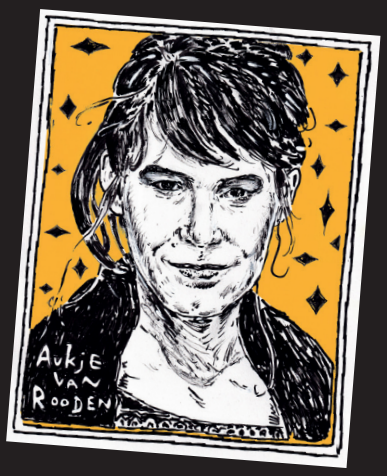

Playing as Gambling

Blanchot's Interpretation of Huizinga's *homo ludens*

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Abstract

Huizinga argues that true humanity emerges through play. However, the real intrigue lies in defining what kind of play epitomizes full humanity. What constitutes the quintessential form of the homo ludens? Is it the strategic chess player, the competitive footballer, the immersive stage actor, the carefree child? Can all forms of play be distilled into a singular essence? This investigation delves into Maurice Blanchot's perspective on this matter, as outlined in his work "L'Attrait, l'horreur du jeu" in which he investigates both Huizinga's Homo Ludens and Roger Caillois' "Les jeux et les hommes". He contends, though somewhat ambiguously, that the ultimate homo ludens is the gambler, someone who engages in games of chance without talent or skill. This conclusion challenges conventional notions of human capability. Blanchot contends that the essence of play lies not in marking delineated spaces and times, but in its transformative influence on these fundamental dimensions. Play disrupts the ordinary dimensions of existence, opening a dimension that connects with the limitless and the uncontrollable. The gambler, by embracing indeterminacy, uncontrollability, and uncertainty, embodies the modern human condition in its purest form. This resonates with Blanchot's earlier exploration of literary writing as a "nonsensical game of writing".

Man only plays when he is fully human, and he is only fully human when he plays. This we learned from Friedrich Schiller as early as 1795. In a way, this is also the claim made by Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* (1938), half a century later.[1] Taken in a general sense, this claim might seem convincing enough,

1 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), fifteenth letter: "Man *plays only* when he is a *human* being in the fullest sense of the word and he is fully a *human* being *only* when he *plays*." Although there is some affinity between Schiller's 1795 Letters and Huizinga's 1938 *Homo Ludens*, it is unlikely that Huizinga drew on Schiller. See also Heumakers, "Schiller and the *homo ludens*."

but it only becomes *interesting* when one tries to specify it: What kind of play are we actually talking about? What kind of play do we need to practice in order to be fully human? In other words, what is the prototypical *homo ludens*? Is it the strategically thinking chess player? The competitive football player? The simulating stage actor? The carefree child? And if it were possible to reduce all different forms of human play to one shared essence, would there then be a prototypical play in which that essence shows itself?

Here, I will investigate the answer to this question given by Maurice Blanchot, a French philosopher, writer and critic, in his article "L'Attrait, l'horreur du jeu". In this text, Blanchot discusses Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois' *Les jeux et les hommes*.[2] Blanchot's answer – this would at least be my claim because he himself is not too clear about it – is the *gambler.* The *gambler* is the homo ludens par excellence, that is, the kind of person who carelessly loses themselves in the throwing of a dice or the spinning of a wheel without any kind of talent or skill. For those who would like to think highly of man's abilities, this conclusion might come as a surprise. So, what brings Blanchot to this interpretation of Huizinga's homo ludens?

An encounter with the gods

In fact, Blanchot *does* start his analysis with an exploration of man's more esteemed faculties. Following Huizinga, he first examines the kinship of human play with those two other cultural practices usually identified as typically human: religion and art. These three human forms of expression are closely linked. Blanchot reconstructs Huizinga's line of reasoning, and even more than that: in fact, they cannot act without each other. In religious or artistic practices, there must always *also* be a certain playfulness. Play is the "mediator", as it were, ensuring that these activities contain exactly *that* which makes them religious or artistic.[3] This is why, according to Huizinga, play lies at the basis of human culture, why all human cultural expressions are "animated" by the "spirit" of play.[4]

That spirit, according to Blanchot, lies in a dealing with what *escapes*, with that which does not allow itself to be captured in rules or customs, or at least not in the ordinary ones. Play is precisely a way of situating ourselves outside the normal course of events. In the definition that Blanchot borrows from Huizinga, "playing" is therefore "the act of deliberately standing outside everyday life for a well-defined period of time and in a clearly defined space by voluntarily submitting to strict rules for no other purpose than the game itself".[5] In other words, the player is a person who deliberately interrupts the normal course of events, makes a caesura in it. "A very attractive definition", Blanchot says in his text.[6]

2 Blanchot, "L'Attrait." Originally published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* n 65 vol. 6 (1958) on the occasion of the appearance of Johan Huizinga's *Homo ludens. Essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu* (1951) and Roger Caillois' *Les jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige* (1958).
3 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 270.
4 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 269.
5 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 270.
6 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 270.

For Blanchot, the attraction lies not so much in the regulated way this caesura takes place – the defined space and time, the set of rules.[7] If that were to be the essence of play, Blanchot holds, then "work routine" would also fall within this definition.[8] Indeed, the factory worker – for Blanchot, still *the* model of the working man – also operates within a highly ritualised place "cut off from the world", during a strictly measured amount of time: clocking in and out, wearing certain prescribed clothing, performing specific acts. Should this be the essence of play, then the working man "differs in no way from the playing man".[9] But if play is *not* work, as Blanchot wants to argue, what, then, *is* play? "*Qu'est-ce qui est* jeu *dans le jeu?*"[10] What is *at play* in play?

The playfulness of play, Blanchot suggests without saying it in so many words, lies not in the regulated demarcation of a space and time but rather in its effect on space and time *as such*. The playing field, be it a sports field or a theatre stage, opens up our everyday space and time in such a way that they cannot be closed off again. During the "interruption of time"[11] brought about by play, a dimension is opened up that *transcends* any usual human dimension, a dimension that, although delimited, opens up to something *un*limited, un-limitable, to that what escapes. Whereas Blanchot usually designates this immeasurable dimension with notions like "the Outside" or "the Night", here he does so with the notion of "the divine". Play, Blanchot claims, is the place "where gods and men meet", "where human beings connect themselves with the gods in innocent freedom".[12]

The interruption of the normal course of events that play brings about is therefore more fundamental than an interruption of the everyday: it is an act that breaks with the measurable as such. Strictly speaking, then, the connection with the gods that arises through play should be called "sacred" rather than "religious". Whereas religion literally involves a connection or reconnection with the divine (*re-ligare*), the sacred retains a distance from it. Or more precisely, it is a way of connecting oneself with that distance, with "that distance which *is* the divine".[13] Play is not an entry ticket into a divine order, a god-making of man, but a cautious *human* way of dealing with that which transgresses the human, a way of putting oneself in contact with that transgression itself.

The pure decision

This reveals what Blanchot calls *l'essence légère* of play – the essence of lightness, but also the lightness of its essence.[14] Even more than by a well-delineated interruption of the everyday, play is marked by this lightness. That is, it cannot have the heaviness or presence of other, "real", human activities like work. It is always just a game. One can become totally absorbed in it; it can feel as if one's life depends on it, but all in all it is always just playing for the sake of play itself or for the sake of that light feeling Huizinga calls "pleasure" or fun.[15] "When we play, we are not at work, nor do we die", Blanchot dryly sums up

7 Blanchot here clearly aligns himself with Bataille who, in his discussion of Huizinga, also pointed out that the latter puts too much emphasis on "order" in his analysis of play. Bataille, "Sommes-nous là pour jouer?," 109.
8 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 271.
9 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 271.
10 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 272, my emphasis.
11 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 271.
12 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 270, 271.
13 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 270, my emphasis.
14 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 272.
15 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 272.

that light essence.[16] The interruption of the ordinary by play thus implies a certain release from serious, weighty reality, a release that, according to Blanchot, leads to a feeling of "unreality", "unconcern" and "irresponsibility".[17]

As recognisable as this "lightness" of play may be, it also constitutes the most difficult part of Blanchot's reflection on play. If play marks the essence of the human condition, and if the homo ludens is the human being in *optima forma*, what exactly does this lightness consist of? What does it mean that the essence of the human condition is apparently one of lightness, unreality and irresponsibility? A purely psychological explanation is not enough for Blanchot, and this is why he finds Caillois' distinction between different kinds of psychological instincts that would cause different types of play not far-reaching enough. Not only are these instincts – Caillois distinguishes competition, chance, simulation and vertigo – closely interrelated, but an explanation in terms of *instincts* would also not help distinguish humans from other animals. What both Huizinga and Caillois teach us, according to Blanchot, is that there is something more *fundamental* to human nature, something that surpasses these instincts and underlies what they call human culture or civilisation.[18]

So, what, then, is this lightness that distinguishes humans from other animals? It is here that Blanchot, following Caillois, introduces the figure of the gambler, or, more precisely, the attraction of *chance*. Where all other forms of play – competition, simulation and balancing acts – can be found with other animals too, *gambling*, according to Caillois, is only found among humans. Passively waiting for a random outcome, taking uncontrollable risks, deliberately anticipating loss – all these are typically human.[19] Blanchot therefore rephrases Schiller's famous claim as follows: playing in a *human* way essentially boils down to "rolling dice".[20] The gambler, the dice player, is the human being par excellence – this is a far-reaching claim in which Blanchot pushes Caillois' and Huizinga's ideas to their ultimate consequence.

This ultimate consequence mainly concerns the idea of the human *will*. According to Caillois, the gambler's attraction to chance can be explained by the human need to momentarily let go off our usual desire for control and to completely surrender to what cannot be controlled. The risking and waiting of the gambler therefore mark a "*renouncing*" of the human will, according to Caillois.[21] Interestingly, Blanchot draws the exact *opposite* conclusion. According to Blanchot, gambling is not *renouncing* the will but rather an ultimate *exercise* of the human will. There is no other moment, no other action in which the human capacity to *decide* is so concentrated as in the moment when one throws the dice, when one spins the wheel of fortune: "This is the moment when [man] decides [*se décide*], for the sole reason of the decision itself".[22] Where other forms of play are usually driven by decisions for the sake of strategy, effect or pleasure, the gambler's decision is in the end a decision for *nothing*, for the sake of the decision itself, and for that reason, according

16 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 272.
17 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 272.
18 Huizinga's intention was not, as Blanchot also points out, to present *homo ludens* as the essence of being human. Rather, according to Huizinga, it is historically one of the guises of man, alongside that of the *homo faber*. Nevertheless, Huizinga does seem to anticipate a philosophical analysis of the human condition as elicited by Blanchot.
19 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 275.
20 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 274.
21 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 276.
22 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 276.

to Blanchot, it is the pure, the purified, decision. The gambler, he argues, is "the person who experiences what the word '*decisive*', and the leap that accompanies each decision, means".[23]

With this characterisation of the gambler as the decisive man, the *willing* man, Blanchot does not completely reverse Caillois' characterisation of the gambler as passively waiting, but, as mentioned, he pushes it to the extreme. For indeed, according to Blanchot, the pure, empty decision made by the gambler is an exercise of will that takes place *where there is nothing to will*. The absence of will that Caillois recognises in the game of chance does not mean that there is *no* will but only that this will has no "*support*", that there is nothing it can be based on. "[T]he absence of the will is only the absence of support for the will", *l'absence d'appuis pour la volonté*, according to Blanchot.[24] In other words, the will that expresses itself in the gambling act is the will that asserts itself within a domain of absolute indeterminacy, uncontrollability and uncertainty. Moreover, it is *because* of this uncertainty that the human decision is both necessary and empty, both needed and impossible.[25]

The absence of support for the human will is also where the light, fleeting essence of play comes from. Where "premodern" or devout human beings could still be guided by divine providence, the condition of modern man is one of *not* being guided. During the orderly working hours, it may still be possible to forget this condition of uncertainty, but during play, it is consciously sought after, according to Blanchot. "The player is the person who brings himself into a state in which he [. . .], even in limited form, knows the greatest possible uncertainty, yes the essence of uncertainty".[26]

If play is a sacred "encounter" with the "divine" as Blanchot stated earlier, it thus concerns an encounter with that which cannot be known, with that which is fundamentally beyond human reach. Not only do we step outside the usual course of events, but, much more fundamentally than that, we confront ourselves with the ultimate Outside of the human condition. Blanchot therefore describes play as an encounter with the "*inhuman*".[27] Even though play is "only" a game, and even though we do not usually die when we play, we put *ourselves* at risk in play, *as* human beings, in confronting ourselves with the fundamental uncertainty of our condition.[28]

From fate to chance

This encounter with uncertainty is thus, according to Blanchot, deliberately sought out with gambling, with that kind of game in which chance reigns, where house and home are betted for the sake of an uncertain outcome. In Blanchot's oeuvre, we know this eager and impatient embrace of the uncertain, regardless of the consequences, also from his analysis of literary writing, which he describes, not without coincidence, with Stéphane Mallarmé, as "the nonsensical *game* of writing", *ce jeu insensé d'écrire*.[29]

23 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 276.
24 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 276.
25 This is similar to what Bataille in his review of Huizinga's *Homo ludens* called "the impotence of necessity", *l'impuissance de la nécessité*. Bataille, "Sommes-nous là pour jouer?," 100.
26 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 276.
27 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 277.
28 A similar claim can be found in Bataille, "Sommes-nous là pour jouer?," 111.
29 See, among other things, the motto to Blanchot's *L'Entretien infini*.

While writing, one enters a space without coordinates, where nothing is certain. Like gambling, writing, according to Blanchot, is all about making a decision – this word and not that other – that is based on nothing, that takes place in the absence of a guiding authority and is therefore, by excellence, "pure".[30] This purity often makes the act of writing also a terrifying act because one can never rid oneself of the sense of arbitrariness. "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance", *un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, as Mallarmé has it.[31] Like gamblers throwing their dice and placing all their unfounded trust in that one number, the writer strings words together in the frivolous but nonetheless weighty conviction that this is the right word, the right moment, knowing that there is nothing to know here. This is a terrible knowledge because it implies that the written work could just as well have been different, could just as well *not* be, just like we ourselves could just as well not have existed, deprived as we are of any necessity or providence. Truly human beings, truly *playing* beings, are the ones who do *not* want to be the master of their own fate.

For Blanchot, the writer figure is Orpheus, who – consumed by the sudden death of his beloved, Eurydice – descends into the underworld and makes a pact to bring her back to life, as long as he does not turn around to look at her.[32] Although Orpheus can take his fate in his own hands as long as he walks his path with the tact of a chess player, he chooses to turn around – the ultimate gamble – to face the darkness, that realm of "extreme uncertainty".[33] Wanting to meet his happiness there, in that way, is what Blanchot calls the ultimate "leap", a leap that cannot be but light, careless and irresponsible.[34] And that, as we know, leads to the loss of Eurydice.

However, because Orpheus' decision takes place at the point of extreme uncertainty, in that space without coordinates where chance cannot be eliminated, his "loss" of Eurydice is neither an actual loss nor a form of "punishment" or "bad luck". We should not see in the figure of the gambler a secular version of the religious devotee. The gambler is not someone who surrenders himself to the whims of a deity and receives its blessings and punishments as signs of an unknowable fate. For Blanchot, the chance embraced by the gambler actually goes one step further. The condition of utmost uncertainty sought by the gambler is *not* that of an unknown fate that would be favourable or unfavourable. The real player knows that no one is turning the knobs, that there is no higher providence and that there is therefore no good or misfortune, no right or wrong choice. Where *chance* rules, bad fortune disappears as much as good fortune. According to Blanchot, only the player "who does not know how to play" and is preoccupied with "calculation and seriousness" encounters such a thing as misfortune.[35]

The gamble, the dice throw, of the player, the writer or modern man is, in short, nothing but a throw that turns out a certain way. *Ça tombe*, something falls, something is decided, and exposing ourselves to that is in itself the "luck" of the game. Indeed, the throw exposes us to what Blanchot calls the ultimate encounter, that is, the encounter with a "unique possibility", with the *possible* itself if you like, with the fact that something is possible.[36] The homo ludens is the one who cares about exactly this: about that pure encounter

30 Blanchot, "L'Expérience de Mallarmé," 49.
31 Blanchot, "L'Expérience de Mallarmé," 37. *L'Espace littéraire* includes two essays by Blanchot on Mallarmé, "L'Expérience de Mallarmé" and "L'Expérience de 'Igitur'." In both texts, a major role is played by the throw of the dice, which recurs in Mallarmé's oeuvre both in his *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* and in the chapter of *Igitur* entitled "Un coup de dés."
32 Blanchot, "Le regard d'Orphée," 229.
33 Blanchot, "Le regard d'Orphée," 229.
34 Blanchot, "Le regard d'Orphée," 231–232.
35 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 277.
36 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 277.

with what happens, again and again, because it is precisely here where lies the fortune of human destiny, "*la seule fortune qui nous soit faite dans le jeu*"[37], the only fortune that is given to us in the play.

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37 Blanchot, "L'Attrait," 278.<\>