
SEMANTIC PLAY AND POSSIBILITY
Invited Contribution

Play Which Is More than Play

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This semantic play is on the word “play” itself—a word that in the modern sense has lost its great significance since the glory days in ancient Greece, prior to Socrates.¹ Much has been written about play from various disciplinary perspectives, about the value of play, its relationship to child development and to learning. We all know “play,” don’t we? Why search for new meanings, and why look to such archaic times? One answer to that question is that in recognizing differences between play then and play now one begins to achieve what Gregory Bateson (1979) calls binocular vision (double description) for enhanced depth of perception. By “interrogat[ing] common sense definitions of core vocabularies,” (*Complicity*)—in this case, *play*—I hope not only to open up modernist habits of thought, but also to suggest that *play* might be the organizing principle of a discursive practice prior to modernism, prior to literacy and rationalism. As the organizing principle of mythopoetic (primarily oral) discursive practices, *play* signifies recursive relations, dynamics, and liminality characteristic of an open system of representation, one that has far greater complexity than the modernist practices of representation that continue to hold us captive.²

In modernist discursive practices one observes play, objectifies play as a “thing” or an “event,” and represents “play” definitively. This discursive practice of representation is founded on the organizing principle of *mimesis*, meaning *imitation* (this is that).³ One represents “play” in “words,” and the modernist assumption has been that words *do* represent play. “This is that” (*mimesis*) has a sense of equivalency. As Timothy Reiss (1982) points

out, however, modernist discursive practices are (1) very different than the dominant discursive practices that preceded them; and (2) these prior practices probably cannot be fully appreciated from our now too distant stance. As C. S. Peirce maintained, however, we can *speculate*—and it is necessary for us to do so, because in regard to “methods of representation and the recasting of meaning” there have been “universes of thought evolving into other universes of thought” (Kevelson, 1998, p. 40).

It is due to the “recasting of meaning” that I am led to consider the implications of another meaning of play as “the play,” as in theatrical performance, as an acted re-presentation of a story. While one might associate the origins of a play of this type with Homeric “plays,” I speculate that the play is not the thing itself, but rather, the play is a site of far greater complexity, a *nexus*, or perhaps, a *temenos*, in ancient Greek thought “a sacred space within which special rules apply and in which extraordinary events are free to occur” (Nachmanovitch, date, p. 75). The play is not just the play: it is much more (Bateson, 1979, pp. 133–134, pp. 146–149). And it is the “more-ness” in this sacred space of the play I wish to bring forward: the staging of cultural education (*paideia*) leading to creativity and transformation.⁴ In this place, in this ancient time, the play was not just entertainment it was education; recreation was for re-creation.

In this sacred space of play extraordinary events occur. There is “sympathy between all things as a sign of a universal vitalism” (Reiss, p. 49). This *vitalism* is an energy that flows through all things, bringing contiguity (Tambiah, 1990). The free play of forces brings into relations: players: the poet, the chorus, and the audience; time: the mythic past, the present, and the future; senses: speaking, hearing, seeing, and feeling; and inter-subjectivities: gods, goddesses, heroes, and mortals. There is a flowing together that forms an unbroken sequence in time and uninterrupted expanse in space. There is a dynamic system of patterns and transformation that “makes it possible to deal with unresolvable differences and contradictions” (Reiss, p. 49) in a relational manner. Stability and meaning in such a culture are achieved by recognizing patterns and rhythms in traditions and in speech. Recognition by “patterns of resemblances” means that *bundles* of relations must be seen rather than one set of relations, or isolated events. While all situations are contextual, one is, in a mythopoetic culture, looking at *an* event as a bundle of relations over time. Continuity in a primarily oral culture depends on this recollection, but evolution requires creativity. This backward and forward looking marks the threshold of play, for in this culture, the play, as a sacred *temenos* where extraordinary events are free to occur, insists on the flow of dynamical interactions.

The play is the stage of *paideia* (cultural education) and *poiesis* (to create, to make, to do). *Paideia* is obviously not education as we today understand

it. Cultural values were carried in the epics and the performers and the audience, brought together in this place, participated in the play of *paideia* and *poiesis*. The poet's performance was a re-presentation, a re-enactment. The audience looked for it to be varied in some way with each performance, a re-creation; as much as they expected continuity, drawing from the past, they expected new elements in the present.⁵

In *paideia*, Gregory Nagy (1996a) explains, a "definite goal," a *telos*, is part of re-enacted (mimetic) performance. The goal is cultural education, however this education is not simply passing on cultural values, beliefs and attitudes. Implied in the semantics of the word *mimesis* is *deuk-/duk*, the Greek root word for education (*educere* in Latin), which means to draw continuously forward—not pulling or pushing—toward a definite goal, in a future direction, toward maturity or, perhaps, to a stage of initiation, which marks achievement. In the drawing forward—extraordinarily—*poiesis* occurs. The inter-connectedness of these words and concepts—*poiesis*, *paideia*, *mimesis*—is characteristic of primary orality. Where language was organized prior to literacy there is a surplus of meaning and meaning can be played with.

The dynamic flow of play is complicated, but the energy might be thought of as deriving from the use of language (which is why I suggest play is the organizing principle of mythopoetic discursive practices). The *agonistic* nature of orality is a competitive tension that fires up Homeric performance and its creativity requires feedback and reflexivity. In this sense, *poiesis* has a "double nature"; for example, in the first aspect, the audience is moved between enchantment (captivated, under a spell) and synthesizing, meaning two different "states of mind" (George Walshe, 1984), but which contribute to their reflexivity. The second aspect of the double nature of *poiesis* is related to the flow of energy achieved by the production itself, the staging of the epic performance, highlighting the contrast between near and far, foregrounding and backgrounding characters against a sociohistorical context (Richard Martin, 1989). Simultaneously, the chorus and audience, the "present" respondents, interact with the mythic past. The audience members are drawn out of themselves, their energy flowing outward, toward the events enacted on stage, reacting to the performance; and energy from the performer is absorbed, drawn into, as the viewer receives this version of the tale. This active engagement and participation, giving and receiving, attention and reflection, is a part of *paideia*, being drawn out of oneself, drawn continuously forward toward a definite goal. Each performer and participating viewer allows him or herself to be drawn in to the movement, to find the play, the slip, in a situation, to be in the movement, and to work with the movement, to find—to *create*—variations. But there are multiple sites of play in the play, and the flow of reflexivity and reflection infuses

all, permeating individuals with cultural values of creating, perhaps even creating as an ethical responsibility—creating *self*.⁶

Michel Foucault's concept of *epimeleia heautou*, which he calls "care of the self" is "working on or being concerned with the role and responsibility of the individual."⁷ Care of the self "is not imposed on the individual by means of civil law or religious obligation, but is a choice about existence made by the individual. People decide for themselves whether or not to care for themselves" (p. 244).⁸ Ethics is tied to aesthetics in this culture. Foucault asks, why couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? (236). By connecting ethics and aesthetics with *self*, one's *being* is tied to creating. As Foucault goes on to explain, the *self* creates reflexively, therefore, by looking both inward and outward, seeing oneself in the other. *Self* in this sense is not an object, but rather seems almost another site of play, of reflexivity, reflection and connection, with the other and with tradition.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986/1998) associates play with performance and the dynamism of play with creating of self. As he says:

[T]he movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to... play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. (p. 103)

The player is subsumed by the play, playing without purpose or effort, absorbed into the structure of play, and relaxed by it (pp. 104–105). Gadamer describes a child with a playful task, playing with a ball, which is the performance of a task. When the performance is before an audience it is a presentation—of the self. Performing the task presents it. "First and foremost play is self-presentation All presentation is potentially a representation for someone" (p. 108). Play before an audience becomes "the play" and "openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only completes what the play as such is" (p. 109). He continues, play is

... a process that takes place "in between"... Play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him...all the more the case where the game is itself "intended" as such a reality—for instance, the play which appears as presentation for an audience. (p. 109)

For Gadamer play infuses the creative space of being, of *self*-creating. Each performative occasion is an opportunity to create, to reinterpret and to grow through the experience. The extraordinary occurrence of play, the "moreness," derives from the powerful dynamism of relations and interactions, the circumstances for the emergence of the new and for transformation.

This semantic play does not provide a neologism for *play*, a word—like “spirit”—that defies defining. It presents a only a speculative re-description of play as a dynamic flow through which systems—cosmological, mythological, human, and natural—are transgressed, transcended, and transformed. Play, as the organizing principle of discursive practices of re-presentation (re-enactment) in ancient Greece, blows open the tight and constraining discursive practices of representation in modernity. But then, we all know about “play,” don’t we?

Notes

1. Let me acknowledge here, at the beginning, criticisms of early Greek intellectuality as the root of Eurocentric Western intellectuality. The view I present of Homeric performance and its significance in pre-Socratic Greece is speculative, though well researched. The topics of primary orality, transmission of culture (*paideia*) and development of intellectual, creative thought in ancient Greece related to Homeric epic poems is controversial. There is general agreement, however, that the ancient culture distinguished itself by the transmission and performance of Homeric (and other) epic poems.
2. I use this term “discursive practices” following Timothy Reiss (1982) who writes, “The term “discourse” refers to the way in which the material embodying sign process is organized. Discourse can thus be characterized as the visible and describable praxis of what is called “thinking” (p. 9). Discursive practices shape, and are shaped by, “thought.”
3. The concept of *mimesis* is elusive, but in variously nuanced forms seems to underlie the “universes of thought” (I refer to later) regarding the transmission of culture through discursive practices. The Oxford English Dictionary (online version) defines *mimesis* in Platonist/ Aristotelian terms: “Imitation; specifically, the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art, literature, etc. Sometimes used with reference to Aristotle Poetics 1447a or Plato Republic 598b. Although Plato and Aristotle use *mimesis* to refer generally to the imitation of nature in art, both also use the term more specifically.” Plato and Aristotle were both critical of poetic tradition as it was practiced in their time and re-defined *mimesis* accordingly. Based on this notion of *mimesis* Jeffrey Walker (2000) notes, *mimesis* as “this is that” “allegorically figures forth” or “represents general truths and aligns those truths with an appropriate emotion, mood or attitude that the well-bred observer may properly entertain” (p. 286). From Merlin Donald’s (2001) perspective, *mimesis* is “self-conscious control of action” (p. 262) that is tied to identification with others in a cultural group (p. 266).
4. More-ness is a word coined by Dwayne Huebner (1999) to allude to that which is felt to be present in a situation, but which is ineffable. For him, “more-ness” is spirituality.
5. “Re-enactment” is the ancient, pre-Socratic sense of the word *mimesis*—which is *not* a replication and *not* an imitation. In oral traditions, the performance is a song, which varies in its composition, varies as it passes from one performer to another, and again for each local audience. Variations in the song (poem), termed *mouvance*, a word predicated on oral tradition, differ by degree and kind, and are inconsistent—perhaps, at times, even unpredictable. *Mouvance* is a condition of *poiesis*. The fluid nature of songs (poems) and their singing (performance) persists until the orality of the tradition becomes obsolete, and songs are fixed in written text. Nagy

- illustrates this fluidity with the example of the French troubadours' songs and the jongleurs who popularized—and changed—them. By comparing versions of Rudel's songs, Gregory Nagy is able to bring forward the (probable) origins of an authorization process, one which depended upon both the authenticity of the composer and the approval of the audience (1996a, p. 19).
6. When Katherine Hayles (1994) develops the notion of reflexivity in relation to cybernetics and the Macy Conferences, she begins by describing it as "precisely what enables information and meaning to be connected" (p. 450); but this "man-in-the-middle" position leads to input/output "black box functioning" psychological and psychoanalytic discussions. In the context of the Macy conference discussions, reflexivity is divorced from the homeostatic feedback loop concept and, drawing on Humberto Maturana's work, it is associated with *autopoiesis*, thereby providing a conceptual space for creativity through self-organization. About this Hayles says: "Maturana defined a self-organizing system as a composite unity: it is a unity because it has a coherent organization, and it is composite because it consists of components whose relations with each other and with other systems constitute the organization that defines the system as such. The circularity of the reasoning foregrounds reflexivity while also transforming it. Whereas, in the Macy conferences, reflexivity was associated with psychological complexity, in Maturana's world it is constituted through the interplay between a system and its components. They mutually define each other in the bootstrap operation characteristic of reflexive self-constitution" (p. 462).
 7. As Foucault points out, in classical Greece there was no "normalization" of this ethics, for two reasons: first, it was a personal choice; second, it was reserved "for a few people in the population; it was not a question of giving a pattern of behavior for everybody" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, p. 230). Further research into his concept of *epimeleia heautou* being a carry over from ancient (pre-Socratic) Greece is indicated. Foucault develops care of the self drawing on a wide range of Greek literature, carrying forward themes of *austerity* and *mastery* that were picked up by Christianity. In the following paragraphs I stitched together extracted references concerning the care of the self from his interview with Paul Rabinow.
 8. Foucault, in discussion with Paul Rabinow, only hints at the difference that concept of *epimeleia heautou* might make in the organization of societies. I am reminded that Gregory Bateson (1958), in *Naven*, realized and, I assume, was shocked to find, that the Iatmul people had no formal system of laws; theirs was a society that functioned without such rules—a complicated, if not "complex," organization. Many of the concepts that Bateson subsequently develops concerning how systems work—learning systems, social systems—were germinated in this study.

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