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DERRIDA AND KRISTEVA PLAY SOLLERS' *NUMBERS* (A Gamer's *Mode d'emploi*)

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Abstract. Jacques Derrida's influential essay "Dissemination" (1969) offers a detailed commentary and subtle response to Philippe Sollers' novel *Numbers* (1968), which he calls a "textual machine." Elaborating some of her most fascinating concepts, Julia Kristeva's essay on *Numbers* "Engendering the Formula" appears almost simultaneously with Derrida's text. In terms of dialogical contiguities but also in terms of irreducible specificities, this unique crossing of perspectives is indicative of the 1960s intellectual efforts to surmount the technocratic pressures on the humanities. Addressing the novel and the essays as an "ensemble" – as different replays of a quasi "video game" – the present study foregrounds the performative aspects of the three authors' formidable artistic and theoretical encounter. Their employment of quotation, numerology and levels of meaning are approached through their intertextual play with each other as well as, among other things, Dante's work, *Kabbalah*, and *I ching,* the Chinese *Book of Changes*. In the face of the unprecedented flattening and automatization of language we are facing today, the *Numbers* exchange provides a powerful vindication of writing as a supernumerary and multi-dimensional non-linear process.

Keywords: Intertextuality; numerology; levels of meaning; Dante; video game

O tu che leggi, udirai nuovo ludo.
Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXII

The Example Vanishes

Shortly after the publication of Philippe Sollers' novel *Numbers* (Sollers 1968c) two remarkable commentaries of the novel appear: Derrida's "Dissemination"[1] and Kristeva's "Engendering the Formula"[2]. The successive appearance of the commentaries, both of them in two consecutive issues of their respective journals, is hardly a coincidence – or, to put it in Philippe Forest's inimitable way, this appearance is "*sous l'effet de nul hasard*. "(Forest 1995, p. 259) The commitment of these two formidable works to the novel is abundantly demonstrated by the profuse

quotations from it. In fact, Derrida calls (or, rather, was asked by the editors to call) his essay "but a tissue of 'quotations'.[3]" And yet, beyond quoting it, what exactly do Derrida and Kristeva do with the novel? The answer to this question is not an easy one, and, perhaps, putting it in a Derridean way, it is not one at all. The fact is that in the years to come Derrida's and Kristeva's texts go their separate ways and their readers seldom remember to consider Sollers, let alone the triangulated arrangement of which these texts seem to have been part.

Tellingly, the celebrity of Derrida in the anglophone world, the translation in English of this particular essay, and the popularity of his conceptualization of dissemination did not create any urgency for the translation of *Numbers*. Even more tellingly, Kristeva's essay, in spite of the unwavering American attention to her work, has not as yet been translated in English. Nevertheless, it enjoys a vigorous life of its own in semiotic circles which pay no heed to *Numbers*. There are, to be sure, various factors to consider with regard to this bewildering situation, including the estrangement between Sollers and Derrida a few years later, the conceptual divergence between Derrida and Kristeva, the disruptive political dramas of the day, and the vagaries of the American reception of "French theory" and "French feminism." Reading *Numbers* decades after having read the two commentators, I was stunned by the novel's staggering beauty. For all the quoting, Derrida and Kristeva had not prepared me for this. Somehow, they had drawn all the credits to themselves.

Readers of Sollers' novel, however, unlike readers of its illustrious commentaries, tend to acknowledge the triad. The results vary. There is, on the one hand, Philippe Forest's analysis (Forest 1992), a solid piece of interpretation, which applies Kristeva's concepts and evokes Derrida's work in expounding the brilliant qualities of *Numbers*. With Forest, everything looks in order: there is the novel, there are the theoretical tools, the tools are applied, understanding is gained. Forest has no problem elucidating the textual and biographical entanglements and tackles the three texts as separate and even opposed entities. In fact, he notes, although it did not become immediately apparent, the two "masterful readings" of *Numbers* would eventually reveal themselves to be rivals. A conceptual gap appears between them, not sufficiently noted but foreshadowing the future of post-structuralism. (Forest 1995, p. 259)

On the other end of the spectrum, there is Jean-Michel Lou's claim that the novel throws around clues which foreclose rather than open it to interpretation. Far from sorting out its puzzles, its celebrated commentators multiply the novel's complexity. "I feel a bit as if I am facing an idol flanked by majestic Cerberi who stand guard." And yet, one cannot simply bypass the Cerberi because they seem to be somehow entangled with their idol. "By commenting on *Numbers*, we engage in an inextricable textual network." (Lou 2012, p. 37) Forest gives a further twist to Lou's tangle by saying that Derrida's essay conducts "a strange analysis that seems

to fully appropriate its object: studying *Numbers* Derrida "rewrites" this novel, as if he set himself the task to dislodge Sollers from the place of his own creation." (Forest 1995, p. 402)

Less dramatically, Sollers says in one of his interviews that Derrida "found in the novel a sort of illustration of his theory" (Sollers 1991, p. 103). If Derrida did this, then arguably so did Kristeva, although Sollers prefers to keep their cases apart. What Sollers seems to imply is a pretty well-established practice: literary works are frequently used not as objects of interpretation but as examples illustrating philosophical or theoretical arguments. The examples sometimes illuminate the arguments, sometimes they conceal their flaws and aporias. However, such uses as a rule enhance the visibility of the examples, do not occlude them as seems to have happened here. Suffice it to mention *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, or *The Sandman*. It is as if things have been reversed in the *Numbers* case: the novel somehow emitted its commentaries as examples for its procedures, and, like the proverbial Romantic shadow replacing the subject that cast it, the examples gained visibility at its expense. If this is the case, in order to understand the examples – i.e. "Engendering the Formula" and "Dissemination" – we need to treat the novel *Numbers* as the theory they illustrate. One might wonder, for instance, whether Umberto Eco's interpretation of "Dissemination" might have taken a different turn had he paid some attention to *Numbers* – which he did not. (Eco 1991, pp. 23 – 43)

Nuovo ludo

There is, however, a third possibility which, due to the enormity of the task, will be outlined in this essay only as an invitation for continuation. In 1968, the year when *Numbers* was published, a collection of essays by the *Tel Quel Groupement d'études théorique* appeared under the title *Théorie d'ensemble*, which might be translated as "collective theory" or, why not, "ensemble theory".[4] The book was meant to be something like a manifesto of the group. It includes texts by Derrida, Sollers and Kristeva, i.e. the authors that concern us here, as well as Barthes, Foucault, and others. In the very end of the unsigned introduction we learn that the project uniting the essays in the collection involves "the transfers of energy provoked by the pursuit of a practice without rest and without guarantees. For now, this is where the experience has led: we allow it to formulate itself, from one level to another, from one background to another, with the necessity but also the always suspended chance of a game." (ffrech and Lack 1998, p. 24)

The word for game – *jeu* – which ends the introduction occurs about 170 times in the 400 pages of the book. The (self) formulation of a shared experience as the ludic conjunction of necessity and aleatoriness and as – to put it in the formula suggested in one of the essays – an oscillation between "the *mode d'emploi* of a limited activity and the metaphorical description of an ineffable practice," (Risset 1968, p. 266) – seems to be so relevant to the "assembly" project that it

begs the question why *jeu* does not figure among the "certain number of decisive concepts," which are enumerated at the beginning of the introduction. *Jeu* (I prefer the French word here because it does not differentiate between game and play) figures prominently in Derrida's already published books and in his contribution to the volume, "La différance".(Derrida 1968) It weighs heavily in the contributions of Jean-Louis Baudry who evokes Derrida's claim that the advent of writing is the advent of the game (*jeu*). (Tel Quel 1968, p. 161) Right in the middle of the collection, as the fourteenth of the 26 essays, we find an intriguing short text by Jacqueline Risset, a poet and later on renowned translator of Dante, titled "Questions About the Rules of the Game." Not referring to anything or anybody in particular, throwing us, so to say, *in medias res*, the essay certainly is meant to introduce Risset's own "writing about the fact of writing," with writing defined as a game (Risset 1968, p. 266). Her poems will be published a few years later in a book titled *Jeu*. (Risset 1971) Still, beyond her own work, Risset's poetic input echoes the assembly's preoccupations and inserts her questions about the "rules of the game" in the heart of the "anonymous reality"(ffrech and Lack 1998, p. 24) of the collective *jeu*.

The phrase *le jeu commence* – "the game/play begins" – appears in parenthesis, as a sort of theatrical remark, in the first sentence of Sollers' earlier novel *Drama*[5] and is reproduced in *Numbers*. (Sollers 1965, p. 11, 1968c, p. 47) A play, a poem and a novel, as Barthes describes *Drama* in an essay included in the assembly collection (Barthes 1968), *Numbers* is a continuation of *Drama* and, among other things, a further venture into the experiment of transforming the novel into – not exactly a play but a "theatre without a stage or a hall"(Sollers 1968b, p. 318), which is "at the same time its own stage, its own text, its own actors, a theater where the spectators cannot be its spectators, because they are first of all forced actors, caught in the constraints of a text and roles of which they cannot be the authors, since this is, in essence, *a theatre without an author*." (Sollers 1968b, p. 317)

The transformation of the novel into this theatre without authors or spectators is achieved through quite an *ensemble* of rules which are provided - a few essays after Risset's questions - in Sollers *exposé* "Semantic Levels of a Modern Text," the modern text being none other than *Numbers*. The rules concern the making of the text *as a text about its making* – or, rather, its engendering as Kristeva will conceptualize it – but they also prescribe its reading which, Sollers' instructions manual insists, is incorporated in the writing, inseparable from it and stratified into semantic levels. In the rigid structure of the novel – it consists of 25 "carrés", each of them having 4 parts, three in the past tense and one in the present tense – the fourth part, the one in the present tense, plays the role of the missing fourth wall of the theatre performance; it is the part of the spectators who are forced into being actors… "Thus, both added up and multiplied, the narrative process will comprise up to a hundred sequences (since 1 + 2 + 3+ 4 = 10 repeated – that is, squared – gives 100)..." (Sollers 1968b, p. 321)

Amidst this numerological spree, Sollers invokes Dante – or rather, his own earlier essay on Dante which was collected in a book in this very same busy year. (Sollers 1968a)[6] Decades later, Sollers will say, "Dante is my guide, as Virgil was to Dante." (Sollers 2021) However, one hardly needs such reiterations in order to notice the multiple intersections of Sollers' writing – in the 1960s and later - with his reading of Dante. Some of these intersections include:

1. *Numbers*. They belong to the "deep layer" of the text and, quoting Artaud, "the arterial beat of things." (Sollers 1968b, p. 324) Dante is not the only authority. Sollers' earlier novel *Drama* is structured with reference to the Chinese *Book of Changes, I Ching*. As Kristeva puts it apropos of the *I Ching*, "In the 8 trigrams and the 64 hexagrams of the book, mathematical operations and constructions of linguistic meaning merge to prove that "the quantities of language and their relations are regularly expressible in their fundamental nature by mathematical formulas" (F. de Saussure)." (Kristeva 1969, p. 198)

2. *Calling a novel a drama and treating novelistic writing as mis-en-scène the way Dante's poem is called a comedy and involves "scenography":* "few texts can be more exemplary for us than that of the *Divine Comedy*, precisely insofar as it manages to organize a scenography that makes a considerable number of textual data intersect and redouble each other. Such a text is not "inspired" by other texts, it has no "sources": it rereads them, rewrites them, redistributes them in its space; it discovers the junctions, the substrata, both formal and ideological, that it uses for its own session." (Sollers 1968b, p. 323)

3. *Interfacing the reader/spectator in the "fourth wall" of the text.* "One must recognize that the entire poem [*The Divine Comedy*] is turned toward this empty site that reads it, and to which it is addressed in order to become readable to itself." (Sollers 1983, p. 14) Sollers supports this assertion by pointing out Dante's appeals to the reader, finding as most significant the one in Canto XXII of *Inferno*, verse 118: "O tu che leggi, udirai nuovo ludo." Now the *ludo* Dante speaks of has been translated in various languages in all sorts of ways, and no wonder, since the game that Dante then describes is one of *Inferno*'s most sadistic, although not without its wicked dark humour. I will translate the verse directly from Sollers' French translation: "O you who read, you will hear a new game (*jeu*)." (Sollers 1968a, p. 47)

4. *Semantic levels*. Dante expected his poem to be read on four levels, literal, allegorical, symbolic, and anagogical. This is only one possible aspect of the non-linearity of writing which the "collective theory" explored and for which Mallarmé was another anchor. Sollers ends his exposé "Semantic Levels" enumerating three levels in *Numbers* (deep, intermediate, and superficial). Yet a fourth level seems to emerge in their dynamic totality, which goes beyond the limits of the individual work and connects to the "generalized text" (*texte generalisé*) of other texts and history. Positioning Dante, with reference to Engels, as poet of the tumultuous transition from the feudal to the capitalist age, Sollers alludes in a manner not

particularly subtle that his novel, like the *Divine Comedy,* rejoins its own epoch's revolutionary transition: through it, "A NEW MYTHICAL STORY" (capitalized in the text) has been set up.(Sollers 1968b, p. 324) Kristeva will go even further by comparing texts of this kind to ancient sacred hymns. (Kristeva 1969, p. 278) While the transition may have turned out to be not exactly of the kind Sollers imagined at this point, a profound turbulence, which has only deepened in the subsequent decades, is masterfully staged in *Numbers*. Derrida diagnoses it by calling the novel a "textual machine" (Derrida 1993, p. 292) and pointing out that Sollers' numbers "proclaim themselves the contemporaries and inhabitants of" – and Derrida quotes Sollers here – "'cities where the mute machines are henceforth capable of reading, deciphering, counting, writing, and remembering…'" (Derrida 1993, p. 295) Derrida is warning:

"No one is allowed on these premises if he is afraid of machines and if he still believes that literature, and perhaps even thought, ought to exorcise the machine, the two having nothing to do with each other."(Derrida 1993, p. 292)

Afraid or not, obligated rather than allowed in those cities, here we are, facing three legendary beasts.

And the game may begin.

All we need is a trigger.

A number of them.

Triggers

My subtitle was prompted by Jean-Michel Lou who calls *Numbers* a "textual machine" (referring to Derrida here), for which he has not found the *mode d'emploi.* (Lou 2012, p. 35) He nevertheless proceeds to operate this machine using the Chinese characters in Sollers' novel as – to put it in terms of Derrida's first subtitle in "Dissemination" – *déclenchemen*t. Or trigger, as the word has been translated by Barbara Johnson. The word, in this case as in many other cases in both Derrida's and Kristeva's essays, including their titles, is derived from the novel. It makes its appearance early on – in fact in the first part of the first carré – in the sentence,

"Because of something [a word – *une parole*] said in another language, accentuated, repeated, sung – and straightway forgotten-, I knew that a new story had been triggered off." (Sollers 1968c, p. 12; Derrida 1993, p. 292)

A new story was triggered off by a word sung in another language. Which word was it, in which language? Well, it was straightway forgotten. Like the elusive flavour of the madeleine out of which there will emerge Combray and Proust's entire project for the search of lost time, the new story, *nuovo ludo*, of *Numbers* will be triggered by the singing sound of an unintelligible and forgotten word. Had this word anything to do with "her body" described in the previous paragraph? We have every reason to believe so. Julia Kristeva – to whom, with her name Юлия written in Cyrillic, the novel is dedicated - reinforces this impression by calling

the "non-person of the other sex" the "trigger," *déclencheu*r, or should we say *déclencheuse*, for a game (*jeu*) between the I *(je*) and she (*elle*) and describing this *jeu/ je* as *joyau* (jewel), Sollers real surname being Joyaux:

"In this way, as a game between "I" and "she", a jewel bringing together in a multitude of fragments the irreconcilable terms of "me" and the "non-person", masculine and feminine, the subject shatters its unity by introducing, as a trigger for this infinitisation, the non-person of the other sex." (Kristeva 1969, p. 354)

With Kristeva, the trigger unlocks the shattering and infinitisation of the subject and the process she describes as *signifiance*, the constant making and unmaking of signs and the subject in poetic language. Although the word occurs late in her text, and in a rather unemphatic manner, it nevertheless indicates the switch – the jewel, so to say - which sets in motion her own pursuit of engendering the formula. It is Derrida, however, who activates *déclechemen*t's multiple meanings, triggering its conceptual scope and, in a typical mise-en-abime, turning the word itself into the trigger of his own text. More polysemous than its English counterpart, *déclenchement* refers to the automatic release of a mechanism and the device or act of setting in motion or stopping a machine but it can also mean to unlock by lifting a latch or to begin to speak, "unclench one's teeth." These clarifications are provided as dictionary quotations and placed as epigraphs preceding the part titled "The Trigger [Le déclechement]" so one might expect that they promise to unlock the meaning of the novel as an automatic speech production. Something of a sort does happen. Derrida's first sentence immediately after the epigraphs states that,

"These *Numhers* enumerate themselves, write themselves, read themselves. By themselves. Hence they get themselves remarked right away, and every new brand [marque] of reading has to subscribe to their program."(Derrida 1993, p. 290)

Derrida says nothing that Sollers has not already asserted in and about his novel and correctly claims that his approach to the novel as a machine is "authorized" by it. All that its reading can do is trigger again its operations. The reading, any reading, has to subscribe to the *Numbers*' program, to their "presentation, commentary, interpretation, review, account, or inventory" (Derrida 1993, p. 294), which inevitably means repetition: a repetition of repetition since the "new story" is, Derrida notes, "born of repetition even in its first occurrence" – for, to quote Sollers comment about triggering the new story, "How many times had that happened?" (Sollers 1968c, p. 292; Derrida 1993, p. 292)

Years later Sollers will describe what he did in *Drama* and *Numbers* as "spiritual exercises" driven by the desire "to build a mechanism of perpetual motion, the world writing itself and reading itself, the book becoming the world... I felt as if I was touching, by tracing the words, a "geometrical," "algebraic," "magical" background... I wanted to really separate myself from my body, to become only the interlacing of syllables and letters... wake up not in myself but on the page..."(Sollers 1981, pp. 100 – 101)

With Derrida, then, "the trigger" triggers his analysis of *Numbers*, setting in motion the novel's program of going beyond mimesis, figuration, representation, subjectivity, or authorship; "unclenching" the text's infinite self-generation, its incessant birth from the consumption of other texts, its constant resumption of emergent meanings. In her altogether different perspective – the nature of the present enquiry does not allow me to dwell on the Kristeva-Derrida theoretical differences here – Kristeva directly challenges "the process of technocratisation of the so-called 'human' sciences" with her conceptualization of "text" as "readable only when we traverse *vertically* its genesis"(Kristeva 1969, p. 280). In the 1960s unlocking this type of "text" or "writing" - conceptually and as avant-garde practice - was summoned as capable of withstanding the flood of spurious images in the mass media, the sleek rhetoric of propaganda, and the flattening effects of technologies on literature and the arts. Today, when the society of the spectacle has reached new levels in cities where machines are no longer that mute, a new shade in the meaning of "trigger" (and likewise of "*déclechement*") has emerged. Sequences in computer games are triggered. In games with multiple choices certain actions or dialogue options can trigger divergent plot lines. The sequences can be scripted, procedurally generated, or, as players try sometimes to do, broken. In any case, the trigger marks the interaction between the player and the mechanics of the game: the degree of freedom or algorithmic dependency, of uniqueness or repetition, which this interaction involves, is a matter of on-going controversies.

Derrida's claim that the reading of Sollers' novel has no option but to follow the novel's program places its reading in the vicinity of this triggering. The trigger's repetitive novelty leaves no space for priority: it always inserts itself as a new repetition and a repetition of the new.(Nikolchina 2017) Kristeva confirms the same status of her text: her "type of discourse," she says, has been "foreseen" by the novel because *Numbers* "is a text whose very specificity requires that while practicing in its *formulas* the laws of this phenomenon of which its formulas are the *residue*, it represents in its narrative, that is to say at the level of what is narrated, the theoretical, epistemological or political principles in which what is *written* can be *said*." (Kristeva 1969, p. 289)

This entanglement of the novel with its interpretations (it seems impossible to say about it something that it has not already "enumerated") has the already noted perplexing result of rendering the two essays not only very different but also completely autonomous. It is precisely by following the rules of the novel's game (its "laws" – *Laws* will be the title of Sollers next novel rounding up *Drama* and *Numbers* into a trilogy) that Kristeva and Derrida *produce their own replays* rather than provide literary criticism or use *Numbers* as a philosophical example. This is not to say that their essays do not include analyses of the novel: they do, and in doing so they arguably take different directions. Yet they do this by sticking to Sollers' rules whose very rigidity and comprehensiveness produce a massive residue, which

cannot be subsumed or reduced. For, to utilize at this point the availability of two words for *jeu* in English, *play is always in excess of the game*. It is "supernumerary." If I prefer the video game analogy here rather than stick to theatre, scenography, and the putting on stage, which figure in all three texts, it is because of the greater visibility of the ontological leap between the game as coding, algorithm, database, automatic *déclenchement*, on the one hand, and, on the other, playing as an interaction triggering the repetition of "new stories" and as non-computable experience, unique in its sensory, embodied, biographical and material transpiring, ultimately extendable into the "generalized text" of the social and the political world. Today's encounter with LLM-s has added a new dimension to this leap which, conceptually, belongs to the philosophical domain of negativity. With their various layers the replays of *Numbers* do offer "a new mythical story" of this leap.

1. Literal. Enumerating (themselves)

Derrida suggests in so many ways and, in fact, directly states that *Numbers* "comprehend all discourses you can have proffered about them." (Derrida 1993, p. 359) Kristeva, as quoted above, claims that her discourse has been foreseen by the novel. The past tense of the novel (*imparfait*) overflows, Derrida tells us, the prior future (*futur antérieur*) of its interpretations. So, to ask again, what are the two essays doing? Well, they add more numbers. The multiplication of which Jean-Michel Lou speaks, when he says that Derrida and Kristeva multiply the complexity of *Numbers*, should be taken literally. They multiply.

Several novels after *Numbers* Philippe Sollers will call himself a "practitioner of sets and nothing but a practitioner of sets... : another way of saying: *I am a theatre*..." (Sollers 1991) Through its title the novel *Numbers* makes this obvious, he notes, but before and after it, this is what he is. Thus, as noted, *Drama* is composed of triadic sequences comprising 64 pieces with reference to both the chess board and the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching*. The *I Ching* hexagrams are composed by combinations of eight trigrams, which in their turn involve two possible states of two fundamental lines, Yin and Yang, female and male: a gender carré. Both Kristeva and Derrida take *Drama* into account pointing out that *Numbers* is a continuation of the previous novel and is itself open to continuation.

In short, although "these" *Numbers* have foreseen and overflow all their prior futures they nevertheless allow for more… numbers. Derrida's essay consists of ten parts – this condensation of Sollers' 100 parts to 10 is justified through various numerological operations – and an eleventh part titled "Supernumerary." The ten parts are marked with Arabic figures and the eleventh part is marked with the Roman XI. Already in "The Trigger" Derrida has warned us that it is necessary to account for the possibility that what "comes here" – i.e. "this" text which he is reluctant to call "his" – might be inscribed as a supernumerary. (Derrida 1993, p. 292) The supernumerary is hence both an extra eleventh part switching to a different

notation of numbers *and* the collection of the previous ten parts. Derrida does not speak explicitly of sets at this point[7] but his description of the supernumerary as being part of and exceeding the *Numbers* turns it into the power set of *Numbers*. Or, alternatively, into the eleventh sephiroth of the Kabbalah, the Da'at, which is not exactly a sephiroth (safar means "to count" and sephiroth, Derrida reminds us (Derrida 1993, p. 342), has been translated as, among other things, numerations) since it is all ten sephiroth counted as one, i.e. once again their power set.

Thus, apart from having a lot to say about numerology in general and about the figures 10, 4, and the square of 10 with a view to the *carrés* forming the 100 parts of Sollers' novel, Derrida constructs his own text as the power set of *Numbers*. What does Kristeva do? To begin with, up and against Derrida's supernumerary (*surnombre*) she also adds a term – *le nombrant*, a now rare way to designate in French an ordinal number. I have dedicated a separate text to the mysteries surrounding this term, however, not with a view to Kristeva's reading of Sollers' novel but with a view to her future work whose program we might follow back to this moment in time.(Nikolchina 2024) The question that I will foreground here concerns the partition of her own essay into six parts. Not 10, not 4, not 10 squared = 100, but 6. A hexagram? Which one?

Speaking of Sollers' earlier novel, *Drama*, Philippe Forest, whose interpretation of Sollers' novels includes subtle and profound Chinese references, finds it impossible to highlight a direct link between the *Drama* triadic sequences and the hexagrams of *I Ching*. He makes an exception for the last two sections of the novel which he connects to hexagram 63 – "Already completed," and 64, "Not yet completed." (Forest 1992, p. 126) Completion is followed by incompletion: this *I Ching* wisdom of perpetual change fits perfectly the openness of *Numbers*. Still, looking for direct derivation of what goes on in the novels from their numeric references might not be the best idea (*Numbers* contains 100 parts but its connection to Dante is far from repeating what goes on in the 100 Cantos of *Divine Comedy*). The same applies to the "hexagrammatic" structuring of Kristeva's essay which, nevertheless, not only elaborates conceptually but also performs the sequencing from number to meaning to myth, which *I Ching* exemplifies.

At this point I will introduce another puzzle. As I mentioned above, the novel is dedicated to Julia, written in Cyrillic. Now as it happens, in Bulgarian the pronunciation of the name begins with iu, as it would be in its original Latin. It thus contains only one proper consonant, l, the most liquid one of them all, so liquid that in certain regions it approaches the pronunciation of w and in pronouncing this name it might simply disappear. The pronunciation of the name, hence, would be something like IOUIA.

Now in the third part of the first carré in *Numbers*, a "formula" appears, which has drawn the attention of both Derrida and Kristeva but also of Forest and Lou with everyone providing various thoughts about it, mostly concerned with voice,

vowels, and sonority. According to Kristeva, "sequence 3 summarizes the emergence that the other sequences will take up, orchestrate, amplify."(Julia Kristeva 1969, p. 315) The formula is I-O-U-I-A-I-. While Kristeva calls this formula "infinitely devoid of meaning" I have no doubt that it liquifies Julia's name – responding to or, perhaps, repeating the forgotten singing word which marks the birth of the new story. The question is why there is an extra "I" at the end.

Kristeva ties this "I" to red (via Rimbaud's poem "Vowels") and to burning (because of things that precede it in the sequence). Immediately after the "I" there is a Chinese character – the first one of many to follow later in the novel.[8] The hieroglyph is pronounced "i" and signifies "different." Kristeva can hence connect it to Leibniz's differential, which plays an important role in her conceptual apparatus. She also adds, however, that the sound of "different" is like the sound for the Chinese word for "one." Lou objects to this because the sound might be the same but not the tone: to a Chinese ear, the two sounds would not be the same. The point, however, is that Kristeva is discussing the transformation of the infinitely meaningless string of sounds I-O-U-I-A-I- (whatever we may think about its connection to Julia) and, more concretely, the meaningless supernumerary "I" at the end. Whether it would be intoned one way or another, and what meanings the "i" might take, is a matter of infinite possibilities in languages past, present, and future: this is the quintessence of Kristeva's discussion of engendering and of the hieroglyph as marking infinity in a point. Surely the burning redness of "I" is not a fact engraved in stone. What matters is that, via Kristeva's reading of the formula, these meanings germinate: red, burning, different, one.

I cannot help but notice, however, that with the addition of the extra "I" the letters of the formula are now 6. Moreover, if we ascribe, according to the oldest game in town, numerical quantities to the letters corresponding to their place in the alphabet, we obtain 9 +15 + 21 + 9 + 1 + 9. Their sum is 64, the number of hexagrams in the *I Ching*. Now 64 = 6+4 = 10 = 1+0 = 1. One.

We get:

I = 9.

I (hieroglyph) = 1.

I-O-U-I-A-I = 64 = 1

Hexagram 1: The Creative.

Hexagram 64: Not yet completed.

In Canto XXX of "Purgatory" – which is the 64th Canto of *Divine Comedy* – Beatrice appears to take over as Dante's guide in "Paradise".

"Beatrice *is a* 9, says Dante." (Sollers 1983, p. 23)

2. Allegorical. Writing (themselves)

When Sollers calls himself a practitioner of sets, he specifies that he is not a mathematician. So what is this practicing of sets about? Obviously, it is about writ-

ing – the writing of novels like *Numbers*. Why is Beatrice a 9? Dante has a number of things to say about this; and so does Sollers. Beatrice is a 9 because 9 is all those other things. Numerology permeates Dante's work on all levels. Still, Dante does not write about 9 showing him the way, he writes about Beatrice. The nines becoming Beatrice, enumerating becoming writing – this is the mystery allegorized by Sollers' *Numbers*, the new mythical story, in which the other two players partake. Derrida and Kristeva add numbers and multiply Sollers' *Numbers* while altering the numbers encoded in their texts so that these enumerations merge with the *déclenchement*, the triggering of their own writing. These actions problematize and are accompanied by an intertextual redistribution which takes the form of a "tissue of quotations" – before Derrida's essay being a tissue of quotation, Sollers' novel is. Sollers calls these quotations *prélèvements*, borrowings. Barthes justifies them by asserting that "what writers have long called the "real" is itself only a system, a flow of writings extended to infinity: the world is always already written." (Barthes 1979, p. 51) Forest points out that Kristeva's famous term intertextuality was derived from her work on Bakhtin and to no lesser degree from her work on Sollers' novels. (Forest 1995, p. 259) The term having been coined, *Numbers* can be described as an "intertextual play with quotations" (Forest 1992, p. 107)

"The text, as we can see, presents itself as a montage that assembles, in an unprecedented configuration, the texts which it sees itself as rewriting: any text is no more than a tissue of quotations." (Forest 1992, p. 110) Curiously, Forest says almost word for word the same thing when he implies – as quoted above – that Derrida "set himself the task to dislodge Sollers from the place of his own creation." (Forest 1995, p. 401) It turns out, however, that quoting plentifully both from the novel and from its network of borrowings, enlarging and amassing this network in various directions, Kristeva and Derrida simply reiterate the procedures of *Numbers*: they follow its "rules," they play its game. The result is that they reassemble their own texts in unprecedented configurations.

The "borrowings" are massive: from Pythagoras to French surrealism, from *I Ching* to Mao, from the *Vedas* to Lacan. Ancient sacred texts, *Kabbalah*, poets and philosophers of all times and places, mathematics, linguistics, but also colors, sounds, motifs, drawings, hieroglyphs, subtle echoes merge with neologisms and words from other languages in this flow. Kristeva frequently indicates her sources; Derrida sometimes does; Sollers has it as a principle not to. No wonder *Numbers* – and, in a different way, "Engendering the Formula" – present challenges which translators in English have so far evaded. For all its difficulties, conceptual and stylistic, Derrida's essay is the most accessible one.

For Sollers, the intertextual layer is intermediate: it is situated between the deep layer, which includes numbers, and the superficial one, which includes "words, rhymes, sentences, sequences, "patterns" (Sollers 1968b, p. 324). The intermediate layer is the layer of materiality and corporeality. Unlike Dante for whom the lowest

level is the most corporeal and material, Sollers positions the body – as fractured and incessantly pulverized intertextuality – in the in-between layer. The spiritual exercises, as he describes them later, for the disappearance of the body, involve the shattering of the body into fragments, into bits and pieces of other texts, of dreams, of myths, which, presumably after having touched the algebraic, geometric, magical background, reconstitute the body – a body that has nothing to do with anatomy - on the page through this *jeu de je*, game of the I. "Writing takes place when the whole (of the I, *je*) becomes a game (*jeu*)." (Risset 1968, p. 268) It is this level that "relaunches the narrative function" (Sollers 1968b, p. 324).

"Dissemination" and "engendering" are used in close proximity in sequence 4.48. The sequence takes us from "a dissemination without images, without earth, the leap out of the marked accumulated pain" to the question how "not to keep your body but constantly beyond the muscles to find the air without consciousness or to touch, like a colour, the granulated, smooth energy, the surface of engendering and of erasure..." (Sollers 1968c, p. 64) Extracting the terms in their titles from this passing of the "I" into text ("more and more lost in the text, posed, stopped in a corner of the text and no longer really doing anything but passing" (Sollers 1968c, p. 62)), Kristeva and Derrida conceptualize what Sollers is doing while performing in their own texts the game of the emergence of writing and of writing as emergence.

3. Moral. Reading (themselves)

Sollers states that the goal of the numerical distribution of the text is to "establish a "scope" which de-linearizes the textual process and places it in an operation with multiple simultaneous dimensions." (Sollers 1968b, p. 320) Numerical distribution is only one way to emphasize the non-linear character of textual processes. There is the folding over of reading onto writing, writing as reading, reading as re-reading: a quotation from Mallarmé reveals the origin of Barthes' better known dictum (Sollers 1968b, p. 321). There is sound, i.e. numbers as vibration, which "triggers off a power of inscription that is no longer verbal but phonic. Polyphonic." (Derrida 1993, p. 332) Rhymes, paragrams, verbal patterns, polyphony, the mute incursion of Chinese characters in the French texts emphasize writing's vertical dimensions, presented in mythical and mystical terms by the Tower of Babel, the cosmic tree, the sacrificial pillar, Dante's Mountain of Purgatory, etc. The dialogue with other texts, the criss-crossing of intertextuality, rearranges the text in multiple directions. Its "volume" is conceptualized (as in Kristeva's 'white' *nombrant*) and illustrated in various ways, including references to the concave mirror evoked in all three texts – i.e. the mirror that can produce both virtual and real images as well as their dismantlement in infinity.

In short, writing is not about predicting the next word in a linear sequence, as we are constantly being plagued by machines these days, nor is it about finding an unpredictable next word, although both happen, both take place, the predetermined

and the aleatory, the automatic and the evental. Writing of the type which the "theory collective" recognises, the writing which is multi-dimensional re-reading, is about lightning, short-circuiting, orchestration, polyphony, forking paths, volume: for example, the volume of three unique texts in dialogue with each other. Mallarmé – especially his poem "A Throw of the Dice" – is a major focal point of the discussions of non-linearity but Dante's work is no less relevant. As Sollers puts it in his essay on Dante, "He himself engenders the generation whose object he is, but this "he," in a certain sense, does not "exist." Or rather, he only comes to be as our reading. … *Dante situates himself as Dante's writing*, as a traversal of this limitless and endless writing without limits and without end." (Sollers 1983, p. 29)

4. Anagogical. Remembering (themselves). At least

The essay on Dante is published in Sollers' book *Logics*. Derrida includes *Logics* in a sort of tetralogy along with three of Sollers' novels: *Park*, *Drama*, and *Numbers*, pointing out "the tetralogical configuration that takes shape in *Numbers*, along with *Logics* and the (IV X 4) four times four propositions in its Program." (Derrida 1993, p. 348) The Program serves as an introduction to *Logics*: it reproduces – in fact it squares – the quartet structure of *Numbers*. This, however, is far from being the only example of a fourfold configuration in *Logics*. The essay on Dante ends with an analysis, divided in four parts which relate the 100 Cantos of the *Divine Comedy* to the well-known claim that Dante's poem, like the Scriptures, should be read on four levels: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Dante is, indeed, Sollers' guide, even in terms of accompanying one's own artistic writing with self-exegesis and theoretical reflection. Dante's role for Sollers is somewhat neglected in the two essays, especially in Derrida's case. This passing over the obvious, however, does not preclude discerning the four-fold Dantesque layering in the three texts. Literally, they are about numbers. Allegorically, they are parables of writing. Morally, they are about the virtues of a miraculous transformation, the erasure and engendering of the subject, and its dissemination in writing without limits and without end.

So what about the fourth level, the anagogical, the most mystical one? According to Dante in *Convivio*, quoted by Sollers, the anagogical level reveals a higher spiritual meaning beyond the literal meaning of the written. (Sollers 1983, p. 40) Perhaps, however, Sollers adds, we could call this meaning "hyper-literal" – a perpetual return to the words of the text, an anamnesis in the interaction of writing and reading. The last sentence of *Numbers* in the last sequence 4.100 manifests hyper-literality as literally squared by a literal return to numbers:

$(1+2+3+4)^2 = 100.$ (followed by the Chinese character for "cube")

Derrida quotes this ending without the Chinese character, i.e. without the cube, and makes it "supernumerary:"

$(1+2+3+4)^2 = 100.$ At least.

For all his insistence on incompletion Sollers tries at the end to encapsulate his book into its "cube;" hermetically closes it off, as one might say. Quoting for one last time in this tissue of quotations, which Derrida is reluctant to call "his," Derrida's essay ironically breaks the cube of numbers and opens the finale beyond the hyper-reality of counting. Kristeva also ends with a quotation – this is the game, after all, is it not? - but it is not from Sollers' last sequence. It is from sequence 1.93. Is it because Beatrice is 3x3=9? Perhaps. More importantly, however, Kristeva insists that this passage inscribes the *Numbers* story, if there ever was one, into monumental history. *Mutatis mutandis*, history went this way and that in the years that followed but it still seems relevant to "… know how to rebel again and again, never give up, never accept the gesture of bending over and censoring; learn to counterattack, to change and to connect…" (Kristeva 1969, p. 371) The last sign in the quotation, once again, is a Chinese character. It means something like "with, together, simultaneously, ensemble... "

A little late it may have revealed itself, but here goes my trigger. Ensemble. In the fourth space which is each of the three texts and none of them separately, their ensemble still holds answers to the question what to do vis-a-vis those cities of machines.

NOTES

1. The initial publication of the essay is in February and March 1969 in the magazine *Critique*. Cf. (Derrida1972, p. 319)
2. First published in 1969 in the Spring and Summer issues of *Tel Quel*. Cf. https://classiques-garnier.com/aux-limites-de-la-langue-la-langue-litteraire-de-l-avant-garde-1965-1985-bibliographie.html?displaymode=full
3. There seems to lurk some drama here, which has been muted in the English translation. Compare (Derrida 1972, p. 320, 1993, p. 287)
4. The introduction to the collection "Division d'ensemble" (Tel Quel 1968, pp. 7 – 10) has been translated as "Division of the Assembly" (ffrech and Lack 1998, pp. 21 – 24) – a fine way to resolve the polysemy of the word encompassing meanings from everyday uses, linguistics, set theory, Marxism, etc. Still, the title of the collection undoubtedly emphasizes doing theory together.
5. The novel has appeared in English with the title *Event*. (Sollers, 1986) Here, I will render it as *Drama* in order to keep the connection to theatre although I am aware of the misleading connotations this word might have in English.
6. In what follows I will quote the English translation (Sollers 1983).
7. He does so later. See (Tenev 2024).
8. The little I am able to say about Chinese writing I owe to Kristeva, Lou and the help of Darin Tenev and Stefan Rusinov.

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