

*Jean d'Ormesson*

## THE DEATH OF ROGER CAILLOIS

The death of Roger Caillois was vividly felt by writers and intellectuals all over the world. Not only in France, where his work in sociology, surrealism, criticism and literature brought him into the *Académie française*, but also in Japan, Brazil (whose Academy elected him to the seat previously occupied by André Malraux), in Argentina (where he counted numerous friends whose works and thought he had made known in Europe) his passing profoundly saddened literary and intellectual circles. Struck to the heart by his death also is the review *Diogenes*, which he founded and which has been formed by his perpetually needle-sharp curiosity, his creative imagination and his uncompromising precision.

The curiosity of Caillois was united with an intellect that plunged into the most diverse realms of knowledge. He explored dreams and games. These he discussed at various times in the pages of *Diogenes*, and here appeared his famous and by now standard classification of games: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulacrum), *ilinx* (vertigo). He was interested in poetry, in celebrations, in masks, in butterflies and stones. Equally engrossing for him were semantics and demography, epistemology and political economy. Director of Unesco's Division of Cultural Development, working through the famous Ideas Bureau at first, later through the Album-Exhibition on the rights of man, and

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finally through the Unesco series of translations of representative works of world literature, he devoted himself to the dissemination of a broad picture of the different world cultures and of the aspirations and the achievements of the spirit of man. His encyclopedic mind easily encompassed the entire range of the most diverse disciplines.

Most characteristic of Roger Caillois was his struggle against dispersion. He resisted the exclusive (and to him abusive) compartmentalization of pure scholarship which leads ultimately to the neglect of the reference point common to all the different sciences: man. It is here that his creative imagination came into play. In place of successions of mutually impervious monologues in which each specialist attempts to establish the irreproachable originality of his own field, Caillois inserted an element, if not of unity, at least of confrontation. In place of the excessive specialization of narrow research areas, he promoted more than just interdisciplinary research, but what he called the *diagonal sciences*. Not content with just the analysis of the same phenomenon seen from the particular viewpoints of individual sciences (Caillois' example was that of a currency studied in turn, but separately, by a chemist, a metal-founder, an historian, an economist, an aesthician, etc.), he pursued the creation of hitherto unexplored aspects of collaboration at different organizational levels.

Beyond the pages of *Diogenes*, in his last published works, Roger Caillois extended far his all-encompassing view of science and of the universe even to establishing formal and secret bonds between stones and dreams, between inert and living matter, between free imagination and scientific precision.

This audacity, this temerity which he himself characterized occasionally as "demented," were always subject to the most unyielding intellectual rigor. "Never," he wrote, "am I tempted to relax my power of control." Simply, rather than incarcerating imagination he always tried to stimulate it. He rejected the paralysis of dogmas, of systems, of explanatory principles which were too broadly accepted. He replaced these with an incessant concern for intellectual fertility. However, this sense of original research, this taste for audacious innovation were always regulated by a salutary respect for precision.

Verbiage, superficiality, authoritarian arguments were all for-

eign to him. In his great works, from *Le Mythe et l'Homme* to *Le Fleuve Alphée*, from *Babet* to *l'Art poétique*, from *l'Homme et le Sacré* to *Récurrences dérobées*, he presented the image of a writer and of a man who never ceased to enlarge his perspectives and his ambitions. The combination of such rare qualities, here *et le Sacré* to *Récurrences dérobées*, he presented the image of a century through *Diogenes* to realize the first attempt on a world-wide scale of a journal of general culture at a high scholarly level which would answer the needs of an age equally avid for precision, for synthesis and for renewal.

The loss of Roger Caillois is a difficult trial for *Diogenes* and for the pursuit of knowledge in our times. But he leaves us his example. We shall try to be worthy of it.

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