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Literary Play: Explorations in Hyperdimensionality

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When in 1795 Friedrich Schiller asserted the centrality of "play" to conceptions of what it is to be human, he had in mind the human capacity for variability, invention and zestful exuberance, a capacity associated with both body and spirit and manifest in a vast range of activities. Play is as old as culture and, in Johan Huizinga's view in *Homo Ludens*, it produces culture. There is a long history of attention to its definition, reach and importance. No longer defined in simple opposition to work or to seriousness, play is variable in form and register, multi disciplinary and endemic in the operations of language, discourse and communication. Whereas Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Derrida provide rich grounds for consideration of play in language, more recent mappings that have a specific interest in language and literature include studies from Bernard Suits, James Hans, Mihai Spărișu, Robert Rawdon Wilson and Brian Edwards. A leading concept in poststructuralist linguistics, it is also central in theorising postmodernism.

If play is often defined in contrast to notions of seriousness, work and reality, it takes only an eye-blink to perceive the terms not as oppositional but as interactive. Associated with activity, movement, process, invention, freedom and change, play affirms possibility against restriction, resignation and closure. As Rawdon Wilson suggests, for example, in his study *In Palamedes' Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game, & Narrative Theory* (1990):

Drawing with it a number of subordinate concepts such as self-representation, make-believe, role, rule, move, strategy, tactics, aleatory combinations, and so forth, play has shifted from a descriptive vocabulary appropriate to the activities of children and the leisure of adults. It may be used as a model to describe and explain all kinds of human activity: learning procedures, social interaction, personal expressivity, cultural formation and transformation, as well as a wide range of activities that involve the creation and reception of works of art, simulation, dissimulation, risk-taking, strategic thinking, tactical decision-making, structural experimentation, the testing or trying out of ideas. (28)

Once we acknowledge the distinction between word and referent, let alone such inviting complications as a writer's (and speaker's) personal perspective and

language choices and a reader's (or listener's) experiential-ideological-aesthetic baggage, it may be seen that language, textuality and reception/interpretation are extraordinarily rich sites of play. Nietzsche's, Wittgenstein's and Derrida's observations upon the play of language are *late* definitions of characteristics variously present from the first use of words. Composed of approximations, relativities and difference, and notwithstanding its connections to *the real* (of history, work, culture), language is inherently playful and this characteristic is particularly evident, with such vast modulations of difference, in the literary text. Further, as Derrida has pointed out repeatedly, the concept of the text does not exclude the world, reality, and history. On the contrary, for construction and reception of the text are always worldly and, according to our preferences, multiple and complex in their relationships with specific contextual realities.

There is a decided play spirit and considerable use of the term in Herbert Smith's *The Locus of Meaning: Six Hyperdimensional Fictions*. Expressing an interest in pattern and structure, in spatial concepts with respect to texts and their operations, he borrows figures from science to explore their usefulness for literary theory and critical practice. In Part One, "A Theory of Hyperdimensional Isomorphisms," and in agreement with Barthes that criticism should address "the locus of meaning," he produces an isomorphic analysis of semiotic processes, an attempt to graph textual operations and, in particular, text-reader interaction. With Barthes lurking in the background, and with examples from Pirsig (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) and Donne ("Elegy XIX, To His Mistress Going to Bed"), he considers the recursive or metatextual, the *metadign*, as a "four-dimensional poetic effect" (18), as an expression of the invitational complexity of some literary texts. One might now claim of *all* texts while acknowledging the significant variations in degree, complexity and interest. Whether or not the spatial figures (Smith's graphs and diagrams), together with his borrowings from catastrophe theory, elucidate these processes any more than say, Bakhtin's heteroglossia and polyphony, Derridean deconstruction, or Lacan's or Deleuze and Guattari's psychoanalytic revisionism is not really the point. Offering other figures, they do so differently; certainly, they reassert the intricacies of encoding and decoding while offering provisional access to the interplay and holding off the endgame of final meaning.

Taking Jakobson's metaphor-metonymy distinction, Smith argues that they are not in fact polar opposites but, rather, more complexly interactive, a view supported by Jakobson's own attention to so many variables that complicate the relationship. With passing consideration of writings from David Lodge, Umberto Eco and Paul de Man that address metaphoric and metonymic structures, he suggests that Jakobson's terms provide the basis for an appreciation

of multidimensionality and an approach to the *locus* of meaning. Thus literary expression is most powerful when it provokes a reader's self-consciousness, when it disturbs our sense of the familiar by introducing difference, when it moves the interaction to what Smith calls "Learning II":

The greatest literature, the greatest art of any kind, inevitably risks forcing its audience to Learning II by demanding that it discriminate *uncomfortably* between metaphoric and metonymic modes. The effect is equivalent to the change in perception or dimensionality between data-processing texts and literary texts, except that in this case the dimensionality goes beyond our sensually reassuring limit of *three*. That takes us beyond the experiences of our senses and beyond "common sense" ... (41)

Suggesting that in its typical unsettling, postmodernism demands not just an increase in attention but also a qualitative change from writers, readers and critics, he finds its products emblematically hyperdimensional. Made uncomfortable, forced to reread the modes, and the codes, we become wanderers in Eco's Garden of Aesthetics or Borges' labyrinth or Barth's funhouse, defamiliarised, confronted with choices, facing surprise and possibilities of anguish and delight. Whether or not his isomorphisms clarify distinctions between aesthetic and ideological coding, they do remind us of their sway and interplay. For my money, the aesthetic is never free of ideological implications.

From this revisionist semiotics, Smith's consideration of style distinguishes two large categories: the view that styles in art reflect broad natural (universal) cycles and the view that style responds to social particularities. It is an old tension and talking point, and Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) presents one of the best known attempts to map thematics and texts on a grid that subsumes and exceeds the local. Smith's second category is "Modern" and it better includes his interest in the transgressive, avant-garde, experimental, complex and multidimensional, or the shock of the approach of Learning II. But as his analysis concedes, the goal posts shift and, heaven knows, notions of natural, organic and universal (and even the avant-garde) have been so radically deconstructed in semiotics, poststructuralism and ideological critique. Even so, there is difference in the play of difference and his choices of Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* and Eco's *The Name of the Rose* serve well enough to show modes as *nets* and *ladders*, as provisionally useful conventions challenged by the complications of texts, one an example of poststructuralist criticism and the other a highly self-regarding work of fiction, that demand reconsideration of form, tradition, exchange and meaning-formation. Abducted or seduced by such texts, by hyperdimensional *catastrophes*, we are invited "to proceed meaningfully through contraries and

paradoxes and meaninglessness to awareness of the relationship of forms" (67). What Smith holds as common to such cases (and the examples far exceed his short list) are their dissociation from orthodoxy of the period, metalinguistic play, a catastrophic effect upon their audience and their capacity to contribute to the evolution of forms of art. From discord new insights and possibilities might arise; the view does not preclude the recognition that newness is transitory.

Parts Two and Three are notable for their analytic rigor. Pursuing his interest in hyperdimensional fictions and selecting examples that are held to proceed from the writers' discord with their social-intellectual milieu, Smith is attentive to critical history and sharp in his focus upon textual detail and the interlacing argument. In Part Three, he considers three "problematic" texts from nineteenth-century American literature: Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, each of which claims the controversy of strongly divided readings. The chapter on Poe is especially effective. Smith applies Barthes' five semiotic codes from S/Z, the demonstration piece in which, with parodic excess, Barthes reveals the dimensional complexity of Balzac's "classic realist" text. Noting the triple voices, "errors" and puzzles, patterns, the symbolic range, checks and reversals, influences, paradox and the metaphors of sex and gender, Smith "resolves" the critical opposition between readers of Poe's fiction, between the "hoaxers" and the "symbolizers," by emphasizing the work's hyperdimensionality. In its playfulness, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* deliberately invites misreading and, as Smith suggests, postmodern readers trained upon Borges, Nabokov, Barth et al. will appreciate Poe's "freeplay with serious content" (86). Poe's fiction, particularly the Dupin detective stories, has proved immensely attractive to recent criticism with the Lacan-Derrida et al. attention to "The Purloined Letter" as just one well known example of this battleground of letters.

Melville, too, is an obvious candidate and although Smith concentrates upon *The Confidence-Man*, *Moby-Dick* is another postmodernist wonder *avant la lettre* that would serve the argument just as well. This discussion has the same authoritative appeal as the chapter on Poe and, proceeding from a fine analysis of trends in Melville scholarship, Smith argues that undecidability is the real subject of *The Confidence-Man*. His attention to the text's recursive elements, to Melville's emphasis on epistemological issues, to structure and metaphors is very persuasive. Ghosting in the background, the figures of whiteness, Faust of the quarter-deck, an emblematic Pequod, monomania, a mad chase and an elaborately self-reflexive text reinforce the case. Ahab's proclamation "[h]e tasks

me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate," is just one more confirmation of the great riddling enterprise at the heart of the text. The struggle for mastery is shown to founder upon inexhaustible mysteries and multiplicities, not least of which is this title figure as a social, economic, philosophical and linguistic construct. *The Confidence-Man* and *Moby-Dick* are both engagingly "hyperdimensional" texts whose multi-faceted playfulness invites reader collaboration in a pursuit of meanings not so much in the face of as licensed by the notion of ultimate undecidability. Rounding off this case for hyperdimensionality in nineteenth-century American fiction, Smith provides a post-Holocaust, post-Vietnam War political reading of competing ideologies in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, a reading that shifts attention from aesthetic to political considerations (though, again, the one involves the other). So Twain's playful-satirical fiction, a book that "appears to be an indeterminable mishmash of modes, styles, genres, and intentions" (109), both high and low mimetic, deals with "reality" as a construction of competing ideologies, abuse, exploitation, intersection and opportunity. The conflict of forms is central to the apparent intention and, in play and seriousness, Twain invokes *myth* to deconstruct *reality*.

In Part Three, Smith turns to postmodernist fiction, the obvious playground for his interests in this study, and he presents fine chapters on Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Barth's *Chimera* and, in my view, a slightly less successful (though still interesting) chapter on Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. The choices are indeed appropriate. In their elaborate playfulness with forms, narrative position, intertexts and metaphors, in their *hyperdimensionality*, these works investigate the conditions and possibilities of meaning. Whatever we make of the labyrinthine dissemblings upon postmodernism, it involves a high degree of self-consciousness about form, ideology, identity, meaning and significance. Accentuating the invitational possibilities of invention, difference and heterogeneity, Lyotard's construction accords with the emphases of Smith's study: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" (*The Postmodern Condition*, xxv). Any number of studies address the debate about postmodernism, including its multidisciplinary reach and the problematics of its acceptance as a cultural dominant, a perspective on multinational consumer capitalism, an aesthetic or as a set of strategies and technological changes with profound effects upon language, communication

systems and the state of knowledge. They provide a context for the third part of *The Locus of Meaning*.

Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is famously elusive. For Smith, it is "the archetext of postmodernism... the most striking example of the essential postmodern ever written" (123). Its readings indicate such a range of variables; its *difficulty* might have pleased even Eliot. Again, the trajectories of criticism are covered. Starting with the Foreword and its pointers to the multidimensional text, Smith concentrates on the Shade-Kinbote interplay, the novel's discontinuous structure, its complex metaphors and the implications for analysis and understanding. The discussion is exuberant, with an erotics of reading that recalls Barthes' *jouissance* and *The Pleasure of the Text*:

The Foreword is a kind of foreplay, urging the reader to assume a poetic or a novelistic position, to be changed to another position as another discontinuity arises. The Index, of course, is a kind of *afterplay*, which can also turn into narrative arousal at any moment. Because of this reversibility and possibly infinite variation, the reading of *Pale Fire* is limited only by the reader's willingness to pursue these possibilities beyond the three dimensions of pre-Einsteinian physics and the rigidities of pre-post-structuralist criticism. (138)

This is a case of what others attempt to indicate in terms of the uncertainty principle, undecidability and, while the energy lasts, inexhaustible interpretative delight.

Barth is indeed an archetypal postmodernist, one who has addressed the label, rejected membership of any club that does not include García Márquez (see "The Literature of Replenishment") and whose fiction fits the measure. Smith glances at Barth's production through to *The Tidewater Tales* (1988) to emphasize his wondrously variable yet continuing attention to the form of fiction. His case for the centrality of *Chimera* (1972) in Barth's work is well-made as he situates it within the Fibonacci sequence that it also addresses self-consciously in its novellas. Locating "Dunyazadiad" in the romantic mode and "Perseid" in the classical, he argues that "Bellerophoniad" is a deliberate "botch" and a leap into a new dimensionality of forms (inter and extra textual). Furthermore:

The theme of storytelling (not the same, of course, as novel-writing) needs an incompetent Bellerophon to balance the "passionate virtuosity" of Scheherazade and Dunyazade. The "golden" quality of Perseus and his myth, their very *phit*-ness, needs some baser metal – lead, as in the pencil-like spear that may have done in the

Chimera – for contrast. And perhaps "Bellerophoniad" proves, for the paradoxical purposes of Learning III, that the classical way is not the only way, and that even "passionate virtuosity," for all its quality, is but one of the ways to the Tao of art. (152)

Finding beauty, and interest, in Bellerophon's chaos, he emphasizes the invitation to free play, to textual *jouissance* in this third part of Barth's *Chimera*. It would be interesting to see what Smith might make of Barth's later work, *LETTERS* (1979), the elaborately self-conscious and playful work in which an author so attracted to recycling (to revisiting famous figures and narratives from world mythology and literature) *recycles himself*. Addressing three forms of pastness, American history, Barth's own writings and the history of the novel, it is both intricately formalist and open-ended, a postmodernist epistolary novel whose nods to early experiments with the genre serve the purposes, simultaneously, of recognition and difference. In this play of letters and as one of seven epistoles, the correspondent created especially for *LETTERS*, Lady Amherst, serves as the main link between the European tradition and American letters, the one who, in her relationship with ageing writer Ambrose Mensch and in her correspondence with The Author, re-examines language, connections and the making of texts. As it unsettles old distinctions between past-present, fiction-reality and art-life, *LETTERS* implicates the reader as a multi-disciplinary visitor to the "funhouse." Packed with allusion yet philosophically committed to openness, sending its letters off in so many directions, it poses challenges for diagrammatic representation while offering one more example of the fascination of hyperdimensional fiction.

There are many attractions in setting Pynchon alongside Barth. If Barth's fictions reveal the play-element in self-delighting invention, notwithstanding the social critiques that accompany his redemptory aesthetics, Pynchon, particularly in *Gravity's Rainbow*, takes playful complexity to another level. Smith chooses *The Crying of Lot 49* and with attention to the much-discussed place of entropy in Pynchon's work. The analysis is assured, with useful reference to "The Secret Integration" with respect to the thematics of integration-differentiation and with Eco's discussion (in *A Theory of Semiotics*) of ideological overcoding as a pointer. Sorting-machine Oedipa, pursuing all clues into the dark night, awaiting the crying of lot 49, is not only an interesting figure of the challenging processes of decoding (and encoding) but a predecessor to the more labyrinthine possibilities set at play in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Whereas her paranoid questing is sharply delineated in terms of alternative meanings, the panoramic range of *Gravity's Rainbow* resists such definition. With its huge variety of characters, intersecting

plot-lines and elaborate allusiveness, it is, in my view, a definitive example of the decentered text, another *hyperdimensional* postmodern fiction.

In his "Epilogue," Smith refers to Salman Rushdie's, *The Satanic Verses* and the *fatwa* against him. But if the infamous case indicates, yet again, fiction's ambiguous relationships with particular historical, political and cultural contexts, including the contexts of its reception, it is one more reminder, as well, that fiction is ideological. Rushdie may well emphasize, in his defence, the fiction of his fiction, disclaiming any intention of insulting Islam or the Islamic world, and, good readers all and believers in the principle of freedom of expression, we will condemn use of the pillory (Defoe's penalty) and sentences of death for writers who upset people. Nevertheless, even though contexts of reception and modes of reading and interpretation change, it is odd that Smith envisages a time when "the ideological coding will have disappeared and *The Satanic Verses* will be pure aesthetic" (175). Texts, including hyperdimensional fictions, come contaminated into the world, the aesthetic is ideological and, however much, for convenience, we choose to separate these codes, we also, characteristically, insist upon fiction's relationships with "the real."

Wary of graphs and diagrams, I am sceptical of their usefulness in representing textual spatiality let alone the dynamics of reading and interpretation with all of their cultural, material, institutional and personal baggage. But if this pictorial stasis seems to underplay complexities of structure, reference, allusion, narrative perspective, ideology and the like, the figure of "hyperdimensionality" is one more metaphor for those possibilities of interplay that demand and legitimate libraries of production. Against the temptation of meaning, Herbert Smith's study makes a strong case for continuing appreciation of meanings, for proliferation and heterogeneity, a case well-supported in poststructuralist linguistics and endorsed by the concept of *play*.

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