

## Wor(k/d)play

There is something sacred about the sequence of symbols which compose text, the signifying fabric of meaning. Therefore there is something childishly irreverent about the interruption of this purity by *play*: play is adolescent, immature, naive. And at the same time it is academic, pedantic, a/the decadent activity of excess and surplus. It is not even so much sacreligious as it is banal, played out for too long - a child whose perhaps initially charming antics become ridiculous, obnoxious, utterly stupid. This is the accusation against wordplay: Let us not traverse the shallow space of signifiers but rather the deeper realm of meaning; let us not play with our food, we should consume it, digest it, and move on. Wordplay is the obsession of child-professors. Against this criticism, we can only adopt Slavoj Žižek's strategy of "fully endorsing what one is accused of": wordplay is banal, it is obnoxious, it is shallow. But here we should remember the crucial symbolic-philosophical point - it is the exception which logically precedes the universal as its constitutive element; it is the ridiculous which makes the sensible. Therefore, to dismiss play is to obscure not only that play is a certain form of work but also to collapse what work is itself: ultimately, writing which dismisses play paradoxically becomes the most banal, most childish, most self-engrossed writing there is. In this essay, we argue that wordplay - in all its stupidity and shallow banality - is one of the most accessible and meaningful means of conceptual inquiry and even the form of writing truest to its historicity. In doing so, we demonstrate how critical writers can effectively engage with wordplay in their work.

The grievous objection against wordplay runs long and deep - as far back as Plato, even, with "That yelping bitch, shrieking at her master" (*The Republic*, Book X). Very tongue-in-cheek, on his part - from Book X of the Republic, a quoted response by poets against

philosophers' derisive slanders. And slanders there were, and slanders there have been: one of the most effective means to render a philosopher's work impotent is to label it as poetry. To play with one's words - the exemplar being Derrida - is to be unserious, childish, banal. To better capture the form of the objection, let us characterize wordplay first as poetry, in the vein of Plato. Wordplay *is* poetry: a weaving dance of morphemes that, so the criticism runs, masquerades as wisdom - a sophist's mocking infiltration of the philosophical pursuit. Wordplay is play with words, the carefully careless construction of infinitely back-referential meaning-seemings, or rather seeming-meanings. The particular objection against the many practices and intentions we have uniformly characterized as 'wordplay' is as such: wordplay, being *mere* poetry, does not even deign to deal with meaning at all - it is self-consciously and arrogantly illegitimate, at once both a crutch for and dismissal against the sacrosanctity of singularly-endlessly pursued meaning. Moreover, this objection is not particular to one school of philosophy - rather, it is the great conceit (at large) of philosophy almost by definition. Inasmuch as, say, Peirce and Husserl may disagree on what meaning *is*, they both - and many others - are united in unambiguously proclaiming that the poetry of play is *not* meaningful.

Being that much of contemporary philosophy is at least *expressed* in the language of semiotics, we will formulate the discourse of wordplay and meaning in the semiotic terms of sign, signifier, and signified. That precious, ephemeral qua(ntal)ity of meaning is retroactively constituted as a relationship between a signifier and signified. A proposition gains meaning through its signified, (what/how)ever that might be. Wordplay in our sense must utterly dispense with this conception of meaning to be legitimate (or so it seems) - wordplay is seen as a recur(rent/sive) loop of signifiers with no signified. When propositions are made to stand in (ap)proximate (contra)dition to each other, or a banal emphasis is made of a (pre/in/post)fix via

the parenthetical, the two morphemes are constituted in exception to one another - they are now only pretending to signify, 'playing' at the nature of the word. It is sorcerous sophistry, and ultimately-utterly meaningless. The severed, e(mas/ja)culated word acts out the premise of its necessity with all the farcical self-awareness of juvenile high-school theater; it mimes, cuttingly, and in miming gleefully destroys, renders impotent.

In fact (or so goes the objection), if there is one thing wordplay does seriously, the work of wordplay, it is the trivialization of meaning as a whole. Take a theory of language such as Chomsky's with its universal grammar; or take a criterion of meaning like that of the Vienna Circle and their verification principle - wordplay spits in the face of both. To Chomsky, the structure of the acquisition of grammar as a relation between semantic entities is universal across cultures and developmental experience, encoded into genetics itself: thus, wordplay at the height of its excess denies such crude distinctions as that between noun and verb - in this stage play, one character can act as many parts as the director demands - demanding a meaning where none can exist, totally severed from language as a consequence of universal grammar. To the (hypothetical) verificationist (although for that matter critical rationalists as well), wordplay taken seriously is deliberate in demanding meaning from constructions designed to provoke in(deter)minacy. Any attempt at taking wordplay seriously is natively incompatible with any theory of expression and any theory of meaning contingent on a determinate proximity between signifier and signified, on a legitimate gulf between an arbitrary reference and terminal referent. This idea of a meaning-for-the-world, a meaning constituted by reaching out and spanning the vast gulf between our experience and our reality via expression, must seem at first to the opponents of wordplay like the only legitimate (or for that matter, useful) premise for meaning as a general concept.

And yet, in spite of these enormous contentions, we claim that wordplay is not only legitimate but meaningful, an accessible source to/of/for meaning. This requires a new framing of meaning - but we have not the audacity to do so without the aid of two most distinguished and influential theorists. Derrida and Wittgenstein may seem radically different, but their convergence in treatment of language as inconstant, derivative play unites the long trajectories of their respective schools in a blessed new dictum of meaning we borrow from the latter to unashamedly parrot: "Meaning is use." By abandoning the conceit that the gulf between the signifier and the signified must be finite and determinate, we open the door to a whole new world of intentional-incidental-accidental (but no less meaningful) meaning.

Saussure and the tirade against wordplay hold the key tenet: the signifier is empty - always-already empty, even, an eternal vessel for the absence of ephemerality. This is generally taken to be true, independent of the relationship between the form or mode of a given signifier and its supposed signifieds. It is held that the signifier is back-constituted as an empty image, a photograph overlaid in white, and then manipulated relationally, that meaning is created by the proxy actions of signifiers as a back-constitution for the signified dynamics. Rather, though, we are to imagine the signifier's emptiness as *primaeval*, and its meaning as dynamic-relational in a truly materialist way. There is no apparent difference between an unfilled (white) canvas and filled canvas with a photograph covered in white paint; they look identical, but their histories are different, and once we bring historicity into the picture it is more plain to see that the latter have been posing as the former for very long, but that the two are markedly different. We must affirm all signifiers as originally empty; as once-unfilled canvases.

Imagine a film camera and its little reel of black, rolled up in a neat bundle. Feed the reel into the camera - now the subject poses, the shutter flashes, and behold, we have an image. It is

only latent, now - invisible, (im)possible to interact with - so let us go and develop the photo. After many hours of processing, it appears like a (re)flection of the world in the mirror. But *ceci n'est pas un sujet* - it is only a (re)flection, a 'mere' (re)flection, a photo(graph) and not the thing-in-itself. But let us make a change - imagine instead sending the film by mail to a lab to be developed. Regrettably, it gets switched out somewhere in the process, and now this new reel of film is on its way to be developed, posing as the original. Several hours later, an employee removes the film from its various chemical baths. "What a beautiful photograph," he says, "the person who took it must have been very skilled." This is the nature of the signifier. It begins empty, and in a great flash, it is exposed to the world, and wrapped in an envelope - it may even be given a name, a signifier for a signifier. And its name may remain the same even while it (still a signifier) changes, morphing in unrecognizable ways until it is developed relationally, acted out. In developing the photo, acting out the signifier, meaning slowly comes to be, full of (mis)takes and (contra)(diction)s.

And make no mistake, we *act* out our signifiers - the world of signs is the world of play, full of substitutions innumerable. Our relationship with meaning is always-already (ir)reverent - we are always switching out the photo in the envelope and all the while proclaiming its inviolability and beauty. In this way, our world is not constituted by our words - instead, our words are constituted by our world, by the raw materiality of our (re)(flex)ive acting. After all, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Now this play is play in a game; a game in fact which subsumes the many language-games of everyday use. Its rules are those which determine which language-games are permissible, and each language-game is itself a use, a function, an inconstant, derivative mode of play.

So we return to wordplay - playing with our signifiers, cutting them and extending them. It is more plain to see now that wordplay is nothing more than an acknowledgement of the nature of the game, an ultimate comedic irony. There is a gap between the solemnized, (in)violable Word - the Logos, perfect from the moment of its conception - and the stage play where words are acted out. That gap is only ever traversible by irony - through the ironic acknowledgement of the (im)possibility of the Logos, the Logos is actualized via inaction. This is to say, the words of wordplay are *not* acted out, even though they can be - its signifiers are still un(de)veloped. Wordplay positions itself as not only derivative but lateral, an (et)ernal struggle for an (in)ternal criticism of hegemony. Wordplay is deliberately critical, but in this lies its beauty and strength. Wordplay is an ironic play, an act at the level of the language-game-game. To be precise, wordplay is a ironic-comedic acting out of the conception of the Logos as perfect and inviolable which produces (materializes, even) a (mal)formed Logos and privileges it as original. In so doing, wordplay reveals to its audience the (im)possibility of the Logos. Wordplay itself is a signifier, slowly being developed through intentional explorations of meaning via ironic play.

Central to this notion of ironic play is the identity of the material self of the Logos - or rather, the relational interplay between selfhoods (authorhoods, rather) which produces the Logos as an (im)materiality. At play (yes, at play) are the writer and reader (rather, the scriptwriter and (aud)ience), of course, but also the Logos-for-itself (as in(de)pendent concept of inviolability, what might be called a social Logos) and the original sign as already-acted-out; the social relations that ground the signifier. The four work together to produce a new, (mal/de/re)formed signifier from their mutual antagonisms, and in some ways disappear in the so doing. We explicate the stage thus - the social Logos and original sign are prior to the writer-author, who sets out from his position within the original sign to produce a new, wholly separate sign which

draws on the social Logos. His attempt is impossible, but he acknowledges its impossibility, and through his acknowledgement, the original signifier is (per/con)verted into a radically different re-image, a separate form whole and entire, sacredly profane and profanely sacred in its newborn innocence. The reader is left with the new signifier as unacted Logos, to (trans)form at will. In this way, the moment of wordplay is a ((cata)clysm/trag/iron/comed)ic moment of birth - it might be called an anaclysm, a 'washing away upwards,' a radical moment of transformation.

Inspecting the moment of wordplay as birth-anaclysm gives us more insight into the fates of the *dramatis personae*. The writer-author must efface; in acknowledging the (im)possibility of his critical objective he dies, kenotically pouring his ego into the new signifier - and yet, the signifier is as yet unassociated, nothing more than a blank reel of black film. Thus the author's kenotic removal into the signifier serves to constitute the 'flash' through the id and superego that remain - both the products of the original sign but directed at the vanishing goal of the ego; it is only natural that the id and superego, conspiring behind the ego's back, should serve to pantomime and create in mockery an image of the original sign - a graven idol unto itself. But the graven idol is as yet determinate - after Derrida, we might term it phallic. The new signifier is a herma, with a head and phallus alone surmounting a bare slab of polished stone. As an idol to the Logos, it is patently phallogocentric, as it must be. Yet here is where the crucial motion of wordplay enters, the motion which sets it apart as meaningful and distinct rather than purely replicatory and derivative - a ((d/r)e)(con)stitution as severed, the (in)(s/v)er(t/s)ion of a 'far remove' especially between a thing and its purported negation. This is a moment of castration and emasculation - an Alcibidean (mutil/vandaliz)ation of the herma, an act of ultimate impiety which rejects the Author-God (a la Barthes) (kills the id and superego, even) and decenters the original Logos. Alternatively, we may interpret the moment of severing as a moment of

circumcision - it is a creative act, to be sure, one which confirms the new signifier even as a terrible-to-look-upon parody of the original signifier. Yet consider thus - circumcision is the necessary (re)quirement of ontotheological masculinity, a sacrifice of flesh to be confirmed in the sub(miss)ion to God, to the Logos; but the castrato is *always* circumcised, he enters existence as a new creature separate from his prior existence as a young boy. This is our new signifier - a castrato, always-already circumcised (and so ultimately masculine) and yet always-already emasculated. The masculine potentiality of the signifier is very much in(vis)ible; the vandalized herma is completely conscious of its vandalization; the creative (potent)iality of ejaculation stands only in yhe collective notion. But in this moment of grief, eucatastrophe strikes - the reader-citizen (who must (in)evitably be Other (and thus Woman as Other a la Beauvoir)) comes upon the castrated herma and fills its creative potentiality through adoption into the creative potentiality of the kin group; the castrato regains his masculine potentiality through opposition against femininity. The castrato, in fact, is Osiris, impossible ruler, king of the death-world of the Duat - the castrato has achieved the lateral remove his father sought. His phallus is (im)possibly-magically reconstituted in the deathly, in the imp(a/o)ss(a/i)ble Beyond. A male child has been conceived in the image of his mother; his father has been sacrificed in parts, but castrates the child before death; a wandering traveller comes upon the child - this is the moment of anaclysm, the Hegelian triad that frames all wordplay, a Life, Death, and Resurrection; a Being, Nothing, and Becoming.

This is the s(tr)u(c)turing narrative of wordplay, a Hegelian anaclysm which creates a (trans)(form)((m)at(e))(ion(ian)) (which is to say, a single charged particulate signifier with a distinct orientation in the world characterized thoroughly by its historicity (its Ionian historicity as derivative of the ironic form stemming from the original Socratic irony) and sexually situated



(both in the sense of its production and its narrative trajectory as a transposition from the gap between the sign and the Logos onto the actualization as inaccessible Logos); moreover materially situated in its sexuality as distinctly yet transitorily formed (first actually-phallicly, then impossibly-phallicly, and characterized by the transgender change in positionality)) from Hermes/Thoth as original Wisdom and Logos to Dionysus/Osiris. And as this has been unveiled, let us return to the idea of wordplay as a 'mere' poetry - it is plain to see that poetry it is, inasmuch as this anaclysmic narrative is deeply dramatic-theatrical and internally rife with poetry. But mere poetry is never mere, as we have attempted to show - the act of producing and then subsequently (or sometimes, coterminously) speaking poetry is a kind of play, a being-in-the-world which actualizes the latent signifier and fills it with meaning. Poetry is *poiesis* - making meaning - and so meaning is inseparable from poetry, inasmuch as poetry is inseparable from meaning. All forms of poetry are a kind of meaning, all meanings a kind of poetry. It is through this lens of poetry-as-poiesis that we finally see the role of the dramatic-anaclysmic epic of wordplay as productive of a meaning which transcends meaning, or rather a self-referential meaning which is always-already ironic. Moreover, we finally see work laid bare for what it is - all meaningful work is 'mere' play, play which means by being 'mere' poetry. Work is (in)separable from its poetry, from its signs latent and actualized, from its play. In that way, wordplay is really a kind of wor(k/d)play, and one of the most meaningful acts of all.

But let us demonstrate wor(d/k)play in praxis by beginning with parentheticals: a useful toy to perform surgical operations on words - severing, appending, dismembering. Parentheticals are already commonly used to express a parallel duality, such as between singular and plural or between masculine and feminine. For instance, "Hegel had a (several) lover(s)" can be used to represent a multiplicity of possibilities which cannot be succinctly represented in language:

Hegel might have had a lover, or he might have had more, and what the writer wants to capture is both the singular and the multiple. More interestingly, one might write “(wo)man” in lieu of either “man”, “woman”, or an agendered alternative: this move should not merely be read as listing an array of possibilities - that one can substitute this compound expression with “man” or “woman” and move on. This reading is more suitable for a formulation such as “woman or man”, in which the words themselves are left intact but externally modified. Rather, the *internal* surgical appendage - the operation within the body of the symbol rather than outside of it - points towards an internal bleeding, a suturing: an immanent antagonism in which, to paraphrase Žižek, two divides into one. This insight points towards multiple possible formulations: for instance, we might understand it in a Lacanian sense: masculine as universal and feminine as exception; “wo-” is the exception to the universal “man” (in a non-accidental parallel, “fe-” is the exception to the universal “male”: we obtain “(fe)male”). We must pay close attention to the way the word reasserts itself even more truly after its suturing; reconstitutes itself in a resurrective motion. We unmistakably and almost inevitably arrive at the revelation of the structural binary, and can never truly evade the phallogocentric as interpreters - we are always Other to the text. Moreover, what those who insist on excising the “man” in “woman” by using the formulation “womxn” miss is that “man” is only possible in “woman”: its existence is contingent on woman as constitutive exception. If “woman” is rewritten as “womxn”, then “womxn” is more truly expressed as “wo(mxn)”: “man” becomes “mxn”.

Consider another example: (de//con)struction. English-speaking successors of the intellectual tradition articulated most famously by Derrida notably assert that deconstruction is not the negation or reversal (as possibly implied by the prefix ‘de-’) of construction, that is destruction. But we must admit this term “deconstruction” is quite a poor choice of expression,

an unnecessary obscuring: the proper one is rather “(de//con)struction”, in which the immanent tension is not between construction and its negation, but rather twofold - between “de-” and “con-”, then between this tension itself and “struction”. The tension between “de-” as dismembering (destroy, delineate, derail) and “con-” as bridging (connect, construct, converse) is again one of constitutive exception. This is the first step of Derrida’s “double gesture”: the inversion of the traditional binary opposition by pairing “de” against “con”, a similar move as in “female / male” or “nature / man” (as opposed to the more familiar “male / female” and “man / nature”). The second step - the disruptive emergence of a new concept which is concerned with embodying differ(a/e)nce and unity, is made in the pairing between this negative tension (“de//con”, like “-1//+1”) and the positive body of the “struct(ion)”. The tension is given a certain type of home to perpetually live, die, and relive in. Therefore “(de//con)struction” (and this formulation particularly) already embodies the process (de//con)struction, and more accessibly than mere “deconstruction”. Consider how (de//con)struction is already at work as a mode of analysis: rather, (anal)ysis.

Let us repeat it again: (anal)ysis. Here, we should not attempt to neutralize adolescent sexual sociality - dirty jokes about the anal, and so on - but recognize how (anal)ysis is itself already a ridiculous, pleasure-ridden, dirty, masochistic action. The anal is the second stage in Freud’s theory of psychosexual development, after the oral: it is the first where pleasure must be repressed, controlled. (Anal)ysis is a process of excrement-production: we ingest, digest, and shit. It is always a dirty process, even if we attempt to cast it as natural and hide it behind locked doors. (Anal)ysis must involve a minimally fecal-sexual intellectual movement, and we should not forget this: there is no clean purity in dissecting systems and generating modeling potentials,

whether it is in epidemiology or in the analytic philosophy of mind. (Anal)ysis is always already dirty, let us not pretend it is not: let us accept the play and obscenity which was already there.

Let us conclude by revisiting our discussion of (wo)man in a slightly ridiculous way: (wo(mb))man. We can read this as on the surface as enumerating linguistic permutations: man, woman, wombmman. But the surgical slices and appendages are important here - yes, we have cheaply exploited the linguistic similarity between “wo-” and “womb”, but we should not be preoccupied with the stupidity of this move (yes, it is stupid - it is hard to deny this) but rather think about what this move is doing. There are many directions to pursue here, but here is one: “wombman” as the figure of the pregnant man in Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild”, severed through parentheticals into a molecular structure composited from overlapping atomics of gender and reproduction. Ultimately, parentheticals are combinatory tensors: it should therefore be no surprise that parentheticals are an essential syntactic feature of modern programming languages. Parentheticals compactly open up a world of control, difference, and order, to use Baudrillard’s computational language of the postmodern. They compute possibilities by slicing and appending: they make us see particularity in the universality of the signifier, and universality in the particularity of its dismemberment.

Let us now turn our attention to a more blunt toy which has already been previously employed in several instances: slashing. While the closedness of the parenthetical gives it its combinatory power of computation - what opens must be closed, the precision and logic of the surgical - slashing is separation itself, a murderous operation. It can take the form of /, //, ///, \, |, ||, and so on: it is the visual force of interrupting the stream of words which gives it its power. Most obviously, it can be used to create a signifying unit of opposition - Real / Artificial, Light / Dark, True / False. But we should realize that the single slash “/” takes the form of a singular

mirror - a reflector, a unifier, a bridger. Indeed “True / False” is the most syntactically efficient way to unify an opposition. Visual variations can be used to demonstrate separation, visceral (rather than reflective) separation - “True /// False” is clearly different from “True / False”; whereas the latter is a symmetry, a reflection, a substitution - there is something untraversable in the former, like the vertical slash in Lacan’s barred subject  $\$$ . To use “//” or “///” over “/” is to create a critical, cold distance between opposing terms - symbolically the closest two unique signifiers can be. A simple negation, reflection, symmetry will bridge the two. But we are forced to read “True /// False” differently because of how we have slashed it, and it is this degree of difference which is valuable. Make no mistake: we should not hold the person who puts the interruption as making an important move (again, it is a quite stupid and childish thing to do, excessive), but rather the person whose interpretation of the interruption leads us towards novel ground. (It is just that often these two are the same people.) But slashing need not be only a tool of separation: we can appropriate the close mirror reflections of “/” into a maze of mirrors / reflectors / refractors / prisms / liquid crystals of meaning. We should not resignedly settle for choosing only one signifier when we mean (and this is always the case, although we may not know it) an open, contingent field of blurred / intermeshed / superimposed symbols, expressed as a reflexive mirror; this is a certain type of poetry - of course not free in that freedom is necessarily asymptotic at best, but a small step towards realizing symbolic liberatory potential.

But we can also play on a more abstract level, outside the playground of philosophical or analytical writing: by appropriating or borrowing (pick your word of choice) terms from other fields of study, we can accumulate partial dimensions of new spaces. Not only do many of the most effective philosophical works employ domain appropriation, we may even assert that domain appropriation is *necessary* for effective writing in our time: our writing and intellectual

work is always situated within social totality, and our social totality is that of Baudrillard's hyperreal circulation of signs. We need an intellectual syncretism of scholarship to keep on doing philosophy. One must not revert to a naive Luddite resistance by pushing against circulation - this is its own form of cold, premodern deterrence - but rather to flow through the bloodstream of the hyperreal body (cadaver?). Take from topology - the Mobius strip, the Klein bottle, unorientable surfaces; from linear algebra - the matrix, the tensor, the eigenvalue; from computer science - the pseudorandom, the reboot, the cybernetic; from biology - epigenetics, the cancerous, the parasitic. To use these terms is not quite to actively appropriate concepts from one context to another in a novel fashion, it is not a pioneering act: this appropriation was always happening, they were already circulating - it is a gesture of recognition, but one which pulls heavy intellectual weight too. Writing which effectively recognizes the abstract circulation between information as an institution begins to read something like 'materialist poetry': it begins to work towards a universality structured by partiality, and this is the only universality that can be. This is what it means to write, to accept our historicity - one contemporaneous with information itself.

The (con)trovery over the playful and the poetic as philosophical work is ever-present: play is discredited as stupid, banal - a false attempt to derive semantic meaning from shallow manipulation of the syntactic surface. However, this purportedly shallow manipulation, the movement of wordplay, is always already entangled with radical reconception of meaning. Through the origina(ry/l) emptiness of the signifier and its development through use, meaning arises in a materialist, organic way. Under this schema, we characterize wordplay as a Hegelian anaclysm - creation by the id and superego, severing by the ego, and encounter by the reader-as-Other. In the final movement, the reader must confront the newly generated signifier

from a liminal space - the phallogocentrism of the original signifier is always already reasserting itself. We know that the process of wordplay is really wor(k/d)play: we can engage with wor(k/d)play in praxis through a variety of mechanisms, including parentheticals, slashing, and domain appropriation. While it is easy to accept that one can unknowingly derive pleasurable play from the activity which is supposed to be their work (such is the subversive potential of Freudian psychoanalysis, that everything serious is really 'secretly' perversely dirty), the possibility that one can derive serious work from activity supposed to be just stupid adolescent play has always seemed questionable - but it is precisely this possibility which we must recognize as true: that the id and the superego may conspire through wordplay to produce an expression which the ego only understands several moments later as meaningful, that everything stupid and banal is really 'secretly' perversely revelatory, profound. These banal aleatoric permutations of wordplay, in all their pseudorandom stupid spontaneity, make us *think*, and this is what we should strive for when we write: not to tuck the complexities of the signified under an esoterically false signifier but instead to ejaculatorily erupt consciousness into the signifier through the surgery of the word.