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# **Archaic Chinese Sacrificial Practices in the Light of Generative Anthropology**

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René Girard and Eric Gans developed their so-called "originary" or "generative anthropology" by reinterpreting some of the major developments in Western civilization. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the applicability and relevance of this theory in the field of archaic Chinese culture. China has been essentially a sacrificial civilization and, therefore, may be an adequate testing ground for Girard's and Gans's "originary" thinking.

The epistemology Girard and Gans bring to the "Chinese" testing site suffers from their almost exclusive concentration on Western traditions, as well as from the absence of any discussion on the wide-spread divinatory/oracular activity and the "animistic" phenomenon one finds throughout ancient humanity. From the beginning of its documented history, until recently, the Chinese state and much of its intellectual life remained directly or closely sacrificial. One can go so far as to say that the Chinese premodern state was built upon sacrifice. Sacrifice remained central in the Chinese state and no theory of Chinese statehood could ever be proposed without reference to sacrifice and sacrificial ideology. Like Western culture, China follows the evolution from blood sacrifice to non-blood, re-presented, "morally correct" sacrifice, and to the esthetic and ethical systems, such as Taoism and Confucianism, that evolved from it. It would be a formidable undertaking, however, to study the evolution of Chinese sacrificial practices and the impact they had on statehood throughout their long history, especially if we study, as we should, the Chinese sacrificial system or systems within a cultural totality. I must content myself with summarizing the sacrificial history of China's earliest states. I do so to point out how, always keeping Girardian and Gansian originary hypothesis in mind, sacrifice continued to play a central role in both "Realpolitik" and socio-political ideology in the subsequent periods. The reader should keep in mind that ancient Chinese archeological and written data lack academic consensus and may invite controversy. Yet an attempt to put Girard's and Gans's hypothesis to a Chinese test is essential to our understanding of the usefulness of these theories.

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The earliest historical dynasties were: the Hsia culture (ca. 2205-ca.1766), the Shang (ca. 1766-ca.1122) dynasty, and the Chou dynasty (ca. 1122-256). Because of the wealth of archeological and paleoglyphic data, I shall concentrate on the Shang and, to a lesser extent, on the subsequent Chou, mainly, to support

the interpretation of Shang material. The Shang dynasty occupied a large territory, encompassing the fertile alluvial plains of the Yellow river. It was an agricultural state with a degree of socio-political organization needed for the kind of water control required by rice agriculture. The Shang also engaged in cattle-raising and silk manufacturing. It was ruled by a dynasty of "kings" who appointed (or confirmed) a landed gentry of warriors in what has been understood by most as a feudal system, but which appeared to be a kind of clan or kinship administration. Below these, the "state" was made up of petty officials of all kinds, plus artisans, peddlers, peasants and slaves. Among the kings' most important functions were sacrificial ritual, and ritual-related war and hunting, understood, among others, as a state-unifying, ritual action in search of sacrificial supply.

Between 1928 and 1937, more than twenty thousand oracle bones dating back to the 273 last years of the Shang dynasty have been unearthed in the Anyang area, the political center of Shang (presently Honan province, about three hundred miles south of Beijing). More recent excavations yielded about forty-thousand more. Excavations from the subsequent Chou dynasty (ca. 1122-256) adds another fifteen thousand. There would be considerably more if it were not for the medicinal (divine) qualities the ancient and modern Chinese have believed them to contain. These oracle bones were shoulder bones of oxen (also of goat and sheep) and, later, turtle plastron onto which, either before or after divination, the diviners inscribed the divinatory questions addressed to mostly ancestral but also a number of nature deities. These bones were heated to obtain a pair of cracks consisting of a vertical line plus, at about mid-point, a perpendicular line, corresponding to the present Chinese character meaning 'divination' or 'question to a deity'. If the perpendicular crack was more or less at a right angle to the vertical one, that is, within twenty degrees up or down the 90 degree point, the oracular reply was deemed positive. If the angle of the crack did not fall within this 40-degree range (from 70 to 110), the reply was negative.[\[1\]](#)

These Shang oracle bones provide us with a rich source of knowledge on Shang political and social organization, as well as its religious (ritual) system. No less important is the light they throw on the origins and, to an extent, the development of the Chinese writing system. Particularly relevant in view of the Girardian and Gansian theories are the oracle-bone inscriptions, by far the most numerous, which deal with sacrifice. I have therefore selected some oracle-bone inscriptions which both, in the nature of the questions they asked whom and at what occasions, represent the kind of oracular activity typical of the Shang, and which provide suitable data to discuss questions of generative anthropology. Given the lack of differentiation between a noun, verb, adverb, adjective and preposition in both archaic and modern Chinese language, I have preferred to translate, as much as feasible, each symbol only with a noun and to add the "most likely meaning". I shall begin with examples of animal, human and combined animal/human as well as other sacrifice which addresses itself to mostly ancestral and, to a lesser extent, to "nature" deities. It is important that we keep in mind from the very beginning that oracle-bone activity was a royal prerogative, hence its centralization and subjection to government control.

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1. Ping-tzu/question/K'o/question/no/purification/Princess Hsieh/front/Keng, promise/Keng/pair of sheep/promise/Keng/three/sheep pairs.

Most likely meaning: "On the day of Ping-tzu, K'o asks (asked?) the oracle: Should Princess Hsieh be purified in front of [the late] Keng? Should one or three pairs of sheep be promised?"

When the bones mention the word "promise" it probably was fulfilled after good results. A large number of oracle bones indicate that animals and humans were sacrificed to "purify" a royal ancestor. The control

of natural forces seems to have been the main reason for this purification. The following example combines animal and human sacrifice with a petition for rain:

2. Should/petition/rain/to/Hsi/burning/nine/sheep pairs

Most likely meaning: "Should a petition for rain be addressed to Hsi? Should nine pairs of sheep be sacrificed?"[\[2\]](#)

Some oracles asked how the sheep should be killed, e.g., by letting them bleed to death, or how the sacrifice should be offered, e.g., by boiling them in a cauldron, etc. In the following two examples, humans were sacrificed for rain:

3. Question/burning men/stakes/have/follow/rain

Most likely meaning: "Should a man be burnt at the stakes? Will rain follow?"

4. Question/burning men/stake/have/follow/rain

Most likely meaning: "Should a man be burnt at the stakes? Will rain follow?"[\[3\]](#)

The Shang offered blood sacrifice for a good harvest of millet:

5. Chi-mao/question/petition/millet/to/Shih-jen/three/oxen pairs

Most likely meaning: "On the day of Chi-mao the oracle was asked if, to get a good harvest of millet, three pairs of oxen should be sacrificed to Shih-jen?"

Shih-jen, the preferred object of such petitions, was the grandfather of the dynasty's founder, and Chi-mao was his name date in the ancient Chinese decimal cycle.

Many oracle-bone inscriptions fail to mention any other sacrificial purpose than the purification of an ancestral deity:

6. Chia-hsu/question/Hsuan/question/purification/Princess Hau/front/father I/promise/slave.

Most likely meaning: "On the day of Chia-hsu Hsuan divines (divined?): "Should Princess Hau be purified in front of [her late] father? Should a slave be sacrificed?"

7. Purification/before/Tsu-hsin,use/Ch'iang

Most likely meaning: "Should the purification take place before Tsu-hsin? Should a man of Ch'iang be sacrificed?"

Men from the sheep-raising Ch'iang tribe seemed to have been the preferred source of human sacrifice. Sometimes, diviners presented the deities with a choice of animal or human sacrifice:

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8. Question/question/purification/before/Ting/three/oxen pairs/Ch'iang/ten

Most likely meaning: "Should the purification before Tsu-ting be done with the sacrifice of three oxen pairs and ten men of Ch'iang?"

The Shang also divined the outcome of war:

9. Question/perhaps/king/going/fight/Hu...

Most likely meaning: "Should the king personally lead the military expedition against the Land of Hu?"

The following oracular question about going to war against Hu, suggests a choice of ancestral deities who should be asked:

10. Question/not/recruiting/fight/Hu Land

Question/not/recruit/man/three thousand

Question/recruit/man/thousand

Question/to/T'ang/petition

Question/petition/Hu Land/to/Shang-chia

Most likely meaning: "Should the people be recruited to fight against the Land of Hu? Should three-thousand or one thousand men be recruited? Should the petition for victory in the campaign against the Land of Hu be addressed to T'ang or Shang-chia?"

Thanksgiving sacrifice was also divined. E.g.:

HsinTzu/question/K'o/question/wine/libation/we/reciprocation/Ta-chia/Tsu-i/ten/decapitation/ten/sheep pairs.

Most likely meaning: "On the day of Hsin-szu K'o divined: 'Should we offer wine? Should we offer ancestor Ta-chia and Tsu-i ten beheaded men and ten pairs of sheep to thank them?'"

This oracle presented a choice between wine and human sacrifice. The meaning of the decapitation of sacrificial men is yet unknown. The Shang also performed oracles to find out the outcome of illness and what sacrifice should be offered for recovery. The questions the Shang dynasty diviners most often asked was, however, what sacrifice the ancestral spirit or nature deity preferred in response to a situation which is, in most cases, left unexplained, but, most likely, responded to a real or putative sacrificial crisis.

Some well-defined "nature" deities, such as river and mountain deities, required their own sacrifice. Unlike other ancient agricultural states, no sacrifice was ever offered to the sun or the moon. Instead, the river god Ho played an important part in ancient Chinese ritual, requiring his own set of animal and human sacrifices which were sunk, or buried on the river banks. Perhaps, in their agricultural endeavor, the Shang feared the capricious nature of the river more than the sun. Probably in the Shang, but definitely in the Chou dynasty, Ho required a yearly sacrificial marriage with a select virgin who, in a place called Yeh in the area of the Shang capital, was ritually sacrificed/married to Ho. She was placed on a raft and drowned.<sup>[4]</sup> She differed from other human victims in that she was a surrogate member, probably a precious one, the community was willing to "sacrifice" only to ensure its well-being. This practice was discontinued under pressure of Confucian "humanism" in the year 400 BC.

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As we have learned above, Shang dynasty sacrifice consisted in humans and animals and, to a lesser extent, wine and food (millet), and sometimes, as practiced later in Japan, tools, weapons and clothing. Sacrificial animals included dogs (traditionally interpreted as guides for the spirits, to help them during their hunts), and also sheep, oxen and pigs. Over one hundred dogs were buried underneath the city walls of the Shang capital. According to the pictographs archeologists have been able to decipher, there were in Shang thirty-seven categories of blood and food sacrifices. Some of them were completely or partially burned or buried. The total burning of sacrifice has usually been interpreted as a way to feed the spirits in the form of smoke climbing up the heavens. Humans were completely burned either to satisfy the ancestral appetite and, or, as scapegoats, to exonerate the community from evil. Partial burning may have had, in addition, the purpose of communal feasting. Some sacrificial victims were buried especially when

they were addressed to an earth deity or, they were sunk into the water of a river deity.

Shang China seems to support Gans' understanding that human sacrifice was not practiced *in illo tempore*, only later in agricultural "high culture".<sup>[5]</sup> Tsung-Tung Chan believes that human sacrifice was a relatively late practice belonging to an agrarian high culture and its centralized court and, therefore, cannot be found in more primitive local agricultural settings. There is also ample evidence of human funeral sacrifices which, by the tenth century BC, were gradually replaced by clay and wooden substitutions. According to the *Shih-ching*, they buried in all 117 men including three high dignitaries during the funeral of duke Mu.<sup>[6]</sup> In this particular area of China, such human sacrifice was abolished only in the year 384 B.C.E. and replaced, like in China's heartland, by clay and wooden figures.

As we can observe in other (e.g. the Aztecs) cultures as well, the most common Shang source of human sacrifice was war prisoners and, or, slaves, many of whom were natives of the sheep-raising Ch'iang tribe, the preferred source of human sacrifice for the Shang. A community tends to choose its sacrificial victims outside itself, as René Girard pointed out; prisoners of war, slaves, beggars, cripples, and other people at the fringe of society, being the favorite supplies.<sup>[7]</sup> Sociologically, such selection not only reflected the social order, but created it. The *Tso-chuan* reports that in the years 663 BC, 532 and 488, in Lu, a backward state continuing the Shang sacrificial system, war prisoners from a recent campaign were sacrificed.<sup>[8]</sup> Sacrificed war prisoners were sometimes mutilated (beheaded), although the meaning of such mutilation is still being disputed.

The hunchback, another favorite sacrificial victim, was believed to be the drought spirit among humans. According to the *Tso-chuan*, in the year 639 BC, the duke of Lu wanted to expose a hunchback to the heat of the sun during a severe drought. When his minister discouraged him, for reasons of humanity, he selected a shamaness but finally decided to close the market as a sacrifice. (Confucian ideology). Slaves must be understood not only as war prisoners, but useful laborers until sacrificed, but included people accused of crime, desertion, murder, etc. Other than the surrogate bride of the river deity, the way war prisoners were sacrificed at the ancestral shrine, does not seem to reflect Girard's understanding that such victims must first be totally integrated into the community before sacrificing them.<sup>[9]</sup> Integrating a relatively large number of war prisoners into the community would surely have been dangerous and uneconomical. It is more likely they were killed without delay.

6

It is sufficiently clear that the kinds of sacrifice enumerated above were addressed to royal ancestors, offering them animals, humans, a choice between them, or both. Often, as the oracle bone inscriptions clearly indicate, these sacrifices were offered at the ancestor's name day.<sup>[10]</sup> Royal ancestors were believed to control the weather and the welfare (peace, harmony, etc.) of the state. They had the power to influence the course of nature. To overcome a sacrificial crisis, animals and or humans were sacrificed at the royal ancestral altar to an ancestral deity. The blood of the sacrifice was supposed to end drought, flooding, and other natural calamities believed to originate from dissatisfied ancestors, or, to obtain from them the climactic conditions necessary for agriculture and human survival. Sacrifice was also offered as a prayer for victory in war. According to one oracle-bone inscription, at one occasion, one hundred prisoners of war were sacrificed as a prayer for victory.

The blood of a sacrificial victim was considered the most potent apotropaic, and was spilled upon an altar or sprayed towards the four earthly points of the compass. Oracle-bone inscriptions refer to sacrificial

blood-letting ritual in its positive rather than negative sense, that is, as a purifying, cathartic and sacralizing force rather than a polluted and dreaded symbol of human violence.

Whereas human sacrifice was offered to ancestral deities, such sacrifice (including that of children and women) was also believed to strengthen the foundation (and pillars) of buildings, building gates (entrances), dikes, embankments and other water works. After he was caught in a battle that brought ruin to his kingdom, the crown-prince of Ts'ai, for example, was sacrificed to strengthen a dam, suggesting a possible correlation between sacrifice to the founders of the human order and to important buildings and public projects that uphold that order. The more important the construction, the more humans were sacrificed. Hundreds of human skeletons, sometimes with chariots and horses, were found at the site of the royal palace.

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The Shang especially offered sacrifice to the royal ancestors and other deities who had a stake either in the continuous welfare of the state or, in case of "ritual neglect", in causing harm to the state. The royal family worshipped the founder of the dynasty as an ancestor who continued to have an interest in its maintenance and, therefore, continued to be the center of attention. Also, these ancestors were thanked for good weather and harvests and for victory in battle, all in "thanksgiving" sacrifice. Conversely, the humans therefore blamed them for droughts, bad harvests, enemy invasions, or, for the curses they inflict upon the members of the elite. The role the Chinese attributed to their ancestors follows universal patterns. When social ills began to proliferate and clan relationships to crumble, when ritual was neglected and taboo broken, the ancestors were allegedly displeased with the living and caused natural disasters, nightmares, social disharmony and other ills. The leaders' ancestors, who have a stake in the order they had established, were particularly identified with natural calamities and social upheavals. Thus the ancestors were feared to cause natural calamities and worshipped to control them; they allegedly provoked as well as contained violence. From the viewpoint of generative anthropology, one can interpret the royal ancestor as the "first" violent deity who created a new order on the basis of "sacrificing" the old. As every royal successor's authority depended on the dynasty's founder, the maintenance of the new order continued to depend on the violence of its foundation which, in peacetime, was continued under the control of the sacrificial violence offered by the royal descendants.

7

In the way sacrifice is linked to royal ancestors, we discover an intrinsic system of reciprocity. The king's worldly authority seemed not only to depend upon, but to correspond to the ancestors' spiritual power. Therefore, in order for the combined king/ancestor to have sufficient power to maintain the state order, they had to be fed properly with nutritional sacrifice, the most potent food being, of course, raw or cooked meat. According to the *Tso-chuan*, ancestors, especially royal ancestors, had to be fed to keep them strong, like their living descendants. By this acquired strength, they could respond effectively to the demands and needs of the state.<sup>[11]</sup> If underfed, writes Girard about other archaic cultures, the god would waste away, or else, he will descend among men and lay claim to his nourishment with unexampled cruelty and ferocity.<sup>[12]</sup> If we understand the deities, like Girard did, as initially a "sacrifice" then the offer of sacrificial flesh and blood would mean feeding the god with his own "originary" substance.<sup>[13]</sup> This view is relevant to the Chinese experience insofar as, later, under Taoism and Buddhism, the deities' diet was changed to the less violent one of words and incense. The living, too, had to feed themselves well; behind an underfed human was an equally underfed deity and meagerness

was taken as a sign or presage of a drought. Sacrifice was therefore a sharing of divine powers, ensuring longevity. This was also why the spirits of those who died premature, violent deaths were feared because they were supposed to take their still vibrant living energies with them into the world of the dead where, as evil ancestors or kwei, they were feared to curse the living and inflict illness.

A reciprocal "logical" parallelism seems to have determined the sacrificial system; the greater the calamity, the greater the required sacrifice; the greater the sacrifice the more likely it was answered; and the greater the bestowed favor of the deity, the greater the thanksgiving sacrifice the living offered it. Supernatural power seems to have depended not only on sacrifice, but on its amount. The greater the amount, the greater its effect. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the corresponding "magical" power of the spirit, to whom it was addressed, was supposed to grow. This perhaps explains human sacrifice as the ultimate sacrifice in the hierarchy of sacrificial values, and, most likely, as a later "derived" development.

The ritual language, too, reflected this reciprocal state; the same word being used for 'revenge', 'atonement' and thanksgiving'. This reciprocity may have contributed considerably to the kind of "give-and-take" that, under Confucianism, dominated Chinese social ideals. Veritable "deals" or covenants, based on a strict give-and-take, bound the living to their ancestors. Whoever it addressed, sacrifice has to be understood as a ritual, carried out in a ritual context. Scholarly opinion is divided as to who officiated in ritual. Oracle-bone divinations and, most probably, oracle-bone inscriptions were the domain of "official" diviners. Yet, according to Chou dynasty data, there were also both male and female shamans, whose functions are subject to controversy. Some may have served "private", others "public" interests. Some oracle-bone inscriptions, such as the following, refer to the practice of sacrificing shamanesses during droughts:

11. Perhaps/woman/Tsai/man/burning at the pyre/bringing/rain

Most likely meaning: "Should the woman Tsai be burned at the stakes? Will this bring rain?"

8

Conceivably, Tsai may have been a popular (non-official) shamaness accused to have caused the drought by evil sorcery.[\[14\]](#)

Some oracle-bone inscriptions suggest the existence of official shamans who, called wu, sacrificed to the supreme royal deity Ti. For example:

12. Chia-tzu/question/Wu/Ti/sacrifice

Most likely meaning: "On the day of Chia-tzu the oracle was asked: Should Wu sacrifice to Ti?"

Or:

13. Wu/Ti sacrifice/a/dog

Most likely meaning: "Should Wu offer a dog to Ti?"

Other than sacrificing to the highest royal deity, the wu were also entrusted with the placation of natural gods, such as the wind and earth. These shamans were not directly involved in oracle-bone divination, but, given the fact they were placed under state control under the Chou, they must have fulfilled important ritual state functions.

K.C. Chang suggested that the king himself was a shaman who asks his ancestors about wind, rain, rituals, war, hunts, and who divines, foretells, and dances to pray for rain, and also interprets his

dreams. [15] Oracle-bone inscription indeed suggest that Shang kings danced and foretold the future, two activities which, in many archaic cultures, were the domains of shamans. It is possible, however, that such report was based on the activities of "professional" shamans under the king's control. If Shang kings were truly shamans we would still have to offer a plausible definition of Chinese shamanism versus, say, Siberian shamanism. Scholarly opinion as to whether the king in fact practiced shamanism or used shamanic clairvoyants for his own political ends is sharply divided. We know that shamans concentrated around the royal palace and that, especially in case of succession disputes or rivalries, the contenders used shamans to claim legitimacy and eliminate rivals. False accusations must have resulted, as in Japan, in witch hunts, undermining orderly leadership succession. Once firmly established, Chinese leaders tried to subject shamanistic predictions to political control. Uncontrolled shamanism would undoubtedly have been a mixed blessing for the early leaders because maintaining the state without controlling spontaneous oracles would seriously jeopardize the orderly foundations of the state. If the kings would have let shamans freely predict the outcome of important political and social issues, the state could only survive if the king himself was the chief shaman, or if he effectively controlled the delivery of oracular foretelling. We know that the official diviners who were in charge of oracle-bone divination and not the shamans. Oracle-bone divination was the domain of royal officials under the political control of the kings and not of the shamans. This is what led David Keatley to claim that the oracle-bone inscriptions were inscribed not before, but after the oracle, providing a historical record of the communication with the divine. [16] Whether such a posteriori inscriptions were truthful history remains an open question.

9

To define Shang kingship as shamanistic is misleading, especially in view of the strong possibility that the Shang kings supervised most if not all politically sensitive oracular activity and were, no doubt, assisted by subservient oracle interpreters and other "morally pure," "loyal" officials. Conceivably, not all kings possessed the necessary shamanistic skills, nor did all have shamanistic inclinations, the use of "professional" shamans thereby becoming a sine qua non. Perhaps we should judge Shang shamanism in light of the Chou kings who placed the shamans under their political control, presumably to discourage ordinary people from sacrificing to state deities. It is easy to understand that such private sacrifice increased as central control weakened. Sacrifice and politics went hand in hand. Also, the difficulty in maintaining political control over shamanistic practice may have prompted the later Taoists to oppose shamanism and sacrifice, accusing the shamans of causing cosmic disharmony and earthly violence (succession struggles) and warning against its harmful effects on the state. It wanted to replace shamanistic practice with a state-controlled "shamanistic" bureaucracy, and sacrifice with an emphasis on "healing" and longevity, which it considered more beneficial for the state.

To maintain his state, the king had to control access to his ancestors (heaven), which is likely to have been the reason behind the designation, no doubt by a Shang king, of a supreme deity (Shang Ti), found in oracle-bone inscriptions. This was most probably, an abstract (neutral) royal ancestor superior to the ancestors of subordinate clans and squarely under the king's ritual control. The religious system had to correspond to the socio-political one and the ruler had to monopolize the communication between him and heaven for him to be able to maintain the state.

The kind of archeological evidence as summarized above strongly suggests that the Shang state was held together by ritual. Ritual rules and obligations were in fact law, the legal system developing out of ritual as in other cultures. The ancestral temple was the center of ritual and therefore the center of state affairs. In tune with the importance or "centrality" of ancestral worship, the ancestral shrine constituted a center

of social and political activities, where divinatory questions were asked, the place where important decisions were made, where warriors received their portions of meat before going into battle, where, after the war, the prisoners of war were paraded, where those who were not enslaved for labor, were sacrificed, and where quarrels were mediated and judged. It was the sacred center of the state where most if not all "significant" activity took place. It was a place on which depended the community's very existence. This place corresponds well to Gans's "sacred center of signification".

We can further conjecture that the defense of an ancestral temple was paramount to the existence of the state; its destruction or defilement meant the end of it. Taking its symbol across a borderline meant a declaration of war. Ancestral worship determined all those elements that allow leaders to "legitimately" claim and control a state, to establish the necessary socio-political hierarchy. Myths were tightly attached to the temple; they explained the virtues of the dynasty's founder(s), providing the *raison d'être* of the ancestral cult. The ritual also determined the calendar, that is, the measuring of time as an important device of socio-political control.

10

An ethical system also emerged from early Chinese ancestral ritual. This was not the freedom and equality Gans discovered in the "originary" human, but one which determining the relationship between king and subject, typical of the socio-political hierarchy of the early, as well as of the later Chinese states. The kings' ancestors become the ethical models of political and religious virtue the ruling kings allegedly inherit. Therefore, at least in principle, the kings merit the loyalty of their subjects because of the virtues they were supposed to embody, having inherited them, in direct patrilineal descent, from their ancestors. The myths portray the dynasty's founder as a person of exceptional virtue, a tradition the ritual wants to preserve. The *Li Chi* states:

According to the institutes of the sage kings about sacrifices; sacrifice should be offered to him who had given good laws to the people; to him who had labored to the death in the discharge of his duties; to him who had boldly and successfully met great calamities; and to him who had warded off great evils...Only men and things of this character were admitted into the sacrificial canon.[\[17\]](#)

Maybe we can discover here the seeds for the retrospective nature of most of Chinese political ideology, that is, rather than establishing their own moral order, present rulers had to abide by the ethical standards established by the mythical founders. In this way knowledge of the past, knowing the virtuous deeds of one's ancestors, became one of the requisites of political authority. Such emphasis on ritual virtue may have been a reinterpretation of the founding myths imposed by later generations of Confucian scholars/officials. First Shang King T'ang's abortive self-sacrifice - he is reported to have cut his hair and nails and was about to offer himself to the pyre as a self-sacrifice to overcome a severe drought were it not for a sudden rain that saved his life - may have been such a myth assembled and aggrandized according to Confucian ideology in a later age. This myth may have some historical basis, at least the king's cutting his hair and fingernails, since we know the Shang kings to have conducted their own sacrifices.

Gans's theory on the origin of language encourages us to think seriously about the way or ways the Chinese written language developed. The earliest Shang symbols found on offertory vessels are generally understood as emblems or names, most likely those of the clans's ancestral deities, and, or, that of the clans themselves. Clan or lineage leaders may also have devised such emblems to enhance their identity

vis-a-vis other clans or the royal clan, especially when ancestral worship was still, by and large, a private affair. These symbols were, no doubt, invested with divine power and used only vis-a-vis the divine. They are Gans's "uniquely significant" naming of the center or whatever the center renders meaningful.[18] They were devices to make the deities present, or, vice-versa, to represent the communities vis-a-vis their deities. Yet, like ritual or the king/priest, they tend to blur the separation of center and those who communicate with it. Language was believed to have had a divine origin and, therefore, was the only way to communicate with the deities. This symbolic communication, according to Gans, appealed to both deity and man, substituting, like ritual itself, the absent deity.[19] This name or emblem is a sign that not only signifies something, but is also meant to influence something that, by its own essence, can never be completely controlled. Beyond the fundamental question whether this sign was closer initially to the divine than it was to the human, the Chinese experience suggests an oscillation, however subtle, between the divine and the human, leaning toward one or the other depending on the occasion and needs. Since animism depends on an identity between sign and the object it signifies, the closeness of sign and deity, for example, may explain the identity that one discovers in China as well as in other cultures between the shaman/priest and his deity, and between the name and its "sacred" substance.

11

If the birth of language is to be found in ritual, then the birth of music must have been coeval. Music gave rhythm to language and dance and must have been an important part of shamanistic practice. The *Li Chi* states something one discovers in many other, including Western cultures: "When one used words in song, one drags them out. One gives words to things which have impressed one, but, because words are not enough, one adds exclamations and sighs. When one still wants to express something more, then one moves spontaneously one's hands and feet in dance." [20] Such "performance" is to be understood as the origin of Chinese poetry, music, dance, and, later, of the theater, originally offered by shamans and, as we have seen, by the kings themselves, to their ancestors. This was done not only to "entertain" the deities or an audience, but to attract a deity onto the dancer/musician, an aspect many other archaic cultures share.

The Chinese language may have started with the "ostensive" but we must keep in mind that we know nothing about the development of the Chinese spoken language, only about the written one, as it is inscribed on ritual bronze vessels and oracle-bones. Paleoglyphic investigation seems indeed to suggest that the written signs were, above all, names, that is, according to Gans's theory, an "ostensive", used in China exclusively to communicate with the "absolute center". The control of writing was perhaps as important socially and politically as the control of technology (casting bronze ritual vessels and tools), all of which were strict royal prerogatives.

Oracle-bone inscriptions, however, mark a "later" development into "mature" language or narrative. This narrative continued to be based on the ostensive, especially, because of the Chinese notorious indistinction of a name/word/noun from a verb, adjective, preposition or adverb. The Chinese language continues to be one of the simplest systems among advanced languages, determining grammatical function simply by the position of a word within the narrative. The narrative is in this sense merely a juxtaposition of various "ostensive" words which, according to their positions, can be understood as nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs. The same applies to those words which, depending on their positions, function as interrogative, negative, perfective, pronominal, prepositional, and conjunctive particles, or, as devices introducing a relative clause.

There is another important possibility we need to take into consideration. The oracle-bone "written" language may, in all likelihood, have been a highly coded and esoteric language under the exclusive control of royal officials. Conceivably, only they had access to this language, only they mastered the code and only they could manipulate it to benefit (and sometimes harm) the state. The people who possessed these writing skills were both mediums and ritual scribes. How and when such a "secret" code was established, or, how long it took for it to develop, we don't know. Eighty-eight pre-oracle-bone symbols have been found in early Shang inscriptions, sixteen of which at an other archeological site, indicating that, in the early stages, only a portion of the "vocabulary" may have been a "universally" shared one. There was a great leap from there to the ca. 4500 uniform symbols Tsung-Tung Chang counted in oracle-bone inscriptions.[\[21\]](#) The gap between names inscribed on offertory vessels and oracle-bone inscriptions prevents us from being able to trace the writing system through each important developing stage. The post-oracle-bone development of the written language is equally untraceable. We only know that poetry, but perhaps also to a degree, the writing of myth and history, developed from oracle-bone inscription. It also influenced later poetry which was controlled, as the oracular bone inscriptions were, by the kings' and emperors's bureaucracy.

12

We are equally unable to ascertain, at present, in what way this written language had once been spoken language; perhaps it never was spoken and only later came to be spoken as the ritual court language. As such it would have been a response to the traditions of the written language, rather than the oral. There is no doubt, however, that many Chinese ideographs originated in ritual and represent ritual gestures, speech, and ritual implements.

That the post-Shang Chinese official/scholars substituted ritual with language is beyond doubt. Opposed to both blood sacrifice and spiritual mediumism, Taoism only offered words. The Taoist "written" petition rites addressed to the Celestial Bureau of the government, indicate the degree of Taoist reliance on the written word more than on the shamanistic spoken word, encouraging development toward religious textualization or codification.

It is evident that political authority emanated from ritual. Though referring mainly to the following Chou dynasty, the *Li Chi* (Li Ki) indicates that the Chinese were keenly aware of the political use of ritual:

Of all the methods for the good ordering of men there is none more urgent than the use of *li*.  
*Li* are of five kinds, and there is none of them more important than... *chi* [rituals].[\[22\]](#)

In typical Confucian way, the text correlates ritual and virtue, so that, the people who conduct ritual, who are the ritualists and have ritual know-how, are also looked upon as people of virtue imbued with political authority:

[Rituals]...are not a thing common to a man from without; it issues from within him, and has its birth in the heart. When the heart is deeply moved, expression is given to it by ceremonies; and hence, only men of ability and virtue can give complete exhibition to the idea of [rituals].[\[23\]](#)

This made it possible for the conquerors-to-be to blame a sacrificial crisis on the previous ruler for having lost virtue by neglecting the rites, and that his elimination was legitimate. The following Chou dynasty was established precisely when, during a drought and the resulting sacrificial crisis, Chou Wu

Wang overthrew the last Shang king on whom he blamed the neglect of ancestral worship.

Let us throw additional light on Shang practice by directing our attention to the Chou dynasty and investigate Chou continuation of, and deviation from Shang practice. The early Chou kings followed by and large the culture of the Shang and therefore maintained the sacrificial system basically as it was. Yet changes are visible; we just don't know whether they came about by sheer evolution or revolution. It is to be expected that a "violent" change in leadership would legitimize a break with tradition. On the other hand, there is also considerable continuation of traditions that depend on the virtuous founders of the previous dynasty or dynasties.

13

The Chou tried to establish their socio-political order by juxtaposing and, at the same time, ordering the divine hierarchy to match the human one. In order to do so, the Chou established the *t'ien* (heaven) of the ancestors, but, made it a political center to which only the kings had unhindered access, claiming legitimacy by blaming that the last Shang king (Ti Wu-i) had despised it.[\[24\]](#) The Chou differentiated more between heaven and earth perhaps as a result of socio-political hierarchy and tabooization of the political prerogatives of the kings. They delegated the gods to heaven or to the earth, that is, to spheres where only the kings and their (priestly) representatives had access. The *Kuo Yu*, a fourth-century BC. text speaks about a separation of heaven and earth:

Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend upon them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, called *hsi* (shamans), and, if women, *wu* (shamanesses). It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters. As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits sent down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities.

In the degenerate time of Shao-hao (traditionally put at the twenty-sixth century BC.), men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence the successor of Shao-hao, Chuan-hsu, charged Ch'ung, Governor of the South, to handle the affairs of heaven in order to determine the proper place of the spirits, and Li, Governor of Fire, to handle the affairs of Earth, in order to determine the proper place of men. And such is what is meant by cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth.[\[25\]](#)

Despite the idealization of the past, this text provides a plausible rationale for the "political control of heaven", allowing only government officials to communicate with it.

Whereas the Shang used their "writing system" exclusively in ritual, that is in most cases, divinatory rites, the Chou secularized the system to the degree that it satisfied both religious and secular (state) affairs. Also, this shift resulted in a more structured ritual banquet during which the sacrificial animal was eaten in a way to create and maintain social hierarchy and strengthen the social fabric. The

correspondence between human and divine satiation was thus carried on by the Chou.

Through this process, the emphasis shifted, however slightly, from the deities to the human sphere and to the esthetic/ethical "performance" of ritual, and, in the case of sacrifice, to the human consumption of the sacrificial animal, or other representative foodstuff, in ritual banquets. The spirits are no longer the main guests but important human guests fed to create political consensus and hegemony. During unexplained phenomena, one no longer questioned the divine so much as to change the ritual, the divine thereby being given a more permanent and stable status. This emphasis on performance will, in its own turn and according to its own dynamics, change into the ethical institutions of Confucianism valuing virtue over ritual effect. The Confucian concept *li* (rite, ritual) assumed a socio-ethical value, that of virtue as the correct attitude toward the ancestral shrine. The Confucian concept of filial piety undoubtedly developed out of ancestral worship/sacrifice at the ancestral shrine.

14

According to the *Chou Li*, the founder of the Chou dynasty set up a Ministry of Ritual with a number of subdivisions indicating the ritual activities the court deemed necessary to control:

- Officials in charge of the maintenance and furnishings of temples
- Officials in charge of tombs
- Court musicians
- Diviners
- Invocators
- Ritual scribes
- Palace scribes
- Officials in charge of ritual carriages
- Temple officials outside the capital[26]

This ritual bureaucracy comprised at least 3,763 persons, plus several offices (e.g. spirit mediums) whose number is unknown.[27] Accordingly, the spirit mediums were either placed outside the Ministry or subordinated under its various officials. The organization of the Ministry does not suggest that the spirit mediums were an entirely independent group, outside of government control. Yet they seemed to have been of low status, priority being given to the diviners in charge of ancestor worship rather than on the spirit mediums in charge of nature worship. According to the *Chou Li*, the shamans were squarely under government control: "When the king offers condolence, they together with the Invocators precede him." And in case of the wu (shamaness): "When the queen offers condolence, they together with the invocators precede her... In all great calamities of the state, they pray, singing and wailing." [28] The spirit mediums continued to fulfill important ritual functions for the state including rain-making dance and exorcisms. They bore the titles of deities and lent their bodies to them (spirit possession), which suggests their identity with the divine, and with the political world only if this possession was politically manipulated. This was different for the invocators who, in charge of proper ritual demeanor and sequence, represented the needs of the government.

The Chou began what the Han (206 BC - AD 8 and 25-220) completed, namely the subordination under the state of all religion with the emperor as the high-priest of the nation. The Chou appointment of a master of ritual became, under the Han, the minister of sacrifice. Each dynasty changed the ritual system.

The Ch'in ordered a general survey of all ritual activity in the state, from which only those that confirmed the overlordship of the Ch'in were tolerated. *Ti* (highest imperial title probably deriving from the Shang "Shang Ti") came to signify "divine emperor" or "emperor by divine right". The religious system had to reflect the state order and vice-versa. Private sacrifice was prohibited. Ritual became professionalized under ritual experts serving the state.

In conclusion, one may say that the earliest Chinese statehood experiences were heavily based on ritual of a kind I discussed above. In order to maintain the state, the ritual had to demarcate between the divine and human realms, government officials occupying a mediating position, whereas the king himself came to be identified "animistically" with the center. What was important for the king was to separate the divine center from the outside; the king maintaining a monopoly over it. To establish and maintain their authority, the kings had to identify with the divine center, that is, with his patrilineal ancestors. By virtue of this identity, the king controlled the communication with his ancestors through an esoteric system of symbolic communication. By virtue of this identity, his laws were believed to have had a divine origin. As long as he maintained order, this order was seen as the blessing the king's divine ancestors bestowed upon the state. Identical with the center, the king becomes the source of signification, of peace and order. In case of ritual/cosmic crisis, the king substituted animals and humans for his own sacrifice.

15

In the early Chinese states, however, the emphasis is not on the originary control of human violence, but on the natural forces which, under the control of the king's ancestral deities, threaten the state. The control of human violence is only indirectly implied in this perhaps more positive system of deferring human violence onto natural violence. Yet, in all royal ritual, the maintenance of the human order was a central concern of the king/priest. Since sheer martial force could not guarantee continued order, political authority and charisma had to come out of the divine center with which the king identified himself. Even this "scheme" did not ensure political eternity. During major sacrificial crisis, the king was vulnerable to rebellion, justified by the center and its clever sacrificial/ritual, oracular, and linguistic manipulation. Overthrowing the king, as can be observed when the Shang changed to the Chou and during subsequent dynastic changes, the "last kings" became the real sacrificial victims, who, by neglecting their proper rites, have lost legitimacy and, have, like some of their African counterparts, become the system's outsiders eligible for sacrifice. This regicidal sacrifice would absorb all impurities and potential for violence and shift the control of the natural forces to a new, legitimate representative of the center.[\[29\]](#) The new king was not only appointed as the new representative of the center, but, on the basis of this newly acquired identity, was charged "by the center" of writing the history of the former dynasty. By so doing he legitimized his newly acquired authority by pointing out how the last kings of the preceding dynasty had lost their legitimacy (mandate) by breaking ritual taboo. Thus, it was not the break of taboo which engendered the new order, as we observe it in ancient Judaic myth, but a legitimate re-establishment of taboo.

The unmistakable trend we discover in the early Chinese experience, is the political control of the divine "center" upon which the welfare of the state seemed to hang. Most Chinese emperors continued to identify with *t'ien* (heaven) the symbols of which were embroidered on their garments and signified by the palaces they inhabited and rituals they performed. The natural successor of this system is the bureaucratization of the divine in the Han dynasty, which gave government ranks and titles to a corresponding hierarchy of deities. In this development, the emphasis shifts from a "center" as the divine source of the human order to one combining control of the natural forces with that of human order thus

trying to sustain the agricultural productivity which supported the state. The deities of the "center" turn into the ancestral spirits of the kings and other prominent families. The new king replaced the older deities of the "center" with his own ancestors. He cannot tolerate the continuation of separate deities related to a different or previous power base. Yet, as all founding kings embody universal virtues, each new king had to base his order on a combination of preceding founders. His rebellion against their later descendants becomes legitimate only if he can prove a spiritual discontinuity between them and their own founding ancestors, regardless of the blood that linked them.

In order to assume control within a state, the king must appropriate control over the "center". Without this, the Chinese state if not any early state, would have been impossible. This may be a "normal", to-be-expected development of early state formation. His position within the system is therefore highly volatile. To avoid undermining his state, he appoints ritual officials who can cushion some of this volatility. Since natural calamities never last forever, the king was able to claim that his power and control over "heaven" enabled him to overcome the "ritual crisis". The state functioned squarely within this juxtaposition of human and divine in the absolute center of signification. The state ideology emerged from this center; it gave the king or any other claimant the ideological justification for authority, rebellion and war, and, by the same token, for the establishment of a new and "corrected" order.

16

In view of the Chinese experience, The Gansian theory based on René Girard's pioneering work, finds a fruitful new testing ground. Both Girard and Gans developed their theory on the basis of Western traditions. The non-Western, Chinese tradition has strengthened rather than weakened their theory of the centrality of ritual, especially sacrificial ritual. The Chinese experience confirms that sacrifice played an important role in state formation, in the ordering of human society and in the control of human violence. This suggests that a state, like Shang and Chou China, could not have been successful without the violence control mechanism a state could provide. We might discover differences between "East" and "West" in the ways this mechanism was put in place, but we also discover the paradox of a state as a violence-controlling and avoiding organism. Paradoxically, the state could only avoid violence by perpetuating it in ritual periodicity. The archaic Chinese experience seems to confirm the universality of sacrificial ritual as a civilizing force. Like other nations, however, modern China carries on the "historical" burden of its violent "ritual" past as we have learned from recent events, and this, despite the non-violent, non-metaphysical Confucian ideology that has dominated much of China's state ideology.

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## Notes

1. I owe this information to Hung-Hsiang Chou, "Chinese Oracle Bones," *Scientific American*, vol. 240, no. 4 (April, 1979) pp. 135-51.[\(back\)](#)
2. Hsi was a mythical ancestor of the Shang royal clan.[\(back\)](#)
3. These examples have been adopted from Tsung-Tsung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie im Spiegel der Orakelinschriften - Eine paläographische Studie zur Religion im archaischen China* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970) p. 34ff.[\(back\)](#)
4. For further discussion, see *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 167ff.[\(back\)](#)

5. *The End of Culture - Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985) p. 137ff. ([back](#))
6. James Legge, transl., *The She King*, The Chinese Classics, vol. 4, Reprinted edition, Hongkong University Press, p. 199. ([back](#))
7. *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977) p. 254. ([back](#))
8. James Legge, transl., *The Ch'un Ts'ew with The Tso Chuen*, The Chinese Classics, vol. 5, part 1, p. 117 (as a result of a solar eclipse); p.167 and footnote, p. 177; p. 633 and footnote on p. 635. ([back](#))
9. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 272. ([back](#))
10. See on this, K.C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983) p. 97 and p. 110. ([back](#))
11. James Legge, transl., *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen*, p. 613. See also, Werner Eichhorn, *Die Religionen Chinas* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Koln, Mainz: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1973) p. 40 and Tsung-Tsung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 130. ([back](#))
12. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 266. ([back](#))
13. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 266. ([back](#))
14. This is the opinion of Tsung-Tung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 250ff. ([back](#))
15. *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, p. 45 and p.47. ([back](#))
16. *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze-Age China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1978). ([back](#))
17. James Legge, transl., *Li Ki* in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 27 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885) pp. 26-28. ([back](#))
18. *Originary Thinking*, p. 64ff. ([back](#))
19. *Originary Thinking*, p. 94. ([back](#))
- 18
20. Transl., Seraphin Couvreur, *Li chi: Mémoires sur les bienséances et les cérémonies...* Tome II (Paris: Cathasia, 1950) pp. 113-14. ([back](#))
21. *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 4. ([back](#))
22. Legge, *Li Ki*, p. 236. ([back](#))
23. Legge, *Li Ki*, p. 236. ([back](#))
24. Arthur Waley, transl., *The Book of Songs* (London: Allen & Unwin, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937) p. 262ff. See also W. Eichhorn, *Die alte Chinesische Religion und das Staatskultwesen*, Handbuch der

Orientalistik, Vierte Abteilung, Vierter Band, 1. Abschnitt (Leiden/Koln: E.J. Brill, 1976) p. 39ff.[\(back\)](#)

25. From Derk Bodde, "Myths of ancient China," *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel N. Kramer (New York: Doubleday, 1961).[\(back\)](#)

26. See on this, Lothar von Falkenhausen, "Reflections on the political Role of Spirit Mediums in early China: Two *wu* Officials in the *Zhou li*," forthcoming in *Early China*, no. 20. Von Falkenhausen argues that this early Chou dynasty ritual bureaucracy may have been projected on the Chou by ideologues of the Warring States period.[\(back\)](#)

27. This figure may be exaggerated. See "Reflections on the Political Role of Spirit Mediums in early China," p. 5.[\(back\)](#)

28. Sun Yirang, *Zhou Li Zengyi*, Sibü Beiyao ed. (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1927, revised Taipei) 50:20a-21b.[\(back\)](#)

29. Wang Mang (r. 9-23) was a notable exception. He conquered the former Han without bloodshed, empassizing therefore, his moral virtues and virtuous conduct. His reign was exceptionally short-lived.[\(back\)](#)

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# **Philosophy and Its Other--Violence: A Survey of Philosophical Repression From Plato to Girard**

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What does it mean to say that the other of philosophy is violence? First, it means that violence plays a role in the naming of philosophy. We are accustomed today to thinking about the founding of disciplines in terms of what they must exclude. Structures of exclusion, the argument goes, are the defining practices for the creation of disciplinary formations. The identity between a discipline and its other is cemented by the act of excluding the other from the scene of representation. Actually, "exclusion" is not the right word because the other term is not formally excluded; it remains a passive force in the definition of the more active term. Perhaps, for this reason, "repression" is a better word if we consider the dynamic sense that Freud gave to it.

Thus, to name philosophy, to found philosophy, something must be designated as the other. If the other of philosophy is violence, philosophy must represent (and repress) violence in the name of philosophy. I want to suggest, however, that philosophy represents (and represses) violence in a particular way. It represents violence as an idea rather than as a phenomenon. The idea of violence appears in many guises in philosophy--and I will be taking up some of them in a moment--so many guises in fact that one is reduced to an analysis of the "metaphorics of violence" when one approaches the subject of violence and philosophy. Indeed, some recent philosophizing has gone so far as to designate this problem as a cure, arguing that violence is at base metaphorical, epistemological, ideational, and so forth. The phenomenon of violence, however, remains virtually untouched as a philosophical subject. There is no phenomenology of violence in philosophy. Some might object that this is more properly speaking a subject for political science, not philosophy. But I would argue that this is another case of repressing violence in the name of philosophy. Consequently, the question guiding this survey is: Can philosophy take violence as an object of study and still know itself?

Before looking at some of the guises of violence in philosophy, I need to make clear why I am investigating this topic with a particular beginning and end in mind, that is, beginning with Plato and concluding with René Girard. Girard is not a philosopher, it seems, which means only that it is difficult to be serious about the nature of violence and retain the title of philosopher. But Girard is in some

manner a phenomenologist of violence. He is a phenomenologist of violence because he wants to assert, first and foremost, that violence is an object of representation. Violence is what representation takes as its object, and what representation does to violence is to re-present it in the form of different ideas. Most obvious are the social ideas that exist to repress, to reorient, and to contain the nature of violence: these are evident in political orders, religious systems, and aesthetic forms. What is most daring about Girard's thought, however--and this is what makes it both useful and pertinent to philosophy--is his sense that second-order discourses, such as philosophy, also participate in the translation of violence into ideas. According to Girard, cultural formations--and discourses about them--re-present violence by engaging in a process of substitution in which other names stand in for violence and redirect its effects. He refers to this process of substitution, of representation, as a sacrificial order because it scapegoats one term in the name of the desire to escape from the ultimate term, violence. No doubt, I add quickly, this process of representing violence as something else has an ethical dimension insofar as it attempts to contain violence. But because it also sacrifices this something else in the place of violence, it possesses what we might be tempted to call an unethical dimension as well. Whatever chooses to re-present violence, rather than to reveal it, colludes with violence.

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Philosophy as a discourse with a certain fondness for knowledge, then, is as implicated in this repression of violence as are the orders of knowledge that it loves. The rigorous devotion to the idea, which is philosophy, is part and parcel of a containment program whose object is violence and whose name is, to use the most general term, "culture." That this culture is sacrificial is Girard's fundamental insight as well as the source of our ultimate discontent.

Notice, as I now turn to my survey of philosophers, that I will be treating some philosophers who may not be recognizable as philosophers at all. I want to emphasize thinkers for whom the representation of violence is the most transparent, and since the title of philosopher--or so my thesis argues--shares the stage only at its peril with the phenomenon of violence, I have been forced to stretch the designation. For among more recognizable philosophers the topic of violence is so contained as to be virtually nonexistent.

Idealism begins properly speaking with Plato, and that long line of idealists called philosophers descends from him. Plato writes the originary scene of philosophy's love of ideas, but it is rarely noted that he also creates the originary scene of philosophy's repression of violence. The theory of ideas is in truth an asceticism of ideas, and what Plato wishes to master is violence. This is evident, first of all, in the fact that philosophy and political science share the same stage. The *Republic* sketches a theory of mimesis that begins the long association between truth and solidarity so important to political evolution. On the one hand, Plato defines truth according to a view of mimesis in which all divergences from or versions of truth descend from a single ideal, so that one can calibrate the degrading of forms with respect to the ideal. The closer a form is to the ideal, the more true and less corrupt it is. In epistemology, this theory of ideas appears harmless enough. Indeed, the theory of ideas is fascinating. Undergraduates love to debate about Plato's ideal table, and they easily understand how the theory of ideas works, despite all the paradoxes involved in it. Plato's theory of ideas fascinates because Platonism captures our need to be saved from violence through the fascination by ideas. It defines the desire to turn ourselves away from things human toward transcendence. Plato and the most ordinary undergraduate share the desire to become more godlike, as do we all.

In the political sphere, on the other hand, the theory of ideas looks very different. When we translate to the realm of the city Plato's desire to reduce conflict between competing forms by describing them as descending from a common idea, it grows clear that he is concerned with competition among human beings, and that the theory of ideas is a means of representing the violence of the city as a problem about ideas. Consequently, Plato idealizes everything, including violence. Violence is rational in Plato. It has an end and object in view. In a remarkable passage in book two, Plato makes the transition from his theory of ideas to his notion of the ideal republic. He argues that warfare arises because individuals compete for possessions and take over other people's concerns, and he proposes a solution by establishing the same type of hierarchical arrangement found in the realm of ideas in the realm of politics. In the perfect state, "one man could not do more than one job or profession well" (374b). Each individual represents a type of character, a character that dictates his or her talents, activities, and purpose. As long as individuals obey their nature and do not diverge from it, harmony will continue to exist in the city.

3

Plato fails to account for the irrational nature of violence, then, although he does attempt to impose a cure for it. Violence grows according to a mimetic pattern in which individuals want to possess objects not because they desire them but because they are imitating other people around them. The teleology of desire does not lead to objects in the world, although it appears to do so. The teleology of desire is more desire, and it relies on a distinctly interpersonal dimension of human existence. Mimetic desire is both violent and necessary with regard to the city. The desire to repeat the actions of others makes communal consensus possible; the conflicts inevitable in such imitations bring about social violence. Plato addresses both of these problems in his idealization of violence. First, he defines desire as a desire for objects. Second, he apportions objects according to distinct patterns in which individuals will only compete for objects appropriate to their characters. Like individual ideas, each type of citizen in the community is cordoned off in a separate realm, and within each realm, a hierarchy establishes which individual represents the highest instance of that realm's truth. The Platonic model of government looks like an ancient *quadrillage*--a quarantine--to fight the plague. It superimposes a grid over the city, inhibiting travel and transactions between separate zones, and within each zone a similar system maintains order. But Plato does not admit that the plague is violence. His theory of ideas needs, first and foremost, to repress the phenomenon of violence and to translate what cannot be repressed into an idealized form. The *Republic* takes place on the outskirts of Athens because ultimately Plato's city is only an idea of a city.

Sadism may be thought of as the philosophical idea most cognizant of violence. And yet Sade also idealizes violence, and in a manner reminiscent of Plato. Perhaps the best way to recognize the idealism of violence in Sade is to remember that he is involved in a philosophical dispute. In recent years, thanks to Lacan, much has been made of the fact that Sade creates a philosophical allegory in his work to attack Enlightenment philosophy. In the case of Kant especially, critics are delighted to show how much Kant is like Sade. But if Kant is like Sade, it means that Sade is like Kant. Sade does not diverge ultimately from Enlightenment philosophy because his definition of sex is about proving ideas and aspiring to utopia. First, even though he wants to prove that his idea of human nature is superior to that of his philosophical opponents, he does not diverge from the philosophical language of his times, and he confirms its traditional opposition and conclusions. Sade uses the discourse of nature to justify his arguments, privileges liberty above all else, uses nascent ideas of human rights to describe the individual's ownership of his or her own body, and attacks religious belief as the source of many problems. Second, he wishes to design a utopian community. As horrible as Sade's bedroom may seem to us on the outside, to those on

the inside, it defines a domain of ideal consensus and cooperation achieved through the universal pursuit of pleasure and through education, that is, through the imposition of ideas. The right ideas about sex bring happiness and harmony. The more natural the idea, the more its chance of success. The logic of Sadean philosophy critiques few Enlightenment principles, except on the basis of Enlightenment principles. Indeed, the erotic mores of our own day combine most obviously Sade's interest in sex and Enlightenment moral pedagogy: we are required to respect individual ends to the point of feeling a moral responsibility to help people who take pleasure in pain. Our sense of self-sacrifice to this categorical imperative is so great that we never question whether we might be harming ourselves by agreeing to hurt people who like to be hurt.

4

I do not mean to underplay either the originality or the irony of Sade. *Philosophy in the Bedroom* marks a divergence from philosophy as usual in many ways. First and foremost is the inclusion of sex as a philosophical subject. But Sadean sex ends by reinforcing philosophy as usual. In the same way that Plato's theory of ideas puts us off the scent of violence, Sade's theory of sex represses the notion of violence. There is a lot of violence in Sade, but we read it as sex. There where cruelty is right before our eyes, we fail to recognize it. Sadism is not the pleasure in violence. It is the concealment of violence in sex, and sex remains a rational order for Sade. How else do we explain the ability of Sade's libertines to fuck and philosophize at the same time? The consequence is a philosophy of the bedroom in which violence is submitted to the idealism of sex. Indeed, Sadean sex is a challenge to outphilosophize violence in order to produce an ideal form of violence. If there has to be violence and cruelty, Sade seems to say, we might as well enjoy them. There has yet to be a reading of Sade that exposes the traditional nature of his philosophy with regard to violence.

Hegel's dialectic of the master and slave finally makes explicit the interpersonal violence troubling Enlightenment philosophy, taking a decisive step in the history of philosophical conceptions of violence.<sup>[1]</sup> Most explicitly, he explains that cause and effect occur in an anthropological context in which individuals struggle for recognition and to dominate others. Each individual is potentially another cause interfering with the schema of cause and effect in which I direct my actions toward a proposed end. By defining desire as the desire for recognition, Hegel also succeeds in conceiving of violence in terms of a human conflict rather than epistemological incommensurability.<sup>[2]</sup> His idea of violence is by far more raw than anyone before him, including Sade, and it is no accident that Girard has been influenced by him.

There is, however, a latent idealism in Hegel's description of violence, and it lies in its relation to Being. According to Hegel, human beings are communal beings, first and foremost, but they discover their essence only by achieving freedom from their distinctive nature as communal beings. In a move reminiscent of Sade's, Hegel argues that individuals rise to the level of Being-for-self only by denying their communal nature in an act of violence against other human beings. By defining violence as the destruction of the social realm by social beings, Hegel shows both his romantic heritage and the fundamental insight of romanticism, namely that violence is only and always a form of human conflict. Nevertheless, his desire to trace the purely logical development of Being-for-itself transforms violence into a logical device, an idealism, serving his definition of Being. Indeed, violence is the primary educator of Being-for-itself: in the life and death struggle of violence, the self discovers a violence (the violence of the other) that escapes its violence and that threatens its entire existence, thus recognizing the reality of other individuals. Through violence, the self attains a universal point of view in which the

dynamic of self and other may be conceptualized.

However, the problem is that Hegel's definition of violence is not compatible with his theory of desire. If desire is the desire for recognition, the self endangers its desire by acting to destroy others by whom it needs to be recognized. One cannot be recognized by a corpse. This contradiction points to the irrational nature of violence, despite Hegel's efforts to give it a logical role in the emergence of Being. It also seems to dispute that violence might serve education. Hegel never reconciles the desire for recognition and the violent impulse to destroy other people. He simply refers to this violence as evil but as an evil needed to ensure the freedom of Beings-for-itself. In short, Hegel puts violence, despite its irrationality, in service of the idea of Being, and it becomes impossible in his philosophy to understand it outside this orbit.

5

It may help to turn, for the penultimate philosopher in my survey, to Jacques Lacan because Hegel's idealization of violence leaves its mark on the new psychoanalytic theory of aggressivity.<sup>[3]</sup> Lacan has the opportunity to create a true phenomenology of violence. He seems eager at points to emphasize the interpersonal nature of violence, and his idea of the symbolic, in which the circulation of signifiers determines subjectivity, seems to provide him with a model for describing how violence exceeds the grasp of any one individual or state of Being. It turns out, however, that aggressivity does not follow the laws of grammar, at least with regard to interpersonal relations. Aggressivity for Lacan arises as an effect of self-image. It does not exist between individuals; rather, other individuals provide a mirror-image by which we play out our own self-aggressivity. For Lacan, interpersonal aggressivity is first and foremost self-aggressivity. Indeed, the theory of self-aggressivity designs a new autonomy of the self, one more powerful than Kant's. First, self-aggressivity is a new form of autonomy because it is strictly a cognitive development. The mirror stage appears at a precise period in mental development, revealing violence to be a problem of individual cognition: between six and eight months, the child recognizes different versions of selfhood and has to think through them. Second, self-aggressivity is a form of autonomy because aggressive behavior toward others is only a symptom of an essential self-aggression defining our individual formation. Never does Lacan view self-aggression as a reflection of interpersonal violence, even though the Freudian theory of introjection could easily permit it. Insofar as Lacan accepts Hegel's definition of desire as the desire for recognition, he remains both an ego psychologist and an idealist of violence, and he fails to reconcile this definition of desire with the autonomy of self-aggressivity. In the end, Lacan contains violence within a metaphorical conception of Being.

In the early *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard accepts many of the basic ideas of Hegelian desire, and he tends to define violence in terms of competition for Being. According to this schema, the model is defined as the individual whose Being we try to imitate. The model of desire appears to possess a surplus of Being, and this abundance spurs individuals to desire the model, to imitate him or her, and to abandon the sense of the originality of their own desires. Girard defines desire as the desire to be the Other. The self-hatred of desiring subjects as well as their hatred of the model nevertheless present Girard with the same contradiction discovered by Hegel. One cannot be what one has killed.<sup>[4]</sup> Consequently, Girard introduces a variation on Hegelian mediation. He makes the case that internal mediation, which is imitation of desire among human beings, can be organized by external mediation, which is imitation of the nonhuman desire of God. The immortality of Christ introduces a distance that permits the violence of desire to cool, and once this religious hierarchy establishes itself, political forms of hierarchy also become possible. In brief, violence is contained by another form of idealism, one reminiscent of Platonic

idealism, in which a hierarchy arranges versions of imitative behavior.

In his later work, however, Girard takes a more phenomenological approach to violence, and the vocabulary of Being drops out of his theory. Mimesis itself adjusts violence to different intensities. Imitation is a function of desire insofar as it occurs between individuals, and these individuals are compelled to repeat other people's gestures. But desire ceases to be metaphysical. Girard begins to seek authority in ethological models of animal mimicry and traces an evolution of representational forms spanning from simple animal mimicry and dominance patterns to kinship relations, ritual, and political forms. It is at this point that his fundamental insight concerning representation and violence finds its most powerful articulation: higher forms of representation repeat the repetitive cycles of violence as a means of containing violence. But the success and failure of this containment depends on the phenomenon of violence itself.

6

Consequently, one finds in Girard a most unusual and, I think, fruitful attempt to capture the nature of violence. Violence, according to Girard, becomes an entity--a phenomenon--for human beings, and he explains that it is important to describe it as such:

The *mimetic* attributes of violence are extraordinary--sometimes direct and positive, at other times indirect and negative. The more men strive to curb their violent impulses, the more these impulses seem to prosper. . . . Violence is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother its flames. The metaphor of fire could well give way to metaphors of tempest, flood, and earthquake. . . . In acknowledging that fact, however, we do not mean to endorse the theory that sees in the sacred a simple transformation of natural phenomena. . . . Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence--violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred. We have yet to learn how man succeeds in positing his own violence as an independent being. (*Violence and the Sacred* 31)

It is important to note that this apparent personification of violence is not merely another version of Hegelian Being. By giving violence its due, Girard makes the point that it exists between individuals, as a function of mimesis, rather than being a property of metaphysical Being. This is most clear in his late treatment of subjectivity and Being. Almost concurrent with the attempt to describe the phenomenology of violence, Girard simply abandons talk about Being. Being as such becomes impossible to discuss as an individual phenomenon. There is no autonomous self in Girardian theory. Individuality--perhaps better called "interdividuality" [5]-- is a function of imitative patterns existing in the social realm, and individual autonomy is better recognized as a political artifact created by particular societies. As such it has many political uses. But it has no existence apart from these political uses. In brief, Girard sketches the most radical theory of the decentered, nonessentialistic self on the current scene. For him, human desire is only relatively distinct from animal desire. There is no Freudian unconscious with its lingering autonomy. The unconscious is fully social. Self-aggressivity, for Girard, is a by-product of interpersonal violence. Alienation is not a function of Being. It is a political creation brought about by the violent exclusion of individuals and their internalization of exclusionary language.

If Girard begins to sound at this point more like a political scientist, psychologist, anthropologist, or sociologist than a philosopher, it is because philosophy, not Girard, has difficulties with the problem of

violence. I began by asking whether philosophy can take violence as an object of study and still know itself. The answer given by many postmodern philosophers--Seyla Benhabib, Cornelius Castoriadis, Nancy Fraser, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor, to name but a few--as they turn from traditional areas of philosophical inquiry to issues of solidarity, democracy, power, ideology, political identity, and human rights, appears to be a resounding "No." Better that philosophy forget itself, they seem to be saying, and remember violence.

7

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## Notes

[1] For a clear exposition of the role of violence in Hegel, see Hoffman's *Violence in Modern Philosophy*. See my "Politics and Peace," for an exposition of how the relation between self and other affects Kant's political philosophy. ([back](#))

[2] Although let us not forget that Hegel did author the unfortunate notion that the word kills the thing. Despite his emphasis on human conflict, then, he did buttress the tradition that views epistemological

violence as a greater sin than physical violence. ([back](#))

[3] I leave out the obvious case of Nietzsche whom I have treated elsewhere (1988). The portrayal of violence in Nietzsche is raw in the Hegelian tradition, but his concept of power has had the paradoxical effect of turning current philosophy away from ideas of cruelty and violence. ([back](#))

[4] Eric Gans (*The End of Culture*, chap. 1) founds his theory of generative anthropology at this juncture in Girard's theory, departing from Girard's idea that the body of the victim is the first sign and making the case that an aborted gesture of appropriation, which simultaneously renounces and refers both to the victim and to the surrounding community, is the first act of representation. Gans's perspective is especially valuable because it permits a description of epistemology as an attempt to contain violence, thereby returning the idealization of violence in philosophical circles to its primal scene. ([back](#))

[5] This is the coinage of Jean-Michel Oughourlian, whose *Puppet of Desire* makes the strongest case from a Girardian point of view for the absence of any individual core self. ([back](#))

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## The Anthropology of Speech-Act Literary Criticism: A Review Article

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**Angela Esterhammer. *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994. 245 pp.**

### I

J.L. Austin would no doubt be bemused by the debates that his 1955 lectures at Harvard have inspired, especially now that they have entered the frequently polemical world of literary and critical theory. The irony is only heightened when we remember the philosopher's own infamous disavowal of literature which he brusquely excluded from a serious consideration of a philosophy of speech acts. But literary criticism--for better or for worse--has absorbed Austin's ordinary language philosophy and applied the eminent Oxford philosopher's analysis of speech-acts to the very phenomenon that he saw as beyond its rightful jurisdiction.

As Austin's own cursory remarks to the literary utterance suggest, the interface between literature and speech-act theory appears to be founded on a curious paradox, namely: how do we reconcile a theory that concentrates on pragmatic "real-world" utterances with a theory that concentrates on utterances that are fictional, or, as Austin put it, "parasitic" on those real-world utterances (Austin 22)? This paradox in fact points to a more fundamental paradox concerning the very status of the fictional text itself. For why is it that we have a category of utterances that do not obey the normal sincerity conditions of everyday speech? Why is it that a fictional text can produce whatever constative assertions it pleases without thereby being held responsible for their truth or falsehood in the real world? In short, why is it that we have, as Margaret Atwood has recently put it, a category of utterers who are "licensed liars" (44)?

It is into this debate between speech-act philosophy and speech-act literary criticism that we must situate Angela Esterhammer's worthy contribution. For if Esterhammer's book certainly does not "solve" the underlying tension between the philosopher of language and the critic of literature, it does nonetheless offer a welcome addition to the commentary currently available on the relevance of speech-act theory to the study of literature.

2

Having raised the general theoretical question of the difference between a theory of speech acts and a theory of literature, we must offer a preliminary caveat. Esterhammer's book is not primarily intended as a theoretical investigation. Rather, its chief significance lies in its demonstration of what a literary critic, well-informed in the philosophy of speech acts, can do when she turns to literary texts. Thus Esterhammer's main interest is in the critical possibilities opened up by speech-act theory for a consideration of the performative language in the visionary poetry of Milton and Blake. This is not to say, however, that Esterhammer's study lacks theoretical merit. On the contrary, her opening scrupulous review of the various applications to which the doctrine of speech-act theory has been subjected is exemplary for its awareness of the divergent and often contradictory paths the theory has taken since its original exposition by Austin. Indeed, if the term "performative" has now become something of common currency--a currency frequently used with little attention to Austin's own severe suspicion of its ultimate categorical validity--no such accusation can be made toward Esterhammer's own careful and often insightful commentary on speech-act theory and the disparate uses to which it has been put by literary critics eager for a new source of cultural episteme.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the epistemological-theoretical question that remains most problematic in speech-act analyses of literature, and Esterhammer's book here is no exception. Questions of referentiality, of ontology, and of fictionality are unavoidable when considering the applicability of speech-act theory for literature. The pragmatic domain of "ordinary language" is not the same as the aesthetic context of fictional language. The shift from the kind of pragmatic speech situation analyzed by speech-act philosophers to the aesthetic context of the literary critic must be justified by those who make this translation. This shift is not simply a matter of thematic applicability. The analytic tools of speech-act philosophy may be useful in drawing out central and enduring themes in the literary work. But as long as there is no reflection on the difference between these two contexts--the pragmatic and the fictional--there can be no reflection on the presumed unity of their ultimate source. It is to the general epistemological and ontological question that we shall turn in this review, for if Esterhammer does not always make explicit her own ontological position, we find it nevertheless implied in her account of world-creation in Genesis 1-3, the archetypal performative text and founder of, as Esterhammer perceptively recognizes, a Western tradition of literary anthropology.

3



Esterhammer's book divides naturally into two sections. The first, spanning the two opening chapters, provides the theory. Here Esterhammer gives a brief account of Austin's conception of the performative

described most fully in the posthumously published *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In addition, she refers us to some of Austin's "followers" who have expanded upon his theory in significant ways--in particular, John Searle, whose taxonomy of speech acts greatly systematizes and refines Austin's original less consistently defined categories, and Emile Benveniste who introduces the notion of subjectivity into the category of the performative. Esterhammer then provides a sketch of her own theoretical position, which, characteristically perhaps for a critic of literature, is a synthesis that seeks to weld the dry analytic tendency of modern Anglo-American philosophy (albeit the least dry speech-act version thereof) with the humane and thematic concerns of the literary critic.

Indeed it is perhaps because of this critical commitment to the more general anthropological question that Esterhammer largely bypasses the subtleties of, for instance, Austin's grammatical and syntactical analyses of the "explicit performative," or Searle's thoughtful and painstaking taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Instead she posits a more general, and indeed more sympathetically anthropological, account of the speech act that weds Austin's firm emphasis on the preestablished convention or institution necessary for speech acts to occur "felicitously" with Searle's and Benveniste's independent revisions that confer more authority on the speaking subject. The marriage of these two oppositional tendencies in the theory of speech acts--the tendency to stress, on the one hand, the importance of a collective "extra-linguistic" or institutional authority and, on the other, to emphasize the authority of the individual speaker or intentional subject--is important for Esterhammer, for it ultimately provides her with the poles of a dialectic that drives her literary-historical account of the development of visionary poetry, from Genesis to Milton, and thence to Blake. (As an aside, we may remark here on the question of a justification for Esterhammer's own theoretical position, the coherence of a theory being in part measured by the possibility for its own "historical moment" to be included within the overall dialectic.)

To fully comprehend Esterhammer's dialectic, we need to take a closer look at the notion of authority in the speech act. Now for the performative utterance to be successful, it must have authority. The question we are bound to ask then is: Whence comes this authority? Austin's account largely pins authority on the collectively bound speech act--i.e., on the rituals, ceremonies and institutions that preexist the individuals who participate in them. Austin's prototypical example is the utterance "I do" in the marriage ceremony--the various roles of the participants, the conventions of the marriage ceremony, must already be firmly in place for this utterance to have validity, for it to be uttered "felicitously." On the other hand, both Benveniste and Searle have opposed Austin's emphatic stress on the collective or ritual speech act, suggesting that this is only one kind of performative, and that often sufficient authority resides in the speaker's intention or consciousness alone, or even that the rules of language itself are enough to make a particular performative felicitous. Thus, for instance, Searle counters Austin by suggesting that though there are a "large number of illocutionary acts that require an extra-linguistic institution" (e.g., speech acts of naming, marrying, etc.), not all speech acts are like this: "In order to make a statement that it is raining or promise to come and see you, I need only obey the rules of language" (*Expression and Meaning* 7).

4

For Esterhammer, this opposition between a collective performative and a performative authorized by speaker or by language is ultimately irresolvable since the tension resides in the speech act itself. What underlies all performative utterances, Esterhammer proposes, is a fundamental dialectic. On the one hand, words appear to have the power to create states that did not exist before; on the other, they appear to be limited by the conceptions and conventions that must already exist for language to be

comprehended in the first place. The former type of performative, which Esterhammer calls the "phenomenological" performative and which has especial relevance for poets and literary theorists, finds its source in the Judeo-Christian narrative of worldly origin. Esterhammer points us to Genesis 1, the Priestly narrative or "P" myth, as the archetypal phenomenological performative, since here God creates a world by his words alone. In contrast to this divine use of words to create a world stands a "fallen" or "human" vision of the performative speech act. This performative, which Esterhammer calls "sociopolitical" and which she associates more or less explicitly with Austin's conception of the performative, is dependent upon preestablished convention. This type of speech act also has a Biblical archetype--the second narrative of creation, or Jahwist account ("J" myth) of Adam and Eve's creation and expulsion from Eden. Here words are not used to create a world; rather, the central speech act is one of interdiction, the negative command that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

As is perhaps already evident from this brief summary, Esterhammer's dual distinction between two types of performative serves more as a heuristic device than as an indication of a formal structure inherent to speech acts themselves. Thus, the distinction is not a "deep structure," a formalist a priori, but rather a descriptive and thematic categorization of types, types that ultimately find their source in the twin acts of creation in Genesis. As such, the distinction somewhat resembles the empirical descriptive method of speech-act theory itself with its penchant for creating categories or lists of speech acts. But Esterhammer's two categories are significantly looser than the rigid categories of, for instance, Searle's taxonomy. Indeed it seems fair to say that the dual taxonomy Esterhammer creates is an effort to systematize literature along lines other than strictly formalist, that is, other than internal to the literary text. In this she follows the speech-act concern for context.

And yet promising though Esterhammer's dialectic is for a speech-act analysis of literature, particularly in its sensitivity to the fictional or "phenomenological" speech act, her perspective is hindered by a general evasion of the ontological question of worldly reference, of true statements as opposed to fictional ones. For it must be remembered that speech-act theory, rebellious though it was toward its logical-positivist precursors, is still hewn from the same philosophical tree, and that tree understands language as primarily referential, not fictional. Literary theorists appropriating these models are therefore inevitably plagued by the fact that they are theorists of fictional speech acts, not pragmatic functional ones.

5

Why should this present a problem? Quite simply, unlike theorists of speech acts, theorists of literature cannot look to the pragmatic scene of ordinary linguistic exchange, for this pragmatic scene has no use for fiction, as Austin's exclusion of it demonstrates. The speaker in ordinary conversation can be (and generally is) held accountable for his or her statements in a way that does not apply to the utterances of the writer of fiction. This seems to lead us to a fundamental conundrum facing the literary-critical use of speech-act theory. If speech-act theorists look to the pragmatic context of everyday linguistic exchange, to what context can literary critics look? If the aesthetic text does not obey ordinary language rules, i.e., the sincerity conditions of pragmatic conversation, whence comes its force? In short, what would an ontology of fiction look like?

Regrettably, Esterhammer does not explicitly concern herself with these crucial questions. But she does not pass them over completely. Instead, we are treated to moments of analytical insight that hint toward

what such a theory might look like, even as we must ultimately be disappointed by the tentativeness of this gesture. Thus, in Chapter 1, Esterhammer observes that literary critics interested in Austin's theory have tended to follow one of two paths, paths which match her distinction between the phenomenological and sociopolitical performatives. One approach stresses speech acts within the text, while the other sees the literary text as itself a speech act. Now it should be evident that the first method unproblematically treats the literary text as a doubling of reality that provides an, as it were, ideal "laboratory" for the analysis of speech acts on the model of Austin's pragmatic analysis of real-world speech-act situations. This approach deals with Austin's exclusion of fiction (i.e., his infamous aside suggesting that fiction is merely "parasitic" on pragmatic speech) by simply ignoring the ontological problem inherent in the very idea of fictionality. The world of fiction is modestly accepted as unproblematically analogous to the world of pragmatic language-use. The second approach, on the other hand, appears on first sight to be more hopeful, since it at least acknowledges the ontological paradox inherent in a mode of discourse that appears to deny the prized constative value of referentiality. The question of reference in fictional utterances has indeed been the central concern of most analytic philosophers interested in literature. Austin's most outspoken successor and inheritor, John Searle, for instance, seeks to account for the "logical status of fiction" by suggesting that the normal conditions of reference are suspended by "horizontal conventions" (*Expression and Meaning* 66).

6

For Esterhammer, however, these two paths ultimately merge into one, or rather form the poles of a single continuum. Thus the difference is one of degree, not one of kind. But it is here that certain theoretical problems begin to emerge, problems that once hatched lead to less readily soluble contradictions. For though there is a bona fide anthropological truth to the argument that the language of reference and the language of fiction arise from the same source, the force of this argument remains handicapped by Esterhammer's unwillingness to provide an adequate model that can incorporate her notion of a continuum more rigorously. Thus she remains content to point to the different approaches taken by literary critics, remarking that the question of speech acts internal to the literary text "easily slides over to the subtly different question of the text's status as speech act," thereby raising "more complex questions concerning the ontological status of literary texts" (16). Indeed--but what ontological criteria then do we attribute to the literary text? After making this mature observation, Esterhammer, somewhat puzzlingly, does not attempt to provide a fuller ontological account for her own perspective, preferring instead to argue that the two approaches--speech-acts within the text and the text as speech-act--are simply two sides of the same coin neither deserving of privilege or preference.

Diplomatic though this accommodation may be, it does not adequately account for the radically different status we must accord fiction in contrast with ordinary pragmatic discourse or, more problematic still, logical-scientific discourse. The upshot of this broad inclusiveness is that the notion of fictionality becomes largely a matter of arbitrary definition, the pawn of those with the power to define it. True, one may refer to a physics textbook as, in a sense, "fictional," if by fiction one means that it consists of humanly constructed models that are clearly not identical to, but rather approximations of, the reality to which they refer. Outdated scientific theories highlight the fact that science presents only approximations of the world. But though the quaintness of superseded scientific models may make them appear "fictional" in the sense that they are no longer considered true, they do not appeal to us in the way that a work of literature does. Beyond polemics, it seems there is little to be learned from such an intolerably broad notion of fiction.

A more careful scrutiny of the question of referentiality seems warranted. For are the two modes of speech-act analysis Esterhammer describes ultimately thus compatible? Is it possible both to analyse speech acts within the fictional text on the model provided by Austin and Searle and to treat the literary text as a speech act itself without thereby engaging the paradox that forced Austin to exclude fiction from a theory of speech acts in the first place? The paradox is not simply a matter of emphasis--i.e., Do we choose to stress internal questions of plot and theme within the text using the insights of speech-act theory, or do we choose to study the very fictional status of the text as itself a speech act? For a little reflection tells us that the two views depend on fundamentally different ontological premises. To study the internal practice of speech acts within the text is to effectively make the text itself the empirical referent which Austin considered only available in the pragmatic speech situation of everyday conversation.

7

Now fiction may represent everyday speech situations in the real world, but it is itself clearly at a remove from the kind of empiricism Austin was interested in. Austin's own cursory reference to literature as "parasitic" on the pragmatic speech situation is in fact dependent, as we have already suggested, on a fairly straightforward (Aristotelian) view of fiction as a mimetic doubling of the real world. Critics who simply exchange the pragmatic world of language-use for the fictional world of literature are thus, explicitly or implicitly, subscribing to an ontology that views literature as an unproblematic mimetic representation of real-world situations. But for Austin this meta-representation, as it were, cannot provide an empirical ground for speech-act theory precisely because it is at a remove from the empirical base of pragmatic language-use. When our neighbour at the dinner table says "Could you pass the salt?" we do not sit back and admire the utterance for its fictionality. And yet if the utterance takes place within a novel, we do not, on the other hand, immediately cast around for the salt-shaker. Why is this? Despite appearances, the question is not wholly trivial. It is easy to deride the laborious attempts of speech-act philosophers to provide a logical accounting for what we find intuitively obvious. But the question is nonetheless a profound one. And all too often it is simply ignored by critics of literature.

Once we accept that there must be a categorical difference between fictional and non-fictional utterances, we cannot simply ignore the ontological implications of using speech-act theory to describe fiction, for if we do, we are willy-nilly endorsing Austin's view that fiction is derivative of--and thus parasitic on--standard empirical speech situations. And yet this view is precisely the view that literary critics inevitably (and rightly) disagree with. What we need is an ontological understanding of fictionality, one that can integrate the formal analyses of the speech-act theorists with the anthropological knowledge thematized by the literary text itself. Without such a synthesis, we indeed have little choice but to follow tout court in Austin's exclusion of fiction.



Though Esterhammer does not explicitly concern herself with investigating the ontological status of fiction, a model is nonetheless implied in her account of the "phenomenological performative"--the speech act which seeks to emulate a divine utterance that can bring a world into being through words.

Since fiction appears to create a world *ex nihilo*, that is, since it appears to defy normal conditions of reference that restrict conventional speech acts to an empirical world, it thus resembles the primordial act in Genesis 1--God's creation of the universe. Milton and Blake, as self-conscious poetic inheritors of the Judeo-Christian model of divine origin, were only too aware of the power of the word to create, and Esterhammer insightfully points us to this primordial scene of creative utterance ("Let there be light"). This forms, for Esterhammer, the prototype of all phenomenological performatives. As the originary creation of the universe, it becomes the overt model which visionary writers such as Milton and Blake seek to emulate.

8

But, of course, once a "phenomenological" model has been given to emulate, its successors no longer possess an equivalent divinity or uniqueness. With respect to the original, they appear "always-already" to be late manifestations of an original transcendence. This is in fact the latent historical dialectic that Esterhammer pins her anthropology on. The attempt to recuperate the original performative of Genesis 1 in order to share in its inherent "phenomenological" generative power is thus rendered increasingly problematic. The visionary poetry of Milton and Blake traces this path of increasing disillusionment with respect to the divine power of the phenomenological performative. Milton's invocation of the Muse in *Paradise Lost* is supplemented by his contractual, legalistic self-presentation as an inspired individual in *The Reason of Church Government*. Likewise, Blake's original faith in the transcendent poetic speaker (in, for instance, the *Songs of Innocence*) evolves into a bleaker vision of miscommunication and institutional corruption (the *Songs of Experience*). The tension witnessed here involves the movement from a "phenomenological" optimism to a darker "sociopolitical" pessimism. Esterhammer is not afraid to put her dialectic into a historical narrative, suggesting that the path from Milton to Blake is one of an increasing awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions of language which necessarily counter the poet's claim to divine authority.

Enlightening though this argument is, the reader may express some reservations. For Esterhammer's analysis tends to be modeled on the romantic opposition between the lonely creative self and the alienating social order. To be sure, Esterhammer does not uphold the kind of forthright optimistic individuality of the early first-generation romantics, but she does accept the romantic principle that the individual scene is "phenomenological" or "generative" whereas the social scene is restrictive and limiting. Thus she maintains the romantic priority of the generative individual scene over the collective scene. Beyond her analysis of the texts of Genesis, Milton and Blake, Esterhammer gives no thought as to the possibility of a generative or phenomenological scene that is other than either theological and transcendent, or individual and romantic. Our suggestion here is that a more radical anthropology--one neither ultimately transcendental nor immanent--is needed to show how Judeo-Christian transcendence is related to the romantic scene of individual poetic secular authority.

Such an anthropology is only partially worked out by Esterhammer. Her dialectic between the phenomenological and sociopolitical is translated in terms of the "phenomenological" romantic self who stands alone against an impersonal and restrictive "sociopolitical" order. Accordingly, the self-consciousness of Blake's poetry, which understands the alienated position of the individual poetic voice, stands in contrast to Miltonic inspiration which still adheres, if somewhat equivocally, to a traditional (neoclassical) account of divine transcendence. The poet's authority is not his own but that of, ultimately, God. The poet thus remains only the mouthpiece of God's voice. Milton's elaborate opening invocation in *Paradise Lost* is made in due respect of the ultimate transcendental source of his authority

to recount the narrative of "Man's first disobedience." With Blake, however, we move from this neoclassical Christian paradigm to a secularized scene of divine immanence. Here the poet is not simply the mouthpiece of the muse, rather, he is the very muse, the site of original creativity. But with this centring of the divine within the creative poetic self comes a simultaneous realization that the self is alone. No longer equally united before a transcendent God, self and society become irrevocably divorced; the individual stands separated from the only context left to define it, the social order, which henceforth becomes the focus of the self's alienation and resentment.

9

For Esterhammer, this coming-to-consciousness of the "sociopolitical" progressively overshadows the "divine" or "phenomenological" use of language which creates worlds out of words. Increasingly, the phenomenological performative modeled on divine creativity is displaced by a sociopolitical awareness that such transcendental performativity is dependent upon an inherited institutional and conventional context. It is here that Esterhammer's dialectical tension between two types of performative becomes more or less explicitly parallel to the romantic opposition between the (divine) subject and the (inhibiting) social order. Accordingly, Austin's theory of the speech act, which emphasizes the preestablished conventional context necessary for language to function, represents the final dissolution of the romantic self into the social order that spawned it in the first place. In contrast, "Blake's work," Esterhammer suggests, "may be read as a struggle to maintain the validity of individual voice in an age when institutions, not individuals, have control over speech acts" (41).

This is a somewhat equivocal statement, for it seems to imply that prior to Blake, authority over speech acts was indeed individual. But this runs counter to Esterhammer's implied historical dialectic, which grounds the originary source of inspiration in the centralized monotheism of Judaism. Creative inspiration here is the sole prerogative of Yahweh, the unique creator. But the secularization of this divine performative model--the omniscient expansion of the sacred centre to the human circumference that is the contribution of Christianity--traces the path of the rise of individual "talent" as expressed in the poetry of, for instance, Milton and, more forthrightly, Blake, but also, as Esterhammer insightfully points out, in the socioeconomic sphere of the bourgeois marketplace. Milton, in his prose works, justifies his unique position as a prophetic speaker of God's word by citing his individual poetic talent. In Greek, *talanton* refers to a sum or weight of money. But it is reinterpreted by Christ's parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30) as a measure of inherent individual worth. Milton's protestant conviction in the divine nature of his poetic talent exposes the complicity between the modern socioeconomic market and the Christian emphasis on the unique creative individual. The "marketability" of the poet depends upon a personal readership that protestantism in particular saw as the exclusive prerogative of the individual.

This puts an extra twist in Esterhammer's dichotomy between the individual and the social order, the phenomenological and the sociopolitical performatives. For can we not then say that the conflict between the individual and the collectivity is precisely the product of the transcendentalizing of the self--which is also to say its potential for liberation from the institutional context? It is only once the individual is separated from the scene of its collective origin that it can thence resent the social order which produced it. This is indeed the source of Rousseau's insight into the paradoxical nature of the social contract.

10

Likewise, for Blake, the price of individual divinity is resentment toward the social order, which now appears as an antagonistic obstacle to the self, rather than as an equally subordinated "subject" before

God. Theological transcendence maintained, in principle, equality between self and society. To be sure, the implicit iconoclasm of Milton's poetry provides the model for Blake's radical anthropomorphizing of God, but Milton himself remains within the institutional framework of Christianity. When Milton invokes the muse, he is not appropriating a divine performance for himself, but in fact expressing what is, at least in principle, available to all believers who have faith in God. And this faith, regardless of individual differences, is conceived as universal.

It therefore seems truer to say that it is in Milton's age, not Blake's, that the institution--albeit a theological one--has greater authority over speech acts. With the romantic subject's internalization of Christian transcendence comes the post-romantic potential to see the individual as a self-consciously "alienated" figure, irrevocably divorced from any notion of a collective transcendental origin. But this is not simply a dispelling of the anthropological notion of the divine--the "phenomenological" or the "originary." Rather, the "phenomenological"--the divine--is viewed as coeval with the self. Consequently, the surrounding social order becomes more or less explicitly identified as hostile and limiting. No doubt, from the point of view of the post-romantic individual (of which we are all heirs), it does indeed appear as though institutions have control over our speech acts. But this is the very paradox of our so-called "ironic" freedom. The fact that we are conscious of the discrepancy between personal choice and an impersonal or objective social order reveals how the theological debates of Milton's and Blake's eras are still with us today, only the theological now appears to be upstaged by its secular offspring, the "sociopolitical."

The paradox is in fact implicit in the second narrative of origin (the "Jahwist" account of creation) to which Esterhammer makes detailed and perceptive reference. As she suggests, the "sociopolitical" dimension is already implied in this narrative. We may suggest here, however, an alternative anthropological basis that can sharpen Esterhammer's account of the sociopolitical aspect of the "J" text, that is, an anthropological basis that more explicitly thematizes the paradoxical tension that leads Esterhammer to make the (essentially romantic) opposition between the divine poetic legislator and an alienating social order. In this sense, what the "J" text thematizes is not so much in formal antithesis to a "phenomenological" performative; rather, it represents the necessarily alienated experience that the very notion of a divine performative implies. God is viewed as the ontological originator of all things, but human experience must always feel irrevocably separated from this moment of divine transcendence.

11

This is not merely an intellectual point of logic, for such separation breeds real human resentment--resentment which a society ignores at its peril. Judaic monotheism, by subordinating all inter-human resentment to a human relationship with a single personal God, seeks to cut resentment off at its source. Resentment is always resentment of other humans, but by redirecting unfocused multiple resentments to the central arbitrate powers of a unique unapproachable God, Judaism reveals that resentment is founded on the frustrated desire for a transcendent and humanly unapproachable position of absolute centrality. Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden break their compact with God because divine interdiction, though made to prevent reciprocal unmediated violence, also inevitably breeds resentment. The creation of the covenant and the resultant resentment that leads to its subversion is no doubt the theme of the entire Hebrew Bible, but it is particularly apparent in the "J" text. Here resentment is first articulated by the serpent, who tempts Eve with a vision of its successful transcendence--"you will be like gods knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5-6). Resentment is passed on to the human community, prompting this nascent society to rebel against the divine hand that brought it into being in the first place.

But the irony is that the "divine" inheritance promised to humanity by the serpent is contingent upon a human "fall" from grace, that is, upon a self-conscious awareness that transcendence and resentment are two sides of the same coin, or, in Esterhammer's terms, that the phenomenological and the sociopolitical are two aspects of a single gesture, a gesture which, as Esterhammer's reading indicates, is essentially a linguistic gesture. Thus the collective nature of language is made prominent. For though it is available to the unique individual in a phenomenological performative, it nevertheless is always already inherited from a context that must be collective--i.e., institutional--in nature.

This is perhaps the profoundest lesson in Esterhammer's study of the visionary poetry of Milton and Blake. By analysing both poets from the point of view of her two types of performatives, she shows the necessarily collective nature of the originary phenomenological "scene of origin." The evolutionary path Esterhammer maps out--from the text of Genesis, to Milton, and thence to Blake--reveals the increasing awareness that the anthropology of the Biblical account of origin is also an account of the romantic generative scene of individual origin. Milton's emphasis on individual talent (already a premonition of the rise to eventual supremacy of the bourgeois marketplace where individual talent becomes the currency for collective interaction) is an early intuition of the full-fledged romanticism of Blake's divinized poetic creator. But with this divination comes a deeper awareness of the complicity of the individual and the social order against which the self struggles for definition.

Though Esterhammer never formulates her notion of the phenomenological performative in terms of an "originary scene," her study nonetheless points us toward something which in the philosophy of speech acts has been profoundly lacking, namely, a historical-anthropological approach to linguistic utterance. This is not to say that we can treat aesthetic texts as an alternative to the pragmatic speech situation. On the contrary, we have already seen the problems with such an easy translation. But it does suggest the necessity for a historicization of what ordinary language philosophy--in a typically metaphysical gesture--dismisses with alarming alacrity, namely, the deeply layered anthropology underpinning our everyday speech acts. If Esterhammer does not quite provide us with a wholly satisfying theoretical framework that convincingly synthesizes the synchronic-analytic models of speech-act theory with the anthropological perspective latent in the texts of Genesis, Milton and Blake, she does nevertheless provide us with an analysis that makes a significant step in that direction. And this, to be sure, is no small achievement.

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# Mimetic Paradox and the Event of Human Origin

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Generative anthropology, like all projects of fundamental reflection on the human, whether they be called myth, theology, or social science, is a bootstrapping operation that seeks to explain in human language the origin of human language. This apparent aporia has traditionally been masked by transcendental figures that we may now understand as projections of the originary scene of language. The historical "death" of these figures in the modern era has been taken by some as revealing the inconceivability of the operation itself. What is indeed revealed is its paradoxicality. But the paradoxical is not the unthinkable; on the contrary, without paradox, thinking would be impossible.

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Paradox is the privileged road to understanding the human, because paradox reveals the seam--the umbilical hole--in the hierarchy of sign and referent that is the essence of human language. The foundational modern definitions of the sign fail to grasp its double essence as a relation both real and ideal, dualist and monist, "vertical" and "horizontal."

For Charles S. Peirce, the sign is defined as "determined by something else," that is, it stands in a horizontal relation to its referent.<sup>[1]</sup> The inadequacy of this relation is then supplemented by a hypothetical third term or "interpretant," along the lines of the "third man" of Greek philosophy who furnishes the ground of resemblance between a real man and the idea of a man. The sign-relation is explained through a movement of infinite regress, thereby deferring the horizontal encounter between sign and referent at the cost of the definitional rigor of the system. In distinguishing families of signs by their type of motivation, Peirce can make no place for the *arbitraire du signifiant* that distinguishes human language; the *arbitraire* is not a zero degree of motivation but a formal absolute--one that, like all absolutes, is not immune to deconstruction.

In contrast to Peirce, Saussure sees in the sign nothing but verticality. In giving to the bar that separates signifier from signified the--in his perspective primordial--anthropological function of paternal interdiction, Lacan implies the necessity of a generative-anthropological explanation for the emergence of the formal-vertical from the horizontal. The bar is a mystery; if the sign and what it refers to are identical areas on either side of a sheet of paper, one wonders not only what function can be served by turning the paper over, but how we ever got from the real world to the paper in the first place. By bracketing the referent of the sign and substituting its signified or concept, Saussure only defers the

understanding of the horizontal relationship between sign and referent as two worldly things.

2

My solution to this aporia was published well over a decade ago in *The Origin of Language*. The terms in which it was expressed, as well as those in which it has been repeated and refined in my more recent books, have sometimes been misunderstood as formulating a new "myth of origin." No doubt I grasped the essence of the problem better than the strategy for articulating it. I offered a minimal hypothesis for the origin of language, of the human--of "man," as we said at the time. But depicting a scene of origin of language, as opposed to merely affirming language's essential scenicity, could not fail to give the appearance of an excess rather than a minimum of content. Which is all the more the case when the rival hypothesis is that no hypothesis is conceivable.

The "triangular" version of the originary hypothesis that I present here differs little in substance from that of *The Origin of Language*, but that difference makes it henceforth impossible to tax the hypothesis with naturalistic naivete. Our fundamental anthropological intuition is far more sensitive to the mode of narrative presentation of the hypothesis than to its real content. The description of a collective scene of origin goes against the grain of a postmodern intellectual climate suspicious of centers of mimetic attraction. My early formulations of the originary hypothesis defied this fact of our intellectual life, as was no doubt necessary to permit something new to emerge. Our intuition of minimality is infallible, but only in the long run; in the immediate, one adds to the imaginative burden in order ultimately to subtract from it. Now that the subtraction has been made, the reader should find it easier to grasp the minimizing principle at work both here and in my earlier narrative reconstructions of the originary scene. The crux of the origin of language is the emergence of the vertical sign-relation from the horizontal one of animal interaction. The originary hypothesis claims that this emergence is conceivable only as an event because the communication of the new sign-relation to its users gives them a conscious, directly manipulable access to the sign as a transcendent form of representation. One cannot be given access to the sign without knowing it, which does not mean knowing what this access is--what language is--in our terms.

The emergence of the sign is the product of the becoming-paradoxical of mimesis in a situation of "mimetic crisis," of imminent conflict among beings that animal means of differentiation can no longer protect against dedifferentiation. Our model of this transformation requires only one presupposition; that mimesis, having reached a certain level of intensity, becomes incompatible with prehuman forms of differentiation. There are of course many kinds of such differentiation; among the higher apes there is no question of hard-wired divisions of labor as among insects. Differentiation serves the purpose of maintaining a social order, of avoiding or restraining conflict. Pecking-order hierarchies limit conflict to one-on-one attempts to rise in the hierarchy. But it is only as the result of viewing animal hierarchies from the standpoint of human equalitarianism that we understand their essence as limitation. In terms of the evolution of animal social organization, animal hierarchies introduce new degrees of freedom by rechanneling the mimetic energy of intraspecific rivalry.

3

It suffices then to hypothesize that the indifferenciation of mimesis overcomes at some point the differentiating force of animal hierarchy. Since this hierarchy did exist, there was mimetic conflict to be controlled; since the hierarchy has ceased to function, the conflict can no longer be controlled by it. Hence a new system of control is necessary, one that can operate under the condition of a collective dedifferentiation. This system is language.

The linguistic sign as an aborted gesture of appropriation is detemporalized, cut off from the practical domain in which imitative action slips unnoticeably into violent rivalry. The sign points before it imitates; its horizontal, metonymic relation to its referent turns back on itself as verticality, metaphor.<sup>[2]</sup> As the object of representation, the central figure takes over the negative role of the mimetic obstacle. The goal of the imitated worldly activity has become its other-worldly model.

## Mimesis

Imitation leaves its ontology unthematized; it knows only that since you are like me, I can do as you do. Mimesis thematizes its ontology. This great misunderstood concept of the metaphysical tradition was confined by Aristotle's *Poetics* to the esthetic domain for over two millennia until Girard gave it its due by revealing that human desire, and the human as such, obey the paradoxical structure of mimesis.

Imitation of behavior among similar creatures is generally unproblematic. More precisely, I can imitate your actions unproblematically so long as they do not involve the appropriation of a scarce object that we both desire to possess. But the search for such objects is precisely the kind of behavior that makes imitation advantageous. The evolution of higher animals has been driven by the difficulty of obtaining appetitive satisfaction, particularly food. If I serve as your model in the hunt, all will go well until your imitation reaches the point of reproducing my appropriative gesture toward the same object. At this point imitation provokes rivalry; the mimetic model becomes an obstacle.

The becoming-obstacle of the model is not in itself uniquely human. At the most elementary level of imitation, when a swarm of animals gather around a source of nourishment, each one becomes sooner or later an obstacle for the others. But the energy and attention of members of the group are directed to the prey, not to one another. If they do enter into conflict, or even begin to devour each other, this remains incidental to the appropriative operation that ultimately benefits the swarm and the species to which it belongs. The mimetic obstacle is there, but it remains epiphenomenal with respect to the benefit conferred by imitation.

4

In animal imitation, the becoming-obstacle of the model remains an unpleasant side-effect that must be countered by the very process of mimetic evolution that serves to increase it. Whereas the less fit among the multiple members of lower species can easily be sacrificed, higher animals, of greater individual value to their species, are worth preserving within a hierarchical order that prevents mimetic conflict, or limits it to one-on-one battles for supremacy. The "alpha" animal is the product of a higher level of mimetic tension than can exist within the leaderless swarm. His maintenance of order implies a degree of rivalry with his fellows. But this order is not threatened by the reinforcement of collective mimesis. Animal imitation is naturally self-controlling; the tensions of rivalry reach a semi-stable equilibrium in the dominance of the most robust individuals. The mimetic model stabilizes at higher evolutionary levels in greater order rather than less.

But the emergence of humanity demonstrates the limits of this correlation between imitation and order. The mutual reinforcement of collective imitation leads to the overthrow of the one-on-one mastery of the alpha animal and the formation of the equalitarian human community. Once the conflictive structure of mimesis reaches the point of overwhelming the constraints of animal hierarchy, it can only be controlled, or more precisely, deferred, by the formal hierarchy that is human language. The origin of language is

describable as the establishment of this new hierarchy, through which the linguistic sign acquires its uniquely human verticality. The originary hypothesis addresses the mystery of the generation of the vertical from the horizontal, form from content, or, in the old dialectical vocabulary, "quality" from "quantity."

In our elucidation of this mystery, we must concentrate our attention on the inherent conflictuality or proto-paradoxicality of prehuman mimesis, where we will find the horizontal correlative to the verticality of the sign. This in turn obliges us to analyze more closely than previously the central idea of the originary hypothesis: that the originary sign is an "aborted gesture of appropriation" transformed into a gesture of representation out of fear of the mimetic rivalry of the others.

## The Triangular Hypothesis

In a plausible historical reconstruction of the originary scene, the mimetic "other" or model would be a plurality of individual others. The novelty of the present exposition of the hypothesis reflects the hitherto unexploited fact that the original Girardian triangle is already a sufficient, and more truly minimal, model of this scene. At the moment in which the appropriative gesture is initiated, the prehuman mimetic relation is simply imitative: the other is my model, but not yet my rival. I reach for the object on the model of my model's gesture. But at that moment, I realize the incompatibility of my gesture with his; two movements toward the same object cannot both be fulfilled. The other-model leads me to intend an act that would make him an other-rival.

5

Here we must stop to consider precisely what makes this situation intolerable. It is easy enough, in the collective version of the hypothesis, to introduce two naturalistic explanatory elements. One is the obvious one of a plurality of others; in a collective situation, a single individual wishing to appropriate the object of common interest risks provoking the hostility of the group. The second, less obvious, element is the preexistence of the animal hierarchy spoken of above. Freud's scenario of the murder of the father in *Totem and Taboo* may be rewritten in ethological terms: the alpha animal attempts to exercise his normal privilege in appropriating the object of common desire, but because of the increased level of mimesis and consequent dedifferentiation, the others no longer defer to him but imitate his appropriative gesture "out of turn," with the consequence that he must abort his own action, the others then following suit.

There is no reason to doubt the plausibility of this scenario; but its naturalism is incompatible with minimalist rigor. This is more obvious in the case of animal hierarchy, but it applies to the plurality of others as well--and this despite the necessarily public nature of the event of origin. For the "public" can be modeled as easily by two people as by two hundred.

The problem is not that an alpha animal may not have existed, but that its empirical existence, even were we certain of it, cannot be substituted for an explanation of the breakdown of its dominant role. To account for the end of hierarchy by its inherent instability is merely to beg the question. Thus the alpha's existence does not serve as a true explanatory element, but as a relay or intermediary stage that avoids the crucial question of fixing the degree of freedom inherent in the specific operation of human mimesis.

Animal hierarchy arises in order to avert the conflict implicit in mimesis. But this intermediate stage between lower life-forms and the human only interests us insofar as it determines the minimal conditions

of emergence of the latter. That reliance on animal hierarchy is inherently misleading is already apparent from the examination of Freud's model, despite its lack of ethological references. Freud envisioned the prehuman horde as a hierarchically organized group, the liberation or dehierarchization of which corresponded to the appearance of man. But we cannot understand the mimetically dedifferentiated state in which the originary scene takes place simply as a product of the unexplained dissolution of a previous hierarchy. It must be explained from within as the subject's state of undecidability between the mimetic other-mediator's two roles of model and rival. This statement of the problem makes clear that it is unnecessary to postulate a protohuman animal hierarchy; mimesis itself defines a hierarchy, however unstable, between subject-self and other-model, and this hierarchy is the basis upon which all others are founded.

6

Similarly, the triangular formulation of the hypothesis eliminates the need for the independent postulation of the plurality of others. The determining factor in the conversion of the appropriative gesture into a sign is not fear of the violence of the other(s), but the incompatibility of the two roles of subject and other in the mimetic process. This correction should not be taken as a sanitization of our bloody past. "Fear" and "violence" are not the clear-cut categories they appear to be. If fear of the violence of my mimetic model(s) is supposed to explain my failure to carry my appropriative gesture to completion, it hardly explains why I continue to perform the gesture under a new intention, or why I remain within the mimetic configuration rather than seeking to escape from it. The subject's attachment to the scene, whatever its dangers, demonstrates that mimesis rather than fear is the explanatory element; but in that case, the most economical explanation is the one that presupposes nothing beyond the triangular mimetic configuration. Reduced to the mimetic triangle purged of all naturalistic elements, the originary hypothesis may be formulated as follows: the sign originates as the solution to the "paradoxical state" or "pragmatic paradox" engendered when the mimetic relation to the other-mediator requires the impossible task of maintaining the latter as model while imitating his appropriative action toward a unique object. Put in geometric terms, the parallel lines of imitation must converge toward a single point. The mimetic model is both model and (potential) obstacle; it is at the moment when this contradiction prevents action that the human linguistic sign appears.

The cessation of action in the situation of mimetic crisis is more radical than in that of hierarchical submission, where the non-alpha animal acts out its submission by its very stasis--and where it would normally expect to take its turn after its superiors. We need a more general word than "action" or even "behavior" to describe what is prevented in a truly paradoxical situation--*habitus*, perhaps--a term that designates simply a coherent mode of being. The psychological correlate of the paradoxical state of mimesis is anxiety, as was the case with Pavlov's dogs. The situation is obviously similar, but here the feedback loop is minimized; it is not determined by the interference of two conditioning factors that drive the subject to two incompatible actions at the same time, but by an internal contradiction in the (mimetic) mode of behavior itself. When mimetic attraction has reached a sufficient intensity, behavior as such becomes impossible.

7

What is done in this circumstance is no longer to "behave," but to produce a sign. The triangular model of the hypothesis permits a more rigorous analysis of how the function and character of this designating sign differ from those of the original appropriative gesture. In the naturalistic model, the clearest function

of the sign is apotropaic; it averts potential violence from the group by demonstrating to it that the emitter no longer intends to appropriate the object. To designate is to renounce, to defer possession through representation. This still leaves unclear the nature of the link between renunciation of appropriation on the one hand and imaginary possession through representation on the other. The very fact that we talk about a "link" between what appear to be two wholly distinguishable operations is proof enough that this is not yet a minimal exposition of the hypothesis.

This is the appropriate point at which to recall the Aristotelian notion of mimesis as (theatrical) representation. This notion leaves the potentially conflictive horizontal imitation of others to the subject-matter on stage and retains as its formal definition only the conflict-free vertical representation of reality. In the originary scene, the Aristotelian concept of mimesis applies, not to the original appropriative gesture, which depends on the other as its mimetic model, but to the new designative-representative gesture of the sign.

The sign emerges as a turning away from the other as model to the object of desire as model. In the transformation of the mimetic relationship wrought by language, the subject displaces the intention of his gesture from (unconsciously) imitating the other to (thematically) imitating the object. Signing remains a mimetic operation in the older sense; the sign in its otherworldliness, its "arbitrariness," can be learned only from others. But unlike even the most stylized of animal behaviors, the sign is intended to make-present a referent other than itself.

How does this doubling of mimetic models resolve the "paradoxical state" of mimesis, the originary mimetic crisis? Prehuman imitation, whether one-on-one or in a herd, has a two-place structure of actor and model; the only difference in the latter case is that the model has many bodies. Animal imitation, lacking in triangularity, can only be the basis of a dualistic order, a "pecking" order of one-on-one relationships. Unlike the triangle of human mimesis, it cannot be expanded into a communal circle in equilibrium around its center. If a central object is the actors' common goal, they go to it in accordance with the pecking order; the appropriative gestures of the non-alphas are not converted into signs but merely postponed. Hence the circular structure of the scene of representation, fundamental to human cultural phenomena, is unknown among animals, except as it may have evolved in hard-wired form for a single purpose--as in the famous waggle-dance of the honeybee.

8

The formation of the triangle of human mimesis, the minimal structure in equilibrium, resolves the crisis by permitting the resumption of mimetic activity. The sign begins as the same physical action as the aborted gesture of appropriation, but the intended deferral of horizontal interaction with its object allows it vertically to "intend" this object in the phenomenological sense, to take it as its theme. What unblocks the mimetic process has its source within mimesis itself. As the appropriative intention of the original gesture makes its imitation impossible within the framework of animal relations, it increasingly focuses attention on the object to be appropriated. When I imitate the other in his appropriation of an object, my attention focuses on him if I have my own counterpart to his object, but on the object if it is the same for us both. The intensification of mimesis, by putting into question the equivalence between my object and the one that partakes of the aura of the mediator, makes it increasingly less satisfactory for me to choose an object different from his. The normal child chooses a mate in imitation of his father's choice; Oedipus, the mimetic archetype, can take no wife other than his father's.

The movement toward the object--and concomitantly away from the model--is inherent in mimesis as

such. The appropriative gesture is so to speak already "predisposed" to re-present the object even as it performs its practical function.[3] What remains for the originary scene to accomplish--but it is the accomplishment that makes all the difference--is the thematization of the intention to represent and defer appropriation. Once attention to the object and its interdiction by the other have increased to the point of rendering appropriative action impossible, the mimetic shift to the object formalizes--in effect, brings to (human) consciousness--this already-existing tendency.

This analysis moves in the opposite direction from Girard's original exposition of mimetic desire in *Mensonge romantique*, which consists in bringing to light the mediating third element behind the "romantic lie" that conceives of desire as a dual object-relation. Here it is the object of desire rather than the mediator that is exposed as central to what had appeared to be a one-on-one relationship of behavioral imitation. This counter-intuitive result requires explanation.

Appetitive behavior normally directs itself to objects, and it is not stretching the analogy too far to say that it "intends" these objects. A cat hunting a mouse knows what object it is looking for as much as a human hunter stalking a deer. But the cat's behavior, unlike the hunter's, is an unlearned routine that includes its object categorically within it--not hunting behavior that happens to alight upon a mouse, but mouse-hunting behavior. When imitative learning does take place with respect to such behavior, the object, as part of the behavior itself, does not fall under the spell of the imitation; if one cat learns from another a new mouse-hunting technique, no particular mouse receives thereby a supplementary value. The supplement that comes from re-presentation of the object can only arise when it is not already present as an element of the learned activity.

9

Desire is always mediated desire. The movement of appetite toward desire is that of an intensified mimesis that discovers not only behavior but the goal of behavior in the other. What causes the late emergence of the object into the mimetic equation is not indifference to it but, on the contrary, the practical object-orientation of animal behavior. Because the object as source of food, shelter, sexual release, and so forth is less freely chosen (more "scarce") than the behaviors of the subject by which it may be appropriated, the techniques of appropriation are subject to mimetic learning before there is any need to "learn" the object of appropriation. It is only at an advanced stage of mimesis that not merely the action itself but its goal falls under the influence of the mediating other.

Why should the intensification of mimesis lead the subject away from the other's behavior toward the object to which it is directed? This movement reflects an internalization of the model's motivation, the self's closer assimilation to the other's own reality. The more closely I imitate my model's goal-directed action, the more I share the goal of this action, which is not located in the action itself but precisely in its external object. (This analysis applies as well to self-directed actions; a higher level of mimesis will lead me, for example, to imitate the other animal's "narcissism" and groom it rather than myself.) Whence the apparent paradox that as imitation becomes more intense, it prefigures the triangular structure of human representation, focusing less on the model's behavior and more on the object to which it is directed. The paradox of the sign The sign, as we have noted, is the conversion of a gesture begun in imitation of the model's appropriative gesture into the "imitation" of the object that was the aim of this gesture. In performing the sign, I abandon my imitation of the other's original intention of appropriating the object; I turn back from the object we desire in common. In consequence, my situation in performing this gesture is once again compatible with that of the other, whose action can take place simultaneously with mine

without any danger of convergence on the object. The two gestures are not parallel as before, they are both directed toward the object, but they no longer seek to remove it from its central position. The object has now become the center of a *scene*.

The emission of the sign creates verticality out of what was previously a horizontal relationship of appetite and appropriation by combining the roles of model and object in a single behavior. I imitate the other in my *énonciation* and the object in my *énoncé*. Instead of my action being a simple means of self-expansion into the world through the incorporation and obliteration of external objects, it becomes a means to preserve these objects by reproducing them within myself. I can now continue to imitate the gesture of my model despite the presence of an obstacle to appropriative action. Because the model does not disturb my signing behavior, it is the object that is perceived as the obstacle to its own appropriation; this is what we call its sacrality.

10

This model of the first emission of the sign is that of its "early" or "thoughtful" emission. In the sense that I emit the sign as the result of my own abortion of the gesture of appropriation rather than in imitation of my model, the decision to emit the sign is the originary example of thinking. This may be contrasted with the emission of the sign under the mimetic or "rhetorical" influence of the model by the "late" participant still seeking to appropriate the object.

Once again, the specific difference between these two moments of the emission of the sign is clarified by the use of a minimal rather than a naturalistic context. The originary sign is the first instance of the free, conscious, intentional thematization of an object. Our analysis cannot be content with showing that the sign is freely performed, but must show how freedom is born with the sign. Like the birth of verticality from horizontality, the birth of freedom from necessity is another statement of the paradox of originary signification. Its explanation can never be complete; as the birth of a new level of complexity, it is irreducible to any earlier configuration. But rather than lament the futility of intellectual bootstrapping, we should take such paradoxes--and all paradox reduces to this one, the paradox of the human-as-such--as guarantees of the inexhaustibility of originary thinking.

In a brief discussion of the question of freedom in the Introduction to *Originary Thinking*, I used Kant's formulation of the esthetic judgment ("without a concept") as my model for the freedom of the signifying intention: the subject was influenced by the "beauty" of his gesture, that is, by its ability to re-present the all-desirable central object. This is a suggestive formulation; but it complicates the matter by introducing the category of the esthetic, in which the subject's attention oscillates between sign and referent. The esthetic is dependent on the sign; it perpetuates our paradoxical experience of the sign's thematization of its referent as already significant. To grasp the originary freedom of the sign prior to the reinforcement provided by the esthetic, we must attempt instead to define "freedom within the limits of mimesis": to understand how a mimetic act can free itself from "instinctive" or non-reflective dependency on its model.

The transformation of the aborted gesture into a sign is a movement from the imitation of a human model to the "imitation" of an appetitive object. In the mimesis of the object, the subject is not copying another's gesture, but representing the object itself.

Let us consider for a moment the subject-object relation. I appropriate an object in order to fulfill an appetitive need. Whether or not I am imitating a human mediator is not critical so long as I indeed have

this need. Up to this point, mimesis is merely a beneficial way of learning the technique of such necessary appropriative gestures.

11

We might then be tempted to call even the appropriative gesture "free" when it arises in a non-mimetic context. I may have learned it from another, but my performance of it is dictated by my own needs, and in higher animals these needs themselves need not obey a strict physiochemical calculus of stimulus-response. For example, animals engage in various kinds of play. Here we come up against the traditional question of "free will," which is, along with the existence of God, one of Kant's antinomies of pure reason.

Generative anthropology offers a new understanding of the concept of freedom as well as of that of God. Ours is a strictly anthropological explanation; it makes no cosmological claims. The question of freedom vs determinism, like that of the existence of God, is really a purely anthropological question. One can no longer take seriously the nineteenth-century "science of religion" that wanted to derive the concept of God from our awe of the cosmos. The reality is just the opposite: having sufficiently deferred human violence by means of the concept of God, we become interested in the relatively dangerous cosmos on the model of extremely dangerous humanity. Religion tends to apply to the cosmos a model of divine power that is indeed of value in anthropological situations but has little functionality in cosmological situations. In times of crisis, cosmic or otherwise, we appeal to God because in our fundamental, originary model of crisis, the sign as name-of-God provides the solution.[\[4\]](#)

The problem of freedom vs determinism is equally anthropological rather than cosmic, "cultural" rather than "natural." To say that the future movement of a particle is "determined" is to conceive a mind potentially aware of this determination. The simple anthropological test of determinism is the following; if after calculating the future state of a system, I can inform the system of my calculations without leading it to deviate from them, that system may be called determined. If, on the contrary, I must hide my calculations to avoid such deviation, then the system is free; for someone within the system could eventually perform the same calculations as I have.

The obvious objection to this definition is that it is biased in favor of language-users; how could I convey the results of my calculations without language? But the burden of proof should lie not with the definition but with its critics. It is for them to show why, if human language is just one among many means of communication that makes no real difference to the matter of free will, it has such an effect on the system that contains it, why the animals whose languages they study so intensively are incapable of such feats. Nor should the question be deflected by bringing in artificial intelligence. *Jusqu'à nouvel ordre*, computers have been constructed by human beings for their own benefit.

12

The freedom of signing as an act of representation distinguishes it from imitation as a new, human variety of mimesis. To imitate is not to represent. I imitate you because we are analogous beings; I need make no conscious effort to follow your gestures, to thematize them as objects of representation.[\[5\]](#) The mimetic crisis leads to stasis precisely because prehuman imitation is non-reflexive; the subject has no knowledge of itself as a self imitating another. In contrast, my representation of the object is a conscious thematization. I am not like the object; I cannot follow it by analogy. When I imitate you, I imitate your action, make movements analogous to yours; but when I represent an object, I designate *it*, not a

particular action of it. My intention of the object is an intention to recall it into being, to double it using only my own resources. I cannot perform the sign, as opposed to the gesture of appropriation, without thematizing the purpose of the sign to represent its object.

The key to the freedom of the sign lies in the detemporalizing/retemporalizing movement discussed in *Originary Thinking*, Chapter 6, ("Narrativity and Textuality"). Imitation has no inherent form. The practical gesture is "horizontally" contiguous with its object; its lack of end-in-itself is visible in its outward formlessness. Because appropriation ends with the object, not with the act itself, if I imitate you successfully, I have no awareness of the limits of my gesture, which are imposed upon it from without. The non-formal quality of the practical gesture is reflected in the continuity between its temporality and that of the life-world to which it is subordinate; the hunter's movements must obey the rhythms of the animal he hunts rather than his own. In contrast, the sign is detemporalized, cut off from its natural aim and therefore from the time in which such aims are realized.

In the discussion in *Originary Thinking*, the sign's detemporalization of the original appropriative gesture was considered tantamount to its constitution as form, even esthetic form (for example, "In the originary scene itself, in the presence of the sacred, the esthetic contemplation of the sign is the complement of the sign's desiring prolongation toward the center" [103].) But in the present discussion, we stand at the origin of form, which we must explain without recourse to the notion of the esthetic. This explanation will return us to the question of freedom.

Abortion of the gesture is not in itself detemporalization; it is such only when the aborted gesture becomes an action in its own right--an action of a new kind, devoid of direct worldly aim. We may say that it defers this aim, that its very existence as form is a worldly realization of deferral, by which I refer to the fundamental equivalence, pointed at by Derrida's seminal term *différance*, between differentiation as marked by the sign and deferral of the mimetic conflict that the loss of difference risks bringing about. The sign re-presents the object as what may truly be called an object of desire, now that its potential appetitive attractiveness is cut off from practical action. Desire is not first experienced and then "repressed," as in the psychoanalytic model; its thematization of its object is itself a product of the repression of the possibility of discharge in appetitive satisfaction.

13

The detemporalized gesture possesses a new, formal temporality. The beginning and end of a form are within the form itself. At the origin of formality is the new aim of the aborted gesture, which is transformed from a practical into a representational act. Within the practical realm, the goal is no longer to appropriate the object in imitation of the human mediator but to imitate the object to the latter's satisfaction, that is, well enough to make him understand the new sense--which can already be called the "meaning"--of the gesture. This is an aim external to the gesture itself, but one that depends on its formal closure as a representation. This closure is not perceived within the practical world but on the other's imaginary scene of representation. In practical terms, this imaginary aim mediates the deferral of conflict, averting the potential wrath of the other-mediator toward his disciple-rival.

It is justifiable to follow past practice in calling this originary form of representation "designation" and the utterance that performs it an "ostensive," with its connotation of pointing. (But it is useless in this context to speculate on the oral vs manual character of the "aborted gesture"; we may just as well assume it to have both.) In principle, any appropriative gesture will "point" toward its object in the sense of serving as a natural sign that draws attention to it, but this within the continuum of worldly action that

leads ultimately to its appropriation. Now that the latter course has been foreclosed, the sign does nothing but "point," not in anticipation of further action, but as re-presentation, calling to attention. The aim of the action now having shifted to communicating a representation of the object to the other, the beginning and end of this action, whatever feedback is available from the other, are ultimately determined by the internal or formal coherence of the gesture itself, since it is this coherence that makes *it* an object of perception and thereby communicates to the other the intention to re-present the object. The formality of the signifying gesture, however different its form may be from that of the object it designates, is of the same kind, in contrast to the nonformality of the practical gesture--the normal aim of which is rather the de-formation of the object, the destruction of its form for the benefit of one's own, as is the rule in appetitive operations.

The formality of the gesture is an objective quality analogous to that of the forms of objects in the real world; the gesture as part of a sequence having its principle of coherence outside itself becomes an autonomous object of perception or *Gestalt* in itself. This alone is sufficient to allow us to speak of the sign as an imitation of its object. At the same time, the creation of a formal object in the sign requires that the criteria for formal closure be imposed by the subject. A feedback loop connects the progress of the sign with the perception of its completion, something not required either in prehuman mimesis or in the performance of life-world routines. This loop anticipates the oscillatory structure of the esthetic, but it determines the specificity of the signing action as the creation of form-in-general rather than beautiful form. The sign is well-formed rather than beautiful; it does not call for "a second look" as does esthetic form. This first loop of formal judgment, in which the relation between sign and object is thematized so that we examine our sign and "see that it is good," is the minimal structure of human free will.

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14

Paradox is a structure of language; it cannot be conceived without the sign. But neither can the sign be conceived without paradox. The horizontal and the vertical cannot be cleansed of one another. The doubling of reality by the sign-world cannot follow either the Saussurean or the Peircean model. The sign that is in the world represents the world it is in; the sign that stands above the world remains within the world of the sign.

There is more than an analogy between this situation and that of the mimetic subject who finds the doubling of his model's gesture blocked by the collision of converging trajectories. There are neither two places in the same universe nor two separate universes for the one to find room to mimic the other. The constitution of the sign is the creation-and-deferral--the *différance*--of paradox. Paradox itself is paradoxical; that is what makes it paradox. It cannot be reduced to "lowest terms," only deferred. But neither is it ever present before our eyes; it is *always* in a state of deferral.

The subject sets the process in motion by imitating the object, doubling within his own action the inaccessible goal of his mimetic gesture. This action liberates the gesture from its stasis by separating the components of the mimetic blockage. On the one hand, the signing gesture, unlike the gesture of appropriation, can be imitated without further difficulty, since it has its end in itself and not in the material world. On the other, the object is designated, represented as an obstacle to the very appropriative action its designation incites. Instead of two hands converging on the object, we have two coterminous gestures cut off before they can interfere with one another, but which thematically reject the practical aim that incited them in the first place.

What this transformation generates is a radical redefinition of the "practical," a program for the stabilization of the human community through signification the validity of which has been demonstrated by our continued use of it for at least 30,000 years. This program creates paradox by deferring it. The referent is no longer a simple object of appropriation but an object of signification; there is no way to maintain a barrier between its "natural" and its "cultural" being. Formally to designate the object through language is inevitably to designate it as an object-of-designation; the object I mean is always already an object-meant. This is not an artifact of mimesis that can be overcome with the benefit of a lucid theory of desire; it is already the case for the first sign, the originary aborted gesture, at the first moment of human thought.

15

## Notes

1. The complete definition, given in his letter to Lady Welby of December 23, 1908, is as follows: "I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter [person] is thereby mediately determined by the former [object]. My insertion of 'upon a person' is a sop to Cerberus, because I despair of making my own broader conception understood." (Charles S. Peirce, *Values in a Universe of Chance*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958, p. 404.)[\(back\)](#)
2. This suggests an originary analysis of Roman Jakobson's familiar metonymy-metaphor dichotomy as homologous to the opposition between the horizontal and vertical components of the original mimetic paradox.[\(back\)](#)
3. To this mimetic predisposition corresponds the cognitive evolution toward the formation of prelinguistic "concepts" referred to by Derek Bickerton and others as the necessary preliminary to human language. (See Bickerton's *Roots of Language* [Ann Arbor, Mich.: Karoma Publishers, 1981] and his later synthesis *Language and Species* [University of Chicago Press, 1990], which is even less concerned than the earlier work to hypothesize an originary scene of language.) Imitation is "always already" protolinguisitic, not merely in the abstract sense that *après coup* we can recognize an unthematized version of concentration around the center, but in the very concrete sense that neurons are becoming devoted to differentiating among categories of objects as a result of this concentration. This having been said, because Bickerton's conception of early linguistic evolution, although a considerable advance over purely linguistically-oriented theories, does not recognize the centrality of mimesis, it fails to take issue with what is after all the fundamental question of the origin of language: the crossing of what Bickerton calls the "Rubicon" of interactive speech.[\(back\)](#)
4. See my "The Unique Source of Religion and Morality," *Anthropoetics* I, no. 1 (June, 1995; URL: <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/>), and *Contagion*, forthcoming.[\(back\)](#)
5. The game of "Simple Simon Says" is a practical demonstration that in matters of simple mimesis, language only gets in the way. The ironic point of the game is the difficulty of listening for the words when it is so natural "simply" to repeat the gesture.[\(back\)](#)

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# Anthropoetics I, 2 Benchmarks

**Herbert Plutschow's** scholarly synthesis on Chinese sacrificial practices is the first serious attempt to use GA as a point of departure for examining a major non-Western civilization; it was written specially for **Anthropoetics**. **Richard van Oort's** piece, **Anthropoetics'** first review article, was also written specially for this issue. **Tobin Siebers'** article is adapted from a paper given at the **Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy**. **Eric Gans's** text is adapted from his forthcoming (Stanford) book, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*.

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