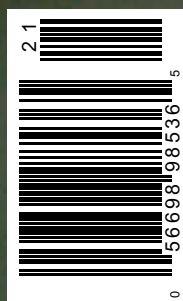


Cabinet

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LOCUS COMMUNIS

JEFF DOLVEN

Take the following lines. If they are a game, what are the rules?

*Garibaldi finished gulping the chocolate milk shake and
stuck his head in the oven,
Where he saw a fresco of Socrates drowning in a
bathtub of applejack;
Methuselah realized that beer and falling from step-
ladders are both caused by lovin’*

Rules might seem at first to be in short supply. Certainly the author broke a lot of useful ones, pertaining, for example, to anachronism, consistency of diction, and (usually tacit, but widely relied upon nonetheless) what is reasonable to expect when you open your oven door. Other rules, however, come forward as you read.

*A chandelier dripping with green wine hits George
Bernard Shaw on the back;
Black tea-junipers wave in the infirmary courtyard
where scalded Rameau
Hears a rum-soaked dove tell tales of Bernard Berenson
being felled by a steel hatrack.¹*

Aha! Each line, it seems, contains a proper name—Garibaldi, Bernard Berenson, et al. Each also contains the name of a beverage, and none fails to relate some unhappy beverage-related accident, be it drowning, scalding, or a backslap from a drunken chandelier. These rules are borne out in the remaining ten three-line stanzas, when Winston Churchill tries vainly to prevent his facebristles from hardening in the orange juice rain and Stonewall Jackson, his house collapsing around him, bravely reminds us to “keep the persimmon juice handy!” The perpetrators—there were two of them, an important fact for present purposes—were John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch. The poem appeared in the summer 1961 issue of their journal *Locus Solus*, which was printed in Switzerland (thanks to expatriate co-editor Harry Mathews) but served, for its brief life, as the house organ for the poets we have come to call the New York School. This issue, edited by Koch, was devoted to collaboration. His notes do not describe the composition of “The Inferno,” as the poem was called (naturally), but it would be typical of the poets’ process to have alternated lines. The poem, that is, is a kind of game, played between friends by the rules just deduced.

But can a poem, a real poem, be a game? Or can

a game make a poem—or more generally, can it make literature, or even more generally, a work of art? Would we put the category of art at risk in saying so? For better or worse, it cannot be denied that there are some family resemblances. Games usually have rules, and so do works of art, for example the rules we call “form.” (The rules of a sonnet, or a sonata, or the golden ratio.) Games and works of art both have boundaries, too: you usually know when you’re inside one, and when you’re back out, thanks to the book’s cover, the painting’s frame, the final whistle, or your last dollar. But what they have in common is not enough to guarantee that what we recognize as a game is therefore art, certainly not for serious spirits like Paul Goodman. The prolific midcentury social theorist, critic, and poet was something of a hero to the Koch-Ashbery-Frank O’Hara crew, on account of his 1951 essay “Advance-Guard Writing” for the *Kenyon Review*.²

A few years later, however, he offered a gloomier cultural prognosis in his “Reflections on Literature as a Minor Art,” published in the summer 1958 issue of *Dissent*. “The diminution of letters is especially evident,” he wrote, “to those of us who write very seriously, who try for the classical literary functions of subtle ideas and accurate distinctions, ingenious and cogent reasoning, distilled learning, poetic expression.”³ Goodman is speaking seriously for seriousness, for a literature that is an ambitious encounter between tradition and the shaping rigor of the individual talent. You cannot easily derive anything like a how-to from his description, and if you have to ask, you haven’t read enough, or the right things, or both.

Let Goodman stand, then, for how the two categories—for all their neighboring—should not be allowed much to overlap. Literature is not a game. A version of the problem is joined explicitly in the same volume of *Locus Solus*. Here is a stanza from a poem called “Boult to Marina”: it, too, was made with rules in mind:

*Sainted and schismatic would you be?
Four frowning bedposts
Will be the cliffs of your wind-thrummelled sea
Lady of these coasts,
Blown lily, surplice and stole of Mytilene,
You shall rest snug to-night and know what I mean.⁴*

The poem was written by the Australian poet Ern Malley, who was written, in turn, by the Australian poets James McAuley and H. S. Stewart. They invented him and his collected works in an afternoon of rummaging through, among other books, a rhyming dictionary and a one-volume Shakespeare.⁵ Malley had an enviable, if brief, career as the coming genius of Antipodean letters, just



above: John Ashbery, *Back of the Depot*, ca. 1972. Note the poet's unwavering interest in beverage-related accidents. Here, a glass of wine is dangerously tipped.
 below: John Ashbery, *Chutes and Ladders II* (for Oliver Brossard), 2008. Observe teacup, startlingly akimbo.

long enough to be published in 1944 by Max Harris, the reigning editor-experimentalist of *Adelaide*. McAuley and Stewart meant to expose the fraudulence of the Australian avant-garde, and after confessing their hoax a few weeks later, they explained the rules of composition:

- 1. *There must be no coherent theme, at most, only confused and inconsistent hints at a meaning held out as a bait to the reader.*
- 2. *No care was taken with verse technique, except occasionally to accentuate its general sloppiness by deliberate crudities.*
- 3. *In style, the poems were to imitate not Mr. Max Harris in particular, but the whole literary fashion as we knew it from the works of Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece and others.*⁶

This list is not prescriptive in the manner of Koch and Ashbery. McAuley and Stewart chose a few texts to draw from, and constructed their rules to intervene when their labors seemed likely to produce too much intelligibility or an accidental lyricism. Both sets of rules





John Ashbery, *Corona*, 2011. Witness the curiously stable glass of orange juice. All images courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

do, however, share the property of shaping a day's entertainment. And by design—for the aim was satirical—the Malley rules make what the Australian authors, if that is the right word for them, cheerfully called “bad verse.”⁷ They revealed them later as the hidden principles of their avant-garde target, principles that readers should have recognized there all along. Implicit is the idea that any act of composition reducible to rules (conscious or not) will make for bad verse, or even make verse bad. Real poetry must be written otherwise.

That view is not, however, the one taken by Kenneth Koch, who fifteen years later sides with Harris's original and much-mocked judgment of the work's value. The rules, in fact, can “explain some of the profundity and charm of Malley's poetry.” His note at the back of the issue lays out his interest in poems that “have been composed according to fairly well-defined

schemes, both as regards which poet writes what line and what sort of thing he has to say in that line.”⁸ Which is to say, according to rules that govern not only what the collaborators write (the ultimate form that the work will take), but *how* they write, or play, together, structuring from moment to moment the contingencies of the shared activity. They are rules, moreover, that give pleasure in the following, as a game is usually supposed to do. Wittgenstein famously counsels against taking any particular quality to be essential to our understanding of what games are: “game” is his main example of a concept that needs family resemblance for its definition.⁹ But with all of them together—rules, boundaries, pleasure, play—we can be reasonably confident that a game is what we've got.

So the last laugh, Koch's laugh, turns out to be the same laugh that McAuley and Stewart at play must have

shared the day they dreamed Malley up. (Not the laugh they had afterwards, at Harris's expense.) The revaluation recuperates the rules and the idea of making with rules. The result can be both charming and profound. That said, Koch's collection still does not speak altogether with one voice on the question. Here is one more example:

*Snow yet remaining
The mountain slopes are misty—
An evening in spring.*

*Far away the water flows
Past the plum-scented village.*¹⁰

What are the rules this time? The lines are from the beginning of "Three Poets at Minase," composed in linked verse, late in the fifteenth century, by the Japanese masters Sogi, Shohaku, and Socho. Koch quotes the translator, Donald Keene, on how they were made. "Generally, three or more poets took part, composing alternate verses of 5, 7, 5 syllables and 7, 7 syllables." Mention spring or autumn in a verse, and the next two to four verses must follow suit, although the mention can be oblique (lingering snow, plum-flowers). Following the rules, however, is not the chief challenge. "Beyond the technical difficulties imposed by the rules of linked-verse, was the major consideration of keeping the level so high that it would not run the risk of resembling a mere game." Major, indeed: whatever that major consideration is, it is not to be identified with the rules, and it makes the difference between a poem and a "mere game." You could follow the rules scrupulously, and still not have a poem.

Paul Goodman, however serious he could be, may nonetheless, in another mood and at an earlier moment, show a way out of this predicament. His principal concern, in "Reflections on Literature as a Minor Art," is with the decline of literature's role as a resource for social and political reflection. Its demotion to minor art leaves it "more important than pottery or weaving," he allows, but "perhaps less important than block-printing."¹¹ Such comparisons rely upon the textbook category of the minor arts, which since Alberti has included most everything visual or plastic except architecture, sculpture, and painting. What we might say these minor arts have in common is their readiness to serve as decoration, as ornaments to dailiness which it is no sin to take for granted. (We often define ornament by its superfluity, but if it is extra to form or structure, it is entirely and uncomplainingly a part of life.) As the grand claims of the Major

Arts recede, artificiality comes forward, "art" in the old sense of *ars*, or *techne*, so amenable to formulation in a set of how-to rules. And they justify themselves, these minor arts, by the pleasure they offer us in our ordinary rounds—rounds that they aspire to better, but not to transform.

Perhaps, then, Koch and Ashbery and stiff-whiskered Winston Churchill and their fellow travelers would do well to embrace (or have they already embraced?) Goodman's gloomy forecast of literature's future as a minor art. (As O'Hara famously remarked, "Let's face it, *Les Sécheresses* is greater than *Tristan*."¹²) Such poem-games find a comfortable home in that minor category, with the rules of making foregrounded both in the composition and the reception, and with their readiness to give pleasure. The experience of reading them is the experience of discovering the principles by which they were constructed and they offer to the discoverer a kind of participation, at least insofar as they make such an open wager of their own how-to. (Or in Malley's case, await disclosure of their rules—which can be recuperated, a little mischievously, for the playful collaboration they abet.) You could say that such rules tell you what to do with a part of your day, or your night, and better yet, how to do it together, and then look! dear reader, you're already playing along. If this kind of play is not writing very seriously in the Goodmanian vein, it is entirely consistent with his earlier forecast for the avant-garde, which so inspired the twenty-five-year-old O'Hara: "The essential present-day advance-guard is the physical reestablishment of community," and the means of establishing that community is likely to be "Occasional Poetry—the poetry celebrating weddings, festivals, and so forth."¹³

Which ambition puts us on the brink of the inevitable question: is this minor art, this art as a game, for a community of players, the new major art? The best representation of the civilization that gives rise to it, its richest resource for self-understanding? To say so would be to reproduce, by a different route and as it were in a different genre—decidedly comic—the argument of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the most influential modern account of minorhood, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. With Kafka as their model, the definition is different. Minor literature has three characteristics: it is written in a minor language, a language carved out from a major one, as Kafka's *Prager Deutsch* was; it is everywhere political, written in such a "cramped space" that there is no escape from social meaning; and, because of the size of the community and the shared political predicament, "everything takes on a collective

value.” The authors conclude with a polemical transvaluation: “There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor.”¹⁴ The account has some affinities with the collaborations in Koch’s issue of *Locus Solus*, especially those of the editors themselves, who were members of a few linguistic subcultures, including the Cedar Tavern tribe of abstract expressionists and mostly underground gay New York. The poems fend off the political as it was given to them, but that itself is a kind of politics (if you like that kind of argument, and it serves well enough here). And the importance of collaborative play-in-making promised to dissolve the individual into a sociable collective, an ambivalent experiment for all of the participants, but a genuine one. We can hear Koch weighing his allegiances when he speaks of that “charm and profundity” in Ern Malley’s work. Minor, charming? Major, profound? Can you have them both?

Only at a cost. “Major” art is defined here by implication, as the negative of the minor. That is a common enough procedure: the greatness of the great is whatever exceeds the languages of (mere) art, the limits and the rules of game, our powers of definition generally. So what would happen if we tried this aspect shift with the final line of “Inferno,” which stands by itself, after the last stanza, on the bottom the page? “The reindeer milk annoyed Goethe; the playroom caved in on his halibut lyre.” We are all too ready: the line begins with a moment of fatal distaste, and that is all it takes for the poem’s play-space, its game-space, to cave in on the poet and his gimcrack fishbone excuse for a sacred instrument. Who knew it was so ambitious, this poem that we now recognize to be about no less serious a subject than the death of art? And here, though not only here, the reckoning with greatness becomes a matter of trying to say what the poem is *about*. (It’s a move we don’t usually make with games, unless we are sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists. Win one *about* the Gipper?) With the about, comes detachment. We are no longer playing along, and the poem, which was a regular part of life—a game set off by its rules, but still one we played not merely, but certainly, to pass the time—has become something else. Perhaps, life’s rival. It can no longer help us with the question, what to do, let alone what to do today. It can only tell us what we must do instead.

besides sex, and it is so heartening to know that someone understands these things.” Allen Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters, Thomas J. Dodd Center, University of Connecticut, Box 1 Folder 2.

3 Paul Goodman, “Reflections on Literature as a Minor Art,” in *The Paul Goodman Reader*, ed. Taylor Stoehr (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), p. 216.

4 Ern Malley, “Boult to Marina,” *Locus Solus* no. 2 (Summer 1961), p. 72.

5 Christine Wertheim has discussed the Malley affair at length in an article for this magazine, “The Fall and Rise of Ernest Lalor Malley,” *Cabinet*, no. 33 (Spring 2009), pp. 88–94.

6 Note to Ern Malley, “Boult to Marina,” *Locus Solus* no. 2 (Summer 1961), p. 204.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

8 Kenneth Koch, *Locus Solus* no. 2 (Summer 1961), pp. 203, 195.

9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1973), § 66–69.

10 Sogi, Shohaku, and Socho, “Three Poets at Minase,” *Locus Solus* no. 2 (Summer 1961), p. 20.

11 Paul Goodman, “Reflections on Literature as a Minor Art,” *op. cit.*, p. 216

12 The remark is reported by John Ashbery, who comments that it was intended with some irony, “but at the same time he felt it important to make that statement, possibly because he felt that art is already serious enough; there is no point in making it seem even more serious by taking it too seriously.” “A Reminiscence,” in Bill Berkson, ed., *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, (Bolin, CA: Big Sky, 1988), p. 20. O’Hara was evidently fond of the comparison, repeating it in a 11 February 1956 letter to James Schuyler: “I have been having a terribly spiritual morning bathing in Poulenc songs, 2 piano concertos and *Les Sécheresses* which I found here. (It is greater than *Tristan*, so there!)” Allen Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters, Thomas J. Dodd Center, University of Connecticut, Box 1 Folder 6.

13 Paul Goodman, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950,” *op. cit.*, p. 376.

14 Gilles DeLeuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 17, 26.

1 John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, “Inferno,” *Locus Solus* no. 2 (Summer 1961), p. 162.

2 Paul Goodman, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950,” in *Kenyon Review*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Summer 1951), pp. 357-80. O’Hara recommended the essay breathlessly to Jane Freilicher in a letter dated 1 August 1951: “The only pleasant thing that’s happened to me since you left gal is that I read Paul Goodman’s current manifesto in *Kenyon Review* and if you haven’t devoured its delicious message, rush to your nearest newsstand! It is really lucid about what’s bothering us both