

Postface

Roger Caillois or Aesthetics according to Sisyphus

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From the jumping bean controversy, through his jousts with Malraux,¹ to his charge against Picasso,² Roger Caillois's attitude remained the same: a fear of the seductions of misunderstood originality, a condemnation of the fear of influence that characterized the moderns, and praise for imitation, conceived as the only true school of art. Originality, according to the formula he was fond of repeating time and again in the most varied contexts, consists not in refraining from imitating anyone else, but rather in being inimitable.

In this sense, aesthetics is above all an ethics, that of Occam's razor: "not to multiply entities unnecessarily." Along the same lines, Caillois liked to recall this quip of Valéry's: "Sisyphus did not work in vain; he built up his muscles." The artist is a Sisyphus who must constantly start his labors anew in an attempt to repeat nature—ever One and Multiple—indefinitely. This is why the copy is the fundament of Caillois's labor, and why the best school of art remains what he called, in a well-known phrase, "the writing of stones." "Like Paracelsus," he wrote, "I can readily imagine that there exist many sorts of *signatures* of things: patterns that are at once varied and constant. In ways whose variety is at first surprising, if the universe is finite, they must indeed repeat themselves."³

These are the theses expressed starting in the 1930s, and Caillois's entire body of work—aesthetic, critical, or fictional—bears traces of them. The few titles that follow will make it possible to better grasp the imperatives of his thought on the matter:

La Nécessité d'Esprit, 1981; *Esthétique généralisée*, 1962; *Cohérences aventureuses*, 1976; *Babel, précédé de Vocabulaire esthétique*, 1978;⁴ *Le Champ des signes: Aperçus sur l'unité et la continuité du monde*

physique intellectuel et imaginaire ou premiers éléments d'une poétique généralisée;⁵ *Cases d'un échiquier* (in particular: "Découverte de l'art" and "Logique de l'imaginaire"⁶); *L'Écriture des pierres*.⁷

It seems that Caillois's rigors and arrows intimidated critics: the collective volume edited by Jean-Clarence Lambert, cited in note 1, and Claude Carillon's work, "Roger Caillois et la peinture," a Master's thesis in the history of art (unpublished, Paris IV-Sorbonne, June 1994), nevertheless remain useful introductions to Caillois's aesthetics as well as to the unifying theme of the present issue.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

1. "Dialogue André Malraux - Roger Caillois," in J.-Cl. Lambert (ed.), *Roger Caillois*, Paris: La Différence, 1991.
2. Roger Caillois, "Picasso, le liquidateur," in *Le Monde*, 28 November 1975, reprinted in *Le Nouveau Commerce*, Fall 1994, no. 92/93.
3. "L'Apostat," in *Pierres réfléchies*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
4. All of these titles were published in Paris by Gallimard.
5. Paris: Hermann, 1978.
6. Gallimard, 1970 for the first text; *Diogenes*, no. 69, January-March 1970 for the second.
7. Paris: Flammarion, 1970. Published in English as *The Writing of Stones*, trans. Barbara Bray, Charlottesville, 1985.