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Homo Ludens revisited

In writing about play, it is impossible to ignore Huizinga's book, *Homo Ludens*[1], which inaugurates an anthropology of play expressing views of remarkable scope and insight. Huizinga is in fact the first to have undertaken, in a systematic way, to establish certain relationships between various human activities (law, war, poetry, art, etc.) which at first glance might appear to have nothing in common. His great merit is specifically to have discovered in the play-element of these activities a common denominator and an important factor of culture. Extending, completing the ground-breaking work of Huizinga but also modifying and contesting certain of his theses, Roger Caillois criticizes Huizinga's conception and definition of play as being simultaneously too broad and too narrow.[2]

Too narrow insofar as Huizinga retains only one characteristic of play, its competitive aspect, whereas according to Caillois's typology play falls into four basic categories (*agôn:* competition; *alea:* chance; *mimicry:* simulation; *ilinx:* vertigo); these are subject to another classification superimposed on the first, a continuum running from *ludus* (controlled play) to *paidia* (spontaneous play).

Too broad insofar as Huizinga fails to delineate with precision the sphere of play, to draw the line between that which, in each culture, belongs to the domain of play and that which belongs to the domain of the "sacred," the "institutional."

[1]French translation from the Dutch by Cécile Seresia, Gallimard, 1951. The original text was published in 1938. The page numbers given in parenthesis after the quotations refer to the French edition.

[2]As Caillois has published the same texts (with modifications which appear minor in as much as they do not affect his thesis) twice or even three times (once in the form of articles in various reviews, again in his book *Les jeux et les hommes,* a third time in the volume of the *Encyclopédie* of La Pléiade devoted to "Sports and Games"), we will refer to his book *Les jeux et les hommes,* Gallimard, 1958, assuming that it represents the most complete expression of his thought on this problem. The page numbers given in parentheses following the quotations refer to the pocket edition.

For his critique of Huizinga's definition of play, cf. p. 33.

If Caillois has to his credit the discovery of certain aspects of play neglected by Huizinga, his debit, so to speak, is to have been too categorical, to have succumbed to his own classifications, believing that he could confine play within them. On the other hand, even if Huizinga erred in limiting play to one of its characteristics (competition), he had the merit of perceiving that play could not be enclosed in a separate domain, identifiable as such among human activities. Indeed, falling prey to a sort of hesitation as he concludes, he looks back on the theses he has been advancing and, with creditable honesty, instead of masking his inability to delimit the field of play in culture, he exposes it in these terms:

> Here once again is revealed the troubling insolubility of the problem: play or seriousness. We have gradually become convinced that culture is grounded in noble play, and that it cannot neglect the play-element and still display its supreme quality of style and dignity. Observance of the established rules is nowhere so indispensable as in the relationship between peoples and States. If the rules are violated, society falls into barbarism and chaos. On the other hand, we judge that it is specifically in war that man lapses into the agonistic attitude which gave form and meaning to primitive games played for the sake of prestige. (p. 335)

Play or seriousness. This alternative is sometimes treated as a dialectic: play and seriousness which, in turn, implies a whole series of others: gratuitousness and/or utility; play and/or work; play and/or everyday life; the imaginary and/or the real; etc. . . . The concepts here placed in opposition or in parallel are found constantly in Huizinga – as in Caillois, moreover, and in an even more pronounced way, since the latter's definition and classifications of play lead him, as we have indicated, to delimit too categorically the sphere of play by opposing it to the real, to work, and so forth.

Thus, although there are divergences between Huizinga and Caillois (where the one finds transition between spheres the other sees division), these appear secondary once we have observed that

they are based on the same world-view, a fundamentally rationalist view according to which human activities relate, on the one hand, to dreams, gratuitousness, nobility, imagination, etc. and on the other to consciousness, utility, instinct, reality, etc.

A profoundly consequential cleavage. Each of these terms, loaded with meaning and tacit implications, evidently needs quotation marks to sustain itself (is it the sign of unacknowledged uneasiness if these authors use them abundantly whenever they are concerned with "ordinary life," "reality," and all their synonyms?) and to sustain the assault of efforts to question, to define, to analyze – efforts which, to be sure, are never undertaken.

For finally, if the status of "ordinary life," of "reality," is not thrown into question *in the very movement of thought given over to play,* the theoretical, logical, and anthropological bases on which this thinking is based can only be extremely precarious and contestable. In other words, we are criticizing these authors chiefly and most seriously for considering "reality," the "real," as a *given* component of the problem, as a referent needing no discussion, as a matter of course, neutral and objective. They define play in opposition to, on the basis of, or in relation to this so-called reality. As the criteria against which play is measured are external to it, its nature remains necessarily *second* in relation to the "reality" that serves as its yardstick and is therefore considered "primary" (cf. Huizinga: "Play always represents something," p. 35). But it is legitimate to wonder by what right "reality" may be said to be *first,* existing prior to its components – play in this case (although it might just as well be some other object of the social sciences) – and serving as their standard. How could "reality" serve as a *norm* and thereby guarantee *normality* even before having been tested and evaluated in and through its manifestations? For – we need not insist on it – there is no "reality" (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it.

The problem of play is therefore not *linked* to the problem of "reality," itself linked to the problem of culture. It is one and the same problem. In seeking a solution it would be methodologically un-

sound to proceed as if play were a variation, a commentary *on,* an interpretation, or a reproduction *of* this reality. To pretend that play is mimesis would suppose the problem solved before it had even been formulated. It is essential then to reverse the order of the analysis (this precautionary note is valid not only for the study of play but for all other objects of inquiry in the social sciences). This "reality" which is considered innocent and behind whose objectivity some scholars sheepishly take shelter, must not be the starting-point of any analysis but must rather be its final outcome. A necessarily disappointing outcome, because it is impalpable and fleeting to the extent that it is dissolved in the manifestations analyzed, i.e. to the extent that it has no other content beyond these manifestations.

We shall attempt to show this through a critique, first of the play-reality relationship, then of the play-culture relationship, as seen in Huizinga, Caillois, and the linguist Benveniste.[3]

I. "Reality," Play, The Sacred

It will be simplest to begin with the respective definitions of play given by these authors.

Huizinga:

> From the standpoint of form, we can define play in short as a free activity, experienced as "make-believe" and situated outside of everyday life, nevertheless capable of totally absorbing the player; an activity entirely lacking in material interest and in utility. It transpires in an explicitly circumscribed time and space, is carried out in an orderly fashion according to given rules, and gives rise to group relationships which often surround themselves with mystery or emphasize through disguises their difference from the ordinary world. (pp. 34-35)

[3]Emile Benveniste, "Le jeu comme structure," *Deucalion,* 1947, no. 2, pp. 161-167.

Caillois:

> . . . the preceding analysis allows us to define play as an activity which is essentially:
> 1. free: the player cannot be obliged to participate without robbing play of its nature as alluring and joyful diversion;
> 2. separate: it is circumscribed within limits of space and time which are precise and fixed in advance;
> 3. uncertain: its course cannot be determined nor its outcome reached in advance, a certain latitude for innovation being left necessarily to the initiative of the player;
> 4. unproductive: it creates neither goods nor wealth nor new elements of any kind; and, except for redistribution of property within the circle of players, it results in a situation identical to that with which it began;
> 5. controlled: it is subject to conventions which suspend ordinary laws and introduce temporarily a new body of legislation endowed with exclusive authority;
> 6. fictive; it is accompanied by a specific awareness of a second reality or of straightforward unreality in relation to everyday life.

Benveniste:

Before offering his definition, Benveniste is careful to show the "deep-seated relationship" existing between play and the sacred: "The sacred presupposes a reality, that of the divine; through ritual, the faithful are introduced to a separate world, more real than the true world [sic]. Play, on the contrary, can be unhesitatingly distinguished from the real. The sacred may be seen as pertaining to the surreal, play to the extra-real. In addition, the sacred operation has a practical end. . . Play in itself has no practical goal; its essence lies in its very gratuitousness." (p. 164) Here now is his definition:

> In short we have the elements of a structural definition of play. It originates in the sacred, of which it offers an inverted and broken image. If the sacred can be defined by the con-

> substantial unity of myth and rite, we can say that there is play when only half of the sacred operation is carried out — when the myth alone is translated into words, or the rite alone into acts. We are thus outside the devine and human sphere of the efficient. Play understood in this way will have two forms: *jocique,* when the myth is reduced to its own content and separated from its rites; *ludique,* when the rite is practiced for itself and separated from its myth. From this dual standpoint, play incarnates each of the two halves into which sacred ceremony is split. Furthermore, play characteristically recomposes, through makebelieve, the missing half in each of its two forms: in word play, we act as if some actual reality should result; in physical play, we act as if motivated by a rational reality. This fiction allows the acts and the words to be consistent, in an autonomous world which conventions have protected from the fatalities of the real world. (pp. 165-166)

In each of these definitions it is apparent that the zone of play is caught, like limbo, between the hell of "reality" subject to instincts and the paradise of the sacred, of the divine. Thus, for these authors, one escapes from play either toward the lower realm (reality, practical life) or toward the higher (the sacred, divine efficiency) — with, as we shall note, the moral implications borne by the terms high, low, sacred, reality.

1. *Play — "ordinary reality"*

Huizinga, for example, explains that play "represents a combat or a contest." Represents in the sense of showing off, as the peacock lets himself be seen when he struts. "If the bird adds dance steps, it becomes a spectacle, an evasion of ordinary reality, a transposition of this reality *to a higher plane.* We do not know what is going on at this point in the animal's head. Very early in human childhood, such representations are already full of imagination. The child is representing something else, something more beautiful, nobler or more dangerous than what he usually is." (p. 35) (our italics)

Without trying too assiduously to understand how a peacock escapes from "ordinary" towards an "extraordinary" reality let us note simply that Huizinga clearly distinguishes two levels, that of play and that of ordinary life, the first being a transposition, an embellished, ennobled representation (mimesis) of the second.

The same notion of play as representation recurs in Caillois: "The pleasure lies in being different or in *passing for another* . . . At Mardi gras, the masquerader does not try to gain acceptance as a real marquis, a real toreador, a real redskin, he seeks to inspire fear and to profit from the general license which results from the fact that the mask conceals the *social self* and liberates the *genuine personality* . . ." (p. 64) (our italics)

According to Caillois there would thus be a "genuine personality" as opposed to a "social self." The "real" (*vraie*) person would be the one who appeared during Mardi gras while "passing for another." The false person would be the social self who plays a role during all the rest of the year. But, we might wonder, if this false person is playing a role, then is he not more real than the "real" person who wants to "pass for another" during Mardi gras? This circular logic leads to absurdity.

Nevertheless, in the passage we have just cited, Caillois adds: "Nor does the actor seek to have us believe that he is "really" Lear or Charles V." But then, which is the "genuine personality" in question above, if not the one who wears the mask?

The same desire to delimit the sphere of play, to enclose play in a "pure" time and space, leads Caillois to devote a chapter to the "corruption" of play: "If play consists in providing these powerful instincts with a formal, ideal, and limited gratification removed from ordinary life, what happens to it when every convention is rejected? When the universe of play is no longer sealed off? When it is contaminated by the real world. . .? Corresponding to each of these basic categories of play there is a specific *perversion* which results from the absence of both restraint and protection. . ." "The principle of play is *corrupted*. . . by the *contagion* of reality." (pp. 103-104) (our italics)

The terminology is eloquent. "Reality" is seen as contagious,

corrupting, perverting, impure. It is the domain of the "powerful instincts" which must be restrained.

And Caillois writes in concluding this chapter:

> It is easily understood that they (the instincts of competition, pursuit of luck, mimicry, vertigo) can only be satisfied positively and creatively under ideal and circumscribed conditions, those which are provided in each case by the rules of the game. Left to themselves, *frantic* and *ruinous* like all instincts, these elementary impulses can only lead to disastrous consequences. Games *discipline* the instincts and institutionalize them. During the time that games grant them a formal and limited satisfaction, they are being *trained* and *fertilized,* the soul being *vaccinated* against their virulence. At the same time the games are preparing the instincts to make a *useful* contribution to the *enrichment* and the stabilization of cultural patterns. (p. 121) (our italics)

Caillois's language is clear. It allows us to pinpoint at once the metaphysics that governs his reasoning: on the one hand, nature represents disorder, chaos, the absence of laws; "these elementary impulses" are "like all instincts"(!) "frantic and ruinous," their consequences are "disastrous"; on the other hand, civilization (culture) represents order, the law which "institutionalizes" the instincts; it "trains," "fertilizes," "enriches," "vaccinates" against "contagion," the "contamination" (cf. pp. 103-104) of reality.

From this perspective, play (and by extension civilization itself) would act as a remedy for a nature which is inherently sick since it is subject to destructive instincts. Play would thus have a "civilizing role" which would oppose it to "natural avidity" (p. 106). As comforting as this thesis may sound to those who retain a "humanist" vision of "civilization," it appears untenable on the simple level of logic, insofar as it poses in a contradictory way the problem of origins, as we will see later on. (cf. part II, Play and culture).

2. *Play and the sacred*

If in the sequence reality-play-the sacred, "reality" is for these

authors "corrupted" play, play is, then by way of contrast, the sacred inverted and thereby impoverished, degraded, devaluated. This is explained by Benveniste, according to whom the efficiency of the sacred act lies in the "conjunction of the *myth* which sets forth the story and the *rite* which reproduces it." (p.165) Play occurs in two forms: *jocus,* play in words, corresponds to the myth; *ludus,* play in action, corresponds to the rite.

> Cut off from its myth, the rite is reduced to an ordered body of acts which are thereafter inefficacious, to an inoffensive reproduction of the ceremony, to a pure "game." From the divine struggle for the possession of the sun there remains a ball game in which the player can with impunity – did a god ever have such a privilege? – take possession at will of the solar disc. Such is *ludus.* (p. 165)

Once again, *ludus* has no independent existence since it is only a "reproduction" of something else, of the sacred, and even then an impoverished, gratuitous reproduction because it is "inefficacious," "inoffensive."

Thus we confront the same opposition of the gratuitous and the useful which we noted earlier and which will attract our attention again: it is the gratuitousness, the very uselessness of play, which makes it "pure."

In relation to the sacred, play is perceived as a deficiency, since, cut off from its myth, it has been deprived of its voice, so to speak. If play can say nothing, one would be tempted to conclude that it means nothing. The sense of play would lie in its futility, in its very absurdity. The remainder of a subtraction, it is reduced to gratuitous rules, to gratuitous gestures. Within such a perspective, it would be useful to know in which domain, that of play or of the sacred, the author would place the Tour de France.

How could it be aligned with "pure" play since we know, after Barthes's admirable analysis, that it is inseparable from its accompanying mythic discourse?

> *Jocus* offers a similar but inverse structure. Here words instead of acts constitute play, but they are words which incorporate nothing but their own being as words; they are uttered "as if" they conveyed a reality, but within the convention, accepted by all participants, that they have in fact no true content. *Jocus* is characterized by the deliberately fictive nature of the reality to which it alludes. (p. 165)

Here *Jocus* is gratuitous, ineffective speech, "pure myth to which no corresponding rite gives a grasp on reality." Does Benveniste mean thereby to characterize the domain of poetry? It is difficult to affirm this with certainty. But how can we accept the distinction between efficacious and inefficacious speech except by relying on the evidence of a causality which has never proved anything?

Huizinga's point of view on the relations of play and the sacred appear much less debatable insofar as these two domains are not, for him, incompatible. The passage from one to the other occurs gradually. In contrast to Benveniste's thesis (and Caillois's), Huizinga observes no break splitting play off from the sacred. Whether enigma (cf. pp. 185-188), judicial conflict (156-157), or music (257), etc. is in question, play can be transformed into "sacred play," or the sacred into play. In the latter situation there is a "giving way" (*fléchissement;* another term synonymous with degradation) of customs which were *formerly* serious, as in the case of the riddle, for example, or the duel (cf. p. 159). In the other situation play passes through a subjective metamorphosis into the sublime, it is transcended "upward," as with music for example: "the sensations of beauty and of sacred mystery mingle with one another in the enjoyment of music, and in this confusion the opposition of play and seriousness disappears." (p. 257)

It is at this point that Huizinga's intuition appears to us more accurate than his judgement. He warns us repeatedly that "play doesn't exclude seriousness" (p. 291), but by this same statement he maintains them as two separate categories. Indeed, if in the sacred game the opposition of play and seriousness disappears, it is because

this opposition was *basically*, or *originally*, present somewhere. Our criticism bears precisely on this point, namely on the possibility of grounding an anthropology of play in the dual opposition of play and reality, of play and the sacred, this in turn entailing a division between the serious (the real, the sacred) and the non-serious (play), with play then being defined privatively as non-serious, non-real, non-sacred. The preceding analysis permits us to conclude that the operative value of such a classification is highly contestable, for it rests on a simplistic and ethnocentric metaphysics of consciousness. The anti-or an-economic role which these authors assign to play will furnish supplementary proof.

3. *Play and economy*

In these authors the play-seriousness opposition appears, in effect in the economic domanin through another opposition: gratuitousness and utility. Gratuitousness is one of the points they stress most readily. We may recall that it constitutes one of the common denominators of their three definitions of play. A survey of their vocabulary permits us to establish the following paradigms:

seriousness		play
usefulness		gratuitousness
fecundity	which are opposed by	sterility
work		leisure
science		literature
reality		unreality

When he draws up the inventory of the characteristics of play at the beginning of his book, Huizinga notes:

> We see here the first fundamental trait of play: it is free, it is *freedom*. To this trait another is directly connected. Play is not "daily" life or life "properly so-called." It offers a pretext for evading the latter to enter a provisional sphere of activity with its own characteristics. The small child is already fully conscious of acting "just because," "just for fun." In this "just" of play, a feeling of *depreciation* is expressed, of joking

> as opposed to seriousness, which appears primary. Nevertheless, the opposition play-seriousness remains at all times fluid. (pp. 26-27) (our italics)

This quote allows us to see clearly the close connection which the author establishes between play and gratuitousness, seriousness and utility, i.e., the an-economic character attached systematically to play in order to preserve it from the "contamination" of economic contingencies. But if he does not notice that this an-economy remains an economy, even though turned upside down, it is because his dialectic only operates at the level of conscious social structures. The same criticism applies to Caillois and Benveniste. Contrary to their affirmations regarding the so-called gratuitousness of play, Huizinga unwittingly exhibits in the quotation we have just given the tripartite economic role of play:

a. *play as free expenditure.*

We recall that in his definition of play Huizinga was already insisting on its characteristic liberty: "free activity, experienced as 'make-believe' . . . entirely lacking in material interest and in utility." (p. 35) To insist on the freedom of play is to insist in the same breath on its gratuitousness. If play is detached from ordinary life, it must also be detached from its contingencies.

But even if play is understood as a "pure" expenditure, an expenditure *for* nothing, it consumes something nevertheless, if only time and energy, but sometimes also considerable property. It would be appropriate then to account for this expenditure, to learn where it went, what it produced. It was consummated and consumed in play itself, say Caillois and Huizinga. That is why, in their view, play must be accomplished "in an expressly circumscribed time and place." But they fail to see that the interior occupied by play can only be defined by and with the exterior of the world, and inversely that play viewed as an exterior is only comprehensible by and with the interior of the world; that together they participate in the same economy. Play cannot therefore be isolated as an activity without *consequences.* Its integrity, its gratuitousness are only apparent, since the very freedom

of the expenditure made in it is part of a circuit which reaches beyond the spatial and temporal limits of play.

On the level of conscious structures (where these authors are working) it may be that play is experienced as an expenditure *for* nothing, that its end lies in itself; but at the level of underlying (unconscious) structures this explanation proves insufficient: the ethnologists (the same ones whom are quoted by Huizinga and Caillois) have taught us that the "pure" gift is in fact an exchange. One gives, one spends *in order to* receive. The so-called liberty of the gift is in fact liberality; the generosity, the gratuitousness of play are ways of *acquiring* prestige and power. Thus Huizinga's interpretation of the potlatch (pp. 102-110) as ennobling play remains partial and erroneous insofar as the author refuses to see that the potlatch is also the ritualization of an economy and even of a political exchange.[4]

b. *play as "depreciation."*

If we return to the quotation from Huizinga which served as the starting-point for our analysis of the economic characteristics of play, we note that play's share can be calculated by subtraction: what *remains* when seriousness has been taken away. This remainder is the "just" of play, activity in which one engages "for fun," or, as we were saying above, for nothing. Thus play appears not only gratuitous but also *without value,* an activity whose worth has been withdrawn as it has been weighted down with the "plus value" of seriousness. It is this which allows Huizinga to separate play from daily life, to say that play "is situated outside the mechanism of immediate satisfaction of needs and desires" (p. 27). However in our view this is by no means correct. In play there is no *subtraction* of value (deprecia-

[4]In spite of the superficial divergences, Caillois's position does not deviate significantly from Huizinga's. He reproaches the latter for excluding bets and games of chance by his definition of play. He is indeed correct in pointing out that play is defined as an action lacking in all material interest, the "implication is that play has no inherent economic interest." We have seen that this is by no means the case. However, after the incursion into the economic domain which allows him to retrieve a sphere of play which Huizinga had cast aside, he withdraws at once by affirming that play "remains rigorously unproductive." "It is in fact characteristic of play to create no wealth, no works. It differentiates itself thereby from work and from art." Once again Caillois is a victim of his own categories. Within a series of activities running from basketball to dancing to ballet to comedy, it would be interesting to know, indeed, where play stops and where work and art begin. We come back to the same opposition of utility and gratuitousness. "Play is an occasion for pure expenditure," he writes (p. 36). And again: play is "always a contingent and gratuitous activity." (p. 115)

tion) but *relocation, redistribution* . . . in pursuit of *immediate* satisfaction of needs and desires. We have seen that play consists in giving in order to receive more.

This mediation is none other than that of the law (or: rule of the game), a detour which must be followed for the satisfaction of human needs and desires, the path of their institutionalization. Far from being a depreciation, the detour of law as an expression of play constitutes a transfer, a placing in reserve.

One could summarize, then, by saying that since play consists in giving in order to receive . . . later on or . . . in a different form, it fulfills a dual function of expenditure and savings.[5]

The necessity to conceive of play as economy is confirmed for us by game theory insofar as it can be considered as a way to recuperate, to *utilize* the very *gratuitousness* of play — in other words, to construct the economy of chance. Economy in the dual sense of expenditure and savings, of expenditure-savings, for to take chance into *account* is to preserve it in order to invest it, to spend it in order to save it.

The gratuitousness of play is thus only apparent, i.e., it accounts only for its superficial, external, conscious structure. But at the level of underlying structures the division between gratuitousness and utility, the separation into intra-and extra-economic spheres, an *interior* and an *exterior,* are no longer operative. We recognize here that, far from corresponding to a supposedly gratuitous, disinterested aspect of culture, play in the fullest sense is coextensive with culture. This is confirmed by a critique of the notion of play as a complement, as a luxury.

c. *play as "complement" and as luxury.*

"Play appears to us," writes Huizinga, ". . . as an intermission in daily life, as a relaxation. But by virtue of its regular alternation it constitutes an accompaniment, a complement, and even a part of life

[5]Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Le mot d'esprit et ses rapports avec l'inconscient,* French translation by Marie Bonaparte and M. Natman, Gallimard, 1953. See especially the second part (pp. 135-181) in which Freud presents an economy of witticisms precisely in terms of psychic expenditure and savings.

in general. It adorns life, compensates for the deficiences of life and in this respect is indispensable." (p. 28)

Huizinga deserves credit for noting "the utility [of play] with respect to culture" (a notion he develops in the lines following the preceding quote). He cannot bring himself to enclose play within the limits he had prescribed at the outset. Play, in the end, invades the territory of culture; it becomes "indispensable" to culture, to life in general. And yet this concession is only a last resort.

Huizinga's analytic procedure can be broken down into three stages: 1°, play is gratuitous in relation to the seriousness of life; 2°, play affects all (or nearly all) aspects of culture; 3°, play, because it is gratuitous, is useful to culture. We can see here how seriousness is privileged in being granted precedence over play. Seriousness is "primary," he says. This point of view tallies with the notion of play as a representation of something which existed prior to play. We are trying to show the methodological dangers and the ideological implications of such a point of view.

Indeed, if play were secondary in relation to a primary seriousness, whatever concessions may be made to the cultural utility of play, the latter remains a contribution to culture, a "complement." It could therefore be cut off, *substracted,* without taking anything essential away from culture, in a word without depriving culture of what it *is*. Even deprived of play, life would remain life. It would simply be serious, dull, ordinary. In such a perspective, it is clear that play represents the gratuitous, the beautiful, the noble, the artistic aspect of life, the Sunday of life. As a costume hides nudity and embellishes it, so play "adorns life"; it is life's luxury.[6]

Caillois says so explicitly: "play is a luxury and implies leisure. The hungry man does not play." (*Encyclopédie des jeux,* p. xv). This last statement, designed to forestall any objection, nonetheless strikes us as highly contestable. We can reply epigrammatically: the hungry man *beguiles* hunger, and thereby plays. This answer, sufficient in itself, can be supported by another, which is more "pro-

[6]Was this not already Rousseau's point of view on science and art, civilization's (corruptive) luxuries?

found:" if play as the capacity for symbolization and ritualization is consubstantial with culture, it cannot fail to be present wherever there is culture. We realize then that play cannot be defined as a luxury. Whether their stomachs are full or empty, men play because they are men.

To say that play "implies leisure" is to set forth the problem while placing oneself in an ethnocentric perspective that falsifies the basic data to be analyzed: it is to oppose the notion of work to that of leisure (an opposition which carries with it all the others we have already noted: utility-gratuitousness, seriousness-play, etc.). Such an opposition may be valid in our society (and even there, less and less), but it certainly cannot be generalized to include cultures other than our own. On the very first page of the preface of the *Encyclopédie des jeux et sports,* Caillois writes:

> [play] evokes an activity free of constraints but also without consequences for real life. It is opposed to the seriousness of real life and is thus termed frivolous. It is opposed on the other hand to work, as *time lost is opposed to time well spent.* In effect play produces nothing: neither goods nor works. It is essentially sterile. (vii)

And several lines farther:

> It is condemned to establish nothing, to produce nothing, for by its very nature it cancels out its results, whereas work and science *capitalize* on theirs and transform the world, more or less. (xv) (our italics)

Clearly, the opposition leisure-work (science) corresponds to a conception of culture limited to the industrial phase of our civilization. It seems to give rise only to rudimentary and simplistic Marxist analyses. In point of fact, alienation in and through work can no longer be automatically opposed to leisure-freedom in a society — our society — where leisure is being industrialized and work is being automated.

The value attributed to accumulation, to capitalization through

work and science is thus part of this same utilitarian and materialist attitude toward culture (time lost as opposed to time well spent) whose ethnocentric position – as we have already had occasion to observe – entails the expulsion of play into the exterior of gratuitousness and futility, where it becomes the utopian complement of seriousness.

This utilitarianism and this materialism are accompanied by a contradictory impulse toward idealism insofar as the "purity of play is guaranteed by its gratuitousness, by the fact that it *costs* nothing (as opposed to work, of course): "lost time," it is pure loss but also – being disinterested – pure generosity. "Sterile," it is *clean;* in contrast, money, earnings (payment for work) are defiling, degrading. When money comes into play, play is corrupted. Hence the distinction made by Caillois and Huizinga between the activities of professional actors or athletes and amateurs, a distinction which appears more and more dubious if we are to judge by the incidents it provokes in various international athletic contests.[7]

This distinction corresponds to the industrial phase of our history. The very phase in which play and work have become antithetical. The very phase which has witnessed the birth of the notion of "realism" in literature and the arts. This convergence is not accidental. It corresponds to the materialist-idealist metaphysics which

[7]The explanations given by Caillois are confusing and hardly convincing (cf. pp. 65, 105, 149-150). Huizinga too denounces the corruption of play by professionalism, by money:

> It now appears that the ever-increasing systematization and discipline of play are going to suppress in the long run something of the pure play-element. The behavior of the professional is no longer appropriate to play, no longer carefree and unconcerned . . . (p. 315)

Then he observes the same "sliding toward seriousness" in certain card games: "With its manuals and its systems, its important instructors and professional trainers, bridge has become a deadly serious affair." This sentence is followed directly by another which does not appear very appropriate in the development of the argument but which by its almost involuntary character emphasizes to what extent seriousness and gratuitousness are opposed in the mind of the author: "A recent newspaper item estimated the income of the Culbertson couple at more than $200,000." (p. 317) The indignation is transparent. Must we conclude that to play "well" one must be neither too rich nor too poor? Being too rich prevents enjoyment of play — for play is no longer a complement to the needs of ordinary life. Being too poor, too hungry, as Caillois puts it, creates a threshold behind which these needs totally occupy the mind, and since not even the essential ones can be satisfied, there is surely no room for a complement. However, adds Huizinga:

> The attempt to uncover the play-element of the confused present leads us constantly to contradictory conclusions . . . In opposition to the tendency of play to turn into seriousness, certain phenomena seem to manifest the opposite tendency. (p. 318)

He is referring there to a certain "gratuitous" form of rivalry among major enterprises, rivalry which takes on an agonistic character; wherever industrial production takes on a sporting character, the desire for setting records has free rein: "the liner with the greatest tonnage, the blue ribbon for the most rapid maritime crossing . . ." (pp. 319-320)

has been circulating during the last hundred and fifty years of our civilization.

We have still to carry out the critique of the anthropological framework on which Huizinga and Caillois base the relation of play and culture.

II. Game and Culture

"The play attitude must have been present before human culture or a linguistic faculty of expression existed" (p. 230), writes Huizinga. In other words, one might say: in the beginning there was play. We would subscribe to this formula if it allowed us to account for the passage from animal to human play, i.e., that fault *(faille)* which is found in every instance of play and due to which there is "play," i.e., chance. Corresponding to cosmic play would be biological chance.

However, nothing permits us to say that Huizinga attributes this meaning, suddenly enlarged, to play. It seems more reasonable to believe – if we rely on the context provided by the entire book – that it is still in the perspective of a dialectic between play and the serious, between play and utility, that this "play attitude" which antedates culture takes on its meaning for Huizinga.[8] We have tried to show the ideological presuppositions of this conception of play; corresponding to it there is a conception of culture through which Huizinga and Caillois, by failing to call it into question, reveal unwittingly their implicit values and undermine their own analyses. It will be noted that for them the word culture (and its synonym, civilization) has a double meaning. The first, technical or ethnological, simply designates the diverse forms that human societies take. The second, which we may call "metaphysical," refers to the trajectory of a history of man-

[8]Ortega y Gasset develops the same point of view, but in a more categorical, almost caricatural fashion in his essay on "The sporting origin of the state." He writes:

> Utility creates nothing, invents nothing; it simply approves and registers what has been created independently.
>
> Life's original, primary activity is always spontaneous, playful, superfluous in its intent. It is free expansion of a pre-existing energy.
>
> What is most necessary is the superfluous.

Needless to say, we can hardly subscribe to this view, with its rather naive idealism.

kind which would also be that of a progression, of a history which starting with primitive man would lead *necessarily,* in its "superior" stage, to civilized (cultured)-western-man — to us.

Let us note, first in Huizinga, this progressive conception of cultural history, and play's correlative function within it:

> . . . If religion, science, law, war and politics seem to *lose little by little,* in *more advanced* forms of society, the abundant contacts which they seem to have had with play in these *remote periods* of culture, poetry for its part, while it originated in the sphere of play, has not stopped moving out of this sphere. *Poièsis* is a play function. It is located in a play space of the mind, in a universe all its own created by the mind, where things take on an aspect different from that of "daily life" and are related to each other by bonds which differ from those of *logic.* If we conceived of the serious as that which is expressed exclusively in the terms of *lucid* life, then poetry is never entirely serious. It lies beyond seriousness in the primordial domain peculiar to the child, the animal, the savage, the visionary, in the domain of dreams, of ecstasy, of intoxication, of laughter. (pp. 197-198) (our italics)

The quotation is long, but crucial in as much as it draws together all the threads of the conception of play and of culture which we are examining. We find here in fact that play is assimilated to: 1) a particular stage of human history where culture in its entirety is articulated in play (the "most remote periods" which are implicitly opposed to the most recent periods, i.e. the present); 2) a type of mentality (infantile, animal, savage, visionary, as opposed to an adult, "civilized," reasonable mentality); 3) a type of behavior and a form of awareness (playful, illogical, non-lucid as opposed to serious, logical, lucid). Poetry would be the connecting link between "primitive" and "civilized" mentality, the bridge which the adult takes to rejoin the child: "To understand poetry, one must be able to adopt the soul of a child, as one would put on a magic cloak, and admit the superiority of the child's wisdom over that of the man."

(p. 198) Corresponding to nostalgia for childhood there is nostalgia for primitive life (the modern form of the myth of the noble savage), for a life which is "played" thus gratuitous, a life in which poetry impregnates all human activity: "In all civilization which is alive and flourishing, and especially in archaic cultures, poetry has a social and liturgical function." (p. 199)[9]

But curiously, in spite of the value attached to childhood and to the primitive-poetic mentality, we note a reticence with respect to the unreasonable illogicality of this same mentality where "the play-seriousness opposition has not *yet* taken hold," in contrast to what appears in the superior, logical, adult stages of civilization (our own!):

> The line between that which is conceived as possible and that which is not has been drawn only gradually as civilization has developed. For the savage with his limited logical conception of the world everything, in short, remains possible. Myth, in its absurdities and its enormities, in its exaggeration and its confusion of relationships, in its tranquil inconsistencies and its hectic variations, does not yet trouble him as something impossible. (p. 213)

Caillois subscribes to the same conception of history as Huizinga, a history which would have meaning (direction), i.e., which would move from original meaninglessness to present meaningfulness; a history in which the "civilizing" process would have allowed men gradually to rid themselves of the illogicality of the "earliest ages"; in a word, a history of the conquests of reason. He writes: "Spread over the whole surface of the globe, [the wearing of masks] appears as a false solution, obligatory and fascinating, before the

[9]Cf. the entire chapter on "Play and poetry" and in particular pp. 210, 212, 217-220. Huizinga expresses too his nostalgia for an art unaware of itself, of its "civilizing" role, in these terms:

> Since the eighteenth century, art, manifesting a new awareness of itself as a factor in civilization, has to all appearances lost more than it has gained in play quality. Does this signify a raising of its level? It would not be impossible to show that it was formerly a blessing for art to be in large measure unconscious of the meanings it transmits and the beauty it creates. In the pronounced feeling for its own greatness, something of its worldly ingenuousness is lost. (p. 323)

slow, painful, patient and decisive advancement of civilization. The way out of this trap is nothing less than the very birth of civilization." (p. 193)

It now appears evident that the relations of play and culture are for these authors based on two "acknowledgments": on the one hand that man becomes more and more civilized, on the other that civilization becomes less and less play-like in the course of history. Therefore, if play has a civilizing influence (that is their thesis!), it becomes impossible to reconcile the contradictions implicit in such a point of view. Indeed, if play is essential to culture, civilization should become, not less and less play-like, but constantly and consistently more so.[10]

If neither Huizinga nor Caillois manages to resolve this contradiction, it is because they are both prisoners of a contradictory notion of the *origin* of civilization, which itself rests on a contradictory idea of the *present* of their civilization. In their view, both innocence and brutality are present in the origin. Brutality when the instinct of competition, of rivalry is not checked by any rule. Nature's law is the law of the jungle. We have then a *return* to primordial chaos and disorder, "perversions of the agôn," as Caillois explains:

> Outside the arena, after the bell, begins the veritable perversion of the agôn, the most widespread perversion of all. It appears in each antagonism no longer tempered by the rigor of the spirit of play. Now *absolute rivalry is nothing but a law of nature,* which resumes in society its *original brutality* as soon as it finds an open path in the network of moral, social or legal constraints which, like those of play, are limits and conventions. For this reason *frantic, obsessive* ambition, in whatever domain it breaks out, provided that respect for the rules of play or for free play is lacking, must be denounced as the decisive *deviation* which, in the particular case, brings

[10]This contradiction, although not avoided by Caillois, is particularly noticeable in Huizinga who, writing just before the Second World War, had good reasons to be alarmed at the return to barbarism which the rise of Hitlerism symbolized for every "conscience."

> about a return to the original situation. Nothing shows *the civilizing role of play* better than the restraints by which it habitually counters natural greed. (p. 106) (our italics)

This text (like the one from page 121 which we quoted in the first part of this essay) obliges us to formulate certain questions not resolved by Caillois: do the play-instincts exist prior to play itself? The author for whom the competitive instinct is a law of nature seems to be saying this (we may recall that he considers play to be a purified *reproduction* of "ordinary reality"). However, if this is the case, one wonders how these instincts could have created the conditions in which play is possible, since they are described as "disastrous," destructive, manifesting "primordial brutality." On the other hand, if games exist prior to the play-instincts – in other words, if law precedes nature, as one would logically have to suppose in order that the very possibility of law, of civilization might come to light – we do not see how games could be "perverted" into instincts (i.e., into an unbridled "nature" which eludes the law; does the law of the jungle not remain law?) since these laws would have been present from the beginning and even the animals would obey them (for, according to Caillois himself, animals do play).[11]

But for these authors, as we have already shown, the origin of civilization is also innocent, insofar as play and civilization are not distinguishable, but on the contrary participate in a full-blown world-view which is "poetic," childlike. This view, they say, is opposed to their own, which they call "realistic."

This very "realism" which we examined critically in the first part of this essay lies at the heart of the dual and contradictory vision of the present period of our civilization seen in Huizinga and Caillois. In fact (like the origin, but inversely), the present is simultaneously experienced as more "civilized" insofar as we do not commit the error (!) of confusing play and reality (which neither children nor

[11]Law, nature! It seems that we have not taken a single step forward since Rousseau. See also, in regard to the relation of law and natural savagery, Huizinga, pp. 168-170. While leaving open the possibility of returning to this problem, let it suffice to point it out here and to say that it could only be resolved by a new approach to play.

savages know how to do!); we might even say insofar as we do not let ourselves be taken in by play. Thus the more we are *conscious* of play, of the fact that the game is only a game, that we must not take it seriously, the more we are supposed to be civilized, polite, orderly. The ideal being the British *fair play* – an ideal of nobility, of respect for the rules, of moral and esthetic detachment (perhaps also of indifference?):

> It is understood that the good player is one who can envisage with distance, detachment and some appearance at least of composure the unhappy results of the most sustained effort, or the loss of exorbitant stakes. The decision of the arbiter, even if unjust, is approved on principle. Corruption of the agôn begins where no arbiter and no arbitration is recognized. (Caillois, pp. 106-106)

The same attitude is found in Huizinga:

> . . . true culture cannot exist without a certain play-element, for culture presupposes a kind of moderation and mastery of self, an ability not to see ultimate perfection in ones own propensities, but to understand that culture is confined within certain freely accepted limits. Culture will always in a sense be played according to given rules based on mutual agreement. True civilization always requires fair play in every respect, and fair play is nothing but, in the terminology of play, the equivalent of good faith. Whoever breaks up the game breaks down culture itself. (p. 337)

"True culture," "true civilization," must therefore *lift itself* toward "true play," "pure" play. Whence the ethical function attributed to play, or rather play considered as an ethical standard. [cf. Huizinga, pp. 336-337, and:

> In order that the play-element of civilization be productive of culture or favorable to it, this element must be pure. It must not consist in deviation from or in the repudiation of the

> norms prescribed by reason, humanity or faith. It must not be pretense which masks the objective of attaining goals determined by means of intentional developments of play forms. True play excludes all propaganda. It is an end in itself. Its spirit and its climate are those of joyous exaltation, not of wild hysteria. The current propaganda which is taking hold of all areas of life utilizes the hysterical reactions of the masses. Thus even when it takes the form of play it cannot be admitted as the modern expression of the spirit of play, but only considered as a falsification. (p. 337)]

What Caillois calls "perversion" Huizinga calls "falsification." These terms bear witness to the nostalgia for a "pure" society, rid of the violence of the instincts, to the same consternation in the face of a present — and more justifiably, of a future — which does not square with their utopian vision of them (a vision derived from the image they have of the origin of time). This present, still burdened and soiled by a "reality" which has not yet been transformed by play, contradicts the ideal of "reason, humanity, and faith" through which our civilization thinks it can proclaim itself superior to its predecessors. Where to turn, then, if this perspective is incapable of keeping its promises? Might revolution be the answer? These authors reject it, for revolution breaks down the play (fair play) of civilization. "Whoever breaks up the game breaks down culture itself."

We arrive naturally then, through a see-saw effect, at the other side of the vision of the present: a present which threatens constantly to fall back into the instinctive, primordial brutality of which the signs are all the more visible to the observer since they are closer, more "real." To break up the game is to *lower* civilization back toward its original barbarism and chaos . .. and also toward that first "reality," the *knowledge*[12] of which, our authors tell us, nonetheless constitutes our superiority over primitive men who were ignorant of it, just as they were unaware of seriousness. This ignorance of the

[12]Hence the care with which Huizinga and Caillois distinguish play from science. In their view, science is on the side of work. Like work it "transforms the world," it comes to grips with the "real," in contrast to play which has no grasp of it. Needless to say, we do not share this view.

"real" and of the serious dovetails with their moral ignorance (play does not constitute a standard of "value" for them, their civilization being completely immersed in play!), in other words with their innocence. So we have returned to our starting-point after surveying the various stages at which the circularity of these authors' thinking comes to light.

We can conclude then that if neither Huizinga nor Caillois succeeds in resolving these contradictions it is because they do not see them, although – or because – the contradictions are at the very heart of the viewpoint they adopt. Their formulation of the problem of play makes no allowance for the problem of understanding culture. Culture, *their* idea of culture, is at no time called into question by play. On the contrary, it is *given:* a fixed, stable, pre-existent element, serving as a frame of reference in the evalutation of play.

Thus just as in our first section we reproached them for evaluating play in opposition to and on the basis of a "reality" which was never questioned even though it was only valid in relation to a given culture, itself relative to the observer, we can now reproach them for evaluating play in opposition to and on the basis of a conception of culture which is never questioned even though it is only valid in relation to a given "reality," which is relative to the observer.

In other words, in an anthropology of play, play cannot be defined by isolating it on the basis of its relationship to an *a priori* reality and culture. To define play is *at the same time* and *in the same movement* to define reality and to define culture. As each term is a way to apprehend the two others, they are each elaborated, constructed through and on the basis of the two others. None of the three existing prior to the others, they are all simultaneously the subject and the object of the question which they put to us and we to them.

Huizinga and Caillois erred principally in never doubting (except Huizinga perhaps, timidly, at the end) that the player (themselves!) is the subject of play; in believing that, present in the game, at the center of play, they dominated it. They forgot that players may be played; that, as an object in the game, the player can be its stakes *(enjeu)* and its toy *(jouet).*

III. Conclusions

They need not be very elaborate. They will have become apparent during the reading of our text. Let it suffice to recapitulate:

1. Play is not played against a background of a fixed, stable, reality which would serve as its standard. All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts which designate it. Reality is thus not capable of being objectified, nor subjectified. However, it is never *neutral.* Nor can it be neutralized. Thus,

2. the role of the literary critic (since that is our department) is not to try to measure the gap which would separate a so-called "reality" from the domain of the so-called "imaginary", in order to reach a verdict: one text is realistic, another unrealistic. Such an approach makes no sense. Each text contains in itself its own reality, which in essence (or by nature!) is put into play by the words which make it up.

3. At the methodological level, play and reality, being inseparable, can only be apprehended globally and in the same movement.

4. In other words, the distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played. Play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable. Nature does not exist prior to culture. The role of the critic is specifically to understand and to explain by language (literary language in particular) how this nature-culture manifests itself in different historical and cultural contexts.

5. Just as culture is, in the last analysis, communication, so is play . . . and game. Thus, any theory of communication (or of information) implies a theory of play . . . and a game theory. And vice versa. Here arises the necessity of a dialogue with our colleagues in the sciences.

6. The player, like the speaker – that is, each of us – is at once the subject and the object of the play. The pronouns I, you, he are the different modes of the play structure. The subjectivity-objectivity dualism is abolished because it is inoperative.

7. Play is articulation, opening and closing of and through language.

It is only at the intermediate level that it can and must be apprehended.

8. All of our critical methods must be reconsidered according to these new norms.

Translated by Cathy and Phil Lewis