

A Review of the Literature
Glancing Towards a Deep Definition of Lightness

*A monk asked Ummon, "What are the whole lifetime teachings?"
Ummon said, "An appropriate statement"
(Secret of the Blue Cliff Records 47).*

In its *ethos* of glancing lightness, frivolity defies a unilateral alignment with one particular area of academic study. It scatters its minute brilliance like a shake of spice throughout philosophy, mythology, psychology, sociology, art, and literature, becoming in its smallness paradoxically a meta-subject, flavoring action and thought rather than existing as a cohesive separate construct. It is, perhaps, a way of being and a way of seeing that is reflective by nature in that it is about reacting to given contexts and constructs and rebelling against the practical and pragmatic; I am not certain that frivolity can exist without its opposite, or at least without an other.¹

As a result, a review of the literature of frivolity moves, not unlike frivolity itself, through a variety of disciplines, gleaning insights from small references and nuances.

¹ This assertion, and the cultural critique implicit in it and throughout this dissertation, is admittedly vastly limited by being grounded in a comprehension and context that is dominantly white Western European/American. While I will attempt to explore some small aspects of gifts of frivolity visited upon other cultures by the dominant culture in the United States, I recognize this limitation and will only attempt to excuse it for two reasons: first, it is a culture from which I spring, personally and academically, and therefore have some first hand understanding of; and second, my hope is that by defining an understanding of frivolity's worth to the dominant culture, that a more sophisticated, cross-cultural conversation may then open using it as a fulcrum. The validity of this hope lies, I believe, in the very definition of frivolity itself: by addressing the importance of a concept that a dominant culture has defined as 'small and trivial,' a comprehension of the importance of other concepts and traditions that are not dominant may then emerge.

Like Mandelbrot's sets, frivolity's potential infinity emerges in the pinpoint of an intellectual train of thought, most often intuited rather than seen with the naked eye. Interestingly, a deeper look at the etymology of the word frivolous reveals an undercurrent of both this smallness and the instinct to undermine that very smallness. In *Origins*, Eric Partridge connects the Latin *friulous* to *friare* "meaning 'to rub or rub away, to reduce, to grind to little pieces'" (237). True to its etymology, frivolity has most often been "rubbed away," and a search for it is a journey of dead-ends, sidetracks, and sleight of hand tricks. In Jacques Derrida's *Archaeology of the Frivolous*, for example, a text to my knowledge unique in the academic world in daring to include the word 'frivolous' in its title, the archaeology must indeed run deep: frivolity is not clearly visible at the surface, and must be dug for, sifted out, and reconstructed from shattered shards of Derrida's play on Condillac's work and his own thought.

That said, I will indulge in a bit of my own archaeology of the frivolous in this dissertation, moving from the top layers of contemporary conversations downwards through psychology, philosophy, then to the myths, and then finally, to the phenomenological exploration of frivolity through nonsense literature. I do this, in part, because this literature is moving towards the understanding of frivolity by moving towards the images, archetypes, and narratives that shape the (non)conversation about frivolity. I also have chosen this route for the sake of finding a point of entry into a topic that does not have a canon. Much like Pirandello's characters' search for an author, I have been searching for a body of academic study that has some direct, articulated link with frivolity.

After that search, the academic field that seems most overtly pertinent to the ethos of frivolity is contemporary play theory. In fact, in one of the few instances wherein a scholar actually tackles the concept of frivolity with any depth, Brian Sutton-Smith works what he deems the “Rhetorics of Frivolity” in his recent text, *The Ambiguity of Play*, where he comes to the defense, ultimately, of frivolity as it plays with play.

Play Theory

Although there are aspects of frivolity and play that do not seem to intertwine completely, play is so closely linked to frivolity that it is worth beginning this discussion by perusing how play’s constructs have been defined to begin to tease out a definition of frivolity. Because Sutton-Smith’s thoughts on frivolity and its relation to play are reflective of close to a century’s worth of thought on play in general, in order to explore the relevance of his ideas, it is important first to understand their context. The following is by no means an exhaustive exploration of the extensive literature on play theory, but this cataloguing will at least provide a sense of the throughlines² in play theory and their relationship to frivolity.

In *Homo Ludens*, the 1938 work that many scholars agree set the tone for the contemporary conversation on play, Johan Huizinga asserts the essential and ancient role of play to human kind. He states:

This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play. Nature, so our reasoning mind tells

² Throughline: a term originating in dramaturgical theory, capturing the underlying theme(s) that move the dramatic action forward through the course of a play. In this paper, I use the term to attempt to capture the underlying concepts that course through the unfolding of an idea or field of thought.

us, could just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions. But no, she gave us play with its tension, its mirth, and its fun (2).

Huizinga further articulates the centrality of “fun” in any understanding of the character and role of play (3), adding, “you can deny seriousness, but not play” (3), and he suggests, “The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start” (4). Interestingly, in an echo of what I am discovering about frivolity, Huizinga addresses the somewhat subterranean quality of play in intellectual thought, suggesting that historically in European culture, “the fact that play and culture are actually interwoven with one another was neither observed or expressed” (Huizinga 5).

Mihai Spariosu further echoes this intuition in *Dionysus Reborn*, stating:

In other words, play seems to belong to what the Germans call *das stumme Wissen* (tacit knowledge), involving intuition rather than the rational faculty. There are hundreds of definitions of play, but none seems satisfactory. This situation has led certain contemporary theorists, especially in the sciences, either to deny the possibility of defining play altogether or to classify it as a paradox (1).

Perhaps it is not a question of either definition or classification, but instead that frivolity is tacitly begging to be recognized as paradoxical.

Huizinga ultimately makes three points that are most pertinent to a conversation about frivolity. First, in his initial definition and differentiation of play he states, “play is the direct opposite of seriousness” (Huizinga 5), an argument which can also be made about frivolity. However, he then challenges the simplicity of this statement by acknowledging that some play can, indeed, be very serious, and that “play is not foolish” (6). He then argues the uniqueness of play (and while he omits it, by my extension, frivolity) by stating:

All the terms in this loosely connected group of ideas – play, laughter, folly, wit, jest, joke, the comic, etc. – share the characteristic which we had to attribute to play, namely, that of resisting any attempt to reduce it to other terms. Their rationale and their mutual relationships must lie in a very deep layer of our mental being (6).

Second, as he concludes his work, Huizinga suggests “the human mind can only disengage itself from the magic circle of play by turning towards the ultimate. Logical thinking does not go far enough” (212). Huizinga is suggesting the validity of a way of understanding that is beyond linear logic, which, I believe, is also one of the values of frivolity. The creative element of this dissertation attempts to work this manner of understanding; it is a spiraling taste of a variety of frivolity’s flavors with the goal of constellating its meaning. Lastly, he intimates what I have perceived as one of the differences between most contemporary conversations on play and frivolity by intuiting that as one seeks to identify what is productive and valid versus what is play, that naming becomes a question of ethics. He insists that play itself is outside of morals, and that one can decide if his actions are “serious duty or licit play” (213). Whether frivolity is licit is, in most sources, still deeply at question—so deeply, it is assumed by most not even to merit attention—and, accordingly, this is a central question that this dissertation is attempting to answer.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois challenges some of Huizinga’s definitions of play and attempts to define a matrix by which one can identify the scope of play’s constructs. Although a complete dissection of his constitution of play is not relevant, some interesting ideas that help further define the boundaries of frivolity emerge in his deconstruction of and additions to Huizinga’s definition of play.

First, Caillois takes issue with Huizinga's connections between play and the mysterious, stating, "this relationship can not be a part of the definition of play, which is nearly always spectacular and ostentatious" (4). This is in direct contrast to frivolity, which carries in it a nuance of smallness and lack of ostentation. In fact, I believe that when frivolity begins to become large and ostentatious, and supported by power and economics, it begins to cease being frivolity. Simultaneously, a connection between mystery and frivolity is important, particularly as characterized by the paradox inherent in its simultaneous worth and lack thereof, the point of its pointlessness and by, I believe, its invitation towards understanding the unknowable in an intuitive manner.

Second, Caillois responds to Huizinga's assertion that play is "action denuded from all material interest" (5). His disagreement with Huizinga on this point lies within the scope of gambling and games of chance as legitimate play. As an extension of this, Caillois acknowledges that in play, property can be exchanged but no goods are produced (5), stating, "A characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art." (5). Although I do not necessarily agree with this statement in itself, believing that, for example, it is not accidental that a musician "plays" her instrument, a further move towards frivolity amplifies its differences from at least Caillois' definition of play. In frivolity, while the production of wealth or goods is certainly not the point, that production is not precluded. There is a certain *poiesis*, a making, within frivolity (and, obviously, in art). It may not be a tangible, concrete good that enters a marketplace, and it may be simply an idea as a good of the imagination, but something is manifested when one embraces frivolity. Caillois goes on to add, "play is an occasion of pure waste: of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often money . . ." (6).

So may be frivolity, but there is an interesting nuance in his use of the word “waste.” In some contexts, to waste something is to use it all up (even “frivolously” use it all up, without it being put to good, moral, pragmatic use), but in other contexts, when one wastes something, there is an implication of a product: be it a by-product or a waste product, something is created. Again, this begins to hint at the external ethical dialectic around the practical and pragmatic and frivolity. What is wasted, who has wasted it, and most importantly, who has done the defining of that waste?

Caillois’ next thought about play is at first glance clearly in alignment with frivolity: that play is a “free activity,” and that “one plays only if and when one wants to” (7). At one level, this is an essential aspect of frivolity: I choose to frivol. At deeper inspection, however, it is not that simple, and again reflects the external moralizing that impacts a comprehension of the frivolous. While I can actively chose to be frivolous, I can also realize after the fact that I have been frivolous, whether I intended to be or not, and ultimately, I can have the judgment of frivolity thrust upon me by the outside world—an external valuation of my work or play, point or pointlessness.

Caillois’ next rule of play is that it “is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life” (6). In one sense, this is true of frivolity as well. When I chose to be frivolous, I rebel against the rest of my adult life and responsibilities and take leave of them to dally, to fritter, to indulge myself in a non-pragmatic, non-directive activity. However, Caillois’ assertion brings me to pose a question as to whether work and art can be frivolous. If thought of existentially, it is perhaps all frivolous, particularly if I ponder the presence or absence of deep meaning in my daily activity. Even further, it

is entirely possible, and perhaps even likely, that the actions deemed most frivolous by the community around me are ultimately the most valuable or the most meaningful.³

Ultimately, the greatest difference between Caillois' work on play and a notion of frivolity is his interest in and definition of play as a literal game. Although games themselves can be deemed frivolous in that they do not in themselves serve anything but themselves, frivolity itself is very different from a game, at least those ruled games that he spends a great deal of energy categorizing. As a caveat to this, he does characterize play as two types of game: one that is not ruled and "make believe" and one that is ruled, which incorporates all other forms of play (9). Although make believe does fall within the purview of frivolity, all frivolity is certainly not make believe. Caillois states, "The game consists of the need to find or continue at once a response *which is free within the limits set by the rules*" (8). Even though I am attempting to define some rules for frivolity in terms of its definition, one of those rules is that within an act of frivolity, there are no rules. Indeed, part of frivolity's impetus is a rebellion against rules, or perhaps, an acknowledgement of misrule as its only recognized form of rules. Additionally, for the ruled games that Caillois catalogues, there is a generally a desired outcome: I play a game to win. Frivolity's outcomes, if they exist, are far less direct and literal.

³ For an eloquent example of how values can get convoluted, I am reminded of an excerpt from a speech by Robert F. Kennedy on the gross national product, ostensibly an ultimate measure of the United States' worth. He concludes, "Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile" (Public Address, University of Kansas, March 18, 1968).

For a richer, more metaphorical definition of play and games, I turn to David L. Miller's *Gods and Games*. He writes, for example, "It would seem that 'game' and 'play' are important metaphors of meaning in contemporary consciousness" (12). While the disconnection between a definition of games and frivolity still exists, Miller teases out the differences between Huizinga and Caillois' work, recognizing that while Caillois is "performing an analysis of culture's actual play as if it had a serious function" (21), Huizinga is actually looking at a broader vision of "culture's seriousness as if it were play" (21). This is an important distinction, and spurs questions worth asking regarding frivolity: first, what is the function of frivolity (and can it have a serious function, as intimated by the title of this dissertation), and how does that differ from culture's inherent frivolity or lack thereof?

Miller also plays intellectually with the axis of seriousness and non-seriousness within play that hints at the paradox inherent in frivolity. He extends Huizinga's argument on behalf of play as "a category lying beyond the dichotomy of serious/not-serious" (19), challenging the reader to look at all culture as a form of play. He also, while amplifying J. C. F. Schiller's explorations of the role of play in surviving life, speaks about child's play.⁴ I include the entire statement here because it is a rare moment wherein a scholar speaks of the richness of play through the eyes of a child without relegating its relevance to childhood. Miller writes:

Children—we all once knew—experience life as characterized by freedom and coherence; they experience no substantial dichotomy between the life of play and

⁴ There is an enormous amount of literature regarding children and play that I have not addressed in this thesis, for the simple reason that to speak of play (and by extension, frivolity) as the provenance of children rather than adults is antithetical to the premise that frivolity is a legitimate element of culture. And so, in a barely apologetic spirit, I have ignored this literature much in the way that most scholars have ignored frivolity.

the life of seriousness. When a two-year-old boy is asked to wash his hands for supper, he embarks on a ten-minute adventure of splashing water and letting the soap slip through his hands, fingerpainting the slimy suds all over the bathroom tiles. He has no purpose in mind; he does not yet know that the point of the game is to win. He plays freely. His work is no different from his play; nor is his play different from his work. Play is the name of the unification of seriousness and nonseriousness for the child. Or as Robert Neale put it; 'To have a playtime and playground with a story to tell and a game to play is to have a life of adventure that surpasses all description. . . . What happens to the child in play can happen to the adult. And when it does, paradise is present' ("Religion and Play," *Crossroads* 71). It is because the metaphor 'play' carries these connotations that placing it in a position of primacy works the magic of mediation and reconciliation between schizoid categories of meaning and being (115).

Freedom and coherence, no purpose in mind, the paradox of seriousness and nonseriousness, and a small bit of paradise evoke frivolity more than many play concepts, and in this context, Miller's construction of a matrix of play has more relevance to frivolity than that of theorists like Caillois.

As he explores the mythology of play, Miller divides play into four categories, with subtitles both amplifying and refracting his message: *Aesthesis*: nonseriousness is the highest seriousness (139); *Poeisis*: fiction is the highest truth (146); *Metamorphosis*: change is the highest stability (146); *Therapeia*: purposeless is the highest purpose (150). This is perhaps the writing on play by a play theorist most deeply and intuitively connected to frivolity that I have encountered, and has served as a launching pad for the bones of this dissertation. While the links to these four constructs are at their richest in their sublated presence in the production element of this thesis, I will briefly amplify their relationship to frivolity as it relates to my writing and thinking process for the work as a whole.

First, this entire dissertation is a dance with the dialectics inherent in Miller's use of *aesthesis*. Throughout this writing, in both the theory and the production elements, I

have attempted to work in a way that is nonserious enough to reach the high seriousness demanded of a doctoral dissertation, particularly one on that most nonserious of topics, frivolity. I have attempted a discourse that invokes a sense of frivolity, with a goal of bursting past “the importance of being earnest” to allow the lightness of thought on the topic to illumine the argument.

My inclination towards the inclusion of a production element for this dissertation very much reflects Miller’s sense of *poiesis*. It is in the fictional moments of the dissertation that frivolity’s truths ring most clearly to me. This is, I believe, at least in part because they exist in their own fictional, frivolous universes with their own spiraling imaginal logic, and invite the reader to extract their own versions of frivolity’s truths from the more oblique presentation of fiction rather than a straightforwardly logical, intellectual argument, opening the reader to the possibility of their own organic sense of frivolity’s qualities. Since frivolity is often seen best out of the corner of one’s eye, this *poiesis*, this divining of truth through fiction, seems to me a most appropriate method of glancing at it.

In Miller’s *metamorphosis*, the stability in change, there is a connection to what I perceive as the psychological implications of frivolity: if I can shift and turn left away from the stasis of my earnest, dull existence into frivolity, I can find a different, broader stability. This is a stability that is not monolithic, stuck in its own course and discourse, but instead embraces a polymorphous understanding of stability. It has the strength and balance of many legs, many ways of being, rather than perching upon one—forever vulnerable to tipping over.

Miller describes his forth construct as *therapeia*, or the purposefulness of nonpurpose. This therapeutic application of the point of pointlessness is at the heart of my comprehension of frivolity's worth, and is the idea that has worked at me throughout the writing of this piece. Purposelessness has a reason for being, and that reason is can provide therapy for the soul, particularly in a culture that is so inclined to be seduced by productivity. Sometimes all the soul is or requires is pointless, without expectations of greatness, of worth, or of legitimacy. What a freeing, therapeutic realization this is: I don't have to be anything, I can simply be. Lastly, as an aside, a dissertation itself seems to be an exercise in this therapy. In a strange version of a vanity press, I pay my hard-earned money to write a serious document that in all likelihood will exist in glorious anonymity on the institution's library shelf, read by virtually no one but my mother. This is, indeed, a purposefully purposeless therapeutic exercise.

I now return to Brian Sutton-Smith, and the "Rhetorics of Frivolity." In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith explores what he defines as seven rhetorics of play: play as progress, play as fate, play as power, play as identity, play as the imaginary, the rhetoric of the self, and, lastly, the rhetoric of play as frivolity. While the last is obviously the most relevant directly to this discussion of frivolity, there are other ideas inherent in several of Sutton-Smith's rhetorics that resonate with frivolity, most obviously his thought on power, identity, the imaginary, and the self. Interestingly, Sutton-Smith defines the power, identity, and frivolity rhetorics as ancient ones, and sees the remainder as having "a history largely elaborated ideologically only in the last two hundred years" (11). At least in his mind, frivolity has played an important cultural role

as long as play has, even if it has been a subterranean, sublimated (and, I wonder, sublated) one.

Sutton-Smith's core thoughts on play and power raise some interesting questions pertaining to frivolity. Beyond the vision of a game as a literal power play, he explores the role of play in the cultural tension between rationality and order, irrationality and chaos (78). This distinction is both important and revealing to thought on frivolity and a culture's discomfort with it, for frivolity most clearly lands on the side of chaos rather than order: this is an intimation of frivolity's ethos as a revolutionary force, for it rebels against the orderly, "civilized" norm.

As Sutton-Smith works ideas of identity and play, the most relevant address power issues in another important way, suggesting that there is "strong support for the notion that play at both adult and child levels gives expression to concerns over power and identity" (123). While he asserts that much of a child's activities in play (in which he includes tricks, jokes, goofing off, giggling, making mischief (126), along with other, darker activities) are as much an expression of the child's interests as any need to rebel against adult authority, the same is not true for adults in such activity (126). This, I believe, personalizes and makes appropriately small, the rhetoric of rebellion in frivolity: it is a small, trifling, often personal effort to assert one's identity by not following the rules.

As he looks at the imaginary and play, Sutton-Smith identifies this particular rhetoric as having a lighter and more playful mood than the previous rhetorics he has discussed (127), acknowledging that it is a protean, complicated rhetoric, encompassing imagination, creativity, fancy, and flexibility (128). He writes:

Thus play can be both heavy and light, ritualistic and playful, earnest and frivolous. There is an ever changing heteroglossia of voices and the realm is not polarized but always fluid (128).

He separates out the metaphor of play from the players themselves in this rhetoric, works the paradox play's role within and outside of civilization (136), and utilizes ludic literature to work more deeply some of the ambiguity of play, which I will in turn explore more deeply later in this paper as I examine nonsense literature and its relation to frivolity.

In working what is arguably the newest rhetoric of play—the self—Sutton-Smith amplifies the ideas of several scholars that resonate with frivolity. In a statement that captures a number of frivolity's qualities, Sutton-Smith highlights theories of play that “find the meaning of play in the quality of the player's experience” (174), when play is played simply because it's “fun.” He writes (in a list, incidentally, that looks remarkably like the beginnings of the “Dictionary of Frivolity” production aspect of this dissertation):

There are also the terms – like merry, joyful, lighthearted, carefree, aimless, joking, jesting, radiant, lightly engrossed, relaxed, amused, antic, bantering, capering, whimsical, cavorting, frisky, frivolous, frolicking, gamboling, galumphing, jumping for joy, jinking, kicking up heels, larking, sprightly, scampering, lolloping, sporting, monkey business, merrymaking, reveling, rollicking, and romping – that are said to describe what people are doing and how people often feel when they are play, and which are an important part of their playing (174).

Finally, as Sutton-Smith addresses the rhetoric of frivolity itself, he begins by the tension in a Protestant/Puritanical ethic about work and play and its impacts on visions of play as frivolous (201), acknowledging that each rhetoric of play “involves an internal polarity between good play and bad play and uses the term *frivolous* for whatever kind is chosen as bad play” (204). The power constructs implicit in an examination of frivolity once again rise to the surface as he works this idea. He writes, “The label ‘frivolity,’ is . . .

. an abuse of some kinds of play on behalf of other kinds of play, because that is what is politically suitable for some dominating groups” (207). Ultimately, then, what the powerful do is not frivolous; what the weak or disempowered is. This is once again an extrinsic value judgment. Sutton-Smith reminds his readers that this move is not to be taken lightly, as it is accompanied by the exertion of power in “the forms of rudeness, censorship, banishment, annulment, or cancellation” (208). In an echo of the earliest etymology of the word frivolous, the competition is “rubbed away.”

But Sutton-Smith pushes back at the assumption of frivolity’s denigration. He searches for the least valued form of play, landing on what he defines as “dilltantist play, the form of play defined not as the play but as the trifling with play” (210). This is, to my mind, the purest player indulging in the purest form of play: the player playing with play itself. Sutton-Smith seems to agree, stating:

Perhaps the spirit of playfulness, never entirely foreign to all kinds of serious play, is ultimately the guarantee that all forms of play potentially promise that one can never quite lose while still at play. The promise is that the greater the frivolity, the greater the transcendence of the common writ (212).

Ultimately, Sutton-Smith wonders if perhaps “frivolity is potentially the most sacred play of all, a condition once recognized by the appointment of sacred tricksters and holy fools” (212), and can, along with the rhetoric of fate, be a gateway to a certain kind of transcendence and immortality. He does this wondering even as he acknowledges that in order to maintain that place, it must retain its outsider role even in the outsider discussion of play. He concludes (in a statement that is also deeply relevant to dissertation writing) “no theory of play would be adequate if it did not leave scope for its own deconstruction and distortion into nonsense” (213). This is a most frivolous move indeed.

Finally, while once again acknowledging that I have barely scratched the surface of the extensive work on play theory, and while promising to engage the work of some additional play theorists as I examine other aspects of a definition of frivolity (for example, Mihai Spariosu, whose work I will examine in a philosophical context, as he provides a great link to several contemporary philosophers who work frivolity, as least obliquely), I will close this particular discussion with some thoughts from Diane Ackerman and her text, *Deep Play*.

Although she obviously pulls from the work of academic play theorists to construct her writing, Ackerman writes of play from the perspective of a poet, naturalist, and personal essayist. I have chosen to include her because she works play with a unique *poiesis*: as she dives deeply into play she intuits some of the lightness of frivolity in intriguing ways, raising interesting questions and intuiting links outward into other lenses through which to gaze upon frivolity. She writes, “If necessity is the mother of invention, tedium is the father of distraction” (88). I would add, in this family tree, frivolity’s gaunt old aunt is obligation.

Ackerman defines a certain kind of play, one that goes beyond the straightforward constructs of “work-a-day” play and opens the player out into the vast, the immortal, and the sacred, reflecting Sutton-Smith’s musings on frivolous play. She states:

Deep play arises in such moments of intense enjoyment, focus, control, creativity, timelessness, confidence, volition, lack of self-awareness (hence transcendence), while doing things intrinsically worthwhile, rewarding for their own sake, following certain rules (they may include the rules of gravity and balance), on a limited playing field. Deep play requires one’s full attention. It feels cleansing because, when acting and thinking become one, there is no room left for other thoughts (118).

This description is intriguing to me because it includes both elements that are conjoined with frivolity and elements that are on some levels antithetical to frivolity. Enjoyment, creativity, timelessness, lack of self-awareness, transcendence, doing things intrinsically worthwhile and rewarding for their own sake are all the domain of frivolity, but those elements that seem out place are worthy of more consideration.

Perhaps, examining the elements that are not in alignment with frivolity will allow me, Zen-like, to define what it is not and by doing so, help to further an intuitive definition of the frivolous. Several of these elements are connected to the paradox of frivolity. For example, focus: frivolity demands, on some level, a lack of focus, at least on those things deemed important to focus on. However, simultaneously, there is something focused in frivolity's spangled prism, even if it is simply a focused non-focus on what one was supposed to focus upon.

Control, volition, and confidence similarly turn in and around on themselves in frivolity. They all reflect power, and the intrinsic/extrinsic roles that power plays both in and on frivolity. To choose to be frivolous is to break external control, of one's own volition, with a certain confidence. To be deemed frivolous is the antithesis of the three.

Even Ackerman's deepening of the rules of deep play is an interesting aspect of this glimpse of frivolity. These are not rules of how many players, or who will win and how, but instead vaster rules that govern a planet and universe, like the rules of physics. Frivolity may need to heed these rules, but then again, maybe not; I am reminded of an old Warner Brother's Bugs Bunny cartoon, where Bugs (Trickster that he is) is doing some seemingly impossible feat and mugs to the camera, saying, "I know I'm violating the laws of physics, but then, I never studied law" ("High Diving Hare").

Ackerman's vision of timelessness in her explorations of deep and sacred play similarly open up some interesting questions regarding the nature of frivolity and time. She suggests that deep play is a way into what she calls "deep time" (23), arguably a mythic sense of time, wherein the player can:

lay aside [her] sense of self, shed time's continuum, ignore pain, and sit quietly in the absolute present, watching the world's ordinary miracles. No mind or heart hobbles. No analyzing or explaining. No questing for logic. No promises. No goals. No relationships. No worry (23).

This is, to my mind, again much like a definition of the time one discovers when embracing and being embraced by frivolity (sitting quietly notwithstanding). So, then, is the very lightness of frivolity a way into this deepness? And conversely, can one find the fine lightness of timelessness and frivolity through deep work and thought?

Psychology

This wondering aloud of frivolity's connection to the depth of soul brings me to the realm of psychology, particularly depth and archetypal psychology. As C.G. Jung and Sigmund Freud set the stage for the modern discourse on depth psychology, they taught scholars of psychology to go down, deep, into the dark and fecund waters of the soul and psyche instead of leaping upwards toward the perceived lightness of spirit. However, in the paradoxical nature of soul, it is, I believe, possible for frivolity to serve as a psychopomp up the proverbial down staircase.

The psyche itself holds some of that lightness; as Lionel Corbett points out, "It is no accident that in antiquity the butterfly used to symbolize the soul, or that 'psyche originally meant 'breath'—both of these evoke a sense of alive movement" (*Religious*

Function of the Psyche 85). Transforming from the imago, the butterfly literally imagines (this is the scientific term for the transformation) itself into being – a process not unlike the development of the human psyche, and that transformation is into some light creature, that flutters by. Additionally, a certain intuited constellation of meaning and connections emerges for me as I muse upon the relationships between the butterfly and chaos theory (the butterfly effect) and the light chaos invoked by frivolity's rebellion.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi works the sense of “alive movement” invoked by Corbett beautifully, and his initial thoughts on flow are helpful in further defining frivolity. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he defines flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (4). On the face of it, this could be a description of frivolity. He also intuits the resisting of society's pressures, stating:

To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself. She has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances” (16).

Ignoring that troublesome reference to purpose for the moment, Csikszentmihalyi intuits the fluidity of frivolity and hints at its role as a small rebel in its relationship to culture. He suggests that consciousness and its control are central to defining quality of life, asserting that that control “cannot be institutionalized” (21). He strikes at society's instinct to codify its rules on how to make life qualitative and he says, “As soon as it becomes part of a set of social rules and norms, it ceases to be effective in the way it was originally intended to be. Routinization, unfortunately, tends to take place very rapidly”

(21). Frivolity rebels against this very routine, forcing creative energy through small cracks to in turn force society to reshape its thinking on consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi continues:

In each new epoch—perhaps every generation, or even every few years, if the conditions in which we live change that rapidly—it becomes necessary to rethink and reformulate what it takes to establish autonomy in consciousness (22).

Csikszentmihalyi would define those reformulations and that autonomy as flow, or at least a part of the process of flow. This is relevant to a conversation on frivolity because it touches upon frivolity as both a soul and societal curative; as Thomas Jefferson said, “a little rebellion now and then is a good thing” (*Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 199).

However, like frivolity and play, there are differences between frivolity and Csikszentmihalyi’s vision of enjoyment. He outlines eight characteristics that create a flow/enjoyment experience, which resonate with Ackerman’s deep play and similarly both hit and miss frivolity. The first element of enjoyment he defines is “a challenging activity that requires skills” (49). This is not particularly in alignment with the ethos of frivolity, at least not directly. However, as he discusses the distinction between pleasure and enjoyment, he states, “Enjoyment is characterized by this forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment” (46), exemplifying this difference by pointing out the difference between a person who merely feels pleasure while he eats, versus a gourmet, who “pays enough attention to a meal so as to discriminate the various sensations provided by it” (46). While he goes further than frivolity in an assumption of challenge and skill, he brushes up against the *aesthesis* that is inherent in frivolity: to be frivolous is not be careless about one’s frivolity or the actions one undertakes as one frivols. For all of its lightness, frivolity has some weight, some gravity to it, contained

within its creative and imaginal impulses. It is light but substantive; to use a further edible example, it is fine chocolate rather than a Twinkie, and has the nutrition of deep enjoyment.⁵

Several of Csikszentmihalyi's other elements of enjoyment are fairly easily aligned with frivolity, including the merging of action and awareness (53), concentration on the task at hand (58), the loss of self-consciousness (62), and, like Ackerman, the transformation of time (66). The paradox of control, which he describes as "lacking a sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life (59), is by this definition deeply attuned to frivolity, and echoes some of the power nuances in frivolity when he expands the definition to state "what people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control" (61). However, he diverges again from frivolity when he completes that sentence as "sense of exercising control in difficult situations" (61). This is not relevant to the frivolous, unless, of course, one defines the responsibilities, obligations, and expectations that one is turning left away from while being frivolous as the difficult situations – something that makes complete sense to me, but I suspect that it is a stretch to work within Csikszentmihalyi's model. The most disconnected of his eight elements of enjoyment to frivolity is an expectation of "clear goals and feedback" (54). Goals in frivolity are anything but clear—they are at the vanishing point—and work paradoxically much like focus (i.e. the goal, if any, is to have

⁵ In the both/and nature of frivolity, it is possible to make the argument on behalf of the humble twinkie and its role as a frivolous play on cake. However, for me, there are qualities in its mass production, its innate plasticity, and its replacement of richer, more original cake that pulls it away from frivolity. Perhaps the first several dozen twinkies were truly frivolous; I am not certain that the millions that sit hardening on Quik-Stop shelves are.

no goals), and feedback is not necessarily something that one invites when being frivolous, for fear of being branded worthless.

Ultimately, where Csikszentmihalyi most strongly parts company with any semblance of frivolity is his connection of flow to meaning, by way of understanding goals and creating order. He states, “an experience is meaningful when it is related positively to a person’s goals. Life has meaning when we have a purpose that justifies our strivings, and when experience is order” (244, Notes). For Csikszentmihalyi, a lack of tangible, quantifiable meaning translates to “existential dread” (12). His earnest striving, that need for purpose that I ignored earlier, and his commitment to goals pulls the frivolity from flow, and to my mind, fatally weakens his argument in a direction that is dangerously close to a pop-culture, self-help recipe, for it ultimately does not, as true soul work always does, contain or acknowledge its opposite.

To look at frivolity through a truly depth psychological lens raises several questions. If an individual chooses to be frivolous, from where does that choice arise? Is it instinctive or conscious, or some combination of the two? What motivates that choice? If one assumes a certain economy of soul, to enter into the realm of the pointlessness psychologically, is there an implicit suggestion that there is a point lying somewhere behind that randomness?

These questions are further multiplied by the difference between choosing frivolity and deeming something frivolous. Those above are referent to an individual who wishes to be frivolous. Equally important, however, is the question of the psychological implications of dismissing something (or someone) as frivolous from the perceived heights of power or moral rectitude. This is important, I think, both because it

reflects upon a culture's understanding of frivolity and reflects another layer of the power issues inherent in frivolity's existence.

Freud offers what is arguably the most basic of motivations towards frivolity in what he calls "the pleasure principle," the idea that pleasure is in turn one of humanity's most basic motivations. This theory of the instinctive drive towards pleasure as a basic function of the psyche undergirds much of Freud's thought, but it is one that he works with a certain ambivalence as he feels what he perceives of in his later work as the opposing tugs of Eros and Thanatos, life and death. I think that this ambivalence reflects the dance of discomfort and desire, guilt and freedom that co-exists in frivolity.

For Freud, sex (i.e., polymorphous infantile sexuality) is the great motivator for the instinct for pleasure. He writes, "The pleasure principle long persists, however, as the method of working employed by the sexual instincts . . ." (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 4). Like its correlations with play, frivolity is both larger and smaller than this definition: sex can be defined as frivolous, particularly non-procreative sex, but I am not convinced that all frivolity is compelled by a sexual drive, though it is driven, perhaps, by libido in a broader, Jungian sense. The deeper relevance of the connection between sex and frivolity, however, is intriguing. The idea that humans are physiologically "wired" for pleasure erotically, and that this penultimately pragmatic biological need utilizes pleasure as its motivator is an important comment on the soul's economy, for it suggests that practicality is not the essence of the soul's work. If it were, why would a biological imperative need any assistance? It would suffice simply to be necessary, and humans would simply, grimly, go about their business making sure the species did not die out.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, the title of which attracts me with its revolutionary undertone, Freud alludes to several other concepts that interweave with frivolity which are worth a brief examination. He makes, for example, an eloquent statement on behalf of beauty in all of its pointed pointlessness, writing, “The enjoyment of beauty has a peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality of feeling. Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it” (29). Similarly, he writes on behalf of joy, “And, finally, what good to us is a long life if it is difficult and barren of joys, and if it is so full of misery that we can only welcome death as a deliverer “ (31)?

Freud’s analysis of guilt is also relevant to the theme of frivolity. Defining guilt as a “tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it...express[ing] itself as a need for punishment” (*Discontents* 70), Freud articulates the power struggle that exists even within an individual around worth and value. He suggests that the analyst finds how a person comes to feel guilty “when he has done something he knows to be ‘bad’” (*Discontents* 71). What is interesting here to with respect to frivolity is Freud’s discussion on where that ‘badness’ originates. He writes:

How is this judgment arrived at? We may reject the existence of an original, as it were natural, capacity to distinguish good from bad. What is bad is often not at all what is injurious or dangerous to the ego; on the contrary, it may be something which is desirable and enjoyable to the ego. Here, therefore, there is an extraneous influence at work, and it is this that decides what is to be called good or bad. Since a person's own feelings would not have led him along this path, he must have had a motive for submitting to this extraneous influence (*Discontents* 71).

For Freud, that motivation is a “loss of love.” While this may indeed be true, the importance of this exploration of the origins of guilt rests in Freud’s recognition that they are external. If frivolity is something that can be defined as “desirable and enjoyable,”

then the guilt that can accompany it is, by Freud's definition, external. Thus, frivolity is and cannot be defined, at least internally, as 'bad.' On its own merits, it can be a legitimate goal and function of the larger psyche.

Freud also has some interesting thoughts pertaining to the pursuit of happiness, which are relevant to frivolity. He suggests that happiness "is a problem of the economics of the individual's libido," adding that "every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved" (*Discontents* 30). He defines this struggle to find or create happiness by stating:

It is a question of how much real satisfaction he can expect to get from the external world, how far he is led to make himself independent of it, and, finally, how much strength he feels he has for altering the world to suit his wishes. (*Discontents* 30)

This is an important set of ideas with regard to personal frivolity. Frivolity for the individual happens in response to pressures from and dissatisfaction from the expectations of the external world, demands a certain independence from those pressures, and requires a legitimate strength to swim against those forces. "Altering the world to suit his wishes" is a marvelous image when pondering frivolity. It suggests both that there is an altered, frivolous world into which one may enter and/or create, and that an individual has the ability to alter the world at all. Frivolity's rebellion and creative aesthesis are both imbedded in this assertion.

However, after such a courageous statement of rebellion, Freud quickly retrenches. For him, the manners in which individuals seek that altered world can be replete with pathologies. He speaks, for example, of the young man's "flight into neurotic illness," and then of the older man, who "sees his pursuit of happiness come to nothing in later years can still find consolation in the yield of pleasure of chronic

intoxication; or he can embark on the desperate attempt at rebellion seen in a psychosis” (*Discontents* 31). He suggests that intoxication, the “crudest but most effective method” of altering reality, provides both:

the immediate yield of pleasure, but also a greatly desired degree of independence from the external world. For one knows that, with the help of this 'drowner of cares' one can at any time withdraw from the pressure of reality and find refuge in a world of one's own with better conditions of sensibility (*Discontents* 25).

Freud is concerned with the danger of intoxicants, which he defines as the “useless waste of a large quota of energy which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot” (*Discontents* 25). Intoxicants are not injurious, at least in this moment in Freud’s mind, in terms of physical health and wellbeing, but because they are wasteful. It seems that he is suggesting that the effort towards happiness must be a pragmatic, goal-driven exercise, and one that is, additionally, about the betterment of the rest of humanity. While I recognize the issues of scale and balance inherent in a discussion of intoxication, I disagree with the implications of Freud’s thinking. Pleasure and happiness can be as intoxicating as any substance, as can frivolity, and it can be just that intoxication and waste that provides the value in the experience. While an addiction⁶ to such intoxication brings with it other issues, intoxicants both literal and metaphorical are interwoven with frivolity: frivolity can be intoxicating and intoxicants can be frivolous.

⁶ Interestingly, there are those in the addiction recovery community who vehemently resist the term “substance abuse,” suggesting that the substance that addicts ingest is the one thing in their life they do not abuse. It is sacred, protected, and adored to the exclusion of everything else. Linking this thought back to frivolity, one of the nation’s most effective detoxification centers for teens utilizes a “Dionysian” approach: offering young heroin addicts not the somber gray promises of a responsible adult life, but a level of fun that replaces the toxin with play and lightness that can be similarly sacred and adored.

The word “intoxicant” carries with it its own poisoned judgment, reflecting a culture’s discomfort with being transported out of socio-political and historical reality. As those who seek intoxication are subject to moralizing (whether that moralizing takes the shape of sermons against demon rum or the uncomfortable acknowledgement of such behavior as a “disease” without a real acknowledgement of the “dis-ease” that may have begun the behavior in the first place), the frivoler is also subject to similar, if lighter, moralizing. So, in a discussion of frivolity, perhaps a word such as “enchantment” would be a better choice than intoxicant.

Freud does recognize that such an enchantment can be of value, stating:

satisfaction is obtained from illusions, which are recognized as such without the discrepancy between them and reality being allowed to interfere with enjoyment. The region from which these illusions arise is the life of the imagination; at the time when the development of the sense of reality took place, this region was expressly exempted from the demands of reality-testing and was set apart for the purpose of fulfilling wishes which were difficult to carry out (*Discontents* 27).

Here is a moment of imagination and one of its links, I believe, to frivolity, in the creation of what Freud terms “*phantasy*.” This is the power of creativity, of aesthesis, rather than the toxic escapism of the “intoxicant.” Freud makes the leap to art here, both for the creators and enjoyers of it, but even art has its limitations in his mind. He writes:

People who are receptive to the influence of art cannot set too high a value on it as a source of pleasure and consolation in life. Nevertheless the mild narcosis induced in us by art can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery. (*Discontents* 27)

What Freud is missing here is the possibility that art, or frivolity, or intoxication, or enchantment, or *phantasy*, while fleeting in its literal experience, can in fact open something that does alter the world and can make someone “forget real misery.” By going to illusion, or escaping the confines of the press of reality for a moment, the

escaper is forever changed, as is the world around him. This change may be literal and tangible, or may ultimately be a form of sublation: that moment's difference gets rendered as the escaper returns to his life, but is not gone. Its essence remains. In another paradoxical moment, the ephemeral nature of frivolity can turn around on itself as it sublates, and can become everlasting.

Ultimately, Freud is uncomfortable with all of this pleasure on a variety of levels.

He suggests that:

under the pressure of these possibilities of suffering, men are accustomed to moderate their claims to happiness--just as the pleasure principle itself, indeed, under the influence of the external world, changed into the more modest reality principle--, if a man thinks himself happy merely to have escaped unhappiness or to have survived his suffering, and if in general the task of avoiding suffering pushes that of obtaining pleasure into the background (*Discontents* 24).

Pleasure makes way for reality, and pleasure itself becomes suspect. Freud concludes this thought by adding, "An unrestricted satisfaction of every need presents itself as the most enticing method of conducting one's life, but it means putting enjoyment before caution, and soon brings its own punishment" (*Discontents* 24), landing the pleasure-seeker back into a fear of punishment, and its accompanier guilt. It is as if Freud cannot hold on to the legitimacy of pointlessness and pleasure, and must, at the very least, champion its delay, if he is not able to deny it completely. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which he wrote late in life, he states:

Under the influence of the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure. The pleasure principle . . . often succeeds in overcoming the reality principle, to the detriment of the organism as a whole (4).

Again, while a life lived in wholesale pursuit of pleasure (or frivolity, for that matter) may not ultimately bring pleasurable results, this assumption that pleasure must bow to reality and self-denial flies in the face of the energy of frivolity, and denies the potentiality of such a move towards opening a life that is not simply waiting for some divine happiness after its end.

Perhaps most tellingly, Freud abandons the pleasure principle and sings the praises of those who can live somehow beyond pleasure. He writes:

One may therefore hope to be freed from a part of one's sufferings by influencing the instinctual impulses. This type of defense against suffering is no longer brought to bear on the sensory apparatus; it seeks to master the internal sources of our needs. The extreme form of this is brought about by killing off the instincts, as is prescribed by the worldly wisdom of the East and practiced by Yoga (*Discontents* 26).

Freud does acknowledge that there are limitations to even this particular phantasy, adding that, "If it succeeds, then the subject has, it is true, given up all other activities as well--he has sacrificed his life; and, by another path, he has once more only achieved the happiness of quietness," (*Discontents* 26), but suggests that the aesthete is a good model to follow in respects to controlling one's baser instincts.

He softens his stance a few pages later a bit by suggesting that the ultimate solution to finding happiness is a "way of life which makes love the centre of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved" (*Discontents* 29). If the love of doing something for its own sake is inherent in frivolity, then Freud cannot fundamentally dismiss it. His ambivalence about happiness and its relatives, frivolity included, however, is always close to the surface, reflecting his commitment to understanding the unconscious and shadow aspects of human emotions, and as a result, I believe, he was never able truly to have faith in their unalloyed delights.

If Freud had issues surrounding the theme of pleasure, and by implication, frivolity, C.G. Jung was almost silent on the subject. For such a seminal leader in the union of myth, symbol, and psychology to have such an abject disinterest on a particular way of being may be of interest in itself, and, I believe that this silence can shed some interesting light on two of the important axes in a discussion of frivolity: the axis of power and powerlessness, as well the axis of personal and cultural approaches towards frivolity.

With the axis of personal, internal, chosen frivolity versus the cultural judgment of frivolity particularly in mind, I turn to Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, to probe some of his (non)ideas about frivolity. I do this for two reasons, first, because the text, while autobiographical, is in many ways a summation of much of what he found most important in his work over the course of his life; and second, because there seems a poignancy to looking at the work of a great psychologist as he turns his gaze inwards, and a revelatory quality that is missing from his analyses of other people's psyches. There is a third reason, frivolously, as echoed by David Cohen in the first line of his introduction to *Psychologists on Psychology*: "The psychology of psychologists might seem to be an esoteric, even frivolous, subject" (1). Ultimately, and more seriously, this approach is not irrelevant to Jung's own thought process, as he states:

From the beginning I had conceived of my voluntary confrontation with the unconscious as a scientific experiment which I myself was conducting and in whose outcome I was vitally interested. Today I might equally well say that it was an experiment which was being conducted on *me* (*Memories* 178).

For Jung, a central metaphor in the work of the psyche was a downwards journey, as in the experience of his earliest remembered dream, where he climbs down into a yawning dark hole to the man-eating phallus (*Memories* 12). His fantasies take the shape

of horrific wastelands and rivers of blood, portending the outbreak of world war (*Memories* 176), and he states, “in order to grasp the fantasies which were stirring in me ‘underground,’ I knew that I had to let myself plummet down into them, as it were” (*Memories* 178). No frivolous lightness here, but a deep and well-founded fear of being lost in the depths of psyche’s darkest reaches.

However, I think the most telling disconnect from frivolity within Jung’s thought comes with his own wrestling with the unconscious and his need to define himself as a scientist, combined with a healthy dose of misogyny. When he identifies the *anima*, the indirect, and to his mind feminine, energy of the psyche, he recognizes that his first interaction was an interior dialogue with a woman’s voice answering his query about the nature of his work (which he would very much like to be science) and the voice answers that it is actually art. He quickly discounts this voice as sounding like the voice of a current patient, whom he characterizes as a “talented psychopath who had strong transference to me” (*Memories* 185).

When he begins to engage the voice in discourse, it is not with the sense of openness and wonder with which he generally meets other psychic entities, but instead “prepares himself for an argument,” responding to her by insisting, “No, it is not art! On the contrary, it is nature” (*Memories* 186). He neither gets an answer to his assertion from the voice nor answers it himself, until he grants her the use of his speech centers, and he responds with what he describes as a long statement, which he never then articulates.

Jung’s relationship with the *anima*, “the soul in the primitive sense” (*Memories* 186) is as dark and complex as his fantasies. In a telling paragraph from *The Practice of*

Psychotherapy, he describes the *anima* as having a “predilection for everything that is unconscious, dark, equivocal, and unrelated in woman, and also for her vanity, frigidity, helplessness, and so forth” (*Practice, CW* 16). As he describes the relationship between the *anima*, *animus*, and the individual man, he writes with a savage, misogynistic wit:

No man can converse with the anima for five minutes without becoming the victim of his own anima. Anyone who still had enough sense of humour to listen objectively to the ensuing dialogue would be staggered by the vast number of commonplaces, misapplied truisms, clichés from newspapers and novels, shop-soiled platitudes of every description, interspersed with vulgar abuse and brain-splitting lack of logic” (*Aion, CW* 15).

This diatribe is telling for two reasons: first, that arguably the *anima/animus* is the soul’s source of creative vitality, and thereby frivolity, and second, because it sheds light on Jung’s discomfort with perceiving of himself as an artist, and what seems to me to be an inclination towards disempowering both the *anima* and art, thereby dismissing them as merely frivolous.

Jung seems to have deeply conflicting thoughts on the relationship between art, myth, and symbolism. At times he seems very comfortable with the connections. He writes eloquently in the *The Spirit of Man, Art, and Literature*, for example, that the artist speaks in what he defines as “primordial images” (*Spirit* 82) that enables “humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night (*Spirit* 82), continuing, “that is the secret of great art, and its effect upon us” (*Spirit* 82).

He also intuits the ineffable, unconscious quality of the origins of creative work, acknowledging that the psychologist “can no more explain [the process of artistic creation] than the intellect can describe or even understand the nature of feeling” (*Spirit* 66). However, although he spent a lifetime creating art, whether stone sculptures or mandalas, he seems to be unwilling to make the final leap in his own work between

symbolism and art, and he is deeply suspicious of connecting art and the unconscious in his own life. Again, speaking of his internal conversations with his *anima* about art, he writes:

If I had taken these fantasies of the unconscious as art, they would have carried no more conviction than visual perception, as if I were watching a movie. I would have felt no moral obligation to them” (*Memories* 187).

His work is the work of the unconscious, of myth, and symbol, but in this instance he refuses to acknowledge it as art.

In a more benign moment, Jung states “creative life always stands outside convention” (*Essential Jung* 202). I glimpse here an indirect (though in all likelihood unintentional) nod to frivolity and its role as a creative/artistic effort that withstands the pressures of societal expectations and echoes Freud’s thoughts on altering the world. However, Jung continues, “That is why, when the mere routine of life predominates in the form of convention and tradition, there is bound to be a destructive outbreak of creative energy” (*Essential Jung* 202). Again, Jung could be speaking of frivolity, but with a nod that is not necessarily of approval. For an outbreak of creativity to be defined as destructive, it must be the routine it is rebelling against that is destroyed. Jung here plays the classic role of a cultural critic condemning the frivolous, conservatively concerned that structures be upheld. I find this ironic coming from the champion of individuation, and tragic coming from a man whose genius was deeply creative. It is as if he suspects himself and his work to be frivolous, as he obviously does while condemning his stone sculpting as he describes as “childish humiliation of playing with rocks” (*Essential Jung* 76). In this anecdote he recognizes his loss of a creative energy once

enjoyed by his childhood self and understanding his need to recapture it as an adult, but he is tortured by how to do so. He writes:

This moment was a turning point in my fate, but I gave in only after endless resistances and with a sense of resignation. For it was a painfully humiliating experience to realize that there was nothing to be done except play childish games (*Essential Jung* 76).

Even as he finds the frivolity of playing with stones, he smashes his own need to do so.

This reflects one of the power battles of frivolity: in order to embrace frivolity, I must either feel a strong enough sense of self-worth that I know that I transcend my frivolousness, or be content in my own slightness. Rhetorically, on Jung's behalf, I suppose that to have spent a lifetime so earnestly attempting to define the point of everything, accepting the distinct possibility that one has no point would seem cataclysmic. Ultimately, and more literally, I suspect that this inability to reconcile his ambivalence towards his own "childish games" reflects his efforts to present his life's rich work in psychology and the field itself as a science, as something legitimate, quantifiable, and worth serious attention.

Beyond Freud and Jung, I will briefly touch upon some ideas from several other psychologists that resonate with a flavor of the frivolous, and can assist in its definition. First, I turn to Erich Fromm, who brings a fine-tuned awareness of the power issues between individual and culture. He warns, in the face of an authoritative cultural ethic that "we have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals," continuing:

man lives in a world to which he has lost genuine relatedness and in which everybody and everything has become instrumentalized, where he has become part of the machine that his hands have built. He thinks, feels, and wills, what he believes he is supposed to think, feel, and will (*Fear of Freedom* 163).

This is a world that is simultaneously antithetical to frivolity while in deep need for it. In another text, Fromm extends this idea of relatedness in a discussion of the differences between having and being, defining these different ways of existing, the first in a materialistic way, and the second with “aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world” (*To Have or To Be* 7). In turn, there is an intuitive relatedness to frivolity: frivolity, while it entails a creative *aesthesis*, it is not ultimately about material creation, product or productivity. Frivolity, I believe, can both provide an escape hatch from the grasp of materialism, and provide a vision of the possibilities of life beyond it. If I can be truly frivolous, and release the need for having, I am free to simply be, and can be, simply, free.

Fromm also engages in a fairly detailed dissection of the differences between happiness, joy, satisfaction, and gratification, ultimately assigning an ethical value to each. He writes:

We are now in a position to formulate our view on the ethical relevance of pleasure. Satisfaction as relief from physiologically conditioned tension is neither good nor bad; as far as ethical evaluation is concerned it is ethically neutral, as are gratification and pleasure. Irrational pleasure and happiness (joy) are experiences of ethical significance. Irrational pleasure is the indication of greed, of the failure to solve the problem of human existence. Happiness (joy), on the contrary, is proof of partial or total success in the ‘art of living.’ Happiness is man’s greatest achievement; it is the response of his total personality to a productive orientation toward himself and the world outside (*Man for Himself* 191).

While I am not convinced that “irrational pleasure” is actually an indication of greed, an identification of pleasure as being ethically relevant is an important in the exploration of frivolity, be it the irrationality of pleasure or the pleasure of irrationality. Frivolity, in all of its irrational pleasure, actually is in some respects far closer to what Fromm describes as happiness or joy, in terms of it being a moment of success in ‘the art of living.’ It

deviates from his definition when Fromm adds the flavor of productivity; it seems that he, like most writers on happiness, feels some belated need to justify its existence by reminding readers that it achieves something altruistic for the good of humankind in general. Somehow, joy for its own sake, like frivolity, is a guilty pleasure when enjoyed personally without a sacrifice of the self to the greater good. Ultimately, however, Fromm's idea that pleasure itself is "ethically relevant" is an important movement forward in 20th Century psychological thought.

Fomenter and irreverent spirit, James Hillman has any number of ideas that could help shape a definition of frivolity, but at this moment, it is his musing on ethics that is perhaps most relevant. In an article in a 1996 issue of *Tikkun*, he poses the question, "Can there be ethics without aesthetics?" ("Aesthetics and Politics"). He traces the connection in classical Greece between goodness and beauty, and the subsequent separation of the two in Christianity, both from one another (excepting inner, "moral beauty") and between this life and the next, claiming "Ethics not only co-opted beauty, but repressed it. This was one of the many ways that Christianity could get rid of Aphrodite and other pagan goddesses" ("Aesthetics and Politics"). I would argue that it became a way to get rid of the frivolous as well.

Hillman then plays with the idea of beauty being "practical," stating:

Many philosophers consider beauty useless, and therefore opposite to the practical. Whereas I've been arguing that it is the most useful and practical. For any practice that is not at the same time idealistic, that does not have a further vision, that does not attempt to realize in practice some image of beauty, loses its practical goodness ("Aesthetics and Politics").

What I find interesting in his argument is in his connection of the word "practical" to "practice." On the surface, like beauty, frivolity is impractical. But it is also, like beauty,

richly “practice-able,” and out of that practice comes its practicality. In the spinning paradox of frivolity, its point is its pointlessness, and its pointlessness brings me to its point. This is, I believe, one of frivolity’s greatest gifts, for it grants me a point (or, as Hillman would term it, vision) precisely when I do not ask for it. It comes, unbidden, in the manner of both the imagination and the soul.

Ultimately, Hillman states that “The world is first of all an aesthetic phenomenon—this is so hard to realize—before it is mathematical, logical, or theological” (“Aesthetics and Politics”). It may be worthwhile to wonder if the same could not be said about frivolity—could the world be frivolous before it is mathematical, logical, or theological? It is possible to make this logical leap through a variety of lenses. First, mundanely, as I have suggested earlier, I, as I suspect most people do, spend most of my days doing things that really have little impact on the generation or destruction of the universe on some deep level. Second, on a philosophical level, I could argue that there is no point to the world and humankind’s existence in it, and that a search for relevance is more of a fantasy than accepting the reality of its pointlessness. Third, even if there is a point to all this, it could very well be the point simply of continuing to exist, which becomes, like frivolity, a point which lands in the self-contained logic of its own constructs, and thereby lands back in the realm of pointlessness.

This possibility of pointlessness is perhaps one the reasons why frivolity is so suspect, for human beings seem to be obsessed with making meaning, even if it is only a sense of personal meaning and value in the face of an enormous universe. It is a frightening thought, indeed, that I might have no meaning or relevance, and simply am a (pointless?) point on a cosmic radar screen. However, what frivolity simultaneously

presents to me is the possibility that if I could learn to rest from my earnest strivings towards relevance, I could, perhaps, begin to understand that I have any relevance at all.

From Hillman, I will turn for an initial glance at some of Norman O. Brown's writings, who in his book on Freud works the dynamics of instincts towards life over death. This move is another important element of frivolity: its nihilism is a light one, rather than a hopeless one, and it is far more about life than it is about death. Brown includes happiness as an important tool and goal in the individual's embrace of life rather than death. Interestingly, in his text *The Party of Eros: Radical Social Thought in the Realm of Freedom*, Richard King characterizes Brown as a "rebellious Hermes" (a truly archetypal image of frivolity) to Freud and his theories on happiness, "reshaping, extending, and transforming the original Freudian teachings" (159), especially those of sublimation and repression. King suggests that Brown's concept of sublimation is "crucial to Brown's entire thesis" (*Party of Eros* 161). Unlike Freud, Brown holds that sublimation "does not really avoid the curse of repression" (*Life Against Death* 141), suggesting that sublimation is not a solution, and culture, as a construct of sublimated libidinal energy, is actually a move away from both life and death.

Repression and sublimation can both be seen as dancing hand-in-hand with frivolity. Frivolity as an impulse is arguably both: it is repressed by both external, cultural forces and internal, personal momentums towards productivity and meaning; and could be a sublimation of darker impulses towards rebellion and discontent. But Brown's delineation could provide a road map towards a richer vision and understanding of frivolity's role within a culture, particularly as a subversive, rather than sublimated energy. King, incidentally, supports this thesis when he highlights Brown's vision of art

as an attempt “to regain the lost laughter of infancy” (*Life Against Death* 60), and suggests that Brown sees art in this context as an act that could “be seen as subversive to civilization and in the service of Eros” (*Party of Eros* 161). This, too, is an evocative archetypal image of frivolity, and further underscores the connections between frivolity and art.

In *Psychotherapy, East and West*, Alan Watts interweaves throughlines of a number of the thoughts highlighted in this review, suggesting that the opportunity for freedom from repression lies within a new vision of Eros. In Watts’ view, an earnest, grim vision of life as work is at the root of what limits people and causes their unhappiness. He writes:

Release depends upon becoming aware of that primordial repression which is responsible for the feeling that life is a problem, that it is serious, that it must go on. It has to be seen that the problem we are trying to solve is absurd (28).

If viewing life as a problem is pointless, is it not also frivolous? Watts adds, “When it comes down to it, civilized repression simply builds up the power of Eros like water accumulating behind a dam” (152), suggesting that Eros is in this instance not so much called upon as built up as an irrepressible force that will ultimately break through cultural repressions and surge forth. This energy of Eros, I believe, is precisely what empowers frivolity. While I may choose to be frivolous, that choice is not made in a vacuum. It is instead a choice made in response to repression of desire, of freedom, and of pleasure, and it is an irrepressible expression of life energy.

Like Fromm and Hillman, Watts also envisions this move as within an ethical and aesthetic context. Rather than imagining ethics as a heavy-handed morality that presses people into normative, conformative behavior, he turns ethics back onto itself, asserting:

When cultural disciplines are in the service of Eros, ethics are transformed from the rules of repression into the technique of expression, and morality becomes the aesthetics of behavior (*Psychotherapy* 139).

Ethics in this view of the world become, as Watts suggests, not the ethics of survival (143), but instead a celebratory, life-invigorating commitment to spontaneity. He suggests that “the joyous task which confronts an ethic of spontaneity, however difficult it may be, is quite literally to woo people out of their armed shells” (146). This is a superbly frivolous task, in all of frivolity’s splendid lightness. Ultimately, Watts views this ethic of spontaneity as the ethic of Eros, which is a far more empowered vision than Fromm’s ethic of happiness, and one that resonates far more richly with frivolity.

Philosophy

If the previous two sections of this literature review are glancing, attempting to hold up to the light the occasional shimmering gem from a hundred years or so of the disciplines of play theory and psychology, their smallness becomes positively titanic when compared to an effort to do justice to three thousand years of philosophy. With an awareness of both I will now add a handful of glittered philosophical thoughts into this frivolous definition. It will be noted that the philosophical literature reviewed is not explicitly on the thematic of frivolity. Rather, I am attempting to take note of six moments in the philosophical tradition of Europe and America (Aristippus, Epicurus, Kant, Kierkegaard, Derrida, and Casey) where insights from philosophers approach the thematic of this study indirectly.

First, acknowledging that if frivolity does indeed have any point, its immediate point could be identified as pleasure, I turn to the Greeks and the seekers of pleasure, the

Cyreniacs. While only small tidbits of the work of Aristippus the Elder exist through the lenses of Diogenes Laertius, Xenophon, and Sextus, he is recognized (often with a certain smug distaste) as the champion of hedonism. Wilhelm Windelband defines this by stating, “If, then, virtue is knowledge directed toward happiness, it must enable man to enjoy as much and as vigorously as possible. Virtue is ability for enjoyment” (*History of Philosophy*, 85). A pupil of Socrates, Aristippus emerges as something of a trickster figure, managing to contradict Socrates, irritate Plato, and engender the title of Sophist for his irreverent willingness to play the fool for Dionysus of Syracuse and accept money for his thoughts.

Aristippus and his followers posit that pain and pleasure are the axes on which human life is lived, and that pleasure is the ultimate goal of life. There are two concepts most relevant to frivolity in Cyrenaic thought: first, that pleasure is not a static state, but a state of motion. This echoes, I believe, the nuance of motion and action in the chosen frivolity of an individual. To choose to be frivolous intimates action, even if being deemed frivolous does not.

The second hedonistic throughline that reflects frivolity is Aristippus’ contention that even if an act that brings pleasure is disreputable, the goal and achievement of that pleasure outweighs any negatives inherent in the act. Windelband states that the Cyreniacs:

regarded all that is fixed by the social convention of morals and law, as a limitation of that right to enjoyment which man has by nature and which the wise man exercises without troubling himself about historical institutions. The Hedonists gladly shared the refinement of enjoyment which civilization brought with it; they found it convenient and permissible that the intelligent man should enjoy the honey which others prepared; but no feeling of duty or thankfulness bound them to the civilization whose fruits they enjoyed (*History of Philosophy* 86).

Julia Annas, in her text *The Morality of Happiness*, has a slightly less disapproving tone about Aristippus' unwillingness to bow to the expectations and responsibilities towards society, stating:

Consistently emerging from the tradition is the image of a person who pursues what is presently attractive, quite explicitly at the price of commitment to ideals which require self-control and deferral of gratification (228).

This is the mindset of the frivoler. Gratification is not to be deferred, self is not to be controlled, and instead, the pleasure of the moment, even if it is an illicit, irresponsible one that is not even remotely interested in the larger good, is worth pursuing. In this light, Aristippus emerges not only as a trickster, but also something of a philosophical patron saint of frivolity: he is perhaps the only philosopher to espouse whole-heartedly the virtues of an autonomous pleasure.

The other obvious Greek pleasure-seeker is Epicurus, who at a surface glance closely resembles Aristippus. As Annas writes, "According to Epicurus, our final end in life is pleasure" (*Happiness* 188). Terrence Irwin amplifies a further connection between Aristippus and Epicurus, that of a certain self-definition and autonomy that are not defined externally by society. He writes, "the Epicurean takes control of his life, and frees himself from the fears that preoccupy most people" (*Classical Thought* 156), continuing:

Epicurus' ethical theory rests on his hedonism—his belief that pleasure is the ultimate good, and other things are good only to the extent that they are means to pleasure. Aristotle accepts the common belief that pleasure is a good and must be a component of any credible account of the good. Epicurus claims that this belief about pleasure is no mere common belief (an 'appearance' in Aristotle's broad sense), but an immediate appearance of sensation, and therefore infallible; and he claims that the infallible appearance recognizes pleasure as the good. All animals immediately recognize that pleasure is good, and pursue it as their end; children

pursue it spontaneously before they have acquired any other beliefs about what is good (158).

Two concepts ultimately separate Epicurus from Aristippus. First, for Aristippus, pure and simple pleasure is the unapologetic goal of a successful life. For Epicurus, however, that becomes somewhat more measured, and a pleasurable life is one that is as free from pain as possible. More to the point for frivolity, however, is the second difference that I see in the two philosophers' thought: Epicurus espouses a sense of asceticism, which is an interesting nuance in someone so committed to the concept of pleasure. For Epicurus, pleasures of the flesh and acquisition are problematic methods of finding pleasure because they leave the pleasure-seeker more vulnerable to the power constructs of society. This autonomy is necessary for happiness, and people's problems with finding it, Epicurus believes, springs from a fear of death. Irwin writes:

Epicurus thinks that fear of death underlies all the acquisitive and competitive aspects of our lives. . . . Fearing death, we try to assure ourselves of security and protection against other people. The search for security leads us to pursue power, wealth, and honour, and makes us constantly afraid of losing them (*Classical Thought* 147).

The Epicurean, not laden with the need for material goods or the good themselves, leaves himself free to enjoy pleasure. "He does not fear the loss of worldly goods, since he does not need many; he is therefore not tempted to act like a coward" (*Classical Thought* 159).

This train of thought provides an interesting reflection on the nature of frivolity, and foreshadows Erich Fromm's thought on the difference between having and being: frivolity is not dependent on material wealth, and, indeed, could be pulled under by the need for it.

Perhaps the puritanical vilification of Epicurus both has its roots in just this concept, and can provide another interesting connection to frivolity. Unlike Aristippus,

who seems to champion the pursuit of happiness with concern for whom or what one might damage in the process only somewhat engaged by a need to not pay the price for overstepping bounds too far, Epicurus suggests that in order to find happiness one must simply define a life that is self-directed and not pulled off course by societal expectations and the need for security. This is a frivolous move, certainly, and one that I think instills the same nervousness in a system as frivolity does: by choosing not to enter into the game of rat race, the Epicurean and the frivoler both challenge the stasis and stability of the system. How tantalizing, then, for a system to yearn to deem them worthless, and rub them both out.

Two millennia after Epicurus, the work of Immanuel Kant became philosophically relevant to the theme of frivolity for two reasons. First, as Kant works to shape meaning, he revisits the concept of autonomy, differentiating between autonomous and heteronomous will, asserting that genuine morality flows from within the individual rather than being dictated by the societal structures and strictures around him. Though Kant would not, in all likelihood, have made this leap of logic, it strikes me that this is an interesting counter argument to the condemnation of frivolity: if one is pursuing an inward sense of what is legitimate and good, could not frivolity be seen as one legitimate direction to move?

Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck (the purposiveness of nonpurpose) is Kant's phrase that is most important to a notion of frivolity, and implies an answer the question just posed. He writes:

The power of desire, insofar as it can be determined to act only by concepts, i.e., in conformity with the presentation of a purpose, would be the will. On the other hand, we do call objects, states of mind, or acts purposive even if their possibility does not necessarily presuppose the presentation of a purpose; we do this merely

because we can explain and grasp them only if we assume that they are based on a causality [that operates] according to purposes, i.e., on a will that would have so arranged them in accordance with the presentation of a certain rule. Hence there can be purposiveness without a purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will. Now what we observe we do not always need to have insight into by reason (as to how it is possible). Hence we can at least observe a purposiveness as to form and take note of it in objects even if only by reflection—without basing it on a purpose . . . (*Critique of Judgment* 65).

Kant has intuited what is perhaps the central paradox lurking in the idea of frivolity: its point is pointlessness, and its pointlessness has a point. Beyond this, an interesting coloration to a person's reaction to frivolity lies in, as he suggests, the desire to make meaning. I seek out the pleasures of pointlessness as I frivol, and on some levels, the point of that seeking is to find pointlessness, but there can be other points beyond that pointlessness: I can frivol in order to escape, to rebel, to play. But as Kant says, the purposiveness forms as a reflection; the initial movement towards frivolity cannot be towards a point, or it ceases to be frivolity even before it begins.

At moments, even his discussions on purposiveness seem to reflect the purpose/nonpurpose swirl of frivolity. For example, Kant writes:

To judge of objective purposiveness we always require the concept of a purpose and (if purposiveness is to be internal [perfection] and not external [usefulness]) we require the concept of an internal purpose, that is, of a purpose that would contain the ground of the object's internal possibility. In general, purpose is that whose concept can be considered to be the ground of the possibility of the object itself (*Critique of Judgment* 33).

This in itself poses an interesting question regarding purpose and frivolity: the interiority or exteriority of frivolity's purpose, which I think also reflects the differences between being frivolous or being deemed frivolous. If frivolity's purpose is nonpurpose, that is an internal perfection, and accordingly, a purpose. If frivolity is seen through the eyes of

someone who does not understand that paradox, it is missing the external, perceived purpose of usefulness.

According to some philosophy scholars, Kant's work around purpose and nonpurpose is on some levels revolutionary, which is also interesting. Israel Knox asserts:

Kant's doctrine of disinterestedness and of purposiveness without purpose was—as a revolt against the historical tradition—a salutary concentration upon the more specific, the more autonomous aspects of beauty and of art (*Aesthetic Theories* 51).

Ignoring for the moment my discomfort with the idea that aesthetics and nonpurpose are by nature “disinterested,” what Knox illumines here is intriguing in that it reflects both a little of frivolity's revolutionary energy, and Kant's uncertainty about it. Knox continues:

But Kant's revolt was only a partial one, as his doctrine of dependent beauty shows. He liberated beauty from its moral and intellectual fetters and endowed the harmony of the cognitive faculties in the aesthetic experience with no content. He consigned significant beauty and almost all of art to the category of dependent beauty, that is, of beauty that adheres to a concept. He failed to see that art may truly manifest a purposiveness without purpose (that is, a purpose, alien and extraneous to itself)—that it may come to us free, bright, and enchanting (51).

Mihai Spariosu, in *Dionysus Reborn*, his text on the relations between play and aesthetics, echoes this disappointment in Kant, writing:

It is this arbitrary, chaotic, and uncontrollable play of the irrational that Kant constantly runs up against and attempts to come to terms with throughout his philosophical thought. The irrational relentlessly haunts him, in the *Ding an sich*, in the free, spontaneous, and unruly play of the intuition and the imagination . . . (51).

So, even while he nods to the purpose of nonpurpose, the point of pointlessness, Kant eventually pulls back from reveling in the nonrational, imaginative world of frivolity. He may simply be too seduced by reason and deontology. He also, like most philosophers, is not able to ask himself difficult questions about the reverse of the purpose of nonpurpose,

i.e., the nonpurpose of purpose, a question that challenges the basic assumptions on the value of anything a society or individual does.

I consider next Søren Kierkegaard, the nominal father of the Existentialists, and by extension a family of philosophers who actually do work questions of purpose and nonpurpose from the outside in. Kierkegaard intrigues me for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is his frivolous inclination to write under a collection of silly *noms de plume*, including Nicolaus Notabene, Vigilius Haufniensis, and, my favorite, Hilarius Bookbinder. In their introduction to *The Essential Kierkegaard*, Edna and Howard Hong write, “Kierkegaard's principal pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, declared that his task was ‘to make difficulties everywhere’” (*Essential Kierkegaard* ix). Kierkegaard emerges as another trickster philosopher, providing entertaining solutions to the challenges of subjectivity and objectivity questions that consumed him in what is, on some levels, a truly frivolous response. Mary Warnock suggests:

The illusion from which Kierkegaard himself, above all, wanted to free people was the illusion of objectivity. This was the illusion most likely not only in fact to dominate their thought, but actually to be welcomed by them as enlightenment and progress. He says that we have lost the capacity for subjectivity, and it is the task of philosophy to rediscover it for us (*Existentialism* 7).

Explaining his thought on the objectivity and subjectively, while simultaneously contradicting Kant’s beliefs on the distance and disinterestedness of purpose, Kierkegaard states:

In order to clarify the divergence of objective and subjective reflection, I shall now describe subjective reflection in its search back and inward into inwardness. At its highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion; truth as a paradox corresponds to passion, and that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject. In this way the one corresponds to the other. In forgetting that one is an existing subject, one loses passion, and in return, truth does not become a paradox; but the knowing subject shifts from being human to

being a fantastical something, and truth becomes a fantastical object for its knowing (*Essential Kierkegaard* 205).

This inward movement and accompanying passion is an important aspect of frivolity: its pointlessness and aimlessness are not without passion, cold or disinterested. The aesthetic of frivolity is a subjective one whether its delineation is internal or external. As I seek to be frivolous, what I define as frivolity and the passion that I bring to it are mine, celebratively and unabashedly subjective. And if someone pronounces me frivolous, in spite of the potential assumption of a cold objectivity by the pronouncer, his is really a subjective judgment, caught in a matrix of the perceiver's own value structures and definitions of responsibility and morality.

Kierkegaard understands this subjectivity with regard to frivolity, and intuits the importance of the small revolutionary moments of independence. For example, he writes in warning about becoming a "tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic" (60), by taking an official post, and then sings the praises of frivolity. He asserts:

Even though one stays clear of official posts, one should nevertheless not be inactive but attach great importance to all the pursuits that are compatible with aimlessness; all kinds of unprofitable pursuits may be carried on. Yet in this regard one ought to develop not so much extensively as intensively and, although mature in years, demonstrate the validity of the old saying: It doesn't take much to amuse a child (*Essential Kierkegaard* 60).

This is an interesting insight into the scale of frivolity: unprofitable pursuits are about intensive rather than extensive experiences. Frivolity is concentrated (in its lack of concentration), passionate, but not large and elaborate. Like David Miller's intuited connection between childlike versus childish in his description of the child playing at the bath I quoted earlier in this review, Kierkegaard finds the connection between frivolity and the smaller, simpler, scale of childhood without deeming the actions childish.

For a more concentrated glimpse at Kierkegaard's celebration of the frivolous, I will share some of the thoughts captured in his essay "Either/Or a Fragment of a Life," a piece in which he casts himself as the editor, Victor Emerita, who has discovered in a secret compartment in his desk, "the papers of a witty, ironical, disillusioned young esthete the editor called A, who had seen through everything in life and found it wanting" (*Essential Kierkegaard* 37).

This young esthete muses, for example, in a frivolously paradoxical manner on the meaning of life:

What, if anything, is the meaning of this life? If people are divided into two great classes, it may be said that one class works for a living and the other does not have that need. But to work for a living certainly cannot be the meaning of life, since it is indeed a contradiction that the continual production of the conditions is supposed to be the answer to the question of the meaning of that which is conditional upon their production. The lives of the rest of them generally have no meaning except to consume the conditions. To say that the meaning of life is to die seems to be a contradiction also (*Essential Kierkegaard* 41).

While the young esthete has any number of spinnings on frivolity, it is his description of boredom and idleness that is a most relevant rant. He argues:

Idleness, we are accustomed to say, is the root of all evil. To prevent this evil, work is recommended. But it is just as easy to see from the dreaded occasion as from the recommended remedy that this whole view is of very plebian extraction. Idleness as such is by no means a root of evil; on the contrary, it is a truly divine life, if one is not bored. . . . Idleness, then, is so far from being the root of evil that it is rather the true good. Boredom is the root of evil; it is that which must be held off. . . . There are people who have an extraordinary talent for transforming everything into a business operation, whose whole life is a business operation, who fall in love and are married, hear a joke, and admire a work of art with the same businesslike zeal with which they work at the office. The Latin proverb *otium est pulvinar diaboli* [idleness is the devil's pillow] is quite correct, but the devil does not find time to lay his head on this pillow if one is not bored. But since people believe that it is man's destiny to work, the antithesis idleness/work is correct. I assume that it is man's destiny to amuse himself, and therefore my antithesis is no less correct. (*Essential Kierkegaard* 53).

In this definition, perhaps the point of frivolity is to move, without “businesslike zeal” to the divine state of idleness, for being idle, at least for Kierkegaard in this mood, is the ultimate freedom.

Next, I turn to deconstructionist Jacques Derrida.⁷ In the beginning of this literature review, I referenced his text, *Archaeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac*, and contended that frivolity was a difficult topic to find in his critique. In some ways, this is not true. The final chapter of the book is entitled, “Introduction to *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge—Frivolity Itself*.” Additionally, he paradoxically and frivolously entitles a twenty-plus page section “A Marginal Note or Remark—the Two Loose Pages” in which he acknowledges the nonlinear connection to Condillac’s essay in this introduction, writing:

You have already remarked that this alleged Introduction prohibited itself from saying in short anything about the *Essay*, about what we would want to find there as its own proper and ventral context (108).

He suggests that an introduction is a seduction of the text, a deviation, “just enough to surprise it again very close to its content, which can always open out as nothing” (*Archaeology* 108). Once into his “introduction,” he justifies its premise by stating “In place of an introduction—to such a circle [he is referencing what he describes as Condillac’s self-defining circle of logic]—our reading can only add more (too much) of

⁷ Derrida’s passing in October, 2004 was marked by efforts of his detractors to ‘rub him away’ (as has been done to frivolity) posthumously, and the passionate defense of his thinking by his supporters. Of all of the writing on the topic, perhaps the most superbly frivolous was a brief commentary on the National Football League’s home website. Columnist Gregg Easterbrook (who, incidentally, has editorial duties at *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic Monthly*) describes Derrida’s work as “gibberish,” but then acknowledges the spiraling, reflective nature of his logic and lauds him for getting “people excited about intellectual theory, which is more than we can say for most intellectuals” (“Free the Inactive Seven”).

an elliptical and frivolous blow” (118). All of this sounds as if he is intuiting the rich lightness of frivolity, its intuitive logic, its playful comprehension of the dance between importance and irrelevance, and in his description of elliptical, deviating nature, its left hand turn.

Bruce Krajewski, in his text *Traveling with Hermes: Hermeneutics and Rhetoric*, suggests that “Derrida, for instance, wishes to expunge presence and identity through a certain kind of play—frivolity” (121). However, I believe that Derrida’s frivolous play is problematic, for ultimately, Derrida’s use of frivolity suggests a negativity without its creativity or aesthesis. Derrida intuites frivolity’s connection to nothing (‘no–thing’), turning Condillac’s words on uselessness in on themselves as he echoes Condillac’s definition of frivolity:

Frivolity consists in being satisfied with tokens. It originates with the sign, or rather with the signifier which, no longer signifying, is no longer a signifier. The empty, void, friable, useless signifier. So Condillac says. In the *Dictionnaire des synonymes*, he refers us from *frivolous* to *useless* (“*FRIVOLOUS*, adj. See *Useless*.”) Useless then: “adj. *vain, frivolous, futile*. Useless is said of things which serve no purpose, are of no use. If they appear to have some utility but are fundamentally useless, they are called *vain*. If their utility bears only on objects of little consideration or worth, they are *frivolous*. As for *futile*, it adds still more to *frivolous* and is said chiefly of reasoning or arguments which bear on nothing (*Archaeology* 118).

While he makes an interesting move towards frivolity and its relationship to nothingness, I think that Derrida misses the entirety of the connection between meaning and nonmeaning that frivolity can lead the reader to, reducing intuited symbols, rich with underlying and perceived meaning, into meaningless objects that no longer signify anything. This is a deconstructionist move, and while I appreciate the underlying connections between those who deconstruct the staid ivory towers of philosophical

thought and their echoes of revolutionary frivolity, I think that Derrida does not fully reflect frivolity's multiplicity.

Krajewski references Hans Blumenberg's text, *Work on Myth*, and suggests that Blumenberg "understands the relationship between this negativity and frivolity, and his perspective unsettles Derrida's playfulness" (*Traveling with Hermes* 121). Additionally, Blumenberg writes,

One who discovers the law of increasing misery sees everything driving toward a point at which the only thing left is for everything to become different [*différance*]. Frivolity is only a weak derivative of all this, a means of anthropomorphic relaxation of tension vis-à-vis myth: One can do this, or say that, without being struck by lightning. It is the first stage of 'Enlightenment' satire, of rhetorical secularization as a stylistic technique employed by a spirit that is not yet confident of its [or his] enlightened status (*Work on Myth* 17).

So frivolity, in Derrida's construct, is a weakening and devaluing process in philosophy.

He writes, for example:

Philosophical style congenitally leads to frivolity. But the reason for this is logical, epistemological, ontological. If philosophical writing is frivolous, that is because the philosopher cannot fulfill his statements. He knows nothing, he has nothing to say, and he complicates, subtilizes, refines the stylistic effects to mask his ignorance (*Archaeology* 125).

While I think Derrida makes an interesting argument here about the nature of philosophy and its inherent propensity towards frivolity, for the philosopher who philosophizes while not having anything to say is, indeed, frivolous, (to argue the point of one's thought when the thought is innately pointless is a marvelously frivolous move), this frivolity becomes for Derrida more of a condemnation rather than celebration. This is a meaninglessness that leads to disconnection. He continues:

Thus he misleads pay change (*donne change*) out of the essential emptiness of his discourse. When philosophical writing is difficult, esoteric, reserved to a small number, that is because such writing is hollow (*Archaeology* 125).

Frivolous and esoteric are not essentially the same thing; and while arguing one's point in a language that is inaccessible for one's listener's is pointless, it is not necessarily frivolous but instead becomes simply futile and frustrating for both philosopher and receiver.

Derrida sees frivolity as emerging in repetition, asserting "the repetition of the idea, the identity of ideas is not frivolous. Identity in words is frivolous" (*Archaeology* 127). Krajewski suggests:

The repetition of words characterizes Derrida's writing, for he wishes to show how supplementarity is at work. Repeating a word places it in a new context, giving it a different sense. The infinity of contexts in which words appear eliminates the possibility of words having univocal meanings, or what might be called an identity. This is what Derrida calls iterability. Part of Derrida's project involves exacerbating this iterability to produce undecidability. He empties language by overfilling it with frivolity, but decorating the margins to make a kind of illuminated manuscript that gives off no light, only lightness. This frivolity, however, is not to be taken frivolously. Derrida can do willful violence with deconstruction, for he can use repetition in its etymological sense, i.e., to attack again (*Traveling with Hermes* 121).

Derrida's connection of frivolity and repetition is interesting within the context of his argument of iterative meaning. The relative meaning or lack thereof injected in to a word in different iterations and contexts can indeed both illuminate and be illuminated by frivolity's play with meaning and nonmeaning. However, without arguing his explorations of iterative wordplay as frivolous, it once again, to my mind, does not capture frivolity's totality in two ways. First, while repetition can be frivolous, all repetition is not frivolous and all frivolity is not simply about repetition. Second, landing an understanding of frivolous in repetition as Derrida has done illuminates the spaces between meaning, but I do not think it adequately illuminates the meaning in between the spaces; once again I am not certain that it reflects the *aesthesis* and *poiesis* that I perceive

in frivolity. Lastly, perhaps this iterative nature of Derrida's definition of frivolity does diverge from mine. It is perhaps a concept of Schlegel's that better captures my sense of frivolity's left hand turn. "Digression has something like the form of bliss. Repetition of the theme is the very opposite of that." (*Literary Notebooks* 157).

Beyond his thoughts on Derrida's repetition game, Krajewski has two additional important insights in this passage on Derrida's use of frivolity. First, he points out that Derrida's frivolity "gives off no light, only lightness" which while it may indeed be true of Derrida's vision of frivolity, is not true of frivolity itself. Derrida misses the light that such lightness can bring, and the meaning that can come from such elliptical understanding, which on some levels seems to contradict his own elliptical thinking. Second, Krajewski's identification of Derrida's ability to do "willfull violence" in his use of frivolity (defined, again, as repetition) is intriguing, as it reflects undercurrents of frivolity's revolutionary energy. Derrida's revolution of deconstruction and reconstruction is, like frivolity's revolution, a rebellion against the systemic norms, and reflects a certain intellectual left-hand turning. However, I am not certain that it is as superbly unconcerned with the systemic norm as true frivolity. While frivolity is a reaction to the system, it extends outside that system into itself, content in its own value and meaning or lack thereof. And while a deconstructionist revolutionary challenges normative thinking, it seems to me that on some level his thinking intertwined with the structure he is rebelling against.

Krajewski writes that play theorists and Derrida's "notion[s] of play, or frivolity, are different" (*Traveling with Hermes* 122), suggesting that "postmodern play is sophisticated adult play that often is not play at all, but overly self conscious self-

consciousness, which continually denies itself. It plays off a self-lesser-than-thou attitude” (122). I would tend to agree with this contention, but would add to it: that self-lesser-than-thou attitude, I believe, translates into an odd complex of inferiority and desire for superiority. In a frivolous context, this lesser/smaller way of being, that is so inherent to frivolity’s ethos, simply is. In a self-conscious dialogue (either internal or external) this lesser/smaller way of being becomes transmogrified into something of great import, and the ‘lesser-than-thou’ stance runs the risk of becoming a posture of false modesty. As a result, what could have been a playful flip of iterative meaning and frivolity in Derrida’s work becomes laden under the weight of the negativity, and, I believe, Derrida’s own desires and uncertainty about certainty.

Derrida closes this chapter on frivolity wondering if “frivolity could be thought to come from need through desire” (*Archaeology* 134), which is in itself a lovely definition of frivolity’s origins. However, he is not certain if frivolity can have origins, asserting that, “since its structure of deviation prohibits frivolity from being or having an origin, frivolity defies all archaeology, condemns it, we could say, to frivolity” (*Archaeology* 118). My sense is that this landing in the philosophy of desire reflects Derrida’s own desire, becoming a dance about his own subjectivity in his deconstructionist thought process. Desire becomes for him in the end, an end, “an end without end bending need into a kind of flight” (*Archaeology* 135). His last projection is that of a statue “beginning to produce—in order (not) to become again what it will have been, contrary to the frivolous distraction,—the headstrong identities of signs, other frivolities; the fear of a Medusa, legitimacy itself” (*Archaeology* 135). A frightening, and, I believe, a telling vision of legitimacy, but one by which Derrida cannot, somehow, avoid being seduced

even as he attempts to stay in the “no-thingness” of his frivolity. For Derrida, the “no-thing” element of frivolity is its validity, and he seems most content to stay in that nothingness. That frivolity might engender a ‘becoming’ via that nothingness is, in his mind, a risky business that undermines what remains open in its nothingness, calcifying into a Medusa-like stone of legitimacy. While this is, indeed, a legitimate concern, and while a state of non-being is on some levels a state of infinite possibilities, it also, ultimately, suggests to me a stasis that is eventually not frivolous: not being becomes in its own way as limiting a way of being as does being itself.

While reading Derrida on frivolity rather leaves me with the sense of being the archaeologist who looks for the minutiae of soil discoloration of a Paleolithic site over the rampant wealth of an unlooted Egyptian tomb, I will close this glimpse into a review of the literature around frivolity with a renewed sense of the value of the diminutive and the seemingly inconsequential. I will glance at the glance itself.

Edward Casey, in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of the Flesh*, muses on the nature of the glance in an article entitled, “The World at a Glance.” He writes of:

the glance—not the gaze or the regard (which is Sartre's territory,) or studied scrutiny (the prescribed attitude of so much Western philosophy, from Plato to at least Descartes) or even bare contemplation (an ascetic ideal). The glance has none of the gravity of these more austere and traditionally sanctioned kinds of looking. It is a mere featherweight by comparison. Instead of bogging down, the glance alleviates. Rather than petrifying things -- as in the case of the Sartrian regard—the glance graces what it looks at, enhancing and expanding it (147).

Casey argues on behalf of the glance, asserting that it brings a certain kind of life when he states it “endows...with the lightness of Becoming” (147), and that it “takes us out of ourselves” (148).

Interestingly, the glance also has suffered the same treatment as frivolity in Western thought. Casey asks:

But what is the glance? What happens in it? (What happens to it is all too clear; it is bypassed, outright neglected in almost all of Western philosophy, which assumes that the glance can only be concerned with trivialities. But to be concerned with the surface is not to be concerned with what is superficial) (148).

Similarly bypassed and neglected, frivolity can offer a reflection into a depth past the surface not in spite of its glancing *ethos*, but because of it. The glance has many of the same characteristics as frivolity, both with the *aesthesis* intuited in Casey's "Becoming," and in its ability to move the glancer out of the limits of her own consciousness and into a different sense of the world. This movement is the movement of "now," immediate, and, as Casey amplifies Husserl's concepts of now, is a moment "absolute flux" that is "creative" (152). Like frivolity, the glance is not concerned with the future, but instead holds the vastness of time in the moment. Casey captures this paradoxical quality of the glance, so like the paradoxes of frivolity, beautifully, describing "the primary paradox of the glance: namely, the fact that something so diminutive in extent and bearing can provide such far-ranging and subtle insight" (148). Unlike Derrida's reduction of frivolity and frivolity as simply a reducer, this is an intuitive imagining of the intuitive logic that I believe is central to a true understanding of frivolity; a comfort in the paradox of large and small, point and pointlessness that frivolity brings to those willing to live in that contradiction. Casey continues:

Not surprisingly; the glance is too often taken as the epitome of the shallow in human perception, something that merely flits over the *superficies*—literally the 'outer face,' the bare 'outward appearance'—of things, like a butterfly playing on the surface of a glacier. My argument has been that precisely in such flitting, such fickle and flirtatious glimpsings, the glance proves to be of inestimable value in coming to know the world as a full phenomenon. Not unlike the *papillon*, by

indirections we find the world's directions out—as well as, perhaps better than, in conventional modes of visual address (161).

Here he captures some of my argument on behalf of frivolity: the value of the fluttering-by of the frivolous butterfly (not, as I mentioned earlier, an accidental symbol of the psyche), in its indirectness and pointless meanderings can offer an understanding of the world. I would add to Casey's point, it can offer a similar understanding of the internal world of the soul.

Ultimately, while this glancing literature review has both deepened my belief that there has been no group of scholars conversing specifically about frivolity in a relevant way, it has deepened my own understanding of frivolity in a way that is truly frivolous, in tiny tastes and left-hand turnings, and intuited wisdom that emerges when not looking at it directly.