

Anthropoetics I, no. 1

ISSN 1083-7264

Table of Contents

1. Richard van Oort - [Epistemology and Generative Theory: Derrida, Gans, and the Anthropological Subtext of Deconstruction.](#)
 2. Matthew Schneider - [Sacred Ambivalence: Mimetology in Aristotle and Longinus.](#)
 3. Thomas Bertonneau - [Like Hypatia Before the Mob: Desire, Resentment, and Sacrifice in Henry James' The Bostonians. \(An Anthropoetics\).](#)
 4. Eric Gans - [The Unique Source of Religion and Morality.](#)
 5. [Benchmarks](#)
-

[Eric Gans](#) / anthro@humnet.ucla.edu

Last updated 8/11/95

Anthropoetics I, no. 1 (June 1995)

Epistemology and Generative Theory: Derrida, Gans, and the Anthropological Subtext of Deconstruction

Richard van Oort

Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism
University of Western Ontario
London ONT Canada N6A 5B7
rvanoort@bosshog.arts.uwo.ca

1. Introduction

On the surface it may seem odd to bring together two such apparently opposed thinkers as Derrida and Gans. For are not the two precisely at loggerheads? Derrida, after all, we associate with the critique and deconstruction of origins, whereas Gans explicitly sets himself the task of theorizing origins in what he claims to be a positive and scientific sense. But in fact such an opposition, though pertinent, does not tell the whole story, for where Gans's and Derrida's paths cross is in their conception of language as speaking the definition of humankind. Certainly, this moment of contact on the question of language is brief and leads to widely divergent paths for both thinkers--Gans to generative anthropology, Derrida to epistemology critique and deconstruction--but the overlap is there, and thus deserves some attention.

In this paper, I will examine Gans's claim that the Derridean critique of a "metaphysics of presence," economically illustrated by the neologism *différance*, is not merely an unrepresentable space that underwrites (and therefore deconstructs) all metaphysical--*i.e.*, ungrounded--ontological categories, but is indeed a historical event that initiates a continuous "genetic" chain of human culture. Whereas metaphysics begins in ahistorical ontological categories, generative anthropology presents a historical scene, which shows that the deferral Derrida finds animating the metaphysical hypostatization of presence is in fact the very structure of human difference itself--that is, humanity as the language-using animal. Derrida's discovery of the mechanism of linguistic deferral is given historical rigour by Gans in a hypothetical "scene of origin" that takes this mechanism as the epistemological basis for its anthropology.

In many ways, generative anthropology is like the proverbial bad dream of the philosophical unconscious. For, like the Freudian unconscious which provides the foundations for the all-knowing, yet simultaneously unknowing rational ego, so too generative anthropology provides an extensive prehistory to classical philosophical foundations. Thus, just when the philosophical logos thought it had finally expelled its anthropological and sacred origins, they return to haunt the clean well-lighted place of

"logocentric" (Platonic) rationality. Derrida's deconstructive project is indeed an exposing of philosophy's pre-logocentric origins, and as such it serves as a direct invitation to anthropology. Yet Derrida's perspective, as we shall see, will not admit of a possible positive foundation prior to the philosophical one. Thus, Derrida concludes that foundation outside

2

the philosophical logos is an impossibility, since all ontological gestures are "always-already" inscribed within the necessarily logocentric discourse we use. But this paradoxical situation between the language of the present and the language of the origin need not be carried thus to its epistemological absurdity. The unthematizable deconstructive aporia belongs most fundamentally to the origin of language, not in our contemporary discourse. The Derridean performative of *différance* must have been performed at the origin of humanity as the first historical moment. The attempt to recreate this experience within contemporary discourse is a belated ritualizing (as all rituals necessarily are) of an event that must have taken place in wholly more urgent circumstances--indeed, in circumstances that have decided the fate of human history ever since.

This radical inversion of the Derridean insight that representation, or more precisely "text," surrounds human history ubiquitously is the product of Gans's well-nigh single-handed attempt to found a human scientific program based on the assumption that humanity originated in a unique event, the resonances of which can be seen in a continuous "genetic" thread of subsequent cultural evolution. For Gans, the demise of metaphysics and the poststructuralist elevation of representation signal the beginning of human science construed as a systematic construction of the "scene of human origin." Ultimately, all culture is concerned with recreating the originary scene, but it is only generative anthropology that proposes this scenic creation as a subject for methodological reconstruction. The originary scene is thus a hypothesis, that is, a heuristic, which serves to generate explanations of cultural phenomena. As such, the hypothesis possesses a privileged position within the theory compared with those cultural developments that are seen to stem from it. This privileging, however, is not simply matter of personal preference. The scene itself must explain in a plausible fashion how language as the salient feature of the human originated to establish a collective scene of representation. Unlike the empirical sciences, human science must draw its evidence from the very same scene it is trying to describe. This is the paradox of human science which Derrida unveils as the unexplained Achilles' heel covertly present in metaphysics since Plato. Generative anthropology takes this paradox as its starting point. Thus, the scene of human origin is also the origin of its theorization. Gans's radicalization of traditional epistemology is not in the first place a question of ontological categories, but of hypothetical scenic construction, the very purpose of which is to explain the birth of the metaphysical, that is, the transcendental, that Derrida finds underpinning an entire ontotheological tradition as a "metaphysics of presence."

2. Epistemology and Generativity

What then is this prehistory--this unconscious nightmare--which lies anterior to the philosophical logos? We can approach this question most efficiently from the point of view of language, taking as our point of reference Gans's genetic scheme of

3

linguistic evolution outlined comprehensively in his book *The Origin of Language*. For Gans, language defines humankind, thus separating our species from the higher mammals, whose communication systems operate non-scenically and hence can give rise to no internal ethic. But to juxtapose ethics and language together in this manner is already to suggest the need to articulate our understanding of language in more concrete terms, for clearly there is more at foot in the linguistic act than the mere communication of "bits" of information. Thus, Gans proposes a concrete historical scene as a model or prototype which includes within it all the fundamental elements of culture. Yet care must be taken in constructing this scene. For simply to select by way of example an arbitrary cultural "scene" from a presumably infinite array of such scenes (be they aesthetic, religious, or more particularly political or economical) would condemn our analysis to incompleteness, there being no criteria whereby we could thus justify our "arbitrary" selection. This is in fact the perennial problem with all theories of culture, and it serves to point out the epistemological question we are here addressing. The problem is ultimately a problem of distinguishing what is truly original, from what is supplemental. The term "arbitrariness," as its ancestry in synchronic linguistics suggests, is thus seen to be the sacrifice of the genetic question for the relative peace of mind of the structuralist, detemporalized whole, where each supplement may exist equally as part of a differential system. But this "scientific" egalitarianism does not solve the problem of origins--it simply ignores it.[\(1\)](#)

The cultural problem of origins is one of theorizing cultural continuity, that is, of presenting a narrative. The question of arbitrariness reflects the inability to motivate a decision between competing supplementary structures which influence the course of the theoretical narrative we seek. But this hesitation before adding another link in the chain of history constitutes itself an awareness of history as narrative. The theoretical moment of our time--postmodernity--suggests a certain self-reflexivity which hesitates before the traditional eschatological and teleological understandings of cultural history. Our problem with the arbitrary scene held up as an ideal model reflects this. For by thus leaping "into the middle of things" we would simply be contributing to culture in the narrow sense, that is, as a mere extension of previous cultural products. As such, our analysis could not claim any authority over those other "scenic" instances of culture, and any "metaphysical" claims we would seek to make would be condemned to the "always-already" argument of Derridean deconstruction. But it is precisely the rigour of Derrida's critique that forces us to address the "question of culture" at the scene of cultural origin and not *in medias res* where culture has already diversified into an always supplemental manifestation of its originary moment.

Thus Gans argues for the postulation of an originary hypothesis or scene of origin that, following the scientific principle of minimality (Ockham's razor), seeks to explain the transition from nature to culture as a unique event, the occurrence of which provides the first moment of representation and initiates the human-cultural adventure.

4

The originary hypothesis describes the creation of the fundamental scene of representation to which all subsequent cultural scenes refer. By reconstructing this initial scene, we are given a general model which integrates the essential features of culture, and thus serves as a heuristic for understanding subsequent cultural developments. For Gans, this is indeed the only basis upon which human science can claim to be a science at all.

To comprehend the epistemological radicality of Gans's program, we need to grasp the centrality of

language and, more broadly, of representation for generative anthropology. To do this requires a fresh perspective on the function of language that goes beyond the metaphysical understanding of representation as a convenient tool for signifying a reality absent from the scene it appears on. It is indeed only after a painstaking evolution of linguistic form itself that such a "metaphysical" understanding of language could thus be conceived.

What, then, constitutes language as a uniquely human phenomenon? Whereas animal experience is motivated primarily by appetite--animal cognition reflecting the fundamental difference between a perceiving consciousness and appetitive objects--human experience remains mediated by a common scene--language--which is nothing other than the institution of a barrier of representation, dividing the (prehuman) appetitively motivated subjectivity from the desirable object. For Gans, the first moment of specifically human experience occurs when protohominid society reaches a critical level of intraspecific violence and its existing social structure (based on a complex and strict pecking order decided by one-on-one contests of dominance and submission) no longer provides the community with unifying power. Thus, violence typically breaks out over objects attractive to instinctual appetite. The originary hypothesis proposes that the salient feature of human society--language--must have originated as a mechanism for deferring violence. Thus, the first sign is an "aborted gesture of appropriation" which defers animal appetite through the institution of communal representation. This gesture takes place on a communal scene where the participants surround an object attractive to animal appetite which all seek to appropriate but, for fear of mutual reprisal, are forced instead merely to equally designate. This moment of suspension opens up a linguistic space between the designating individuals and the attractive central object, thus providing the characteristic centre-and-periphery configuration which will be reflected in all recreations of the scene. The "aborted gesture" becomes the first sign and instigates a mechanism for communal interaction far more efficient than the genetically programmed forms of communication inherited from the animal past.

In the scene of origin, the first sign--the aborted gesture of appropriation--is an ostensive. This minimal definition of language is all that is needed to institute the scene of representation. In designating the central object, all the participants reveal their desire for the object, but at the same time they prohibit any one individual from fulfilling that desire through the appropriation of the appetitive object. In thus deferring their desire, they transform

5

the perception of the object from being merely attractive to animal appetite, to a transcendental plane where it is represented as universally significant to all the individuals on the periphery. This creation of a shared scene of universal significance is nothing other than the collective scene of linguistic presence upon which all representational (*i.e.*, cultural) productions are subsequently dependent.

Now it is important to see that this construction of the scene is dependent upon a dichotomy lying at the heart of the originary event. This dichotomy is none other than the paradoxical bifurcation between inside and outside that so animates Derrida's analyses. From our point of view it can be formulated most succinctly as the division between the peripheral designators and the central object. This difference is in turn founded upon the primal (*i.e.*, anterior) difference between organism and appetitive object which motivated the scene in the first place. But what the act of designation achieves is precisely a deferral of this primal difference, thereby establishing in the temporal space thus created a unique moment of human presence where each individual becomes aware, through the signifying gestures of the others, of his/her

own presence amidst a community of others, that is, of linguistic presence in the anthropological sense we are giving it here. Now it is evident that our construction of the hypothesis is dependent upon an outside vantage point which the original participants naturally did not enjoy, but it is precisely because these original participants were able to designate--*i.e.*, represent--the central object that the possibility for our own theoretical position is thus justified. That is to say, our own moment of theoretical reflection on the entire scene is in formal structure fundamentally the same as the original act of representation. All that was necessary was that this identical scene be established. The originary hypothesis shares with the participants at the origin the representational structure that saw a scene established upon which otherworldly--*i.e.*, linguistic--models could be conceived. This paradox is indeed the anthropological correlate of Derrida's ungrounded aporia.

To the participants at the origin, their own act of signification would appear maximally alienated from the central object being represented. That is, their experience, though a conscious one, does not provide for any thematization of either the linguistic designations of the individuals or the object thus being designated. All that the originary scene provides is the minimal criterion for defining humanity. This minimal criterion is simply the establishment of a scene of linguistic presence that mediates between the object as appetitively perceived and the object as forbidden by the mutual designations of the individuals. The construction of this barrier of representation suspends momentarily the appetitively motivated act of appropriation. But once this scene has been established, it does not simply disintegrate but is remembered by each individual. To the individual, the scene appears as the gift of the central object which appears to forbid appropriation. Hence, the object is sacralized, later to become the central focus of ritual repetition that seeks to recreate the miraculous experience of the originary event in order to defer violence and

6

recreate communal order. But that ritual and its mythical discursive inheritors are always a supplement to the originary event is the lesson of Derrida's relentless critique of all efforts to recreate the moment of undeferred linguistic presence. This goes for the originary hypothesis itself, which as a hypothesis makes precisely a more open claim than its religious and aesthetic precursors: namely, that of reversibility through analysis and revision. This is indeed the founding methodological criterion for generative anthropology which seeks to provide rigour to previous--mythical--attempts of "originary thinking."

3.The Anthropological Roots of Metaphysical Presence

We have shown the category of presence to be synonymous with the originary act of designation. But how does this differ epistemologically from the metaphysical category of presence? If we examine Gans's prefatory remarks to *The Origin of Language*, we find explicit acknowledgement to Derrida's work as paving the way for the program of generative anthropology. This acknowledgement is significant because it points to an epistemological problematic that ultimately sets the whole project of generative anthropology on its course.

What is this epistemological problematic? Briefly, Derrida's position, as is well-known, affirms the irreducibly metaphysical character of logocentric discourse. Less well-known, and contrary to popular conceptions of deconstruction, Derrida does not deny referentiality or scapegoat metaphysics. Rather he

engages preeminently in what one might call transcendental critique. This involves the close examination of philosophical texts that claim to be based on an ontological ground--"a metaphysics of presence"--which stands free of the deferring structure of differentiation, but which upon closer analysis ultimately reveals that the very concept of origin is fissured by the difference philosophy hoped to expel in the beginning. Thus Derrida concludes that what lies at the origin is not "presence" per se, but rather *différance*, that is, the undecidable double crossing between absence and presence, the very non-originary origin of difference itself. Now it is important to realise that Derrida does not affirm a substitute non-metaphysical structure by which to replace the canonical texts of the Western philosophical tradition, because for Derrida such a belief in an outside to metaphysics, to traditional ontology, is at the limit impossible. Indeed, as far as conclusions or agendas go, Derrida remains conspicuously reticent, preferring to engage in his own performative staging of *différance* than in the constative affirmation of a clearly defined ontological program.

Thus, for Derrida, metaphysics as a foundational project is continually undermined by its own effort to ground itself in a moment of undeferred presence. Derrida proposes in the place of a metaphysics of presence a "scene" of deferred presence, the term "scene" providing the dramatic connotations of an "always-already" secondary, represented temporality that permeates classical notions of absolute and self-contained presence. In his commentary on Freud entitled "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida explicitly highlights the originary but at the same time unrepresentable status of this deferred scene:

7

No doubt life protects itself by repetition, trace, *différance* (deferral). But we must be wary of this formulation: there is no life present at first which would then come to protect, postpone, or reserve itself in *différance*. The latter constitutes the essence of life. . . . It is thus the delay which is in the beginning. Without which, *différance* would be the lapse which a consciousness, a self-presence of the present, accords itself. To defer (*différer*) thus cannot mean to retard a present possibility, to postpone an act, to put off a perception already now possible. That possibility is possible only through a *différance* which must be conceived of in other terms than those of a calculus or mechanics of decision. To say that *différance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of present origin. Which is why "originary" must be understood as having been crossed out, without which *différance* would be derived from an original plenitude. It is a non-origin which is originary. (*Writing and Difference* 203)

Responding to Freud's effort to theorize the origin of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida reveals how the binary between life and death, pleasure and destruction, must itself be clefted by *différance*. For Derrida, however, *différance* itself remains beyond representation, being "neither a word nor a concept" (*Margins* 7), and as such it can never itself become a foundation firm enough to build on. In other words, as the condition of possibility for a metaphysics of presence, *différance* is also the condition of possibility for the deconstruction of that presence.

But let us pause for a moment and examine Derrida's understanding of presence. For Derrida, the ideal of presence underwrites any search for a stable ground or origin that may serve as a foundation to structurality in general. In Freud's case, the pleasure principle was first postulated as the absolute ground of human instinctive action. But some puzzling observations that contradicted the pleasure principle led Freud to postulate an aggressive instinct or death drive which he attempted to graft onto the pleasure

principle. Derrida gives this tension in Freud's theory extreme importance, for it thereby demonstrates the tacit deconstruction of a foundation which would privilege a certain term (here, the pleasure principle) but ends up including its excluded opposite (the death drive). Thus presence can be privileged to neither term of the binary, but rather must cross incessantly back and forth like an electron spinning madly from one subatomic orbit to another. This double crossing or invagination, as it is often called, provides us with the deconstruction of the binary, thus preventing a privileging of either term. Since this process moves across boundaries, it is patently uncategorizable. Hence Derrida's insistence on the nonconceptualizability of *différance* which enacts this unthematizable, unrepresentable double movement.

But is it fair to understand presence as merely the opposite of absence? Does not this understanding itself depend upon a continuation of the binaries which Derrida is precisely trying to argue against? Without such binarism, would not deconstruction become significantly redundant? And do we indeed think always in terms of binaries?

8

These questions suggest the indebtedness of deconstruction to its structuralist-linguistic precursors. This structuralist inheritance orients Derrida's understanding of language--and thereby also his general critique of metaphysics--to a particular view of presence that fails to grasp its anthropological roots. By radicalizing Saussure's understanding of language as a system of differences without positive terms, Derrida indeed exposes the "metaphysics of presence" underlying the structuralist privileging of *langue* as a transcendental synchronic structure, but only to show that it is absence that founds presence, and that the metaphysical privileging of presence is "always-already" supplemented itself by its opposite--*i.e.*, by absence. Thus, difference is also deferral; (structuralist) synchrony is diachronized. The conclusion thus reached is that presence itself cannot stand alone as the ideal point of reference. But neither can absence become the term of privilege. Rather, we must remain undecidably suspended between the two. Thus, even though Derrida can say that *différance* is the condition of possibility for presence, he will not permit this term to be recuperated and thence become the site of origin itself. "To say that *différance* is originary," Derrida declares, "is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin."

But this polarization between presence and difference need not be mutually exclusive, as Derrida believes it must. "Difference," Gans argues, "'always already' exists in a form that Derrida refuses to recognize." This "original difference," Gans continues, "is precisely that of life itself, which from its own problematic origin has distinguished structurally, if not conceptually, between the organism and its appetitive objects" ("Differences" 803-4). Gans's counter-argument does not seek to reaffirm the "metaphysics of presence" that Derrida deconstructs (for in this aim, Gans's project may also be called a "deconstruction"). Rather, it seeks to anthropologize the notion of presence itself, that is, to reestablish, on a nonmetaphysical basis, the understanding of presence as a uniquely human phenomenon arising not from the hands of a mythical deity, nor from an ontological category of abstract ideal forms, but from a mimetic scene of conflict rooted in empirical appetite. Hence presence is here understood as the presence provided by the linguistic scene. In aborting their appropriative gestures, the individuals of the originary event understand that the object is being designated and not appropriated. This deferral of appetitive desire creates the first moment of linguistic designation, which is simply the shared awareness that the object will not be seized by any one individual. The aborted gesture is the indication of this deferred appropriation, which thus becomes not merely an animal gesture but precisely a sign representing the forbidden status of the central object to each of the individuals. Derrida's concept of presence admits of

no historicizing precisely because he understands presence as a concept (and thus as an ontological category) and not as a historically realized event. But Gans reveals that before presence can be thus hypostasized as a metaphysical category, it must first be experienced as the mutual presence of the original interlocutors of the originary scene.

9

This assertion is not ontological but hypothetical. That is to say, the only explanation we can give for our common experience of linguistic presence is a hypothetical one. Thus "presence" becomes not a given metaphysical premise, but precisely the object of explanation itself. That is, the hypothesis seeks to explain the category of presence before it can itself take on the ontological status of a metaphysical concept. Generative anthropology, Gans states, in contrast to metaphysics "must at the very least recognize the hypothetical rather than absolute nature of its fundamental concepts" (*Origin* 38). If traditional metaphysics treats presence covertly as an ideal to be striven towards, and thence as the ungrounded term upon which to pin its ontological system, the originary scene takes presence itself as the object of analysis, deriving its status as human linguistic presence from its appetitive precursor in the differentiation between "the organism and its appetitive objects" ("Differences" 804). "The fundamental importance of presence," Gans claims, "can be gauged from the fact that the whole point of the hypothesis is to provide a plausible context for its origin" (*Origin* 38). The detachment of sign (designation) and presence from their originary anthropological context dehistoricizes them and thus leads to their fetishisation as metaphysical categories:

Designation and presence are thus the fundamental concepts of language. Their "fetichisation," that is, their detachment from the historical context of their origin and assimilation to--what comes in the end to the same thing--divine or "natural" phenomena, defines the "metaphysical" basis of classical philosophy and of all the forms of thought which even today fail to respect their anthropological origin. (38)

The detachment of presence and sign from its anthropological context stems from a metaphysical faith in the originarity of the concept, that is, the belief that the declarative sentence constitutes the elementary linguistic form. Concepts require declarative sentences. But in the originary scene, the first sign is an ostensive which is clearly incapable of a conceptualization of the central object. Thus, Gans claims that in the originary scene, it "is deferral that produces presence in the uniquely human sense--the presence of the community to itself and of each member to the others" ("Differences" 804). This understanding of presence is founded upon the belief that appetitive deferral opens up a unique space between the subject and the attractive object that is precisely a linguistic space where the object is re-presented. The ostensive sign accomplishes this "re-presenting of the present," but simultaneously it "creates the category of the present--that is, as present-to-me and present-to-others at the same time" (*Originary Thinking* 64). Presence in this "uniquely human sense" ("Differences" 804) must not be confused with prehuman appetitive perception of the present object. The latter, as an example of the "primal difference" (804) between eater and object-to-be-eaten, understands

10

itself only in relation to what can be appropriated and ingested. But what in the original scene cuts this primordial animal desire short is the imposition of a collective prohibition which defers individual appetite via the mutually designating signs of the fearful participants.

Derrida's understanding of representation as structured by *différance* is a profound probing from within the metaphysical tradition of Gans's explicitly anthropologized concept of originary deferral and linguistic presence. Gans indeed credits Derrida's critique of metaphysics as identifying the "hypostasized presence" of the metaphysical conceptualizing of linguistic deferral, but he criticizes him for believing that "deferral and presence [are] incompatible" ("Differences" 805). In *The Origin of Language*, Gans reiterates the point:

Derrida indeed attacks the 'metaphysical' ground of original presence as a myth, that is, as content, while opposing it with his own critically de-conceptualized mechanism of '*différance*' or deferral as the true ground of communication. This critique fails to remark that presence and deferral, far from opposing each other as (spurious) plenitude and (real) absence, are merely different terms for the same phenomenon, the original presence being precisely a deferral of appropriative action (73).

Bearing Gans's criticisms of metaphysical presence in mind, let us return to our question of the anthropological and linguistic prehistory which underpins philosophy and the metaphysical logos. In *Originary Thinking*, Gans suggests that "[m]etaphysics may be defined as thought based on the (usually tacit) principle that the declarative sentence--in philosophical terminology, the proposition--is the fundamental linguistic form"(63). However, contrary to this metaphysical faith in the declarative sentence, generative anthropology claims that "the proposition, which is the fundamental or atomic element of logic, is not, anthropologically speaking, an elementary form" (*End of Culture* 66). To begin with the proposition as an originary model upon which to base a metaphysics is to begin *in medias res*. That is, it is to exclude its linguistic prehistory which is also its anthropological basis. Thus, philosophy is founded upon a hypostatization of an abstract world of form (the Platonic *eidos*) that acts as the ground for its theory of representation. Such an abstracting of the idea as separate from its worldly articulation is only possible once declarative sentences have evolved, but the declarative sentence is not a fundamental linguistic form. The minimal definition of language, as articulated within the originary scene, is the act of designation of a centrally significant object. This gesture cannot engage in conceptualization, that is, in abstract thought; it merely indicates to all the participants in the originary scene that the central object is significant to all--significant because forbidden. As such, this sign is simply an ostensive sign. That is, it is wholly dependent upon the "presence" of its worldly referent (the central object) for meaning to take place.

This linking of mature discursive structures (such as metaphysics) to their linguistic roots is a characteristic move for Gans. And it is easy to see

11

why. Since all systems of representation are genetically related, the most economical explanation of their functioning will occur at the moment of their origin, namely, in the originary hypothesis. Philosophy takes as its ontological ground the primacy of the concept. Thus Plato's world of ideal forms is dependent upon the articulation of an abstract world entirely removed from worldly reality. But, in terms of our genetic theory of representational form, such an articulation is dependent upon declarative sentences. The precise uniqueness of the declarative is that it can provide a linguistic scene--*i.e.*, can conceptualize a state of affairs--separate from the worldly scene upon which it is articulated. This is indeed the substance of all truth claims, which require a wholly other linguistic scene upon which a model may be constructed that can subsequently become the object of verification when compared to worldly reality. The

logico-scientific use of language is obviously dependent upon this other-worldly scene.

Yet, as we have seen, language is not primordially a question of truth statements and constative propositions, but an ostensive act which designates a scene of absolute significance. Language here involves, not a system of differences, but simply the establishment of linguistic presence, that is, the understanding that the interlocutors are designating the central object rather than appropriating it. Deferral and presence are here synonymous terms for the same phenomenon--the creation of a linguistic scene. Derrida's critique of presence as a metaphysical category uncovers its hypostatization in the declarative but it fails to note the anterior category of presence as a product of the ostensive sign upon which metaphysical abstraction is ultimately based. The originary hypothesis is an attempt to inject rigour into previous philosophical conceptions of the metaphysical by postulating a more minimal scene of language-use than that presupposed by the tacit philosophical faith in the declarative sentence.

Works Cited

- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.
 ---- . *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
 Gans, Eric. "Differences." *MLN* 96 (1981): 792-808.
 ---- . *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.
 ----. *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1981.
 ----. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1993.

12

Notes

1. Derrida indeed exposes the ideal conception of presence lying at the heart of the structuralist project. Thus, Lévi-Strauss's rejection of the genetic--*i.e.*, the historic--in favour of the "scientific" structure hinges on an ungrounded acceptance of the ideality of the structural present, which, as Derrida points out, can only arise out of "the history of metaphysics" itself (291). See "Structure, Sign, and Play" in *Writing and Difference*, 278-93. ([back](#))

Anthropoetics subscribers may copy or download this text from the network, but its distribution or publication shall constitute an infringement of the Author's copyright.

Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume I, number 1 (June 1995)

ISSN 1083-7264

URL: <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/>

Email: anthro@humnet.ucla.edu

Anthropoetics I, no. 1 (June 1995)

Sacred Ambivalence: Mimetology in Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus

Matthew Schneider

**Department of English
Chapman University
Orange CA 92666
schneide@nexus.chapman.edu**

Almost from its very beginnings mimetology has looked to ancient Greece for its proof texts. For both René Girard's hypotheses surrounding the ethical and ethnological implications of mimetic desire and Eric Gans's identification of the part played by mimetic resentment in cultural evolution, the texts of Homer and the tragedians have served (in the words of Walter Burkert) as "a mirror in which the basic orders of life, lying far behind us, become visible with an almost classical clarity" (xxiii).

For Burkert, this mirror's clarity is the product of ancient Greece's serendipitous "union of antiquity and sophistication" (xxiii). While mimetic theory has dwelt on the significances of Greek literary and religious traditions, the culture's sophistication--especially in matters critical and philosophical-- have received relatively scant notice. In light of the historical priority of the aesthetic over the theoretical, such inattention is understandable. This essay, however, will demonstrate how the writings of three of the classical age's most influential commentators on literary theory--Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus--manifest a debate on the proper place of the sacred in the aesthetic scene of representation. The debate begins with Aristotle's establishment, via critical fiat, of the aesthetic scene's formal and ethical self-sufficiency. Rather than following up the possibilities for artistic and anthropological discovery enabled by this bold gesture, however, Horace and Longinus display a curious reluctance to evacuate sacrality from aesthetic representation, as if they sensed that to do so was, at the very least, to run the risk of emptying the center of its attention-fixing capabilities.

For Aristotle's successors, in other words, the processes of aesthetic demystification came into inevitable conflict with the originary "power" the aesthetic scene retained as it emerged from ritual. Their writings can thus be seen as struggles to reconcile originary or ritual immediacy with the emotionally leveling effects that representation acquired as it became increasingly institutionalized. An examination of these early attempts to codify aesthetic value thus illustrates that--despite postmodern claims to the contrary--the problematic status of mimesis is never fully eradicated by artistic institutionalization.

I. Aristotle

Tradition holds that Aristotle's *Poetics*, the West's single most influential work of literary criticism, originated in an esoteric dispute. To the end of his argument for the banishment of poets from the good State in book X of *The Republic*, Plato appended a challenge to all those who "love poetry but who are

not poets to plead for her in prose, that she is no mere source of pleasure but a benefit to society and to human life" (340). Aristotle's *Poetics* answered this call, countering Plato's claim that poetry is "far removed from reality" and "wisdom" (334-5) because the poet lacks both knowledge and "correct belief" of the

2

"subjects he portrays" (332) by asserting that "poetry and politics, or poetry and any other art, do not have the same standard of correctness. . ." (67). Further, as a reply to Plato's concern that seeing "some hero in Homer or on the tragic stage moaning over his sorrows in a long tirade" (337) will encourage us to indulge in similar theatrics when "we are suffering ourselves" (338) so that we behave "like a child who goes on shrieking after a fall and hugging the wounded part" (336), Aristotle advances his famous theory of catharsis: tragedy "through a course of pity and fear complete[s] the purification of tragic acts which have those characteristics" (25).

The impatience with aesthetic representation that prompted Plato to question the place of poets and poetry in the ideal state is conventionally attributed to the problematic status of art within his "theory of forms"; teacher and pupil differ, it is said, in the degree to which they grant philosophical legitimacy to poetry. Whereas Plato sees "a long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (339), Aristotle advances the opinion that "poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history" (33). From the standpoint of the mimetic theory, however, the real issue at stake is not philosophy, but the threats posed by any kind of imitation to the social fabric. As Girard writes, "Plato's hostility toward mimesis is an essential aspect of his work and it should not be seen as confined, as it always is, to his criticism of art. If Plato mistrusts art it is because art is a form of mimesis, and not the reverse. He shares with primitive peoples a terror of mimesis that has yet to be sufficiently explained" (15). Though he concedes his teacher's intuition that that imitation is art's core element, Aristotle nevertheless asserts that the aesthetic scene's self-containment amounts to a guarantee that representational mimesis cannot threaten the polis with the kinds of social and ethical disintegration Plato feared. Eric Gans puts it this way:

For Aristotle, mimesis has none of the conflictive connotations it had retained for ritually focused thought up to Plato. It is a wholly advantageous doubling, participating in all the benefits of originary representation with no possibility of provoking the resentful rivalry that accompanies mimesis in the real world; on the contrary, mimesis is a purgative cure for resentment, a catharsis (*Originary Thinking* 135).

For Girard, then, Plato's intolerance for poets and poetry stems from his unwillingness or inability to separate "appropriation from imitation." Furthermore, this misapprehension has passed "unnoticed because all of his successors, beginning with Aristotle, have followed his lead" (*Things Hidden* 8). Gans, on the other hand, recognizes the extent to which Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of mimesis differ. For Plato, literature's ties to the originary event remain strong enough to ignite new crises; Aristotle, on the other hand, holds that poetry's institutionalization has effectively severed its threatening connections with primeval, violent forms of mimesis. That artistic representations are indeed "far removed from reality" is for Aristotle their saving grace; poetry's ability to create bracketed worlds effectively establishes safe havens where primevally "infectious" behaviors may be indulged with relatively little fear of instigating communal crisis.

3

The difference between Platonic and Aristotelian mimesis therefore becomes more a matter of degree than of kind. Thus both Girard's refusal to distinguish between the two and Gans's view of Aristotelian mimesis as "participating in all the benefits of originary representation with no possibility of provoking . . . resentful rivalry" oversimplify the contribution of *Poetics* to the understanding of the essential operations of imitation and art. Lying at the core of Aristotle's text is an ineradicable tension between the tangible emotional power of originary or ritual immediacy and the comparatively vitiated affects of secular, aesthetic representation. This tension places Aristotle and subsequent critics on the horns of a dilemma both ethical and practical: how much violence can the scene of representation contain? How thoroughly must--or can--poetry cleanse itself of the stain of its violent origins?

Aristotle's inquiry into the precise nature of the relationship between the ritual and aesthetic scenes of representation is the bold first step that enabled his subsequent discoveries of art's possibilities; only by calling into question Plato's one-to-one identification of the two scenes could Aristotle advance, as Gerald Else has written, "a viable philosophy of literature" (*Poetics* 4). Curiously, however, this achievement begins not by denying literature's ritual origins, but by relocating ritual from the human to the animal realm:

As to the origin of poetic art as a whole, it stands to reason that two operative causes brought it into being, both of them rooted in human nature. Namely (1) the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood (actually man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative and learns his first lessons through imitation), and so is (2) the pleasure that all men take in works of imitation (20).

His anthropological starting point enables Aristotle to disconnect mimesis and ritual by advancing a hypothetical, pre-ritual scene of representation. If mimesis is a behavior, part of our animal inheritance ("man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative"), then the Platonic closed loop of imitation and ritual leading either to ethical action or to mimetic crisis must be re-examined in light of the existence of animal (non-ritualistic because "congenital") "forms" of mimesis. In short, resituating mimesis within an ethological context enables Aristotle to rid representation of its narrowly ethnological (that is to say, Platonic) threats and terrors.

The distinguishing characteristic of the neoclassical art, according to Gans, is its aesthetic self-consciousness (*Originary Thinking* 151-156). While it is impossible to decide whether Aristotle's faith in artistic self-sufficiency enabled or merely hastened the neoclassical era's "discovery" of aesthetic self-consciousness, it seems more than just a coincidence that this development so closely followed the Renaissance's rediscovery of the *Poetics*. But while separating the aesthetic and ritual scenes represents an important step in the ongoing process of understanding the fundamental categories of humanity, de-emphasizing literature's ritual legacies comes with an affective price, and Aristotle knows it. So long as Aristotle strives--as he clearly does in *Poetics*--to present both a general theory of

4

representation and universal criteria for poetic excellence, he cannot ignore the potent emotional force, or pathos, which ritual, drawing on the crisis/resolution pattern of the originary event, possesses in abundance. The famous "rules" of tragic construction are, in fact, attempts to specify the means by which a relatively de-ritualized aesthetics may nevertheless retain ritual's power (to employ a telling and still-popular metaphor) to "strike" its audience. Take the central recommendation about plot: "the plot must be so structured, even without benefit of any visual effect, that the one who is hearing the events

unroll shudders with fear and feels pity at what happens. . ." (40). This represents, in effect, the interpolation of a ritual or even pre-ritual phenomenology into the theory of tragedy. By definition, ritual is participatory, even if participation amounts to little more than directing one's attention to the scene on which an event unfolds; the complete evacuation from the aesthetic scene of ritual elements would thwart the arousal of what Aristotle calls the indispensable "tragic emotions" of pity and terror.

Other Aristotelian recommendations for representational success can be seen as attempts to balance the power--and danger--of originary representation against aesthetic distance. We will begin with the most famous--and hotly debated--criterion: what nearly two thousand years of criticism have termed the "unity of action." From Ludovico Castelvetro in the 16th century, through Pierre Corneille in the 17th, right up to the present century's "Chicago critics," perhaps no aspect of *Poetics* has generated as much comment and controversy as this. The so-called unity of action informs practically all of *Poetics*, since tragedy is defined as "an imitation not of men but of a life, an action" (27) and "the structure of events, the plot, is the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the greatest thing of all" (27). Subsequent critics derived the unity of action primarily from section 7: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action which is complete and has some magnitude (for there is also such a thing as whole that has no magnitude). 'Whole' is that which has beginning, middle, and end" (29-30). Elaborating on the meaning of "magnitude," Aristotle writes that

the beautiful, whether a living creature of anything that is composed of parts, should not only have these in a fixed order to one another but also possess a definite size which does not depend on chance--for beauty depends on size and order; hence neither can a very tiny creature turn out to be beautiful (since our perception of it grows blurred as it approaches the period of imperceptibility) nor an excessively huge one (for then it cannot all be perceived at once and so its unity and wholeness are lost), if for example there were a creature a thousand miles long--so, just as in the case of living creatures they must have some size, but one that can be taken in in a single view, so with plots: they should have length, but such that they are easy to remember (30-31).

In short, a tragedy's length should be such that "it must be possible for the beginning and the end to be seen together in one view" (63).

5

Like almost all of Aristotle's recommendations in the *Poetics*, the unity of action is grounded in what a hypothetical viewer is likely to see and, more important, to believe. Tragedy's formal coherence, in other words, is itself tested and therefore relies for its ability reliably to produce its defining effects upon its phenomenological consistency with a hypothetically pre-aesthetic concept of human nature. Despite his contention that poetry and politics may employ different standards of correctness, both are ultimately subject to the fundamental structure of center and periphery. In fact, it is the unity of action by which aesthetic representation accesses ritual's spellbinding and emotionally charged effects. As Gans writes,

Discourse, as it emerged from ritual, was temporalized, as was ritual; its own duration followed the irreversible progress of the rite, which itself followed that of the original event. . . . Discourse operates within the temporal limits of the original crisis/resolution, which, whether it last a few hours or a few days, is of necessity extremely short in relation to the normal life span of its participants. . . . The elaboration of ritual is less a prolongation of the critical moment than the addition to it of other episodes. Significance is thus originally a short-term phenomenon, which we may assume to follow more or less the time scheme of a

drama, where the speeches of the characters occupy a real time of interaction (*Origin of Language* 243, 288).

Aristotle anticipates Gans in grounding the significance (or, to use his word, beauty) of literary discourse in a ritually derived temporality. As Aristotle writes in Section 7: "'Beginning' is that which does not necessarily follow on something else, but after it something else naturally is or happens; 'end,' the other way round, is that which naturally follows on something else, either necessarily or for the most part, but nothing else after it; and 'middle' that which naturally follows on something else and something else on it" (30).

To make the connections between aesthetic contemplation and ritual participation too explicit, however, is to risk falling into what Aristotle might have called the Platonic fallacy. Hence his recommendations with respect to the construction of plots tend to de-emphasize the perceptual elements most closely associated with originary representation. The three elements of plot, according to Aristotle, are peripety, recognition, and pathos, which he defines as "a destructive or painful act, such as deaths on stage, paroxysms of pain, woundings, and all that sort of thing" (37). The emotions aroused by pathos play a paradoxical role in *Poetics*: while he identifies pity and terror as the "tragic emotions," the most effective formal means by which they are aroused are, in Aristotle's view, "the least connected with poetic art." Though "the visual adornment of dramatic persons can have a strong emotional effect," this is the "least artistic element" among the six constituents of tragedy (29); and while "it is possible for the fearful or pathetic effect to come from the actors' appearance," the "mark and characteristic of a better poet" is to engender these effects "from the very structure of events" (40).

6

Again, originary analysis points to how this, one of the most influential of Aristotle's literary opinions, can be understood as an attempt to reconcile what increasingly appeared to be the potentially mutual exclusiveness of aesthetic contemplation and ritual participation. The non-instinctual attention of the periphery toward the central object at the originary scene must be, at least initially, captured and sustained (for however brief a time) through the eyes. That is, peripheral identification with the central figure is first visual and then "replayed" on each individual's internal, imaginary scene of representation. For this reason, ritual retains a primarily visual orientation. Thus, to define aesthetic excellence as that which resists the strict mimetic conservatism of ritual is to disconnect even more radically art from its violent origins. Similarly, Aristotle's recommendation against reliance on the *deus ex machina* arises not merely from the "organicism" of his concept of dramatic plot, but from his perception that the proper phenomenal model for tragedy is not ritual but revelation. The poorest plots, he writes, "are those that are contrived by the poet," such as that of *Iphigenia*, where Orestes says "what the poet, rather than the plot, wants him to say" in the recognition of his sister. By contrast, the most artistic plots are those "that develop naturally but unexpectedly." Ritual is the opposite of revelation," writes Gans in *Science and Faith* (16).

Nothing new must occur there; the only evolution the rite undergoes is the gradual draining away of the truth it was its task to preserve. Rites die and are replaced by others, keepers of new revelations. But these revelations themselves never occur within the framework of ritual; their privileged locus is the individual imagination, whose intuitions are tested only after the fact by the community (16-17).

Aristotle thus anticipates Gans in identifying some of the ways in which the aesthetic scene's escape from

ritual conservatism enables it to become an important locus for the discovery of fundamental human truths. The durability of Aristotle's theory therefore results neither from historic accident nor scholarly conspiracy: discovering that an anthropologically-grounded theory of the sign could sidestep Plato's fears about art initiating the contagion of conflictive mimesis enables the classical aesthetic eventually to achieve its logical end point: the exploration the scene of representation *qua* scene. Aristotle's achievement comes not, however, from merely denying the validity of Plato's intuited connection of representation and crisis. Both thinkers recognize, as Gans has put it, that "[t]he institution of art constitutes an intermediary third term between the minimal institution of language and the maximal one of ritual," and that "[l]anguage and ritual are each in their own way coercive" (*Originary Thinking*, 122). Poetry, according to Plato, has ties to the more communally coercive (and therefore threatening) institution of ritual; for Aristotle, it is more closely allied with the individually coercive institution of language.

It is significant, however, that Aristotle's attempt to rid the aesthetic scene of its Platonic threats never fully succeeds; as Gans writes, "[t]hroughout history, Plato's qualms about the subversive nature of art alternate with the cathartic claims of Aristotle" (*Originary Thinking* 136). Later literary theorists,

7

--especially Horace and Longinus, as we will see--while they followed Aristotle's lead in centering their discussions around mimesis, found themselves having to steer between the Scylla of art's violent origins and the Charybdis of the emotional lassitude of a scenic center devoid of its specifically sacred power. Although, as Gans argues, the "relative importance of the Platonic and Aristotelian attitudes depends upon the balance of centrality and decentralization within a given society" (*Originary Thinking* 136), the most famous ancient literary critics maintained the belief that the positions were interchangeable by falling into sacred ambivalence: the unwillingness to further Aristotle's desacralization of the aesthetic scene.

II. Horace

Consider, for example, Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Both in form and content, this treatise on the craft (*techné*) of poetic composition is predominantly Aristotelian: like that of the *Poetics*, the argument of *Ars Poetica* unfolds according to the prescribed succession of poesis, poema, and poeta (Atkins 70). Both works, moreover, identify unity as the essential determinant of literary quality. During the renaissance, in fact, neoclassical critics frequently spoke of the two as if there were no differences between them: concerning the so-called "unity of place," writes Pierre Corneille in "Of the Three Unities," "I can find no rule. . .in either Aristotle or Horace" (Adams 211).

For all their concurrences, however, there is an important difference between Aristotle and Horace. Whereas the former makes only one fleeting--and rather dismissive--reference to the question of poetic inspiration, the latter devotes a considerable number of words to the elucidation of the temperamental qualities that conduce to literary genius. Horace's contribution to classical literary criticism thus consists of neither an elaboration of the theory of representation nor the practice of poetry, but of his subtle, even hesitant reminders of the poet's "cult of personality." For Aristotle, Sophocles' greatness as a poet is demonstrated a posteriori, the result of his having produced the "perfect" tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*. Horace, on the other hand, takes what would no doubt have struck Aristotle as a step back toward the Platonic fallacy by reviving both mystery and violence as indispensable elements of poetic craft.

In *Ion*, Plato had offered the characteristically mythicizing statement that "all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed" (Adams 14). Though Horace does not go quite that far in this anti-Aristotelian direction, his very willingness to consider "whether a praiseworthy poem be the creation of nature or of art" (Adams 74) indexes his dissatisfaction with what Gans has called Aristotle's patently demystifying gesture of identifying "the human with the central" (*Originary Thinking*, 135). Though Horace refuses to commit himself explicitly to either side of the craft/inspiration controversy--"For my part I do not see what study can do without a rich vein of native gift, nor what the native gift can do without culture" (74)--other elements of the essay indicate that he may have felt inspiration to be more important than he is willing to admit. First, he repeatedly invokes the Muses, indicating that for him poetic composition was still to be undertaken in an attitude of religious seriousness. Second, and even more significant, is

8

Horace's deliberate and detailed attention near the end of the letter to the social influence and temperamental characteristics of the poet.

"While men were yet savage," writes Horace,

Orpheus, the sacred, the mouthpiece of the gods, awed them from bloodshed and the foulness of their living; whence the legend said that he tamed tigers and ravening lions. . . . This was what was meant by wisdom in old days--to separate the rights of one from the rights of all, divine things from common, to forbid lawless love and prescribe rules of wedded life, to build cities and grave laws on wooden tables (74).

This legacy imposes sober duties on those who would take up the poet's vocation. Consequently, Horace concludes his treatise with a warning: "the rapt poet is the terror of all sensible people: they fly at his approach" (75). Therefore those like Empedocles, who indulge themselves in the euphoria of the *furor poeticus* "should have the right and the power to destroy themselves" (75), for

none of us knows how he came to be always writing verses. It may be he has defiled the graves of his ancestors, or set foot on some accursed ground and incurred uncleanness: at the best he is mad, and like a bear if he has broken his cage bars, he sets unlearned and learned alike scampering away from fear of his reading his poetry to them. If he catches one, he hugs him close and reads and reads till he kills him; for he will not let him go, any more than a leech will let go the skin before it is gorged with blood (75).

Recalling for his reader the "fate" of Empedocles does more, however, than merely buttress Horace's insistence that poets maintain both literary and personal decorum. The equation is clear: poetic inspiration is inextricably tied up with originary violence. Almost despite himself, Horace abandons the Aristotelian scientism that characterizes most of his essay for an exhilarating return to poetry's violent origins. In ultimately rejecting the ethically advanced Aristotelian gesture of reconfiguring the poet as attendant on the scene of representation, Horace opts for the Platonic and necessarily sparagmatic vision of poet as primeval victim. That he would purchase poetic sacrality at this price testifies both to Horace's inability to overstep the imaginative horizons of ritual closure and to the strength of his sacred ambivalence, his anguished intuition that the very processes of artistic institutionalization which he helped to further threatened to erase literary distinction as he knew it.

III. Longinus

Horace's response to these levelling tendencies is archetypically conservative: he retreats, though somewhat obliquely, to the terra firma of the originary indistinguishability of violence and sacrality. For an even more radical attempt to establish the propriety of the sacred within the aesthetic scene we must look to Longinus, whose concept of

9

the "sublime" manifests its ties with originary violence far more explicitly than Horace's "poetic inspiration." His recuperation of the originary into literature, however, is also more thoroughgoing than Horace's, less ambivalent, since rather than arguing merely for the indispensability of an originary moment to poetic composition, Longinus makes the re-creation of the structure of the originary scene the very essence of poetic achievement.

The Longinian sublime is frustratingly ambiguous, so vague, in fact, that it must be approached via negativa; one arrives at the sublime by differentiating it from "that which aims at persuasion and gratification" (77). "[A] certain distinction and elegance in expression," the sublime is "power and irresistible might." Unlike "skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter," which at best impress the mind or gratify lesser order, basic emotional desires that "we can usually control" (77), "sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt" (77).

In short, the sublime is that which is palpably violent. Not surprisingly, then, the sublime is repeatedly and closely associated with imitation--though decidedly not with the "wholly advantageous" Aristotelian variety of mimesis. In fact, Longinus embraces Plato's nightmare by endorsing emphatically the imitation of literary models. Essentially, the sublime is an attribute of the soul, a propensity toward "vehement and inspired passion" and a willingness to undertake the arduous task of "forming great conceptions" (80). Yet these largely innate qualities can be fortified--and, to a certain extent, those who lack them can begin to develop them--through the "imitation and emulation of previous great poets and writers" (85).

For many men are carried away by the spirit of others as if inspired, just as it is related of the Pythian priestess when she approaches the tripod, where there is a rift in the ground which (they say) exhales divine vapor. By heavenly power thus communicated she is impregnated and straightway delivers oracles in virtue of the afflatus. Similarly from the great natures of the men of old there are borne in upon the souls of those who emulate them (as from sacred caves) what we may describe as effluences, so that even those who seem little likely to be possessed are thereby inspired and succumb to the spell of the others' greatness (85).

As we have seen, the scandal of imitation for Plato is its dimly-perceived pre-historic connection with communal crisis and scapegoating violence. Longinus celebrates that very connection, for to be in the presence of violence is to experience the exhilaration of genuinely originary representation--what Nietzsche would later identify as the Dionysian "intoxication" that had succumbed to the Apollonian principium individuationis. Hence the practical recommendations Longinus offers for achieving sublime effects in poetic composition and oratory consistently aim at recreating the "vehement emotion" of mimetic crisis. Rhetorical figures like asyndeton, the elimination of conjunctions, hyperbata (inversions), and anaphora are reliable means of achieving sublimity, for they mimic the gestural stychomythia and undifferentiation of violence:

The words issue forth without connecting links and are poured out as it were, almost outstripping the speaker himself. 'Locking their shields,' says Xenophon, 'they thrust fought slew fell.' . . . For the lines detached from one another, but nonetheless hurried along, produce the impression of an agitation which interposes obstacles and at the same time adds impetuosity. This result Homer has produced by the omission of conjunctions. . . . By these words the orator produces the same effect as the assailant--he strikes the mind of the judges by the swift succession of blow on blow. In this way, with him, order is disorderly, and on the other hand disorder contains a certain element of order (89-90).

Periphrasis, on the other hand, if "handled with discrimination," can add a "lofty idea" (93) to an expression; its employment is most often, however, "[a] hazardous business," because "its odor of empty talk and its swelling amplitude" make it particularly susceptible to "fall[ing] flat" (93). The successful figures, therefore, are successful by virtue of their connection with violent immediacy; whatever vitiates that immediacy is for Longinus necessarily not sublime.

In the end, Longinus is much more daring than Horace in allowing those aspects of art that Plato feared most to be recuperated in a defense of poetry. This willingness to recognize the extent to which culture originates in crisis is unprecedented in ancient literary criticism, and stems, perhaps, from just how far art's institutionalization in the first century of the common era had stripped it of its Platonic dangers. It is curious, therefore, that Longinus' treatise ends as pessimistically as it does. Rather than building to an appropriately sublime climax, in other words, Longinus concludes by noting--with no small degree of bitterness--how sublimity has of late all but disappeared from the world.

[A] philosopher has recently noted that in our time there are men who have the gift of persuasion to the utmost extent, and are well fitted for public life, and are keen and ready, and particularly rich in all the charms of language, yet there no longer arise really lofty and transcendent natures unless quite exceptionally. So great and worldwide a dearth of high utterance attends our age. "Can it be," he continued, "that we are to accept the trite explanation that democracy is the kind nursing-mother of genius, and that literary power may be said to share its rise and fall with democracy and democracy alone? For freedom, it is said, has power to feed the imaginations of the lofty-minded and to inspire hope, and where it prevails there spreads abroad the eagerness of mutual rivalry and the emulous pursuit of the foremost place" (101).

Instead of noting how consistent this argument is with practically everything he has said, Longinus attributes the contemporary decay of greatness to the "love of money, (a disease from which we all now suffer sorely) and the love of pleasure," which have combined to "drown us body and soul in the depths, the love of riches being a malady which makes men petty, and the love of pleasure one which makes them most ignoble" (101). If, however, this is really Longinus's final statement on the decline

of sublimity, he appears to have missed his own point. The absence of democracy has to have played a crucial role in creating what strikes Longinus as modernity's degraded character; for sublimity as Longinus describes requires both freedom (that is, from ritual coercion) and rivalry. In other words, since the sublime, as a theory of representation and art, manifests its originary inheritance as blatantly as it

does by locating the highest achievement as that which most closely approximates the emotional and phenomenological states of the crisis at its height, only in a society relatively free of ritual and political restraint--here understood as the liberty to instigate the mimetic tensions that brought about the crisis in the first place--can the sublime exist.

Longinus's apparent failure to recognize this is, however, quite telling in itself. We must see this partial blindness to the implications of his own theory as itself a reflection of sacred ambivalence, which for Longinus is relocated from the aesthetic to the political realm. Frightened, perhaps, by the violent realities that lay behind his own views, Longinus rushes to the judgement that "being the slaves of pleasure,"

it is perhaps better for men like ourselves to be ruled than to be free, since our appetites, if let loose without restraint upon our neighbors like beasts from a cage, would set the world on fire with deeds of evil. Summing up, I maintained that among the banes of the natures which our age produces must be reckoned that half-heartedness in which the life of all of us with few exceptions is passed, for we do not labor or exert ourselves except for the sake of praise and pleasure, never for those solid benefits which are a worthy object of our own efforts and the respect of others (102).

For all the sophistication of his understanding and elaboration of the generative links between mimesis, cultural crisis, and art, Longinus shows himself in this passage to be susceptible the very Platonic blindnesses he implicitly opposes. In the end, like Plato, he is willing, even eager, to sacrifice sublimity to a communal peace which, while condemning him to a life of half-heartedness, prevents men from setting the world on fire.

Ironically, this banishment of greatness to the irrecoverable past establishes even more fully the extent to which Longinus's sublime can be said to correspond to the central object of the originary scene. The central object's minimal significance derives from its ability to focus desire while remaining inaccessible; in this way it becomes, as does the sublime for Longinus' theory of the operations of art, the guarantee of aesthetic value. As the center gradually loses its sacred aura, however, it also loses its power to transport the those on the periphery, who must, like Longinus and his philosophic friend, satisfy themselves with ever-lower thresholds of signification. Longinus's is the paradigmatically anguished cry against the inevitability of this draining away of the sacred, and against a society that sacrifices the aura of centrality in the name of protection from mutual aggressiveness.

Its nostalgia and poignant evocation of a "belated" consciousness give *On the Sublime* an eerily modern tone. We must be careful not to push this anachronistic interpretation too far, however, for Longinus can be distinguished from what we are

12

tempted to portray as his postmodern progeny by the touching ambivalence of his attitude toward metaphysics. As Gans has written,

Postmodern metaphysics thinks it has purged itself of the metaphysical by its atheism, but its fundamental gesture is still the same. The sacred is irrecoverably violent, so it must be denounced. But the denial of violence is not its overcoming. The historical movement of desacralization operates neither through the endless deconstruction of the originary center nor through its definitive rejection, but through its omniscient multiplication (*Originary*

Thinking, 219).

The sacred ambivalence undergirding the founding documents of western literary theory demonstrates that there is nothing new about the "postmodern" attempt to deconstruct or reject the originary center. That center is maddeningly paradoxical: born of violence, it is nonetheless the best means arrived at for deferring the conflict and strife that brought it into being. For Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, longing for the genuineness of the originary (conceived, of course, *ex post facto*) alternates with terrified intuition of its irrecoverably violent reality. Their struggle to maintain a place for the sacred finally testifies not to their bloodthirstiness but to their honest recognition of the ineluctability of origins in any genuinely comprehensive theory of the sign.

Works Cited

- Adams, Hazard, ed. *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. ed. Gerald F. Else. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985.
- Atkins, J.W.H. *Literary Criticism in Antiquity*. Vol. II. New York: Peter Smith, 1952.
- Burkert, Walter. *Homo Necans*. Tr. Peter Bing. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.
- Gans, Eric. *The End of Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.
- . *The Origin of Language*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981.
- . *Originary Thinking*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- . *Science and Faith*. Savage, Maryland: Rowland and Littlefield Publishers, 1990.
- Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Plato. *The Republic*. ed. Francis MacDonald Cornford. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Anthropoetics subscribers may copy or download this text from the network, but its distribution or publication shall constitute an infringement of the Author's copyright.

Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume I, number 1 (June 1995)

ISSN 1083-7264

URL: <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/>

Email: anthro@humnet.ucla.edu

Like Hypatia before the Mob: Desire, Resentment, and Sacrifice in James' *The Bostonians* (An Anthropoetics)

Thomas F. Bertonneau

Department of English
Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant MI 48859
3e4kkhr@cmuvm.csv.cmich.edu

Imitative desire is always desire to be Another. There is only one metaphysical desire but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety. From what we can observe directly, nothing is constant in the desire of the hero of a novel. Even its intensity is variable. It depends on the degree of "metaphysical virtue" possessed by the object. And this virtue, in turn, depends on the distance between object and mediator. (René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.)

There is no doubt that resentment often finds refuge in moralistic prudery and hypocritical denunciations of those whose real accomplishments one envies. The artist's own resentment, so visible in the Bohemia of Nietzsche's time or in the attitudes of an "antibourgeois" like Flaubert, is transcended in his art, whereas the moralizer creates nothing. But this should only make us all the more respectful of a moral tradition that insists on the right of all to reciprocal relations. *** Resentment may be defined as the scandal of the peripheral self at the centrality of the other which transforms the equality of the original scene of representation into an absolute polarity of significance. (Eric L. Gans, *The End of Culture*)

I

At the climax of *The Bostonians* (1885), when protagonist Basil Ransom has delivered Verena Tarrant from his cousin Olive Chancellor's imminent presentation of her at the Boston Music Hall, in what Olive hopes will be the inaugural event in her public crusade for feminism, Olive decides that she herself will have to go on stage before the increasingly agitated and seemingly hostile crowd. It is a crisis, purely and simply, which demands resolute and immediate action. Could Basil have read Olive's face, James writes, "it might have seemed to him that she hoped to find the fierce expiation she sought for in exposure to the thousands she had disappointed and deceived, in offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces. She might have suggested to him some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, or even the

sacrificial figure of Hypatia" (431-32). This finely calculated allusion makes explicit the sacrificial theme of the novel that James develops from the beginning, when Verena makes her first appearance in the seedy environment of Miss Birdseye's parlor, where Olive has reluctantly taken Basil so that he might get a glimpse, not of Boston but, as she pretentiously phrases it, of "humanity" (50). As a study in desire--that most fundamental motive of human behavior, one which often produces a crisis and which can, in certain circumstances, lead to violence--*The Bostonians* is paradigmatic. We find in *The Bostonians* a conscious and conclusive working-out of James' novelistic meditation on the linkage between desire, resentment, and sacrifice, a meditation which can be traced back to *The American* (1875) and which plays an important, if not fully thematic, role in *Washington Square* (1880) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). While James the theoretician of desire and resentment is well known, James the student of sacrifice as a fundamental gesture of the bewildered community, sometimes of the alienated individual, is less familiar and less understood. A reading of *The Bostonians* from the anthropological perspective provided (as the epigraph suggests) by Girard and Gans will help

2

to make manifest the role played by sacrifice, as James comprehends it, in human affairs both public and private. We will show that, while James affirms desire as positive and understands that resentment can be turned in a productive direction, he nevertheless condemns sacrifice (defined as the coercion or abuse of the other for purposes not his or her own), viewing it as the subterfuge of an ego unable to free itself from desire mediated by others and therefore condemned by that inability to a state of intolerable resentment from which violence, eradicating a malefactor, seems the only exit. Such an ego, failing to triumph over the supposed malefactor, frequently takes refuge in the idea of martyrdom. But martyrdom sought is a perversion. Sacrifice including self-sacrifice is the opposite of morality and morality can finally be understood only as the systematic recognition of the other in his or her full autonomy, including the recognition of his or her desire (his or her properly defined purpose) as equal to one's own. In what way, precisely, is Olive Chancellor like Hypatia, whom James suggests that she resembles? Or what--as we must first ask--is the precise significance of Hypatia's story, as James might have known it? Hypatia was the Neo-Platonist scholar-in-chief at Alexandria in the early fifth century A.D., whom a Christian mob murdered in 415 during the burning of the famous Museaeon, or Library. The French poet Leconte de l'Isle celebrated her in a poem, "Hypatie" (1852), and the Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley took her as his protagonist in a full-length narrative, *Hypatia* (1853), which MacMillans reissued in 1881, and which found a wide readership well into the early decades of the twentieth century. In the latter, the climactic moment occurs after the learned woman, described significantly by Kingsley as a person "of the fancy and the religious sentiment, rather than of reason and the moral sense" (289), has been dragged from the Library to a nearby basilica, or church. Hypatia's student Philammon witnesses the sparagmos, for that is what it is, and Kingsley describes it from his (Philammon's) point of view:

[Hypatia] shook herself free from her tormentors, and springing back, rose for one moment to her full height naked, snow-white, against the dusky mass around--shame and indignation in those wide clear eyes, but not a stain of fear. With one hand she clasped her golden locks around her; the other long white arm was stretched upward toward the great still Christ appealing--and who dare say in vain?-- from man to God. Her lips were opened to speak; but the words that should have come from them reached God's ear alone; for in an instant Peter [her main tormentor] struck her down, the dark mass closed over her again. . . . and then wail on wail, long, wild, ear-piercing, rang along the vaulted roofs, and thrilled like the trumpet of avenging angels through Philammon's ears. (289)

James' allusion makes it plausible that Olive herself has Kingsley's romance in mind, and that she envisions herself, in the moment, as standing in eternal company with the celebrated martyr. Olive is certainly bookish, if not "learned," and she envisions herself *comme femme* as hemmed in by a hostile male society. Nor does the crisis in the Music Hall constitute the only time when Olive has entertained the thought of perishing in defense of her ideals. Invocations of martyrdom abound in *The Bostonians* and Olive's own probable identification of herself with Hypatia would be consistent with her self-dramatizing proclivity. Does Olive indeed make such a connection? She never says so explicitly, but readers know that when she undertakes to instruct Verena, she assigns readings to the girl having to do with illustrious women in history; since James mentions Hypatia,

3

she likely figures in the curriculum. In Book the First of *The Bostonians*, James confides about Olive that "[t]he most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that [...] she might someday be a martyr and die for something" (43). Etymology in fact links the name of the place where Olive must face the crowd, the Music Hall, and the name of the place from which Hypatia was dragged by her killers and with which history most famously associates her, the Musaeon. But others, too, not only Olive, interpret the situation in polemical and immolatory terms. As the expectant audience in the rented Music Hall grows ever more impatient of the delayed agenda (Verena feels belatedly reluctant about cooperating with Olive), Tarrant mere worries aloud to Basil whether in fact he "wants us all murdered by the mob?" (426). Olive, who has earlier opined that it is Basil who wants a "sacrifice" (427), does not exactly fear that the crowd will strike her down when she appears in Verena's place; but she does anticipate that she is "going to be hissed and hooted and insulted!" (432) which, for someone of her "tragic shyness" (41), would be fully mortifying enough. Olive's susceptibility to slights is highly marked throughout the narrative; she is one of those persons who can--and who frequently is--slain by a word. James meanwhile records a "great agitation in the hall [which] rose and fell, in waves and surges" (431), a sign of the increasing hostility toward the proceedings among the audience. The debacle implicit in Verena's failure to appear certainly does threaten Olive's planned campaign and, therefore, the realization of the feminist utopia for which she has high, almost millenarian hopes. Although Olive's own appearance on stage in place of Verena does bring an offertory "hush" (433) to the auditorium, the sense of crisis has not entirely abated. Leading the now affianced girl through the "labyrinth" of "hasty groups" outside the Music Hall, Basil deliberately "thrust[s] the hood of Verena's long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity" (432-33) because he, too, like the girl's mother and Olive, guesses at the possibility of violence. The very term "labyrinth" plays into the sacrificial atmosphere that James carefully constructs, for it refers to the Cretan maze where, according to myth, the tyrannical Minos regularly offered Athenian virgins to the grotesque minotaur. At the climax of *The Bostonians*, Basil (whose surname, Ransom, suggests a rescuer) plays the role of Theseus-Liberator, delivering Verena from her sacrificial fate. Basil himself, on entering the Music Hall, had likened it to "the Colosseum" (414), evoking a gladiatorial interpretation. On his way backstage Basil had taken stock of the "gathered auditory":

It had become densely numerous, and, suffused with the evenly distributed gaslight, which fell from a great elevation, and the thick atmosphere that hangs forever in such places, it appeared to pile itself high and to look dimly expectant and formidable. He had a throb of uneasiness at his private purpose of balking it of its entertainment, its victim--a glimpse of the ferocity that lurks in a disappointed mob. (416)

There has, moreover, been a hint, an ominous prefiguring, of sparagmos: the "photographs of Miss

Tarrant" (415) being hawked in the Hall that disperse the girl into multiple, portable tokens of herself, supplied in advance, which can be carried away from the scene and which will ever afterward refer back to it. The popularity of these tokens indicates that Verena has become the object of the crowd's mounting desire, a phenomenon which replicates en masse the effect that the girl has produced individually on both Olive and Basil, not to mention on the hopeful suitor Henry Burrage and the celebrity-hunting journalist Matthias Pardon. Olive has unwittingly provoked and heightened this desire

4

by secreting Verena away, "enshrin[ing her] in mystery" (416), James writes, while she prepares her for the role of public champion in the cause. The emptiness of the Music Hall stage, which Olive herself will shortly have to fill, is the negative figure signifying Verena's absence; and Olive has kept Verena out of the limelight exactly because she grasps the value of absence as a stimulus of interest. The crowd's density (the people are "densely numerous") presages an outburst, for it is the tendency of desire exacerbated to precipitate in a melee of attempted appropriation from which, rationally, no one can expect to come away genuinely repleted. One might even say that the desire of the crowd, if not of Olive and Basil, has become metaphysical, and that the competition among parties for possession of the girl (her value mythically inflated by their desire) has grown more important than the girl herself. According to Girard:

Desire is the mimetic crisis in itself; it is the acute mimetic rivalry with the other that occurs in all the circumstances we call "private," ranging from eroticism to professional or intellectual ambition. (*Things Hidden* 288)

*** The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. And the value of the model grows as the object's value grows. Even if the model has no particular prestige at the outset, even if all that "prestige" implies--praestigia, spells and phantasmagoria--is quite unknown to the subject, the very rivalry will be quite enough to bring prestige into being. (295)

Gans explains how difficult it is for the subject to escape the mimetic element in desire:

[In highly] differentiated society[,] the resentment of others, like the jealousy of the central figure, is an essentially agonistic sentiment. The resentful [also the desiring] imagination is a reaction against real perceptions that are painful in that they show another in the place that the self would like to occupy. Irrealizable desire is faced with the scandal of a humanly realized centrality. It is thus through resentment [in which desire is always implicated] that the individual comes to feel his essential unfreedom within the social order[.] This is as true of kings as of commoners. (*The End of Culture* 225)

Olive and Basil do appear to be, in Girard's terms, rivals and models of one another; indeed, the incipient riot at the Music Hall can persuasively be shown to stem from the original copresence of the two at Miss Birdseye's on the evening, represented in *The Bostonians*, Book the First, where Verena speaks before the heterogeneous group of feminists, spiritualists, and social dissenters, united only by their eccentricity and consolidated only by the mediation of the girl. (Before her appearance, the company is fractious and downright catty.) It appears that Olive and Basil become rivals from that moment. More than models and rivals, they became doubles, converging disastrously on the same object, the initially characterless Verena herself. It is moreover particularly true in Olive's case that, as Gans suggests, desire reveals to the subject the limitation of his, or her, own freedom, reveals in fact an "essential unfreedom" against which

the ego necessarily and desperately rebels. The "seance" at Miss Birdseye's, as Basil calls it before the fact without Olive's contradicting him, anticipates the rebellious convention in the Music Hall in a number of ways. In fact, the occasion for Verena's speaking in the first instance lies in the refusal of "the celebrated" (50) feminist, Miss Farrinder, to address the group, as had been promised by Miss Birdseye. Miss Farrinder's refusal can itself be understood mimetically.

5



Olive describes Miss Farrinder as "the great apostle of the emancipation of Women" and adds that Miss Birdseye, too, is "a celebrity, a woman of the world [...] who has laboured most for every wise reform" and who was, among other things, "one of the earliest, one of the most passionate, of the old Abolitionists" (50). Yet "passion" in a noble sense appears oddly lacking in the seance, which exhibits a subdued and disorganized character when Olive and Basil arrive. A certain tension nevertheless hovers in the air. Before leaving for the affair, Olive has opined out loud that Basil might indeed be put off by Miss Birdseye's abolitionist past, since he is a Southerner, a Mississippian, who fought in the Civil War who might be supposed to sustain a certain bellicose animosity; but the prospect puts him off not at all, and he shows considerable interest, in fact, in meeting the much celebrated personage. At this stage, Olive quite suddenly "repent[s] of having proposed to [Basil] to go" (51). Ostensibly, she credits this to Basil's irony, as he refuses to take her grave anticipation of the affair as seriously as she would like him to take it. It might well be, however, that Basil's interest in the event as such is what disturbs Olive. Olive has casually designated an object, the seance, which attracts her, only to find that it attracts Basil, too, however casually or mockingly. (She suspects him of mocking her.) When Basil, undeterred by the opportunity of coming face to face with an "old Abolitionist," reports that he "want[s] so much to meet [her]" (51), Olive's resistance to his company spontaneously increases. And yet, like Hypatia's at the instant of her immolation, Olive's power of expression fails. She has thoughts, a maelstrom of them no doubt, but she finds no voice in which to convey them. She is carried along as though by an external force:

She was now trying to think of something she might say that would be sufficiently disagreeable to make him cease to insist on accompanying her; for, strange to record--if anything, in a person of that intense sensibility, be stranger than any other--her second thought with regard to having asked him had deepened with the elapsing moments into an unreasoned terror of the effect of his presence. (51)

As James writes, Olive's character conforms to an "intense sensibility," by which the novelist means that she feels insults to her dignity even where none exist and constantly calculates how she stands in the opinion of others. In this cause plausibly lies self-encloisterment (for that is what it amounts to) as does her preference for the "exotic" (42) as opposed, by implication, to the domestic. The familiar, or what stands near to hand and therefore cannot be avoided, rather than the outrageous, is what is likely to sting Olive: "It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage" (42), as though ordinary human limitations were the same as deliberate iniquity. Thus the "exotic" serves for Olive the compensatory function of an imagined place where she stands out as different, for what really bothers her about the indignity of the "usual" is that she, too, might be "usual." Olive also suffers from a powerful emotive impulse directed at whole categories of persons; these categories reduce actual persons to convenient

caricatures by means of which passing whims, dissimulated as elements in a social program, may be easily rationalized. To absolve herself from the breach of courtesy inherent in revoking her invitation to her cousin (she has, in fact, invited Basil from New York to Boston for the purposes of making his cousinly acquaintance), Olive falls back, in

6

James' phrase, on "a moral resource that she could always fall back upon" (51). James puts it this way: "it had already been a comfort to her, on occasions of acute feeling, that she hated men, as a class, anyway" (51). It is the case, then, that Olive's original inclination to be charitable to Basil, because he and his people had lost everything in their defeat and because as a Southerner he would be in a manner "exotic," metamorphoses abruptly into something very like its diametrical opposite. Of course, both dispositions (liking him or disliking him) are metaphysical, substituting doctrines and images for actual persons, and both may therefore be characterized as psychological stratagems whose purpose is the concealment of something unseemly. The something unseemly that needs to be concealed is Olive's own resentment, her venality, her duplicity. On the assumption of those traits one can easily imagine the mental contortions that constitute Olive's reasoning. Thus: if the defeated, as a class, should be pitied, then Basil, as an individual belonging to that class, should be pitied; if men, as a class, should be hated, then Basil, as an individual belonging to that class, should be hated. As long as Basil plays the role of the defeated, he can be evaluated charitably; but as soon as he manifests any non-defeatist assertiveness, as soon as he intimates that Olive (the Northerner) is not in some manner his victor and he her vanquished, he reverts to the other category and can become the object of righteous vituperation. It is in such schematic dispensations that Olive's sacrificial impulse begins to reveal itself. One would be justified in asserting, at least metaphorically, that Olive tends to sacrifice persons to doctrines, including perhaps her own person. Rationally and ethically, she ought to respond to Basil as an individual; but she responds to him according to categories that have little connection with empirical facts. In James' summary, indeed, "the logic of her conduct was none of the clearest" (52). Nor can Olive so much as bring herself to say directly to Basil that she would rather he not accompany her. Olive cannot state her own desire because she is unsure what that desire really is. Basil goes with her to Miss Birdseye's.

Olive's interaction with Miss Farrinder, once they reach Miss Birdseye's, repeats her clash with and arbitrary reassessment of her cousin. Miss Farrinder makes it clear that she is reluctant to speak: "She had addressed so many assemblies, and she wanted to hear what other people had to say" (60). One suspects that Miss Farrinder wants her audience volubly to insist on her speaking, the more to gratify her ego; and knowing of Olive's shyness, she asks her why she (Olive) does not speak, no doubt to delectate in her (Miss Farrinder's) own superior talent and oratorical experience. The so many assemblies which Miss Farrinder reminds Olive that she has addressed serve as a pedigree of public approval. Olive owns no such badge. Miss Farrinder quickly compounds this insult. She subtly mocks Olive by remarking Olive's bourgeois status. (James' spiritualist-radicals have the typical radical disdain for the bourgeoisie.) Miss Farrinder "urged upon her companion," James writes, "the idea of labouring in the world of fashion, [and in so doing] appeared to attribute to [Olive] familiar relations with that mysterious realm, and wanted to know why she didn't stir up some of her friends down there on the Mill-dam?" (61). This implies that Olive is not a radical or a reformer at all, but a dilettante from the assertive middle class, inappropriately slumming among the real agitators for change. Farrinder carefully chooses her words to suggest that the bourgeoisie, the world of "fashion," are "mysterious" to her but "familiar" to Olive. Given Olive's fear that she is bourgeois and that, basically, she belongs among the detested middle class, this amounts to powerful incitement carefully aimed. Indeed, Farrinder's remark provokes strong

Olive, who reasons (or emotes) as follows. Miss Farrinder, whose social position is lower than Olive's precisely by bourgeois standards, thinks (as Olive imagines) that "the Mill-Dam" (bourgeois Boston) is spiritually beyond redemption but can be coaxed into an alliance with the reformers which would contribute much to the feminist cause, and that Olive is the key to this. Olive, who belongs by circumstance of birth to the bourgeoisie ("the oldest and best" [61]) and lives in a fine house on Beacon Street, but who herself disdains the bourgeoisie, suspects that Miss Farrinder is right; Olive frankly regards the bourgeoisie as comprised of "all sorts of inferior people" (61), inferior, that is, to herself, according to a spiritual measurement. She wants, in fact, to have nothing to do with them, as is consistent with her loathing of the "usual" and the "familiar." At the moment, however, Miss Farrinder has the spiritual upper-hand and the rhetorical initiative. Olive, confronting Miss Farrinder, thus finds herself in a nasty double-bind: she secretly agrees with Miss Farrinder about the bourgeoisie and secretly suspects that the taunting Miss Farrinder is correct in estimating that she (Olive) is a dilettante thoroughly steeped in bourgeois values; but Olive cannot, of course, admit this. James has previously revealed, for example, that Olive "mortally disliked" (57) the surroundings in Miss Birdseye's parlor, finding its cheap decor and impoverished haphazardness an offense to her highly cultivated taste. Neither, however, can Olive rise to Miss Farrinder's bait and speak to the crowd, for the doubts that she has about herself paralyze her. At the same time, James gives evidence that Olive's utopian feminism is a diversion, a false front to hide what she really wants, or to hide the fact that she does not know what she wants. Farrinder's use of the word "fashion," meanwhile, has a mimetic implication, since "fashion" is what people follow for no good reason other than the fact that other people are keen to follow it too. In this sense, Olive reveals that "fashion" really does dominate her, since she takes her behavioral cues from other people and seems powerless to generate any desire genuinely her own.

What Olive really and profoundly wants, James adds by way of a peculiar *non sequitur*, is "to know intimately some very poor girl," which, although it "might seem one of the most accessible of pleasures" (62), eludes her. She maintains acquaintance with "two or three pale shop-maidens" (62) but cannot deflect their interest from "Charlie[,] a young man in a white overcoat and a paper collar," for whom "in the last analysis" (62), they cared the most. Olive's momentary rivalry with Miss Farrinder reminds her, by the most general of associations, of her rivalry with "Charlie." The confrontation with Miss Farrinder, then, does not constitute the first time (by any means) that Olive has located her desire in the desire of another, a rival, a blocking-agent.

Olive's emotional extremity of character derives from desire and from her sense of being closed about by rivals. Such extremity, in turn, is rationalized in dogmatic terms in a remarkably bloodthirsty inner monologue which, as one must suppose, Olive indulges in while she is being mildly insulted (perhaps not so mildly insulted) by the crudely clever Miss Farrinder. (And it ought to be added that Farrinder's mistreatment of Olive provides a telling index about Farrinder's own self-image; the fact that Olive is self-absorbed and manipulative does not mean that Farrinder escapes the charge of being a snob and a bully who calculatedly uses someone else's shyness to gain a sense of personal superiority.) It ought to be noted, however, that Olive could disengage from the morbid company that she cultivates at any time if she so wished. They could all disengage from each other. What afflicts Olive, then, afflicts her community as a whole. These people are so intermediated that they cannot turn away from

the torment that they cause each other. Wincing thus over Farrinder's put-down, Olive feels that "she had been born to lead a crusade" which would redeem "that dreadful image that was always before her." This image is:

The unhappiness of women! The voice of their silent suffering was always in her ears, the ocean of tears that they had shed from the beginning of time seemed to pour through her own eyes. Ages of oppression had rolled over them; uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified. They were her sisters, they were her own, and the day of their delivery had dawned. This was the only sacred cause; this was the great, the just revolution. It must triumph, it must sweep everything before it; it must extract from the other, the brutal, blood-stained, ravaging race, the last particle of expiation! (64)

A few lines later, Olive imagines that such a violent overturning of the existing order would bring about "a new era for the human family" and that "the names of those who had helped to show the way and lead the squadrons would be the brightest in the tables of fame. They would be the names of women weak, insulted, persecuted, but devoted in every pulse of their being to the cause, and asking no better fate than to die for it" (64). James adds by way of comment, however, that "it was not clear to this interesting girl in what manner such a sacrifice (as this last) would be required of her, but she saw the matter through a kind of sunrise mist of emotion which made danger as rosy as success" (64). The violence and fantastic character of this monologue require comment. Olive's ferocious musing corresponds in its rhetoric to a certain type of radical discourse exemplified, for example, by Manichaeism descriptions of the Day of Judgment or Marxian predictions about the Revolt of the Proletariat against the capitalist tyranny culminating in the foundation of Socialist Utopia. All such outpourings, as Nietzsche recognized around the time that James was writing *The Bostonians*, stem from resentment. A weak character, as Nietzsche argued, finding itself blocked in the acquisition of what it wants and unwilling or unable to assert itself against the blocking agent, turns its thwarted desire into a putative virtue and cultivates it, rhetorically. Thus the meekness celebrated by Christianity amounts simply, according to Nietzsche, to the slave's inability to act, tropologically revalued as meritorious rather than contemptible; the positing of damnation for "sinners" (for the triumphantly non-meek) functions similarly to explain away humiliating empirical facts. One need not accept Nietzsche's peculiar and rather biased claim that Judaism and Christianity uniquely embody resentment of this especially crude type in order to accept his general diagnosis that resentment explains a great deal of human behavior rather neatly. The twentieth century indeed offers many examples of inflated resentment seeking expression in massive rhetorical distortions of reality, not to mention in technically orchestrated pogrom and massacre. It might nevertheless be worth noting en passant that Olive's feminism has its context in a quasi-Christian, spiritualist milieu populated by clinically ineffective types such as Selah Tarrant and the prematurely gray Matthias Pardon. These are by no means self-reliant characters and they do indeed appear to seek indemnity for their ineffectiveness in various theological or quasi-theological displacements. Perhaps Olive's turning to thoughts of "triumph" in which the mocking other abjectly yields "the last particle of expiation," on being snubbed by Miss Farrinder, is not as arbitrary as it seems; nor is her indulging in an obviously erotic reverie about shop-girls. It only needs to be added that, if sublimated, resentment can be, as Gans describes it, "constructive of the self." This is because "the resentful imagination sees in the suspension of

satisfaction, in its continual deferral, a confirmation of its own eventual conversion of its own peripheral position into a new center" (*The End of Culture* 206). Olive's dream that her name might one day burn with brightness in "the tables of fame" resonates with Basil's sense of Verena in Book the Second as a source of light. Olive wants to be the brightness or light that Verena already is, but she also wants to be Basil, the one who ardently desires that light. The question is whether Olive can sublimate her resentment or not, whether she can convert her peripherality into centrality or not. The indices at Miss Birdseye's seance do not appear favorable. We will return to this.

It is while the testy *tete-a-tete* between Olive and Miss Farrinder is going on that the moderately poor young girl, to whom Olive will soon transfer her unappeased cathexis, enters Miss Birdseye's home.

Basil is the first of the two to see Verena. He notes merely that "[t]he girl was very pretty, though she had red hair" (60). Olive must take notice of Verena soon after, but she does not at first dote on the girl. (The text suggests that Verena is about sixteen years old when she first appears in public at Miss Birdseye's.) Indeed, Olive thinks of Verena, whose name she does not yet know, only as a source of potential relief to what she takes to be Basil's boredom with the proceedings (she characteristically refers his tedium to herself, as a kind of unspoken insult): "[I]f he was bored, he could speak to someone; there were excellent people near him, even if they were ardent reformers. He could speak to that pretty girl who had just come in--the one with red hair--if he liked; Southerners were supposed to be so chivalrous" (66). We note that, in James' sentence, Olive's attention moves from Basil to Verena. James' syntax therefore suggests the precise mimetic course by which Olive becomes interested in the girl. Basil converses, meanwhile, with the skeptical Doctor Prance, and it is she who identifies Verena for him:

She was Miss Tarrant, the daughter of the healer; hadn't she mentioned his name? Selah Tarrant; if he wanted to send for him. Doctor Prance wasn't acquainted with [the girl], beyond knowing that she was the mesmerist's only child, and having heard something about her having some gift--she couldn't remember which it was. [...] Yes, she was pretty appearing, but there was a certain indication of anemia, and Doctor Prance wouldn't be surprised if she didn't eat too much candy. Basil thought she had an engaging exterior. (70)

Prance remains invulnerable to whatever poignant charms the "mesmerist's only child" might possess; indeed, she shows less susceptibility to mimesis than any of the novel's other characters except Basil. There is no reason to believe, in fact, that Prance's diagnosis of "anemia" is incorrect. It is at least metaphorically correct, since Verena has been exploited by her charlatan father, Selah Tarrant, whose cynical purpose is to bleed the girl's talent (however meager) for all the money and notoriety that it is worth. Contrast of age and maturity no doubt makes Verena stand out among the other company; but this hardly implies that, in a less funereal situation, she would be outstanding or attractive. She seems, however, naturally to resist the obligatory sobriety and preposterous moralism of the setting, or has not yet succumbed to it, and that is enough to differentiate her from all others, and not only in Basil's eyes. (Miss Farrinder regards her as, possibly, a "minx" [77], which we read as a defensive dismissal.) Whatever the cause, Verena at

10

this moment strikes Basil as "the first pretty girl he had seen in Boston" (70), even though, perhaps precisely because, she is "restless," fidgeting with "her large red fan," and unaffectedly returning the gaze of all who gaze on her. Many do gaze upon her; her lively presence has, for a moment, distracted the gathering from Miss Farrinder's stagey delay. But "[b]y this time a certain agitation was perceptible" (71)

and some of the women begin remonstrating with Miss Farrinder to speak. Miss Farrinder now says that she needs opposition in order to speak effectively and Olive, thinking that Basil might provide it, introduces him to her. It would be consistent with Olive's attitude toward Basil that she hopes that Farrinder will outargue and humiliate him on some topic that pits them against one another, but this does not occur. During Miss Farrinder and Basil's exchange, Verena at last makes herself heard, opposing to Miss Farrinder's deprecating assessment of the possibilities of a Southern speaking-tour her own experience of having "had a magnificent audience last spring in St. Louis" (75).

Verena has not deliberately contradicted Miss Farrinder; she has, rather, reported her own experience spontaneously, unaware of the fierce hostility circulating among the agitated company. In a purely unconscious way, Verena is at this moment free from resentment and, to that degree, innocent of the nasty subterfuge that seems to be almost everyone else's style at Miss Birdseye's. To report a fact does not imply, for Verena, taking up the rhetorical cudgel. (We must begin to modify, therefore, our contention that Verena is characterless; her character is nascent, and the question is only whether it will be born or not.) When attention gravitates to Verena, Miss Farrinder gives up any intention of speaking; she especially will not provide a mere introductory performance in a show in which the girl herself would be the main attraction. But Verena proves oblivious to any subtle, or not so subtle, dig, and she steps in, exercising that "strange spontaneity in her manner," that "air of artless enthusiasm" (77), that mark her off increasingly from the stultifying style of Miss Birdseye's seance. "Who is that charming creature?" (77) Basil overhears his cousin say at that moment.



Basil Ransom "had never seen such an odd mixture of elements" (82) as those that added up to Verena. To Olive, Verena no doubt appears enticingly "exotic," exactly because she is really ordinary, a shop-girl in other circumstances, onto whom Olive projects the compensatory opposite of her own drab self-image. In many ways bizarre (she has a "melodramatic" [83] appearance, amplified by a parti-colored outfit of garish reds and yellows set off with amber beads, the whole of which gives the suggestion of her belonging perhaps to some kind of a circus troupe [82]), Verena appears to be exploited by her mesmerist father as a kind of spiritualist circus-act. In conformance with Prance's diagnosis, Verena exhibits a blanched complexion, "very pale, white as women are who have that shade of red hair; they look as if their blood had gone into it" (82). Before Verena speaks at Miss Birdseye's, she allows her father to put her into a kind of trance. Selah Tarrant makes "grotesque manipulations" around his daughter's bowed head which, in Basil's estimation, do "a dishonour to the passive maiden" (83). The speech itself offers contradictory features. Its content is hackneyed and inane, about "the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron heel of man" (84), but Verena delivers it with an "impertinence" (86) which makes Basil break into "a genial laugh" (86), and in this

11

Basil, like Verena, demonstrates spontaneity and freedom from the oppressive resentment of the occasion. Whether for content or delivery, however, Verena steals the show, becoming the focus of all attention. Olive, Basil notices in a telling metaphor, "had felt the universal contagion[:]"

Her eyes were fixed on the floor with the rigid, alarmed expression of her moments of nervous diffidence; she gave no sign of observing her kinsman's approach. [...] [S]he bored the carpet with her conscious eyes. He said something to Miss Farrinder, something that imperfectly represented his admiration of Verena. (88)

The "contagion" in Basil's figure of speech refers to the charisma that passes from Selah's mesmeric gesticulations through Verena's "trance" to the centripetal interest of all. Basil's figure is thus a figure par excellence of mimesis. Basil himself feels this too, of course, but, as his figural assessment of it suggests, he also possesses a consciousness of the phenomenon not possessed by others. Basil now makes known his admiration of the girl to Miss Birdseye, who obliges his approval by leading him across the floor to meet the young sensation. At this moment, however, "Olive arose abruptly from her chair and laid her hand, in an arresting movement, on the arm of her hostess. She explained to her that she must go, that she was not very well, that her carriage was there; also she hoped that Miss Birdseye, if it was not asking too much, would accompany her to the door" (89). Before taking leave, however, Olive finds the opportunity to speak briefly with Verena and invites her to visit her at Beacon Street. Olive's repressed courtship of Verena, who duly visits the next day, begins. Olive gradually takes charge of the girl, making a particular effort to shield her from Basil, as from other suitors, by isolating her from the world. Shortly, Verena has left the seedy household of her parents, on the tantalizingly named Monadnoc Street in a neighborhood in Cambridge, to domicile herself on Beacon Street with Olive, who will tutor and cultivate her, preparing her for the particular role that Olive thinks the girl ought to fill. Most commentary remarks the repressed lesbianism of the relationship. Here, however, with Kingsley's novel in mind, one might well call attention to its quasi-ritual character, with Olive acting as priestess and Verena ("perfectly uncontaminated" [105]) as catechumen, further purified of worldly taint as she is instructed in what amounts to an apocalyptic doctrine.

With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer or a fortune-teller; and this had the immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to "the people," threw her into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes knew so little about, and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. (101)

Despite Verena's commonplace exterior, Olive believes that Verena's inner character ("her soul") "could not be vulgar" (101). But this is merely a narcissistic judgment projected on the other, for, as we have seen, Olive fears that she herself might be essentially vulgar, even while she hopes that she is not. Note that, in essence, Verena is to serve Olive in a scheme of social revenge involving the toppling of the bourgeoisie. At least that is how Olive imagines it. Actually, as her own musings have revealed, her animosity stems from male blocking agents like "Charlie," the Don Juan among shop-girls, and Basil. Although cohabiting platonically with Olive, Verena occasionally returns to her parental home in Monadnoc Place for brief visits,

12

and it is during one of these, a full year after she first appeared at Miss Birdseye's, that Basil calls on her, taking her up on a casual invitation to visit uttered quite offhand and pro forma at an unexpected meeting at Olive's which Olive had been unable to prevent. (Olive was out when Basil called; had she been home, she would have kept him apart from the girl.) Basil has in fact made no effort to contact Verena, although he has seen her speak at a trial-outing arranged by Olive. Verena has nevertheless been on his mind, even

while he made an effort, perfunctory and against his better judgment, to court Olive's sister, the widower Miss Luna, in New York. Basil has not, in fact, come to Boston with the idea of seeing Verena (that is not his ostensible purpose, at any rate), but he is on his way to pay his respects to Olive when he meets Miss Birdseye and has his attention redirected by her to the girl. When Verena appears in the foyer to receive Basil, he notices that "she had developed and matured": "She had appeared to him before as a creature of brightness, but now she lighted up the place, she irradiated, she made everything that surrounded her of no consequence" (229). This meeting, unlike the couple's previous encounters, remains unencumbered by mediating parties. Basil's bedazzlement may therefore be taken as spontaneous and genuine, and so, too, Verena's pleasure at seeing him, which is much more than mere enthusiasm feigned out of politeness. Verena speaks to Basil "as if she had seen him the other week" (230), an indication that he has been on her mind as she has been on his. We learn from the banter between the two that Olive has been coaching Verena. Olive, Verena says, "makes [my speeches]--or the best part of them. She tells me what to say--the real things, the strong things" (230). Verena soon after amends this in stronger terms: "Miss Chancellor has absorbed me," she says (234 [emphasis altered]). Perhaps to dispell a certain tension between them stemming from a disagreement over Olive's feminist principles, which Verena claims are her own as well, the two decide to promenade, Verena offering to show Basil the local sights, including the Harvard campus.

Basil heartily admires the college architecture, which Verena is happy to show him. But "there is one place," she opines, "where it would perhaps be indelicate to take a Mississippian[:]"

"I mean [she says] the great place that towers above the others--that big building with the beautiful pinnacles, which you see from every point." But Basil Ransom had heard of the great Memorial Hall; he knew what memories it enshrined, and the worst that he should have to suffer there; and the ornate, overtopping structure, which was the finest piece of architecture he had ever seen, had moreover solicited his enlarged curiosity for the last half-hour. (245)

The Memorial Hall, which the two now enter, stands as a monument to the fallen, the martyrs, of the Civil War, in which Basil had fought on the Southern side. Particularly impressive are "the white, ranged tablets, each of which, in its proud, sad, clearness, is inscribed with the name of a student-soldier" (246). In Basil's mind, "the effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn," speaking to him silently "of sacrifice and example," as of the "youth, manhood, [and] generosity" (246) of the dead. Verena thinks that the place "is very beautiful [...] but very dreadful" (246). But here, once more, the two find themselves in an unmediated situation, alone with each other (except for the dead). The lovers' solitude in the Memorial Hall contrasts starkly with their first encounter in the seedy throng at Miss Birdseye's, where desire floated freely among the desirous, effacing individuals and becoming itself the object of contention.

13

In their convergence on the hapless Verena, Basil, Olive, Miss Farrinder and the others became, on that occasion, multiple doubles of one another, their individuality dissolved in their chaotic rivalry. Now, in different circumstances, Basil and Verena are at last who they are. Basil becomes suddenly aware that "in a moment they had become more intimate. They were discussing their affairs, which had nothing to do with the heroic symbols that surrounded them; but their affairs had suddenly grown so serious that there was no want of decency in their lingering there for the purpose" (247). At stake is the question whether

or not Verena will tell Olive about her meeting with Basil. (She does eventually but only after having concealed it for some time, so that the act of not having told her becomes irrevocable.) As they emerge at last from the Hall, "[t]he afternoon had begun to wane, but the air was filled with a pink brightness, and there was a cool, pure smell, a vague breath of spring" (248). The psychological condition of the two young people is correlatively "springlike" (true to the implication of Verena's name) and in like wise spontaneous. Although Verena dismisses Basil without commitment as she takes her leave to return home, her interest in him, and his in her, have from this crucial moment been affirmed as genuine, and the rest, in fact, is very nearly denouement.

This does not, however, imply any sort of conventional or "happy" ending. Far from it: James never makes Basil out to be anything other than a young man, entirely too intellectual for his own good (he is always picking up books and reading them while he stands), whose prospects as a philosophical journalist, whatever that might be, are dubious in the extreme. When Verena leaves the Music Hall with Basil, foregoing her much anticipated public debut as the angel of the feminist revolution, she is definitely not walking into "the vales of Arcady" (229), which Basil imagines to be her ideal setting on the occasion of their stroll through Cambridge. She is very probably walking off into poverty and disappointment. The tears that she sheds, James writes, would probably not be her last. Basil's notion of marriage certainly does not hold out to Verena the opportunity for independence which Olive's program at least pretended to offer her. Even so, Verena has determined her own mind; the decision belongs properly to her and to her alone. The only thing that James affirms is the authenticity of the lovers' desire for one another and the legitimacy of their acting on it as long as the desire is mutual. James poses this, moreover, against the sacrificial desire held in common by Olive and Verena's parents, which takes no cognizance of the desire-object's selfhood or autonomy. All of these people desire something beyond Verena to which, in a mysterious way, Verena seems to provide convenient access; and it is this elusive goal, evaluated as more important than anything on the empirical scene, which justifies for them in their minds the relegation of an actual person to mere secondary and disposable importance. For Olive, as her meditations make clear, what lies through and beyond Verena is demonic revenge against anyone and anything that she feels has slighted her. For Verena's parents, it is fame and wealth via the providential medium of the gifted daughter. For Henry Burrage it is the prospect of pleasing his mother by accepting the bride whom she proposes that he marry. What it might be for pallid asexual Matthias Pardon is difficult to say, except that he is a journalist of some unspecified affiliation who fancies that he can profit from Verena's notoriety by making a story out of it. But the very unspecifiability of Pardon's longing reveals the mimetic character of the desire stimulated by Verena's presence, by her being designated as object by any self-nominated suitor from outside the self-appointed circle of her overseers. Pardon need not desire anything explicit; he need only desire, for he is obeying

14

an impulse of which he is not altogether (perhaps hardly at all) conscious. Rejecting all such ulterior suits, Verena has liberated herself from the desire imposed on her (and leading necessarily to a kind of immolation) by others, particularly by Olive. In so doing, Verena cannot avoid repudiating Olive, who must herself now find some spontaneous impulse-to-action to replace the complex mediations on which she has hitherto relied to bestir herself. Even Olive, therefore, achieves a certain degree of belated self-determination, despite the masochistic character of her desire to fill the martyr's place before the impatient and potentially dangerous audience. It is of no little importance, with respect to Olive, that in the moment of truth she chooses to bypass martyrdom, rejecting it as unsuited to the development of an independent self capable of acting productively in the world. Verena's departure catalyzes Olive's own

transformation. "All novelistic conclusions are conversion," Girard argues in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*; protagonists must follow one of two courses, rejecting solitude and embracing others or rejecting others and embracing solitude. But if "the opposition seems insurmountable[:]

Yet it is not. If our interpretation of the conversion is correct, if it puts an end to triangular desire, then its effects cannot be expressed either in terms of absolute solitude or in terms of a return to the world. Metaphysical desire brings into being a certain relationship to others and to oneself. True conversion engenders a new relationship to others and to oneself. The mechanical oppositions of solitude and gregariousness, involvement and noninvolvement are the result of romantic interpretations. (295)

It is also the case, Girard adds, that "the victory over desire is extremely painful" (300), as it must be not only for Olive, but for Basil and Verena, who remain immersed in metaphysical desire as long as either one of them maintains a relationship with Olive and her radical company, but who are not necessarily (not even probably) made happy by their liberation. We can appropriately recall in this context Kingsley's description of the martyred Hypatia, with whom James has explicitly identified Olive, as a person "of the fancy and the religious sentiment, rather than of reason and the moral sense." The terms "fancy" and "religious sentiment" signify for Kingsley--and for James, who is making deliberate use of Kingsley--a certain unconscious response to non- thematic emotions and impulses and cues taken from the immediate scene. "Reason and moral sense," on the other hand, signify a self-consciousness of the positive sort, an ability to thematize desire, and to free oneself thereby from abject dependence on the whims of others. Verena and Basil's exercise of spontaneous desire acts, in this sense, to deliver all three members of the triangle (Verena, Basil, and Olive) from an immolatory unreason over which they have otherwise lost control. Hypatia fought against what Kingsley calls her "tormenters" but fell to them in the end. Olive's worst tormenter is herself. Unlike Hypatia, however, Olive does not fall before the mob; and she does not even fall before herself--the outcome for which she had certainly set herself up. She avoids becoming a victim with the same step that propels her into the dangerous center- of-attention, committing herself to the action even though taking that step might well entail "being hissed and hooted and insulted." It turns out, indeed, much less dreadfully than that, for when Olive appears, "the hush was respectful" (433). Thus Basil, hearing the roar subside, "was relieved to know that, even when exasperated, a Boston audience is not ungenerous" (433). Clearly, this crowd is unlike the crowd of Hypatia's murderers in Kingsley's novel; the sacrificial impulse does not reside in them. It resides backstage, with Olive's pathologically intermediated friends.

15

IV

This essay has argued in passing that *The Bostonians* takes up problems (those we have been discussing) presented in earlier novels by James. This is a fact worthy of consideration. Consider, then, the moment in *The American* when Christopher Newman confronts Madame de Cintre about her failure to act on what Newman believes is her genuine affection toward him, deferring her feelings to those of her family, who oppose the projected union. "You are not a child," Newman says, "you are not a minor, nor are you an idiot. You are not obliged to drop me because your mother told you to" (247). Cintre responds that she can give no other explanation of her refusal than that she is, indeed, imbecile, and that Newman ought to accept that in the absence of an alternative. Newman remains unsatisfied and works himself up to this

remonstrating oration:

"You are not frank[;] you are not honest. Instead of saying that you are imbecile, you should say that other people are wicked. Your mother and your brother have been false and cruel; they have been so to me, and I am sure they have been so to you. Why should you try to shield them? Why do you sacrifice me to them? I'm not false; I'm not cruel. You don't know what you give up; I can tell you that--you don't. They bully you and plot about you; and I--I--" (248)

Why do you sacrifice me to them? Newman asks. But this seems, in context, a strange way to put the question. The meaningful form of the question would be, why do you sacrifice yourself to them? Or why do you let them sacrifice you? While Newman understands that someone is the victim of coercion and that love does not receive its due, he nevertheless remains in some confusion over just who the abused party really is. A short while later, Newman again casts himself in the role of the intolerably injured party: "He was filled with a sorer sense of wrong than he had ever known, or that he had supposed it possible he should know. To accept his injury and walk away without looking behind him was a stretch of good-nature of which he found himself incapable" (254). Newman sees himself as someone who has been forced to eat "humble pie" (254) and experiences powerful "vehemence" against those--the Bellegardes--whom he holds responsible for his wicked act. When Newman discovers that Cintre has been destined to a Carmelite nunnery by her cruel guardians, he imagines that "the door of the tomb is at this moment closing behind her" (267), and resolves to make one last attempt to retrieve her to himself.

The Parisian cloister where Cintre's ultimate induction into orders will occur strikes Newman, when he first lays eyes on it, as "too strange and too mocking to be real" (288). Inside, he finds the initiates separated from visitors by an opaque screen and can hear from beyond it "the strange, lugubrious chant uttered by the women's voices"; this "began softly, but it presently grew louder, and as it increased it became more of a wail or a dirge" (289). Seated in back of the chapel, Newman cannot see the faces of the other visitors. He wishes that he could, for he imagines them to be "the mourning mothers and sisters of other women who had had the same pitiless courage as Madame de Cintre. But they were better off than he, for they at least shared the faith to which the others had sacrificed themselves" (289). Yet even here, where he acknowledges that the initiates are "sacrific[ing] themselves," Newman still senses himself as supremely wounded. Thus "[t]he priest's long, dismal intonings acted upon his nerves and deepened his wrath; there was something defiant in [the priest's] unintelligible drawl [which] seemed

16

meant for Newman himself" (289), as though he were the one on whom "the door of the tomb" were closing. Unable finally to confront a scene that is both "hideous" and "horrible" (290), Newman flees outside. He never manages to catch a glimpse of Cintre, who remains hidden, like her sisters in piety, by the impenetrable "darkness" (289) of the screen, behind which lies "the real convent, the place where she was" (289) and where she would now for ever more remain. We note that this scene, toward the end of *The American*, strongly prefigures the climax of *The Bostonians*, while the latter alters the former by permitting the rescue to succeed. Basil Ransom succeeds where Christopher Newman fails in part, at least, because Ransom better understands his situation than does Newman; Ransom overcomes narcissism where Newman does not. But this change in outcomes also reflects James' own knowledge of desire, resentment, and sacrifice. We note that, leaving off its final grammatical element, Newman's question to Cintre, why do you sacrifice me? uncannily echoes Jesus' question to Saul (not yet Paul) on

the road to Damascus: why are you persecuting me? We note additionally, however, that Newman, unlike Paul, is the utterer, not the auditor, of the question. Consistent ethically with Newman's failure to understand who has been coerced (nothing in the description of her fate suggests that Cintre acts according to her own will) is his project of revenge against the Bellegardes. Newman has discovered that Madame Bellegarde poisoned her husband and managed to conceal it; he threatens to reveal this secret, not to get Cintre back, but as a form of tit-for-tat, still positioning himself as the main sufferer. Of course the Bellegardes qualify as snobs of the first water; they are vicious and conniving. But the ethically integral thing to do, once Cintre enters the Carmelite life, is to walk away from them without a word, which is what Ransom would do. In his role as avenger of personal slights, as a man of resentment, Newman prefigures Olive Chancellor, at least as we find her before her apparent transformation at the end of the novel. Olive, of course, constitutes a more intense and unpleasant sort of avenger than Newman, but the generic resemblance persists. Ransom, on the other hand, simply faces away from those who have coerced and exploited Verena and snubbed him and moves with her into a world of their own, independent of that which they are leaving. These observations allow us to return to *The Bostonians* for the purpose of explicating its carefully presented ethical content.

As Basil Ransom's name might lead one to suspect, *The Bostonians* is a novel that has something to do with Christianity; it is in some sense, the evidence indicates, a peculiar type of Christian novel, and numerous other features of the narrative support this thesis. In James' careful description of the de facto cult centered around Miss Birdseye's parlor--that mixture of mystics, mesmerists, feminists, and advocates of radical causes--*The Bostonians* is a book about the degeneration of Christianity into various low-grade and half-secularized forms. The account of Miss Birdseye herself in Book the First bears centrally on this point:

[S]he belonged to any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever. This did not prevent her being a confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman, whose charity began at home and ended nowhere, whose credulity kept pace with it, and who knew less about her fellow creatures, if possible, after fifty years of humanitarian zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements. Basil Ransom knew very little about such a life as hers, but she seemed to him a revelation of a class, and a multitude of socialistic figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of, grouped themselves behind her. She looked as if she had spent her entire life on platforms, in audiences, in conventions, in phalansteries, in seances[.] (55)

17

We note how James links Miss Birdseye's proclivity-to-belong, as it might be denominated, with her "zeal," the term zeal being related by etymology to another term, jealousy, which can serve as a synonym for resentment. The present seance involves some twenty people, among whom Basil notices "a want of convivial movement[,] even of mutual recognition. They sat there as if they were waiting for something" (59). Basil "had the general idea," which James never dispels, that "they were mediums, communists, vegetarians" (59). Before Verena's performance, Miss Birdseye at one point tells a story, more or less to Basil, in which Selah Tarrant's "miraculous cures were specified" and Verena's marvelous success on her Western speaking tour recorded as though they were the "recognized wonders [of] an age of new revelations" (79). When Selah induces the trance in his daughter, Basil thinks of him as a spiritual "carpetbagger" (83). Camille Paglia claims, in *Sexual Personae* (1991), that James is not the clinically observant "social novelist" that most criticism takes him to be, but rather a "Decadent Late Romantic"

(607). Paglia assesses Olive as "an irritable political ideologue whose summery Cape Cod has no connection to dangerous cthonian nature" (611). When Paglia says that Olive demonstrates nothing of the "cthonian," she means that Olive does not represent the violence and eroticism that animate interest and contribute so much, as Paglia sees it, to the power of literature. One would be hard pressed to disagree with Paglia's sense that James is a decadent (an American Huysmans) and that Olive is an obnoxious apparatchik in the making; but the fact that James is a decadent does not mean that he is not also a perceptive analyst of decadence. (In a real enough sense, Basil does indeed get a glimpse into "humanity" when he visits Miss Birdseye's parlor, just as Olive had said he would, though not in the way she supposed.) Nor is Olive's ideological fanaticism by any means harmless: it is, on the contrary, vehement and sacrificial, quite capable of justifying the use of other people for its indefinitely deferred ends.

Olive's prudery in fact makes her repressed eroticism volcanic and potentially explosive. Paglia notes that Basil stands out among James' male protagonists in being "a virile hero" (611). What Paglia calls Basil's virility (and it certainly is that) needs to be linked, however, to what we have identified as his ethical character. Virtually everyone else in the novel, all of those quasi-somnolent people at Miss Birdseye's seance, require a victim (Paglia calls it vampirism), whereas Basil himself, aided at last by Verena (just as she is aided by him), acts to rescue--to ransom--the designated victim from her sacrificers. The sacrificial impulse in this milieu stems from the milieu's intensely agonistic character, a character that the morbid "want of conviviality" noticed by Basil clearly if indirectly reveals. Olive and Miss Farrinder and those around them all dote obsessively on what each takes to be his or her own intolerable peripherality; yet none wants to become central, precisely, either, since that would entail a dangerous conspicuity. Each wants, rather, to acquire quasi-central importance by controlling the center through a surrogate, no matter what the cost to the surrogate. And everyone's surrogate turns out to be Verena. In acting as he does, then, to confirm the dignity of the other by validating mutual spontaneous desire, Basil attests to the ethical principle implicit in Jesus' question to Paul, echoed in distorted fashion by Christopher Newman in *The American*, who never quite understands who exactly has endured the greatest indignity at the highest price. That principle is the principle that one

18

must recognize the full humanity of the other and not subordinate the other to oneself. In this manner, as Gans has written in an extended interpretation of Paul's encounter with Jesus, "each [person] would be a sacred center for the other" (*Science and Faith* 107), an act of generosity which Olive is emphatically unwilling to grant to Verena. Gans writes elsewhere of Christianity's insistence on "absolute reciprocity of human relations as the model--the fundamental model-- of human interaction" (*Originary Thinking* 45).

Significantly, Basil's relation with Verena, over the course of the narrative, is dialogic, that is to say reciprocal, rather than monologic and responsory, as in the case of Olive's relation with Verena. Newman's relation with Cintre, by opposite example, never becomes truly dialogic, due in part to Newman's self-absorption and in part to Cintre's dissimulating irony. With Paglia's claim in mind, it is possible to imagine a different version of *The American* with a more virile Newman who asserts himself meaningfully and saves Cintre (who has done nothing to deserve it) from her enforced encloisterment. In effect, Newman sacrifices Cintre for the sake of his own sense of martyrdom at the hands of the Bellegardes. Newman's subsequent lack of interest in marriage supports the judgment that he is essentially narcissistic and that he remains fundamentally uninterested in the necessary reciprocity of a conjugal relation. *The Bostonians* is that different version of *The American*.

Basil Ransom is clear-sighted in this respect at least: he has come to understand that inaction with respect to Verena amounts to complicity in the exploitative design of others. In "an age of unspeakable shams" (328), Basil will not sham a lack of interest in the person who "had even more power to fix his attention than he had hitherto supposed" (266), as he thinks of Verena during their long peregrinating conversation in Book the Second, and who gives signs of responding with mutuality to him. Basil is thus responding by deed to the question that his counterpart in *The American* so badly misunderstood. In the final moments in the Music Hall, Basil notices that "the expression in Verena's eyes was ineffably touching and beseeching" (425). Basil sees that "she trembled with nervous passion, there were sobs and supplications in her voice, and he felt himself flushing with pure pity for her pain" (425). Basil here comprehends Verena not only as the young woman whom he certainly loves but as the abused object of a cynical scheme in which the internal disposition of the subject receives no acknowledgment. "But at the same moment," James continues, Basil "had another perception, which brushed aside remorse; he saw that he could do what he wanted, that she begged him, with all her being, to spare her" (425). This corresponds to the sudden Pauline insight that persecution is universal and that it represents the iniquity of the world. Thus, one must stop persecuting others, either actively or passively. Mrs. Tarrant meanwhile declares that Basil's intention toward Verena adds up to "the most horrible, wicked, immoral selfishness I ever heard in my life!" (426). Basil, by his own lights, only wants to deliver Verena from the disgusting scene. But how can we reconcile our claim that Basil's impulse is essentially Christian, hence moral, with the various moral positions staked out by the novel's radicals, especially by Olive, who argues that her cause absolutely requires Verena and so establishes a claim over her prior to Basil's and prior, in fact, to the girl's proper claim over herself? After all, a hundred and ten years after James wrote *The Bostonians*, feminism has been vindicated (in any movie of *The Bostonians*, the writers would have to make Olive the righteous heroine and turn Basil into a lascivious kidnapper; the Merchant-Ivory *Bostonians* already shows some of these revisionary tendencies), and everyone knows

19

that marriage is simply a patriarchal ploy to dominate women. We have already admitted that Basil's idea of marriage is not modern but strictly and confiningly traditional. And James, after all, readily admits that, in securing Verena to himself, Basil is acting on his insight that "he could do what he wanted." Does this not confirm Mrs. Tarrant's complaint that Basil is horribly, wickedly, immorally selfish?

Answering this question requires a backward glance at the murder of Hypatia as portrayed by Kingsley in the romance to which James alludes, comparing Olive to Hypatia, during the tense final moments in the Music Hall. Hypatia's murderers are an ostensibly Christian mob and the murder takes place in a basilica under the gaze of an image of Christ to which the doomed woman reaches out a hand in desperate supplication. Hypatia herself is a pagan, but, as Kingsley's description of her makes clear, she is a decadent pagan whose thought is no longer rigorous in the style of her Platonist precursors. The conventional contemporary reading of this scene would be that the crowd truly represents Christianity and that Kingsley is depicting the essential hypocrisy and brutality of the new creed. The immolation, in today's orthodox exegesis, would affirm Nietzsche's diagnosis of Christianity as a case of pathological resentment disguising itself in saccharine but totally misleading figures. The lynchers would murderously resent Hypatia because she represents a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual level of attainment which the bigots can neither match nor understand. The fact that the mob thinks of itself as Christian or acts in the name of Christianity does not mean, however, that Christian is what they are. It is important that the image of Christ hovers above the scene of the murder and that the murderers act on a plane below it. It is

equally important that, in the terrible moment, Hypatia beseeches the image of Christ, Himself the victim of a murder, for succor. She suddenly identifies with Him, one victim with another. "And who would dare say in vain?" Kingsley significantly asks. The truth, in Kingsley's scene, is that the sacrificial impulse comes not from Jesus (not from Christianity) but from the mob, who are motivated by passion, not by compassion, which has a cognitive element implicitly denoting the equivalency between self and other. The mob enact the very impulse, namely sacrifice, that Jesus would suspend. Hypatia's final gesture shows that she understands the meaning of Jesus' revelation even though those who allege that they act in His name do not. To say, then, that Olive stands in relation to feminism as the lynch-mob in Kingsley's novel stands in relation to Christianity is simply to say that Olive's self-articulated attachment to feminism, however we evaluate that creed, is utterly irrelevant to an assessment of her character and deeds. The lynch-mob's act is irreconcilable with the anti-sacrificial essence of Christian morality and Olive's exploitation of Verena is irreconcilable with the essence of feminism, which is that women are the moral and intellectual equals of men and deserve to be treated on their merits as individuals, just as men are. Whether Verena's decision regarding herself satisfies the additional demand, made implicitly by Olive, that all women stand in doctrinal solidarity with feminism, is again utterly irrelevant. Verena's "Ah, now I'm glad" (433), uttered as she leaves with Basil, might represent an unrealistic assessment of her prospects, but the fact remains that it is her assessment and it constitutes good evidence that she is doing what she wants to do, at last. It is indeed extremely difficult to see how one could celebrate Olive's program without effacing Verena's right to her own program. In this sense, vindications of Olive necessarily acquiesce in the sacrifice of Verena's volition and her desire. Olive's gender-preference, like her politics, is another non-issue. The principle that James takes care to illuminate is that choice needs to

20

be mutually affirmed, for if it is not, then it can be nothing less than coercion. The basic structure of coercive eroticism remains sacrificial. Elective unions need include no guarantee of ultimate satisfaction; indeed, as elective, they cannot. But this is only to say that all utopian agendas, which insist on a guarantee of satisfaction, must issue in the compulsory participation, hence in the negation as self-determining subjects, of those who would rather not participate, because they have some other plan.

Works Cited

- Eric L. Gans. *The End of Culture. Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.
- . *Originary Thinking. The Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- René Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965.
- Henry James. *The American*. New York: Penguin, 1981
- . *The Bostonians*. New York: Penguin, 1988
- Charles Kingsley. *Hypatia; or Old Foes with new Faces*. London: MacMillans, 1881.
- Camille Paglia. *Sexual Personae*. New York: Vintage, 1990

Anthropoetics subscribers may copy or download this text from the network, but its distribution or publication shall constitute an infringement of the Author's copyright.

Bertonneau

Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume I, number 1 (June 1995)

ISSN 1083-7264

URL: <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/>

Email: anthro@humnet.ucla.edu

The Unique Source of Religion and Morality

Eric Gans

French Department U. C. L. A.
Los Angeles CA 90095-1550
gans@humnet.ucla.edu

La religion est une réaction défensive de la nature contre la représentation, par l'intelligence, de l'inévitabilité de la mort. (Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* [in *Oeuvres*, PUF 1970, p. 1086])

Qu'on s'imagine un nombre d'hommes dans les chaînes, et tous condamnés à la mort, dont les uns étant chaque jour égorgés à la vue des autres, ceux qui restent voient leur propre condition dans celle de leurs semblables, et, se regardant les uns et les autres avec douleur et sans espérance, attendent à leur tour. C'est l'image de la condition des hommes. (Pascal, *Pensées*, 199-434)

Why are there no atheists in the foxholes? Because they have all made Pascal's bet. In times of crisis, God is present, not in some ineffable sense, but as the interlocutor of last resort. God is whoever is named by the name we call out in our panic. The customary rationale that we pray in the foxhole out of prudence, "to keep all our options open," fails to explain why God is an option in the first place. This option exists only because humanity originates in the crisis that both God and language--language as the naming-of-God--were revealed and invented to resolve. God's all-powerfulness is the inverse of our powerlessness in the event of human origin, the only crisis the outcome of which could be directly affected by the language of prayer.

The first word is the name of God because by the utterance of his name, the substitution of the sign for the appropriative gesture, we defer the threat of violent conflict over the object of our common desire. The source of this originary crisis is humanity's susceptibility to mimesis, which even in circumstances of abundance creates scarcity by multiplying desirability. What we now call "humanity" was not long ago called "man," including, yet not yet including, woman; our hypothesis explains the scandal of this exclusion. When we spoke of "man," we named our species after its more violent gender; if we are now able to abandon this designation, it is because we now understand that the origin of the human is, not the sacralization, but the deferral of this violence, its *différance* through the sign of language.

We no longer contest the primacy of the vertical signifier- signified relation in the realm of signs. The dominant position of Saussurean verticality is accepted even within the Peircean world of "horizontal" semiotics. It is time to take the more radical step of hypothesizing the ultimate identity of linguistic verticality with the transcendental in general. Both the Platonic heaven of the Ideas and the more familiar paradise of the Judeo-Christian or Moslem afterlife are hypostases of the vertical relation of the sign to

its referent. This is clear enough in the case of the Ideas, which are no more than reified words, but it is equally true of the eternal abode of souls. Although we inevitably situate the transcendent prior to the ethical or human realm, the ultima ratio of our gesture is itself ethical. We may call this the "paradox of transcendence": it is the need to maintain order among human beings that generates the eternal verticality of the sacred sign.

2

The postulation of transcendence is the first originary hypothesis; the nascent human community discovers and invents the permanence of the sacred central being that brings peace by deferring its own appropriation. All theology is an elaboration of this originary postulate. God guarantees ethics by providing a transcendental source for ethical norms, which he promulgates as divine law. Plato's Ideas perform the same function, but less explicitly. The Idea of the Good is not itself an ethical law, but it guarantees the possibility of such laws, indeed, suggests that explicit knowledge of the Ideas--accessible to the philosopher alone--carries with it the unique ability and responsibility to create and govern the good society.

When we pare from the myth of the cave its imaginary setting, what remains is the transcendent priority of the Ideas over the slaves who figure humankind. Both Plato and the Bible require a transcendental realm to guarantee their thematization of the ethical in the form of laws. Both metaphysics and Judaism are products of societies that have broken with what Eric Voegelin called the "compactness" of the archaic empires, Egypt and Babylon, where a supernatural guarantee of ethical norms is indivisibly linked to ritual practice.

The Mosaic rejection of concrete figuration of the divinity is not a simple triumph of enlightenment over superstition. The social payoff from ritual prolongs the deferring effect of the originary scene; worship guarantees worldly success because it averts internal conflict. But the Mosaic revelation shows that the power of communal worship is independent of the esthetic centrality of the figure. A freer, more internalized ethical system is guaranteed by a more cleanly vertical relation of transcendence, in which representation of the divinity is reduced to the minimal, originary form of the linguistic sign. Both metaphysics and Mosaic religion move in the direction of an ethic governed by moral principles rather than arbitrary ritual rules. This postulation of transcendence affirms the primordial ethical significance of the vertical relation of sign to referent, as opposed to the mystified concreteness of the "horizontal" worldly interactions characteristic of ritual.

The clear vertical separation of the transcendental realm from the real world is an early stage in the dialectical process of "secularization," the reduction of the transcendent to the immanent, the vertical to the horizontal.⁽¹⁾ To specify the minimal ethical principles consonant with the originary hypothesis is to confront the ultimate crux of secularization: that of constructing a model that explains without recourse to a prior sacrality the originary emergence of the vertical from the horizontal.

Whatever the usefulness of speaking of such things as the genetic "code," the transcendent verticality of the sign does not preexist human language. In order to arrive at the Saussurian model of language as a parallel world stretched above non-linguistic reality, language has to pass through a stage at which verticality is constituted within the horizontal relations of worldly appetite. This first stage is that of ostensive, in contrast to mature or declarative language.⁽²⁾ An ostensive utterance points to what is already present, as in "Fire!" or "Man overboard!" These are typical ostensives in that they are used in moments of crisis; we may even say that their use constitutes crisis. (We do not cry "fire" every time we

strike a match.) The most primitive form of language reflects the chaos in which it came into being.

3

Derrida points out in *De la grammatologie* that Saussurian linguistics shares the foundational assumptions of metaphysics. But metaphysics itself is ultimately a vision of language: one that views the declarative sentence or proposition as the fundamental linguistic form, reducing the ostensive and the imperative to "defective" variants of the declarative. There is a clear parallel between Platonic metaphysics and the "declarative" name of God (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) in Exodus 6.⁽³⁾ But, in contrast with Plato's denial of ostensivity, the biblical scene adds an exoteric "ostensive" name (YHVH) after the esoteric declarative one. Despite the revelation of God's sentence-name, which affirms his existence beyond the pre-thematic appeal of the ostensive, ostensivity remains the standard of religious practice. If metaphysics understands only declarative sentences--metaphysical prayer is inconceivable--religion never forgets the originarity of ostensive presence.

In the foxhole, even those who never pray elsewhere take Pascal's odds. Pascal's own foxhole is a dungeon where man's violence to man is unmediated by mortar shells. This setting reflects a profound anthropological intuition; the scene of our wager is one of purely human violence. We beseech God, the creator and creation of man, to manifest himself at the moment of crisis to stay the hand of potentially violent appropriation. Our foxhole prayer is an acknowledgment of his presence, not a reasoned proposition. Its language is not declarative, but ostensive.

We pray to God in crisis; but God lacks the power to solve most crises, or, in the believer's terms, he forgoes the use of it. The technologically mediated human violence of war, like the deadly violence of nature, is invulnerable to the power of God, who "lets his rain fall on the just as on the unjust." The only efficacious prayer is that of the entire human community, the common and spontaneous use of the sign as the name of God to represent the common object of desire and abort the potentially fatal appropriative movement toward it. Only in this originary configuration could God really be said to "exist," to function objectively in the world to prevent human violence.

But moments of crisis are no time to speculate on God's limitations. In what crisis situation can the danger of human violence be altogether excluded? Even the progress of a disease is not uninfluenced by the solicitous or hostile desires of one's fellows. Pascal's bet is always a good one in a pinch. Since the violence whose deferral obliged us to invent ourselves in language is not natural but human, we cannot understand violence as anything other than human. We first humanize natural violence, then call upon God to prevent it. The positive effects of prayer in bolstering our courage and reinforcing group solidarity are distant reflections of the peace established by the linguistic sign as name-of-God in the originary crisis.

When I say that "we" are incapable of understanding violence as other than human, I refer not to our "etic" or theoretical understanding but to our "emic" intuition of violence from within, at the moment of crisis. The emic-etic distinction, which translates into that between ostensive and declarative language, allows us to explain how we may pray to God in times of war without believing in him in times of peace. The ostensive is the language of crisis; the declarative, that of stability. In the foxhole, we believe "ostensively"; we speak as if in the presence of God. In contrast, when we affirm a theological proposition, the question of whether God's existence is implicit in our enunciation is, however crucial to our argument, not essential to our meaning. But whatever the theology of our declaratives, God subsists in our ostensives, where presence in language cannot be distinguished from real presence.

The ostensive operation of the sign is independent of our hypothetical reconstruction of the originary scene and our derivation from it of the idea of God. It is immaterial to our ostensive belief whether or not the originary hypothesis is more powerful than those of metaphysics or theology; to use language is itself to express this belief. The believer differs from the atheist only in affirming the applicability of their common ostensive experience to the domain of declarative language. No ultimate demonstration is available for either position. The nature of the existence of the originary signified of the ostensive sign can never be determined separately from the scene on which it manifests itself.

The very fact of my appeal to God implies my solidarity with the rest of the human race. A God conceived as a wholly personal daemon would have no power over the other parties to the scene of human conflict that is the originary model of crisis. It is inconceivable, for example, that the God I pray to for a cure to my illness be without the power to cure another's. Our ostensive belief in God supplies the core of our ethical intuition: the sacred being is only present to me because it is present to all, because all have transformed their gesture of appropriation into a sign.

But the foxhole is no place to work out the social contract. Our first explicit ethical notion can only emerge when, the crisis having passed, we relax our fixation on the center and become aware of the other members of the community. At this point we become susceptible to the scandalized reaction of resentment that reveals the moral exigency of reciprocity among the users of human language.

What we call our "sense of justice" is first experienced through the scandal of injustice. We need no reflection to feel resentment when we see ourselves refused a privilege granted to another. The model we apply to such situations is that of the symmetrical exchange of signs in the originary scene of language. The originary crisis is averted by the enunciation of the sign as name-of-God by the entire human community. At this moment there is no hierarchy, no alpha individual; the exceptional being that resolves the crisis is God, not man. Resentment is our scandalized reaction to the existence of situations where this symmetrical configuration is not maintained. Unequal treatment of anyone constitutes a disequilibrium that is scandalous because it seems to threaten the community with return to originary chaos. I am not merely upset at my own ill-treatment; I am in terror of the potential disintegration of the entire social order.

Our resentful reaction to inequality reveals our belief in the moral model--an ostensive belief like the foxhole belief in God. Resentment points to the act of injustice, makes it known. God remains the implicit audience of our resentment as he was of our plea for help, but now we expect the rest of the human community to share our reaction. Where the foxhole renews the terror of the originary crisis that compels the use of the linguistic sign, the scene of resentment reproduces the moment in which language has already brought peace by deferring appropriation of the central object. In the first case, there is no preexisting model of resolution; we put ourselves in the hands of God. In the second, the community is expected to close ranks against a threat to an already established stability.

The equalitarian moral model is the minimal basis of ethics, just as ostensive belief in God is the minimal basis of religion. The traditional claim that this model, like the idea of God, is implicit in humanity itself is sharpened by its identification as that of the originary exchange of signs. But the resentment that reveals this model to us is no more a demonstration of its truth

than foxhole belief is a demonstration of God's existence. The conviction that accompanies our inner sense of morality is ostensive rather than declarative. And just as we ask God to solve problems caused by phenomena outside the anthropological domain where alone the idea of divine control finds justification, so our resentment is aroused even when the non-reciprocity that offends us is defensible on broader ethical grounds.

How does the originary deferral of violence through representation lead to the formulation of ethical codes? The prescription of concrete acts, however elaborate, has for its basis the differentiating deferral or *différance* of the appropriation of the central object. At the core of the acts of ritual observance prescribed in ancient codes is the reenactment of the originary interdiction of the center.

The advantage of interdiction mediated by language over the constraints of animal behavior is the superior flexibility of software over hardware. Because animal constraints cannot be thematized in language, they cannot be transgressed. The originary core of interdiction is deferral through representation--not absolute denial, but postponement. The achievement of the originary scene is on the side not of constraint, but of liberation.

All thought realizes the liberating movement of self-understanding through the sign. The truest anthropology is the one that best exemplifies the power of representation to reduce the verticality of sacred interdiction to horizontal, worldly relations, a process sometimes called deconstruction. The principle of the maximization of deferral defines an ethic of both thought and action. What must be deferred through representation is the conflict engendered by de-differentiation, the convergence of the two sides of the mimetic triangle on a single object. An act of positive ethical value is one that creates a new significant difference, that promotes openness rather than closure.

Yet the creation of difference cannot be dictated by ethical law. Ethical norms must share the accessibility of signs, not the scarcity of things, the originary model for which is the unique central object. The interdictions and corollary precepts that compose an ethical code are such that all are presumed capable of carrying them out. The only way to claim inability to obey an ethical law is to plead insanity.(4)

But no law can prescribe the significant differences that the "open society" seeks to multiply. The market system that promotes the creation and circulation of such differences operates on the inherently fallible basis of economic judgment. In contrast with the preestablished differential roles of ritual societies, the values of the marketplace are determined a posteriori through exchange. Laws regulate the fringes of the exchange operation; they do not touch its central core. In principle, market transactions are non-coercive: with some well-defined exceptions, I can offer whatever I please at the price I choose.

The market system accustoms us to the divergence between the social imperative of increasingly freer deferral and ethics in the narrow sense of a set of obeyable rules. We are so used to this fundamental modern tension that we fail to be struck by the anomaly of a situation in which our ethical needs cannot be solved by an ethic. Our only enforceable ethical code is the minimal morality of criminal justice. The law assimilates gross violations of reciprocity (theft, rape) to the forbidden appropriation of the center; it is indifferent to the quality of the interpersonal exchanges on the periphery.

6

Ethical laws are never merely instrumental rules; even where there is no claim of divine promulgation,

their imperative force is transcendently guaranteed. This guarantee not merely to laws, but to the ethical propositions of metaphysical systems as well, even those that claim to be "beyond good and evil." The use of morally charged concepts like "the good" or "justice" makes it impossible to avoid the slippage from "is" to "ought." This invisible displacement of the ethical question from the anthropological to the conceptual plane was effective throughout the pre-Nietzschean history of metaphysics; it is still very much alive, if a little less well, today. Once one goes beyond the genealogical discussion, or what I call the originary analysis, of concepts such as "the good" to give one's own definition of them, that is, once one accepts their validity as concepts--as is more or less obligatory in Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy--one cannot avoid going beyond description to prescription. A "theory of justice" is not a theory in the usual sense of the term. We cannot create a theoretical model of justice without conveying the imperative implication that we should act in the manner theorized as just.

Theories of the just society are as old as conceptual thought. The birth of Greek metaphysics accompanies the loosening of ritual constraints in an exchange-based economy, the first step toward a modern market-system. In such a world, where behavior can no longer be regulated by ritual prescription, metaphysical ethics, the ethic of the concept, finds the truth of the social order by projecting the moral model implicit in the use of language into the conceptual content of the Idea of the Good. The reasoning that goes into the establishment of such a concept is circular. One first postulates the existence of a universal Good from which mimetic rivalry is somehow excluded-- whereas the common-sense notion of the good, as expounded by Callicles in the *Gorgias*, is indexical, my good and yours not being necessarily identical or even compatible. Then one claims that the "good society" is one whose members simply act, as all enlightened people must, for "the Good."

The construction of this good society nevertheless requires political reflection; people need to be instructed as to the Good that is their own best interest. In contrast, the Gospel utopia of the Kingdom of Heaven obeys only the fundamental moral principle of reciprocity; the Platonic parallel to this transcendent realm is not the Republic but the heaven of the Ideas. But in either case, the transcendent is a hypostasis of the world of representation; the common referent of both the heaven of the Ideas and that of the Word is the sign.

If the moral model is based on the reciprocal exchange of words, the notion of justice originally concerns the distribution of things.⁽⁵⁾ The Greek dike refers to just or equitable distribution before it acquires the meaning of "justice" in the narrow or judicial sense. The notion of "social justice" still implies distributive equality. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*⁽⁶⁾ is concerned not with crime and punishment but with the distribution of goods. The fiction that the author calls the "original position" is a metaphysical version of the originary scene, where equality is imposed by an artificially constructed "veil of ignorance" rather than being a necessary condition of the hypothetical emission of the sign in the originary event. The passage from ignorance to knowledge in Rawls' scheme may be understood as an allegory of the historical evolution from primitive equalitarianism to modern market society.

Rawls postulates that things should by right be equally distributed; any other distribution must be justified by the greater good of the least-favored members of the community. This

7

attempt to articulate moral equality with ethical differentiation is a step beyond Benthamite utilitarianism, which treats society as an aggregate of human atoms.⁽⁷⁾ But the "original position" goes

beyond the familiar fiction of the social contract, the parties to which have full knowledge of their situation: Rawls's fictional scene is only conceivable as directed from without. Once the fiction is converted to a hypothesis, the authoritarianism that is the only plausible context of this scene becomes implicit in the scene itself. For there to be the kind of uncertainty that an original position, as opposed to an originary hypothesis, requires, it would have to be imposed by the equivalent of a Platonic guardian. This anthropological critique of the authoritarian basis of liberal/socialist redistributionism is not coincidentally similar to that of such modern conservatives as Hayek.(8)

Justice in the narrow sense is the restoration of an imbalance, the punishment of a crime. The *Oresteia* recounts in mythical terms the emergence of the civic judicial system that breaks the endless chain of reciprocal retribution by offended parties and their families. Justice in this sense is not concerned with the original distribution of goods; it intervenes only to counteract acts of redistribution that threaten to subvert the deferral of conflict. Justice is a supplement to the originary deferral of appropriation; it punishes the violation of a norm that was enforced in the originary scene by the sacred power that manifests itself in the presence of the community as a whole.

Throughout all previous history, the historical diminution of this originary power has been recuperated by means of religious or secular eschatologies that assign as the end of history the making-eternal of the deferral of violence with which it began. The egalitarian moral model, which presides over the origin of man as an ethical animal, becomes humanity's immanent goal. But to set the symmetry of originary deferral as a final goal imposes closure upon the open paradoxical structure of human mimesis. The claim that history returns in the end to the model that deferred conflict at its beginning--thereby justifying present violence on its behalf ("the end justifies the means")-- reduces history as a whole to the eternal retour of the originary scene. But the doctrine that deals with the total social order as though it were perpetually in the throes of the originary crisis is precisely what we call "totalitarianism." What purports to be the self-closure of history is really the imposition of a gnostic tyranny.

From the standpoint of the originary hypothesis, the rough material equality that follows the division of the central object is not the beginning but the end of the originary process of distribution. True economic activity depends upon the deferral of ritual centrality; only after this activity has been performed away from the communal center is its product returned to the center for evaluation. Long before it becomes a dominant force, and however strongly a given social order attempts to resist its influence, there is always a "market": a locus where value is determined through exchange. At the very least, the competition of rival societies in war provides a locus for determining value--not only that of weapons, but of social development in general. The creation of the free "capitalist" market that makes all goods fungible thematizes and liberates this process of exchange; it does not create it.

Market society realizes the Christian intention of making the moral model into a ethic, but in a minimal rather than a maximal mode. Between the Kingdom and the market lies all the difference between the mutual love of intimates and the free

8

exchange of goods among strangers. But before goods can be exchanged and distributed, they must be produced. Ever-expanding, ever-diversifying production is the primary imperative of the market system because it continually expands the ability of the members of society to acquire the differentiated personalities that oblige their fellows to recognize them as individual persons. The deproletarianization of the working class has gone hand in hand with the expanding productive capacities of the industrial

market-system.

The free market, as opposed to ritually controlled systems of exchange, obliges the individual to evaluate the product of his own labor before testing that evaluation in the marketplace. This social reliance on both subjective evaluation and its subsequent correction by the a posteriori objectivity of the market generates a free-floating resentment in virtually all members of market society. Although in crisis situations such as the Great Depression this resentment can come to focus on the market system itself, it normally attaches to specific "injustices" that can themselves become items of exchange. The elective legislative bodies characteristic of the mature market system constitute markets for ethical ideas and for the resentments, real or potential, that underlie them. The democratic political order permits the negotiation of these individual resentments on the basis of an expanded version of the moral model: one person, one "voice" or vote. The effectiveness of the "moral" domain of politics as a corrective to the "ethical" domain of economics derives from the fact that, like the economic market, the ethical market is wiser than any a priori set of norms.

The foregoing discussion suggests that we may derive from the originary hypothesis, not a prescriptive ethic, but two meta-ethical principles:

1. The reciprocal exchange of signs is the fundamental ("moral") model of human interaction. This model justifies our intuition that "we are created equal."
2. The fundamental operation of the social order is the deferral of conflict through the generation of significant differences (*différance*).

The first principle is the basis of all ethics. But it is insufficient to govern society. Conversely, the increasingly minimal application of the moral model to human interaction that accompanies the historical process of secularization allows ever greater scope for the operation of the second principle, which, as we have seen, is not susceptible to ethical regulation. The free market minimizes constraint on the circulation of goods and services that regulates the society's production of differences.

But to claim that the wisdom of the market is superior to that of the theoretician is to affirm, as a derivative principle, the necessity that the market continue to operate, since its loss could not be made up by any theory. This principle counsels us to reject attempts to replace market society with one or another kind of socialist utopia, and to support political forces that expand the circulation of both economic goods and ethical ideas. At the same time, in accordance with the first principle above, we must defend the capacity of the members of the social order to engage in the reciprocal linguistic exchange that is the essence of human behavior. This proviso is analogous to the requirement in Rawls's distributive model that social inequality contribute to the welfare of the least favored, but the minimal requirement of human welfare cannot be expressed in material terms. What is essential is to maximize participation in the social dialogue.

9

But the prerequisites of this participation at a given historical moment cannot be specified in advance. Nor can the freedom of a society be measured within a single generation; the parents' sufferings may be redeemed by their children's or grandchildren's success. Because political, like economic activity takes place in a market that is wiser than any theory, no overall theoretical position can serve as an infallible guide for action within it. Hence the theory that puts its faith in the market explains why this faith cannot be made to justify political fanaticism, including the fanaticism that would unconditionally subordinate

political exchange to the economic values of the marketplace.

10

Notes

1. Generative anthropology articulates our postmodern dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment version of secularization, which either denies the transcendental altogether or reduces it to the most abstract version of the metaphysical "first mover" (Deism), without ever explaining the transcendental of the language it uses in the process. Revolutionary atheism is an inverted religious fundamentalism that makes use of verticality to tell us that the vertical does not exist.[\(back\)](#)
2. My *The Origin of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) contains a fuller discussion of this distinction.[\(back\)](#)
3. I discuss the Exodus passage at length in *Science and Faith* (Savage, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991); the parallel with Plato is taken up in a forthcoming work entitled *Paradoxes of Mimesis*.[\(back\)](#)
4. Saint Paul claims that the very point of the Hebraic Law is to create guilt for our inability to fulfill it. But we only feel guilty because the source of this inability lies in the rebelliousness of our will rather than our incapacity to follow the Law's instructions.[\(back\)](#)
5. In the originary circle of participants surrounding the sacred object, there is no "justice" because there is no material distribution. In the ensuing *sparagmos*, in which the object is torn to pieces and distributed among the participants, the force of originary resentment against the center diminishes the rivalry among the participants, resulting in a roughly equal division. Justice among the participants is a consequence of the community's vengeance against the center for having withheld itself from its members.[\(back\)](#)
6. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971.[\(back\)](#)
7. As a consequence, the apparently benign utilitarian calculus can be made to justify any degree of sacrificial violence for the sake of making the "greatest number" of atoms cohere. The economy of Girard's scapegoat model, where a single individual is sacrificed for the greater good of the whole, is both the *nec plus ultra* and the *reductio ad absurdum* of utilitarianism.[\(back\)](#)
8. Rawls's model lacks the very notion of production, let alone that of entrepreneurial innovation. His list of "primary goods" the distribution of which is hidden by the "veil of ignorance" includes not merely the basics of survival but "wealth," as though the latter were found in nature and apportioned by a central authority rather than created through risk-bearing economic activity.[\(back\)](#)

Anthropoetics subscribers may copy or download this text from the network, but its distribution or publication shall constitute an infringement of the Author's copyright.

Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

ISSN 1083-7264

Volume I, number 1 (June 1995)

URL: <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/>

Gans

Email: anthro@humnet.ucla.edu

Anthropoetics I, 1 Benchmarks

Richard van Oort's and **Matthew Schneider's** articles are revised versions of their presentations at the December 1994 San Diego MLA session on **Anthropoetics**. Since **Tom Bertonneau's** paper on Charles Olson has already been accepted by the print media, he has substituted an article on Henry James's *The Bostonians*. **Eric Gans's** text is taken from a talk at the Chicago meeting of the **Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R)** in early June.

About our Contributors

Tom Bertonneau, a veteran of the **GA** seminar, received his PhD from UCLA in Comparative Literature in 1990. His dissertation applied **GA** to the study of the modern epic, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* and Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés...* Since then he has published and presented papers on Williams, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and other American authors, as well as on theoretical topics (and science fiction). He currently teaches English at Central Michigan University.

Eric Gans is Professor of French at UCLA. His CV is accessible by clicking on his name below.

Richard van Oort holds a BA in English and German and an MA in English literature from the U of Victoria, Canada. Currently a graduate student at the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at the U. of Western Ontario, he has presented papers on **GA** at the '94 MLA in San Diego and the '95 NEMLA in Boston.

Matthew Schneider, another founding member of the **GA** seminar (who has managed to attend some portion of the seminar every year it has been given) holds an MA from Chicago and received his PhD in English from UCLA in 1991. His revised dissertation, entitled *Original Ambivalence: Violence and Autobiography in Thomas De Quincey*, will be published by Peter Lang this year. He teaches at Chapman College (Orange, California).

[Return to Anthropoetics home page](#) | [Return to Anthropoetics I, 1](#)

[Eric Gans](#) / anthro@humnet.ucla.edu

Last updated 10/9/95