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CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication

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Section: Literature

FOR KEEPS

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Abstract: The title of the paper contains the two clues to the motivation for our effort: a parallel presentation of American stories about games and a view of each story-teller (and of literature in general for that matter) as a game-playing writer. The three short stories are Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and Ralph Ellison's "Did You Ever Dream Lucky?"; the games—as different from one another as the stories and writers themselves—are a frog-jumping contest, sheriffs-and-outlaws (or good guys-bad guys) and finders-keepers. The writers' games include writing as such (metaphors, allusions, striking images...), telling-and-guessing (with readers for their playmates), suspense (i.e. expectation-and-surprise).

Keywords: play, game, suspense, ironic reversal, frame/d stories

While doing some research for a paper—this paper—on the role of games in literature, we were bound to come upon the phrase in our title; the McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (2002) informs us that the origin of the phrase is in the game of marbles (and is used in other betting games), where the winner actually keeps all the marbles/money won; so "play for keeps" has come to also mean "be serious in one's actions," "do things with very serious concern about the results" (our intention here), or "do things with permanent effect" (our writers' accomplishments).

Having thus made sure that nobody thinks we are "playing games" with our literary games, we borrowed from Dean Flower the idea of grouping together three American stories that are based on games and thought of first defining our central concept; only this gradually proved to be something beyond any critic's possibility in the space of a few pages, and the solution is a brief "air view" presentation.

A great amount of attention paid to play and game in the past one-hundred-and-fifty years or so resulted in dozens of definitions, characterizations, classifications and extrapolations coming from writers in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, arts and literature, media studies and communication, computer science...; William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygostky, Johan Huizinga, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roger Caillois, Melanie Klein... and so many others made it certain that today we can only regard play as endemic to the human species; some of them (including Huizinga) even come close to suggesting that all human activity is a form of play.

And thus, from the idea of game/play as enjoyment, amusement, diversion, pastime, fun or joke, research moved into the wider and more complex realms of culture and civilization,

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and this form of activity was revealed to have other and other components and implication; first, the participants in a game are supposed to accept a system of rules, or a code, which they often may disregard, not observe, and so deception, manipulation, cheating, dishonesty, mockery, ridicule and/or bluffing may change the whole activity; creativity and invention are always accompanied by improvisation and pretense, by luck or chance; the idea of interaction (even though there also are one-person games) soon introduces that of the games' educational and psychological roles; when contest and competition is the basic drive (as in sports games), two other participants are the umpire and the spectators; the very pursuit of a certain goal immediately requires the construction of a feedback system; and as the stakes are higher and higher, mental and/or physical skill, dexterity, hand-eye-coordination become essential.

The great number of categories and types may explain their above-mentioned endemic character: from ball games to lawn games, board games, card games, and pooling games to literary games, guessing games and charades, role-playing games, pursuit and evasion games..., to tile games, video games, electronic and computer games, business games and online games, to games of bluffing and strategy or gambling as such (dice, poker, roulette...), the play patterns evince an astonishing variety of potential human behaviors and cultural forms of expression and manifestation.

The most systematic study of play and games seems to be that proposed by Johan Huizinga (1872-1945); his *Homo Ludens* ("Man the Player") was first published in Dutch in 1938, then in German in Switzerland in 1944 and then in English in 1949, with the summarizing subtitle "A Study of the Play Element in Culture," i.e. play regarded as a primary and necessary condition of the generation of culture; this is the result of the observation that play is older than culture, as "animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (p.1; all quotes from the 1955 edition); so frogs, for instance, may have had their jumping contests before Mark Twain, his Jim Smiley and Californian story. So, for Huizinga, culture (including literature, therefore) arises in the form of play, as game represents "the living principle of all civilization..."(pp.100-101) and "in the absence of play-spirit civilization is impossible"(p.101); "poesis" itself is "a play function," and so are metaphor and myth-making, and so is music, dancing, and the plastic arts; all creative impulse is rooted in play and games; Huizinga has got also interesting things to say about play and politics, play and war (Chapter V), play and the uses of language in general.

In the meantime, game studies (ludology) evolved, and game theories have developed; one of the game theories is a branch of mathematics, in which games are studied as models of human behavior (sets of players, various types of strategy and outcome spaces, preference profiles, etc.); another game theory concerns the study of strategic decision making (mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between decision makers); as we shall see, at one point of another in each of the three stories, the main characters—and/or the narrators—are such decision makers themselves.

Having reached this point, we may simply say that the three stories are all based upon some form or another of game playing (an outrageously unusual animal context and the implied betting, the lawman-and-renegade post-Western game, a finders-keepers game); and in all the

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game turns out to go through an ironic reversal, as the potential winners turn out to be losers and vice-versa. This is where the writers' games become relevant because, in fact, we witness three levels of game-playing: the first is that of the contest itself between the imagined antagonists (two frogs, a marshal and an outlaw, the finders-keepers and the potential police); the second is the game as witnessed by the narrators (and spectators); and the third (the first, basically) is that of the writers (who, naturally, control all three variants of one great game).

Here one could develop a whole theory about how literature itself proves to be a game played by two protagonists, the telling writer and the guessing reader; or the encoder and the decoder of the story; or, more technically, a game of suspense, created by the writer and experienced by his playmate the reader—with suspense as the oldest and most frequent literary device or strategy—or game; naturally, as suggested by Huizinga, each of the writers plays his writerly game of metaphors, allusions, implications, images...As far as a game pattern is concerned, the three games may prove to be entirely different, but all have a number of components that they share: the conflict or contest (even though mostly implicit in the third), amusement (in the telling) as a primary goal, audience or spectators (other than the readers, and who may also act as umpires or judges), the high stakes, the rules—which are not observed, so deception, dishonesty, mockery and ridicule as psychological dimension--, creativity and interaction, gambling and/or betting (whether real or implied again), winners and losers (or winners as losers).

Chronologically, the first story is “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (November 1865, *The Saturday Press*) by Mark Twain (1835-1910), which has its own complicated story that we intend to summarize here (and this may be seen as our own scholarly game). First, its original title was “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog,” and another title was “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”; it was first included—and gave the title to Twain's first book (1867) of twenty-seven stories.

Next, Calaveras County was—and is—a real county in the gold country of California, with its county seat in San Andreas; “calaveras” means “skulls” in Spanish, and the name comes from Calaveras River, thus named by Spanish explorer Gabriel Moraga when he found a number of skulls of Native Americans along the banks of the stream; for the past half-century or so Calaveras County holds an annual fair and Jumping Frog Jubilee featuring a frog-jumping contest to celebrate the “celebrated frog” story. The literary source is another story, an older one naturally, that Mark Twain heard when he spent three months in the county, and wrote his story in the Angel Hotel in 1865.

Third, there is a “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” where Mark Twain recollects another background to the tale, including a Professor Van Dyke of Princeton who tell the author that his story bore a strong resemblance to an Ancient Greek tale of an Athenian and a Boeotian having a frog-jumping contest; it then turns out the British Professor Sidgwick, quoted by Van Dyke, “had merely appropriated the Calaveras tale and transferred the incident to classic Greece; anyway, Twain took the whole thing light-heartedly: “it all came as a justification of a favorite theory of mine—to wit, that no occurrence is sole and solitary, but is

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Section: Literature

merely a repetition of a thing which has happened before”; Sidgwick seems to have told Twain himself the whole thing when they met in England in 1899 or 1900.

Fourth, Twain discovers a French translation of the story in Revue des deux mondes of July 15, 1872, and back-translates it into English (see nasty title in the REFERENCES section here); he then published all three versions, as he found the French mistranslation “ungrammatical and insane” (the title itself was “The Frog Jumping in the County of Calaveras”); “I claim that I never put together such an odious mixture of bad grammar and delirious tremens in my life...”

Finally, “The Celebrated Frog” is adapted as a scene in The Adventures of Mark Twain (1910), where the author is the pilot of a gadget-laden lighter-than-air dirigible bound for Halley’s Comet (the “pilot” was born during a year when Halley’s Comet visited our atmosphere); his earlier well-known characters, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn and Becky Thatcher stow away with their author on this journey through time, and along the way they encounter other Twain characters, including those of the “Jumping Frog story,” so the narrative gets to be retold by Twain himself.

The narrator in Twain’s celebrated story, old, fat and bald-headed Simon Wheeler is also garrulous and good-natured and “plays for keeps” in the dilapidated tavern in the decayed mining camp of Angel’s—i.e. during his monotonous narrative about Jim Smiley (as an absurd replacement of Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley that Twain’s alter-ego was looking for) he never frowned, never smiled, never changes his voice, pretending he was telling about some really important matter concerning his two heroes, whom he admired as “men of transcendent genius in finesse.” And, in the “winter of ’49 or, maybe spring of ’50” these heroes were, first, Jim Smiley, the irresistible Western liar, “always betting on anything..., if he could get anybody to bet on the other side”; for instance, this “dangdest fellow..., if there was two birds sitting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first...;” and he was also “uncommon lucky,” so he would bet on horse races, dogfights, catfights, chicken fights...,” and frog fights.

This Smiley had a small bull pup, whom he called Andrew Jackson (part of Twain’s game: US President between 1829 and 1837, former famous general—“Old Hickory”—and a democrat of a violent temper), who won lots of fights, but then died of a heart attack after losing one; next, Jim “ketches a frog,” whom he “cal’lated to educate,” i.e. “learning that frog to jump,” as, Smiley said, “all a frog wanted is education...;” and he calls this gifted frog (the bull pup “had genius”) Daniel Webster (1782-1852, great Whig leader, lawyer, diplomat, statesman and great speaker—nicknamed “Godlike Dan” but also “Black Dan”); as “Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog” and its jumping abilities, a stuffy, “deliberate” Easterner comes to camp one day and does not believe Daniel Webster is “any better’n any other frog”; as self-assured Smiley offers to get this guy a frog and goes to the swamp to “ketch one for him,” the “feller filled Daniel full of quail shot” with a teaspoon, so when the frog-jumping contest takes place, Daniel Webster and Jim Smiley lose, as “Dan’l was planted as solid as a church; the “feller” takes the forty bucks bet and leaves.

A simple story, whose main point is obviously in its telling (its dead pan humor and the creation of suspense) about two frogs as competitors, two “betters,” a surprise winner and a

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Section: Literature

sore loser (“the maddest man “), and thus a reversal, lots of funny dialect in the framed story of the picturesque narrator (writerly game), tall tale atmosphere, game cheating, an unexpected stratagem...; if one adds the fake Greek antecedent and the outrageous French version, as well as a (possibly) hilarious opera composed in 1950 by Lucas Foss, we have an impressive series of games involving three or four cultural traditions.

Our second American story is “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (February 1898, *McClure’s Magazine*) by Stephen Crane (1871-1900), where the writer’s game appropriately begins in the very title, with such a name for the town/setting and a “prominent” bride who is vaguely, anonymously, and almost irrelevantly present in the story. As far as this tragically short-lived writer is concerned, one cannot help remembering him from the recollection of another famous author, Willa Cather (1873-1947); two years younger than the already famous young author, Cather meets Crane in an editorial office in Lincoln, Nebraska; Crane was twenty-three and student Willa Cather was twenty one; her recollection: I have never seen one “who presented such a disreputable appearance as this story-maker man”; and—“...I have never known so bitter a heart in any man as he revealed to me that night”; her “When I Knew Stephen Crane” appeared in 1900, just two weeks before his death. And this “bitter... story-maker” could write parodies of so much humor as this story—part of his writer’s game, with death or whatever. It may not seem unimportant to remind here that Mark Twain’s “lies,” exaggerations, straight-face telling and colloquial style were among his models; as were those of Twain’s own “masters,” Joseph G. Baldwin, Augustus B. Longstreet and Johnson J. Hooper.

Parody itself is a game and so is any formula story, so that two levels of Crane’s game are already present as he writes a parody of the well-known—and too much used—Western formula story; another Twain aspect here is the East-meets-West game that Crane also very subtly plays, as in this depiction of an illusion from the train: “the plains of Texas pouring eastward;” moreover, the bride coming from the east was not pretty and not very young either.

The game is the sheriff-outlaw confrontation (an Americanized version, as a matter of fact, of the cops-and-robbers more or less universal game), modernized as good guys-bad guys, and it is here a fun game, especially since the encounter never really takes place as in the well-worn formula. The winner-loser pair is made up of two contestants who are both winners and losers at the same time, which really makes it “a hell of a game.” Thus, the good guy is not really that good and he is the one, in fact, who bends the rules of the game by getting married; in the Western all-male game, marshals or sheriffs should be free of domestic entanglements, as marriage, a civilized institution, has no place in the wild West; so from the very beginning, Jack Potter, the Marshal of Yellow Sky, has violated the frontier code; as he boarded, at San Antonio, the parlor-car of the great Pullman train (the writer is careful to describe its “dignity of motion”) with his new bride, the Negro /we are using here the then racial denominations) porter announces: “We are due in Yellow Sky at 3:42”; it is now “seventeen minutes past twelve,” so they will go to the dining car, where they are met by a Negro waiter; the marshal and his wife are both almost openly patronized—even intimidated—by the black porter and the black waiter, which again—one cannot help noticing—cannot be part of the game. And thus, Crane’s first playmate may be a well-known, prominent and upright Western marshal, but he is

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Section: Literature

also too self-conscious, nervous, restless, worried (“What’s worrying you Jack?” inquires the plain bride), with as acute sense of guilt and, above all, married.

At the other end (of this big corral), the expecting audience (suspense is the game here as well) is made up of six Yellow Sky locals in the bar (three Texans, two Mexicans, and—typically, already—a newcomer, a drummer from the East), already threatened by the drunken gun-slinger of the town—Scratchy Wilson, the bad guy; but the bad guy, “a wonder with a gun” and “a terror when drunk,” is not really very bad either, as we find out he is rather simple and silent when not drunk; and even now what he does is shoot at the lazy dog at the door and take pot shots at the town (“a toy for him”), like a child who refuses to grow up; and so “the hour of Yellow Sky—the hour of daylight/high noon?/--was approaching” in this story about the twilight of the Old West.

As the California express enters the Yellow Sky station the great moment has come: the bar keeper typically locks the doors, “all had become instantly solemn” and “for the next two hours this town won’t be a health resort” (double irony soon to be revealed), as “there is a fight just waiting.” Enter Scratchy, his clothes made in New York and in his New England boots, with two long revolvers, howling challenges at Potter’s house—who was on his way, with his bride, from the railway station; but there is “no offer of fight,” as the marshal has no gun; all he has is a wife, so, facing this unbelievable truth (his playmate has grown up and got married), Scratchy “was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world” and in “the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains.” So “his arm dropped to his side..., he picked up his starboard revolver, and, placing both weapons in their holsters, he went away. His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand.”

In this mock-heroic style, Crane concludes his story with an anti-climax, where the celebrated rite looks like a “fall from grace”—no rules means no game and the two losers (alongside Twain’s Smiley and Ellison’s Mary) win, paradoxically, as rule-breakers; and then they become more complex, more picturesque, more memorable and less vulnerable from a literary point of view.

And here one needs to mention the only winner—the author (and, possibly, the reader), whose game (which, like his master Twain, he played for keeps) included marriage, the bride herself, the black porter and the waiter, the “Weary Gentleman Saloon,” the naïve drummer (a traveling salesman, in fact) from the East, “Scratchy” and his attire, his shooting at a piece of paper, the funnel-shaped tracks above and such statements as: “Potter’s mouth seemed to be merely a grave for his tongue...” and “it was as if the surrounding stillness formed the arch of a tomb over him.”

Ralph Waldo (his father was “aware of the suggestive power of names and the magic involved in naming”) Ellison (1914-1994) is the author of just one novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), proclaimed after a 1965 survey as the most important American novel since World War II; at the same time, many critics think it to be one of the most significant novels of the twentieth-century—a real classic of literature, continually informed by black music, especially the blues (Ellison had an MA in music from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and was a trumpet and saxophone player). His short story “Did You Ever Dream Lucky?” was first published in *New*

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World Writing, no.5, New York, 1954; Mary Rambo, the narrator, a “rueful liar,” is taken over from Invisible Man, where she sings Bessie Smith’s “Black Water Blues” and then occurs once more in the author’s 1963 “Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar.”

The game in “Did You Ever Dream Lucky?” may well have its origins in an Ancient Roman law (“Terra nullius”—claiming ownership of what was previously unowned), which later involved mainly shipwrecks: whoever discovered a shipwreck could file a salvage claim on both shipwreck as such and its cargo. The “Terra nullius” law was certainly the basis for the US Homestead Acts—federal laws (The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850, the Homestead Act of 1862 signed by Lincoln, and other similar laws in 1866, 1873, 1909, 1916, and 1930) that allowed settlers to claim land in the West (mostly), i.e. grants of unappropriated federal land. In Britain, the result was an English adage with the premise that when something is unowned or abandoned, whoever finds it can claim it; and next came a children’s game upon discovering a lost object, with the rhyme “Finders keepers/ Losers weepers”; and then a whole series of songs (Cliff Richard, Elvis Presley...), children’s books, movies, TV game shows and videogames, fashion labels, shops and companies...--all named “Finders Keepers”--, and even a very recent (2015) Stephen King novel.

In Ellison’s story, one of the characters (part of Mary Rambo’s “audience”), Portwood notices: “Y’all was playing a little game of finders-keepers...” and “concentrating on the keeping part;” as a matter of fact, what we have here is “theft by finding” in legal terms, or “larceny by finding,” or even “stealing by finding,” though the circumstances of finding were such that no inquiry (the police as part of the cops-and-robbers game are practically absent) as to the true owner was required (especially since this owner, the “they” in the story, might have been gangsters, bootleggers, or gamblers in Mary’s wishful thinking psychology).

The story game is the result of an accident (“accidents will happen,” won’t they?), suspensefully narrated, with interruptions, asides and seeming digressions, by Mary Rambo (in the framed “morality play”) to an audience of two (Mrs. Garfield and Portwood) after a Thanksgiving dinner. Her (the writer’s) flashback takes the reader to the previous summer, in New York, when a collision takes place in the street, a smashup followed by a great commotion which Mary and her daughter Lucy—later partners in the “crime” and in the finders-keepers game—go out to watch; at the place of the accident, Mary finds a “bag full of somebody’s money,” hides it “up under her skirts” and takes it to her apartment: “anybody fool enough to have that much money riding around with him in a car deserves to lose it;” and the rejoinder from Mrs. Garfield: “Oh, Miss Mary..., you’d given in to the devil.”

Devil or no devil, mother and daughter “goes to the bathroom and I gits up on a chair and drops that bag dead into the flush box;” in the meantime (i.e. all along her narrative) Portwood interrupts: “she’s bound to lie”; “she go’ lie”; “tole this lie before”; “who’s telling this lie?”; “a lie somebody’s telling”; “just tell the lie...”; “let her finish this lie”; “is this lie about money or children?”...; (“lie” is so frequent as one may begin to wonder it its meaning in an African American variant is not just “story”). But Mary goes on to explain the game: “We was like couple kids who somebody’s done give a present and tole ‘em it would disappear if they opened it before Christmas.”

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As Mrs. Garfield's late husband "often said the possession of great wealth brought with it the slings and arrows of outrageous responsibility" (he seems to have known his Shakespeare, as this is from Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1), Mary goes on "fighting with.../herself/...over what.../she/...oughta do," so she cannot wait until Christmas and one day, when Lucy went to the dentist, she opens the bag (but the suspense is not over yet): "And let me tell you, dear people, after I looked I was so excited I had to get down from there and put myself to be. My nerves just couldn't take it..." And her conclusion, to Lucy, who had her own ideas about buying a restaurant or a beauty salon: "the truth 'bout what I think, I think we oughta buy us an auto"—but with other money, since the gold in the bag was just several tire chains, and so "the dream of money becomes the reality of chains;" and Portwood insists: "I just want you to tell us one last thing... Tell us if you ever dreamed lucky." Game over—or, rather, games over: that of the narrator with her audience as playmates and that of the writer with us, readers, as his playmates; which completes our (and Dean Flower's) trio of American authors playing their literary games for keeps.

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