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Table of Contents

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"Wrung by sweet enforcement": Druid Stones and the Problem of Sacrifice in British Romanticism

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Near the beginning of Book II of *Hyperion* (1818-1819), John Keats's uncompleted first attempt to retell in blank verse the Greek myth of the overthrow of the Titans by the Olympian gods, the vanquished demigods, nursing their wounds in a "covert drear," are described as "scarce images of life. . .like a dismal cirque / Of Druid stones, upon a forlorn moor" (II, 33-4). Though buried amid sweeping Miltonic evocations of suffering, this simile reveals an important constituent element of Keats's romanticism, and merits detailed attention. For the purposes of this essay, the most significant feature of the simile is the historico/archaeological misconception contained in the metaphoric vehicle: Keats repeats the error--common in his day--of attributing the stone circles that dot the British landscape to the Druids, a Celtic priesthood described in Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* (and other classical texts) as practitioners of human sacrifice.

This essay will explore in some depth the historic and cultural sources of Keats's mistaken association of Druids with prehistoric stone circles like Castlerigg, which he visited on his walking tour through northern England, Ireland, and Scotland in the summer of 1818(1) [fig. 1]. Doing so will serve as the starting point for some more general observations on the problem of sacrifice in English romanticism. Sacrifice is a problem for English romantics because--following the paleoanthropological wisdom of their day--they associated some of the most commanding and picturesque features of their native landscape with a sacrificial cult, and, as a result, their familiar surroundings appear replete with evidence of prehistoric institutions of victimization. Thus to think in originary terms--a guiding principle of romanticism--is to confront the English romantic with a difficult double task: he must resist the originary appeal of the landscape's continuing sacrificial temptations at the same time that he assimilates sacrifice into a scheme of orderly cultural evolution. Keats may be distinguished from his proto-romantic and romantic precursors by the relative degree of ease with which approaches these potentially conflicting imperatives.

For Keats, as for his great poetic precursor William Wordsworth, the Druids provide the crucial link between the sacrificial character of prehistory and the present-to-mind landscape. On the rhetorical level, this is how the *Hyperion* simile works: the vanquished demigods' resemblance to the still-extant, even familiar remnants of human sacrifice suggests to Keats that the Titans, representatives of an obsolescent social order, were sacrificed by their successors. On the ideological level, the simile thus suggests that in Keats's view sacrifice is the engine of cultural evolution. Moreover, by evoking a contemporary, patently British landscape within the context of a hypothetically re-created scene of significant cultural transition, Keats invited his readers to recognize the "relevance" of a distant Greek myth--and, by extension, all mythopoesis. In short, recreating an originary scene--and reminding ourselves that its powers continue to constitute reality, even to the level of shaping the landscape--becomes the best means of understanding that scene's continuing constitutive operations.

In this regard, Keats's attitude toward Britain's mythic past is quintessentially romantic: as Eric Gans has written, "the knowledge offered by romantic esthetic culture, however mediated through worldly matters, is not worldly but

anthropological knowledge--knowledge of the originary scene in its modern disguises" (170). How the Druids came to play this anthropologically significant role for romantics like Keats and Wordsworth is in many respects as interesting as the originary insight to which it ultimately led. Before examining selected poetic evocations of the sacrificial overtones of "Druid stones," I will recount first how Britain's mysterious monuments mistakenly came to be associated with the Celts, and, second, how the Druids' sacrificial penchant was assimilated into a powerful myth of their "nobility."

2

Britain is fortunate to possess the greatest concentration of prehistoric monuments in Europe: today, the remains of hundreds of prehistoric burial barrows, henges (circular enclosures surrounded by one or more concentric banks and ditches), and, most impressively, circles of standing stones (more than 170 in England, Wales, and Scotland) are scattered through the countryside, attracting tourists, New Age spiritualists, and archaeo-paleontologists. The most famous of these is, of course, Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain [fig. 2], which, owing to the remarkable sophistication of its engineering and the celestial alignments of its sarsen pillars, has served as the focus of most of the paleoanthropological speculation the monuments have inspired. In fact, such speculation has a long and colorful history, having begun when Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100?-1154), according to a note by the compiler of the fourteenth century *Tractatus de mirabilibus Britanniae*, wrote that Stonehenge had been brought from Ireland to its present location by the Arthurian wizard Merlin in AD 438.

Geoffrey's speculation is typical of early paleoanthropological thinking in two respects: it links the features of the British landscape with "established" myth and history, and it drastically underestimates the age of the monuments it considers. Modern archeological research has shown that Stonehenge, for example, was built in three stages over a period of nearly 1300 years, from its earliest beginnings as some type of ritual center in about 2800 B.C., through various intermediate configurations, to its present form, believed to have been completed about 1550 B.C. The tendency to place the monuments in relatively recent times--which, as we will see, helped later writers to attribute them to the Druids--arose, as Stuart Piggott has written, from the fact that even as late as the sixteenth century, "the concept of non-historical antiquity was almost impossible to grasp" (*Ruins* 7). In the wake of the destruction of the myth of British history that sustained Geoffrey, Piggott writes,

> an unfortunate gap was left. It was necessary to construct a new documentation for the remote past, which would again link British antiquities to the historically documented past of either the Bible, or the world of classical mythology and history. The bolder spirits managed to combine the two, and so make the best of two ancient worlds, sacred and pagan. Bale, for instance, produced in 1548 a splendid scheme by inventing a character called Samothes, son of Japhet, as the first post-diluvian King of Britain, in the third millennium BC, with a collateral descendant, Albion, who was the son of Neptune and the great-grandson of Ham, and who later came to the British throne (*Ruins* 7).

While the secular spirit of the Renaissance gathered momentum through the seventeenth century, culminating in the founding of the Royal Society for the Study of Antiquities in 1662, "gentleman diggers" continued to struggle with the notion of prehistoric antiquity, and even well into the Age of Reason were excavating tumuli with one hand while clutching their Bibles and *Commentaries* of Caesar in the other. Indeed, it was during the Enlightenment that the most spectacular archeological misconception concerning the provenance of ancient monuments arose, ironically through the well-meant efforts of the man who is still credited with having done more than any other single figure to preserve Britain's rich archeological history. That man was William Stukeley (1687-1765).

After having been educated at Cambridge (where he befriended the aged Isaac Newton), Stukeley was a physician in Boston, Lincolnshire when, in 1719, he first visited Stonehenge. Captivated by the majesty of the site, he spent his spare time over the next ten years cataloguing and mapping prehistoric monuments, largely in Wiltshire and Hampshire. His most valuable work by far was the careful and precise measurements he made at Britain's largest and most spectacular prehistoric site, the temple complex at Avebury in northwest Wiltshire [fig. 3][fig. 4]. This site, which includes a stone circle thirteen times larger than that at Stonehenge, appears to have served as southern Britain's dominant prehistoric cult center, and encompasses numerous burial barrows, long "avenues" marked out by standing

stones, and Silbury Hill [fig. 5], the largest man-made hill in Europe.(2) Stukeley's work at Avebury was nothing less than heroic: he precisely measured and mapped the positions of the standing sarsens on the site just ahead of the workmen who were toppling and breaking up the stones for building material. Visitors to the site today, in fact, owe Stukeley a debt of gratitude, for it was largely through his efforts that excavations and restorations of the stones in the 1920s and 1930s were possible.(3)

3

It was natural that after so much field work Stukeley would speculate on the prehistoric origins and function of the site he had so lovingly mapped and described. When he came to publish his findings at length in the early 1740s, however, Stukeley shocked and disappointed his fellow antiquarians by proposing not only that Avebury had been built by the Druids, but that the overall layout of the entire temple complex "proved" that Druidical religion was both an offshoot of the pre-Judaic patriarchy of the Old Testament and a clear precursor of Christianity. Undeterred by the fact that (in the words of Stuart Piggott) "there is nowhere in the classical writers any association made between the Druids and stone circles and similar monuments" (*Stukeley* 80), Stukeley concluded that the Druids had shaped the Avebury site as a "Serpentine temple" [fig. 6] in order to symbolize their miraculous intuition of Christianity's central doctrine, the Trinity:

> The form of that stupendous work is a picture of the Deity, more particularly of the Trinity, but most particularly what they anciently called the Father and the Word, who created all things. . . . A snake proceeding from a circle is the eternal procession of the Son, from the first cause. . . (quoted in Piggott, *Stukeley* 104).

This symbolic interpretation of the site's shape also enabled Stukeley to reconstruct the history and doctrine of the Druids; his "findings" are here presented as summarized by Stuart Piggott:

> [T]he Druids had come to England as part of "an oriental colony" of Phoenicians, "in the very earliest of times, even as soon as Tyre was founded: during the life of Abraham, or very soon after; indeed, soon after Noah's flood...." [W]hile [Stukeley] is careful to write that "we cannot say that Jehovah appeared personally to [the Druids]," yet he thinks they could by their own reasoning have reached "a knowledge of the plurality of persons in the Deity" and so become at least not Unitarians, but in a fair way to claim themselves good churchmen. Isolated in Britain ("left in the extremest west to the improvement of their thoughts," as he puts it), they had preserved the patriarchal traditions intact--"the true religion has chiefly, since the repeopling of mankind after the flood, subsisted in our own island." This religion "is so extremely like Christianity, that in effect it differ'd from it only in this; they believed in a Messiah who was to come into the world, as we believe in him who is to come." The leader of the Druidic immigrants Stukeley conceived as being the Tyrian Hercules, "a worthy scholar of Abraham" and "in the same generation as Noah's grandsons." He had landed in west Britain and probably as one of his labours, had built the stone circle of Boscawen-Un, in Cornwall (*Stukeley* 99-100).

What had led Stukeley to such a far-fetched conclusion? This is easily answered: in 1729 Stukeley abandoned medicine to take holy orders in the Anglican church, and thenceforward saw himself as a vanguard soldier in the war against Deism. Deism followed David Hume in holding that the historical progress from polytheism to monotheism was the natural result of advances in reasoning power, and that the primitive's egoistic tendency to "trace the footsteps of invisible power in the various and contrary events of human life" leads necessarily to "polytheism and to the acknowledgment of several limited and imperfect deities. . . . We may conclude, therefore, that, in all nations, which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind" (section II, paragraphs 3-4). Monotheism, by contrast, arises from the "contemplation of the works of nature," which necessitates forming the "conception but of one single being, who bestowed existence and order on this vast machine, and adjusted all its parts, according to one regular plan or connected system" (paragraph 1). By describing the Avebury complex as just such a "connected system," Stukeley hoped to obscure the obvious functional implications of its shape (the avenues as processional paths for victims and their attendants, the circles as enclosures for sacrificial

altars) behind a doctrinal symbol that implied the presence of a monotheistic mind. As he put it in a 1730 letter to his friend and fellow antiquarian Roger Gale, viewing the monument as a "serpentine temple" enabled Stukeley "to combat the Deists from an unexpected quarter, and to preserve so noble a monument of our ancestors' piety, I may add, orthodoxy" (quoted in Piggott, *Stukeley* 104).

4

This aim required Stukeley diligently to overlook not only the possibility that Avebury's plan was functionally derived. He also had to ignore the first-hand picture of the Druids provided by the classical authors, especially Julius Caesar, whose *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* documented Druidical practices in greatest detail. The keynote of Caesar's account of the Druid cult is their love of sacrifice: in fact, the main difference between the Germans and the Gauls is that the former "have neither Druids to preside over sacred offices, nor do they pay great regard to sacrifices" (6.21). According to Caesar

> The nation of all the Gauls is extremely devoted to superstitious rites; and on that account they who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and they who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice men as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them, and employ the Druids as the performers of those sacrifices; because they think that unless the life of a man be offered for the life of a man, the mind of the immortal gods can not be rendered propitious, and they have sacrifices of that kind ordained for national purposes. Others have figures of vast size, the limbs of which formed of osiers they fill with living men, which being set on fire, the men perish enveloped in the flames. They consider that the oblation of such as have been taken in theft, or in robbery, or any other offense, is more acceptable to the immortal gods; but when a supply of that class is wanting, they have recourse to the oblation of even the innocent (6.16).

Stukeley's account of Druidical religion makes no mention of these practices. Indeed, Stukeley mentions sacrifice only once in his account of Avebury, and only in passing: "Publick sacrifices, games, hymns, [and] sabbatical observance," he writes, were probably celebrated at the site. Nowhere does he acknowledge that some of those sacrifices might have been of human victims.

Ironically, writes Stuart Piggott, Stukeley's enlistment of the Druids in the battle against Deism proved to be an inspired strategy: while the "Deistic controversy is now a remote lost cause, enshrined in the faded pages of unread sermons and pamphlets, and alive only to the ecclesiastical historian," the "Druids die hard, as every British archaeologist knows to his cost, and even recently could appear without warning in the pages of some journal in the very guise in which they were decked by Dr. Stukeley 200 years ago" (*Stukeley* 25). The classical testimony of their sacrificial essence, however, was never as forgotten as Stukeley might have wished; and even as Romanticism, eager to see the Celtic priesthood as champions of liberty for their resistance to Roman imperialism, spread the myth of the noble Druids, their apologists frequently found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to explain away or otherwise account for the obvious conclusion that the stone circles provided the loci for unspeakable rites. Both the picturesque poetry and the guidebooks of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that treated prehistoric monuments invariably ran up against the problem of Druidical sacrifice, usually concluding in Stukeleian fashion that the nobility of Druid dogma more than compensated for their unfortunately savage--if ultimately understandable--customs. Consider, for example, how Rev. J. Ogilvie's poem *The Fane of the Druids* (1787) glosses a reference to "sacred virgins":

> It is not to be denied, that those women are said to have been the instruments of perpetrating deeds in the oblation of human sacrifices; which cannot be related, or even thought on, without horror. Some ancient writers seem to dwell on this subject with a satisfaction, which may induce an impartial reader to suspect that their accounts are greatly exaggerated. . . . I should, however, do injustice to my subject, if I did not observe upon this occasion, in their behalf; that in the exercise of this practice, in the inhuman manner in which they are said to have set about it, the Druids exhibit an object altogether singular and extraordinary. For, although history offers to our view barbarous nations, who sacrificed human victims in such a manner, at the celebration of their horrible orgies; yet we ought to remember, that they meant, by this rite, to conciliate the favour of certain malevolent beings, who were supposed to derive pleasure

> from the miseries of mankind; and to whom they believed they had given offence. But we have already seen that the Druids entertained the purest and most sublime conceptions concerning the majesty and perfection of the Divine mind; that they venerated the oak, as the Jews did the most holy place, only as being honoured by his immediate presence; that they officiated among men as his viceregents; and that they every where inculcated the doctrine of immortality.... In other respects, neither the Romans nor the Carthaginians, who practiced this inhuman rite themselves, had any reason to find fault with it among others (22).

5

For the purposes of this essay, the most important legacy of Stukeley's establishment of the inevitable association of the Druids with the British landscape's prehistoric traces is the undertone of guilty self-justification that runs through this passage. In accepting that the Druids built the stone circles, the romantics found themselves having to confront what we might call the landscape's guilty sacrificial secret, since their anthropological intuition could not avail itself of Stukeley's polemically-motivated transformation of the Druids into proto-Christians. Various strategies evolved for resisting the landscape's sacrificial temptations. To provide a contrasting backdrop that will highlight the singularity of Keats's approach to this dilemma, we will first examine an isolated but nevertheless characteristic response to the landscape's lurking sacrificial challenge by Keats's great precursor, William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

Like Ogilvie, Wordsworth acknowledges but then quickly suppresses the sacrificial secret of the Druids: their association with groves and circular stone enclosures lends all such places a vaguely violent cast; but this association is generally glossed over or suppressed in favor of the fulfillment of some other aim--memorializing the victim or lauding the restraint of the lyric self. *An Evening Walk*, one of Wordsworth's first published poems, begins by placing its lyric speaking in a sun-drenched landscape, inhabited by friendly cattle and horses. His way seems naturally to tend, however, out of the light; and as he seeks some relief from the heat by a stream, an "obscure retreat. . .opened at once, and stayed my devious feet." Entranced by the trickling waters that dance in the light, the "listless swain" rests awhile, and pauses to praise the bower in which he finds himself so pleasantly ensconced:

> Did Sabine grace adorn my living line,
> Blandusia's praise, wild stream, should yield to thine!
> Never shall ruthless minister of death
> 'Mid thy soft glooms the glittering steel unsheath;
> No goblets shall, for thee, be crowned with flowers,
> No kid with piteous outcry thrill thy bowers;
> The mystic shapes that by thy margin rove
> A more benignant sacrifice approve--
> A mind, that, in a calm angelic mood
> Of happy wisdom, meditating good,
> Beholds, of all from her high powers required,
> Much done, and much designed, and more desired,--
> Harmonious thoughts, a soul by truth refined,
> Entire affection for all human kind (4).

"Soft glooms" and "mossy rocks" suggest their inevitable paleoanthropological concomitants for the post-Stukeleian poet of the British landscape: the "glittering steel" of the sacrificial knife and the thrilling, but "piteous" cry of the victim. Wordsworth's hurried, and therefore telling response to this chain of associations is not only typical of his early poetry, it sets the pattern for many of the most haunting lyrics of his "great decade" of 1797-1807. The British landscape's challenge to his cherished notions of intrinsic human benevolence will continue to be met with "more benignant sacrifices" than the bloodthirsty rites of the past. Like that of Stukeley, Wordsworthian originary thinking merely repeats the sacrificial reality it uncovers by substituting an intellectual expulsion for the physical one that so affronts it.

By contrast, Keats's evocation of the Druidic landscape--and, by extension, the sacrificial in general--reveals a

somewhat more equable acknowledgment of the centrality of the practice to an originary understanding of the human. That sacrifice plays an important role in Keats's poetic vocation and works is demonstrated not only by the fact that it appears so frequently in his poetry. That, after all, could be explained merely by Keats having chosen, especially in the longer works, to draw his subjects from Greek mythology. At the center of Keats's most famous poem, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and therefore, perhaps at the center of his poetic project, stands a compelling sacrificial scene:

6

> Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
> To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
> Leads't thou that heifer lowing at the skies
> And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

These earnest questions stand, as generations of readers have recognized, at the core of Keats's artistic project. Their quest is not, however, as narrowly historical or exclusively aesthetic as has been assumed; to search for the "actual urn," whether literal or figurative, evoked by these lines is to turn away, in Stukeleian and Wordsworthian fashion, from the anthropological challenge posed by scenes on Grecian urns and by the "dismal cirques" of "Druid stones" that issue their own challenges in the familiar landscape. For our purposes, Wordsworth's wish for a "more benignant" sacrifice to replace the unnamed but presumably brutal Druid rites can be seen as the conventional first generation response to the landscape's sacrificial temptations. Keats's evocations of the Druidic landscape differ from Wordsworth's and Ogilvie's sentimental pictures of the Druids and their rites--a view which must shrink guiltily from the violent reality of their practices--to the extent that the younger romantic anthropologizes sacrifice: instead of hiding or rejecting it, he searches out the practice's originary significance.

A comprehensive demonstration of this aspect of Keats's poetry is, of course, beyond the scope of this essay. I also do not mean to suggest that Keats merely hypostatizes sacrifice as yet another means of defusing it of some of its terrible power. In order to suggest how Keats in practice differs from his proto-romantic and romantic forbears, I will conclude with a look at perhaps the most critically neglected of Keats's great odes, the "Ode to Psyche." Composed in late April or early May of 1819, "Psyche" is commonly held to have served Keats as something of a warm-up to the most famous of his odes, the companion poems (composed in late May of 1819) "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn." "Psyche" begins--conventionally enough--with an invocation of this goddess of late antiquity, "wrung by sweet enforcement" (Keats 275). As in Wordsworth's "An Evening Walk," the attention of the lyric speaker in "Psyche" moves from its initial focus on the peripatetic landscape to an internalized scene, which, tellingly, is quickly reconfigured as a Druidic bower. Owing to the lateness of Psyche's ascension to Olympian status, Keats imagines, the indispensable establishing gesture of her divinity--a sacrifice--was neglected. That oversight, he promises, will be remedied by the mental processes which the composition of the ode instaurates:

> O latest born and loveliest vision far
> Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
> Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
> Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
> Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
> Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
> Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
> Upon the midnight hours;
> No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
> From chain-swung censer teeming;
> No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
> Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming (275).

Pledging himself to priestly service for the neglected goddess, Keats vows to "build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind" :

> And in the midst of this wide quietness

A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in! (275)

7

At the outset of his last and greatest creative outburst, Keats enters a sacrificial bower strikingly different from that which produces Wordsworth's troubled evocation of the guilty secret that clings to the Druid-haunted landscape. Instead of hurrying to a vague but comforting prediction that unspecified but less gory rites would soon supplant the violent realities of the past, Keats here searches for some means of assimilating the ubiquity of sacrifice to an understanding of essential and continuing human processes. This he finds in the tantalizing metaphoric equation between the sacred spaces that dot his landscape and the "untrodden region" within his mind. That, in turn, leads to an essentially scenic intuition: the birth of "psyche" (thought) can be conceived of not only chronologically, but spatially as well--that what is needed for the continual creation of new knowledge is a cleared space, a space set off from its surroundings by some readily recognizable boundary. A "dismal cirque of Druid stones," or any other such marker of sacred precincts, provides just such an instaurating boundary. The countryside's vestiges of Druid sacrifice are therefore not merely the hints of a guilty historical secret; they are traces of originating gestures, new thoughts. For Keats, stone circles and mysterious monuments furnish the starting points for an understanding of the role sacrifice plays in creating the permanent structures of both thought and history. The apparent ubiquity of the practice carries for him, therefore, less of a threat to his conceptions of man's fundamental benignity and the ancient functional overlap between priest and bard.

Permanence is the keynote of the rest of Keats's great odes, completed between May and October of 1819. The transcendent permanence that Britain's stone circles appeared to possess served as the starting point for a more detailed and profound consideration of transience in the human realm, a theme which famously runs through "Nightingale" and "Grecian Urn." Transience was not, however, merely one of many "themes" or ideas successively stumbled upon and explored by Keats in his tragically short poetic career. It was, as W. Jackson Bate has recognized, the culmination of a thought process, begun in Keats's letters, but completed, meditatively as it were, in verse (486-7). However timeless and moving those meditations continue to be, we must continually remind ourselves that they, like all thoughts, did not spring up *ex nihilo* from the fevered brain of the poet. Like his fellow romantics, Keats discovered in his native land plentiful evidence for speculation on the character and practices of incipient cultures. Unlike many of his early nineteenth-century compeers, however, Keats courageously accepted the inference to which the sacrificially-derived stone circles and monuments led him.

Notes

1. Most critics and biographers agree that Keats's immediate source for the image in Hyperion was this monument, which still stands near Keswick in the county of Cumberland. For both details of the walking tour and a photograph of the stone circle, see Carol Kyros Walker, *Walking North with Keats* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 17-18.(back)

2. As the figures show, the stone circle at Avebury is complex, consisting of a large circular bank and ditch (about 1400 feet in diameter) and an outer circle of standing stones (1100 feet in diameter) that itself encloses two rings of smaller standing stones. Silbury Hill, the purpose of which has never been definitively established, rises to a height of 40 meters and has a base diameter of 165 meters. It is believed to have been begun about 2750 B.C. and completed by about 2700.(back)

3. Visitors owe another debt of gratitude to the iconoclasm of medieval Christianity, for during the middle ages many of the stones were felled and buried in order to conceal evidence of Britain's pagan past. Stukeley himself excavated many of these stones; but the majority lay undisturbed until the 1930s, when Alexander Keiller excavated and restored the stones that stand today.(back)

8

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Illustrations

1. Castlerigg Stone Circle

(back)

2. Stonehenge

(back)

3. Avebury

(back)

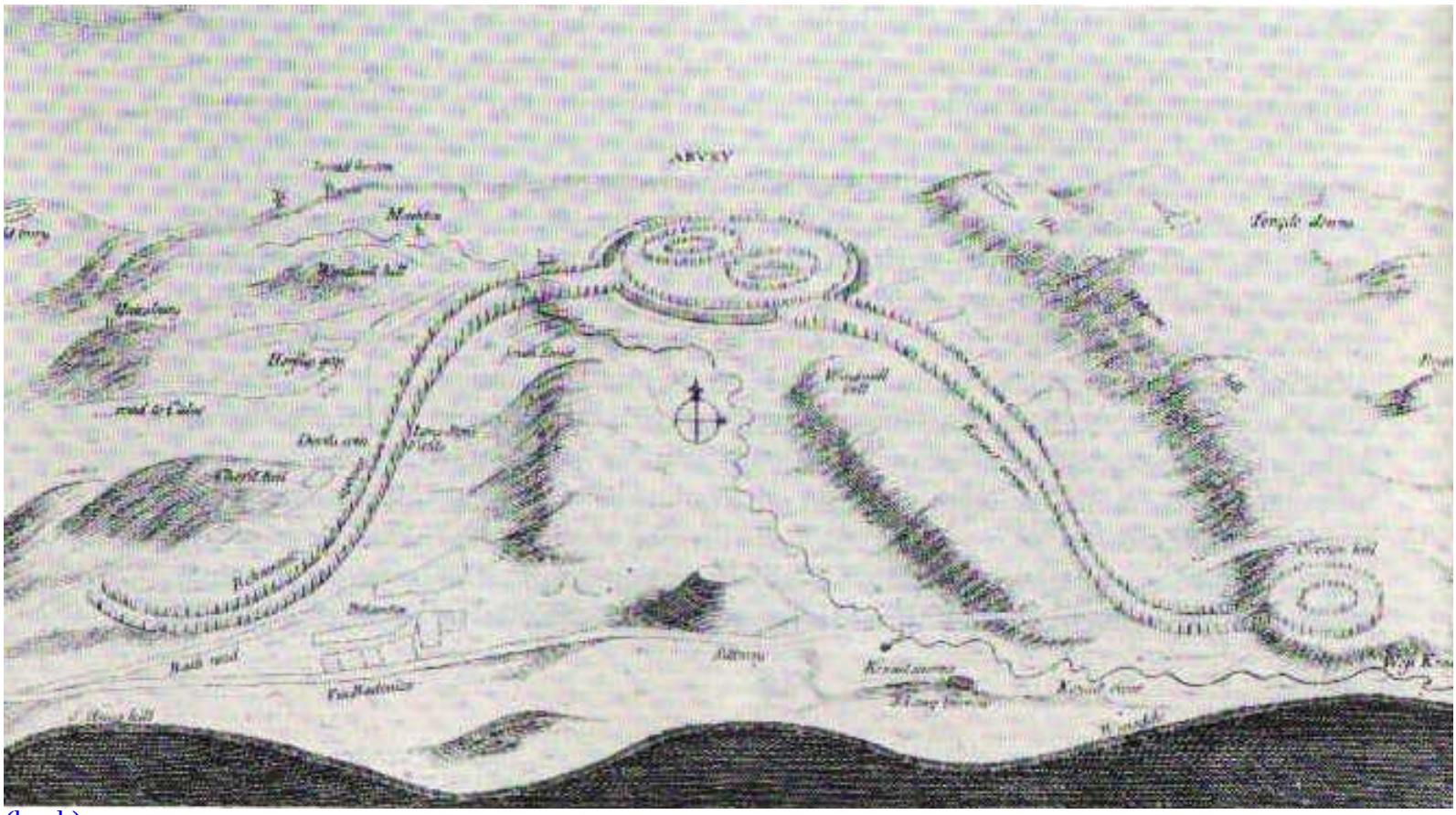
4. Avebury

(back)

5. Silbury Hill

(back)

6. Stukeley's plan of Avebury as "Serpentine Temple"



(back)

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Performative-Constative Revisited: The Genetics of Austin's Theory of Speech Acts

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It may seem unlikely that so paradoxical and apparently unmaintainable a thesis as J.L. Austin's elementary distinction between performative and constative should be described as part and parcel of a general "revolution in philosophy," but this is precisely what Austin tells us at the beginning of his famous 1955 Harvard lectures, posthumously published in his How to Do Things with Words. With characteristic ironic British humility, Austin begins his lectures by politely remarking upon a "mistake" that a certain traditional philosophical attitude toward language is guilty of. This mistake arises from the view that language is preeminently the tool of constative assertion, that is, a tool primarily interested in providing statements about the world, which are characterizable as either true or false.(1) In contrast to this rather limited view, which when actually compared to the full range of utterances in the real world is forced to exclude most of them as simply nonsensical, Austin proposes a second category of utterances that are not subject to the truth/falsity conditions of propositional knowledge. Rather, these exist as acts in themselves, that is--as Austin dubs them--as performatives. The peculiarity of the performative utterance, in contrast to the constative, is that it does not describe a state of affairs independent of itself, but that it is itself the reality it describes. It is therefore a self-reflexive utterance. Austin's archetypal examples of these are the acts of naming, marrying, bequeathing and betting (see How to p. 5). Thus, for instance, when I utter, "I name this ship HMS Hermes," I do not describe a state of affairs in the real world. Rather I bring a state of affairs into existence by virtue of my utterance. The act of naming is simultaneously the reference of my statement. The performative is therefore, in the most rigorous sense, an act and not a representation of something else, at least not in the preferred constative sense of a representation.

Let us examine this situation more closely. In querying the nature of the utterance's relation to the world, Austin's conception of the performative has deeper epistemological and ontological implications. That is, it touches on the problem of linguistic reference. Are we representing a reality external to our utterance, or are we creating by the very act of the utterance the reality which we seek to define? The first type of utterance is the classic model of constative assertion, manifest in the proposition which can be verified, that is, which can be proven true or false.(2) This is the model indispensable for empirical science, for without being able to separate worldly reality from linguistic utterance, empirical science would not be able to create objective models, the validity of which is measured by the separate existence of a world

conceived as ontologically prior to, and independent of, the models used to represent that world. The second type of utterance, however, does not conceive itself as merely a supplement--accurate or inaccurate, true or false--to a world against which this accuracy is measured. Rather, it presents itself as producing the very reality it names. If, given the appropriate conditions, I declare, "I name this ship HMS Hermes," then the mere fact that I have said the words produces the event to which I am referring. Thanks to my utterance, the ship is named where it was not before.

2

But why is this so paradoxical? Why does it cause philosophers so much consternation? One reason no doubt is the challenge the performative model presents to the ontological faith that philosophers have placed in the proposition as the fundamental unit of all our utterances. Austin's delight in taking the constative model to task is indeed one of the major themes driving his deliberations on the performative nature of language-use, and undoubtedly this undermining of constation and its concomitant concern for propositional truth is precisely the quiet "revolution" Austin regards his analyses as contributing to.

But ultimately I do not think Austin's hypothesis is radical enough. The revolution he suggests that is taking place in philosophy may appear revolutionary from inside philosophical circles, where a certain understanding of truth and language has held sway since Plato, but from the originary-anthropological perspective I wish to adopt here, Austin's questioning of the supremacy of the logical proposition is a necessary prelude to a more radical model that includes within its linguistic model a historical and anthropological content that counteracts the ideal and detemporalized models of metaphysics.

Can we then give a more radical thesis to Austin's conception of the performative? I think we can, but to do so we will have to begin from scratch and dispense with the philosophical faith--if not always explicit, certainly tacit--in the declarative sentence as the fundamental semantic unit of linguistic communication.

Why must we dispense with the declarative sentence? The simple answer is because the declarative sentence is not an originary form. In the spirit of generative anthropology, the hypothesis I wish to present is in fact based on a more economical formulation of language origin that, rather than beginning with the declarative sentence (and its younger philosophical brother, the proposition), seeks instead to explain how such a complex linguistic form originated in the first place. The assumption behind this argument is, of course, that we need a rigorous formulation of language origin at all. That such an assumption is valid is not something that can be proven indisputably. But, indeed, the very notion of such an absolute criterion of truth is itself a product of an unquestioned faith in the capacity for declarative sentences to generate ontological truth from the detemporalized scene that it is the specific capacity of the declarative to produce. The generative or originary claim is, in contrast, a more minimal one. By understanding the scene of original language production, we hope to provide not transcendental logical models, but, rather, a historical hypothesis which explains this capacity to generate abstract models of reality divorced from the scene upon which they occur. The error of traditional metaphysical thought is to grant this capacity for abstract model-building--and hence truth/falsity conditions--an ontological status. Implied in this metaphysical ontology is the belief that conceptual thought, and with it the categories of truth and falsity, is concomitant with the origin of language. But this implied model of origin, as we will see, is dependent on an anterior, more minimal model of language-use, one that does not require developed declarative sentences but is rather simply an ostensive (or indicative) use of language (as in the nominal utterance "Fire!" which indicates the presence of fire). By presenting an explicit model of the origin of language--one based on the scene of the originary performative context of

the first linguistic sign--we seek to introduce precisely what is lacking in metaphysical models of language, namely, the entire scene in which language must be conceived to have evolved. It is only with the advent of the declarative, a later development of linguistic evolution, that language can divorce itself from its context, and thus appear to be wholly independent of its scene of production.(3)

3

There is much in Austin's lectures that suggests the need for a fundamental "scenic" hypothesis of language-use in general. His analysis of performatives is based on the intuition that propositional truth is a product of a more developed linguistic form. Ordinary language situations reveal this conflation of language-use and constative description to be, more a scientific ideal to be pursued, than a normal condition of the pragmatic context of language-use. The danger of the scientific ideal, Austin warns, is to hypostatize it as somehow the normal condition of all language-use:

> One thing, however, that it will be most dangerous to do, and that we are very prone to do, is to take it that we somehow know that the primary or primitive use of sentences must be, because it ought to be, statemental or constative, in the philosopher's preferred sense of simply uttering something whose sole pretension is to be true or false and which is not liable to criticism in any other dimension. We certainly do not know that this is so, any more, for example, than that all utterances must have first begun as imperatives (as some argue) or as swear-words--and it seems much more likely that the "pure" statement is a goal, an ideal, towards which the gradual development of science has given the impetus, as it has likewise also towards the goal of precision. Language as such and in its primitive stages is not precise, and it is also not, in our sense, explicit: precision in language makes it clearer what is being said--its meaning: explicitness, in our sense, makes clearer the force of the utterances, or "how (in one sense ...) it is to be taken." (72-73)

Austin's well-known dissatisfaction with the traditional view that language is fundamentally propositional here receives overt expression. Rather than interpreting this passage as simply a point-blank refutation of the constative framework as a workable model (as many cultural critics have been wont to do), it is more valuable, from our point of view, to note how Austin refutes philosophy's love of the verifiable proposition. It is not that propositional knowledge is a priori an impossibility or an illusion (as an absolute skepticism would claim), but that it is an ideal, a goal, which science gives impetus to. The "mistake" (as Austin says) of philosophy is to presume that this category is originary, that it is somehow fundamental to all speech acts. For once this conclusion has been drawn, we are left with no way to explain nonconstative speech acts other than as parasitic or simply nonsensical.(4)

Austin's location of the performative is a realization from within philosophy that all language is at bottom "performative," and that constation can be better explained as a highly evolved, specialized and scientific outgrowth of more basic performative (i.e., pragmatic and communal) language-uses. Austin, however, does not seek to expand on this historical hypothesis; indeed, in the passage cited above, he deliberately refers to originary conceptions of language-use (such as imperatives) with cynicism. For Austin, the fact that there is simply no evidence for such hypotheses prohibits the question from the beginning.(5) Significantly, however, at the end of the penultimate lecture of How to Do Things with Words, he does suggest that between the performative and the constative, the illocution and the locution, "we have here not really two poles, but rather an historical development" (146). Admittedly, it is not entirely clear from this brief remark whether Austin is suggesting that the performative utterance is

indeed more primitive, and that the constative is thus a specialized development from its more fundamental performative context. But given Austin's earlier remarks (and indeed the whole thrust of Austin's analysis of performative language) it seems difficult to deny that because the performative, in its most general sense, provides the more inclusive context for a consideration of speech acts than does the constative, it therefore represents an earlier stage of language development.

4

The problem with giving such an argument, at least in the context of Austin's work, is, of course, that Austin himself will give no historical account for such an evolutionary point of view, presumably because to do so would force him away from the rigour of empirical analysis and into the realm of unsubstantiated--that is, hypothetical--speculation and model building. But empirical analysis is not a guarantee against metaphysics; it includes its own parti pris by refusing to confront the genetic character of linguistic form. The point of the originary hypothesis is precisely to minimize our presuppositions when we theorize. The alternative, I would suggest, is to forego historical rigour for metaphysics (whether rationalist or empirical), which is clearly a position Austin himself would be unhappy with. Eric Gans, in his original anthropological analysis of speech acts, has criticized speech-act theory for this unwillingness to develop a genetic-historical account which can synthesize its taxonomic classifications of types of speech acts. Using an analogy from the history of biology, he suggests that "[p]hilosophy's dealings with speech acts involve the same kind of a posteriori classifications that we find in pre-Darwinian biology," adding that "only an anthropological hypothesis can lead us from Linnaeus to Darwin" (62, 64).(6)

How then are we to articulate our intuition that language-use cannot be explained solely on the model of constative truth functions, but rather as an expression of urgent pragmatic situations? Austin's path, as we know, is simply to point to the numerous cases of ordinary language-use that clearly cannot be defined by the truth/falsity criterion of the constative. These contexts of language-use are analysable only in terms of the total speech-act situation, or what we can here call the "scene" of the utterance. Often they do not even seem to need the complete linguistic form of the proposition, being merely single-word utterances and not well-defined sentences. But though such analyses of discrete scenes of everyday language-use allow us to question the constative model, they do not in themselves allow us to replace it with a more powerful a priori model of the general context of all language-use. Searle does talk of "illocutionary force" as his common denominator for all language-use, but this is an abstract descriptive term, not an integrated model. On the whole, both Austin and Searle remain content with a classification of illocutionary acts, making no attempt to synthesize their intuition that language operates "scenically" by proposing a general hypothesis of the scene of universal language-use. Such a hypothesis, to be rigorous, must begin with the origin of language, that is, with the creation of a universal scene of representation, which is seen as the defining aspect of the human in general. Eric Gans, whose work is dedicated to this conception of "originary thinking," proposes that what remains implicit in all individual scenes of language-use is an "originary scene"(7) which constitutes the human capacity for representation:

> In the linguistic act, speaker and hearer, or writer and reader are placed in the presence of a common scene of representation. Everyday acts of language can allow us to exemplify this scene, but the only hypothesis that allows us to explain its existence is one in which the communal presence of language originates as an event. Language could not have evolved imperceptibly from prehuman forms of communication; it must have been created, or

> discovered, through a revelatory act. This does not imply that its structures appeared miraculously all at once, as those linguists implicitly believe who make the declarative sentence-form the unexplained basis for their grammars. But the simplest, ostensive form of utterance, which merely designates an already-present object, can only arise in the context of a collective scene, in which the scenic center is isolated at least momentarily from the human "spectators" and language-users at the periphery. ("Sacred Text and Secular Culture" 53)

5

We see here, I propose, an explicit articulation of Austin's notion of the performative as the context for the origin of language. The first sign is an ostensive that simply designates an already present object. For Gans, this scene in which language first occurs brings about a minimal use of language. But to avoid the circularity characteristic of previous "myths of origin," which are hence open to a deconstruction via the "always-already" argument, the originary scene must be explained by prelinguistic motivations. The designated object must have already been of interest to the group for appetitive--i.e., prelinguistic--reasons. Thus, the nascent human community surround an object attractive to appetite that all wish to appropriate but, fearing the mutual reprisal from the other members of the group, each individual is forced to abort his or her appropriative gesture, which thereby becomes instead a designative gesture, that is, precisely a representation of the object as significant to all, and therefore as forbidden to all. Language here is the solution to the potential for violent crisis brought on by excessive appetitive desire. Prehuman systems of conflict resolution depend on genetically programmed communication signals and rituals based on strict dominance hierarchies observed by ethologists in the higher animals and primates. By contrast, the aborted gesture is successful as a linguistic act only if every member participates intentionally in the act. Each member must renounce his/her appetite in order to establish the significance of the central object as being a topic worthy of a new form of perception, that is, as an object represented to all as universally significant because universally denied. The act is only a linguistic act if an intention not to appropriate the object is attributable to each designating individual. Without this establishment of what Gans calls "communal presence," there would be no intentional deferral of conflict and therefore no linguistic act.

We are now in a position to flesh out some of the performative implications of Gans's originary scene. Austin notes the "felicity" conditions necessary for performative language to occur successfully. But the ultimate "felicity condition" of all language-acts is the originary scene. Here, the "successful" performance accounts for the very origin of the human. We may assume that the conditions at the origin are wholly more urgent than those of subsequent uses of the linguistic scene of representation. The protohominid community is faced with a dangerous crisis that can only be dispersed and deferred by the mutual renouncement of instinctive appetite. The immediacy of the everyday interactional speech situation reconstitutes the original immediacy confronting the protohominid community. The plausibility of the hypothesis stems from this observation. Language must have evolved as the more effective means for controlling the dangerous immediacy of unmediated and conflicting appetitive desires for an object of universal interest. It is the immediate and threatening presence of each individual on the scene that provides the unique interactional and intercommunal conditions that are characteristic of the intersubjective basis of language-use in general. Thus, every participant is aware of the others' aborted gestures and participates equally in the creation of the moment of communal presence. This is the minimal condition necessary for language to take place. We reproduce this presence in everyday speech acts without further reflection, but at the moment of its inception, the power of the speech act was the

direct response to an imminent crisis. It is worth observing that in primitive ritual situations most obviously, and aesthetic representations less overtly, this moment of crisis is explicitly--i.e., thematically--reproduced.(8)

6

In contrast, language performs the original resolution of the crisis simply by virtue of its form. This understanding of the human as constituted, not by (mythical and sacred) thematizations of the linguistic scene, that is, as content, but rather by form is indeed what justifies us in reconstructing a hypothesis for the origin of language. That is, rather than assuming that this origin is itself explained by a transcendental content which is generated only after language could have come into being, we seek to give a plausible account of how this linguistic scene itself could come into existence. In this originary sense, the overlap between metaphysics and religion is apparent, for both grant the content of the linguistic scene an a priori status without seeking a more minimal explanation for the development of this content via its linguistic-scenic form. Only an originary hypothesis can provide a plausible explanation for the development of linguistic content.(9)

The originary scene offers us a general anthropological model that allows us to situate more rigorously Austin's notion of the performative speech act by returning it to its original collective and ritual context. Almost all of Austin's original examples of performatives are of ritual origin and thus possess an explicitly ethical dimension (as opposed to a strictly logical one). Naming and marrying are obvious examples of social rituals that take place before the whole community. Promising and betting are not so clearly ritualistic because they do not possess the same public setting. To promise or bet, one merely needs another person with whom to undertake the promise or bet. But implied in the "local" scene upon which we engage in everyday acts of betting or promising is the equivalent understanding that our word will be evaluated according to the "public" scene explicit in our more ceremonious and externalized rituals of marrying and naming. It is indeed a measure of a society's freer ethical structure that local interactions between individuals can displace the essentially conservative domain of large public rituals, the local scene always being the site for more individual freedom.(10)

Promises and bets are instances of contractual agreement between individuals. The binding constraint they place on the individual should give us a clue as to their ritual roots. Naming, marrying, promising, betting, all operate on the same principle tacit in the originary sign. In designating the central object as collectively forbidden, the original participants provided the first "contractual" agreement between each other--the "agreement" not to appropriate the central object. The originary sign "names" the object as forbidden. The notion of an "agreement," however, is misleading. The originary sign is not a conventional contract, an agreement on already stipulated terms. It is the originary "contract," a revelatory event that produced the institution of language by deferring violence. This deferral of conflict cannot take place without the whole community participating collectively in the designation of the object. From this originary gesture stems the model for all collective acts of ritual designation. The oddity of such speech acts, in contrast to indicative and constative acts of worldly reference, is that they require the sanctioning--the commitment--of the community to be successfully performed. Hence Austin's category of appropriateness conditions. In the cases of marrying and naming, this is clear enough. But the anthropological context carries over into the cases of promising and betting. Here it is the speaker, not the entire community, who is committed to the speech-act.(11) What both types of performatives share is their emphasis on the human designators. Hence the fascination of such speech acts for perplexed philosophers who have first pinned their loyalties on the descriptive or constative

model of language. The intuition behind Austin's category of linguistic performatives and felicity conditions is based on the ostensive nature of ritual. Language here can operate only in the presence of significant or, in the case of ritual, sacred objects. The ostensive designates an already present object (as in the originary scene), but it cannot abstract a model separate from the worldly scene of the linguistic utterance. This is a property of the declarative sentence, which is a later development that must be explained on the basis of the more parsimonious description of language as fundamentally an act of ostension.

7

At the elementary level of language-use, signification takes place as an indication of a significant object. Single-word utterances, such as the cry "Fire!", demonstrate this primitive level of ostensive utterance, which requires the context of the scene in which it is uttered to be understood. Certainly, such ostensive utterances can be seen as simply abbreviations of the declarative/propositional utterance: e.g., "(I declare) there is a fire (here)."(12) But such explanations fail to comply with the criterion of a minimal explanation of language. Thus, they assume that the scenic context must be excluded from the linguistic utterance. But this is an ex post facto hypostatization of the declarative sentence, as Austin's repeated criticism of the constative implies. The cry "Fire!" is a warning, not a proposition. The point of its utterance is for others to share in an awareness of the danger; the cry once uttered will be taken up by others. Presumably the hearers can be expected to verify for themselves whether there is indeed a fire or not, but the efficacy of the utterance lies in its ability to circulate urgently throughout the immediate community, not in any capacity to propose an abstract state of affairs that can be either true or false. Thus, at the ostensive level, we must follow Austin's argument for appropriateness conditions. The performative is not true or false, but rather felicitous or void. The cry "Fire!" when there is in fact no fire is simply a void utterance. Ringing an alarm bell has the same effect as the cry "Fire!" but we cannot attribute a truth value to either the bell or the utterance. This follows from our understanding of ostensive signification. What is signified by the elementary gesture is simply a referent deemed worthy of general communal attention. But this significance receives no measure other than that provided by the attentions of the community. There is no abstract realm to appeal to in order to apply the notion of truth to the referent. All that we can say about the ostensive object is that it is significant to all.

But is this not equivalent to a proposition? Does not the utterance assume that the speaker is asserting a fact about the world, namely, that there is a fire, the worldly reality of which will either prove or disprove the utterance? Certainly, there is the brute fact of the fire that must be present for the utterance to take proper (felicitous) effect, but what this objection fails to note is the difference between a linguistic utterance that is uttered solely in the presence of its reference and an utterance that proposes a state of affairs about the world, that is, that precisely does not need to be uttered in the presence of its referent. The confusion arises from an inadequate theorization of the distinction between the ostensive utterance (Austin's performative) and the constative utterance. The former can only be understood in context of the scene where it is uttered. Crying "Fire!" where there is no fire simply makes no sense. On the other hand, if I say "The boys have lit a fire in the park," I have depicted an abstract scene for you that does not need the immediate context of my enunciation to be understood qua statement. You can conceptualize the abstract scene regardless of my own position as interlocutor. To understand my utterance you have first to conceive a scene independent of the context in which my act is uttered; that is, you have to imagine for yourself a state of affairs where the boys have lit a fire in the park. No doubt, once you have constructed this independent linguistic scene you are free to speculate on the illocutionary force of my statement that will necessitate an examination of the context of my utterance. Such questions as the speaker's status and

power, so dear to the sociopolitical interpreters of speech-act theory, necessarily come to the fore: e.g., What authority do I have? Am I merely another juvenile? an adult? a fire-inspector? Could I be lying? tattle-telling? Perhaps we are both poor out-of-work fire-fighters who have ordered the boys to start the fire.

8

But these questions of context are all contingent on the assumed conceptual ability to represent abstract scenes independent of the context of the utterance. This is the essence of all propositional knowledge, as well as, let it be noted, all fictional utterances. It is only because an independent scene can be constructed that the possibility for fiction arises. Fiction is inherent to the propositional utterance itself. The difference between an utterance that is fictional and one that is propositional is not that the former is parasitic upon the latter, but precisely that the latter forgoes the primacy of its independent construction of an imagined state of affairs to relate this conceptual scene to a worldly reality. The declarative can always in principle (if not in reality) be verified by taking it beyond the linguistic scene it creates. Thus, you can go to the park yourself, and see if the boys have indeed lit a fire. Hence the original sense behind Austin's term "constative"--to constate (from the French constater)--which means to verify or to ascertain. What distinguishes the fictional utterance from the propositional utterance is the willingness of the hearer to remain captivated by the original imaginative scene that is constructed for him/her. What is deferred here is the presence of the worldly referent, which in the case of the declarative sentence-form--the prototype of the logical proposition--is a worldly state of affairs. And this should not surprise us, for what motivated the originary sign was also the deferral of the dangerous presence of the appetitive object. The difference is, of course, that the originary sign is a more "local" form of deferral, for the referent appears in the presence of the linguistic sign.(13)

The first linguistic sign is simply a centring of the referent which by its position at the centre is deemed worthy of significance to all individuals on the periphery. This sign, in its unique situation at the origin, demonstrates the ambiguity of both directions of Searle's word/world relationship.(14) On the one hand, the sign is motivated by the worldly appetitive object that must be conceived as ontologically prior to the sign, thus demonstrating the world->word direction of fit; on the other hand, the object is sacralized as a cultural object which is forbidden appropriation by the community, thus revealing the word->world direction, where the sign creates a newly perceived reality. The act is performative precisely because it defers, via the temporal performance of the gesture, the reality of the object that threatens the stability of the community. The originary gesture takes place as a temporal deferral of this dangerous immediacy by inserting between the participants on the periphery and the object at the centre a cultural space, which is also, more specifically by our hypothesis, a linguistic space, where the object is mediated by the cultural/linguistic sign.

9

Now this sign is nothing other than the mutual participation of the whole community in the scene of representation. But what this collective act produces is a universal scene where the object, formerly only perceived as an appetitive object to be unproblematically appropriated, is transposed to a collective scene that forbids the individual to act out his/her appetite by forcing upon him/her the awareness that others are also designating the object. That this linguistic sign, at this primitive stage, is an act, a performance, is evident from the concrete temporalized deferral that the original sign accomplishes. The act creates the moment of collective presence, which is an ethical consolidation of the unity of the community. We may

observe that the linguistic sign, at this ostensive stage, is more a musical phenomenon than a representative one, or better, that it is the musical aspect of temporalization that creates the representative aspect (in the limited--ostensive--sense used here) of the originary sign. Through temporal deferral, significance is bestowed on the central object. Northrop Frye, in a perceptive analysis of the musical aspect of spoken charms, provides us with an insightful perspective on the sacred and magical element of ostensive signification with its capacity for shutting down random, potentially destructive action: "the central idea of the magic of charm is to reduce freedom of action, either by compelling a certain course of action or by stopping action altogether" (125). Frye continues by noting the use of rhythm and sound which compels the hearer to a version of linguistic mimesis distinct from the traditional (Aristotelian/constative) conceptions of language as a mimetic doubling of worldly reality. Language in this sense is truly performative, for its mimetic efficacy does not operate through objective constation but through participation in what we have defined here as a collective performance of communal and ethical presence. Performer and performance, sign and referent, signifier and signified appear on the same scene. Hence our analogy between ostension and music, as demonstrating the "pure" form of temporal representation, is justified. The purely formal domain characteristic of secular music in the West since the Baroque era is, from our point of view, the ultimate liberation of the ostensive sign from its reference to a worldly, sacralized object. One can define music anthropologically as the secular development of the ostensive form of signification, where the sacred referent has finally been displaced into a world of pure form. Music is thus truly the most "performative" of the art-forms.

Searle's world/word distinction allows us to theorize more rigorously the dichotomous uses of the elementary ostensive sign. The cry "Fire!" demonstrates the world->word direction of fit. The utterance of the word "Fire!" does not change the nature of the reality that motivates the utterance, but spurs those within hearing into appropriate action. Very different are Austin's archetypal ritual performatives. Declarations of naming and marrying confer a cultural reality that was not present before the utterance occurred. They thus take the word->world direction of fit. By virtue of the utterance, a new (cultural) reality is created. Or, in anthropological terms of the originary scene of language-use, the newly proclaimed reality is dependent upon the voluntary consent of all the ritual participants. No doubt the temptation is to see this voluntary communal consensus as an unwarranted idealization of the sociopolitical order which is better described in terms of authority and power than in terms of communal consensus. But what such critiques fail to take into account is the essentially egalitarian context of the minimal linguistic act. There has been much discussion on the sociopolitical context necessary for authoritative acts of ordering,condemning, and such like. But such "political" explanations do not disprove the originary hypothesis; on the contrary, they lend evidence for it. It is precisely because language transcends social status and is understood across political hierarchies that we must assume the originary--i.e., fundamental--status of egalitarian linguistic exchange. Political accretions to this linguistic context are always possible, but unless we wish to hypostatize such accretions for all time, they must be understood as just that--later developments that depend upon the essentially egalitarian context of originary linguistic exchange. It is indeed precisely this originary awareness of the egalitarian context of linguistic exchange that enables the sociopolitical interpretation to gain a moral foothold. For how else could our common and basic level of linguistic understanding, let alone our moral sense that "we are created equal," be explained? It is rather those notions of language that would make the sociopolitical the epistemological condition of our linguistic heritage that unthinkingly condemn cultural reflection to a mythic interpretation of power which itself remains beyond explanation. To give the sociopolitical complete supremacy as a model of cultural reflection is to assume that hierarchy itself is originary. Rather than liberating us, this model merely leads to an ontological stalemate, for having elevated

hierarchy--and more subtly the abstract concept of le pouvoir--to a transcendental category that governs the social order, we are left with no way to explain our own liberation (outside of divine salvation) from the hands of such a disenfranchised conception of the social order. (15)

10

The word->world direction of fit, then, explains the voluntary consent of the participants to bestow a cultural reality, such as a name or a marriage, upon a worldly reality. Such consent mirrors the irenic path of the originary sign which allowed the community to pass from crisis to consensus. Minimal speech acts such as greetings and apologies (Austin's "behabitives," Searle's "expressives") reproduce this irenic collective context. "Hello" clearly cannot be explained either as a constative act, nor indeed as an explicit performative, as in Austin's original examples of marrying and naming. However, its usage becomes clear as a minimal ritual inherited from the originary scene. Thus, uttering "Hello" to a stranger is an attempt to reestablish the original equilibrium that must exist in ritual performatives for consensus to occur. The greeting is a prelude to more practical speech acts, but its fundamental nature is evident in the fact that it has itself no content, being merely a ritual to be performed before communal presence can allow the interlocutors to engage in more functional speech acts. No doubt greetings have become trivial affairs where a grunt, or simply a nod, is adequate for a civil threshold of presence to be established. But this is a consequence of the ever-increasing awareness that communal presence is not a unique contingent phenomenon but a condition of human existence. Acts of apology function in much the same way. The utterance "Sorry" serves to avert conflict in the event of an action that disturbs the balance of communal equilibrium.

In conclusion, we can refer back to our initial suggestion that performatives are not simply the polar opposite of constatives. As we have seen, Austin himself took care not to reduce the two types of speech acts to a simple case of binary opposition. But Austin's hypothesis, I have argued, is not radical enough. His performative-constative distinction is better explained along genetic lines, where the performative is understood as the condition of possibility for more specialized constative speech acts. Our own investigation of Austin has led us to Gans's conception of the originary scene, which is a radical reformulation of the concept of the performative from the perspective of generative anthropology. Such an originary hypothesis allows us to explain the genetic unity behind such seemingly trivial acts as greeting, as well as more overtly ritual acts, such as naming, and finally also fictional and logical speech acts which are dependent upon a fully developed declarative sentence-form. At the basis of our analysis is the model of the originary sign which deferred conflict via the creation of a communal scene of representation. All linguistic-cultural acts have this deferral as their basis, and all such acts are--as was indeed already the originary sign--reflections on this moment of origin. The current analysis, by seeking to perform its own act of reflection on our collective origin, makes the same wager that created humanity in the first place. There is no logical proof for this conception of origin, but that is why it is a performative wager. We bet our existence on the ethical efficacy of theorizing our own origin, just as the original humans wagered their existence on designating consciously, for the first time, something other than the human--the inaccessible sacralized object which could generate the cultural and ethical space necessary for a temporary solution to the crisis. To be sure, our current theorizing does not blindly wager its faith by designating for the first time a unique object as sacred, as the original protohumans must have done. The wager we place is the originary hypothesis, which gives a plausible account of the entire scene in which this original act of faith must have occurred. This scene is both a consequence of, and a heuristic for, interpreting the cultural acts that we, as the descendants of the first humans, have inherited. Speech acts, because they exemplify the minimal institution of language itself, are only the most

fundamental of these cultural acts. But they are also therefore the best indicators of our common heritage as creatures who have wagered their existence on the communal efficacy of language-use.

11

Notes

1. See p. 3: "Not all true or false statements are descriptions, and for this reason I prefer to use the word 'Constative.' Along these lines it has by now been shown piecemeal, or at least made to look likely, that many traditional philosophical perplexities have arisen through a mistake--the mistake of taking as straightforward statements of fact utterances which are either (in interesting non-grammatical ways) nonsensical or else intended as something quite different."(back)

2.This is meant in the broadest sense. Naturally, the interpretation of the evidence will influence one's judgment, but the fact remains that the proposition by offering an independent model--i.e., in grammatical terms, a predicate of a topic--always leaves itself open to the criterion of correspondence--true or false--to a world from which it is definitively severed. This is both why there indeed exists a notion of "truth" at all and why such truth can never be "absolute" but enters into the intermediary space--the "hermeneutic circle"--between word and world. The performative, however, in obvious ways does not offer such an independent model. The power of Austin's analyses lies precisely in his realization that the performative is tied to its scene of utterance in a way the constative is not.(back)

3. As will become evident in this paper, the distinction between performative and constative is best explained as the difference between an utterance that includes the scene of its own production and one which must be understood first as a predicating a state of affairs about the world on a plane separate from the scene upon which it is conceived. This latter, more complex, utterance requires the characteristic subject-predicate construction of declarative sentences. The error of linguistic and philosophical models of language is to presume that the declarative sentence is the elementary unit of language. It might be objected that though perhaps linguistics and analytic philosophy presume the declarative sentence to be fundamental, speech-act theory makes no such equivalent assumption, since it deals, not specifically with elements of grammar, locution, or propositional meaning, but with the illocutionary force of utterances, i.e., what gets done by the total speech-act. But this remark fails to note that speech-act philosophy's concern with elements of context is not specifically an undermining of the general faith in the declarative as an elementary unit, but indeed precisely an assumption of its validity as a semantic unit embedded within the context of ordinary language usage. Thus does, for instance, John Searle describe the illocutionary acts he seeks to classify as "the illocutionary force of an utterance and its propositional content," which he symbolizes as: F(p), where F = force, and p = proposition (Expression and Meaning 1).(back)

4. Hence the bemusement that so-called fictional "constative" speech acts cause. Austin, sensibly perhaps, simply ignored the question of such acts, referring to them, infamously, as merely parasitic on ordinary speech acts. Subsequent attempts to resurrect a speech-act model of fiction usually begin with the constative assertion and then add rules that allow us to account for the non-verifiability of such assertions. Thus, Searle talks of the suspension of the "horizontal conventions" relating the statement's words to the world (Expression and Meaning, Chapter 3), and Samuel Levin of a "higher sentence" that implicitly prefaces all literary statements with a warning that we are entering a fictional world ("Concerning What Kind of Speech-Act a Poem Is"). But such models cannot avoid the tacit assumption

that fiction is indeed an afterthought parasitic upon the real constative business of language. Consequently, they revert back to the model Austin was intent on undermining. See Thomas Pavel, "Ontological Issues in Poetics," for a criticism of this "breakdown model" of fictional speech acts.(back)

5. But how could there ever be empirically observable evidence for the origin of language?(back)

6. See Originary Thinking, Chapter 4. For a full exposition of language evolution see his The Origin of Language (1981). Much of what I say will be a development of the generative model in the area of speech-act theory, which strikes me, as I hope will become clear, as a particularly fruitful place for such analysis.(back)

12

7. Cf. also, The End of Culture, pp. 16-17: "As soon as the phenomenon of representation is no longer accepted as a given, either 'natural' like the genetic and other 'codes,' or miraculous and incapable of explanation, then it is obvious that any explanation of categories of representation, let alone individual acts of representation, must refer at least implicitly to an explanation, that is, a theory, a hypothesis concerning the phenomenon of representation-in-general. And the only hypothesis that can in any sense explain representation as a historically given activity peculiar to our species must be a generative one that proposes a model of its emergence from an earlier state in which it was absent."(back)

8. See René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, for a comprehensive analysis of the sacrificial crisis in primitive ritual and aesthetic-cultural representations.(back)

9. It should be noted that the originary hypothesis is not another version of the social contract model popular in the Enlightenment period. The originary hypothesis is not a myth or fiction that seeks to describe on the model of already existing categories a narrative of the origin of the social order. The paradox of all such aetiological/mythical derivations is, as Derrida, de Man, and others have delighted in pointing out, precisely that the social categories for which the explanation is sought must already have been present at the origin. At its most radical, the deconstructive argument gives this paradox its own hyper-substantive (metaphysical) status. Thus, Derrida's différance becomes the epistemological condition of language and meaning itself. But rather than seeking recourse to metaphysics (even as anti-metaphysics), the originary hypothesis, by postulating that the originary sign is the deferral of appetite via the simultaneous creation of a uniquely significant centre, historicizes the philosophical (non)category of Derridean différance. For generative anthropology, the first linguistic difference is precisely the temporal deferral of the appetitive object.(back)

10. The great insight of speech-act theory is to return language to the collective scene of the human community. It is only in context of such a collective scene that we can understand the radically communal origin of representation. Many speech-act interpreters have focused on this collective scene in order to undermine, on the one hand, the objectivist notion of truth and value, which ignores the anthropological context for a metaphysical conception of ideal form estranged from its human context, and, on the other, romantic myths of the autonomous self whose individual creativity is understood as independent of the communal context. But the parallel ontological danger also applies to pragmatist interpretations of truth; for once we assume that because everything is at root collective, it is all too easy to simply invert the objectivist and romantic paradigms by excluding tout court questions of objective truth and individual subjectivity. Hence, for instance, Stanley Fish's interest in speech-act theory is

reflected in his affection for the notion of "interpretive communities." That Fish can offer no explanation for such good-natured communal valuation should alert us to the ultimate anthropological nullity of his hypothesis as an explanatory category. The same logic lies behind Fish's use of speech-act theory to analyse Coriolanus (Is There a Text in this Class?, Chapter 9). For Fish, Shakespeare's hero is an example of the error of believing that the individual exists independently of the community. But what Fish neglects to comment on is precisely why such an error should occur in the first place. For us, Coriolanus is not a metaphysician guilty of constructing a false ontological model of the human, but an illustration of the real human resentment that is produced by the communal scene, which, we note, is not only a site for collective representation via the linguistic sign, but also the moment of rejection, where each individual is denied, by the collective designations of the community, the supremacy of occupying the centre of the scene of representation. The source of Coriolanus's rage--like his archaic Greek precursor, Achilles--is the resentment of being denied the communal centrality that each man assumes is his by right as "first" among warriors.(back)

11. This is also the "liberation" of the individual from the more conservative scene of public ritual, brilliantly thematized by Shakespeare in Coriolanus. Coriolanus's preference for making promises and his scorn for participating in public rituals reflects the tension between the romantic/modern belief in the uniqueness of the individual and the premodern subordination of this self to the communal context of public ritual. It would be an error to believe, however, that Coriolanus's extreme individuality is a mere ethical aberration. As our derivation of promising shows, the romantic scene requires an ethically advanced conception of the self prohibited in the collective context of public ritual, as Shakespeare's play makes clear.(back)

12. Benveniste's observation that deictic demonstratives such as "here," "there," "now," are explicit indicators of performativity is an a posteriori insight based on the declarative sentence's ability to thematize the instance of utterance which is the sole condition of the ostensive utterance. That there is a fire "there/here/now" is already implicit in the utterance "Fire!" See Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics, Chapter 21.(back)

13

13. This generative model resolves most elegantly the problem--apparently intractable to speech-act theorists--of why fiction can use propositional utterances without thereby being restricted to the conditions of verifiability that constrain such utterances in ordinary language situations. From our point of view, fictionality is precisely a function of the originary deferral which renounces worldly appetite for the moment of peaceful linguistic presence. Fiction capitalizes on the aesthetic pleasure of this renunciation, for in prolonging our separation from worldly contact we gain an imagined satisfaction that is more powerful, because more total, more ideal, than its worldly counterpart in the culmination of the sign with the subsequent division of the appetitive object. Austin intuits the fundamental status of originary deferral when he comments on the impossibility of stating with absolute conviction "There are fifty people in the next room" (138). But rather than seeing this example as the inherent temporal condition of all declarative forms which must begin with independent scenes (such as the room next door) before they are (or, in the case of fiction, are not) verified, Austin stresses the immediate context of the utterance, believing that the utterance depends on the same kind of felicity conditions that characterize his prototypical performatives. What is lacking in this explanation is the realization that the felicity conditions of the declarative or constative utterance are dependent upon a notion of a sincere speaker in the way that the felicity conditions of such ostensive performatives as marrying and naming

are not. To be sure, Austin is well aware of the collective felicity--as opposed to individual sincerity--conditions of his ritual performatives, but his inability to prov ide an overall model for this collective context--an originary scene--leads to the kind of paradoxes that Austin encounters with his performative understanding of statemental utterance.(back)

14. Gans makes this observation. See Originary Thinking, p.77.(back)

15. For a one-sided account that transforms Austin's analyses of speech acts into a sociopolitical theory of linguistic usage, see Sandy Petrey, Speech Acts and Literary Theory. Petrey accepts with enthusiasm Austin's emphasis on the collective context of speech acts, but, sadly, he parodies Austin's account of performative language by turning the latter's concern for appropriateness conditions into the ontological condition for all language-use as unproblematically "sociopolitical." But this is simply to beg the question of linguistic usage that interested Austin in the first place. By declaring that political context alone explains the speech act, we have not solved the problem of why language functions as it does; we have only moved from a narrower context--the specific occasion for linguistic utterance itself--to a greater one--the illimitable context of human social and political action. This interpretation simply forgoes tout court the notion of the linguistic. Thus becomes clear Petrey's interest in speech-act theory, namely, to evacuate Austin's empirical analyses of speech-act situations and turn the notion of language-context into a moral platform for general criticisms of authority and power. Such a theory does not help us explain language, but merely contributes to the veil of sacrality that continues to shroud it under a blanket of moralizing. The kernel of truth behind Petrey's (and others') sociopolitical position is that the cultural order is ubiquitous. But this only proves the strength of the originary scene as the only rigorous model that can provide substance to the inchoate criticisms of the culturalists, who assert the universality of the cultural but can provide no model of their own to account for this blanket pronouncement.(back)

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Reconsidering the Fantastic: An Anthropological Approach

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In 1764, Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, "ce catéchisme de l'école encyclopédique," was published in Geneva. As one of the contributors to Diderot's *Encylopédie*, Voltaire had been complaining about the cumbersome in-folio size of this "bible" for all the enlightened minds of the eighteenth century. His "paperback" version of the *Encyclopédie* was supposed to remedy this problem and make the ideas of the Enlightenment accessible to more than the 4,500 subscribers of the *Encyclopédie*. Numerous editions of the *Dictionnaire* proved its success and it seemed as if nothing could stop the ideas of the Enlightenment from spreading to even the most remote corners of Europe. However, during this very same year, while Diderot and his colleagues were pursuing the illusory goal of categorizing, cataloguing and cross-referencing the entire body of human knowledge in their effort to forever ban ignorance and the superstitious beliefs of the past from their world, Horace Walpole published his novel *The Castle of Otranto* in England. This novel is anything but a tribute to the ideals of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, it marks, as José Monléon notes in his *A Specter is Haunting Europe*, the "origins of the Gothic tale, and of fantastic narrative in general" (Monléon 5). Among the gothic and fantastic tales which followed Walpole's novel is Jacques Cazotte's *Le diable amoureux*, published in 1772. As one of the earliest true fantastic stories according to Todorov, it can be considered a precursor to the large number of fantastic works in France in the nineteenth century.

What had gone wrong from the perspective of the Enlightenment? How could gothic castles and dungeons, ghosts and goblins, the supernatural, superstition, and the fantastic become popular at this particular juncture in (literary) history when such beliefs were thought to have been "repressed" forever? The danger of a blind faith in Reason, this supreme weapon against superstition, is, of course, not a discovery of fantastic or gothic narratives. Already Voltaire treated the ideals of the Enlightenment in a satirical manner in his *Candide* (1759). The work of the Marquis de Sade is an ironic monument to the power of Reason, and the Spanish painter Francisco Goya contributed to this growing suspicion towards the Enlightenment when he published his *Los Caprichos* in 1799. One of the aquatint plates from this collection bears the title "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters."

2

Even though the fantastic, "perhaps the supreme literature of difference" (9), as a widely read and practiced form of literature is a phenomenon of the nineteenth century and in particular of Romanticism, as Tobin Siebers shows convincingly in his *The Romantic Fantastic*, I would nevertheless argue that it

emerged as an idea at a moment when faith in human intellectual progress, reason, and science reached a first peak during the second half of the eighteenth century. This era also marks the transition from the classical to the modern world, creating a paradigm shift of such magnitude that it affected all aspects of human existence and its repercussions could be felt throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. As an aesthetic reflection of these crucial developments, the fantastic is more than the playground for confused or escapist minds, as some critics maintain, but a hitherto little explored source of revelatory insights into the history of humanity. With the exception of Todorov, who is primarily interested in the formal aspects of a literary genre and therefore hesitates to venture into any elaborate discussion of its historicity or content, the large majority of later critics, such as Rosemary Jackson, Tobin Siebers and José Monléon, have adopted an overall historical approach to the fantastic. Monléon's "social history of the fantastic" (4), for instance, links its development to a series of revolutionary, sociological, and economic changes from the French Revolution to the revolution of 1848 and the 1917 October Revolution in Russia.

Instead of adding another approach to the discussion of the fantastic, I propose an integrative anthropological analysis of this complex literary phenomenon which would allow us not only to account for its emergence at specific historical moments but also to raise some questions of a more general nature regarding (fantastic) art and its role in culture. The particular anthropological value of fantastic fiction is revealed in its use of figurative language. The fantastic problematizes the figural and thereby critically foregrounds what realist fiction tries to hide, as Eric Gans remarks in *Originary Thinking*: "The conflictual nature of mimesis is ironically and/or violently revealed when an apparently innocent linguistic figure of desire appears in a real incarnation" (Gans 1993 179). To this end, I will focus mainly on how the concept of mimesis, in its double meaning of representation (aesthetics) and imitation (ethics) is approached by writers of both realist novels and fantastic narratives.(1)

If we follow its literary history throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, we find that the fantastic appears strongly during precisely those eras when both art and science claimed to have comprehended, in the senses of "to seize" and "to understand," the real, as was most notably the case for the literary schools of Realism and Naturalism. But the question of realism was already of major concern to the Encyclopédistes who tried to overcome the epistemological doubts of their time by simply exhausting them through the sheer volume of knowledge presented to their readers. To this end, they complemented the seventeen volumes of articles with some 2,885 illustrations in another eleven in-folio volumes. That the Rationalists created their own form of epistemological tyranny that could not tolerate any dissent became most obvious when the French Revolution tried to dispose of all those who by birth, faith or intellectual conviction did not adhere to the new world order. The question of representation should not be treated independently from the question of its ethical implications, as Hayden White points out in his exhaustive study *Metahistory*: "the important theoretical and ideological disputes that developed in Europe between the French Revolution and World War I were in reality disputes over which group might claim the right to determine of what a "realistic" representation of social reality might consist" (White 46).

3

In the domain of literature it is the realist historical novel that claims the right to be the declared bearer of "truth" throughout the nineteenth century. A closer look at some publication dates of realist as well as fantastic works will establish their close chronological relationship. That these dates also coincide with major historical, social, and economic revolutions further supports my proposition that the fantastic must

be approached from an integrative anthropological perspective.

One of the canonical works of French realism is Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, published in 1834-35. During these years, Auguste Comte worked on his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42), an encyclopedic-philosophical treaty on the development of humanity which reaches, according to Comte, its highest level once it has adopted the laws of natural sciences and sociology as its foundation. Both works can be considered as quintessential expressions of a "realist" *vision du monde* of their time. Simultaneously, there is a proliferation of fantastic short stories in France under the influence of the German author E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose work was translated into French in the late 1820s. Among the authors who wrote fantastic stories were Balzac himself (*La peau de chagrin*; "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu"; *La recherche de l'absolu*), Gautier ("Omphale" and "La Morte Amoureuse"), and especially Prosper Mérimée whose "La Vénus d'Ille," published in 1837, figures among the acknowledged masterpieces of the fantastic novella.

A good forty years later, after the political disillusionment of 1848, the disaster of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the debunking of the realist novel by Flaubert, French art and science made their last attempt in the nineteenth century to reappropriate this privilege of representing and explaining reality. Whereas the authors of the romantic era had tried to resolve the mimetic crisis through the "hypermimeticism of the realistic detail, the *petit fait vrai*," Zola, as the main representative of Naturalism hoped to do the same by "transforming mimesis into scientific description" (Gans *Originary Thinking* 177, 180). Similar in scope to Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* tries to explain the development of French (bourgeois) society by means of scientific criteria. The best-known author of fantastic short stories at this time is no doubt Guy de Maupassant. The author of "Le Horla" (1887) and many other fantastic novellas was initially associated with the experimental novel and the circle surrounding Zola but quickly distanced himself from this school. Like Zola, however, he was deeply affected by the deep social crisis that followed the war. It is no surprise therefore that one of the main themes treated in Maupassant's fantastic and other short stories is the protagonist's ontological fear.

Before I attempt a thematic discussion of a few selective fantastic works, a formal analysis of this genre seems appropriate. Let me begin with a quote from Richard M. Sainsbury's book *Paradoxes*:

> Paradoxes are serious. Unlike party puzzles and teasers, which are also fun, paradoxes raise serious problems. Historically, they are associated with crises in thought and with revolutionary advances. To grapple with them is not merely to engage in an intellectual game, but is to come to grips with key issues" (Sainsbury 1).

4

A comparison between Sainsbury's characterization of paradoxes and my discussion of the fantastic reveals an intimate relationship between these two forms of writing. Further analysis will show that the fantastic's *raison d'être* lies precisely in its use of paradoxical structures and dialectical modes of thought. The key issues with which we have to come to grips in the fantastic are the concept of representation and its consequences in the realm of ethics and human interaction. Eric Gans elaborates on the importance of paradoxical thinking to intellectual activity in his *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*: "... the paradoxical is not the unthinkable; on the contrary, without paradox, thinking would be impossible. 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" (Gans 1997)

The relevance of paradox for our analysis of the fantastic is clear if we consider the natural and the supernatural as two apparently acceptable narrative parameters. When used separately, they are unproblematic modes of narration. Brought together, however, in the same narrative, they necessarily challenge each other and entail a disturbance at the level of comprehension. The disturbance or hesitation on behalf of the protagonist as well as the reader caused by this procedure is, of course, one of the fundamental elements of Todorov's often quoted definition of the fantastic: "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous" (Todorov 25).

In general, critics find Todorov's definition of the fantastic too restrictive because he ultimately considers only those stories as truly belonging to this genre which are able to sustain the enigma created by the fantastic phenomenon beyond the closing lines of the story. Cazotte's *Le diable amoureux*, Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille," and James's "The Turn of the Screw" fulfill this requirement for Todorov. We do not have to dismiss Todorov's definition if we choose to treat the fantastic as a paradoxical structure. Since paradoxes by definition are composed in such a way that neither of their constituents, in our case two different narrative modes, can prevail over the other, the only requirement of a fantastic story is that it develop such a paradoxical-fantastic situation at least once during the narration. Even if the enigma is artificially solved in the story itself, as is often the case, the goal of the fantastic story has been achieved; it has caused enough structural disturbance for the reader to hesitate and reinvestigate the validity of the story's content.

Paradoxes as well as fantastic literature invite us to engage in a dialectical process whose beginning and end remain open because they refuse to provide their reader with easily acceptable scientific or logical explanations. Our interest in fantastic narratives consequently shifts from reaching closure to an endless process of reconsidering the same central problematic of mimesis from different perspectives, be they historical, economic or social. Because of its dialectical structure, it is appropriate to compare this cognitive effect provoked by the fantastic to a Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Each new reading reconfirms the double meaning of this paradoxical term: it transcends the previous reading while at the same time preserving it for further use.

5

The anthropological value of the fantastic's problematization of mimesis through a paradoxical structure is best exemplified if we link it to what Gans calls the hypothesis of the "originary event." This event, we recall, is itself based on a paradox created by the simultaneously attractive and repellent force of a central object of desire. In order to temporarily defer the outbreak of violence among the members participating in this event because of their common (imitated) desire for this object, the latter use "a sign [as] an economical substitute for its inaccessible referent" (Gans 1993 9). The human thus emerges through the experience of a mimetic crisis that forces the participating members to contemplate the potentially violent consequences of their action. Because this hypothetical "originary event" creates an *Ur*-model, or Heideggerian *Ursprung*, of all subsequent cultural development, its basic mechanism must be detectable in all manifestations of culture. Gans shows that the subsequent artistic approaches to the concept of mimesis, whether they are classical, romantic or modern, are based on this originary event: "The historical succession of esthetics through romanticism reflects a progressive refinement in the reproduction of the originary event" (Gans 1993 170).

Since our approach to the fantastic coincides with the emergence of the philosophical as well as aesthetic concept of realism, our analysis cannot be complete without a comparison between the fantastic novella and its "enemy brother" the realist novel. At the aesthetic level, realist art tries to cope with the mimetic crisis in a way that is quantitatively as well as qualitatively similar to the vast project of the *Encyclopédie*. While the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century used a combination of word and image to master reality, Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* was viewed by the author as an encyclopedic undertaking in the sense that its 91 novels and short stories were supposed to provide an "étude sociale" of French society from the Empire to the July Monarchy. The effective use of recurrent characters in the *Comédie* is analogous to the systematic cross-referencing in the *Encyclopédie.*

The fantastic, on the other hand, critically plays on the realist's assertion that reality can be captured through truthful representation. By deliberately creating a paradoxical situation at the vertical (aesthetic) level of representation, the fantastic draws the reader's attention to the potentially conflictual horizontal (ethical, social, economic) relationships inherent in the concept of imitation. The formal requirements of a fantastic story are consequently different from those of a realist novel. In order to show the illusive quest of the realist novel, what the fantastic has to accomplish is to develop a natural (realist) frame similar to those in Balzac's novels which it then puts into question by introducing one or several supernatural (fantastic) events. The quality of such fantastic novellas as Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille" and "Lokis" stems from their gradual development of the paradoxical situation which makes it difficult to detect at what point the supernatural enters the natural realm.

6

Let me return once more to Balzac's *Le Père Goriot,* where we find one of the best illustrations of how the illusion of an approximation, and ultimate merging, between the sign and the referent is created in a realist novel. Considering realism's quest for a truthful representation of reality, we understand why it usually claims to avoid highly figurative language. Metaphors are particularly suspect figures of speech since it lies in their nature to leave gaps in the process of transferring one image to another. Metonymy and synecdoche, on the other hand, appear less dangerous because they operate through contiguity; the gap between one image and the other is hidden by a necessary relationship between them.(2) The description of the Pension Vauquer at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot* is a model for the attempt to fuse reality with fiction, since streets and buildings in his work can frequently be traced to real locations. Even though no scholar has yet found, to my knowledge, a precise address for this famous pension, its description nevertheless makes us treat it as one of the typical Parisian pensions of its time. Its fictitious owner, Madame Vauquer, becomes real by sheer proximity to the house she has been living in for so many years. The link between the house and its owner is achieved by contiguity and a gradual movement from the inanimate to the animate; no particular rhetorical figure links Madame Vauquer to her house yet we all know, since Balzac authoritatively says so, that she "is" like her house: "enfin toute sa personne explique la pension, comme la pension implique sa personne" (Balzac 30 ["her entire person explains the pension, just as the pension implies her person"]. That realist fiction cannot avoid figurative and, in particular, metaphoric language is evident; the point is rather that it treats these figures as essentially unproblematic tools of representation.

Mérimée's short story "La Vénus d'Ille" is, on the other hand, a perfect example of the fantastic's particular way of problematizing figurative language. A short summary of the main events will help the reader to appreciate Mérimée's mastery in developing the fantastic phenomenon. The narrator, a well-educated Parisian traveler interested in archeological discoveries, visits the small town of Ille in

Southern France where he is invited to participate in the marriage of Alphonse de Peyrehorade, his host's son.(3) The visit is overshadowed by the discovery of a bronze statue of a Venus which, as the narrator tries to convince his reader, takes on human features over the course of the story. This process begins when one of the workers, who helped to unearth the statue, describes her look as "malevolent." His aversion to the statue can easily be explained by an accident in which the statue fell on and broke a friend's leg. The next day, the "idol," as it is called by now, is charged with "throwing back" a stone which a young man had thrown at it. One plausible explanation is that the stone simply ricochets from the statue, sending the stone back to where it came from. Yet even the erudite Parisian narrator cannot refrain from attributing human qualities to the statue when he sees it for the first time: "Ces yeux brillants produisaient une certaine illusion qui rappelait la réalité, la vie" (Mérimée 739) ["Those brilliant eyes produced a certain illusion that recalled reality, life itself"]. As the day goes on, M. Alphonse takes off his diamond ring and places it on the statue's finger to play a "jeu de paume." When he afterwards tries to take back his ring from the statue, he is unable to do so because it seems that the statue had purposely bent its finger to keep the ring. The final "turn of the screw" occurs when the young husband is found dead in his bed the morning after the wedding, his chest seemingly crushed by a ring of iron.

7

The increasing anthropomorphization of the statue throughout the story, combined with the final "evidence" of M. Alphonse's ring next to his dead body and the noise of a heavy body moving through the house during the night of the murder, suggest that M. Alphonse's joking remark about the statue being his wife after he had given her his ring has become reality. We are led to believe that the statue has finally become alive and killed her "husband" M. Alphonse in a violent embrace during their wedding night.(4)

Fewer incidents would have sufficed to characterize "La Vénus d'Ille" as a fantastic story according to our definition. What makes it so powerful, however, is the way in which the supposedly innocent and explicable metaphors describing the statue as "breaking" legs, "throwing" stones, and "bending" fingers gradually turn into the real yet inexplicable "killing" of M. Alphonse. This fantastic development is artfully paralleled by a heated yet collegial discussion between the Parisian visitor and M. de Peyrehorade concerning two inscriptions on the statue. The conflicting interpretations by the two "archeologists" refer to the ambiguous nature of the statue. Whereas the narrator interprets the Latin inscription *Veneri turbul...* as "Vénus qui trouble"["Venus who troubles"], M. de Peyrehorade adopts a more benevolent interpretation, claiming that the cut-off word refers to the local origin of the statue and is nothing but a simple linguistic reversal leading to Boulternère, the name of a nearby village. The same is true for the inscription *Cave amantem*, which the narrator translates/interprets as "Prends garde si *elle* t'aime" (739) ["Beware if *she* loves you"]. M. de Peyrehorade remains at a more general level with his interpretation "Prends garde à celui qui t'aime, défie-toi des amants" (739) [Beware of the one who loves you, distrust lovers"].

In his analysis of "La Vénus d'Ille" in *The Romantic Fantastic*, Tobin Siebers makes several important points in regard to my proposition of considering the fantastic as a romantic manifestation of the "originary event." In both "La Vénus d'Ille" and "Lokis," the creation of the fantastic is not only implicitly a crisis of representation and imitation, but it is also explicitly problematized in the content of the story: "It is striking that Mérimée generated the fantastic from linguistic interpretations, for the fantastic itself springs from the most radical manipulations of language ..." (Siebers 70).(5)

The crisis at the level of representation created by the fantastic has inevitable consequences for the ethical relationship among the users of language. Mérimée presents us in fact with two different possibilities for such consequences. One of these possibilities is foregrounded in the archeological-linguistic discussion between the Parisian visitor-narrator and his host M. de Peyrehorade. Their mimetic rivalry is caused by their common object of desire, the statue of Venus, for which both display a passionate admiration. A second example of such a rivalry exists between M. Alphonse and the narrator. Once again, their rivalry is generated by a common object of desire; this time it is M. Alphonse's fiancée, Mlle de Puygarrig.

8

Whereas the two protagonists in the first triangle seem to have, at first sight, the same linguistic power, conflict between them, over the possible appropriation of the statue, is constantly deferred through a non-violent battle of representations. Each interpretation of the statue given by the visitor-narrator appears as valid as the interpretations presented by M. de Peyrehorade. However, as the story unfolds towards its tragic end, the series of fantastic and increasingly violent events involving the statue suggest that the narrator was indeed right in insinuating the statue's malevolent nature. In the battle of representations, it seems as if reality proves the narrator right. When the visitor from Paris leaves his host after M. Alphonse's funeral, he makes an attempt to profit from his intellectual victory over M. de Peyrehorade when he momentarily contemplates the idea of asking his host to donate the statue to a museum. As a known lover and connoisseur of art whose domain is the museum, the narrator would thus have "possessed" the statue. That he does not dare to make this request and instead leaves without saying a word will be significant for my later discussion of the narrator's status in the fantastic story.

The second mimetic triangle reveals not the narrator's linguistic but ethical superiority over M. Alphonse. Because the battle over the common object of desire, Mlle de Puygarrig, is more personalized and concrete in this triangle, it is also more dangerous as the end of the story shows.(6) Here, the narrator does not waste a minute to present M. Alphonse from the beginning as naive, simple-minded, and physically repulsive and himself as courteous and well-educated. The problematic double status of the Parisian visitor as a character in the story as well as its narrator reveals itself in these two mimetic triangles. As the Parisian amateur archeologist and language specialist, he develops the "myth" of the fantastic nature of the statue through his linguistic battle with M. de Peyrehorade. On the other hand, he portrays M. Alphonse as a monster, a "Minotaur," through a series of soliloquies which can only be known to the reader.

In light of Siebers's discussion of the unreliability of the narrator and his possible implication in the death of M. Alphonse, the specificities of the story's end become more significant. If the narrator has indeed reason to cover up his traces, he knows that he has achieved his goal as far as the protagonists in the story are concerned. With the exception of M. de Peyrehorade who, as I argue, does not believe in the statue's fantastic nature, all other characters fall prey to the narrator's clever scheme, because they are already prone to superstitious beliefs and unable to challenge his linguistic superiority. Once he realizes that even the state prosecutor cannot make sense of the events, the narrator does not insist to push the investigation any further. As to his silence towards M. de Peyrehorade, it can be viewed as an act of politeness but also as a sign of guilt.

9

That the narrator's task of convincing his reader is, however, not complete yet as the conclusion of the

story itself and a postscript show. When the narrator receives the manuscripts of the events after the death of M. de Peyrehorade, he expresses his desire to publish them. In what can be regarded as his final bluff, he tells us that the two pieces of evidence that could still cause him trouble retrospectively, the parts of the manuscript dealing with the inscription as well as the statue itself, do not exist any more. The manuscripts are lost and the bronze statue has been melted and turned into a bell. Since the narrator has nothing more to fear, he does not have to be silent, as was the case with M. de Peyrehorade. On the contrary, counting on a benevolent audience that has followed him this far, he tries to finalize his victory by subtly creating yet another "lie" about the statue, this time presented as a letter from his friend in Ille, in which the latter informs his Parisian friend that the vines have frozen twice since the statue's transformation into a bell. The establishment of a causal link between the freezing of the vines and the bell is not insinuated by the friend, rather it is the trap into which the reader is supposed to fall himself.

Mérimée's problematization of representation through a clever juxtaposition of the two mimetic triangles is, I believe, a historical and cultural commentary. If we compare the two contrasting translations/interpretations of the inscriptions, we note that M. de Peyrehorade always remains at a general or non-individualized level. Especially his interpretation "Beware of the one who loves you, distrust lovers" strikes me as classical in that the style of a maxim of La Rochefoucauld. In fact, everything about M. de Peyrehorade leads us to see in him a well-educated man of classical taste and manners: he likes to speak Latin and, at one point, quotes Racine's famous line from *Phèdre* C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée! (739)[It's Venus wholly attached to her prey]. As a man whose aesthetic and ethical values originate in the classical world, M. de Peyrehorade looks at the statue as belonging to the realm of the *merveilleux*. As such it is a transcendental signifier, as Siebers remarks (71). Because of this, however, it is impossible for him to understand the danger of violence the statue incarnates. Rather than looking at the incident of the broken leg as a concrete event, M. de Peyrehorade interprets it as another instance in which human nature reveals itself when brought in contact with Venus: "Qui n'a pas été blessé par Vénus?" (735) ["Who has not been wounded by Venus?"]. The configuration of this mimetic triangle maintains a classical, that is ritualistic, structure. The two protagonists, even though they have contrasting interpretations of the statue, keep their place at the periphery of the scene and respect the centrality of the object of desire. M. de Peyrehorade is a classical protagonist unable to adapt to the changing world around him; he dies in resignation only a few months after his son.

10

We discover a completely different attitude if we look at the interpretations of the two inscriptions given by the narrator. In both instances, he chooses a romantic interpretation which anthropomorphizes the statue. Through his linguistic interpretations and treatment of the statue throughout the novella, he wants to make his reader believe the statue actually becomes alive. The Parisian's double status as a protagonist in and narrator of the story reveals the latter's romantic desire for the center, on the one hand, and his awareness of the dangers inherent in this move, on the other. Thus the hitherto classical and relatively stable configuration of the mimetic triangle breaks down and develops a more fluid and therefore highly volatile structure. The central object of desire is not considered sacred any more by the protagonists who consequently attempt to appropriate it. This leads to the violent mimetic conflict between the narrator and M. Alphonse that can only be "resolved" by the paradoxical insertion of the transcendental narrator into the world of the novella as the cause of M. Alphonse's death.

Merimée's use of two aesthetic experiences with different ethical consequences in "La Vénus d'Ille" shows his anthropological insight into the problematic inherent in the concept of mimesis. As an author

writing during the era of Romanticism, he is conscious of the artistic development of his own time period and uses the revelatory qualities of the fantastic to reflect critically upon it.(7) By virtue of these qualities, that the value of the fantastic goes beyond the aesthetic and ethical specificities of a certain era and reveals about the human what otherwise would remain hidden. As man's struggle with his own violence constitutes the core of many a fantastic story, it is not surprising that mainstream criticism tends to dismiss this kind of literature exactly because it reveals "les choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde," that is things about the human condition that we are not at all eager to hear. In an essay entitled "Aminadab or the Fantastic as a Language," Sartre develops this function of the fantastic as follows:

> We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own. There are no phantoms, no succubi, no weeping fountains. There are only men, and the creator of the fantastic announces that he identifies himself with the fantastic object. For contemporary man, the fantastic is only one of a hundred ways of mirroring his own image (Sartre 64).

Based on my analysis of the paradoxical structure of the fantastic, its emergence during epistemological as well as ontological crises from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, I propose a new historical typology of the fantastic. As I have mentioned earlier, it is possible to recuperate Todorov's definition of the fantastic by structurally linking it to paradox. This allows us to include in our textual analysis all those stories which, according to Todorov, fall either in the realm of the marvelous or the uncanny and therefore cease to be fantastic. A true paradox, we said, cannot be solved by definition. How can a typology of the fantastic reconcile the stories where the enigma continues beyond the closing lines of the narration and those where it is solved in one way or another? To answer this question I will analyze the endings from three fantastic stories which also represent three different time periods: Cazotte's *Le diable amoureux* (1772), Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1815), and Mérimée's "Lokis" (1869).

11

In *Le diable amoureux*, which can be considered as a sort of fantastic *Bildungsroman*, the mother of the main character, Alvare, and a doctor from Salamanca tell him at the end of his numerous fantastic adventures that he has been tempted by the Devil.(8) Although this explanation may settle the affair for young Alvare, it certainly does not solve the problem for the reader, who may not necessarily accept the mother's or doctor's explanation of the fantastic events.

Because the protagonist himself is unable to reach a decision on his own based on the events he has experienced, other authorities, such as parents, relatives, friends or the narrator, are permitted to step in and attempt to impose their explanation on him and us. This means that if our analogy between paradoxes and the fantastic is correct, any such final explanation does not emerge logically or scientifically from the content of the narrative itself but is forced upon it from the outside, since it lies in the nature of any paradoxical structure, and consequently also of the fantastic, that it cannot be resolved from within. Alvare's situation is that of a young man in limbo between adolescence and maturity. As a young Spanish nobleman, he lives according to an old-fashioned moral code which conflicts several times with the fast-living, money-oriented life style of the Republic of Venice where most of his adventures take place. Alvare's doubts and uncertainty, albeit of a fictitious nature, mirror the very real doubts and fears that swept through Europe at the end of the eighteenth century when the relatively stable social order of the Ancien Régime was slowly being replaced by a more open and seemingly unstable bourgeois market-oriented society. The solution to his problems provided by the authoritative figure of the doctor from Salamanca, who "imposait, même avant de parler, par la gravité de son maintien"

(Cazotte 124)[who "imposed, even before he talked, by the gravity of his bearing"] is appropriate for a young aristocratic man:

> Votre vocation n'est point assez décidée; les gens instruits par leur expérience sont nécessaires dans le monde. Croyez-moi, formez des liens légitimes avec une personne du sexe; que votre respectable mère préside à votre choix, et, dût celle que vous tiendrez de sa main avoir des grâces et des talens célestes, vous ne serez jamais tenté de la prendre pour le Diable (Cazotte 126).
>
> [Your calling has hardly been decided yet; this world needs people educated by their experiences. Follow my advice, seek a legitimate relationship with a woman and let your mother preside over your choice. And if the woman whom you will receive from your mother's hand has grace and faith, you will never be tempted to mistake her for the Devil]

The *Aufhebung* of the fantastic events by the doctor and the mother can be considered a progress insofar as their immediate personal situation is concerned: for Alvare, because he now appears to be able to continue with his life; for the mother and the doctor, because they have imposed their traditional set of values on him. Considered from a historical perspective, the *Aufhebung* of the fantastic events is, however, not a step forward but an attempt to consolidate the values of Enlightenment Europe that still provide some kind of guidance for young Alvare throughout his adventures. Alvare descends from a long line of Spanish noblemen who do not work for a living. He is educated and wealthy and follows the lifestyle of his contemporaries. Confronted with a relatively strange modern world in Italy where all his values are turned upside down, Alvare expresses the uncertainty of a man who finds himself in the middle of a historical change which, in this case, centers around sociological and economical issues. The explanation at the end of the story thus reflects a conscious choice by the author Cazotte, who has his hero, instead of making the leap into the new world order, return to the protection of the old social hierarchy.

12

In 1815, approximately 40 years after the publication of *Le Diable Amoureux*, E.T.A. Hoffmann published probably his best known fantastic story "The Sandman." This story is situated in a completely different socio-economic context: the young protagonist Nathanaël comes from a bourgeois family. The lawyer Coppelius, a former friend of his father, is, in the eyes of the boy, responsible for the father's death during a chemical experiment. Even as a young man, he is still haunted by this event, especially since Coppelius will reappear out of nowhere each time Nathanaël seems to have overcome his doubts and fears of being haunted by the "Sandman," a figure Nathanaël remembers from a gruesome fairy tale told to him by an old servant at his father's house. The fantastic element is introduced in the story by the appearance of a man who has a striking resemblance with Coppelius. The man's name, Coppola, adds to the confusion. This Piedmontese barometer-seller sells a pair of binoculars to Nathanaël. Ordinarily considered to be a beneficial instrument, the binoculars have the opposite effect on Nathanaël's life because he can now observe Olimpia, the daughter of his neighbor the famous professor Spalanzani. Whereas everybody in town "sees" through the cold, unnatural beauty of Olimpia who, as we will find out later, is nothing but an automaton created by the combined efforts of Spalanzani and Coppola, Nathanaël is completely infatuated with this robot. In his blindness, he jeopardizes his relationship to his fiancée Clara and almost provokes her brother to a duel with him.

On several occasions, his mother, his fiancée and her brother step in to rescue Nathanaël. As far as the

father's death is concerned, Clara finds a rational and very bourgeois explanation:

> As for his [Coppelius] uncanny nocturnal goings-on with your father, I expect the two of them were simply conducting secret alchemical experiments, which could hardly please your mother, since a lot of money must have been squandered and moreover, as they say always happens to such inquirers, your father became obsessed with the delusive longing for higher wisdom and was estranged from his family (Hoffmann 94).

They also discard the probability that Coppelius haunts Nathanaël in the guise of the Piedmontese glass-seller Coppola. Instead, they urge the young man to settle down, take up a business and marry Clara (the name indicates that she sees clearly and would thus be perfect to counter Nathanaël's supposedly blurred vision of reality). The explanation of the fantastic events is, once more, typical for its time period. A bourgeois family and its young son face the challenges of a new economic and social era which is represented by the automaton Olimpia. The father's search for knowledge and wisdom through alchemist experiments, which is also the obsession and undoing of Balthazar Claës in Balzac's *La recherche de l'absolu*, has a negative influence on the well-being of the family. In order to rescue the only heir of the family, everybody (including the narrator) step in to comment and explain at length Nathanaël's fantastic adventures which to them are in fact only uncanny (Olimpia can be explained in scientific terms). Nevertheless, the mystery surrounding the double character Copelius/Coppola survives the end of the story and ultimately causes Nathanaël to commit suicide.

13

For our third example, we make another leap of 40 years to 1869 when Mérimée published "Lokis." This fantastic short story centers around a murder which was committed, the narrator Professor Wittembach wants us to believe, by a young count who supposedly suffers from a kind of werewolf syndrome with a bear in place of the wolf. The murder of the count's bride serves as the culminating point of a mimetic rivalry between the count and the professor. In what can be considered a more extreme version of "La Vénus d'Ille, Mérimée once again links an aesthetic experience to an ethical problematic, this time in a single mimetic triangle. The professor and the count are not only competing for the lovely Mlle Ioulka, they are also involved in a constant discussion of art and language. Professor Wittembach is, as was the case in "La Vénus," a protagonist and the narrator of the story. In "Fantastic Lies: *Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence," Tobin Siebers reveals the narrator's unreliability and shows that he has reason enough to kill the woman. Since not even the doctor in the story can determine exactly the cause of her death and only suggests that it was caused by a "morsure," the professor seems to have the last word as he directs our suspicion towards the count by linking him to the word "Lokis" which means *bear*.

The question of who is right and wrong in "La Vénus d'Ille" and "Lokis" leads us back to our question of who has the ultimate authority in the fantastic story to "resolve" the fantastic paradox. In Cazotte's "*Le Diable Amoureux*," we found that a solution is imposed by the doctor from Salamanca. The narrator hides behind Alvare who tells his story in the first person. The former's status as a reliable and trustworthy narrator is never challenged, since he supposedly leaves the last word to the authoritative figure of the doctor who would therefore be the first target of a critical inquiry on behalf of the reader. This changes when we move to Hoffmann's "The Sandman." Here the narrator relates the story to his reader from different perspectives. He presents letters written by the protagonists themselves and only appears as the third-person narrator once he has established the authenticity of the events through the letters. Even though Hoffmann's narrator never participates directly in the development, we find out

through his comments that he is a close friend of the family. In contrast to the good-natured Clara, however, the narrator reveals himself as a harsh and ironic critic of his good friend Nathanaël and the latter's blind love for the automaton Olimpia. That the narrator is involved in a mimetic rivalry with his hero Nathanaël in the same way the narrator is implicated in Mérimée's two stories is revealed by the following admission:

> I might now go on cheerfully with my story; but at this instant the image of Clara is so vividly present to me that I cannot look away, as always happened when she used to look at me with her lovely eyes (Hoffmann 99).(9)

The status of the narrator in Mérimée's two short stories is, as we have seen, the most elaborate and paradoxical one. His masterful ability to use figurative language to his advantage is explicitly and implicitly developed in the story, since the fantastic appears first through the guise of a discussion of representation, which is not the case in *Le Diable Amoureux* and "The Sandman." Whereas the narrators in these two stories "resolve" part or all of the mystery, the narrator in Mérimée consciously creates the fantastic through his use of language. In fact, his survival as both a protagonist and a narrator depends on this ability. But his (dangerous) use of language to create the fantastic is also his undoing. He cannot fool the reader forever since his scheme can be revealed through thorough analysis. Mérimée's narrator wants to be like the narrator in one of Balzac's realist novels whom we follow blindly and whose reliability is initially not questioned. He jeopardizes his desire to be the transcendental narrator by his desire to be a part of the story. This and the creation of the fantastic through the juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural lead, as the century advances, to an ever growing suspicion in regard to the narrator's reliability that reaches a peak in Maupassant's "Le Horla."(10)

14

Based on our discussion of the fantastic's revelatory anthropological quality in regard to the potentially violent nature of mimesis in general combined with its specific historical manifestations in art from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, we can create a historical typology of the fantastic. The solutions openly imposed or cleverly suggested by the narrator who, over the course of the nineteenth century loses his authoritative status, will allow us to account for the specific development of French bourgeois society, from the hopes created by the Enlightenment to the disillusion of the revolution of 1848 and the war of 1870/71. Despite its different appearances, the fantastic remains a powerful aesthetic manifestation of the "originary event." In contrast to the *Encyclopédie*, the realist or experimental novel, the fantastic has no claim to solving the problem of how reality can be represented in fiction. What it can do, however, is to remind us of ourselves and humanity's birth in a potentially conflictual crisis which we constantly have to reinvent in order to avoid the violence that "Lokis" represents as *homo homini ursus*.

15

Notes

1. This article summarizes my basic ideas and critical approach to the fantastic which I am currently developing in my dissertation with the provisional title: "Paradoxes, Paradigms and the Fantastic."(back)

2. The system of cataloguing and cross-referencing used by the Encyclopedists is similar in nature to the figures of metonymy and synecdoche. Although its intended purpose was to circumvent the constant censorship by the government, the cross-referencing of articles enhances the notion of realism since one

article explains and also authorizes the other. No a priori authoritative model or transcendental signifier is necessary to validate this system.(back)

3. Let us not forget that Mérimée himself was interested in archeology and the conservation of antique art work in his function as "Inspector of Historic Monuments."(back)

4. That an unproblematic aesthetic experience can suddenly turn into a nightmarish reality is equally well expressed by the adventures of a character in Gautier's "Le Club des Hachichins," first published in 1846. In this fantastic story, the narrator experiences the effects of opium for the first time in his life. For a few moments, the results are quite pleasant and promising: "La réalité ne servait que de point de départ aux magnificences de l'hallucination" (219) ["Reality only serves as a point of departure towards the splendors of hallucination"]. But the pleasure lasts only for a few moments as Daucus-Carotus, a character out of Hoffmann's fantastic tales, suddenly starts tormenting the narrator by constantly uttering the following sentence: "C'est aujourd'hui qu'il faut mourir de rire" ["Today you must die of laughter"]. From this moment on, countless fantastic figures, who are none else than the other opium smokers in the room, join Daucus-Carotus. When the orgy reaches its aesthetic and mimetic peak the "rire avait perdu son timbre et tournait au grognement, le spasme succédait au plaisir; le refrain de Daucus-Carotus *allait devenir vrai*" (224; my emphasis ["was going to become *real*"]. Only the intervention by one member of the group who did not participate in the orgy prevents them from committing a collective suicide by jumping out of the window.(back)

5. For further reading on "Lokis," I refer the reader to Tobin Siebers's article "Fantastic *Lies: Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 28 (1981): 87-93.(back)

6. Siebers shows that Mérimée actually changed his initial portrayal of Mlle de Puygarrig as beautiful yet uninteresting to a seductive woman because he "recognized ... that there had to be an object of contention between the two men if the eruption of the fantastic was to be motivated" (Siebers 66).(back)

7. For further reading in regard to Mérimée's ambiguous attitude towards Romanticism, I refer that the reader to Eric Gans's *Un pari contre l'Histoire. Les premières nouvelles de Mérimée (Mosaïque)*, Paris: Archives des Lettres Modernes, 1972.(back)

8. That the doctor is from Salamanca is of importance since the city was considered a center of intellectual and spiritual life in Spain because of its famous university and cathedrals. The city was at the height of its fame during the Renaissance, the classic and baroque era. Thus it is symbolic of the Ancien Régime.(back)

9. It would be interesting to discover whether or to what degree Mérimée, as a reader of Hoffmann, has made use of this admission by the narrator in "The Sandman," especially since the long passage following this passage bears a striking resemblance to the description of Mlle de Puygarrig's physical beauty in "La Vénus d'Ille" discussed by Siebers.(back)

10. See also Siebers's chapter "Narrative Unreliability and the Fantastic" in *The Romantic Fantastic*.(back)

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Plato and The Birth of Conceptual Thought

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For over a century, thought has attempted to free itself from metaphysics.[1] A certain philosophical postmodernity has declared this a vain endeavor, having decided that metaphysics is the indispensable form of any coherent reflection. Yet since humanity existed before metaphysics, we should be able to survive its demise. It suffices that we oppose to it a form of thought sufficiently powerful to be able to think both its beginning and its end.

Primitive, egalitarian societies function by means of ritual distribution systems guaranteed by the symmetrical differentiations of mythical speech. With the appearance of social hierarchy, the mastery of ritual distribution becomes fixed in one place and refuses to circulate; the new task of cultural language is to justify this disequilibrium. But in the society of the "Greek miracle" that arises in the margins of the archaic empires, the accelerated circulation of goods and ideas loosens hierarchical rigidity and gives language a competitive value. The Sophists learn to manipulate speech for the purpose of persuasion. Yet, whether out of indifference or self-interest, they do not seek the a priori conditions of this manipulation; language is for them simply a tool in the hands of man who claims to be "the measure of all things."

The concept as ethical content

Following Socrates, Plato understands that "free" speech, far from being gratuitous, is the sign of a new, implicit ethical order. In order to understand this order, it is necessary to reflect not on what language refers to but on what it signifies to the community. We may roughly express this distinction by contrasting the ensemble of worldly referents of a word (its "denotation" in analytic philosophy) with its "signified" or meaning (its "connotation"). But for Plato, the latter is not an abstract meaning but a substantial *content* that the users of the word possess in common. The intuition that the usage of certain words reveals an ethical content that is more than an abstract signification is the very foundation of philosophical reflection. This intuition is already implicitly that of the Socrates of the early dialogues, and was no doubt that of the historical figure who irritated his contemporaries by forcing them to define courage, beauty, friendship... It is by deepening his understanding of the content of words that Plato will transform Socrates' open interrogations into conceptual thought, which is only another name for metaphysics.

In order to grasp the ethical point of departure for this way of thinking, let us listen to the debate between

Socrates and Callicles in the *Gorgias*:

> 1. [Callicles:] For by nature the ugliest thing is also the worst: to suffer injustice; whereas it is only because of the law that it is worse to commit it [...] Unfortunately it is the weak and the masses who have created the laws [...] they say that it is unjust to wish to have more than the others. [...] For, as they are inferior, it suffices for them to have equality! (482abc) What is by nature beautiful and just, is that [...] he who wants to live his life rightly must [...] give to each desire that may come upon him its fullness of satisfactions [...] Should they who are able to enjoy without restraint all that is good pose as a master over themselves what is decreed [...] by the multitude? [...] Sensuality, license, unreserved freedom, [...] that is virtue and happiness! (491e;492c)
>
> 2. [Socrates:] But [the pleasures] that are good, are they also those that are useful [...] ? Now, pleasures as well as pains, it is those that are useful that one must choose and practice? [Thus] it is for the sake of good things [...] that we should do everything [...] Do you not agree [...] that the good is, without exception, the end of all our acts and that it is for the purpose of the good that all the rest must be done, but not the good for the purpose of the rest [...] ? Is it not therefore for the purpose of good things that one should carry out all acts, including those that are pleasant, but not the good for the purpose of the pleasant? (499de,500a)

2

For Callicles, to satisfy one's desires, assuming one can get away with it, is a clearer path to happiness than obedience to the law, which this proto-Nietzschean sees as the instrument of domination by the weak over the strong. All other things being equal, the "unjust" person who disobeys the law to promote his own satisfaction has the advantage over his obedient opposite number. But the unjust does evil, and evil is harmful, whence Socrates demonstrates that no one can knowingly be unjust. No one can intend the harmful, therefore knowingly do evil, even if the harmful is "pleasant." Any conflict on this point is not real but illusory, an error of ignorance.

Of the two arguments, it is rather Socrates' that strikes us as contrived. The question Socrates avoids is how he knows that "the good" is always the same for all. In the practical (ontic) world, the concepts of good and evil are "indexed"; what is good for me is not necessarily good for you. Indeed, if my good and your good involve the possession of an identical object--a person we both love, an honor we both covet--the two goods cannot be identical. This is the very structure of mimetic rivalry. We will not be able to avert conflict merely by pronouncing some magic word ("good," "just," or "beautiful") as we might the name of a god in a rite.

There is nothing sacred in the words themselves. Plato's new sacred is the *concept*. At the time of the *Gorgias*, the Eidos/Idea/Form has not yet been conceived. But what Plato has already discovered is that the concept of the Good, to which the Just and the Beautiful are related (and which ancient philosophy never really distinguishes from it) contains something more than the meaning of the word. The eirenic sharing of the concept that founds the identity of your good with mine is not a product of the meaning of the word "good," but of its ethical content, a notion explainable only within the framework of an originary anthropology.

Plato's doctrine of the good-as-concept, the decisive moment of the forgetting of the sacred-ontological

denounced by Heidegger, is not yet fully developed at the time of this not altogether persuasive refutation of the anti-idea of Callicles. When the latter's argument is taken up again by Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic*, the insufficiency of the old answer of the *Gorgias* motivates the displacement of the subject, in the sense of the Subject of the Good, from the individual human soul to the political collectivity. The capstone of Socrates' argument is that "no ruling authority works for his own benefit, but [...] for the benefit of him who is under his authority." (346e) This is the beginning of a necessary but incomplete return to the communal origin of the Idea, where alone the notion of a commonly possessed, conflict-deferring content makes sense.

What separates us from Plato is supposedly his "realism." But the reality of the Ideas is nothing but what we have been calling their "content." Let us forget for a moment the heaven where the Ideas with a capital "I" are supposed to dwell. Their reality has a more concrete meaning, which the lesson of the *Gorgias* can help us to uncover. A "real" idea is an idea that intervenes in reality between desiring beings. It is an apotropaic object that serves to defer potential conflict. The reality of the Idea is the substantiality that makes it capable of replacing the thing that provokes the conflict. It is because Callicles and Socrates possess in common the Idea of justice that they cannot rationally come to blows. Those who do are only the ignorant who do not possess the Idea, or rather, who are unaware that they do so.

The concept is a representation; ultimately, nothing more than a word. But the word is not a simple duplicate of the thing. The thing is unique, or, to speak more prudently: reproducible with difficulty. The word is multiple, or, let us say, reproducible with ease. Where we would have to divide the thing, we can share the totality of the word. Where, between you and me, the good-as-thing would pose a problem, the good-as-word would not; it is neither your word nor mine, but everyone's. As though a word could replace reality, the cynic will object. But it can, on the condition that the good-as-word acquire the reality that will transform it into a concept, that is, an entity of another order, which is like the word infinitely shareable but which, being substituted for the good-as-thing, stands in the path of conflictual desire.

3

The originary and the metaphysical *logos*

Plato does not seek, does not want to recognize the configuration of the originary scene of language in which alone such a substitution is conceivable. The linguistic sign comes into being to substitute for the thing that the multiplicity of appetites makes inaccessible--not forever, but for a certain time. The sign defers, this lesson we have learned well, but we forget that what it defers is in the first place the violence of the desires converging on a common object. The collective possession, division, and distribution of the thing are all deferred; the thing-totality remains only as the remembered referent of the sign. We need no psychoanalytic scenario to understand this idealization of the object as totality, to which we preferentially give the name of God.

The sign defers conflict, offers instead of the thing an imaginary substitute. One might object that this hypothetical sign is hardly the equivalent of Plato's Idea. Plato did not formulate an originary anthropology; on the contrary, his doctrine promoted the suppression of the originary anthropologies he knew in their ritual form. No doubt Plato retains, by attributing it to the concept, the essential function of the originary scene he denies: the deferral of conflict through representation. But in affirming the reality of the concept, he inverts the ontological priority of word and thing. The entire doctrine of Ideas that

derives from this affirmation and that will be elaborated beginning with the *Cratylus*--to which I shall return--maintains this inversion, which prolongs and preserves in the form of an ontology the sacred difference attached to the scenic center. This prolongation, this fetishizing of the word in its difference from the thing, is an alternative, equivalent characterization of metaphysics.

In our hypothetical originary scene, the role of language is reduced to its strict minimum: the momentary hesitation between the (chaotic) beginning and the (minimally ordered) end of an act of collective appropriation. The minimal linguistic act is the re-presentation of an already-present object by means of an ostensive sign that will preserve the memory of the object after its disappearance. The ostensive word is not yet a concept; it is the name of an object-in-situation, a phenomenon that we can no doubt better understand as the "name of God."[2] It is by means of the ostensive that we teach words to children; they subsequently learn to use these words as imperatives to make-appear objects designated in their absence, and finally to construct "complete sentences," that is, declaratives. In the declarative sentence, language achieves its mature capacity to create imaginary models on the "other scene" of representation. We may then give a preliminary definition of the concept as the word/noun understood as necessarily an element of a declarative sentence, cut off from the original act of naming. ("Noun," like "name," comes from the Latin *nomen*.) Metaphysics, by denying the existence of an utterance-form more primitive than the declarative, incarnates the refusal to think the origin of language as an event.

This metaphysical sacrifice of the elementary linguistic structures institutes "logocentrism" in the precise sense of domination by the declarative sentence or proposition, the strong meaning of the word *logos*. It is this, rather than the strategic marginalization of writing, that is the founding expulsion of Western philosophy. The ostensive exists only in situation; spoken or written, it cannot detach itself from the place in which it is uttered. The arrow on the signpost, the sign on a door of the toilet constitute an ostensive form of writing that presupposes on the part of its reader the same (virtual) copresence with the referent as the living word. The inaugural gesture of metaphysics, which makes possible analytic thought, suppresses the ostensive that attaches us to the trace of the historical presence we continue to commemorate under the name of God. The concept, the Platonic Idea, is something we all possess without having to point to it, that is, without needing to perform the ostensive sign that defers potential conflict among those who covet the same object. It is not in its role as a grammatical form that the ostensive is dangerous. What is protected against by its exclusion (and not merely from grammar books) is the renewal of its originary function of designating the sacred center of the communal circle.

4

The fundamental circular structure of ritual reveals the connection, not obvious in the abstract, between ostensive language and religion. The oft-repeated notion that philosophical logocentrism is in complicity with religion misunderstands the communal operation of the sacred. Traditional metaphysics redefines the sacred in its own terms as a "first principle," as though the universe itself were deduced from a master proposition. The *logos* of the conceptual sacred of metaphysics, whose gods, beginning with the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, have never been worshiped by anyone, is not the *logos* of the historical religions. The deferred, discursive presence that presides over metaphysics is not the real presence that the rite claims to realize. The ostensive is banished by the linguistics of the philosophers, who replace faith in the divine presence it designates by confidence in the self-presence of philosophical language.[3]

The two *logoi*, that of religion and that of metaphysics, the one that refers to originary revelation and the other that denies it, can only be reconciled in the discourse of originary anthropology. There is, however,

a fundamental parallelism between the conceptual "forgetting of Being" inaugurated by metaphysics and the new, similarly "declarative" conception of the name of the divinity that a few centuries earlier in Judea had become the point of departure for a religious revolution. Their common replacement of predeclarative linguistic structures by the declarative sentence establishes between Hebrew religion and Greek metaphysics the founding homology of Western culture.

I have proposed elsewhere an exegesis of the *ehyeh asher ehyeh* by which God names himself to Moses in Exodus 3.[4] By refusing the ostensive-imperative name by which the divinity can be called, Moses liberates his people from the sacrificial system that commands divine presence. God is the central being of the scene of representation that survives the disappearance of the central object of the originary scene; in the terms of *Originary Thinking*, he is the subsistence of the central locus of the scene remembered as a being. In Exodus, the divine being, whose concrete origin is recalled by the ritual fire of the burning bush, becomes "transcendental," detaching itself from any specific historical locus. But this detachment itself is an event that takes place in a specific historical locus. The liberation provided by revelation has the strength and the weakness of never being able to deny its historicity. The two "universal" religions born from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, remain as attached as their ancestor to a historical place of foundation.

To eliminate the ostensive is to expunge the local historicity of the deferral of collective violence by means of the sign. The originary opposition between center and periphery that founds and is founded by language is the source and model of all the great philosophical dichotomies: word and thing, form and content, Idea and copy, ontological and ontic... But if all these oppositions are already latent in the sign as such, it is only from the time of the declarative sentence that they can be thematically expressed. To understand a declarative sentence, one situates it on an "other scene" that is not a simple prolongation of the present scene but a mental scene inhabited by imaginary objects.

The Mosaic revelation distances the corporeal presence of the divinity that was formerly accessible to invocation by means of the imperative. But in contrast to metaphysics, religion cannot demand the exclusiveness of the declarative. The God whose names himself "esoterically" as a sentence (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) in Exodus 3 consents, in a second "exoteric" moment in Exodus 6, to condense this sentence into a single word/name (YHVH).[5] This inversion of the historical order of linguistic evolution is analogous to that of the grammar books, which define the imperative as a "transformation" of the declarative. But whereas the inversion of the grammars is a simple forgetting of linguistic origin, that brought about in Exodus puts linguistic form in a dialectical relationship with the divine will, for which it proposes a paradigmatic model. To the request for a (magical) name, the answer is a sentence, which is only then recondensed into a (religious) name. The God who maintains himself in the "other world" chooses to manifest himself to a man, to let himself be called by him. Our knowledge of God's choice determines the nature of our address; we are no longer commanding God but appealing to him.

5

The *Euthyphro* and philosophy's eventless ethic

Although metaphysics is a fundamentally anti-religious mode of thought, as we have observed, it has its own conception of God. It is not certain whether the metaphysical divinity was the God of Socrates but it was certainly that of Plato. Attempts have been made to associate the latter with the religious movements of his era: orphism, the Eleusinian mysteries, and the like. But from its earliest formulations, Platonic

religion is essentially delocalized.

In the *Euthyphro*, Plato-Socrates attacks the traditional conception of the sacred that leads his interlocutor to bring an accusation of murder against his own father. Euthyphro affirms that his action is pious; Socrates asks him to inform him then as to the "form" (*eîdos*, *idéa*) that makes pious things (*ta hosía*) pious. Some have gone so far as to see in this manner of formulating the question a primitive version of the doctrine of Ideas. Euthyphro attempts to define the pious as what pleases the Gods, but lets himself be tricked by Socrates into agreeing that, on the contrary, an act only pleases the gods because it is pious. In the last analysis, the pious, like all the other virtues in the Socratic dialogues, is indistinguishable from the just (*díkaion*); the consequence is to eliminate from religion the very revealed element through which it preserves humanity's originary historicity.

For anyone who takes religion seriously, it is the divine will that determines what is pious and not the reverse. The god who would be satisfied with the Platonic definition of piety is one no longer capable of being worshiped. The fact that the metaphysical God has no proper name--not even the sentence-name revealed by Moses--is an indication of this. The philosophical divinity covers over a profound contradiction: he is a person-subject possessed of a will, yet this will, like the content of the Platonic concept, never reveals itself in any specific time or place. It is by means of this construction that metaphysics conjures away the paradoxicality of its "declarative" sacred.

Plato's God is a weapon against the narrow humanism of the Sophists, which he interprets as a radical individualism, indeed, an anarchism incompatible with maintenance of the social order. For the Plato of the *Theaetetus*, he who affirms that "man is the measure of all things" would deny all values that transcend the individual. In the face of this danger, Plato relocates the foundation of the human community outside of it, but this "outside" is no longer revealed in the localized history of religious revelation. In this manner, he creates the no-man's-land that metaphysics will inhabit for over twenty centuries--that it has not yet abandoned.

The *Euthyphro* is the only Platonic dialogue in which the argument is directed not at the opinions or attitudes of the interlocutor but at a specific act, an event of ethical significance. Euthyphro accuses his father of having brought about the death of a *thête* or dependent (of Euthyphro), who suffocated when the father had had him bound and imprisoned because this dependent had himself been guilty of the murder of a slave (of the father). Socrates is surprised that the death for which Euthyphro is requesting punishment was not that of a member of his family: only this would justify so great a lack of filial respect. Thus Plato gives us to understand that the father's murder of a murderer through negligence should be left without punishment. No doubt the piety that demands this punishment is mechanical, formalistic, blind respect for tradition rather than true justice deserving of divine approval. Nonetheless, a man has perished. The traditional piety of Euthyphro recognizes in its own way, by speaking of "pollution" (*míasma*), a disequilibrium that Plato prefers not to acknowledge. In the place of the old logic of pollution, which obliged Orestes to appear before the Areopagus even though he too had only requited a murder, philosophy substitutes a logic of neutralization. In either case, we fall short of a moral judgment that views any murder as a crime against human reciprocity.

6

The *Euthyphro* presents a paradigm of the opposition between philosophy/metaphysics and sacrificial religion. Where the latter prolongs the chain of revenge by making use of the very judicial institutions that were designed to break it, the former puts an equilibrium of injustice in the place of genuine moral

reciprocity. Sacrifice consecrates the event of the murder; philosophy evacuates it. If one side finds it too easy to point the finger of accusation, the other finds it even easier to accuse no one. But the second case is not really any more eirenic than the first; the accuser finds himself accused in the place of the one whom he accuses. Not only is Euthyphro, like so many others, intellectually humiliated by Socrates; he is implicitly charged by him with a murderous design against his father.

Socrates himself, as Plato's readers will know, must answer an accusation of impiety before the archon, in whose palace his interlocutor is surprised to encounter him. To bring a lawsuit is to designate a victim, whereas, in its historical origin, metaphysics is the refusal to designate (the victim)--the refusal, at its Platonic point of departure, to participate in the sacrifice of Socrates. However, as the example of Euthyphro's father shows, to decline to bring an accusation does not prevent violence. In contrast with Judeo-Christian morality, whose refusal to designate a sacrificial victim goes together with an insistence on communal reconciliation, philosophy tacitly approves of an equilibrating violence.

Is it a simple matter of chance that in the example chosen by Plato as a counterexample to true piety, the father did not kill deliberately, or that his victim was both of inferior status and himself guilty of murder? In this manner, the original murder is punished without its perpetrator being designated as a criminal. Just as in ritual executions, where care is taken so that no individual be made "unclean" by the blood of the victim, justice has been done without any individual carrying out an overt act, or even a thought, of violence. He who would destroy this providential equilibrium is the patricidal son who accuses his father within the traditional ritual context.

Thus the judicial system of metaphysics eliminates the designation of the guilty party on analogy with the declarative proposition's elimination of the ostensive of religious revelation. The suppression of the ostensive is magically compensated by a justice, and by extension a social order, that is both effective in punishing crime and yet non-violent. The evacuation of the event--which is in principle always a murder--permits the intellectual negation of Socrates' execution in the *Phaedo*. It is the suppression of *this* event that is the anti-evenemential origin of philosophy.

The *Cratylus* and the discovery of the signified

The *Euthyphro* speaks of the *eidos* of piety, but only as a substrate for pious things, not as an Idea existing in itself. The order of composition of the dialogues will probably never be sufficiently well established to permit us to determine from historical evidence at exactly what point the doctrine of Ideas came into being; our hypothesis must consequently be based on the internal logic of Platonic thought. By this criterion, I shall follow those who locate the first appearance of the Ideas proper in the *Cratylus*.[6] Even if it is impossible to prove that this dialogue precedes the *Symposium* or the *Phaedo*, the progression from Cratylic reflection on language to the Ideas is attractively parsimonious. It is logical that, at the moment when Plato is meditating on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, he should be led to separate explicitly the concept-signified from the word-signifier that designates it.

The *Cratylus* devotes a very long digression to the fabrication of "motivated" etymologies, the real significance of which is that most of them construct, like the God of Moses, names out of declarative sentences. To name is to designate, and as in Genesis, the distribution of names is carried out by a "legislator." But Socrates finds "primitive words" too distant and obscure to reveal their object clearly. In answer to this objection, Cratylus attempts to guarantee the revelatory power of names by appealing to the sacred, proposing a Heraclitean derivation of primitive names on the basis of universal movement.

The raison-d'être of this derivation has never been satisfactorily explained. It is in fact a nascent semiotic that marks a crucial step in the dialectic leading from pre-Socratic thought to Platonic metaphysics. If names are given to things "insofar as they are borne and flowing and becoming" (411c), it is in order to permit us, since we are unable to immobilize this becoming, to observe it from a stable "Archimedian point." It is only when we possess the unchanging word "river" that we can affirm that we never put our foot in the same one twice. The Heraclitean flux generates in the sign its own antithesis. In this view of signification, the name preserves its ostensive function; it points to an ongoing worldly movement, as the just-quoted passage from 411c indicates--a remark made by Socrates himself, who informs us that he was in his youth a student of Cratylus.

But Socrates no longer accepts as univocal the Heraclitean derivation; basing himself on a few etymologies as apparently arbitrary as those which preceded them, he insists on the equal plausibility of the derivation of words on the basis of "immobility." By forgetting the implicit raison-d'être of the Cratylean-Heraclitean doctrine--the opposition between atemporal words and their temporal referents--Socrates slips from the idea that the name is made necessary by the impermanence of things to the idea that the name must "signify a movement and a translation," that is, that rather than imposing its stability on the flux of things, the name must itself be a model of the thing-in-movement that it designates.

But if *this* is the point, then it is easy enough to find examples of word/things that are "immobile." The still-ostensive name of Heraclitus thus becomes the conceptual name of Plato, which expresses or "contains" the quintessence of an action--movement or the stopping of movement--attributed to the thing by Socrates' fantastic etymology. His first example of an "immobile" word says it all: it is the word *epistémè* (knowledge), which he would derive from *hístesin epí* ("[it] stops on," "the sign that knowledge 'stops' our soul 'on' things" (437a). In order to refute the Heraclitean who claims that knowledge has a stable existence only in relation to the instability of the things to which it refers, Plato derives the very name of "knowledge" from the already-theorized action of knowledge-that-arrests-movement; like the God of Exodus, he arrives at the name only by the detour of the sentence.

The endpoint of Plato's reasoning is the demonstration that, since nothing in the words themselves could universally impose a revelation of their referents as being either in movement or in repose, our sole source of knowledge concerning the accuracy of words is the things (*ta prâgmata*) themselves. But it is precisely at the moment in which Plato abandons words for things that he discovers the fundamental relationship between the word and the thing it designates. For the deconstruction of the originary opposition between the stable word and the unstable thing does not for all that render the things of this world capable of offering to the word the solid basis that would permit it to function within a semantic system. Once the semiotics of Cratylus-Heraclitus has been refuted by a declarative conception of language, Plato finds himself obliged to present a stable correlative for language that would not only be other than things-in-movement, but *of another nature* from them. As he puts it, in order that there be knowledge, there must exist not only beautiful and good things, but something that would be "beautiful and good in itself" (*ti ... autó kalón kai agathón*, 439c).

It is thus upon the stability of the *signified* that Plato constructs his theory of knowledge. Heraclitus, in remarking that things constantly "translate" themselves, would not have been able to think that this state of flux makes them incapable of functioning as correlatives of the linguistic sign. Heraclitean ostensive

nomination depends in fact on a subjacent sacred model. The originary ostensive is not the name of an impermanent thing, but the name of permanence itself--the name of God. To rid himself of the sacred Being that lurks within the Heraclitean flux, Plato must ground the sign not upon its worldly referent but upon the signified, which is by nature in a state of extrawordly repose.[7] The impermanence of each beauty is unimportant, provided that the Beautiful remain in place. Plato is the first real theoretician of signification. Without the signified, there can be no linguistic sign; Plato was the first to understand this capital fact, the foundation of all semiotics.[8] But metaphysics is not content to be a theory of the sign, nor a fortiori a linguistics; it wants to found an ontology. The signified "beautiful" will consequently be transported beyond the region of perishable things to become the Form-Idea "the Beautiful."

8

Plato realizes that language cannot be explained on the basis of ontological monism. The word is something other than the thing, and not merely another variety of thing (an "imitation" like that of the artisan, for example). But lacking the possibility--ethical as well as intellectual--to return this dualism to its anthropological source, he fetishizes it and consequently degrades it. To affirm that the Ideas alone are real is not to distinguish them absolutely from worldly things, but on the contrary, to assimilate the two. As soon as one imagines a "heaven" inhabited by the Ideas, one makes them play the same role in the other world as things play in this one, just as they do in the myth of the Cave. The other world is in fact the "other scene," the scene of representation, on which only signs appear.

What then is the relationship between the world of Ideas and the other world of souls, that imaginary locus consecrated by religion, described at length in the *Phaedo*? Let us not be too hasty to naturalize the religious heaven as an instrument of priestly manipulation of the credulous or as the fantastic wish-fulfillment of some inborn desire for immortality. Its model is clearly, as Plato reveals, the (signified of the) sign. But Plato fixes this model in a dualistic ontology by suppressing the originary link between signifier and referent, a connection the syntactic trace of which is precisely the ostensive.

So long as the sign serves as a means for the revelation of the central object of desire, the other world of permanent Being will appear to be inhabited by that object rather than by the sign itself. The originary model of immortality is that of the sacred center of the scene of representation. To use language is to institute a relationship that is from the beginning formal and consequently liberated from the force of time. Those who would put a transcendent Language in the place of the Christian or Hegelian *logos* forget that language *is* not, but that it is constructed, and that the point of departure for this construction cannot well be the declarative sentence that crowns it. No doubt some of the responsibility for this lapse is attributable to Saussure's emphasis on signification at the expense of syntactic structure. But it is more profoundly the responsibility of metaphysics itself, whose disillusioned adepts believe even today that it must magically furnish them with the entire set of tools needed for its own deconstruction.

It is the formality of the linguistic signification-relation that engenders the world of the Forms. Immortality in this realm is not a beatific prolongation of lived time into eternity, but an extratemporal form of being. Although he did not understand the other world to be originarily that of linguistic signification, Plato is the first to have realized that it is inhabited by beings accessible solely through meditation on the sign--beings that we call in a formalist vocabulary "signifieds," but that merit their Hegelian name of *Begriff*, concept, for they "grasp" and preserve an originary content.

The concept is born when the formal immortality of signification becomes separated from its origin in ostensive designation. We proceed from immortal gods to immortal Ideas, in such a manner that when

the gods themselves are invoked in the mythical passages of Plato, they are creatures rather than creators of language. The judges of the myth of Er at the end of the *Gorgias* are fictions that illustrate the idea of Justice, not gods who incarnate it. Their distributions of compensatory pleasures and pains reveal by the "logic of the supplement" the inefficacy of Socratic morality; the tyrant Archelaos suffers in the underworld in order to embody a moral truth that cannot be exemplified on earth.

Liberation from metaphysics?

Now that we have seen by what dubious stratagems Plato imposes order on the seething Heraclitean universe, we can well understand the impatience of those who would liberate us from the grasp of metaphysics. The late Jean-Marie Benoist, in his *Tyrannie du logos* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1975), sets out the postmodern indictment. Socrates has only freed our language from Sophist "technocracy" in order to enslave us to a repressive *logos*. What a wonderful opportunity was lost for a linguistics of the signifier, for a community founded on the pleasure principle... The doctrine of the always-already remains haunted by a myth of origin, always the same: the myth of difference and desire "polymorphous and perverse"--the dream, inherited from modernism, of a Being anterior to language. It bears the influence of the Lacanian schema in which language imposes a paternal order on the fragmentary turbulence of "imaginary" desire.[9] However, in the model of historical evolution that Benoist follows, it is not the unmentioned origin of language, but that of metaphysics which institutes repression. This permits him to regret the repressive domination of metaphysics without admitting that its *logos* is human language itself.

9

The originary-without-an-origin language of deconstructive thought is a free play of the signifier that, by returning us to the material reality of the sign, puts signification and therefore metaphysics into question. Heidegger could conceive of a "thinking of Being" that would stand opposed to metaphysics as the ostensive is to the declarative, that would designate Being itself rather than creating fictive models of it taken from the realm of the ontic. The disappearance of this pre-Socratic paradise in the postmodern era has relegated ostensivity to the religious domain in which it originated, and where no philosopher is likely to seek it out. As a consequence, Benoist has recourse to psychoanalysis as postmodernity's official originary anthropology--an anthropology in which the substitution of ontogenesis for phylogenesis permits the evacuation of the ethical. But *chassez le religieux, il revient au galop*: what psychoanalytic authority supplies is nothing other than a myth of origin. Within the horizon established by the author's concluding reference to Heraclitus, the reign of the mythical is all the less contested for being entirely unavowed.[10]

It is time to return *la dépense* to the ritual context where Georges Bataille found it.[11] Benoist's summary reference to the potlatch reflects a typical postmodern failure to understand--as Bataille did in his lucid moments--that this marvelous flux, this outpouring of energy beyond all reason, is born not in the delicious polymorphism of individual desire but in the ritual "cruelty" (to use Artaud's term) of societies far removed from our intellectual utopias. The pre-Socratic chaos expelled by metaphysics is the decadence of a ritual order subject to a control far more rigid than latter-day metaphysics imagines. When Plato attempts to constrain the tyrannical excesses of individual desire, it is to avert crisis in a barely post-ritual society, not to put a phallocratic brake on the pristine appetites of originary humanity. Originary humanity already knows language and order in their most rigid sense; our dream of anarchy is

conceivable only on this basis.

The metaphysical conception of language is defined by the expulsion of the elementary linguistic forms. But Plato does not expel the ostensive as such because he does not theorize it as such. Had he been able to theorize it, he would not have had to expel it. Plato fears the immediacy of language that itself acts on the world. The Sophists are dangerous because their rhetoric restores to language its originary power of creating meaning, but in a context where the speaker is no longer subject to the transcendent communal order incarnated in ritual. The stability of the Ideas that maintain the social order is founded on a deeper, albeit still mystified vision of the originary event and of the scene of representation that preserves it.

The formal logic of signification justifies the founding gesture of metaphysics. The concept is indeed immortal because it does not belong to the real world, whatever its point of entry into human language. But if the nominalized virtues of the early dialogues and the Ideas themselves of the later ones possessed only the formal immortality of the sign-in-general, they would fail to meet the ethical requirements that Platonic thought imposes on them. In attempting to find in language the basis of a conflict-free community, Plato creates a form of thought that effaces the historical origin of language as the human community's means to defer conflict. In order for the concept to be immortal, it must be without origin and therefore without history. On the contrary, the real immortality of the concept is in its evocation of the scenic sharing of the sign in the originary event as a transtemporal guarantee of communal peace.

10

Notes

1. The reader will recall that in *Originary Thinking*, I defined metaphysics as the way of thinking founded on the principle that the declarative sentence--the "proposition"--is the fundamental linguistic form.(back)

2. Our intuitive comprehension of this term is the simplest indication of the persistence of our attachment to the originary scene. We could not conceive the existence of God, even in order to deny it, without basing our conception on an experience of the sacred, an experience of which the name-of-God is the crystallization. (For further elaboration of this idea, see *Science and Faith* and particularly *Originary Thinking*, Chapter 2, "The Anthropological Idea of God.") In contrast, the construction of a concept of God that needs no name is the task of metaphysics.(back)

3. As the original target of deconstruction, the phenomenological notion of the "self-presence" of speech refers to the speaker's presumed relation to his utterance rather than to its specificity; for all the notion of "self-presence" tells us, he could be engaged in glossolalia. Only the context of philosophical discourse suggests that the referent of the utterance is situated on the "other scene" of the declarative. Where is self-presence in, for example, an imperative utterance that specifically designates what is experienced-as-absent? Only in the fact that (assuming I am not deaf) I hear myself speak, that is, my heard speech supplies me with feedback while I speak, not in anything relating to the specifics of human language. Only in the case of the metaphysical proposition, entirely contained within the imaginary scene of representation, can the *content* of the utterance be characterized either as absolutely present (to itself) or as absolutely absent (to the empirical world).(back)

4. See *Science and Faith*, Chapter 3.(back)

5. As I have pointed out elsewhere (see "The Unique Source of Religion and Morality," *Anthropoetics* I, no. 1 (June 1995; URL: http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/) and *Contagion* 3 (Spring 1996): 51-65, in the original revelation in Exodus 3:14, God already distinguishes between the full sentence by which he names himself to Moses and his instruction to tell the people "I am/will be (*ehyeh*) has sent me to you."(back)

6. See Henry Teloh, *The Development of Plato's Metaphysics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981): "The date of composition of the *Cratylus*, unfortunately, is in dispute. I do believe, however, that separate Forms appear at the end of the dialogue (439c-440d), but in a very rough and rudimentary manner, which indicates that Plato has just started to think about them" (p. 83). The fact that Teloh's arguments are taken from the metaphysical tradition only adds strength to my own very different ones. On another point, it can hardly be a simple coincidence that the name of Euthyphro reappears in the *Cratylus* (and nowhere else in Plato), in an ironically marked fashion: "that [this onomastic "science"] fell upon me, the one whom I consider responsible for this, Hermogenes, is above all Euthyphro..." (396d). Is this not a sign of the progression of Plato's reflection on the *eidos*? It is Euthyphro who is said to have inspired Socrates with his divine etymologies; we shall see that it is precisely these which lead the Platonic Socrates from Heraclitean Cratylism to the notion of the Idea-signified.(back)

11

7. In contrast, Plato is familiar enough with the plurality of "barbarian" languages to recognize the instability of the *signifier*; it is precisely for this reason that he denies the usefulness of the empirical search for "primitive" names.(back)

8. In contrast, Parmenides, the thinker of the One, of absolute permanence, is not a semiotician. The dialogue that bears his name and which is faithful to what we know of his thought shows that the One, far from being, like the Platonic Idea-signified, a fixed point between the contrary mobilities of signifier and referent, is as mobile as the world of Heraclitus. The word "One" designates an absolute totality that is unnameable--"One" is not a name but an attribute--and indeed, like the "set of all sets," properly inconceivable. As such it stands at the moment just prior to the emergence of metaphysics at which the sacred-ostensive component of Being has not yet been replaced by the abstract presence of the Ideas.(back)

9. But Lacan himself has no illusions concerning the freedom of the imaginary, which he describes on the contrary as enslaved to the desire of the Other.(back)

10. After the famous fragment 60: "War is the father, the king of all things..." the last Heraclitean passage Benoist quotes is: "Denizens of the night: magicians, bacchants, lenai, myths; one is initiated sacrilegiously into the mysteries practiced among men." He then concludes, "Voici venir encore ces ombres et ces masques, ces figures de mauvais augure que l'on cache..." [Here they come again, those shadows and those masks, those hidden figures of evil portent...] (p. 181). Benoist would have done well to read Girard's remark on Heraclitus in *La violence et le sacr*,, "N'est-ce pas la genèse même du mythe, l'engendrement des dieux et de la différence sous l'action de la violence [...] qui se trouve résumé dans le fragment 60?" [Is it not the very genesis of myth, the creation of the gods and of difference through the action of violence ... that is summed up in Fragment 60?] (p. 129).(back)

11. See especially Bataille's *La part maudite* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).(back)

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Anthropoetics II, 2 Benchmarks

Matt Schneider's study, our first illustrated article, was written especially for this issue. **Richard van Oort**'s was adapted from an earlier paper on speech-act theory. **Markus Müller**'s article develops the central idea of his doctoral dissertation. **Eric Gans**'s text is another chapter from his forthcoming (Stanford) book, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*, scheduled to appear in March 1997.

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Return to *Anthropoetics* home page | Return to *Anthropoetics II, 2*

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