the primeval soil of play” (5). The resulting concrete manifestations of play’s ‘instinctive forces’, become social structures such as jurisprudence and ethics, economics, writing and war, which in their turn generate economic necessity, material interest and ideology. But it is precisely such contingencies and consequences of the quotidian which play must transcend in order to be consistent with Huizinga’s definition. This is because, according to Huizinga’s thesis, it is the disinterestedness of play (particularly in the monetary sense), its freedom from biological necessities, the “wants and appetites” of ordinary life, and play’s characteristic “fun-element” and gratuity, which constitute its very essence (7-9). Here again, if we adhere to Huizinga’s definition, *gratuity* and *fun* are the essential elements of a play structure, yet it would be difficult to maintain that this were so in the case of banking or warfare (social constructions which are fundamentally ludic according to Huizinga), as indeed it is difficult to argue for the disinterestedness of structure in general.

In the specific case of war Huizinga argues that “a strong element of play” manifests itself as “the agonistic element in warfare proper” (95). It is the *agon* or the contest of war in which “play and combat, justice, fate, and chance are intimately commingled” (100). But since war is undeniably based on the wants and appetites of “ordinary life”, Huizinga must conclude that only chivalrous wars in the name of virtue

were fought in the spirit of play as *agon*. However, if play as *agon* is the animating force of a chivalrous war, why would *agon* not equally be the motivating drive behind any form of contest or combat? It was evidently difficult for Huizinga to reconcile play by his own definition with elements of military strategy, from the context of Holland in the Second World War. In order to maintain the heroic or transcendent character of military play as he has constructed it, Huizinga is obliged to retrieve examples of “martial athletics and ceremonial social play” from the medieval chivalric tradition, to which he nostalgically attributes a proper understanding of the virtuous play element in war (102).<sup>19</sup>

This is related to Huizinga’s assertion that the play-element is slowly and progressively taking its leave from the aforementioned play-forms, such as cultural institutions, which lend form and social order to human existence, as they become corrupted by economic necessities, material interest and ideology in the modern age. As a consequence, Huizinga pessimistically concludes that the last two centuries have witnessed the waning of play proper, or the fall from an innocent primitive era when play informed all human activity, and animated rituals which embodied the essential gratuity of play. Hence, one of the basic premises of *Homo Ludens* is the eschatological vision that play has been leaving us since sometime before the 19th century, and will soon make its final exit.

To give a specific example of Huizinga’s theory of the development play, and its departure from progressively more ‘corrupt’ structures, I shall turn to the brief analysis of bridge offered in *Homo Ludens*. In keeping with the general properties of play he has outlined, Huizinga sees the game of bridge as just one example of a play structure from which the play-element disappears, as the game becomes increasingly tied to monetary concerns. He writes that since bridge has become a vehicle for the exchange of wealth and the focus of “organized clubs,...the virtue has gone out of the game” (199).<sup>20</sup> But if a

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<sup>19</sup> See “Play and War” in *Homo Ludens*, p. 89-104. Note that in footnote 1, p.104 Huizinga connects these ideas with his earlier work in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1955, p. 9-130.

<sup>20</sup> Apart from my other objections, it is worth pointing out that bridge never existed independently of clubs nor, quite probably, of monetary interest. Although no one knows the exact origin of the game, it is a club invention that arrived in the Portland, the St. George’s Club and the New York Whist Club around 1892, and is a card

card game is in itself a *play-form* by Huizinga's own definition, one is want to ask how it is that the play-element leaves the game when it is played for money, if indeed people continue to *play* at it. Huizinga's insistence on preserving ludicity from the game throughout the essay forces him to disqualify what one might, for lack of a better term, call non-ludic play. However, while he also conflates play and game, the kind of play involved in playing many games is not gratuitous and fun as Huizinga's definition necessitates, so that the conflation of play and game is a problem which plagues his essay throughout.

### **3. Defining Play and Game as a Function of Language**

Contradictions inherent to Huizinga's thinking about play and play-structure or game, manifest themselves in many forms throughout *Homo Ludens*, however, the crux of these contradictions is most apparent in his etymological study of the "play-concept", as it is expressed in several languages. Here Huizinga explains that in languages such as French, German, Dutch and Spanish, the verb and noun for play are elided in one compound expression : *jouer un jeu, ein Spiel spielen, een spel spelen, jugar un juego*. This is proof, he argues, that languages which have "succeeded better than others in getting the various aspects of play into one word", demonstrate a superior degree of refinement and sophistication (29).

The reason for this, Huizinga conjectures, is that "so-called primitive languages" often have many words for a given species but not the genus. These more "primitive"

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game hybrid arrived at by crossing whist and possibly the Russian game *Vingt*. Moreover, bridge was instantly institutionalized in works such as the *Pons Asinorum*, *Scientific Bridge*, and the *Bridge Magazine*. Hence, although I disagree with Huizinga's theory that games, or in his terms play-forms, have of necessity become more corrupt as they are modernized, it would seem he has chosen a particularly unfitting example with which to make his point. Bridge has never been 'innocent' nor has it fallen into 'corruption' from some golden age form of the game based on pure ludicity, as Huizinga would have it. See Parlett, "From Whist to Bridge" in *A History of Card Games*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 214-37.

Furthermore, there has always been plenty of ideology and monetary interest attached to the game of bridge, being as it is the proud purveyor of class distinction. See Irving Crespi's "The Social Significance of Card Playing as a Leisure Time Activity: in *The American Sociological Review*, 21, 1956, p. 717-721. See also the chapter on the social development of the game of Whist in William Andrew Chatto's *Facts and Speculations on Origin and History of Playing Cards*, London: John Russell Smith, 1858, p.47-60.

languages have words for various manifestations of a given concept such as play, while they do not have a single word which expresses the concept as a unity. Greek is exemplary of this phenomenon in primitive languages, having several words for specific types of play, and “mak[ing] the remarkable terminological distinction between play and contest” (31). This fact, in turn, leads Huizinga to conclude “that the Greeks...failed to perceive the essential play-element” (31).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the absence of a single word to express play as both verb and noun, as in many modern Western European languages, reveals the failure of a language to have achieved an important level of linguistic and conceptual refinement. ‘Primitive’ languages, concludes Huizinga, do not express the “higher unity” which is play.

The reduction of the “play-concept” or “play-element” to a single verb-noun compound expression is supposed then, to be a conceptual achievement or refinement, and not a linguistic impoverishment, as one might expect. In the case of English, however, Huizinga’s thesis poses a problem, because English remarkably needs both ‘play’ and ‘game’ to express the concept as an activity and as an object. Therefore, because Huizinga does not include English in the category of primitive languages, he must conclude that the verb/noun doublet was somehow “lost” in English, and with it, the capacity to express the unique, independent nature of play which lies outside of normal categories of action. Since partial proof of the special status of *play* in human experience is supposed to be demonstrated by the development of the compound noun/verb play in European languages he writes in the English version of *Homo Ludens* that:

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<sup>21</sup> The editor’s note to this passage in Huizinga’s essay is as follows:

This argument does not occur in the German edition of Huizinga’s book, and the presentation of it in his own English version is somewhat obscure. It is hoped that the drift of his argument has been reconstructed without undue distortion (31).

It is obvious that Huizinga is labouring to make a point upon which he is unclear. This arises, as I will show, from the problems he encounters in distinguishing play from game.



Playing is no ‘doing’ in the ordinary sense; you do not ‘do’ a game as you ‘do’ or ‘go’ fishing, or hunting or Moris-dancing, or wood-work—you ‘play’ at it [sic] (31).

Here we see that Huizinga’s argument does not hold up to his example, for he has just stressed the fact that the verb ‘to play’ is somehow outside of, yet specific to game, rather than showing how English is at a semantic disadvantage because the noun is not elided in the verb. And since his discussion on the subject ends here, it turns out to be nothing more than an ‘apples and oranges’ argument which does not prove, as it sets out to, how the lack of this linguistic refinement makes for a lexical gap in the English language.

Furthermore, at several junctures Huizinga is obliged to recuperate the ‘primitive’ Greek *agon* in order to discuss competitive play in the English, German and French versions of *Homo Ludens*. This borrowing from a ‘less developed’ language undermines his own assumptions regarding the sophistication of Western languages, in their capacity to express the unique nature of play as a noun\verb compound. One is at a loss to comprehend how it could be considered semantically advantageous for one “culture to [have] abstracted a general notion of play much earlier and more completely than another” if, when speaking from the idiom of a culture which has arrived at “the aggregation of all the forms [for play] under one head”, Huizinga is obliged to retrieve additional words for play from languages which he supposes to be less developed (29).<sup>22</sup>

The problem which the game\play distinction in English exposes in Huizinga’s etymological survey of play in European languages, is one which Roger Caillois

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<sup>22</sup> I do not wish simply to reverse Huizinga’s argument and claim that English is one of the few languages in which we may properly comprehend and maintain the distinction between play and game. To substantiate such a claim would require a detailed study in comparative semantics which is beyond the scope of this thesis, and certainly outside of my interests. However, while not wishing to be facile, it seems that the difference between play and game which lies plainly on the surface in English, is not self-evident in languages where both noun and verb are expressed in the same root word. What I am arguing is that Huizinga’s thesis, which is intended to demonstrate the more sophisticated European understanding of play as opposed to a more “primitive” one, has rather the effect of highlighting the untenable eurocentric foundations of Huizinga’s argument. On this last point, more below.

attempted to remedy in *Les jeux et les hommes*.<sup>23</sup> Rather than arguing that languages which have one noun\verb compound for play somehow better comprehend its uniqueness, Caillois attempts to unpack the concept by retrieving six words for play from Greek. Therefore, writing in French, Caillois adopts *aléa*, *agon*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* as categories of play, which in turn are subtended by rational or calculated (*ludus*) and irrational or spontaneous (*paideia*) play. He then postulates that all forms of play (*jeu*) will participate in at least two of the first four categories—that is chance, confrontation, imitation or vertigo—and partake of a predominantly rational or irrational mode.<sup>24</sup>

One could say, however, that these are rather four types of game (*jeux*) through which play may be expressed: games of chance, confrontational games, imitative games, and carnivalesque games. This is certainly correct if we understand games as being based on the definition above, that is, as procedures for arriving at an end by means of a routine, or set of rules which will put forth certain strategies and moves as being more favourable than others in obtaining a desired goal or result. In this case, each of Caillois' categories describes a specific goal or desired result, and all of them involve a particular configuration of procedures or rules for arriving at that end.

In French, the problem surrounding game and play is not immediately discernable since the distinction made between *jeu/play* and *jeu/game* is not apparent. However, Caillois' 'play categories' as they are translated have served as the foundation for many studies of play and literature, and give rise to confusion because they are, more precisely, a system for classifying games. The problem is not resolved by finding a better translation for *jeux*, since it is ultimately a more complex issue hinging on how one understands play, game and the interaction between them. As a result, game and play are no more clearly defined in Caillois than they were in *Homo Ludens*, in spite of the categories which were meant to impart greater precision. This is because Caillois' system of classification is actually intended to define pure modalities of play which, like Huizinga's play concept, belong to a higher transcendent order. Caillois' version of play

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<sup>23</sup> Caillois, Roger. *Les jeux et les hommes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1958.

<sup>24</sup> Using this typology, bridge would be expressed as  $\pm$ mimicry+agon+aléa/ludus.

like Huizinga's transcends and imitates or reflects culture and social structure rather than being an actual constituent of structure. However, Caillois' categories serve the purposes of interest, of goal, often of material gain, in every case they are structured around rules and are, at turns, also described as structures. Although these categories are supposed to reflect ordinary, every day life yet rise above it, Caillois' version of play is actually a classification of games which are very much a part of 'ordinary' material existence.

The argument underlying both Caillois' categories, and Huizinga's etymological study of the play concept, is informed by the notion that play is transcendent and therefore, not ordinary. The transcendence of play can only be maintained by opposing play to 'ordinary' and 'reality', and this in turn gives rise to a series of related oppositions which structure both arguments. Therefore, both authors define play as rising above the material configurations of 'ordinary life', while maintaining the primacy of play as the wellspring of culture and all of the 'structures' of ordinary life to which culture gives rise. However, in the case that culture comes out of play—and indeed according to Huizinga cultural institutions are forms of play—the assertion that play transcends culture as its own constituent forms is problematic.

#### ***4. Play/Game: Other Approaches***

The problems which may be imputed to the collapsing of game and play in *Homo Ludens* and *Les jeux et les hommes*, have been explained by some critics as being essentially ideological. For example, in "Homo Ludens revisited", Jacques Ehrmann argues that the abundant contradictions in these texts are symptomatic of the eurocentric standpoint from which Huizinga and Caillois wrote.<sup>25</sup> Ehrmann holds that both texts are constructed around a constant and stabilizing model of play developed and expressed in European culture, which is inadequate in a larger context. Hence, according to Ehrmann, both authors would see their models of play as being objective reports on the actual state

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens revisited Game, Play, Literature", *YFS*, 1969, p. 31-58.

of things, and then go on to oppose their concepts of play to what is supposedly an equally transparent model of reality. Hence, Huizinga and Caillois will oppose play to 'ordinary life' and 'reality', but neither of them ever asks what their idea of 'ordinary life' consists of, or if their version of reality coincides with that of others.<sup>26</sup> This is a result of the concept of play at the centre of both theses, which was arrived at as a function of European standards and constructs. Hence, these texts foreground Western models of the 'real' and the 'ordinary', which in turn provide a background against which to project and describe the 'playful'. This then is maintained as the correct model which forms the focal point of a regulating norm, while other cultural models of play and reality are removed to the peripheries. So, in saying that play steps outside of 'reality', both Huizinga and Caillois have unproblematically posited a Western notion of the 'real' as though it were a universal given. It is also assumed that this model of play and reality is actual and transparent, rather than culturally and ideologically determined, so that it is believed to be aligned with the 'natural state of affairs' and does not "rest on a simplistic and ethnocentric metaphysics of consciousness" (Ehrmann 41).

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<sup>26</sup> It has been pointed out by anthropologists such as Duvignaud in *Le jeu du jeu*, that on other continents, what constitutes play and what might be understood as work are very different from the European notions of the same (St. Amand: Editions Balland, 1980). It is important to keep in mind that for Huizinga and Caillois one of the major characteristics of play is gratuity. We need only reflect on how European notions of utility and gratuity have conflicted and continue to conflict with that of the peoples indigenous to North America, to understand how a European concept of play should be read with caution. The direct result of parcelling off play as Huizinga and Caillois do, is the introduction of hierarchies of a particularly revealing nature. That this is the case, becomes clear in Caillois when he applies his categories to European and non-European games. By his lights, non-Europeans (Africans, South-Americans) play games based on simple mimicry and *ilinx*, in other words drunkenness and imitation, while European games tend to be more sophisticated and based on a marriage of challenge and chance.

Moreover, Huizinga and Caillois turn an equally blind eye to that other 'Dark Continent', namely, women. Huizinga's subject is universal, and pretends to comprehend both men and women, hence women either play games just like men or they are invisible. Indeed, one need only re-read most works on play with this in mind, to see that almost no thought is given to how little girls and later women play at games. For example, in *Les jeux et les hommes* Caillois writes "Comme on l'a justement remarqué, les panoplies [de jouets-miniatures] des filles sont destinées à mimer des conduites proches, réalistes, domestiques, celles des garçons évoquent des activités lointaines, romanesques, inaccessibles ou même franchement irréelles" (42). In other words, girls play at mundane imitations of the everyday (tea parties, mummy and baby) while boys' mimetic play is difficult, imaginative, exotic (cowboys, secret agents) and this later, for Caillois, is the product of pure invention, rather than the imitation of any aspect of the quotidian such as, for example, the television or movies. For a critique of Piaget's developmental studies of boys' and girls' play and games, see Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 5-23.

Consequently Huizinga, and Caillois after him, structure their arguments around binary oppositions such as seriousness and play, usefulness and gratuitousness, ordinary life and exceptional modes of being. For Ehrmann, however, it is no longer possible to maintain these categories as oppositions because we are now supposedly caught up in an economy of play which informs all human activity. Play and reality are understood as being “inseparable [and] can only be apprehended globally and in the same movement” (Ehrmann 58). Hence, according to Ehrmann, ludicity cannot be divorced from conscious social structure, nor can it be said to both inform and transcend these structures at the same moment. Ehrmann objects to the inherent logic of both texts, and counters by proposing that play is always present. There can be no inside or outside of play, since we are always acting from within the movement of play; it defines both reality and fiction, culture and civilization. Or, as Eugene Fink concurs:

Play confronts them all [work, reality seriousness, authenticity]—it absorbs them by representing them. We play at being serious, we play truth, we play reality, we play work and struggle, we play love and death—and we even play play itself (22).<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, objections can, and probably should, be raised in light of such global assumptions concerning the nature of play. What has effectively been performed in the above, is a reversal of classically opposed categories such as work and play, serious and non-serious, which tips the balance on the side of the ludic and privileges play. The consequence of this manoeuvre is that one may now explain work as a variety or manifestation of play, so that by logical extension play comes to define and inform all human activity: nothing is outside of, or opposed to play. One of the obvious attractions of such an understanding of play is that appears to validate the nonserious, which is often equated with playfulness, fun and *jouissance*, by giving it primary status.

However, while replies to *Homo Ludens* such as Ehrmann’s and Fink’s appear at first glance to be satisfying and even liberating, it is obvious that the world would be oppressive in the extreme were only one concept, playful or otherwise, to dominate our

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<sup>27</sup> See Eugene Fink’s article “The oasis of happiness: Toward an ontology of play”, *YFS*, No. 41, p. 19-31.

experience of being. Moreover, we make sense of being as a function of our capacity to discern difference, that is, by distinguishing things from one another. However, to say with Ehrmann and Fink that everything is play, that we are always in play, that we play at everything we do, is tantamount to saying that at night all cats are black. If we are not to be blinded by play which absorbs all difference in the same way that darkness makes the spectrum disappear, play must be more clearly outlined in relation other modes of being.<sup>28</sup>

Bernard Suits effectively illustrates the pitfalls of conceptualizing play in a 'global' (Ehrmann) or utopian way, by collapsing virtually everything into play. "The Grasshopper: Posthumous Reflections on Utopia"<sup>29</sup> is Suits' parable of a possible world in which playing at games, which are assumed to more or less the same as play, accounts for all activity. Predictably however, the resulting utopia looks more like a dystopia: in order to arrive at a work-free society, all action is re-defined as play, which becomes "a very heavy game-playing indeed", because the stakes of this game-playing are correspondingly high (201). Since work, in Suits parable, is simply given a more palatable name, play absorbs work to the extent that one now speaks of playing in the most serious and life-threatening of tasks, but the result is not hedonism. Rather, play has merely taken over all activity, and as a consequence, many of the games played in the utopia are simply the twins of what we customarily call work.

As Suits' tale shows, the trouble in this paradise is the assumption that games—a label which has been euphemistically substituted for the odious term 'work'—may be unproblematically collapsed into play. The denizens of Suits' utopia ignore the fact that

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<sup>28</sup> To speak of distinguishing things from one another is not to revert to the dreaded binary opposition as an inflexible construct, but rather to affirm difference. In a recent article on the theory of literary genre, E. Bolongaro explains that it is crucial to keep in mind that dichotomies form a continuum of variance. For example, he writes that binary oppositions constitute spectra which are not exclusive but rather inclusive and represent, more aptly, degrees. And further, that "concepts constituting the spectrum can only be understood in terms of a process of reciprocal self-definition: they represent a movement or a trajectory which becomes cognizable only in terms of an opposite. To put it more accurately, these inclusive oppositions represent the attempt to grasp conceptually the concrete dynamics we experience" (3). "From Literariness to Genre: Establishing the Foundations for a Theory of Literary Genres", *Genre XXV*, Fall, 1992, p. 277-313.

<sup>29</sup> Suits, Bernard, "The Grasshopper: Posthumous Reflections on Utopia", *Utopias*, ed. Peter Alexander and Roger Gill. London: Duckworth, 1984.

work is reintroduced as play, and the resulting games, stakes and rules are serious to varying degrees: they are as grave, serious, painful and unpleasant as prison or the death penalty. Therefore, playing at the games which have been substituted for work is invested with a purpose or final goal which is neither gratuitous, amusing nor fun, as play is often thought to be. Rules, moreover, are the essential components of games, and while games are animated by play, play cannot be made to simply absorb structured or ordered activities such as games. Therefore, what has been forgotten is that games are not the same as play, and that while games may be activated when played, there is no reason to believe that they may not be difficult and require serious work.

Ideally, in a utopian construct of play, we would all play at and enjoy menial tasks, but our experience tells us plainly that this is not the case. For certainly play may be earnest, and there exists, for example, the complicated play involved in war games, and indeed, in military strategy. There is also play which is not necessarily fun, such as playing the stockmarket and other speculative economic practices. And if discursive forms like fiction are taken to be ludic, how would one classify serious writing on the subject of play? Moreover, it is precisely when one works at play and attempts to sort out the serious and the complex elements of play, that the inherent difficulties in thinking it through as a concept come to light. But because play has classically been opposed to work, it is conceptualized as having qualities such as 'ludic buoyancy', 'gratuity' or 'fancifulness'.

As I have tried to show, there have been many reversals and upsets in theoretic constructs of play, which forward opposing views of what constitutes play. When considered together as in dialogue with one another, theories of play engender their own dialogical play. Debates on the nature of play may be read themselves as forming a continuum of theoretical moves which gives rise to a sort of *va-et-vient* between opposing constructs of play. For example, while Huizinga would assert that the "first main characteristic of play [is] that it is free, is in fact freedom", Baudrillard, at a later date writes that: "Il n'y a donc tout simplement pas de liberté du jeu...*le jeu n'est pas*

*liberté*”.<sup>30</sup> Opposing versions of play such as these illustrate how a ludic dialectic is set in motion through writing on the subject of play, which is implicitly playful in its turn.

It is precisely the *va-et-vient* or oscillatory motion of play in various forms which, according to Gadamer, constitutes the primary element of his ontological play-model.<sup>31</sup> So, given that the primary element of play is this motion, the dynamic of exchange that takes place between the players of a game is understood by Gadamer as being the characteristic of the play element in games. Likewise, in the case of dialogue the turn-taking which takes place between interlocutors is characterized, for Gadamer, by playful oscillation. Hence, what is cognizable as play in the Gadamerian model, is this animating to-and-fro movement rather than a particular playful mood or attitude on the part of the players.

Moreover, in Gadamer’s view, play has its own specific and independent ontology, that is, a double ontology which is unique to play. This is why we say that a movie or a piece of music is playing somewhere (*daß etwas dort und dort oder dann und dann ‘spielt’, daß etwas sich abspielt, daß etwas im Spiele ist*) or why we speak of the play of water in a fountain (105). Furthermore, play is medial (neither subjective or objective) by virtue of this double ontology, and therefore, it can exist on its own without players, somewhere between subjects and objects.<sup>32</sup> Given this, we may say that Gadamerian play is a middle-voice phenomenon, that is, one which can be expressed independently of a specified subject or object.

Because play has its own specific ontology as oscillation in Gadamer’s model, play is likewise possessed of its own temporality and its own goals. Importantly, to say that play has its own unique temporality and objectives, is quite different from asserting that play is ‘atemporal’ and ‘autotelic’, as Huizinga and Caillois would claim.

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<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *De la séduction*. Paris: Galilée, 1979 p. 183.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Wahrheit und Methode* Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1960. Gadamer also describes play as being akin to the mobile form of nature (*Bewegungsform der Natur*) or as a form of self-perpetuating energy: “Das Sein alles Spieles ist stets Einlösung, reine Erfüllung, Energieia, die ihr ‘Telos’ in sich selbst hat” (110, 117).

<sup>32</sup> “[D]as Spiel hat ein eigenes Wesen, unabhängig von dem Bewußtsein derer, die Spielen...[d]ie seinsweise des Spieles ist also nicht von der Art, daß ein Subjekt da sein muß...[w]as nicht mehr ist, das sind einmal die Spieler” (108, 109, 117).



Atemporality and autotelism imply disconnectedness from, or nonparticipation in being, whereas Gadamer appears to propose a nontranscendental theory of play. In his view, play is understood as ‘other’, but beside rather than above, as a different modality of being.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, for Gadamer the temporality of play is different from our customary experience of the chronological succession of events. This, however, does not mean that play time should be conceived of as being ‘autotelic’, but rather as existing *with (gleichzeitig)* our common experience of time, as a ‘carnavalesque’ version of it.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the unique temporal nature of play is for Gadamer a function of its medial ontology, its capacity to exist independently and to mark its own time. This is why, when players are involved in playing a game, they become absorbed in the parallel temporality of play and are in turn themselves played.

Similarly, the specific temporality of play is linked to the postulate that the goal, or telos, of play is itself. For Gadamer, the objective of play is always self-representation and this is why play is distinct or other.<sup>35</sup> Because the *va-et-vient* of play is limited to representing itself, the task of any game may be interpreted as the embodiment or expression of a particular mode of representation (painterly, theatrical, literary, sporting, etc.). Consequently, play represents itself through games which, according to Gadamer, are ultimately about the projection of some modality of aesthetic being. Accordingly, each game has a particular “spirit” (*Geist*) which delimits the movement of play, determines how play will move through a particular configuration of rules, and provides it with a goal which will decide where the to-and-fro movement comes to a halt in each game:

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<sup>33</sup> Hence, play time co-exists within our quotidian experience of temporal succession as other:

Man nennt diese Gleichzeitigkeit und Gegenwärtigkeit des ästhetischen Seins im allgemeinen seine Zeitlosigkeit. Aber die Aufgabe ist, diese Zeitlosigkeit mit der Zeitlichkeit *zusammenzudenken*, mit der sie wesentlich zusammengehört. Zeitlosigkeit ist zunächst nichts als eine dialektische Bestimmung, die sich auf dem Grunde der Zeitlichkeit und auf dem Gegensatz zu der Zeitlichkeit erhebt (126).

<sup>34</sup> “Die Zeiterfahrung des Festes ist vielmehr die *Begehung*, eine Gegenwart *sui generis*” (128).

<sup>35</sup> “Das Spiel ist also wirklich darauf beschränkt, sich darzustellen. Seine Seinsweise ist also Selbstdarstellung” (113).

Games themselves differ from one another by their spirit. The reason for this is that the to-and-fro movement, which is what constitutes the game, is differently arranged. The particular nature of a game lies in the rules and structures which prescribe the way that the area of the game is filled. This is true universally, when ever there is a game (96).<sup>36</sup>

When play conforms to a pattern it becomes a specific type of game, and this is what Gadamer refers to as the “transformation into structure” (*die Verwandlung ins Gebilde*). This is the case in artistic representation, or play in the theatrical sense, just as a novel maybe the playful representation of a fictional world. These kinds of games then, are about various modes of representation which differ from one another on the basis of the rules which ‘structure’ the play and determine the ‘spirit’ that fills a given representational game. When play is mediated through the game and transformed into structure, as in a work of art, it is rendered “lasting and true” (100) (*das bleibende Wahre*, 111).<sup>37</sup>

In the case of literature this is problematic because, in the broadest sense, all texts may be called literature. However, for Gadamer works of literature which are the product of the transformation of *play* into structure (*Gebilde*) belong to Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur*. According to Gadamer, we naturally know that some playful or poetic texts belong to this great Western canon because, even in translation, in and of themselves, “they are true and valid for all time” (144).<sup>38</sup> Hence, for Gadamer, the canon

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<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Trans. Barden and Cumming, New York: Crossroad, 1985. The original German follows:

Die Spiele selbst unterschieden sich voneinander durch ihren Geist. Das beruht auf nichts anderem, als daß sie das Hin und Her der Spielbewegung, die sie sind, je anders vorzeichnen und ordnen. Die Regeln und Ordnungen, die die Ausfüllung des Spielraums vorschreiben, machen das Wesen eines Spieles aus. Das gilt in aller Allgemeinheit überall dort, wo überhaupt Spiel vorliegt (112).

<sup>37</sup> For Gadamer play is structure and structure is play, hence play is lasting and true because it “characterizes the independent and superior mode of being of what we call structures” (102). When play is transformed into structure it becomes transcendent and true:

Die Verwandlung ist Verwandlung ins Wahre...Der Begriff der Verwandlung soll also die selbständige und überlegene Seinsart dessen, was wir Gebilde nannten, charakterisieren. Von ihm her bestimmt sich die sogenannte Wirklichkeit als das Unverwandelte und die Kunst als die Aufhebung dieser Wirklichkeit in die Wahrheit (118).

<sup>38</sup> “Ebenso beweist das Dasein einer Übersetzungsliteratur, daß sich in solchen Werken etwas darstellt, was noch

is not a problematic construct but rather a natural paradigm structured around works which are in essence true, beautiful, and therefore, eternal. What makes the work of art or poetic literature part of the canon, is the way in which it has crystallized play, giving form to spirit (*Geist*). Because of the play element, which is the essence of its components, the canon arises of itself and has not, by Gadamer's lights, been constructed around ideological conceptions of 'truth' or 'beauty', to the exclusion of otherness.<sup>39</sup>

Play, according to Gadamer, is movement which becomes perceptible in games such as art forms, through a process of transformation which mediates between the *va-et-vient* movement of play, and the spectator or player. However, while Gadamer's ontological concept of play correctly understands play as the back-and-forth movement between players (the spectator and the work of art, the reader and the novel), he goes on to argue for the transcendence, eternity and truthfulness of the game, the work of literature, or the object of art. This raises problems around concepts such as the 'essence' or the 'spirit' of the work of art which transcend being. In other words, Gadamer advances the basic assumption that play, quite simply, is movement, but then goes on to say that games which are the formalization or representation of play are implicitly true and belong to the canon of high art.<sup>40</sup>

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immer und für alle Wahrheit und Gültigkeit hat" (167).

<sup>39</sup> According to Gadamer, "the literary work of art, is declared to belong to world literature"...because its "literary merit has caused it to be considered" worthy of a place in the canon of *Weltliteratur* (144) (Denn wenn schon Zugehörigkeit zur Weltliteratur nur einem literarischen Werk zuerkannt wird...durch ihre schriftstellerischen Vorzüge sich den Anspruch erworben haben, als literarische Kunstwerke gewürdigt und zur Weltliteratur gezählt zu werden. 167-8) That this process occurs in the passive rather than the active mode, implies that it takes place spontaneously and seemingly naturally because of something essential or intrinsic to a particular work of art. Therefore, there is no subjective authority which awards this status, and we are to assume that this comes to pass without ideology, and outside considerations such as gender or ethnicity.

<sup>40</sup> It would be difficult, using Gadamer's model of play, to understand what kind of a game kitsch art and literature would constitute, since both of these represent in a playful way, yet they are neither 'pure structure' nor are they 'lasting and true'. In answer to this problem, Ludwig Giesz proposes his phenomenological concept of the *Kitschmensch* in "Über Spiel und Ernst" in *Phänomenologie des Kitsches*, p. 87-101, however this is something of a 'beauty is in the eyes of the kitsch-beholder' solution to the problem, and seems to me to suggest that some beholders are simply *déclassé*. Giesz, Ludwig. "Über Spiel und Ernst" in *Phänomenologie des Kitsches*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971, p. 87-101

Derrida's writing on the ludic, unlike the theories outlined above, provides a theoretical approach to play which takes into account its destabilizing effects as movement or circulation.<sup>41</sup> For example, in "La structure, le signe, et le jeu", (*L'écriture et la différence*) Derrida writes:

The concept of a centred structure is in fact the concept of a *game* based on a fundamental ground, a *game* constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset. And again on the basis of what we call the centre (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or end, *arché* or *telos*), repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always taken from a history of meaning—that is, in a word, history—whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence (279).<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Derrida's formulation of play foregrounds movement, rather than binary oppositions or 'structures'. Because he insists on movement and displacement, Derrida's approach to play embodies its own playfulness, that is to say, this account of play is flowing and open-ended because it is decentred and anticipates no fixed point of return. Hence, there is a play of substitutions and a fluidity built into Derrida's definition which 'keep in step' with the perpetual motion of play. Rather than attempting to arrest or control play by constructing it through, or as, 'structure' and anticipating its end as

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil, 1967. See also *Game, Play, Literature*, "Scribble (writing power)" (YFS 41, 1969) p.117-147.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. I have substituted the word game for play in Bass' text in some places, and this is indicated by italics. The following is the original text from *L'écriture et la différence*:

Le concept de structure centrée est en effet le concept du jeu fondé, constitué depuis une immobilité fondatrice et une certitude rassurante, elle-même soustraite au jeu. Depuis cette certitude, l'angoisse peut être maîtrisée, qui naît toujours d'une certaine manière d'être impliqué dans le jeu, d'être pris au jeu, d'être comme être d'entrée de jeu dans le jeu. A partir de ce que nous appelons donc le centre et qui, à pouvoir être aussi bien dehors que dedans, reçoit indifféremment les noms d'origine ou de fin d'*arché* ou de *telos* les répétitions, les substitutions, les transformations, les permutations sont toujours prises dans une histoire du sens—c'est-à-dire une histoire tout court—dont on peut toujours réveiller l'origine ou anticiper la fin dans la forme de la présence (410).

autotelos, the above focuses on indeterminacy, engendered by the volatility and the decentering effects of play which elude mastery.

Most importantly, Derrida's essay foregrounds the breakdown of the illusion of fixed structure in the case of games, or in the case of what Gadamer would see as essentially ludic cultural constructions such as canons of literature. Play displaces the centre, it moves through the configurations and permutations of games (of discourse, of military strategy, of economy, of law), upsetting the stakes and leaving destabilizing structures in its wake. Moreover, play dislodges and displaces the notion of centre so that we recognize the impossibility of retracing the 'structure' of game to a common source or origin where the movement of play would be halted: "the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible" (279).<sup>43</sup>

We are then, always already caught up in a game, which in turn is animated by play, so that we are set in motion by play. In other words, we pass through one game and into another, be it dead-serious or pleasurable, as a function of the *va-et-vient* of play. School children, for example, progress from the spelling-bee and other pedagogical games, to hopscotch or the baseball diamond, back to mathematics quizzes, and so on, throughout their day. Likewise we are caught up in professional games that are a part of the decentered social institutions through which play circulates, just as we might sit down to an evening of cards or a game of chess, and wake up to the crossword puzzle in the morning paper, before tackling the next day of political games in whatever institutional setting frames our daily routine.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "En tant que centre, il est le point où la substitution des contenus, des éléments, des termes, n'est plus possible...[mais] le centre n'est pas le centre" (410).

<sup>44</sup> Peter Greenaway's film *Drowning by Numbers* is an excellent illustration of the point I am trying to make. All of the action in the film is reduced to elementary childrens' games, including literally deadly serious activities such as death itself, hence the title, which makes of dying a sort of connect-the-dots. Moreover, because complex aspects of human existence are expressed as an allegorical game of snakes and ladders, the film nicely makes Derrida's point. Since complicated and even life-threatening games that we would ordinarily play in professional life (getting tenure, getting full professorship, taking early retirement) are represented in simplified board-game terms (do pass 'Go', do collect \$200.00, do go to Park Bench), we are compelled to understand life as a game circuit, rather than an on going-opposition of work to play, or the like. This is not to say that everything is fun, and indeed the gamewright of the movie hangs himself during the course of the last game, which is about suicide. What this does signify is that human activity can be theorized as a series of games (in Derrida's sense of systems, configurations, permutations), distinguishable from one another by virtue of the stakes and configurations of rules which inform them.

The notion of centre is rethought by Derrida as the infinite and random play of substitutions, which is endless because the centre is missing: the notion of the source and of the origin. The point of beginning which would anchor and arrest the movement of play, has been (or more correctly 'always already' was) evacuated. To be assured of centred structure would be to overcome the anxiety of which Derrida writes; to master the game by anticipating its outcome, to exclude, or to factor in, the element of chance. Play rather circulates through systems of relatively more stable rules, where it becomes perceptible as the *va-et-vient* that sets the game in motion, as a configuration of rules and hierarchies of value.

To say that we are always within the movement of play is not to say, like Ehrmann or Fink, that nothing is different from play. Nor is this to insist on the maintenance of a binary opposition, and subsequently to explain the vastness of play by reversing this opposition in order to privilege play. Play surrounds us and moves through us, but we are also distinct from it. It is perhaps no longer possible to think of structure as being fixed, stable, and immutable; it seems rather more likely to think, at our present moment, in terms of systems and configurations which are permeable, in greater or lesser degree, to movement, to change, and to play. Hence, what may appear to be a stable, sedentary structure is rather constantly shifting and in a state of flux.

Consider, for example, a house as a stable structure both in the literal sense and paradigmatically or metaphorically as a 'house of knowledge'. Over time the foundation gradually shifts, rooms will be added, walls will be knocked down, and the materials of which the house was made are subject to erosion and organic deterioration. However, there does exist a recognizable space to which we may come home, which remains in some measure fixed until it is raised. In other words there is a temporary 'stabilization' but never absolute stability, because any structure is permeable to play (the floor boards creak because there is play between them, there is play between the door and the jamb). Hence, play moves through and surrounds such a structural space, so that we may speak of it as being permeable to play yet distinct from it.

Likewise, it is significant that the game may, in Derrida's understanding of play, be defined as a system of configurations, substitutions and displacements through which

play passes. Games are not merely a play-form, nor do they dissolve into play; they have a substantiality and specificity which make them recognizable and repeatable. However, this does not mean that games are fixed structures. For example, while it may be the same Monopoly board which we get out every time we sit down to play, this does not mean that we always abide by the same rules, or that the game does not change over time. Likewise cards and card games, although we may think of them as having been the same for many centuries, have been and continue to be in a constant state of process, both synchronically as well as diachronically.<sup>45</sup> Hence, although we may assert that games partake of a certain stability, they are not, any more than houses, immutable, fixed structures which are rigid and impermeable to the movement and flow of play.

### ***5. Play/Game and the Question of Literature***

I have devoted a great deal of this chapter to disentangling play and game, because this moment is capital to understanding games as they appear in texts. Therefore, I have insisted that play and games are not one and the same for the simple reason that this thesis is about novelistic card *games*, and how they may be made to speak for the stakes of the discourse which is internal and external to the text. Games, as I have tried to show, are not the same as the *va-et-vient* movement of play: they are rather structured by more stable albeit conventional rules, which is why there is something to which we may return each time we want to play a particular game. In this way, I see a novel as being analogous to the game (most particularly, as I will argue, card games) since novels are structured by sentences, paragraphs, and chapters which lend them a certain rule-based recognizable configuration. While this may seem perfectly simple, numerous studies continue to be written about literary *play* which are principally about games and texts. This subsequently gives rise to a particular kind of confusion that I want to avoid in this analysis of fictional texts as games which interpolate the reader through play.

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<sup>45</sup> This point will be taken up again in Chapter 2, and it is the focus of the fourth chapter of this thesis.

For example, in *Dreadful Games: The Play of Desire and the 19th-Century Novel*, Nancy Morrow approaches literary play through the play/work opposition as it is constructed in 19th-century European and American fiction.<sup>46</sup> Morrow's approach, which is based primarily on *Homo Ludens*, is aimed at solving what appears to be a major discrepancy between the mood or *Zeitgeist* of the 19th century, and the narratives which came out of that period. Realist prose, which for Morrow is the fictional mode most representative of 19th century, offers the reader countless examples of situations featuring characters who are inveterate players of games. This seems odd, however, since the consensus in most writing on the 19th century is that, as centuries go, the 19th had very little sense of play and games indeed.<sup>47</sup> And this appears to be the crux of a paradox, for why should game-playing be a prominent image in fictional texts written at a time when, according to Morrow after Huizinga, people had at best a 'corrupted' or false sense of play?

What Morrow means by 'false play', is an interested playing for monetary gain, or for evil ends such as the death or downfall of a rival, foil, or innocent victim. Because Morrow's notion of what constitutes play is, for the most part, based on Huizinga's definition, she concludes that the scientific and utilitarian ideologies which dominated the 19th century were singularly resistant to properly gratuitous play, and gave rise to corrupt interested play.<sup>48</sup> Realist prose recounts an historical period in which play was opposed to work in the strongest sense as the world witnessed an increase in commerce, industrialism, and bureaucracies. Moreover, the industrial working class who subscribed

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<sup>46</sup> Nancy Morrow, *Dreadful Games: The Play of Desire and the 19th Century Novel*. Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (173-94): "The 19th century seems to leave little room for play...the great currents of its thought, however looked at, were all inimical to the play-factor in social life" (192).

<sup>48</sup> In the chapter of *Homo Ludens* entitled "Western Civilization *Sub Specie Ludif*", Huizinga writes of the 19th century: "...the great currents of its thought, however looked at, were all inimical to the play-factor in social life. Neither liberalism nor socialism offered it any nourishment. Experimental and analytical science, philosophy, reformism, Church and State, economics were all pursued in deadly earnest in the 19th century. Even art and letters, once the 'first fine careless rapture' of Romanticism had exhausted itself, seemed to give up their age-old association with play as something not quite respectable. Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism and the rest of that dull catalogue of literary and pictorial coteries were all emptier of the play-spirit than any of the earlier styles had ever been. Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness. Culture ceased to be 'played'" (192).



out of necessity to the work ethic, greatly expanded over the course of this century. The result was that play and work occupied separate spheres, and were meant to be activities pursued at different times, each at the expense of the other. In the 19th century, according to Morrow, “philosophical ideas worshipped ‘science’” (28). In other words, this was an age that looked to hard science to uncover ‘truth’ through experimentation, which would result in empirical, verifiable knowledge. Hence, the 19th century was also the period of history which witnessed the birth of Positivism, Utilitarianism, Darwinism and Marxism.

So how are we to reconcile the popular theme of game playing in 19th-century fiction with a predominantly resistant attitude towards play? Morrow has dealt with this problem by suggesting that fictional worlds of this century are possessed by a corrupted, faulty notion of play which reflects the ‘real’ world resistance to play contemporary to it. Apparently, 19th-century characters who play dreadful games, such as the bridge players in James’ *The Golden Bowl*, are confused about (or are simply unable to grasp) the “true nature” of play. They, therefore, sully and corrupt what Morrow, following Huizinga, sees as the true ludic spirit—play in its purest sense—by using it to serve the end of material gain. Such a conclusion, of course, arises from thinking play as autotelic, elevated, spontaneous, free, and gratuitous: in sum, Huizinga’s “play-concept”. As we have seen, this conceptualization of play necessitates that one posit the existence of something like a transcendent concept of play-proper, which translates into a correct ludic attitude and is subsequently corrupted as it takes shape in human activities which bring with them the trappings of ‘ordinary life’.

But whether or not the former century’s work ethic corrupted *play* is not what is really at stake in Morrow’s analysis, or for that matter, in many other texts published on play in literature. As the title of *Dreadful Games* indicates, what is at issue here is not the nature of play but rather that of *games*. These “dreadful games” are manifest in many forms in the novels Morrow studies, from card games and dice games to humorous plays or sketches, as for example in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. The essay is concerned with showing how game configurations in 19th-century fiction offer the reader a complex representation of contemporary philosophical issues, particularly in

relation to mimesis and play. But since the study is informed by Huizinga's notion of play, it is essential that Morrow interpret textual games (and games in texts) as forms of play, while maintaining that play leaves off as soon as material contingencies are involved, which is generally the case in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel.

However, what would happen were one to approach the question from another angle? Let us say that there is certainly a relationship between play and games, while at the same time focusing on the material factors which are involved in game playing. For instance, in *Mansfield Park* the characters play at many dreadful games which Morrow draws on in her argument. Henry Crawford of *Mansfield Park*, is a thoroughly corrupt and manipulative cad in matters of the heart, and proves himself a sly gamester when the characters of the novel sit down to an evening of speculation, a popular card game of the last century. As a *player of games*, Crawford skillfully functions within the systemic rules and hierarchies of speculation, being careful not to over-bid his hand and to dissimulate the value of the cards he has been dealt. Crawford indeed, does not play speculation, or any of the other games that present themselves in the narrative, in a disinterested or gratuitous spirit, that is, with an attitude that would correctly reflect the play-concept in Huizinga's definition. Crawford is most interested in winning and monetary gain, yet in spite of his interestedness which goes against the the 'play-concept', he is an excellent player.

On the other hand, one might well argue that Fanny Price is possessed of the correct spirit of play, one which properly apprehends play's gratuitous, elevated nature so that the idea of placing a wager, gambling, or the introduction of money into the game, is vulgar and scandalous to her. Consequently, at the game of speculation, Fanny "will have bought [the queen] too dearly" and will "not be allowed to cheat herself as she wishes" (Austen 185). In other words, although she personifies Huizinga's definition of the play-concept, Fanny Price is an unsubtle and ineffectual player of games. We see, therefore, that a proper ludic disposition does not a skilled card player make and, as Henry Crawford so aptly demonstrates, such a disposition may well be a liability. What is at issue is how well one understands and executes the moves of the game with the intention of winning, and not one's sense of gratuitous play.

What I hope has become evident is that, while we may play at games with a greater or lesser degree of seriousness, they are not play but rather cultural developments sometimes called games and sometimes called institutions. It becomes problematic to insist on calling games play-forms and talking about play rules, if one asserts that play is of a higher transcendent order, that it is the structure of structures, and that it leaves parts of itself behind as soon as these parts become contaminated and dragged down by materiality. For example, what happens to these play-forms as play leaves them because they participate increasingly in material interests? Do they lie dormant? Do people stop playing at them? Obviously not: one need only go to the horse races, or think about how enthusiastically people play the stock market, in order to confirm the contrary. Furthermore, because we possess no certain knowledge of a pre-fall period during which there existed play-forms which were not contaminated by materiality and human interest, one may only speak of uncorrupted play forms as imaginary primeval rituals, by attributing a lack of materialistic intentionality to the rites and games of the “noble savage” as potential examples of uncorrupted play.<sup>49</sup>

This is why it is important to understand play as moving through [game] systems, which in themselves become destabilized and do not remain rigid or fixed. While games (configurations, systems) and play are distinct, they are also fluid, mobile and flow through and into one another. In this way, we are not committed to judgements concerning the appropriateness of materiality to play, or to decisions concerning which systems play must recede from on the basis of corruption or material interest. If play moves beyond the centre and the origin, one is not obliged to posit some historical juncture at which we played disinterestedly and, therefore, correctly. Play is rather open-ended, keeps its own time, and is always in motion, moving on toward the next relatively stable game, and through that on to the next.

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<sup>49</sup> The best example I know of this kind of analysis of play is Fink’s *Spiel als Weltsymbolik* in which he presents muscular, homoerotic images of primeval rituals, and ancient Greek olympic events. Such works are highly imaginative, but as their content is almost strictly speculative nostalgia they do little to advance one’s understanding of play.

## 6. *The Game-Playing 'Subject'*

It is evident that the kind of games I am analyzing here—literary games, card games, language games—are based on subjective involvement. Card games more often than not involve interaction between players, and most novels are written by authors who invite the potential or presupposed reader to enter into, and play through, the game set up in the text. Moreover, great debt may be incurred through excessive card playing, which in turn leads to a loss of agency through the disappearance of an economic profile. Since the card playing that goes on in the novels I will deal with in this thesis involves subjective fragmentation or release of some kind, it will be necessary throughout this project to reflect on the implications of playing at games as a function of subject position, and subjective involvement, excessive or otherwise. It remains to be seen then, what happens to subjective agency as the subject engages with games.

As I have tried to show, the fact that one plays a game does not necessarily imply some kind of unbounded expression of human liberty or freedom from 'ordinary life', because games are a part of the 'structures' and institutional spaces that make up our experience of the quotidian. There exists perhaps gratuitous, unrestricted play, *as well as* game configurations with rules which are stable to varying degrees, and stakes which vary in terms of seriousness. The two constantly interact since games may certainly be animated by play, however, they are properly seen as separate entities. What is cognizable to human beings is a mediated experience of play, as it comes to us through playing at games. In other words, while we may never know absolute gratuity or 'free play', we do have a certain modified experience of it in games that we play. Therefore, we know play as it is temporarily contained in, and mediated through games, but while play may be gratuitous, there is no reason why the games through which it circulates may not be laborious, lucrative or dreadful, just as they may be fun or entertaining.

Therefore, while games give form to play, they also have a tendency to absorb the player entirely, and ultimately to deprive the player of certain subjective freedoms, such as the choice to disengage. Such is the case in Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*, or with the young engineer in Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades", who are both reduced to

dependency and partial subjectivity, rather than empowered, autonomous agency. It is the inherent capacity of games to enslave the player that accounts for the potentially addictive attraction of gambling. In Caillois' terms we could call this the *ilinx* aspect of playing at games, the giddy, excited intoxication which accompanies risk and occasions a loss of control, or an experience of the sublime<sup>50</sup> moment of relinquishing, in which one gives oneself over to something beyond one's control. This is the point that Gadamer is making when he writes:

The primacy of the game over the players engaged in it is experienced by the players themselves in a special way, where it is a question of human subjectivity that adopts an attitude of play...One can only play with serious possibilities. This means obviously that one may become so engrossed in [games] that they, as it were, outplay one and prevail over one. The attraction of the game, which it exercises on the player, lies in this risk. One enjoys a freedom of decision, which at the same time is endangered and irrevocably limited...all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game tends to master the players (Gadamer 95).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> In writing 'sublime' I am aware of the weight of the tradition behind this word. I am using 'sublime' to connote something similar to what Richard Klein speaks of in *Cigarettes are Sublime*. Klein writes for example that "Kant calls 'sublime' that aesthetic satisfaction which includes as one of its moments a negative experience, a shock, a blockage, *an intimation of mortality*", or again "Warning...[gamblers] or neophytes of the dangers entices them more powerfully to the edge of the abyss, where, like travellers in a Swiss landscape, they can be thrilled by the subtle grandeur of the perspectives on mortality opened by the little terrors in every [wager]. That is why [gambling] is good—not good, not beautiful, but sublime" (xi, 2). I have replaced smokers and smoking with gamblers and gambling in order to get my point across, and because the substitution of the one for the other is peculiarly fitting. Moreover, tobacco and gambling have been represented as a thematic entity (to which alcohol also belongs) in painting as well as in writing from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will have occasion to discuss this point in greater detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>51</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Trans. Sheed and Ward Ltd., New York: Crossroads, 1975:

Der Primat des Spieles vor den es ausführenden Spielern wird nun, wo es sich um menschliche Subjektivität handelt, die sich spielend verhält, auch von den Spielenden selbst in besonderer Weise erfahren...Nur mit ernstlichen Möglichkeiten kann man spielen. Das bedeutet offenbar, daß man sich soweit auf sie einläßt, daß sie einen überspielen und sich durchsetzen können. Der Reiz des Spieles, den es auf den Spieler ausübt, liegt eben in diesem Risiko. Man genießt damit eine Entscheidungsfreiheit, die doch zugleich gefährdet ist und unwiderruflich eingeengt wird...*Alles Spielen ist ein Gespieltwerden*. Der Reiz des Spieles, die Faszination, die es ausübt, besteht eben darin, daß das Spiel über den Spielenden Herr wird. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1990, p. 111-12 .

Hence, the player is not at the centre of play when playing a game, and to assume that the subject controls play is related to the supposition that games are necessarily fun or non-serious, within our capacity to control and exit at will, because they are an expression of subjective freedom. If we conceive of play and games as being separate entities, we need no longer deliberate on the question of how play becomes corrupted in games like poker, and why people may become addicted to gaming. When it is understood that play animates games corrupt, evil, pleasurable and wholesome alike, then there is no question of the play being robbed of its 'ludic buoyancy'. When we loose ourselves in games it is not because they are some form of evil or pure play, but rather because the game and its stakes overwhelm the subject who plays them, so agency is given over to the game, and to risk.

McLuhan discusses the question of subjective involvement in games as a function of their collective social function in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.<sup>52</sup> For McLuhan, "games, like institutions are extensions of the social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism" (208). Hence, games intrinsically imply a projection of the self beyond the self, they extend subjectivity outside of and past the subject who plays. When we play at games we loose ourselves either through cooperation with others in the service of achieving a common goal, or through intense involvement in the mechanics of a game. According to McLuhan, the depth of subjective participation in the game "erases the boundaries of individual awareness for individualist Western man" because individuality is surrendered to collective demands (210). When we relinquish individualistic subjectivity in games, we give ourselves up to participation in a larger spectacle, and in this state we recreate "the conditions and attitudes of primitive tribal man in ourselves" (210).

Hence, the subject at play gives selfhood over to a game such as solitaire or a novel as in Gadamer's model, or in another sense to collective subjectivity as for McLuhan. However, while it seems correct to say that one allows oneself to be absorbed in a game, or dispersed in a group activity, it is important to be cautious about the

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<sup>52</sup> Marshal McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

conclusions that one may draw. It is often remarked in this context, that premodern and postmodern society have a great deal in common, and these arguments frequently revolve around subjectivity, and the subject's self-awareness or abandonment thereof.

At least since Freud, it is accepted that the notion of the unified subject or well defined individual is no longer tenable. Hence, it has been suggested by McLuhan and others that postmodern notions of the self or the agent have more in common with what has been constructed as the 'primitive' or premodern collective notion of subjectivity. This is, of course no minor shift in human consciousness—it has explosive social ramifications because it affects the way in which people understand their circulation through every institution (economic, academic, religious) which comprises our daily experience.

People have, however, become at least tacitly familiar with the idea of dispersed or fragmented subjectivity in this century, and indeed many celebrate it. Giving over the need to maintain oneself as a rigidly defined individual involves a kind of release which occurs in many ways, as for example, the loosing of oneself in games. Many works on the subject see this moment in human consciousness as celebratory, orgiastic (Bataille), or pagan (Lyotard). While this may be the case—it is sometimes fun to loose oneself—one must keep in mind the limitations on how much one may give oneself over to loosely defined collective subjectivity. Perhaps at this juncture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the idea of unified individualistic subjectivity is no longer credible, but there is undeniably a moment of coming back, from the collective, to the self. To put it another way, just because a construction of the 'individual' in the 18<sup>th</sup>-or even in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sense of the term may no longer be functional, does not mean that in the current subjective mode, humans will celebrate their fragmented subjectivity in a spectacle of mass ritual suicide.

Moreover, one should be cautious in advancing a premodern construction of the subject, as a correlative of the postmodern 'subject' as, for example, when trying to understand subjective involvement in games.<sup>53</sup> In looking back to premodernity we are

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Wlad Godzich's preface to Doros-Louise Haineault and Jean-Yves Roy's *Unconscious for Sale: Advertising, Psychoanalysis, and the Public*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, p.ix-xix.

perhaps replacing one nostalgia with another, that is the unified subject has been replaced with a *vox populi* idea of what people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are about. Some have popularized a cult of the folk who “rise in one voice because of their lack of consciousness of difference”.<sup>54</sup> But this should be seen as rather a dialectical giving over of the self, which comes back to the self, and reaffirms partial subjectivity rather than subjective plenitude. As Rebecca Comay points out, if this were not the case, a blurring would set in which would paralyse “all hope of exit and mock every fantasy of regression as being the collusive daydream of the herd” (81).<sup>55</sup>

In terms of play and games, this release has been described as the moment when the subject gives herself over to deep play.<sup>56</sup> Deep play is related to the stakes of the game: the higher they are, the more we give ourselves up to play because the promise of extravagant, ecstatic loss (or gain) through the mechanism of the game is greater. But while this may be true, even the most addicted gambler knows that at some point it is time to regroup and pay off his gambling debts. The debt always returns to the ‘subject’ or the agent, and if one forgets that, there is always a bank or collection agency to remind one: *je dépense donc je suis*. The addictive gambler pays up or risks getting ‘rubbed out’, which is the ultimate loss of subjectivity. But then the game is really over.

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<sup>54</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> See Rebecca Comay’s article “Gifts without Presents: Economies of ‘Experience’ in Bataille and Heidegger”, in *On Bataille* YFS 78, 1990 p.66-89.

<sup>56</sup> On deep play “Cavendish” quotes the following in his *Card Essays* (London: Thos. De la Rue & Co., 1879) from Jeremy Collier’s “Essay on Gaming” (1713):

Deep play sets the spirits on float, strikes the mind strongly into the face, and discovers a man’s weakness very remarkably. You may see the passions come up with the dice, and ebb and flow with the fortune of the game. The sentence for execution is not received with more concern than the unlucky appearance of a cast or a card. Why resign repose of mind and credit of temper to the mercy of chance?...When misfortune strikes home, the temper generally goes with the money, according to the proverb, “Qui perd le sien, perd le sens”. When your bubbles are going down the hill, you lend them a push, though their bones are broken at the bottom (32-33).

See also Clifford Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1972 p. 412-453.



## 7. Conclusion

So then, play has a profound significance in our experience of being, and this significance is not necessarily about freedom, gratuity, or fun as many writers on the subject have claimed. If indeed play is devoid of interest, elevated and free, it is debatable whether or not we may ever hope to enjoy an unmediated experience of play in a pure form. My purpose here is not to speculate on what gratuitous and extravagant ‘jouissance’ or pure ludicity is, nor to set down a conclusive definition of play. Indeed, I have devoted this chapter to the relationship of play to games, and to disentangling the two, in order to move beyond the simple equation between literature and play, and as a preparative gesture to writing about the common features which novels and games share. Moreover, since the topic of this thesis is the card game in the novel of the 20th century, I have set out to describe how literary play is mediated through in this way in texts.

What remains to be determined is the relationship of literature to *games*, and more specifically of the game to the novel. Perhaps one might say, to paraphrase Rilke, that to read a novel is to catch a ball thrown by the author, and to create meaning in the trajectory of the ball as it is returned.<sup>57</sup> However, the relationship between a ball game, a language game, or for that matter a card game, and a novel is not symmetrically analogous for the simple reason that one of the players in the equation is missing, namely the author. Therefore, in the following chapter I will inquire into the limitations and specificities of novelistic games, given that their authors are generally absent or distanced. I will explain why card games are particularly apt and provocative devices for communicating the similarity obtaining between novels and games.

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Solang du Selbstgeworfenes fängst, ist alles  
Geschicklichkeit und läßlicher Gewinn,—  
erst wenn du plötzlich Fänger wirst des Balles,  
den eine ewige Mitspielerin  
dir zuwarf, deiner Mitte, in genau  
gekonntem Schwung, in einem jener Bögen  
aus Gottes großem Brückenbau;  
erst dann ist Fangen-können ein Vermögen,—  
Nicht deines, einer Welt.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

**CHAPTER 2**  
***Novels and Games***

Whist is a language, and every card played an intelligible sentence.

—Cavendish

As languages go a game of cards is superior in one respect to all other languages presently in employment, viz that the person who speaks it best, demonstrating the greatest fluency and the fanciest subordinate clauses, most likely ends up going home holding a sizable sack of potatoes.

—Salman Rushdie

No, but seriously, if you wished to be—I do not say original but merely contemporary—you might try a card trick in the form of a novel.

—Lawrence Durrell



**1. *Introduction***

In the previous chapter, I suggested that to discuss ‘literature’ as though it were ‘play’ is a very broad proposition and affords little insight into the question of what sort of ‘play’ or ‘literature’ one is talking about. In this chapter, I will narrow down the field of my inquiry, and be concerned primarily with explaining what it means to refer to novels as *games* in the larger context of discourse, and more specifically, of language itself. Language is often described as being in many ways analogous to games, based on certain elements common to both of them, such as rules and formal structure. The novel, itself a product of language, is a very complex kind of language game, which may

in turn contain or represent other games such as plays, card games and dialogues. Because of the analogy I assume between language and games, I will argue that the novel, as an essentially linguistic entity, is a type of *game* rather than some variety of literary *play*. Therefore, I will discuss the game of the novel as a construct of language which is also a game. My point is that, within the double frame of reference of the novel and of language, the narrative card game serves as a textual model.

Theories of literature which relate games and fiction often construct their arguments around rules, modes of progression, and subjective involvement, the same elements on which analogies between language and games are drawn. Significantly, rules are a primary element of games, language and fiction, and they are also what determines modalities of interacting or playing with fictional texts and games. Rules direct the to-and-fro movement of play in games, and in novels which are a specific kind of game, because they inform a given representational mode or goal.<sup>58</sup> In both cases, the reader or player must be familiar with the rules that govern the shape and 'spirit' of games and of texts, in order to obtain a certain goal, such as taking a trick or making sense. Games and novels, then, make sense through a rule-determined exchange of signs, a process which has been called semiosis.

Further, classes of rules for games and texts enable the participant to recognize a novel or game for what it is. This process generally occurs as a result of how a given class of rules shapes, contains and directs the movement of play within a game configuration. By relating the rules of fiction and games to one another, readers and players may form genres or families, such as linear narrative fiction or card games that share trump-taking. Hence, rules are a primary element in how we group various kinds of games into genres.

On the point of subjective involvement, both games and novels elicit or require a certain modality of participation. Once the game or novel is activated, certain strategies are needed in order to move through the hierarchies and configurations of the game/text. This is what we might refer to as the pragmatic situation of the game. Therefore, if my

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1990, on the 'spirit' of games and the transformation of play into structure, p. 112-13.

argument based on the relation which obtains between game and text is tenable in the specific case of the card game in the novel, it must be demonstrable that the aspects I have been outlining are somehow similar in both cases.

Therefore, because this thesis is devoted to the problematic of decoding card games recounted within the novel as a key to the game of the text in which they occur, I will proceed by explaining why literary texts (and other texts) are commonly seen as specific types of language games. This will be established on the basis of how language games present a system or a configuration of possible moves, in order subsequently to show how the narrative card game is a particularly apt literary device for imparting certain kinds of information to the reader. My working hypothesis then that the novel is in some respect a game, and therefore, a textual entity which can be summed up in short-hand through embedded narrative card games.

## ***2. Language and the Ludic***

In order to deal with the issues I have raised above—the relationship between language, games and novels—I will first proceed to a more general level and discuss the relationship between language and game. My task here is not to situate games within language, but rather to discuss language in general as a series of games.

Probably the best place to start is Ferdinand de Saussure's chess metaphor for language, in *The Course in General Linguistics*.<sup>59</sup> The chess metaphor occurs in the third chapter of the *Course*, where Saussure is at pains to describe the relationship which obtains between the historical and the simultaneous axes of linguistic development: those aspects of language which occur diachronically as "parole" and are present synchronically as "langue". This passage of the *Course* is the focal point of Saussure's argument, for it is here that the two axes of his thesis cross. Indeed, anyone who has read the *Course*, will probably remember the chess metaphor as a strikingly synthetic and lucid moment in the text, and I doubt that the persuasiveness of this metaphor is accidental:

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<sup>59</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Trans. Roy Harris, Illinois: Open Court, 1983.

But of all the comparisons one might think of, the most revealing is the likeness between what happens in a language and what happens in a game of chess. In both cases, we are dealing with a system of values and with modifications of the system. *A game of chess is like an artificial form of what languages present in natural form.*

[...] In the first place, a state of the board in chess corresponds exactly to the state of a language. The value of the chess pieces depends on their position on the chess board, just as in the language each term has its value through its contrast with all the other terms. Secondly, the system is only ever a temporary one. It varies from one position to the next. It is true that the values also depend ultimately upon one invariable set of conventions, the rules of the game which exist before the beginning of the game and remain in force after each move. These rules, *fixed once and for all*, also exist in the linguistic case, they are the unchanging principles of semiology (87-88). [My italics]<sup>60</sup>

Throughout the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure argues that language is arbitrary and context-determined, with the exception of rules to which he attributes the specificity of being “fixed once and for all”. So according to Saussure the relationship between *signifiant* and *signifié* is arbitrary, in part because a signifier does not have just one fixed ostensible referent. The production of meaning is based not on a rigid correspondence of sign to referent, but rather on a fluid *glissement*, a process in which the signifier glides along a signifying chain, generating sense as a function of difference. Therefore, signifiers are polysemous—they mean various things depending upon the setting in which they appear. In other words, meaning is context determined, so that “I’ll

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<sup>60</sup> Mais de toutes les comparaisons qu’on pourrait imaginer la plus démonstrative est celle qu’on établirait entre le jeu de la langue et une partie d’échecs. De part et d’autre, on est en présence d’un système de valeurs et on assiste à leurs modifications. Une partie d’échecs est comme une réalisation artificielle de ce que la langue nous présente sous une forme naturelle. Voyons la chose de plus près. D’abord un état du jeu correspond bien à un état de la langue. La valeur respective des pièces dépend de leur position sur l’échiquier, de même que dans la langue chaque terme a sa valeur par son opposition avec tous les autres termes. En second lieu, le système n’est jamais que momentané : il varie d’une position à l’autre. Il est vrai que les valeurs dépendent aussi et surtout d’une convention immuable, la règle du jeu, qui existe avant le début de la partie et persiste après chaque coup. Cette règle admise une fois pour toutes existe aussi en matière de langue; ce sont les principes constantes de la sémiologie (*Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot, 1982, p. 125-126).

Samuel Weber has pin-pointed this moment in the *Course in General Linguistics* as the undoing of Saussure's argument: “The question of how the play of difference ever comes to be systematically intelligible remains unanswered. Except, of course in the famous example of the chess-game, which in a curious and significant way disrupts the argument it is intended to illustrate” (39). “Closure and Exclusion”, *diacritics*, June 1980, p. 35-46.

fold”, for example, can mean one thing at a poker table, and quite another at the laundry. Saussure also pointed out that, while language develops historically or diachronically, there is also the present moment or synchronic axis which is of equal importance. Moreover, he advanced the notion that *parole*—the utterance of a particular speaker, or author—is as valid an object for linguistic investigation as *langue*, or the larger frame of reference which is language itself.

On a larger scale, Saussure’s work facilitated subsequent connections that have been made between linguistics and other disciplines such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology, and literary theory. Yet, in spite of Saussure’s many innovative and novel insights into the nature of language, he insisted that one aspect of language—the rules—remain immutable and “fixed once and for all”. This is perhaps noteworthy, given that Saussure ‘liberated’ thinking on language, and particularly notions held to have universal application are concerned. Yet, in the chess analogy he maintains that rules are resistant to diachronic and synchronic change.

According to Max Black, however, rules are far from being stable or easily defined. This is why rules have a particular status in language, which is manifest in their formulation.<sup>61</sup> The rule serves a function analogous to the performative (I swear, I do, I promise), in other words, it creates the state it signifies at the moment of pronouncing it. If this is the case, however, there is no activity called ‘ruling’, that is, one cannot say ‘I rule that all face cards will have the value of ten’. For Black, the absence of an identifiable grammatical form unique to the rule, is indicative of the ambivalent status of rules within language. Compare, for example, questions which take specific punctuation and for which there exist a limited number of recognizable forms. Rules, Black argues, are distinguished in their formulation from other kinds of sentences. Hence, “the dealer at bridge always bids first” could be read as a simple statement of fact rather than a rule, just as “no eating in theaters” may well be interpreted as a command rather than a rule. In fact, because rules are somehow inherently ambiguous,

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<sup>61</sup> See “The analysis of Rules” in Max Black’s *Models and Metaphors*, New York: Cornell University Press, p.1962, p. 95-139.

we most commonly preface them by saying “The rule that”, which underlines the status we are intended to give such statements (106-107).

Furthermore, the use-function of rules is determined by their formulation for use within a specific game, so that rules are defined by context, according to what they allow or interdict. Hence, rules are co-determined by their function within a particular language game; they are not fixed and do not apply ‘across the board’ once and for all. Therefore, to return to Saussure’s chess metaphor, rules seem unlikely candidates for the epithet “fixed once and for all”. Rather rules are polysemous and can mean many different things, depending on the game-context in which they function.

Putting aside Black’s variance with Saussure theory, I would like to discuss the game metaphor in and of itself as being singularly meaningful. For example, I would suggest that it is significant that Saussure saw games as a correlative for language and chose to describe the meeting of the diachronic and synchronic axes, the crux of his argument, in the figure of the chess game. Indeed, in this century many thinkers have conceptualized language as being essentially game-like about language, so that games have become the preferred metaphor through which to describe language. When we enter into dialogue, and the dialogical process of turn-taking is set in motion between interlocutors, then it is here that one aspect of language akin to the game makes itself evident.

Wittgenstein is another 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinker for whom language is inherently game-like, as he writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*. According to him, language is a series of ‘speaking activities’ which he called language games, and which he enumerates in the following passage:

Giving orders, and obeying them-  
 Describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements-  
 Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)-  
 Reporting an event-  
 Speculating about an event-  
 Forming and testing a hypothesis-  
 Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams-  
 Making up a story; and reading it-  
 Play-acting-

Singing catches-  
 Guessing riddles-  
 Making a joke; telling it-  
 Solving a problem in practical arithmetic-  
 Translating from one language into another  
 Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (*PI:23*).

If language is a plurality of games, then rules should function in the same way here as they do in other kinds of games, such as card games or language games, of which novels would logically qualify as one. According to Wittgenstein, language games consist of certain arbitrary rules which the players have agreed upon, because they are convenient and move the players as expeditiously as possible toward the goal of the game in which they are involved. Wittgenstein's model constitutes language as an agreed upon convention which we call grammar, operative within individual settings or games which must be understood one at a time. In each case, the linguistic practice required to play the language game successfully is different and bears its own unique set of appropriate and applicable rules. Quite simply put, in a game about 'making up stories' it might be perfectly acceptable to begin with 'once upon a time', whereas in a game about 'forming a hypothesis' this utterance would either be inadmissible, or taken to mean something entirely different than it did in the first case. Meaning, therefore, is contextual and is produced in the playing of each game. It is also bound to the use-potential of a linguistic element in a specific game, so that the production of meaning cannot be reduced to a systematized, homogeneous structure which explains all states of language at all times. Hence, language games in Wittgenstein's sense, are open-ended and constantly undergo change.

Wittgenstein affirms that games consist of their rules and it is on this point that he founds his analogy between language and games: rules are to games what grammar is to language.<sup>62</sup> In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard has summarized Wittgenstein's notion of rules and their role in language games in the following passage:

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<sup>62</sup> "Grammar describes the use of words in the language. So it has somewhat the same relation to the language as the description of a game, as the rules of a game have to the game" *Philosophical Grammar*, R. Rhees (ed.), A. Kenny (trans), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974. p.60.



Three observations are worth making on the subject of language games. The first is that their rules do not have their legitimization in themselves, but that they are the object of a contract, whether or not it is explicit, between the players, (which is not to say that the players invent the rules). The second is that in the absence of rules there is no game, that even a minimal modification of a rule modifies the nature of the game, and that a 'move' or an utterance that fails to comply with the rules does not belong to the game defined by those rules. The third remark has just been suggested: every utterance must be considered as a 'move' in a game (CP 19).<sup>63</sup>

So rules are not an entity on their own, but rather exist in an on going process of contractual renegotiation, or an indeterminate state of revision. Lyotard's *Au juste* opens with the epigram "La règle de l'indéterminé est elle-même indéterminée" which concisely explains the relation of the rule to the game.<sup>64</sup> That is, rules do not exist in the presence of stable, centered structures, and so what they make possible (or impossible) is not predictable. Hence, rules are not immutable, but rather indeterminate, so that players do, to some extent, 'make up the rules as they go along' from one game context to the next.

Two problems arise from this discussion of the game and the rule, which bear further investigation. First: if for Wittgenstein language is a series of rule-based games which articulate the discrete communicational situations that inform them (testing a hypothesis, telling a joke, writing an essay), then novels would be constituted as a series of language games, and Wittgenstein would support the argument on which my thesis hinges. But if this is the case, is it possible to compile the rules for telling jokes or writing stories in the same way that the rules for contract bridge have been assembled by

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<sup>63</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979, p.22-23:

Trois observations valent d'être faites au sujet des jeux de langage. La première est que leurs règles n'ont pas leur légitimation en elles-mêmes, mais qu'elles font l'objet d'un contrat explicite ou non entre les joueurs (ce qui ne veut pas dire pour autant que ceux-ci les inventent). La seconde est qu'à défaut de règles il n'y a pas de jeu, qu'une modification même minime d'une règle modifie la nature du jeu, et qu'un 'coup' ou un énoncé ne satisfaisant pas aux règles n'appartient pas au jeu défini par celles-ci. La troisième remarque vient d'être suggérée: tout énoncé doit être considéré comme un 'coup' fait dans un jeu.

<sup>64</sup> François Lyotard. *Au juste*, Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979.

Goren? Furthermore, if games are made up of their rules, must players of necessity be able to summarily list the rules of the game in question? And if one is to define novels as games with a constituent set of rules, must one then be able to cite these rules exhaustively in order to engage with this variety of textual game effectively? In other words, is language actually a game or is this, more correctly, an analogy which has been extended to texts?

Second: Wittgenstein is clear on the point that games are completely different from one another. Games have nothing more in common with each other than perhaps a few superficial features, which make it possible to classify them loosely as families, but in essence they are radically heterogeneous. Rules of games, like rules of grammar are arbitrary and serve no purpose external to the system to which they belong. If some essential element of a game is changed, then a different game is created. These changes may involve some part of the game's material composition—the board, the place-markers, or in the case of text games, the binding, the pagination—or a systemic rule, such as the number of players, the goal, or the mode in which the game is played.

I, however, want to investigate the possibility that there is something which all games share and which would be common to all of them. While I am not attempting to erect a structural metarule common to all games, games must certainly share at least one common feature. If games had absolutely nothing in common, however minimal, it seems that the transition from one game to the next would be awkward and disruptive, if not nearly impossible. Moreover, we are able to recognize and describe one game from inside another without disruption. For example, telling a joke and explaining how it works might be part of a hypothesis about language or psychoanalysis (think of Freud's *The Relationship of Jokes to the Unconscious*) and this would suggest that they must have something more in common than Wittgenstein has proposed.

In the first case, Roy Harris has raised several objections to Wittgenstein's argument, in *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words*. Harris asks how rigorously one may apply the game analogy to language, particularly where rules are concerned.<sup>65</sup> Can we, for example, really play a game effectively

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<sup>65</sup> Roy Harris. *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words*. New York: Routledge,

without being thoroughly acquainted with the rules? Is the ability to play a game tantamount to knowing its rules and can one have perfect knowledge of the rules of a language game (a joke, a novel, a thesis) in the same way that players can know the rules of chess? Wittgenstein has posed this question himself and answered it in the following manner:

What's the sign of someone's understanding a game? Must he be able to recite the rules? Isn't it also a criterion that he can play the game, i.e. that he does in fact play it, even if he's baffled when asked for the rules? Is it only by being told the rules that the game is learnt and not also simply by watching it being played? Of course a man will often say to himself while watching "oh, so that's the rule", and he might perhaps write down the rules as he observes them; but there's certainly such a thing as learning the game without explicit rules (*PG* 62).

Of course, there are many games that we play without consciously being capable of reciting the rules. For example, it would be possible to teach someone a card game by playing a 'dummy hand' before playing for points, rather than reading the rules aloud from the Hoyle. However, in a game like cribbage which has many seemingly gratuitous rules for scoring bonus points, teaching the game without being able to list all of the rules, or without an authoritative guide, could be problematic. Indeed, without the benefit of perfect knowledge, it is likely that the first time one of the players turns up 'his knob' or 'his heels', the instructor would have to admit having forgotten to explain this rule, and count the additional points for herself or her opponent, with some embarrassment. Indeed, then, one may be a skilled cribbage player, without being able to list the rules summarily.

Likewise, many people are fully competent native-speakers of languages without having any formal knowledge whatsoever of that language's grammar. In fact people are perfectly capable of communicating verbally, without having perfect knowledge of the rules of a grammar. Likewise people are able to write sentences without being able to parse them, to identify a subordinated clause, or to describe any of the formal rules of grammar which subtend sentence construction. By extension, many people who are avid

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readers of novels, have never heard of narratology or, any other theory of literature which proposes a formalized grammar of the diegetic features of narrative fiction.

It does seem, therefore, that people can and do play all sorts of games without being able to recite the rules *verbatim*, and indeed in some instances, without so much as being aware of their existence. This applies for the rules of card games, novels, word games, grammar and textual games. Moreover, in any kind of game the rules are arbitrary and at least partially context-determined. Thus for David Parlett, the author of *A History of Card Games*, the only two rules which may be thought of as stable are based on the necessity of factoring in arbitrary agreement: everyone who is playing should agree to follow the same rules at the same time, and everyone should know what rules they are following, but of course this is not always the case.<sup>66</sup> Rules, then, are agreed upon and they change as a function of context, so that it would be impossible to know all of the rules to any game exhaustively.<sup>67</sup> To do so, would be to list the known or immediate code of rules and then to account for the possible set of immanent rules which would manifest itself when the game is activated in play. Likewise, in order to master language games one does not have to be able to recite all possible codes of grammar in order to qualify as a competent communicator.

According to Harris, one could object that the analogy between language and games has been carried too far: “[g]ames are games...precisely because they have no connection with the rest of social life or intellectual activity. They afford us a welcome opportunity to opt out of everyday routines and relax; and the self-contained, insulated character which games have is essential to this function” (77). This concurs with Saussure’s meaning, when he wrote that chess is an *artificial* model of language, while language is a *natural* phenomenon. In other words it is assumed that games are

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<sup>66</sup> David Parlett. *A History of Card Games*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>67</sup> Because rules are contextual, Parlett has formulated the two universal rules of card games as: 1) everyone at the same table should be following the same rules at the same time, and 2) everyone at the same table should know which rules they are following (Parlett 50). These are the minimum requirements for card players just as they are the utopic base requirements for any other communicational game. Although one might argue that novels are solipsistic games, the necessity of settling on ground rules still applies: if the solitary player does not decide to adopt and stick to a code of rules she might just as well be playing Fifty-Two-Pick-Up, or building a castle of cards.

somehow a facsimile of the 'real' which and are divorced from 'reality', rather than a part of it.

However, for Wittgenstein, the relationship between games and language is not an analogy: language *is* a game. Chess and card-games are not tiny models of language but rather one example of the same thing: a game. At the bottom of arguments such as Saussure's and Harris' is a conception of games as being inherently artificial<sup>68</sup>, and therefore, in some respects more trivial since they are seen as not being universal in the same way as language. But then, if language *is* a game, what is really at stake is defining the game. If we see games as being self-contained and closed off from reality then they are, indeed, just an analogy for how language works, and perhaps even a poor one at that. However, if one opens up the definition of game to include all games from the simplest (hop scotch, crazy eights) to the most complex of social systems (the stock market, wars), then the position shifts radically.

It is often claimed that games, like the ones children play, have no goal or purpose outside of themselves and are, therefore, trivial or insignificant<sup>69</sup>. If games are seen in this way, the idea of describing war as a game appears to caricature or minimize its seriousness. In *On War* however, Clausewitz, one of the major military strategists of the 19th century, uses a game model to theorizes the two axes of military intelligence as *tactics* ("acts, each complete *in itself*") and *strategy* ("planning and executing these engagements themselves") (128).<sup>70</sup> Revealingly enough, for Clausewitz war is systematized as progression of acts which are complete in themselves. Each tactical maneuver has a singular and self-contained goal and a multiple of these tactical maneuvers comprises the strategy. Hence, the interaction of tactics and strategy is best

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<sup>68</sup> McLuhan, on the other hand, argues that games are like language *because* they are both artificial. In *Understanding Media* he wrote: "[Games are] like vernacular tongues, all games are medial of interpersonal communication, and they could have neither existence nor meaning except as extensions of our immediate inner lives. If we take [...] thirteen playing cards in hand, we consent to being a part of a dynamic mechanism in an artificially contrived situation", one that is analogous to linguistic communication (210).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Kathleen Blake, *Play Games, and Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974, "Games", p. 56-94.

<sup>70</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

described according to Clausewitz as having the same functional properties as card games.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Clausewitz is quite explicit in his view that this is no metaphor, but rather that to theorize war as a game is a statement about the ‘real’ state of affairs. In other words, Clausewitz does not understand games as being artificial or non-goal oriented, but rather as fully integrated into the ‘real’, so that the relationship between game and war is motivated.

Therefore, when we say that ‘games are analogous to language’ rather than ‘language is a game’, we are placing games outside of experience, or at least outside of the experience of language. To quote Harris, “languages [unlike games] are not set apart from the rest of social life. Linguistic activity is all-pervasive” (77). However, one could equally argue that games are not ‘set apart from the rest of social life’, and that they are indeed a profound and meaningful part of social life and interaction. I would suggest, moreover, that linguistic persuasiveness can only argue against language being a game, in the event that one’s definition of game is too narrow.

To return to the second consideration that has arisen in this discussion of games and rules, namely the heterogeneity of games, I cite the following passage from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*...Now to pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group [board-games], but many common features drop out, and others appear...And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family...And for instance the kinds of number form a family...And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length...But if someone wished to say: “There is something common to all these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common properties”—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: “Something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of fibers” (*PI*: 66, 67).

<sup>71</sup> On this point, see also Jean-Pierre Etievre’s article “Du jeu comme metaphor politique: Sur quelques textes de propogande royale diffusés en Espagne à l’avènement des Bourbons”, in *Poétique*, No. 56, 1983, p.397-415.

In answer to Wittgenstein I would forward the possibility that the common fiber that runs through the length of the thread is play. If there is one simple feature which all games share it is just this: that we interact with them, we play at them. This interaction constitutes our subjective experience of the game entity. Games are activated by play, a play which is articulated through the rules that inform the system of the game. A deck of cards is a potential game but it does not come into play until shuffled, dealt and put into motion by the players. Like the fibers of a thread, games overlap, opening onto one another, and it is play which runs through and animates games. Likewise, when one picks up a work of fiction, a novel for instance, one is effectively entering into a special kind of dialogue or ludic repartee with the text, filling in gaps, taking turns and second guessing the author.

Furthermore, when a game comes into play its most salient feature manifests itself, namely, chance, the aleatory. This is why many games are open ended, raise unforeseeable combinations and result in incalculable effects: as soon as they are activated some game systems will occasion unpredictable occurrences and evoke the event of the next game in the process. Likewise, if language is an endless progression of games which overlap and which are held together or related to one another by aleatory play, reading a novel effectively activates a series of language games. Our entry into play with the text brings with it an infinite array of chance interactions and possibilities.

In the case of a novel, the equation of probable outcomes is informed by two base factors: the experiential information encoded in the text by the author, and that which is decoded by the reader based on his own experience, and both of these factors are mediated through the text. And since, as I have just argued, language is essentially a game system animated by play, the reader's experience of the text is essentially ludic. Likewise, on the side of the author, writing is a playfulness which is always in the process of unfolding itself through the mobile, shifting structures and hierarchies of the grammar game. Indeed, the verb 'to spell' in English comes from the root *spelen*,

whence *spelen* in Dutch and in German *spielen* to play: to enter language, to write, to engage grammar, to spell, is to play game.<sup>72</sup>

Derrida discusses the profound relationship between play, writing and the aleatory. in *L'écriture et la différence*.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Derrida opens his essay with a 'chance' citation from Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*, underlining the relation between language and one specific aspect of ludicity, and suggesting that texts are woven by the random movement of the signifier.<sup>74</sup> Since, language is set in motion by the free play of the signifier; it comes into being through chance, and is therefore, a dicey business. Chance mobilizes free-play but it cannot be factored in ahead of time so that one could predict endings, and come out even. Instead, because chance, which cannot be brought into line, is an inherent factor in language, writing always produces a surplus, a supplement which is dangerously aleatory. In "The Father of Logos", Derrida again writes of chance and language, opening his text with the story of the Divinity Theuth or Thoth of Naucratis to whom the invention of "numbers and calculation, geometry and astronomy, *not to speak of draughts and dice and above all writing (grammata)* has been attributed".<sup>75</sup> This is the mythical origin of writing which speaks of writing as a chance event, the hazardous concurrence (from Arabic *az-zahr*: the die) of elements, coming together as in the throw of the die, to form a thought, or a poem.

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<sup>72</sup> That the Word Perfect spellar has a function called 'wild card' suggests that people still somehow experience spelling as playful, or as being some form of game.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Derrida. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967.

<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the connection between the aleatory, the ludic, and writing is also what inspired Lacan to open the introduction to his *Écrits* with the following:

Par cette chaîne apparaît qu'il n'y a de maître que le signifiant. Atout-maître: on a bâti les jeux de cartes sur ce fait du discours. Sans doute, pour jouer l'atout, faut-il qu'on ait la main. Mais cette main n'est pas maîtresse. Il n'y a pas trente-six façons de jouer une partie, même s'il n'y en a pas seulement une. C'est la partie qui commande, dès que la distribution est faite selon la règle qui la soustrait au moment de pouvoir de la main (7).

Jacques Lacan. *Écrits I*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Disseminations*, Trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p.75. "J'ai entendu conter que vécut du côté de Naucratis, en Égypte, une des vieilles divinités de là bas... qui découvrit la science du nombre avec le calcue, la géométrie et l'astronomie, et aussi le trictrac et les dés, enfin, sache-le, les caractères de l'écriture" (93). Jacques Derrida *La dissémination*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972.



### 3. *Rules for Text*

Having established that language is a game, I would now like to turn to the context of fiction, in order to show how the novel, as a specific discursive form, may be effectively described and understood as a specific kind of game. I have argued that the most fundamental and salient feature of games is their rules, and that novels are a kind of language game. If novels are to be understood as games in more than a metaphoric sense, then they must share some basic features which it will be necessary to outline. In so doing, I hope to describe the kinds of rules that tell the reader what novel-game s/he is sitting down to. These are the same rules that make it possible to play along with the text, through the execution of appropriate moves, toward the goal of making sense. It is by recognizing the rules of the novel-game, that the reader is able to participate in the text and make sense.

The novel repeats a variety of codes of rules, and may thereby, represent some version of reality, virtual or otherwise. The novel then, may take the form of play based on mimesis, the play of representations. If this is the case, the condition of textual imitation is adherence to certain rules. Rules ground representation, because they are the condition of the copy and its capacity to imitate. The rule gives form to the game of representation, and makes it recognizable and re-playable in its mimetic capacity to signify to a familiar fictional situation. Mimetic fiction in the novel form is more properly seen as a game, because it conforms to rules which govern the relationship of the text to the things which it imitates.

Rules for imitation may be as elemental as Aristotle's mandate in the *Poetics* that a story have a beginning, a middle and an end or as abstract as Kandinsky's rules for the use of color on canvas. However stringent or liberal a poetics of representation may be it remains, nonetheless, a collection of rules, and it is rules which ground the fundamental difference between play and game.<sup>76</sup> This is why in order to participate in

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<sup>76</sup> I believe it is safe to say that rules are the primary element of games, and that things with rules are, at least in this respect, analogous to games.

the communicational situation set up in any text/game, the reader must be, to some degree, conversant with the rules that give it form and govern its perimeters. Like any game configuration, novels are interactive and ask us to make certain moves, to anticipate the next best possible move based on the information we have received, in order to arrive at the goal of making some sort of sense. They recount, in some measure, the systems and configurations of daily experience through which the reader passes in the 'real' world, however far from stable the reader's concept of the 'real' may be.

The reader's perception of the 'real' is best summarized, for my purposes, by Foucault's definition of the 'episteme':

By episteme we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalizations are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures and practices (1).<sup>77</sup>

Therefore, in concurring with Foucault, I would suggest that knowable and cognizable constituents of the real, are subject to an on-going process of shifting and regrouping and that, as a consequence, the reader's notion of reality is subject to constant change. This is because certain statements concerning what we understand as being part of the real world are possible and comprehensible at different times. Since meaning is contingent on the context to which the reader belongs, she will make sense of statements and texts as a function of familiar rules, objects, and the relations between these things when they are encountered in texts.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

<sup>78</sup> Any text, if it is to be understood to any degree, assumes a certain comprehension of the communicational situation at hand, and that the reader will adjust her approach to the text accordingly. We read newspapers, science text books and telephone directories with different presuppositions concerning such things as truth-value and referentiality.

For example, Chomsky coined the now famous phrase “green ideas sleep furiously”, as an illustration of what a linguistically competent speaker of the English language would reject as incorrect and incomprehensible. While this phrase may be syntactically grammatical, it was given as an example of a statement which is semantically incorrect, based partially on referentiality—that is, it refers to something that one would discount as impossible or unreal. However, the same phrase is now understood and widely known as ‘a sentence that linguists use’, and has, therefore, become a part of what many accept as their lexicon of the ‘real’ because it functions as a reverse example of the rule of linguistic competence.<sup>79</sup> The sentence still has no semantic value, whereas it has come to have referential value: it is a case to which we may point as a negative illustration of a rule. Hence, the phrase “green ideas sleep furiously” has taken on secondary meaning within a certain pragmatic context.

The material features of the text are also part of the rules which inform it, and determine the pragmatics of how meaning is produced and received. These are the elements of the text which make up its concrete form, and which influence the reader’s understanding. Books, for example, generally conform to certain standards of print, order, and pagination so that in the West readers expect, as a rule, to read from left to right. We anticipate that books will have a certain palpability: that we will be able to dog-ear pages and write in the margins. However, rules concerning printing and pagination, which make books consistently recognizable to readers, are not stable: they are not fixed structural elements, but rather part of a systemic configuration which itself is in a state of flux. But, as long as books and novels continue to be bound and printed on paper, readers will expect them to conform to some aspect of format which is recognizable.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida “Signature, événement, contexte”, dans *Les marges de la philosophie*.

<sup>80</sup> As I write, of course, this is becoming less and less the case. On the book and its constant development see Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection*, particularly Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 2, for example, Stewart points out that the invention of printing coincided with the development of micrographia and the miniature book. She thereby shows that the invention of printing was accompanied by a parallel and destabilizing phenomenon, namely “the miniature book [which] always calls attention to the book as total object” (44). Indeed, because miniature books must be read with the aid of a magnifying glass they challenge the social space of reading and are, moreover, “an affront to reason and its principal sense: the eye” (40). Hence, no sooner was the book established as a format in which printed matter

The material features of non-electronic texts and games constitute certain of their elemental rules, and ground the game of communication into which the reader or player will enter. Hence, in all kinds of games, textual and otherwise, this is to some extent a function of specific implements and rules. In the realm of card games and board games, for example, we know that there are fifty-two cards in a deck, and that in order to play the game of Snakes and Ladders we need a board that has been marked out accordingly, dice and an opponent. Cards, dice, markers and boards are the basic material components of games which form a given communicational situation, and which make this situation recognizable as such. Without these material components we may have another variety of game altogether: with a different board and place markers we may find ourselves playing scrabble, monopoly or chess. Textual games, likewise, share this feature in terms of ordering and divisions, which channel the reader's interaction and progress through the text, thereby influencing comprehension.<sup>81</sup> Hence readers expect that they will turn pages, that they will do so based on some mode of continuity or progression, and they might also expect that this information be divided into chapters. Narrative fiction depends on how information is both disclosed to, and withheld from the reader, a process which is analogous to way in which information comes to players of card games, that is one page or card at a time, turned to disclose information. Similarly, the way in which the reader recognizes a textual game and knows how to play it, is analogous to how players read the cards they are dealt, and interpret the incremental out-lay of information as the hand is played.

The features or rules of a book which make it, like a game, consistently recognizable to us are both internal and external. Some of these features and rules concern the very materiality in which a book consists, while others are a function of the

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would be bound and received, than the most basic element of its conceptualization, its readability, was undermined.

On the development of the space of the page and of the book, see "Print, space and closure" in Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*, New York: Methuen, 1982. p. 117-138.

<sup>81</sup> See Lotman's article "The Theme of Cards and the Card Game in Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century", *PTL*, 3 (1978): "Faro fragments its own universum...it fragments [the novel] into separate indivisible sign-states—the cards—and the intervals between them...each card possesses a certain significance, and the unconnectedness of the episodes in the narrative [of the card game] is reminiscent of the novel" p. 469-70.

pragmatic context in which we come across it. This is because what books mean as objects is co-determined by the pragmatic context in which they are situated. For example, a comic book in a museum of modern art, or in a dentist's waiting-room, are both comic books, but readers familiar with the rules of Western cultural practice which determine codes of value and disposition, will distinguish between the two.<sup>82</sup> In each case what the book/object means is something quite different based on a code of rules: while one of the comic books is an *objet d'art*, the other is something with which a child may amuse himself. Hence, there exists certain traditional behaviors with which readers are familiar as a result of familiar cultural practices and previous experiences of making sense

#### 4. Rules and Genres

In a previous section I discussed the arbitrary and unstable nature of rules for games. This applies equally to all sorts of games from novels to card games. The novel form is no more a stable formulaic set of narrative patterns and structures, than games are immutable configurations of rules. In fact, the word 'novel' self-consciously draws attention to the form's intrinsic imperative for innovation. The genre, and the novel form, are subject to constant revision, and challenged by such works as Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* or Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, and so on. Indeed from early on novels have played games on themselves and on their status as fiction, hence works like *Tristram Shandy* which foreground the genre's propensity for innovation. Furthermore, narrative divisions such as chapters, cantos, or letters are particularities of narrative form. This is why some novels foreground form in order to subvert it, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, a text which destabilizes rules concerning standardized print and format by juxtaposing print forms. These procedures subvert the most basic assumptions about how a book should be segmented and what the print should look like.

The novel is an unstable genre, so that whatever may be proposed as a code of rules for things like narrative sequence, is immediately undercut by numerous

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. Mieke Bal's *Double Exposures*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.87-135

exceptions. For example, readers tend to expect that narrative follow a linear progression from beginning to end, at least since Aristotle's wrote in the *Poetics* that stories necessarily have a tripart construction. This is why narrative forms that are, for example, circular or fragmentary, scramble expectations of linear sequence and seem to oppose or deviate from the rule. Moreover, the linear narrative is persistently challenged by innovations such as stream of consciousness, which is now in itself a recognizable genre and under which we may group Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, or Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, there are novels such Nabokov's *Ada*, which have, in fact, no end and which playfully disappoint any desire the reader might have for textual closure.

Innovations on the rules which govern the form of the novel are similar to Chomsky's phrase 'green ideas sleep furiously', and become known and consistently recognizable as examples from the lexicon of the 'real'. Hutchinson, in his book entitled *Games Authors Play*, calls these kinds of stylistic novelties 'jokes' by which the reader is amused, because s/he understands the referential context of the pun. In this particular variety of fiction, jokes or games are akin to shaggy dog stories in which the reader is left with egg on his face, because the text in question has upset his assumptions about how things like stories should turn out. These assumptions, according to Hutchinson, are based on rules of narrative which the reader has gathered from his experiences of stories, and because of which he will anticipate the conformity of new stories, to some format which is familiar.

So if the novel, by name and definition, is in an ongoing process of undercutting its own foundations, how can readers decide, when interacting with the text, what game they are playing? Can the reader trust the narrator? Does the author really hold all the cards and merely give the impression that the outcome, in some way depends, on the

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<sup>83</sup> The rule of narrative linearity is often transgressed in order to question our perception of the 'natural' progression of time. However, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* a text often pointed to as epitomizing the will to textual linearity, tacitly undermines this mode of progression in the way in which it was written. The curious fact that Gibbon wrote the manuscript of his history on the backs of playing cards, seems to undercut the principle of linear progression which the title promises. Hence, this text, which has become synonymous with teleocentricism and linearity seems implicitly, in the mode of its production, to invite the reshuffling of narrative sequence: the work is haunted by the disturbing possibility of randomness which underlies a seemingly natural, motivated order.

luck of the draw? How does the reader know what moves will be preferable in advancing toward the object of the game, if the game is constantly shifting away? And in some cases, for example a *roman à clef*, readers must also decide if things like personal names are motivated or if the place names cited are real or fictional.

However, even in the face of the most daunting novelistic experiments (think of *Finnigan's Wake*), readers keep buying texts, reading and making some kind of sense. Because, just as when we play cards we anticipate that each new game will involve a different code of rules and of turn-taking, so too when readers move from one novel to another, they expect to receive information and move through the systems and entanglements of the plot differently each time that a new narrative form is activated. Just one does not play war in the same way that one plays spades or poker based on rules of play and elemental values germane to each game, so too, from one novel to the next, readers understand that there is a distinction in reading practice to be made, and adjust themselves accordingly if they are successful. By picking up certain clues which the author has left, the reader will recognize that a different game is to be played from the outset based previous associations, and will reshuffle her expectations. So, there are certain operative codes of rules and behaviors with which readers need to be familiar in order to make sense of a text, and these codes permit the reader to interact with texts as a function of their expectations.

Max Black refers to one manifestation of this phenomenon as 'associated common places' or semantic features which are commonly linked to an author. For example, readers commonly associate Joyce and Derrida with difficulty, while they might expect that a text by Nabokov and Barthes will be humorous and difficult, or that a novel by Dickens will be long. Such commonplaces affect the reader's attitude toward a narrative from the outset, be it challenged, entertained, bored, believing or incredulous. The reader recognizes the distinction in reading practice to be made because s/he associates the text in hand with, or differentiates it from, former experiences of textual comprehension, and indeed of the world of which this experience was a part.

### 5. *Troping the Trump: Games and Genres*

While games may mean something as a function of difference, card games, novels, and other games also signify because of similarities. Hearts, spades, whist and euchre, for example, all share trumps and trick-taking, while rummy, piquet, and cribbage rely on the matching of cards.<sup>84</sup> Games, moreover, may be arranged into genres based on what Pierre Berloquin has called ‘ludemes’, that is, common elements or shared rules which direct the flow of play, and generate possible moves.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, the reader’s capacity to participate in the game of the text hinges, to some extent, on his ability to recognize texts in families or genres such as the novel. The concept of genre, though it has been rightfully criticized as a hegemonic device for privileging one textual mode while suppressing others in its service, may well be useful for the purpose of coming to an understanding of the series of rules which make fictional games familiar, and in turn playable.

Therefore, without touching on problematic issues such as the limitations historical periods, cultural and sexual boundaries and the relation of canon formation to genre, I would like merely to suggest that there is something generic about certain kinds of novels. It is clear, for example that the novel distinguishes itself generically from other literary games such as sonnets and short stories. Although one might argue that any text, in and of itself, is inherently heterogeneous, I would like to put forward the notion that there are markers and rules that let us know what variety of textual game we are invited to play.

I am interested, then, in genre as a tool for bringing into focus configurations of rules which order texts and which make a family of texts recognizable as a function of elements peculiar to it. On genre and its morphology V.N. Volosinov wrote the following helpful definition in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*:

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<sup>84</sup> Parlett cites the following from John Hall’s *Horae Vacivae* (1646) generic guide to card games: “A man’s fancy would be summed up at Cribbage; Gleek requires a vigilant memory; Maw, a pregnant agility; Picket, a various invention; Primero, a dexterous kinde of rashness” (Parlett 55). Hence, according to Hall, card games and novels are classifiable as genres, each requiring a different attitude on the part of the participant.

<sup>85</sup> Berloquin is cited in Alain Borovo’s *L’Alluette-anatomie d’un jeu de cartes*, Nantes (1977), p. 18.



Genres are definable in terms of specific combinations of features stemming from the double orientation in life, in reality, in which each type of artistic “form of the whole” commands an orientation at once from outside in and from inside out. What is at stake in the first instance is the actual status of a work as a social fact [...] in short-its full ‘situational’ definition. On the other side, what is involved is the work’s thematic orientation, its thematic unity. Each genre has the capacity to deal with only certain aspects of reality; to each belong certain principles of selection, certain manners of envisioning and conceptualizing reality; each operates within a certain scale of depth and range of treatment. These two kinds of orientation are inseparably linked and interdependent. Such a concept of genre offers a dynamic, creative principle for the interpretation and integration of all components of construction [...] (184).

The concept of genre is a means of defining texts according to content or mode, in order to construct categories based on criteria such as similarity of form, as in the case of the novel. There exist textual features (internal and external, material and ideological), which novels have, at least to some degree in common, and which this model of the genre takes into account. Such features are the constituents of a possible codes of rules which structure particular genres of textual games.

The concept of genre may be helpful if it brings to light some new discursive configuration, or ensemble of textual elements. Volosinov’s model favors such an approach to genre, as it accommodates a broad spectrum of contributing factors which act in concert with one another. Hence, the criteria of genre are internal, part of the form of the text itself (the paragraph, the order or ‘structure’) and some are external (cultural context of textual production, the status of the novel at a particular moment in history). In turn, these inside and outside features constitute what Volosinov refers to as the generative process at the inception of genre, “the dialectics of the intrinsic and the extrinsic”.<sup>86</sup>

Volosinov’s model is well suited to the object of this thesis, which consists in part of describing the card-playing novel as a thematic genre within the context of the 20th century. My goal is to establish similarities within a select corpus, on the point of a

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<sup>86</sup> It would be unrealistic, however, to believe that any model could eventually embrace “*all* of the components of construction” of what may be called genre, because this presupposes a stable definition of genre as a consistently identifiable entity and an equally stable social and historical context.

shared focus on card playing, among the elements internal to each of the texts. I will also, in later chapters, consider external contingencies such as the economic and cultural context which gave rise to a particular novel and how these factors influence the representation of card playing as a social, economic or aesthetic practice in the text.<sup>87</sup> In the process, the significance of including this detail of private life in a novel will become clear, in as much as the representation of a card game communicates information about the status of a work as social fact. Moreover, by focusing on representations of this seemingly trivial cultural practice, I will show how novels work as games from the inside out, that is, by exploring the dialectic of internal and external which informs the text.

The novel form is a product of the culture in which it was produced, and of the culture through which readers play along, and produce meaning as the pages are turned. The novel will be made up of certain features or rules that are familiar and recognizable through culture, otherwise the game is over and we cease participating. The familiar features of the novel which facilitate comprehension, and as a function of which we create meaning, will be both ideological and material. For example, in order for a reader to understand a novelistic work of fiction it will have to meet, at least to some extent, her notions of how the world works, and some aspects of the rules which govern her quotidian experience and ideology. As Iser has written, if the text “goes too far”, that is, if the text is so experimental that nothing in it is familiar and every attempt on the part of the reader to make sense is frustrated, boundaries of comprehension will be overstrained and “the reader will leave the field of play”, that is, stop reading (*A.R.*, 108).<sup>88</sup> Or to couch it in Jaussian terms, if a novel is so far removed from our horizon of expectations that every surface of the text’s horizon is alien and unreadable, we will simply close the book and put an end to the process.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, a novel must include

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Jorij Lotman, *Op. Cit.* p.455-492 and Gillian Beer, “The Reader’s Wager: Lots, Sorts, and Futures”, *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1990, pp. 99-123.

<sup>88</sup> Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London, 1978.

<sup>89</sup> The question of how much the world of the text and the reader’s world need to overlap in order for the text to be understandable has been directly addressed by possible worlds theory. See for example F.E. Sparshott’s “Truth in Fiction” *JAA*, 26 (1967), p. 3-7, Raymond Bradley and Norman Swartz *Possible Worlds: An Introduction to Logic and its Philosophy*, particularly Chapter 1, “This and Other Possible Worlds”, p. 1-25, and

features and assumptions of a cultural paradigm that are at least vaguely known to the reader, some aspect of the rules which she assumes to be a part of the 'natural order' of her being-in-the-world, if she is to make sense, to participate, and to keep reading.

On the side of ideological features that must, to some degree interface with the reader's reality and experience of it, are elemental assumptions such as, for example, that people buy and sell things, that people play games, that people fall in love. In other words, a novel will participate in some aspect of what the reader distinguishes as 'reality' at a given moment, at very least, to the extent that it may be perceived and read as a novel. Therefore, the 'fact' that Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked on an island, September 30, 1659, and took a slave man to whom he gave the name Friday, is part of popular memory and falls in with ideology. This last is precisely the sort of cultural commonplace that J.M. Coetzee assumes in the novel *Foe*, which interfaces with *Robinson Crusoe* at several points. The context of the 'real' which a novel partially reproduces may equally be another fictional text or situation or, to quote Nabokov: "...a make-believe conversation about a fake book by some popular fraud" (*Lolita* 62). But this in turn assumes that conversations, books and popular frauds, are in some regard part of our experience.

## 6. *Textual Games*

The novel is a specific and problematic kind of language game, since there is no direct communication between the reader and author, save in the form of the text which mediates the two positions. The reader's communication with the text is contingent on the process of distanciation, the absence or death of the author. In fact, to discuss the relationship that the reader has with a text, that is, what happens when a person activates

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Martin Minsky, "A Framework for Representing Knowledge" in *The Psychology of Computer Vision*.

Of course, the question of comprehension remains: how well has the reader understood the text? How well has s/he mastered the game to be played out in the text? My object here is not, however, to address the question of reader competence and mastery. For the present I am concerned with this problem only to the extent that I assume that if the reader finishes a novel, s/he will have successfully done something analogous to playing out a hand.

the game of text in the process of reading, it is hardly necessary to discuss the question of author. Other games like cross-word puzzles which are published anonymously are analogous in that any knowledge of the author is superfluous, because what is at stake is how the player interacts with the puzzle.

The distance between author and language game will, of necessity, be taken into account in this study of card playing novels of the 20th century, as a specific kind of novel-game. This distance is perhaps discernible in the form of a trace or series of clues left by the author which may take the form of a playful configuration of events or semantic features through which the reader must pass, with the goal of making 'sense' of the text. Susan Stewart has compared the process of making sense to the completion of a crash course.<sup>90</sup> At the close of the novel readers "have 'graduated' we have finished the book": we have moved through the extratextual and intratextual systems of the novel to arrive at some sort of understanding (10). To incorporate the notion of game playing with that of 'graduating' from the composite challenges of the novel, one might say that completing and understanding a novel is analogous to competently playing out a hand at cards. On closing the novel the reader will have, in some degree, interpreted the systems of the text and made some of the moves which are possible in following the trajectory of the narrative.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, the competent card player will not attempt to trump a straight flush, or to look for a crib hand at a poker game. Such a conflation of game systems would indicate a systemic failure in communication, incompetence or cheating.<sup>92</sup>

Before discussing the card game in the novel, and the relation of these narrative games to the broader context of the genre, it is necessary to address the problem of

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<sup>90</sup> Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

<sup>91</sup> Naturally, chance will be present in the act of reading and 're-writing' the text which is why people are able to come to different conclusions about the same text.

<sup>92</sup> Cheating is an important aspect of game playing, to which I will have occasion to return. For the present, suffice it to say I agree with Salman Rushdie that "cheating at cards...[is] a creative act. You achieve your end by stepping outside the frame" (*TLS*, 11.16-22, 1239). Cheating is deviant, it departs from the rule, and maybe conceived of as a variety of innovation. This is Derrida's point when he writes about "the ever open possibility of the *kibdèlon*, [that] which is falsified, adulterated, mendacious, deceptive equivocal" in *Disseminations*, Op. Cit., p. 83. Cheating then, is an innovation, and in the case of those who cheat the novel form, their gesture may well be recuperated into the larger discursive game, so that transgression becomes its own rule.

individual language moves, and the manipulation of the component parts of language in this communicational setting. Stewart once again, has pointed out that the relationship between author and reader is based on linguistic communication—as a type of conversation—and it is constructed in the form of a genre. The genre relates to modes of communication on the basis of “the rule of turn-taking, which plays such an important part in our concept of ‘conversation’ and in the various ‘conversational genres’: repartee, verbal dueling, riddling, punning, telling proverbs, telling jokes and joking, and constructing narratives of personal experience” (7). Moreover, a particular novel will be different from other novels as a function of its composite rules, just as one card game involves a different routine of rules and turn-taking from another. Hence, the novel is a specific language game comprised of a number of game rules, chosen from the lexicon of extant rules for telling stories. Novels are different from one another on the basis of the rules that inform the text, which are, according to Max Black, “like playing cards used in many different games” (108-109).

### *7. Players and Games*

The question of just how competently the reader will have played along with the text poses several problems. For instance, any discussion of the novel as a game begs the question of whether or not the skilled player/reader could win the game by beating the author. In approaching this question in *Games Authors Play* Peter Hutchinson writes that since it is difficult to describe the way in which the game *with* the reader takes place, there may be only partial answers to this question.<sup>93</sup> For example, with many kinds of fiction such as stream of consciousness or the self-conscious novels common to this century, it is particularly tricky to explain the game that readers play with the text, that is, the interaction between reader and text. This is because these novels “represent an advanced and elitist form of game [which] posits discriminating, often learned, and above all, like-minded readers” (34). So, according to Hutchinson, in the case of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* or Nabokov’s *Ada*, for example, it is impossible that any reader would

get all puns, clues or intertextual allusions in the text. Such literary games are referred to as competitive or agonistic, because they seek to baffle or outsmart the reader. On the other hand, competitive fiction is opposed to the writing of authors such as Jane Austen, who according to Hutchinson, want the reader to win the game that is being played out in the text.<sup>94</sup>

This solution, however, is not entirely satisfying: “winning” in Hutchinson’s sense is tantamount to gaining total knowledge of the text; to having grasped all that is implicit in the text. However, if it is impossible that a reader should ever decipher a difficult, self-conscious text, it is equally implausible that any text be an ‘open book’ and entirely transparent to the qualified reader. There is no reason to believe that a message once written and distanced from its author, indeed even a personal letter to a close friend, may be read without fear of ambiguity. Once the content of a message has been disconnected from the objects to which its deictic indicators point, it becomes infinitely polysemous. Therefore, every text presents difficulties and should be understood as competitive only to some degree.<sup>95</sup>

In order to settle the issue of textual mastery, one would have to determine in which sense, and to what extent, the reader of a novel plays the game of the text interactively. Subsequently, based on the degree of interaction, one could begin to determine how successfully the reader has played along. The question of whether it is possible to beat the author at his own game has been explored in the context of detective fiction, a genre which relies on riddle solving. According to Bernard Suits, if the reader figures out the whodunit before the author has revealed the guilty party, the reader wins.<sup>96</sup> However, even if one were to accept the parallel between the game and the novel

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<sup>93</sup> Peter Hutchinson. *Games Authors Play*, New York: Methuen, 1983

<sup>94</sup> Op. cit. “Some authors, such as Sterne, or, say, Jane Austen, want the reader to ‘win’ this game, to penetrate the facade in order to recognize all the implications of their text” (22).

<sup>95</sup> Indeed, a text is not a text, according to Derrida, unless it hides itself away from the reader, unless it presents interpretational difficulties. The reader, or critic, who believes she has mastered the game of the text is deluding herself, and must rather, run the risk of “entering into the game, [and] getting a few fingers caught” (*Disseminations* 63).

<sup>96</sup> See Suits’ article “The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature” in *Game and the Theories of Game*, CRCL June 1985, p. 200-219.

in the strict sense, this solution has very limited application in a small number of cases, for all detective can certainly not be reduced to a competitive game model between author and reader.<sup>97</sup>

Given the infinite variety of textual games and readers, however, no solution may be given universal application. There are many kinds of fiction, not all of which are detective novels, so the question is evidently more complicated and cannot be dismissed in terms of the reader's ability to solve riddles. And the suggestion that jumping ahead of the text by solving the riddle before the end constitutes a win, raises the question of degree even in the limited case of the detective novel. For example, can the player's level of mastery be decided on the basis of where she folds or quits reading for the answer? Does the reader 'skunk' the novel if she solves the mystery less than half-way through the text? Probably, the only safe thing to say is that, while not all textual games will necessarily involve riddle solving, most literary games do involve some form of turn-taking in the form of receiving and interpreting on the part of the reader.

So while a discussion of the novel as game necessarily raises the question of how, or if, one is to win, the issue remains indeterminate and undecidable. Moreover, what constitutes a win would be different from case to case as textual games are not identical. Because the game that is played out between the reader and the text involves unrecoverable distance, it may never be completely analogous to games where opponents meet face to face, hence there exist important differences which must be taken into account. Some aspect of the text will always remain obscure, the reader will never resolve every textual ambiguity, so that one can only discuss the problem in terms of skill and not of mastery. The best solution is probably to stick to ground rules such as:

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. Thomas A. Reisner, "Game Universes and Literary Scenarios", in *RSSI*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1992), p. 49-66. Reisner's article concludes with an impressive series of diagrams illustrating possible moves in a game called the Knight's Tour, with the purpose of demonstrating that the number of available choices for moves appears to multiply towards infinity, but ends up being radically reduced as possible moves cancel each other out. While this in itself is interesting, the connection with the literary text is tenuous: the author does little to show us how all of the assiduous diagrammatic plotting relates to the text, except to suggest that at the close of a work of fiction, the choices of possible outcome will naturally limit themselves. It is probably equally productive to do as Nabokov does in his essay on *Mansfield Park* and refer metaphorically to certain devices used by an author as a "term from chess to describe a sudden swerve to one or the other side on the board of (in this case) Fanny's chequered emotions" (57) "*Mansfield Park* (1814)" in *Lectures on Literature*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980, p9-60.

that one establish a clear definition of game as I did in Chapter 1, that one explain what literary process one wishes to apply game analysis to (is the process some aspect of the text intrinsic to its production, the text itself, the reader's response to it, or all of these?), that one explain if the game of the text actually being constructed, played or viewed.

In *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Iser has added a further nuance to game typologies of fiction which explore player/reader textual interaction, by applying Caillois' categories of play.<sup>98</sup> Iser advances the notion that a model of literary texts could be constructed by marrying Derrida's 'free play' to Caillois' categories (*mimicry,ilinx, alea, agon*), based on the assumption that "authors play games with readers, and the text is the play ground" (250). Texts will exhibit a combination of these categories, and consequently we may be able to determine what kind of game is being played out in the text, and what game is being set up for the reader by the author. For example, Iser writes that texts which are directed toward winning the game of making sense, such as detective fiction, are agonistic, while postmodern narratives frequently play a loosing game because they are indeterminate (Iser 256). Further, Iser proposes that texts be classified according to this system to provide a basis for a further investigation at three different levels: structural, functional, and interpretive. An analysis of the structural level would serve to map out the perimeters of the playing field/text, a functional analysis is necessary in order to determine the goal, and the interpretive level is intended to question the motivation of the play of the text. This model of reading permits a description of the stakes of the game-text as well as the broader implications of these findings, such as the role of the reader and the context of production.

Robert Detweiler and Peter Hutchinson have suggested that the problem of games and texts should be approached through fiction in which a particular game articulates the plot, as an embedded narrative or metafictional device. Based on the assumption that games and literary fictions have something in common, the relationship between the two will logically manifest itself most 'visibly' in connection with a

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<sup>98</sup> Wolfgang Iser. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.



tangible example.<sup>99</sup> Significantly, Hutchinson has identified a genre of such texts which he calls “Games —Social and Sporting” which almost exclusively describes card games in fiction.<sup>100</sup> That this is the case would suggest that as metafictional device, card games are particularly evocative of the relationship that obtains between the game and the narrative that frames it. But this raises the question, why card games as opposed to other games such as chess.

In *Card Essays* Cavendish claims the superiority of whist to chess by arguing that “some games possess a higher generic character than others, just as, in literature, epics rank above ballads”.<sup>101</sup> Although my question concerning chess and card games is not one of generic superiority, it is significant that this comparison has been made on textual grounds. Playing cards and card games draw this commentary because they are syntactical, that is, they have a hierarchical surface grammar, and are therefore, perceived as being textual and linguistic objects. In other words, cards are linguistic systems which produce meaning as a function of a hierarchy of value and a grammar which is particular to them. Likewise, cards bear a physical resemblance to novels, in that both represent an array of possible outcomes which are revealed sequentially while permitting dissimulation.<sup>102</sup> In part this can be accounted for through material and historical factors, which are a result of the parallel development of cards and texts over time, as printed objects.<sup>103</sup> Hence, cards and texts share similar features which make card games particularly fitting and resonant when used as a metafictional narrative device.

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<sup>99</sup> See Robert Detweiler’s article entitled “Games and play in modern American fiction” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1986, p.44-62.

<sup>100</sup> Hutchinson, Op. cit., Part 2, p. 65-9.

<sup>101</sup> “Cavendish” (Henry Jones). *Card Essays, Clay’s Decisions, and Card-Table Talk*. London: Thos. De la Rue, 1879, p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> See Lotman’s article “The Theme of Cards and the Card Game”: “The theme of the card game introduces chance—an unpredictable course of events—into the mechanism of the plot and into the link between the motives of the hero and the results of his actions” Op. Cit. p. 473.

<sup>103</sup> In Chapter 4 I will have occasion to discuss in detail the historical development of cards, specifically in their relation to texts.

Although these may be also factors in the game of chess, as a board game, chess is perhaps more analogous to some textual or discursive mode other than the novel. In chess, all of the positions on the board and the chessmen are (barring unusual circumstances), clearly visible to both players at any given moment. In other words, chess is a game of perfect information, whereas card games and novels are games of imperfect information. Moreover, as I wrote above, the systemic and semantic possibilities of a particular card game are contained in a closed deck which, like a closed book, will slowly be unfolded as the cards are distributed and played one by one. The process of producing meaning across the blank space of the card table on which they will be laid out, is analogous to the process of reading page by page. This means that in card play, certain information will be strategically withheld, dissimulated, and slowly revealed in a way that is mimicked in the novel.

## 8. *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have discussed language, following Wittgenstein, as a series of language games. Within this theoretical paradigm, the novel is constituted as a compilation of possible language games, and therefore, distinguishes itself as a specific configuration of games. Given this, the narrative card game which is both a fictional and a metafictional element in the text, imparts a specificity to the novels in which it occurs. Card games in the novel collapse the systems, hierarchies, and values at play in the games of the text, informing the order of turn-taking between the text and the reader, and as well as between the players in the text. Moreover, as a paradigmatic event, narrative card games condense elements of the novel such as chance, risk, debt, loss, and contest.<sup>104</sup>

I also introduced the notion of genre and the possibility of applying it to novels which share card playing as a common feature. The question will be more thoroughly

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<sup>104</sup> Salman Rushdie summed this up nicely when he wrote that “card playing...is an activity wherein chance, skill, drama, intrigue, deception, crime, violence and wild fluctuations of fortune are so intimately conjoined, an activity at once literal, symbolic and even allegorical” (Rushdie, *TLS* 1239).

investigated in the last chapters of this thesis, where I will show how novels draw attention to themselves as constructed objects through the card games at their center. Briefly, this may be characterized as a self-conscious or autoparodic commentary on novel itself; on how the narrative game which frames the card game has been constructed. Hence, card games in novels articulate the stakes in texts, the interaction between characters, and the power balance that subtends this interaction.

Whether the game in the text is one that the reader can win in the process of turn-taking remains to be answered. In this chapter I have reviewed approaches to this question by Suits, Stewart, Detweiler, and Iser among others, in an attempt to understand to what extent the analogy between game and novel, and subsequently card game and novel, may be applied. In each case, although certain parallels are evident, it would appear that the analogy has limited application. Indeed, novels are certainly game-like, however, they are not games in the same strict sense that card games are. For example, a card game is essentially a performance which is repeatable but never identical. The novel on the other hand, is written to be read and remains, for the author a performance, while for the reader as well as for the cultural institutions through which the text circulates, the novel is essentially an object.

Moreover, to maintain the game-novel analogy in more than a metaphoric sense, raises the question of players. For example, does the reader play against or with the author, or the text? And further, do readers play with or against other players in a game situation mediated by the text, as for example in the case of several critics reading a text such as Poe's "The Purloined Letter"?<sup>105</sup> And if the game analogy is to be rigidly maintained, must one not exclude the possibility that the reader plays with rather than against the text? Indeed, the reader may well enjoy a relationship with the text independent of the notion of winning or losing. Given all of this, I wish to conserve the game-novel analogy in the chapters that follow as a metaphor rather than as a strict methodological parallel. By doing this one conserves, for the purposes of elucidation, an

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<sup>105</sup> Cf. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

instructive metaphor while distancing impossible questions about winning, losing, and keeping score in the process of reading.

Finally, the novelistic card game raises another question, for when card games involve gambling and monetary exchanges, they become an activity of an economic order. As this is the case in all three of the novels I will focus on in the final chapters, I will read the card games represented in these novels as indicators of the economies both internal and external to the text. Moreover, gambling is not a neutral form of exchange, but rather one subject to legal prohibition, and to which a certain social immorality has been attached. When gambling occurs in a novel it signifies at the level of the internal and external economy of the novel and constitutes, for example, an autoreferential commentary of the status of 'literature', or fiction as artistic production within the greater economy. The object of the following chapter is then, to analyze of these economic considerations in order to more fully explicate the density of the novelistic card game as a pragmatic event.

**CHAPTER 3**  
***Ludic Economies***

The word Economy, like a great many others, has, in its application, been very much abused. It is generally used as if it meant parsimony, stinginess, or niggardliness; and at best, merely the refraining from expending money, hence misers and closefisted men disguise their propensity and conduct under the name of economy; whereas the most liberal disposition, a disposition precisely the contrary of that of the miser, is perfectly consistent with economy

—Cobbet

Go hence in debt: and therefore like a cipher,  
Yet standing in rich place,  
I multiply.  
With one we thank-you  
many thousands more.

—Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (1:2)



**1. *Introduction***

In this chapter I will discuss the relationship which obtains between economy and text. Previously I analyzed the nature of play and games, and at several junctures I had occasion to describe social mechanisms and institutions as games. One of the institutions to which I referred under the aegis of games was economics, and it will be my purpose in the following pages to describe the notion of economy as it relates to textual games. My claim is that games, texts, and economies are necessarily connected to one another by virtue of several common features. In the applied analyzes which form the final segments of my project, therefore, I will show how games, economics, and text

meet and interact in the novels I have chosen to study. These three novels will be analyzed in terms of game and economy, with the assumption that the figure of the card game recounted in each text, will articulate both the discursive and the economic games that inform it. Moreover, if economy is a variety of game it will be necessary to show how play moves through a given economic game system. In this case I will focus on the economy of the wager because I am dealing with novels in which playing cards and gambling constitute a model of monetary exchange and the circulation of value in the economy of the text.

In the following I will ask the reader to think of texts as economies and then outline ways in which the analogy might be put into practice.<sup>106</sup> I will also invite the reader to consider the shift from premodern economic systems to modern economic systems, while holding that the former system has never been able to divorce itself entirely from the latter. That is, while modern economics have sought to contain and regulate premodern modes of exchange, these modes have insistently asserted themselves as a whole spectrum of gratuitous activities such as art and literature, gambling and speculative ventures. This will bring me to a discussion of Baudrillard's theory of the economics, based on Saussure's linguistic model of signifier and signified in relation to language, and further to text. I will also relate Baudrillard's economics to Mauss' essay on prestation economics, particularly on the issue of how the present 'postmodern' paradigm shares certain features with prestation or premodern economics. This relation manifests itself around the constitution of the 'subject' (or unsubject) as a function of economic systems and their relation to debt, and the inflation to which debt may give rise.

Finally, this is undertaken with the objective of considering how Bataille, and Derrida following Bataille, have linked certain aspects of early and late modes of economic exchange. In Bataille, prestation and utilitarian economics are designated general and restricted, which are in turn conceptualized as economies of discourse. In

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<sup>106</sup> Naturally this analogy is not hard and fast but should rather, be understood in a metaphoric sense. One does not spend language strictly speaking in the same sense that one spends money. Unlike money which once spent is gone, language words remain part of language to be used again. Moreover language is, with few exceptions, equally available to everyone, so that words are repeatable by many speakers in a variety of discursive situations.

Derrida, general economy is the risky, playful and aleatory expenditure of signs which so often marks the 'literary' text, and which distinguishes it from restrictive expository discourse which has as its aim a specific utilitarian purpose.

## **2. Text and Value**

There are many ways in which economics may be applied to the study of texts. At one level, for example, one may speak of their publication and circulation in terms of cost and value. In the present inquiry my purpose is to discuss textual economies primarily as a function of semantics, and to describe production in terms of meaning-value, both external and internal to the text. However, while it is helpful to divide certain aspects of textual economy into the categories of outside or inside, there is constant circulation between the two economies, and they should be understood as interactive rather than antithetical. Therefore, there exists no clear demarcation between the external and the internal economics of text, but sorting them out in a preliminary fashion is a necessary step in discussing the notion of textual economy.

I would, then classify the meaning value that readers ascribe to texts as part of the external economy through which the text circulates. The act of reading produces a value-added factor which is akin to the notion of the readerly rewriting of the text in Barthes' sense.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, as a function of readers' interaction with texts, certain texts are given special or exemplary value by a community of readers. This attribution of value which occurs externally to the text, begins with the decision to buy one book as opposed to another, based on features of the text such as the title and/or the cover illustration, an associated semantic commonplace, or a specific need and use-value. Further, buying a book involves an exchange of wealth through which the purchaser feels s/he is getting an object whose value is, in some respect, commensurate with the outlay of cash.

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<sup>107</sup> See Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, Trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1987, p. 3-6.

If the purchaser is not familiar with a book, the title may influence her expectations of what she is buying. Hence, one might expect that a novel called *Manon Lescaut* will probably be about a woman by that name, or that *The Progress of Love* will describe a love affair across time, and accordingly the reader will settle in for an entertaining read.<sup>109</sup> In this way, titles of a books act as a interpretants, setting in motion the process of value-making to which the materials of the text are subjected as it is read in terms of pleasure or intellectual pursuit. This is the process by which a text becomes, in some respect meaningful and, therefore, valuable to the reader in a particular use-context. Hence, readers make decisions concerning what they intend to use texts for, be it relaxation, intellectual stimulation or other, since reading, whether pleasurable or painstaking, requires concentration and mental labor. In, and from, the process of reading we are rewarded with a textually mediated experience to which we attribute a certain value. That is, the spending of one's mental energies in reading entails an expenditure of the self for which one hopes to take away something of corresponding value, in terms of information or pleasure.

There are, of course, other varieties of textual value against which to exchange readerly expenditure because the range of textual products available for consumption is almost limitless. In the case of fiction, one might take on difficult texts such as *Finnegan's Wake* as an exercise which has some pedagogical value, as well as the value of affirming one's competence in the area of difficult texts. Reasons for buying texts are also context-determined, that is, the reader will perceive a book to have use-value in a specific setting, such as the home or the university. So in buying a book, be it a text book, a comic book or a novel, there are decisions one makes concerning use-value and personal economy, and the decision to purchase will be motivated by aspects such as titles, and associations which readers make with the author, genre, and subject area. These factors belong to the *external* economy of the text, that is, to the general context

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<sup>108</sup> It has been suggested that titles may be provisionally divided into four categories as a function of their performative value: the proper name (*Pamela, Agnes Grey, Tom Jones*), the substantive (*La Disparition, Das Gaspertenspiel, Palefire*), names of narrative genres (*The Life and Times of \*\*\*, Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*), or a clause or sentence fragment (*Under Western Eyes, The Music of Chance*). See Didier Coste's *Narrative as Communication*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, particularly "Narrative Economy: A Dissident Approach to Logic and Necessity", p. 239-246.



in which texts circulate and through which they come to be worth something as meaningful semantic and semiotic objects.

As I stated above, there exists an economy which is internal to the book or the novel. Any writing is, in a figurative sense, an act of expenditure on the part of the author: it is a laborious process in which the one who writes expends energy in collecting and processing the linguistic materials at her disposal. Metaphorically speaking, how a writer chooses to spend the materials at her disposal is based on a series of decisions of an economic order, in that they require a certain type of value judgment.

So while the writer draws from a stock of materials which is linguistic—verbs, nouns, prepositions and adjectives—each of these elements will be chosen over others for their perceived value in a particular context. For example, words may vary in semantic density within a particular discursive context just as they may take on new meanings in common currency and, as this is the case, an author will choose words that best suit the style and argumentation she means to convey. Likewise, how a writer chooses to expend materials is a matter of syntax and displacement: certain elements are chosen over others, because they have a specific value in relation to one another. Subsequently, words are crafted into sentences, and subordinate clauses, which are in turn segmented and accentuated with punctuation (periods, colons, and question marks). Likewise, some clauses will be subordinated while others will have primary status and these be modeled into a syntactical and morphological configuration which presents itself to the writer as being a more fitting construction than others. Decisions such as these are made by the writing subject, frequently as a function of judgments concerning the value of elements of language in a specific context.

Furthermore, writing and reading are inflationary practices because texts have the potential to produce surplus meaning. On the side of the author and the process of writing, surplus value results directly from the disposal of discursive elements. To tell a story as in some narrative fiction, is to recount certain events, and one does this by counting out or spending units of language which form a text such as a novel. Indeed, the verb to tell in English, as well as in many other European languages, is related to the

verb to count: *raconter*, *recount*, *erzählen*, *vertellen*, *contar*, *raccontare*.<sup>109</sup> In terms of discursive economy, one of the effects of this counting which is narrating, may be verbal extravagance, that is, a surplus in textuality which is sometimes a byproduct characteristic of narrative fiction.<sup>110</sup> The extravagant, and seemingly gratuitous elaborations which occur frequently in some fiction, such as Flaubert's description of Charles Bovary's hat, or Emma Bovary's wedding cake, are examples of narrative squander. In a *utilitarian* view of discursive economy, such minutiae which defeats common spatial logic, would be extraneous to the thread of the story; it is embroidered onto an already intricate narrative as superabundance or extravagance and serves no "useful" function in advancing the plot, but rather wastes words.

Because much artistic writing such as fiction makes generous use of rhetorical figures such as metaphor, metonymy, and allegory they produce a surfeit of possible meanings. Rhetorical figures condense several semantic registers and may signify several things at once, so that they compound signification and produce a surfeit of sense. "My love is a rose" for example, evokes the literal image of a rose, suggesting a connection between the sensual and olfactory qualities of both ladies and flowers. Likewise, because there is no rose without thorns, the metaphor may well refer (by way of metonymy to another metaphor) to the tempestuous nature of love. And because this rhetorical figure comes from the distant past, it may bring to mind behaviors from antiquity, thus augmenting the metaphor's semantic volume, and figuratively, its value.<sup>111</sup> The discursive expenditure which informs the internal economy of the text

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<sup>109</sup> The verb to tell, from the old English *tellan* is a cognate of the old high German *zellen*, which meaning 'to count'. The relationship between telling and counting is manifest in the word 'teller' in English, meaning someone who counts out money in a bank, as well as someone who tells a tale.

<sup>110</sup> While descriptive extravagance has been associated with forms of literary discourse such as novels and poetry, it is fallacious to assume that other forms of discourse are free of rhetorical embellishment or the sumptuous expenditure of signs. While books on science and mathematics are supposed to be 'serious' and as free as possible from poetic frivolities, it has been argued that authors of such works also make use of metaphor, simile, hyperbole and other rhetorical figures. The use of these rhetorical figures betrays a certain dependency on such 'trivial' or 'extraneous' enhancements. On this point, see Richard Boyd, "Metaphor and Theory Change", in Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 364-387.

<sup>111</sup> See "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics" in Paul Ricoeur's *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 165-81.

refers in part, therefore, to the way in which the author disposes signs, figures, and rhetorical devices, as well larger things like syntax and complex verb constructions, in order to recount events which add up to a narrative.

When read, these narrative elements have the potential to produce new meanings, and a circulation of signs, which may inflationary, is set in motion. This is because the act of reading is a re-reading in two senses. First, to use one simple example, when we read a story we re-re-count to ourselves the tale which the author initially recounted. In doing so, we reconstruct the narrative and recast it in our own terms, thereby producing our own version of the story. The reader fills in the significant gaps in the text (in Iser's sense of the term) with information from her own lexicon of experience, and this creates another parallel readerly text, and an inflation of sense.

The second aspect of internal textual economics is a semantic phenomenon common to many literary discourses such as fiction. In novels, as a specific example of fiction, the reader is often asked to invite a group of actants into her consciousness who will exchange goods and sexual favors, buy and sell properties, lose and win fortunes. The composite configuration of these transactions constitutes a fictional economy internal and specific to the text in question. Therefore, the mode of exchange which is brought into play in the narrative, at the level of plot, constitutes one more aspect of the internal economics of the text. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* for example, is the story of radical reversals of fortunes and the circulation of wealth between two families. These exchanges take place over the card table, through marriage, and in large speculative ventures. This internal narrative economy, moreover, is a reflection of the broader economic context of England caught up in the Napoleonic wars and large-scale investment in the colonies. The characters in the novel are swept along by the war and commercial speculation in India, with the result that their private behaviors (financing the household by gambling at piquet, negotiating favorable marriages) respond to the ongoing chaos (the war, and speculative bubble investments) that drives the greater narrative of which they are a part. Moreover, *Vanity Fair* is arguably an historical novel so that we may posit an interaction or correlation between the movement of wealth within the narrative and the economic institutions external to text which were operative

at the time it was written. Hence, the logic of the circulation of wealth and desire which structures *Vanity Fair*, is a function of the larger economy in place in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century England.

### 3. *Systems and Signs*

It is possible then, to use the terminology of economics in a metaphoric sense to describe the linguistic configuration which constitutes the text. The vocabulary of economics may equally be applied by way of analogy to the problematics of expenditure on the part of the author, and of the reader who consumes and expends, creating a readerly text. This could well be construed, however, as an application of one set of terminological labels to another field of discourse, that may not necessarily help to explain how texts work. Baudrillard, however, has investigated the inverse correlation between economics and discourse, which argues for a relationship conjoining textuality and economy.

In *La société de consommation*, Baudrillard proposes a systematic investigation of objects, their production and displacement—in short economics—in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century consumer society.<sup>112</sup> His point is that, as economic subjects, we are no longer defined by our relationship to other persons, but rather by our significant relationship to consumable goods and objects.<sup>113</sup> In other words, objects are no longer potential instruments, because objects (and consequently one's power to appropriate and use them) form the background against which subjectivity is projected, and against which subjects define themselves in the process of becoming *themselves* functional objects. In Baudrillard's reading of consumer society, the definition of the self in relation to a material context or system, is based on the correlation between a specific *system of objects* which is co-extensive with a *system of needs*.

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<sup>112</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

<sup>113</sup> On this point, see Wlad Godzich's forward to Doris-Louise Haineault and Jean-Yves Roy *Unconscious for Sale*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.xviii-xix.

Objects are then conjugated in accordance with a system of needs, and consumer items are further classified into groups by semantic content. The resultant systems of objects are in turn framed as consumer paradigms. According to Baudrillard, the semantic content which subtends such groupings as the stereo system, the brand name, series of 'how-to' books, the household appliance group, translates readily into use-value. Hence, in order to participate in consumer society one must understand the circulation and systematization of objects, and be able to integrate oneself into a given organization of codes, services and behaviors, which congregate around paradigms of consumable items. In short, for Baudrillard, the *monetary economy* (why we buy objects and how much we spend on them), the *political economy* (the inherent subjective power of owning particular objects, and who has the purchase-power to obtain such objects), the *cultural economy* (how one system of objects signifies as opposed to another, and what it means to define oneself in relation to a given paradigmatic configuration of things) are *systems of signs*. Therefore, both production and the order of consumption become a matter of the manipulation of signs. That is, consumable objects are manufactured in the system of signs, to fill a corresponding gap in the system of needs.

Importantly, in Baudrillard's system of needs, the aim is not to maximize utility or to satisfy a productive material need, but rather, needs and consumer demand are both manufactured. The system generates its own needs, as well as the products with which to satisfy these needs. Therefore, the relation obtaining between the two systems (needs and objects) in late capitalism is inflationary, and sets in motion an upward spiral of consumerism rather than favoring recuperation and accumulation. The system's endless capacity to regenerate and reproduce itself is what gives it the capacity to produce surplus value.

Implicit in Baudrillard's notion of economic circulation is a reading of Saussure's model of language.<sup>114</sup> It is Saussure who conceptualized language as a

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<sup>114</sup> According to Marc Shell, Saussure's concept of verbal value, as well as the distinction he makes between synchrony and diachrony, are adaptations of Léon Walras' economic theories. See Shell's *The Economy of Literature*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978, p. 6. Shell cites P. Veyne and J. Molino's "Panem et circenses: l'évergétisme devant les sciences humaines" in *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 24, 1969. Cf. *Social Semiotics as Praxis: Text, Social Meaning Making, Nabokov's Ada*, p. 130-1.

system of signifiers, elements which have no inherent, intrinsic meaning on their own, but which take on relational meaning in terms their difference from other signifiers within a given language system. The significance of situating economics within a model such as Saussure's, is that it makes of economy a system which may be understood in terms of language, as opposed to the reverse procedure which I outlined above. For Baudrillard then, people buy things that signify (or act as signifiers) in order to differentiate themselves from others, and thereby participate in the circulation of signifying objects and created needs. It is this participation in an economic system and the concomitant circulation of wealth to which we refer as 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Therefore, "[c]onsumption is a system which assures the regulation of signs and the integration of the group: it is simultaneously a morality (a system of ideological values) and a *system of communication*" [my italics] (SC 109). So when Baudrillard speaks of codes and the relation which obtains between objects based on a scale of value, he is describing economic exchange as a system of communication. In other words, a code of rules will organize objects and their meaning hierarchically as a system of pricing, value, and ownership prestige/power. The economic code determines exchange value, just as we currently conceptualize language as a function of the interplay between signifier and signified.

Both systems are understood to generate meaning as a product of the circulation of significant elements, regulated by rules which ground communication. Systemic rules structure a given economic or discursive paradigm in terms of an agreed upon hierarchy of value, and it is these rules which determine the displacement of signifying elements (words, clauses, material possessions) into readable configurations.

#### ***4. Background: Prestation and Utilitarianism***

The above remarks on narrative economy are representative of certain views which have gained currency as ways in which to think texts and economies. Approaches such as Baudrillard's however, repose on a specific analytics of language which owes a large debt to theories of monetary exchange. Specifically, Marcel Mauss' *L'essai sur le*

*don* has influenced late 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinking about economy, and has served as the starting point for discussions which link economy to discourse, such as George Bataille's *La part maudite*, and Derrida's work on economy and writing including *L'écriture et la différence*. Therefore, I will now turn to Mauss' essay on gift economics and the relation that exists between prestation, language, and artistic writing as a specific economic paradigm of discourse.

In *L'essai sur le don*, Mauss investigates 'primitive' economic systems based on the exchange of gifts or prestation. The potlatch, which Mauss describes, a premodern system for the circulation and expenditure of wealth through gift exchanges. As the oldest economic system of which we have knowledge, the potlatch is radically different from what is known as modern economics. However, while this exchange modality may be premodern, it existed and continues to exist along side modern North American and European economic systems. The potlatch was practiced in Norway, Germany, and Ireland for example, and gift exchanges are part of the culture of native tribes of the Pacific Northwest, the Maori of New Zealand, and other colonies or countries that some might consider "primitive".<sup>115</sup>

Prestation or the potlatch is, more precisely, a system of gift-giving in which objects exchanged have a symbolic force which inheres after the exchange. The symbolic power of the gift maintains the giver in the position of creditor and the receiver in the role of debtor, until another potlatch is organized that the debtor may reciprocate. Hence, the consequence of the gift exchange is a situation wherein the debtor persists in a position of weakness and indenture under the gift's symbolic power, and this continues to be the case until a gift of *greater* value has been returned. The debt incurred in the reception of the gift is inflationary, because the gratuitous act of the gift generates supplementary symbolic value as a function of its gratuity.<sup>116</sup> Because the

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<sup>115</sup> The epigraph for Mauss' essay is taken from the Havamál, a Norwegian poem of the Scandinavian Edda tradition, and other examples throughout the text are taken from Samoa, the Pacific North West, Malaysia and Africa.

<sup>116</sup> Although the act of giving is comprised of a certain gratuity, it is essential to remember that it is not devoid of *interest*. Because one of the three obligations of the gift is to receive, the debt is enforced and regulated by the second and third obligations which are to return and to give ("Les trois obligations: Donner, recevoir, rendre", p. 205-214). The act of giving is, in effect, banking on long term returns from trading with a new partner.

debtor is obliged to reciprocate in kind and *more generously*, each new gift exchange raises the stakes and forces the debtor to ‘up the ante’. Moreover, because the objects exchanged in most cases have symbolic or religious significance, they take on a surplus in value as they collapse several systems of signs and become all the more precious as signifying objects.<sup>117</sup> It is debt and imbalance in the system which guarantee an upward spiral of generous return. Prestation then, as a function of the symbolic value of the gift, creates its own debt, which is in return satisfied in the process of opening up another debt.

The debt of the gift may also be answered through an assertion of economic power in the form of gratuitous, conspicuous waste: “La notion de valeur fonctionne dans ces sociétés; des surplus très grands, absolument parlant, sont amassés; ils sont dépensés souvent en pure perte, avec un luxe relativement énorme” (266).<sup>118</sup> Indeed, gratuity and wastefulness are fundamental characteristics of gift economics. Mauss cites examples of groups where it is collectively decided that, in order for a chief or chiefs to assert the authority of the tribe, it is necessary to destroy or to squander wealth as an expression of economic and political power. Likewise, there are cases in North America where large numbers of slaves have been slaughtered as a demonstration of the tribes’ power of expenditure. According to Mauss, destruction is a principle element of prestation, and tribes will burn down shelters, destroy copper ingots and vessels, or burn food stores in order to prove the extent of their economic potency. Hence, excessive waste is power because it indicates that a given affluent group, quite literally, has ‘money to burn’.

In this regard, Mauss’ essay on gift economics foregrounds two aspects of subjective constitution, which are seminal to any discussion of how the economic subject has been constructed in relation to wealth and exchange. First, when Mauss

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<sup>117</sup> Mauss compares this supplemental value of the gift in premodern societies, to the institutional surplus-value of so called ‘priceless’ works of art which, in modern occidental societies, become inflated based on their artistic merit (260).

<sup>118</sup> “L’obligation de rendre dignement est impérative. On perd la ‘face’ à jamais si on ne rend pas, ou si on ne détruit pas les valeurs équivalentes” (212). See the section titled “Les trois obligations: Donner, Recevoir, Rendre”, p. 205-214



writes about debtors and creditors in the context of prestation economics he is not speaking of a specific individual indentured to another, but rather one tribe in a relationship of debt to another. Therefore, indebtedness and wealth are collective concepts in premodern economic systems: affluence and debt signify at the level of communal privilege rather than individual interest. Since wealth is communal, the direction of its flow is left up to a leaders acting for the tribe, who decide what to do with the group's wealth. In other words, agency is understood as a collective singularity of purpose rather than personal, individualistic interest.

Further, the essay has far-reaching consequences for the narrative of the European encounter with the New World. When in the 15th and 16th centuries European colonial expansion into the Americas and parts of South-East Asia was well under way, it was assumed the primitive systems for the exchange of wealth were "discovered" by Europeans in the New World. When modern European consciousness sought to apprehend societies where prestation was the established form of exchange it was, with few exceptions, unable to grasp the logic of the gift, save as crude or primitive. If this is the case, it is because the majority of Europeans colonialists came from the context of a mercantilism which would become utilitarianism, an economics which manifested itself in institutions founded for the conservation of wealth.

In modern Europe, financial institutions such as national banks and markets were founded in accordance with particular notions of economy and expenditure. The modern economic model favored accumulation rather than open expenditure, the constituent transaction of prestation economics. Modern continental systems which were founded with the purpose of channeling and controlling the flow of wealth gained in importance, as nations asserted their economic integrity by trying to limit the flow of expenditure outward, and in order to recirculate wealth back into their own system.<sup>119</sup> So in the modern economy, exchange is mediated by the market and the bank which act as

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<sup>119</sup> The European imperative to control the circulation of national wealth is part of common currency as in, for example, the English expression "penny-pincher" or the Dutch family name *Duytschaever*, which means "dime-shaver". Both refer to the practice of skimming off the top of currency in circulation, quite literally by shaving or pinching gold and silver coin money so that it returned to the bank of origin in a much reduced form. This shady practice in part motivated the gradual shift to paper money which reflects national wealth in precious metal *symbolically* rather than *physically*, so that foreign tampering with currency was reduced.

regulating and controlling mechanisms, whereas exchange is unmediated and noninstitutionalized in premodern tribal societies. This is why, according to Mauss, the two economic systems clash so dramatically: “toute cette économie de l’échange-don était loin de rentrer dans les cadres de l’économie soi-disant naturelle, de l’utilitarisme” (266).

In the concluding chapter of *L’Essai sur le don*, Mauss advances a radical postulate by way of extending the observations he has made concerning gift, or premodern economies to the “present day” economy. Taking examples of the gift economy from ancient Rome and early Germanic societies where prestation was the dominant mode of exchange, Mauss shows that gift economics existed in Europe long before colonialism and the ‘discovery’ of this supposedly illogical, naive form of exchange practiced by the ‘primitives’. The potlatch or gift economy was merely rediscovered in ‘primitive’ societies such as the Algonquins, with which Europeans came into contact in the New World. What Mauss wants to show through these examples is that, as the notion of gift economics was gradually abandoned, modern systems of economics sought to reincorporate expenditure and to re-circulate surplus wealth back into a closed system based on individual interest. Writ large, this principle translates into the interests of autonomous nations, controlled through financial institutions.<sup>120</sup>

What is more, if European economics developed out of premodern systems of exchange, then the gift economy does not belong to a radically other, crude, unsophisticated and primitive system which was seen for the first time in the colonies. The gift was at the root of European economic and subjective consciousness, having been long forgotten on the continent by the time colonization began. Consequently, this implies that the potlatch and its accompanying subjectivity is not other and inferior, but

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<sup>120</sup> An autonomous nation or state made up of well-defined individuals should not be confused with a collectivity. It is rather the compounding of individual interests united geographically and politically but not as an economic collective, since wealth is individuated. That in the modern European state certain things are shared, does not imply commensurability with premodern tribal society. Moreover, one can argue that in tribal societies members certainly have possessions which they do not share. It would be naive, however, to assert that one system exists to the exclusion of the other. My argument rather reposes on exemplary systems which never exist absolutely but in degrees, and which are certainly not entirely separate from one another.

rather part of the same. Hence, the European self-interested individual was historically, and on that same continent, once a more communal construct, in part because the boundaries of his subjecthood were less rigidly defined by his economic situation. According to Mauss, Europeans have not always understood themselves as *Homo economicus*. The modern notion of the individual is not inherently logical or at one with the ostensible order of the world; it merely reflects what Mauss calls the *assumed* natural motivation of stringent utility.<sup>121</sup>

Moreover, while pre-modern potlatch economics (what Mauss calls noble expenditure) are set off against modern economics in the essay, it is important to remember that one system does not exclude the other. One form of economic practice is not conceived of as being inherently better, or the ‘natural’ and exclusive domain of ‘civilized’ nations, while the other is discredited as belonging to ‘primitive’ or ‘uncivilized’ new-world tribes and clans. Although we may have become ‘calculating machines’, we are still far from maintaining ‘glacial utilitarian reckoning’ (“ce constant et glacial calcul utilitaire”) as a stable condition (272). For example, indulging in sumptuous expenditure for luxuries such as exorbitantly priced art, reading novels which have no practical application, recreational drug and alcohol use, or reckless spending like gambling, is explained by Mauss as a deviation from utilitarian containment, into noble prestation behaviors. The collective economy of the gift re-asserts itself into closed-system, institutionalized modern economics with (as Mauss predicts hopefully) increasing persistence: “Les thèmes du don, de la liberté et de l’obligation dans le don, celui de la libéralité et celui de l’intérêt qu’on a à donner, raviennent chez nous, comme reparaît un motif dominant trop longtemps oublié” (262)<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> “Il ne semble pas qu’il ait jamais existé, ni jusqu’à une époque assez rapprochée de nous, ni dans les sociétés qu’on confond fort mal sous le nom de primitives ou inférieures, rien qui ressemblât à ce qu’on appelle l’économie naturelle” (149-150).

<sup>122</sup> Likewise, the gift economy is not constituted entirely of extravagant, gratuitous expenditure and disinterestedness. The Tsimshial chief is likened to the capitalist who knows how to spend his money at the right time only to build his capital:

On dirait vraiment que le chef trobriandais ou tsimshian procède à un lointain degré à la façon du capitaliste qui sait se défaire de sa monnaie en temps utile, pour reconstituer ensuite son capital mobile. Intérêt et désintéressement expliquent également cette forme de la circulation des richesses et celle de la circulation archaïque des signes de richesse qui les suivent (269).

What Mauss effectively shows in the essay is that prestation inheres even in cultures which are assumed to be predominately utilitarian, as a sort of decadent, carnivalesque or derelict register of exchange, which the greater economy attempts unsuccessfully to outlaw or regulate. Consequently, modern economics cannot be entirely divorced from prestation in the service of controlled utilitarian production and exchange. Rather there exists a spectrum that spans unrestricted disinterested prestation, buying and selling, and (partial) utility, which is accompanied by a corresponding progression of subjective constructs from the less well defined to the individual.<sup>123</sup>

Hence, Mauss is asking us to question and rethink is the so-called ‘natural economy’ of utilitarianism which has turned us into ‘calculating machines’ (266). He thereby reacts, in turns implicitly and explicitly throughout the essay, to the kind of economic parsimony promoted by Bentham and other 19<sup>th</sup>-century propounders of utilitarian theory. In particular, Bentham’s vision of society is based on a stringent calculation of pleasures and pains translated into units of measure, with the goal of containing wealth and minimizing loss. Indeed, the basic tenet of Bentham’s utilitarianism is that pleasure and pain exist in direct and natural economic relation to one another, and must be regulated by the principle of utility.<sup>124</sup> Thus the utility of human actions, most importantly expenditure, is measured in terms of the augmentation or diminution of the happiness of the party whose interest is in question. Therefore, in the utilitarian scheme of things, actions such as gambling which diminish public wealth or potentially increase pain constitute public offenses, whereas premodern economic systems tend to large collective speculative ventures or gambles, based on the idea that the exchange partner collectivity will reciprocate under the bond of noble debt.

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<sup>123</sup> “Ils nous permettent [les données de l’analyse du don] de concevoir que ce principe de l’échange-don a dû être celui des sociétés qui ont dépassé la phase de la ‘prestation totale’ (de clan à clan, et de famille à famille) et qui cependant ne sont pas encore parvenues au contrat individuel pur, au marché où roule l’argent, à la vente proprement dite et surtout à la notion du prix estimé en monnaie pesée et titrée” (227).

<sup>124</sup> For example, in Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* several sections are devoted to such topics as “Of the Four Sanctions or Sources of Pain and Pleasure”, “Value of a Lot of Pleasure or Pain, How to be Measured”, “Pleasures and Pains, Their Kinds”.

Similarly, in *The True Alarm: A View of Paper Money*, Bentham discusses “money given for evanescent services” such as singing, dancing, prostitution and particularly gambling (14).<sup>125</sup> While these activities may augment human pleasure and diminish pain, they have no intrinsic utility, and therefore, they exceed or slip outside of a system bent on the control and recirculation of capital. This is why gaming comes within Bentham’s “Division of Offenses”, while lotteries are condoned as a less “burthensome” mode of taxation, provided that “personal expenditure amounts to no more than a percentage of the yield” (*EW* 536). By Bentham’s logic, lotteries can be regulated by the state to channel money back into the system, while individuals who are want to gamble are prevented from squandering large sums of money in unsanctioned activities such as card playing.

Importantly, the notion of personal interest (ethic, moral, aesthetic) in Bentham’s writing is also part of a theory of monetary interest, so that the notion of the subject, even in the strictest sense of persons and bodies, is related to the circulation of wealth. This is why economy in Bentham’s writings is consistently thought in metaphors of corporeality, as for example the circulation of wealth and illness in the body politic. This greater body is in turn reducible to its smallest common denominator, that being the balance of pleasure and pain in each well-defined individual member of a given nation.

Therefore, the principles of utility aim to break down expenditure into individual and smaller collective exchange ventures. The idea is that if every individual is fiscally responsible, the system will work on the grand scale. Theoretically, if every individual manages his or her own portion of the financial pie which is the wealth of a given nation, circulation within the body politic is easier to control (read tax), and massive collective loss will be kept to a minimum. Irresponsible individuals may well go bankrupt but the chances of this happening to the system in its entirety are thought to be greatly reduced.

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<sup>125</sup> Non-procreative sexual activity, as well as the expenditure of the self in onanism is described throughout Bentham as waste or debt. As Susan Sontag explains in *Illness as Metaphor*, ( New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) “having an orgasm in nineteenth-century England slang, was not ‘coming’ but ‘spending’” (62). The word ‘*perte*’ in French has similar connotations.

But of course, theory does not always work in practice: economic crises in modern history may be construed practically as the rule rather than the exception. There is always a gap or hole somewhere in the system, through which extravagant and nonrecuperable loss escapes. This is because modern European economics have always, in spite of themselves, left the door open to wild financial gambles, speculative misadventures, extravagant loss and expenditure, with an air of parsimonious utility. Hence, premodern economic modalities of exchange are not as far removed from the modern European imagination as people once liked to believe. There has always been a “potlatch”, or a high-stakes speculative venture of one kind or another in operation within restricted modern European economic systems from their beginnings.

### ***5. Economic Gambles***

History provides many examples of chance running away with formally restricted economies and undermining the whole notion of economic restraint. Likewise, there are many cases of parallel economies based on gambles and ostentatious loss which exist *within* restricted modern economics like unstoppable holes in the system. I will now discuss a few such financial ventures in light of the above discussion of premodern gift economies and the relationship of prestation to modern economics and debt.

Huizinga described the development of European economics from the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a trend to the “closed system...[based on] the principle of unrestricted autonomy and self-interest”.<sup>126</sup> However, from within this closed-system economy that was taking hold throughout Europe, the Dutch prospered by steadfastly adhering to an antiquated premercantile economic system, the likes of which neighboring countries had already abandoned in favor of more ‘efficient’ institutions for controlling the circulation of wealth. Private banking systems such as the Venetian Rialto and the dynastic court banks of Genoa and Augsburg were devoted to “adjudicating and conserving”, with the

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<sup>126</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century* (*Nederland's Beschaving in de 17th Eeuw* Amsterdam, 1941), Trans. Arnold J. Pomerans, London: Collins, 1968 p. 34.

intention of carefully controlling the circulation of wealth.<sup>127</sup> The Dutch, however, within their outmoded system, engaged in countless banking experiments such as playing with interest rates and trading *in blanco*, that is, in promissory notes as opposed to hard-coin currency.<sup>128</sup> These experiments, far from leading to catastrophe created even more capital, thus rewarding the Dutch for their entrepreneurial bravado.<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, at the heart the anachronistic of Dutch 17th-century economic paradigm, the largely experimental bourse generated wealth at a phenomenal rate. Schama has remarked that this thriving and dynamic bourse grew out of an “entrepreneurial ethos”, a result of the Dutch resistance to restrictive modern economic behavior. Moreover, Schama also links the Golden Era economic success of the Dutch, to their penchant for taking wild risks in the face of financial disaster. Indeed, the general economic attitude of the Dutch was a menace to the dominant trend toward contained systems which the rest of Europe was striving toward (Schama 341).

Likewise, there existed a carnivalesque and more radically speculative trade which paralleled the Dutch bourse in the 17th century, known commonly as the “*windhandel*”. The *windhandel* was the circus cousin of the bourse based on speculation

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<sup>127</sup> On this point see the chapter entitled “Money Unconfined: I Invest, He Speculates, They Gamble” in Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, London: Fontana Press, 1987, p. 345

<sup>128</sup> This is the precursor of our present mode of paper money exchange, and it amounted to trading in I.O.U.’s. The obvious consequence of exchange based on promissory notes is that it puts debt into circulation in a system which is in principle formed to control debt. Hence the circulation of paper money is yet another paradoxical fiscal behavior which appears to fly in the face of any system bent on restrictiveness and closure. However, in the contemporary postmodern high-stakes financial game, paper money has, since the oil crisis in the 1970’s, been lifted off the gold standard. Effectively we have given up on the myth of monetary referentiality: paper money can no longer be redeemed at any bank, for a corresponding amount of precious metal, hence our system of exchange becomes increasingly symbolic and debt-based. For a discussion of the history of paper money, zero-balance accountancy and debt see the chapter entitled “Absence of an Origin: Xenomoney” in Brian Rotman’s *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, p. 87-97.

<sup>129</sup> Although Huizinga lauds the curious economic strategies of the Dutch in the 17th century, it is clear that he speaks from a modern utilitarian standpoint. While he writes at length about the exuberance of the potlatch as a ludic economy in *Homo Ludens*, he balks at the Netherlands Bank President’s use of the expression play, as in ‘the Gold Standard cannot play due to the devaluation of the Guilder’ (58, 38). For Huizinga, the verb ‘play’ can only be used metaphorically, and ironically at that, in the context of the modern market. To speak of play in this context is a misuse of the play concept because it undermines the seriousness and restrictiveness of the modern notion of economy. To understand modern market economics from a nonutilitarian perspective is inherently inappropriate. Moreover, this ‘misuse’ of play threatens the neo-Kantian transcendence which Huizinga has constructed around the concept in *Homo Ludens*.

in tulip bulbs, and tulip bulb futures, and was intended to cater to down-market customers. If tulip bulbs are a particularly ephemeral commodity, the promissory notes written on the prospect of their arrival from Turkey was certainly twice removed from a tangible stock, and therefore, by 1636 the *windhandel* was a full-blown “paper gamble”. Prices could double or triple in a week or a day as the “object of the exercise became snapping paper delivery obligations and then off-loading them again for a choice mark-up” (Schama 359).

The *windhandel* was then, an exaggerated reflection of the Dutch economic ethos which existed at the center of 17<sup>th</sup>-century European restricted economics. If the Dutch bourse system, which depended on high risk, seemed unfathomably to generate wealth while defying the modern notion of closed system economics, the *windhandel* was yet a more carnivalesque version of the Dutch market gamble. The rapid outgrowth of this enormously risky “wind market” is not surprising considering that the standard bourses in Amsterdam and Antwerp were seen as part and parcel of a nation of seasoned gamblers and inveterate card players. Indeed, by the 17th century card playing in Low Lands had become a popular genre in commercial art, which reflected of a national past-time and the prevalent attitude toward risk, uncertainty, and debt, which stimulated prosperity and growth in the economy.

Because it relied on extravagant expenditure and loss, the tulip trade is exemplary of the dominant theme of the gift economy and its intrusion into closed system European 17<sup>th</sup>-century economics. For example, Mauss wrote that prestation economies “retain a ceremonial character, obligatory and efficacious; they have their own ritual character”, which is attributable to the religious origin of the notion of economic value (Mauss 70). Correspondingly, the *windhandel* rapidly developed “highly ritualized and formal conventions in which to conduct its trade” as well as a whole lexicon of secret handshakes, and clandestine body language (Schama 359). The state of perpetual economic effervescence which resulted from an ‘in the wind’ economics based on undirected and nonpurposeful expenditure occasioned lavish ostentation in the form of feasts and gifts to the poor or “gestures of redemptive charity” (Schama 360).



This as well recalls the extravagant rituals of consumption, feasting and waste which accompany the potlatch (Mauss 33-35).

In a similar vein, Kavanagh has used Mauss' essay on gift economies in his study of aristocratic gambling under the *ancien régime* in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France.<sup>130</sup> According to Kavanagh, Mauss' essay may be used as a tool with which to explicate a phenomenon largely misunderstood or ignored, yet which operated as an important *parallel economy* during the 18th century. Hence he writes that "to study gambling in *ancien régime* France is, in one sense, to study a new chapter in the history of the circulation of wealth and the increasingly ubiquitous phenomenon of money" (29).

Kavanagh explains the hyperactive redistribution of wealth based gambling and card playing through the opposition of sanctioned *jeux de commerce* as opposed to unauthorized *jeux de hasard*. While permission was granted by the king for the former category of games, because these were considered to contain an element of skill alongside of risk, the latter were less tolerated since winning or losing depended entirely on the turn of a card. But while this official distinction was maintained, games of pure chance were conducted all the same in the back rooms of authorized *maisons de jeux*. Hence, there existed a certain will to contain the aleatory economy of games of chance within another economy of gaming which was somehow less risky, and therefore, thought to be sanctioned under state control. However, since gambling in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France was referred to as the "*vice principal de la cour*", one understands the tenuous measure of control maintained by the intervention of authority.

Historians of the 18th century have analyzed rampant court gambling as the king's subtle way of keeping the nobility conveniently indentured. Gaming has also been seen as an effect of primogeniture, which dictated that the first born son inherit the bulk of family wealth, thereby leaving subsequent generations of sons with less income and no access to ignoble forms of commerce beneath their birth. Kavanagh, however, reads this phenomenon through Mauss, as an eruption of noble expenditure into a modern economic system which was supposedly bent toward restraint. According to Kavanagh,

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<sup>130</sup> Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993.

there is a link between gambling and Mauss' description of the potlatch in North American tribes:

Gambling was one of a number of practices crucial to a concept of honor according to which individuals fulfilled, through what could be virtually unlimited consumption and destruction, 'the duty of returning with interest gifts received in such a way that the creditor becomes the debtor' (45).

Given the above, the concept of premodern noble expenditure may be linked to the nobility of the 18th century as an expression of its 'natural' claim to sovereignty. It was at the piquet table, for example, that privileged lineage was asserted through prodigious and lavish expenditure. The gratuity with which this class squandered wealth affirmed the unalterable fact of their inherited privilege. The capacity to throw away wealth as a noble ethic was important in the asserting of one's undeniable birth, at a time when France was rife with parvenus in possession of purchased letters of nobility. Unlike these *nouveaux nobles*, the aristocracy was born to distinguish itself through gestures of sumptuous gratuity.

While the nobility stood apart from the enterprising individuals who comprised the parvenu class, the subjective outline of the gambling nobility is fragmented and effaced. According to Kavanagh, this is because gambling is an economy in which the individual finds itself redefined by the group who plays the game to hand: he is part of the ambient community of card players rather than an individual in the Enlightenment sense of the emerging ideal of the rational man (18). The self-control which is necessary in a utilitarian exchange of goods between individuals, is an impediment at the gambling table, because here subjectivity is effaced in the service of extravagance. In other words, a collective construction of agency rather than a well-defined construct of the individual is necessary and germane to the economic potlatch that is gambling. Kavanagh cites the following observations on the gambling 'subject' from Dusaulx's *De la passion du jeu* (1779):

What particularly characterizes gamblers is their lack of any character. Their tumultuous and contrary feelings reciprocally destroy each other and leave only

confused traces. They have the faces of lost men with no distinct physiognomy.<sup>131</sup>

Noble extravagance and the aristocratic gambler may be seen as “the confused traces” of a collective agency unto which it was born, so that aristocratic subjecthood is anachronistic, at least in respect to financial transactions.<sup>132</sup> As a consequence, gambling debts associated with nobility had the special status of partial gratuity viz. the gratuity of the expenditure and of the indenture which they incur. Because gambling debts had no legal status, repaying them was considered a matter of prestige or privilege as *engagements-pari*. “The true aristocrat recognized a gambling debt as binding because in so doing he was not submitting to the dictates of any externally imposed law” (Kavanagh 42). Because gambling was tolerated but not permitted, the legality of these debts was based on honor and noble obligation, just as returning the gift is the noble and appropriate gesture in prestation economies.

Small gambling ventures (card games, gambling houses) are gaps in an economic system which, once opened up, are resistant to closure and regulation. Gambling practices are ‘always already’ a part of even the most rigidly restricted utilitarian economics and in spite of efforts to control such parallel economies, they will re-insinuate themselves by finding new ways in which to manipulate the signs that circulate in the dominant monetary economy. Small-scale gambling operations like card playing are related to even larger scale gambles like the Bubble ventures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it is perhaps no coincidence that John Laws’ name is pronounced *l’as*—the ace—in French.<sup>133</sup> John Laws’ System (1719-1720), which he sold to the king of France in Paris,

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<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Kavanagh, p. 36.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Panasitti and Schull, “Re-articulating the Moral Economy of Gambling”, in *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers: Essays on Controlling Processes*, Ed. Laura Nader, No. 77, 1994, p. 65-102, where gambling is described as an out-moded privilege in Victorian society: “[C]onspicuous consumption, and games of chance were vestiges of an outdated and predatory Victorian aristocracy whose pecuniary standards were incompatible with the demands of industrial capitalism” (66). On gambling in Victorian England, see Gillian Beer’s article entitled “The Reader’s Wager: Lots, Sorts and Futures”, *Essays in Criticism*: Vol. 40, 1990, p. 99-123. See also Jurij Lotman’s essay on gambling as an anachronistic aristocratic privilege in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novel.

<sup>133</sup> On the same note, packs of cards called “Républicains” were authored by famous *citoyens*, including Saint-Simon, in post-revolutionary France. The aces in Saint-Simon’s deck were called ‘Laws’ presumably after John Law (Benham, 146). Saint-Simon wrote that Law was “a man of systems, of calculation and comparison, well

was the most infamous of the 18th-century speculative Bubbles, and not surprisingly, Law fronted his system with one hundred thousand livres won at gambling tables in the great cities of continental Europe.<sup>134</sup>

Likewise, Peter DeBolla describes a parallel monetary crisis in England, which resulted from that country's seven-year long war (1756-1763) with France, as "the discourse of debt".<sup>135</sup> In order to finance the war, the Bank of England, which had been entrusted with the management of the National Debt, issued and circulated a large number of exchequer bills in return for an unprecedented 4.5 percent rate of interest. The numbers of bills written and circulated escalated throughout the war, and the national debt increased in direct proportion to their circulation within the system. The most perplexing aspect of this economy based on debt, was that the rise in public borrowing based on paper credit created a situation of infinite expansion of debt and led to "the acceptance of a permanent discrepancy between the total circulating specie and the debt" (DeBolla 111). However, the discrepancy between circulating specie and the national debt, stimulated public spending and economic growth in general. Debt opened new investment possibilities rather than limiting them, and literally put potential wealth into circulation.<sup>136</sup>

Thus we may speak of the creation of surplus wealth based on the monetary crisis of the Seven-Years-War and the resulting situation of debt, as a manifestation of an unrestricted economy, in which new wealth is created through a financial gamble, on the return of possibility. In other words, this is a situation analogous to the gift economy, where new wealth is created in the form of a wager made through the offering of goods

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and deeply versed, the kind who, without ever cheating, had everywhere won immense sums at gambling because he could predict...the sequence of the cards" (Kavanagh, 98).

<sup>134</sup> There were many other high-stakes speculative ventures going on all over Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century of which the disastrous South Sea Bubble (1720-21) and the Mississippi Company are examples.

<sup>135</sup> See the chapter entitled "The Discourse of Debt" in Peter DeBolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime*. London: Blackwell, 1981, p. 103-140.

<sup>136</sup> The paradoxical capacity of debt to create surplus wealth is the subject of Kant's essay "Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Grössen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen (1763)" in *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768, Band II*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1968. According to Kant, debt in the system occupies a virtual space of possible wealth because debt puts created potential capital into circulation.

against the anticipation of greater return. This is essentially the gamble taken in financial strategies where public debt is increased giving rise in turn to speculation and greater public spending. The contracting of debts, on the one hand and the paying of one debt with another is, in essence, another manifestation of the prestation gamble in a restricted economy.

In the present economic paradigm of late capitalism, however, risk, debt, and massive speculative projects are characteristic of the ways in which wealth is circulated. Because the current economic trend favors risk-taking, governments now turn to the casino as an increasingly important source of revenue. Indeed, gambling has become so vital a part of the global economy that casinos are now a leading industry, and gambling has come to be promoted as a family activity.<sup>137</sup> However, because government involvement in gambling as a source of revenue constitutes a fairly radical departure from traditional modern economic practice, the issue has generated considerable and unresolved debate. For example, gambling's detractors maintain that there is a basic systemic incommensurability between the gambling industry and the greater economy. Those who hold this opinion argue that as an industry, gambling rarely amounts to more than a zero-sum game, in part because of the "negative externalities" (addiction, drinking, smoking) which it engenders.<sup>138</sup> In this view, the benefits to be reaped from the casino market are negligible at best when one factors in the vice engendered by casino culture, the costs to the community in crime control, and the sloth in members of the work force.

Economists who see the gambling industry as a lucrative venue, do so on the basis of their assessment of the current postmodern paradigm as being compatible with the casino.<sup>139</sup> Hence, casino culture is promoted as a family activity and as a social

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. "From Vice to Nice: The Suburbanization of Las Vegas", *The New York Times Magazine*, December, 1991, p. 68-71, 79-84:

Las Vegas is drastically transforming its image. The city that was once perceived as the moral sinkhole...[is now] cleaning up its act to attract a larger, family crowd (68).

<sup>138</sup> See the recent article entitled "The False Promise of Development by Casino" in *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 12, 1994, p. 5.

<sup>139</sup> See Mike Panasitti and Natasha Schull's "Re-articulating the Moral Economy of Gambling" in *Kroeber*

phenomenon which reflects existing cultural and economic norms. Moreover, because postmodern 'subjects' supposedly understand themselves as "people of chance", their interaction with high risk seems natural or appropriate so that gambling presents itself as a fitting industry and investment.<sup>140</sup> As a consequence of these factors combined, gambling is understood in certain economic circles as taking on increasingly greater systemic compatibility with the surrounding economy.

### ***6. New Accountancy: The Zero Balance***

One of the reasons for many gaps in restricted systematized economies, is directly related to the institution of banking. Early in the 14th century, Europe began to grapple with the best ways of controlling economic activity and manipulating wealth over the paradigmatic shift from premercantile feudalism to mercantilism. In part, this was undertaken through banking practices which necessitated innovations in accountancy, most importantly the practice of double-ledger bookkeeping, which reposed on the concept of zero. In such a system, debt is visibly inscribed and set off against profits, which renders assets and liabilities immediately apprehensible, ostensibly facilitating economic control measures and the manipulation of figures.

The new accountancy, along with the oriental concept of zero which made the double-entry zero-balance possible, was imported into occidental Europe beginning in the 10th century. The importation of oriental numbers into Europe constitutes a radical shift in Western consciousness as it amounts to a complete restructuring of mathematical annotation and its accompanying consciousness. Previously unknown in the West, zero and the other nine Sanskrit numerals, were brought into Europe with Arab merchants. By the tenth century the cipher was in use in the Arab Mediterranean countries. The cipher began its entry into the rest of Europe in the thirteenth century through treatises on the Hindu numerals which were translated from Arabic into Latin,

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*Anthropological Society Papers*, No 77, 1994, p.65-102.

<sup>140</sup> See John M. Findlay's *People of Chance: Gambling in American Society from Jamestown to Las Vegas*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

for instance in Fibonacci's *Liber Abaci* of 1202, or in the treatise on the cipher written by Al-Khwarizmi (1320).<sup>141</sup> While these are not the only works on the oriental numerals which became popular in continental Europe, they are often cited as pivotal moments in the occidental reception of the cipher.

At the same time that zero gradually migrated into Europe, double-entry accountancy was also gaining in consequence. Since the aim of this bookkeeping practice is the zero-balance, the oriental concept of zero was absolutely fundamental to the double-ledger system. Hence, zero was a principle element in the development of mercantile capitalism and informed, from the beginning, the modern European system of annotation: its writing.<sup>142</sup> If the reception of zero into Western consciousness was difficult<sup>143</sup>, resistance to the use of the cipher was broken down by the perceptible material benefits obtaining from the new more efficient accountancy it implemented:

The central role occupied by double-entry book-keeping (the principle of the zero balance) and the calculational demands of capitalism broke down any remaining resistance to the 'infidel symbol' of zero, and insured that by the early seventeenth century Hindu numerals had completely replaced Roman ones as the dominant mode of recording and manipulating numbers throughout Europe (Rotman 7-8).

Further, as Rotman has shown, this presented considerable difficulties, which is why it took European consciousness a considerable length of time to fully grasp the concept of zero. How is it, for example, that adding zeros to the end of a number increases it tenfold, rather than reducing the number by a corresponding amount if zero means nothing? Why is it that one cipher multiplied makes "many thousands more"?

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<sup>141</sup> See Karl Menninger's *Number Words and Number Symbols: A Cultural History of Numbers*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969, p. 410-13. Cf. George Ifra's *Histoire universelle des chiffres*, Paris: Seghers, 1981, p. 270-9.

<sup>142</sup> See Brian Rotman's *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 7-8.

<sup>143</sup> Christian European resistance to the inherent foreignness of the infidel cipher (coming from the Sanskrit *sunya* which became *sifr* in Arabic) left its trace in language. This is why zero is still called *le chiffre arabe* in French, *die arabische Ziffer* in German, *de arabische cijfer* in Dutch, and *la cifra arabica* in Italian. The adjective 'arabic' qualifies the cipher as oriental, imported, foreign, and other. The inherent strangeness of the cipher also accounts for its secondary meaning in English as a secret or mysterious code which must be deciphered.

rather than a larger negative composite? The difficulty involved in grasping these arithmetic fundamentals is still clearly in evidence three centuries after zero entered Europe, as for example, throughout Shakespeare in the form of pithy sayings which express its paradoxical nature, such as the epigram from *A Winter's Tale* that begins this chapter.<sup>144</sup>

If we follow Rotman's argument to its logical conclusion we see that the mathematical foundation upon which mercantile capitalism constructed its accountancy is, metaphorically speaking, full of imported holes. That is, modern European restricted economic practices, from double-entry accountancy to the banks and other institutions which house these financial systems, are founded on the necessity of the 'infidel cipher', because they hinge on the zero balance. The modern idea of economy was to close the system as much as possible by setting up national commercial institutions which would restrict the outward flow of wealth, and subsequently control debt. However, as we know, none of this ever went entirely according to plan, due in part to the cipher rattling around in the machine.<sup>145</sup>

Given the above, I submit that the shift from premodern gift economics, to a more restricted modern economics may be understood as a movement away from a system of exchange between collectivities of non-individualized agencies based on debt and risk, to a restrictive system of exchanges between individuals, political bodies and institutions, with the goal of circumventing economic crises through the reduction of debt. However, since the advances in book-keeping involved in this shift were based on

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<sup>144</sup> Much more recently, during the economic crisis at the end of the Weimar Republic, German physicians invented the term 'cipher-stroke' to describe a condition which caused those afflicted to write endless rows of zeros. This fixation evidently resulted from sufferers' inability to comprehend what had happened to value and worth during a period of outrageous inflation, so that they felt compelled to deal with the crash by writing row upon row of zeros, as though this might unlock the secret. See Galbraith's *Money: Whence it Came, Where it Went*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1975, p.157. For a discussion of zero in *King Lear*, consult "King Lear and 'nothing'" in Rotman's *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, p.78-87.

<sup>145</sup> This suggests, furthermore, that oriental non-Christian otherness was always already present in the shape of a zero, a character which embraces emptiness by circumscribing it. I will have occasion to return to this topic in greater detail in Chapter 5 below.



the imported concept of zero, a gap is introduced into modern economic systems which forces us to think about both agency and closure.

While zero is a character *for* emptiness, it is also a character *of* emptiness as in the English sense of cipher, that is, a person void of importance or value.<sup>146</sup> Zero signals absence and nothing, while marking the place of the counting or mathematical subject, hence this same numeral has been referred to as the locus of the ‘necessary residue of ego extinction’.<sup>147</sup> The cipher encompasses the place of subjective dispersion and nothingness and, by extension therefore, invites us to think about the integrity of an economy which defines the movement of goods as between individual subjects and coherent political bodies. What is more, while the zero balance was intended to serve as a restrictive economic measure, it seems rather to have introduced more play into the system, by allowing for greater freedom in the manipulation of numerical signs.<sup>148</sup> The cipher opened up a space for nothing and inflationary debt as a function of its inherent negativity, instead of making for increased systemic containment.

Finally, I have raised the issue of subjectivity in relation to Baudrillard’s version of late or postmodern capitalism and Mauss’ essay on premodern prestation economics. In both cases it is suggested that the economic paradigm in question is driven by debt, and this in turn informs how the subjective economic profile is constructed. In Baudrillard’s model of late capitalism, a system of objects creates its own system of consumer needs and debts which are met in turn with objects created by the system. As a consequence, the subject who must negotiate the system comes to understand itself

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<sup>146</sup> The second definition for cipher in the *Collins English Dictionary* is “a person or thing of no importance or value”.

<sup>147</sup> Rotman explains that “as a numeral within the Hindu system, indicating the absence of any of the numerals 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, zero is a sign about names, a meta-numeral; and as a number declaring itself to be the origin of counting, the trace of the one-who-counts and produces the number sequence, zero is a meta-number, a sign indicating the whole potentially infinite progression of integers” (14).

<sup>148</sup> Zero marks the place of difference and the entrance of play into the numerical system. Hence in the Latin version of Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizimi’s text on the zero we read “Si nihil remanserit ponas circulum ut non sit *differentia* vacua: sed sit in ea circulus qui occupet eam, ne forte cum vacua fuerit minuantur *differentiae* et putetur secunda esse prima [When nothing remains, put down a small circle so that the difference will not be left empty, but the circle must occupy it, so that the number of differential places will not be diminished when the place is empty and the second be mistaken for the first] (Menninger, 413).

increasingly as an object among others in the system, rather than a unique, rigidly individuated, subject. Similarly, premodern agents negotiate collective exchanges with other collectives so that the individuals define themselves communally, as a function of their economic paradigm. Hence, while individuals in premodern economies may have personal possessions, the bulk of wealth is communal, so that economic transactions take place between groups rather than individual subjects. However, while we may argue that the postmodern construct of the subject is also a dispersed collection of systemically-defined agencies, the reasons for the nature of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century 'postmodern subjectivity' being explicable this way spring from different conditions.

One might describe the postmodern economic paradigm as a sort of global village casino over which individuals exercise little or no subjective control. Some take this to be a point on which to equate the postmodern with the premodern subject, that is in terms of how the part played by the subject in a given economy will fix the perimeters of agency. Previously, I linked both agencies with the constitution of the 'subject', and the *loss* of subjectivity experienced in games and gaming situations, as the player finds himself being played. However, I also stated that premodern agency and postmodern deconstructed subjectivity are not identical. It would be a mistake to constitute the premodern person as a disembodied note in the *vox populi*, rather than as a plurality of possible positions in an oral narrative of collective history. While I am following a line of argumentation which falls in with the popular trend of equating premodern phenomena with postmodern, it is important to recognize their similarities without conflating them. The postmodern 'unsubject' is not essentially naive, romantic and ready to give itself over to an orgiastic spectacle of mass collective destruction, just because it understands itself as being fragmented and not rigidly individuated. I would submit rather, that the present economic game in which we find ourselves *both* players and playthings is aleatory and based on debt, which explains in part why subjects may construe themselves as being fragmentary. Hence, at some points, our current economic situation bears a resemblance to the premodern gift economy. While this is true, premodern agency and postmodern 'subjectivity' cannot be directly equated to one another, nor can one economics be reduced to the other.

In his preface to *Unconsciousness for Sale*, Wlad Godzich explains what is different from the premodern to the postmodern paradigm, by focusing on subjective economic alienation.<sup>149</sup> If in premodern oral ‘culture’, argues Godzich, we have persons who may occupy several different positions in an oral narrative rather than autonomous, self-contained individuals, then subject power is located in collective oral memory, rather than in the individual who is speaking. Succinctly put, “[p]ersons are thus defined not ontologically but discursively, and their aggregate, the community of persons, is equally derived from memoria as the treasure trove of discourses” (xiv). Similarly, in potlatch economics persons do not define themselves as individuals with balanced chequing accounts and investment portfolios, but rather as members of an economic community who participate in the same treasure trove of goods: subjective power is contained in the gift not in an individual giver.<sup>150</sup>

While in the postmodern economic paradigm subjects are loosely defined economically as part of a global casino, the resultant agency is not integrated but rather disintegrated. This is because at the close of the 20th century, it is the *economy* which is perceived as having autonomy rather than persons. The economy is open twenty-four hours a day, so that while agents or actors are at rest, the economy carries on generating needs and desires which it in turns fills, without there ever having been an agential experience of these needs independent of the system. As Godzich writes, the postmodern agent “leaves it to the mysterious inner dynamic to produce the adjustments necessary to prevent the whole [economy] from crashing” (xvi). The result is an autonomous economy which has produced thoroughly alienated and dispersed agents who feel themselves incapable of any form of intervention into the system.

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<sup>149</sup> Wlad Godzich “Subjects without Society” in *Unconscious for Sale, Advertising, Psychoanalysis, and the Public*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1992.

<sup>150</sup> See also Mauss’ discussion of the mercantilist notion of interest in terms of the individualistic accumulation of wealth, as opposed to pre-modern interest which excludes the concept of utility viz. the individual (271).

## 7. *Discursive Economies and Zero-Subjectivity: Bataille and Derrida*

### a) *Bataille*

In *La part maudite*, Bataille founds his theory of the *économie générale* on Mauss' presentation of the gift economy, as a critique of the "insuffisance du principe de l'utilité classique".<sup>151</sup> For Bataille, the fundamental element of the potlatch is non-recoupable loss: an unconditional excessive spending. This is an unrecoverable waste that cannot be contained within the ledgers of balanced accounts where spending is compensated by acquisition. Hence, for Bataille, the potlatch is a "ritual poker game" in which the best strategy would be to lose everything—a total expenditure as the ideal state of general economy.<sup>152</sup>

In turn Bataille's general economy is predicated on the natural expenditure of solar energy, in the same way that Bentham's model of utilitarian conservation is taken to be a reflection of some external natural state: "La source et l'essence de notre richesse sont données dans le rayonnement du soleil, qui dispense l'énergie—la richesse—sans contrepartie. Le soleil donne sans jamais recevoir" (66). So in Bataille, the potlatch becomes the model for global non-recoupable, sovereign *dépense*, which is part of the same general economy as the sun. In the same way that the sun gives off energy with no return, general expenditure is "un jeu de l'énergie qu'aucune fin particulière ne limite; le jeu de la *matière vivante en générale*, prise dans le mouvement de la lumière dont elle est l'effet" (61).

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<sup>151</sup> George Bataille, "La notion de dépense" in *La part maudite*, Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1967, p.25.

<sup>152</sup> "L'idéal, indique Mauss, serait de donner un *potlatch* et qu'il ne fût pas rend" (34), and "En tant que jeu, le *potlatch* est le contraire d'un principe de conservation...une activité d'échange excessive a substitué une sorte de poker rituel, à forme délirante, comme source de la possession. Mais les joueurs ne peuvent jamais se retirer fortune faite : ils restent à la merci de la provocation" (35).

Other economies, non-utilitarian exchanges which are analogous to the general economy, for example gaming, art and artistic writing,<sup>153</sup> exist within the general economy (“à l’intérieur d’un ensemble plus vaste”). Hence, in Bataille’s sense, within this vast economy, writing as an economic practice may be a sumptuous spending of signs (for a non-utilitarian purpose) as in poetic writing, or the conserving of signs, as in the utilitarianism of expository discourse. Major poetry, artistic writing, is gratuitous: it is the artists ‘gift’ as it were, a free expenditure of signs which come together to form a textual economy of language, which has no express purpose.<sup>154</sup>

What is interesting is where Bataille places himself as a writer, as one who spends language in the expenditure of the self:

En d’autres termes mon travail tendait d’abord à accroître la somme des ressources humaines...où la richesse accumulée n’a de valeur que dans l’instant. Ecrivant le livre où je disais que l’énergie ne peut être finalement que gaspillée, j’employais moi-même mon énergie, mon temps, au travail (51).

Therefore, writing is seen as a form of economy in which Bataille’s own text does not answer to the “froideur inhérent à tout calcul”, that is, to the economics of utilitarian writing which calls for the restrictive expenditure of signs (28). Bataille does not offer the sort of discursive economy which one would expect to encounter in an “ouvrage d’économie politique”, an eventually which he self-consciously suggests in the *avant-propos* to *La part maudite*. Bataille is self-conscious because he would not describe

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<sup>153</sup> Bataille lists the following as economic activities which are analogous to the general economy: “les activités dites improductives : le luxe, les deuils, les guerres, les cultes, les constructions de monuments somptuaires, les jeux, les spectacles, les arts, l’activité sexuelle perverse (c’est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale) représentent autant d’activités qui, tout au moins dans les conditions primitives, ont leur fin en elles-mêmes” (28).

<sup>154</sup> I am aware that this is a problematic neo-Kantian conceptualization of art, and the status of art: it makes of art an art for art’s sakes and of the artist a pauper. This point is brought into focus in Derrida’s work which I will consider presently. See, as well, Rebecca Comay’s article entitled “Gifts without Presents: Economies of ‘Experience’ in Bataille and Heidegger”, *YFS* 78, *On Bataille*, ed. Allan Stoekl, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. 66-89:

If it is true that, in his invocation of ‘ends in themselves’ Bataille would seem to invoke the most classical split between the natural and the cultural...the apparent ‘purposelessness’ of the flower pitted against the functionality of the artifact (Kant), the wasteful effusions of the songbird pitted against the niggardly efficiencies of the craftsman (Schiller)—he is unsentimental in his attachments, and dismisses every yearning for archaic Nature as being just ‘poetic fulguration’ (82).

himself within a referential or restricted economy of discourse to which books such as his usually belong.<sup>155</sup> Writing for Bataille, here as elsewhere, is rather an exuberance, an admixture of traces and discursive economies which he calls “*la bizarrerie*” that is his text (51).

### *b) Derrida*

In Derrida’s essay “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale” he describes modes of discourse through Bataille’s *économie générale*. More specifically, Derrida wants to explicate the way in which Bataille’s reading of Hegel works on the Hegelian economy of discourse, and how it in turn works with or against general economy. For example, Derrida considers that Bataille is reshuffling an economy of discourse (Hegel’s) which strives to restrict and complete itself, to include within itself “and anticipate all those figures of its beyond, all the forms and resources of its exterior, in order to keep these forms and resources close to itself”(252).<sup>156</sup> The system regulates its internal circulation and the resources exterior to it so that these are returned to, and recuperated by, the system which subsequently accounts for them.

But Bataille, according to Derrida, is an expert player at this economy of signs: he understands the technique involved, he makes use of the philosophers ruses, “manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts” (252).<sup>157</sup> His game is risky and difficult; “the trembling to which he submits these concepts” in the text has the effect of setting up new configurations, into which concepts are reinscribed

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<sup>155</sup> “L’intérêt qu’on attribue d’habitude à mes livres est d’ordre littéraire et ce dut être inévitable : on ne peut en effet les classer dans un genre à l’avance défini” (49).

<sup>156</sup> “Car au bout de cette nuit [de la raison hegelienne] quelque chose s’était tramé, aveuglément, je veux dire dans un discours, par quoi s’achevant la philosophie comprenait en soi, anticipait, pour les retenir auprès de soi, toutes les figures de son au-delà, toutes les formes et toutes les ressources de son dehors” in *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p.370. The English translation I use is by Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. Page numbers from the English translation are in the text.

<sup>157</sup> “Rire de la philosophie (du hegelianisme)—telle est en effet la forme du réveil—appelle dès lors toute une ‘discipline’, toute une ‘méthode de médiation’ reconnaissant les chemins du philosophe, comprenant son jeu, rasant avec ses ruses, manipulant ses cartes, le laissant déployer sa stratégie, s’appropriant ses textes” (370).

and displaced (253).<sup>158</sup> In short Bataille sets up an itinerant high-stakes “ritual poker game” in the restrictive economy of Hegel’s writing, the writing of an old man “who repeated his courses and played cards”, (most likely Solitaire) (253).<sup>159</sup> I say itinerant because the game that is the economy of the text is open-ended in spite of itself. It opens upon new games through which play circulates and displaces elements to form new configurations and reinscriptions. The consequent accountancy of the Hegelian dialectic should be able to reabsorb any surplus of uncodifiable meaning or nonsense, reincorporating it into a zero-balance of meaning and value. However, in spite of itself we find that this discourse like any other discursive economy, is not easily regulated. There is always an opening to play.

This is because, as Derrida reminds us, the two economies do not exist in opposition to one another: “Le rapport d’alterité entre l’économie restreinte et l’économie générale n’est surtout pas un rapport d’opposition...[il s’agit plutôt] d’une chaîne d’apparence *analogique* (*Économimésis* 72).<sup>160</sup> Therefore, all discursive economies are admixtures of restrictive and general practices. For Derrida, the Hegelian dialectic is a form of discursive economy which seeks to account for and anticipate every contingency while turning a blind eye to moments which exceed discursive closure: the laugh, silence, nonsense. These moments constitute sovereign writing or major poetry, moments in discourse which are not subsumable under the bookkeeping practices of a regulated dialectic. In a discursive economy these moments open the text up to condition of debt; they are the gaps, the gift of the text which indenture the reader in the name of gratuity, asking her to return the gift without interrupting the inflationary upward spiral of the text. These moments are what Derrida calls “potlatches of signs”, which occur through the text [any text] and will be met with a gift from the reader given

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<sup>158</sup> “Car faute de ressaisir en son rigoureux effet le tremblement auquel il les soumet, la nouvelle configuration dans lequel il les déplace et les réinscrit, y touchant à peine pourtant, on conclurait selon le cas que Bataille est hégélien, ou qu’il est anti-hégélien, ou qu’il a barbouillé Hegel” (373).

<sup>159</sup> “On pourrait aussi décrire...l’histoire des rapports de Bataille aux différentes figures de Hegel...[un Hegel qui par exemple] ‘ne se posa plus le problème’, ‘répétait ses cours et jouait aux cartes’” (372).

<sup>160</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Désarticulations” in *Économimésis*, Paris: Flammarion, 1975, p. 57-92.

in fulfillment of the obligation of the text, under the contract of noble debt (274).<sup>161</sup> These are the holes that are ‘always already’ there within discursive economies, threatening their stability with wasteful extravagance, the absence of sense and purpose.<sup>162</sup>

These moments of non-sense, of expenditure without reserve which escape the circularity of absolute knowledge destabilize the concept of a subject as a definable source, as the origin of an economy of discourse. One must contemplate absence in the circulation of meaning and value not retraceable to, or centered in a subject, the celebratory destruction of value. Nothing and absence are the unpredictable moments circumscribed by the numeral zero, the moment at which we turn up *le mort* or a dead-man’s hand. The natural moment of giving would demand no return, would be utterly gratuitous, would give itself over to absence. In Bataille’s words: “Le luxe de la mort, à cet égard, est envisagé par nous de la même façon que celui de la sexualité, d’abord comme une négation de nous-mêmes, puis, en un renversement soudain, comme la vérité profonde du mouvement dont la vie est l’exposition” (*La part maudite* 73). The potential for meaning to be lost, a moment of laughter set off by some non-sense or some semantic gratuity is answered by a corresponding non-subjectivity. The absolute gamble of putting sense at stake “simultaneously produces the risk of absolute death, the feint through which this risk can be lived, the impossibility of reading a sense or truth in it” (257).

## 8. Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined various approaches to text as economy, with the objective of arriving at an appropriate method for reading texts where games and money

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<sup>161</sup> “Non pas la réserve ou le retrait, le murmure infini d’une parole blanche effaçant les traces du discours classique mais *une sorte de potlatch des signes*, brûlant, consommant, gaspillant les mots dans l’affirmation gai de la mort : un sacrifice et un défi” (403).

<sup>162</sup> Issues surrounding absence, nothing and zero will arise and be discussed in detail in the following chapter on the history of playing cards and their introduction into Europe, as well as in the applied analyzes which comprise the final three chapters of this thesis.



are featured. In the remainder of the thesis I will be asking the reader to consider the narrative card game as phenomenon which constitutes a gap in the discursive economy, and which causes an inflation of possible meanings in the three novels I will analyze. As I have argued above, gambling opens up a hole in restrictive economic systems through which wealth may escape untaxed. This is why gambling is considered pernicious and dangerous to the economy at large, and every attempt has been made to control and regulate it.

In an analytics of discourse which understands textuality in economic terms, gambling is perhaps the economic practice which most closely resembles artistic writing and the reader's engagement with it. Therefore, the intent of this thesis is to consider card games as a narrative event which constitutes a discursive trope in the form of a set of Chinese boxes, or as a *mise en abyme* in the text at several levels. I have discussed the card game in the text as a *mise en abyme* in the sense that language in itself is a game, and further that novels are a collection of language games. If, in economic terms, artistic or literary writing (in this case the novel) is analogous to a general model of expenditure, a 'potlatch of signs' or a 'ritual poker' game predicated on sumptuous loss, what does it mean when an actual potlatch, in the form of a card game that involves monetary loss, is played out in the text? In answering these questions I will explicate the fictional monetary economy which is an integral part of the plot of the novels under consideration, as well as of the greater economy through which these texts circulate: in this case 20<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism.

Moreover, if one may argue that if the general economy of loss, set up in a card game wagering system such as poker or whist, is recovered in the text as part of the author's discursive economic game, the text as a whole will be open-ended, inherently exceeding and resistant to closure as a result. As well, the entry of the reader into the textual economic game constituted by the three novels on which I will focus, perpetuates the free play of the signifier, the manipulation and expenditure of the signs which form the text. Card playing then, both as a discursive object and as an activity, raises questions concerning the nature of play, games, texts and economy. As such, novelistic card games collapse narrative elements which comment on literary, agency (who is

playing and who is played), the constitution of the modern subject (individual, collective, absent), and economics in all of the senses of the term which I described above (monetary, discursive, literary, expository).

Finally, I invoke the term *mise en abyme*, as a figure which makes a particular literary phenomenon visible, and at the same time opens up an abyss, thereby inviting us to contemplate absence and nothingness. As a consequence, it will be necessary to discuss the novelistic card game in its relation to nothingness, death and absence, like the bridge game in the funeral scene from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. More importantly, zero marks the place of the absent monetary subject who counts, just as it marks the absence of the subject who recounts. Therefore, the zero as death and loss which the card game introduces into the text, asks us to contemplate the absence of two subjects: the subject who recounts—*Homo narrans*—and the subject who counts —*Homo economimus*.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Playing Card's Progress*

My good knave Eros  
Even such a body: here I am Antony;  
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave  
I made these wars for Egypt; and the queen,-  
Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine;  
Which whilst it was mine, had annex'd unto't  
A million more now lost,—she, Eros, has  
Pack'd cards with Caesar, and false-playe'd my glory,  
Unto an enemy's trump

—Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (4:14)

Les livres que j'y voy de diverse peinture,  
Sont les Livres des Roys, non pas de l'Escriture.  
J'y remarque au dedans différentes couleurs,  
Rouge aux Carreaux, aux Coeurs, noir aux Piques,  
aux Fleurs.

—Le P. Pierre St. Louis, 1668 (Chatto, 16)



### **1. Introduction**

In the preceding chapters I discussed the three fields of investigation—play, language and economy—which together form the theoretical and methodological context for the present thesis. Although play, economy and language may be described as the ‘frame’ or the ‘outline’ of my project, these are vast concepts which are interactional, and cannot be concretely demarcated as rigid paradigms. I am assuming, moreover, that these areas of inquiry do not function as discrete conceptual entities; they are rather, three sides of one and the same topic of investigation. Indeed, in recent theories of discourse, the relationship which obtains between language, semiology, economics and play has been both taken for granted, and explicitly addressed.

It will be my purpose in the following pages to explain how the playing card, and the narrative card game, are related to these three conceptual fields, as a function of how they intersect in the playing card. The correspondence between playing cards, economy, ludicity, and language has been well documented by playing card historians. And in folk wisdom, the idea that playing cards are intimately related to language and economy as well as to games, has been common knowledge for the past six centuries. However, because cards and the games played with them are often dismissed as a trivial pastime, their history is little known to any save those with a particular interest in the history of cards and printing, or professional players of card games. What I will undertake here is a brief history of the playing card, from its introduction into Europe in the 13th century, with the specific intent of showing how cards are related to the theoretical concerns I have outlined above.

Briefly, in the first case the relationship of playing cards to play is manifested as a function of their role in games. When the deck is taken up and animated by players, cards are used as randomizers which open games up to the movement of play. The game system, consisting in this case of the deck of cards and a series of arbitrary rules, lies dormant until movement of play is introduced into it, and this will happen as a function of subjective interaction which takes place over and through the cards, as a game is played. I assume, therefore, that the relationship obtaining between playing cards as randomizers in specific card games is ludic, and that as such, playing cards are intimately linked to play when they are made to function as markers in games.<sup>163</sup> I would suggest, therefore, that playing cards celebrate play and offer a standing invitation to the aleatory and to the random occurrence. When chance is introduced into any game system (linguistic, novelistic, economic) it becomes playable, making the movement of play palpable within the pragmatic game context at hand.

Naturally it is necessary to differentiate between actual card games and their narrative counterparts, for the two should not be conceived of as one and the same. In

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<sup>163</sup> When I assume all of this I am speaking of card *games* and not, for example, cartomancy or any of the other divinatory practices in which playing cards are used. While the Tarot and tarok cards were introduced into Europe at the same time as playing cards, and they are most likely the cards from which the standard deck of fifty-two playing cards developed. They are not, however, one and the same as I shall explain presently.

the literary card game, chance is represented and orchestrated by the author who ultimately controls the outcome of the narrative to some extent. However, when a reader enters into the larger game that the author has set up in the text, the exclusive relationship that exists between the author and the novel is disrupted and thrown open. The reader is free to shuffle the deck, to read the chapters in a different order for example, and to make her own decisions about the meaning of the outcome of the narrative. The author then, offers the reader a pack of cards in the form of a novel, which reader takes up and rewrites to a greater or lesser extent.

In the case of novels in which card games are played, the text's malleability and susceptibility to readerly rewriting is foregrounded as a salient feature of the narrative. Hence, the literary card game acts as a metaphor for how texts work, as well as for the nature of fictional discourse in general, so that through this metaphor the reader may to assess the relationship between the card game and novel in which it is represented in various ways. For example, if we may say that the discursive frame around the novelistic card game is itself necessarily ludic in Wittgenstein's sense of a language game, then the textual card game collapses ludic elements in the narrative as a significant *mise en abyme*. Or again, one might look at the way in which card games open the door to chance and give rise to sweeping reversals of fortune, upsetting the expectations of the reader or player, in the novel as in lived experience.

Moreover, cards and texts have long been associated with one another, due in part to the fact that cards and books are printed on paper. While this shared trait may be perfectly obvious, it is not trivial as I will argue below. This is in part because, as I wrote in Chapter 2, one turns playing cards over sequentially like the leaves of a book, so cards disclose information item by item as a slow and incremental process of revelation. These material features, common to cards and books, are actually historically grounded, however forgotten this history may be. My task in this chapter is to show how the parallel historical of development of playing cards and books accounts for the ways in which they are represented in novels, as well as for expressions such as "reading the cards" which continue to be part of common currency. I will also argue that cards have been read as an iconic or painted language by virtue of the fact that they carry printed

text, and have followed the same development from the wood block to the printing press.<sup>164</sup> In fact, before the founding of English and continental card makers' guilds in the 16th century, both cards and printed texts were made by the same craftsmen, so that from their arrival in most European countries, decks of cards were understood as being analogous to, or even some form of, book.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, as late as 18th century, cards were commonly called the Devil's Almanac, the Devil's Picture Book, The Bible of the Gypsies, The Encyclopedia of the Dead and the Perpetual Almanac.<sup>166</sup>

In Germany, for example, from the 15th to the 18th century the word for playing cards was *Briefe* and the craftsmen who made them were called *Briefmaler*, indicating that playing cards were thought of as being essentially textual objects.<sup>167</sup> It would appear that a similar connection was made between cards, language and texts in Italy, so that the title *Lettere Pittoriche*—the painted letter—was given to an order issued by the

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<sup>164</sup> M. Leber claims that Baron Heineken was "persuadé que la première empreinte tirée sur un ais qui parut en Europe était une carte". *Études historiques sur les Cartes à jouer in Mémoires de la Société royale des Antiquaires de France Vol. 16* (Paris 1842) p.3. I have not been able to compare this with Heineken's *Idée Générale d'une Collection d'Estampes*, Leipsic, 1771.

<sup>165</sup> The relationship which has existed between the printing and reading of cards and books, accounts for the interest taken in the history of playing cards by people from large publishing families. Andrew Chatto and Katherine Hargrave, for example, have written important books on the subject. This may also explain in part why many of the 14th century cards still in existence were discovered preserved intact in the bindings of old books as reinforcement. (Andrew Chatto, *Facts and Speculations on the Origin of Playing Cards*. London: John Russel 1848, p. 204. Detlef Hoffmann, *Le monde de la carte à jouer*, Leipzig: Éditions Leipzig, 1970, p.15. Cf. Van Rensselaer, *Prophetic, Educational, and Playing Cards*. London: Hurst & Blackett, 1912, p. 231).

<sup>166</sup> See Mrs. J. King Van Rensselaer's *The Devil's Picture Books*. London: Hurst & Blackett, 1908, p. 15. Furthermore, it is tempting to draw an analogy between cards' allotted role of virtual museum, containing at once both past and future, and the encyclopedic moment which occurs in most texts where cards are mentioned. On this, more below.

<sup>167</sup> Heineken, who authored *L'idée Générale d'une complète collection d'estampes* (Leipzig, 1771) observes that "playing cards were called with us *Briefe*, that is letters, in Latin *Epistolae*, and they are called so still. The common people do not say 'Give me a pack of cards', but a '*Spiel Brief*'; and they do not say 'I want a card' but 'I want a *Brief*'". (Quoted in Chatto, p. 82-85).

It has also been conjectured that this usage of *Brief* for playing card is related to *Schuldbrief* or I.O.U. The blank sides of playing cards were considered the appropriate surface on which to inscribe I.O.U.'s incurred as gambling debts, until the idea of printing a pattern on the backs of cards to keep players from marking them and cheating was put into practice late in the 18th century. (Maurice Rickards' *Collecting Printed Ephemera*, p.138).

The backs of cards were also commonly used for sending invitations and missives—particularly ribald *billet doux*—as in Hogarth's *Marriage à la Mode*. In this etching, a card lying on the floor in the foreground reads "Count Basset begs to know how Lady Squander slept last night", a message capturing both the sexual and economic unseemliness associated with card playing (Van Rensselaer 253).

magistracy of Venice in 1441 to printers of playing cards. The order was intended to prohibit the introduction of foreign-manufactured printed figures into that city from Germany or Spain, which threatened “the art and mystery of card-making and of printing figures practiced in Venice” (Chatto 82). A century later in Italy, a popular book of allegory on the subject of cards entitled ‘The Speaking Card’, *Le Carte Parlanti: Dialogo di Partenio Etiro* (anagram of Pietro Aretino) was published in Venice.<sup>168</sup> Even today, the connection between cards and books persists, which is why we continue to speak of editing a deck of cards in French, or publishing a deck in English.

In terms of monetary exchange, card games which involve gambling and money are an activity of an economic order: they are intimately linked to the keeping of accounts, mathematical annotation, and the manipulation of numeric signs. This evidenced by the many banking games that people have played over the centuries such as lansquenet (Landesknecht), trente et quarante, pharaon, baracca-banque, newmarket, speculation, basset, faro, and piquet. All of these card games require that one player act as banker and account for moneys bet, as well as for the cards on which players wager as futures. Banking games are based, furthermore, on the double ledger and the zero-balance; the same accountancy on which modern European economic practices such as banking itself are based, and this as I will argue, is no coincidence.<sup>169</sup> As I explained in Chapter 3, zero was a principle element in the revision of mercantile capitalism’s system of annotation, that is, its style of mathematical inscription. In both card games and banking, zero is the foundation of double-entry bookkeeping, and a pivotal moment in the passage from premodern modalities of exchange to mercantile capitalism. That card playing and modern banking share this common mathematical feature is explained in part by the fact that both playing cards and zero balance accountancy arrived at the same moment in European history, sometime late in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>168</sup> Pietro Aretino *Le carte parlanti* (1545), Palermo: Sellerio, 1992. *Les Cartes Parlantes*, the translation of Aretino’s dialogue was also popular in France, where it enjoyed two editions in 1589 and 1651 (Chatto 194).

<sup>169</sup> Indeed, zero-balance score or bookkeeping is a common feature of most card games, with the possible exceptions of solitaire games. On this point see Parlett’s *A History of Card Games*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991: “At base, card games are technically zero-sum games, in that one player’s gain is another one’s loss and all wins and losses sum to zero” (20).

Similarly, the essential link between cards and money has manifested itself at times of economic crisis—the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Lower Canada, the Maritimes and New England, the French Revolution, the Weimar Republic—when playing cards were substituted for devalued currency.<sup>170</sup> The addition of cards into the circulation of monetary signs effectively introduces a new denomination into the flow of currency in a given economic system and creates, quite predictably, a great deal of inflation.<sup>171</sup> Remarkably enough, at times of financial crisis people will unproblematically accept playing cards as a suitable substitute for money, which suggests that there is some innate similarity between cards and currency. This same perceived inherent likeness between cash and cards accounts for the suit of coins in early Italian decks of playing cards. The suit of coins, (along with batons, cups and swords) was previously in use all over Europe until the standardization of the deck in the 17th century, and these cards are still common currency in certain games in Spain, Italy and Luxembourg.

## **2. *In the Beginning: Ex Africa Semper Aliquid Novi***<sup>172</sup>

This would be the logical juncture at which to ask where the playing card originated. Has anyone found the very first playing card? To whom may we attribute its invention? These are questions which naturally come to the mind of anyone who has

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<sup>170</sup> In 1685, 1686, 1690, 1691, and 1709 playing cards were sent to Québec from the treasurer of France in such quantity that card money eventually replaced even copper coins. Card money was withdrawn in 1719 only to return March 2, 1729 in the amount of 400,000 livres. On this point see Hargrave's *History of Playing Cards*, New York: Dover, 1966, p. 312-316 and J.K. Galbraith's *Money, Whence it Came, Where it Went*, Deutsch: London, 1975, p. 51.

<sup>171</sup> More often than not, playing cards which circulated as paper money introduced inflation into the system due to the difficulty involved in regulating the movement of the card money, which had supposedly been signed by a financial administrator. Signatures were easily forged, and cards which were to have been removed from circulation were traded and recirculated after their official expiration date. On this point see *Histoire des Canadas*, Bilodeau et al, Montréal: Hurtubise, p. 157-9 and D. Hoffmann's *Le monde de la carte à jouer*, Leipzig: Walch, 1972, p. 9. On the use of card money during the French Revolution and in Germany in 1925, see also Rickards' *Collecting Paper Ephemera*, England: Phaidon, Christies, Oxford, 1988, p. 77.

<sup>172</sup> See W. Gurney Benham *Playing Cards: A History of the Pack and an Explanation of its many Secrets*, London: Spring Books, 1968, p.2.



given cards much thought, and indeed which have quite probably occurred to anyone who has ever shuffled a deck or played a game of cards. For even the most modern cards speak to us of the past and, indeed the face cards embody forgotten medieval allegory in the portraits of strange kings and queens from many centuries ago. Are these, one wonders, the stylized pictures of some obscure family of monarchs who once lived and ruled? And how is it that these old, arcane cards of pressed paper have been preserved and transmitted to us over the centuries, so that people still augur their future on them, and play games with their plastic-coated and computer-generated descendants?

Early works devoted to the history of cards were nationalist in spirit, and attempted to trace cards' invention to one ingenious person, who coincidentally came from the author's own country of origin.<sup>173</sup> For example, works written in Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century claimed that the playing card had been invented by Nicolao Pepin, whose initials were read *NyPy*, and pronounced almost like *naïpe*, hence the word for playing cards in Spanish.<sup>174</sup> The Spanish nationalist Pepin theory was rejected elsewhere in Europe for obvious reasons, and by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century no further attempts appear to have been made in Spain or elsewhere in Europe to link the playing card to a particular inventor.

Having unanimously dismissed Nicolao Pepin as a fictional character on the order of *Eulenspiegel* by the close of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, historians began by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to direct their efforts toward proving theories of origins which, although possessed of an equally nationalist bent, were somewhat more subtle in their argumentation.<sup>175</sup> Rather than attempting to prove or disprove theories which would

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<sup>173</sup> Examples of this are Père Menestrier's *Des Principes des Sciences et des Arts Disposés en Forme de Jeux* (1704) in which the author claims that cards were a French invention, or Heineken's *Idée Générale d'une complète Collection d'Estampes* (1771), in which he attempts to prove that playing cards originated in Germany, based on that country's particular strength in the development of printing techniques (Chatto 26-7).

<sup>174</sup> Etievre cites the following entry from the *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española*, 1611: "Dixéronse naipes de la cifra primera que tuvieron, en la qual se encerrava el nombre del inventor. Eran una NyPy, y de allí les pareció llamarlos naïpe; pero las dichas Nicolao Pepin [sic]". This is also the definition given in the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (Tome IV, 1734, *naïpe*): "[naïpe] significaba el nombre de su inventor Nicolao Peppin: y de ahí con pequeña corrupción se dixo Naïpe", in *Figures du jeu: Études lexico-sémantiques sur le jeu de cartes en Espagne*. Madrid: Casa Velazquez, 1987, p. 29, 64.

<sup>175</sup> Although the rascally Pepin may never have existed, his name has given rise to some interesting amateur etymologies advanced by playing card historians. For example, a *pépin* can mean a mischievous person or minor

trace playing cards to an inventor, historians began to place the origin of the playing card in China, India, or Egypt in order to show how cards made their way to the author's country first, where they flourished and were subsequently disseminated throughout the rest of Europe. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, there seems to be a general consensus among most card historians, independent of the argument they were attempting to put forward, that playing cards made their way from Egypt into Europe at some time in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, having been carried in the trappings of gypsies or crusaders.<sup>176</sup>

While the fiction that Nicolao Pepin invented playing cards was abandoned by the Enlightenment, histories which place the origin of cards in Egypt still consistently begin by trying to trace the etymology of the curious Spanish and Italian words for cards, namely *naipe*, and *naibbe*. Since both languages have the word *carta* which can mean playing card, *naipe* and *naibbe* seem strikingly foreign and one is at pains to explain whence they came, and why these languages have two words for the same thing. It is believed that these words, which are evidently related, come from the Arabic word for

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problem as well as a seed in French and both words, claim card historians, derive from Señor Pepin's name. Likewise, the English word *pip* means seed and suit mark. The word *pip* comes from the French *pépin*, which found its way into English with 16<sup>th</sup>-century French playing cards from Rouen. In 1567, Pierre Maréchal the famous *cartier* of Rouen perfected and printed the first decks with simplified pip marks (hearts, spades, diamonds, clubs) which are now standard in most of Europe, the Americas and England. These suit marks were called pips in England after the French *pépin* which refers to Pepin and to seeds. On this point see W. Gurney Benham's *Playing Card*, Chapter 5, p. 29-43, and Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer's, *Prophetic, Educational and Playing Cards*, p.222-3.

<sup>176</sup> While there has been much heated debate on the point of whether or not it was the gypsies or the crusaders who brought playing cards into Europe, the question is of little import here. According to Kavanagh and Bell for example, it was the crusaders who brought dice, cards and chance (*hazard*) back with them into Europe from the same place. Legend has it that itinerant people used to play a game of dice on the grounds of the oriental palace *Hazard* in Syria or Egypt (Bell 157, Kavanagh 2, Etievre 16). This is why the etymology of *hazard* in *Le Petit Robert* is "*Hasart*, XIIe; arabe *az-zahr dé*"; in the *Duden*, "afz. hasart = Würfelspiel, zu arab, ysara = Würfeln", and a similar definition is given in the dictionaries of most European languages.

Similarly, two entries in *Le Petit Robert* for *Pharaon* read "1597; *pharao*, 1197 lat; *pharao* de l'égyptien, 1691; (nom du roi de coeur dans certains jeux). Jeu de cartes de hazard et d'argent." In other words, both the oriental palace and king or pharo metonymically give their names to games of cards and dice. By the dates, with the exception of the card game which may well have been played much earlier, all of the above entered Europe from the 12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century. I take this slow incremental introduction of Eastern elements into the West to be a sort of *longue durée* effect of general migration of peoples between the East and the West. My purpose is not to quibble over who exactly brought cards, dice and hazard into Europe by citing the first European references to gypsies, or by citing Chaucer as some have, as a counter example against the notion that the crusaders brought them. What is significant in my opinion is that cards were brought into the West from the East and were not, it is quite certain, a European invention.

deputy (*na'ib*) or prophet (*nabaa*).<sup>177</sup> As recently as 1971 some very old cards turned up which appear to bear out this etymology, as their appearance would suggest that *naibbe* and *naipe* are derived from the name of an early Arabic card game.<sup>178</sup> According to Parlett, L.A. Mayer discovered an almost complete 12<sup>th</sup>-century deck of Egyptian Mamluk playing-cards in a museum in Istanbul in 1939. This pack predates by about one hundred years the first recorded references to playing cards in Spain or Italy, so that Mayer's discovery and his article on the cards published in 1971, constitute the most convincing evidence that playing cards may have made their way into Europe from Egypt.<sup>179</sup>

Mayer's Arabic pack has fifty-two cards numbered one to ten in Arabic numerals, and court cards marked *malik*, *na'ib malik*, and *thani na'ib* (King, Deputy and Second or Under Deputy). The four suits of the Egyptian deck are swords, batons, cups and coins, the same suits found on early and current Italian (*naibbe*) and Spanish (*naipe*) cards. Moreover, in the Mamluk deck the court cards are called *na'ib*, which is quite a forceful confirmation of etymologies that trace the Spanish and Italian words for playing cards to the Arabic *na'ib*, deputy or nabob, and favors the opinion of most card historians who, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards believed that playing cards came from Egypt.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Even in Spain, where it was thought that Nicolao Pepin had invented cards, there existed a *Recopilación de algunos nombres arábigos* as early as 1593 which links cards to Egypt through the name *Bilham*. The entry for *Bilham* in this work reads "en españa el juego de los naypes" which later became Vilhán, the *vil hombre* who was accredited with bringing cards to Spain from Egypt (Etienvre 31). And later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the following was written of playing cards:

Otros hallaréis de parecer diferente que, a título de discretos, refieren graciosos disparates, como uno que afirma ser Vilhan *nombre arábigo*, guiado de sólo su antojo, diciendo que la aspisación con que se escribe y pronuncia huele a aquel lenguaje, de la manera que Hamlet y otros de esta traza, cargando por aquí la invención de naipe a los de aquella secta (Etienvre 51).

<sup>178</sup> See Parlett's, *A History of Card Games*, Op. Cit. p.40-1.

<sup>179</sup> Mayer, I.A. (Ettinghausen and Kurz eds.) *Mamluk Playing Cards*, Leiden, 1971.

<sup>180</sup> In Vol. I of Court de Gebelin's *Extrait du Monde Primitif Analyisé et compare avec le Monde Moderne*, entitled *Du jeu des Tarots* (1781), he attempts to prove that playing cards and tarot cards come from ancient Egypt, based however on the word *Nabaa* which is the Arabic for divination. Likewise in Breitkopf's *Versuch den Ursprung der Spielkarten, die Einführung des Leinenpapieres, und den Anfang Der Holzschneidekunst in Europa zu erforschen* (Leipzig 1784) he gives the following reason for tracing the etymology of *naipe*, playing card, from *nabaa*:

In *Prophetical, Educational and Playing Cards*, J. King Van Rensselaer deals almost exclusively with the mythical Egyptian origins of the playing card.<sup>181</sup> Cards, she argues, should be studied not only as randomizers in card games, but as the leaves of a book because the symbols on the cards reveal their original connection with the worship of Thoth, the Egyptian god of death. Thoth (alternately transliterated Theuth) was known also as Nebo, Hermes and Mercury in Babylon, Greece and Etruria.

The invention of many things has been attributed to Thoth, the god of death, and of these the most important are speech, writing, numbers and games of chance. It was the priest of Thoth who first devised a powerful system for transcribing language by placing signs which represent the chief gods (Thoth, Isis, Maut, Phthah and Ammon) as well as virtues and vices, on the interior walls of the temple of Thoth. This was effectively the invention of a system of signs representing all the possible events and contingencies of human existence, a code for transcribing and recording all that it is possible to communicate in the absence of the one who speaks. These mural pictograms were then consulted by the priests of Thoth, who would cast rods or arrows on an altar at the center of the temple built to the deity. When they fell, the rods would point to pictograms on the temple walls, and the signs indicated in the cast were arranged to form unites and sentences interpreted by the priest. So as legend would have, it this system of annotation, given to the ancient world by Thoth, the divinity of Naucratis, is the mythical origin of speech transcription: the first writing.

Thoth invented not only writing and numbers, he also perfected parchment as a surface on which to inscribe the new science of annotation. Hence, the story goes, the temple of Thoth is where parchment tablets containing profound knowledge were

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Im Arabischen heist [sic] *Nabaa*: er hat einen leisen Ton, wie die Zauberer *Thun*, von sich gegeben; davon *Naba*, die Zaubertrommel, und *Nabi*, ein Prophet, Wahrsager, herkömmt [sic] (Cited in Chatto, 26).

I have not been able to consult works which date from before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however it seems that it was roughly at the middle of that century that card historians began to focus on Egypt as the country of origin of the card.

<sup>181</sup> Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer. *Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards*, London: Hurst and Blackwell, 1912.

housed during the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt. As one might guess, the first things recorded on parchment were the signs comprising the divinity's configuration of the signs for existence, and these were then copied by priests from the walls of the temple of Thoth. The invention of parchment gave portability to this system annotation, making it possible for the priests of Thoth to transport their signs with them, in order to consult the gods virtually anywhere. According to Van Rensselaer, and de Gebelin before her, these parchment documents were collected as a volume, to which people have referred as "The Tablets of Fate", "The Register of Souls" and "The Great Book of Thoth Hermes" (H.T. Morley 18, 19).<sup>182</sup> While the parchments were initially bound as the leaves of a book, it was found that the leaves were more conveniently carried as a pack of loose tablets which could be laid out and read as an augury.

So the signs inscribed in Thoth's 'perpetual almanac' were the figures which comprised his systems of annotation, that is, writing and numbers. Playing card historians who believe cards were invented in Egypt are naturally eager to claim that these parchment tablets of Thoth were indeed the first playing cards, thereby accounting for the fact that the sign system on cards is pictorial and numeric in equal measure. Arguing for this filiation, Van Rensselaer asserts that early Italian tarots could not possibly have been used for play as they were thick, ornate, and covered in gold leaf. She thereby postulates that cards were originally intended solely for the solemn purpose

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<sup>182</sup> When Van Rensselaer writes that "the strange collection of unbound leaves that are the parents of all modern playing cards" came into Europe from Egypt, she cites the French archaeologist Court de Gebelin (1728-1784) as her source. She also translates the following on the origins of the card from Vol.I, *Du Jeu des Tarots*, from M. de Gebelin's major book on the subject:

If it were announced that one of the most ancient books of the early Egyptians that contained most interesting information had escaped the flames that consumed their superb libraries, everyone would doubtless be anxious to see such a precious and rare work. If added to this information it was stated that the leaves of this book were scattered over Europe, and that for centuries they had been in the hands of all the world...and that no one had even suspected the connection of the scattered pages in their possession with those of Egyptian mysteries, nor had any person deciphered a line on them, and that the fruit of exquisite wisdom is today regarded as a collection of extravagant pictures without any significance the world would be surprised at its own ignorance (216-17).

Playing cards are also called The Book of Thoth Hermes in Samuel Weller Singer's *History of Playing Cards*, Chatto's *Facts and Speculations on the Origin and History of Playing Cards* (1848), and Rev. Edward Taylor's *The History of Playing Cards* (1865). Since these three books are the major works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the history of cards, the received opinion was that playing cards had originated in Egypt.

of reading the fates.<sup>183</sup> These cards she conjectures, are “the unbound leaves of the great book of Thoth, [which predate] any historical record of cards for gambling” (Van Rensselaer 38). Hence, in folk culture, playing cards have been called the Book of Thoth Hermes, the Encyclopedia of the Dead, the Devil’s picture book; and the ace of spades, the Devil’s bedposts, because in sustained cultural practice cards have been linked to the cult of death, and hence (by the informed) to the infidel Egyptian deity Thoth from the distant past.<sup>184</sup>

Histories of cards that argue for the mythical invention of Thoth, maintain that cards are the point at which writing, numbers and games of chance converge. It is thought, for example, that the pips on the suits (in particular spades) are the last vestiges of the rods cast on the altar by the priests of Thoth, the rods that indicated the signs to be read from the text of the temple wall.<sup>185</sup> Therefore, card historians conclude that the figures on modern playing cards have as their distant ancestors the signs copied from the temple walls, and that they were originally the leaves of the Book of Fate.<sup>186</sup> The Book

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<sup>183</sup> Roger Tilley’s book *Playing Cards*, London: Octopus Books, 1973, as well as Hoffmann’s *Le monde de la carte à jouer*, contain photographs of these early cards, whereby one can see that their basic construction more or less excludes the possibility of play. This is why many card historians maintain that playing games with cards is a vulgar or popular usage of them which came later in their development. Cards suited to the kind of games we now play with them were developed over time, but clearly this was not their initial function, but rather they were intended to be read.

<sup>184</sup> The connection between cards, gambling (hazard), and Egypt is still alive in popular memory. For example, I would argue that it probably has something to do with this connection that the architects of the new Luxor Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas chose to build the modern-day pleasure palace as a scale model of an Egyptian pyramid.

<sup>185</sup> According to Van Rensselaer, figures from the cult of Thoth “representing a father, a mother, a child and a servant”, and four tokens or heraldic devises were also scratched on the rods, dividing them into the suits that have been retained (37).

This mythical explanation of the suit marks also informs Charles William’s representation of cards in his novel *The Greater Trumps*:

The shapes, perhaps, are for two things...On the one hand they must mean some step, some conjunction, some—what we call a fact—that is often repeated in infinite combinations; on the other, it must be something that we know and can read. This, I think, is what was meant, but even the secondary meaning has been lost—or was lost while the cards were separated from the golden images, as if a child were taken from its mother into some other land and never learned her language, that language which should have been the proper inheritance of its tongue (100).

<sup>186</sup> Card historians such as Court de Gebelin, and Van Rensselaer as well as Sir Gardiner Wilkinson and Rawlinson, both Egyptologists, claim that the flat, two dimensional representation of figures on cards attests to their kinship with Egyptian pictography. That is to say, the way in which Egyptian portraiture simultaneously represents profile and a full-front view of the subject was translated into heraldic imagery and informs, to this

was broken down into a pack of these tablets of fate, so that they could be manipulated with greater ease. It has been conjectured that at this juncture, people came onto the idea of playing a game with these parchment signs, as well as reading the narrative of their destiny on them.

This explains why very complex early card games such as *Hombre*, the game of man, have been read as a profound commentary on the nature of being, or a sort of god-game played with the signifiers of destiny. Moreover, the 'deeper significance' of playing cards as a perpetual almanac or the register of souls is expressed numerically: there are fifty-two cards in a pack and fifty-two weeks in a year, a suit has thirteen cards and there are thirteen weeks in a season, there are four suits and four seasons, each suit being the allegory of a season or of an element, there are twelve court cards and twelve months, and the value of the sum of the pack (364) plus one for the joker (365) equals the number of days in a year.

As card games grew in popularity and variety, playing cards became increasingly further removed from their initial function as the Book. Developments in the size and appearance of cards reflect a growing trend to their being used as instruments of play rather than as documents to be laid down and read.<sup>187</sup> And in order to make cards accessible as instruments of play to a wider spectrum of the population, the tarot deck was streamlined to fifty-two cards around 1400, and the figures on the court cards were

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day, the way in which the portraits on court cards are executed (Van Rensselaer 61, 127).

<sup>187</sup> For example, one of the earliest German decks painted in Stuttgart in 1440 measures 7" x 4", and a French deck painted in 1393 measure 8" in length, which suggests that these cards were not meant to be taken up into the hand (Hargrave 89). For this reason, Chatto conjectures that before 1450 no cards have "been discovered which can fairly be supposed to have been intended, either from their size or execution for the common purposes of play" (Chatto 194). Gurney Benham claims that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century playing cards required a special stand or support that players would slide cards into, because they could not be held in the hand (29). And later still, any 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painting of the genre known as *Kaartspelers*, or Chardin's paintings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century of children playing cards, clearly illustrate that cards were formerly much larger and more cumbersome.

That the backs of the cards at this time were blank, indicates that taking cards up into the hand to be held throughout play is a relatively new practice. People had obviously not given this blank surface much thought until late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for the simple reason that they most often played games where cards were laid down. As games in which cards were hand-held increased in popularity, it became necessary to cover the backs in *taroté* to keep people from marking them and cheating. The last innovation made in adopting cards to hand-held play, is the American 19<sup>th</sup>-century invention of the 'squeezer', that is the small pips in the corners of cards which allow players to squeeze their hand of cards into a fan and still easily read the suit (Hargrave 189).

politicized and popularized.<sup>188</sup> According to Chatto, there already exist “several specimens of numeral cards of four suits, either stenciled or engraved on wood, and evidently of cheap manufacture, or of common use, of a date not later than 1450” (Chatto 194). Late in the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> century Etienne Vignolles and Pierre Maréchal, card makers of Lyon and Rouen, had more or less standardized the deck of fifty-two to which the queen had been added<sup>189</sup>, and had given us the simple heart, diamond, club, and spade suit marks, an innovation that greatly sped the process of block printing (Benham 29, Chatto 206). The French-designed deck is then the first ancestor of the standard pack we play with today, which in all likelihood developed out of the larger tarot deck.<sup>190</sup> So, these developments in the printing and disseminating of

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<sup>188</sup> This is when playing cards became “des fragments d’idéologies mis à plat sous forme d’une véritable bande dessinée” (Alain R. Girard et Claude Quélet, *L’Histoire de France contée par le jeu de l’oie*, Paris: Balland-Massin, 1982, p.8) And in *Prophetic, Educational and Playing Cards*, Mrs. Van Rensselaer writes that Etienne Vignoles or La Hire of Lyon printed face cards with caricatures of popular figures of the 16<sup>th</sup> century French court, such as the king’s banker Jacques Coeur who became the Jack of Hearts (214). In *The Devil’s Picture Books*, Van Rensselaer states that Jacques Coeur was a “merchant of the day whose trade with the East might have been the means of introducing cards into France” (60). A two centuries later, a portrait of Agnes Sorel supposedly graced the queen of clubs, that is *la reine de trèfle*, as a play on her family name. It has also been suggested that the queen of British cards is a portrait of Elizabeth of York, the daughter of Edward IV, wife of Henry VII and mother of Henry VIII. This rather dubious claim is based on existing portraits of Elizabeth of York in the London National Portrait Gallery (*P.E.P.C.* 236).

<sup>189</sup> All the female figures were eliminated from the tarot in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in order to streamline the deck to better suit it for the purposes of play. This is obviously an indication of whom and what was considered dispensable or superfluous to the mind of the male card printer of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, until Pierre Maréchal and the other *cartiers de Rouen* reintroduced the queen to the deck around 1567. This reintegration of female figures, I would conjecture, was more probably undertaken in the spirit of *chercher la femme*, than as an attempt to provide a more positive image of the women by ‘undisappearing’ them.

<sup>190</sup> On the innovations in card print which came out of France, I cite the following from Jean-Michel Mehl’s *Les jeux au royaume de la France*, Paris: Fayard, 1990:

Ce système d’emblèmes va peu à peu l’emporter sur tous les autres, sans toutefois les éliminer. Cette “victoire” du système français s’explique par des raisons techniques. Il offre des silhouettes monochromatiques, constantes, de tailles et de formes simples, rendant ainsi facile la réalisation des cartes *numérales*. Seuls les honneurs nécessitent des dessins spéciaux. Le succès commercial ne peut être qu’évident (166).

The immediate and wide-spread success of the French system is evidenced in Bruegel’s *The Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, 1559 (see Fig. 1), *The Triumph of Death*, 1568, and Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1505, in which playing cards bearing the French suits are clearly depicted in the foreground. Obviously, the new French cards were immensely popular and very rapidly disseminated when one considers that the major manufacturers of playing cards were located in Germany and Brabant less than a century previous (Hoffmann 22, Beal 45).





Fig. 1

cards from their mythical beginnings as the invention of the divinity of Naucratis, through the tarots, account for the lingering hints in folk legend and popular memory that playing cards are somehow linked to ancient Egypt.

### 3. *Derrida and the Divinity*

Given the popular and mythical history of the card outlined above, it is of particular interest that Derrida opens “The Father of Logos” with the story of Thoth or Theuth, recounted by Socrates<sup>191</sup>:

I heard, then, that at Naucratis in Egypt there lived one of the old gods of that country, the one whose sacred bird is called the ibis; and the name of the divinity was Theuth. It was he who first invented numbers and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing (75).

In this famous investigation into the father of the word, the dialogue between Plato and Socrates is made to speak for preferred Derridian topics: writing, the absence of the writing subject, the origin of absence. It is the story of Thoth told over by Socrates which, in turn becomes the parable of what Derrida is performing in his essay, a parable of traces and erasure, a space in which to write about absence.

In the same essay, Derrida writes about zero and absence, the absence that is paradoxically inherent in written annotation, and further, what this absence means in terms of origins. Zero is a metasign: it is at once the absence of other numbers, null and void, as well as the source of infinite multiplication, the promise of surplus or debt, the promise of presence in the transcription of nothing. He writes:

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<sup>191</sup> I am quoting from Barbara Johnson’s translation of Derrida’s *Dissemination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. I cite the original from *La dissémination*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972:

Eh bien! J’ai entendu conter que vécut du côté de Naucratis, en Égypte, une des vieilles divinités de là-bas, celle dont l’emblème sacré qu’ils appellent, tu le sais, l’ibis et que le nom du dieu lui-même était Theuth. C’est lui, donc, le premier qui découvrit la science du nombre avec le calcul, la géométrie et l’astronomie, et aussi le tricrac et les dés, enfin, sache-le, les caractères de l’écriture (93).

[...] the power of speech, the creation of being and life, the sun (which is also, as we shall see, the eye), the self-concealment-is conjugated in what would be called the history of the egg or the egg of history. The world came out of an egg. More precisely, the living creator of the life of the world came out of an egg: the sun, then was at first carried in an eggshell. Which explains a number of Ammon Ra's (the sun) characteristics: he is also the origin of the egg. He is designated sometimes as the bird-sun born from the primal egg, sometimes as the originary bird, carrier of the first egg...It would make no sense here to ask that at once trivial and philosophical question of 'the chicken or the egg', of the logical, chronological, or ontological priority of the cause over the effect. This question has been magnificently answered by certain sarcophagi: "O Ra, who art in thy egg". If we add that this egg is also a "hidden egg" we shall have constituted but also opened up the system of these significations (87-8).<sup>192</sup>

The association between zero or nothing and the egg is very old. Lear's fool tells the riddle of the egg and of nothing, and later cracks an egg over Gloucester's empty eye sockets. And the word love, when it means zero in English, comes from the French *l'oeuf*. Like the hidden egg of Isis, zero is at once the source of being and the point of disappearance. This is why the allegory of death in Bosch's *Hell* from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is embodied in a broken egg. Likewise, the decadent drunkard in Jan Wierix's 17<sup>th</sup>-century etching (see Fig.2) rides an egg which is cracked to reveal death in the figure of a devil.<sup>193</sup> Eggs and zero have something in common: they simultaneously signify the wellspring of being, and nothing or death. The egg in an organic sense represents potential which has not yet been realized and is yet extremely fragile. In a

<sup>192</sup> "Le pouvoir de la parole, la création de l'être et de la vie, le soleil (c'est-à-dire aussi bien, nous le verrons, l'oeil), le se-cacher—se conjugue dans ce qu'on pourrait appeler l'histoire de l'oeuf ou l'oeuf de l'histoire. Le monde est né d'un oeuf: le soleil, donc, fut d'abord porté dans la coquille d'un oeuf. Ce qui explique plusieurs traits d'Amon-Rê...[qui] est aussi l'origine de l'oeuf. On le désigne tantôt comme oiseau-soleil né de l'oeuf, tantôt comme oiseau originel, porteur du premier oeuf...Il n'aurait ici aucun sens à poser la question, à la fois triviale et philosophique, de 'l'oeuf et de la poule', de l'antériorité logique, chronologique ou ontologique de la cause sur l'effet. A cette question certains sarcophages ont magnifiquement répondu : 'O Rê, qui te trouves dans ton oeuf.' Si l'on ajoute que l'oeuf est un 'oeuf caché', on aura constitué mais aussi ouvert le système de ces significations" (109).

<sup>193</sup> Both works are based on the Flemish proverb "*Foey u verbuykte dronckaerts fot, Altijt leckt en fuipt vol to den crophe, Op u vuyl ey vindende als een marot, ten lesten in den ijdel en doppe*". (Shame you defective guzzling drunkards, Always leaking and merrily full to the gizzard, Atop your addled egg, Like a spectral fool in cap and bells, Until the shell of vanity gives out. My translation) Incidentally, Bosch's egg is placed above some decadent gamblers on the road to self-destruction who are playing cards.

For more on the relationship of playing cards, gambling, subjective dissipation and death in painting, see Joyce Medina's *Cézanne and Modernism: The Poetics of Painting*, particularly Chapter 5 "Death and Non-Figuration: Cézanne's Ultimate Synthesis", pp. 145-200.



Fig. 2

figurative sense, eggs are associated with zero as a metasign, which stands simultaneously for nothingness and for infinite potential.<sup>194</sup>

The power of speech, according to the passage cited above, is one with the power of creation, because language has the power of bringing into being a state of affairs which did not previously exist. However, texts also bespeak the absence or death of the one who wrote them, of the subject-who-recounts, the one who traced the signs but who is no longer present. Hence, according to Derrida, “it goes without saying that the god of writing must also be the god of death”, which Thoth is (91). Likewise, the transcription of numerical values which Thoth of the myth also invented, marks the place occupied by the absent subject-who-counts, a point circumscribed by the numeral zero which encloses signifying traces, the possibility of meaning and of nothing. The place of the dead author who has spoken is marked in signs, just as the absence of the mathematical or calculating subject is encircled in the figure of zero.<sup>195</sup>

If I remarked that playing cards were the text of Thoth’s almanac, they also bear a special relationship to the infidel cipher and to Thoth’s invention of numbers. As I have established, card historians like to claim that both cards and numbers (not to mention chance) were invented by that same Egyptian divinity. Moreover, if one believes some of the card historians I cited above, three of the most important things given us by the divinity of the dead—writing, numbers, and games of chance—all meet in the figure of the playing card as a text, a value, and as a randomizer.

On the score of numbers, we know that the majority of cards bear a number, and that all cards have a prescribed value, but it is the system of numbers which appears on

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<sup>194</sup> The *Algorism* of the Salem Monastery written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century explains the capacity of the “algorism-cipher” to act as a metasign in the following manner:

Every number arises...from the Zero. In this lie a great and sacred mystery: He is symbolized by that which has neither beginning nor end; and just as the zero neither increases nor diminishes...so does He neither wax nor wane. And as the zero multiplies by ten the number behind which it is placed, so does He increase not tenfold, but a thousandfold—nay...*He creates all out of nothing* [my italics].

Quoted in Karl Menninger’s *Number Words and Number Symbols*, Trans. Paul Broneer, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1969, pp.423.

<sup>195</sup> On this point see Rotman’s *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, in particular “Number, Vision, Money” p. 7-26 and “Emergence of a Meta-Subject” p. 27-56.

playing cards that is at issue. In the case of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Mamluk pack, the cards are numbered 1 through 10 *in numerals*, that is, in Arabic numerals including the zero to make ten. As we know, works on the advantages of eastern numerals such as *Liber Abaci* and Al-Khowarazmi's treatise on the zero, entered Europe and were translated into Latin in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. If we take the Mamluk pack to be the ancestor of decks which began to appear one hundred years later in Europe also bearing Arabic numerals, one is tempted to draw a connection between the entry of both playing cards and Arabic numbers into Europe since they arrived more or less simultaneously. One might speculate then, that as an enormously popular cultural practice, card games would have played a large part in familiarizing people with the new Arabic system of numeric annotation.

Moreover, it is well documented that the concept of zero, zero-balance book-keeping, cards, and card games based on zero-balance score keeping, made their way into Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. As *Gargantua* bears witness, cards were common currency by the time the giant listed his thirty-five favorite card games, less than two centuries later.<sup>196</sup> Indeed, as card games were introduced on the continent they became popular and spread so rapidly, that guilds and government institutions were formed almost immediately to regulate their profitable production and vast circulation. Therefore, it is my thesis that the use of the new arithmetic cipher and the accountancy which it made possible, the accountancy on which modern bookkeeping and the score-

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<sup>196</sup> *Gargantua's* list, which also forms the narrative of a life of sorts, is set down as follows:

Le flux; la prime; la vole; la pille; la triomphe; la picardie; le cent; l'espina; la malheureuse; le fourby; le passe-dix; le trente et un; pair et sequence; trois cens; le malheureux; le condennade; la charte virade; le maucontent; le lansquenet; le cocu; qui a, si parle; pille, nade, jocque, fore; le mariaige; le gay; l'opinion; qui faict l'un faict l'autre; la sequence; les lutttes; le tarau; coquinbert, qui gaigne perd; le beliné; le torment; la ronfle; le glic; les honneurs (1:22).

And on the wide-spread popularity of cards in France just one century after their introduction into that country, Jean-Michel Mehl writes the following in *Les jeux au royaume de France du XIIIe au début du XVIe siècle*:

"La référence du père Menestrier faisait état, en 1392, de 56 sous parisis pour trois jeux de cartes, dont cinq de tarots...et quatre de cartes de Lyon, valent 66 florins. Autrement dit, le prix des cartes à jouer s'est réduit en l'espace d'un siècle. Produit de luxe à leur apparition, les cartes sont accessibles à un plus grand nombre à la fin de XVe siècle...Jehan Fort, originaire de Paris ou de Normandie, venu en Avignon vers 1488, est à la fois maître cartier, pelletier et mercier. En 1507, il a en magasin 164 douzaines de jeux de cartes complets, soit près de 2,000 jeux" (162-4).

keeping for virtually all card games is based, became popular on the continent at the same time. Moreover, I would suggest that the sustained use of playing cards may well have made this complicated new system of accounting available in a simplified popular form, which might well account for all the card games that are named for banking practices.

While playing cards bore Arabic numbers and bear a direct relation to modern book-keeping, they stand in a special relationship to the numeral zero. In early 14<sup>th</sup>-century decks for the game of tarot (still regularly reproduced), the fool, *il matto*, *le mat*, or *le fou*, is given no number at all, or designated 0 (see Fig. 3).<sup>197</sup> In other words, over the centuries cards, these infidel and deceptively trivial signifiers, have subtly yet persistently helped to import mathematical innovations such as the zero into Europe from the East, innovations which would contribute to a major shift in paradigm and in consciousness, namely the shift from feudalism to mercantile capitalism.

To return to *Plato's Pharmacy*, notice how Derrida turns his attention from writing and absence to playing cards in "The Filial Inscription: Theuth, Hermes, Thoth, Nabû, Nebo":

Sometimes the dead person takes the place of the scribe. Within the space of such a scene, the dead one's place [la place du mort *also the dummy, in Bridge*] then falls to Thoth... He is thus the father's other, the father, and the subversive movement of *replacement*...He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play. (92, 93)

I wrote above that the fool in tarot decks was either given no number or designated '0'. Unlike the other cards in the deck, the figure of the fool was not one of the signs from the temple walls, but rather represents a statue at the center of the temple. The statue

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<sup>197</sup> Hence, in Charles Williams' *The Greater Trumps*, which centres on the game of tarot, the following exchange between characters occurs:

"Henry," she went on, "why is the card marked nought lying right away from the others?"  
 "I don't know," he said, "but I told you that no one can reckon the Fool" (88).



Fig. 3



could be consulted to interpret the other signs because it was meant to represent “Thoth, Mercury and Hermes himself” so that the representation of the statue as the fool in the pack of tarot cards is “quicksilver...it dominates every card in the deck” (Van Rensselaer 55).<sup>198</sup> This card, which became the joker in playing card packs represents chance, destiny, fate, and death: it takes the privileged place of Thoth, Hermes or Mercury “who alone could tell to mortals what he had foretold at their birth, when as ‘the Writer’<sup>199</sup> he inscribed on his ‘tablets’ all the events of life” (Van Rensselaer 56).<sup>200</sup>

Hence, the fool and the joker are clothed in the attributes of Thoth, Nebo, Hermes and Mercury: they wear the trappings of an itinerant, a tramp, a fool, or a juggler signifying capriciousness, irresponsibility, luck and uncertainty. While this is true, the fool and the joker are the most powerful cards in either the tarot or the playing card deck: they control value and can take any other card. This is because Thoth-Hermes is the god of death and the father of logos, signifying zero which is the metasign, the source of the sequence of other signs, chance, death and nothing. To quote Derrida once again, Thoth the joker always “takes a place that is not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy, he has neither a proper place *nor a proper name*” (93). In other words, the fool or joker’s improper name is zero, signifying at once that he is the metasign for all the other cards in the deck, and that having no proper value, he takes any value not his own. He is both the origin and the death of all possible value in the deck.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> This is why In *The Greater Trumps* the central figure of the cards is the “Fool who is numbered nought...always arranging itself in some place which was empty for it” (Williams 80-1).

<sup>199</sup> If Van Rensselaer speaks of ‘Writing’ and of Thoth the ‘Writer’ with a capital letter it is, I believe, because she means something very akin to ‘Writing’ in Derrida’s sense, that is, she is speaking of the mythical origins of a metalanguage.

<sup>200</sup> I am not suggesting that the ancient Egyptian god Thoth of the legends actually invented the playing card, numbers, speech or chance. That is, I am not attempting to ontologize a myth, nor am I trying to prove that the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Mamluk playing cards discovered in Turkey are indeed the origin of the species. And I am certainly not suggesting that this is what Derrida had in mind when he wrote the passages I have cited from *Plat’s Pharmacy*. To paraphrase Said, this is rather one of those moments when the secular and the magical appear seductively to coincide. What I am describing is an object around which the lore of beginnings enticingly suggests the adamic aligning of signifier with signified, and threatens to satisfy our nostalgia for the historical truth of an origin.

<sup>201</sup> In Agamben’s “*Il paese dei balocchi: Riflessioni sulla storia e sul gioco*”, he suggests that playing cards (and

So this slippery wild card that puts play into play marks the place of death, the extinction of ego, the erasure of the subject. Historically, the joker has always signified death and zero. Some of the earliest jokers known originated in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Holland, at a time when cards were still laboriously stenciled and colored by hand. It was the custom at this time in Holland for the artist who authored the deck to draw a self-portrait on a blank card which was included as a wild card, and this became the signature card of “the writer” or author of the pack. One of the more famous card makers of Holland was Emmanuel Juker of Utrecht, so that when Dutch cards came into England, English cardmakers began including their own signature cards after the tradition of Juker. These cards became known as Juker cards, which the English pronounced “jooker”, until the meaningful cognate “joker” was settled on. Later, as the plague spread through Europe, jokers became re-associated with death and, therefore, linked once again to the god of death whose portrait they bore on the card of Thoth, and these jokers were consequently depicted wearing a black cap.<sup>202</sup>

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toys in general) act as the residue of diachrony in synchronic situations such as ritual, and synchronic residue in diachronic situations such as games when they are no longer being played. Moreover, following Rohde, he observes that funeral games are a part of the cult of the dead, and that we continue to symbolically include the ‘dead man’ in games, as in *le mort* in bridge, or the dead man’s hand in poker: “Rohde ha osservato con molto acume e su basi filologiche incontestabili che i ludi funebri facevano parte del culto del morto e che ciò implica che si attribuisse al morto una reale partecipazione ai giochi. Si giocava col “morto”, come fanno ancora oggi I giocatori di carte”, *Infanzia e storia: Distruzione dell’esperienza e origine della storia*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1978, p. 81.

<sup>202</sup> See Curtis Slepian’s article “The Joker is Wild” in *Game*, April 1994, p. 12-14. There exists as well a book entitled *Dutch Jokers* by William Hogenes which I have as yet been unable to consult. Other writers such as Catherine Perry Hargrave (*A History of Playing Cards and a Bibliography of Cards and Gaming*, New York: Dover, 1930, p.189) and Michael Dummett (*The Game of Tarot*, London: Duckworth, 1980 p.7) would disagree, claiming that the joker is a purely American invention and the result of a printing innovation of 1850, which left a blank square on the finished sheet of cards before they were cut. Card manufactures supposedly took to filling this space with the company’s logo and the figure of the joker which apparently presented itself to their imagination out of thin air.

However, in Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death* (see detail on opposite page) there is clearly an allegorical figure of death dressed as joker, creeping away under a card table amongst the playing cards strewn about in the foreground. Moreover, there seems to be considerable evidence that Johann Emmanuel Juker of Utrecht did indeed print his portrait on signature cards which related to the fool, and the joker.

In his *De geschiedenis van de speel kaart: een standaardwerk over de vele facetten uit de rijke geschiedenis van de spelkaart*, Han Janssen is cautious on the point of the joker. He does however write that “Met een joker in de hand bakt man de tegenpartij een poets”, a curious statement that means ‘with a joker in the hand one can always cook up a nasty trick on one’s opponent’, or very roughly ‘a joker in the hand is worth a poet in the bush’, because poet can also mean a swag or a prank.

David Parlett, on the other hand, asserts that the figure of the joker, if not related to the fool of the tarots (a possibility he does not rule out) comes from *juggler* in English, *jongleur* in French, and *jugar* in

#### 4. *Recent History*

Having discussed the mythical origins of playing cards, I would now like to turn to more recent history, that is the 14th century and the introduction of cards into early modern Europe. Some claim that the first reference to cards in European history occurs in a Catalan epistle from 1331 or 1332, however this is difficult to ascertain since the ‘Golden Epistles’ of Guevara are extant only in translations, the first of which is dated 1539 (Chatto 66). There does exist, however, an inventory taken of the household of Nicolás Sarmona, Calleón San Daniel, 1380, in which “*unum ludum de naypes qui sunt quadraginta quatuor pecie*” is registered (Etienvre 18). In the same year there is a record of Rodrigo Borges who set up shop as a painter and card maker (“*pintor y naipero*”) in Perpignan, and two years later there is a record of an ordinance which was issued in Barcelona against the use of playing cards among other games of chance.

Similarly, an ordinance was issued in Florence on May 23, 1376, in which the city elders voted 98 to 25 to prohibit the playing of “A certain game called *naibbe*, which has recently been introduced into these parts” (Hoffmann 12). An ordinance was also decreed in 1387 by Juan I of Castile against the use of playing cards,<sup>203</sup> and in the *Istoria della Citta di Viterbo* of 1379 the following entry occurs which makes specific

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Spanish. All three words come from the Latin *ioculator* meaning joker or player, which would tie the joker nicely back to play. One has to wonder if this etymology does not somehow link up to previous works on the juggler, such as Jeffrey Kittay and Wlad Godzich’s exposition of the socio-discursive function of the “ubiquitous juggler” in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Here the juggler occupied a role which would later be filled by the “writer qua writer”, in whom converged the Latin *auctor* from *augure* (to foretell), the Old French *acteor* and *acteur*, and at the same time the Latin *auctoritas* which became *autorité*, and subsequently author. However, the juggler who told stories and read fortunes in the town square in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, later found himself unceremoniously displaced by writing, which was “for the vernacular, a device...needed to inscribe a sort of *degree-zero* of enunciative markedness” [my italics] (*The Emergence of Prose: an Essay in Prosaics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 61-3).

<sup>203</sup> “Mandamos y ordenamos que nignunos de los de nuestros reynos, seà osados de jugar dados ni naypes, en publico ne en escòdido, y qualquier que los jugare”, *Recopilacion de las Leyes destos Regnos*, Edit. 1640. Cited in Chatto, p. 67.

reference to card games: “Non giuocare a zara, nè ad altor giuoco di dadi, fa de’ giuochi che usano i fanciuli; agli aliossi, alla trottola, n’ferri, a’*naibi*, a’*coderone*, e simili”.<sup>204</sup>

In France, there is record of a special set of cards which were commissioned in 1393 to entertain Charles VI, who became a simpleton as a result of sunstroke in childhood. The document in which they were commissioned is cited in Menestier’s *Bibliothèque curieuse et instructive*, and it suggests that cards were already well known in France by this time, so that a custom-made set could be ordered for the entertainment of the insane monarch.<sup>205</sup>

In German, the first known reference to playing cards is the *Tractus de moribus* of 1377, written by the monk Reinfelden of Fribourg. The tract describes in some detail the form and function of cards without actually describing how games are played with them.<sup>206</sup> Following Reinfelden’s tract, cards are mentioned frequently in northern Europe for example at St. Gall in Brabant 1380, in Nuremberg, Flanders<sup>207</sup> and Burgundy in 1382, Constance in 1388, 1389 in Zurich, 1390 in Holland, 1391 at Augsburg and 1392 in Frankfurt (Hoffmann 22). A significant volume was printed about eighty years later in Augsburg entitled *Güldin Spil* (ca. 1472) by the Dominican friar Ingold. In his compendium of gaming Ingold condemns card playing as a perfidious occupation:

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<sup>204</sup> Cronica di Giovan Morelli, in Malespini’s *Istoria Fiorentina*, p. 270. 4to, Florence, 1728. Cited in Chatto, p. 73. See also Parlett’s *A History of Card Games*, Op. Cit. p. 36.

<sup>205</sup> “Donné à Jacquemin Gringonneur, peintre, pour trois jeux de cartes à or et à diverses couleurs, ornés de plusieurs devises, pour porter devers le Seigneur Roi, pour son batement, cinquante-six sols parisis.” Menestrier, *Bibliothèque curieuse et instructive*, tome II, pp. 168-194, 12mo.: Trevoux, 1704. Cited in Chatto, p. 76.

<sup>206</sup> “In the game called cards, the cards are painted in different designs and are played with in various way. In the commonest manner—the one in which the first reached us—four cards depict four kings, each of whom is seated on a royal throne. Each of them holds a certain sign in his hand, some of these signs being considered good but others signifying evil” (Parlett 36). Reinfelden’s text is dated 1377 and only exists in copy, one of which is on display in the British Museum.

<sup>207</sup> Apparently Johanna van Brabant and her husband, Duke Wencelaus van Luxemburg were inveterate players of games, so several of their bills to card makers have been preserved, for example this entry of 14 May, 1379: “Ghegeven Minenhere ende Minrevrouwen, XIII in meyo *Quartspel* (literally quarter game, pack of cards) met to coopen III peters, II gulden, maken VIII mottoenen” (Janssen 114).

Nun is das Spil vol untrew; und, als ich gelesen han, so ist es kommen in Teutschland der ersten im dem iar, da man zalt von Crist geburt, tausend dreihundert iar (Chatto 74).

Cards entered England about a century later than the continent, but their late arrival was made up for by instant and wide-spread popularity. Indeed, the first existing document that mentions cards is an act passed in the parliament of Edward IV in 1463, expressly prohibiting the importation of foreign made playing cards. This law was imposed in order to encourage the establishment of card makers' guilds and the development of this lucrative industry at home, and to expressly discourage continued importation of the expensive novelty from Spain and the Low Countries. Following this, the document most often cited as the first reference to cards in England is a letter to Sir John Paston written by his wife on December 4, 1484. In her letter Lady Paston reports a Christmas party at Lady Morlee's home were "sche seyde that ther wer non dysgysyngs, ner harpyng, ner lutyng, ner syngyn, ner non lowde dysports, but pleyng at the tabylls, and schesse and cardes; sweche dysports sche gave her folkys leve to play and non odyr" (Benham 25).

### 5. *Cards and Text*

The northward progress of playing cards in Europe, as well as their popularity and availability is intimately linked to the rise of printing.<sup>208</sup> Moreover, because cards and texts are related through language and printing, they seem an appropriate space for the intersection of the two, or as Hoffmann writes, "elles [les cartes à jouer] furent employées, plus que tout autre jeu, comme journal ou comme tract" (Hoffmann 43). Moreover, playing cards were the central metaphor in a genre of poetic tract called *los*

<sup>208</sup> In his *A Treatise on Wood Engraving, Historical and Practical*, London: Charles Knight, 1839, Chatto writes:

It has been conjectured that the art of wood-engraving was employed on sacred subjects...before it was applied to the multiplication of those 'books of Satan', playing cards. It, however, seems not unlikely that it was first employed in the manufacture of cards; and that the monks, availing themselves of the same principle, shortly afterwards employed the art of wood-engraving for the purpose of circulating the figures of saints; thus endeavoring to supply a remedy for the evil, and extracting from the serpent a cure for his bite (45).

*folletos*, which lampooned contemporary political figures in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain.<sup>209</sup> Likewise, Rowlands *The Knave of Clubbs* (1609), a poem in five cantos, ridicules the mores and political figures of the previous century. Hence, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the suitability of cards to the circulation and dissemination text such as political satire, and advertising, as well as pornography, to a large audience had been noticed<sup>210</sup>, and card makers decided that their popularity could be exploited for the more wholesome purpose of pedagogy. To this purpose decks were published all over Europe containing important facts about mathematics, the colonies, economic catastrophes, history, military strategy, philosophy and geography from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So it is not surprising, given their mythical origins, that decks would be adapted to teaching the fundamentals of grammar, as for example a pack dated June 1, 1676 published with a tract on the proper use of the cards in which we read:

For as your cards are entitled Hearts, Diamonds, Spades, and Clubs, so ours are to be called by the names of Orthographie (Spades), Etymologie (Clubs), Syntax (Hearts), and Prosodie (Diamonds) (Van Rensselaer, *P.E.P.C.* 304).

Because the printing of cards and texts has followed a parallel development, the texts written about cards follow the same discursive trajectory, and are marked by the same epistemic and paradigmatic shifts observable in other discourses. For example, the first lexical works on the subject of cards were florilegia, such as John Cotgrave's *Wits Interpreter: the English Parnassus* (1662) which contains *The Art of Reasoning*, *Theatre of Courtship*, *Labyrinth of Fancies*, *Love Songs*, *A Description of Beauty*, *Poetical Fictions*, *Letters à la mode*, and *Richelieu's Key to his Cyphers*. *The Wits*

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<sup>209</sup> On the 16<sup>th</sup>-century political Spanish genre *los folletos* see Jean-Pierre Etievre's article "Du jeu comme métaphore politique" in *Poétique* 56, 1983, p. 397-415.

<sup>210</sup> According to Hoffmann, "c'est au cours du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle que les industriels se sont rendu compte que les cartes à jouer pouvaient servir d'instrument de publicité" (10). And today, the circulation of advertising is one of the principle functions of playing cards. According to Carta Mundi, the largest manufacturer of cards in Europe "No other object so often meets the eye, cards are passed from hand to hand [and] what is printed on them is more penetrating because cards are not played casually" (Carta Mundi 2).

The relationship of pornography and the playing card has been explored in a 2 volume work by K. Frank Jensen entitled *Eroticism on Playing Cards*. According to *The Playing Card*, this text is regularly seized by Customs in England and North America so that I have been unable to consult it. Cf. *The Playing Card: Journal of the International Playing-Card Society*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1992, p. 62.

*Interpreter* includes a section on recondite knowledge like “How to make an egg flye about the room”, and instructions for how to play “Games and Sports now used at this day among the gentry of England” such as the game of l’Ombre, Picket, Gleek, and Cribbage. The section closes with an entry that explains how to remove corns from the feet (Parlett 56).<sup>211</sup>

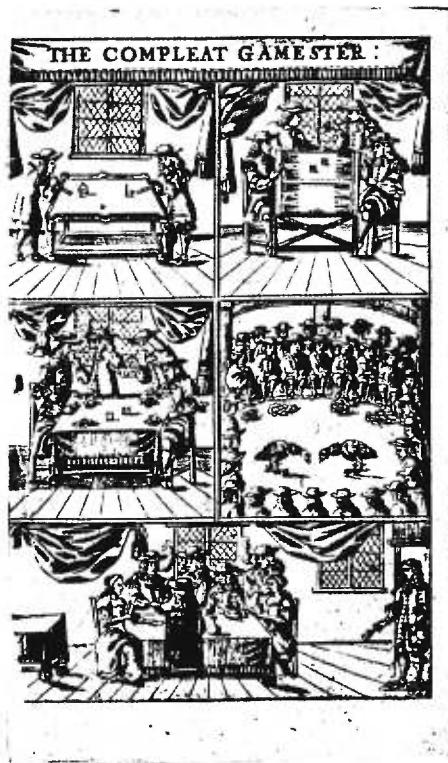
A number of dialogues were written in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries on or around card games, which argued the question of gaming and probability, courtship, politics and money. I have already mentioned Aretino’s famous dialogue, *Le carte parlanti* (1545), in which the greater trumps are allegorical figures who debate with Padovano, a monk, on the subject of gaming, and the manipulation of money and credit. Likewise, there is *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Daucing, Vain Plaies or Enterludes, with other idle pastimes &c., commonly used on the Sabbath day, are reprooved by the Authoritie of the Worde of God and Nothbrooke, made Dialogue-Wise by John Northbrooke*. The point of Northbrooke’s dialogue is, naturally, to discuss and criticize playing cards on the grounds of immorality, and thereby discourage their use.<sup>212</sup>

As one might expect, the 18th century saw the publication of the first encyclopedic works on the subject of playing cards. Of these the best known is Hoyle’s *The Treatise on the Game of Whist, containing the laws of the game; and also some Rules whereby a Beginner may, with due attention to them, attain to the Playing it well*. Hoyle’s treatise was published in 1737 as a comprehensive guide to the game of whist

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<sup>211</sup> On the florilegium and pre-encyclopedic endeavors to organize knowledge, see Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) and his account of Aldorvandi’s book on snakes, p.54.

<sup>212</sup> Since card playing and the gambling that goes with it became a matter of concern virtually over night, many dialogues were written on the subject of which I will mention a few of the more representative here: “The Anatomie of Abuses, containing A Discoverie or briefe Summarie of such notable vices and Corruptions as now raigne in many Christian Countreyes of the World; but especially in the Countrey of Ailgnia, Together with the most fearefull Examples of God’s Juddgments executed upon the Wicked for the same, as well in Ailgnia of late as in other Plases elsewhere, Made Dialogue-wise by Phillip Stubs” (1583), “Del Giuoco; Discorsos del R. Padre M. Tommaso Buoninsegni”, Florence 1585, “A short and plain Dialogue concerning the Unlawfulness of playing at Cards or Tables”, a dialogue between a Professor and a Preacher by James Balmford (1593), “Sur Mera” a Rabbinical tract on gaming and card-playing written as a dialogue between Medad and Eldad, Venice, 1615, “An Essay upon Gaming, in a Dialogue between Callimachus and Doldedes”, Jeremy Collier, London 1713 and “*Noctes Ambrosianae*” written in dialogue form by John Wilson, 1826.



**THE COMPLEAT**  
**Gamester :**  
 OR,  
**INSTRUCTIONS**  
 How to play at  
**BILLIARDS, TRUCKS, BOWLS,**  
 and **CHESS.**  
 Together with all manner of usual and  
 most Gentile Games either on  
**CARDS or DICE.**  
 To which is added,  
**The ARTS and MYSTERIES**  
 OF  
**RIDING, RACING, ARCHERY,**  
 and **COCK-FIGHTING.**

LONDON: Printed by *A.M. for R. Cutler,*  
 and to be sold by *Henry Brome* at the  
 Gun at the West-end of *St. Pauls.* 1674.

**ADVERTISEMENT.**

*THIS* Book having been entered at Stationers-Hall, according to Act of Parliament, who-  
 ever shall presume to Print or Vend a Pirate Edi-  
 tion, shall be Prosecuted according to Law.  
 The Proprietor has already obtained an Injun-  
 ction against Nine Persons for pirating or selling  
 pirated Editions.  
 No Copies of this Book are genuine, but what  
 are signed by

**EDMOND HOYLE**  
 and  
**THOMAS OSBORNE.**

**A SHORT**  
**TREATISE**  
 On the GAME of  
**WHIST.**

**THE** Author of this Treatise  
 did promise, if it met with  
 Approbation, to make an  
 Addition to it by way of  
**APPENDIX.** which he has  
 done accordingly.

It is necessary to premise, that those, who  
 intend to read this Treatise, are desired to  
 peruse the following Calculations; and they  
 need only charge their Memories with those  
 that are marked with a *N. B.* upon which  
 the whole Reasoning of this Treatise de-  
 pends.

**B** **C**

**To the READER.**

*THE* Proprietor of the following Treatise has  
 thought proper to give the Public Notice, that  
 he has reduced the Price of it, that it may not be  
 worth any Person's while to purchase the pirated  
 Editions, which have been already obtruded on the  
 World; as likewise all those Piratical Editions  
 are extremely incorrect; and that the Author will  
 not undertake to explain any Case but in such Copies  
 as have been set forth by himself, or that are Au-  
 thorized as Revised and Corrected under his own  
 Hand.

*Edmond Hoyle.*  
*Tho Osborne*

Fig.4



which had, by this time, achieved the status of a social necessity in England. The comprehensive work (which made Hoyle something of a celebrity at its publication, and a household word to this day), was developed by the barrister out of his experience as a “tutor of card games to persons of quality”, to be consulted as a reference. Hoyle’s compendium was instantly pirated, giving rise to a whole genre of works on cards like the *Goren*, so that no home was without a reference work on cards. These encyclopedic works replaced Charles Cotton’s *The Complete Gamester* 1654, in which information was arranged in the encumbered lexical style of the previous century (see Fig. 4).

As we have seen, from their introduction into Europe cards seemed the appropriate place to inscribe text, including everything from personal missives and eroticism, to the basic principles of grammar, as well as lessons in mathematics and military strategy.<sup>213</sup> Moreover, it is not surprising, given the inherent relation between cards, gambling money and text, that playing cards would seem the perfect place to print and circulate narratives of the great financial gambles of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that turned into catastrophes. Hence in 1720, the year that saw the failure of John Law’s System as well as many of the other “bubble” companies in the colonies, Pasquin published his “*Windkaart op de Windnegotie*”, which bore the inscription “these new bubble cards were made for the purpose of idleness by Little Lau (read Law) of Scotland under the Goldseeking Cock” (*Dese nieuwe Windkaarten worden gemaakte en verkogt te Nullenstun bij Lautje van Schotten in den gold zoekende Haan*).<sup>214</sup> Other decks printed on the continent commemorated all manner of aleatory economic practices, including the Dutch tulip trade or *Windhandel* (Morely 128, Hoffmann 47, 48) In England, after the bursting of the Bubble Companies and Law’s System, Bubble cards bearing inscriptions such as “The Free Holder invites Ye Spendthrift Prodigals...to Drown your

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<sup>213</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, note 75 on Gibbon and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and this chapter note 159 on Hogarth’s *Marriage à la mode*. On cards used as calling cards, see Rickards, p. 78 and Marilyn Simonds Mohr’s *The Games Treasury*, Vermont: Chapters, 1993, p. 181. On playing cards used to instruct mathematics and military strategy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, see Van Rensselaer, p. 292-307.

<sup>214</sup> As I wrote in Chapter 3, Saint-Simon issued a special post-revolutionary deck in 1793, in which the court cards have been replaced with allegorical figures such as “Libertés” for the queens and “Égalités” for the valets, and the aces in the deck are called “Laws”, a play on the fact that John Law’s name is pronounced *l’as* in French, and a reminder that speculation and systemic gambling occasion disasters both great and small.



Fig. 5

Purchase Money in South Sea” (1720) were published (see Fig. 5). There were also special decks called “Stock Jobbing Cards, or the Humours of Change Alley”, printed to celebrate the stock market, a form of economic folly that card players and gamblers understood so well (Morely 185-6).

## 6. Cards, Legality, and Tax

That discourses on financial speculation were printed on cards attests to the fact that cards, numbers, money and the manipulation of signs that grounds economic practice are closely related. This initially was perceived as cards were introduced into Europe, when they were still rare and expensive luxury items painted individually on which people were want to spend a great deal of money. Subsequently, every attempt to ban or regulate the circulation of cards was strictly enforced as soon as block printing made them readily available to most classes in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>215</sup> And the synod of Langres published *De Ludibus prohibitis* in 1404 in which it is written “nous défendons expressement aux Ecclesiastiques...de jouer aux dez, au triquetrac, ou aux cartes” and in 1491 the synod of Bamberg prohibited “Ludosque taxillorum et chartarum, et his similies, in locis publicis” (Chatto 80).

Bans on cards often took the form of *auto da fe* based on the immorality of gambling and playing at games of chance.<sup>216</sup> For example, Saint Bernardin of Sienna

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<sup>215</sup> In fact, as early as 1346 the city of Tournai issued general public ordinance which stated “Que nulz geuwe aus dez ne as quartes dedens le pourpris del hospital” (Mehl 156). On the 22 January, 1397 the provost of Paris issued an edict forbidding working people “to play at tennis, bowls, dice, cards or nine-pins on working days” (Chatto 78). These early interdictions were evidently put in place to keep the general populous from squandering time and money on cards.

<sup>216</sup> This interpretation of gaming is largely based on St. Augustine’s *Cité de Dieu*, translated by Raoul de Presle in 1375, as well as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, in particular Book VIII. If I wrote above that there are still some card historians who would argue that playing cards sprang up in Europe at the same time as the game of tarots, rather than developing out of the tarots, I believe their opinion to be largely informed by the question of morality. For such writers, it would be offensive to believe that playing cards are somehow a simplified version of a more complex Eastern game, where this simplification allows for a greater hand to be played by evil hazard. In other words, these historians are still troubled by the notion that playing cards might be the devil’s toys or the instruments of idleness, and seek to invest them with greater complexity and the status of an independent invention. However, few playing cards from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century survive because they were burnt on the grounds of morality, so that it is difficult to draw a conclusion in favor of either argument.

gave a sermon on the immorality of games of chance, and in particular playing cards, from the stairs of San Petronio in 1423, at which all the cards which could be found were publicly burned. In 1519 at Toulouse Thomas Illyricus delivered a sermon on gaming, ordering the burning of all the cards that could be rounded up, and demanded that the city's card makers burn their precious printing blocks. As a compensation, it was suggested that the *cartiers de Toulouse* turn their hand to the art of printing religious images as a means of income (Mehl 161). In 1492 at Nuremberg, a Capistran of the order of St. Bernard delivered a three hour sermon in which he disclaimed luxury and gaming so compellingly that 3640 backgammon boards, 40,000 dice and playing cards innumerable were presented to be burnt in the public square (Chatto 91, Van Rensselaer 292).<sup>217</sup> Since Nuremberg, Ulm and Augsburg were the chief manufacturers of playing cards in Europe from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the beginning to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were many occasions on which card burning became a public spectacle, as for example at the confession of Augsburg in 1530 (see Fig. 6). And in England in May of 1526 a proclamation was made against "All unlawful games accordyng to the statutes made in this behalf, and Commissions awarded into every shire for the execucon of the same, so that in all places Table, Dyce, Cards and Bowles were taken and burnt" (Benham 25).

It is quite obvious that what all of these discourses on the morality of gambling were really about, was more properly economical than theological in nature. In other words, what is essentially immoral about playing cards is their potential to induce people to make large sums of money disappear, and historically there have been two ways in which to deal with this problem. The first is to burn or ban playing cards in the hopes that they will go away, a method which, as we know, has proven to be almost entirely without effect. The second manner of dealing with the problem is to tax cards heavily, a solution which, while it does not eliminate cards, certainly makes them appear to be profitable. As Henry Jones ("Cavendish") wrote, "that playing cards are articles of luxury, are fit objects for the imposition of a duty, is a proposition which can hardly be denied" (85). Indeed, as recently as 1992 a deck of cards was published entitled "Taxes

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<sup>217</sup> This event is the subject of a wood cut by Hans L. Schäufelein, 1519, and it is reproduced in many playing card histories. See opposite.



Fig. 6

are Trumps". If one accepts an etymology put forward by Chatto, the word exchequer, check and card all derive from the Hindustan *Chatur-anga*, which would seem to speak for the inherent taxability of cards.<sup>218</sup> Therefore, if it be impossible to keep the general public away from the fascination of games of chance and the thrill of the wager, (and indeed the first prohibitions against gaming in the service of morality were written for the benefit of the clergy who were supposedly above temptation) taxation hopefully makes it possible to recycle losses back into the larger economy, under the watchful eye of the exchequer, with the intention of causing irresponsible individuals to increase the potential general wealth of the body politick, rather than frivolously wasting it.

According to the earliest records, the proceeds from card playing were originally taxed *en nature*, that is, in goods which were judged to be commensurate in value. For example, ordinances were passed in Nordlingen against playing cards in 1426, 1436, and 1439, however in 1440 the town magistrates decided to rescind the prohibition and allow playing cards in public houses where gaming could be contained. This was particularly encouraged on the occasion of the magistrates' annual goose-feast, at which time it was decreed that card players would pay a tax or fine in the amount of one half pound of bees' wax to be made into holy tapers and burned at the alter of a patron saint (Chatto 93-4).

As well there are protocols from 1407 recorded in the *Mémoires de l'Académie Dijon* (1828), concerning inveterate card players who had so thoroughly internalized institutional discourses on morality and monetary responsibility, that they voluntarily signed agreements not to gamble for a prescribed period of time, subject to a self-imposed penalty:

Le premier est tiré du protocole de Jehan Lebon, notaire, et de ses clerecs Jehan Bizot, Guyot Dizot de Charmes, et Jehan Gros. On y lit qu'en 1407, il y eut convention de ne pas jouer pendant une année, entre Jehan Violier de Volexon, boucher, à Dijon; Guillaume Garni, boucher, Guguenin de Grancey, tournestier, Vivien de Picardet, pâtissier, et Gorant de Barefort, coustellier, tous de Dijon, à peine de deux francs d'or au profit de ceux qui n'auront pas joué, et de deux

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<sup>218</sup> See Chatto, p.16.

francs d'or à lever par le Procureur de la Ville et Commune de Dijon, au profit de la ville. Le second en l'année 1505 (Chatto 79).<sup>219</sup>

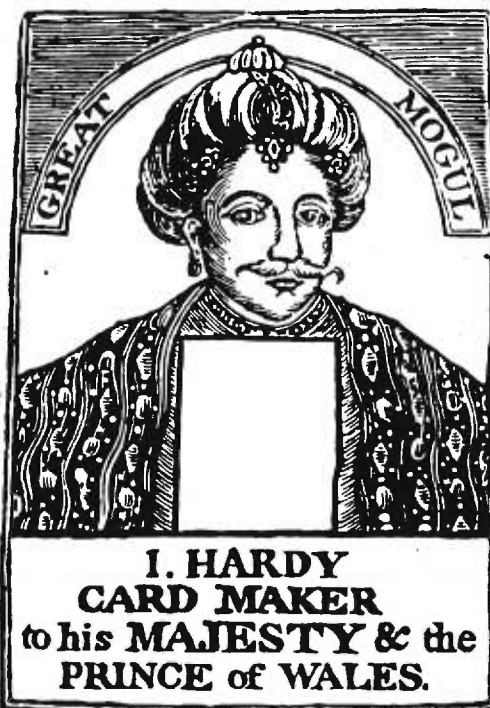
It was in England, however, that the most efficient and stringent systems for the taxation of playing cards were developed. The first rigorously imposed tax was levied by James I in 1615, which took the form of £ 200 per annum, and 5s. per gross on playing cards, and £ 1,800 due on the cards imported by Sir Richard Coningsby in that same year ("Cavendish" 85).

By the reign of Queen Anne, the notion that playing cards were a lucrative source of revenues was so well established, that in 1711 a special tax was levied with the intention of raising the sum of £186,670 per annum with the eventual goal of raising £2,602,200, "for carrying on the war, and for other [of] her Majesty's Occasions" ("Cavendish" 87). Therefore, it was decided that the duty on each deck should be set at sixpence for a period of thirty-two years, commencing in 1711. Furthermore, all card makers were required to send notice in writing to the Commissioners of the Stamp Duties on Vellum, indicating the address of their establishment for inspection. Failure to comply brought an initial penalty of £50 and £10 for each subsequent refusal. The makers were required to wrap and seal each pack with stamped government paper and special thread issued by the Commissioners of Duties, and failure to comply meant immediate removal of all merchandise in stock, plus a penalty in the amount of three times the value of the goods seized. Moreover, card makers were required to furnish an inventory report every 28 days, after which they had two weeks in which to pay all taxes owing. Failure to report to the Commissioner of Duties resulted in a fine of £20 for default, and double duty for non-payment of the tax within the time allotted (Benham 69-80). Moreover, this elaborate system of taxation was accompanied by another tax intended to "prevent excessive and immoderate gambling" which had already been passed in the House of Commons in 1709. In other words, this series of acts and

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<sup>219</sup> A similar contract between Jacques Jean and his friends Honorat d'Abe and Nicolas Miol was notarized by Laurent Aycardi of Marseilles, in 1381. The penalty imposed by the contract was 15 florins (Mehl 156).

FOR EXPORTATION FIFTY POUNDS PENALTY IF RELANDED AND TWENTY POUNDS IF SOLD OR USED IN GREAT BRITAIN



EXPORTATION I-HARDY.

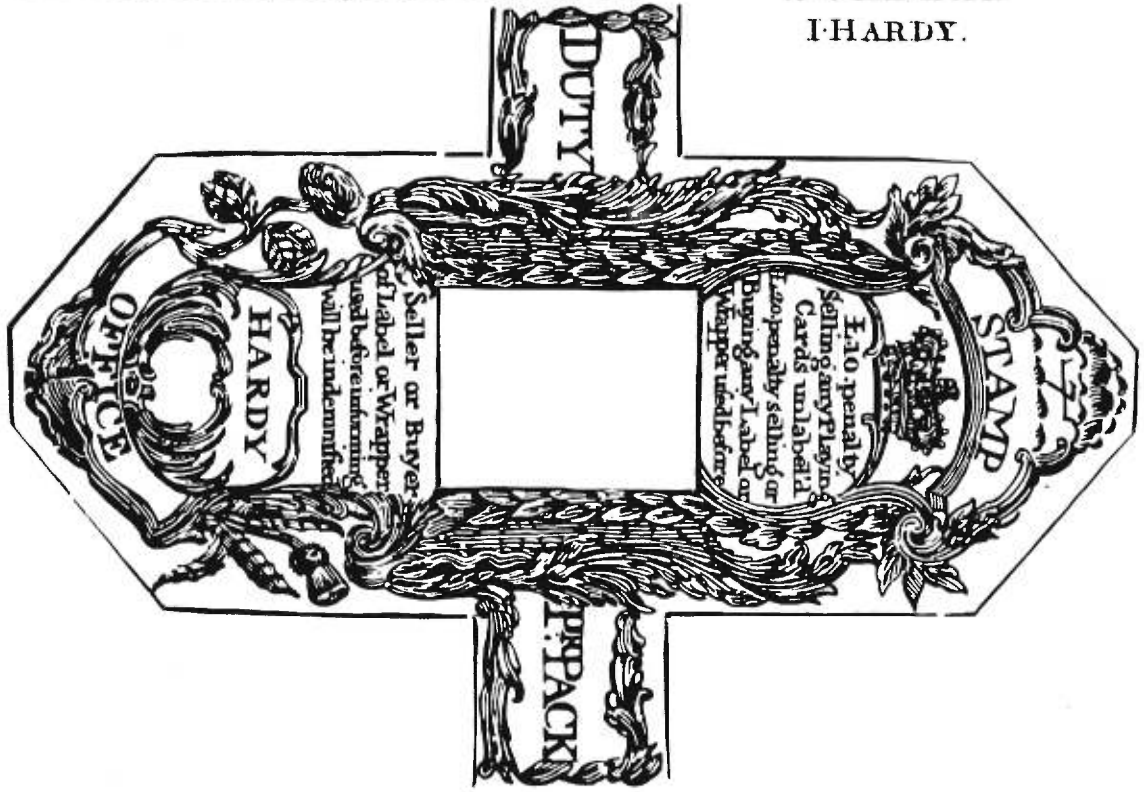


Fig. 7



interdictions was intended as a tax net through which no aspect of card manufacturing (paper, printing, binding, gaming) or playing could pass without first paying the price.

While cards, as a popular luxury item suggestively emblazoned with monarchs and military themes, immediately presented themselves as the perfect place to look for revenues with which to fund the war effort, the government was effectively killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. The card makers' guild responded with a five-point report, concluding that they were "obliged to pay a Duty for Ten times more Cards than ever they will sell" such that "your Honours will...lay a Duty which it is humbly conceived will bring no profit to the Queen, but inevitably ruin many hundreds of her subjects" ("Cavendish" 89). A similar petition was present by the English Paper-Manufacture Mills who sold one quarter of their total production to the card makers, as well as the importers of Genoa Paper who supplied 40,000 reams of paper annually to the Guild.

The petitions were summarily ignored, the Act became law, and it was required that all cards manufactured before June 12, 1711 be brought to the Tax Stamp-Office to be properly marked for the imposition of duty, with a penalty of £5 to be paid for every unstamped deck found in the manufacturer's possession. This the tax was meant to be taken seriously: the death penalty was handed down to an assistant named Harding who engraved a counterfeit duty ace of spades for the purpose of evading the tax. What is more, this Act, which was originally intended to cover a term of thirty-two years, was extended indefinitely.

The obvious result of these exorbitant and unrealistic duties is an elaborate history of tax-evasion schemes with counter moves from the office of the exchequer. For example, the duty stamp on the outside of packs could be carefully removed, recycled and re-applied to new decks. Likewise, old and soiled cards were bought by the pound, sorted, cleaned and resold free of tax until this practice was discovered in 1756, and a new tax stamp was developed for "waste cards". This was circumvented by the invention of the category 'second-hand' until a new duty stamp was invented for the court cards of these decks to be used on penalty of a £5 fine per pack. When counterfeit duty aces of spades were manufactured, the exchequer responded by periodically

changing the duty card. When methods for subverting this tax were found, the response was to require that any card bearing the duty stamp be made on a special vellum which itself was taxed, and finally yet another tax was extended to the government-printed wrappers for each deck. By 1897 a new tax of 3d. was imposed which covered the seal and wrapper which was issued by Somerset House, specially printed for each manufacturer. As well, special wrappers were issued for second-hand cards sold at clubs and no further duty was imposed provided the words "second-hand cards" was legibly printed on the wrapper.

Likewise, in the United States, government records show that import duty on playing cards was twenty-five cents per pack in 1796 and this sum was collected on 1,552 decks on imports in excess of exports. In 1804 John Dorr, a Boston merchant, paid an export duty of \$936.00 on a gross of Dutch playing cards imported from Antwerp. More recently, in 1956, it was estimated that over fifty million decks of cards would be sold in any given year, with the exception of years where games like canasta became popular fads, in which case one could estimate that upwards of eighty million decks would be sold throughout the United States in one year. Considering that each deck sold was taxed, this represents what appears to be a considerable sum in government revenues.<sup>220</sup>

Over the past centuries, however, such summary and extensive card tax strategies have been less than entirely successful. Playing cards seem the fitting and natural place to apply a tax since they are both a luxury and 'immoral', which would make punishment and crime symmetrical. However, the proceeds from taxation strategies on playing cards and gambling in any given century or country, are actually illusory. Moneys collected from card taxes amount to a brute figure which does not take into account vice and negative profits made in the illegal practices occasioned by playing cards. Attempts to make cards pay invariably give rise to a convolution of tax

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<sup>220</sup> Irving Crespi, "The Social Significance of Card Playing as a Leisure Time Activity" in *The American Sociological Review* No. 21, 1956 p. 717-721. Crespi cites *Facts and Figures on Government Finance*, 1950-51, New York: The Tax Foundation, 1950, and Jesse Steiner, and *The Budget of the U.S. Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1953*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952. Similar records exist in other countries such as those of the *Statistisches Bundesamt Finanzen und Steuern. Reihe 9.6.4: Spielkartensteuer, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, vol. 30, 1976.*

strategies and tax evasion as in 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, resulting in a considerable expenditure of government funds in tax maintenance. In order to keep a tax in place which is being subverted at every turn, governments must continually come up with new and ingenious ways of making taxes stick. Often this takes the form of new duty stamps and labels or the imposition of heavier penalties and stiffer regulations. The history of vice suggests, however, that one clever tax strategy will be met with an even cleverer means to undermine it, and this trade off will escalate infinitely, so that revenues from card taxes are, more often than not, negative.

## 7. Conclusion

Of course, one could attempt to join them instead of ceaselessly trying to beat them, hence the current popularity of the government-regulated casino. As appealing a maneuver as this may seem, economic negativities have always attached themselves to government controlled gambling establishments, and this was as true of the legal card playing salon in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, as it is of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century state-run casino. Indeed, the term ‘negative externalities’ has been invented by economists to describe the fiscally unfavorable effects of legalized gambling. As I wrote in Chapter 3, negative externalities are expenses incurred in controlling the vice which arises as a side-effect of legal gambling.<sup>221</sup> Such externalities include violence stimulated by the high intake of alcohol at these establishments, and a general sloth in the members of the work-force in the host community, which leads to reduced productivity in the work place. The bottom line is, evidently, that card playing and gambling cannot be made profitable.<sup>222</sup> Gambling will

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<sup>221</sup> Cf. Note 130, p. 86.

<sup>222</sup> Indeed, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Grimmelshausen wrote the following of the illusory profits made from gambling with cards and dice:

Und weil das Spielen deß leidigen Teufels eigne Invention ist, und ihm nicht wenig einträgt, also hat er auch absonderliche Spiel-Teufel geordnet, und in der Welt herum schwermen, die sonst nichts zuthun haben...und wird man doch unter zehntausend Spielern selten einen reichen finden, sondern sie sind gewöhnlich im Gegentheil arm und dürfftig, weil ihr Gewin leicht geschäbet, und daher gleich entweder *wieder verspielet, oder sonst liederlich verschwendet wird*: hiervon ist das allwaare, aber sehr erbärmliche Spruchwort entsprungen: Der Teufel verlasse keinen Spieler, er lasse sie aber Blutarm werden; den er raubet ihnen Gut, Muth und Ehre...(169-70). *Simplicissimus* II:XX (Kehl: Swan, 1993).

consistently make large sums of money disappear, hence the failure of economic strategies which rely on gambling, such as John Law's system. An inveterate card player himself, Law constructed a system based on the principles of high-stakes card games like piquet and basset which in both theory, and in practice, involved high losses.

Another disruptive consequence of gambling is its tendency to make subjects disappear with their losses, an eventuality of which the joker is a constant reminder. The obscenity and immorality of a fortune being wagered on the turn of a card, the fate of a life and the fruits of intense labor being given over to chance, is at once thrilling and terrifying. It is the sublime possibility of relinquishing large amounts of the wealth through which one defines one's financial individuality, the accumulated materiality which describes the individuated subject. Yet, however invigorating the thrill of contemplating the void may be, the cause of utility needs well defined, fiscally responsible subjects. The potlatch of ritual poker, as Bataille called it, must be contained so that the illusion of a 'healthy flow' of mutually compensating expenditures is regulated and maintained. Hence, it has been thought that in order for an economy based on the accumulation of wealth to function (or some form of economic system which at least has the appearance of this), irruptions of general economic practices such as gambling must be restricted.

People who gamble, however, engage in unpredictable, extravagant behaviors which are subversive to the project of systemic utility. Addictive gamblers are classified and dismissed as destabilizing marginals, who give over their subject-hood to a carnivalesque, spectral version of the dominant mode of exchange. This is why gaming has received but passing attention in institutional discourses, save studies aimed at controlling and containing it. This would account for the dearth of studies on gambling in history, literature, or virtually any discipline other than statistics. In fact Buffon, one of the people who pioneered the theories of probability which would give us modern statistics, was mostly interested in gambling and the deleterious effects it had on the Enlightenment subject. Quite appropriately then, Buffon's *Essaie d'arithmétique morale* (1777) in which he analyzes gambling in order to determine what he calls 'moral certitude', is based on a figure arrived at by calculating the probability that a 56 year-old

man will die in the next twenty-four hours.<sup>223</sup> In other words, Buffon's method for predicting and harnessing the effects of chance in the specific case of gambling is predicated on a disappearing subject.

How we understand ourselves as subjects hinges on the ways in which we interact with others and circulate through the greater economy that channels the flow of wealth through the body politic. The composite narrative of the exchanges, expenditures and transactions we make determines who we are. People who gamble position themselves against the flow of the restricted modern notion of economy, and engage in a form of exchange which belongs to the general economy, which is perhaps akin to the contemporary view of premodern economics. Through the work of Mauss some have identified gambling with *prestation*, a premodern economic behavior based on prodigious spending and escalating debt. However, I am not advancing the utopian notion that premodern societies have no concept of wealth, or that the primary principle of *prestation* is squander. I am suggesting that premodern agency is collective rather than individualistic and relates to wealth in terms of the prestige of lavish spending rather than the accumulation of wealth in personal savings accounts. Gambling, as I argued previously, is a kind of sovereign expenditure which signals that the agent behind it is able to spend freely, a privilege of the extremely wealthy who make a spectacle of affluence, and of the poor when they are able to forget themselves temporarily. There is a nobility, however fleeting, in the upsets and extravagant losses of gaming.

That playing cards belong to these moments of sublime dispersion of selfhood, or what Caillois would call *ilinx*, is attested to by their role in the libidinal economy. As I noted previously, all sorts of texts and images have been printed on the backs of playing cards, most frequently pornographic ones: this is where *jouer* becomes *jouir*.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> See Kavanagh, "The Triumph of Probability Theory", in particular p.25-6. This is in fact related to the word 'mortgage' in English, which historically and quite literally, is a kind of bet (*gage* from the French) against the eventuality of one's death (*mort*, also from the French). For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between insurance, mortgages, probability and death, see Johanne Villeneuve's article "Der Teufel ist ein Spieler oder: Wie kommt ein Eisbär and die Adria?" in *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche: Situationen offener Epistemologie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991, pp. 83-96.

<sup>224</sup> That this is the case may well have to do with the etymology of the word pornography (prostitute: *porne*, writing: *graphein*), as well as the relationship of playing cards to writing and Writing. Coming from the Orient as an early form of writing or at very least a system of signs, cards are identified with what has been called

The racy and lascivious messages that have graced the backs of playing cards from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, bespeak unproductive expenditures of sexual potency. Sexual potency which is not channeled into the wholesome cycle of human reproduction amounts to a loss in the economy of the body, hence Lacan's dictum, "la jouissance, c'est ce qui ne sert à rien". Non-utilitarian squander of sexual potency has come to be associated with playing cards by virtue of the ostentatious outpouring of subjective wealth which characterizes both gambling and 'emancipated' or 'marginal' sexual behaviors. This, likewise, is the connection between economy and sexuality made by Bataille in *La part maudite* when he describes *perte* as "l'activité sexuelle perverse (c'est à dire détournée de la finalité génitale)" (28).<sup>225</sup>

In the above I hope to have made more sound the connections drawn previously between cards and theories of play, writing, and economy both discursive and monetary. I have not done this in the service of proving some one-to-one correspondence between playing cards and their meaning in a novel. What I have tried to show rather, is that playing cards evoke certain associations in popular memory with text and books as well as with subversive and irresponsible pecuniary and sexual behavior, which in turn are part of how we understand the constitution of subjectivity. When card games are part of the fabric of a novel, these associations affect how we will read them as a metaphor, or as a clue to the unravelling of a text. Card games, as I will show in the following chapters, tend to leave holes in narratives, opening up discursive debt and displacing the subjectivity of the characters who populate the text. In the next sections then, I will show how the novelistic card game works by drawing on examples from *The Magic*

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'alphabetic barbarism', or the idolatry of the alphabet, that is, writing which is other, and which looks to Western consciousness like pictograms. Hence, in this respect, cards have been understood as a kind of infidel, 'other' or prostitute writing, so that it is entirely appropriate that pornography should be printed on their reverse side. Cf. Note 202.

<sup>225</sup> See *La part maudite*, "Le principe de la perte", p. 28-31. It is this same giving over of subjecthood, death, wastefulness and the sublime experience of dizziness that motivates the strong connection between alcohol, smoking and card playing. Indeed, cards, alcohol, and tobacco are the standard iconography of the painterly genre of card players from Teniers' *Tobacco Collegium of the Apes* (1650), and Cézanne's *Joueurs de cartes* (1892) to Gorsz's *Apaches* (1916).

*Mountain, Ada or Ardor: a Family Chronicle*, and *The Music of Chance* which I will interpret as a function of the problematics I have outlined in these first four chapters.

## CHAPTER 5

### *The Sum of Nothing : The King of Cups, The Burgher's Pike, The Grand Duke of Jerusalem, and the Carnival Cavalier in Thomas Mann's Der Zauberberg*



#### 1. Introduction

Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* has been called, among other things, a *Bildungsroman*, a *Zeitroman*, an 'economic swan song', and a fiction in the tradition of the tuberculosis novel, all of which are applicable.<sup>4</sup> That these statements are equally 'true', is indicative of the eclecticism of *Der Zauberberg*. The novel is, indeed, constructed as an exhaustive and labyrinthine compilation of knowledge, pugilistic dialogues, and elaborate, painstaking detail, which threatens to ensnare the reader over an indefinite period of time, or perhaps—as the narrator suggests—seven years. Indeed, complex reflections on early 20<sup>th</sup>-century economics, as well as philosophical meditations on the nature of time, health and illness, being and nothingness, are frequently foregrounded in the text, demanding the reader's undivided attention. In turn, these issues form the narrative of Hans Castorp's many intellectual detours along the path to 'humanistic enlightenment', during his seven-year sojourn at the Berghof sanitarium. As a function then, of the wide variety of subjects encountered by Hans on his path to enlightenment, the reader is repeatedly asked to consider the text as a

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<sup>4</sup> See for example M.M. Bakhtin's "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)" in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Trans. Vern W. McGee, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.10-59, Judith Marcus' "*The Magic Mountain* as a *Zeitroman*" in *Georg Lukacs and Thomas Mann: A Study in the Sociology of Literature*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, pp. 51-90, Thomas Mann's essay "The Making of the *Magic Mountain*", published in the 1958 Knopf edition of the English translation, pp. 721, or Susan Sontag's *Illness as a Metaphor*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977, pp.20-42.



‘hermetic’ whole, that is, a self-contained, enlightenment-style encyclopedic compendium of wisdom.

Moreover, the actual recounting of Hans Castorp’s many epistemological peregrinations and the minute detail in which they are told, becomes an essay on the limitations of written narrative’s capacity to ‘leave nothing out’. This discussion of narrative inclusiveness structures the text and eventually becomes a major subject of the narration. As such, it is referred to with increasing self-consciousness, which manifests itself as an uneasy irony with regard to the probability of such an undertaking, so that the novel constantly parodies the enterprise of narrative inclusiveness at its center. A particular textual configuration then takes form, only to be ironically unraveled through the self-conscious foregrounding of the limits of the proposed hermetic textual representation.

Furthermore, Hans Castorp’s journey of discovery is punctuated by textual games, parlor games, philosophical riddles, and puzzles which contribute to the composite allusion that *Der Zauberberg* might be a ‘hermetic’ unity. Paradoxically however, this same ‘novelistic achievement’ in narrative hermeticism, is at turns also referred to as “the sum of nothing [*null und nichtig*]” (502, 685).<sup>227</sup> Puzzling relationships such as that of hermetic plenitude to nothing, are of a piece with the other riddles and games—“language games” in Wittgenstein’s sense—which inform the texture and the shape of Mann’s novel.<sup>228</sup> These ‘language games’, which constitute the fibers of the string that run through the text (to borrow from Wittgenstein), are played out in number of modes: they are dialectical, sexual, numerical and recreational. These games, moreover, are based on issues such as the antithesis of thought and theology in the Occident and the Orient, economics, history and politics.

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<sup>227</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, Trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948. Quotes in the German are taken from *Der Zauberberg*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1991.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, Section 2, “Language and the Ludic”, of this thesis. See also Valentine Cunningham’s article entitled “A Comma ‘tween their amities? Hermetic versus Pleromatic Readings”, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, LXII, 1984, Vol. 3, p.449-462.

My purpose in this reading of Mann's novel, is to show how all of these games intersect in "Vingt-et-un", a chapter which constitutes an important turning point in the narrative. Significantly, and not 'innocently' as I will argue, this pivotal moment in *Der Zauberberg* occurs when the denizens of the Berghof sanitarium are united over an evening of card-playing. As I have shown in the four previous chapters of this thesis, playing cards are tied to the meeting of Eastern and Western logic in numerical annotation, economic practice, writing, as well as 'sense' and 'non-sense'. I will argue, therefore, that playing cards, and the card game at the center of the text, at once subtend and destabilize the above, because they constitute an 'always already' presence which cannot be dissociated from dominant cultural practices of the Occident. My point is then, that the card game played in "Vingt-et-un" may be read metonymically as a key to the text, that is, as the part that collapses the other language games, which together make up the text as a whole.

## **2. Games: *Sevens and Compendiums***

Arguably, the first of these textual games encountered by the reader in *Der Zauberberg*, is the game of numbers based on seven. Indeed, in a "Foreword" to the text devoted to the subject of narrative time it is announced that, for the telling of the tale, "the seven days of a week will not suffice, no, nor seven months either...heaven forbid it should be seven years" (vi).<sup>229</sup> As the reader will recall, Hans Castorp ends up spending seven years rather than three weeks in the Berghof sanitarium, where the daily ritual of taking one's temperature, requires exactly seven minutes.<sup>230</sup> During his seven-year convalescence at the sanitarium, Hans occupies room 34 (3+4=7), and eats at each of the seven tables in the refectory, in the space of seven years. And Hans Castorp's *Walpurgisnacht* tryst with Madame Chauchat, the occupant of room No. 7, takes place

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<sup>229</sup> "Die sieben Tage einer Woche werden dazu nicht reichen und auch sieben Monate nicht...es werden, in Gottes Namen, ja nicht geradezu sieben Jahre sein" (8)!

<sup>230</sup> "'Aber wie lange dauert denn das' fragte Hans Castorp...Joachim hob sieben Finger empor...'Ja, wenn man ihr aufpaßt, der Zeit, dann vergeht sie sehr langsam...eine Minute oder gar ganze sieben,—wo man sich hier die sieben Tage der Woche so gräßlich um die Ohren schlägt'" (92).

precisely seven months after his arrival at the sanitarium. Hans' cousin Joachim is assigned room 28 on his return to the sanitarium during the fourth of the seven years of Hans Castorp's stay ( $4 \times 7 = 28$ ).<sup>231</sup> Likewise, the 43rd narrative segment ( $4 + 3 = 7$ ) of the seventh chapter is entitled "Vingt-et-un", because it contains the card game by that name, which is based on threes and sevens ( $7 \times 3 = 21$ ). Significantly enough, in the final pages of *Der Zauberberg*, the narrator comments on the puzzling persistence of the number seven throughout the text:

Partisans of the decimal system might prefer a round number, though seven is a good handy figure in its way, picturesque, with a savour of the mythical; one might even say that it is more filling to the spirit than a dull academic half-dozen (706).<sup>232</sup>

The prominence of the number seven in the novel is, I would argue, not gratuitous. Most immediately the number seven, by virtue of its frequent recurrence throughout the text, comes to be associated with both the circularity of time and its passage in the narrative. But outside of *Der Zauberberg* the number seven is 'loaded', because it carries a number of mythical and mystical associations which circulate in popular knowledge, and these associations come to play a role in the text as well. For example, seven often has the meaning of completion or perfection, which has perhaps come down from the Sanskrit tradition where three is the first male number and four is the first female, so that their union in seven signifies completion.<sup>233</sup> In Masonic ritual

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<sup>231</sup> See as well Oskar Seidlin's "The Lofty Game of Numbers: The Mynheer Peeperkorn Episode in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*", *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 86 (1971) pp.924-939.

<sup>232</sup> "Sieben Jahre blieb Hans Castorp bei Denen hier oben,—keine runde Zahl für Anhänger des Dezimalsystems, und doch eine gute, handliche Zahl in ihrer Art, ein mythisch-malerischer Zeitkörper, kann man wohl sagen, befriedigender für das Gemüt als etwa ein trockenes halbes Dutzend (967)".

<sup>233</sup> See Karl Menninger's *Number Words and Number Symbols: A Cultural History of Numbers*, Trans. Paul Broneer. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969, pp.182. All other references to this author appear in the text. See also George Ifrah's *Histoire universelle des chiffres*. Paris: Seghers, 1981, pp. 180-3. According to Ifrah, the maleness and femaleness of numbers in early mythology is based on a resemblance which these numbers supposedly bear to certain parts of the human anatomy. Moreover, he conjectures that three, the first male number is indivisible while four divides into equal halves just as women 'divide' themselves in childbirth. Three and four, when united in the number seven, signify plenitude.

there are seven steps and seven Masonic secrets in the “Legend of the Winding Stairs”, the spiral path which leads the Freemason upwards to “Ultimate Truth”.<sup>234</sup> In cartomancy, sevens generally mean closure, completion and satisfaction.<sup>235</sup> And, the “seven liberal arts” are composed from the Latin *trivium* (*tri-via* “three roads”) which in the Middle Ages referred to the three basic disciplines of the curriculum: grammar, rhetoric and dialectics. These three disciplines together with *quadrivium* or the four paths of knowledge (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) made up the seven liberal arts (Menninger 177).<sup>236</sup>

As I suggested above, these associations with the number seven, have their counterparts in several aspects in Mann’s novel. For example, Settembrini as his name suggests, is one of the many sevens which play a major part in *Der Zauberberg*. Settembrini, the humanistic Italian scholar of the Middle Ages, is Hans Castorp’s self-appointed pedagogical guide through the seven liberal arts and, as it is finally revealed, a Freemason. Moreover, in keeping with the mythical and mystical associations of seven as completion or wholeness, it is fitting that Herr Settembrini’s convalescent years in Davos should be devoted to the compiling of an enormous, comprehensive

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<sup>234</sup> See Harry B. Weber’s article “Pikovaja dama: A Case for Freemasonry in Russian Literature”, in *SSEJ*, Vol. 12, No.4, 1968, pp. 435-447. Further references appear in the text. Cf. *The Meaning of Masonry*, W.L. Wilmschurst, New York: Gramercy Books, 1980. Here the author explains that if the Masonic “three-sided emblem... is added to the four-sided emblem beneath, [it makes] seven, the perfect number; for, as it is written in an ancient Hebrew doctrine with which Masonry is closely allied, ‘God blessed and loved the number seven more than all things under his throne,’ by which is meant that man, the seven-fold being, is the most cherished of all the Creator’s works” (31-2). Likewise, part of the Masonic garb includes “seven-fold tassels” which are supposed to “typify the seven-fold prismatic spectrum of the supernal Light” (46). See also Albert Gallatin Mackey’s *The History of Freemasonry*, New York: Random House, 1966, particularly Chapter 4, “The Legend of the Craft”, p. 18-25, and Chapter 8, “The Origin of Geometry” p. 40-4.

<sup>235</sup> See for example the Marquise Bertrade de Circé’s *Les Révélations mystérieuses: Voici les cartes*, Paris: Librairie populaire, 1950, or Joanne Leslie’s *The Playing Card Workbook: A Contemporary Manual of Cartomancy*, Northamptonshire: Thorsons Publishing, 1988. Menninger also claims that the German expression *die böse Sieben* comes from the seven-card in certain medieval card games, which could take all others because it was initially the Devil’s card, and was later attributed to women (182). In *Prophetic, Educational and Playing Cards*, London: Hurst & Blackett, 1912, Mrs. Van Rensselaer writes that “seven was always considered by the Egyptian savants a mystical number, so this card played an important part in occult science... moreover Twenty-one represents the Egyptian doctrine beloved by Pythagoras, of the perfect number Three and the mythical number Seven” (143). This is perhaps why we speak, in English, of lucky sevens.

<sup>236</sup> For yet more on the mystic and mythic meanings of seven, see Mrs. Van Rensselaer’s *Prophetic, Educational and Playing Cards*, London: Hurst & Blackett, 1912, pp. 144-5.

encyclopedia. Settembrini's longwinded discourse on this project which he and a group of fellow humanists have embarked upon, is the subject of "Encyclopaedic" which comprises section twenty-eight of the novel.<sup>237</sup> It is the work of Settembrini's International League for the Organization of Progress [*Internationaler Bund für Organisierung des Fortschritts*], to gather 'comprehensively and scientifically', "all the projects for human improvement conceivable at the moment" (244).<sup>238</sup> This encyclopedia of humanist thought, (to be published as twenty volumes in lexical style) is undertaken with the purpose of fighting class conflict, increasing industrialization, war and human suffering, all of which impede "the progressive evolution of civilized humanity" (245).<sup>239</sup>

The League's encyclopedia is meant to embrace a wide range of disciplines including articles on international law, economics, and the masterpieces of world literature. These articles are to be written by experts and practitioners from a wide variety of fields such as lawyers, literati, physicians and psychologists, hailing from a sampling of Western European countries.<sup>240</sup> The purpose of this daunting project is to pitch what Settembrini calls "the banner of freedom, culture and enlightenment" (155) [*die Fahne der Aufklärung, Bildung und Freiheit* (214)] in the face of 'the unknown';

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<sup>237</sup> "Es handelt sich um ein enzyklopädisches Werk, an dem mitzuarbeiten ein humanitäres Institut mich würdigt" (331).

<sup>238</sup> "Ein wissenschaftlich ausgearbeitetes Reformprogramm großen Stils ist entworfen, das alle augenblicklichen Vervollkommnungsmöglichkeiten des menschlichen Organismus umfaßt" (336).

<sup>239</sup> "Sie wird also in etwa zwanzig Bänden von Lexikonformat alle menschlichen Leidensfälle aufführen und behandeln, die sich überhaupt denken lassen, von den persönlichsten und intimsten bis zu den großen Gruppenkonflikten, den Leiden, die aus Klassenfeindschaften und internationalen Zusammenstößen erwachsen, sie wird, kurz gesagt, die chemischen Elemente aufzeigen, aus deren vielfältiger Mischung und Verbindung sich alles menschliche Leiden zusammensetzt, und indem sie die Würde und das Glück der Menschheit zur Richtschnur nimmt, wird sie ihr in jedem Falle die Mittel und Maßnahmen an die Hand geben, die ihr zur Beseitigung der Leidensursachen angezeigt scheinen...über die fortschrittliche Entwicklung der Kulturmenschheit" (339, 337).

<sup>240</sup> "Berufene Fachmänner der europäischen Gelehrtenwelt, Ärzte, Volkswirte und Psychologen, werden sich in die Ausarbeitung dieser Enzyklopädie der Leiden teilen...Auch den schönen Geist will dieses große Werk nicht vernachlässigen, soweit er eben menschliches Leiden zum Gegenstande hat. Darum ist ein eigener Band vorgesehen, der...eine Zusammenstellung und kurzgefaßte Analyse aller für jeden einzelnen Konflikt in Betracht kommenden Meisterwerke der Weltliteratur enthalten soll" (339).

the encyclopedia being a principle element of the League's project to systematically enlighten mankind and expose ignorance throughout the globe.<sup>241</sup>

Importantly however, this project is treated with irony and skepticism in the text. For example, when Settembrini presents the League's project to Hans, he unceremoniously disrupts the young man's salacious and infinitely more interesting musings on the subject of Mme Chauchat. This unwelcome interruption is viewed by Hans as yet another visitation from the hand-organ man rather than an opportunity to benefit from the teachings of the 'man of letters' (240).<sup>242</sup> Indeed, a running commentary on the absurdity of inclusive projects such as the encyclopedia is written into the text at many levels.<sup>243</sup>

Furthermore, the encyclopedic moment in *Der Zauberberg* is one of the language games which inform the text, the specificity of this game being its function as lexical discourse, and as agonistic assault on the 'unknown'. In other words, the encyclopedia is a language game about the exposure of ignorance, which adheres to a very specific form and a particular code of rules for its composition. Significantly, the word encyclopedia

<sup>241</sup> "Ich antworte Ihnen: Ordnung und Sichtung sind der Anfang der Beherrschung, und der eigentlich furchtbare Feind ist der unbekante" (338).

<sup>242</sup> "Wie oft er auch im Traume den 'Drehorgelmann' von der Stelle zu drängen gesucht hatte, weil er 'hier störe'" [...] (331). It should be noted that Settembrini is frequently ridiculed in the text in passages such as the following: "da war denn freilich noch dieser Settembrini selbst, der Oppositionsmann, Windbeutel und 'homo humanus'...der ihm mit vielen prallen Worten verwiesen hatte, Krankheit und Dummheit zusammen einen Widerspruch und ein Dilemma für das menschliche Gefühl zu nennen" (205).

<sup>243</sup> I locate this critical moment in the text, in Mann's pastiche of archimedean inclusiveness that is in evidence throughout *Der Zauberberg*. Apart from his rendering of Settembrini's encyclopedia, there is Hans' continual self-serving and futile 'stock-taking', by means of which he attempts to tally all that he knows at any given moment along his path to enlightenment. Indeed in response to Lowe-Porter's inquiry as to how she should translate Hans' expression for his favorite past time, Mann wrote that "Regieren 'stock-taking' ist...eben nur das spielerische und kindliche Wort, das der junge Hans Castrop innerlich für seine politisch-philosophischen Spekulationen gebraucht [...]". Cited in Jeffery B. Berlin's "On the Making of *The Magic Mountain*: The Unpublished Correspondence of Thomas Mann, Alfred A. Knopf, and H.T. Lowe-Porter", *Seminar*, No. 28.4, 1992, pp. 283-320.

Similarly, Section 1, Chapter 7 entitled "Strandspaziergang" derides the narration of time as an inclusive hermetic "time-economy" [Zeitwirtschaft (746)], with the purpose of composing a "time-romance" (543) [Zeitroman (740)]. In other words, although it appears that what Mann has been up to in *Der Zauberberg*, is the compilation of an *encyclopaedia temporis*, a narrative in which its medium—temporality—becomes its subject, he lampoons his own narrative enterprise in the final chapter: "Kann man die Zeit erzählen, diese selbst, als solche, an und für sich? Wahrhaftig, nein, das wäre ein närrisches Unterfangen! Eine Erzählung, die ginge: 'Die Zeit verfloß, sie verrann, es strömte die Zeit' und so immer fort,—das könnte gesunden Sinnes wohl niemand eine Erzählung nennen" (738).

[die Enzyklopädie] comes from the Greek *egkyklopaideia* [*egkyklios* + *paideia*]<sup>244</sup>, the first component [*egkyklios*] of which means circular or cyclical, while the second component *paideia* refers to things having to do with the child, such as education and play.<sup>245</sup> The encyclopedia is, at least in this novel, a pedagogical language game (*paideia*) about circumscribed completeness, a circle (*egkyklios*) that has no beginning or end, which leads one around and around auto-referentially. Settembrini, therefore, decides to introduce Hans, a student newly under his tutelage, to the encyclopedia with an eye to his general edification. Hans is the perfect initiate to this game, being as he is, “a delicate child of life” (329), and an “inquiring youth on his travels”), in short, a child on a pedagogical odyssey through the subjects of Settembrini’s encyclopedia (590).<sup>246</sup>

In its capacity as a game moreover, the encyclopedic moment is a self-conscious gesture which apprehends a filiation with the other language games informing the text, not the least of which is the card game at its center. As I established in the previous chapter, playing cards have long been known in popular knowledge and in folk wisdom as the ‘Perpetual Almanac’, the ‘Register of Souls’ and the ‘Encyclopedia of the Dead’. Hence, in *Facts and Speculations on the History of Playing Cards* Andrew Chatto writes that:

A history of Playing Cards, treating of them in all their possible relations, associations, and bearings, would form nearly a complete encyclopedia of science and art...[c]ards would form the center—the point, having position, but no space,—from which a radius of indefinite extent might sweep a circle comprehending not only all that man knows, but all that he speculates on (3).<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Taken from the *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*, Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1983, pp.355.

<sup>245</sup> See Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1950: “Greek has no less than three different words for play in general. First of all: *paideia*, the most familiar of the three. Its etymology is obvious; it means ‘of or pertaining to the child’...the use of *paideia*, however is not by any means restricted to children’s games” (30). cf. Caillois *Les jeux et les hommes*, “De la turbulence à la règle”, Paris: Gallimard, 1958, p. 51-9.

<sup>246</sup> “Sorgenkind des Lebens” (452) Bildungsreisenden” (808).

<sup>247</sup> Andrew Chatto, *Facts and Speculations on the Origin and History of Playing Cards*, London: John Russel Smith, 1888. Cf. Van Rensselaer, p. 216-17.

Following Chatto, I would argue that there is an implicit historical connection between the arcane wisdom of the deck and the encyclopedia, as a lexical arrangement of the knowable, governed by a circular system of reference. The deck effectively constitutes a 14<sup>th</sup>-century carnivalesque encyclopedia, a random compendium or bible of folk wisdom, which relies on an index of chance. Moreover, the ‘Encyclopedia of the Dead’ possesses a temporality which is threefold because it holds the past, accommodates hazard in the present, and supposedly forecasts events in the future. In this last sense, the compendium of the pack is virtual. It is fitting, given all this, that a card game should occur at the center of a text preoccupied with encyclopedias and the stock-taking of knowledge, a card game which, as I will show, carnivalizes the fictional encyclopedia within the text, among other things.

### ***3. East/West:Empty/Full:Female/Male***

But the question of the unknown remains: what gives rise to this void which so threatens the progress of human enlightenment, and which Settembrini is devoted to rubbing out with his encyclopedia? Who or what impedes the onslaught of reason? In Settembrini’s lengthy diatribes (to which Hans often refers as “*Windbeutelei*”) the unknown is consistently located in the Orient, Asia, or the East. And in Settembrini’s view, oriental darkness or the unknown, is alarmingly close at hand because, for this Italian humanist, the Orient begins at the Polish border. What is more, because the ‘up here’ world of the Berghof is a microcosm of the larger ‘corrupted’ European scene in the early 20th century, it contains many ‘Orientals’ within its walls, and poses a threat to the enlightenment of young Hans Castorp. As Settembrini warns his student: “Asia surrounds us—wherever one’s glance rests, Tartar physiognomy...Genghis Khan, wolves of the steppes, snow, vodka, the knout, Schlüsselburg, Holy Russia [sic]” (241).<sup>248</sup> And from within Settembrini’s ethnographic paradigm, there are degrees of oriental egregiousness which are considered incrementally ‘worse’ than others, hence the ‘bad’

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<sup>248</sup> “Asien verschlingt uns. Wohin man blickt: tartarische Gesichter...Dschingis-Khan...Steppenwolfslichter, Schnee, Schnaps, Knute, Schlüsselburg und Christentum” (332).



Russian table where the unacceptable ‘easterners’ gather, as opposed for the somewhat better Polish table.<sup>249</sup>

It is sloth, indolence, non-sense, mysticism, and unreason which, for Settembrini, characterize the great enemy of European progress that is Asia:

Two principles, according to Settembrinian cosmogony were in perpetual conflict for possession of the world: force and justice, tyranny and freedom, superstition and knowledge; the law of permanence and the law of change...One might call the first the Asiatic, the second the European principle; for Europe was the theatre of rebellion, the sphere of intellectual discrimination and transforming activity whereas the East embodied the conception of quiescence and immobility (157).<sup>250</sup>

Throughout *Der Zauberberg* the debate between Orient and Occident is a constant which takes on many forms, and constitutes the stakes in many of the games that will be played out in the text. For Settembrini, who, in spite of his impressive and encyclopedic knowledge remains a somewhat unsophisticated binary thinker, the world must rid itself of one element. The West, Settembrini hopes, will eventually crush the East, evacuating the undesirable elements of decadence, superstition and intransigency, so that civilization and ‘humanistic enlightenment’ may proceed unhindered.<sup>251</sup>

While Settembrini’s Orient is characterized by occult and subversive practices, lethargy, and profligacy, the East is also associated in *Der Zauberberg* with loose sexual behaviors and libertinism. Promiscuity, Settembrini explains, dissipates the humanist construct of the individual, because non-procreative, recreational sexual practices,

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<sup>249</sup> “‘Hier liegt vor allem viel Asien in der Luft,—nicht umsonst wimmelt es von Typen aus der moskowitzischen Mongolei! Diese Leute’,—und Herr Settembrini deutete mit dem Kinn über die Schulter hinter sich,—,richten Sie sich innerlich nicht nach ihnen, lassen Sie sich von ihren Begriffen nicht infizieren, setzen Sie vielmehr Ihr Wesen, Ihr höheres Wesen gegen das ihre, und halten Sie heilig, was Ihnen, dem Sohn der Zivilisation, nach Natur und Herkunft heilig ist, zum Beispiel der Zeit” (334).

<sup>250</sup> “Nach Settembrini’s Anordnung und Darstellung lagen zwei Prinzipien im Kampf um die Welt: die Macht und das Recht, die Tyrannei und die Freiheit, der Aberglaube und das Wissen, das Prinzip des Beharrens und dasjenige der gärenden Bewegung, des Fortschritts. Man konnte das eine das asiatische Prinzip, das andere das europäische nennen, denn Europa war das Land der Rebellion, der Kritik und der umgestaltenden Tätigkeit während der östliche Erdteil die Unbeweglichkeit, die untätige Ruhe verkörpert” (216).

<sup>251</sup> “Zwischen Ost und West gestellt, wird es wählen müssen, wird es endgültig und mit Bewußtsein zwischen den beiden Sphären, die um sein Wesen werben, sich entscheiden müssen” (705).

which are part and parcel of oriental decadence, are a form of waste (spending, *perte*).<sup>252</sup> And this association of the Orient and voluptuousness is in play during Hans' visit to Hofrat Behrens' home, which ends with an impromptu collation in the doctor's private Turkish smoking-cabinet. On this occasion, Hans is made to blush by an oriental silver service, engraved with an erotic motif, from which he is offered Turkish coffee.<sup>253</sup> Appropriately, in the Hofrat's erotically charged oriental layer, Hans lasciviously examines a portrait of Madame Chauchat<sup>254</sup> in diaphanous semi-'nudeness', while Behrens holds forth on the subject of the fat layer of "the female breast and belly...and soles of the feet [which] are fat and ticklish" (262).<sup>255</sup> The coffee service is then, a well-chosen vessel, given the moment of titillation caused by the exotic Polish woman's portrait, and the subtle intoxication of tobacco. Conveniently, as a two-dimensional *objet d'art*, Madame Chauchat is rendered anodyne and subservient to the gratification of erotic fantasy. The lewd coffee cup that Hans holds in his hand, serves as yet another source of erotic pleasure from the East, as an object appropriated to libidinal ends.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> This, likewise, is why in Hans' ancestral home, exotic and erotic Eastern bric-a-brac, like playing cards "and other such attractions" are carefully shut-up out of view (21).

<sup>253</sup> "Hans Castorp drehte die röhrenförmige Kaffeemühle zwischen den Händen. Sie war, wie die ganze Garnitur, wohl eher indischer oder persischer als türkischer Herkunft...Hans Castorp betrachtete die Ornamentik, ohne gleich klug daraus werden zu können. Als er klug daraus geworden war, errötete er unversehens".

"Ja, das ist so ein Gerät für alleinstehende Herren", sagte Behrens. 'Darum halte ich es unter Verschuß...Ich habe es mal von einer Patientin geschenkt bekommen, einer ägyptischen Prinzessin, die uns ein Jährchen die Ehre schenkte. Sie sehen, das Muster wiederhold sich an jedem Stück. Ulkig, was'" (360)?

<sup>254</sup> The portrait (or the ham—*der Schinken*—as Behrens calls it), which depicts Madame Chauchat, "neck and bosom...bare or veiled with a soft drapery" [*dekolletiert, mit einer Schleierdraperie um Schultern und Busen 353*] is painted in a "rather suggestive" manner [*plumper Effekt 355*], and is therefore, more appropriately removed from the living-room wall and brought into the oriental den, for closer scrutiny (257, 258).

<sup>255</sup> "Am dicksten und fettesten ist es an der weiblichen Brust und am Bauch, an den Oberschenkeln, kurz, überall, wo ein bißchen was los ist für Herz und Hand. Auch an den Fußsohlen ist es fett und kitschig" (360) [My italics].

<sup>256</sup> Given this, it is interesting that at the close of the novel, Hans' Castorp has stopped ordering his Maria Mancini cigarettes from 'down below' to which he refers as his 'mistresses', and has learned to smoke the "*Sphinx in Golddruck geschmückte Zigaretten*" (360). These effete, "Extrafein" cigarettes (made popular at the sanitarium by the same Egyptian princess who was a patient at the sanitarium and gave Behrens the slightly obscene coffee service), also known, in the English translation, as 'Light of Asia', are offered to Hans for the first time in this same scene (708, 970). That Hans learns to derive the same narcotic pleasure from these Asian cigarettes is indicative of his complete resignation to the lamentable and decadent "orientalism" of 'over-sexed' sanitarium life. Mann himself apparently found the inmates of sanatoria to be somewhat sexually promiscuous as he wrote in his essay "The Making of the *Magic Mountain*", that after "the first six months the young person has

When represented as a discursive object, the Orient has been typically feminized, because recumbency, indolence and erotic degeneracy, have been long been associated with a certain female ‘type’.<sup>257</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the discourse on the orient (in Settembrini’s sense), and the discourse on women, meet in Madame Chauchat, an over-sexed woman from the East. This exotic, “slant-eyed sufferer” (554) as Hans calls her, embodies the qualities supposed to be common to the orient and to women.<sup>258</sup> She speaks slowly with a foreign accent, and indeed, she prefers French, the language of love. What is more, Madame Chauchat is slovenly and decadent, she slams doors, bites her nails, and in every way personifies a sort of *laissez faire décolleté*.<sup>259</sup> True to type moreover, Madame Chauchat is a woman of easy virtue, having many paramours with whom she appears freely in public, as well as a husband located conveniently in some remote corner of Russia.

Predictably, Settembrini enthusiastically disapproves of Claudia Chauchat because she embraces the unknown, in terms both of her race and of her gender. Indeed, Settembrini refers sardonically to Hans’ infatuation with Madame Chauchat as his “weakness for Asia”, and advises him to steer clear of that ‘dark continent’.<sup>260</sup> Consequently, the orient and women are seen by Settembrini as being parallel objects, which constitute the unknowable. These unknowables, by the Italian humanist’s lights, pose a dissipatory threat to the stability of the western male subject (Hans) and to the ideas and institutions constructed through this culture. This is why the Orient, as a discursive object is spoken of—in *Der Zauberberg* and elsewhere—as something which

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not a single idea left save flirtation and the thermometer under his tongue” (Op. Cit. 721).

<sup>257</sup> Cf. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, particularly Chapter 1 “The Scope of Orientalism”, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 31-92.

<sup>258</sup> “Selbstzugegeben, daß sein Verhältnis zu der schrägäugigen Kranken die Grenzen abendländischer Vernunft und Gesittung dem Wesen nach hinter sich ließ” (756).

<sup>259</sup> All of Mme. Chauchat’s qualities are summarized nicely in following passage: “Sie lachte, *die Zigarette im Munde*, daß ihre tartarischen Augen sich zusammen zogen, und ließ, gegen die Boiserie zurückgelehnt, die Hände neben sich auf die Bank gestützt und ein Bein über das andere geschlagen, den Fuß im schwarzen Lackschuh wippen” [my italics] (816).

<sup>260</sup> “Ihre Schwäche für das Asiatische ist bekannt” (800).

is incomplete, lacking and feminine; something to which a masculine compliment must be wedded before it can be considered whole. Hence, women and the Orient are represented in terms of lack in the text, the presence of both being predicated on a menacing absence that constitutes the unknown. Moreover, because Madame Chauchat is the over-determined meeting point of these discourses, and therefore doubly lacking, she is appropriately absent from most of the text although she is one of its principle elements. Indeed, a negative quite significantly and literally marks her absence in the greater portion of the text, so that her presence is reduced to an *objet fétiche*; the diminutive portrait of her lungs which Hans keeps in a breast pocket over his heart, or in a frame-stand on his night table.

#### 4. *Counterpoint*

Although *Der Zauberberg* may appear to reproduce only hegemonic (eg. Western European, colonizing, patriarchal) discourses, somewhat in the style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the text also resonates with other voices. These voices are 'always already there' in the text, and effectively destabilize the discourse which threatens to dominate. These other voices are not reducible or susceptible to being absorbed into the supposedly homogenous, dominant discourse of the narrative, and furthermore, they motivate an open-endedness, and undecidability in the novel. Probably the other voice most persistently heard in the text is that of Naphta, Settembrini's rival for the task of educating Hans. The importance of Naphta's disruptive presence is manifested in the novel through the volume and frequency with which his debates with Settembrini appear, so that they become a primary element of the text's largely dialectical construction. Naphta's role in the discursive game that informs the text is that of Settembrini's equal and formidable sparring partner on such topics as economics, the Middle Ages, death, and theology.

A Jew of Eastern origin converted to the Catholic faith, Naphta is a sort of negative mirror-image of Settembrini in many respects. As a young man of exotic provenance, he is sent to a Jesuit college in Holland where, upon becoming subdeacon

he is retired to private lodgings in Davos, because of his tubercular condition. However, although Naphta represents alterity in these dialogues, he is not radically other. Hence, while the positions taken by Naphta and Settembrini in the discursive game they play over Hans are often represented as being mutually exclusive, they are actually mutually reinforcing and sustaining. While the Italian Humanist is supposed to represent the autonomous, dominate voice of Reason and Logic, he needs the dialectical moment which the Hungarian Jewish Jesuit's eclecticism affords him.<sup>261</sup> In fact, as the 'dueling dialecticians' approach each other, taking discursive turns on the metaphysical game board, their positions become virtually indistinguishable, achieving what Hans calls "*pädagogisches Gegengewicht*" (394, 539). Indeed their last debate, which occurs just before the arrival of a the third player in the contest, disintegrates into nonsense and circularity.<sup>262</sup>

Furthermore, if Naphta is something of an epistemological 'mixed bag', Settembrini, who appears to personify enlightenment rationality, subscribes to a paradigm of thought which is less homogenous than the reader is initially lead to

<sup>261</sup> "'Gegensätze', sagte Naphta, 'mögen sich reimen'" (552). "...Herr Settembrini's Stimme klang sanft, resigniert und enthielt doch ein leises Beben..." Herr Naphta ist ein Mann von Kopf—das ist selten. Er ist eine diskursive Natur—ich bin es auch. Verurteile mich, wer will, aber ich mache Gebrauch von der Möglichkeit, mit einem immerhin ebenbürtigen Gegner die Klinge der Idee zu kreuzen. Ich habe niemanden weit und breit...Kurz, es ist wahr, ich komme zu ihm, er kommt zu mir, wir promenieren auch miteinander. Wir streiten uns aufs Blut, fast jeden Tag, aber ich gestehe, die Gegensätzlichkeit und Feindseligkeit seiner Gedanken bildet einen Reiz mehr für mich, mit ihm zusammenzutreffen. Ich brauche Friktion" (556-7).

<sup>262</sup> Or, as Hans speculates: "'Denn die Frage, die ich aufstelle, ist eben, wie weit es verfehlt ist, sie gegeneinander zu stellen, wie weit sie vielmehr unter einer Decke stecken und eine abgekartete Partie spielen'" (682).

In "Operations Spirituales", one of the last debates of the 'riddling royalty' is given particular attention, especially in terms of how one position synthesizes the other:

Und wie ein Ritter trat er [Settembrini] für den Adel der Gesundheit und des Lebens ein, für denjenigen, welchen die Natur verlieh und dem es um Geist nicht bange zu sein brauchte. "Die Gestalt!" sagte er, und Naphta sagte hochtrabenderweise: "Der Logos!" Aber der, welcher vom Logos nichts wissen wollte, sagte "Die Vernunft", während der Mann des Logos "die Passion" verfocht. Das war konfus. "Das Objekt!" sagte der eine, und der andere: "Das Ich!" Schließlich war sogar von "Kunst" auf der einen und "Kritik" auf der anderen Seite die Rede und jedenfalls immer wieder von "Natur" und "Geist" und davon, was das Vornehmere sei, vom "aristokratischen Problem". Aber dabei war keine Ordnung und Klärung, nicht einmal eine zweiseitliche und militante; denn alles ging *nicht nur gegeneinander, sondern auch durcheinander*, und nicht nur wechselseitig widersprachen sich die Disputanten, sondern *sie lagen in Widerspruch auch mit sich selbst...Nicht weniger verworren stand es mit dem 'Objekt' und dem 'Ich'*, ja, hier war die Konfusion, die übrigens immer dieselbe war, sogar am heillossten und buchstäblich derart, daß niemand mehr wußte, wer eigentlich der Fromme und wer der Freie war [my italics] (635-6)

believe. For example, despite Settembrini's rigid stance toward the unknown, his intolerance of superstition, death cults and the orient, it is discovered to the reader late in the novel that he is rather more lenient in his thinking on these issues than might be supposed. It is Naphta who explains to Hans Castorp that Settembrini's logic is tainted by oriental mysticism, belonging as he does to the Freemasons, the Brotherhood of the Egyptian god Thoth. It is duly noted by Naphta that Thoth is, indeed, the god of Death and of death cults<sup>263</sup>:

He spoke of the Egyptian god *Thoth*, identical with the thrice-renowned *Hermes of Hellenism*; who was honoured as the inventor of writing, protector of libraries, and inciter to all literary efforts. He bent his knee metaphorically before that Trismegistus, the humanistic Hermes, master of the palaestra, to whom humanity owed the great gift of the literary word and agonistic rhetoric...and in his Hermes aspect, a God of death and of the dead, a soul-compeller and tutelary soul-guide, of whom late antiquity made an arch-enchanter, and the cabalistic Middle Ages the Father of *hermetic alchemy* (524) [my italics].<sup>264</sup>

To this moment in the text, all of Settembrini's pedagogic and dialogic energies have been focused in his perpetual diatribe against the East, superstition, and the 'irrational',

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<sup>263</sup> In his article on Freemasonry in Russian literature, Harry B. Weber underlines the fact that Freemasons, in spite of appearances, remain essentially a death cult. He explains, for example, that during the initiation ritual, candidates spend part of the ceremony in a "room decorated in black cloth, as is the table on which is placed a skull", and further, that for some orders a coffin is placed in the room for the ceremony, Op. Cit. p.439-40.

<sup>264</sup> "Er sprach von dem ägyptischen Gotte Thot, mit dem der dreimalgroße Hermes des Hellenismus identisch gewesen und der als Erfinder der Schrift, Schutzherr der Bibliotheken und Anreger aller geistigen Bestrebungen verehrt worden war. Er beugte das Knie vor diesem Trismegist, dem humanistischen Hermes, dem Meister der Palästra, dem die Menschheit das Hochgeschenk des literarischen Wortes, der agonalen Rhetorik verdanke...und unter dem Namen des Hermes vor allem ein [Gott des] Todes—und Totengott: der Seelenzwinger und Seelenführer, der schon der späteren Antike zum Erzauberer und dem kabbalistischen Mittelalter zum Vater der hermetischen Alchimie geworden sei" (714).

Cf. Derrida's "L'inscription des fils: Theuth, Hermès, Thot, Nabû, Nebo", (*La dissémination*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) where he cites the following from Borges' "La Sphère de Pascal":

L'histoire universelle continua son cours ; les dieux trop humains que Xénophane avait attaqués furent ravalés au rang des fictions poétiques ou de démons mais on prétendit que l'un d'eux, Hermès Trismégiste, avait dicté des livres, en nombre variable...salon les porters de Thot, qui est lui aussi Hermès, toutes les choses du monde y étaient écrites. Des fragments de cette bibliothèque imaginaire, compilés ou forgés à partir du IIIe siècle, composent ce qu'on appelle le *Corpus hermeticum*... (104).

cultish veneration of sickness and death.<sup>265</sup> It now becomes evident that Settembrini's involvement in the cult of the Egyptian god of writing, numbers, death and games of chance is the undoing of the arguments which he has presented so far in the text. So it is not without significance that the *homo humanus* is well-placed in the order of the Brotherhood of the Freemasons, and enjoys a privileged correspondence with the Swiss Grand-Master of the thirty-third degree concerning such projects as the encyclopedia.<sup>266</sup> Given the number of times that the Italian man of letters has "constrained [Hans] to a choice between the East and West", the discovery of Settembrini's riddling and paradoxical double nature causes Hans to remark that "here was blue-mantled death masquerading as a humanistic orator...with the sign of night and magic on its brow" (523, 524).<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> "Nun denn, nein! Krankheit ist durchaus nicht vornehm...sie rührt aus abergläubisch zerknirschten Zeiten her, in denen die Idee des Menschlichen zum Zerrbild entartet und entwürdigt war, angstvollen Zeiten, denen Harmonie und Wohlsein als verdächtig und teuflisch galten...Vernunft und Aufklärung jedoch haben diese Schatten vertrieben" (136).

[A]uch die einzig religiöse Art, den Tod zu betrachten, die ist, ihn als Bestandteil und Zubehör, als heilige Bedingung des Lebens zu begreifen und zu empfinden, nicht aber—was das Gegenteil von gesund, edel, vernünftig und religiös wäre—ihn geistig irgendwie davon zu scheiden, ihn in Gegensatz dazu zu bringen und ihn etwa gar widerwärtigerweise dagegen anzuspieren. Die Alten schmückten ihre Sarkophage mit Sinnbildern des Lebens und der Zeugung, sogar mit obszönen Symbolen,—das Heilige war der antiken Religiosität ja sehr häufig eins mit dem Obszönen. Diese Menschen wußten den Tod zu ehren...Denn der Tod als geistige Macht ist eine höchst liederliche Macht, deren lasterhafte Anziehungskraft zweifellos die greulichste Verirrung des Menschengestes bedeutet" (276).

<sup>266</sup> "Und Herr Settembrini fuhr fort, mit Wärme von dem Gedanken dieses Weltbundes zu sprechen, der von Ungarn aus ins Leben getreten und dessen zu erhoffende Verwirklichung bestimmt sei, der Freimaurerei weltentscheidende Macht zu verleihen. Er zeigte leichthin Briefe vor, die er von auswärtigen Bundesgrößen in dieser Sache empfangen, ein eigenhändiges Schreiben des schweizerischen Großmeisters, Bruder Quartier le Tente vom dreiunddreißigsten Grade, und erörterte den Plan das Kunstidiom Esperanto zur Bundesweltsprache zu erklären" (706).

<sup>267</sup> "Hans Castorp, dessen Aufmerksamkeit nur halb beim Gespräch gewesen war..., machte dann aber ein Gesicht wie damals, als Settembrini ihn zur Entscheidung zwischen "Ost und West" feierlich hatte nötigen wollen...Was, was? In Hansens Gedanken—und Vorstellungswerkstatt ging es drunter und drüber. Da war der blaubemantelte Tod as humanistischer Rhetor; und wenn man den pädagogiscghen Literaturgott und Menschenfreund näher ins Auge faßte, so hockte da statt seiner eine Affenfratze mit dem Zeichen der Nacht und der Zauberei an der Stirn" (713-14).

That Settembrini is rather less monolithic than the reader is lead to believe, is further evidenced in the parting kiss which he bestows upon Hans. The parting youth (*Giovanni*) detects in this kiss something southern, as well as something Russian or eastern: "Lodovico [Settembrini]...küßte ihn wie ein Südländer (oder auch wie ein Russe)" (975).

It is at this juncture that the word ‘hermetic’ takes on its full significance in the context of *Der Zauberberg* and of this thesis, because it is here that a link is forged between Thoth, “the trice renowned Hermes of Hellenism” [*der dreimalgroße Hermes des Hellenismus* (714)], Settembrini’s “alchemistic-hermetic pedagogy” [*alchimistisch-hermetische Pädagogik* (816)], and “stories [like *Der Zauberberg*] that practice a hermetical magic” [*die Erzählung sich eines hermetischen Zaubers bedient* (739)] (523, 596, 542). As I established in the previous chapter, playing cards belong to the same tradition of hermetical of magic which informs *Der Zauberberg* because, like Freemasons, their mythical origins are rooted in Thoth-Hermes, hence the prominence of the adjective ‘hermetic’ in the text.<sup>268</sup> The discovery of the cult of the Freemasons at the center of Settembrini’s enlightenment ‘rationalism’ opens the door onto the unstated logic, which appears now to have been behind this hermetic text from the outset. Given this, it is significant that a card game which is so carefully centered and framed in the text, should follow so closely on this explanation of Settembrini’s hermetic logic.

### 5. *The Third Man: Zero*

At this moment in the text, moreover, Hans has made his way through many of the circles of knowledge which comprise his “*Bildung*” and his “stock-taking” on the magic mountain.<sup>269</sup> Hans’ journey, structured around the discursive *va-et-vient* of the ‘dueling dialecticians’, has now come full-circle as he progresses through the disciplines encountered in *Der Zauberberg*. It is at this point that Hans’ mentors have achieved

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<sup>268</sup> The connection between Thoth, playing cards and Freemasons has been noted in historical works where it is claimed that the signs which appear on early cards are signs of recognition between the Freemason’s of the society of Thoth. For example, *Le pendu* of the Tarot deck, who hangs cross-legged from the ankles is akin to a Masonic secret gesture of complicity. And in 15<sup>th</sup> century English decks the suit of spades was represented as the burgher’s pike, hence the black knaves who carry pikes as their attribute. The symbol of the pike originates from Boaz and Jakin, or the pillars of the Temple of Solomon, which are important elements of Masonic myth of their origins as the architects of that temple (Van Rensselaer, 153, 234). This accounts for the attribution of the Burgher’s Pike [*Pike des Bürgers*] to Settembrini the Freemason, throughout *Der Zauberberg*. It is worth noting in this regard, that the game of *Vingt-et-un* is also known as Black Jack.

<sup>269</sup> In the section entitled “Research” of Chapter 5 of *Der Zauberberg*, the narrator recounts Hans’ complete itinerary through the humanities, the organic and the inorganic sciences.



‘pedagogical equilibrium’ and have, therefore, ceased to prove a satisfying source of stimulation:

They broke off at last. There were no limits to the subject, but they could not go on for ever... the two disputants had to go into the cottage together, the one to seek his silken cell, the other his humanistic cubby-hole with the pulpit-desk and the water bottle. Hans Castorp betook himself to his balcony, his ears full of the hurly-burly and the clashing of arms, as the army of Jerusalem and that of Babylon, under the *dos banderas*, came on in battle array, and met each other midst tumult and shoutings (469).

The heated debate has now, as far as Hans is concerned, exhausted itself and threatens to achieve stasis until Settembrini lays his cards on the table with the confession of his Masonic connections. By exposing his associations with the Freemasons, Settembrini effectively opens the debate onto potential territory in new domains. In other words, until it is suggested that there exists a beyond or an underside to their logic, the dialogue between Settembrini and Naphta has been kept within the parameters of Western European knowledge. It is this configuration of events, or balance in the text which sends Hans off on a search for other sources of cerebral stimulation, outside of the Settembrini-Naphta dialectic.

Two activities present themselves to Hans’ as distinct from the dominant dialectic rivalry which informs the text: playing cards and skiing, the latter winning out, as the former is “interdicted by authority” (474).<sup>270</sup> As Hans sets off on skis , he effectively opens up another circle or sphere of knowledge to be explored and circumscribed, that is, the corporeal. His journey ends in his tracing a circle in the snow which just precedes the upset of the discursive economy of *Der Zauberberg* over the card game “Vingt-et-un”. Importantly, the circle which Hans describes is a zero that he feels encompasses all of the issues raised by Settembrini and Naphta, just as it is also a dead-man’s circle in the blinding whiteness of the snow, in an alpine meadow above the

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<sup>270</sup> “Ihn stach nicht der Ehrgeiz, es den Freiluftgecken und Schicksportlern gleichzutun, die, wäre es eben Parole gewesen, mit ebenso wichtigem Eifer dem Kartenspiel im stickigen Zimmer obgelegen hätten” (646).

sanitarium.<sup>271</sup> In the midst of this snowy oblivion, Hans gives himself over to hallucinations of a beyond, to nothingness, and virtually to death.

Happily, however, this void is followed by the appearance of Mynheer Peeperkorn, another zero in the text, who will act as Hans' third mentor. Indeed, Mynheer Peeperkorn's connection to zero—on the same order as that of Settembrini to seven—is hinted at from his arrival in the sanitarium. Peeperkorn is quite literally described as “this commanding cipher” [*dies herrscherliche Zero* (808)] in the text, his preferred *ad locuto* gesture being “the lifted hand, whose thumb and forefinger were joined in an O” (590, 552).<sup>272</sup> What is more, the aged Dutch colonialist is ushered into the Berghof on the arm of Madame Chauchat who is, fittingly enough, the center of lack in the text and the object of both Peeperkorn and Hans' desire.

Peeperkorn's characteristic *ad locuto* is, therefore, a self-conscious gesture with which he indicates the lack of content, and the unintelligibility of his own ‘discourse’.<sup>273</sup> Peeperkorn's efforts to “override logomachy” [*Logomachie hinüberstreben*] constitute a subversive element in the text, because they represent the other side of the dominant well-balanced dialectic which has been confined to the parameters of Western European epistemology and metaphysics. Indeed, much is made of Peeperkorn's foreignness and he

<sup>271</sup> “Benommen und taumelig, zitterte er von Trunkenheit und Exzitation, *sehr ähmlich wie nach einem Kolloquium mit Naphta und Settembrini, nur ungleich stärker*, und so mochte es kommen, daß er seine Trägheit im Bekämpfen der narkotischen Ausfälle mit betrunkenen Reminiszenzen an solche Erörterungen beschönigte,—trotz seiner verächtlichen Empörung gegen das Zugedecktwerden durch hexagonale Regelmäßigkeit etwas in sich hineinfaselte, des Sinnes oder Unsinn, das Pflichtgefühl, das ihn anhalten wolle, die verächtlichen Herabminderungen zu bekämpfen, sei nichts als bloße Ethik, das heiße schäbige Lebensbürgerlichkeit und irreligiöse Philisterei, Wunsch und Versuchung, sich niederzulegen und zu ruhen, beschlichen in der Gestalt seinen Sinn, daß er sich sagte, es sei wie bei einem Sandsturm in der Wüste, der die Araber veranlasse, sich aufs Gesicht zu werfen und den Burnus über den Kopf zu ziehen...*Man lief im Kreise herum*, plagte sich ab, die Vorstellung der Förderlichkeit im Herzen, *und beschrieb da bei irgendeinen weiten, albernem Bogen, der in sich selber zurückführte wie der vexatorische Jahreslauf*” [my italics] (662, 664).

<sup>272</sup> “Ferner waren seine Hände zwar ziemlich breit, aber mit langen, spitz zulaufenden Nägeln versehen...den Zeigefinger mit dem Daumen zum Kreise gekrümmt...” (751).  
Cf. “Er hatte eine Art, den Ring, den sein gekrümmter Zeigefinger mit dem Daumen bildete, über das Ohr emporzuhalten und das Haupt schiefischerhaft davon abzuwenden, die Gefühle erweckte, wie etwa der bejahrte *Priester eines fremden Kults sie erregen würde*” [my italics] (782).

<sup>273</sup> “[Mynheer Peeperkorn] hatte nichts gesagt; aber sein Haupt erschien so unzweifelhaft bedeutend, sein Mienen—und Gestenspiel war dermaßen entschieden, eindringlich, ausdrucksvoll gewesen, daß alle und auch der lauschende Hans Castorp höchst Wichtiges vernommen zu haben meinten oder, sofern ihnen das Ausbleiben sachlicher und zu Ende geführter Mitteilung bewußt geworden war, dergleichen doch nicht vermißten” (753).

is frequently described as a primitive oriental potentate: “one watched him as one might an elderly priest of some oriental cult” (572). Peeperkorn’s *parole vide* gives both Hans, and the reader, pause to contemplate the authenticity of the positions maintained by Naphta and Settembrini in their debate, because it proposes the inverse of what they pretend to practice and preach:

The Dutchman’s manner toward Hans Castorp’s friends was rather mocking than ironic. He made beautiful fun of them, either openly or veiled in exaggerated respect. “Oh, yes, yes”, he would say...”this is—these are—ladies and gentlemen, I call your attention—cerebrum, cerebral, you understand! No, no—positively. Extraordinary—displays great—”...and behold, in a thrice the current cut off! Dead. As a door-nail. They [Settembrini and Naphta] tried another track, invoked more powerful spells...not a spark...where was the spark, where the current, directly one looked at Mynheer, as one did, irresistibly, as though magnetized?...Yes, this stupid old man, this commanding cipher! (582, 590).<sup>274</sup>

Peeperkorn’s sallies into the discursive fray are powerful, and give rise to long meditations in the text on the nature of meaning and the logic of nonsense. This incoherent [*undeutlicher*] old man threatens to seduce the “object of pedagogic rivalry” [*Streitobjekt der Pädagogik* (787)] with his parody of “the riddling royalty”, leaving Settembrini with no other recourse than to look on and say “what a stupid old man you have there, Engineer” (591, 582).<sup>275</sup> What this nonsense or stupidity amounts to, according to Hans, is the bedevilment of mysticism: “Stupid—well there are so many

<sup>274</sup> “Und so war es denn eher eine zugleich feine und großartige Spöttereie zu nennen, was unter leicht übertriebenem Ernst verborgen oder offen zutage liegend, des Holländers Benehmen gegen Hansens Freunde kennen zeichnete. ‘Ja-ja-ja!’ konnte er wohl sagen, indem er mit dem Finger nach ihrer Seite drohte, den Kopf mit scherzhaft lächelnden zerrissenen Lippen abgewandt. ‘Das ist—Das sind—Meine Herrschaften, ich lenke Ihre Aufmerksamkeit—Cerebrum, cerebral, verstehen Sie! Nein—nein, perfekt, außerordentlich, das ist, da zeigt sich den doch—’. Sie rächten sich, indem sie Blicke tauschten, die nach der Begegnung verzweifelt himmelwärts wanderten, und in die sie auch Hans Castorp hineinzuziehen trachten, was er aber ablehnte” (796).

Or again: “Revolution und Erhaltung—man blickte auf Peeperkorn, man sah ihn daherstapfen...mit seinem seitwärts nickenden Tritt und den Hut in der Stirn, sah seine breiten, unregelmäßig zerrissenen Lippen und hörte ihn sagen, indem er scherzhaft mit dem Kopf auf die Disputanten deutete: ‘Ja-ja-ja! Cerebrum, cerebral, verstehen Sie! Das ist—Da zeigt sich denn doch—’ und siehe, der Steckkontakt war mausetot! Sie versuchten es zum ändern, griffen zu stärkeren Beschwörungen...Kein Funke...und mit mattem Zucken erstarb der Nerv des Streites. Stärkere Spannung...Kurzum, sie bleiben aus, und das war, mit Hansens Wort, nicht weniger noch mehr als ein Mysterium” (807).

<sup>275</sup> “Aber, in Gottes Namen, Ingenieur, das ist ja ein dummer alter Mann! Was finden Sie an ihm?” (797).

different kinds of stupidity—[this] is something quite different, mystical; because so soon as the physical has anything to do with it, it becomes mystical, the physical goes over into the spiritual, and the other way on, and you can't tell them apart" (582-3).<sup>276</sup>

So Peeperkorn opens up the balanced dialectic which informs the text by insinuating himself as a wild card, or a zero into the equilibrium that the discursive economy has achieved.<sup>277</sup> In mimicking Settembrini and Naphta, Mynheer effectively appropriates all possible positions in the game, just like a joker which can take, or stand in for, any other card. Because he is a cipher, Peeperkorn performs the function of a privileged metasign in the text, having the capacity to wipe out or to take the other players—Settembrini, Naphta, Hans Castorp, Clavdia Chauchat—who are the stakes of text.<sup>278</sup> With his lengthy interjections devoid of sense, Mynheer Peeperkorn opens up a new space in the discursive economy of the text which, by this point, has become a more or less bankrupt dialectic. And because the textual dialectic has expended itself, Hans is receptive to this zero, this 'stupid old man', in spite of Peeperkorn's liaison with Clavdia Chauchat.

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<sup>276</sup> "Ach, Dummheit. Es gibt so viele verschiedene Arten von Dummheit, und die Gescheitheit ist nicht die beste davon...Das ist so schwer auseinanderzuhalten, das geht so sehr ineinander über...Ich weiß wohl, Sie hassen das mystische guazzabuglio und sind für den Wert, das Urteil, das Werturteil...aber das mit der 'Dummheit' und der 'Gescheitheit'. das ist zuweilen ein komplettes Mysterium...und doch spielt ganz ohne Zweifel das Körperliche eine Rolle dabei,—nicht im brachialen Sinne, sondern in einem anderen, im mystischen,—sobald das Körperliche eine Rolle spielt, wird die Sache mystisch—und das Körperliche geht ins Geistige über, und umgekehrt, und das nicht zu unterscheiden, und Dummheit und Gescheitheit sind nicht zu unterscheiden, aber die Wirkung ist da, das Dynamische, und wir werden in die Tasche gesteckt" (797-8).

<sup>277</sup> Cf. Chapter 4 of this thesis on the historical relationship of the joker to zero, particularly Section 3, "Derrida and the Divinity".

<sup>278</sup> Importantly, although he may be a zero and a stupid old man, it is Peeperkorn who is Madame Chauchat's lover, in spite of which fact Hans admires him greatly, as do all of the other residents at the Berghof (*Ein eigentümlicher, persönlich gewichtiger, wenn auch undeutlicher Mann. Die Berghof-Gesellschaft nahm regen Anteil an ihm* [755]). Moreover, because Mynheer as a cipher is such an important and disruptive element in the text, the narrative describing him is carefully contained in three chapters and a card game ("*Mynheer Peeperkorn*", "*Vingt-et-un*", "*Mynheer Peeperkorn (des weiteren)*", "*Mynheer Peeperkorn (Schluß)*"). Hence, Pieter Peeperkorn is presented as a temporal and narrative package, which comes to a neat and definite close when he commits suicide.

For more on the function of zero as a metasign, see Brian Rotman's *Signifying Nothing: the Semiotics of Zero* London: MacMillan, 1987. Cf. this thesis, Chapters 3 and 4.

## 6. Exchange

If Peeperkorn disrupts the discursive economy of the text by undoing Settembrini and Naphta, he equally upsets the monetary economy of the sanitarium by encouraging card-playing and gambling. That Peeperkorn incites the residents of the sanitarium to tip the scales of morality and economy, and to gamble a good deal of money over the card table in “Vingt-et-un”, is significant on a number of textual registers which intersect in this event. Hence, in preceding chapters of *Der Zauberberg* playing cards make an appearance as a sort of augury,<sup>279</sup> as a slightly illicit pastime over which the moribund of the sanitarium win trifling sums,<sup>280</sup> and finally as an activity prohibited by the direction of the Berghof.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, the accountancy which informs *Der Zauberberg* has been meticulously balanced up to this evening of card playing, from the institutional bookkeeping of the sanitarium, to Hans’ bi-weekly bill from offices of the Berghof.<sup>282</sup>

<sup>279</sup> Hans’ vocation is chosen at random over the Saturday night whist game: “[Und als er einmal gewählt hatte—es geschah auf Anregung des alten Wilms...der nämlich am sonnabendlichen Wistisch zu Konsul Tienappel sagte, Hans Castorp solle doch Schiffbau studieren...(49)]. This is why, when Settembrini asks him much later “Warum sind Sie denn Ingenieur geworden?” he responds “Aus Zufall”. (361) In other words, the fact that his career was chosen for him over the card table causes him to interpret this choice as a matter of chance, as being ‘in the cards’.

<sup>280</sup> “[Hans] verweilte sich auch ein wenig am Bridgetische, wo der unheilbare Herr Albin mit hängenden Mundwinkeln und weltmännisch wegwerfenden Bewegungen die Karten handhabte (118). Or: “Ich bin aufgehalten worden. Sie haben mich zu einer Partie Bridge gepreßt,—Bridge nennen sie das nach außen hin’, sagte [Joachim] kopfschüttelnd, ‘und dabei war es schließlich ganz was anderes. Ich habe fünf Mark gewonnen...’” (278).

In the frequent references to the game throughout the novel, Bridge is presented as being somehow symptomatic of sanitarium life. This may well account for Lowe-Porter’s translation of “*der blaue Heinrich*” (a bottle which the patients of the sanatorium are given for the purpose of expectoration) as the Blue Peter, a popular bridge term meaning to dissimulate (449, 327). Cf. David Parlett’s *A History of Card Games*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, “From Whist to Bridge”, pp. 223.

<sup>281</sup> “Und was das Verbotensein betrifft, da gibt es noch mehr Verbotenes, was hier gespielt wird, Poker, verstehst du, und in dem und jenem Hotel auch *Petits chevaux*,—bei uns steht Ausweisung darauf, es soll das allerschädlichste sein” (103).

<sup>282</sup> “Am Dienstag war unser Held nun also seit einer Woche bei denen hier oben, und so fand er denn...in einen grünen Umschlag...[d]ie kalligraphischen Aufstellung selbst betrogen ziemlich genau 180 Franken, und zwar entfielen...auf das Zimmer 8 Franken für den Tag, ferner auf den Posten ‘Eintrittsgeld’ 20 Franken und auf die Desinfektion des Zimmers 10 Franken, während kleine Sporteln für Wäsche, Bier und den zum ersten Abendessen genossenen Wein die Summe abrundeten. Hans Castorp fand nichts zu beanstanden, als er mit Joachim die Addition überprüfte” (180-1).

The accountancy in place at the sanatorium which issues these detailed ‘additions’ is also described in detail: “Über und hinter [der Organisation] standen unsichtbare Mächte, die sich eben nur in Gestalt des

As well, trends in the larger European economic scene are at stake in several of the debates between Settembrini and Naphta, so that these issues are as prominent in the text as both a micro paradigm (Hans Castorp's budgetary concerns and the internal economics of the Berghof) and as a macro paradigm (the larger European economic scene). However, as is the case with the other pedagogical dialogues, this debate stays well within the confines of a strictly European market, from early mercantilism and utilitarianism to Marxism.<sup>283</sup> "Vingt-et-un", however, constitutes a serious disruption in the accountancy of *Der Zauberberg*, upsetting the players' usual relationship to money, and carnivalizing the otherwise restricted textual and monetary economies in play:

They sat down, twelve together, Hans Castorp between his kingly host and Clavdia Chauchat. Cards and counters were produced, they decided on some rounds of *vingt-et-un*... [Peeperkorn] had taken charge of the bank at first, but soon turned it over to Herr Albin and was understood to say that the charge of it hindered his unfettered enjoyment. The gambling [*Hasard*] was to him quite evidently a minor consideration. The stakes were very low, a mere trifle in his view, though the bidding, at his suggestion, began at fifty *rappen*, a considerable sum to most of those present. Lawyer Paravant and Frau Stöhr went white and red by turns; the latter suffered pangs of indecision when called on to decide whether it was too high for her to buy at eighteen. She squealed when Herr Albin with chill routine dealt her a card so high as to confound her hopes...only Dr. Ting-fu's [complexion] remained unchangingly yellow...he staked very high...and was shamelessly lucky...[when] the game had come to an end, no one troubled to take cards or gains from the table [my italics] (561-62, 570).<sup>284</sup>

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Bureaus...manifestierten: ein Aufsichtsrat, eine Aktiengesellschaft, der anzugehören nicht übel sein mochte, da sie nach Joachims glaubwürdiger Versicherung trotz hoher Ärztegehälter und liberalster Wirtschaftsprinzipien alljährlich eine saftige Dividende unter ihre Mitglieder verteilen konnte" (182).

Cf. "Das Thermometer": "[Hans Castorp hat] fest gestellt, daß...hier alles im allem 12000 Franken pro Jahr benötige, und...daß er für seine Person dem Leben hier oben wirtschaftlich mehr als gewachsen sei, da er sich als Mann von 18-19000 Franken jährlich betrachten durfte" (223). In other words, to this point in the novel, bookkeeping proceeds in a very orderly fashion.

<sup>283</sup> Cf. "Noch jemand", particularly pages 522-28, "Vom Gottestaat und von übler Erlösung", pp. 550-52.

<sup>284</sup> "Zu zwölf Personen ließ man sich nieder, Hans Castorp zwischen dem majestätischen Gastgeber und Clavdia Chauchat; Karten und Spielmarken wurden aufgelegt, denn man hatte sich auf einige Gänge Vingt et un geeinigt...[Peeperkorn] war es, der als erster die Bank übernahm; doch trat er sie bald an Herrn Albin ab, da, wenn man ihn recht verstand, das Amt ihn am freien Genusse der Umstände hinderte. Ersichtlich war das Hasard ihm Nebensache. Man spielte um nichts, seiner Meinung nach, hatte fünfzig Rappen als kleinsten Einsatz ausgerufen nach seinem Vorschlage, doch war das sehr viel für die Mehrzahl der Beteiligten; Staatsanwalt Paravant sowohl wie Frau Stöhr wurden abwechselnd rot und blaß, und namentlich diese wand sich in furchtbaren Kämpfen, wenn sie vor der Frage stand, ob sie bei achzehn noch kaufen sollte. Sie kreschte laut,

That Peeperkorn is obviously no initiate to gambling or ‘*Hasard*’, is linked in the text to his being a Dutch colonial from Java, where the local economy is based largely on gaming.<sup>285</sup> Given his background in Holland and in South-East Asia<sup>286</sup>, where the dominant mode of exchange differs greatly from the economy of the Berghof, (and of Western Europe at the turn of the century), it is significant that the evening of card playing takes place at Peeperkorn’s behest. However, while the players at *vingt-et-un* have bet sums of money which make them turn “white and red by turns”, they do not bother to collect their winnings, so that their gaming is ultimately wasteful, non-purposeful expenditure. Hence, because this narrative event (the card game) represents the intersection and the clash of two modes of exchange, it marks the cash nexus of the text. It is here, in “Vingt-et-un”, that prestation exchange obtrudes into the greater restricted economy: this is where chance meets the balance sheet of probability, and the potlatch meets the restricted economy of utility to which it is not reducible.

Furthermore, there are many parallels which may be drawn between Peeperkorn’s extravagance in “Vingt-et-un”, and gift or potlatch economics. For example, the central topic of conversation over the cards is what the Dutch colonial refers to as “the classic gifts of life”, that is, those primitive pleasures tied up to ‘nonproductive’ spending and the undirected pouring forth of wealth (565, 568, 569, 573).<sup>287</sup> Likewise, this “regal luxury” [*königlicher Luxus*] finds further expression around the card table in the form of excessive eating and drinking. Over the six hours

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wenn Herr Albin ihr mit kalter Routine eine Karte zuwarf, deren Höhe ihr Wagnis über und über zuschanden machte...mit Ausnahme Doktor Ting-Fu, [dessen Gesicht] unveränderlich gelb blieb, mit jettschwarzen Rattenschlitzen darin, und zwar mit unverschämtem Glück. Andere wollten zurückstehen...[aber] das Spiel hatte aufgehört, *ohne daß man sich bemüßigt gesehen hätte, Karten und Geld vom Tische zu räumen*” [my italics] (767,780).

<sup>285</sup> See Clifford Geertz’s article, “Deep Play: Cock Fighting in Bali” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, pp. 412-453. Cockfighting, and the gaming of which it is a part, are of equal importance to the economies of both Bali and Java. In fact, according to Geertz, the two islands were separated from each other in local legend by a gambler (418). Cf. Chapter 3 of this thesis concerning the rise of the bourse, and the historical relationship of the Dutch to aleatory economic practices.

<sup>286</sup> His exotic background is referred to in the text as “Peeperkorn’s leicht farbige Nationalität” (748).

<sup>287</sup> “einfache Lebensgaben” (772) “klassische Lebensgaben” (776).

they spend at cards, the players are treated to round after round of champagne and schnapps, and four generous meals. In fact, regal portions of alcohol and victuals nourish regal attitudes, so that an entire course of “cold meat, joint and roast; tongue, goose, ham, sausage, whole dishes of delectables” is simply sent back (563).<sup>288</sup> At the end of the evening of cards, Mynheer Pieter is “royally unashamed” of his drunken state, giving over to “regal rage” [*königlichen Zornmut* (776)], and holding forth prodigiously on sexuality, religion, and vice (573, 568). Revealing, these are forms of expenditure disparaged by Settembrini, the *homo humanus* in the text who embodies the *zeitgeist* of the European enlightenment, as “barbaric lavishness” in the Asiatic style, (243).<sup>289</sup>

Hence, regal extravagance extends to the ostentatious dissipation of the self in drunkenness, gaming, as well as in discourse. According to Peeperkorn, “civilization is not a thing of the reason, of being sober and articulate; it has far more to do with inspiration and frenzy, the joys of the winecup” (568).<sup>290</sup> In fact the entire evening is a celebration of what Derrida would call ‘sovereign’ expenditure, that is, a sort of

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<sup>288</sup> “Man müsse essen, ordentlich essen, um den Anforderungen gerecht werden zu können, so gab er zu verstehen, und bestellte Stärkung für die Runde, eine Kollation, Fleisch, Aufschnitt, Zunge, Gänsebrust, Braten, Wurst und Schinken,—Platten voll fetter Leckerbissen, die, mit Butterkugeln, Radieschen und Petersilie garniert, prangenden Blumenbeeten glichen... Mynheer Peeperkorn erklärte sie nach wenigen Bissen für “Firlefanz”—und zwar mit einem Zorn, der die beängstigende Unberechenbarkeit seiner Herrschernatur bekundete...er schlug mit der Faust auf den Tisch, indem er das alles für verdammten Quark erklärte” (769-70).

<sup>289</sup> “Diese Freigebigkeit, diese barbarische Großartigkeit...ist asiatischer Stil,—das mag ein Grund sein, weshalb es den Kindern des Ostens an diesem Orte behagt” (334).

Cf. Chapter 3 of this thesis, Sections 3, 5, and 7. It is typical of Settembrini’s world view, which he identifies with the enlightenment, that he should disapprove of loose sexuality, gaming, and over-indulgence in general, as being primitive and barbaric. As I have pointed out, it may be more accurate to understand gambling, for example, as a blind spot in the economies of Western logic, rationalism, and utility which has ‘always already’ been there. Cf. Derrida’s “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale”, *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris: Seuil, p. 369-407.

<sup>290</sup> “Denn wir hören ja, daß der Kunst, den Wein zu pflanzen und zu keltern, die Menschen aus dem Stande der Roheit traten und Gesittung erlangten, und noch heute gelten die Völker, bei denen Wein wächst, für gesitteter, oder halten sich dafür, als die weinlosen, die Kimmerer, was sicher bemerkenswert ist. Denn es will sagen, daß Gesittung gar nicht Sache des Verstandes und wohlartikulierter Nüchternheit ist, sondern vielmehr mit der Begeisterung zu tun hat, dem Rausch und dem gelabten Gefühl.” (776-7).

This scene could also be read as an enactment of nietzschian themes such as the dionysian versus the apollinian, the attic versus the Asiatic, and Christian versus the Pagan. Cf. Oskar Seidlin’s “The Lofty Game of Numbers: The Mynheer Peeperkorn Episode in Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*”, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 86 (1971) pp.924-939.



celebratory premodern potlatch mentality.<sup>291</sup> This explains why Hans interjects that “since the most primitive times man has had to his hand a resource, a means of mounting to the heights of feeling, which belongs to the classic gifts of life” (568).<sup>292</sup> These classic gifts which meet here in “Vingt-et-un” as debauchery and gambling, constitute a disruptive moment of premodern sovereignty and barbaric lavishness, in the otherwise balanced discourse of this restricted, modern text.

Moreover, because this subversive ostentation extends to the ‘heights’ of feeling or ‘classic gifts’ which comprise the libidinal economy of the text, Peeperkorn’s guests feel compelled to join in a gratuitous sexual exchange around the card table. Throughout this episode the members of the card party become so free-handed with their sexual favors, that their game takes a decidedly orgiastic turn:

Hermine Kleefeld...showed the giggling Ting-fu all the enamel of her front teeth. Frau Stöhr...sought to reawaken Lawyer Paravant to desire. Frau Magnus’s state was such that she had seated herself on Herr Albin’s lap...[Peeperkorn] made love to every female creature within reach, without discrimination or respect of person...he paid Frau Stöhr compliments that made the vulgar creature...almost senseless with affection. He supplicated—and received—a kiss from Fräulein Kleefeld, upon his thick, chapped lips...and all this without detriment to the delicate homage he paid his companion [Madame Chauchat], whose hand he would...carry gallantly to his lips (571-2).<sup>293</sup>

In such a configuration of desires, it is appropriate that Clavdia Chauchat should occupy a pivotal role and, in fact, she is precisely the stakes of the game: as the center of lack and desire, ethnicity and class, she forms the nexus of the libidinal economy of the text.

<sup>291</sup> Cf. Derrida’s “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale” in *L’écriture et la différence*, op. cit. p. 369-409, and Chapter 3, Section 6 of this thesis.

<sup>292</sup> “Aber dem menschlichen Trachten nach Gefühl ist ja von Urzeiten her ein Hilfsmittel, ein Rausch—und Begeisterungsmittel an die Hand gegeben, das selbst zu den klassischen Lebensgaben gehört...” (776)

<sup>293</sup> “Hermeine Kleefeld...wies lachend dem kichernden Ting-Fu den Schmelz ihrer Vorderzähne, indes Frau Stöhr...den Staatsanwalt ans Leben zu fesseln suchte. Mit Frau Magnus war es dahin gekommen, daß sie auf Herrn Albins Schoß Platz genommen hatte...[Peeperkorn] zeigte sich verliebt in all und jede erreichbare Weiblichkeit, wahllos und ohne Ansehen der Person...er sagte der Stöhr Artigkeiten eines Kalibers, daß die ordinäre Frau ihre Schulter noch ärger vorbog und die Ziererei bis zur völligen Verrücktheit trieb, [er] erbat sich von der Kleefeld einen Kuß auf seinen großen, zerrissenen Mund...dies alles unbeschadet seiner zärtlichen Ergebenheit gegen seine Reisebegleiterin, deren Hand er oft mit galanter Andacht an die Lippen führte” (781-2).

On this textual register, therefore, the card game constitutes an economic renegotiation of Hans' "relations with the slant-eyed sufferer [which] went beyond the limits prescribed by the traditions of the Occident". Furthermore, this renegotiation of the terms of his sexual contract with Madame Chauchat, will in turn determine how her sexual favors are divided out to her two admirers (554).<sup>294</sup>

And it is over the cards that Peeperkorn is stricken by the uncomfortable intuition that Hans Castorp has "eaten a philippina with Madame"; that they complicitly share the knowledge of previous intimacies (605).<sup>295</sup> Because this 'philippina' tips the balance of exchange, it necessitates a repositioning around the object of desire, which prompts Pieter Peeperkorn's halting discourse on sexuality. The old Dutchman's meditations focus on the consequences of impotence in a libidinal economy based on gratuity, such as he and Hans have enjoyed with Clavdia Chauchat. According to Peeperkorn, impotence constitutes a refusal of the 'classic gifts', and is concomitant to "ruin and bankruptcy" in a libidinal economy of exchange (566).<sup>296</sup> By virtue of the fact that he is seated between Mynheer and Madame for the evening, framed by age and beauty, Hans Castorp the 'carnival cavalier' [*der Ritter der Faschingsnacht* (794)], appears the more likely lover. So, by declining a kiss from the 'Queen of Hearts' which he has won from Peeperkorn, Hans unwittingly turns up the old man's "last trump" (580, 620). That Hans and Clavdia must virtually carry the 'King of Cups' to bed in his state of 'regal intoxication', compounds the irony of the elderly Potentate's impotence,

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<sup>294</sup> "Selbst zugegeben, daß sein Verhältnis zu der schrägäugigen Kranken die Grenzen abendländischer Vernunft und Gesittung dem Wesen nach hinter sich ließ,—in der Form war vollkommenste Zivilisation und für den Augenblick so gar der Schein der Gedächtnislosigkeit zu wahren" (756).

<sup>295</sup> "Man hat, so weit Sie in Frage kommen, den Eindruck, als handelte es sich um eine Wette, als hätten Sie ein Vielliebchen mit Madame gegessen..."

'Aber Mynheer Peeperkorn... Was denn für ein Vielliebchen...'

'Es war an jenem Abend, der mir den Vorzug Ihrer Bekanntschaft gebracht hatte... da geschah es... beim Abschiede, daß mir die Eingebung kam, die Aufforderung an Sie zu richten, Sie möchten mit den Lippen die Stirn der Frau berühren... Sie verwarfen rundweg meine Anregung...'" (829, 830).

<sup>296</sup> "Die Niederlage des Gefühls vor dem Leben, das ist die Unzulänglichkeit, für die es keine Gnade, kein Mitleid und keine Würde gibt, sondern die erbarmungslos und hohnlachend verworfen ist,—er-ledigt [sic], junger Mann, und ausgespien... Schmach und Entehrung sind gelinde Worte für diesen Ruin und Bankerott, für diese grauenhafte Blamage. Sie ist das Ende, die höllische Verzweiflung, der Weltuntergang..." (773-4).

disclosed in Hans' gentlemanly refusal of his libidinal winnings [*die Hörige Peeperkorns* (794)] from a lesser contestant.

### 7. Conclusion: Anticipation and Dissipation

It is the exposure of this past affair in the act of playing cards, which precipitates Peeperkorn's giving himself over to death. Therefore, following the discovery of Hans' and Clavdia's 'philippina' in "Vingt-et-un", the "oriental priest" makes a last appearance as the "King of Cups", in order to deliver an inaudible and incomprehensible discourse, to a company of seven.<sup>297</sup> He kills himself hours later, by introducing exotic poisons into his veins through the syringe-like claw of an oriental scarab, thereby linking the Orient to the cult of the dead once again. What is more, the passing of this venerable cipher has a domino affect in the text, precipitating in its turn Naphta's suicide, as well as an accumulation of zeros predicting the total chaos and destruction which, metaphorically, blow a hole through the end of the text.

The progression of textual zeros begins, or is perhaps foreshadowed by, the circle of doom which Hans traces in "Snow". This is followed directly by the arrival of another zero in the person of Mynheer Peeperkorn, and with it, a change in the narrative voice from sardonic to self-conscious. From this moment, the text is informed by an uncomfortable autoreferential deprecation, a sort of parodic fretting over the narration of time, a problem which has haunted the text from its beginning.<sup>298</sup> For instance, at this turn in *Der Zauberberg*, the narrative voice takes on new-found cynicism with regard to the possibility of inclusive temporal narration:

<sup>297</sup> That Peeperkorn's suicide is a direct consequence of the affair is made clear by Madame Chauchat: "'C'est une abdication' sagte sie. 'Er wußte von unserer Torheit'" (856). Peeperkorn's abdication, which he delivers under the din of a waterfall, is the cipher's last indecipherable discourse, and it forecasts his suicide as a negative sublime experience.

<sup>298</sup> The sections entitled "Exkurs über den Zeitsinn" and "Strandspaziergang" deal exclusively with this subject as in the following: "Kann man die Zeit erzählen, diese selbst, als solche, an und für sich? Wahrhaftig, nein, das wäre ein närrisches Unterfangen! Eine Erzählung, die ginge: 'Die Zeit verfloß, sie verrann, es strömte die Zeit' und so immer fort,—das könnte gesunden Sinnes wohl niemand eine Erzählung nennen" (738). That these are the first lines of the seventh and final chapter of the novel, is probably no coincidence. The text has arguably 'run its course' by now, and Mann devotes this last chapter to closing the last circle.

Someday even [this] story itself will come to an end. Long has it lasted; or rather, the pace of its contextual time has so increased that there is no more holding it, even its musical time is running out...The doctrine of the illimitability of time and space [is], surely, based on experience? In fact, anybody with a very little logic could make very merry over the theory of endlessness and the reality of space and time; and could arrive at the result of nothing: that is, at the view that realism is your true nihilism...*Quite simply; since the relation to infinity of any size you choose to postulate was zero* [my italics] (624, 691-2).<sup>299</sup>

In other words the “time-economy” of the text has spent itself, its relation to the infinity of time is zero. The reader is informed that this seventh chapter, containing the card game at its center, will represent the emptying out or bankrupting of the temporal economy.

Furthermore, the four sections of the embedded Peeperkorn story, are clearly divided into beginning, middle, and conclusion, with the exception of one suspended episode, namely, “Vingt-et-un” [*“Mynheer Peeperkorn”, “Vingt-et-un”, “Mynheer Peeperkorn (des weiteren)”, “Mynheer Peeperkorn (Schluß)”*]. In turn, these four segments form a miniature narrative in Aristotelian proportions, which is disconnected from and framed in the text, just as “Vingt-et-un” is suspended in the frame of the Peeperkorn narrative. This segment then forms a *mise en abyme* of the temporal progressions or the “time economies” which inform the novel (546). Moreover, because of its reduced size, this segment draws attention to the artifice of narrative time, while contextualized in a novel which threatens to absorb seven years of the reader’s time, or even continue indefinitely.<sup>300</sup> And further, the rigid segmentation of the Peeperkorn

<sup>299</sup> “Einmal endigt selbst diese Geschichte; sie hat die längste Zeit gedauert, oder viel mehr: Ihre inhaltliche Zeit ist derart ins Rollen gekommen, daß kein Halten mehr ist, daß auch ihre musikalische zur Neige geht...Die Lehre von der Unendlichkeit des Raumes und der Zeit fuße sicherlich auf Erfahrung? In der Tat, man werde, ein wenig Logik vorausgesetzt, zu lustigen Erfahrungen und Ergebnissen gelangen mit dem Dogma von der Unendlichkeit und Realität des Raumes und der Zeit; nämlich zum Ergebnis des Nichts. Nämlich zur Einsicht, daß Realismus der wahre Nihilismus sei...Aus dem einfachen Grunde, weil das Verhältnis jeder beliebigen Größe zum Unendlichen gleich Null sei” (948).

<sup>300</sup> This is perhaps what Mann is suggesting concerning temporality as it is represented in fictional worlds, which in turn belong to the greater external “time-economy”: “Unschwer wären Wesen denkbar, vielleicht auf kleineren Planeten, die eine Miniaturzeit bewirtschaften und für deren ‘kurzes’ Leben das flinke Getrippel unseres Sekundenzeigers die zähe Wegsparsamkeit des Stundenmessers hätte. Aber auch solche sind vorzustellen, mit

episodes, and that of “Vingt-et-un” in particular, constitute a self-conscious, self-ironizing commentary on *telos*, and on the narrative project *in toto*. It is not without significance then, that this scene occurs at the turning point in the text, that is, the moment at which the narrative voice admits exhaustion and the failure of *Der Zauberberg*, as a hermetic *Zeitroman*, to seamlessly represent and reproduce time.

While cards conveyed Oriental ‘otherness’ in mathematical annotation, logic, and accountancy into Europe, the games played with them possess a “time-economy” which is ‘other’. Playing cards and card games belong to what Settembrini calls an Eastern economy of time, a style of temporal reckoning of which he disapproves. As Settembrini observes of his fellow patients, “Time is in the Asiatic style [at the Berghof]. Have you ever remarked that when a Russian says four hours, he means what we do when we say one” (243).<sup>301</sup> The patients’ idiosyncratic understanding of time is a consequence of death’s propinquity and is witnessed to in the many references to Eastern death cults, and to Thoth, the god of death and games of chance.

Game-time is similar to narrative time here, as both economies of time are disengaged from the context in which they are found, and involve the suspension and displacement of time perception. For example, time spent at many card games, frequently means ‘killing time’, or at least not entirely respecting clock-time, and so distinguishes itself as being of a different order than customary perceptions of time.<sup>302</sup> Given that “Vingt-et-un” is the representation of a card party where the players lose themselves in game-time, contained in a *Zeitroman* with its own temporal economy, it is fitting that this scene stands out as a temporal narration which is ‘other’. Hence, the card

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deren Raum sich eine Zeit von gewaltigem Gange verbände, so daß die Abstands begriffe des ‘Eben noch’ und ‘Über ein kleines’, des ‘Gestern’ und ‘Morgen’ in ihrem Erlebnis ungeheuer erweiterte Bedeutung gewannen” (742).

<sup>301</sup> “[...] diese barbarische Großartigkeit im Zeitverbrauch ist asiatischer Stil,—das mag ein Grund sein, weshalb es den Kindern des Ostens an diesem Orte behage. Haben Sie nie bemerkt, daß, wenn ein Russe ‘vier Stunden’ sagt, es nicht mehr ist, als wenn unsereins ‘eine’ sagt” (334).

<sup>302</sup> On the nature of subjective involvement in game playing and the suspension of time in these interactions, see Chapter 1 of this thesis, particularly Section 5 on Gadamer. See also Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, Chapter 1, “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon”, pp. 1-28, and Chapter 1 of Duvignaud’s *Le jeu du jeu*, St. Amand: Editions Bolland, 1980.

players in “Vingt-et-un” are swept up in this other temporality and find themselves irresponsibly out of step with the larger economy of narrative time when Hofrat Behrens steps in at the end of the episode. Moreover, the subjective experience of temporal suspension is heightened when players interact with games, and since novels are language games in Wittgenstein’s sense, the reader’s experience of time will be ‘other’ when engaging with the text. So within what Mann calls the “time economy” of his novel, the heightened temporal suspension which occurs in the card game mirrors the suspension of time which occurs when the reader engages with this ‘hermetic’ text.<sup>303</sup>

As I wrote above, the embedded narrative of the card game foreshadows an increasing number of zeros, circles and desultory mystic games which become popular pastimes at the Berghof sanitarium, only to be dropped shortly. There is, for example, Lawyer Paravant’s obsessive attempt to square the circle, an impossible operation which he believes he will be able to perform at the Berghof, because of the sanitarium’s vertiginous elevation above the “flatland”.<sup>304</sup> Since Paravant’s endeavor consists in endless multiplications of the circumference of the dimensionless points of the circle “from its beginning—which did not exist—to its end—which did not exist either, and the overpowering melancholy that lay in eternity” it takes a dissipatory turn, and is eventually denounced at the sanitarium as “mystic hocus-pocus” (630).<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Cf. Thomas Mann’s essay “The Making of *The Magic Mountain*”: “Because time is one of its themes...the book itself is the substance of that which it relates: it depicts the hermetic enchantment of its young hero within the timeless, and thus seeks to abrogate time itself...it pretends to give perfect consistency to content and form, to the apparent and the essential; its aim is always and consistently to *be* that of which it speaks...in the hermetic, feverish atmosphere of the enchanted mountain...[Hans] undergoes a heightening process that makes him capable of adventures in sensual, moral, intellectual spheres he would never have dreamed of in the “flatland”. His story is the story of a heightening process, but also as a narrative it is a heightening process itself” (725-6).

<sup>304</sup> “Der entgleiste Beamte hatte sich im Lauf seiner Studien mit der Überzeugung durchdrungen, daß die Beweise, mit denen die Wissenschaft die Unmöglichkeit der Konstruktion erhärtet haben wollte, unstichhaltig seien und daß planende Vorsehung ihn, Paravant, darum aus der unteren Welt der Lebendigen entfernt und hierher versetzt habe, weil sie ihn dazu ausersehen das transzendente Ziel [die Quadratur des Kreises] in den Bereich irdisch genauer Erfüllung zu reißen” (863).

<sup>305</sup> The narrative voice calls Paravant’s calculations “die heillose Irrationalität dieses mystischen Verhältnisses”, namely the relation of the circle to the square. Furthermore, Hans Castorp “nannte es eine Eulenspiegelerei, rief Herrn Paravant, sich bei seinem Haschespiel doch nicht zu ernstlich zu erhitzen, und sprach von den ausdehnungslosen Wendepunkten, aus denen der Kreis von seinem nicht vorhandenen Anfang bis zu seinem nicht vorhandenen Ende bestehe, sowie von der übermütigen Melancholie, die in der ohne Richtungsdauer in sich selber laufenden Ewigkeit liege, mit so gelassener Religiosität, daß vorübergehend eine begütigende Wirkung davon auf den Staatsanwalt ausging” (865).

Similarly, a passion for a cousin of solitaire called *Eiferpatience* captures the imagination of the company at the sanitarium, threatening to “turn the Berghof into a den of vice”, and claiming Hans Castorp as a “temporary victim” (632).<sup>306</sup> In fact, the young engineer is so taken “with abstract chance” that he is discovered playing the game in his pajamas, too absorbed in oriental ‘unlogic’ and mysticism to bother with clothing (633). Indeed, he gives himself up to the card game so completely, that when Settembrini attempts to discuss mounting hostilities between the Balkan Federation and Austria, Hans’ only reply is:

“Eight and three. Knave, queen, king. Its coming out. You have brought me luck, Herr Settembrini”...the result [of the card game] was negative...The whole undertaking died a natural death and Hans Castorp went on playing patience-and gazing into the eye of the demon, whose unbridled sway he foresaw would come to an end of horror (633, 635).<sup>307</sup>

This contract with luck and the demon is discarded for an equally consuming obsession which Hans develops for an oddly sarcophagal gramophone, “a truncated little coffin of violin-wood...a small dull-black temple” (642).<sup>308</sup> Throughout “Fullness of Harmony” [*Fülle des Wohllauts*] the gramophone is described in macabre and mortuary terms which draw the reader’s attention to the hypnotic spinning of the hard-rubber disks around the hole at their center, haunting him even in his dreams. The uncanny relationship of these spinning ‘zeros’ to death and the spirit realm does not pass without comment in the text: as they turn with “the indicator set at zero”, the phonographic

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<sup>306</sup> “Aber dem armen Hans Castorp war doch noch schlimmer zumute beim Anblick der Patienceleger, die überall im Hause und zu jeder Tageszeit zu beobachten waren. Denn die Leidenschaft für diese Zerstreuung war neustens derart eingerissen, daß sie buchstäblich das Haus zur Lasterhöhle machte, und Hans Castorp hatte um so mehr Ursache, sich grauenhaft davon berührt zu fühlen, als er selber zeitweise ein Opfer—und zwar vielleicht das hingenommenste—der Seuche war” (866-7).

<sup>307</sup> “‘Sieben und vier’, sagte Hans Castorp. ‘Acht und drei. Bub, Dame, König. Es geht ja. Sie bringen mir Glück, Herr Settembrini’...Das Ergebnis war Null, ohne beim Namen genannt und ausdrücklich verkündigt zu werden. Die Unternehmung verlief im Sande, und Hans Castorp fuhr fort, Patience zu legen—Aug in Auge mit dem Dämon, dessen zügelloser Herrschaft für sein Gefühl ein Ende mit Schrecken bevorstand” (867, 871).

<sup>308</sup> “Hans Castorp war allein mit dem Wundern der Truhe in seinen vier Wänden,—mit den blühenden Leistungen dieses gestutzten kleinen Sarges aus Geigenholz, dieses mattschwarzen Tempelchens, vor dessen offener Flügeltür er im Sessel saß, die Hände gefaltet, den Kopf auf der Schulter, den Mund geöffnet, und sich von Wohllaut überströmen ließ” (880).

albums make dead musicians eerily present, lending the experience an aura which, for Hans, belongs to mysticism (642). This is perhaps why one of Hans' favorite recordings is "Blick ich umher in diesem edlen Kreise", which recalls the circle of death, traced by Hans at an earlier juncture in the narrative (641).

The events of this seventh chapter (including the bizarre episode "Highly Questionable" in which the Berghof patients are visited by Joachim's ghost), appear to lead inexorably to war, death and nothingness, as well as to a turning point in both the textual and monetary economies of the text.<sup>309</sup> The mass random waste of the great war is predicted by Hans' game of *Elferpatience*, in which he conjectures that intervention of chance [*hasard*] in the card game, is related to the actual situation in Europe, and to his future. The war is likewise foreshadowed by gratuity and randomness of the game of "Vingt-et-un" at the center of the chapter: the manner in which cards and winnings are left helter-skelter on the table, prefigures the final scene in which Hans, the Carnival Cavalier, and his fellow soldiers are discovered lying face-down in the mud:

[Hans] stumbles. No, he has flung himself down, a hell-hound is coming howling, a huge explosive shell...he lies with his face in the cool mire, legs sprawled out, feet twisted, heels turned down. The product of a perverted science, laden with death, slopes earthward thirty paces in front of him...explodes inside there, with hideous expense of power, and raises up a fountain high as a house, of mud, fire, iron, molten metal, scattered fragments of humanity. Where it fell, two youths had lain, friends who in their need flung themselves down together—now they are scattered, commingled and gone (715).<sup>310</sup>

<sup>309</sup> In this sense, I mean that the European economy underwent a huge crisis during and after the first World War, from which a certain class never recovered. According to Thomas Mann, "such institutions as the Berghof were a typical prewar phenomenon. They were only possible in a capitalist economy that was still functioning well and normally...[today] most of the Swiss sanatoria have become sports hotels" (*TM* 721). Fittingly enough, the sanatorium which Mann visited and described in *Der Zauberberg* has been turned into a brewery and pub, quite in the spirit of Peeperkorn.

<sup>310</sup> "Da ist unser Bekannter, da ist Hans Castorp!...Er stürzt. Nein, er hat sich platt hingeworfen, da ein Höllenhund anheult, ein großes Brisanzgeschöß...er liegt, das Gesicht im kühlen Kot, die Beine gespreizt, die Füße gedreht, die Absätze erdwärts. Das Product einer verwilderten Wissenschaft, geladen mit dem Schlimmsten, fährt dreißig Schritte schräg vor ihm wie ein Teufel selbst in den Grund, zerplatzt dort unten mit gräßlicher Übergewalt und reißt einen haushohen Springbrunnen von Erdreich, Feuer, Eisen, Blei und zerstückeltem Menschentum in die Lüfte empor. Denn dort lagen zwei,—es waren Freunde, sie hatten sich zusammengelegt in der Not: nun sind die vermengt und verschwunden" (980).



That one scene recalls the other is not coincidental, given that playing cards have been used as metaphor of war, at least since the *folleto*, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish genre of political satire in which playing cards were used as allegory.<sup>311</sup> Bakhtine, in his article on games of the Middle Ages and narrative, writes that “the images of [card] games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historic process: fortune, misfortune, gain and loss, crowning and uncrowning” (129).<sup>312</sup> Chatto, the card historian, and military strategist Clausewitz also concur that card games are primarily and historically military in nature.<sup>313</sup>

The explosion in the war segment at the close of *Der Zauberberg*, leaves the text open and undecided: the reader is uninformed of Hans’ fate as a soldier, and the novel quite literally ends in a question mark with the narrative voice asking what will resolve this conflict.<sup>314</sup> As I have argued, the text metaphorically and numerically passes from sevens to zeros, from plenitude to nothingness, and this proliferation of textual zeros constitutes a ‘hole’ through the ‘close’ of the text. The movement from sevens to zeros which informs the text, passes from hermeticism to the void, drawing the narrative toward the war as the ultimate celebration of death [*Weltfest des Todes* (981)]. The text is open-ended because it concludes without *telos*, by exhausting itself and ending abruptly without closure in nothingness and undecidability.<sup>315</sup> This in turn is an ironic commentary on the bankruptcy of the Western metaphysical tradition, the failure of

<sup>311</sup> See Etienvre’s “Du jeu comme métaphore politique”, *Poétique* No. 56, 1983, pp. 397-415.

<sup>312</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “The role of Games in Rabelais” in *Game, Play, Literature*, *YFS*, No. 41, pp. 124-133.

<sup>313</sup> Cf. Chapter 2 of this thesis and Jean-Pierre Etienvre’s article “Du jeu comme métaphore politique”, op. cit. pp. 402-6. See also Chatto’s *Facts and Speculations on the Origin and History of Playing Cards*: “Comme c’est un jeu militaire, il y a dans chaque couleur un roi, un officier supérieur ou capitaine, nommé *Ober*, et un bas-officier appelé *Unter*. On appelait encore de nos jours dans l’Empire, où les mots François se sont pas en vogue, les officiers supérieurs *Oberleute*, et les bas-officiers *Unterleute*” (15).

<sup>314</sup> “Wird auch aus diesem Weltfest des Todes, auch aus der schlimmen Fieberbrunst, die rings den regnerischen Abendhimmel entzündet, einmal die Liebe steigen” (981)?

<sup>315</sup> What is left undecided in the text is Hans’ fate. The reader finds him, in the final pages of the narrative lying face-down in the mud, following an explosion. He is not dead, however, but picks himself up and disappears so that the reader never knows what is to happen to him: “Und so, im Getümmel, in dem Regen, der Dämmerung, kommt er uns aus den Augen” (980).

enlightenment metanarratives, and the culmination of irrationality and violence in the great war.<sup>316</sup> The humanistic metanarratives of the enlightenment have failed and Settembrini's project for eradicating ignorance through the encyclopedia is abandoned. The text moves from the constructed illusion of rationalistic hermeticism, through Oriental otherness, and into a representation of alea and mysticism—activities which are 'highly questionable'. Hence, the project of the encyclopedia, as well as that of hermetic narrative inclusiveness in *Der Zauberberg*, are ceded to the postulate that realism is true nihilism, ultimately reducible and retraceable to zero.

It is remarked in "Vingt-et-un" that the card game is the convergence of many existential experiences:

Outbursts of jubilation and despair, explosions of rage, attacks of hysterical laughter—all due to the reaction of this unlawful pleasure...indeed, the chances and changes of life itself would have called up...no other reaction (562).<sup>317</sup>

This narrative segment marks an eruption of zeros in the text which threatens the epistemological debate grounding the text, by destabilizing the two positions from which it emanates, and by introducing a volatile third element. This is also the apparent point of entry of 'otherness' in many forms: premodern economic practices, chance, alterity and chaos. It is here that randomness enters in the form of thriftless economic transactions and loose sexuality, as well as in the figure of the cipher, the infidel god Thoth of writing, numbers and games of chance. In short, this is the representation of breakdown in the text, a point where narrative events appear to be dictated largely by chance, and where 'Settembrinian' rationalism and logical causality are bankrupted. In

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<sup>316</sup> According to Evelyn Cobley, reconstructions of myth in narratives of the first World War function as a replacement for the metanarratives of the enlightenment which were lost to the twentieth century. See *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. 188-193.

<sup>317</sup> "Jubel und Verzweiflungsausbrüche, Entladungen der Wut und hysterische Lachanfalle, hervorgerufen durch den Reiz, den das bübische Glück auf die Nerven ausübte, ereigneten sich, und sie waren echt und ernst,—nicht anders hätten sie lauten können in den Wechselfällen des Lebens selbst" (768).

the Peeperkorn episodes then, the controlled economy of *Der Zauberberg* is disrupted in spite of the narrative's obsession with rationality and hermeticism.

While this may be seen as a moment of rupture in the text, the text does not become entirely aleatory or open, nor does Mann give his writing over to chance through the end of the text. It is evident that Mann does not relinquish control of the form or style of his relatively 'classic' narrative when describing scenes of negativity. Mann rather represents irrupting 'otherness' in the text, scenes of card playing and gambling, death and mass destruction. Moreover, these scenes are, as I read them, carnivalesque and unrestricted, without being celebratory. I would argue then, that in a fictional economy which is primarily restrictive, both in terms of what kind of economy is represented in the narrative and of how the narrative is structured, the card party and its accompanying debauchery prefigure the chaos and excess of destruction of war.

Be this as it may, *Der Zauberberg* is, from the beginning, 'always already' tainted by Oriental logic and ritual in the doubly-oriented figure of Hermes, and the hermeticism practiced in the text, which is at once rationalistic and mystic. *Der Zauberberg* carries this space of 'otherness' at its center which opens up the text, however little, to chance and ludicity from within its logical structure. Hence, the colonial Dutchman's carnivalisation of the cultural practices at the numerical center of the text is given structural and thematic prominence as the turning point in the novel; it is the point at which the story appears to have come full circle over the cards.

## CHAPTER 6

### *VANIADA : cousinage-dangereux-voisinage adage*<sup>5</sup>



#### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I showed how the card game at the center of Mann's *Der Zauberberg* destabilizes the dialectical structure which informs the narrative. I also argued that as a disruptive event, "Vingt-et-un" prefigures the outbreak and ensuing chaos of the First World War, at which point the novel abruptly ends. In this chapter I will describe the significance of card games recounted in *Ada or Ardor: a Family Chronicle* based, however, on considerations specific to this text. Although *Ada* may share common features with *Der Zauberberg* (ie.: they are both novels, they both contain a card playing scene) they are, quite obviously, different from one another both thematically and structurally. In this chapter, one of the points I will argue is that, as a consequence of elements which are different in the fictional context of Nabokov's novel (textual, economic, structural), the card game in *Ada* does not constitute an event as the card game does in *Der Zauberberg*.

In part, this difference arises from circumstantial aspects of the narrative, such as Van and Ada Veen's incestuous relationship which informs the text, and ultimately determines how the card game in *Ada* is played and signifies. Since the novel is devoted to recounting the Veen's consanguineous romance, the issue of incest is always present as the backdrop against which Van and Ada project their provocative disrespect for prohibition and morality.

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<sup>5</sup> From Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, p. 226, 232. Further references to this novel are in the text.

For example, in the first few pages the Veen children discover that their *cousinage-dangereux* is more dangerous than they had imagined. However, when Van and Ada come across the documents that prove they are actually brother and sister, and not just “kissin’ cousins”, they continue their passionate affair completely unrattled (232).<sup>319</sup> Indeed, this discovery rather fans than cools their passion, so that their lust is eventually extended to Ada’s little sister Lucette, who is shared as substitute object of desire by brother and sister until she commits suicide. But in spite of bizarre circumstances (and Lucette’s suicide aside) *Ada* is primarily a celebratory account of sibling love that deepens over many years, extending well beyond the flower of age and enduring through two life-times. So as the subject of narration, incest is ever-present in *Ada*, its social ramifications blissfully ignored and pleasurably subverted, while elsewhere in literature and in culture incest has been constructed as a universal taboo.

Furthermore, the general disrespect for the incest prohibition in *Ada* extends throughout the text to accounts of ‘social structure’ in general, to include all kinds of rules and prohibitions. This generalized recalcitrance in the narrative on the score of accepted norms, has the appearance of destabilizing those things which are often thought of as ‘structural elements’ belonging to ‘texts’. Hence, perhaps as a consequence of these considerations, this tale of taboo *seems* to be *destructured*: ‘universal norms’ and interdictions which might regulate random, chaotic intercourse between characters, and elements of the narrative, as well as between the novel itself and other texts, *appear* to have been evacuated from *Ada*. In other words, the lack of regard for prohibition which drives *Ada* seems to preclude adherence to any normative interdictions that could possibly regulate exchange in the narrative (sexual, textual, economic), and makes for a text that appears to be void of structural elements holding it together from a ‘center’. Because of this, *Ada* gives the impression of being constantly off-center and in the process of slipping beyond its own constructedness as a narrative, a character, and as a linguistic entity.

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<sup>319</sup> Brian Boyd points out that the Veen’s relationship is more complicated even than this, as Van and Ada are first, second and third cousins as well as brother and sister. See B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 p. 545. All other references to Boyd in the text.

In this regard, *Ada* the text could be read as a performance of Derrida's "La structure, le signe et le jeu", in particular his argument with Lévi-Strauss' construction of incest and taboo.<sup>320</sup> For Derrida, Lévi-Strauss' *Le cru et le cuit* is exemplary of thought which takes as its starting point a 'stable narrative' such as "le *factum* de la prohibition de l'inceste...[et] s'installe donc au point de où cette différence qui a toujours passé pour aller de soi, se trouve effacée ou contestée" (416). According to Derrida, the moment at which the structurality of structure begins to be rethought as something which can no longer be unproblematically taken for granted ("passer pour aller de soi") constitutes an "événement de rupture...et [de] redoublement", and his essay is devoted to showing how this 'event' destabilizes texts like Lévi-Strauss' (409).

Derrida argues, for example, that Lévi-Strauss' work on incest is subtended by fixed and founding discourses on the subject. If, however, cultural taboos are susceptible to being 'deconstructed' the concept of a center, or "un signifié central, originaire ou transcendantal" which would ground constructions of knowledge, has been evacuated (416). Therefore, at this poststructuralist moment, discourses ("philosophique ou scientifique...[et] aussi politique, économique, technique, etc.") are no longer perceived as having a center ("le centre n'est pas le centre") so that where there was previously a centre, there is now the infinite play of substitutions (410, 414). So within various discourses (literary, philosophical, economic, and etc.) Derrida's argument perhaps explains the 'postmodern' tendency to a-centricity. At the very least, Derrida's essay helps to explain how *Ada* works, at both the narrative and the textual level, in so far as it is a story about incest, which 'deconstructs' the incest taboo, and seemingly itself, in the process

And finally, to return to the central preoccupation of this dissertation, I will argue that card playing in *Ada* is consistently dishonest or subversive, and that this is articulated in the text in various ways. While this is the case, however, I believe that Nabokov has 'stacked the deck', and that it is possible to identify the trace of an organizing metanarrative or principle in *Ada*, which in some way 'structures' the narrative. The focus of this chapter will then be to demonstrate how, given the above, card games work through the various textual registers that make up *Ada*, and how they

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320 Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1967

articulate the textual slight of hand at work in the novel, by virtue of features that appear to be compatible with the artistic mode in which the novel was produced.

## 2. *Ada, Incest, Intertext*

Several features of *Ada*'s structure are put forward in the first line of the text, which readers familiar with Tolstoy will recognize as the first line of another novel in reverse, namely *Anna Karenina*.

“All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike,” says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (*Anna Arkadievitich Karenina*, transfigured into English by R.G. Stonelower, Mount Tabor Ltd., 1880) (3).<sup>321</sup>

In this new fictional setting and inverted form, Tolstoy's axiom tells the reader that *Ada* will probably have something to do with families, and that this ‘something’ will be rather the reverse of conventional wisdom.<sup>322</sup> And of course, the reader rapidly learns that the Veens are certainly not like other families.

The citation of this well-known line, moreover, suggests a link or affiliation between the two texts, and perhaps between Tolstoy and Nabokov. Likewise, the line relates *Ada* to her extended literary family, that is, to the tradition of the canonical 19<sup>th</sup>-century family history, of which *Anna Karenina* is a member. However, while it

<sup>321</sup> The first sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* reads “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”, Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*, Trans. Joel Carmichael, New York: Bantam, 1960.

<sup>322</sup> It is certainly arguable that not *all* readers will make this particular connection, or even that not *all competent* readers will immediately apprehend this aspect of the text, for it is certainly possible to imagine that someone might read *Ada* having never read, or forgotten, the first line of *Anna Karenina*. Indeed, one might read the novel from cover to cover and conclude that *Ada* is a multi-lingual text about two amusing and incestuous aristocratic children, born to a life of leisure. In other words, *Ada*, is a text which may engage readers on many different levels. I would argue however, that given the difficulty with which the text presents the reader on the level of ‘making sense’, ‘naïve’ readers would find little in *Ada* to keep them reading. In fact, John Updike's review of the novel “Van Loves Ada, Ada Loves Van”, which appeared in *The New Yorker*, 1969, criticized the novel for being ridiculously recondite and consequently practically unreadable. Moreover, the ‘intentional’ obscurity and difficulty of this text are precisely the reason why it is so often cited as a limit case in works on readerly competence. Cf. Peter Hutchinson's *Games that Authors Play*, New York: Methuen, 1983, p. 12. See also Alfred Appel Jr. “*Ada* described” in *Nabokov: Criticism, reminiscences, translations and tributes*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970, p. 160-186.

announces these connections, this line rendered backwards is the first indication that *Ada*'s position viz. the canonical family romance, and European literary conventions, will somehow similarly deviate from convention. In other words, the line indicates how canonical intertexts will be used in *Ada*, and this usage in turn determines how the novel relates to its extended literary family.

From the opening sentence, the borrowings that appear in *Ada* mirror the Veens' rather twisted sibling romance in many regards. With a verve not unlike Van and *Ada*'s passion, the novel incestuously appropriates text from the family romance in the European tradition of the past century. *Ada*, the text, goes outside of itself and freely assimilates text from novels of the canon of European 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature,<sup>323</sup> with the same extroverted enthusiasm that *Ada*'s embrace takes in brother, sister, and various paramours, both male and female. In this respect, the "tender consanguinity" that motivates the narrative and informs the text's construction, parallels *Ada*'s essentially parodic and transgressive relationship to the canon.

For example, Chateaubriand's *René* is a prominent and oft misquoted intertext in the collage of quotations of which *Ada* is constructed. In keeping with the parodic mode in which *Ada* is written, *René* is foregrounded throughout in a way which at once underscores and satirizes *Ada*'s relationship to the traditional sibling romance.<sup>324</sup> While *René* is an incest romance about Amélie's unwholesome and unconsummated passion for her brother René, *Ada* is the story of a girl who does much more than fantasize about her brother, Van Veen. Unlike her counterpart in *René*, *Ada* does not chastely enter the Sisterhood in order to avert tragedy, but rather maintains a long and passionate affair with her bother, unruffled by the unfavorable light in which incest might cast their love. Conveniently enough then, *Ada* recalls happening upon a line "in a story by Chateaubriand about a pair of romantic siblings" in her "ninth or tenth year" which she inaccurately remembers as "*les deux enfants pouvaient donc s'abandonner au plaisir*

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<sup>323</sup> For an exhaustive listing of the myriad intertextual references which may be detected in *Ada*, consult Boyd, op. cit., Chapters 20 and 22, and Alfred Appel, Jr.'s "Ada Described", op. cit., especially p. 182.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. see Marc Shell's *The End of Kinship: 'Measure for Measure', Incest, and the Ideal of Siblinghood*, Stanford: Stanford University, 198, p.3-25, 190-196. See also Boyd on *René* and *Ada*, p. 552-3.



*sans aucune crainte*" (133). So while in the tradition of incest literature sibling passions usually spells disaster, in *Ada* they light-heartedly spell unrestricted *jouissance*.

Therefore, the abiding disdain for the rules and for prohibition in amorous affairs which informs *Ada* gives rise to a general disengagement from prohibition, effectively reversing narrative norms in the novel and defining its non-traditional relationship to the canon. This external relationship to the canon and to the genre of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, like those relationships internal to the novel, is in many ways off-center or reversed, and this from the opening line. At first glance, *Ada*'s affinity with canonical literature and with the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular, is attested to by the opening line from *Anna Karenina*.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that familiar lines, standard devices, scenes and situations of the past century's 'great novels' are to be routinely trotted out and parodied. For example, the games and gaming scenes in *Ada* recall scenes from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, wherein games frequently served as an indicator of affluence and aristocratic privilege, as well a metafictional device. Similarly in *Ada*, Demon Veen's social status is attested to by his general nonchalance toward gaming and gambling debts. In particular, his hurried departure from a dull family gathering for an evening of cards and gambling bespeaks his aristocratic disdain, and general *ennui*, while it echoes a similar exit made by Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's novella.<sup>325</sup>

Similarly, the use of parlor games in the novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a narrative device for the chaste revelation of love is parodied in Veen children's own penchant for parlor games. For example, the scene in *Anna Karenina* where Levin receives a covert confession of love from Kitty in a word game is recalled in *Ada* when, in a game of Scrabble, "Vaniada" is spelled out, revealing the children's unwholesome love affair

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<sup>325</sup> Demon arrives at Ardis Hall complaining that the "gaming [in town] is not what it used to be" and then impatiently leaves a family dinner "glutted with family joys and slightly annoyed he had missed the first half of a gambling night in Ladore for the sake of all that well-meant but not *quite* first-rate food" (242, 261). This line recalls an opening scene where Ivan Ilyich leaves a funeral for an evening of bridge in Tolstoy's novella of the same name, which also appears earlier in *Ada* as a piece of furniture: "Van...lowered himself on the *ivanilich* (a kind of sighing old hassock upholstered in leather)" (232). On the role of card playing and gambling in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novel, see Jorij Lotman's "The Theme of Cards and the Card Game in Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century", *PTL* 3 (1978), p. 455-492.

(226).<sup>326</sup> On several other occasions, moreover, the Veens' many language games disclose erotic messages which are anything but chaste, such as Ada's skillful anagrammatic manipulation of "*Eros qui prend son essor*" ("Eros, the rose and the sore"), with the result that the inhibitions and constructions of morality of *Ada*'s parent literary tradition are ignored and satirized (367).

Many of Van and Ada's language games merge finally in the invention of a secret code, ostensibly to serve the purpose of communication, when their romance temporarily enters the epistolary mode. As it develops, however, the code is progressively destabilized until it becomes a language game which resists, rather than conveys sense. Because the rules of the code are subject to ongoing 'deconstruction', Van and Ada's:

messages [become] even harder to read than to write, especially as both correspondents, in the exasperation of tender passion, inserted after thoughts, deleted phrases, rephrased insertions and reinstated deletions with misspellings and miscodings, owing as much to their struggle with inexpressible distress as to their overcomplicating the cryptogram (161).

Quite predictably, the Veens' abandon in these matters goes hand in hand with their general contempt for rules in games as in love, so that the games played in the novel are undercut through cheating or lack of adherence to any kind of rules, and break up before reaching a logical conclusion. The Veens' language games, like the greater language game that is *Ada*, appear to resist sense and to leave behind 'deconstructed' fragments which are subsequently integrated into the text. For example, the Van and Ada's code is eventually disrupted entirely and then reabsorbed incoherently and seemingly randomly as fragments into the greater narrative, as for example in the following passage:

Van plunged into the dense under growth. He wore a silk shirt, a velvet jacket, black breeches, riding boots with star spurs—and this attire was hardly convenient for making *klv zdB AoyvBno wkh gwzxm dqg dzwAAqvo a gwttv vq wifhm* Ada in a natural bower of aspens, *xlic mujzikml* [...] (157).

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<sup>326</sup> Cf. Appel, op. cit. p. 169.

Games in the text, then, breakdown around the general disregard for rules and prohibitions, and these games are subsequently incorporated into the main narrative with the appearance of ‘seamlessness’. In other words, *Ada* appears to be extremely fluid and resistant to stable textual structure, having the capacity to integrate just about anything with which it comes in contact.

### 3. *Trumps and Tropes*

While *Ada* turns outside of itself intertextually, this moment has its reversed counterpart in the novel’s predilection for self-indulgence. *Ada*’s ‘*amour propre*’ takes the form of pervasive textual introversion, which might be described by some as ‘writerly self-consciousness’, ‘autoreferentiality’ or ‘autofictionality’.<sup>327</sup> This is to say that references are made to Nabokov himself in the fictional world of *Ada* (or the “nulliverse” as Lucette calls it), which effectively fictionalize Nabokov, both author and text. The narrator, for example, speaks of “the days of Timur and Nabok” as well as the butterfly “*Nymphalis danaus Nab.*,...[and] its discoverer Professor Nabonidus of Babylon College”, which are self-conscious allusions to Nabokov, the novelist and the lepidopterist (158, 268).<sup>328</sup> Similarly, fictional characters from Nabokov’s other texts make appearances, as on the occasion of *Ada*’s 12th birthday for which the “dolorous nymphet” dons a *lolita*, which relates *Ada* and Dolores (*Lolita*) Haze, the nymphet of *Lolita* (218-9).<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Cf. Brian McHale’s *Pöstmödmernist Fictiön*, New York and London: Methuen, 1987 or Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, New York and London: Methuen, 1984.

<sup>328</sup> “*Nymphalis danaus Nab.*”, is at once a reference to Nabokov’s passion for lepidoptery, as well as his invention of the word nymphet which most dictionaries attribute directly to him. And *Ada* is of course, like *Lolita*, the story of a Nabokovian nymphet and her discoverer ‘Professor Nabonidus of Babylon College’. According to Boyd, Nabokov studied the butterflies of ancient Egypt, painted on the walls of Theban tombs in researching his *Butterflies in Art*, while he was working on *Ada*, so he was well acquainted with that country’s ancient art and mythology (Boyd 481). The play on the name Nabokov (Nabu, Nabok as “in the days of Timur and Nabok”) links the author to Nabu, one of the incarnations of Thoth who, coincidentally, was the mythical inventor of the tarot. Cf. Chapter 4 of this thesis.

<sup>329</sup> Intertextual games in *Ada* are always more complex than this simple observation and generally have the appearance of receding infinitely. Cf. Paul J. Thibault’s *Social Semiotics as Praxis: Text, Social Meaning Making and Nabokov’s Ada*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, Vol. 74, 1990. Thibault links this

While this kind of introverted self-indulgence is manifest in such references made by Nabokov to himself and to his other works, it equally has certain ramifications where other aspects of the text are concerned. In the construction of the text, for example, Ada's tendencies and preferences are mirrored in *Ada's* textual acrobatics and linguistic antics. In this case, *Ada\Ada's* playfulness takes the form of self-indulgent paronomasia that folds onanastically inwards.<sup>330</sup> And the text's double orientation, its propensity for introversion as well as for extroversion, is inscribed in Nabokov's chiasmatic rendition of the line from *Anna Karenina*, doubled back on itself and placed at *Ada's* inception.

Given this double orientation, it would seem a felicitous coincidence that both *Anna Karenina* and *Ada* are named after heroines whose names are palindromic, and can be read from either end. Indeed, it is significant in more ways than one that the name 'Ada' can be read in either direction, because Ada's doubly-directed lust reverberates through the text in rhetorical figures and anagrammatic games. Importantly, it is in *Ada* that these multidirectional rhetorical figures of which the text is assembled, meet and spell out the introverted proclivities of the Veen family, just as they render in prose the children's extroverted tendencies. The "ambiverted" girl and the palindrome 'Ada' at the 'center' of *Ada* constitute a point of shifting or reversal inscribed in the narrative, which insures the text's instability (165). This is why the equation of lust with anagrammatic language and subversive ludicity, appear to have their nexus in *Ada\Ada*. Because *Ada* is the shifter in all of the games of which *Ada* is made, and the subject of the novel, her destabilizing influence extends to virtually every aspect of the text.

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passage as well to the popular song "Carmen" in *Lolita*, to Mérimée's *Carmen*, and to Chateaubriand's *Le dernier Abencérage* through the "signifier little Andalusian gypsy" (130-2). Thibault's study is a meticulous semiotic analysis of the intertext in *Ada* which provides clues to many of Nabokov's language puns. However, interesting tracing Nabokov's obscure language puns may be, such an enterprise is not the focus of my argument here.

<sup>330</sup> That the text is made almost exclusively of cunning multilingual puns and expanses of rhetorical figures is attested to by Alfred Appel's observation that in *Ada*, "Nabokov seems to suffering from terminal paronomasia" (183). See "Ada described", in *Nabokov*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. In fact, in the introduction to *Bend Sinister* Nabokov comments that "[p]aronomasia is a kind of verbal plague, a contagious sickness in the world of words... where everybody is merely an anagram of everybody else" (*Bend Sinister*, New York: Vintage International, 1990, p.xv). Nabokov's tendency to be overly precious, particularly in *Ada*, has been criticized, as I mentioned above, as the source of difficulty in the text. Op. cit. Boyd, p. 536-63.

Therefore, with sister as with brother, this instability plays itself out in language, so that Lucette and Ada's symmetrical filial trysts, to which they refer as *vanouissements*, are recalled in rhetorical terms:

We were Mongolian tumblers, monograms, anagrams, adalucindas [...] our heads clamped in such odd combinations that Brigitte [...] thought that we were giving birth simultaneously to baby girls (375).

Love making's linguistic equivalent in this passage is a verbal redoubling of Ada and 'Lucinda' in real and invented ("adalucindas") rhetorical figures, which reflect the multiplication and disappearance of Adas and Lucindas ("...we were simultaneously giving birth...your Ada bringing out *une rousse*, and no one's Lucette, *une brune*." 375).

This relationship between language, sexuality, games and subversion which is in evidence throughout the text, is exemplified in a game of anagrams that Ada plays on her twelfth birthday:

Van looked at his love's inclined neck as she played anagrams with Grace, who had innocently suggested "insect."

"Scient," said Ada, writing it down.

"Oh no!" objected Grace.

"Oh yes! I'm sure it exists. He is a great scient. Dr. Entsic was a scient in insects."

Grace meditated, tapping her puckered brow with the eraser end of the pencil, and came up with: "Nicest!"

"Incest," said Ada instantly.

"I give up," said Grace. "We need a dictionary to check your little inventions" (85).<sup>331</sup>

As this passage makes clear, the anagram game (like all the other games played in *Ada*) is driven by Van and Ada's lust, so that the game ends up speaking for their passion. This, moreover, gives rise to the metaphorical and semantic shift in the narrative from

<sup>331</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that this same anagrammatic pun is central to Paul and Belinda Haas' (the makers of the movie version of *The Music of Chance*) film "Angels and Insects", about an amorous brother and sister in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the long-time incestuous relationship between brother and sister at the crux of the film and of the novel, is discretely spelled out by the governess, over a game of cards. The playing cards she uses are of the educational variety used to teach children to spell, which were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the subject of grammatical playing cards of past centuries, see Chapter 4, Section 5. *Cards and Text*.

'incest' to 'nicest' which occasions the text's general instability. In other words, the constant subversion of prohibition, censure and ultimately authority in the narrative, sets in motion the shifting that goes on in *Ada* and through *Ada*, at multiple textual registers.<sup>332</sup> In this specific case, both semantics and grammar are at issue since the anagram game highlights *Ada*'s irreverence with regard to both language and love, which leads invariably to the break down of the games from which the novel is constructed. Fittingly then it is *Ada*'s lack of respect for the rules of language as well as her anagrammic and semantic turn of phrase which send Grace off to consult a lexical authority.

#### 4. *Ada the Queen of Hearts*

Within a fictional context that is self-consciously constructed of language, games, and language games it is not without significance that Lucette describes *Ada* "as touched with fraise in four places [...] *pour conger une fraise*, a symmetrical queen of hearts" (375). That *Ada* is symmetrical and can be read from both ends like a playing card is important since, as I have been arguing, she constitutes a busy intersection in the Veen family's 'ambi-amorous' love triangle, regulating rhetorical traffic in the Veen children's polymorphously perverse liaisons. The precocious little heroine is necessarily reversible and symmetrical like a queen of hearts, and as such, *Ada* is ultimately a double-faced *mise en abyme* of herself.<sup>333</sup>

In various other contexts throughout *Ada*, playing cards are used as a recurrent metaphor for sexuality, and often trigger erotic memories. For example, the Veen's first

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<sup>332</sup> Op. Cit. Derrida, p. 409-17.

<sup>333</sup> Likewise, because the heraldic figures on the court cards are double-faced they reflect themselves and constitute a *mise en abyme* in the Dällenbach's primary sense of a "*la réflexion 'simple', représentée par le blason dans un blason*" (37-38). It has been argued that cards are two-faced because of their mythic lineage which links them through Thoth to Hermes, the two-faced gods to whom their invention is attributed in myth. See Lucien Dällenbach's *Le Récit spéculaire : contribution à l'étude de la mise en abyme*, Paris: Seuil, 1977, p. 37-38, and Mrs. van Rensselaer, *Prophetic, Educational, and Playing Cards*, 1912, p. 127.

intimate experiments are connected with Ada's castle of cards, built with only the two-faced court cards from a gambling deck:

"You [Ada] were building a house of cards, and your every movement was magnified, of course, as in a trance, dream-slow but also tremendously vigilant...". "I remember the cards," she said, "...[i]t was not a castle. It was a Pompeian Villa with mosaics and paintings inside, because I used only court cards from Grandpa's old gambling packs. Did I sit down on your hot hard hand?" (113).<sup>334</sup>

This initial erotic scene takes on the quality of an epiphany, which will be recalled frequently throughout the narrative, in keeping with the proustian obsession with memory that runs through *Ada*.<sup>335</sup> Lucette, then, will also remember her siblings' first sexual encounter when she remembers the card table on which Ada built her villa, along with her own recollections of "comminglings" and "adalucindas" with her sister. Exhibiting a remarkable facility for displacement, Lucette refers to their incestuous trysts as "Pressing the Spring" or releasing the lock, which ultimately and metonymically links card tables, locks and *jouissance*:

"Well, that secretaire," continued Lucette, considering her...patent-leather Glass shoe.... "That secretaire enclosed a folded card table and a top-secret drawer...it was crammed with our grandmother's love letters, written when she was twelve or thirteen. And our Ada knew, oh, she knew, the drawer was there but she had forgotten how to release the orgasm or whatever it is called in card tables" (374).

Sexuality ("our grandmother's love letters") and more specifically orgasm, are collapsed into in cards<sup>336</sup> and locks in this passage, as they are Pope's *The Rape of the*

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<sup>334</sup> This scene is perhaps based on the Chardin's 18<sup>th</sup>-century painting entitled *Château de cartes*, c. 1740 (see Fig. 8), which also makes an appearance in Nabokov's earlier novel *Bend Sinister*: "The only pure thing in the room was a copy of Chardin's *House of Cards*" (p. 34).

<sup>335</sup> Van, for example, consistently links playing cards and eroticism, so that awaiting Lucette while and entertaining erotic thoughts about the woefully absent Ada, Van's mind wanders "to the sitting room which gave on sun-bordered Greencloth Court", recalling up Ada's Villa of court cards and Lucette's card table (366). Likewise, during her extended absences Ada's calling card is the ace of hearts, which draws the metonymic association of her role in Lucette and Van's erotic life as the queen of hearts (330).

<sup>336</sup> Cf. Chapter 4, particularly notes 202 and 216, on the subject of playing cards and pornography.



Fig. 8



*Lock*, a mock epic which also makes an intertextual appearance in *Ada*. *The Rape of the Lock* is an allegorical account of the erotic conquest of a lock of hair from the poem's heroine, Belinda. The lock of hair, a thinly veiled metaphor for Belinda's virtue, is lost in a card game called *ombre*.<sup>337</sup> This is significant because *The Rape of the Lock* and the game of *ombre*, resurface with some regularity in *Ada*. For instance, on the occasion of Van's first meeting with Ada in an earlier passage, Pope's game of *Ombre* is hinted at when Ada introduces him to games belonging to her own "shadow and shine group", until they settle finally on one particular shadow game (*jeu d'ombres*) (51).<sup>338</sup>

To pursue this connection further, the game of *ombre*—the 'shadow' game of Pope's poem—got its name from *Hombre* a game popular in Spain from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which spread over the European continent, and persisted as a popular pastime into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>339</sup> If one places the original Spanish name of this card game alongside the cognate under which it became known in the rest of Europe, one gets *hombre-ombre* or man-shadow. This combination could easily be construed as an autoreferential pun of the sort to which I referred above, recalling the running play on being and shadow that turns up in a great deal of Nabokov's fiction, in names like *Lolita Haze*, *John Shade* and *Humbert Humbert*.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> On Nabokov's knowledge and opinion of Pope and the use he subsequently made of the 18th century poet, see Boyd op. cit. p. 315, 331, 418. Nabokov also borrowed from Pope for *Pale Fire*, hence the imaginary country Zembla.

<sup>338</sup> This connection with the game of *ombre* is suggested elsewhere in the narrative, as for example, in the mention of an English novel called "*Ombre Chevalier*" (270), a possible re-writing of Chateaubriand's "*Ombres et couleurs*" (280).

<sup>339</sup> For more on *Hombre / Ombre*, "the game of man" see Van Rensselaer's *Prophetical, Educational and Playing Cards*, New York, 1912, p. 253, an on Pope, p. 255

<sup>340</sup> All of these characters are referred to directly in the text as well. For example, Ada amuses herself by "translating John Shade into Russian and French", who is quoted as having written "Time is a singing in the ears" (577, 542).

## 5. Cards and Writing

Metaphors that depend on cards and card games also frame the account of Van Veen's two outstanding achievements: dancing on his hands, and writing *The Texture of Time*, a "space romance" (343).<sup>341</sup> For Van, writing and "gripping the brow of gravity" are somehow connected so that "the magical reversal" of perspective that occurs when he dances on his hands, is understood by Van as an acrobatic performance of the theory of time and space which he develops in *The Texture of Time* (82):

Thus the rapture young Mascodagama [Van's stage name] derived from overcoming gravity was akin to that of artistic revelation... Van on the stage was performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life—acrobatic wonders that had never been expected of them and which frightened children (185).

Because it is rhetorical (it performs his figures of speech organically) the gravity-defying hand-dance is, according to Van, on the same order of activity as the "self-imposed, extravagantly difficult, seemingly absurd task" that becomes his dissertation on time,

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<sup>341</sup> In Van's *Texture of Time* he develops his theory that the problem of time should actually be approached through space:

My purpose in writing my *Texture of Time* [...] is to] examine the essence of Time, not in its lapse, for I do not believe that its essence can be reduced to its lapse [...] I am aware that all who have tried to reach the charmed castle [Ada's castle of cards] have got lost in obscurity [...] what I endeavor to grasp is precisely the Time that Space helps me to measure [...] the *true* present, is an instant of zero duration, represented by a rich smudge, as the dimensionless point of geometry is by a sizable dot in the printer's ink on palpable paper [...] this is *my* time and theme [...] the arc of triumph—not, however, triumph over Time (536-559).

As the reader will recall, Mann referred to *The Magic Mountain* as a *Zeitroman*, a novel that attempts to represent time hermetically and linearly. Significantly, the construction of time put forth by Van in his *Texture of Time*, which work also has time as its theme, distinguishes itself as a self-proclaimed synchronic "space romance" (562). It is tempting to read passages of *The Texture of Time* as intertextual puns on Mann's *The Magic Mountain* or a parody of Mann's novel as a *Zeitroman*, which Nabokov held in contempt. For example, Van writes that "a graduated tape, even of infinite length, is not Space itself" but a metaphor for the process of writing in time, a metaphor which may refer to Mann's "Silent Sister" (541). Likewise, Van bemoans not being able to pack Ada's bothersome husband "off to a mountain sanitarium in a novel to linger there through a few last pages of epilogical mopping up", a passage which might be read as a sarcastic commentary on Mann's sanatorial time paradigm (528). Similarly, Van speaks of Elsie Langford, "a gaunt girl with a feverish flush and protruding teeth, who had been obscurely involved in a 'poltergeist' affair at a medical institution" which parodies Elly Brand and the "Highly Questionable" episode in *The Magic Mountain* (470). For more on Nabokov and Mann, see Boyd, op. cit. 138, 181, 349, 494.

namely *The Texture of Time*. Importantly, however, *The Texture of Time* “always reminded [Ada] of the sun-and-shade games [the game of ombre] she used to play as a child in the secluded avenues of Ardis Park” and not, indeed, of Van’s hand-dance (759). So if one combines both Ada and Van’s assessments of his major accomplishments, then many of the metaphors for writing, time and space, as well as for *Ada*, come full circle through Van’s gravity defying acrobatics, the shade/ombre game and *The Texture of Time*, to the castle of cards that Ada builds on the oft-remembered occasion of her first tryst with Van:

It was Ada’s castle of cards. It was the standing of a metaphor on its head not for the sake of the trick’s difficulty, but in order to perceive an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time (184-5).<sup>342</sup>

Ardis (the name of the manor and its arbors where Van and Ada expend their first ardors) is Greek for arrow, so the ‘ardis of time’ refers to a linear trajectory between two temporal points.<sup>343</sup> The *triumph* over linear narrative progression (‘the ardis of time’) is rendered metaphorically in the text as Van’s hand-dance or as Ada’s castle of cards and is, quite literally, the subject of Van’s dissertation, *The Texture of Time*. What Van’s work propounds and *Ada* pretends to perform, is an aleatory, risk-oriented form of artistic production, a compositional mode that supposedly emerges from random connections and contingencies. Hence, the Veen’s first intimate moment, which takes place as Ada chooses court cards at random for her ‘Villa’, is recalled as an analogy for the writing process informing Van’s *The Texture of Time*. “Chance creases in the texture of time” such as the memory of Ada’s castle of cards resurface throughout the supposedly haphazard collection of elements of which *Ada* is made, giving the impression that the text is constructed as a function of chance and coincidence (32, 34). Indeed, it is the general climate of stochasticity in *Ada* which prompts Ada to declare

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<sup>342</sup> Cf. Joyce Goggin, “La Métaphore tacite” (*La problématique de l’implicite*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1992, p. 27-37.

<sup>343</sup> Hence “Ardis. Arrowhead Manor. *Le Château de la Flèche*, Flesh Hall” (318).

that she is “only a pale wild girl with gypsy hair in a deathless ballad, in a nulliverse, in Rattner’s ‘menald world’ where the only principle is random variation” (416). So both *Ada*, and *The Texture of Time* which it frames, are purported to be compositions of chance, a triumph over the ardis of linear narrative time, and a performance of writing for which playing cards are a preferred metaphor.

Furthermore, playing cards as a metaphor for writing are part of the hallmark Nabokovian autoreferentiality to which I referred earlier. The deck collapses and re-enacts the random process of writing which the narrative voices of *Ada* claim as their *modus operandi*, and which Nabokov suggested was as the generative principle of his own writing. As it is well known, Nabokov had the unconventional habit of writing his manuscripts on index cards, and often posed for photographers doing precisely that.<sup>344</sup> This somewhat unorthodox method supposedly offered the author the possibility of reshuffling his cards at will in order to restructure his narrative, while heightening the element of chance in the writing process. In other words the implication is that the author’s deck of cards, metaphorically speaking, allows for seemingly endless random combinations of narrative elements which fall where they may.

*Ada* does not adhere to many of the recognizable codes of representation such as narrative linearity, and it is a partial freedom from the restraints of some program or other of mimetic representation, which adds to the illusion that the text came together through the luck of the draw. Nabokov is at pains to convey the idea that *Ada* is a sort of ‘*coup de cartes*’, that is, a random artistic production for which cards and card games became a generative metaphor. So what Nabokov is performing in his publicity photographs for the press, is a reenactment of his (and Van Veen’s) chance-oriented

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<sup>344</sup> See Boyd “Lolita Sparks: Cornell, 1955-1957”, p. 288-318. This idiosyncrasy was apparently very dear to Nabokov, since he frequently arranged publicity photographs of himself writing on cards in unconventional settings, like the back seat of a car (See illustrations in Boyd, particularly 226-7, “Nabokov composing *Lolita* on index cards in a car—a reconstruction for *Life* magazine, 1958”, or “Nabokov composing at his lectern, 1966”, p. 562-3). In pointing this out, I am suggesting that Nabokov liked to draw attention to his practice of writing on index cards, as being somehow essential, or analogous to the creative process. Hence, when writing on *Ada* was going particularly well, Nabokov wrote to a friend “New novel progressing at an alarming rate—at least half a dozen cards daily” (Boyd 509) Likewise, John Shade of Nabokov’s metafictional *Palefire*, meticulously composes his heroic epic on “eight medium-sized index cards” (p. 1)

Cf. note 23, Chapter 2, p. of this thesis on Gibbon’s use of playing cards to write *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

writing practice, with the hopeful result that this process, thematized in *Ada* and elsewhere in Nabokov, will appear to be somehow uncannily grounded in ‘reality’.<sup>345</sup>

In *Ada* then, writing is thematized as a practice in which word play, proustian memories, dream images, and rhetorical figures present themselves in random combination like playing cards, turned up by chance. These elements are subsequently held or discarded by the writer at the moment of composition, as possible or impossible candidates for the narrative which he writes. So because the narrative of *Ada*, in which *The Texture of Time* is cited in full, is structured around a sort of game logic and puzzle-solving, Van arrives at the conclusion that “all art is a game”, while Ada contends that “in ‘real’ life we are creatures of chance” (426, 452). It is fitting then, that Ada’s castle of cards be remembered again and again as a condensed model for writing, and for the process of constructing narrative based on chance (452). Given this is not surprising that at Van Veen’s college poker game with an expert cardsharp and a “doctored deck”, the discussion turns to the subject of art and people who think they are artists, like novelists:

“I say, Dick, ever met a gambler in the States called Plunkett? Bald grey chap when I knew him...One of my father’s pals. Great artist.”

“Artist?”

“Yes, artist. I’m an artist. I suppose *you* think you’re an artist. Many people do.”

“What on earth is an artist?”

“An underground observatory,” replied Van promptly.

“That’s out of some modern novel,” said Dick, discarding his cigarette after a few avid inhales.

“That’s out of Van Veen,” said Van Veen (174).

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<sup>345</sup> *Ada* is not Nabokov’s first use of cards and card games as a generative metaphor for his fiction. Readers of Nabokov will recall *King, Queen, Knave*, an earlier novel that uses court cards as a metaphor for its principle characters, and their interaction. Incidentally, this novel was also written on index cards. Moreover, in his own lectures on *Mansfield Park*, Nabokov comments on the fitness of card games as both a metafictional device for the expression of elements of narrative, and as a metaphor for textual composition. See “*Mansfield Park* (1814)” in *Lectures on Literature*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980:

All this talk [of marriage in *Mansfield Park*] is artistically interlinked with the game of cards they are playing. Speculation, and Miss Crawford, as she bids, speculates whether or not she should marry...This reechoing of the game by her thoughts recalls the same interplay between fiction and reality [throughout the novel]...this theme of planning and scheming, linked up with improvements of the grounds...[and] card games forms a very pretty pattern in the novel (40).

Quoting himself, Van Veen the artist asserts authoritatively that an artist is an ‘underground observatory’. If this is the case, then Van’s art is self-contained (“‘That’s out of Van Veen,’ said Van Veen”) and reproduces its own possible world or ‘nulliverse’ in infinite regression. What is more, by Van’s definition an artist is someone who, like a cardsharp, belongs to the underground because they engage in slightly clandestine activities. Hence Van’s relates what he does in his writing, to the artistry and slight of hand of the creative cardsharp with whom he is at odds (“I’m an artist. I suppose you think you’re an artist”). While bluffing is, of course, a part of the game of poker, playing with mirrors and marked cards as the characters do in *Ada*, is certainly not. In this novel, however, cheating is elevated to the status of an art form, entirely compatible with everything else that goes on in the text, so that a dishonest poker game does not constitute a disruptive event here as it might in some other fictional contexts. Given this then it is perfectly natural that during the poker game, Dick the cardsharp is not surprised to learn that Van has been cheating, but rather that he has been dealt three honest aces.

The similarity between cardsharpping and writing, according to Van, resides in his observation that both artists practice “the tricks of an art...pure and abstract and therefore genuine” (172). The product of the tricks of Van’s trade is a fictional world articulated through “parlor game rules”, and populated with “crystal cretins” and “Cartesian glassmen”, while the professional poker player develops a repertoire of similarly fictional moves involving reflective surfaces and marked cards (123, 173, 558). So what makes of *Ada* a ‘random nulliverse’ constructed around an artistic mode somehow similar to cardsharpping, is the way in which the text embraces “the gambit, the gambol and the gambler”, “mere poker luck”, and most importantly the “faint possibility of trickery” (200, 352, 172). So, just as the text gives the impression of being constructed of chance occurrences, it is also the product of trickery and rampant transgressions of prohibition such as the one against cheating, which is perhaps the only universal rule of card games.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Cf. “On the Morality of Card-Playing” in “Cavendish’s” *Card Essays, Clay’s Decisions and Card-Table Talk*, London: Thos. De la Rue & Co., 1879, p. 13-40.

## 6. *Ada and Exchange*

Van's college poker game comes to an abrupt end when he indignantly hurls cards and chips in his opponent's face, and writes a cheque to cover the losses of his "ecstatically astonished" fellow players, Jean and Jacques (175). Van's monetary nonchalance in this scene at the poker table makes it abundantly clear that, for the Veens, money is no object. The Veens' disposition in money matters is typical of the class to which they belong, a class affluent—or that remembers itself as being affluent—enough to permit of gratuitous expenditures, or purposeless spending.<sup>347</sup> Van's gesture is characteristic of the aristocratic privilege to which the Veens are born, and which privilege colors all of their monetary transactions. Hence, the family's economic profile is defined throughout the novel by various forms of ostentatious and aleatory expenditure compatible with inherited privilege such as gambling. Demon, for example, is always eager to duck out for an evening of cards and gambling, and Ada's nostalgic reminiscences late in the novel turn to "the happy old days when Demon paid all [of his son's] gambling debts", or her vacation in the casinos Nevada, her "rhyme-name town" (476, 333). As I have argued elsewhere, risky financial exchanges such as gambling are essentially forms of 'sovereign expenditure' which incur 'noble debt' and which are properly settled in a gentlemanly or regal fashion.<sup>348</sup> So as people of gentle birth, Van and Ada indulge their sovereign privilege in unorthodox, gratuitous financial expenditures and pay up regally.

While gambling is represented in many contexts throughout *Ada*, it also informs the characters' behaviors in other areas, particularly where sexuality is concerned. And since sexuality is more or less the subject of the novel, it is not without importance that sex and gaming should be related.<sup>349</sup> In connecting the two, I return to Bataille's model

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<sup>347</sup> Cf. Chapter 3 of this dissertation, particularly Section 4, "Economic Gambles", p. 23-33. (specifically p. 29)

<sup>348</sup> See Chapter 3 of this thesis on Derrida and Bataille. Cf. Thomas Kavanagh's *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth Century France*

<sup>349</sup> This association is also made by Van, whose metonymic word play moves into the libidinal economy, eliding

of sexuality and economy, wherein noncopulatory sexual activities (like the ones which define Van and Ada's romance) are considered a form of gratuitous expenditure, akin to the expenditure entailed in gaming.<sup>350</sup> According to Bataille, in a sexual economy based on Puritanism, certain aspects of which coincide with utilitarianism, sexuality is centered on reproduction, whereas gratuitous or ostentatious sexuality (*dépense*) is considered a delinquent form of exchange. So if the Veens are monetarily capricious and engage in forms of expenditure which are more or less gratuitous like gambling, their views on sexuality are similarly whimsical, and shape the parallel incestuous and ostentatious libidinal economy that informs *Ada*. In other words, the monetary exchanges transacted by the 'tender siblings' are lavish and ostentatious, just as the pervasive descriptions of orgiastic sexual expenditure throughout the novel constitute a libidinal economy which is in no way restrictive.

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to establish a connection between expenditure, subjectivity, sexuality and writing based on the work of Bataille, Derrida and others. I have argued, for example, that forms of sexual and monetary expenditure which are non-restrictive or gratuitous, like noncopulatory sex and gambling, are analogous to artistic writing, a category to which the three novels which serve as exempla for this thesis all belong in some measure. This is because, in theories of economy and writing such as Bataille's, expository writing is thought to correspond to monetary utilitarianism while artistic writing, is more analogous to what Derrida has called general economics, that is modes of expenditure that have no ostensible utilitarian purpose.<sup>351</sup>

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himself with Ada (Vaniada) in Nirvana via Nevada ("Nirvana, Nevada, Vaniada") (583).

<sup>350</sup> On the relationship between sexuality and expenditure see Bataille's *La part maudite*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1967, particularly "Le principe de la perte", p. 28-31 and "Le Christianisme et la révolution", p.41-3. According to Bataille, "l'activité sexuelle perverse (c'est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale)...[est une activité pour laquelle] il est nécessaire de réserver le nom de *dépense* à l'exclusion de tous les modes de consommation qui servent de moyen terme à la production...[car] l'accent est placé sur la *perte* qui doit être la plus grande possible pour que l'activité prenne son véritable sens" (28). The waste (*perte*) that accompanies non-reproductive sexual activities is, according to Bataille, the equivalent of the potlatch and other forms of non-utilitarian expenditure in the economy of the body. Cf. Susan Sontag's *Illness as a Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p. 57.

<sup>351</sup> Under the aegis of expository writing I would include those texts that have as their ostensible purpose the demonstration of some aspect of 'reality', and which expect that they express some sort of transparent



If, following Bataille and Derrida, it is possible to read texts as falling within a spectrum of possible modes, each based on an specific economics of discourse, I would suggest that *Ada* falls far from the utilitarian end of the scale for a variety of reasons. For example, there is a spectrum of discourse from general to restrictive within fiction, so that traditional realism, which is expository in so far as it claims to seamlessly represent realities external to itself, would have more to do with a restrictive than a general economics of fiction. *Ada* on the other hand is not only unrealistic, it is also particularly resistant to sense, logic and linearity. According to Derrida, a general economy ultimately arrives at the breakdown (*l'absolu déchirement*) of the kind of meaning (*sens*) or logic that gives itself up to linear reading (*se donner à lire*) resulting in writing which would subvert even the most fundamental presuppositions of reading and could, therefore, be read “*dans n'importe quelle main : la droite ou la gauche*” (407).

While *Ada* does not perform such a breakdown in any absolute sense, the novel certainly presents a variety of reading problems, due in part to its seemingly complete disregard for familiar structure, sequence, continuity and realistic conventions of representation. If the greater economic paradigm of *Ada* were based on regulation and recirculation, expenditure which is ostentatious or without *telos* like gambling and noncopulatory sex, would distinguish itself from the contextual circulation of wealth. In the case of *Ada*, however, *Ada* is the greater economy so that, as a mode of exchange, sexual and monetary gambles do not constitute disruptive events in the greater textual circulation of wealth.

Moreover, novels which may be described as restrictive economies, like some of the narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often favor closure, that is, they appear to be entities

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correspondence with ‘reality’ while uncritically accepting or ignoring their own constructedness or artificiality. While one may think of fiction as discursive ostentation or gambling, there are many more restrictive economies of fiction such as traditional high realism, which is expository in so far as it claims to seamlessly represent realities external to itself.

Cf. Jacques Derrida, “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale” in *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris: Seuil, 1967, p. 369-407. In models of discursive economics, artistic writing, (for example fiction) is seen as having more in common with what Derrida would call “*économie générale*”, whereas expository, nonfictional discourse which purports to be co-extensive with, or corresponding to ‘reality’ is more utilitarian in nature and partakes in restrictive economics (*l’économie restreinte*).

complete and conclusive in themselves. Frequently in such narratives, it appears that events have lead inexorably to a specific and unavoidable *telos*, with the effect that most narrative details can be accounted for within the logic of the text. *Ada*, however, resists closure, so that the narrative is open-ended and frustrates any desire the reader may have for a satisfying resolution. Unlike novels that conclude by recuperating most occurrences, including narrative happenstance to the logic of the text, so that every detail may be accounted for and serve the purposes of a ‘natural conclusion’, *Ada* spills over with narrative surplus. So instead of offering the reader closure, *Ada* reaches beyond itself opening onto a jacket blurb which, to all intents and purposes, describes another virtual novel, offering “much, much more” (589).

In such a context, it is significant that the reader may be invited to understand the novel as somehow analogous to *Ada*’s castle of cards, or to Van’s poker game. Gambling, which is obviously dependent on chance, constitutes purposeless incompatible form of expenditure or vice in a restrictive economy. While this may be true, all kinds of gambles including art and artistic writing always already coexist with more restrictive economies. I am suggesting therefore, that in terms of discursive economics *Ada* appears to constitute a gamble at the textual index of exchange from without, in terms of what kind of writing this text constitutes, and from within because the novel thematizes gambling, and appears to be constructed as a gamble.

### ***7. Old Masters and Young Mistresses***

Many forms of gambling manifest themselves throughout *Ada* as an activities both recreational and financial. For example, it is explained early on that *Ada* and Van’s father, Demon Veen, has invested his half of the family fortune in speculative ventures. Formerly a Manhattan banker, Demon decides to devote himself late in life to his “twofold hobby [of] collecting old masters and young mistresses” (4). Known as it is to be risky business, art collecting is a hobby particularly well suited to an aristocrat with a predilection for wenching and gaming. Indeed, because art has no quantifiable utilitarian use-value, and because it becomes ‘priceless’ when the title of ‘masterpiece’ is

arbitrarily and fairly unpredictably bestowed upon it, trading in art is perhaps the perfect gamble.

While risk—like the risk involved in playing poker or investing in the art market—is an important element in the text, there is equally an underlying and pervasive preoccupation with art collection and the museum. Demon, in fact, attempts to create an all-inclusive museum which would contain microfilm of the world's master pieces. Demon's obsession with the museum extends to the general way in which he experiences and describes his life, so that he says of his daughter Ada that "her mind is a closed museum", and refers to the "vast library of microfilmed last thoughts" which comprises "the copiously illustrated catalogue" of his son, Van's, mind (435, 436).<sup>352</sup> This tendency to conflate art with life and museum with experience, perhaps accounts for Demon naming his son after the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch Master, Otto *van Veen*.

Moreover, this fascination with the museum, like all things in *Ada*, is a family affair. Predictably, as enthusiasm for the museum is transferred from father to son it takes a decidedly more erotic turn, and results in Van spending a great deal of time in his callow years at the "Villa Venus: an Organized Dream", or 'gentlemen's club' (348). The Villas Venus, of which there are one hundred in different locations around *Ada's* fictional globe, are part of a project conceived by the adolescent Eric Veen and executed by "David van Veen, a wealthy architect of Flemish extraction". From without the Villas are meticulously constructed as a sort of museum of architecture "from dodo to dada, from Low Gothic to Hoch Modern" (350). From within, any of the Villas in the Venus chain are designed to be living erotic museums in flesh, boasting a collection that includes every possible variety of feminine charm from "slender Nordic dolls" to "opulent Southern charmers" to the exotic "Egypsies" (347, 348, 349). In turn, each of Villa Venus' "collectibles" evokes a masterpiece in portraiture, so that the "three Egyptian squaws" that Van selects for his pleasure, are "borrowed...from a reproduction of a Theban fresco...printed in Germany (*Künstlerpostkarte* Nr. 6034)" (353).<sup>353</sup>

<sup>352</sup> Cf. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, London: Fontana Press, 1991, p. 76-77.

<sup>353</sup> Cf. note 320 on Nabokov's knowledge of ancient Egyptian art. .

The Villa Venus harks back to Ada's castle of cards, that is, to her "Pompeian Villa with mosaics and paintings inside" made only from court cards and, consequently, to the Veen children's first shared sexual experience ("Did I sit down on your hot hard hand?") (113). The Villas and the castle of cards from "grampa's gambling decks" are similarly inclusive, in that each deck of cards is of itself a kind of perpetual almanac<sup>354</sup>, from which Ada produces a miniature art gallery in court cards and each Villa contains every possible female creature. I am suggesting then, that since decks of cards are often thought of as being self-contained and encyclopedic, the Pompeian Villa mirrors Van's Villas, Demon's collection, *Ada* the novel, and Van's *Texture of Time* in such a way that these elements recede into each other, as a *mise en abyme* of the novel as a whole.

But while *Ada*, the Villas, the cards, and Demon's collection appear to be exhaustive museums, they also undercut or parody the idea of the collection.<sup>355</sup> The source of this parody, like the constant decentering that goes on in *Ada*, is traceable, to Ada who constitutes a paronomastic shifter in the text, a center that is perpetually displaced. For example, in the case of Van's visits to the various Villas of Venus which are intended as an antidote for Ada, she resurfaces repeatedly in anagrammic games which throw the narrative off centre and disrupt the coherence of the text. Hence, the popular name of one of the Villas is the "Madam-I'm-Adam House", a pun and a palindrome that takes in the style of Robert Adams in which the Villa is faithfully constructed, and re-echoes Ada's palindromic name (349). Likewise, Ada and ardis are recalled incessantly through Van's 'cure' at the Villa ("the trembling Adada", "a pale Andalusian", "the ardent Ardilllusian", "her name was really Adora") so that the last word in the chapter is Ada ("the soft little creature in Van's desperate grasp was Ada") (353, 354, 358). Finally, Van's feverish memories of Ada erupt in paronomasia and give form to this description of the Villa Venus:

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<sup>354</sup> Cf. Chapter 4, Section 2, "In the Beginning: *Ex Africa Semper Aliquid Novi*".

<sup>355</sup> Cf. Appel, *op. cit.* p. 161: "*Ada* is a kind of museum in more ways than one. As the family chronicle to end all such chronicles, it is also a museum of the novel". Appel goes on, however, to show how in *Ada* the idea of the museum is consistently undercut with parody.

[Van Veen's Villa Venus] looked like [...] a converted convent [...] with such miraculous effect that one could not distinguish the arabesque from the arbutus, ardor from art, the sore from the rose (351).

So once again, the text breaks down around *Ada* until narrative elements become indistinguishable from one another, and notions of sense and narrative logic *appear* to have given way to a deconstructive language game.

## 8. Conclusion

*Ada* then, approaches what Derrida calls a 'general economy' of discourse, because the text seems to go against the grain of familiar narrative logic. Probably one of the most salient and subversive features of this text is the incest romance that it recounts and this, I have argued, is the element of the text around which narrative conventions and structured sense almost breakdown. In other words, the happy and passionate sibling romance that *Ada* tells, has a great deal to do with the way in which the text is structured. Moreover, this liaison at the heart of the novel sets up a sort of general decentering in the text so that non-reproductive sexuality and monetary gambles constitute compatible rather than disruptive events in the narrative, because they seem to follow the circulation of wealth in the text.

I have also argued that because of the way in which the text is put together, the decentering that goes on in *Ada* is analogous to Van's poker game, which undercuts the prohibition of cheating. The text, I would surmise, is collapsed into the poker game with the 'crystal cretin' an occurrence which reflects the ostensibly random confluence of elements of which the text is made. The novel is fragmentary and appears to have been produced as a function of chance, as a random collection of borrowings from the canon, and does not seem to be based on any variety of narrative logic. In this respect, *Ada* is likened a castle of cards made up of palindromes and random rhetorical figures, always threatening to collapse and reconstruct itself elsewhere.

But while *Ada* appears to be a textual performance of stochastic and general economics, there is after all, a central organizing metanarrative which has made it into

the text by slight of hand. For Nabokov, the old Master, has given us a collection of young mistresses, a veritable gallery of and willing and disposable virgins who, like Lucette, are considerate enough to commit suicide when things become cumbersome. Hence, the Master has dealt the reader a strong suit of 19<sup>th</sup>-century-style misogyny, along with the queen of hearts. Although the text appears to have come together by the luck of the draw, and to function as an unregulated economy of textual elements, the profound misogyny which underscores the narrative is logic to which the texts consistently returns.<sup>356</sup>

Moreover, Ada's ontology is very different from Van's because she is primarily a narrative object as opposed to being a active and controlling participant like Van. Hence, during her extended absence in the novel she is present as a film, or as Lucette says "she's only a picture painted on air". But as a fictional character whose subjectivity is zero-based, she is also the place of difference in the text, the point at which ludicity enters the novel, a playing field for the free-play of Van's signifier. So in spite of appearances, *Ada* does adhere to a formal aesthetic, in so far as the norms of misogynist fiction are present so that the novel does not *entirely* deconstruct itself, or disengage from recognizable metanarratives. In other words, while *Ada* has the appearance of a text that could be read, as Derrida wrote "*dans n'importe quelle main : la droite ou la gauche*", Nabokov has more correctly, as Rousseau wrote, written a text to be read "*qu'avec une main*" (406).<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Indeed, the overwhelming and unsettling misogyny of the text has proved a rough spot in Nabokov criticism, which Brian Boyd and others have attempted to smooth out. Boyd, for example, tries to accord greater importance to the Lucette character in an attempt to justify the subject of narration, thereby arguing that Lucette is a significant character in the novel, and not just Ada and Van's expendable 'love slave'. See Boyd, *Nabokov: The American Years, Ada*, p. 536-563.

<sup>357</sup> Rousseau, *Les confessions I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, p.74.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Engines of Loss : Ritual Poker and Paul Auster's The Music of Chance*



#### 1. Introduction

In Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis, I explained how card games may be compatible or incompatible elements of the novels in which they are narrated. I also discussed how—as a function of the degree of compatibility that fictional card games enjoy within their narrative context—readers may discern several things. I argued, for example, that in *Der Zauberberg* the card game “Vingt-et-un” constitutes a disruption and a turning point in the narrative, whereas in *Ada*, the poker game is a well-integrated non-event, albeit an essential element of the text. In this chapter, I will discuss the poker game around which Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* is constructed, with the aforementioned readings of Mann and Nabokov in mind. In doing so, I will describe how the poker game at the center of Auster’s novel is at once a *compatible* and a *disruptive* occurrence in the text, because in part of how, and perhaps when, the novel was written.

As I will show, *The Music of Chance* is an undecidable text, centered on a sickening decisive poker game. The consequence of this undecidability, which effects virtually every element in the narrative save the poker game, is a deep and underlying tension that comes to inform the text. This tension, I will argue, arises in part because of incorrect presuppositions maintained by characters in the novel, regarding the appropriateness of their actions to the fictional situations in which they find themselves. Furthermore, the characters’ persistent misreading of their circumstances eventually sets up a conflict between the two economies of the text; an economy which they

presuppose, and the economy with which they must live. So because of this double monetary ethic around which *The Music of Chance* is structured, it must also be given a double reading, as a tale of poker playing and extravagant losses of fortune, and as a story about restricted expenditure and careful book-keeping.

Furthermore, this tension, which is the result of discrepancies in the economic practices represented in the novel, has ramifications at multiple textual registers. Hence, in the case of both the monetary and the discursive economies of the *Music of Chance*, it would be difficult to find a model that fully accounts for the workings of the text. In monetary terms for example, exchange in *The Music of Chance* appears at first glance to be based on some hybrid form of utilitarianism and late capitalism. However, while it seems that monetary exchanges transacted in the narrative should eventually be regulated by simple utilitarian principles, transaction actually gives rise to an upward spiral of debt and nonrecuperable loss, which threatens to extend beyond the novel. And in terms of narrative representation, this fictional economic model translates into a conservative economics of realism and telocentric linearity, which is eventually undercut so that possible expectations are thoroughly subverted. Hence, while appearing to adhere to traditional, realistic narrative structures such as linearity and resolution, *The Music of Chance* turns out to be an open-ended and undecidable text, which cannot be entirely accounted for within a traditional, restrictive economic textual model.

## **2. Freedom, Indenture, Contractual Obligation**

*The Music of Chance*, as the title implies, is a text constructed around the coincidence of chance occurrences. The novel, in fact, begins when Jim Nashe, a Boston fireman, unexpectedly inherits two hundred thousand dollars from a father whom he barely knew. After freeing himself of all previous indenture with the windfall inheritance, Nashe buys a new car, and “for one whole year he d[oes] nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America as he wait[s] for the money to run out” (1).<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Paul Auster, *The Music of Chance*, New York: Viking Press, 1990, p.1. All other references to *The Music of Chance* are in the text.



Appropriately, Nashe sets out on his largely haphazard odyssey, in the spirit of one tossing the dice, that is, with a certain casual resignation to chance:

[H]e missed the ramp to the freeway—a common enough mistake—but instead of driving the extra twenty miles that would have put him back on course, he impulsively went up the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road. It was a sudden, unpremeditated decision, but in the brief time that elapsed between the two ramps Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both ramps were finally the same (6).

After siding with chance in this way, Jim Nashe's life supposedly becomes a random voyage fueled by the freedom that the inheritance money buys. This freedom, however, proves to be illusory. For if Jim's world has been opened up to the thrills of aleatory rambling, the reader is given constant clues that his "freedom" is actually some subtle form of bondage:

[h]e realized that he was no longer in control of himself, that he had fallen into the grip of some baffling, over-powering force. He was like a crazed animal, careening blindly from one nowhere to the next, but no matter how many resolutions he made to stop, he could not bring himself to do it (6,7).

Eventually Nashe is forced to admit that it is "unsettling to think of his life in these terms"; as a series of chance events which have dropped a large sum of money into his lap and somehow enslaved him to aimless, perpetual motion (2).

Nashe's ability to maintain the difficult balance between having the freedom to act upon chance, and being enslaved to varying degrees is a central problem in the novel. In fact, the degree to which Nashe is at liberty to take up with chance is at stake where most of his behavior is concerned. For example, before he inherits the money, and after he drops out of college, chance appears to be the unifying principle behind Jim's career choices: salesman, mover, bartender, taxi driver, and fireman. What is more, this last career move is made "on a whim", because someone he had met in his cab one night was about to take the entry exam and talks Nashe into "giving it a try" (8). So Nashe "stumbles into" a job as a fireman, a profession which he is quite ready "to throw away on the strength of an impulse" when his inheritance comes through (8).

When Jim eventually spends all but the last fifteen thousand dollars of the inheritance money, his natural impulse is to try to replenish the depleted funds “at the track, gambling on horses” leaving his finances to chance (19).<sup>359</sup> However, as the episode at the track fails to put him ahead, Nashe’s stores reach an all-time low and his financial situation threatens to bring on “full-blown panic” (19). At this precise juncture, luck dictates that Jim come to the aid of Jack Pozzi, a professional card-sharp. Jim spots Pozzi, badly beaten and stumbling in the ditch along side the road, following a high-stakes poker game that went wrong. Because Pozzi’s hosts of the previous night suspected that he had ‘taken’ them, they rob Pozzi of his winnings and beat him to within inches of his life. What is worse, he explains, is that he had counted on those winnings to finance another sure-thing game with a ‘couple of suckers’ named Flower and Stone, who also happen to be multimillionaires. So, undaunted by appearances, or by Pozzi’s somewhat nauseating account of this last high-stakes poker game, Nashe decides to back him for ten thousand dollars in his game with Flower and Stone.

Curiously, Jim looks on backing Pozzi in his poker game with the millionaires as a standard business investment, and indeed Pozzi refers to Jim’s idea of speculation as standard ‘venture capitalism’. Given the history of Nashe’s transactions, as well as the greater economy of the text, which supposedly to this point has been based on chance, Pozzi does not seem to Jim a bad investment; in fact he confidently believes that he may well have “hit the jackpot” (23). So, Jim and Pozzi quickly arrive at an agreement on the terms of their partnership: Jim will put up backer’s fees for Pozzi’s food and clothing, which he will “write-off...as a normal business expense”, for a fifty percent split of the profits, minus the initial investment of ten thousand dollars (57). It is this agreement that will take them to the millionaires’ mansion, across a bridge and through the town of Ockham, to the estate where Pozzi has contracted to play poker. And like Occam’s razor, the transaction with Flower and Stone heralded by this crossing, will reduce the contextual complexities and superfluous baggage of Jim Nashe’s life considerably.

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<sup>359</sup> This is not Nashe’s only bout with gambling on his voyage. On another occasion, for example, he goes on “a gambling jag in Las Vegas, miraculously breaking even after four days of black-jack and roulette” (13). In other words, gambling is a well integrated aspect of his character and behaviors, to which he returns frequently.

Although Flower and Stone have been introduced by Pozzi as “ignoramus”, “genuine peabrains” and a couple of “born chumps”, they turn out to be formidable and interesting opponents (30). A former accountant and optometrist, Flower and Stone became millionaires seven years previously in a state lottery, since which time they have made a further fortune in market speculation. However, in spite of the infantilizing effect that the lottery winnings have had on this eccentric “Laurel and Hardy” pair, Jim becomes increasingly aware that Flower and Stone are certainly not devoid of complexity over the course of the evening. Their hobbies, for example, which he finds childish and eccentric on first inspection, later reveal themselves to be frightening, totalitarian model ‘utopias’, the brainchildren of their strange imaginations. With this awareness, moreover, comes the uneasy realization that Flower and Stone’s business acumen and eye for detail belong to a more threatening side of their character.<sup>360</sup>

For example, Nashe will learn to read Stone’s utopia, the City of the World, as a tiny synchronic “model of some bizarre, totalitarian world” (87). Indeed, in his obsession with building the ultimate, all-inclusive model, Stone has planned to construct a minute model of the model itself, which in turn would necessitate an infinite regression of tiny models within models. Eerily enough moreover, Stone’s model gives the illusion of containing the millionaire’s mansion, at the very moment that Stone is explaining the model to Nashe and Pozzi. Indeed, Stone’s obsessive compulsion to include every moment and minute detail in his nightmarish model City of the World makes it, as Flower eagerly asserts “more than just a toy”: it is rather, a self-contained “what [one] might call utopia—a place where the past and future come together, where good finally triumphs over evil” (79). Of course, the only draw-back to this is that the triumphant ‘good’ depicted in the City of the World, is *Stone’s* notion of what ‘good’ should be.

Flower’s utopia is equally disturbing in its own special way. Housed in a series of five rooms, Flower has assembled a “monument to trivia”, a collection, he explains,

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<sup>360</sup> Cf. Nashe no longer knew what to think. At first he had taken Flower and Stone for a pair of amiable eccentrics—a trifle daft, perhaps, but essentially harmless—but the more he saw of them and listened to what they said, the more uncertain his feelings had become (87).

of insignificant “motes of dust that have slipped through the cracks” of history (83, 84). The collection consists of inconsequential yet strangely significant “snippets [or] dwarf mementos” such as Woodrow Wilson’s telephone, Sir Walter Raleigh’s pearl earring, Voltaire’s spectacles, Nathaniel Hawthorn’s cane, a half-smoked cigar from Winston Churchill, and Babe Ruth’s sweatshirt (83). Moreover, as Flower points out to Jim and Pozzi, “there [is] a certain method to the apparent disorder” of his collection, and it is this ‘method behind the madness’, which lends Flower’s model a certain encyclopedic air (82). It is when Jim finally grasps Flower’s system and the method behind it, that he is forced to understand the meticulously assembled mountain of trivia as more than just “a demented shrine to the spirit of nothingness” (84). Hence, he finds, in subsequent reflection, that objects from Flower’s catalogue of the detritus of time “take on a luminous, almost transcendent quality”, while the ordered madness of the millionaire’s hobby acquires strange significance in his imagination (84).

While Flower and Stone work on their models independently, they have a joint project that satisfies their shared need to build models, and to tinker with time. On a trip to Europe, they purchased the ruins of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Irish castle—ten thousand stones in all—which they had exported to their property in Pennsylvania. Their intention is not to restore the castle to its former splendor on America’s distant shores, but rather to build “a monument in the shape of a wall” dissecting one of their fields (86). This ‘monument against time’, which is to be built from the ancient stones will stand, for the millionaires, as a sort of metaphor of the linear progression of time, which they have halted in its tracks.<sup>361</sup>

Having been suitably impressed by complex models and projects, Jim and Pozzi are finally lead to the poker table, where it becomes evident that Flower and Stone are not the “born chumps” that Pozzi had taken them for. Indeed, they inform the gamblers that they have taken up poker with renewed zeal since Pozzi met and beat them in

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<sup>361</sup> Interestingly enough, a neat symmetry develops between this monument of stones and everything that transpires the novel thereafter. This begins with Flower and Stone’s selection of the winning numbers in the lottery on their weekly trip to *Steinberg’s Deli* (literally ‘mountain of stones’), which in turn makes possible the purchase of the pile of stones with which Jim and Pozzi later find themselves erecting as Flower and Stone’s “enormous barrier to time” (86).

Atlantic City. Indeed, just before they cut the cards, Flower happens to mention lessons that he and Stone took from Sid Zeno, a professional poker player. Pozzi chooses to disregard this information as being of little consequence, and therefore, goes on to misread his situation as a player in the game. As a result, he loses Jim's initial 10 thousand, plus an additional ten thousand, including Jim's car.

This gambling debt is translated into a contractual obligation to Flower and Stone to stay on the estate and build their monument. They agree to put up the wall one stone at a time, for a wage of ten dollars per hour, over a period of approximately fifty days, in order to pay off their outstanding debt of \$10,000. In the process of building the monument, however, they manage to incur even more debt, and finally realize that they are caught in a Sisyphus story, which they are not really at liberty to leave.

When this becomes clear, Pozzi rebels by trying to escape, and is beaten to death. Jim continues to work to settle the debt, and on the eve of his birthday December 13<sup>th</sup>, in his first hours of 'freedom', he drives headlong into an oncoming vehicle. Importantly, while this moment in the text has a certain gruesome finality, it is also another opening because the novel ends at the moment of impact, leaving the outcome of the narrative undecided.

### ***3. The Presupposed Balance***

As I wrote above, the tension informing *The Music of Chance*, arises from false presuppositions maintained by Jim and Pozzi concerning the fictional world in which they live. Jim, for example, often assumes that he is operating within a predictably homogenous paradigm, that is, one that consistently adheres to its own logical causality. Because he takes this for granted, Jim mistakenly expects that circumstances will eventually make some kind of sense, or work to some just purpose. This kind of assumption is brought forward early on in the novel, in a conversation between Jim and a woman he meets on the road:

“Don't worry, I'll be back. I'm a free man now, and I can do whatever I bloody want.”

“This is America, Nashe. The home of the goddamn free, remember? We can all do what we want.”

“I didn’t know you were so patriotic.”

“You bet your bottom dollar, friend. My country right or wrong” (16).

The underlying assumption here in ‘the home of the goddam free’, is that American-style democracy and money are equable with freedom. Given this, Jim may now allege that, because of the inheritance money, he is a ‘free man’, however suspect this logic maybe. Moreover, in the fictional America of *The Music of Chance*, the equation of money with freedom is expected to hold, so that one may ‘bet one’s bottom dollar’ on it.

Nashe’s faith in a fair “economy of exchange” is based, I would argue, on one-to-one equity and it extends, quite significantly, to many aspects of his behavior (11). At the outset, for example, Nashe thinks of the inheritance money as buying him freedom, and disappearing in direct and equal proportion to how much freedom he has. Eventually, this implicit notion begins to trouble his thoughts, which return frequently to the symmetry between the money, and his freedom to continue the aleatory adventure:

The money was responsible for his freedom, but each time he used it to buy another portion of that freedom, he was denying himself an equal portion of it as well (17).

Nashe infers then, that this money is somehow the referent of the state in which he finds himself, a sign that expresses his dwindling power to buy the freedom he enjoys on the road. In fact, Jim becomes so focused on the equation of the inheritance money with his freedom, that he takes to banking it in the glove compartment of his Saab 900, where he deposits the remaining fifteen thousand dollars in “a neat little stack of hundred-dollar bills” (19). His idea is that having the hard cash with him, as an expression of his financial condition, he will “feel more in control of the crisis, as if the dwindling pile of money were an exact replica of his inner state” (19).

Jim’s literal interpretation of money also plays a part in his game with Flower and Stone, for which he prepares by changing the balance of his resources into ten, one-thousand-dollar bills. His reason for this is that “there was something clean and abstract about doing it this way, he found, a sense of mathematical wonder in seeing his world

reduced to ten small pieces of paper” (92). This somewhat quaint economic gesture once again, betrays a quasi-animistic belief in the iconic properties of the ten bills which for Nashe, is evidently the essence of transaction.

All of these behaviors, and particularly this tendency to fetishize ‘green-backs’ suggests that Nashe believes, as I wrote above, in a one-to-one equity of money and things. Such a belief in money’s capacity to stand in direct relation to actual things and states could also be called a faith in the referentiality of paper money. This is to say that in *Jim’s America*, there is symmetry between money and things: freedom has a price, dollars are honest, and the books are balanced. Assumptions such as Jim’s (that there is a direct correlation between money paid, things and freedoms bought, and services rendered) are indicative of a somewhat naïve understanding of money as a realistic medium of exchange. The problem with this is that, even within the fictional context of *The Music of Chance*, Jim’s approach to money distinguishes itself as an antiquated form of ‘monetary realism’, largely out of step with his fiscal reality.<sup>362</sup>

To understand money in the way that Jim does is anachronistic, because it conforms to theories of economics and money typical of the last century, and much earlier in this century, before *The Music of Chance* was written. This kind of thinking recalls a time when money was understood as a realistic medium of exchange, whose value was grounded in commodities of ‘intrinsic worth’ such as gold, with the purpose of anchoring it and maintaining a balance between money and what it stands for.<sup>363</sup> The gold standard, however, was lifted some twenty years before *The Music of Chance* was written, an eventuality of which all the characters in the novel seem to be aware, save Jim and Pozzi. In fact, Flower and Stone have built their fortune on the kind of

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<sup>362</sup> I use the term ‘monetary realism’ to refer to economic models in which it is thought that money, as a sign, refers to palpable or quantifiable referents. Brian Rotman defines monetary realism as “insist[ing] on a palpable *origin*, some ‘thing’ with intrinsic worth, as the source of money’s value”, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 91.

<sup>363</sup> I am referring, of course, to the gold standard which grounded modern Western economics from the rise of paper money, beginning in the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the gold standard was lifted in 1973 and the world began trading in non-referential, off-shore commodities. Since that time we have been living in a ‘postmodern’ economic paradigm in which the play between signifier (money) and signified (the things it buys) is infinite. This is a far cry from Jim’s literal understanding of money as a concrete referent.

speculation that the dissolution of the gold standard made possible: Eurodollars, offshore commodities, and junk bonds.<sup>364</sup>

Furthermore, while Jim insists on carrying cash, and his outdated convictions about the ‘rightness of things’ with him, the novel narrates a supposedly undecidable fictional world, thrown together by chance, in which “anything could happen at any moment” (12). Given this fictional setting, holding on as Jim does, to convictions about the consistent commensurability between things—let alone in the case of money—seems to be missing the point. Yet while he functions within the reportedly random movement of the text, both Jim and Pozzi cleave to some form of rationalistic realism in money matters, and to a belief that things will come out equitably, predictably.

So based his own notions of predictability, Pozzi assures Jim that, even with the best of luck, “there’s no way” Flower and Stone could beat him in their contracted poker game (30). This assurance is based on Pozzi’s professionalism as a poker player, which he believes enables him to read the odds, and to come out on top:

“Do you do anything besides play poker?”

“No, that’s it. I just play poker.”[...]

“So you do all right for yourself.”

“Yeah, I do all right. I have my ups and downs, but there’s never been anything I couldn’t handle. The main thing is I do what I want. If I lose, it’s my ass that loses. If I win, the money’s mine to keep. I don’t have to take shit from anyone.”

“You’re your own boss.”

“Right. I’m my own boss. I call my own shots” (32).

According to Pozzi then, the ‘ups and downs’ of risk are present, but they constitute a calculated and minimalised factor, of which he is skillful enough to stay ahead.<sup>365</sup> As he

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<sup>364</sup> “Even after we bought [the mansion] there was nothing to stop us from using the money to make more money...And once we were rich, we became fabulously rich. I knew my way around investments, after all...First it was silver. Then it was Eurodollars. Then the commodities market. Junk bonds, superconductors, real estate. You name it, and we’ve turned a profit on it” (75). Cf. Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 87-97.

<sup>365</sup> That it is possible to make chance submit to causal logic in the game of poker is not an uncommon notion. In *The Education of a Poker Player* Yardley, for example, writes that “a sound poker player can win in any poker game” because chance can, supposedly, be reduced to a manageable risk factor (51). Herbert O. Yearly. *The Education of a Poker Player Including Where and How One Learns to Win*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957.



explains, "I don't fuck around when it comes to poker. Nine times out of ten, I'm going to come out on top. It's like a law of nature" (56). So by Pozzi's lights, he is an independent businessman whose work involves managed speculation and controlled risk, just like people who play the stock market, or consider themselves venture capitalists. There are certain 'laws of nature' which, if one knows how to read them, will insure a consistent margin of profit above and beyond losses taken in calculated risks.

In a manner of speaking, then, the game of poker has become Pozzi's job which he takes very seriously. So when the young professional player and the millionaires sit down to the "little job of poker" that they have contracted, Jim remarks that they behave with all the sobriety of "diplomats...concluding a peace treaty" (86, 93). They agree on straight seven-card stud with no jokers or wild cards, and an initial investment from each player of ten thousand dollars. It is here then, that Jim's ten thousand-dollar bills will end their itinerary from bank vault, to glove compartment, and come to rest in Flower and Stone's "perfectly empty" safe, so that once the game is underway "they [are] all business" (91, 93). In spite, however, of all the apparently 'above board' conduct, and Pozzi's professional calculations of the odds, he loses, and badly. A full house is beaten by four sixes, and Pozzi's three jacks are answered by Flower's three kings. Finally, after having played several hands, and completely depleted Jim's cash reserves, they cut for his car and lose that too, when Pozzi draws a four of diamonds to Flower's seven of hearts.

However, worse than the monetary loss exceeding either Jim or Pozzi's wildest expectations, is the turn of events precipitated by the agreement struck to build Flower and Stone's wall in repayment of the debt. Despite Pozzi's voluble protestations ("You don't negotiate with madmen. Once you start to do that, your brain gets all fucked up"), Jim signs a contract with the millionaires to work for ten dollars per hour until the debt is settled (107). Interestingly though, even before the game started, Jim tended to interpret the pile of stones for the monument as some sort of symmetrical correlative for his cash, so that he has mentally committed himself to the contract even before they commence play. For example, when he converts the ten thousand ("a good round number") into chips for the game, he remarks pointedly to Flower that there is "a dollar

for every stone in [the] wall” (93). Indeed, the relationship between the debt, the stones, and the labor is described repeatedly in the kind of terms of balance and commensurability that Jim understands best: “Honest work for an honest wage” (106).

True to habit, moreover, Jim is attracted to the arrangement because of the symmetrical equation of debt and labor which he trusts is underwritten in the contract. He then sees fit to ascribe a salutary purpose to his term of labor, thinking of the time he will spend building the wall as an enforced “holiday”, “a therapeutic respite”, “a cure” and a membership in a “health club” (108, 109, 110, 111). Indeed, while listening to the terms of the contract, Jim begins finally to feel “lucid, utterly in control of himself” (107). But this is of course a false sense of security based, as it turns out, on a naïve reading of the text of the contract. Jim, therefore, persists in believing in a just and equitable America where labor and debt will eventually tally up to his freedom, and good-naturedly commits himself to what he assumes is an honest deal. Although Pozzi approaches the contract with his usual skepticism (“It’s a mistake to trust those fuckers, I’m telling you”) Jim is certain that stone by stone, dollar for dollar, he will be “back to zero” in fifty days, and free to walk away from the wall, the tangible record of his indenture (111, 149).

#### ***4. Debt and Distopia***

It is precisely Jim’s confidence in his ability to work to a zero balance, along with the conviction he shares with Pozzi that the poker game is a calculated risk, that turns out to be his undoing. These errors in judgment are, I would argue, part of his general misapprehension of how the greater economy functions, the economy within which the novel’s characters gamble and labor. Hence, in spite of Pozzi and Nashe’s good faith, the fact remains that in the fictional world of *The Music of Chance* they lose a great deal of money, for which no amount of wholesome hard labor will compensate.

Yet another contributing factor to the impossibility of settling his losses with Flower and Stone has to do with the fundamental nature of the debt and how it was incurred. Gambling, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, is anything but a

calculated and bankable risk. As a mode of monetary transaction, gambling distinguishes itself as being ‘other’ within the kind of modern economic paradigm that Jim initially takes for granted in the text. So, because of the nature of the exchange transacted, the resulting loss constitutes a ‘bad debt’ and one which is, therefore, resistant to closure.

In this context, it will be helpful to return to Mauss’ *L’essai sur le don*, in particular his discussion of gambling as an economic practice.<sup>366</sup> According to Mauss, gambling is incompatible with realistic modern economic modes such as utilitarianism, because it is essentially a premodern economic practice, akin to the potlatch or gift-exchange economy. The potlatch, writes Mauss, is based on lavish expenditure of surplus wealth “often at pure loss with tremendous extravagance” and with no ostensible utilitarian purpose (70). So because gift or premodern economic exchanges are based on unrestricted and seemingly open expenditure, they fail to conform to the “so-called natural economy of utilitarianism,” the modern economic paradigm in which Mauss wrote his essay, and which he criticizes.<sup>367</sup>

The kind of rationalistic utilitarian economic theory and practice which Mauss is reacting to throughout *L’essai sur le don* is typified by the work of Bentham, the 19<sup>th</sup> century economist and architect. The basic tenet of Bentham’s economic utilitarianism is that pleasure and pain exist in direct relation to one another, and should be regulated by the principle of utility. In this way, the utility of human actions, most importantly expenditure, is measured in terms of the augmentation or diminution of the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.<sup>368</sup> Here, under the heading of activities that diminish subjective interest, Bentham concerns himself with “money given for evanescent services” such as singing, dancing, prostitution, and particularly gaming (14). Arguably, while the above actions may well augment human pleasure and diminish

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<sup>366</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don, forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques”, in *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: PUF, 1950.

<sup>367</sup> [On] a vu combien toute cette économie de l’échange-don était loin de rentrer dans les cadres de l’économie soi-disant naturelle, de l’utilitarisme (266).

<sup>368</sup> For Bentham, interest means at once ‘greatest good’ and ‘moneys accruing’ as, for example, in *The True Alarm: A View of Paper Money*, in *The Economic Writings*.

pain they have no intrinsic utility, and therefore, they are not subsumable within a system bent on the control and recirculation of capital. Money spent on these activities is virtually ‘disappeared’, to the personal and public detriment of state capital and financially responsible subjects.

To a utilitarian mind like Bentham’s then, gambling naturally falls within the “Division of Offenses” and should be discouraged at all costs. State controlled lotteries, however, are condoned as a less “burthensome” mode of taxation, provided that “personal expenditure amounts to no more than a percentage of the yield” (E.W. 536).<sup>369</sup> It is supposed then, that lotteries can be regulated by the state to channel money back into the system, while individuals who are want to gamble are prevented from losing large sums of money in unauthorized activities such as card playing. In an ideal utilitarian economic system, all surplus wealth would be continuously recuperated in some way by the state, and reabsorbed into a balanced system without waste or loss, thereby keeping subjective dissipation to a minimum.

But of course, a perfectly balanced system based on the ideology of utilitarianism has never really existed, so that ‘potlatch’ practices are ‘always already’ present in activities such as gambling, which are particularly recalcitrant to state regulation. For Mauss, this would be because gambling is a manifestation of premodern economics, and as such it is essentially antithetical to systems for managing wealth put forward by modern economics. Indeed, the exuberant spending and loss that accompany card playing has persistently eluded government regulation ever since cards were introduced into Europe. The disparity between card playing as a premodern exchange modality, and modern economic practices also explains why all the taxes and interdictions that have been levied against playing cards over the last seven centuries have not prevented people from loosing their shirts, nor have they provided governments with an additional source of revenues.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Bentham, Jeremy. *Economic Writings*

<sup>370</sup> On the history of taxation and playing cards, see Chapter 4 “Cards and Tax”.

So far then, I have outlined two styles of money management that are ‘at sixes and nines’ with each other, yet continue to co-exist. What Nashe unconsciously assumes is the economy in place is largely utilitarian, when he agrees to build the monument to compensate for his gambling debt. In Nashe’s ‘possible world’, money is contained and managed within a system of debits and credits, ultimately to insure that the circulation of wealth adheres to the logical telos of straight-forward, double-entry accountancy, arriving at a zero balance with a regularity upon which one may bank.<sup>371</sup>

This explains why the equation of the wall and the gambling debt is so compelling, for it seems perfectly reasonable that, were one paid ten dollars per hour, to work ten hours a day, building a wall of ten rows of a thousand stones, one would eventually clear a debt of ten thousand dollars. So for Jim, the wall serves as a permanent record of his labor, or a sort of primitive balance sheet in stone. Moreover, because this daily lesson in zero-balance accountancy bears the accountant’s penchant for symmetry, it is purported to be “a fair punishment that [has] some educational value to it” (105). Jim and Pozzi should, then, be able to free themselves of indenture in fifty days, and walk away from the wall, having learned a valuable lesson about fiscal responsibility, and personal debt. But while Jim and Pozzi may hope to get “back to zero”, their arrival there will always necessitate accumulation of further debt, so that the narrative of their labor begins to bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the Sisyphus story.

Taking for granted that any of the plus and minus relationships in the text are balanced proves treacherous for Jim and Pozzi, because there is always something that cannot be accounted for, something that appears in the margins of the ledger.. To make matters worse, Pozzi and Nashe unconsciously add to the hidden debt by throwing an expensive party to celebrate “seven straight weeks” of working on the wall (160). Their assumption that celebratory expenditures, including the services of a prostitute, are taken care of in the initial agreement proves yet another disastrous financial blunder, based on the gamblers false notions of the economy in place. Because of this, they must

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<sup>371</sup> Cf. Chapter 3 of this thesis, particularly Section 5, “New Accountancy: The Zero Balance”.

fulfill an additional term of labor, in payment of three thousand dollars in hidden (or unexpected) costs. So although both sides of the ledger in the three thousand dollar addendum are meticulously itemized by the former accountant, to Jim, a naive reader, it is “a dark and dirty thing” (164).

Jim and Pozzi underestimate Flower and Stone’s savvy and misread the terms of the contract; but most importantly, they choose to forget that the millionaires have prepared for the poker game by taking lessons from Sid Zeno. The oversight of this last detail proves fatal, because the name Zeno, in keeping with the running play on proper names throughout the text, is not entirely without significance.<sup>372</sup> The name Zeno, for example, brings to mind Zeno’s two famous paradoxes which are paralleled in *The Music of Chance*. First, there is the one about Achilles never being able to catch the tortoise, because by the time he reaches the tortoise it will have advanced, however little. This paradox is, of course, analogous to Jim and Pozzi’s debt, for the more they work, the more debt they amass, so that the zero balance toward which they toil is always just out of reach.

The second is the paradox of the Cretan Liar: ‘all Cretans are liars and I am from Crete’. In *The Music of Chance*, this paradox could be paraphrased as ‘all poker players are cheaters and I am a poker player’, because it becomes increasingly clear as the story progresses, that Flower and Stone have cheated. Although Pozzi reaches this conclusion immediately after the poker game is over, Jim predictably resists believing this to be possible until he has been working on the wall for ten days. Jim then slowly becomes “convinced that he ha[s] been cheated, that Flower and Stone had stolen the money by using marked cards or some other illegal trick”, which they learned from Sid Zeno (132).

Interestingly, Nashe begins to admit to himself that Flower and Stone have cheated, as he awakens to the idea that he is “already living inside the model”, and that he has become part of the “extravagant smallness” of Stone’s utopian city of the world

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<sup>372</sup> Most of the proper names in *The Music of Chance* are ‘loaded’ or ‘motivated’. Nashe, for example, recalls Thomas Nashe the 16<sup>th</sup>-century English poet, Pozzi may be a reference to Pozzo in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Flower and Stone are compared to Laurel and Hardy (ie. a laurel of flowers, stones are hard) and Calvin, the hired man, is put in the field with the gamblers to enforce a Calvinist work ethic.

(178). Jim imagines that he has been turned into one of the figurines in the City, and that he and Pozzi have been sent there to be reformed like “a couple of delinquent kids” (105). The double suspicion that he has been cheated, and that he is trapped in Stone’s city begins to haunt Jim, as he discovers that the model is, as Flower told them, “more than just a toy” (79). Appropriately, the full weight of his situation is focused in his memory of the model, as he recalls the attention which Flower gave to explaining the correctional facilities in Stone’s model:

If you look at the Prison, you’ll see that all the prisoners are working happily at various tasks, they all have smiles on their faces. That’s because they’re glad they’ve been punished for their crimes, and now they’re learning how to recover goodness within them through hard work (80).

The reigning conception of “goodness”, which is Flower and Stone’s, seems to favor the reform and correctional facilities, which are evidently an important element of Stone’s “Four Realms of Togetherness”. Indeed, when Jim gets a better look at the city on his trip back to the poker table during the big game, he observes that Stone’s construction of “goodness” is somehow askew and disturbing. The implication, repeated in various city scenes purported to be ‘salutary’ or ‘humorous,’ is that people are being made to ‘toe the line’—even being punished—and liking it. The model is comprised of tiny segments informed by a “wicked” sense of humor, such as the grouping of figurines before the hall of justice, all of whom wear glasses (96).<sup>373</sup> In this second moment of observation, Jim understands that Stone has built a synchronic, miniature world in which evil has been absorbed by the singular impulse for “Good,” that is, Stone’s version of good (79). On closer scrutiny Jim sees Stone’s The City of the world as disturbing model world where “the overriding mood [is] one of terror”, overseen by a “murderous, avenging God” (96). Indeed, Stone’s utopia is rather some kind of distopic simulacra, where

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<sup>373</sup> “He saw things that had entirely escaped him during the first visit, and many of these discoveries turned out to be marked by wicked flashes of humor: a dog pissing against a fireplug in front of the Hall of Justice; a group of twenty men and women marching down the street, all of them wearing glasses; a masked robber slipping on a banana peel in a back alley. But these funny bits only made the other elements seem more ominous, and after a while Nashe found himself concentrating almost exclusively on the prison” (96).

distinctions such as 'good' and 'evil' have been collapsed into "good", to no beneficent end. With the domination of "good", the distinction between inside and outside seems to have fallen away, so that any form of 'otherness', be it evil or otherwise, has been absorbed by an overriding force which permits of no alterity in this "bizarre, totalitarian world" (87).

To borrow from Lyotard's *Au juste*, one might say that Flower and Stone are now in a position to control both metastatements and first order statements.<sup>374</sup> Where this is the case, judgment ceases to be a process because specific, first order issues are already decided, as are general ontological statements concerning conditions of being. Hence, judgment and justice are predetermined and the resulting order, rather than good, is violence and totalitarianism. So to return to Zeno, if you could have the paradox both ways, all poker players would be cheaters as a general and a specific rule and they would already be cheating by telling you this, but then who cares if you are the one calling all the shots? Or, as Pozzi puts it so succinctly "The whole world is run by assholes", and that, for Jim and Pozzi anyway, is cheating (135).

What this means, as I will to continue to clarify below, is that Jim and Pozzi have found themselves in some sort of full-blown postmodern, late capitalist nightmare that takes over everything in its path. Here, the breakdown of binary oppositions has reached its logical extension, and the resulting 'order', if one may call it that, is completely undecidable. They are faced with a world order that is perfectly capable of accommodating both sides of any equation, so that "everything is ambiguous, difficult to pin down" (87). Hence, Flower and Stone come off as being, at turns, stern authority figures like "high school principles", and "no more than grown-up children, a pair of half-wit clowns who did not deserve to be taken seriously" (105, 87). This also means that while they talk about meting out just punishment in the form of honest labor, it is equally possible that Pozzi and Jim are being punished because Flower and Stone have cheated. The millionaire's world then, is a disturbing *bricolage* of extravagance and

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<sup>374</sup> Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, "Une politique du jugement" in *Au juste*, Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979. p. 139-59. Cf. Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, London: Routledge, 1991, Chapter 3, "Politics and Ethics", p. 86-127.



utilitarian parsimony, democracy and totalitarianism, meticulous accountancy and random wind-falls, a world, in short, which seems to incorporate and to reduce everything to itself.

### **5. Numbers: Derrida, Mauss and Bataille**

Numbers are foregrounded throughout *The Music of Chance*, both as the language of accountancy, and as cultural signifiers with mystic connections. For example, telling the story of how he and Stone chose the winning numbers in the lottery that made them millionaires, Flower explains that they based their selection on his belief that “numbers have a soul”, and that prime numbers “refuse to cooperate” (73). Flower then goes on to outline the following quasi-mystic theory of animus of numbers, which he has developed over his years as an accountant:

I've dealt with numbers all my life, of course, and after a while you begin to feel that each number has a personality of its own. A twelve is very different from a thirteen, for example. Twelve is upright, conscientious, intelligent, whereas thirteen is a loner, a shady character who won't think twice about breaking the law to get what he wants. Eleven is tough, an outdoorsman who likes tramping through woods and scaling mountains; ten is rather simpl-minded, a bland figure who always does what he's told; nine is deep and mystical, a Buddha of contemplation (73).

Stone, moreover appears to subscribe to a similar belief in the power of numbers. For example, when he wins the final cut in the poker match with a seven of hearts, he remarks: “Ten thousand dollars. We've hit that magic number again” (104). Stone's ‘magic number’—ten thousand—is clearly part of a significant narrative sequence of numbers in *The Music of Chance*, which increase exponentially in increments represented by the addition of zeros: 10, 100, 1000, 10,000. So for Stone, the coincidental correspondence of the 10,000 debt to the precise number of stones, not to mention the inflation of zeros surrounding the numeric sequence which leads there, is down right magical.

As I have explained elsewhere in this dissertation, zero has the double potential to multiply and make value, and to signify nothing.<sup>375</sup> The intriguing power of the cipher to make more something out of nothing, is a power which zero alone among numbers possesses. Or, to put it more concisely, following Brian Rotman, zero occupies a unique place among numbers as a “metasign”, because of its paradoxical capacity to represent nothing and to increase exponentially.<sup>376</sup> Likewise, within *The Music of Chance*, zero occupies a special place among numbers, so that it has a particular resonance for both Flower and Stone. For example, when Flower tells the story of choosing the winning combination of numbers in the lottery, he pays a good deal of attention to the holes which were punched out on the winning ticket, the holes in fact that turn the numbers on the card into zeros. Indeed the millionaires’ account of the selection of the winning numbers is a prime example of how zeros can signify nothing, while holding the place of other possible numbers, since the holes (zeros) on the lottery ticket mark the place of the necessarily absent winning numbers, and describe the potential of a future fortune.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Menninger quotes the following early explanations of the function of zero from a French arithmetic textbook from 1485, and from a 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of zero in the Hessische Landesbibliothek, Darmstadt:

*Et en chiffres ne sont que dix figures, des quelles les neuf ont valeur et la dixieme ne vaut rien mais elle fait valloir les autres figures et se nomme zero ou chiffre (401).*

*Decima dicitur theca vel circulus vel cifra vel figura nihili quoniam nihil significat, ipsa tamen locum ten/n/ens [?] dat aliis significare, nam sine cifra vel cifris purus non potest scribi articulus.*

The tenth [number symbol] is called *theca* or *circulus* or *cifra* or *figura nihili*, because it stands for “nothing”. Yet when placed in the proper position, it gives value to the others (402-3).

Menninger, Karl *Number Words and Number Symbols: A Cultural History of Numbers*, Trans. Paul Broneer, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1969. Cf. Chapter 3, Section 5 “New Accountancy: The Zero Balance” and Chapter 4, Section 3 “Derrida and the Divinity”.

<sup>376</sup> Rotman defines his use of the terms ‘meta-number’ and ‘meta-sign’ in connection with zero as follows: “In short: as a numeral within the Hindu system, indicating the absence of any of the numerals 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, zero is a sign about names, a metanumeral; and as a number declaring itself to be the origin of counting, the trace of the one-who-counts and produces the number sequence, zero is a meta-number, a sign indicating the whole potentially infinite progression of integers” (14). *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Incidentally, zero’s unique ability to stand in for other numbers as a metasign, is shared by the letter ‘n’. ‘N’ is also the phoneme which distinguishes zero from Zeno, the man who taught Flower and Stone the kind of tricks used to put Jim and Pozzi in their debt. The proximity of zero to Zeno has also been pointed out by Richard Klein in *Cigarettes are Sublime*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 89.

<sup>377</sup> This is, indeed, how scholars first explained the function of zero when it was introduced into Europe ca. the

Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, the number zero takes on increasing importance, so that even Jim must eventually contemplate the double function of the cipher. As he fulfills the terms of the ten thousand dollar debt by laying ten thousand stones, Jim begins to understand that reaching a zero balance has dual consequences:

He was back to zero again [yet...] even the smallest zero was a great hole of nothingness, *a circle large enough to contain the world* [my italics] (155).

Jim's fear that his world could be circumscribed by a cipher, indicates a healthy respect for zero's potential in its role as a metasign. Directly following the poker game, however, Jim is principally concerned with the sign's negative potential to increase exponentially while generating debt. It is not until he is served the \$3000.00 rider to his contract with Flower and Stone, that Jim is made to understand, that in his present situation, being "back to zero" actually means the production of more debt. So as I wrote above, Jim becomes sickeningly aware that he is executing a performance of Zeno's paradox in which the goal is always just out of reach. In this case the goal is the unattainable zero balance, which will remain out of reach, because the debt will continue to reproduce itself.<sup>378</sup>

Throughout *The Music of Chance*, the number zero appears so often that the imagery of the text forms a veritable landscape of ciphers and holes. For example, Pozzi is consistently represented as a hole in the text, a zero and a non-person, which is appropriate given that Pozzi is the plural of *pozzo*, the Italian word for hole or pit.

13<sup>th</sup> century. Menninger cites the following from Al-Khwarizmi's 13th work on the zero:

*Si nihil remanserit pones circulum ut non sit differentia vacua: sed sit in ea circulus qui occupet eam, ne forte cum vacua fuerit mimuantur differentiae et putetur secunda esse prima...*

When nothing remains, put down a small circle so that the place [*differentia*] be not empty, but the circle must occupy it, so that the number of places will not be diminished when the place is empty and the second be mistaken for the first. Op. cit. Menninger, p. 412-13.

<sup>378</sup> "There was a problem, however. It had been there all along, a small thing in the back of their minds, but now that the sixteenth was only a week away, it suddenly grew larger, attaining such proportions as to dwarf everything else. The debt would be paid off on the sixteenth, but at that point they would only be back to zero...but they would also be broke, and how far would ...freedom take them if they had no money...The moment they walked out of there, they would be turned into bums, a pair of penniless drifters trying to make their way in the dark" (149).

Pozzi's connection to zero comes into play on his first meeting with Jim, when he makes a joke of telling Jim that his identification number in the International Brotherhood of Lost Dogs is "zero, zero, zero, zero" (62). And in describing how Jim will be amazed at a demonstration of the tricks of his trade, the metaphors Pozzi chooses revolve around gaping mouths and empty eye sockets: "your mouth will drop open and I'll make the eyes fall out of your fucking head" (35). Likewise, seeing Pozzi in terms of his potential to replenish his depleted funds, Jim comes to think of Pozzi as the "hole in the wall that would get him from one side to the other" (36). This is perhaps also why, just before Pozzi is beaten to death, the gamblers dig an escape hole under the fence that encloses the field where they are building the wall, and Jim tells him to "[...] crawl through that hole and be on [his] way", to which Pozzi replies "You afraid of holes or something?" (165, 166). Moreover, throughout the text, Pozzi is referred to as a cipher, "a card-playing specter", and it is observed frequently that he could disappear into nothingness before one could count to one hundred (36, 170, 176).

Yet, while Pozzi is described in terms of negatives, ciphers, zeros, and holes, he also provides the motivation for most of the action that takes place in *The Music of Chance*. In fact, virtually everything that happens in the story after Jim picks him up on the road, can be linked directly to Pozzi. Fittingly, then, it is Pozzi who creates the debt, but the debt is translated into the wall, which ultimately informs the progression of the narrative. What I am suggesting is that, while Pozzi can make fortunes disappear, he is also the source of all potential in the text and as such, he partakes of the double nature of zero.

The constant associations of Pozzi with the 'riddling cipher' are, I would argue, connected to parallel representations of this character in the text as a wild card, a jester, and a joker (77). As I pointed out in Chapter 4, the designated value of the joker is zero, which gives this card the potential to take on the value of any other card in the deck by standing in for it. This is significant because, without the joker, a deck of cards is essentially a closed signifying system, composed of four suits of thirteen cards, each having a specified and fixed value. But because the joker is wild or variable, it has the

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capacity to represent a negative value, just as it may take the place and, therefore the function, of any of the other cards in play. In other words, the inclusion of a wild card with no fixed numeric value in a closed system like a deck of cards, will open the system to chance and to possibility. Or, as Derrida has written, a joker is “a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play...always taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy hand (le mort) [...]” (“The Filial Inscription”, 93).<sup>379</sup> So, in his role as the joker in *The Music of Chance*, Pozzi performs the double function that I have just described, that of a wild card. This is why Pozzi opens the narrative to new possibilities and chance, while he also signifies loss, death and debt. Because virtually everything that is at stake in the narrative appears to be centered in Pozzi, the riddling figure of chance and death, he becomes a central figure for the entire text.<sup>380</sup>

In light of Pozzi’s role as a gambler and as figure of death it would be helpful to look at the relationship between gambling, death, and expenditure through Bataille’s *La part maudite*.<sup>381</sup> Following the earlier work of Mauss on the potlatch or gift economy, Bataille proposes a concept of ostentatious expenditure that informs activities such as games, artistic production, and perverse, or non-reproductive sexual activities.<sup>382</sup> Bataille classes these last within an economics of prestation, because they constitute

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<sup>379</sup> Derrida here is referring to Thoth/Hermes, the legendary inventor of language, numbers, games of chance, playing cards, dice and play (“Le jeu dont il est aussi l’inventeur, Platon lui-même rappelle”) when he writes:

Rusé, insaisissable, masqué, comploter, farceur, comme Hermès, ce n’est ni un roi ni un valet ; une sorte de *joker* plutôt, un signifiant disponible, une carte neutre, donnant du jeu au jeu. Thoth répète tout dans l’addition du supplément : suppléant le soleil, is est autre que le soleil et le même que lui...prenant toujours la place qui n’est pas la sienne, et qu’on peut aussi appeler la place du mort, il n’a pas de lieu ni de nom propres (115).

*La dissémination*, “L’inscription des fils: Theuth, Hermès, Thot, Nabû, Nebo”, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972.

<sup>380</sup> In *Number and Times*, Marie Louise von Franz points out that “this twofold oneness has been preserved in the symbolism of card games” because, as I argued in Chapter 4, the “god of luck [Thoth] is both one and two, in other words, a twin” (98).

<sup>381</sup> Georges Bataille, *La part maudite*. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967.

<sup>382</sup> For Bataille, human activity is divisible into two categories: conservation and reproduction, and “les dépenses dites improductives : le luxe, les deuils, les guerres, ... les jeux les spectacles, les arts, l’activité sexuelle perverse (c’est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale)” (28).

expenditures of the self which are not compensated for by directly proportional acquisition, indeed quite the opposite. Moreover, gambling, like artistic production and noncopulatory sexual activities, has no apparent utility, and the expenditure involved is generally lavish and non-recoupable.<sup>383</sup> So because these modes of being have no ostensible value in the utilitarian scheme of things, they are characterized by Bataille as belonging to prestation economics.

According to Bataille, people, like gamblers, who partake in activities involving great expenditures of the self and its resources, experience a kind of orgasmic release, accompanied by a realization of loss and nothingness. In many respects, *The Music of Chance* performs Bataille's theory of the gambling experience and concomitant loss, particularly in the poker scene with Flower and Stone. Here, for example, Nashe experiences the momentary exhilaration of being "utterly blank inside", while watching Pozzi draw a four of diamonds to Flower's seven of hearts (104).<sup>384</sup> Likewise, as Bataille's account of gambling would predict, Jim's elation is quickly replaced by the sickening realization of a complete loss of subjecthood. Indeed, Pozzi and Jim become painfully aware of this loss when they find themselves dramatically "relegated to the category of nonpersons" by Flower and Stone's domestic staff, (113).

Bataille goes on to argue that the '*postcoital tristesse*' which follows smaller expenditures of the self (*les petites morts*), is often accompanied by an unconscious attraction to death, the ultimate spending of the self. Bataille refers to this cycle of expenditure and release as the "delirium of ritual poker", that is, the ritual rehearsal in small increments of the final, permanent loss of the self in death.<sup>385</sup> The gambler toys

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<sup>383</sup> Indeed, according to Bataille people most commonly lose money in gambling: "Il est vrai que cette circulation d'argent profite à un nombre de parieurs professionnels, mais il n'en reste pas moins que cette circulation peut être considérée comme une charge réelle des passions déchaînées par la compétition et qu'elle entraîne chez un grand nombre de parieurs des pertes disproportionnées avec leurs moyens" (30).

<sup>384</sup> When they first sit down to "that blank wooden surface", the table over which the narrative of his future will be spelled out, Jim realizes that he is "about to gamble his life on that table...and the insanity of that risk filled him with a kind of awe" (90).

<sup>385</sup> In this section, Bataille is outlining what he understands as another human activity that falls into his category of unproductive expenditure, namely the *potlatch* "...[Le *potlatch* est] une activité d'échange excessive [qui] a substitué une sorte de *poker rituel*, à forme délirante, comme source de la possession. Mais les joueurs ne peuvent jamais se retirer fortune faite : ils restent à la merci de la provocation [my italics]" (35).

with the delirium or ritual poker, provoking greater and lesser spasms of exhilarating loss (*perte*) at the card table.<sup>386</sup> Bataille's view of death and gambling is performed in the final scene of *The Music of Chance*, in that the novel presumably ends in death for both of the gamblers. Believing he will escape, Pozzi makes his exit through a hole dug under the chain-link fence surrounding the Flower and Stone estate, only to be subjected to a beating which is probably fatal, and Jim most likely kills himself by speeding into an on-coming vehicle.

Oddly enough, the reader is told only that Jim "press[es] down even harder on the gas" and must rapidly "shut his eyes, unable to look at it [the on-coming vehicle] anymore" (217). The reader, then, never knows for certain the outcome of Jim's head-on collision, so that the event is both jarring and indecisive. And because the accident occurs in the very last line of the novel it seems, metaphorically at the very least, as though a hole had been blown through the end of the text. The impact is heightened, and the illusion strengthened, by virtue of the fact that this is also the point of convergence of several narrative lines, which at this moment in the text collide with some violence. To give just one example, Jim's suicidal car crash takes place on the day he "bring[s] himself back to zero...", that is, the day on which he believes his gambling debt to be paid (204). But this day—December thirteenth—is also, quite ironically, his birthday.

So as the novel closes, he leaves Flower and Stone's estate for the first time since the eventful poker game, agreeing to have a drink with his foreman to celebrate both the end of the debt, and the day of his birth (204). Once inside the bar, Jim makes a friendly wager on a game of pool with Calvin's son-in-law, and surprisingly, finds himself "zeroing in on his shots with a skill and precision that surpassed anything he had done before" (212). Having won the game, Jim declines the fifty dollar wager coming to him, asking instead to be permitted to drive the Saab that he lost in the poker game. This request is significant, because the narrative of the wager has now come full circle, so

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<sup>386</sup> "Il est vrai que cette circulation d'argent profite à un petit nombre de parieurs professionnels, mais n'en reste pas moins que cette circulation peut être considérée comme une charge réelle des passions déchaînées par la compétition et qu'elle entraîne chez un grand nombre de parieurs des pertes disproportionnée avec leurs moyens; ces pertes atteignent même souvent une démente telle que les joueurs n'ont plus d'autre issue que la prison ou la mort" (30).

that this gesture effectively uses part of the one gambling debt to balance another. Again, Jim's somewhat celebratory suicide constitutes a merging of major lines in the narrative; one debt closing by opening another as the text resolves into nothingness, or an endless multiplication of zeros.

But just as I have been arguing that there is an abundance of zeros in *The Music of Chance*, there is equally a preponderance of sevens in the text, so before leaving the topic of numbers, I will look at the role of the number seven in the narrative. In Chapter 5 of this thesis, I had occasion to discuss the cultural and mystic significance of seven which, over history, has been invested with virtually the opposite 'meaning' as that ascribed to the cipher. Unlike zero, seven has been associated with plenitude and closure, which is part of why people often think that seven is lucky, and lucky numbers are a part of gambling fictions like *The Music of Chance*. So, when Jim and Pozzi check into their rooms on the seventh floor of the Park Plaza hotel, Pozzi's immediate response to their accommodations is "lucky seven" (38). Jim, who had "always felt *lucky* to have stumbled" into his job as a fireman, quits after seven years to take to the road, which he attacks in seven hour stretches (8,6). On one such seven hour stretch, he chances to pick up Pozzi who has been playing poker for "seven straight hours", with a group of the men who have played "every month for seven years" (25, 28). Through Pozzi, Jim is introduced to Flower and Stone, who won their fortune in the "Pennsylvania state lottery" seven years previous to the eventful poker game, as part of the ritual prelude to their Friday night poker games which were "always at seven" (71-3). Flower explains that one of the reasons they wanted a rematch is that, with the exception of their run-in with Pozzi in Atlantic City, they have enjoyed seven years of uninterrupted good luck (75). Jim's decision to back Pozzi in this rematch, is based on Pozzi's expertise at seven-card stud which, coincidentally, is also the game in which he loses Jim's investment to Flower and Stone (55, 92). In the final and decisive hand of Pozzi's losing game with the millionaires, Flower has a seven of clubs showing, and when they cut for Jim's card, Flower wins by drawing the seven of hearts (100, 104). But perhaps the most significant of the sevens in the novel is the seventh door in the



millionaires' mansion, which opens onto Stone's city of the world and Flower's museum (77).

I have cited these occurrences of the number seven in order to show that, as is the case with zero, seven comes to form an important narrative thread in text of *The Music of Chance*. It will be noted that most of the occurrences of both seven and zero which I have cited above, are related to the poker game at the center of *The Music of Chance*, as well as to the broader context of financial transaction. Yet, although narrative sequences around the number seven communicate a kind of completeness, and bode 'good luck' in cards and money matters there is, at the same time, an ongoing tension with zero and nothingness. *The Music of Chance* is, therefore, informed by the constant hint that plenitude is a fleeting condition, soon to being emptied out into nothingness and death. So while the text fluctuates between zero and seven, it appears to be perfectly capable of embracing both, as the examples I have cited would suggest. Moreover, that two numbers, which mean virtually the opposite of one another in popular memory, occupy an equal amount of space in the text, is one further indication of the novel's overall undecidability.

What I am suggesting is that these opposing numeric sequences are of a piece with the inherently double or duplicitous nature of the text, which manifests itself in just about everything it represents, including economic modalities and notions of morality or 'honesty'. That the text is capable of accommodating opposing discourses throughout is due, at least in part, to the fact that it was written late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during a period which many would call 'postmodernism'. In his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey describes the postmodern 'mindset' as embracing chaos, anarchy and change in a way that allows for "'play' in entirely 'open situations'" (44). Because 'postmodernism' is subtended by late capitalism it is entirely pervasive and has become "simply a cultural aspect of the economic and social fabric", informing the way in which many read the world at this historical juncture, and indeed, contemporary writing (62).<sup>387</sup> But before coming to any conclusions on *The Music of Chance* and the so-called

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<sup>387</sup> Harvey, David *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

postmodern paradigm, I would like to investigate one more aspect of the text's overall undecidability, namely, how it relates to other texts.

#### **6. *Intertexts and Museums: Postmodern 'Historicism'***

The seventh door of the millionaires' mansion, opens onto Stone and Flower's master projects, both of which address the problem of dealing with history and time late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This problem is of course a central issue in many human endeavors, not the least of which is writing novels. The model utopias take opposing approaches to time and history from the present moment, each providing unique answers to the question of how to cope with the weight of the past. In the first case, Stone's model synchronically collapses time, so that all of the past appears to be simultaneous with the present, at the moment in which the spectator takes it all in. In his project, Flower adopts the reverse approach: by collecting lost moments of historical experience and shuffling together a hodgepodge of 'significant' trivia, he hopes to assemble the past diachronically, in a trail of famous peoples' lost earrings and discarded cigar-butts. And of course, all of this occurs within a *text* which, as I have been pointing out, is essentially duplicitous and undecidable, so that it can comfortably accommodate both Flower and Stone's construct of time. Because *The Music of Chance* is a novel, and therefore a product of language, it performs this last trick discursively, by means of intertextuality.

One of the ways in which this is accomplished has to do with the author's somewhat anachronistic return to linear narrative structure and realism, which I take to be the citation of an outdated generic form. I use the term 'anachronistic' because at this late juncture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant 'form' in narrative fiction tends to disjunction and fragmentation. *The Music of Chance*, however, is doggedly linear and realistic, which makes the novel appear to be largely 'out of sync' with its historical context. In this respect as in others, the workings of the text are foregrounded in metaphors surrounding the debt, and ultimately the poker game whence it came. Therefore, to speak in oxymorons, the wall which represents the debt, becomes a

‘concrete’ metaphor for the way time is worked out in the novel. The wall absorbs, flattens out, and suspends time: historical time (the fifteenth century is being re-erected within the twentieth); Jim and Pozzi’s time (ten thousand stones = ten thousand dollars = fifty 10 hour days @ \$10.00 per hour); and narrative time as the progressive recounting of one event which is followed by another.

Significantly, when Jim finds himself utterly alone to complete the wall after Pozzi’s demise, he becomes obsessed with Couperin’s “Mysterious Barricades”, as well as with the work of “pre-nineteenth-century composers” in general (181). Obviously, given his situation, the title of Couperin’s piece holds a particular charm for Jim, so that he comes to understand the score as a performance of his work on the wall and his time in the field:

It was impossible for him to play this last piece without thinking about the wall...It took just over two minutes to perform, and at no point in its slow, stately progress, with all its pauses, suspensions, and repetitions, did it require him to touch more than one note at a time. The music started and stopped, then started again, then stopped again, and yet through it all the piece continued to advance, pushing on toward a *resolution that never came*...As far as he was concerned, the barricades stood for the wall he was building in the meadow, but that was quite another thing from knowing what they meant [my italics] (181).

So this music ostensibly represents the progress of time, and the building of the wall, in *The Music of Chance*.

In an earlier passage, Calvin has occasion to express the same thought, albeit less eloquently: “You put down a stone, and something happens. You put down another stone, and something more happens. There’s no big mystery to it” (148). This is also what happens when one plays poker: cards are laid out one by one, each one taking on significance in relation to the next and last cards played. To extend the analogy further, in reading a novel one turns the pages one at a time, to reveal a sequence of events, which come together to form a narrative. But the problem is that, contrary to Calvin’s common sense explanation, there *is* a mystery to all of these things. As Jim comes to see, card games do not always turn out as predicted, some walls are impossible to finish, and the narrative of which he is part culminates in a resolution that never happens. This

absence of a resolution subverts the seemingly straight-forward linear representation of time in the novel, so that the text incorporates the impression of building to some sort of *telos*, while remaining undecidable and open-ended.

If narrative time in the text appears to move unproblematically along a linear trajectory, and then avoids doing so at the last possible second, historical time does equally surprising things in *The Music of Chance*. For instance, in the passage I cited above, Jim has taken to foraging through the works of past centuries in the hope that they will yield a straight-forward, parallel representation of his present condition of indebtedness. What he ends up with, however, is nothing more than the sinking feeling that things are badly out of kilter. In dwelling on Couperin's "Mysterious Barricades", Jim is hoping to find a key to comprehending the insane wall that he is building from ancient European stones, on the distant shores of the New World, but of course he never finds the key.

Actually, Jim probably comes closer to the 'meaning' of the wall when he sings Blake's *Jerusalem*, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century hymn about rebuilding on distant shores which "expresses...all the sadness and joy that had welled up in him since the first day in the meadow" (159). Oddly, Jim breaks into the hymn as Pozzi invents a convenient fiction with which he seduces a prostitute, and avoids the truth about what they are really doing in the field. He explains that they are involved in the sophisticated enterprise of "historical reverberation", that is, the erection of grandiose simulacra of ancient monuments, in the service of eccentric millionaires (158). Pozzi then, makes up the term "reverberation" for a kind of historical reconstruction that does not exist, and has nothing to do with the humiliating labor they are performing in order to pay off his failure. Ironically enough, moreover, as they celebrate the assumed termination of their contract, they are placing themselves squarely back in debt.

Pozzi's 'historical reverberation' has its counter part in the text as the novel's relationship to realism. As I wrote above *The Music of Chance* appears to belong, anachronistically and intertextually, to the tradition of realism. However, the novel is also—at least thematically—self-conscious and points back to itself in a way that many

realistic novels do not.<sup>388</sup> *The Music of Chance* is, in this respect, a sign-of-a-sign, a sort of pop image or simulacra which is ultimately autoreferential. And while the novel does appear at times to refer the reader to a reality outside of itself, it does this only partially, and to its own advantage. The result is a text which reflects itself seemingly infinitely, which puts in place an autoreferential debt that tirelessly regenerates itself, producing an endless trail of zeros. This is what Jim finally realizes at the end of the narrative as he speeds into the oncoming vehicle, attempting metaphorically and perhaps literally to finally ‘spend his wad’. Even though appearances may indicate that he has finally paid off the gambling debt by the end of the narrative, Jim is haunted by the possibility that he may never free himself, and so attempts to put an end to the story of his indenture.

Moreover the text borrows for other texts in a way that parallels Flower’s museum. Just as the former accountant approaches history with a sweeping gesture which threatens to succeed in its imperative to ‘leave nothing out’, so too *The Music of Chance* approaches the canon by eclectically appropriating bits and pieces from the Western tradition. For example, Pozzi quotes Dickens: “You’ve got your best of times, and you’ve got your worst of times”, and it is noted that Jim is reading *Our Mutual Friend* (23, 161). The endless piles of stones in the allegory of eternity that so traumatized the young Stephen Dedalus in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, give Pozzi and Jim pause on their first encounter with the pile of rocks from which they are to construct the wall (116). Likewise, the copious allusions made to Shakespeare, Faulkner, Nashe, Dickens, Blake, Coleridge and Rousseau add to the illusion that the text came together in the same way as Flower’s museum, where Voltaire’s spectacles and Hawthorn’s cane are displayed side by side.

The “random” mode of citation at work in the text, together with the chaotic events recounted in the narrative, gives the impression that the novel depends on “the single blind turn of a card”, to quote Auster quoting Faulkner (202). True to the central

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<sup>388</sup> This is perhaps what film makers Paul and Belinda Haas have seen in their screen version of the novel. Unlike the text, the film ends with Jim Nashe disentangling himself from the wreckage of the car accident and stumbling down the road like Pozzi did at the outset. This time, however, it is Paul Auster himself who stops his car and comes to Nashe’s aid, which suggests that the fictional world of *The Music of Chance* is entirely autoreferential and subject to endless repetition

poker metaphor, the reader never knows what unexpected bit of the canon will turn up in the text, just as Jim cannot anticipate what bizarre object will jump out at him from the glass cases of Flower's "monument to trivia". Auster's tapestry of intertexts is woven as if by chance and not a directed referential scheme. Significantly then, the Romantic image of the aeolian harp, is rewritten as the music of chance played with a deck of cards: "At some point during the night, he dreamt of a forest in which the wind passed through the trees with the sound of shuffling cards" (54).

## 7. Conclusion

It has been said that gambling is suicide without death.<sup>389</sup> In *The Music of Chance* this is doubly true because Jim's attempted suicide motivated by gambling is left suspended, and we are not informed as to his success or failure. The novel ends with the possibility of absolute negativity and loss as Nashe accelerates into the oncoming vehicle, in a strange celebration on his birthday. Nashe's attempted suicide is equally a moment of truth and a conscious decision, which I think, performs what Bataille meant when he wrote that "for man finally to be revealed to himself he would have to die...death itself would become self-conscious".<sup>390</sup> Nashe's suicide is perhaps the final and total expenditure of self, the orgasmic release of the absolute loss and negativity in death, for which gambling on horses and playing poker were just the rehearsal.

In Derrida's essay "De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale"<sup>391</sup> he relates the spending of the self and its resources to poetic writing because, according to him, artistic writing is a negative expenditure of signs, a celebration of transgression and excess. "It is the poetic or ecstatic element in every discourse which opens itself up to

<sup>389</sup> Actually, the gambler Clappique in Malraux's *La condition humaine* said this of his habit. Cited in Kavanagh's *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

<sup>390</sup> Cited in Derrida's "From Restricted to General Economics", in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 257. "Pour que l'homme à la fin se révèle à lui-même il devrait mourir, mais il lui faudrait le faire en vivant—en se regardant cesser d'être. En d'autres termes, la mort elle-même devrait devenir conscience (de soi), au moment même où elle anéantit l'être conscient" (378).

<sup>391</sup> Jacques Derrida *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967.

the absolute loss of sense, the un-knowledge of playfulness, the swoon of the throw of the dice” (261).<sup>392</sup> Poetic writing then, is a gamble because it is indeterminate, and because it is unproductive expenditure, like *The Music of Chance*, which typifies this kind of writing while thematizing gambling as a social practice. Ultimately, for Derrida artistic writing, like gambling, is a premodern modality of expenditure, a “potlatch of signs that consumes and wastes words in the gay affirmation of death”( 274).<sup>393</sup> So I would conclude that Nashe’s final gesture, this gay celebration of his probable death on his birthday, is a performance of a text that consumes words and celebrates loss.

But *The Music of Chance* is also about cheating, as it becomes self-evident that Flower and Stone have learned a few extra tricks for Sid Zeno. However, as Derrida has pointed out in “The Father of Logos” it is falsification, trickery, and deception, that cheat the systems like discourse and writing, opening them up to the play of new possibilities. In Auster’s novel, cheating is more than just a subject of narration, it also creates the narrative, for if Jim and Pozzi had not been cheated, the novel would end quite simply with the poker game. Cheating is also a part of how Auster uses intertexts, in that the borrowings from the canon which make up the textual economy of the novel are cited self-consciously and deviously so that they become rather a dangerous supplement. Hence, when Auster tells the episode of the tree from Rousseau’s *Confessions* where Rousseau cheats himself in his own wager by picking the biggest tree he can find, Auster in turn cheats by altering Rousseau’s text and getting the story wrong.

It is, indeed, cheating which opens up a hole in the texts like Auster’s, through which a surplus of meaning will escape no matter how much the novel may deceive one into believing that it is a closed discursive economy. Because *The Music of Chance* is

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<sup>392</sup> “Le poétique ou l’extatique est ce qui *dans tout discours* peut s’ouvrir à la perte absolue de son sens, au (sans) fond de sacré, de non-sens, de non-savoir ou de jeu, à la perte de connaissance dont il se réveille par un coup de dés” (383).

<sup>393</sup> “La destruction du discours...multiplie les mots, le précipite les uns contre les autres, less engouffre aussi dans une substitution sans fin et sans fond dont la seule règle est l’affirmation souveraine du jeu hors-sens. Non pas la réserve ou le retrait, le murmure infini d’une parole blanche effaçant les traces du discours classique mais *une sorte de potlatch de signes, brûlant, consommant, gaspillant les mots dans l’affirmation gaie de la mort*” [my italics] (403).

also haunted by zeros and has as its focal point a dishonest card game, it remains undecidable although it may threaten at turns to tally-up instead. So in spite of appearances to the contrary, a potlatch of signs is at work in the discursive economy of the novel so that in the *recounting* of the tale, the author has produced a little spare change.



## CONCLUSION

This universe is, I conceive, like a great game being played out, and we poor mortals are allowed to take a hand. By great good fortune the wiser among us have made out some few of the rules of the game, as at present played. We call them 'Laws of Nature', and honor them because we find that if we obey them we win something for our pains. The cards are our theories and hypotheses, the tricks our experimental verifications.

—T.H. Huxley



The topic of this dissertation first presented itself to me in an essay by Nabokov, where he comments on the fitness of card games, as a metafictional device for the expression of elements of narrative, and as a metaphor of textual composition.<sup>6</sup> I have pursued the topic out of an interest in the discipline of comparative literature, and out of a fascination with playing cards and their history. By writing this thesis on card games in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel, I hope to have shed some new light on certain aspects of novels, as well as on linguistic and economic theories of literature. I also hope to have brought some new insights to the history of playing cards. In conclusion, I would like to reiterate some of the salient points of this thesis, share some of the findings I made in the process of writing this document, and discuss topics for future research.

Beginning with Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* in the first chapter, I reviewed some of the works on writing and play from this century. This seemed the logical juncture at which to begin, given that thinkers since Aristotle have conceptualized 'literature' as a form of *play*, and that my topic is *playing* cards in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel. However, 'play' and 'literature' as concepts both proved too vast and undefined for approaching the specific topic of card games in 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels. Play, for example,

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<sup>6</sup> See "*Mansfield Park* (1814)" in *Lectures on Literature*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980, p.9-60.

only becomes perceptible when it is temporarily contained in entities such as game configurations, and for this reason I narrowed the focus of my inquiry to play as it is given form in novelistic card games.

Accepting that games stand in a relation of analogy to texts, and further to the language of which texts are made, I devoted the second chapter to exploring this relationship. I proceeded by discussing language as a game based on the function of rules and the role of turn-taking in any kind of dialogue or dialogical situation. Having established language as being itself essentially game-like following Wittgenstein, I then focused on the novel as a complex product of language, in order to determine what sort of game-like configuration a novel might constitute. Finally, I reviewed several approaches to the topic of play and games in literature such as Peter Hutchinson's *Games Authors Play*, which specifically addresses the card game in narrative fiction.

In reviewing theories of games in fiction, I found no one approach which could adequately deal with the problem I have set out to solve. For although novels may certainly be said to be game-like, they are not, strictly speaking, games in the same sense that card games are. Readers and authors may play together in a metaphoric sense only, because the author is generally absent or dead, and the game experience is textually mediated. Moreover, the application of a strict game model to a literary entity such as a novel begs the question of whether or not readers and authors can win or lose at their game with the text. This question is, however, not widely applicable to novels because in most cases it would be difficult to determine the nature of a win for the participants—readers and writers—in a given text. I surmise then, that card games in novels may be seen as a metafictional figure that draws attention to aspects of texts that resemble card games.

In Chapter 3, I addressed the question of literary economy and the economics of gambling because money is wagered in all of the novelistic card games that I discuss in this dissertation. Here, I focused on Mauss' anthropological study of premodern prestation economies in the *Essai sur le don*, in particular his identification of gambling as a premodern economic practise akin to the potlatch. Further, I turned to the work of Bataille and Derrida in which both authors link Mauss' essay on premodern exchange to

artistic writing, concluding that such writing is a kind of ‘potlatch of signs’. The analogies drawn between artistic writing and gambling by Bataille in *La part maudite*, and by Derrida in “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale”, serve to reinforce the connection I made between the novelistic card game and the novel as an example of artistic writing.

In Chapter 4, I sought to provide an historical grounding for this dissertation in order to explain why cards and card games may present themselves, to authors and to readers, as a metaphor of writing and of the fictional context in which they are engaged. I found that, quite literally, cards have served as both writing and text over the centuries. Early Egyptian cards were used as a sacred alphabet, of which each letter was a page in the book of Thoth. As cards entered Europe from Egypt, their original function as an alphabet and as the book of being was displaced or misconstrued. So while they were still used for reading fortunes, they were also adapted for use as randomizers in play, and as a medium of exchange in gambling. Even though Thoth’s books were dissembled for the purpose of gambling early on in Europe, they continued to be published in book form in Germany into the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>395</sup> Today, playing cards, and perhaps more so the tarot, are seen as a kind of condensed language of the unknown which possesses the power to narrate the future.

I also showed how playing cards—invented in legend by Thoth, the god of writing, games of chance and numbers—are historically associated with mathematical annotation and accounting. Above all, cards played an important role in introducing zero, the infidel cipher, into Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the games that entered Europe with cards helped to familiarize people with the zero-balance, and with double-ledger accountancy since card games relied on the zero balance then, just as they do today. Paradoxically, while these foreign inventions were accepted by Europeans in the hopes of increasing the efficiency of their systems for controlling the movement of wealth, the zero and the zero balance proved to be quite unruly. As I explained, the introduction of an oriental system of accountancy into Western monetary logic led to

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<sup>395</sup> Cf. Cathryn Perry Hargraves “Playing Cards in Germany” in *The History of Playing Cards*, New York: Dover Publications, 1966, p. 88-156.

unprecedented inflation and upsets in modern European economics. The inflation and economic instability occasioned by the zero were, I am suggesting, the result of systemic incompatibilities encountered by Europeans when they attempted to introduce a foreign system of accounting into modern economics. The incompatibility of the two systems is particularly evident in the case of gambling (an eastern prestation exchange modality popularly practised with playing cards) which modern economics has long sought to suppress.

Although playing cards have served as a tool for mystic divination, as an alphabet, a book, a system of accounting, and even as real currency in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, I am not suggesting that readers or writers are explicitly aware of all of this today. I am arguing that, while most of this information is unknown to all save perhaps card historians, playing cards are still tacitly associated with these aspects of their past. At the very least, the images on playing cards communicate their antique provenance and their strangeness to the modern subject, decorated as they are with the heraldic iconography of medieval Europe, and the perspectival style of ancient Egypt.<sup>396</sup>

Likewise, few are aware that playing cards were publicly burned in central Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries because of their pagan heritage, yet cards continue to whisper their pagan ‘otherness’ and their long association with ‘vice’. Playing cards signify, among other things, raciness, loose living, and profligacy in modern consciousness. They are clearly associated with gaming, addictive behaviors and illicit pleasures, as well as with mysticism and ‘otherness’. So while I do not pretend to know if a writer is actively aware of the history of cards when writing a card playing scene into a novel, I am suggesting that they quietly invoke the traces of their past and present themselves as eloquent metaphors.

It was Court de Gebelin, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French archeologist and Egyptologist who first made the connection between the ordinary deck of fifty-two and Thoth, the legendary father of logos and of chance. In the final three chapters, I make this connection between writing, chance and numbers, using fictional representations of

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<sup>396</sup> For example, the jack of hearts, the jack of spades and the king of diamonds, present a view of both profile and full-front at once.

playing cards and card games provided by Mann, Nabokov and Auster. I have found that fictional card games may serve as an index of how chance, vice, and unsanctioned economic exchanges are viewed in a given novel, as well as in the greater context of the novel's production. In all three novels—*Der Zauberberg*, *Ada*, and *The Music of Chance*—card playing is a pivotal moment in the narrative that goes with or against the grain of the text, presenting gambling as a disruptive event or a celebration.

In the first case, I argued that the card party recounted in *Der Zauberberg*, is a disruptive event that sets a downward spiral of suicides and violence in motion and culminates in the outbreak of the First World War. While I maintain that in Thomas Mann's novel, cards are associated with prestation expenditure, loose morals and death, I am not suggesting that is a celebration, but rather the beginning of the end. Indeed the card party in "Vingt-et-un" is fraught with tensions from the outset and is, quite evidently, more disturbing than celebratory. For example, Hans Castorp participates in the game only on the insistence of Mynheer Peeperkorn, of whom he is both jealous and a little afraid. As the game gets underway, Peeperkorn delivers lengthy speeches on the fruits of the winecup and divine retribution that some members of the party find shocking. What is more, some of the players lose considerable amounts of money, but they are so shaken and drunken at the end of the night that even the winners do not bother to collect their spoils. All things considered, the card party is far from genteel and stands out from all of the other *soirées* recounted in *Der Zauberberg* because it is debauched and strangely violent.

I also argued that it is appropriate that the card party should take place at Mynheer's behest because, even in the midst of the multi-ethnic population of the Berghof sanitarium, Peeperkorn is clearly 'other'. Coming from Java, a premodern colony where the dominant modality of exchange was based on gambling and cock-fighting, it is fitting that Peeperkorn would incite the residents of the Berghof to gambling and intoxication, that is, to prestation behaviors.

Furthermore, the game arises at a decisive point in the text where the controlled rationalistic enlightenment economies of discourse, sexuality and monetary exchange are being bankrupted as Europe prepares for the first World War. This is represented in the

text, in part, through imagery related to playing cards and to the number scheme which informs the text. For example, the members of the card party in “Vingt-et-un” leave the table having discarded their cards face-down, a moment which mirrors “*Der Donnerschlag*”, the final scene in which Hans Castorp is discovered lying face down following an explosion. By virtue of cards’ more morbid connections to the god of death, I argued that the scene in “Vingt-et-un” aptly prefigures this closing scene of destruction and death. Furthermore, the card playing scene begins a parallel movement in the text from the number seven, which appears to signify completion and hermetic plenitude, to the number zero which brings with it an increasing fascination with emptiness and Egyptian cults of the dead. This scene of gambling, card playing and vice also marks the decline, in the text, of European ‘rationality’ and the feared influx of the ‘other’ just before the war.

In Nabokov’s *Ada*, I argued that playing cards and poker games may be understood as having similar associations, but that rather than serving as a point of rupture or dissipation as in *Der Zauberberg*, cards appear to be a metaphor well-suited to the narrative economy of *Ada*. While in *Der Zauberberg*, cards signify loose morality, gambling and death as detrimental to the economies represented in the narrative, in *Ada* cards are a metaphor well suited to all those aspects of ‘the queen of heart’s’ behavior as she uninhibitedly subverts the incest taboo, and virtually any other form of prohibition. Indeed, as the mirthful account of the three amorous Veen siblings and their combinatory adventures, *Ada* unceasingly thematises a form of sexuality that many would find perverse. Moreover, the Veen childrens’ sexual economy interacts with the other economies in the text, so that the novel is informed at every level by ostentatious expenditure, be it sexual, verbal or monetary. This is mirrored, for example, in Van’s college poker game, a fine example of gambling, ostentatious spending and cheating.

Van’s cheating at poker is compatible, moreover, with the other forms of trickery that go on in *Ada* as, for example, the Nabokovian sleight of hand that informs the text. Indeed, there are constant hints given in *Ada* (and in Van’s *The Texture of Time* which is recounted within the novel) that the text is actually *Ada*’s castle of cards. As a metaphor of writing, the castle of cards suggests that *Ada* is the fragile product of a random

selection of literary citations and elements of language. In fact, Nabokov went to the trouble of having publicity photos taken of himself writing on cards, thereby suggesting that his text came together by ‘the luck of the draw’ and could be restructured at any moment by shuffling the deck. But this is something of a card trick on Nabokov’s part, for it is evident that the text did not fall together randomly, but is rather a system constructed from a meticulous strategy and from ‘stacking the deck’. So while Nabokov presents his text as the product of random combination (and indeed, the characters in *Ada* say just that) this is an illusion, since the text is rather a carefully constructed and controlled literary experiment.

I concluded that the Veen childrens’ incestuous relationship, a sexual economy that parallels gambling in *Ada*, appears to be at work persistently deconstructing the text. This is to say that the on-going *mise en scène* of taboo and subversive sexuality in the novel *appears* to undercut the possibility of a unifying metanarrative or ideology. However, unlike *Ada*’s castle of cards which threatens at any minute to collapse and be erected anew, *Ada* is organized by a ideology which betrays a more stable combinatory logic. The text is regulated by a specific logic, so that the seemingly ‘random’ combination of elements from the canon does not come together as by the chance selection of a card. Indeed, the programatic selection of elements from which the text is constructed fits the novel’s eroticism which, especially in the case of Lucette or of the population of exotic virgins at the Villas Venus, is exploitative and misogynistic. So just as Van cheats at poker, Nabokov built this castle of cards by slight of hand, producing a text that asks to be read as a ‘random nulliverse’, when all along it is controlled by the unifying logic of misogyny.

As the title of Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* suggests, the novel in some way reproduces the music that chance makes, “the wind pass[ing] through the trees with the sound of shuffling cards” (54). Again in this novel, playing card imagery and card games serve as a metaphor of how the narrative arose, or more accurately, of how the author might hint that it came together. It is difficult in Auster’s novel, however, to discern if the card game at the center of the narrative is contextualised as a moment of rupture or as a compatible event. *The Music of Chance* appears to accommodate a reading

of the card game that goes both with, and against, the text and there are several elements in the story which may imply this.

First, Jim and Pozzi consistently misread their situation, and therefore, misapprehend the nature of their dealings with Flower and Stone, as well as the conditions of their debt. Similarly, it becomes clear that the millionaires have somehow cheated Jim and Pozzi, so that Pozzi has misjudged Flower and Stone's ability as poker players as well as their honesty. Textually, the mounting zeros in the narrative seem to point to both the positive fulfillment of the debt, and to an exponential inflation of zeros (10, 100, 1000, 10,000). Likewise, a narrative thread of sevens, which one might expect to spell luck or plenitude, runs through the text yet none of the sevens in *The Music of Chance* seem particularly lucky or enriching. In short, it seems that Auster's novel offers at least two possible solutions to or meanings for narrative events such as the poker game, in keeping with the overall undecidability of the text.

Although these novelistic card games are specific to the contexts I have described above, they do appear to share some common features. For example, I have established links between language, texts, economics and playing cards, for which I provided historical grounding in the fourth chapter. I found that in each of the novels I analysed, playing cards and card games act as a *mise en abyme* of economy, language and textual production within the novel. As such, they mirror the textual economy which frames them, while resisting closure and creating a gap or a hole through the end of text, a space of undecided endings.

Likewise, in all three of these novels, death plays a major role. In *Der Zauberberg* there are frequent deaths and two suicides; in *Ada*, Lucette kills herself; in *The Music of Chance* Pozzi is given up for dead and Jim attempts suicide. These deaths, moreover, are connected in various ways to the card game in the text, as I argued in the last chapters. This connection is fitting, as cards have been linked to death from their mythic association with Thoth and, more recently, through expressions such as 'le mort' or 'the dummy hand' in bridge and the 'dead man's hand' in poker. The preponderance of death in these texts seems to suggest the 'final scene' for which gambling, intoxication



and sexuality (la petite mort) are just the preparation. As such they signal both sublime dissipation and death.

Finally, the novels in this thesis are connected through their references to the encyclopedia, as well as to the museum. A parallel is drawn between the fictional enterprise of the novel, and a similar project represented in the text which is ridiculed or has in some way failed: Settembrini's encyclopedia, Van's *Texture of Time*, Flower and Stone's collections. Moreover, in each case the encyclopedic project is somehow connected to cards, for example, Settembrini speaks of Thoth's library in the same breath as his project; Van likens *The Texture of Time* to Ada's castle of cards; and the logic of Flower and Stone's museum reminds Jim of poker luck. This suggests a filiation between the mystic function of cards as a virtual encyclopedia or 'perpetual almanac', and the fictional world represented in the text.

Contrary perhaps to common wisdom, playing cards are an archive that, to quote Chatto, "sweep a circle comprehending not only all that man knows, but all that he speculates on".<sup>397</sup> While Chatto's statement may be somewhat exaggerated, playing cards, as I hope to have shown, come to us from a rich and diversified past which still resonates in modern memory. Hence, the encyclopedic circle that they sweep continues to make playing cards a dense metaphor for many aspects of textuality. Moreover, because of all that playing cards embody, it is apparent that a similar problematic might be studied in other contexts.

For example, I argued, that the card playing scene in both Mann and Nabokov could be read as a reference to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, as card games are a frequent, if not a standard element in the novels of that century. The results of a study of card games and gambling as a metafictional device in 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction would probably differ greatly from those I have advanced here. It would be interesting, for example, to ask why scenes of card playing and gambling are so prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, if one follows Huizinga for example, there was a strong disregard for gambling specifically and play more generally in Europe at that time.

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<sup>397</sup> Chatto, William Andrew. *Facts and Speculations on the Origin of Playing Cards*. London: John Russell Smith, 1848, p. 3.

Some aspects of this analysis of card playing represented in fiction could be extended to the representation of cards in other media such as painting. Card players came into being as a genre in the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when votive restrictions on painting were lifted, and when the artist was integrated into commerce. At the same time the Dutch bourse was in full operation, as was the *Windhandel*, a riskier trade gamble for down-market customers. A study of Dutch *Kaartspelers* might reveal that card playing was popular in paintings of 17<sup>th</sup> century, in part because these paintings were usually small and inexpensive, but also because they thematised gambling as a common transaction in a greater economy based on a more organized system for gambling. Further, it would be interesting to study how this popular genre became canonised and enjoyed subsequent appearances in the work of Cézanne, Balhuis, Grosz, and Dali among others.

It is my hope that this thesis has shed new light on the deck, “this book [which] is so universally used and seems to be so insignificant that no savant has condescended to study its unbound pages, nor has any student suspected its illustrious origin”.<sup>398</sup> In studying this object in the context of the novel, I also hope to have provided the reader with some new insights into the study of fiction, particularly where the study of texts coincides with play, linguistics, and economics.



With cards I while my leisure hours away,  
And cheat old Time, yet neither bet nor play.  
Engraving by W. J. Linton, c. 1848

Fig. 9

<sup>398</sup> From Court de Gebelin's *Extrait du Monde Primitif Analyisé et comparé avec le Monde Moderne, Tome I, Du Jeu des Tarots*, cited in Mrs. Van Rensselaer's *Prophetical, Educational and Playing Cards*, London, 1912, p. 216.

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