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### Special Section on Wolfgang Iser

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# **The Significance of Fictionalizing**

**A lecture for the Learned Societies Luncheon, given at Irvine on  
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If a literary text does something to its readers, it also simultaneously tells us something about them. Thus literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, inclinations, and eventually our overall makeup. The question arises as to why we may need this particular medium, especially in view of the fact that literature as a medium is put on a par with other media, and the ever-increasing role that these play in our civilization shows the degree to which literature has lost its significance as the epitome of culture. The more comprehensively a medium fulfills its sociocultural function, the more it is taken for granted, as literature once used to be. It did indeed fulfill several such functions, ranging from entertainment through information and documentation to pastime, but these have now been distributed among many independent institutions that not only compete fiercely with literature but also deprive it of its formerly all-encompassing function. Does literature still have anything to offer that the competing media are unable to provide?

I shall try to address this question by focusing on the fictionality of literature, first by detailing how to conceive of fictionalizing, and second by suggesting why we as human beings may need this form of make-believe.

\* \* \*

Most people associate the term fiction with the story-telling branch of literature, but in its other guise it is also what Dr Johnson called "a falsehood; a lye" (1755). The equivocalness of the word is very revealing, for each meaning sheds light on the other. Both meanings entail similar processes, which we might term 'overstepping' what is: the lie oversteps the truth, and the literary work oversteps the real world which it incorporates. It is therefore not surprising that literary fictions were so often branded as lies, since they talk of what does not exist, even though they present its nonreality as if it did exist.

Plato's complaint that poets lie met its first strong opposition in the Renaissance, when Sir Philip Sidney rejoined that "the Poet...nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth,"<sup>(1)</sup> since he does not talk of what is, but of what ought to be, and this form of overstepping is quite different from lying. Fiction and fictionalizing entail a duality, the liar must conceal the truth, but the truth is potentially present in the mask disguising it. In literary fictions, existing worlds are overstepped, and although they are individually still recognizable, they are set in a context that defamiliarizes them. Thus both lie and

literature contain two worlds: the lie incorporates the truth and the purpose for which it must be concealed; literary fictions incorporate an identifiable reality that is subjected to an unforeseeable refashioning. And when we describe fictionalizing as an act of overstepping, we must bear in mind that the reality overstepped is not left behind: it remains present, thereby imbuing fiction with a duality that may be exploited for different purposes. In what is to follow, we shall focus on fictionalizing as a means of actualizing the possible in order to address the question why human beings, in spite of their awareness that literature is make-believe, seem to stand in need of fictions.

Even if nowadays literary fictions are no longer charged with lying, they are still stigmatized as being unreal, regardless of the vital role fictions play in our everyday lives. In his book *Ways of Worldmaking*<sup>(2)</sup>, Nelson Goodman shows that we do not live in one reality but in many, and each of these realities is the result of a processing which can never be traced back to "something stolid underneath."<sup>(3)</sup> There is no single underlying world, but instead we create new worlds out of old ones in a process which Goodman describes as "fact from fiction."<sup>(4)</sup> Fictions, then, are not the unreal side of reality, let alone the opposite of reality, which our 'tacit knowledge' still takes them to be; they are, rather, conditions that enable the production of worlds whose reality, in turn, is not to be doubted.

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Such ideas were first articulated by Sir Francis Bacon, who argues that fictions "give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind ... in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it."<sup>(5)</sup> This is not quite the same as Goodman's ways of worldmaking, but it shows how we can gain access to the inaccessible by inventing possibilities. It is a view that has survived down the ages, and four hundred years later Marshall McLuhan described the "art of fiction" as an extension of man.<sup>(6)</sup>

This may be one of the reasons why we cannot talk of fiction as such, for it can only be described by way of its functions, that is, the manifestations of its use and the products resulting from it. This is evident even to cursory observation: in epistemology we find fictions as presuppositions; in science they are hypotheses; fictions provide the foundations for world-pictures; and the assumptions that guide our actions are fictions as well. In each of these cases, fiction has a different task to perform: with epistemological positing, it is a premise; with the hypothesis, it is a test; with world-pictures, it is a dogma whose fictional nature must remain concealed if the foundation is not to be impaired; and with our actions, it is anticipation. Since fictions have such manifold applications, we might well ask what they appear to be like, and what they reveal in literature.

Undoubtedly, the literary text is permeated by a vast range of identifiable items selected from social and other extratextual realities. The mere importation of such realities into the text - even though they are not being represented in the text for their own sake - does not ipso facto make them fictive. Instead, the text's apparent reproduction of items from the world outside serves to highlight purposes, intentions, and aims that are decidedly not part of the realities reproduced. Hence they appear in the text as a product of a fictionalizing act, which converts the realities concerned into a sign for something other than themselves.

As the creation of an author, the literary text evidences a particular attitude through which the author directs himself or herself to the world. Therefore each text makes inroads into extratextual fields of reference and, by disrupting them, creates an eventful disorder. In consequence, both structure and semantics of these fields are subject to certain deformations. Each one is reshuffled in the text and takes on a new form, a form that nevertheless includes, and indeed depends on, the very function this field has

within the structure of the given world. This function now becomes virtual and provides the background against which the operation of restructuring may stand out in relief, featuring the intention underlying the apparent deformation. Furthermore, the ensuing tension indicates that the referential world which has been overstepped is still present in the text. Every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text.

A complement to the act of selection is the act of combination, which is also an act of fictionalizing, marked by the same basic mode of operation: the crossing of boundaries. Here the boundaries that are crossed are intratextual, ranging from lexical meanings to the constellation of characters. On the lexical level this is to be seen, for instance, with neologisms such as Joyce's coining of the term *benefiction*, which combines the words benefaction, benediction, and fiction. The lexical meaning of a particular word is faded out and a new meaning faded in, without the loss of the original meaning. This establishes a figure-and-ground relationship, allowing both the separation of the individual elements and a continuous switching of the perspective between them. In accordance with whichever reference forms the foreground or background, the semantic weighting will be shifted.

Another level of relating is to be seen in the organization of specific semantic demarcations within the text. These give rise to intratextual fields of reference, which provide an occasion for the hero of a novel, for instance, to step over internally marked boundaries. Such boundary-crossing is a subject-creating event.<sup>(7)</sup> It is "revolutionary" insofar as it infringes on an intratextual organization.

The various clusters, whether they be words with outstripped meanings or semantic demarcations transgressed by the characters in a narrative, are inseparably linked; they inscribe themselves into one another, every word becomes dialogic, and every intra-textual semantic field is doubled by another. Through this double-voiced discourse every utterance carries something else in its wake, and thus the acts of combination unfold a play space between them in which the present is always doubled by the absent, frequently redistributing the weight by making the present totally subservient to the absent: What is said ceases to mean itself, so that what is not said can thus gain presence. There is no third dimension in the text that would allow to relate precisely what is related to what; instead, the double meaning of words as well as the elements selected from outside the text and now yoked together in an unfamiliar way are related through the different influences they have upon one another.

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Fictions also play vital roles in the activities of cognition and behavior, as in the founding of institutions, societies, and world-pictures. Unlike such non-literary fictions, the literary text reveals its own fictionality. Because of this, its function must be radically different from that of related activities that mask their fictional nature. The masking, of course, need not necessarily occur with the intention to deceive; it occurs because the fiction is meant to provide an explanation, or even a foundation, and would not do so if its fictive nature were to be exposed. The concealment of fictionality endows an explanation with an appearance of reality, which is vital, because fiction - as explanation - functions as the constitutive basis of this reality.

When a fiction signals its own fictionality - for which of course literary genres are the most obvious and durable signs - it necessitates an attitude different from that adopted toward fictions hiding their fictionality. The incorporated 'real' world is, so to speak, put in brackets, simultaneously indicating that it is to be viewed as if it were a world, a world, however, that has no empirical existence, and thus is only to be taken as if it were a given world. In the self-disclosure of its fictionality, an important feature of the

fictional text comes to the fore: it places the world organized in the text under the sign of the 'as if'. Thus readers are signaled that they must bracket off their natural attitudes toward what they are reading. But this does not mean forgetting or transcending those natural attitudes, which cannot be abandoned. Instead, they figure as a virtualized background, which as a latent instance of comparison, or at least as a testing ground, is essential if the textual world is to be digested. Thus the bracketing-off process splits the reader's attitude into one that is simultaneously natural and artificial. The natural attitude loses its validity, so that the new one may develop, but the new one would not achieve stability if it could not be played off against the old one.

Thus the purpose of the self-disclosing fiction comes to light. If the world represented in the literary text is not meant to denote a given world, and hence is turned into an analogue for figuring something, it serves two different purposes at once. The reaction provoked by the represented world could be directed toward conceiving what the textual world is meant to 'figure forth.' The analogue, however, could simultaneously direct the reaction to the empirical world from which the textual world was drawn, allowing this very world to be perceived from a vantage point that has never been part of it. In this case the reverse side of things will come into view. The duality of the analogue will never exclude either of the two possibilities; in fact, they appear to interpenetrate, making conceivable what would otherwise remain hidden.

All the acts of fictionalizing that can be distinguished within the fictional text are acts of boundary-crossing. Selection transgresses the limits of extratextual systems as well as the boundaries of the text itself by pointing to the referential fields that link the text to what is beyond the page. Combination transgresses the semantic demarcations established by the text, ranging from the derestriction of lexical meanings to the hero's infringement on strictly enforced borderlines. Finally, the 'as-if' construction discloses the fictionality of fiction, thus transgressing the represented world set up by the acts of selection and combination, thereby indicating that it is to be used for an un verbalized, though overarching, purpose. The self-disclosure has a twofold significance. First, it shows that fiction can be known as fiction. Second, it shows that the represented world is only to be conceived as if it were a world in order that it should be taken to figure something other than itself.

Ultimately, the text brings about one more boundary-crossing that occurs within the reader's experience: it stimulates attitudes toward an unreal world, the unfolding of which leads to the temporary displacement of the reader's own reality. As the acts of fictionalizing are geared to one another and have a clearly punctuated sequence, their different types of boundary-crossing ensure assimilation of a transformed world that issues from them.

The acts of fictionalizing can be clearly distinguished by the different gestalt each of them brings about: selection results in revealing the intentionality of the author; combination results in bringing about unfamiliar relationships of the items selected within the text; and self-disclosure results in bracketing the world represented, thereby converting it into a sign for something else, and simultaneously suspending the reader's natural attitude. All these cases are "facts from fiction."

Furthermore, the various acts of fictionalizing carry with them whatever has been outstripped, and the resultant doubleness might therefore be defined as the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive. All the fictionalizing acts discussed are marked by this doubleness. Selection opens up an area between fields of reference and their distortion in the text; combination opens up another between interacting textual segments; and the 'as if' opens up another between an empirical world and its transposition into an

analogue for what remains unsaid though meant by the text. Thus the formula of fictionality as the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive allows for describing the structure of the fictional component of literature. It gives rise to a dynamic oscillation resulting in a constant interpenetration of things which are set off from one another without ever losing their difference. The tension ensuing from the attempt to resolve this ineradicable difference creates an aesthetic potential which, as a source of meaning, can never be substituted by anything else. This does not imply that the fictional component of literature is the actual work of art. What it does imply, however, is that the fictional component makes the work of art possible.

\* \* \*

4

Now we have to take a look what this doubling structure may imply, and, better still, what it might indicate. As a lead for addressing this issue, we might consider a passage in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by the Czech writer Milan Kundera, who caused a stir with this particular piece of literature before European Communism collapsed.

"Staring impotently across the courtyard, at a loss for what to do; hearing the pertinacious rumbling of one's own stomach during a moment of love; betraying, yet lacking the will to abandon the glamorous path of betrayal; raising one's fist with the crowds in the Grand March; displaying one's wit before hidden microphones - I have known all these situations, I have experienced them myself, yet none of them has given rise to the person my curriculum vitae and I represent. The characters in my novels are my unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border ( the border beyond which my own 'I' ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become."<sup>(8)</sup>

The possibilities Kundera speaks of lie beyond what is, even though they could not exist without what there is. This duality is brought into focus through writing, which is motivated by the desire to overstep the reality surrounding the novelist. Therefore he does not write about what there is, and this overstepping is related to a dimension that retains its equivocalness, for it depends on what is, yet cannot be derived from what there is.

On the one hand the writer's reality fades into a range of its own possibilities, and on the other these possibilities overstep what is and thus invalidate it. But this penumbra of possibilities could not have come into being if the world, to which it forms the horizon, had been left behind. Instead, they begin to uncover what hitherto had remained concealed in the very world now refracted in the mirror of possibilities, thus exposing it as a trap.

In the novel, then, the real and the possible coexist, for it is only the author's selection from and textual representation of the real world that can create a matrix for the possible to emerge, whose ephemeral character would remain shapeless if it were not the transformation of something already existing. But it would also remain meaningless if it did not serve to bring out the hidden areas of given realities. Having both the real and the possible and yet, at the same time, maintaining the difference between them - this is a process denied us in real life; it can only be staged in the form of the 'as if'. Otherwise, whoever is caught up in reality, cannot experience possibility, and vice versa.

In what sense, though, is our world a "trap," and what compels us to overstep the boundaries? All fictionalizing authors do this, and so, too, do readers of literature who go on reading despite their awareness of the fictionality of the text. The fact that we seem to need this 'ecstatic' state of being beside, outside, and beyond ourselves, caught up in and yet detached from our own reality, derives from our inability to be present to ourselves. The ground out of which we are remains unavailable to us. Samuel Beckett's Malone says: "Live or invent"<sup>(9)</sup>, for as we do not know what it is to live, we must invent what eludes penetration. There is a similar dictum, equally pithy, by Helmuth Plessner, who corroborates Beckett from a rather different angle, that of social anthropology: "I am, but I do not have myself".<sup>(10)</sup> "Have" means knowing what it is to be, which would require a transcendental stance in order to grasp the self-evident certainty of our existence with all its implications, significance and, indeed, meaning. If we wish to have what remains impenetrable, we are driven beyond ourselves; and as we can never be both ourselves and the transcendental stance to and of ourselves necessary to predicate what it means to be, we resort to fictionalizing. Beckett gave voice to what Plessner had posed as a problem: that self-fashioning is the answer to our inaccessibility to ourselves. Fictionalizing begins where knowledge leaves off, and this dividing line turns out to be the fountainhead of fiction by means of which we extend ourselves beyond ourselves.

The anthropological significance of fictionalizing becomes unmistakable in relation to the many unknowable realities permeating human life. Beginning and end are perhaps the most all-pervading realities of this kind. This means no less than that the cardinal points of our existence defy cognitive or even experiential penetration. The Greek physician Alkmaeon is believed to have earned Aristotle's approval when saying that human beings must die because they are not in the position to link up beginning and end.<sup>(11)</sup> If death is indeed the result of this impossibility, it is scarcely surprising that it should give rise to ideas that might lead to its abolition. These ideas would entail concocting possibilities in order to do away with what resists penetration, thus linking up ineluctable beginnings and endings and thereby creating a framework within which we might learn what it means to be caught up in life. The unending proliferation of such possibilities points to the fact that there are no means of authentication for the links provided. Instead, the fashioning of the unknowable will be determined to a large extent by historically prevailing needs. If fictionalizing transgresses those boundaries beyond which unrecognizable realities exist, then the very possibilities concocted for the repair of this deficiency, caught between our unknowable beginning and ending, become indicative of what is withheld, inaccessible, and unavailable. In this respect, fictionalizing turns out to be a measuring rod for gauging the historically conditioned changeability of deeply entrenched human desires.

5

If the borderlines of knowledge give rise to fictionalizing activity, we might perceive an economy principle at work: namely, what can be known need not to be staged again, and so fictionality always subsidizes the unknowable. This becomes strikingly obvious when human beings, in contradistinction to the inaccessibility to beginnings and endings, are in full possession of what is or of what they are in. This applies to all evidential experiences of life, which, characterized by instantaneous certainty, embody the exact opposite of inaccessibility.

Evidential experiences are in the nature of an epiphany.

Love is probably the most intense of these experiences, and it is also the central topic of staging in literature. It is far from being excluded from experience, but it is excluded from knowledge, because

there is no knowledge of what evidential experience actually is, or because evidence seems to make all knowledge redundant. Evidential experiences evince indubitability, which obviously tempts us to start asking questions. Is this simply because we would like knowledge of what is guaranteed by other certainties? Jerome Bruner provided an answer to this question, when remarking in a different context: "For the object of understanding human events is to sense the alternativeness of human possibility. And so there will be no end to interpretation."<sup>(12)</sup> If so, then the staging of evidential experiences in literature is concerned with laying out alternatives for instantaneous certainty. Such a display, however, would seem to be without limits, since with evidential experiences one cannot separate the matter experienced from the appearance. This makes the alternatives endlessly proliferating, as is proved by the limitless possibilities of staged love in literature. Evidential experience is almost like an assault; it happens to us, and we are inside it. But the experience awakens in us a desire to look at what has happened to us, and this is when the evidence explodes into alternatives. These alternatives cannot make themselves independent; they remain linked to the evidential experience to which we want to gain access.

But this means that instantaneous certainties trigger the need for staging in exactly the same way as the cardinal mysteries. Now, however, we can see the decentered position of the human being, i.e. to be and not to have oneself, in a somewhat different light. Not being present to oneself is now only one of the spurs to staging, and in the visualization of certainty it springs from the opposite impulse of wishing to face oneself. However, if certainty cannot be understood as compensation for unavailabilities, this asymmetry reflects a craving for alternatives even to those experiences which provide immediate certainty.

This is the point at which literary fictions diverge from the fictions of our ordinary world. The latter are assumptions, hypotheses, presuppositions and, more often than not, the basis of world views, and may be said to complement reality. Frank Kermode calls them "concord fictions"<sup>(13)</sup> because they close off something which by its very nature is open. Fictionalizing in literature, however, appears to have a different aim. To transgress otherwise inaccessible realities (beginning, end, and evidential experiences) can only come to fruition by staging what is withheld. This enactment is propelled by the drive to reach beyond oneself, yet not in order to transcend oneself, but to become available to oneself. If such a move arises out of a need for compensation, then this very need remains basically unfulfilled in literary fictions. For the latter are always accompanied by convention-governed signs that signalize the 'as if'-nature of all the possibilities they adumbrate. Consequently, such a staged compensation for what is missing in reality never conceals the fact that in the final analysis it is nothing but make-believe, and so ultimately all the possibilities opened up must be lacking in authenticity. What is remarkable, though, is the fact that our awareness of this inauthenticity does not stop us from continuing to fictionalize.

Why is that so, and why are we still fascinated by fictionality, whose self-disclosure reveals any hoped-for compensation as pure semblance? What accounts for the potency of semblance is the following:

- (1) None of the possibilities concocted can be representative, for each one is nothing but a kaleidoscopic refraction of what it mirrors and is therefore potentially infinitely variable. Thus semblance allows for a limitless fashioning of those realities that are sealed off from cognitive penetration.
- (2) The possibilities concocted never hide or bridge the rift between themselves and the unfathomable realities. Thus semblance invalidates all forms of reconciliation.

(3) Finally, the rift can be acted out in an infinite number of ways. Thus semblance lifts all restrictions on the modes according to which that play space may be utilized.

The semblance, however, gives vivid presence to intangible states of affairs so that they may penetrate into the conscious mind as if they were an object of perception. What can never become present, and what eludes cognition and knowledge and is beyond experience, can enter consciousness only through feigned representation, for consciousness has no barrier - as Freud has remarked - against the perceptible and no defense against the imaginable. Consequently, ideas can be brought forth in consciousness from an as yet unknown state of affairs, indicating that the presence of the latter does not depend on any preceding experience. - By the way, something similar may be said of the dream. Here, too, the dream thoughts are staged as they push something through into consciousness that is not identical to themselves.

Let us sum up by asking what the fictionalizing of literature reveals of the human makeup. If literature permits limitless patterning of human nature, we may infer that what we call human nature is rather a featureless plasticity that lends itself to a continual culture-bound repatterning. It furthermore indicates the inveterate urge of human beings to become present to themselves; this urge, however, will never issue into a definitive shape, because self-grasping arises out of overstepping limitations. Literature fans out human plasticity into a panoply of shapes, each of which is an enactment of self-confrontation. As a medium, it can only show all determinacy to be illusory. It even incorporates into itself the inauthenticity of all the human patterning it features, since this is the only way it can give presence to the protean character of what it is mediating. Perhaps this is the truth through which literature counters the awareness that it is an illusion, thereby resisting dismissal as mere deception.

Moreover, literature reveals that we are the possibilities of ourselves. But since we are the originators of these possibilities, we cannot actually be them - we are left dangling in-between what we have produced. To unfold ourselves as possibilities of ourselves and - instead of consuming them to meet the pragmatic demands of everyday life - displaying them for what they are in a medium created for such an exposure, literary fictions reveal a deeply entrenched disposition of the human makeup. What might this be? The following answers as to the necessity of fictionalizing suggest themselves: we can only be present to ourselves in the mirror of our own possibilities; or, as a monad in the Leibnitzian sense, we are determined by bearing all imaginable possibilities within ourselves; or we can only cope with the openedness of the world by means of the possibilities we derive from ourselves and project onto the world; or we are the meeting point of the manifold roles we are able to assume, in order to grasp what we make ourselves into. As none of the roles into which we can transform ourselves is representative of what is possible, humankind is driven to invent itself ever anew. If fictionalizing provides humankind with unlimited possibilities of self-extension, it also exposes the inherent deficiency of human beings - our fundamental inaccessibility to ourselves; owing to this gap within ourselves, we are bound to become creative.

But in the final analysis fictionalizing may not be equated with any of these alternative manifestations. Instead, it spotlights that the in-between state arising as an offshoot of boundary-crossing contains boundless options for human self-fashioning. Fictionalizing, then, may be considered as opening a play space between all the alternatives enumerated, thus setting off free play which militates against all determinations as untenable restrictions. In this sense, fictionalizing offers an answer to the problem which the Greek physician, Alkmaeon, regarded as insoluble: linking beginning and end together in order

to create one last possibility through which the end, even if it cannot be overstepped, may at least be illusively postponed. Henry James once said: "The success of a work of art ... may be measured by the degree to which it produces a certain illusion; that illusion makes it appear to us for the time that we have lived another life - that we have had a miraculous enlargement of our experience."<sup>(14)</sup>

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## Notes

1. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesie, The Prose Works* III, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge, 1962), p. 29.[\(back\)](#)
2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, U.K. 1978).[\(back\)](#)
3. Ibid., pp. 6 and 96.[\(back\)](#)
4. Ibid., pp. 102-107.[\(back\)](#)
5. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Thomas Case (London, 1974), p. 96.[\(back\)](#)
6. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York 1964), pp. 42, 66, 107, 235, 237 and 242.[\(back\)](#)
7. See Jurij M. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (Michigan Slavic Contributions 7), trans. Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor, 1977), p. 234.[\(back\)](#)
8. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1987), p. 221.[\(back\)](#)
9. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (New York, 1956), p. 18.[\(back\)](#)
10. Helmuth Plessner, "Die anthropologische Dimension der Geschichtlichkeit", in *Sozialer Wandel. Zivilisation und Fortschritt als Kategorien der soziologischen Theorie*, ed. Hans Peter Dreitzel (Neuwied, 1972), p. 160.[\(back\)](#)
11. Aristotle, *Problemata, Works* VII, ed. E. S. Forster (Oxford, 1927), p. 916a.[\(back\)](#)
12. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 53.[\(back\)](#)
13. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967), pp. 62-64.[\(back\)](#)
14. Henry James, *Theory of Fiction*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1972), p. 93.[\(back\)](#)

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# **The Use of Fiction in Literary and Generative Anthropology: An Interview with Wolfgang Iser**

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This interview took place in February 1998 at the University of California, Irvine. What follows is a collaboratively edited version of the original interview.

**RvO:** Professor Iser, it's been twenty years now since the publication in English of your very successful book *The Act of Reading*. In that book, you develop a theory of aesthetic response, which you define as a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction. The result was, as you put it, a "phenomenology" of reading. More recently, in your latest book, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, you explore the anthropological consequences of such a phenomenological approach. That is, you investigate not only the interaction between text and reader but the broader anthropological implications of fictionality in general. Perhaps you could begin by saying a few words about how your own thinking has evolved and how you have come to be interested in what you call "literary anthropology."

**WI:** Reader-response criticism needed an underpinning because it was concerned with text processing, that is, the way in which readers relate to texts. Consequently, a psychological aspect was involved, which I tried to develop at the time along the lines of Gestalt psychology. Reading as text processing also means -- and this was an implication which may not have come sufficiently to the fore -- finding out something about the human makeup: namely, the way in which the letters we perceive translate into a stream of imagery in our minds. Therefore reader-response criticism needed further exploration in order to find out something about human dispositions by means of literature.

**RvO:** You refer to Gestalt psychology. This would imply a shift toward the ontogenetic? A shift away from the literary text to the reality of the reader?

**WI:** No, I don't think so. The fact that we are conscious of literature as a form of make-believe means that in assessing it we do not abide by what one might call a Cartesian principle, namely, that what we have seen through as make-believe should be discarded. However, we don't discard it, although we know it to be an illusion. Obviously there seems to be a need for this type of fictionality. And as this is the case, we could use fiction as an exploratory instrument in order to investigate this human urge. This,

however, is not an ontological approach.

**RvO:** In your essay, "The Significance of Fictionalizing" (which appears in this issue of *Anthropoetics*), you quote approvingly Samuel Beckett's Malone, who says "Live or invent." You suggest that the fictionalizing impulse arises from our inability to be present to ourselves. We exist and yet we simultaneously desire to "have" ourselves. So we fictionalize. I find your remarks very suggestive here, but I'm not altogether sure I understand your reasons for stating this. Could you concretize these suggestions a bit?

**WI:** As early as the sixteenth century we have had reflections on fiction and fictionality. Bacon once said that fictions provide a "shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it." Now there are a great many things of which we can be pretty certain. We shall die. We have been born. But we neither shall have an experience of these events nor any knowledge of them. One could further say that we do not doubt that we exist, but we do not know what this existence is. If you are a believer, then you know what it is. But if not, you are not satisfied with this not-knowing. As the events mentioned are impenetrable in terms of experience and knowledge, we produce fictions. To put it in Beckett's terms, either we live -- but then we don't know what it is to live -- or we want to know what it is to live, and thus we come up with all kinds of explanatory fictions in order to grasp what is barred from knowledge.

2

**RvO:** So this is a very broad conception of fiction, one that doesn't refer simply to the literary text.

**WI:** Yes. I use the literary text as a starting point in order to find out what this particular type of fictionality might disclose about human dispositions. For instance, if we lie, we also produce a fiction, which means we live in two worlds simultaneously. We know what the truth is, but we make something up for whatever purpose. The ordinary occurrence of lying is already a way of extending ourselves. The type of fictionality which we encounter in literature is also a way of extending ourselves. If that is so, the question arises: Why is there this urge of extending ourselves?

**RvO:** This is the anthropological question.

**WI:** Yes.

**RvO:** Your book, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, attempts to explore this anthropological question. But in order to get at the latter, you make some very interesting theoretical claims at the outset. You begin by rejecting the dichotomy that opposes fiction to reality and substitute the triad: the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. I find your description of these last two categories somewhat abstract and difficult to grasp. I wonder if you could expand on this a little here, just in order to give us some idea of these key terms for your conception of "literary anthropology"?

**WI:** The old dichotomy between fiction and reality implies that there is a stance outside either, which would allow us to designate one particular instance as fiction and the other one as reality. This is logically impossible. There is no such transcendental stance which allows us to come up with these predicates. We can only say something about fiction by way of its manifestation and its use. There is a welter of different uses to which fictions can be put. Thus an ontological definition of fiction is impossible. We can only examine its many uses. Fictionality in literature seems to be different from fictionality in lying. We are always "in the midst of things," and for this reason we can only spotlight the

manifestations of fiction. The same holds true for the imaginary. It was dubbed as a faculty in faculty psychology. Then it was considered to be a means of conjuring up something that is absent. Or we could refer to the mirror stage of Lacan, or to the desire of Freud. In other words, we have the same situation in the latter instances, namely, we can only ascertain its manifestations. I think that the fictive is a conscious attempt to spark the imaginary into action and channel it into a specific use in order to make an impact on something, or a representation of something if one were to use Gans's terms. In other words, there is a continual interaction between the conscious element which is prevalent in fiction and the imaginary potential which that conscious element stimulates in order to effect something. As the fictive cannot make an impact upon itself or the imaginary, it has to make an impact upon something other, and for this reason I have introduced the triadic relationship between the fictive, the imaginary, and the real.

**RvO:** Of these three categories, then, the real or the actual is the most traditional or straightforward.

**WI:** Yes.

**RvO:** The other two -- the fictive and the imaginary -- have been introduced as a way of mediating the traditional dichotomy between fiction and reality.

**WI:** Both the fictive and the imaginary -- their interaction and their relationship -- function by shaping something which we might call the actual or the real. Conceiving this triadic relationship in these terms, we are out of the quandary of providing ontological definitions for the fictive, the imaginary, or the real. Moreover, given the anthropological interest implied in this triadic relationship, there's something else worth pointing out. Human beings live on their "subsidy." This "subsidy" is the imagination which in banking terms is the only "collateral" we have for substantiating all our activities.

**RvO:** Well, I would agree. But nevertheless you still find someone like Searle who explains fiction along the lines of the traditional dichotomy. It seems strange that he can ignore the anthropological aspect, this collateral of which you speak. For him it's simply a logical question. Fictions suspend the rule of reference that applies to all normative or nonfictional language use.

3

**WI:** Yes. But both Searle and Austin call fictions "parasitic," which implies that they are pseudo-real. Fiction veils itself by copying structures of reality. Austin and Searle presuppose reality as a given. Yet speech acts, as long as they are considered to be performatives, actually produce reality. If speech acts are able to produce realities, one could just as well say that fictions are not parasitic in relation to reality. Rather, by intervening into reality they also produce realities -- just as a lie produces realities.

**RvO:** I think that Searle would try to draw a distinction between ontological realities and what he might call epistemological realities, where fiction would be in the category of the latter. Realities that are agreed upon. But of course the foundation is granted to the former, to what he refers to as "natural scientific ontology."

**WI:** I have problems with these distinctions -- ontological or epistemological -- not least as they presuppose a stance which would allow us to discriminate between them. The very fact that epistemology, once the king's way of philosophy, is no longer of central interest is largely due to the fact that one had always to posit something from which deductions had to be made. Whenever positing something is in play, the agency which does it always does so from outside. How can one warrant such a stance in order to introduce these discriminations? Even inside analytic philosophy, Nelson Goodman has

observed in his *Ways of Worldmaking* that worlds are made out of other worlds. Thus the distinction between what seems to be ontologically given or epistemologically cognized is artificial and very hard to substantiate.

**RvO:** Since we're speaking of the speech-act philosophers, I have a specific question about Austin, one that is related to a point you make in *The Act of Reading*. There is a playful moment in his *How To Do Things With Words* where he asks: "When the saint baptized the penguins, was this void because the procedure of baptizing is inappropriate to be applied to penguins, or because there is no accepted procedure of baptizing anything but humans?" Well, Austin offers this question in fun, of course, but it seems to me hard to talk about baptism in terms of procedure only. The rite of baptism does not exist independently of its participants. Since penguins -- as far as we know -- do not engage in this kind of rite, it seems pointless to ignore its anthropological specificity. So surely the point of the question is to remind us that baptism as a particular kind of speech act cannot be abstracted from the concrete anthropological scene of its occurrence. In the original context of the quote, Austin is making a point about the importance of historical tradition and convention. There is no historical precedent for baptizing penguins so the act can only ever be void. You claim in *The Act of Reading* that literature functions precisely in opposition to this kind of appeal to historical convention. By selecting speech acts from ordinary real-world situations, literature reorganizes preexisting conventions and fields of reference, and undermines them in that very process. So I suppose in literature the saint can baptize penguins. But we're still left with the original question about the function of baptism. To what extent is this theory of "the literary" capable of responding to such a question?

**WI:** As we know, the "felicity" of speech acts depends upon the existence of two presuppositions: conventions and accepted procedures. Both are necessary. Conventions are historically established frames of reference and so are procedures. Obviously the example that Austin gives is outside established conventions and outside established procedures as well. However, when you asked this question, it struck me: Might there be an instance in history in which the animal kingdom stands in a kind of typological relation to basic conventions? I am thinking of the *Physiologus*, which was an assembly of animals that formed a typological correspondence to the Christian doctrine. For instance, when the pelican tore open its breast to provide sustenance to the young pelicans it was considered the *figura Christi*. This may be an odd example, but still there would at least be a time in history when this type of convention existed. Of course this is on an eschatological level, rather than a baptismal one. Since we no longer consider the tradition of the *Physiologus* valid, we may draw the inference that conventions are historically conditioned forms of consensus. Similarly, one could say baptizing penguins was not a historically agreed upon convention.

Now as far as the second part of your question is concerned, for a convention to function it has to have a vertical validity. By vertical validity I mean what has been valid in the past with regard to a particular convention is still valid in the present. What had been valid with respect to the *Physiologus* is no longer valid today. What had been valid with regard to how baptism had been executed is still valid in the sense that animals cannot be baptized. Now literature also is full of conventions. But these conventions are taken from different sets of conventions and are organized, not vertically, but horizontally. Consequently, they run counter to what appears to be the necessary guarantee for the validity of conventions in ordinary life. When conventions are broken up and organized horizontally -- that is, taken from different areas -- they are de pragmatized. They no longer have a regulatory function but are held up for inspection. When conventions are thus de pragmatized and arranged horizontally, they become a topic of scrutiny. This is what literature does.

**RvO:** May I ask you to expand on that. You describe your project as a "literary anthropology." Now I take that to mean that literature is your primary source for speaking about the human. You say that literature de pragmatizes conventions, holds them up for inspection. Does the literary text offer an anthropological view that is unavailable to other types of discourse?

**WI:** Taking literature as our example, I would be inclined to say that though we may critique conventions in our day-to-day living, what literature does is to stage a whole array of conventions more or less simultaneously in a text. Obviously if one wants to find an anthropological implication in this particular exposition, one might say that human beings have an urge to look at their regulatory principles. Why is there such an urge? We appear to want to be with ourselves and simultaneously outside ourselves. If that seems to be a basic human situation -- a way of extending ourselves -- then this question of assembling an array of conventions horizontally in the literary text might be a way of looking at the regulatory functions according to which human beings conduct their lives.

**RvO:** Let me return to the ontogenetic question I broached earlier, which I would like to connect to the thoughts you have just related. In *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, you refer a number of times to Winnicott's notion of the "transitional object." At one point you call the intentionality of the text a transitional object. And elsewhere you refer to the fictive as a "'transitional object' always hovering between the real and the imaginary." You link Winnicott's transitional object to Piaget's theory of childhood development. The child makes the crucial leap from "imitation" to "symbolization" when, instead of "imitating" the empirical world through perception and visualization, it uses these stored "images" to assimilate the inaccessible -- to extend itself. You suggest that Piaget offers "anthropological" corroboration for your model of the fictive and the imaginary. But should we not say that Piaget's very interesting theories of childhood development are ontogenetic, that is, psychological rather than anthropological? Why does the child need to assimilate the inaccessible?

**WI:** Insofar as one considers this to be ontogenetic, I've nothing against it. If this seems to be a general human urge, that's fine. Now as far as the "transitional object" is concerned, it is a convenient metaphor which I have used for the literary work, insofar as it consists of two components: the fictive and the imaginary. The transitional object, as Winnicott maintains, is something the child needs in order to be weaned away from the mother, so that it can relate thereafter to the world. The child reaches beyond the confines of its mother. The work of literature is also a means of reaching outside of what we are caught up in.

With respect to Piaget, I would say that the child does not use imitation to "conquer" the inaccessible, but that it uses imitation in order to get outside itself. So a stick, for example, is a horse. By imitating the action of horse and rider in using the stick, the child assimilates a world that lies beyond it. Thus the stick functions as a way of charting something which does not as yet exist. This is exactly what literature does. It assembles items which can be identified from the world in which we find ourselves, and it combines them in such a way that they point to something beyond this familiarity. Literature is structured in such a way that something beyond our ordinary reach is charted and thus incorporated into our lives.

**RvO:** Well, I don't want to push Piaget's theory into this discussion too much, but I was interested in the way you brought Piaget into your argument at that point. I suppose I want to know how much weight you are willing to put on Piaget as anthropological corroboration for your own theory.

**WI:** In a way, Piaget inverts the relationship between imitation and symbolization. Because first of all you have to imitate something, and then you have to use what has been imitated in order to reach out and map that which is beyond what you are imitating. This appears to be a general anthropological tendency.

**RvO:** I agree. Since we're on the topic of imitation and mimesis, this might be a good point to move on to discuss the relationship between "literary anthropology" and "generative anthropology." Let me begin by simply asking: How do you respond to Gans's work? What is your general impression of generative anthropology?

**WI:** First of all, I have to say that it is a most impressive enterprise by a highly original thinker. It strikes me as one of those rare occasions of a new charting of human culture. What is all the more remarkable is that this enterprise is so cogently reasoned and reveals such an impressive intellectual rigor, which adds conviction to the basic hypothesis and to what it allows us to apprehend. What I can't understand is that Eric Gans has not met with an adequate reception which this kind of undertaking merits.

5

**RvO:** Well, I am of course similarly bewildered. But allow me to be a bit more specific. What similarities do you see between your own field of "literary anthropology" and that of "generative anthropology"? What are the differences?

**WI:** First of all, I would say that the common anthropological interest forms the link between what Gans and myself are pursuing. If one were to pinpoint a difference, I would bring it down to what I wouldn't call an opposition, but a differentiation, namely, whereas he uses fictions as an explanatory instrument, I am inclined to use fictions as an exploratory one. Fictions are "explanatory" in his case because he wants to provide an overall picture: from the originary scene right through to the postmodern situation. I'm not as ambitious. Literature has been around for the last 2500 years. Obviously it satisfies a human need. If fiction is considered the hallmark of literature, then fictions could be a means of exploring the human makeup. So I think it's a different direction in which the two of us go.

**RvO:** Yes. And I think that's at least partly encapsulated in the different emphasis in the titles you give to your respective projects: literary anthropology vis-à-vis generative anthropology. Gans has to address the historical position of his own theory. And perhaps that is one reason why people seem to be a little scared off by him.

**WI:** Why? Because of the rigor or what?

**RvO:** Because ultimately he has to explain the emergence of generative anthropology as something that is -- I don't want to say necessary -- but at least historically theorizable. How it must emerge from previous representations, in particular, from literary works, which he calls "discovery procedures." But the point of generative anthropology -- of the originary hypothesis -- is that it is a more rigorous attempt than literature to return to the originary event. So he has to articulate this historical movement from literature to generative anthropology. Do you see what I mean?

**WI:** Yes. He wants to be all-encompassing. And he has to be so, for the simple reason that if you have this parsimonious originary hypothesis you can only give it plausibility by continually unfolding inherent aspects which in turn provide an explanation for historic situations. I think this is the most admirable aspect of his undertaking: namely, that he continually fans out the implication of what he has postulated and yet simultaneously uses these implications, aspects, and perspectives to explain historical

phenomena. Such an explanatory unfolding allows him to bring out the multifariousness that is inherent in his basic hypothesis of the originary scene, and simultaneously makes it possible for him to fold the whole of history back into the originary scene, thus lending credence to the initial postulate. History is not conceived as an ascent towards a goal; instead, the basic constituents of the originary scene, i.e. center and periphery, dominance and resentment, structure the developing history, whose cyclical movements highlight what the "origin" entails, and whose folding back into the "origin" out of which history has arisen makes both history and the originary scene highly plausible. Thus Gans demonstrates the persuasiveness of his explanatory fiction.

**RvO:** Yes.

**WI:** But that's not my undertaking.

**RvO:** No, but you've articulated what I think a lot of people have difficulty seeing, and that is that just because you postulate this originary scene that doesn't mean you close everything down. Gans has repeated over and over again that the whole point of the originary hypothesis is to open up our understanding of culture.

**WI:** Yes. I would also add that it is a most fundamental misunderstanding to say that people who concern themselves with origins are not to be taken seriously. We find ourselves in the situation where the deferral of origins appears to be the be-all and end-all. I don't think that this is an adequate understanding of the way in which Gans has formulated the minimal hypothesis. For him, the latter is a blank. The fact that he suggests how the originary scene might have taken place -- with a kill or whatever -- people are prone to take for a reality. The originary scene, however, is definitely a blank. And this is where I am in sympathy with the way in which Gans conceives his hypothesis, namely, if it is a blank, it is an energizing source, which can never be filled. For this reason, anthropology can indeed only be "generative." As I'm also interested in the energizing or generative qualities of gaps and blanks, I feel pretty close to Gans along these lines.

6

**RvO:** With that in mind, let me then ask you about an important principle in the formulation of this initial blank or hypothesis, namely, Ockham's razor or the principle of parsimony. Within the heuristic of the originary hypothesis, no more elements should be introduced than are necessary to explain the manifold phenomena of human culture with which the theory is concerned. For Gans, the originary is therefore synonymous with the minimal. The first moment of culture -- the event in which the minimal scene of representation is established -- is also the most elementary. In keeping the hypothesis minimal, Gans claims that we respect the originarity of the event. I find this kind of commitment to parsimony highly laudable. It necessitates a certain rigor, and it also provides an implicit methodological criterion by which to evaluate the hypothesis. One continually strives to minimize one's presuppositions as one works from the originary hypothesis through the varying manifestations of representation in history right through to contemporary culture and then back again. Yet when I look around me today in the field of literary and cultural studies, I see no such commitment to minimal or "originary" thinking. On the contrary, diversity and difference -- complexity -- is pursued as an end in itself. We seem terribly afraid of minimal mimetic centers, of hypotheses, of -- dare I say it -- constructive theories. We're very concerned these days with "questioning assumptions," but usually this means bashing a few other critics on the head, which seems to me a poor substitute for minimizing your own assumptions. No doubt the latter is much harder to do, but still this doesn't explain the stubborn resistance within the humanities to

the kind of cogent project Gans offers us. Your own generosity with respect to generative anthropology has been a notable -- and welcome -- exception to this general refusal. How do you respond, first, to the principle of parsimony in Gans's theory, and, second, to the broader question of the contemporary fear among literary and cultural theorists toward such a theory.

**WI:** The principle of parsimony is a necessity because one should not burden the blank with all kinds of conceptions, perceptions, or "leads," though people look for that kind of thing. From an empirically-oriented point of view, one wants to know what in actual fact happened, whether these people stood around the kill and made the ostensive gesture as the deferral of violence. The moment of course you take that as a representation of what actually happened, you are on the wrong track, because then you will not be able to fathom the energizing element which this parsimonious conception entails. To keep it as minimal as possible is necessary in order to be able to unfold and explicate the energizing drive inherent to this "generative" blank. For this reason I think to call it generative is appropriate because if the originary scene had just consisted of the kill with these guys standing around it, nothing much would have ensued from it. The very fact that the minimal hypothesis points to what Gans calls an event is fruitful if one thinks, for example, of Whitehead's definition of an event, namely, that it is an occurrence without referentiality. That's exactly the nature of the originary event that Gans describes. In this respect, he might have been better off if he hadn't offered these naturalistic "leads." Perhaps in an empirically-oriented culture one needs something of this kind. But then things may be misconceived, as they seem to have been in his case.

Now as to questioning assumptions, I consider this first and foremost an old Marxist ploy, which has spilled over into ideology critique. Such a strategy has by now become rather old-fashioned owing to its operative principle. The latter entails that the premise of the opponent is disputed on the ground that those who make the objection judge from the basis of having the right or valid presupposition. It is the opponent's hypothesis which is called in doubt, whereas the one the critic entertains is "off limits." Basically, this is a proleptic strategy, inducing someone to make a statement, then proving the person wrong, thus asserting one's superiority. Having achieved this, it depends how to proceed further; one might give some help to the defeated person by providing some education or even brainwashing. However, this is a strategy that I am inclined to consider a holdover from the nineteenth century which, however, appears still adequate in a highly politicized intellectual climate -- if one can call a politicized climate intellectual at all.

Apart from questioning assumptions, if there are cultural theorists, ethnographers in particular, who do not buy Gans's basic hypothesis, this may be due to the fact that he doesn't do any fieldwork. I would fall under the very same verdict. It depends on whether one considers studying literature and cultural phenomena fieldwork or not. So, again one would have to say: What kind of training do you have to presuppose? Do you have to be an ethnographer to begin with? In fact there are ethnographers -- Geertz, for example -- who are well aware that they are using fictions as explanatory concepts.

7

But apart from the ethnographer's argument, what is going on in cultural studies in the broader sense of the term is basically partisan. There are special interests which are being pursued. Owing to this partisan approach, the field is to a large extent politicized. Politics seems to be the only holistic conception which is nowadays acknowledged as valid. But politics is interest-governed. Whatever is of interest would presuppose that there are certain options to choose from -- a kind of smorgasbord in which some things

are more appetizing than others, but where no item may be privileged. Thus, interest-governed politics is in itself partial and as this is the case, one opposes any overriding, umbrella explanation of things. So, in the final analysis, the objection from politicized circles would be that generative anthropology is nothing but logocentrism, owing to the intellectual rigor with which it is unfolded. As an offshoot of logocentrism, it need not even be refuted, but must be dispensed with on political grounds. I think this is the reason why, at least in the American context, Gans may have difficulties.

**RvO:** I sense that too. Many people -- especially literary and cultural critics -- are instinctively suspicious of Gans's work because of his explicit attention to origins. They tend to evaluate such a project as unnecessarily normalizing and universalizing. But as you say that is a partisan or "political" approach. But what about the overriding ethical dimension of the originary event: the deferral of violence through representation? This event has to found the scene of representation. Although what is ultimately designated is a blank -- and is therefore generative -- this blank does have an ethical result or consequence. Gans is fairly forthright on this question. The only way to evaluate his theory is if it is of ethical benefit to humans.

**WI:** I would say that whenever you provide an overall conceptualization, you have to pay a price. Narrowing down the act of representation to the deferral of violence is such a price -- that is, when your overall conception is guided by an explanatory impulse. If, on the other hand, you have an urge to explore, you can be more diversified. One could use literature as a medium in order to spotlight why human beings are prone to be with themselves and simultaneously outside themselves. We need fictions to come to grips with ends and beginnings. We are sure that we are born and that we shall die, but we have neither experience nor knowledge of either of them. Frank Kermode has once cited the Greek physician Alkmaeon who earned Aristotle's approval by stating that human beings must die because they cannot bring beginning and end together. We cannot tolerate situations of which there is no experience or knowledge, although we are sure that they will happen or have happened. Similarly, we exist and yet we do not know what it is to exist. In other words, we have an evidentiary experience, and simultaneously we want to know what this evidentiary experience is. So we begin to fictionalize. Fictions are modes that allow us to come close to what these situations might be or how they might be tackled.

Then there is what I would call the "multiformity of human plasticity." Representation as a deferral of violence is certainly one way in which this human plasticity is patterned, but it is not the only way. I should like to add that plasticity is just a metaphor for the fact that we know very little about human nature. Nonetheless there is this plasticity, which is continually patterned and shaped. If one uses fictionality as an exploratory instrument, there are many ways to branch out into questions of this type. Basically, one might say that an exploratory use of fictionality allows for the staging of multifarious patternings of human plasticity. For this reason, literary anthropology is not as consistent as generative anthropology. But still I would say that we are heading, or perhaps rather groping, in a shared direction. Therefore, we should consider ourselves comrades-in-arms, instead of saying "I'm right and you are wrong."

8

**RvO:** I couldn't agree more. And I'm in fact struck by a number of passages in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* that seems to identify the same kind of paradoxical process at work that Gans locates in what he calls in his latest book *Signs of Paradox* the "originary paradox" of the linguistic sign. For you, fiction is always a doubled phenomenon. On the one hand, the fictional text denotes a reality that stands outside

it; on the other, it overleaps that reality and insists on its "as if" or fictional separation from that reality. In the process it creates something new, that is, it has the structure of an event. Gans seeks to trace this paradoxical structure that you locate in fiction back to an originary source. Hence what you call his "explanatory" impulse. Humanity invents/discovered itself when it learns to represent itself. For Gans, this originary moment is cast as the specifically anthropological element of his theory. To put it somewhat in your terms -- in terms of fictionality rather than representation -- the fictional moment occurs in the moment when the sign as the aborted gesture of appropriation intervenes and is accepted by the originary participants as an imitation, not of a model-mediator, the imitation of which is entirely unreflective because it appropriates rather than thematizes the object, but rather of a centrally configured object, the very centrality of which is a function of its "figured" or "fictionalized" status. This is of course a highly condensed paraphrase of Gans's argument. But the basic implication there is that the object is no longer mimetically sought after by imitating the actions of a model, but is instead represented within a public scene. The act of imitation becomes a formally closed sign that "imitates" -- represents -- the object. Piaget calls this the movement from accommodation to assimilation, from visualization and perceptualization to symbolization. But the ontogenetic theory cannot explain the originary inherent in this very transition. On Gans's anthropological model, the transition is explained as an event that produces the originary sign. Primitive imitation-of-the-model becomes representational mimesis of the object. But the older form of mimesis as a performance -- as an event -- remains. Reality is doubled by the act; the object must henceforth be interpreted for it is now only accessible via the mimetic structure of the scene of representation. Hence Gans's concept of a generative anthropology. All cultural phenomena ultimately derive from the event of origin. You, on the other hand, are clearly less inclined to speak about anthropological origins. Your concept of a literary anthropology places its focus on already existing texts, that is, on literature. Still, there appear to be a lot of similarities when it comes your reflections on fiction. Would you agree? How would you assess both these similarities and these differences? That is, how would you compare your similar thoughts on the paradoxical nature of fictionality and your dissimilar starting points: literature for you, and human origins for Gans?

**WI:** Well, to cut it down to a final viewpoint, specifically with regard to Gans's latest book: What he calls the "signs of paradox" means that all these representative patterns which manifest themselves in history have a certain duality inscribed into them, or perhaps are an unfolding of a specific aspect inherent in the originary event, or are a specific unfolding of what it means to defer acts of violence by means of representation. Having postulated the originary scene, one cannot declare: That is it. Rather, Gans explains what is entailed in the notion of representation as the deferral of violence. So he brings out the implicit multifariousness of that concept as revealed throughout history. He branches out into different fields, for example, language and semiotics, thereby demonstrating the multiplicity of aspects in what is originally quite a straightforward scenario. There is a similarity between Gans and myself insofar as his basic conception lends itself to fanning out the originary event into so many different profiles. My view is that -- and this is both the closeness and the difference -- fiction is marked by a duality. A lie would be a duplicitous example of the latter. This duality has in itself a blank, that is, a gap between whatever is comprised by fiction as what is mutually exclusive. This inherent blank has a generative force out of which the welter of literature arises. So one might say there is in Gans's basic concept of representation a potential multiformity which he unfolds. I would say that the duality of the mutually exclusive points to the energizing force in fiction. In this mutual mirroring of the mutually exclusive, a world beyond the world in which we live is created, a possible world emerges.

**RvO:** Would it be fair to say that your conception of fictionality is more of a structural conception,

whereas Gans's is a historicized version of it? Gans insists on the actual occurrence of this originary event.

**WI:** Yes, insofar as a privileging of structure seems to be necessary in order to account for the multifariousness to which it gives rise. This, of course, doesn't put me in a situation of postulating an originary scene for this energizing drive. Basically, I am inclined to say that whereas Gans is interested in representation as the deferral of violence, I am interested in the way in which fictionality generates possible worlds. The latter may not necessarily have anything to do with the deferral of violence. Gans explains why humankind is able to sustain itself through representation. I am interested in why we need possible worlds instead of the one in which we live. What could this urge for continually creating and indulging in possible worlds reveal about human dispositions? These possible worlds are in turn, of course, also historically conditioned. There is no doubt about that. So this is roughly what brings the two projects together and also what reveals their distinction.

9

**RvO:** Thank you for this succinct delineation. I have just one final question for you, and it's a bit of an indulgent one on my part for it puts you in the awkward position of having to prophesy about the future. You have enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the field of literary studies on both sides of the Atlantic. Could you say a few closing words about your thoughts on departments of language and literature today? What future do you see for the profession? Is there a place in the humanities for the kind of broad anthropological reflection you yourself have engaged in and to which Anthropoetics is dedicated? Is there an audience -- a need -- for this kind of reflection? Is cultural studies a "groping" attempt to come to grips with "the anthropological."

**WI:** Well, this is a very difficult question.

**RvO:** A fantasy question.

**WI:** I am inclined to say that the humanities can be conceived of as a self-defining process. At the inception, the humanities were intimately geared to the nation-state as it emerged at the threshold of the nineteenth century. However, throughout the nineteenth century this paradigm had been subjected to a great many changes. Initially it was assumed that the nation-state found its adequate expression in art and literature through which the norms and values of a people were bodied forth. In this respect the humanities functioned as the "curator" of the nation-state. Toward the end of the century, a distinctly visible shift occurred as people wanted to know how other nations conceived of themselves through art and literature in particular, in consequence of which departments of English, French, and what have you were established -- a set-up which is still in place today. However, even in the nineteenth century, questions of methodology and attempts to demarcate the humanities from the sciences became an issue that governed the scholastic activities in the humanities. Such a pursuit had very little to do with the nation-state as the original paradigm. In the twentieth century quite a few paradigm switches have occurred, ranging from the predominance of historical preoccupation through close reading to theory, to name only a few prominent ones. Without further detailing the development of the humanities, overseeing what has happened during the last couple of centuries, the humanities turned out to be a self-defining process, in the course of which they addressed concerns that have been current at the time. For instance, after the phase of impressionistic criticism, a need for criteria developed according to which art and literature could be assessed. New Criticism was the response to such a situation which, in turn, created a growing dissatisfaction as it was based on the framework of classical aesthetics. Deconstruction

remedied this apparent deficiency by providing a postmodern framework for close reading. In this vein one might continue to describe the changes occurring in the humanities, all of them pointing to the fact that the shifts highlight a certain sensitivity of the humanities to what appears to be a current need. If we keep this general tendency in mind, we might say that the humanities have experienced several "crises" since their inception; the "crisis," however, does not mean that the humanities were constantly teetering on verge of collapse, rather it proves to be the "fuel" which keeps the humanities going.

Given this general frame, one might ask what current need is to be met. Well, the humanities have to become market-oriented. This happens in Europe to a large extent by dissolving the old departmental set-up and establishing "area studies" instead, such as Institutes of Western European Studies or Far Eastern Studies. I myself have been involved in designing such an institution at the Humboldt University, Berlin. After the Berlin wall came down, state governments tried to introduce a new type of institution in order to meet demands from the growing integration of the European Community, for which a new generation of students had to be trained. Therefore, it did not make much sense to go back to the old departmental system modeled on the nation-state. The curriculum of such institutes is basically cross-cultural, as experts are needed for both industry and European administration who are familiar, for instance, with English literature, common law, international government, industrial management, and equally with what would be the equivalents in French, Italian, and other European cultures. Well, of course, the various curricula offer specialization geared to needs and individual interests. Something similar is happening in Britain, and to a certain extent in France. These fledgling institutions cater to a market which is rapidly emerging and for which so far no education was provided.

10

Such a market-oriented reconceptualization of the humanities need not and should not dispense with research altogether. However, the future research will certainly not be confined to literature, although literature may be an important component of interdisciplinary subject matters that have first of all to be constituted by collaborative research of different disciplines. It may well concern itself with questions of anthropology, although I am not saying that this is the "guiding light" for research in the next couple of decades. What I should like to stress, however, is the necessity for acquiring what has come to be called in Europe a "cultural competence." For this competence, a disciplinary grounding is indispensable, otherwise we get a dilettante jack of all trades. Interdisciplinary research would have to focus on how to underpin the market-driven orientation. For instance, "liminality" might be such an issue, designed to explore borderlines and the distinctions derived from them. The exploration of cross-cultural relationships might be another one which could result in developing ideas concerning cross-cultural discourses. Furthermore, translation of cultures is a highly pertinent topic, as is the related topic that calls for an investigation of what happens when different or even heterogeneous levels of culture are interacting. In other words, the examples mentioned are areas for interdisciplinary research geared to the practical demands the humanities have to meet. Accordingly, the humanities will have a dual function. On the one hand, research will be devoted to aspects of an overarching nature -- of which literature is certainly a part, but not the be-all and end-all, which it used to be when the nation-state was the commanding paradigm -- on the other, there is the market-driven orientation. This two-tiered situation which seems to be emerging strikes me as a response of the humanities to current requirements. It ties in with the observation that the humanities are a self-defining process. I am not denying, however, that there is a certain faddishness, which always accompanies shifts in orientation. We see this happening all the time. In the sixties, for instance, society was the focal point of intellectual concerns in the humanities, in the seventies it was language, and now it is otherness and narcissism. However, the very fact that

trends produce focal points indicates that the humanities are not an exclusively research-oriented enterprise like the sciences, but respond to what appears to be in the air. Thus the humanities, basically in the service of the tradition, nevertheless keep responding to what the tradition might be needed for.

**RvO:** Thank you very much, Professor Iser, both for your time and, more importantly, for your thoughts.

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# Mimesis and Moral Agency in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

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'Talk of love making people jealous and suspicious--it's nothing to social ambition! Louisa used to lie awake at night wondering whether the women who called on us called on *me* because I was with her, or on *her* because she was with me; and she was always laying traps to find out what I thought.' (*The House of Mirth* 250-51)

Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses. (*The Custom of the Country* 13)

There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe.... It was the old New York way of taking life "without effusion of blood." (*The Age of Innocence* 334-35)

Recent criticism of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* has focussed on describing the ways in which its central character's fate has been shaped by the capitalist values of her society or by its patriarchal power structures (Dimock; Robinson; Restuccia; Fetterley; Wolff). In one form or another, these interpretations depict Lily Bart as a victim and stress the deterministic character of Wharton's work. Absent from these readings is an effort to understand the author's attempts to suggest hope and transcendence even in a naturalistic environment. In this essay, I will examine *The House of Mirth* through René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and through some fundamental concepts of Generative Anthropology worked out in the writings of Eric Gans. Central to Girard's thought is the theory of "mimetic desire" developed in his first book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961) and elaborated in his later works. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on Girard's treatment of the rival: "In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires" (*Violence and the Sacred* 145). Because of the mimetic nature of the subject-rival relationship, two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Violence, for Girard, is the product of a mimetic rivalry whose reciprocity can be stopped only by a

community's turn against a surrogate victim. But while Girard sees violence as the primary element of human mimesis, Gans maintains that the human begins with the renunciation, or more precisely, the deferral of violence: "Since every individual poses a potential threat to the existence of the human community, the renunciation of violence by each of its individual members is the constantly renewed foundation of this community" (*Originary Thinking* 3). An extension of Girard's model of the mimetic crisis, Generative Anthropology—through an analysis of such categories as desire, language, the esthetic, the sacred, and the religious—tries to answer the question, "What is the human?"

*The House of Mirth*, probably the best known and the most closely analyzed of Wharton's works, chronicles the social adventures in the life of its central character. Lily Bart, beautiful but still single at age twenty nine, must outdo her rivals and find a wealthy husband if she is to maintain her place in fashionable New York society. But much of the novel's power derives from Lily's unwillingness to realize the future she seems so clearly destined for; as one of the story's perceptive characters puts it, "she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing the seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (189). What makes Lily "despise" some of her own desires, and what drives her to give up a rare opportunity to establish her position firmly in the house of mirth? To grasp the significance of Lily's actions, especially her decision to opt out of her mimetic rivalry with Bertha Dorset, we need to consider the novel in light of Wharton's strong sense that the human begins when the individual renounces mimetic desire and her equally strong feeling that mimetic rivalry is inimical to human reason. By focussing my analysis on the workings and manifestations of desire, that most fundamental motive of human behaviour, and by underlining Lily's agency, I wish to move the discussion beyond the Lily-as-victim school of interpretation and to salvage a sense of hope and morality in a novel that is quite bleak and that has been too often solely read as such.

2

Wharton depicts New York's old aristocracy in *The House of Mirth* as an undesirable model of behaviour. After her parents' death, the question of who is to become Lily's guardian threatens to remain unsolved until Mrs. Peniston offers to "try her for a year." The other relatives are relieved, but are unaware of the aunt's motives: "It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island," Wharton notes, "but with the eyes of her little world upon her she took a certain pleasure in her act" (36). The social posturing, reflected in the discrepancy between the theatrical gesture and the private feelings, is elicited by the presence of others. Mrs. Peniston, who never lights the lamps in her huge house unless there is "company" (101), has erected the social into a religion, a distortion that has earned her "an unequalled familiarity with the secret chronicles of society" (123), whose fluctuations she eagerly watches "from the secluded watch-tower of her upper window" (120). But in spite of the "panoramic sweep" of her mind, Mrs. Peniston fails in being her niece's keeper, for in moments of need, Lily's "relation with her aunt was as superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs" (148). Later, when Mrs. Peniston forsakes Lily, her action is dictated by an anxious concern for social approval--a concern that overrides family obligations, distorts life's natural relations, and allows anger to triumph over understanding. While she does not even try to ascertain the truth of the rumours about Lily, she chooses to have faith in gossip and to harbour "a settled deposit of resentment against her niece" (127), which ultimately pushes her to disinherit Lily.

Other members of Lily's family are also victims of this social obsession. When Lily was nineteen, she suggested to her mother buying fresh flowers for the luncheon-table: "Mrs. Bart stared. Her own fastidiousness had its eyes fixed on the world, and she did not care how the luncheon-table looked when

there was no one present at it but the family" (31). The yearning for social prestige has re-directed Mrs. Bart's feelings so much that she grows resentful when the social success of her rivals serves to magnify her own failure. After her husband's death, Mrs. Bart is ready to sacrifice her daughter, studying Lily's beauty "with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance" (34). In her desperate struggle for what she deems her rightful place in New York society, Mrs. Bart can imagine only one use for her daughter's beauty. As we shall see later, Lily's distinction lies precisely in her ability to transcend such crude ambitions.

Among Lily's friends, such transcendence is unimaginable. Judy Trenor, for instance, "seemed to exist only as a hostess.... because she could not sustain life except in a crowd.... [and] knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself" (40). For Judy, whose Bellomont party begins the social activities in the story, life's possibilities have been narrowed to a single public function and her emotions channelled into an absolute hatred for her rivals. Clearly, Judy has distorted the meaning of kindness and generosity traditionally associated with hospitality, since her extravagant dinners and "amusing" parties are intended to awe friends and intimidate rivals.

Judy's major rival is another society hostess, Maria Van Osburgh, and the competition between the two is all the more intense because never publicly acknowledged. Judy's desire to triumph over Maria can be understood when we remember that in the social stratification depicted in the novel, the Van Osburghs represent the 'best' New York family. Before her party, Mrs. Trenor is worried because her social secretary is away: "It was simply inhuman of Pragg to go off now.... She says her sister is going to have a baby—as if that were anything to having a house-party!... And this week is going to be a horrid failure too—and Gwen Van Osburgh will go back and tell her mother how bored people were" (41). The poverty of Mrs. Trenor's existence is captured in that strange reversal: a house-party seems more important, because socially more gratifying, than the birth of a baby. But although she hopes to avoid being accused of giving boring parties, Judy's speech, punctuated by so many 'ands,' betrays a dull lifestyle. Judy's worries are, however, not unfounded because Maria Van Osburgh has managed to plant her spies at the party. The clearest example of Judy's imitative conduct is her fight with Maria over the Duchess of Beltshire's sister: Lady Cressida had arrived from England with letters of introduction to the Van Osburghs, but Judy, hoping to appropriate the prestige of being the first to display a member of the English aristocracy to her class-conscious circle, manages to upstage her rival: "I heard that Maria Van Osburgh was asking a big party to meet her this week, so I thought it would be fun to get her away.... Maria was furious, and actually had the impudence to make Gwen invite herself here, so that they shouldn't be *quite* out of it" (41-42). The gesture of appropriation suggests selfishness and frivolity, what Judy calls "fun." In fact, the incident dramatizes the petty tricks and complicated strategies that members of fashionable society in *The House of Mirth* resort to for the sake of social prestige. In spite of, or perhaps because of, her high social status, Maria Van Osburgh herself, as her anger clearly reveals, is indeed caught up in the prevailing desire for social glory, for what Judy loosely refers to as "it."

Judy Trenor is, however, disappointed because Lady Cressida is the 'wrong' kind of notability for that time of the year. When fashionable society craves amusement, producing a clergyman's wife can only make one's party boring, as Judy has learned: "I thought any friend of the Skiddaws' was sure to be amusing.... and it turns out that Lady Cressida is the moral [kind]" (42). In a precipitate attempt to outwit her rival, Judy finds herself embarrassed because the "moral" has no place in her hedonistic world, one in which the characters look at each other only in light of how they can manipulate or sacrifice people in the interest of social prestige. Because the Trenors "'have to have the bishop once a year,'" Judy admits,

"[Lady Cressida] would have been so useful at the right time" (42). People become convenient ornaments in Mrs. Trenor's circle, just as religion itself provides a mere opportunity for more social posturing.

Judy's irreverence underscores the ways in which society has become an idol for her and her set, while religion is a matter of social *form* mechanically enacted: "The observance of Sunday at Bellomont was chiefly marked by the punctual appearance of the smart omnibus destined to convey the household to the little church at the gates. Whether any one got into the omnibus or not was a matter of secondary importance..." (51). Religious devotion, Wharton implies, is reduced to the ritualized movements of the omnibus, and for Judy, the Sunday service is nothing but an irritating task. After the uproarious Bellomont party, the people who go to church, like the Wetheralls, do so mimetically: "The Wetheralls always went to church. They belonged to the vast group of human automata who go through life without neglecting to perform a single one of the gestures executed by the surrounding puppets...—and Mr. and Mrs. Wetherall's circle was so large that God was included in their visiting-list" (52). Wharton's disdain is unmistakable for people like the Wetheralls, whose understanding of the divine is exclusively social and for whom church-going amounts to no more than a chance to be in the proximity of the rich and conspicuous.

3

The desire to surpass all competitors for social recognition draws Judy into a vigilant attention to the achievements of others. While she envies Maria's supposed prestige, Mrs. Trenor also fears the story's social climbers—an insecurity reflecting the metaphysical character of fashionable society, an abstraction generated by human mediation. To understand Judy's snobbery toward the Welly Brys—newly-rich and "already thirst[ing] for new kingdoms" (188)—is to grasp what Gans terms "essential unfreedom" (*The End of Culture* 225). Under the auspices of Carry Fisher, a Society scout, the Brys organize a party replete with *tableaux vivants* and expensive music, "and society, surprised in a dull moment, succumbed to the temptation of Mrs. Bry's hospitality" (131). To publicly proclaim her superiority, Judy refuses to attend; her husband (who does attend) declares the party disappointing and the Brys mere social interlopers: "'no, no cigar for me. You can't tell what you're smoking in one of these new houses... my wife was dead right to stay away: she says life's too short to spend it in breaking in new people'" (138). Although the Trenors maintain their pretense to social superiority, their grumbling reflects resentment and fear lest the newly-rich dispossess them. In fact, the story leaves no doubt that mimetic rivalry is behind Mrs. Trenor's apparent indifference: "though she remained haughtily at Bellomont, Lily suspected in her a devouring eagerness... to learn exactly in what measure Mrs. Wellington Bry had surpassed all previous competitors for social recognition" (140); and, as another character assures Selden, "'The dimensions of the Brys' ball-room must rankle: you may be sure [Judy] knows 'em as well as if she'd been there last night with a yard-measure'" (160). Far from being a dispassionate act proclaiming her independence, Judy's absence from the party is in effect a form of presence at it. That Mrs. Trenor's behavior should be profoundly mediated through Maria Van Osburgh's "aristocratic" way of life and the dimensions of a ball-room attests to a world of fluid identities, one in which mimetic rivalries have gradually erased the differences between the various social segments and in which we witness the triumph of what Girard calls internal mediation: "When the concrete differences among men disappear or recede into the background, in any sector whatever of society, abstract rivalry makes its appearance" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 110). Describing the various groups in the story, Richard Poirier notes how "their essential qualities blend so easily into one another that there is in this novel actually no dramatized conflict of class or of social values" (*A World Elsewhere* 219). The absence of such conflicts

reveals how metaphysical desire for social eminence—not the need for any concrete advantages—ultimately dissolves the differences between a Maria Van Osburgh, a Judy Trenor, and a Louisa Bry.

But of all the characters, Lily Bart has the most contradictory relation to her social world. In "*The House of Mirth* Revisited," Diana Trilling points out that "The poignancy of [Lily's] fate lies in her doomed struggle to subdue that part of her own nature which is no better than her own culture" (109). Lily attempts to transcend the links to her social set: her crass ambitions, her snobbery, and her willingness to engage in the prevailing rivalries. But Lily's struggle is not doomed: if her decision in the second half of the novel to opt out of the mimetic rivalry with Bertha Dorset represents a social defeat, it also stands for Lily's spiritual victory, giving the novel a definite moral centre, one which many critics are unwilling to recognize.<sup>(1)</sup>

Lily's plans to entice Percy Gryce into marriage indicate the degree to which she has assimilated the ways of her acquisitive world, and when she thinks she has succeeded in securing the attentions of this wealthy and obtuse bachelor, the nature of her crude aspirations reveals how difficult it is for Lily to escape the mimetic element in desire: "She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset.... Instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered; instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. There were old scores she could pay off...." (49). Lily's speculations reflect how much her (unimaginative) use of wealth is mimetic, but her mediators are perhaps the two most irresponsible and selfish characters in the story—Irving Howe even calls Bertha "a ferocious bitch" ("A Reading of *The House of Mirth*" 123). In short, Lily perceives society as an end, not as an opportunity for nobler and higher possibilities of life; she contemplates using Percy's money "stupidly" (70), to quote her word.

Besides this eagerness to flaunt money, Lily is often anxious to display her beauty, her "asset" as Mrs. Bart calls it. While such readiness makes Lily vain, the need to exhibit her beauty also indicates a dependence on the outside world for the terms of her 'superiority.' As Percy dedicates his millions to drawing people's attention to himself, Lily uses her appearance to achieve a similar end. The novel makes a direct connection between the uses of money or beauty in the interest of social recognition. When it is Lily's turn to appear as Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd* at the Brys' party, we detect again a "certain obtuseness of feeling" (196) in the novel's central character: "the completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power.... At such moments she lost something of her natural fastidiousness, and cared less for the quality of the admiration received than for its quantity" (136). Diana Trilling finds this novel "always and passionately a money story. It is money that rules where God, love, charity or even force of character or distinction of personality might once have ruled" (111), a claim that neglects the power of beauty in the eyes of the novel's central figure. Lily herself manipulates what is essentially an aesthetic moment so as to enjoy maximum triumph, cheapening her artistic appearance by turning it into an opportunity to impress, and, like others of her circle, is thereby involved in the process of redefining terms and debasing ideas.

One of the novel's subtle implications is that mimetic rivalry undermines human reason and that membership in the house of mirth distorts perception. Lily begins to transfigure the objects of her desire, perceiving the "crowded selfish world of pleasure" favourably: "They were lords of the only world she cared for... Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived" (50). Lily's assimilation of her group's values is best captured in the loose

sentence that concludes the quotation—a sentence in which the main clause is followed by three parallel constructions reflecting Lily's relaxed attitude and the extent to which she has surrendered her freedom to others. As Wharton indicates, Lily *knowingly* espouses her group's standards: like a faithful disciple, she is ready to alter her convictions to suit her lords' smug perception of themselves and their arrogant expectations of others. This distorted vision takes Lily into paths of snobbery, prejudice and social rivalry. In a conversation with Selden, she remarks on how "delicious" it would be to have a flat, like Selden's, all to oneself; when he replies that he does know a woman who lives in one, Lily interrupts him: "'Oh, I know—you mean Gerty Farish.' She smiled a little unkindly. 'But I said *marriageable*—and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap....'" (7). The snobbish tone sounds very much like Mrs. Trenor's, for whom "horrid" is a favourite adjective. Lily has already acquired the appropriate note of disdain she assumes when speaking about those she considers socially inferior; her remarks also suggest how beauty and money constitute her guiding criteria of worth, and her ungenerous sentiments about the terms of Gerty's life are clearly not meant to endear Lily to us.

4

A major part of the novel's plot centers on an intense struggle between Lily Bart and Bertha Dorset. We get our first and telling glimpse of Bertha while she is looking for a seat on the Bellomont train: "'Oh, Lily—are you going to Bellomont? Then you can't let me have your seat, I suppose? But I *must* have a seat in this carriage—porter, you must find me a seat at once. Can't someone be put somewhere else?'" (23). Bertha's character is revealed in few words: utterly self-engrossed and irresponsible, Bertha, with her self-assertive tone and gestures, is all will, and, as this incident portends, has no scruples sacrificing other people to please or protect herself. Strange though it may seem, Lily considers her a model, wishing she possessed Bertha's power with men: "the mere thought of that other woman, who could take up a man and toss him aside as she willed, without having to regard him as a possible factor in her plans, filled Lily Bart with envy" (25). Lily's desire is aimed at Bertha's negative form of power, at her ruthless and bull-like strength to behave as her instincts lead. In other words, Bertha's example helps sharpen Lily's perception of what is necessary in the pursuit of pleasure and in power struggles.(2)

The reason Lily fails to "catch" Percy Gryce has to do more with the consequences of mimetic rivalry than with "her impulsively expressed wishes to be with Selden" (221), as Poirier believes. Lily does not accompany Percy to church because she wishes to publicly demonstrate *her* power over Selden—a deliberate response to the rumours that Selden and Bertha's affair is still alive. The story underlines Lily's entrapment in the grip of imitative desire: "Miss Bart had really meant to go to church..... but ... today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden. Why had he come? Was it to see herself or Bertha Dorset?" (53). Bertha's presence has revitalized the triangular relationship, and the day after Selden's arrival, Lily, confident in her unbounded power over men and convinced that Selden had come to see her, is surprised to find him and Bertha closeted in the Bellomont library: "Was it possible, after all, that he had come for Bertha Dorset?... But Lily was not easily disconcerted; competition put her on her mettle..." (60-61).(3) The passage illustrates the power of mimetic desire to muddle understanding, for Lily's assumptions stem from her determination to challenge Bertha's presumed hold over Selden. But although competition helps to sharpen her courage, Lily chooses not to succumb to mimetic rivalry; unlike Bertha, she refuses to be unscrupulous, even in dealings with her rival. Diana Trilling is right: "what Mrs. Wharton is captured by in Lily Bart is her ambiguity of purpose, the conflict between her good sense and the pull of spirit" (109). Lily's practical 'good sense,' determined by the laws

governing social interaction in the novel, grounds her in the pervasive atmosphere of trivial ambitions, vain display, and fruitless rivalries, while her 'pull of spirit,' shaped by Selden's criticism and by Lily's lingering sense of tradition, enables her to transcend the negative forms of desire that circulate in the house of mirth.

Before examining this turning point in Lily's life, I would like to consider how a minor character, Gerty Farish—from whom Lily feels so different because, as she makes clear, "[Gerty] likes being good, and I like being happy" (7)—enacts in her own world what Lily undertakes on a larger scale. Though poor, Gerty is a model of compassion and generosity, and is in every respect motivated by the desire for the good. As if to test Gerty's character—and to dramatize Wharton's sense that the human begins when one renounces mimetic violence—the story unexpectedly thrusts Gerty into a quiet but passionate relationship in which she finds herself competing against Lily for Selden's love. The morning after the Brys' entertainment to which Selden had taken his cousin, Gerty begins to see herself as "the centre of a little illumination of her own" (149), only to realize that Selden had been calling on her because of her goodness to Lily. We witness Gerty's silent suffering as her "suddenly flaming jealousy" jolts her out of a contented existence, pulling her deeper into the love triangle, and profoundly altering her relations with Lily and Selden:

And now she was thrust out [of Selden's heart], and the door barred against her by Lily's hand! ....on her bed sleep could not come, and she lay face to face with the fact that she hated Lily Bart. It closed with her in the darkness like some formless evil to be blindly grappled with. *Reason, judgment, renunciation, all the sane daylight forces*, were beaten back in the sharp struggle for self-preservation. She wanted happiness—wanted it as fiercely and unscrupulously as Lily did, but without Lily's power of obtaining it. (161-63; emphasis added)

Eric Gans explains how difficult it is for people to transcend resentment:

The resentful imagination is a reaction against real perceptions that are painful in that they show another in the place that the self would like to occupy. Unrealizable desire is faced with the scandal of a humanly realized centrality. (*The End of Culture* 225)

Immediately after witnessing Gerty's poignant sense of bitter defeat, we see Lily knocking on Gerty's door, late at night, unaware of her friend's torment, herself exhausted and humiliated, having just narrowly escaped Gus Trenor's sexual advances: "Gerty's compassionate instincts, responding to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances.... disciplined sympathy checked the wonder on Gerty's lips, and made her draw her friend silently into the sitting-room..." (163). Compassion, unthinkable among the other characters, has become second nature to this "incorrigible missionary" (270), whose brief moral lapse prevents any inclination to perceive her as a sentimentalized figure. Although, as Girard points out, "victory over desire is extremely painful" (*Deceit* 300), Gerty does not allow hatred to override generosity of spirit. When Gerty reflects over the incident, Wharton makes it clear that sublimation of resentment is constructive of the human community: "what had passed in the secrecy of

[Gerty's] own breast seemed to resolve itself, when the mist of the struggle cleared, into a breaking down of the bounds of self, a deflecting of the wasted personal emotion into the general current of human understanding" (269).

5

In Gerty-like manner, Lily manages to escape the mimetic element in desire. Aware of her circle's obsession with social significance, Bertha undertakes a systematic campaign of malicious gossip against Lily, resorting to "every turn of the allusive jargon which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood" (110)--confirming the view that in the psychological "struggle of consciousnesses in a universe of physical nonviolence" (*Deceit* 110), social ridicule has become the new weapon for destroying one's enemies. So, when Bertha's love-letters fall into Lily's hands, and given the rules of self-preservation governing the characters' lives, Lily would be justified if she chose to retaliate:

... with a man of George Dorset's temper there could be no thought of condonation—the possessor of his wife's letters could overthrow with a touch the whole structure of her existence.... For a moment the irony of the coincidence tinged Lily's disgust with a confused sense of triumph. But the disgust prevailed—all her instinctive resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples, rose against the other feeling. (104)

Lily is saved from further mimetic rivalries by the restraining hand of tradition and by her enduring sense of honour, two values that represent the only transcendence available in a society where "generosity of feeling" (307) and moral restraint have tacitly become two incomprehensible follies of the remote and forgotten past. Lily's view of experience reaches far back into time—her backward glance, so to speak—suggesting a larger sense of human fellowship and her apprehension of "the primacy of the ethical" in human affairs (*Originary Thinking* 3), in contrast to the narcissistic outlook of a Bertha Dorset. Lily's moral imagination enables her to perceive the consequences of a simple action that could destroy the entire fabric and 'overthrow' the 'whole structure' of a person's existence.<sup>(4)</sup> The extent of Lily's shrinking from such an act is reflected in the strength of her feelings of 'disgust' and 'contamination.' The passage also attests to Lily's grasp of the ethical as a supreme human dimension and represents a scathing indictment of the novel's barbarians who, unlike Gerty and Lily, have severed their links with the past by undermining the continuity of life in the present, and who have cut themselves loose from what Wharton calls "old habits, old restraints, the land of inherited order" (147). In their chaotic scramble for social prestige, the members of Lily's set, for whom the sanctity of tradition is unthinkable, have reduced all values to questions of what Wemmick in *Great Expectations* calls 'portable property.'

Feminist critics of the novel have invariably overlooked the significance of Lily's action in burning Bertha's love letters. Frances L. Restuccia, for instance, in the widely-anthologized "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)," notes that "*The House of Mirth* is a feminist novel" that celebrates Lily's "irreducibility," her "indeterminacy," and her "equivocation"--aspects of character that enable Lily to elude "the attempted encapsulations of her male observers" (407). In "The Destruction of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, and Male Chauvinism," Nancy Topping Bazin claims that "The destruction of Lily Bart is rooted in her socialization and her subsequent inability to act with conviction as her

socialization dictates or totally in opposition to it" (97). Absent from such readings, obviously, is a recognition of Wharton's willingness to endow the central character with full moral agency: Lily's gesture shows no equivocation whatsoever. Lily will not become Bertha's double.

In subduing her desire for revenge, Lily also rejects the view of the social order held by Simon Rosedale, for whom the desire to enter what he perceives as the "inner paradise" (240) accounts for every one of his actions, but whose structural necessity in Wharton's novel has rarely been recognized.<sup>(5)</sup> Presented as the story's most conspicuous social-climber, Rosedale knows what he wants and is refreshingly candid about his determination to get it. He begins his social enterprise as a complete outsider, stigmatized, repeatedly snubbed, and invariably ignored. Judy Trenor expresses her circle's typical response: "he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory" (16). But such an obdurate opposition actually inflames Rosedale's ambitions, for "he was prompt to perceive that the general dullness of the season afforded him an unusual opportunity to shine, and he set about with patient industry to form a background for his growing glory" (121). In a world of social antagonisms and sharp rebuffs, Rosedale, untiring in his efforts, dedicates himself to a life of steady calculation, a life in which the "right" wife would help "establish him in the bosom of the Van Osburghs and the Trenors" (239):

'Why should I mind saying that I want to get into society? A man ain't ashamed to say he wants to own a racing stable or a picture gallery. Well, a taste for society is just another kind of hobby. Perhaps I want to get even with some of the people who cold-shouldered me last year.' (256)

Rosedale's candour is Wharton's attempt to speak the unspeakable and to expose the social hypocrisies of fashionable society. By the end of the story, Rosedale "had figured once or twice at the Trenor dinners, and had learned to speak with just the right note of disdain of the big Van Osburgh crushes" (241). In his triumph, Rosedale becomes a snob, imitating what appears to be the Trenors' affected speech. If Lily refuses his marriage offer (coupled with his condition that she blackmail Bertha into silence), the decision reflects a disenchantment with a world in which ethical considerations seem incongruous: "Put by Rosedale in terms of business-like give-and-take, this understanding took on the harmless air of a mutual accommodation.... Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures" (259). Richard Poirier underestimates Lily's grasp of the "primacy of the ethical" when he claims that "Lily's failure to carry out this blackmail is a matter less of ethics than ... of her responding to impulses" (221). Even before she burns Bertha's letters, Lily is clearly aware of her moral agency:

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In fending off the offer [Rosedale] was so plainly ready to renew, had she not sacrificed to one of those abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life?... why should she hesitate to make private use of the facts that chance had put in her way? After all, half the opprobrium of such an act lies in the name attached to it. Call it blackmail and it becomes unthinkable; but explain that it injures no one, and that the rights regained by

it were unjustly forfeited, and he must be a formalist indeed who can find no plea in its defence. (300)

Lily's reflections go to the heart of what ails New York society: in their desire for an "enviable" social image, the characters have subverted the dictates of the moral life and reduced human interaction to a question of 'concrete weights and measures.' Social supremacy rules where traditional notions of honour once prevailed; spiritual transcendence gives way to social considerations. Diana Trilling notes that "one of the subtler themes of *The House of Mirth* is the parallel Mrs. Wharton traces between Lily's defeat and the inevitable defeat of art in a crass materialistic culture" (109). More fundamentally still, the defeat reflects the subversion of the moral life. Lily's decision indicates her ability to apprehend the universality of values and signals her withdrawal from society's habit of legitimizing its unethical practices: for Lily, blackmail remains blackmail no matter how one looks at it or how justifiable circumstances might make it. The nobility of Lily's resisting such an easy course lies in the fruitlessness of her action: nobody will ever know, let alone understand, the significance of Lily's renunciation of mimetic violence. Only Lawrence Selden will—when Lily is already dead.

It is difficult not to read *The House of Mirth*, especially in light of its last chapter, as an ironic comment on Selden's failure to perceive Lily's real nature until after her death. If the other characters manipulate one another to gratify their social ambitions, Selden is experimenting with Lily to satisfy personal theories and guesses. The opening of the novel catches him putting her intentions to the test as he spots her waiting for the Bellomont train: "An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line ... and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen, she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test" (3). Selden's experiments reflect his bad faith, since they suggest that Lily has already been judged. Behind Selden's ungenerous shrewdness, we sense a fastidious, suspicious, and an excessively analytical mind, determined to "figure out" Lily. The point is repeatedly made that Selden's ways of knowing Lily proceed from his habit of putting her actions under close scrutiny: "In judging Miss Bart, he had always made use of the 'argument from design'" (5), and "he could never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing" (11). At the same time, Selden's rigorous examination of Lily's conduct makes him her most discerning critic/mediator, forcing Lily to re-evaluate and discard some of her crude ambitions:

Lily found herself scanning her little world through his retina... She looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one, from Gus Trenor, with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his shoulders, as he preyed on a jellied plover, to his wife, at the opposite end of the long bank of orchids, suggestive, with her glaring good-looks, of a jeweller's window lit by electricity. (55)

Lily's strongly mediated classification of her friends shows a group oblivious to the higher possibilities of existence; their meager achievements, essentially social, testify to the death of the intellect and the spirit in their lives.

In contrast, Selden's distinction seems evident because, as Lily thinks, "he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at ..." (54). The distinction, Lily believes, lies in his ability to transcend the power of money and resist the prescriptions of the social codes. His

outside points of reference work to offset the stifling power of the 'great gilt cage'; these 'points of contact' are ultimately located in what Selden himself calls his "republic of the spirit," a seemingly attractive alternative to the society depicted in the novel, for it corresponds to the realm of the intellect and "cultivation" (63). In the "republic of the spirit," Selden feels free "from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (68). After spending time in society, he retreats to his safe haven, apparently unaffected by the trivialities of the outside world, thanks to what he calls his 'amphibious' ability. However, Selden's failure to respond to Lily's appeals reflects an obvious flaw in his republic.

"Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?" (72). Although his words cheapen her social aspirations, throwing her whole world out of focus, Selden is unable to suggest a viable alternative to what he condemns. Irving Howe notes that in Wharton's fiction "Men fail the heroines less from bad faith than from weak imagination, a laziness of spirit" (15). In Selden's case, laziness of spirit signals his ultimate failure to resist the insidious influence of the prevailing social standards; the "doubting mind" (193) succumbs to the gossip spread by the barbarians of Lily's world, and his undoing happens while he is immersed in the element he disapproves of and Lily's whereabouts become the subject of discussion for a group assembled around Carry Fisher's dinner-table. Thinking that Judy Trenor was at home, Lily had left the party to join her:

'The Trenors'?' exclaimed Mrs. Jack Stepney. 'Why, the house is closed—Judy telephoned me from Bellomont this evening.'

'Did she? That's queer. I'm sure I'm not mistaken. Well, come now, Trenor's there, anyhow—I—oh, well—the fact is, I've no head for numbers,' he broke off, admonished by the nudge of an adjoining foot, and the smile that circled the room....

The air of the place stifled him, and he wondered why he had stayed in it so long ... It was pitiable that he, who knew the mixed motives on which social judgments depend, should still feel himself so swayed by them. How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected? (158-59)

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So shrewd an observer, who "*knew* the mixed motives" (emphasis added) underlying gossip, is nevertheless unfaithful to his knowledge when he lets his perception of Lily be mediated by the group's insinuations. His difficulty in breathing gives the lie to his claim that, though he spends a great deal of time in Society, his "lungs can [still] work in another air" (70). To be 'swayed' by malicious gossip is to betray a lack of a strong inward self, and to endorse, if only grudgingly, the standards that censure Lily. It is to reveal a keen concern for one's social reputation, to fear the kind of judgment conveyed by the group's smug and knowing smile—in short, it is to side with the vulgar world of the Fishers and the Stepneys against Lily.

Selden forsakes Lily once more when she is expelled from the Dorsets' yacht. Humiliated but hoping to be saved from the awkwardness of the moment, Lily asks Selden to take her for a walk: "[His] reason obstinately harped on the proverbial relation between smoke and fire. The memory of Mrs. Fisher's hints ... while [it] deepened his pity also increased his constraint, since, whichever way he sought a free outlet

for sympathy, it was blocked by the fear of committing a blunder" (219). Selden's 'wretched doubt' indicates his inability to brush off past insinuations about Lily and, through his faith in her, transcend the force of gossip. The novel is making a direct connection between Society's reduction of ethical considerations to a matter of 'concrete weights and measures' and Selden's entrapment in the realm of evidence, his failure to believe in Lily's goodness and innocence—a failure discernable in his adherence to the safe and reductive generalizations of a proverb.<sup>(6)</sup> Richard Poirier captures Selden's inadequacy well: "Selden's ways of 'knowing' people are essentially cosmopolitan—by the guesswork, the gossip, the categorizing assumptions that substitute for the slowly accumulated intimacy on which Mrs. Wharton places such redeeming value" (*A World Elsewhere* 232-33). The 'slowly accumulated intimacy,' presented as a surer basis for knowledge and a viable condition in human relations, is another way of describing faith and trust. When assaulted by the vulgar hints of Mrs. Fisher and her like, Selden's 'republic' proves no fortress: denying Lily his sympathy attests to a stinginess of feelings for which his justification remains purely social. Selden's desertion of Lily, more conspicuous than her desertion by her stodgier, less discerning friends, reveals that society is as triumphant over him as over Lily.

To understand the significance of this desertion, we should now examine the happy story of two minor characters. Nettie Struther first became involved with a stylish gentleman, but was left ill and abandoned until she was rescued by Gerty Farish. As Nettie explains, however, the real change in her life began when George asked her to marry him: "'At first I thought I couldn't, because we'd been brought up together, and I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that that made it easier.... If George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn't see why I shouldn't begin over again—and I did'" (315). George's faith, combining sympathy and understanding, and growing from his shared past with Nettie, makes the latter's renewal possible by bringing hope to her life, and attests to the superiority of belief over the contractual perception of human relationships. Drawing on George's unconditional trust, Nettie has found enough strength to gather up the fragments of her life.

The effect of the visit on Lily is profound. After leaving Nettie's home, she sees that, through George's faith and Nettie's courage, the couple has reached "the central truth of existence" (319). This truth has to do with the sense of solidarity and relatedness in human affairs and demonstrates the need for generosity of spirit as a way of counteracting the disintegrating social forces that pervade the house of mirth, invade Selden's 'republic,' and entrap the human spirit. Unlike Nettie and George, "the men and women [Lily] knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance" (319). Community can be achieved through a strong sense of fellowship, which is possible only through a clear understanding of the destructive potential of mimetic desire.

Just before her death, Lily realizes, in what is perhaps the most compelling passage in the novel, that there is something more miserable than material poverty:

And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts. She herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness

for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (319)

Individual existence acquires meaning and a sense of permanence only in so far as it is part of the larger human community. Lily realizes that identity cannot exist in a vacuum, that hope for the future is inevitably based on the memories, emotions, and experiences of the past, and that fashionable society, though it might give one temporary eminence, does not include a spiritual home as one of its advantages.

Because Wharton's novel is concerned ultimately with what makes us human and with the ethical, that supreme human dimension, it is appropriate to describe it as more than just a "document of cultural anthropology" (Banta). In its careful and detailed tracing of the mechanisms of mimetic desire, *The House of Mirth* is a powerful document of fundamental and generative anthropology.

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## Notes

1 For a sample of this rejection of morality in the novel: Wai-Chee Dimock claims that "Morality, in *The House of Mirth*, provides no transcendent language, no alternative way of being" (387); Gary M. Leonard, for his part, thinks that the "'eerie modern' brilliance of this novel rests on Wharton's persistent and skillful refusal to provide a moral center... to experience and the phenomenon of consciousness as well" (13).[\(back\)](#)

2 Others envy Bertha's ways: after comparing Bertha to Lily, Judy Trenor has no doubt whom she admires: "Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman!" (44). Judy's choice reveals once again how the scale of values in the New York upper class is turned upside down.[\(back\)](#)

3 If people in the house of mirth do not go to church, neither do they put the library to its original use: "The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation" (59).[\(back\)](#)

4 For one of the best treatments of the power of the moral imagination to broaden human sympathy, see Martha C. Nussbaum's "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible": Literature and the Moral Imagination" and "Perception and Revolution: The Princess Casamassima and the Political Imagination" in *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford UP, 1990). 148-67 and 195-219.[\(back\)](#)

5 Except for Irene C. Goldman, no other critic has noticed the ways in which Rosedale functions as a

structural necessity in the novel, as a scapegoat to speak the unspeakable: "Wharton uses Rosedale's Jewishness to illuminate economic issues and social hypocrisies that would otherwise remain underground" (26).[\(back\)](#)

6 Ironically, Selden fails to heed his own advice to Gerty: "[Lily] has it in her to become whatever she is believed to be-you'll help her by believing the best of her" (156).[\(back\)](#)

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# The Sign of the Cross in John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*

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My dear Children, call to mind the former days, the years of ancient times; remember also your songs in the night, and commune with your own heart.

(The author's Preface to *Grace Abounding*, p. 3.)

The reader of John Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), may be surprised to learn that Bunyan does not seek salvation at all, at least not of his own desire and will. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, he is literally assaulted, over and over again, by signs, visions, and biblical texts which threaten and astound him. He writes that the word of God "would . . . fall like a hot thunderbolt . . . upon my Conscience . . . [causing] my very body as well as my minde to shake and totter under the sence of the dreadful Judgement of God. . . . I felt also such a clogging and heat at my stomach, by reason of this my terrour, that I was . . . as if my breast-bone would have split in sunder" (50). He is driven to God in fear and trembling. His fear of wrath and judgment compels him to seek the God of grace and mercy. A close reading of *Grace Abounding* reveals that mimetic rivalry and conflict, as defined by René Girard,<sup>(1)</sup> provide the fuel for the fire of fear and guilt which torments Bunyan. Mimetic rivalry is fundamentally interpersonal, but it is experienced subjectively and often internalized as guilt or inner conflict. As we know from Eric Gans, mimetic rivalry often finds expression in resentment, independently of any overt object of desire.<sup>(2)</sup> The angry God who persecutes Bunyan is essentially a reflection of Bunyan's own resentment. Mimetic rivalry and resentment are transformed into an inner struggle with God.

But how then does Bunyan find peace and assurance, the relief from fear and guilt? Dayton Haskin has observed that his experience conforms to the narrative paradigm found in Paul's conversion narrative, the transition from great "sin to abundant grace" (307). But conversion was not a matter of simply imitating the Biblical model. The Reformation doctrine of *sola fides* meant that salvation could never be reduced to any mechanical repetition of the Biblical paradigm through either actions or words. Salvation required conversion, the sudden and unpredictable act of God, His unmerited bestowal of grace. Haskin, by explaining *Grace Abounding* in terms of a literary model, fails to account for Bunyan's experience of grace as a gift from God, as well as the ethical meaning of grace. The narrative paradigm noted by Haskin is ultimately rooted in human interaction and therefore falls under the domain of the ethical.

Thomas Luxon has recognized that the experience of conversion goes beyond simply a narrative paradigm. As Luxon observes, "The words of Scripture must be interpreted, but truly saving knowledge

of God's Word involves more than interpretation; it must be experienced in the heart" (449). This experience comes through a sign, "a new conjunction of word and image . . . a new conjunction of the experience of things with the experience of the Word" (449). Calvin's doctrine of predestination meant that the central question of the Reformation, "what must I do to be saved?" would become the epistemological question, "how can I know if I have saving faith?" Faith is the result of God's "calling," the gift of grace at the moment of conversion. At the same time, the corruption of man's understanding after the fall of Adam made the direct perception of calling problematic. Individuals could search for only the *signs* of saving grace in everyday life. As we shall see, the paradigmatic sign of grace in Bunyan's experience is the Crucifixion. The Crucifixion (and its essential sequel, the Resurrection) forms the basis for both Bunyan's experience and the narrative pattern of his autobiography.

For Bunyan, grace is found at certain key moments when God communicates directly with him, giving him a sign. Grace is an *event*, located on a physical or virtual scene. Grace, for Bunyan, is always found and experienced through the mediation of an ostensive sign, either a biblical text or an image. He calls these moments of grace "songs in the night," suggesting their fundamentally private and emotionally affective nature (3). The essential feature of *Grace Abounding* is these moments of private revelation. At certain points in his quest, Bunyan is simply presented with a sign--a mysterious wind, a vision of Jesus, or a biblical text which suddenly "falls" upon him and seems to come from another realm. He must accept the sign as a personal message from God *in faith*; the only authority is the implied or explicit connection of the sign to the Bible, together with his experience of peace and assurance. The moment of grace actually obviates any rational process of interpretation. The sign is ostensive, directly pointing to God's mercy. The experience of grace is structured remarkably like an ecclesiastical sacrament as defined by Luther--consisting of the word, a sign, and the promise of grace--and communicates the same sense of peace and assurance (279). The crucial difference from a sacrament, however, is that grace for Bunyan is found privately, independently of the mediation of the church or priest. By finding grace on a private scene, Bunyan is liberated from the hierarchy and authority of the Established Church.

The resolution of Bunyan's inner struggle through a sign conforms to Eric Gans's definition of the underlying function of culture as the "deferral of conflict through representation" and more specifically his "minimal hypothesis" of the human origin.<sup>(3)</sup> In Gans's "generative anthropology," a single "originary event" forms the generative matrix for the essential elements of human culture.<sup>(4)</sup> We can trace both the sacraments and Bunyan's experience of grace back to this originary event as hypothesized by Gans. Bunyan writes, "the Lord would show me the death of Christ"(40); the representation of the Crucifixion (considered as a personal communication from God) functions to resolve, or more precisely to defer his inner conflict. His experience of grace as peace and assurance should always be understood as the successful deferral of mimetic conflict, even if that conflict has been effectively internalized. The Puritan imperative for conversion meant that the believer must seek the solution to conflict *within* first, and only then through the community of believers, the Separatist congregation.

2

## From Mimetic Conflict to an Angry God

Bunyan's quest for salvation takes on a hermeneutic or epistemological dimension through (1) the Puritan imperative to understand the Bible and apply it to himself, to find his life in the Bible and find the Bible in his life, as well as (2) a search for the signs of grace. The basic interpretive mode in *Grace Abounding*, which is to say, the basic process of his progress toward salvation, is internalization and integration. We

will examine how conflict is *internalized* by Bunyan as a prerequisite to its resolution on the scene of conversion. Integration and internalization may also be understood as forms of reconciliation. The basic problem of *Grace Abounding* is the reconciliation of self and Other.

Bunyan begins his narrative with a bold statement of class resentment. He recounts that he came from "a low and inconsiderable generation; my father's house being of that rank that is meanest, and most despised of all families in the Land" (5). The language here goes beyond simply expressing his humble origins. He was actually "despised" for his "low generation."<sup>(5)</sup> W.R. Owens notes that Bunyan's works are filled with "antagonism towards the rich and powerful of this world" (xiii). In the allegorical world of *Pilgrim's Progress*, as Bunyan comments pointedly, "Sins are all Lords and great ones" (PP 143). The fact that Bunyan wrote *Grace Abounding* from a jail cell may have contributed to the sense of resentment in his work. He was imprisoned in 1660 for preaching to an unlawful assembly and refusing to attend the services of the Established Church. He spent a total of twelve years in jail. The composition of his spiritual autobiography effectively helped to establish his identity as a non-conformist in the face of opposition.

Bunyan's call to preaching formed one of the main points of his public controversies. The public authorities bitterly opposed Bunyan's calling as a minister. "Mechanick preachers" were scorned by the established clergy and learned non-conformist ministers alike.<sup>(6)</sup> The judges at his trial insisted that he leave off preaching and follow his "calling" as a tinker, his inherited trade ("A Relation" 110-11). The judges apparently did not want to imprison Bunyan because of the potential for negative publicity. If he would agree to leave off preaching, he would be released--an offer which Bunyan refused. The judges displayed bitter scorn and, at times, an almost irrational fury at Bunyan's assertion of his (biblically-based) right to preach. In exasperation they threatened him with violence, telling him, "you must stretch by the neck for it, I tell you plainly" (118). This was not an idle threat; the law supported the death penalty for Bunyan's charges (Watts 224). By maintaining his position in spite of the antagonism of the judges, Bunyan placed his beliefs above his life. On the side of the judges, it must be said that they were in fear of armed revolts, such as the recent London insurrection led by Fifth Monarchist Thomas Venner in which forty-six people were killed. But even so, there is considerable truth in the complaint of Bunyan's wife to the judges, that "because he is a tinker and a poor man; therefore he is despised, and cannot have justice" (128).

At the age of sixteen years, Bunyan fought in the Civil War, serving in the Parliamentary army for three years--the "most impressionable age" in his mature development (Hill 7). When he recounts some of the early providences of his life, he mentions a fellow soldier who asked to take Bunyan's place during a siege, and "as he stood Sentinel, he was shot into the head with a Musket bullet and died" (8). Although Bunyan's narration of the Civil War is limited to this brief reference in *Grace Abounding*, we can safely speculate that the war's impact upon him was enormous. The possibility of violence and death stands like a specter over his life's work as a writer and preacher, imparting a desperate urgency to the imperative for salvation.

His fears, however, do not begin with the Civil War. Even as a child, and for at least the first half of his life, his inner struggle takes the form of an overwhelming fear of hell. He writes that "even in childhood He [the Lord] did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrifie me with dreadful visions. . . the apprehensions of Devils, and wicked spirits" (6). And even after he has been called to the ministry and begins preaching, one of the reasons he records in his decision not to avoid arrest is "the dread of the torments of Hell, which I was sure they must partake of, that for fear of the cross do shrink from their

profession of Christ" (99). Sports and gaming are also connected with the fear of hell for Bunyan. As a youngster, "in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down and afflicted in my mind" (6). In this same paragraph (§7), he makes a direct transition from his sports and games, to the "despair of life and heaven," and then to a vision of torment and hell. And his famous vision of Christ as a threatening judge occurs during a game of tipcat,<sup>(7)</sup> another competitive game which could include betting (10). Sports and games are virtually the definition of competitive mimesis. Sports and games serve to channel mimetic rivalry into safe forms, but they can do so only by evoking the violence they are meant to defer. The possibility of conflict during these games is not imaginary. Bunyan was tremendously sensitive and imaginative, but the fear that pervades his narrative is not irrational.

In addition to the climate of physical violence in England at this time, we should also take note of Bunyan's swearing, his violence of *language*. He writes that as a youth "I had but few Equals, . . . both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God" (6). Furthermore, "I did still let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the Law of God . . . . I was the very ring-leader of all the Youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness" (7). His transgressions, and the fear of hell which results, occur in a group context involving competition and mimesis: he was the "ring-leader"; the others imitate him. The dangers of competitive imitation are especially prominent in the following passage:

But one day as I was standing at a Neighbor's Shop-window, and there cursing and swearing, and playing the Mad-man after my wonted manner, there sate within the woman of the house, and heard me; who, though she was a very loose and ungodly wretch, yet protested that I swore and cursed at that most fearful rate, that she was made to tremble to hear me; And told me further, *That I was the ungodliest Fellow for swearing that ever she heard in all her life; and that I, by thus doing, was able to spoile all the Youth in a whole town, if they came but in my company.*

27. At this reproof I was silenced, and put to secret shame; and that too, as I thought, before the God of heaven: wherefore, while I there stood, and hanging down my head, I wished with all my heart that I might be a little childe again, that my Father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing. (11-12)

3

The thought that shames and frightens him here is not just his own swearing, but that by so doing he might "spoil all the youth in a whole town," *i.e.*, that they will imitate him.

Before he finds assurance of his salvation, Bunyan seeks to escape the entire possibility of mimetic conflict by recourse to some imaginary haven. He writes, "I wished with all my heart that I might be a little childe again" (12). Bunyan, like the romantics who came later, imagines childhood as a safe haven from a competitive and conflictual world. He expresses a similar escapist tendency when he writes that "now I was sorry that God had made me a man. . . . The beasts, birds, fishes, &c., I blessed their condition, for they had not a sinful nature, they were not obnoxious in the sight of God; they were not to go to Hell fire after death; I could therefore a rejoiced had my condition been as any of theirs" (28-29). His idealization of the animal world can be understood as the wish to escape the frustrations of unfulfillable and conflictual mimetic desire.

His temptation to commit the sin against the Holy Ghost ("to sell my Saviour") may be understood in much the same light. This temptation comes after he has already found evidence of his calling. But every experience of grace, every sign of salvation, is only temporary. Inevitably he begins doubting again. He writes that the tempter provokes him "to desire to sin that sin, that I was as if I could not, must not, neither should be quiet until I had committed that" (33). The fact that this sin is represented as promising "quiet" suggests that conflictual desire again is at issue here. The sin against the Holy Ghost, according to the author of Hebrews, happens when "those who were once enlightened, and having tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost," reject that grace and "fall away" (6:4, 6). The crucial fact about this sin, the reason it represents a temptation to him, is that *it can never be forgiven*. Therefore it promises "quiet." It is the sin to end all sin. It promises the end of temptation, the endless deferral of desire, through the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure. More precisely, his wish here is to be rid of the *other* of mimetic desire, hence the temptation to "sell my Saviour" and thus to desire independently of any mediator. Vincent Newey is correct therefore when he writes, "Psychologically understood, the compulsion to 'sell and part with this most blessed Christ, to exchange him . . . for anything' represents the self's subconscious bid for autonomous being, for freedom from the authority of [the] Other" (198). At this stage in his quest, Bunyan still looks at Christ as the paternal interdictor of desire rather than his role-model for converted desire.

After the woman at the shop-window rebukes him for swearing, he resolves to leave off swearing and reform his life. He begins his pilgrimage proper with "outward reformation" (12), a well-established convention of the conversion narrative.<sup>(8)</sup> He begins to read the Bible, but only the historical parts, ignoring the epistles of Paul. In other words, he reads the Bible as an adventure tale, a form of entertainment, rather than a message of grace that applies to him here and now. He also begins attending church regularly. His outward reformation together with church attendance impresses his neighbors mightily:

Our Neighbors did take me to be a very godly man, a new and religious man, and did marvel much to see such a great and famous alteration in my life and manners. . . .

32. . . . When I understood that these were their words and opinions of me, it pleased me mighty well: for though, as yet, I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite, yet I loved to be talked of as one that was truly godly. I was proud of my Godliness; and, I did all I did either to seen of, or to be well spoken of, by men. (12-13)

His reform is revealed here to be motivated by a desire for worldly admiration instead of a desire for godliness in and of itself. In other words, he is still within a mimetic framework. His desire is focused on the things of this world rather than heaven. In Girardian terms, he still chooses an "internal mediator": his desire is mediated by someone with whom he can compete (*i.e.* his church-going neighbors), instead of God, who is the perfect model for desire since He exists beyond all possibility of conflict (*DDN* 9). Puritanism demands of Bunyan more than simply moral reform. It asks for a complete change of heart, an internal conversion of his desire so that it is directed toward heavenly things. Bunyan's outward reform brings him no peace of mind. His conscience continues to bother him despite the new-found praise and respect of his neighbors.

The next step of his pilgrimage is a sermon preached by his parson against breaking the Sabbath. This sermon awakens him to a new sense of guilt: "at that time I felt what guilt was, though never before, that I can remember, . . . and so went home . . . with a great burden upon my spirit" (10). But Bunyan's guilt

is not an unambiguous sign of grace. It is possible for a sinner to be awakened to a sense of guilt without "effectual calling." His guilt makes him uncomfortable but does not effect true repentance: "when I had satisfied nature with my food, I shook the Sermon out of my mind, and to my old custom of sports and gaming I returned with great delight" (10).

4

The parson and his sermon still exist in a relation of external authority to him and therefore do not impel him to repentance. He only forbids; he does not offer any positive ideal. The parson is above him in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but still relatively close to him, therefore he is a potential figure for rivalry. He can be excelled or rejected but cannot serve as an effective mediator for desire. For Bunyan, the way around the mimetic obstacle is to internalize the message, translating the sermon into a form which will more effectively impress his (still fallen) understanding. The same day, Sunday, the parson's sermon against breaking the Sabbath finds expression in a voice and personal vision to the "eyes of my understanding":

But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game at Cat, and having struck it one blow from the hole; just as I was about to strike it the second time, a voice did suddenly dart from Heaven into my Soul, which said, *Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to Heaven? or have thy sins, and go to Hell?* At this I was put to an exceeding maze; wherefore, leaving my Cat upon the ground, I looked up to heaven, and was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these, and other my ungodly practices. (10)

This is one of those key moments in which an instance of mimetic conflict is transformed, before our eyes, into an angry God who becomes the antagonist in an inner struggle. The minister, potentially a figure of rivalry and resentment, has given him a message of legal reform or Mosaic law--"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8)--an abstract ethical command external to his understanding. Not surprisingly, this message leaves no lasting impression until he translates it into a personal vision so that his guilt can be "fastened on my spirit" (10). To support my assertion that the minister of the Established Church is a mimetic rival, we can turn to an adjacent passage in which he describes his youthful infatuation with their religious services:

I was so overrun with the spirit of superstition, that I adored, and that with great devotion, even all things (both the High place, Priest, Clerk, Vestments, Service, and what else) belonging to the Church; counting all things holy that were therein contained; and especially the Priest and Clerk most happy, and without doubt greatly blessed, because they were the Servants, as I then thought, of God, and were principal in the holy Temple, to do his work therein.

17. This conceit grew so strong in little time upon my spirit, that had I but seen a Priest, (though never so sordid and debauched in his life) I should find my spirit fall under him, reverence him, and knit unto him; yea, I thought for the love I did bear unto them, (supposing they were the Ministers of God) I could have layn down at their feet, and have been trampled upon by them; their Name, their Garb, and Work, did so intoxicate and bewitch me. (9)

In this passage he describes his reverence for priests and clerks as only "superstition," a "conceit" of his fallen spirit. The priests are "sordid and debauched." As a youth he only "supposes" they were ministers of God, implying that in fact they are not. He speaks here with the voice of disillusioned innocence: the voice of resentment. This resentment finds expression in his vision of Jesus as an angry judge, who then mirrors his own resentment back upon him, directing it towards moral reform. It is not coincidental that this vision occurs during a game of tipcat, a competitive game which could include betting, rivalry, and conflict. His "sports and gaming" awaken passion and resentment, which is compounded with his resentment for the Established minister. Thus the anger of God is composed of his resentment towards (1) the Mosaic law itself, (2) the parson, and (3) his gaming companions. All of these sources work to frustrate his desire.

At this point in his autobiography, however, his understanding of Jesus is still incomplete. He still sees Jesus here as distinctly *other*, the vengeful threatening God of the Old Testament rather than his personal intercessor with God.<sup>(9)</sup> He misunderstands Jesus as *other*, rather than *human*, like himself, in this case, a reflection of his own resentment. His vision is effective in beginning the process of repentance, but at this point the moral judgment offered by Jesus is still external to him, in the sense that he may accept or reject Jesus' warning. It is almost as if God is irrationally persecuting him. Before he can find forgiveness, he must come to a deeper insight into the nature of sin. The vehicle for this insight, as we shall see, is Jesus on the Cross, not the angry threatening God of wrath.

## The Scene of Conversion

In describing and summarizing the recursive process of his conversion, Bunyan writes,

In general [the Lord] was pleased to take this course with me, first to suffer me to be afflicted with temptation concerning them [the scriptures which torment him], and then reveal them to me [that is, their true meaning]; as sometimes I should lie under great guilt for sin, even crushed to the ground therewith, and then the Lord would show me the death of Christ, yea and so sprinkle my Conscience with his Blood, that I should find, and that before I was aware, that in that Conscience, where but just now did reign and rage the law, even there would rest and abide the Peace and Love of *God* thorow Christ.

128. Now had I an evidence, as I thought, of my salvation from Heaven, with many golden Seals, thereon, all hanging in my sight; now could I remember this manifestation, and the other discovery of grace with comfort; and should often long and desire that the last day were come, that I might for ever be inflamed with the sight, and joy, and communion of him, whose Head was crowned with Thorns, whose Face was spit on, and Body broken, and Soul made an offering for my sins. (39-40)

5

Rather than giving us here a particular event, he describes a general process, a series of events: "I remember this manifestation, and the other discovery of grace with comfort"--referring to more than one of his "songs in the night." We will examine in detail some of these specific scenes. But I want to start with this passage because it reveals the fundamental process at work here. Grace generally comes to him through the word; all of his experiences in this regard are textually based, either explicitly or implicitly. But he reveals here that the essential content of the word, the one constant of the scene of conversion is in fact the crucified Jesus: "the Lord would show me the death of Christ" through either a text or a vision

or both. In the above passage, he asserts that first he is "afflicted with temptation" by a particular scripture; then the Lord would "reveal them to me," that is, that same scripture's true meaning. This pattern of experience with scripture is synonymous with (as signified by the semi-colon and the conjunction "as" between the two clauses) his experience of "great guilt for sin," after which "the Lord would show me the death of Christ" for assurance. The Scriptures, for Bunyan, all ultimately refer to the Cross. For Bunyan, the imperative in interpreting the Bible is to apply it to himself personally. When he does so, the scripture in question points to his guilt and need for forgiveness and/or God's mercy towards him, both of which are realized in the Crucifixion.<sup>(10)</sup>

In the above passage, the second paragraph (§128) further develops the assurance he feels from "the sight, and joy, and communion of him, whose Head was crowned with Thorns, whose Face was spit on" and so on. The assurance of his salvation is thus tied inextricably with an understanding of Jesus in his suffering and Crucifixion. Just as with Paul on the road to Damascus, conversion is simultaneous with a revelation of the victimization of Jesus ("I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," Acts 9:5).<sup>(11)</sup> The same experience is represented in *Pilgrim's Progress*: it is only when Christian encounters the "Cross, and a little below in the bottom, a sepulchre" that "his burden is loosed from off his shoulders, and fell off his back" (PP 81-2). As he describes his experience in retrospect at the House Beautiful, "I saw one, as I thought in my mind, hang bleeding upon a tree; and very sight of him made my burden fall off my back" (PP 93-4).

But, paradoxically, the Crucifixion also produces the fear and guilt which torment Bunyan. The crucified Jesus replicates in toto the pattern from fear and guilt to peace and assurance which constitutes his experience of conversion. We can safely assume therefore that this image holds the key to the process of conversion as portrayed in *Grace Abounding*. Let us begin by examining the first half of this pattern: the Crucifixion in relation to his sense of guilt.

His struggle with despair after he thinks he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost serves to deepen his understanding of Christ's sacrifice and his guilt therein. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross renders all ritual sacrifices unnecessary because Jesus has offered himself for us "once for all" (10:10). In Bunyan's interpretation, just as Christ's sacrifice happens once and only once for all time, so our justification is also a one-time event. Having been once justified, therefore, those who continue in sin (*i.e.*, the sin against the Holy Ghost) have "crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh" (6:6); they sin directly against Jesus by making his sufferings non-redemptive--they make themselves guilty for the suffering and death of Jesus, for which they will be judged according to the law. Thus when Bunyan thinks that he has committed this sin, the idea which drives him to despair is that "My sin was point-blank against my Saviour"(52)--exactly Paul's realization on the road to Damascus. Bunyan concludes that "I had horribly abused the holy Son of God" (60). Although he later decides that he has not in fact committed this sin, his struggle here leads him into a deeper insight into the nature of sin itself. When he finally triumphs in his struggle with despair, it is through a metaphorical interpretation of an Old Testament Scripture: "the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly" may find shelter in the "city of refuge" from the "avenger of blood" (Josh. 20:3-4). He identifies himself as the "slayer" while the Scripture-promises are his "city of refuge" (68-9). In his self-understanding as a "slayer," one who has sinned against the Son of God, Bunyan goes far beyond the simple recognition of original sin found in other conversion narratives.

Bunyan's genius is always to make the Bible intensely personal and relevant. It is not just the Romans and Jews who crucified Jesus, it is *I*, my own sin, which results in the sacrifice of the scapegoat.

According to René Girard, what the Cross reveals, once and for all, is that the scapegoat is only a scapegoat, an innocent victim rather than a villain.<sup>(12)</sup> Christianity is the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism, the violence that hides behind the sacred. Once this revelation is made, humans can no longer so easily project their violence onto the *Other*; they are confronted with their own violence, and modern self-consciousness begins (Girard *THFW* 199). This is the "original sin" in which all humans without exception participate: our inherent propensity to conflictual desire and sacrificial violence. This sin is universal because, for Girard, it is the very basis of human culture. The Christian revelation demystifies the scapegoat mechanism and thus throws humans back upon themselves, upon their own inner resources, asking for the same radical renunciation of violence which Christ made. This renunciation is made possible through Christ's example.

But how does the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism in the Cross work to generate the experience of grace and assurance? Girard sees grace or atonement as an "at-one-ment, becoming reconciled with God" (*GR* 282). After the process of "kenosis," the "emptying" of conflictual desire, the self finds forgiveness through a complete mimetic identification with Christ and His love. Conversion is a "radical interiorization of the human drama of the Crucifixion," to borrow a phrase from Cesáreo Bandera (250). Generative anthropology allows us to further articulate the experience of grace by examining the role of *representation*, its power in deferring violence and generating transcendence.

In Bunyan's imaginative visualization of the crucified Jesus, the crucial factors are (1) this is a personal communication from God ("The Lord would show me the death of Christ"), and (2) this is an *internal* scene of representation.<sup>(13)</sup> The anti-ritualism found in the teachings of Jesus comes to full fruition during the Reformation. Jesus proclaimed that "the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Jesus recognized that worship does not depend on a place such as the Jerusalem Temple, a sacred object, or any set rituals. The meaning and act of worship are essentially spiritual and transcendent. The scenic center of the originary event can be found within because the central locus of meaning is generated by the sign, a message from God. To have a soul means precisely to have an internal scene of representation. Thus in Christianity the generation of sacred or religious significance is no longer dependent on a physically central scene, as in ritual. Worship can be found "Where two or three are gathered together in my name" (Matt. 18:20), or even with the solitary believer who retires to his closet, shuts the door to pray, "and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward you openly" (Matt. 6:6).

6

The liberation of worship from the external ritual center is realized through the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Gans argues persuasively that Paul, rather than the original apostles, was the first to grasp the true significance of the Resurrection:

Paul's revelation [on the road to Damascus] teaches him the real meaning of the resurrection that the original apostles like Peter had never understood: that it is not a bodily but a spiritual experience, that it consists in the hearing of a voice rather than in the touching of wounds, and above all, that it is the direct consequence of the persecution of Jesus, in which all men without exception were implicated. By assuming the status of the central victim, Jesus forces those who persecute him to centralize him in their imagination, to reproduce the operation of divinization as it occurred in the originary event.

Paul's vision shows him that to combat Jesus' doctrine is to persecute a person, and thereby

to resurrect his voice. But this voice can henceforth be recognized as speaking in Paul himself, something that Moses could never have said of his God. Once this last external revelation has taken place, all future revelation will come from within; revelatory experience proper will no longer be necessary. (*SF* 106)

The important fact about Bunyan's vision of the crucified Jesus, the reason why it becomes a source of grace rather than guilt, is that Jesus *persists* there: He lives on--spiritually. Grace in this sense is not contained in the image of Jesus but rather in Bunyan's complete involvement with that image--"with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30)--his whole self. This involvement is generated by his antagonistic struggle with God. Only through fear and guilt can grace be found, and only the Cross provokes both halves of this pattern. The purpose of the sign of the Cross, the memory of the Crucifixion, is to generate an experience of fear and guilt followed by love and transcendence which will then be effectively retained in the memory as an event. The transcendence of the sign is first of all its power to defer conflict and, second, the persistence of the sign over time and its independence of physical place. The Cross is the paradigmatic sign of grace because of its ethical implications and its affective power which makes it persist within the soul.

Subjectively at least, Christ lives on through Bunyan's love for him. Bunyan finds assurance because the internal scene of representation, his own memory, can continue to generate the sacred difference which defines his new sense of self. The continued presence of Jesus despite his suffering and death assures Him, and Bunyan himself, of eternal life. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection are two sides of the same coin in Gans's analysis. Victimization becomes divinization through the transcendence of representation, the sign of the Cross.

Paradoxically, this transcendence, or spiritual worship is made possible only by the actual historical sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The physical reality of Christ's sacrifice is the basis for Bunyan's sense that grace originates from outside himself; grace is a gift from God, not primarily a subjective experience.

The connection between Bunyan and Jesus, the link which enables his salvation, is the humanity of Jesus. Bunyan's full assurance comes when he is able to see Christ as a *whole* person, which is to say, including the full range of human potential: "I was not onely looking upon this and the other benefit of Christ apart, as of his Blood, Burial, or Resurrection, but considered him as a whole Christ!" (73). This insight into Christ's full humanity allows Bunyan to find the promise of eternal life by identifying himself with Christ, merging with his humanity and thus partaking in his divinity: "the Lord did also lead me into the mystery of Union with this Son of God, that I was joynd to him, that I was flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone" (73). The internalization of the voice of God (that is, the internal realization of grace through a sign) can happen only because Jesus is human.

Christ's death on the Cross is a re-enactment of the originary event as defined by generative anthropology: a central figure sacrificed for the community as a whole (*OT* 7-9). But Bunyan finds liberation from the necessity of a public sacrifice or ritual by reproducing it spiritually, within himself. He is liberated from hatred and fear of the *Other* because he has realized the *Other* within. The *Other* in this context is primarily the Old Testament God of wrath who reflects human resentment and offers judgment according to the law. The Cross reveals the result of human conflict and thus points Bunyan back towards himself, his personal guilt and future responsibility, while at the same time offering

transcendence through its function as a sign.

The scene of conversion, however, is not always articulated explicitly in terms of the Crucifixion. Bunyan is almost destroyed by despair before he comes to a turning point, the first sign of grace to his soul which he is able to recognize as such and realize in his experience. Grace comes to him through the word, a sermon on Song of Songs 4:1: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair." The unnamed minister focuses especially on the words "my love," interpreting them as an expression of Christ's love towards the elect (29). As Bunyan walks home and meditates on the text, he experiences what Samuel Petto calls "the Voice of the Spirit" (3):

The words ["my love"] began thus to kindle in my spirit. . . .they waxed stronger and warmer, and began to make me look up; but being as yet between hope and fear, I still replied in my heart, *But is it true too? but is it true?* at which, that sentence fell in upon me, *He wist not that it was true which was done unto him of the angel, Acts 12. 9.* (29)

7

In response to this sign of grace, he writes, "I thought I could have spoken of his love, and of his mercy to me, even to the very crows that sat upon the ploughed lands before me. . . . I was helped to believe that it was a true manifestation of grace unto my soul" (30). The Scripture which "fell in upon" him points to the intervention of an angel and shows how Bunyan typically thinks of grace as a personal encounter with a living spiritual being, which is to say that he realizes the ethical meaning of grace. His first vision of Jesus was as a threatening judge, so it is entirely appropriate that evidence of grace comes with an insight into Christ's love. Rather than a vision, he finds grace here through the spoken word ("my love") and the invisible work of the Spirit. Even when the Spirit speaks directly to his soul, his experience is always mediated by a sign, either a text or an image. In the originary scene as hypothesized by Eric Gans, the first humans are required to submit their desires to the sign, extending their desiring imagination into communion with the sacred through the sign (*OT* 9). In this first overt token of grace to his soul, Bunyan is presented with a sign, the phrase "my love." This phrase can be considered as a sign insofar as it constitutes a message from God which testifies to his salvation. He must accept this sign in faith, believing that it is in fact meaningful and then applying it to himself, thus finding assurance. He meditates on the word alone; no external authority beyond the Bible validates the word or his experience. The scenic center of the origin thus becomes internalized, set free from ritual and hierarchy. The ideal of Christianity, as Gans notes, "is for each individual to become his own center, recognizing at the same time the centrality of the other" (*SF* 97). The Puritan rejection of ecclesiastical mediation and hierarchy was an attempt to bypass the resentment generated by the figure of the priest or monk as rival and return to the egalitarian reciprocity of the originary event. But even without the intervention of priests, rituals, and hierarchy, the minimal mediation of language itself remains inescapable. Although this is a private revelation, Bunyan then imagines himself communicating the word by preaching to the crows of the field. Since the meaning of the sign, grace itself, is fundamentally ethical, the sign must be communicated in order to find its full potential.

Of course, there is no immediate possibility of conflict here as there was in the originary scene or during the game of tipcat. Even so, the problem of mimetic conflict, with its resultant fear and guilt, motivates his search for grace and assurance. Moreover, this sign comes directly after Bunyan attends a sermon with the accompanying crowd of people. Any sizable assembly of people, even a peaceful assembly, is inherently a situation of intense mimesis. The massed attention of the group focused on the central figure

of the preacher may well have mimetically inspired the desire for his own centrality, which comes through the internalization of the preacher's biblical message. The content of the text here is not merely fortuitous. "My love" represents the supreme fulfillment of the aim of culture: the transcendence of fear and conflictual desire through mutual love. By voluntarily accepting his Crucifixion, Jesus offers up to his persecutors an inverse reflection of their murderous resentment and converts it, through his Resurrection, into love and forgiveness. The love experienced (and expressed) by Bunyan is fundamental to the meaning of his conversion, certainly, but what is truly revolutionary is that this love is found within first, through a sign, and then communicated to his audience. Grace comes through the mediation of a sign and independently of the church, although still linked to the preaching of the word.

Another example from *Grace Abounding* will make my point clearer. The following scene occurs later in the book, when Bunyan is wondering if he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost and, as a result, is struggling with despair. One day as he finds himself in "a good mans Shop, bemoaning" his condition,

Suddenly there was as if there had rushed in at the Window, the noise of Wind upon me, but very pleasant, and as if I had heard a Voice speaking, *Didst ever refuse to be justified by the Blood of Christ?* and withal my whole life of profession past, was in a moment opened to me, wherein I was made to see, that designedly I had not; so my heart answered groaningly *No*. Then fell with power that Word of God upon me, *See that ye refuse not him that speaketh*, Heb. 12.25. This made a strange seizure upon my spirit; it brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart. (52-53)

This is the only place in *Grace Abounding* in which Bunyan directly discerns a sign in the natural world--"the noise of Wind"--nevertheless the wind here is closely associated with "a Voice speaking." We should note that this sign, like all his personal revelations, is "as if," indicating that no miraculous suspension of natural law occurs. The symbolism here suggests the action of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2), so we may safely infer that the wind is being represented as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit to his soul, rather than a physical wind. Presumably someone watching him at this moment would not discern either the "noise of Wind" or the voice he hears. He calls this episode a "strange dispensation," one of the "secret things" of his history: "what it was, I knew not; from whence it came, I knew not. . . . that sudden rushing Wind, was as if an Angel had come upon me" (53). In any case, whether an actual "noise of Wind" occurs or not, what is important for our analysis is that Bunyan experiences it as such.

This episode illustrates the Puritan deconstruction of all the external, merely formal, elements of representation, thus effectively revealing the basic structure of the originary event. In the originary scene, the aborted gesture of appropriation is not really a sign until it has been interpreted as such, until the first human, in a moment of insight, is able to *see* the aborted gesture as *meaning* the sacred object, and through this miraculous insight *becoming* human. The first human is presented with a gesture which in and of itself has no meaning, which cannot even really be called a sign as such, until he or she *discovers* the potential for meaning, actualizing it within himself, and then communicating it to the other humans on the periphery.<sup>(14)</sup>

8

As Gans notes, the original conversion is from hominid to human through the act of representation (*OT* 183). Bunyan, likewise, is presented with a sign ("the noise of Wind") which he must interpret as a sign of grace. The connection to the action of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost provides the necessary biblical

validation for the sign. But even so, he must respond to this sign in faith, interpreting it as a sign of God's grace towards him personally, independently of any external authority, for the wind is an everyday occurrence, not in and of itself sacred. The promise of grace is fulfilled directly in the experience of assurance. The pragmatic effect is that "it commanded a great calm in soul" and "made a strange seizure upon my spirit; it brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart" (53). The real proof of the truth of his revelation is that it works to produce peace in his heart.

The words spoken to Bunyan during this episode ("See that ye refuse not him that speaketh") point to the danger inherent in private revelation. Once the imagination is set free from the external world it acquires the potential for unregulated solipsism. Bunyan has been morbidly brooding on his sin and as a result suffers from despair. He has become isolated from the community in solipsistic interiority. The ultimate purpose of private revelation is not independence for its own sake but the ethical life of the community. The Spirit commands him to "refuse not him who speaketh"--to leave off his morbid imagining and submit himself to the word in recognition of the Other.

The importance of community is brought out in his encounter with "three or four poor women" from the newly-formed Bedford Independent congregation--one of the most important turning points in his narrative. This encounter occurs near the beginning of *Grace Abounding*, but it foreshadows the final ethical aim of the process of conversion. The following scene is not exactly a scene of conversion because it does not include the experience of peace and assurance, but it nonetheless presents Bunyan with a sign of grace, although one recognized as such only retrospectively:

I came to where there was three or four poor women sitting at a door in the Sun, and talking about the things of God; and being now willing to hear them discourse, I drew near to hear what they said; for I was now a brisk talker also my self in the matters of Religion: but now I may say, *I heard, but I understood not*; for they were far above my reach, for their talk was about a new birth. (14)

This encounter awakens him to his need for grace and the inefficacy of moral reform. He learns here that grace does not result from moral action and requires instead a complete inward transformation ("a new birth"). Talking ("I was now a brisk talker") or any worldly action will not lead him to grace. Scenically, Bunyan finds himself excluded from a community which is symbolically represented as living under the protection of grace. They sit "at a door," representing Jesus as the Way, and "in the sun," enjoying the favor of his warming grace. He writes that "they were to me as if they had found a new world, as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned amongst their Neighbors, Num. 23. 9" (15). The separation of this "new world" suggests its freedom from resentment and conflict while also providing a justification for Separating Congregationalism. A Separatist congregation was ideally a refuge from the more unpredictable and competitive larger society. His providential encounter with the women is potentially an important sign of his election, and he responds in faith by "going again and again into the company of these poor people; for I could not stay away" (15). When Bunyan is able to narrate the story of his conversion, he will find admission to this community; he will become integrated into and reconciled with this group.

## Conclusion

Bunyan's debt to the Bible can be summed up in terms of the Passion story, Christ's suffering, death, and Resurrection. In essence, Bunyan has internalized the drama of Christ's Passion. How is this pattern of experience different from conformity to the Pauline narrative paradigm? Narrative is a retrospective act,

looking backward after the event. Grace, on the other hand, is sought in the moment. The Reformation doctrine of *sola fides* ultimately meant the imperative of a personal (inward) experience of grace, not merely an external repetition of the Biblical paradigm through either actions or words (narrative). One needed actually to experience conversion by first confronting one's own sin and guilt and then, through this very struggle, finding grace through a sign. The sign is paradigmatically the Crucifixion but may also be articulated through any Biblical text. Bunyan's experience follows the pattern established in the New Testament of Christ's suffering and death on the Cross followed by his triumphant Resurrection from the grave. For Bunyan, this structure is manifested in the agonizing confrontation with his own sin and the fear of hell, followed by one of his "songs in the night," the private experience of grace. The first half of this pattern, the experience of fear and guilt, can only be adequately explained as the result of mimetic rivalry as defined by René Girard. In a similar fashion, the second half of the pattern, the experience of grace, conforms to Eric Gans' definition of culture as the "deferral of conflict through representation" in accordance with the minimal hypothesis of human origin. Grace comes through the mediation of a sign.

Bunyan's experience, however, needs to be further articulated in terms of his historical context. The novelty of Bunyan's experience lies in his radical interiorization of the Biblical drama. In the Catholic and Anglican Churches, the memory of the Crucifixion is communicated primarily through the Sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is controlled by the Church and its ecclesiastical hierarchy. With Bunyan, however, the Church has become secondary to his private experience. By finding grace on a private scene, he is liberated from the hierarchy and authority of the Established Church in England, along with the potential for resentment which is inherent in any hierarchy. His relationship with God, in this sense, is less mediated; he relies only on a sign from God, a personal communication from God to him.

9

Bunyan's insistence on a personal relationship with God, combined with his lack of worldly status and formal education, was for the Established clergy of his day at best a misguided spiritual pride and at worst a heretical blasphemy. Bunyan realized the most radical implications of Luther's doctrine of salvation by faith alone and especially Luther's understanding that grace is found through passionate adherence to the suffering of the Cross. *Grace Abounding* represents an important step in the centrifugal liberation of the sacred from priestly authority and its integration into everyday life--a decentralizing and democratizing movement which defines the history of Christianity and makes modernity possible. Bunyan's practical realization of the egalitarian potential of the ordinary event--through its reenactment in the scene of conversion--gave him a spiritual freedom that the authorities found scandalous and subversive. Yet Bunyan was always careful to distinguish himself from the more radical antinomian sects such as the Ranters, with whom the authorities confused him. Bunyan refuses to assert that his experiences are in any way miraculous or that they supersede the revelation already given in the Bible. He still respects the necessity for a biblically-validated sign. But he has internalized sacred difference; that is, the absolute difference of God becomes internal to himself via the internal scene, and this difference defines his identity.

The Puritans' emphasis on individual interpretation can be understood as a result of their rejection of the mediating function of the Established Church. Without the ritual ecclesiastical structure to guide experience, individuals needed to (1) apply the Bible to themselves and (2) find the signs of grace in their personal life. But conversion demanded going beyond simply reading and interpreting the Bible; conversion meant experiencing both guilt and redemption through the sign of the Cross.

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11

## Notes

1. For an overview of Girard's theory of mimetic or conflictual desire, see *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 9-44.[\(back\)](#)
2. For Gans, resentment expresses mimetic rivalry, but it also takes on a more specific meaning. Resentment is the scandal of a person (or persons) who enjoys social significance and power based on an apparently arbitrary social hierarchy. The overt presence of an object of desire is not required. Resentment is purely a function of relative social position, although it is still appropriate to call the person who inspires resentment a mimetic rival. For a discussion of resentment in relation to the birth of hierarchical society, see Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), pp. 150-175. For a discussion of resentment on the "originary scene," see Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), p. 18.[\(back\)](#)
3. On the minimal hypothesis, see Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking*, pp. 1-20, and *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), pp. 13-36.[\(back\)](#)
4. On generative anthropology, see Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*, *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*, and *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*.[\(back\)](#)
5. For a recent discussion of the historical context and accuracy of Bunyan's characterization of his family circumstances, see Michael Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context*, (Keele, Staffordshire: Keele UP, 1996) pp. 10-12.[\(back\)](#)
6. On the seventeenth-century controversy over "mechanick preachers," see Mullett, pp. 49-50.[\(back\)](#)
7. Cat or tipcat is a difficult-sounding game using a small piece of wood and a stick.[\(back\)](#)
8. For an account of the "Themes and Variations" of the conversion narrative, see Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 37-52.[\(back\)](#)

9. There has been some speculation that the angry God who terrorizes Bunyan reflects Bunyan's resentment towards his father. See Mullett's discussion of this issue, pp. 15-16. Our anthropological perspective does not by any means rule out such speculation, and we might predict that mimetic rivalry between parents and children is to a certain extent inevitable, as Freud suggests. Girard interprets the Oedipus complex as an expression of mimetic rivalry. See *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 169-192. The only problem with this interpretation of Bunyan's fear of God is that he expresses little or no resentment towards his father in *Grace Abounding*.[\(back\)](#)

10. See, for example, Bunyan's obsession with Hebrews 12:16: "Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright" (43). Bunyan is convinced that this scripture applies to him personally insofar as he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. When he later decides that he is not guilty of this sin, the same scripture works to give him assurance (71).[\(back\)](#)

11. On the connection between persecution and resurrection, see Gans, *Science and Faith*, pp. 85-116.[\(back\)](#)

12. On the scapegoat mechanism and the Christian revelation, see *The Girard Reader*, pp. 69-93, 158-193.[\(back\)](#)

13. In generative anthropology, the "scene of representation" is fundamentally the scene of human interaction insofar as human interaction is mediated by signs.[\(back\)](#)

The scene of representation may be external (the physical exchange of signs between humans) or internal (within the memory or imagination). The imagination is the internal scene of representation. The use of a sign, even in the imagination, implies the virtual presence of an other or others.

14. Cf. Gans on originary rhetoric, *Signs of Paradox*, p. 34.[\(back\)](#)

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# Originary Narrative

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*Originary Thinking* includes a chapter entitled "Narrativity and Textuality" that accorded the latter, as befitted the trend of the time, what seemed a definitive priority over the former. In our textual age, story-telling seemed a naïve activity grounded on the illusion of a historically self-displacing present. I explained the deconstruction of narrative in originary terms as the revelation of the primacy of the sign's "textual" detemporalization of practical appetitive time over its narrative retemporalization as the object of a worldly-biographical quest.

The originary hypothesis proposes the minimal conditions for the generation of the transcendent sign. But these pre- and therefore extra-human conditions cannot be reproduced from within the human; they can only be represented, that is, imitated with more or less accuracy. The representations that accomplish "the deferral of violence through representation," the endlessly renewed process of generating transcendence out of immanence, are what we call "culture." The basis of the transcendent vs immanent dichotomy is the linguistic relation between sign and thing, which is doubled as signifier vs signified. This archetypal dichotomy is an anthropological artifact; it is with the human that the sign was introduced into "nature."

All culture is textual in that it is made up of representations that are virtually if not actually copresent. The distinction between oral and written culture is secondary. The "inscription" of the story in the mind is not as accurate as that of the text on paper, but its relationship to the linear time of telling is essentially the same: in either case, any element of the whole can be accessed independently of the linear narrative sequence. Yet this sequence cannot be dismissed as epiphenomenal. As we frequently hear, we spend our lives telling stories; narrative is our source of meaning. My purpose here is to attempt an originary analysis of narrative.

\* \* \*

The question as to the originary narrativity of the sign is fundamental to our anthropology. If we cannot conceive the human without narrative, then it is incumbent on us to include narrativity in the originary scene, in the emission of the originary sign. We must distinguish between the minimal linguistic or "formal" use of the sign as the "arbitrary" designation of the center and its cultural or "institutional" use as a reproduction of the event. The temporality of the sign is not that of worldly appetitive action, but that of a self-contained act of mimesis and its closure. The sign's very existence depends on the deferral of the temporality of appetite and appropriation. But because the sign nonetheless exists in time (as a "signifier"), it cannot escape this temporality. The material sign is the basis of the arts: it is musical as sound, danced and figurative as gesture, and so on. The institutional inheres as a potential in any real use

of the sign. But once we grant this, we must conceive the originary—and every subsequent—use of the sign as "narrative." Narrativity requires nothing of the sign beyond its own inherent temporality.

Narrative emerges when the time of the sign returns to the world as a model of the time of action. In our experience, narrative involves a plurality of signs, such that the time "between" them takes on a semblance of practical temporality. In the time it takes to emit a number of consecutive signs, one might well have done something else, including perhaps the act designated or "imitated" by these signs. Narration in this sense is drama in words. How then can narration be understood in terms of the temporality of the single originary sign?

2

The minimal criterion of narrative is making the temporality of the sign a model for worldly action. But "worldly action" in general cannot be endowed with a priori significance. The only action that we can consider *ab ovo* as equivalently human and significant is precisely that of the emission of the sign itself, that is, the deferral of violence through the representation of the (sacred) central object. That is, the originary sign *qua* formal linguistic sign represents the object, but *qua* institutional or narrative sign, it represents the process of its own emission.

Hence the story told by the originary sign is, in the first place, that of its own emission, which is to say, the story of the conversion of the gesture of appropriation into a gesture of signification. The sign begins as a movement to appropriate the object and ends as a gesture that imitates the object. It is this final state that constitutes the sign as a form *proprement dit*; but in the originary scene, this state marks the conclusion of a process. We thus arrive at the unexpected conclusion that, although in terms of the already-human, textuality precedes narrativity, in terms of the becoming-human that the scene carries out, it is narrativity that constitutes textuality. The sign must "tell its story" before it can acquire a formal signification.

In the resulting model of narrative as the constitution of the sign, the story is the generation of transcendence from immanence. The formal sign as signifier-signifying-signified is the final destiny of a gesture that had begun as an attempt to appropriate a real object. The deferral of appropriation gives the object meaning, and this meaning in turn "gives meaning" to the original gesture, which sought the assimilation of the object and, with it, the abolition of its meaningful identity. What is meaningful is what resists assimilation and causes it to be deferred. The sign is the "story" of this resistance.

## Sparagmos and Narration

In the originary hypothesis, we assume that the appropriation of the object is only minimally deferred, so that the deferral of the sign is followed by the sparagmos or violent collective appropriation and division of the object. This element of the "narrative" no longer concerns the giving of meaning to the signified, but the signifier's worldly dissolution. After the temporal act of the sign's emission, the sign subsists as a transcendental reality but is no longer in the process of being enunciated. Just as the sign's emergence from the gesture of appropriation tells the story of its constitution, its giving way to renewed desire tells the story of its deconstitution.

The violence of the sparagmos reflects the "supplement" of resentment accrued as a result of the deferral of appetitive satisfaction. But this supplement should not be understood as a supererogatory accretion on the minimalism of our model. The object must be divided in order to be consumed, as would any

appetitive object. Because it has been the object of the sign, what must be destroyed in this consumption is not a mere psychological Gestalt but a meaningful form. The violence of the sparagmos is the violence of the destruction of the worldly incarnation of meaning; it does not depend on an arbitrary translation of resentment into physical violence.

Deferral of appropriation constitutes the object as sacred. But once appropriation has been deferred, sacrality is no longer perceived as a quality of *this* object, but of the Being only contingently incarnated in it. When we renounce the appropriation of the object of our common desire, this desire inspires us to attribute to it a power that is by that very fact no longer a simple emanation of the object itself. Interpreted in practical terms, representation of the object removes its immediate danger to the community. But then that danger, which is experienced as the sacred, is no longer merely that of the object. As the sparagmos becomes immanent, the sign is increasingly less the signifier of the object *qua* object and more the "name-of-God" that designates the Being in which the danger of mimetic violence transcendentally or "immortally" inheres.

In the spirit of the "return to Girard" of *Signs of Paradox*, we may rename the "aborted gesture of appropriation," the "*deferred* gesture of appropriation," for the horizon of Derrida's paradoxical temporality is the violence of the sparagmos. The sign is "but" a deferral of violence, the human is "but" an ever-extended hiatus between natural appetite and its violent demultiplication through desire, that is, through the very representation that had deferred it.

2

In this perspective, the sign's representation of the object may be assimilated directly to Girard's semiotically undefined "designation" of the victim. But this designation is not the "psychological" product of quantitatively intensified mimetic desire. Representation is precisely what separates the object *qua* worldly referent from the object *qua* signified/"Idea," so that we come to resent the material object's occupation of the place of permanent Being that belongs to the sign's ideal referent-in-general. *The Origin of Language* did not do justice to the complexity of ostensive representation. To designate is to represent, but to represent is to transfer the "being" or "essence" of the physical object to the designatum of the representation, which we may already speak of as its "signified." The sign anticipates from the beginning the metaphysical forgetting of its violent ostensive origin that Plato's philosophy will articulate. (See my "Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought," *Anthropoetics* II, 2.)

This "speculative" analysis is founded on an intuition that is not metaphysical but anthropological; each step corresponds to an ethical and not merely a semiotic relation. The discovery that the danger posed by the desirable object can be deferred by the emission of the sign is also the discovery that the object is not itself the primal cause of this danger. The object appears thereby less dangerous, yet danger as such, the force of the sacred, remains as a potential to be actualized by emission of the sign. Without the sign, there could be no disproportion between the central being and its significance, for this being would be a mere object of more or less appetitive *cum* mimetic force. The persistence of the sign as the means of recalling the sacred danger is now scandalously confronted with the object that had appeared to be the source of this danger and that had provoked the consequent "aborted gesture of appropriation."

The revelation of the sacred is never its simple inherence in any worldly thing. The sacrality of place is powerful because the "presence" of the absent object in its empty place is a model for the operation of transcendence, the transfiguration of the worldly thing into sacred Being—which is in turn a metaphor for the operation of the sign. In our ordinary story, the sign of the object is the product of our

renunciation of it. But after this renunciation, the worldly object is not the desired Being but a mere token of it—not the "real" referent/signified of the sign but a mere token of the type it defines. The object has usurped the place of sacred Being through the "category error" of incarnation, which must be punished by its sacrifice *qua* material individual to this subsisting ideal (*idéal*) Being. (Conversely, to renounce sacrifice itself out of respect for individual being is to recognize the ethical reciprocity of all being.) The sparagmos is the punishment visited on the central object by each member of the community in resentment of the object's pretension to centrality.

The sparagmos ends the "story" of the originary sign. The latter's constitution *qua* sign in the divorce between the thing and its represented Being did not end the story because, just as the deferring transformation of the gesture of appropriation into the sign occupied the temporality of the sign's production, so does the undeferring transformation of the sign into a new, sparagmatic gesture of appropriation occupy that of the sign's dissipation. The formal or linguistic sign remains in its transcendental realm, but the institutional or cultural sign that has both a beginning and an end begins and ends in worldly appropriation. Originary narrative tells the story of the sign's constitution and deconstitution, of its constitution as separate from its original object and of the worldly consequence of this separation at the moment of deconstitution for the resented object itself.

To sum up our analysis thus far: the sign, in its birth and death, tells the story of its own constitution and deconstitution. The emission of the sign is an activity first taken up as a substitute for appropriating the object, then abandoned in the appropriative activity of the sparagmos. But this is not a fully symmetrical sequence. The abandonment of the sign is not its obliteration or even its forgetting; the sparagmos is not a forgetting of the sign but, on the contrary, an act of vengeance against the enforced memory of the sign. The deconstitution of the sign in worldly violence does not return us to a prehuman universe. The end of the sign's story tells of its necessary abandonment as the object of a worldly activity, that of its emission, but not of its disappearance from the world. On the contrary, originary narrative is *tragic*: the mortal being that had been the occasion for the sign, abandoned by the sacred Being that it incarnated, is delivered up to the violent desires of the community, to be survived by the sign's transcendent Being.

Originary narration is sacrificial. At the same time, it is a revelation of the limits of the sacrificial. The residue of sadness that follows a tragedy reflects the excess of our love over our resentment. The sign transcends its worldly exemplification; but our experience of this transcendence is dependent on *this* worldly mediator at *this* unique moment. The origin of language as an event is both the constitution of a horizon of significance beyond the merely evenemential and the creation of our capacity to grant significance to the event within this horizon. The origin of language is also, therefore, the origin of narrative.

3

## Myth and Story

The originary narrative is the story of the originary emission of the sign. But how does this analysis account for narrative's domination of our culture and of our lives? In our age of demystification, narration is the sole mystery that remains; indeed, it has come to be understood as the foundational category of cultural mystery—of transcendence. When we repeat that culture is about "telling stories," we revel in the undefinable nature of stories. Neither centuries of literary curiosity nor decades of literary analysis have taught us what makes a "good story," or in what sense a "story" represents an "experience"

differently from the way a word represents a "thing." Nor will originary analysis solve this mystery. Its ambition is merely to reduce it to its lowest terms, to provide the most parsimonious way to think about storytelling. The originary understanding of narrative is not meant to help us to construct our own stories, but to ground our understanding of narrative on a minimal set of anthropological categories.

What we call "mystery" is the paradoxical relationship between the world of things and the world of signs, between immanence and transcendence. There is only one mystery: that of how the latter can be generated from the former. We cannot solve the mystery, but we can reduce it to minimal terms. We cannot know exactly what configuration of subjects and objects gave rise to the originary event nor exactly what configuration allows the event's generative effect to be reproduced. Ritual reproduction is always mechanical because it fetishizes reproducible elements of the scene at the expense of the unknowable overall configuration. Ritual seeks only to reproduce the mystery, not to pierce it, and for that very reason can never reproduce it fully.

Because ritual is not story; it is from the beginning supplemented by myth. Yet myth is not story either, since it is from the beginning supplemented by ritual. The mythical adventure is not a self-contained fiction; it takes its authority from sacred performance. Myth tells about gods, beings both worldly and transcendental who act in the world but who subsist atemporally like signs rather than perishable things. The paradox of the divinity is that of the substantive Being of mimetic desire.

If language is in the first place about gods, and only afterwards about humans, it is because significance inheres in the atemporal Being of the signified. Even when they have animal or other form, gods are anthropomorphic; the real criterion of anthropomorphism is the use of language. Yet because they are "immortal," the significance that founds their system of signification lacks appeal to human temporal experience. The death to which the gods are invulnerable is not in the first place death as an inevitable end to life, but the death that the sign was created to avert: death at the hands of one's fellows. What separates God from man is not existential prolongation, eternal life, but invulnerability to the danger of mimetic desire.

Myths are stories with which the listener cannot fully identify. We are in the domain of story proper when the human companions of the gods begin to take center stage and the experience of mortal humanity becomes the basis of significance. Stories are essentially about mortals who do not share the Being that transcends mimetic desire. As I suggested in *The End of Culture*, Gilgamesh's loss of the herb of immortality may serve as the exemplary dividing line between myth and literary narrative.

Whether we accept or reject the popular anthropomorphic notion of God, its infantilism should make us hesitate to declare ourselves liberated from the toils of superstition. To say that God is like us except that he is immortal is hardly to explain either the origin or the cultural function of his immortality. Immortality is in the first place a quality of the Idea, of that which is signified by the sign. The idea of the immortal god derives from the use of the sign to designate the originary central object; a god is a worldly being who at the same time partakes of the transcendental being of the sign.

This formulation makes more precise the Girardian concept of myth as the mystified narrative of the sparagmos. The sparagmos destroys the form of the object that provided the referent for the sign; but the sign no longer needs a referent, it has a signified. The myth mystifies the sparagmos by transforming the victim into a deity; his worldly integument is shed in the collective murder, leaving behind his "spiritual essence."

The classic Girardian example is the Tikopia myth analyzed in *Des choses cachées...*, p. 115ff. The "foreign god" Tikarau is invited to a feast. He stumbles and leaves a footrace, pretending to be injured, and instead steals the food from the feast. Fleeing the territory; he falls, leaving various foodstuffs behind, and, ascending the hills, returns to the sky. Girard points out that execution by forcing the victim to ascend and eventually leap off a high place is a standard ritual procedure (*cf.* Rome's Tarpeian rock). The ascension that defines the separation of the god from the human community disguises his collective lynching. No doubt the protagonist's flight into the sky is unlikely to be a pure flight of the mythical imagination. But the point that is missed in this reading is that, murder or fantasy, the myth provides a model for the generation of transcendence from immanence—of the superhuman world of signification from the subhuman world that ignores it. The narratively disguised sparagmos of Tikarau is the genesis not merely of the material culture he leaves behind but of the distinction between signs and things that is the minimal characteristic of the human.

Myth is generative; it tells of the birth of the human through the agency of the object of collective mimetic desire. In myth, this agency is ostensibly exercised as a form of human intentionality. But the mythical narrative is only in appearance composed of a recognizable set of human actions: Tikarau's pretended stumbling in the race, his theft, flight, fall, and passage into the heavens, are not genuine intentional acts. From Girard's demystifying perspective, what appear to be the free acts of the hero are in fact the coerced acts of the victim; the narrative disguises the action of the collectivity. Tikarau pretends to stumble when "in reality" he was pushed; he leaps into the sky when "in reality" he was forced to jump. This sacred non-intentionality is the locus of myth's generation of transcendence from immanence, signs from things.

Because they conceal the ultimate agency of the human collectivity, the actions of mythical figures generate meaning without being themselves meaningful for the agents who carry them out. Tikarau's motives cannot be understood by reference to human intentionality. When "post-humanist" theory attributes ultimate intentionality to the "text," to language "in itself," it expresses in fact a central anthropological insight. The intentionality implicit in narrative is indeed inherent in the sign-system "in itself," because the in-itself of language is equivalent to our alienation to the sacred Other of our mimetic desire. The mythical protagonist's intentions are not "his own," but the projection of the community's collective desire and resentment.

The postmodern fetishization of language is nothing but a rhetorical repositioning of the sacred. If we ask a postmodern thinker whether he considers language to be sacred, he might well agree. But his use of the word "sacred" implicitly to denote an unknowable alien power is uninformed by the insights of primitive religious thought, let alone by mimetic theory's rearticulation of this thought. Language is sacred in that it unites the real and transcendental realms; our task is to provide an articulated model of their relationship.

## Grammar and Narrative

Human intentionality is the criterion of fiction proper. Myth elaborates on the historical founding of the sign; it provides for our representations an etiology not so much fantastic as metaphoric. Stories are not explanations of historically given realities. They stand or fall by whether they hold our interest in the context of "everyday life" where, as a consequence of our successful deferral of originary violence, we

find ourselves in a state of unattached desire, boredom, *le vague des passions*. Much has been written about the literary work's fulfillment or transcendence of the "horizon of expectations" that we associate with it. But our expectation is always that a story, however much its form and content may be bound by tradition, transcend any concrete expectations we may have of it. The story repeated to the child who asks to hear the same words every night is story at the limit of ritual; but in ritual, however much we may hope to experience the revelatory origin it repeats, it is repetition that is the *sine qua non*, whereas in story, it is the experience of newness. We participate in the rite's repetition in hope of renewing the revelation; we listen to a story in hope of obtaining a revelation, even if it be through repetition. The joy of the oral tradition is that the "same" story is never the same; to hear a storyteller tell a familiar story is always to hear a new performance. Ritual fetishistically repeats the known; in storytelling, originality is originality.

The dynamic imperative of originality precludes the elaboration of a non-trivial general model for stories. Originary analysis provides a simple explanation for the failure of attempts to define the "grammar" of narrative: narrative begins not with articulated language but with the originary sign. What makes storytelling a useful paradigm for culture in general is precisely the absence of any simple correspondence between the formal structures of language and the institutional structures of narrative. This non-correspondence reflects the paradoxical nature of cultural self-generation. Originary narrative, the story of the sign's own generation, is a story that the sign itself is not structurally equipped to tell.

5

The attempt to reduce narrative to a structural pattern provides the fundamental paradigm of culture's necessarily inadequate attempt to think itself. It tells us why culture is more a marketplace than a rite; despite its ongoing and never more than partially successful attempts at self-analysis, it remains wiser "in itself" than "for itself." Originary thinking is the "final" form of these attempts because it theorizes their inadequacy; it tells us *about* the possibilities of narrative with no pretension of showing us its limits or of uncovering its procedures of generation. Generative anthropology is analogous in the cultural sphere to the theory of markets in the economic. The economist theorizes about supply and demand, and about what kind of things have economic value, but he cannot predict what old products will be demanded nor what new ones will be supplied nor, in general, what procedures are conducive to market success.

## The Narrative Derivation of the Declarative

The sign "tells the story" of its own emergence, but this telling is inadequate, since its own emergence is precisely what the sign cannot articulate. Whence its supplementation by a sequence of signs that model the chronology of this emergence. This supplementation provides a model for the evolution of linguistic form.

In *The Origin of Language*, I derived the declarative sentence from the negative response to an unperformed imperative. Predication, the association of a predicate with a subject or a comment with a topic, emerges as the solution to the paradox of the failed imperative. The simplest imperative form demands an "object" without distinction between nouns and verbs, things and actions. The imperative form makes presentation of the requested object a "transcendental" necessity; in the imperative, a worldly action is, so to speak, included in a representational form. The only possible response to an imperative is to obey it; the verbal replies we customarily give—"Very good, sir!", "Coming up!"—specifically anticipate performance. The grammatical form of the imperative makes no means available to us to

express non-performance, deliberate or otherwise.

The declarative sentence as a response to a failed imperative replaces presentation of the demanded object by predication about it—that is, by "presentation" on the interlocutor's imaginary scene of representation. In the simplest case, the predicate tells us that the object is absent; to be present on the scene of representation is, in the first place, to be absent from the scene of worldly action. This substitution of an utterance for an object is the originary act of narrative "supplementation." The predication that justifies non-performance of the imperative "tells a story" about its object. Articulated or explicit narration, as opposed to the implicit narrative embodied in the originary sign, provides an explanation of the significance of the object: the object is significant because it possesses *this* predicate. Timeless, "descriptive" predication and temporal narration are not distinguished at this stage any more than nouns are distinguished from verbs in the role of imperative object. The predicate tells why the object *must be spoken of*, that is, why it remains of interest although it is not available for appropriation. From the perspective of an ostensive understanding of signs as pointers to objects, the predicate is unnecessary; its necessity is only explicable from a generative perspective, where the sign tells of its own emergence and predication is the first formally explicit step in this telling.

Nothing in this analysis contradicts the derivation of the declarative from the imperative in *The Origin of Language*. But by presenting the passage from imperative to declarative in terms of the narrative supplementation of the sign, the present analysis is more parsimonious; it allows us to ignore the distinction between the sacred context of instituted ritual and the profane one of everyday speech, seen as the appropriate locus for linguistic change. It suggests that we conceive the originary ostensive sign as including the more advanced forms *ab ovo* within itself, that is, as provoking imperative and declarative "readings" not yet formalized in syntax.

The minimal, ostensive conception of the originary sign as the representation of the present central object by means of an "aborted gesture of appropriation," affirms the object's centrality in the face of the mimetic rivalry of the subjects who are about to appropriate it. *Qua* ostensive, the sign denies the conditions of its emergence in order to present itself as a passive reflection of what was "always already" there, a supplement to a sacred reality. It requests no performance but mimetically suggests non-performance, renunciation. The narrative of which I have spoken above, the becoming-sign of the sign, is excluded from our reading of the sign itself; it is part of its "unconscious." The ostensive sign is the negation of narrative; it defers history because it anticipates it as destructive violence. This is narrative as not even the "zero degree" but the negation of narrativity.

6

The identification of the originary sign with the ostensive does not deny either the imperative or the declarative nature of the sentence-in-general; but it insists on the primacy of its ostensivity over its imperativity and its declarativity, both in its diachronic realization and in the syntactic traces of this realization.

The point of language is first of all ostensively to point out something, even if that "something" be a predication. But, by the same token, the point of language, after having made its point, is imperatively to get its interlocutor to do something, even if that "something" be to accede to this point. And the first, originary, point is the sacred significance of the object, which means, imperatively, its inaccessibility to appropriation. If, *qua* ostensive, the originary sign disguises its ambiguously creative relation to the sacrality of the object so that the interlocutor is expected to understand the sign's re-presentation of the

object as a product of the object's prior significance, in reading the sign *qua* imperative, the interlocutor must be aware of what the emitter of the sign desires him to do. If the ostensive presents itself as revealing what already is, the imperative implies a historical sequence from sign to action. In other words, where the ostensive disguises its narrativity as textuality, the imperative is already explicitly proto-narrative.

To reprise the argument of *The Origin of Language*: Because the utterance of the ostensive implies the presence of its referent, the utterance of the sign in the absence of its referent is understood as making its referent present. The child who cries "Mommy!" uses as an imperative a sign he learned as an ostensive; he expects the utterance of the word to make his mother present. This derivation is implicit in our pedagogy; we teach our child to speak so that he may "express his desires."

Before demanding that an interlocutor supply its (nominal or verbal) object, the imperative minimally asserts the necessary conjunction between the word and the thing that had presumably been established by the ostensive. At this point, we may already speak of the imperative's "historical" or "narrative" function. The "necessary conjunction" of word and thing already implies a temporality that is no longer that of the ostensive sign. The conversion of the gesture of appropriation into the ostensive is a movement away from the time of worldly action to the internal temporality of the sign; the ostensive sign "imitates" the object not in its action but in its transcendental Being with respect to which action is inconceivable. In contrast, the imperative mode conceives the passage from an imperfect present to a more perfect future. It is not clear, and in fact irrelevant, what agency is to effect the presence of the absent object, just as it is not clear, and in fact irrelevant, to the child what agency is expected to bring about the presence of his mother. The originary sign *qua* imperative expresses the scandal of absence just as *qua* ostensive it expressed the beatitude of presence.

And the sign *qua* declarative "tells the story" of the impossibility of the imperative—of the desired object's absence from the world of desire. Just as the sign's proto-imperative function does not specify the agent responsible for the making-present it requires, so its proto-declarative function does not specify what agency is telling the story of its failure to make-present. Indeed, narrative may be minimally defined precisely by this absence of specific responsibility. Just as the worldly declarative is a necessarily inappropriate response—a "category error"—to a worldly imperative, a narration is a necessarily inadequate response to the conjunction between word and thing implicit in the imperative form rather than to any specific imperative.

The foregoing analysis suggests the following definition: *narrative is the declarative reading of the originary sign*. Originary narrative is the sign insofar as it responds (negatively) to its prior suggestion of the imperative conjunction of word and thing. By its very nature, the response is negative because, by the "logic of the supplement," were the conjunction a simple reality, no response would be expected.

If the ostensive designates the object as sacred, the imperative redefines it as necessarily, "imperatively" accessible—as, in fact, the future sacrificial victim. Yet narrative, as Girard's Tikopia story illustrates, is the story, not of the sparagmos, but of its "transcendental" negation: flight from the mob leads not to destruction but to apotheosis. To define this apotheosis as a mere disguising of the truth is to require at the outset the impossible choice between myth and the story of the "real" sparagmos, between the story of the unfortunate victim and that of the sacred Being referred to by the sign. The Christian understanding that divine Being is equally as mortal—and as immortal—as each human being is implicit but not articulated in the scene that created the ground upon which such a consciousness could evolve.

For Being to be revealed as mortal, it must first be established as immortal. Which is to say that the human referent of the sign must be established as the protagonist of an originary narrative of transcendence.

7

By what I referred to above as "telling the story of its own emergence," the originary sign turns aside the imperative of physical presence. The sign's presence is indeed conjoined with the presence of what it refers to, but it refers not to a physical referent—nor yet to a "signified" or Idea—but to the Being that stands behind its physical manifestation. The worldly referent "ascends" into the transcendental realm of immortal signs; narrative refuses worldly appropriation by situating its objects in a representational universe. The object is "here," but here in this sentence, not here in this room.

The Girardian reading of narrative as the concealment of a real murder poses, independently of this analysis, a quandary to the analysis of narrative in general. Does every story conceal a murder? If so, which? How do we measure to what extent a story like that of Tikarau represents a specific event in Tikopia history and to what extent it represents the originary human event and similar events in between? Many founding myths involve violent expulsion and murder; but their very similarity in this respect, while lending corroboration to the originary hypothesis of unique human origin, cannot help us decide whether a given myth is based on a specific event resulting from the universal propensity of human societies to mimetic rivalry and crisis or on a transcultural representational model.

This caveat does not sanction return to a state of pre-Girardian innocence that ignores the violence of the sparagmos. But originary analysis displaces the emphasis from violence to transcendence. Myth conceals murder in order to figure the generation of the transcendent. For an undisguised "lynching" to provide this figure, we must await the story of the Passion. We cannot generalize the formula for transcendence either in myth or in fiction; it depends, in the former, on specific historical circumstances crystallized in ritual, and in the latter, on the unpredictability of its ethical revelation.

Narrative cannot enact transcendence; the sign cannot represent the difference between its own realm and that of the world. It might appear that this could be done through metalanguage, as in this present analysis, but analytic discourse can function only because it puts the two ontological levels on the same grammatical plane, so that words and things are both talked about in parallel as two varieties of a broader conception of "thing." Metalanguage tells about ontological difference but cannot show it. Indeed, the very point of metalanguage, which explains its role in "secularization," is to efface the revolutionary nature of the difference effected by human language. Our linguistic metalanguage offers ostensible guarantees to those who would deny the difference between human language and animal communication systems rather than seek to understand it in a mode that can only be allusive and paradoxical—that is, *religious*.

Narrative can only *figure* transcendence; flying off into the sky is an obvious example. Whatever the degree to which mythical figures of transcendence correspond to the modes of ritual murder, the mythical figure defers our own appropriative desires only in the context of its accompanying ritual. It is fiction that liberates cultural deferral from ritual and allows us to participate mimetically in a world of human intentionality.

## Narrative and Figure

Narrative is inseparable from figurality. Girard's conception of myth suggests a model of the figural as the metaphoric translation of a violent worldly deed into a transcendental one. The non-violence of flying through the air contrasts with the violence of the sparagmos principally in its preservation of the integrity of the central figure. It is not the skyward direction of the flight that is essential, but its preservation of the body from harm. The body that flies is "supernatural"; liberation from gravity figures liberation from mortality.

This example suggests that figurality is in the first place supernaturalism—in contrast with the commonplace understanding of the supernatural as a mere variety of figurality. The supernatural cannot be explained as the hyperbolic extension of natural attributes. Rousseau's suggestion in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* that early men out of fear spoke of strangers as "giants" expresses the superior intuition that the supernatural accomplishes "the deferral of violence through representation" through the transfiguration of our potential for mimetic violence. If the other is a "giant," he is not merely a bigger man than I but endowed with sacred powers that I would do well not to contest. Understood as an imaginary incarnation of the supernatural, the figure functions to bridge the gap between the worldly and the transcendental-significant. Its concrete motivation in each case is the attribution to a worldly being of a power (flight, gigantism) that preserves the community from conflict in the circumstances of indifferentiation that characterize "mimetic crisis."

8

The originary figure portrays the victim's invulnerability to death within the world of human experience as an indication of the "immortality" of the transcendental realm of significance. The paradoxical passage from the worldly to the transcendental can only be figured: there is no way of describing the "ostensive" transcendental realm except in inadequate "declarative" terms. (Whence the mystic's sense of an ineffable significance; before generative anthropology, only mystics and humorists practiced paradoxical thinking.)

In what I have been calling the "declarative mode" of the originary sign, the figural functions as a deferring response to an imperative demand for the central object. If the object is not here in this room but here in this sentence, the figure permits us to pass from one realm to the other in our imagination: "here in this sentence" becomes "here on my imaginary scene of representation." In order to present this declarative formulation as *narrative*, we must conceive the absence of the object to be the result of its intentional, and therefore not irrevocable, departure. The sign *figures* or renders imaginable this departure by converting into an intentional sequence our paradoxical experience of oscillation between (1) its reference to this specific worldly being and (2) its representation of the Being that this particular being incarnates. Because the focus of mimetic desire that the sign represents is unavailable to us who demand it, we "figure" its mortal referent as immortal. We see the object as an object of physical experience, yet the sign that represents "it" refers to a significance beyond the temporality of physical experience. What is figured by specific signs of immortality, whether freedom from gravity or invulnerability to injury, is the simple fact of designation by the sign. To be represented by the sign is in itself the primary figure of immortality, which is in turn the basis for all figurality.

The historical ground for the articulation of the originary sign into explicit narrative in the form of myth is the sparagmos, the "Girardian moment" of the originary scene when the worldly object is sacrificed to

the creation of a transcendental narrative. The act of violence that we call "sacrifice" takes place within the context of the human community defined by the sign and, rather than destroying the community, reaffirms the sacred or transcendental meaning of the sign on which its unity depends.

The originary sign, so long as its emission suffices as the sole human activity, must be conceived as an ostensive. But the stasis of the ostensive, by the very fact that it preserves the community from violence, is unstable; the deferral of danger leads to the resumption of desire. The imperative mode reflects a renewed demand for conformity between the sign and the world that eventually puts an end to the deferral of appropriation. In the ensuing sparagmos, the declarative mode, which denies the object's availability, acquires explicit narrative content. On the one hand, the object has disappeared; it has not simply been appropriated but "undone," torn to pieces. On the other, "it" is recalled through the persistence of the sign as the Being of the center. Narrative is neither the object's originary *formal* passage from immanence to transcendence in the ostensive nor yet its *institutional* passage in ritual, which reenacts the scene. It is, in its mediate, *esthetic* passage, the telling of the generation of transcendence from immanence as a story in which the object's absence is figured as eternal presence.

## **Coda: Supernaturalism and Religious Narrative**

Religious narrative is demythified to the extent that it attributes human intentionality to its protagonist or, in Girardian terms, that it views sacrifice from the point of view of the victim. Unlike myth, religious narrative obliges us to concern ourselves with the potential literality of the figure. A figure of transcendence that permits the narrative subject to accomplish supernatural feats not only does violence to the order of the world but embodies in disguised form the transfiguring force of human violence. The imaginary violence Tikarau's flight does to the laws of physics reflects the potential violence of his lynching.

Our decreased tolerance for the supernatural element in religious narrative, like Enlightenment hostility to "superstition" (*survival, sc.* of ritual thinking), reflects our ethical progress away from the sacrificial. All portrayal of sacred powers independent of human interaction is an affront to the ethical. Whether I control such powers or they control me, my actions are detached from my relations within the human community.

9

In *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 118 (November 22, 1997), I examined the attempt by Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar in *The God We Never Knew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) to redefine our relationship to God in such a way as to avoid the anthropomorphic attribution to him of divine powers. Borg's solution is to consider God as a spiritual force that subsists within us—and within whom we subsist—rather than as a distinct being with power over physical reality. But the antisacrificial thrust of Borg's project loses itself in solipsism. His "spiritual" conception of God avoids the sacrificial only by maintaining the emphasis on the isolated individual's relationship with him that characterized the "physical" conception. I inhabit my spiritual relationship with God to the exclusion of reciprocal relationships with other people. My only meaningful relationship with others is through "compassion," which is merely the inverse of resentment.

The New Testament, like the old, contains many supernatural elements. The motivation of the Jesus Seminar, as I understand it, is to weed out such elements from the Gospel story so that we may conceive

how the historical Jesus might have behaved. To this end, Borg includes in his book a 150-word description of Jesus that substitutes plausible worldly guarantees of Jesus' transcendental status—healing, mysticism, charisma, metaphoric speech—for the supernatural ones offered by the text. This description is designed to make Jesus the protagonist of a strictly worldly narrative, in which the Crucifixion is followed not by "resurrection in the flesh" but by survival in the souls of those who learn his story. But the effect of this naturalism is to emphasize our attraction to the person of Jesus at the expense of the doctrine of mutual love by which he would have us relate to him as to all others.

Resurrection, like flying off into the sky, is a figure of transcendence, but one that demystifies the mythical concealment of sacrificial murder. The Resurrection does not undo the agony unto death of the Crucifixion. In his dual status as both entirely human and entirely divine, Jesus incarnates the paradox of the sacred; this duality is the core of the mystery that the Trinity articulates but cannot explain.

Clearly the story of the Passion and Resurrection is an advance over the tale of Tikarau. The supernatural is never naively conflated with the worldly; the resurrected Christ is openly paradoxical, since he both reveals and transcends the violence of the sparagmos. Although *credo quia absurdum* was the watchword of the early Christians, today's Christianity has set itself the goal of telling his story without paradox. In its praiseworthy desire to eliminate the sacrificial, it has lost sight of the core cultural intuition that to be the object of any story, *a fortiori* an exemplary religious narrative, is *ipso facto* to incarnate an "immortal" significance that can never be sufficiently explained by reference to worldly events. The point of originary thinking is not to eliminate but to *minimize* the narrative scene that we must postulate without proof as having generated this significance.

Whatever facts we may unearth about the historical Jesus, as about any other religious leader, our understanding of his story's significance for humanity will reflect our understanding of how human experience embodies the figure of transcendence. The supernatural narrative can be superseded only by one that explains still better the generation of transcendence from immanence. Thus it will not do to explain away the Resurrection as merely an external figure of internal spirituality; we must supply an articulation of this spirituality that is more, not less, explicit than resurrection itself. In *Science and Faith*, I explained Jesus' resurrection in the light of Saul/Paul's own experience as the sign of our admission of responsibility in his sacrificial killing. The "supernatural" return of the victim reveals to us that our cult of the sacred defers but never forgets its originary roots in the ethics of human interaction.

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The minimal conception of the human as the deferral of violence through representation constitutes a qualitative leap in anthropological understanding. Narrative cannot simply be demystified; it is an originary and integral feature of the human and of human discourse. But knowing this, we can focus on improving and tightening our generative model so as maximally to purge sacrificial violence from our figures of transcendence without unleashing the mimetic crisis that this violence had functioned to defer.

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# Anthropoetics III, 2 Benchmarks

**Wolfgang Iser's** article is the text of a talk given at the **Learned Societies Luncheon** in Irvine on February 24, 1997. His conversation with **Richard van Oort**, as well as **Lahoucine Ouzgane's** and **Eric Gans's** articles were prepared specially for *Anthropoetics*. **Peter Goldman's** article is adapted from the first chapter of his dissertation.

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