Aleatory Writing:
Notes Toward a Poetics of Chance

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Borges in "The Library of Babel" imagines a hellish archive of books—a macrocosmic columbarium, whose infinite chambers provide an exhaustive repository for all the permutations and combinations of the alphabet. Inside this endless library (where a single, random volume might consist of nothing but the letters MCV, perversely reiterated on every page), nonsensical texts so drastically outnumber any intelligible books that a coherent phrase, like "O time thy pyramids,"[1] must seem tantamount to a wondrous mishap: "for one reasonable line […] there are leagues of insensate cacophony;"[2] hence, [t]he impious assert that absurdities are the norm in the Library and that anything reasonable […] is an almost miraculous exception."[3] Such an allegory inverts the dominant norms of semantic value in order to suggest that meaningful statements constitute only the tiniest, fractional subset of an even greater, linguistic matrix. Such a repressed nightmare already haunts the work of literary scholars, who confront the oppressive totality of literature with the nagging concern that each book might have arisen of its own accord, not from the expressed sentiment of a unique author, but from the automated procedure of a formal system—a fatal order, in which even the most unlikely sequence of letters, *dhcmrlchtdj*,[4] might yet convey a message in the form of a portentous cryptogram.

Borges describes a bibliomanic prisonhouse, where poets can no longer contribute anything innovative to literature because literature itself has already anticipated and inventoried in advance all the anagrammatic combinations of the alphabet, including even the most irrational, most incoherent, cases—and even this sublime concept already exists somewhere else, written on another page and spoken by another voice: "to speak is to fall into tautologies,"[5] and "the certainty that everything has been already written nullifies or makes phantoms of us all."[6] Poets in this imaginary labyrinth become extraneous custodians, who have little choice but to indulge in the recombinant rearranging of letters, excising and splicing the random shards of other textual genomes, doing so in the vain hope that, by an abrupt stroke of luck, literature might speak for itself and thereby vouch for its otherwise absurd existence. Such an allegory almost seems to call attention to the plight of the modern writer, whose enterprises and experiments often resemble the aleatory activity of "old men who […] hide out in the privies for long periods of time, and, with metal disks in a forbidden dicebox, feebly mimic the divine disorder,"[7] shuffling letters and symbols, as if in reverent response to the final axiom of Mallarmé: *"Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés"* [8]—All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice.

Modern writers from diverse, avant-garde movements (including Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, etc.) have at times imitated the melancholy librarians of Babel, writing poetry by drawing lots or by rolling dice, doing so in order to explore the aesthetic potential of a discourse speaking on behalf of no authorial intention—a discourse not for communicating an expressive sensibility, but for generating an unexpected coincidence. Such poetry might

include, for example, the "*poésie découpé*" of Tristan Tzara and the "*cadavre exquis*" of André Breton, the "mesostics" of John Cage and the "asymmetries" of Jackson Mac Low, the "cut-up novels" of William Burroughs and the "sadhu muffins" of Steve McCaffery. Even though these disparate, aesthetic exercises may stem from a variety of incompatible dispositions, be they nihilist (as is the case for Tzara and Burroughs), buddhist (as is the case for Cage and Mac Low), or leftwing (as is the case for Breton and McCaffery), all of these poets nevertheless suggest that, far from being an autotelic diversion, such writing circumvents the lyrical impulse of subjective expression in order to interrogate our linguistic investment in the poetic values of referentiality and expressiveness, of intentionality and productiveness. Such writing strives to provide an anarchistic alternative to the ideological constraints normally enforced by the capitalist economy of language.

Modern writers who deploy an aleatory strategy in their work may appear to do little more than emulate the random excess of irrational liberation, when in fact they confirm that, within language, such random excess is itself a sovereign necessity, an overriding requisite, which reveals the coincidental, if not conspiratory, order of words set free from the need to mean. Such poets accentuate the fact that, even though language may attempt to regulate the ephemeral interplay between the errancy of the arbitrary letter and the grammar of its mandatory syntax, the act of writing nevertheless finds itself traversed, inevitably and invariably, by the entropic dyslalia of chance-driven phenomena (mistakes, blunders, ruptures, hiatuses, glitches, etc.)—forces of both semiotic atomization and semantic dissipation, threatening always to relegate language to a dissonant continuum of chaos and noise. Such poets attempt to harness, if not to unleash, these errant forces of paragrammatic recombination, doing so in the hope that chance itself might lead the way automatically to a novel train of thought—one otherwise inaccessible to conscious, voluntary intention. Even though literary scholars have often neglected or dismissed this weird genre of writing because of its obdurate, if not hermetic, frivolity, such writing nevertheless formulates an, as yet, unexplored potential within the history of poetics.

Baudrillard remarks that "[c]hance itself is a special effect; it assumes in imagination the perfection of the accident," and ironically this "accidental thing is more meaningful [...] than intelligible connections."[9] Accidents enchant us far more than any ordinary event that has arisen predictably from an expected cause, and nowhere does this principle seem more compelling than in modern poetry, where "[w]ords [...], when we allow them their free play, [...] assume the order of destiny,"[10] becoming all the more oracular when their message seems most unintentionally profound. Aleatory writings of this sort pose what Breton has called "the problem of objective chance"[11]—a kind of fortuitous occurrence, whose random nature nevertheless belies mysterious necessities. Breton has argued that poetics must negotiate the problem of this contradiction in language between unintended meanings and deliberate nonsense—a problem that the history of

poetics has only now begun to analyze: "objective chance at this juncture is [...] the region in which it is most worth our while to carry on our research."[12] While Breton expresses this sentiment during the heyday of Surrealism, his call for such systemic research still applies more than ever to modern poetry, written in a chaotic society, defined increasingly by statistical probability and other uncertainty principles.

Baudrillard remarks that, while quantum physics has corrected an implicit error within deterministic causality, substituting *alea* for *fata*, such a science has nevertheless disclosed an even more implicit order behind indeterminate causality— a synchronistic order that is itself coincidental and conspiratorial: "[c]hance [...] correspond[s] not to a temporary incapacity of science to explain everything [...] but to the passing from a state of causal determination to another order, radically different, also of non-chance."[13] Baudrillard formulates two hypotheses about randomness: the first, metaphysical (all things, when disjoined, disperse and only by chance do they meet each other); the second, 'pataphysical (all things, when conjoined, converge and only by chance do they miss each other).[14] Chance fulfills two contradictory duties, since it scatters connected things even as it clusters unrelated things. Where the world disjoins events in order to keep them quarantined from each other, chance serves to force events into a state of mutual collusion, but where the world conjoins events in order to keep them adulterated with each other, chance serves to force events into a state of mutual dispersal. Is chance preserving its power to be intractable by doing both things at once? Is it not fair to say that, wherever a norm prevails, chance seems to intervene on behalf of an anomalous behaviour?

Baudrillard remarks that, when we gamble, "[c]hance is never neutral, the game transforms it into [...an] agonistic figure."[15] When we throw the dice, we throw down a gauntlet in the face of chance, doing so in order to defy the transcendence of any random series, thereby forcing chance itself to choose sides, either pro or con, with respect to our fortune. Does such a challenge occur when a poet decides to write according to an aleatory protocol? Does the poet wager that, despite the improbable odds, a randomly composed poem is nevertheless going to be more expressive and more suggestive than any poem composed by wilful intent? Is meaning the stake wagered in this game? If the resultant poem is meaningful, has chance proven itself amiable to the desires of the poet? Or does the poet write with a throw of the dice in order to escape the tyranny of meaning? Is the poet challenging chance to a duel: "I dare you to write this meaningful sentence; I dare you to write some marvellous nonsense—I dare you to write a poem better than I can." I suspect that, like the gambler, we fully expect to lose such a wager, but nevertheless we hope that events might conspire to surprise us. I suspect that we gamble with meaning in order to seduce the world of signs, currying their favour in the hope that these signs might indemnify our poetic genius by demonstrating that chance itself has already ordained it.

Baudrillard suggests that we expect order to arise out of chaos in order to resist chaos in what amounts to a desperate conflict, a Sisyphean campaign, waged against an eternal entropy—hence, "Chance tires God"[16]; however, Baudrillard also suggests that, because chance makes tolerable the brutality of fatality, chance is tiresome, not because God must always prevent it, but because God must always produce it, doing so in order to free us from a nightmarish determinism, in which every effect has a primal motive, a causal reason, for which someone, even God, might have to bear the guilt and the blame—hence, "Chance lets us breathe."[17] Chance provides us with a solid alibi, absolving us of any responsibility for the accidents that befall us, even though we might suspect that, at some fatal level, we have somehow willed these disasters into existence. God has nevertheless seen fit to take pity upon us and has let us off the hook for these catastrophes. He has forfeited his duty to account for everything by leaving the task of organizing things to a blind deity—randomness itself. Has not the modern writer also begun to suffer from this same kind of godly ennui, refusing to be held accountable for the words upon the page, desiring instead to let these words organize themselves haphazardly? Do we not even now yearn in secret for our own writing to write itself so that we might be free of its taxing labour?

Poetry written by chance represents a form of automatic scription that displaces the agency of the author onto a system of impersonal, if not mechanical, procedures, the likes of which call to mind the satiric fantasy of Swift, who imagines "a project for improving speculative knowledge by [...] mechanical operations" so that even "the most ignorant person [...] may write books [...] without the least assistance from genius or study."[18] Swift describes a framework of wire axles, upon which wood cubes swivel, their numerous facets covered by square pieces of paper with all the words of the language imprinted upon them in all their moods and cases, but without any order, so that anyone turning the handles on the edge of the frame might alter the old sequence of recorded thinking and thus evoke a new locution. Swift describes a kind of mechanical pixelboard that subdivides the blank space of the page into a striated gridwork of cells, each one occupied by its own unique module of chance—a lone cube "about the bigness of a die,"[19] upon which might depend the poetic fate of a single word. Such a machine synchronizes thousands upon thousands of cast dice in order to orchestrate the manifestation, if not the disappearance, of their "broken sentences,"[20] each word extracted from a grammatical series of coherent points and then implanted into a statistical series of isolated events.

Swift may lampoon the irrationality of such randomized literature and its mechanized authorship; nevertheless, his satiric fantasy does effectively reconfigure the idea of the page itself, modernizing it, so that the page is no longer a static canvas, but a moving screen—a churning, volatile surface, across which the haphazard spectacle of writing finds itself revised and effaced *ad infinitum*. Swift almost seems to imply that, when science has effectively discredited the romantic paradigm of

inspiration, poets have little choice but to take refuge in a new set of aesthetic metaphors for the unconscious, adapting by adopting a machinic attitude, placing the mind on autopilot in order to follow a remote-controlled navigation-system of arbitrary processes. The writer no longer composes a poem in order to transmit a lyrical meaning; instead, the writer launches a stochastic program in order to document a contingent outcome. The writer merely records the linguistic fallout from a discharge of random forces otherwise restrained and redirected within language itself; hence, the reader can no longer judge the poem for the stateliness of its expression, but must rather judge the work for the uncanniness of its production. No longer can the reader ask: "How expressive or how persuasive is this composition?"—instead, the reader must ask: "How surprising or how disturbing is this coincidence?"

Poetry written by chance disintegrates language, pulverizing it, discharging the resultant particles into a void of indeterminate probabilities—a noisy abyss where letters and symbols might collide or disband at random, doing so in a manner reminiscent of the *clinamen* described by Lucretius, who draws an analogy between atoms and words in order to suggest that all substances and all utterances result from the anagrammatic permutations of infinitesimal nuclei[21]: "while the first bodies are being carried downwards by their own weight in a straight line through the void […], they swerve a little from their course,"[22] for without this little swerve, this *clinamen*, all particles must invariably fall vertically, like miniscule raindrops, never interacting with each other in order to form aggregate compounds. The *clinamen* involves a Brownian kinetics, whose descent defies the truisms of inertia since such a swerve entails a change in vector without a change in force. The *clinamen* represents the minimal obliquity within a laminar trajectory. The swerve is a tangent to a descent, but a tangent that defies all calculus since the swerve is itself composed of infinite tangents. The *clinamen* thus describes the volute rhythm of a fractal contour. The myriad veers and sundry bends of such a downfall graph the smallest possible aberration that can make the greatest potential difference.

Kristeva remarks that, within such an aleatory paradigm, letters become "assemblages of signifying, […] scriptural atoms, flying from word to word, creating in this way unsuspected and unconscious connections among the elements of discourse."[23] Letters no longer remain gridlocked in the striated space of their lineated pages; instead, they flit and dart within a smoother space of volatile links that spiral outward from any starting point, turning the text into an agitated ensemble of accidental, but nevertheless ubiquitous, paratexts (be they anagrams, acrostics, or homophones, charades, lipograms, or cryptonyms, etc.). Such aleatory wordplay does not simply interfere with semantic cohesion, but may in fact afford another genre of truth its own chance to reveal itself, for what appears to be a disruptive misprision in one act of reading may in fact be a fortuitous disclosure of an otherwise hidden secret. The *clinamen* simply facilitates these lexical changes of

fortune, transforming unlucky detours into serendipitous opportunities for unanticipated signification. The clinamen simply transmutes each letter into a fugitive particle that might accidentally, if not capriciously, appear, change, or vanish, during its relentless flow through the imperial aqueduct of grammar. The atomic letter thus threatens at every turn to introduce a sublimated turbulence into its own stream of grammatical imperatives.

Baudrillard remarks that "[a]ll these formulas converge on the idea of a "Brownian" stage of language, an emulsional stage of the signifier, homologous to the molecular stage of physical matter, that liberates "harmonies" of meaning just as fission or fusion liberates new molecular affinities."[24] Brownian theories of *lettrisme* presume that, just as a very complex, highly regulated, atomic organization might emerge spontaneously from a random matrix of even simpler, highly localized, atomic interactions, so also might meaningful expression emerge from a random subset of anagrammatic combinations based, for example, upon the frequency of alphabetical distribution in any subset of letters for a specific language (be they bigrams, trigrams, tetragrams, etc.). Mathetic theories of information (as seen, for example, in the work of Shannon) demonstrate how sensible messages might emerge spontaneously from a Markov chain of transitionary probabilities— a chain in which the stochastic likelihood of one letter following another serial subset of letters determines the sequential appearance of these letters in a random series.[25] Such probabilities establish the level of redundancy in a message, permitting us to determine the most likely series of letters when some of them have been altered or omitted due to the entropic deviance of a *clinamen* in the course of transmission.

Shannon explains the stochastic procedures of such Markov chains by imagining a game of vagrant perusal: "[O]ne opens a book at random and selects a letter at random on the page. This letter is recorded. The book is then opened to another page and one reads until this letter is encountered. The succeeding letter is then recorded. [One turns] to another page [where] this second letter is searched for and the succeeding letter recorded, etc."[26] Shannon sets out to demonstrate that, as a larger number of antecedent letters affect the stochastic occurrence of a subsequent letter, the resultant series, although aleatory, does nevertheless approach an asymptote of intelligibility reminiscent of a language.[27] Hartman, for example, has used a computer to generate Markov chains based upon the frequency of trigrams found in Ecclesiastes, yielding: "A wisdot sloth, and forength him then rings. For of to ing is man's whildiginch."[28] Shannon has calculated that, because of these transitionary probabilities, which characterize any serial subset of letters in English, only about 50% of the letters in any series are redundant—which is to say that any person writing in English can voluntarily choose no more than half of the available letters in a text since all of the remaining letters find themselves governed entirely by the statistical constraints of the language itself.[29]

Baudrillard suggests that "[w]riting[...,] [w]hether poetry or theory, [is] nothing but the projection of an arbitrary code [...] (an invention of the rules of a game)

where things come to be taken in their fatal development."[30] Writing by means of an aleatory protocol almost fulfills the dream of Deleuze, who imagines an ideal game of chance, one whose rules are themselves subject repeatedly to chance, resulting in an aimless outcome so futile that we have no choice but to dismiss the game as a nonsensical dissipation of time itself (an atelic, if not asemic, activity, not unlike the speculative daydreaming that might take place, for example, in poetry and theory): "only thought finds it possible *to affirm all chance*" for "[i]f one tries to play this game other than in thought, nothing happens, and if one tries to produce a result other than the work of art, nothing is produced;"[31] hence, "[t]his game, which can only exist in thought and which has no other result than the work of art is also that by which thought and art […] disturb […] reality,"[32] disrupting, with every throw of the dice, our own fiscal demand for excess values, like meaning and purpose. Only the artisan and the thinker can play this game because, in it, "there is nothing but victories for those who know how […] to affirm and ramify chance, instead of dividing it *in order to* dominate it, *in order to* wager, *in order to* win."[33]

Bloom suggests that, within such an aleatory paradigm, antecedent norms no longer inhibit subsequent forms since "the *clinamen* stems always from a 'pataphysical sense of the arbitrary"—the "equal haphazardness" of cause and effect.[34] The *clinamen* intervenes in the historical trajectory of all influences, including even the causal cycles that prevail between young writers and their older mentors. The avant-garde has so far bet its future upon the *clinamen* in the hope that such a swerve might lead poetry away from rules of imitation (and the decline of their masters) into games of agitation (and the ecstasy of their players). One may write by chance in order to be amazed perhaps by what the dice have to say for themselves. The outrage expressed by academics when faced with the work of the aleatory writer almost mimics the outrage expressed by moralists when faced with the vice of the gambling addict. The critics who balk at such poetry refuse to take a chance, even though they speculate on literary legacies, trading in them like shares on a stock index in the casino of aesthetic tradition. Do not critics place a wager on a poet, hoping that posterity might celebrate the pedagogical clairvoyance of the first critic to herald the talent of a young genius? Do not critics play a game of astragalomancy, like a crapshoot, whose outcome remains, in foresight, uncertain, but in hindsight, necessary?

Aleatory writing almost evokes the mystique of an oracular ceremony, but one in which the curious diviner cannot pose any queries, except perhaps for the kind imagined by Roussel in *Locus Solus*, where he describes a fortuneteller, who spins a die inscribed with three phrases: *l'ai-je eu?* (did I have it?), *l'ai-je* (do I have it?), and *l'aurai-je* (will I have it?).[35] Roussel derives this prophetic die from the word *déluge*, which he fragments into *dé* (meaning "die") and *l'eus-je* (meaning "did I have it?"). Roussel thereby deduces an uncanny coincidence in language between the laws that govern both the rising flood and the gaming table. When

we write, using an aleatory protocol—do we not probe the status of our talent, asking the dice whether or not we still "have it," the genius to push our luck, in order to produce a major effect from a minor cause? Do we not exaggerate our insignificance as poets so that, despite our own innocuousness, our sneezes might yet set in motion a series of events, resulting in a cyclone. If my thoughts meander, jumping, as if at random, from topic to topic, I have perhaps let them do so in order to follow the *clinamen* of a peripatetic speculation, taking a chance, putting thought itself at risk in the hope that, like Cage, I might use "[a]narchy [...] to explore a way of writing which, though coming from ideas, is not about them, or is not about ideas, but produces them."[36]

NOTES

1 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan and Anthony Bonner (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 81.

2 *Ficciones*, 81.

3 *Ficciones*, 86.

4 *Ficciones*, 86.

5 *Ficciones*, 86.

6 *Ficciones*, 87.

7 *Ficciones*, 84.

8 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Un Coup de Dés," *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 144.

9 Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), 149.

10 *Fatal Strategies*, 150.

11 Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), 268.

12 *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* 268.

13 *Fatal Strategies*, 145.

14 *Fatal Strategies*, 145.

15 Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990), 143.

16 *Fatal Strategies*, 147.

17 *Fatal Strategies*, 147.

18 Jonathan Swift, "A Voyage to Laputa," *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 148.

19 *Gulliver's Travels*, 145.

20 *Gulliver's Travels*, 150.

21 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975), 175.

22 *De Rerum Natura*, 113.

23 Julia Kristeva, *Language, The Unknown*, trans. Anne M. Menke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 124.

24 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), 218.

25 Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Champaign: The University of Illinois Press, 1963), 45.

26 *Mathematical Theory*, 44.

27 *Mathematical Theory*, 43.

28 Charles O. Hartman, *Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 56.

29 *Mathematical Theory*, 56.

30 *Fatal Strategies*, 149.

31 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constatin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 60.

32 *The Logic of Sense*, 60.

33 *The Logic of Sense*, 60.

34 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 42.

35 Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1974), 293.

36 John Cage, *I–IV* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 2.