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From Plato to Derrida and Theories of Play

Simona Livescu
Rancho Palos Verdes

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Abstract: In her paper, "From Plato to Derrida and Theories of Play," Simona Livescu proposes a reevaluation of the concept of play. By examining various critical interpretations of this term from Greek antiquity to modern structuralists and poststructuralist theories, Livescu analyzes the common denominator in philosophical, cultural, and religious facets of the play. In her discussion, Livescu emphasizes the ultimate importance of the ludic presence in every fundamental human action. Among the conclusions of the paper, Livescu suggests that play exists as an essence of consciousness and that it is, actually, a way of being, not only a way of knowing. Regardless of its multifarious uses along the centuries, the ludic retains a crucial position in the philosophy of culture, of an equal status to concepts consecrated to truth, meaning, value, and knowledge.

Simona Livescu

From Plato to Derrida and Theories of Play

Literary critics, anthropologists, philosophers, and cultural theorists express a deep interest in the concept of play and the ludic aspect of human consciousness. During different periods, the study of the ludic, or the playful, took various turns. Mostly, the idea of play occupies a central role within the activity of discovering or encountering knowledge (world knowledge, extra sensorial knowledge, self-knowledge, etc.) (from the large corpus of scholarship about play and the ludic in culture and literature, see, e.g., Bogue and Spariosu; Scott; Wilson). A journey into various philosophical undertakings of the concept seems to lead to the conclusion that this concept is as ultimate in its importance as traditional philosophical concepts like truth, knowledge, meaning, and value are. Moreover, contemporary critical attitudes are advancing the play/interplay/multiple play as a quintessential dimension of serious action or as an inherent, necessary aspect ever present in any human artistic and non-artistic human expression.

Studies on the Greek antiquity reveal that the Greek etymology of play revolves around a root providing also words like education, culture, and children. Arthur A. Krentz writes in his paper entitled "Play and Education in Plato's *Republic*," that "etymologically, in Greek, the terms *paideia*, the word for education/culture, *paidia*, the word for play/game/pastime/sport, and *paides*, the word for children have the same root, and the three terms often show up in the same context" (<http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducKren.htm>). Another term built upon the same root is pedagogy: "The central aim of pedagogy (*paidagogia*) is to encourage learning as a form of play (paidia) which is the most persuasive and effective approach to learning for the free citizens in a society which honors philosophers" (Krentz <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducKren.htm>). For Socrates (or Plato) play, the best method of instruction, is to be practiced freely, but not randomly. The very freedom of the citizens within a *polis* is ensured by the context of a city. While Plato admits the presence of frivolous play or simple amusement, he is a firm advocate of motivated play, one geared toward the growth and development of individuals who would then contribute to a just society and to the idea of Good itself. Socrates does not see notions such as work and play as being opposite. Through playful dialogue he helps others see the truth. Dialectic, the final stage of education for a philosopher is also serious play, as Krentz observes. The very topic of the *Republic*, that of a just life in a just society, reveals a Socrates addressing a serious issue in a playful frame: he jokes with Adeimantos and Glaucon, he uses allegories, comparisons and irony. He points out ironically that the construction of the city is a form of "play" and a game; a suggestion that the "image of the ideal city, which Socrates describes, must not be taken too seriously," because it may be utopic (Krentz <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducKren.htm>).

There is hardly other *locus classicus* better suited than the Old Testament for identifying an equivalent to Plato's ideal city, transposed into religious terms. One way to capture a trace of the intangible essence of the Primordial Player Elohim is to look into His structures. One of the organizing devices of His create-a-world art is the alternance of play with non-play. The sequence seems to be: play for six days, stop and contemplate the seventh day, play again, stop, and play again, *ad infinitum*. When God rests on the seventh day, he allows the play of the elements to develop: day and night, sky and earth, sun and moon, or trees and birds are free to manifest and interact without more divine interference. Incredibly, this out-of-words playfully created universe does not stop when God or man stops to breathe. Yet God lets Adam know he is to play and enjoy everything in the Garden of Eden, and frees him from concern with what happens to him or the elements whenever he is in a play or a non-play state, under one condition: the human being is not supposed to eat from the tree of good and evil. Elohim creates for Adam's playful freedom a miraculous earthy frame and a unique rule. After Adam breaks this rule, and the context of the Garden is no longer available to his offsprings, God will later grant the Israelites a new set of rules. Moses will be given the Commandments that will help

the Being made from dust gain a degree of control over his own boundless freedom and confusion of unstructured play.

Christian thought may have tackled the playful element in some of its parables: "Jesus, however, called the children to himself and said, "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will not enter it" (Luke 18: 15-17). In the similar passages from Matthew and Mark's Gospels, another word than the traditional *pais* for child is used, *paidion*. *Paidion* is a diminutive of *pais*, and is understood to describe children under seven years old. Traditional Christian exegesis suggests that Jesus's remark refers to the children's openness, humility and receptivity. Why not their playfulness, too? Children associate the idea of play with friendly interaction, inevitable conflict, forgiveness, peace-making, and then playful state again; all this interaction may happen in five minutes or fifty. By comparison, human society may require fifty years or even more, a considerably longer period of conflict and resentment before peaceful feelings occur between belligerent factions again. In the same line of thought, how does one forgive his enemies in true Christian sense, if one is not in a playful mood?

Along with the seriousness, the rationality, and the sobriety, the Middle Ages were broadly marked by the ludic. Mikhail Bakhtin was among those who signaled a ludic culture that flourished subliminally during the "Dark" Ages; moreover, he defined the carnivalesque, which promoted the profane, the vulgar, and the grotesque, the celebration of wine, dance, and the obscene as an expression of resistance to the official high culture of the nobility, the Church and the State. Lauren Langman states that within the confinement of a feudal Europe, the carnival moments were structured ludic forms of free, alternative meanings: "To parody, to mock, to stick out a tongue, butt or a finger to authority is to give one a sense of power over authority, be recognized by others for so doing and integrated into a community of resistance. Fleeting, perhaps, momentary, but so is life and in the mediaeval era, especially so" (Langman <http://www.angelfire.com/or/sociologyshop/langfr2.html>).

Upon reaching the Kantian momentum, the word play becomes used in connection to art. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes art from nature, from science, and from craft. Kant affirms that art is not craft, because "we regard free art [as an art] that could only turn out purposive (i.e.succeed) if it is play, in other words, an occupation that is agreeable on its own account" (Kant 171). One of his insights is reminiscent of the Platonician stand. Kant points out, "it is advisable, however, to remind ourselves that in all the free arts there is yet a need for something in the order of a constraint, or, as it is called, a mechanism" (Kant 171). As an example he mentions prosody and meter in regard to poetry: "Without this the *spirit* which in art must be free and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and would evaporate completely" (Kant 171). Co-paraphrasing Plato and Kant, the reader would conclude that play, art, and the city would evaporate completely without a certain internal or external structure.

Friedrich von Schiller takes the Kantian free play further; his *Weltanschauung* is that a mediator is needed between the material instinct (*Stofftrieb*) and the natural, or formal instinct (*Formtrieb*), namely a ludic impulse (*Spieltrieb*). The former two cannot coexist or interact effectively without the ludic drive, a playful conducive factor. The material and spiritual realms being so differentiated and divided require a ludic cohesive force to bridge the gap.

The materialistic philosophical phase makes Hegel turn to the sublime, the very category addressed by Longinus in Greek antiquity. For Hegel, the gap between the natural and the spiritual (as between Schiller's material and natural impulse) is the sublime. Hegel also supports the idea of a middle path (perhaps in the Aristotelian sense) between accounts of the art that emphasizes rules, and those that rely on pure inspiration. Is Hegel's middle path actually Plato's need for ethical, structured play, and also Kantian *mechanism*?

For Heidegger, "language is the house of Being," and through poetry "humankind creates new worlds, new varieties of meaning" (Leitch 1119). While analyzing how poetry happens, Heidegger

introduces the concept of "dif-ference." Poetry names things, calls things into being; it does not only name things, but also names world. The relationship between world and things is one of intimacy, but not fusion. It is a relationship in which the entities world and thing penetrate each other, divide and remain separated: "The intimacy of world and thing is present in the separation of the between; it is present in the dif-ference" (Leitch 1129).

Criticizing the formalist and structuralist linguistic views on the philosophy of language, which nevertheless bring unity and promote the idea of an authorial voice controlling a discourse, Mikhail Bakhtin denounces this position as monologic. Living language is not monologic, but dialogic, because between any given word and its object or subject there "exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object" (Leitch 1188). In his *Discourse in the Novel* (1935), Bakhtin insists that language is characterized by *heteroglossia*, which is the "internal stratification" of language: the interplay among "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups...of various circles and of passing fashions" (Bakhtin 262-63). The novel, therefore, is characterized not by a systemic structural unity of language, but by the heteroglossic "multiplicity of 'centrifugal' forces at work in language" (Leitch 1188). While for Plato the play with language -- or the play of the *logos* with ideas -- was essential to understand and create a just world better, for the twentieth-century Bakhtin the centrifugal interplay -- actually the play within language itself -- becomes key in deciphering and construing the world around.

Johan Huizinga defines in his *Homo Ludens* (1938) humans as playful beings and argues that play is a fundamental fact of every human expression. For him, play is older than culture, because culture presupposes human society, but "animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (1). Law, poetry, war, culture, and music, all encompass playfulness in both their essence and manifestation: "The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play ... We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play ... it arises in and as play, and never leaves it" (Huizinga 173).

In "The Ontology of the Work of Art and its Hermeneutic Significance" in his *Truth and Method* (1960), Hans Georg Gadamer discusses play in the context of philosophy. His aim is to change the perception of this concept, freeing it from the subjective meaning purported by Kant and Schiller, which became too central in philosophy. Play means neither the orientation/state of mind of the author, nor of those enjoying neither the work of art, nor the freedom of subjectivity engaged in play, but "the mode of being of the work of art itself (Gadamer *Ontology*, 101). The existentialist philosopher clarifies that play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play. He also mentions Huizinga, who investigated the element of play anthropologically in all cultures and who wrote that "the savage himself knows no conceptual distinctions between being and playing" (*Ontology* 104). Therefore Gadamer concludes that "man *too*, plays" (*Ontology* 105). Friedrich Schlegel's opinion holds true for Gadamer more than one hundred years after it was written: "all the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art" (*Ontology* 105).

Gadamer's mechanism comes from his observation that human play requires a playing field -- which in itself is a delimitation -- and from the notion that the game presents the player with a task- the child playing with a ball would have the task of hitting it. For Gadamer, play is associated with essence and being, and his understanding is contoured by the playing field and by the task. Overall, his theory seems to have opened the field for the deconstructionist point of view that playfulness takes place within the work of art itself. Gadamer's reader would be tempted to exercise the notion that the philosopher may have not allowed for the play -- as a mode of being of the work of art itself -- but to exert this mode of being into the mind of the author and the readers thus becoming something which simultaneously exists in and contaminates three realms: the work of art itself, the

author's mind, and the reader's mind, too (an ironical fourth may constitute the critic's or the philosopher's own reasoning as well).

Roland Barthes's essay *From Work to Text* proves quintessential to the poststructuralist textual theory -- as it was elaborated by the writers associated with the Tel Quel movement (Kristeva and Derrida, among others). The introduction to Barthes's work in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* informs the reader, "whereas culture and language for Levi-Strauss and Saussure were structured like a game (chess is the favorite example), the text is structured like play-children's play, musical performance, or the excess motion in a machine" for Barthes (Barhes 1459). In *From Work to Text*, Barthes presents in structuralist terms a Bakhtinian view: the text exhibits an infinite playfulness of the signifier; the text provokes "the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy (lacking it, man would die)" (Barthes 158). Text is also "a system with neither close, nor centre" (Barthes 159). The activity of the reader seems to be Kantian *mechanism* for Barthes: the author is dead, and the act of reading is not an act of playing with a text. "Text itself plays," and what the reader does, is he/she "plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game" (Barthes 162). Extrapolating from Barthes's position, God, as a writer of a six-day play and a reader during the seventh day, may actually play twice over even while seen in a non-play state.

Foucault's approach to Barthes's ideas brings to mind Plato's ethical oriented play and the Kantian mechanism again. Foucault's mechanism is now the author, the missing Barthesian piece. Foucault illuminates us: the concept *author* is an organizing device for holding different texts together. The authorial organizing device is structuring a vast array of materials and interpretations, presenting its conclusions as texts. The activity of writing is "an interplay of signs" for Foucault in his "What Is an Author?" revolving around an authorial mind (see Leitch 1623).

And feminism plays, too. Contemporary American feminists regard play as "vital to maintaining the critical edge necessary for women's studies" (King and Buker 105). Toni King and Eloise Buker build their study on the work of Maria Lugones, who suggested that "play facilitates feminist philosophy" (qtd. in King and Buker 105). King and Buker propose five levels of play: critical play, creative play, healing play, transcendent play, and oppositional play: critical play is reflected in "games of status" and includes voting, put-down humor, pandering, posturing, and social competition; creative play would affirm both individual and collective experiences and identities, and would help with flexibility and change; healing play mediates the surfacing of intuitive understanding, and would identify fractured elements, or ruptures of communal relations. Ultimately, it would integrate contradictions; transcendent play unites all former three types of play in presenting an inclusive story of the feminist group at large; and the oppositional play represents the play of feminist protest and social activism.

In turn, Derrida employs a critical method of identifying the unifying and conflicting messages contained in a text. Interpreted in the *Norton Anthology*, Derrida's idea is that "play and art are lost by Plato as he saves them" (Leitch 1866). Whereas for Plato the very existence of play is essential as an educational tool, Derrida's play is either nothing, or begins to be something. If it is nothing, then it cannot create an activity or discourse worthy of the name, and becomes *alogos*. If it becomes something, then its very essence is under erasure, as writing erases itself right before expressing the truth. Therefore, even if play exists, "it erases itself as such" (see Leitch 1866). As the entire philosophy of culture knows, Plato might have condemned play-poetry, yet he left us seriously playing his dialogical games. Derrida's deconstructionist look at the Platonician philosophy questions "why Plato, while subordinating or condemning writing and play should have written so much, presenting his writings, *from out of Socrates death*, as games, indicting writing in writing?" (see Leitch 1867). The conclusion is that Plato "plays at taking things seriously" (see Leitch 1866).

Contemporary scholarship may be inclined to see the Bakhtinian, Barthesian, or Derridean insistence on the textual play/interplay and on the multiplicity, disappearance, or decentering of the authorial presence in the Nietzschean light of will to power: the contemporary act of reading has the center of textual or authorial meaning shifted upon critical explication. In spite of the more recent

reader-response theories of Wolfgang Iser or Stanley Fish, the center, or the power of reading has shifted historically from the work of art to author, then to reader, and seems to be now centered on the critic as the most indispensable part in the process. Critics are holding the key to the multiple, layered mysteries of the play by having a more comprehensive view upon the intricate rules; no informed reader could dream to compete with those who master the scholarship of the theory of language and literature. The reader's anxiety becomes the following: how will the multiple, dead, or decentered author continue to play/write with such accompanying deconstructive critical Cerberus eyeing him/her? The Marxist mercy of Fish saves the day (or the author, more precisely): readers are allowed the power of their own interpretive community, for every reader will appreciate a work of art according to his/her own socially or otherwise determined standards of taste. Fish has multi-layered the play, decentering the center again: the interpretation game is taking place today among various "interpretive communities," working the same path as language did once heteroglossically for Bakhtin.

Even if play erases itself, voices say that critical theory has never been funnier. Perhaps Derrida was interested in commenting so much on Plato owing to a ludic affinity between them. During an interview, when asked what he would like to find out in a movie made about other philosophers' lives such as Plato, Kant, or Heidegger, Derrida's answer proves a hit: "their sex life" (Kirby and Ziering Kofman). And in my opinion Derrida was only half-joking: he is genuinely interested in these philosophers' attitude about the eternal idea of intimate love, which in fact has been strangely absent from their works. When asked about whom from the philosophers he would have liked best as a mother (a philosophical one), Derrida answers in a jokologically deconstructionist tone, "my son" or "my granddaughter" (Kirby and Ziering Kofman). Deconstructing the question, Derrida involves his future generational line in the issue and not just the past one. Both past and future generations are playing the game whose mechanism is now known as Derrida. Perhaps we finally have critics of the same famous stature as authors. Those accusing Shakespeare once of corrupting the language with twisted wit, supposedly non-moral puns, and ambiguities, came to appreciate his "weaknesses" inasmuch as they offer in turn to the readership their most interesting criticism as poetry, or play.

Or, possibly, critics, authors, readers, and texts are such a continuum, because play is not actually a way of knowing, but a way of being (in a Derridean sense, all that surrounds one at any given time is continuous, is text). The Gadamerian essence is the vital Barthesian symbolic energy released in the endless associations, permutations, and combinations. If Barthes says that lacking this energy, man would die, Huizinga affirms that man would not have existed at all in the first place, because he was born precisely out of play. (Again, it sets one thinking of the Creator's initial effort in the Old Testament, when God played with words while creating the world: *fiat lux!* -- and light it was.) An important aspect that surrounds play is that it needs a shape, a contour, a structure: it must have some set of arbitrarily chosen and assumed rules at a given time. These rules may be called prosody, rhythm or meter; authorial organizational device, or internal mechanism; playing field or its task; the Ten Commandments or the very equilibrium ensured by the constant moving of a center. Without structure, it would be impossible to say that it evaporated; there would be nobody left to call it *alogos*, under erasure, or totally erased, for Huizinga's *homo ludens* would probably have disappeared, or never existed at all. Note: An earlier version of the above paper was published in *Clouds* 15 (Fall 2003): <http://www.cloudsmagazine.com/15/Simona_Livescu_Play_A_Recycled_Gestalt.htm>.

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Author's profile: Simona Livescu resides in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. With an M.A. in foreign languages and literatures from the University of Bucharest, Romania, Livescu intends to enroll in a Ph.D. in comparative literature. Her interests include German aesthetics, critical theory, the literature of vicissitude of Arab and Jewish expression, and the image of war in twentieth-century American and German literature and she is currently working on two projects: a novelette focusing on the adolescent crisis of self-consciousness and a research study with the title "Epigones, Echoes, and Local Originality: The Late Spread of Modernism in Minor Literatures." E-mail: <simonal@powersupplies.net>.