

Anthropoetics IV, no. 2

Fall 1998 / Winter 1999

ISSN 1083-7264

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Last updated 3/1/99

"The Mysteries of Mimicry" Sublimity and Morality in *The Golden Bowl*

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Even depravities and moral failings often bear, for all that, some features of the sublime or beautiful, at least so far as they appear to our sensory feeling without being tested by reason... The amorous inclination (*coquetterie*)... in an otherwise decorous person is perhaps reprehensible but still beautiful, and usually is set above the respectable, earnest bearing.

Kant, *On the Feeling of the Beautiful And Sublime*

I

In his last complete novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Henry James outdoes himself in piling up his insistent lexicon of crisis-saturated and sacrificial terminology. The words "sacrifice," "scapegoat," "martyr," "victim," and their many variants occur, especially in Volume Two, even more frequently here than in *The Bostonians* (1886) or *The Princess Casamassima* (1886): somewhere, that is, between forty-five and fifty times or about once every ten pages over the narrative as a whole.⁽¹⁾ (Similar vocabulary registers with much less frequency in *The Tragic Muse* [1890] and *The Wings of the Dove* [1902] although these belong also to the major phase.) Once again, in *The Golden Bowl*, as in those earlier "sacrificial" novels, James explores the way in which even the smallest and seemingly most sophisticated human sodality tends to establish and maintain itself through the expulsion - the sacrifice - of a guiltless hence quite arbitrary victim; and in the present instance, in what by consensus critics take as his *magnum opus*, he pares down the sodality to a genuine, to a clinical, minimum - to the Verver household with its complicated family romance and the extrafamilial married pair Fanny and Bob Assingham. While other late novels likewise confine themselves to a small number of character-agents, one feels that the Ververs *et al* present an especially isolated case. So susceptible is the billionaire milieu to the lapse into scapegoating that, its refined modernity aside, it begins to resemble a primitive setting in which everything is driven by the charisma of the alpha male, ensconced in a precarious centrality, on which all mimetically converge. James shows, then, how mediated desire (the longing, it matters not for what, copied from another) drives the crisis of marriage-in-dissolution, turning models into rivals and forcing bootless confrontations that can only humiliate the initiator. But James likewise demonstrates, through the moral discretion of his central character, "how to re-establish a violated order" (477) *without* submitting a scapegoat (even a genuinely guilty one) to public and spectacular "humiliation" (552). The response to adultery, in this studious scenario, is not the "brutal domination of others" (*The Cambridge*

Companion to Henry James 223), as Margery Sabin has recently concluded, nor the "rise to a connubial authoritarianism" (*Henry James and the Jacobites* 332), as Maxwell Geismar put it thirty years ago; but rather the careful, if determined, resettlement of two disrupted marriages.

In its peculiar way, *The Golden Bowl* thus differs rather starkly from (even while resembling) *The Bostonians*, with its direct and psychologically violent rivalry between Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom over Verena Tarrant, and *The Princess Casamassima*, with its culmination in Hyacinth Robinson's suicide by pistol-shot; for despite the plenitude of violent metaphor which it shares with those two earlier novels, *The Golden Bowl* exhibits indeed only one moment of overt, and arguably "sacrificial," violence. That is when Fanny Assingham, who has abetted the adulterous transgression (and not altogether unwittingly), learns that the Princess, formerly Miss Maggie Verver, at last *knows* that her husband and Charlotte Stant (a childhood friend now, by odd happenstance, Maggie's step-mother) have in secret consummated a romantic involvement, which they recklessly and destructively sustain. The deceitful partners even reason to themselves that they are "a perfectly passive pair" whom others have forced, as "victims" and "against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid" (244).⁽²⁾

The symbolically charged Golden Bowl of the novel's title - an ungainly *objet-d'art* which probably possesses its prototype in a certain cracked urn in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* - has, by its baroque agency, brought forth this revelation. Some time before, when they made their first illicit foray together on the very eve of Maggie's marriage to her groom, Charlotte and the Prince had entered a Bloomsbury shop; Charlotte had found fascination in the golden bowl, but, as the Prince declared it flawed, left without buying it. Much later - the time is four years after the wedding - Charlotte casually alludes to the antiquarian interest of Bloomsbury and thereby plants a "seed" in Maggie's "romantic" (432) imagination: For, as James divulges, the Princess always attended closely to her step-mother's speech and "always so long retained... any observation of Charlotte's, however lightly thrown off" (432). (In prior times, James adds in order to mark the fact, "Maggie had no use for" what the Prince calls "the *antiquarii*" [109]; it is Charlotte's interest that stimulates Maggie's own.) Wandering through London one afternoon, Maggie thus not entirely by coincidence finds herself in the same odd shop as the adulterous pair and, like Charlotte, quickly settles her delight on the alluring titular object; only our dear naive Maggie, fooled by appearances and lacking a better judge to advise her, shies not from its ostentation but buys the thing on impulse. She guesses not at all, as the Prince cannily discerned and as Charlotte learned from him, that the bowl, while superficially integral, contains a concealed fracture. Its beauty extends but a gilded layer deep.

The shopkeeper, however, in a fit of commercial remorse, pays Maggie a visit to confess having cheated her. In the parlor, he notices photographs of Charlotte and the Prince and remembers aloud having seen them on his premises on that past occasion (461). A long-simmering suspicion on Maggie's part - an "outbreak of the definite" (441), James calls it - now boils over as, undeceived, she understands the worst, including importantly her own prior refusal to see the obvious. These details will bear revisitation. The immediate point to be made here is Fanny's reaction, when Maggie has at last painted the full picture for her, to the revelation of marital perfidy. Fanny, says James:

who had been casting about her and whose inspiration decidedly had come, raised the cup in her two hands, raised it positively above her head and from under it solemnly smiled at the Princess as a signal of intention. So for an instant, full of her thought and of her act, she held the precious vessel, and then with due note taken of the polished floor, bare fine and hard in

the embrasure of her window, dashed it boldly to the ground, where she had the thrill of seeing it lie shattered with the violence of the crash. She had flushed with the force of her effort as Maggie had flushed with wonder at the sight, and this high reflexion in their faces was all that passed between them for a minute more. "Whatever you meant by it - and I don't want to know *now* - has ceased to exist," Mrs. Assingham said. (447-448).

Fanny's rashness, all at once decisive, oblique, and futile, seeks to effect what one might best refer to as a magical goal, or rather several magical goals intertwined; the phrase "casting about" is exceptionally telling, as it connotes a desperate concession to any contingent ploy that might show itself in the diminishing instant.

In the first place, Fanny attempts, through so melodramatically smashing the object-catalyst of Maggie's new consciousness, to efface the knowledge around which that consciousness has so implacably crystallized; it is as if Fanny would suppress the revelation of perfidy by superimposing an arbitrary violence which absorbs the specific and damning knowledge into its own scenic abruptness: the act, so Fanny must intend, will permanently divert Maggie's attention from the troubling discovery. In its audacious transgression of every bourgeois canon, the act certainly invokes a type of sublime in the Burkean sense of an abrupt enormity producing "astonishment" so that "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (*A Philosophical Inquiry* 53). One thinks back to the "wonder" (Mull) that Maggie appears to invest in the Prince in the novel's first half, and of the awe that the Prince experiences in his contemplations of Adam. In any case, the precipitation of the bowl conveys a "thrill" to the perpetrator, and makes both women momentarily mute. Earlier, in Book Fourth, Maggie had thought of her father's blithe trust in the rightness of things specifically as a "sublimity" (353). Two types of sublimity thus confront one another: That of transgression and that of the remote noninvolvement of something that excludes one from it - from imitating it or appropriating it. Adam blandly trusts; while Fanny's precipitating the bowl constitutes an essay in diverting discovery back into ignorance when trust has slipped beyond possibility. Thus, in describing Fanny as "full of her thought and her act," James reveals not lucidity but a state of panicked self-accusation which can utter itself only through a displaced annihilation.

In the second place and quite paradoxically, then, Fanny would express and expunge, by her tactical iconoclasm, the weighty moral case mounting up against her for her own role in the affair, for she (Fanny) has undeniably aided the adulterers by protecting them, and has several times lied to Maggie in order to dissimulate nagging suspicions and more-than-suspicions of her own; in this sense, the act is merely petulant and self-serving, as though guilt and complicity could be expiated by destroying the fetish that represents them. In doing so, Fanny fulfills her expostulation to her husband, in Book Third, that no matter what the suspect couple might have done: "I shall never know. Never, never - because I don't want to and nothing will induce me" (305). Fanny at once knows and wills herself not to know, just as the Prince and Charlotte must when they argue to themselves that others have made them do it. In myths and fairytales, as Walter Burkert points out in *The Creation of the Sacred* (1998), this type of "magical flight" from danger, either real or perceived, is common. The "swift adversary," corresponding here to Maggie's implacable insistence on the unpleasant facts, can only be stopped by means of a magical object or gesture: "Throw a comb and it will grow into a forest or a mountain range" (44); throw a piece of flint and it "grows into a cliff" (45). Fanny behaves as though she existed in a fairytale world and could avert unpleasantness by magic; Maggie has left the fairytale world and Fanny's magic does not affect her.

A third goal implied by the smashing of the bowl consists of Fanny's wanting to seem, in Maggie's eyes, to underscore a reasoned argument with an instrumental gesture of phatic import. Indeed, in a prior moment, as Maggie brought forth, bit by bit, what she had learned, Fanny had "inwardly blushed" (435) at her own prior reticence about the affair, the "abysses of confidence" (55) in which she has consigned herself first by match-making the marriage and then by reintroducing the otherwise forlorn Charlotte to the Verver milieu. Shortly afterward, the Prince will see himself trapped in the "labyrinth" (454) of his own mendacity. Both terms imply victimary status - radical isolation and entrapment under threat - but neither Fanny nor the Prince is a victim. Maggie is the victim. Fanny fails to redeem her "cowardice" (435), however, by coming clean about the facts; she indeed extends and compounds cravenness by making speciously exculpatory asseverations on the Prince's behalf; when Maggie asserts that Charlotte and the Prince have known each other intimately "more than I ever dreamed" (435), Fanny lamely interposes the quibbling question "of what one considers intimate" (435-36). She insists that she still *believes* (442) in the Prince and urges loudly to her interlocutor that "your husband has never, never, never - !" (447), when she knows quite well that he indeed has done precisely and calculatedly what she cannot bring herself to utter. Fanny's stuttering denial inevitably breaks off, indicating by its very incompleteness that the truth is still damningly there. Maggie, increasingly convinced of the Prince's perfidiousness, deflects Fanny's "easy glosses" (447), whereupon Fanny, yielding to her desperate and specious "inspiration," seizes that offending piece of "evidence" (448) the bowl and consigns it to would-be oblivion. James takes us swiftly from the broken utterance to the breaking of the gold-plated curiosity that has so wondrously arranged all the hidden facts in revealing clarity all about it.

One can further fill out the character of Fanny's strategy by saying that she is trying to induce Maggie to share, to imitate, her own pretence of blithe ignorance and trust. (And it is, by this point, a pretence merely.) For a bare instant, James suggests, that hopeless result might actually be achieved, for Fanny "had flushed with the force of her effort as Maggie had flushed with wonder at the sight, and this high reflexion in their faces was all that passed between them for a minute more." In the unspecifiable because absolutely compact emotion generated by "the violence of the crash" and reflected in their mutual coloration, the two women momentarily become one, their union expressed paradoxically by their dilatory silence. Fanny, if but crudely, has called forth a type of sublimity in which the forensic clarity of the case, the true disposition of moral differences and the full assignment of causes and effects, transiently returns to its pre-articulate compactness - that mere and aphonic suspicion of offense. But the Prince, breaking in on the silent awe, dispels the speechless unanimity and by his appearance - in every sense of the term - verifies to both women his now indisputable implication in the betrayal.⁽³⁾ In James's Hawthornesque metaphor, Maggie sees "the red mark of conviction flaming there in his beauty" (450) and finds in it the corroboration of her surmise. "Murder will out" (418), as Colonel Assingham, Fanny's husband, had recently predicted. But Fanny's hope that Maggie can be manipulated into denying what the facts - circumstantial though they might be - tell her does not stem from nothing. For as long as Fanny has known Maggie, the latter has exhibited a willingness to be impressed by others, a susceptibility to influence exemplified by her having peregrinated into the antiquarian's shop in Bloomsbury in response to a casual word dropped by Charlotte. Until the sacrificial moment of the shattered bowl, Maggie has in fact hardly ever been herself; she has been, on the contrary, the blank creature of others, taking her cues from them and molding herself to please them. Fanny's precipitation of the gilded cup produces, in this way, a real if unforeseen consequence: An authentic and autonomous Maggie who coalesces in the very instant when the cup breaks into three great slivers on the hard floor. The Prince himself suddenly perceives that Maggie has become "deep" (463) and Maggie agrees that, for the first time in her dutiful and naive life, she possesses "real knowledge" (463). Without design, then, Fanny's deed has

"redoubled... beyond its intention" (450), giving rise to what she designed it to prevent, namely the grim matriculation of Maggie's long stunted acuity.

It will be productive to borrow an insight from Eric Gans, who has noted on many an occasion that resentment, entailing a consciousness of one's emissary status, can actually be constitutive of the self; expulsion entails the sudden perception of ontological equivalence between one individual and another and the simultaneous perception that, existentially, such equivalence has suffered a disruption. In *The End of Culture*, discussing the breakdown of pre-modern society, Gans notes that "resentment may be defined as the scandal of the peripheral self at the centrality of the other which transforms the equality of the original scene of representation into an absolute polarity of difference" (174). Maggie's expulsion from her own marriage - or rather her discovery of that expulsion - certainly seems to produce such an effect, although it should quickly be added that her resentment is transient and itself quickly undergoes a transformation. In any case, a certain "*Imperium*" (43), on which the Prince meditated in *The Golden Bowl's* opening paragraph, has suddenly and decisively passed from the Prince to his Princess, from the cynical manipulator to the moral adjudicator, and the former possessor shall not regain it. ("*Imperium*" perfectly fits the "absolute polarity of difference" to which Gans alludes in the passage just quoted.) The key terms by which Amerigo formerly thought of Maggie - "pursuit" and "capture," he the pursuer and she the captive (44) - now by reversal apply to him. The true sublime of moral conviction informed by direct and certain knowledge here replaces the false sublime of ignorance, in which thinking comes to a stop in the diverting contemplation of some impressive but vague object.

II

The filiations of mimesis in *The Golden Bowl* twist about one another in complicated strands and they occasionally tighten into fantastic knots; the convergence of multiple parties on singular objects, the contention of plural persons for unique status, the constant fishing by one character after the thoughts, dispositions, and preferences of another to satisfy a want of authentic motive: these repeatedly provoke crises, major and minor, which in their complexity constitute what James labels both "the mysteries of mimicry" (160) and "the mysteries of pride" (528). When James first reveals the Prince, for example, at the beginning of Book First, he puts him strolling in Bond Street in a "restless" (43) state, pausing now and then to gaze at the goods, "the loot of far-off victories" (43) as he imagines, that the shopkeepers have set on display in their windows. The Prince's impending marriage appears to him as a "crisis" (54) in the sense that it forecloses the erotic "possibilities in faces" (43) that he sees about him as he meanders and observes. (One should not underestimate the predatory character of the Prince.) The shop-windows, past which Amerigo peers, signify those external barriers to impulse and appropriation - marriage being the case in point - which *libido* can only regard under the enigmatic figure of "the iron shutter of a shop... rattl[ing] down at the turn of some crank" (52-53). Such an aversion to exchange, to *the market*, will establish itself as a recurring theme in the novel; moral judgments will turn on whether one can assimilate oneself to the old principle of *do ut des*. The Prince both wants his marriage (not least for its cash value) and yet fears it as a "monster" (58) which must, under its *Imperium* (rather than *his*), foreclose all other possibilities. In this state of indecision (this balking before the demand to forsake all others), he requires guidance, a word from some source that will indicate what he should do. Despite his imposing effect on others, he lacks a satisfying fund of inner conviction. Such is the fragility of charisma. He makes his way, therefore, to the one who has already managed so much for him.

The Prince's interview with Fanny Assingham, in her home in Cadogan Place, (Book First) suggests Amerigo's not so subtle mimetic dependence on this lady-mentor. Fanny stands as mastermind behind the

nuptial arrangements: "You had the conception," the Prince says to her, "you had it first [and] you had it the most" (60). Again, the Prince says that "I can do pretty well anything I see" and then quickly adds that he has nevertheless "got to see it first" (61); the unstated corollary of this admission is that the Prince experiences difficulty in originating his own desires, or at least in specifying them. *Seeing through Fanny's eyes* - James ascribes the metaphor to his character - will teach the Prince not only what he should *like* but what he "mayn't like" (62); and such knowledge will help him settle into what Maggie had earlier referred to as his "particular self" (47). It is the case, however, that the Prince has not yet sufficiently made out what others, particularly his father-in-law-to-be, expect of him; he has discerned only a "large bland blank assumption of merits" (56). The Prince, says James, "wouldn't know himself" (56) until he had somehow resolved that "blank assumption" into its particulars. (When he does so, it will be cynically *parti pris*; it will entail taking but no giving and will therefore violate *do ut des*.) Charlotte for her part, as Fanny says to her husband, "wants to be magnificent" (98), the model of magnificence for this girl in "want of means" (77) being the Verver household, particularly her friend Maggie. Fanny herself, as her machinations attest, lives a good deal through others, finds her *being* elsewhere than in herself. She once divulges that she is wholly "mixed up" (100) with others, a phrase which commingles semantically with the idea of adultery as a form of adulteration.

James more than hints, by opening the novel amidst the shop-windows of a London street, that *The Golden Bowl* will treat the world-at-large, the modern world of the consumer and the producer, as founded in a separation, or at least a perceived separation, between the wanting state and a *being* displaced into an elsewhere of yearning and humiliation. The great question concerns how one might come to terms with such an inherent frustration; how, so to speak, one might negotiate the market of esteem without violating its well-founded rules. How wrong Geismar is when he asserts that James's novel has "nothing to do with the modern world" or "with any conceivable world of social reality" (323). That world, non-hierarchical and predicated on negotiation by autonomous parties, lies everywhere at hand and forces the representatives of the vestigial medieval world, especially the Prince, to accept its terms. One must give, therefore, if one would later get. Symmetrical exchange is the profoundest of laws. James will make the case emphatically that it is the refusal of the market - and of the principle of reciprocity which informs the workings of the market - that stokes frustration and leads to a corrosively antinomian "pride" (541). The "currents of the market" (143) operate according to mimesis, and thus establish the pervasive mimetic background for the novel's action.

Yet the primary, perhaps one should call it the originary, mimetic case in *The Golden Bowl* is oddly a negative one, the absence of the mother who might otherwise have provided for Maggie a useful model of feminine autonomy. In the case of the deceased mother, the problems of mimesis and of displaced and inaccessible being come together. One might recall that a similar lack in an earlier James novel, *Washington Square* (1881), leads protagonist Catherine Sloper to the disaster of embittered spinsterhood; but Adam Verver, Maggie's father, corresponds - fortunately - to a somewhat different species than the grim and reserved Austin Sloper, despite the fact that both qualify as self-conscious aesthetes. Sloper stood close to his deceased wife but remains distant from his daughter; Adam Verver stood distant from his deceased wife but remains close, rather too close, perhaps, to Maggie. Sloper withholds his largesse, or at least threatens to do so; Adam spreads his freely around. In enjoying Adam's magnanimity, however, all the partakers in it enjoy indirectly what one might call a troubling relation to the deceased first wife and mother. This relation deserves to be examined in some detail, for it concerns the origin of the sublimity which endows Adam with his powerful and attractive charisma; the relation is nevertheless not sinister, but merely fortuitous - and yet it remains generative of an array of important effects.

One might begin by underscoring the fact that the death of the wife, like the smashing of the bowl, generates unforeseen and ironically positive results. As Milly Theale says to Susan Stringham in *The Wings of the Dove*, speculating on the certainty of her own death: "You'll never really know where I am. Except indeed when I'm gone; and then you'll only know where I'm not" (183). In *The Golden Bowl*, once one becomes aware of her having existed, one remains aware of just how conspicuously the first Mrs. Verver is absent. Not stemming from old money, Adam must have produced his fortune during the period of his first marriage, so that elementary fairness of judgment would necessarily attribute to her a measure of shared credit in the making of it. "Behind every great man..." as the cliché puts it (and not without cause). Adam indeed not only owes some part of his fortune to the original Mrs. Verver; he owes his defining sense of himself as a genuine initiate of the arts to her death - a grim and perhaps unrepayable debt. If Adam now ranks as "equal somehow with the great seers, invokers and encouragers of beauty," it remains the case that "he had been nothing of the kind before" (140). In Book Second, meditating alone in the billiard room of Fawns, his retreat in the English countryside, Adam Verver arrives at a sudden understanding of the causation by which he has become, in his own estimation, nearly "infallible" in aesthetic judgment and a man than whom none other "in Europe or America, he privately believed, was for such estimate less capable of vulgar mistakes" (139).

A self-made billionaire (57) from the Midwest, Adam has given himself over, in early retirement, to the obsessive acquisition of painting, sculpture, luxurious ornament, and architectural fragment. He thinks to himself that:

apart from the natural affections he had acquainted himself with no greater joy of the intimately personal type than the joy of his originally coming to feel, and all so unexpectedly, that he had in him the spirit of a connoisseur. He had, like many other persons, in the course of his reading, been struck with Keats's sonnet about stout Cortez in the presence of the Pacific; but it was probable that few persons had so devoutly fitted the poet's grand image to a fact of experience. It consorted so with Mr Verver's consciousness of the way in which at a given moment he had stared at *his* Pacific that a couple of perusals of the immortal lines had sufficed to stamp them in his memory. His 'peak in Darien' was the sudden hour that had transformed his life, the hour of his perceiving with a mute inward gasp akin to the low moan of apprehensive passion that a world was left him to conquer and that he might conquer it if he tried. (139)

James adds that "the light, in his mind, had so broken" only "during his first visit to Europe *after* the death of his wife" (140 [emphasis added]). Adam attributes his prior obtuseness to the undue influence of the deceased helpmate, whose "flutter had been mainly that of ribbons, frills and fine fabrics" (140). In the days of her presence, Adam "had 'bought'" (140), but only on his wife's pattern, through her eyes, so to speak, and according to her taste: "He sometimes even wondered what would have become of his intelligence, in the sphere in which it was to learn more and more exclusively to play, if his wife's influence on it hadn't been, in the strange scheme of things, so promptly removed" (141). In his bereavement, he became "violently aware" of "the dormant intelligence" within him that only awaited its proper occasion to stir from slumber and mark him with its power. So the disappearance of the encumbering companion - the disruption of the marriage by death - while accidental or providential (the latter, as it seems, from Adam's perspective) nevertheless yields a boon and conforms therefore to the same sacrificial pattern observable in Fanny's performance with the bowl. Both entail violence; both induce what a certain subject - Adam in one case and Maggie in the other - understands as a positive metamorphosis from dormancy to awareness. Adam refers to the "intelligence," "Genius," and "Taste" as

opposed to *vulgarity* (140) that his awakening has granted him, and Maggie repeatedly to "knowledge" (422) and *judgment* (440, 450) as opposed to *ignorance* (446) and *belief* (442). Yet while the oppositions are formally congruent, the categories differ significantly and contribute to the intellectual counterpoint of the narrative: Adam's pertains almost exclusively to beauty considered in an extra-moral sense (even to the extra-moral considered, as in Kant's phrase from my epigraph, as beautiful) and Maggie's to justice considered in such a way as to subordinate merely aesthetic considerations; but this is not to say that Maggie's sense of justice pays no tribute to aesthetic notions such as proportion or seemliness - for it does indeed account for these. Maggie's view of things does not predominate, however, until the denouement; Mull has written of the "near-Platonism" (144) of Adam's thinking, and for most of the novel Adam, through pure effulgence, ordains the aesthetic criteria governing how, in his world, things shall be.

He does so by appearing to embody, in various forms, the being that others fear to lack in themselves and so seek to acquire mimetically by the closest possible association with their model. (When James transcribes Adam's self-assessment, Maggie's father is, in fact, *hiding out* from a crowd of women who have settled in as indefinite guests at Fawns.) Adam's charisma stems in part from his wealth, but in larger part from his having succeeded in making the impression, however insubstantial, of "a *real galantuomo*" (45 [emphasis in original]), as the Prince names him - an embodiment of *reality*.

Surrounding himself with an ever accumulating mass of beautiful artifacts, Adam achieves the effect, on others, of an "essential pulse of flame, brought to the highest point, yet extraordinarily contained" and impresses those around him with an "acquisitive power" that implies "the necessary triumph of all operations" (131). Flame can warm or illuminate or it can burn; the metaphor is the quintessence of the mythopoetic-sacrificial genus. And if "everyone had need of one's power," Adam nevertheless "dread[s] the imputation of greed" (133), of not wanting, that is, to share that "power." These statements imply that Adam, too, by a peculiar splitting of consciousness, is subject to his own quasi-sacred status. Like every priest or quasi-sacred creature, he has an appearance to keep up. True, his inveterate culling of the art-market carries with it the mark of generosity, for most of the stuff will eventually find its way into the Museum that this great patron intends to endow back in "American City" (49); but it also hints at a certain desperation, a haunted sense that the glamour might vanish should he cease the forward motion of his accumulative career. Adam resembles nothing so much as a Melanesian big-man, who, in his pre-civilized setting, as Eric Gans remarks in *The End of Culture* (1985), "attains communal significance by monopolizing the exchange-system function of distribution - by converting it, at least at periodic intervals, into a personal *redistribution*" (154). The big-man's "cultural centrality is founded on economic centrality" (154) but can by no means be reduced to mere economics. Wealth, as such, interests the big-man far less than the prestige that he gains by giving his wealth away, so much so, as Gans reminds us, that he provides the likely prototype of kings in the pharaonic style: "What specifically distinguishes the big-man is [not his wealth but] something else: his *individual* and non-prescribed role in the creation of... surplus. Because the big-man's difference [from everyone else] does not circulate among the other members of the community... a permanent disequilibrium emerges between his function as producer/(re)distributor and the role of consumer to which the beneficiaries of his generosity are relegated" (*Science & Faith* 35).

At the time of his great self-revelation, James writes, Adam "was a plain American citizen staying at an hotel where sometimes there were twenty others like him: but no pope, no prince of them all had read a richer meaning, he believed, into the character of the Patron of Art" (146). A certain self-inflation, our novelist adds, might well have gone "to our friend's head" where "what could it do but steadily grow and

grow?" (146). Others see Adam as a protean "personage" who might be "a Pope, a King, a President, a Peer, a General, or just a beautiful Author" (185). James only unambiguously, in Book Fifth, reveals how Adam, deep down, perceives himself; but in Books First through Third, the several iterations of the metaphor of burning one's ships (192, 195) suggest a personality determined to cut itself off, somehow, from its own past - perhaps even from the foundationally deceased first wife. On one occasion Adam thinks back on "the *sacrifice* of burning his ships" (173 [emphasis added]). The textual nearness of Adam's thought about his departed *uxor* and his mental invocation of the conquistador's radical gesture make the last plausible. Early in Book Second, Adam even wonders, thinking back on it, whether his first marriage "deserved the name" (144), a thought which tends to confirm his sense of his own Emersonian self-creation.

Maggie will later think of her father as "the 'successful' beneficent person, the beautiful bountiful original dauntlessly wilful great citizen, the consummate collector and high authority" whose "quietness," "originality," "modesty," "exquisite public perversity," and "inscrutable incalculable energy" (513) mark him off as the ultimate source and model for those around him, a genius of conjoined opposites, and the *origin* (she thinks it twice) of everything around him. Of course, Adam's current plenitude of passive being disguises the fact that before he could *be* in this quasi-sacred way he had first *to do*, to create the fortune that now endows him with benign majesty. One of the problems which Maggie faces, and which she will finally overcome, is that being resists imitation, which is the primary form of doing. As Gans puts it, "to be present in the center of the scene is to be uniquely significant precisely because it is to be absent from any project of action" (*Signs of Paradox* 92). All of Adam's numinous endowments make him an overwhelming factor in the minds of those who surround him; they also render him useless as the instigator of positive mimesis. The absent mother plays a role in this: For if she were present, she would pose a counterbalance to Adam, humanize him, reveal his resemblance to ordinary mortals like Colonel Assingham, and implicate him more effectively in the immediate social world; she might even rebuke him for his runaway self-inflation.

All that glitters, then, is not gold, and while Adam possesses enough wealth to make a pharaoh envious, what people see in him is his "form" (44) and his "way" (46), terms the very vagueness of which suggests the auric, the numinous, the mysterious, the inaccessible. To marry into the Verver family means, for the Prince, not only his arrival in "the golden isles" (60), that mythic never-never land of appetitive superabundance, but the near-miraculous redemption of his fallen family's historical cumulus of monetary debt; Amerigo indeed understands Adam's free and serial reclamation of these "long-estranged... properties... encumbered with unending leases and charges" as a series of "sacrifices" (156) made by Adam *to him*. As the young man knows that his father-in-law regards him as possessing some "hereditary privilege," some "secret" stemming from his ancestry (184), and as he also understands that Adam values the addition of this quality to the Verver household, he feels himself attached through a "principle of reciprocity" (44) to the "spell" (57), the "thickness of white air," and the "dazzling curtain of light" (56) which emanate from his in-law benefactor, quite as though he were a god or an angel in permanent epiphany.

This phenomenon depends, moreover, on "no mere measurable medium" (267). The object of desire loses its objectality and volatilizes into the nebulous idea of redemptory plenitude, within whose transforming glow all deficiencies of the subject will be made good. Immeasurableness is, moreover, a feature of the sublime as it is described both by Kant and Burke. When we contemplate vastness, Burke says, "we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated" (63); "the sublime," Kant tells us, "is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread" (47). The Prince's attribution to

him of magic immensity invokes for Adam the hypsotic category.

Others, besides the Prince, heed the magic as well. In Book Third, during the soirée at Matcham, Adam exudes among his guests a "pervasion" of "quantity" (267):

Every voice in the great bright house was a call to the ingenuities and impunities of pleasure; every echo was a defiance of difficulty, doubt or danger; every aspect of the picture, a glowing plea for the immediate, and as with plenty more to come, was another phase of the spell. For a world so constituted was governed by a spell, that of the smile of the gods and the favor of their powers; the only handsome, the only gallant, in fact the only intelligent acceptance of which was a faith in its guarantees and a high spirit for its chances. (273)

The Prince thinks that conditions around Adam resemble "the state of our primitive parents before the Fall" (275), a thought that echoes Maggie's remark from Book First that "the happiest reigns... are the reigns without any history" (47), yet another reference to the Arcadian atmosphere generated by Adam's inestimable means. No one, confronting Adam, it seems, can avoid the immediate conviction that being lies elsewhere - *in Adamo* - and that insofar as one possesses it oneself one does so by way of an *influx*, an "influenza" (218), from that august individual. Maggie enjoys such influence by virtue of her filial tie; the Prince enjoys it by virtue of his espousal to Maggie. Charlotte, who knew Maggie when both were children, and who knew the Prince only a short time before, in Italy, feels left out. Early on in the narrative, James records "her recall of her birth in Florence and Florentine childhood" (78); he alludes to the "shabby" quality of her natal milieu and to the "poor convent" (78) where she took instruction. The implied *poor/rich* or *shabby/genteel* contrast verges on the overdetermined. When the Prince, implying that she is Italian in appearance, speculates on the possibility of "some strictly civil ancestor" (78), Charlotte can only admit that she knows of none. She will continue to feel left out, different by origin, perhaps quite *unoriginal*, even after she marries Adam. It miffs her when Maggie telegraphs congratulations not to both of them but only to her father (205). But that is to skip ahead.

Hearing of the imminent nuptials, Charlotte appears (quite uninvited) at the Assinghams, whereupon Fanny mediates the reacquaintance of the young woman and the Prince. Charlotte definitely qualifies as the outsider in the Verver milieu; she declares herself not "absolutely a pauper" but still "too poor for some things" (105), and yet she does, like Adam and indeed like Amerigo, lay claim to a certain charm of her own. While "nothing in her definitely placed her," she nevertheless strikes the Prince as "a rare, a special product," marked off from other women by "her singleness, her solitude, her *want of means*," and exhibiting in her very deficiency "an odd precious neutrality" (77 [emphasis added]).

Yet, for the Prince, Charlotte's "mystery" (78) now suddenly partakes retroactively in the Verver enchantment: he believes that Charlotte once represented *for Maggie* "the liveliest emotion she had known before the dawn of the sentiment inspired by himself" (77). Where there is no directly observable relationship to endow someone with Verver magic, then one must, in the logic of imitation, imagine such a relationship. The Prince and Charlotte, as noted, knew each other previously, but James's prose leaves readers to suppose that, at the time, the Prince had yet to meet the Ververs (something which Fanny would stage-manage) and that Charlotte herself made no mention of them. So she formed, for him, merely another affair; and he, too, for her. If, as Fanny puts it, the Prince "*had* to have money," so, it seems, did Charlotte, for they mutually "gave each other up" (89) in the lack of it. In renewing his former interest, then, the Prince has in effect taken a cue from his wife-to-be. Part of the Verver magic has

passed from Adam via Maggie to Charlotte. She is now more alluring than she might have been before; but her "want of means" additionally enables the Prince to stand to her as Adam stands to him: it enables him to imitate Adam, to exercise a similar apparently magnanimous being in respect to Charlotte.

Charlotte seeks "existence" (80), as she tells the Prince during their first conversation in Cadogan Place, repeating the word three times. She means marriage, of course, but neither merely nor exclusively. Later, as a guest at Fawns, invited by Adam himself, she proves to have "existence" of a sort already, and to exert an "influence" (176) on others all her own. As earlier noted, Adam finds himself genially besieged at Fawns by a swarm of female suitors, the bachelor-ladies Lutch (two of them, evidently) and the widow Rance, from whom he persistently and comically escapes. In short order, Charlotte, in Fanny's words, has "cleared them out" (175). Says Fanny: "One *saw* the consciousness I speak of come over the poor things, very much I suppose as people at the court of the Borgias may have watched each other begin to look queer after having had the honour of taking wine with the heads of the family" (177). Charlotte indisputably boasts "the real thing" (178) and the others, fatalistically acknowledging the quality, leave the field; Charlotte adds up singularly to "exactly what those women themselves want to be" and "her effect on them is to make them recognise that they never will" (178). Having banished her rivals, she turns her attention to the object of her desire, Adam himself. For his part, Adam gravitates to the girl, and for a reason which fits the already several times reiterated pattern of the novel: Charlotte represents for him a "secret," like that which he perceives in his son-in-law; and he even discovers himself wondering, at one point, if that secret "had come to Charlotte, who had unmistakably acquired it, through [Amerigo's] having passed it on" (184). He thinks that Amerigo might have "coached" or "incited" Charlotte in some way, so that she might imitate the Prince's "personal system" (184). In gold-digging coquetry, of course, the Prince has, in effect, so "coached" her, but Adam remains for the present in ignorance of that fact.

Charlotte has not only been spiralling closer to Adam, repelling rivals as she nears him; she has been imitating his "way," or attempting it, since the moment she became reacquainted with the Prince under Fanny's arrangement. When she and Amerigo enter the Bloomsbury shop in Book First, her errand putatively entails making the purchase of a wedding-gift for Maggie (82), or, perhaps, of what she calls a "ricordo" (116) for the Prince which honor, however, he (more or less out of petulance) refuses. She wants to buy something beautiful to bestow on the daughter (Maggie) of the "personage" known for his extravagant and tasteful buying of endless beautiful things, or upon her former lover, now made *more interesting* than previously by his imminent espousal of the radiant Ververs; she too by such a gesture would gain the appearance of being a centrally positioned *redistributor* of largesse.⁽⁴⁾ (Maggie, by contrast, until she imitates Charlotte in making the round of the Bloomsbury antiquarian shops, remains a recipient rather than a giver of goods.) After Charlotte finds herself alone with Adam, and when he begins to test her for a wife, she accompanies him from Fawns to Brighton to complete the acquisition of a set of rare tiles of Syrian origin. The dealer, a certain conspicuously Jewish Gutermann-Seuss, welcomes the couple to his house. "Our visitors," writes James, "found themselves introduced, by the operation of close contiguity, to a group of ladies and gentleman older and younger, and of children larger and smaller, who mostly affected them as scarce less anointed for hospitality and who produced at first the impression of a birthday party, or some anniversary gregariously and religiously kept, though they subsequently fell into their places as members of one quiet domestic circle, preponderantly and directly indebted for their being in fact to Mr Gutermann-Seuss" (190). (Some anticipatory irony might well be assigned to the supernumerary character of the Guterman-Seusses, to their fecundity, for Adam by his first wife had but one child, and his child produces likewise but one offspring, while he, with

Charlotte, through no want of trying, produces none.)

The exchange - Adam's cheque for Gutermann-Seuss's "infinitely ancient... amethystine" (191) tiles - occurs, then, in the context of an intact community, a veritable Old Testament "tribe" (192); it is also paradigmatically an affirmation of the market. Gutermann-Seuss at one point tells Adam that he has long known of and has long wanted to meet "the great American collector" (190). As the praise builds up Adam before himself, so it also builds him up before Charlotte, who can bask, as it were, in the radiation. Gutermann-Seuss's attention to Adam proves, for Charlotte, that her companion incarnates "the aesthetic principle" (179). Adam notices, all throughout the transaction, how Charlotte appreciates the "mystic rite" (192) of the purchase; and he begins to think of her in terms of the "sacrifice" (193) of "burning his ships" (191), a metaphor drawn from those exploits of Cortez alluded to in Keats's sonnet and one which signifies a renewal of romance. There is something odd and perhaps even morbid in this, however, for Charlotte excites in Adam at this moment the reawakening of the sense of a new existence that had followed the *death* of his first wife, Maggie's mother. Adam himself betrays no awareness of the irony. He shortly proposes to Charlotte, who speaks of her desire "to have an existence" (194), and, after a coquettish deferral of a few days, accepts.⁽⁵⁾ The deferral concerns her communication with the Prince - not with the Prince *and* Maggie, as she leads Adam to believe - in which she discerns that she shall not only have her "existence" but that she shall have her Prince too. "*A la guerre comme à la guerre then*" (244), the Prince has written. The announcement of impending marital union thus occurs almost simultaneously with the announcement of *war*. With the image of the Gutermann-Seusses, the large and stable household, still hovering, the intention to sunder such an image constitutes a treacherous tie between the two conspirators. As the Gutermann-Seusses represent the market, with its implicit rule of equivalent exchange, the declaration of bellicosity also signifies an intention to violate that rule. James opposes *war* to *the market*.⁽⁶⁾

III

In Book First, Well before Adam's espousal of Charlotte, Fanny and the Colonel between them sum up the gathering crisis in the figure of plural "*cases*": "There's Maggie's and the Prince's, and there's the Prince's and Charlotte's... there's Charlotte's and the Prince's... there's Maggie's and Charlotte's... and there's also Maggie's and mine. I think too that there's Charlotte's and mine" (94). Fanny, who does most of the adducing, represents the Verver milieu as one of shifting pairs. In fact, each one of her pairs is a trio, with Fanny herself forming the third party in all, not merely in two, of them; for Fanny arranged the engagement of Maggie and the Prince, and has already begun to encourage the re-pairing of the Prince and Charlotte. (Later, Adam will make the third party in some of these combinations: the "case" of Adam, Charlotte, and the Prince will unite the adulterous pair at the expense of the husband; the adultery indeed produces two interlocking triangles.) But something of the truth clings to Fanny's myth, so to speak, of the merely dyadic "*cases*": Maggie and the Prince, as husband and wife, constitute an intact pair only to the extent that all others remain excluded from the marriage; and should the Prince and Charlotte constitute a pair, it will only be through the treacherous exclusion of Maggie from the sanctity of her bond with Amerigo - now all the more sanctified through the birth of the Principino, their son. In many of the instances where James, almost always through one of his characters, deploys the term *sacrifice* (or a variant), the term refers to the problem of exclusion; at other times it has a rather more casual definition. Finally, sacrifice will refer to the opposite of exclusion. When the Prince defines Adam's redemption of various mortgaged properties as a sacrifice (156), he is thinking casually. This, once again, is the big-man establishing solidarity by giving his goods away (while at the same reinforcing resentment

against his unique capacity to eradicate debts); it is the purely material type of sacrifice. Adam, in conversation with Maggie about the way in which her marriage to the Prince excludes him, playfully refers to himself as a "martyr" (163); but Maggie later quite seriously thinks that, in marrying, she has "sacrificed a parent" (185). When the truth of betrayal has dawned on Maggie and she has resolved to put Charlotte out of the picture by packing her and Adam back to America, because she does not want to embarrass Charlotte publicly, she resolves herself to play the role of "scapegoat" (487) for the sake of familial placidity. She could, she thinks, "have yearned for it, for the straight vindictive view, the rights of resentment, the rages of jealousy" (489), but the idea of histrionics disgusts her and she has no desire to compound injuries. In effect, she sacrifices the right to retribution.⁽⁷⁾

Maggie's handling of her knowledge - her treatment of Charlotte - deserves examination, but her behavior will only make sense if one first distinguishes certain of her predispositions from certain of the Prince's and Charlotte's. James cannily arranges his story so that the two adulterers and then the betrayed wife visit that Bloomsbury shop and transact with the shopkeeper. If one were to ask, from where, in this narrative of endlessly circulating imitative desire, the ethical revelation comes that fixes the promiscuous players once again in the ordered pattern called marriage, then one would have to answer that it comes from the Italian-speaking purveyor of antiquities. Consider Charlotte and the Prince during their visit to the antiquarian. James tells us that Charlotte came away from the shop "full of impressions" and that the chief of these concerned the shopkeeper himself who struck her as "the greatest curiosity they looked at" (114). The Prince says laconically that he "hadn't looked at him" at all whereupon Charlotte notes:

how, below a certain social plain, he never *saw*. One kind of shopman was just like another to him - which was oddly inconsequent on the part of a mind that where it did notice noticed so much. He took throughout always the meaner sort for granted - the night of their meanness, or whatever name one might give it for him, made all his cats grey. (114)

Charlotte sees the man, to be sure, but remarks him mainly because she imagines that "he cared - well, so for *them*" (114), that is, for Charlotte herself and her companion. She tells the Prince later that the man could not take his eyes off them and that this proved that he possessed "taste" (114), the quality unanimously attributed to the sublime Adam, who constitutes the metaphysically predominant model in James's narrative scheme. "We're beautiful, aren't we?" (114) Charlotte asks rhetorically, thus illustrating to perfection René Girard's comment on coquetry in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*: "The coquette seeks to be desired because she needs masculine desires, directed at her, to feed her coquetry. She has no more self-sufficiency than the man who desires her, but the success of her strategy allows her to keep up the appearance of it, since it offers her a form of desire she can copy" (370). Charlotte's idea that the man notices *her*, sees in her a being that he does not possess himself, but can nevertheless recognize, strategically complements her sense that the Prince does not notice *him* - that Amerigo possesses, that is, the very being that the man lacks and therefore keenly remarks when it appears in another. In this hopeful but self-contradictory analysis of the moment of desire, Charlotte succeeds in convincing herself, but only precariously, that she radiates the same type of auric desirability which draws *her* to someone who has been *designated by another* as desirable. (The Prince has been designated by Maggie, or perhaps, through her, by Adam.) The analysis remains self-contradictory and precarious, however, because it depends simultaneously on the authority of the shopkeeper as a discernor of *beauty* and on his contemptibility as one "below a certain social plain."

Notice the emissary structure of the situation: Charlotte - in her imagination, at least - forges solidarity with the Prince by participating in his contempt for the antiquarian. In a word, she imitates him, imitates

the disdain that makes him loom before her as self-sufficient. Notice also that another exclusion, more critical from Charlotte's perspective, exists underneath the immediately visible one: Maggie's exclusion from her impending nuptial sodality with the Prince. All of Charlotte's terms in her rehearsal, to Amerigo, of the Bloomsbury excursion are invidiously comparative, and Maggie, although *of course* never mentioned, must bear the detrimental burden of Charlotte's envy. Charlotte's position in her (falsely) suatory treatment with the Prince thus strangely resembles Fanny's position in her (falsely) suatory treatment with Maggie, when she picks up the bowl and hurtles it to the floor: neither one dares mention what is really going on and both must fall back on evasion and non-sequitur to convince their respective interlocutors. There is, as James puts it elsewhere in the novel, a "danger of advertising subtle processes" (397), especially where the subtlety involves elaborate concealment of one's own ontological insecurity. Charlotte's argument, when reduced to its impossible essence, takes the form of an enthymeme: *I have been designated by an ugly and undesirable party, therefore I am beautiful and desirable.*

The one real element in this abyss of desire and self-deception is Amerigo's distaste for the man, the shopkeeper, to whom Charlotte paradoxically attributes the quality of "taste." A short time after the smashing of the bowl, trapped by Maggie in his lie, he lashes out at the man. He remembers the shopkeeper only "as a horrid little beast" (460); earlier, to Charlotte, he described the man as "the swindling Jew who understood Italian" (292), an epithet which Charlotte, on the occasion, mimics contentedly *verbatim*. Maggie, by contrast, tells the Prince that, in the shopkeeper, she has found "a friend [who] took an interest in me" (460). Maggie chooses her words carefully, for the phrase *took an interest* denotes exactly what the Prince has failed to do with regard to his wife - worse than failed. Maggie believes that she "inspired" the shopkeeper "with sympathy" (460), as she reports, remarking what "an oddity of... chance" it was that she "should have been moved... to go precisely to *him*" (460). (I have shown that it was not a matter of "chance" at all, but Maggie's mimetic response to Charlotte's suggestion.) Maggie can, she tells her husband:

"only think of [the shopkeeper] as kind, for he had nothing to gain. He had in fact only to lose. It was what he came to tell me - that he had asked me too high a price, more than the object was really worth. There was a particular reason which he hadn't mentioned and which made him consider and repent. He wrote for leave to see me again - wrote in such terms that I saw him here this afternoon." (460)

The shopkeeper "had nothing to gain" so that his act indicated no taint whatsoever of the mercenary. From the moment of that visit, Maggie has immersed herself in learning how to be, in James's phrase, "a mistress of shades" (423). In the first shock of discovery, she had wondered to herself "who... would inevitably... in the gust of momentary selfishness, be sacrificed" (422) in atonement for the adulterous offense; now, however, drawing her ethical lesson from the reviled shopkeeper's decent act, she thinks in terms of *kindness*, *consideration* and *repentance*. The shopkeeper's knowledge of "how easily the bowl could be broken" (461) pricked the fellow's conscience and "worked in him" (461). If Maggie's language, like Fanny's a short time before, operates by its obliquity, it seeks a very different goal, however, than Fanny's: revelation, namely, with the intent of reconciliation rather than concealment with the intent of sustaining a betrayal. Yet Maggie's plan entails no simple forgiveness, as if nothing had happened, for she is now too much attuned to what she knows (not just about the Prince and Charlotte, but about human relations in general) to make a pretence of naivety in Polly-Anna-ish hopes for the best. The Prince and Charlotte will together have to endure a type of probation, a compensation by equivalence for their

delinquency, but the erotics of exclusion will then at last be closed and the married pairs will be permanently and stably paired off as they should. Maggie takes care, above all, that Adam, if he does not already know, shall learn nothing of the sordid affair; she would preserve unruffled and unsullied the "sublime" equanimity of his "happiness" (502).

Maggie's method for carrying out what she now knows that she must do worthily solicits our critical examination, but one must first say more about the shopkeeper and his bourgeois conscience.

The shopkeeper is a Jew. It is worth recalling that the Prince's younger brother had married "a wife of the Hebrew race" (53), and that Amerigo thinks of this, in Book First, in terms which are aptly described as cynical and which thus converge with his supercilious, if not downright bigoted, reaction to the antiquarian. Judaism thus occupies a special, an unobvious but nearly central, position in this novel about the decadence of Christendom at the close of the nineteenth century - it provides the source of morality and the model of stability. The Prince would, not implausibly, agree with the Marxian dictum in "On the Jewish Question," that "Exchange is the true god of the Jew" (*Early Writings* (239), and that both the Jew and the custom of exchange deserve contempt for this reason. James, on the other hand, might plausibly be read as taking issue, not with Marx's formal analysis, but with the value extracted by Marx from that analysis. Exchange is a formalization of reciprocity and reciprocity is the essence of morality. It is worth noting that a peculiar sentence in *The American Scene* (1907) prophesies not that the Jews will corrupt the ethical matrix of the New World but that it would likely fall out the other way around: A "portentous element" in the Yankee brew that James tasted in New York when he visited there after writing *The Golden Bowl* "reduces to inanity any marked dismay as much as any high elation" (101) on the part of immigrant incursions. Thus, while the Jews represent an *alien* presence, James places no obvious moral stigma on their alienness; the Jews, writes James, possess an "intensity" and "an unsurpassed strength of race" (100), characteristics which contrast with the corruption and decadence predicated of the Verver milieu. One symptom of these qualities of Jewry is the "blaze of shops" (103) in the Jewish neighborhoods, which returns us to the notion of an intact ethos based on exchange, hence on reciprocity. In the broken world for which the Verver household's broken marriages stand as symbol, and amidst blatant immorality on the one hand and timidity in response to it on the other, the familial solidity of the Guterman-Seusses and the scrupling conscience of the Jewish antiquarian appear as beacons in the murk. This contrast should strike readers as all the more significant given the explicitly Roman Catholic affiliation of the Verver milieu. During the outing that initiates their renewed affair, under the pretence that they want a gift for Maggie, Charlotte describes the Prince's wife-to-be not merely in terms of an enviable self-sufficiency ("she does everything herself") but as a paragon of selflessness. The Prince agrees, remarking that Maggie's goodness has something "terrible" about it, which is perhaps why he regards the imminent ceremony as a "monstrosity." Terrible in just that sense Maggie truly is, Charlotte readily and perhaps a bit censoriously admits:

"... unless one's almost as good as she. It makes too easy terms for one. It takes stuff within one, so far as one's decency is concerned, to stand it. And nobody... is decent enough, good enough to stand it - not without help from religion or something of that kind. Not without prayer and fasting - that is without taking great care. Certainly... such people as you and I are not." (111)

The function of the Verver's (including Charlotte's) nominal Catholicism, then, is to be attenuated and nonfunctional. Nothing suggests this moderate Potemkin-morality of false fronts more than the priest, Father Mitchell, who appears at Fawns at that critical juncture in the narrative when Maggie must act on

her resolve to maneuver all and every back into lawful matrimonial settlement. The priest exhibits no quality or office that would distinguish him in any way from the other card-players at the gaming table where we find him; "good holy man" he might be, but Maggie has "found her way without his guidance" (531), and while she ponders moral action he merely *prattles* (532) over the salmon mayonnaise at dinner. The Prince's personality partakes in the same adverse judgment. Back in Book First, Amerigo admits to Maggie that his people, the Vespucis, figure in the histories mainly for their "doings" and "marriages" and "crimes" and "follies" and "boundless *bêtises*," not to mention for their "infamous waste of money" (47). Maggie sees Amerigo as "a creature [of] the *cinquecento*" (49), which she intends, as she utters it, to be a compliment, but which readers must revisit on the basis of later developments with an increasing sense of irony. (When Charlotte drives the other contenders for Adam's hand away from Fawns in Book Second, for example, James drops references to the Borgias and their penchant for poisoning [177]; the Prince himself, in Book Third, makes reference to "the dagger" and the "insidiously [prepared] cup" [261].) James lets pass, likewise in Book First, that Charlotte's expatriate parents, although "from the great country," were "already of a corrupt generation" (78). The very name *Fawns*, with its nod to Hawthorne, conjures the Pagan world of classical myth, to which James makes more than one explicit allusion. When Adam contemplates his proposed Museum in solitude at Fawns, he thinks of it in terms of a "Greek temple" whose steps he ascends at last to oversee "the final rites" (143). The new Arcadia cannot be pristine, nor can it be genuinely pre-moral; because it represents the collapse of that which succeeds the classically moral, it can only be willfully immoral. The notion of *bêtise*, with its connotation not just of stupidity but of the bestial, forms a telling pair with the name *Fawns*: Together they describe the emergence of the primitive amidst the modern, of the faunic amidst the human; and they portend the recrudescence of voracity amidst restraint. It is not for nothing that, long before we meet the Israelite shopkeeper, James qualifies the meddling Fanny by the otherwise incomprehensible negative of her being, despite "her richness of hue, her generous nose, her eyebrows marked like those of an actress," *not* "a Jewess" (64). Nor is it for nothing that James can describe Maggie as "a flit of a creature in an *alien age*" (172 [emphasis added]) haunted by "the ghost of the anomalous" (387). If the law of Fawns be adultery and deceit ("*à la guerre comme à la guerre then*") as long as one can get away with it, then Maggie qualifies as thoroughly "anomalous."

One might indeed speculate that Maggie's deceased mother possessed, whatever her deficiency of high taste, a foursquare sense of morality, and that Maggie, inheriting something of it, is indeed an "alien" presence surrounded by degeneration; her liking for the golden bowl, a flawed and grotesque object according to the novel's aesthetes, might legitimately be said to tie her to her mother by her lack of connoisseurship in comparison with others. We know that Maggie takes her religion seriously in a way that her Amerigo and Adam do not. When at Fawns, she "induce[s] her husband, not inveterate in such practices, to make with her, by carriage, the... pilgrimage to the nearest altar, modest though it happened to be, of the faith - her own as it had been her mother's, and as Mr. Verver himself had been loosely willing always to let it be taken for *his* - without the solid ease of which, making the stage firm and smooth, the drama of her marriage mightn't have been acted out" (147). I read the final clause of this curiously broken sentence as a prolepsis. In light of the Prince being "not inveterate" in his adherence to his nominal faith, furthermore, one should recall a particular imprecation which he utters during his visit to the Bloomsbury shop: "*Per baccho!*" (123) - "by Bacchus!" - an etiquette noticeably Pagan and entirely in keeping with the revealed ethos of Fawns.

But what is beautiful and what is ugly? From the romantic perspective, the consummation of the lovers' affair ought to be beautiful. It takes place at Matcham. "It's sacred," the Prince says to Charlotte:

"It's sacred," she breathed back to him. They vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow straight into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure and their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge. (259)

Later, in a musical metaphor in Book Fifth, Maggie thinks of the two as "Wagnerian lovers" (519), a reference either to Tristan and Isolde or to Siegfried and Brunnhilde (it matters little); the latter pair's love has as its background the dissolution of a world and is perhaps the more apt of the two possible allusions. The reference to Wagner establishes a dichotomy with an earlier musical citation in the novel, for during the soirée at Eaton Square in Book Third, Fanny finds herself momentarily distracted by the "genius" of a Brahms quartet, "moved," in fact, "beyond what she could bear" (269). That remark bears on the Prince and Charlotte alone at Matcham in this way: Brahms figures in cultural history as the great bourgeois composer, the defender of traditional forms, and the string quartet - with its four players always in contrapuntal movement under a harmonic order which requires resolution - can serve as the symbol of what the Verver household ought ideally to be. The term "genius," moreover, with its connotations of positivity and productivity, contrasts with the idea of "degeneration" (318) which Fanny applies jocosely to herself a short time later; it also contrasts with James's remark that Charlotte's parents belonged to a "corrupt generation" (78). It is at Eaton Square that the Prince and Charlotte first attract attention as a pair apart from their respective *sposi*, so that what Fanny so strongly notices in her transient musical rapture amounts to a sharp moral contradistinction. Whether, later on, Maggie thinks of the *Liebestod* or of the finale from *Die Götterdämmerung*, the name of Wagner signifies the dissolution of traditional forms, his lovers being all either adulterous or incestuous; the Wagnerian eros belongs not to the Judaeo-Christian but to the Pagan or neo-Pagan dispensation. Fawns will later remind Maggie of "an old German forest" (519). In this sense, James seems to consign the Prince and Charlotte, too, to such an order, as their mutual invocation of the "sacred" as the mark of their transgression so strongly suggests. That James endows their embrace with the rhetorical indicators of sublimity only strengthens the suggestion: "Everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled"; the lovers' passion exhibits the telling quality of "violence." Fanny's later smashing of the bowl echoes the necessarily disintegrative nature of what the contemporary euphemist might call an improper relationship. One ought note as well the co-presence at Matcham of Lady Castledean, who, like the Prince and Charlotte, carries on an adulterous affair. Even the Prince regards the Castledeans as belonging among "inferior people" (288), which puts them in the same category, for him, as the shopkeeper. By association, the Prince and Charlotte have enmeshed themselves in the very "bondage of ugliness" (143) that Adam, by pursuing his career of connoisseurship, hoped to escape.⁽⁸⁾

The bowl itself - I have hinted at this parenthetically - maintains a direct connection with the faunic. James discovered the well-known and, so to speak, actual prototype of the bowl during a 1902 visit to Lamb House in Sussex: an authentic golden bowl given as a christening gift by King George I to a newborn child of the Lambs; as Leon Edel puts it, "King George's bowl... became a symbol for the theme of the novel which [James] had begun early in 1903" *Henry James*, Vol. 4 209). Virtually every commentator on *The Golden Bowl* rehearses this story. But the Georgian bowl, while it no doubt impressed James the aesthete deeply, lacks key features of its supposed fictional counterpart. The real bowl was, by the account, of solid plate, while the novelistic object covers its crystal with mere gilt; the real bowl was intact, while the novelistic object hides beneath its surface an invisible and disfiguring

rupture. The Georgian bowl, finally, assumes its context in the explicitly Christian ceremony of the christening, while Maggie's bowl partakes of the breakdown of the Christian - more properly the Judaeo-Christian - moral structure that James illustrates by his tale. The real, and the telling, prototype of the bowl may be found in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), in the chapter (XXVII) where Kenyon visits Donatello in the latter's ancestral keep. Walking in the Tuscan hills, the two come across a statuary fountain probably of Roman antiquity, "a marble basin... all covered with moss and shaggy with water-weeds" over which presides, "with an urn in her arms... a marble nymph" (243):

In former days (it might be a remote antiquity,) this lady of the fountain had first received the infant tide into her urn, and poured it thence into the marble basin. But now, the sculptured urn had a great crack, from top to bottom; and the discontented nymph was compelled to see the basin fill itself through the channel which she could not control, although with water long ago consecrated to her. (243)

The nymph represented by the statue, according to Hawthorne's pseudo-myth, fell in love with a mortal youth. When her lover once "flung himself down, and washed his hands and bathed his feverish brow in the cool, pure water" of her pool, "there was the sound of woe... The water shrank away from the youth's hands"; this came about because the lover "had tried to wash off a blood-stain" and, in his guilt, "had polluted the water" (246). The crack in the urn signifies the rupture engendered by the deceit perpetrated on that "fatal noontide" (245) so long ago.

*In Book Second of The Golden Bowl, Adam, meditating on his daughter's character, thinks of her as "a figure... 'generalised' in its grace, something shyly mythological and nymph-like" (172). Maggie moreover resembles another nymph-like character in The Marble Fawn, Hilda, and in a peculiarly relevant way. Hilda, a prideful New England Puritan in Rome, learns a reluctant but important moral lesson from a Roman Catholic priest during a despairing visit to the Vatican; Hilda, the Protestant, stands to the Catholic priest as Maggie, the Catholic, stands to the Jewish shopkeeper. In a generalized way, The Marble Fawn and The Golden Bowl tell the same basic story: The intrusion of evil into a seemingly idyllic world and the necessity for characters to come into consciousness in response to a forced separation from the cherished naivety of "the deluded condition" (484). The anodyne of delusion cannot issue from its own delusory interior; it must come from without. Where non-reciprocal and deceitful relations constitute the norm, some external agent must post notice of their inadequacy. "Non-reciprocal relations may be perfectly ethical," Gans writes, "and consecrated as such in ritual, but they are not moral. This intuition is the fundamental source of the Jewish contribution" to modernity (*The End of Culture* 172). Says James of the shopkeeper, in Book Fifth: "The partner of [Maggie's] bargain had yearned to see her again... had wished ever so seriously to return to her a part of her money" (480); and he had gone on, when Maggie refused restitution, to hope that "she hadn't, at all events, already devoted the crystal cup to the beautiful purpose so kindly and so fortunately named to him" (480). The flawed cup would not be a meet gift from daughter to father, for that is precisely a "beautiful purpose" which should not be unintentionally subverted. Whatever James's attitude toward Judaism elsewhere (it is not, I think, as clearly disdainful as commentators make out), in *The Golden Bowl* it is positive.*

IV

The bowl, which the shopkeeper describes on first producing it as "of a lost time" (121), serves as a metonymy for Fawns ("wide wooded Fawns" [136]), and for the faunic ethos that prevails there until

Maggie forcibly imposes a more decisive moral control. Outwardly brilliant and alluring, inwardly the bowl suffers from the fracture of its crystalline matrix. Fawns as a place is, like the bowl as an aesthetic object, timeless, as witness the cyclic reconvention there at every season of the same old company, even, in the end, the competing ladies whom Charlotte had previously driven away. But Maggie's initiation into the moral view, punctuated by her scene with Fanny, culminating in the fragmentation of the novel's eponymous *bibelot*, has inaugurated a temporal dimension and has apprised Maggie of just how crucial is "the *business* of cultivating continuity" (381 [emphasis added]). That term, "business," again associates the moral with the commercial, and reminds us of the centrally mimetic role of the shopkeeper *for Maggie*. "The silver mist that," James says, "protected" Maggie and her husband, and that "had begun to grow sensibly thin" (358), is of a substance with the airy radiance, the illusory "beauty of appearances" (491), which has hitherto permeated Fawns.⁽⁹⁾ Things will now be altered and roles will be exchanged. The former "flagrancy" (273), "hilarity" (274), and "the air of mere iridescent horizons" (273) presided over by "an infant king" (267), now yield to a grimmer atmosphere and prospect: Fawns now constitutes for Maggie a "figural void" (518), a "darkness of prowling dangers," and a "beast-haunted land" (532). Maggie herself has become "the watcher" (532) over the dangerous premises and, as such, *still* labors under the burden of an exclusion from the sodality. Watching the evening's card-game, she confronts:

the fact of her father's wife's lover facing his mistress; the fact of her father sitting, all unsounded and unblinking, between them; the fact of Charlotte keeping it up, keeping up everything across the table, with her husband beside her; the fact of Fanny Assingham, wonderful creature, placed opposite to the three and knowing more about each, probably, when one came to think, than either of them knew of either. Erect above all for her was the sharp-edged fact of the relation of the whole group, individually and collectively, to herself - herself so speciously eliminated for the hour, but presumably more present to the attention of each than the next card to be played. (486)

Cynically throwing to the winds the moral model offered by the shopkeeper is a gesture that occurs to Maggie in a series of "vertiginous moments" in which she contemplates "the fascination of the monstrous" and during which she knows that "she might sound out their doom in a single sentence" (487). The possibility presents itself as a "temptation" (487). (For the Prince, in Book First, marriage appeared as *monstrous*; now, for Maggie, revenge qualifies under that term.) Yet our protagonist also recognizes that each person present exists in "a relation with herself, which would spare the individual the danger" (487). In formulating it that way, Maggie, or rather James through Maggie, describes the essential link between the sacrificially excluded party and everyone else - unanimity minus one. Maggie fills the role of victim anomalously (she has been "speciously eliminated"), however, because she no longer really conforms to it; she now acts as a victim who has miraculously rejected her victimage, who, in refusing to submit, confounds the plot against her and so charges herself with a charisma quite equal in quantity to that wielded by Adam in the previous stages of the narrative while being, at the same time, of a different quality: focused rather than diffuse, moral rather than aesthetic, merciful rather than cynical. The sodality faces "the whole complexity of their peril" (487), a phrase which the notion of "her father's wife's lover facing his mistress," with its blurring of otherwise decisive categories, perfectly illustrates; and only Maggie can deliver them from it, or "thus they tacitly put it" (487). She might, she thinks, "charge herself" with the responsibility as did "the scapegoat of old, of whom she had once seen a terrible picture," but she will not go "into the desert to sink under his burden and die" (487). Against the background of deceit, duplicity, and dissimulation characteristic of the milieu at Fawns (of the faun itself); against the multiplication of *cases*, to recall Fanny's term, Maggie envisions herself as called by

all, on the grounds of their proven moral incompetency, "to simplify" (487).

The simplification has already begun in her confrontation with the Prince, once "a proud man," now "reduced to abjection" (483); but Maggie must now address the other factor in the adulterous equation, namely Charlotte. In confronting Charlotte, moreover, Maggie must deal with what James, throughout the novel, has referred to as *romance*, a term which I gloss as the ideology of transgression, including especially adulterous transgression. The Prince, in Book First, attached the idea of transgression to Adam, whose opulence suggests "Alexander furnished with the spoils of Darius" (54). The suggestion involves an error which the Prince must know, for Adam has *produced* his wealth, not *plundered* it from someone else; and yet Adam did at one time dream, when he awoke to his mission of connoisseurship, of "rifl[ing] the Golden Isles" (140). The nostalgia for a lost Arcadian order, outwardly idyllic while secretly predatory, informs the romanticism of *The Golden Bowl's* characters, as does the willingness of Fanny and others to dissimulate immoral behavior when they see it; and these things, in their turn, partake in the argument made by the paramours for themselves and by others for them that they are beautifully "beyond" (261) those who surround them, that Fanny, for example, who has facilitated their assignations, now "doesn't matter" (257). They are, from their own perspective, *jenseits von Gut und Böse*. Fanny, for her part, excuses the visible commerce of Charlotte and Amerigo on esthetic grounds: "They're wonderful" (298), "they're beautiful" (299), and "we're in presence" (309), she says of them romantically. At Portland Place, the other guests see the Prince and Charlotte as "truly superior beings" (393). Having elected themselves into the extra-moral company, they begin to dispense with others, just as the Prince earlier dispensed with the shopkeeper by *not seeing* him. Such secondary betrayals, the Prince himself is made to divulge by James, belong among "the services that by all *romantic* tradition were *consecrated* to affection quite as much as to hate" (261 [emphasis added]). In this sentence, James conflates the notions of romance and the sacred, hence of sacrifice. When he tells us that Maggie's decision to visit the Bloomsbury shop on Charlotte's unintentional instigation has about it the air of "romantic opportunity" (432), he alloys to his notion of romance a mimetic element. Romance, as one puts these pieces together, amounts to an enabling myth for those who, out of resentment against it, wish to violate the moral norm of reciprocity; romance is the ideology of trespass and transgression, which endows vice with the attributes of virtue and gilds the mugwort, so to speak, to make it out for a lily. Those who adopt romance, in this sense, as their creed can only do so by a deliberate act of unknowing, by what René Girard long ago named *mensonge romantique*. Fanny does exactly that when she smashes the bowl: she attempts to unknow what she knows. But when upheld for a long time, romance impairs the judgment of the romantic and becomes a moral atavism. James says almost offhand of the Prince in Book First that he had read Poe as a boy and still takes delight in *Pym*. In his essay on Baudelaire, James lets this remark drop in passing: "An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection" (*French Poets and Novelists* 5). James's term, "primitive," allows us to recognize that the romantic and the faunic, as I have been calling it, are one and the same.

By indirectly letting the Prince know what she knows ("Find out for yourself!" [465]), Maggie has guaranteed his silence with respect to Charlotte and has thus isolated her from the knowledge of what is going on; Maggie has, in effect, reduced the complexity of the adulterous triangle back to the simplicity of the hymeneal dyad. But Maggie has meanwhile concluded that two more things must be achieved in order to preserve her marriage against a relapse into, as we might now say, romance. Charlotte must receive notice, as subtly yet as powerfully as Maggie can manage it, that she has been found out, and she and Adam must take themselves back to America. Despite the fact that, in the persons of the Prince and Charlotte seated at the card-table, Maggie sees "evil... where she had only dreamed of good," she cannot,

out of feelings for the totality of her family, "give them up" (489); she cannot expel them from the family structure - as they had expelled her - by humiliating them before others. Maggie does not join the game. She hovers distantly, whereupon her detached gliding at the edge of things draws Charlotte, full of a false "dignity" (493), to her. Maggie indeed fears Charlotte at this moment, worrying that "her [i.e., Maggie's own] head was already on the block... whether or no the axe had fallen" (493). After a short period of mutual hesitation, however, Charlotte reveals her plight in the form of a question to Maggie: Has anything happened, Charlotte wishes to know, "for which I'm in any degree responsible?" (496). She then unnecessarily expatiates on the idea in a mendaciously self-exculpating little speech. Maggie carefully feigns ignorance. She embraces Charlotte at a moment when the card-players have risen and come into the room where the feminine transaction has just occurred. As far as they can tell, Maggie has, in a manner, played the role of scapegoat, accepting the "abasement" (498) of a non-invidious reconciliation with her mother-in-law in order to prevent - as one might say remembering the image of the Guterman-Seusses - the scattering of her tribe. This is not to say that, "if [Maggie's] mood in fact could have turned itself at all to private gaiety it might have failed to resist the diversion of seeing so clever a creature [as Charlotte] so beguiled" (518).

Three days after the reconciliation (false on Charlotte's part, witting and sincere on Maggie's), the Princess joins Adam outdoors at Fawns. They sit together observing the weather. In a great, unfurling sentence typical of the late style, James gives us the following: "They had meanwhile been tracing together, in the golden air that toward six o'clock of a July afternoon hung about the massed Kentish woods, several features of the social evolution of her old playmates, still beckoned on, it would seem, by unattainable ideals, still falling back, beyond the sea, to their native seats, for renewals of the moral, financial, conversational - one scarce knew what to call it - outfit, and again and forever reappearing like a tribe of Wandering Jewesses" (502). The effect of this sentence is to place Maggie at a decisive remove from the cyclicism (another way to name the mimeticism) of Fawns. The phrase "Wandering Jewesses" might strike one as odd until one reflects that Ahasuerus, the original "Wandering Jew," is a man cut off from all traffic with his fellow men, doomed to roam the world nomad-fashion until the Judgment Day. The actual Jew of James's narrative, the shopkeeper, is not a wanderer, but a settled participant in the market; he is one of those people about whom, to take a page from James's *Italian Hours*, "you can complain... only if you never cross their thresholds" (38). (The reference is to the Jewish *antiquarii* of Venice.) Maggie has crossed a "threshold" in many ways; her "old playmates" remain locked within the charismatic order signified by the word "ideals."

The conversation that Maggie now pursues with Adam concerns the abandonment of "ideals" and the espousal, so to speak, of a realistic view of their condition. Maggie asks Adam whether she has been "fatuuous" (502) and then, rephrasing the question, substitutes "sublime" (502) for the former term: "Have we been sublime in *our* happiness," she asks, "as if looking down from a height?" (502). The "as if" qualifies the sublimity which is fatuity as pure illusion, best abandoned; the notion of "a height" meanwhile carries back to Adam's sense of his having once stood, in the instant of his supposed self-awakening, on his own "'Peak in Darien.'" It develops that the primary illusion consisted of Adam's hoping to penetrate English gentryhood, to secure a "place" (503) rather as Charlotte had sought to secure an "existence." So Adam, too, has humbled himself before a model which transformed into a rebuffing rival, an inassimilable being, every time he approached it; Adam's sublime is the class-bound, ultimately and archaically monarchic society of the Mother Country which has, in effect, expelled him simply by not admitting him. Not only has his attempt at admission to gentryhood failed, but he has, by default, surrendered his "reputation" to his countrymen back in American City for them sparagmatically "to tear

to pieces" (509). This, of course, was always a possibility - even an inevitability - for the one who concentrated so much golden charm into his personage. What is a king, an *imperator*, after all, but a victim whose execution has been deferred? Murder will out. The king must die. To the folks back home, Adam must appear no more than rich, eccentric, and obsessive; if his connoisseurship means anything objectively, it will nevertheless mean nothing, save as a kind of pretence, to the uncultured. Yet this difference, between the august and the vulgar, the high and the low, is part of the illusion now under dispersal. In counterpoint with this topic runs another: Maggie's nagging sense of *sacrifice* and *victimhood* in connection with her father. Maggie paints Adam as a "victim" because he has devoted his whole life to her; he answers that he has merely sustained "the feelings of a father" (509). Maggie nevertheless insists, as she says, that "I sacrifice you" (509); and a moment later, she discerns that Adam "was practically *offering* himself, pressing himself upon her, as a sacrifice" (510). What Adam *offers* is to remove himself and his wife from the scene: "We *should* ship"; "we *will* ship" (512). The figure reverses an earlier one, that of *burning one's ships*, which invariably marks Adam's assertive and ambitious - his sublime - moments in the romantic sense.

If the retreat to America be a "sacrifice," then it is the opposite of the expulsory kind; it is of the ascetic and magnanimous kind of the sort the shopkeeper may be said to have made when he offered to compensate Maggie for shoddy goods not altogether honestly sold. Where the Prince and Charlotte expel their spouses unilaterally and to the detriment of the emissary parties, Adam voluntarily quits the scene for the benefit of another. Adam will now appear to Maggie, glimpsed from afar before he departs back to his native shore, under the thoroughly humanized figure of "the little meditative man in his straw hat" (522). Charlotte, in a second meeting with Maggie, out of the sight of the familiar entourage, will pretend, from the motive of "pride" (541), to have originated the idea of *shipping*. Maggie knows, however, that Charlotte now passes through life with "a long silken halter looped about her neck" (523), captured by Adam - and even more by the introjection of a renewed moral structure into the scene.⁽¹⁰⁾ The "golden flame" of Charlotte's affair with the Prince has turned to "a mere handful of black ashes" (553).

To nay-say "the importance of the moral quality of a work of art," James writes in a discussion of Flaubert, "strikes us as, in two words, very childish" (*French Poets and Novelists* 64). But the work of art - no matter how modern or how secular - no doubt also boasts an ineradicable sacred quality, whose importance it would be equally childish to deny. (In denying with such vehemence the sacred element in the aesthetic - in denying, for example, that there is any such thing as literature, or that one work is indeed greater than another - contemporary critics paradoxically affirm it.) *The Golden Bowl* illustrates, and indeed it makes a theme of, the necessary tension between these two qualities. I write of the polar repulsion between the "sacred" and the "moral" rather than between the "aesthetic" and the "moral" because the aesthetic, in the literature of the turn-of-the-century, tends to stand transparently - as it does in Huysmans, for example - for a no-longer-available transcendence. But in *A rébours*, the figurality is Huysmans' or, through him, his narrator's. In *The Golden Bowl*, the figurality is rarely directly the narrator's; almost always it stems from one or another character. The Greek temples, Palladian Churches, pagodas, golden baths, corruscations of solar and purple light; the red blaze of galleons aflame, the invocations of Io, Ariadne, Tristan and Isolde: all these metaphors of sublimity, culled from the stock-in-trade of French poets and *romanciers*, signify the pandemic vanity and vertiginous confusion of Fawns. When the adulterers stay on at Matcham, they offer as their cover-story that they intend to travel the next day to visit the nearby cathedral; their mendacity reduces the religious edifice to one more image

in the narcissistic passion that they refer to as "sacred." Of the novel's moral catalyst, the shopkeeper, I note here that he bears only the simple figures of verbal slight and casts them off as soon as he comes into contact with Maggie, for whom he is "kind." The simple adjective by itself suffices. Following up her fateful meeting with that gentleman, Maggie, as we have seen, comes to grasp her milieu as a "figural void," a place divested of the dissimulating motifs of unchecked desire.

Harold Bloom, in *The Western Canon*, argues that what distinguishes great literature from mediocre and literature generally from all other species of language is its "uncanniness" (3), a phenomenon linked, in Bloom's thinking, with the sublime and necessarily at odds with the moral. When we read a masterwork, Bloom argues, we go "from strangeness to strangeness" (3). James, in *The Golden Bowl*, makes us cognizant of the fact (which Bloom never admits) that morality is just as strange as beauty - perhaps even a great deal stranger. (Keeping faith with a married partner is much more contrary to the human being than taking advantage promiscuously of sexual happenstance.) Let us remember, in closing, the Prince's sense of the shop-windows in the novel's opening scene. These transparencies, like the rules of faith, obligation, and reciprocity, *stand between* the libidinous ego and the immediate exercise of that ego's will. Restraint *is* strange to the natural, the predatory, being. For the Prince, at that moment, the window can only serve as a reminder of the metal cages that clatter down at the turn of a crank to keep out thieves at night. But does that association not imply that, deep down, he knows his own thievish - antinomian - character? The contemporary School of Resentment, as Bloom names it, certainly rebels against beauty, just as he says it does; but it rebels equally against morality (despite its own language being righteously moral), which is why no contemporary critic of James finds anything supportive to say about Maggie, la Principessa, *née* Verver. Defend marriage against adultery? Acknowledge the relevance of Hebrew morality to the postmodern present moment? Admit that a dead white male got something right? But I cede the last word to James himself, quoting again from his judgment of Flaubert: "To count out the moral element in one's appreciation of an artistic total is exactly the same as it would be (if the total were a poem) to eliminate all the words in three syllables... [a moral element] is in reality simply a part of the essential richness of inspiration" (64, 61).

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Notes

1. The importance of this vocabulary to Jamesian narrative received its first concerted notice in Elsa Nettels' "The Scapegoats and Martyrs of Henry James" (*Colby Library Quarterly*, Vol. 10, 1974, 413-427). While grasping the centrality of victims in James's novels and stories, Nettels nevertheless lacks a sufficient anthropological sense of victimage; she sees the vocabulary in question as a sign of the

vestigial Christianity of James's conception. (The surfeit of sacrificial terms signifies much more than that, as the present essay will show.) More recently and more rigorously, Ralf Norrman has shown, in his chapter on "Henry James's *Daisy Miller* and the Scapegoat Mechanism" in *Wholeness Restored* (1998), how punctilious is James's eye for the anthropological details of emissary ritual: "I would argue that it is possible to recognize in the setting of James's story a situation of stress [of the type associated by René Girard with scapegoating]. The stress factor here is the insecurity of exile, the insecurity of ambiguous identity, the intolerable discomfort of being perpetually on display. Yourself being constantly under scrutiny why should you not seize the initiative and gain acceptance by instigating a scapegoating, with a recently arrived compatriot as a victim, thereby proving your allegiance to the real - or imagined - values of your new place of residence?" (160).[\(back\)](#)

2. Critics have generally preferred this way of viewing the novel. Donald L. Mull sums up the many versions of the "it's not their fault" interpretation this way: "Adam and Maggie Verver regard Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant as 'things,'" and exhibit "a tendency to regard human beings as objects for aggrandizement and extensions of themselves rather than as autonomous individuals" (*Sublime Economy* 119). Mull, although himself favoring a somewhat reductively economic view of the Verver story, nevertheless finds such readings shallow. Despite this, Mull himself invokes "the commerciality" of "the Ververs' transactions" chastisingly and suggests that this mercantile outlook tends to "convert human beings into objects" (146).[\(back\)](#)

3. Maxwell Geismar, the founder of the anti-Jacobite school of Jamesian criticism and the anticipator of the postmodern indictment of James, sees in this moment merely "another theatrical coup" (324). James's "abstruse heroine," Geismar writes, "who lacks all the common hysteria and jealousy and sympathy of a betrayed woman, is chiefly concerned with the difference [her discovery of things] would make for herself: 'My possession at last, I mean, of real knowledge'" (Geismar 324).[\(back\)](#)

4. Charlotte assumes the role of "giver," then, purely as a pose; she is not genuinely committed to the purpose of making Maggie happy but, rather, to the goal merely of appearing generous before the Prince. If, as Walter Burkert has argued, "reciprocity is a form of morality" (*The Creation of the Sacred* 138), then Charlotte reveals herself in the hypocrisy of her pose as delinquent from a base-line of honesty and decency. But it goes beyond this because Charlotte poses before the Prince in order to take him from Maggie, to whom he is promised, not only by his expression of commitment but by legal contract; she seeks, in fine, to disrupt an exchange. A further consideration from Burkert is relevant here: "Gift exchange appears to be one of the *universalia* of human civilizations. 'To give' is one of the basic verbs in most languages; the dative is established in Indoeuropean noun declension. Empirical studies have been devoted to the principle of gifts and its manifestation in so-called primitive societies. The principle of reciprocity is recognized in every case. There are of course forms of violent acquisition of goods which may be equally frequent or even more common, not to say honorable, in the same societies: robbery, piracy, cattle-stealing, wars waged for plunder, and trickery of all sorts. But the phenomena are distinct" (130-31).[\(back\)](#)

5. Mull, who puts money at the "symbolic center" of *The Golden Bowl*, has this to say about Adam's courting of Charlotte among the Gutermann-Seusses: "The complexity of thr Brighton scene, in its familiar mingling of the commercial and the affectional, consummately reveals the fusions, tensions, and paradoxes which inform the novel to this point - the selflessness of Adam, which is a selfishness for his daughter; and the bargain for Charlotte, which is an opportunity for exquisite self-manifestation and exquisite duplicity" (*Sublime Economy* 146). Mull grants Adam a notable measure of good will in this

passage; he does not comment, however, on the startling contrast between the Verver milieu on the one hand and that of the Jewish household on the other. James is in fact showing us poverty (chez Verver) and wealth (chez Gutermann-Seuss) as determined by ethical rather than purely economic criteria.[\(back\)](#)

6. Burkert notes that *giving*, in which marriage partakes (one party giving himself freely to the other in exchange for the promise of stability), "is neither disinterestedness nor pure self-interest. It rather creates some precarious balance between the two" (*Creation of the Sacred* 131). In declaring "war" on the marriage between Maggie and Amerigo, Amerigo and Charlotte attack the social fabric at its profoundest basis; they resemble robbers, pirates, cattle-stealers, plunderers and tricksters rather than parties to a mutual and reciprocal intention. Even after "the invention of the free market... brings changes to the system," writes Burkert, *exchange* "remains the basic process... of bilateral profit" (131).[\(back\)](#)

7. Burkert points out that "the principle of reciprocity pervades the sphere of punitive justice. Punishment is accepted as just if it subsumed under the concept of reciprocal giving, of retribution. Retribution can be seen as a simple inversion of action: the culprit is to suffer what he has done" (*The Creation of the Sacred* 133). In a primitive sense, overt revenge would be permissible for Maggie; but she is precisely no longer a primitive. She now operates according to a higher, a more merciful, an altogether more Biblical principle.[\(back\)](#)

8. Mull produces this meritorious comment on the scene of the Prince and Charlotte's adulterous liaison: "It is, amazingly, one of the most erotic scenes in English, and it is the ironic consummation of the form of [the adulterers'] good faith. With it all form breaks down, gives way; all values melt and mingle. *It will be Maggie's burden to perceive the chaos behind the apparent form and to shape out of that tangle of values, if not 'the bowl as it was to have been,' at least a tenable equilibrium*" (*Sublime Economy* 151 [emphasis added]).[\(back\)](#)

9. A remarkably similar metaphor turns up in *The Wings of the Dove*, Book Fourth, when Milly Theale and Susan Stringham (a.k.a. Susie Shepherd) meet London society at Lancaster Gate, the home of Maud Lowder. That grand lady seems to the two Americans to exude 'a fine floating gold-dust, something that threw over the prospect a harmonising blur' (162). As in the case of the hazes of light and fogs of gold that *blur the prospect* at Fawns, Mrs. Lowder's aura - a pure projection on the part of Milly and Susan - exercises a dissimulating effect.[\(back\)](#)

10. Ralf Norrman, author of the previously mentioned *Wholeness Restored* as well as a treatise on *The Golden Bowl* entitled *The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction* (St. Martin's press, 1982), writes these provocative comments on Charlotte's apparent subjugation in a recent item of personal correspondence: "There is the question," Norrman says, "of whether Maggie's interpretation of Charlotte's and Adam's state of mind at the end of the novel is meant to be taken at face value or not. Maggie makes them out to be extremely unhappy, both of them, and she sees their return to America as a banishment, assuming that both Adam and Charlotte are going back entirely against their will... But if, as I believe, Maggie's moral conversion genuinely wins her husband back to her, healing her marriage, why should we not then assume that a symmetrical development takes place with Charlotte-Adam? When Maggie decides to act she puts the Prince on the spot. He abandons Charlotte (the illicit relationship) and tries to recover Maggie... Maggie now defeats her rival Charlotte (who had not been a rival as long as Maggie did not know about the affair). Charlotte is now left to herself, and so, before long, will Adam be - this is the intrinsic logic of the case. The dissolution of the illicit Charlotte-Amerigo relationship brings with it the dissolution of the paternal-filial relationship Adam-Maggie. Charlotte then, in turn, defeats her

rival, i.e., Maggie, and recovers *her* husband... Since everything in this novel has been strictly diagrammatic, why should not this be so as well?" Why indeed should it not be so? I did not think of this sequence of implications, but it strikes me as brilliant, and I hasten to "buy" it at once![\(back\)](#)

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Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume IV, number 2 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999)

ISSN 1083-7264

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

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Anthropoetics IV, no. 2 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999)

Utopia Limited

An Anthropological Response to Richard Rorty

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Utopia's much too big for one small head
I'll float it as a Company Limited!

Gilbert & Sullivan, *Utopia Limited*

Introduction: When Worlds Collide, or Political Hope and Philosophical Irony

Dubbed "Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism" by David L. Hall, Richard Rorty, one of the most prominent figures on the American philosophical scene, is gaining notoriety on the political stage as well. Rorty's latest book, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, advocates pragmatism in the form of New Deal-style political activism. Rorty enjoins American intellectuals (synonymous with the Left, "the party of hope") to take the fight for social justice out of the ivory tower and back into the streets of America. Rorty would rehabilitate an increasingly pessimistic and theoretical liberalism, for which "[h]opelessness has become fashionable..." (*Achieving* 37), as a viable motor for social change. He affirms that "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement" (3). In order to make meaningful political contributions, the Left needs to "kick its philosophy habit" (91).

Whether interventionist speaking the plain language of "tough love," political stumper/analyst, or theologian of the religion of democracy, Rorty has chosen the role of actor rather than that of passive spectator (*Achieving* 9). Although Rorty's multi-purpose rhetoric may be extremely tricky to contextualize, it is nevertheless consistent with *Achieving's* promotion of intellectual crossover from the contemplative to the politically active and necessary to his basic intellectual program in which "the traditional tasks of moral philosophy should be taken over by literature and political experimentation" (*Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*).⁽¹⁾ As a philosopher, Rorty has staked out the territory of pragmatism, where truth-as-correspondence, epistemology, and religion (as witness his mantra "truth is not out there" [*Contingency* 5]), are conceptual *persona non grata* and contingency "goes all the way down," obviating any possibility of a transcendental ego.⁽²⁾ Rorty's notion is that cross-over thought is mutually beneficial for all parties involved. As he says in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, "philosophers help provide a redescription for political liberalism, but political liberalism also helps provide a redescription of their [philosophical] activity" (54).

However, his resolute and persistent identification with a liberal/leftist political position—he proposes that we eliminate the distinction (*Achieving* 42)—places him in a camp that privileges a particular set of values for human interaction; it defines him not as one who continually redescribes existing vocabularies but one who has already redescribed them and must now defend the position created by that redescription. As Gianni Vattimo asks, "is Rorty's distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics itself epistemological, that is, argumentative, or is it hermeneutic and 'poetic'?" (*Beyond* 99). This juxtaposed geography may weaken both Rorty's philosophy and his politics, but it paradoxically continues to drive forward his project of reorganizing the way we think and solve problems in a world without metaphysical foundation by provoking prolific response and debate. However, if Rorty's position is between here and somewhere else, his reader's position is likewise problematized, for any attempt to situate Rorty's self-styled politico-philosophico-artistic discourse can be construed as a demonstration that one lacks the intellectual cosmopolitanism, daring, and flexibility this thought calls for. It seems that Rorty is everywhere—and nowhere—at once.

To be sure, Rorty acknowledges the problematic position that he has created for himself in his attempts to bridge the gap between philosophical theorizing and political activism, but this concession is just as much an invitation to his reader to enter the labyrinth of his intricately wrought oppositions as it is an admission of conceptual inadequacy. He justifies his compromises as problematic precisely because they constitute redescription in a new mode (*Contingency* 54), one which cannot be verified in the present. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he offers to "make this abjuration of philosophical neutrality in the interest of political liberalism more palatable" by reminding us that "a new vocabulary ... will have its utility explained only retrospectively" (55). We will know only in the future. One is reminded of the early nineteenth-century Stendhal's recurrent remarks that he would be understood in 1930. The unspecified and ever-receding future serves as a guarantee of the unfalsifiability of present hypotheses.

2

The future is no mere rhetorical alibi for Rorty; it is a fundamental principle of his thought. For him, those who change the world are models of human existence, and the "strong poet" is a hero (*Contingency* 53). When he declares that "the creative artist, in a wide sense that includes critics, scientists, and scholars, provides the paradigm case of a career whose conclusion leaves the world a bit different from what it used to be" (*Achieving* 122), he implicitly makes a case for himself as firebrand philosopher and standout in the spheres of art and politics, and a preemptive strike against his would-be traditional philosopher critics. Rorty affirms the possibility of "intellectual and moral progress," which he envisages "as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (*Contingency* 9).

Rorty's own metaphor of choice for exploring a world that has come to grips with the "contingency" of its ideas is that of *utopia*—a term that, curiously, the scholarly Rorty does not contextualize within the considerable scholarship on the subject. Always on the horizon of his thought, utopia would in fact be the motor of history, "the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process—an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth" (*Contingency* xiv). Indeed, in his introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Rorty asserts that what he sees as "most worth preserving" in the work of John Dewey, his intellectual forebear, is his notion of the change from our sense of dependence on the past "to a sense of the utopian possibilities of the future..." (17). In *Achieving Our Country* Rorty declares that "Whitman and Dewey

tried to substitute hope for knowledge. They wanted to put shared utopian dreams--dreams of an ideally decent and civilized society--in the place of knowledge of God's Will, Moral Law, the Laws of History, or the Facts of Science" (107).

This characterization could just as easily describe Rorty's own project, whose telos is utopia as substitute for illusory metaphysical Transcendence. Rorty's gravitation toward utopia as a metaphor reveals that he still feels the pull of foundational philosophy. Jürgen Habermas characterizes Rorty as a disappointed convert from traditional metaphysics who compensates the grief of his reluctant farewell to metaphysics by dramatizing the farewell "at the moment of its [metaphysics'] fall" (Habermas 346-47).⁽³⁾ Habermas goes on to claim that nostalgia prompts Rorty to arrive at an "adapted Hegelianism" with a perspective on everyday practices (Habermas 347-48). Vattimo has also diagnosed these "romantic" tendencies and their resulting overly oppositional rhetoric (*End* 149).

Rorty's affinity for the idea of utopia is troubling on the eve of the millenium. The persistent unproblematized use of a term that has acquired in this century such strong connotations and undergone such definitional permutations suggests an outlook that is not only nostalgic but rigid and severely limiting. Rorty's insistence on utopia as a goal, a methodology, and a value points to the need to rethink (or redescribe) utopia in new terms.

A World "Other"

Rorty's substitution of utopia for the epistemological frustrations of theory suggests that it functions as much as a mask as an alternative and cannot be considered an innocent figure, even in his own vocabulary. The tangle of definitions and subsequent implications of utopia does not unravel easily. For Judith Shklar, "by now *utopia* stands for political hope" (41); utopia serves as a horizon that is necessary "if we are ever to look beyond an unacceptable actuality" (55, referring to Benhabib). In this view, history is asymptotic to utopia, for it pursues the utopian horizon in hopes of gaining incremental improvements. This was not the case, she points out, in More's and Rousseau's utopias, which they never expected to become realizable and which served as reflective critiques of contemporary society (44). However, as both Shklar and Vattimo emphasize, the scientific progress of the nineteenth century inspired a new kind of utopian thought. Whether driven by a faith in technology as an answer to humanity's ills or faith in the escape from (or overthrow of) technology and a return to previous agrarian (read hierarchical) forms of social organization, this new conception of utopia was one of attainability. As Shklar writes, "The utopia of the nineteenth century is a blueprint for a planned new society" (47). One could revel in the rapid scientific advancements like the Saint-Simonists, or peacefully retreat to one of many utopian communities inspired by the likes of Fourier, or develop an ideological stance worth fighting for against the deleterious effects of technology.

Hence the muddle when we consider the question of utopia today. Impossible critique or horizon of hope? A simple glance at the table of contents of Manuel and Manuel's *History of Utopian Thought in the Western World* indicates that the arc of utopia's history does not exclude either possibility but is rather the story of their permutations, from Plato's *Republic* to Freudo-Marxism. In his famous *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim maintains a distinction between the two terms on the basis of the class that thinks them: *ideology* is the province of the dominant groups while *utopia* is the territory of the oppressed (40). This is a neat binary opposition: the dominant class is interested in the status quo and hence blinded to any elements that would threaten their dominance, while the oppressed groups are focused on the elements they wish to negate (40). However, the revolutionary vs "conservative" aspects

of these distinctions become blurred as the relative dominance of the groups changes, and it is crucial to note that Mannheim's distinctions date from before the watershed of the Holocaust and the Cold War. As the conception of utopia becomes more entwined with history as historicity,⁽⁴⁾ its practical consequences--either failed hopes or violent approximations of realizations--tend to implicate utopia, strangely enough, in the vocabulary of not only impossible but negative projects. Mannheim's binary distinction between ideology and utopia maintains itself with difficulty in our own fin-de-siècle cataloguing of twentieth-century good intentions gone horribly awry.

Louis Marin's later analysis reflects these historical modifications by emphasizing the structural homology of utopia and ideology. According to Marin, utopia is the ideological critique of the dominant ideology of the historical moment of its formulation (10), or an ideology in figural form. But Rorty's utopia is recalcitrant to such labeling: Rorty would hold fast to the idea of utopia while denying the very possibility of a distinction between ideological and nonideological: "Calling a story "mythical" or "ideological" would be meaningful only if such stories could be contrasted with an "objective" story" (*Achieving* 11). Rorty's denial of the possibility of an operational articulation of the terms "ideology" and "utopia" makes Shklar's question, "What is the Use of Utopia?" yet more pertinent.

3

Gianni Vattimo adds a useful new dimension to the definitional problem by privileging the categories of "dystopia" and "heterotopia" alongside utopia. While Rorty's thought regularly turns toward an idealized traditional felicitous utopian figure, Vattimo has argued that "*the salient feature*" of twentieth-century utopia is its formulation as anti-utopia, dis-utopia, or counter-utopia (*Transparent Society* 76). In Vattimo's vocabulary, utopia can be characterized as "an optimal reality by way of rational design, whether it be oriented metaphysically... or technologically" (79). Dystopias or counter-utopias, on the other hand, "retain the 'optimizing' character of utopia... they imagine a reality in which what are at present only possibilities are realized in all their most extreme implications... a total and irremediable unhappiness" (76). Vattimo suggests that the emergence of the prominence of dystopia is the epochal change occasioned by the "discovery of the counter-finality of reason" (81), that "the rationalization of the world turns against reason and its ends of perfection and emancipation, and does so not by error, accident, or a chance distortion, but precisely to the extent that it is more and more perfectly accomplished" (78). Along with the weakening notion of rational progress comes the end of a "*unilinear*" concept of history (81) and the proliferation of heterotopia, or images of progress that are not all-encompassing but local. In other words, he sees a "strict connection" between the histories of modern rationalism and utopia-dystopia-heterotopia (78), and when conceived within the context of the history of rationalism, the distinctions among utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia are intelligible and useful.

For Vattimo there is yet another twist in terminology: many late twentieth-century dystopias are better characterized as "post-apocalyptic utopias," for once the onerous possibility of destruction has been lifted by the catastrophic consequences of the rationalization of technology, a vision of returning to a happier state of nature, à la nineteenth-century utopias and the "flower power" of the sixties, becomes possible. Vattimo prudently confines his argument to a vision of the "topias" tied most closely to the history of rationalism. But if we consider the broader implications of the terms "happiness" and "irremediable unhappiness," the very distinction between utopia and dystopia seems impossible to maintain. To distinguish dystopia from utopia on this basis relies on the subjective privileging of a moment either of happiness or unhappiness in the "topian" text. A work like *The Turner Diaries* that accomplishes the fictive expulsion of a resented enemy (Jews, non-whites) viewed responsible for societal woes falls into

the dystopian or utopian category according to the perspective of the reader. Conversely, a work like Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, cited by Rorty as a work of "self-disgust" (*Achieving* 4), turns the race tables against the white-anglo-imperialist society that has unjustly dominated the real native Americans. Is the novel a dystopia or a utopia; are these categories even valid in discussion of this novel? In his introduction to *Heterotopia*, Tobin Siebers contends that utopian desire cannot be distinguished from dystopian desire for "utopian desire has both hopeful and pessimistic sides: it yearns for happiness but only because it is so unhappy with the existing world" (3). In terms of the resultant (relative) happiness or unhappiness, we might be better advised to follow Vattimo's historical model and say that the distinction depends on the presence of a narrative that allows different moments of the text to be differentially even if subjectively privileged.

This differentiation is crucial to understanding the broader implications of "heterotopia," a term introduced into the modern theoretical corpus by Foucault.⁽⁵⁾ Kevin Hetherington proposes that we understand the ongoing development of modernity as a result of the interplay between utopia and heterotopia. For Hetherington, heterotopia is an "in-between space" that implies a process of differentiation which defines modernity itself:

Heterotopia do exist, but they only exist in this space-between, in this relationship between spaces, in particular between eu-topia and ou-topia. Heterotopia are not quite spaces of transition--the chasm they represent can never be closed up--but they are space of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve--social order, or control and freedom. Heterotopia, therefore, reveal the process of ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing (see Law 1994⁽⁶⁾). (Hetherington ix)

Like utopia, dystopia and heterotopia are far from innocent terms that imply not only modes of thought but their cultural products. The history of the definition of the genre of science fiction, from its roots in H.G. Wells and his "ambivalent" attitude toward utopia⁽⁷⁾ to the huge variety of SF products now available, largely depends on whether one considers dystopia a form of science fiction or science fiction a sub-genre of dystopia.

Artists and Carpenters

By the logic of the active anti-spectatorial stance Rorty takes in *Achieving*, the active imagining of utopia is a key tool in the analysis of social practice as well as a goal worthy of Dewey and Whitman. In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* Rorty states that, "My own view is that it is not much use pointing to the "internal contradictions" of a social practice, or "deconstructing" it, unless one can come up with an alternative practice--unless one can at least sketch a utopia in which the concept or distinction would be obsolete" (16). Deconstruction (in the broad sense) is therefore useful only in the presence of its constructive correlate. Yet, while Rorty's active, dare we say positive, method implies a proposed course of action, the result of his effort at construction remains an ideal product rather than a concrete plan, for, as he admits, "we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual present to such a future. We can picture various socioeconomic setups which would be preferable to the present one. But we have

no clear sense of how to get from the actual world to these theoretically possible worlds, and thus no clear idea of what to work for" (*Contingency* 182). Nonetheless, Rorty advocates "a general turn against theory and toward narrative" for the "historicist and nominalist culture of the sort [he] envisage[s] would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other" (*Contingency* xvi).

4

Rorty's repeated recourse to this figure of utopia without analysis of its *raison-d'être* suggests a late twentieth century romantic faith-unironic in Rortyan terms—that utopian thought is a legitimate way out of the dilemmas of traditional philosophy. Ironically, utopia for Rorty is less a heuristic filter for the process of redescription than a mold into which his ideas are poured and hardened. That Rorty is aware that utopia is an impossible proposition is a given dispensed with at the beginning of *Contingency*, but this circular recognition makes the status of his own utopia ambiguous. His repeated caveat is that in this ideal liberal society, general acceptance of redescription will create a situation in which the thorny questions of maintaining certain distinctions as we know them will become obsolete. His claim in *Contingency* that "This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable" (xv) seems to invite the disassembly of his utopian apparatus, for it not only asserts that clear conceptual distinctions persist (in the equally valid demands of self-creation and solidarity) but it in fact creates and fixes these distinctions firmly in place rather than, as he prescribes, rendering them "obsolete" (16).

Rorty's utopian discourse is not so much about utopia *per se* and its function as about the detailed contents of his own imagined utopia. Like More's Utopus, Rorty carves his utopia out of already existing territory, a jumbled landscape of public-private, ethical/moral- pragmatic formations. The Rortyan utopia is a unique man-made island of delicate balance between the public and the private that is effected by their fictitious and rigorous separation. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he attempts to describe at length what he terms a "liberal utopia": a polity peopled by liberals, those "who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do," (8) *cum* ironists, imaginative people who realize "that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" and who do not take themselves too seriously (*Contingency* 73). These "liberal ironists" are able to segregate their private ambitions for autonomous selfhood (personified for Rorty by "ironist" figures such as Proust and Nabokov) from their public responsibility to society (according to models of liberals like Orwell or Derrida).

According to Rorty, the ironist fulfills three conditions:

- (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;
- (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
- (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to her reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made

neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.
(*Contingency* 73)

The goal is to see the other "as one of us." In Rorty-speak, the question of who "us" is remains unclear (or perhaps remains all too clear), for the set of ironists is not coterminous with that of private persons, but only a subset of it. Irony is defined in contradistinction to its other, "common sense" (*Contingency* 74), and these qualities in turn define the people who bear them. "In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not. The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist" (*Contingency* 87). Clearly the division between private and public is insufficient to characterize his ideal society; in *Achieving*, the pertinent distinctions are set forth in terms of both political orientation-Left or Right-and of "career." The intellectuals and nonintellectuals of *Contingency* morph into artists vs carpenters:

The reason I cite poets, critics, and painters, rather than dentists, carpenters, and laborers, as having careers is that the former, more typically than the latter, are trying to make the future different from the past--trying to create a new role rather than to play an old role well. The difference is obviously not hard and fast, since there are such things as hack poetry and creative dentistry. But the creative artist, in a wide sense that includes critics, scientists, and scholars, provides the paradigm case of a career whose conclusion leaves the world a bit different from what it used to be.
(*Achieving* 122)

Careers of "artists" are likened to a "sociopolitical campaign" in that they "can be seen to have succeeded or failed--or, or more frequently, to have succeeded to a certain degree while still falling short of its initial aims" (*Achieving* 121-22). But the definition of "artist" still depends on the success or failure of his/her career; a failed artist might as well have been a dentist.

Because the same denial of metaphysical foundations that is crucial to Vattimo's "weak thought" underpins Rorty's own thinking, one might assume that his notions of individual autonomy and self-creation would lead him to express his views in terms of something like Vattimo's concept of heterotopia. Why does Rorty steadfastly privilege the utopia of the liberal ironist over a heterotopic vision and not directly address the question of differences of utopia when he clearly advocates the dynamics of democratic conversation and compromise? The answer lies in his regular reflexive return to binary distinctions, constituents of what Marin would call his "simulacrum of synthesis" (26).

In spite of Rorty's caveat *entre-deux* of "hack poetry and creative dentistry," his evolving description of utopia is constructed from unproblematized binary opposites. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty's belief in a starkly delineated Left and Right never seems to be in doubt. Nor is the Right's role presented as in opposition even in the academy; academic Leftists "have collaborated with the Right" in substitution of "cultural politics" for "real politics." According to Rorty's definitions, "The Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved" (14). In Rorty's narrative, the Left is portrayed as a *chevalier errant* that must find its way back to court by accomplishing honorable deeds and the Right is cast in the role of the dragon. The Left

is future-oriented and is responsible for provoking essential dialogue; it is in fact the motor of political life. Rorty never discusses the good in terms of values in which both sides can actively participate. Sides must be chosen: "Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left" (*Achieving* 14). Maintaining strict separations of incompatibles is essential to Rorty's utopia.

5

Rorty affirms, "My defense turns on making a firm distinction between the private and the public" (*Contingency* 83). But in order to separate them effectively for his picture of liberal utopia he must freeze-frame them as if by fiat in order to resolve the tension between the two. He has noted rather tellingly that Dewey expended a great deal of effort trying to reinsert philosophy into history (*Achieving* 14), but in his own liberal utopia, he must eliminate the temporal aspect of the relationship of give and take that in fact allows democracy to function more or less along the lines that he advocates. This conceptual stasis recalls the figural aspect of utopia signaled by Marin: utopian text is paradoxically "quasi-iconic" (87) and as such can be read as a sign in a larger discursive context. The choice of the word "iconic" is doubly apt in Rorty's case, for this particular sign is one that stands in the place of the metaphysical transcendence that he has had to deny and that Habermas suggests he still mourns. Or to borrow a phrase from Gans, it implies "presence as an absolute coincidence of sign with referent, as a moment of absolute peace and communion in transcended and annulled desire" (*End of Culture* 126).

Measure twice, cut once

The telos of Rortyan thought as designated by the figure of utopia is the elimination of desire. If we construct, as Rorty suggests, a "narrative" from *Contingency's* utopia to *Achieving's* less explicit one, we discover that the concept that must be made obsolete is that of conflicting, converging--mimetic--desire. Behind its liberal mask, Rorty's utopian construction is a symptom of the lingering virus of metaphysics and betrays a fundamental dependency on representational metaphors much stronger and more pervasive than he has been willing to admit. Rorty would deny that he wishes to eliminate desire altogether. However, if we understand desire as mimetic, then we know that desire is mediated by others and will tend to converge conflictually on like objects, both concrete and abstract.

Gianni Vattimo has suggested that for a critique of metaphysics to be truly radical, it must take into account both the violence that metaphysical fictions--human attempts to impose order--have exercised on thought itself (*Violence et métaphysique* 57) and the conflictual violence that is revealed with the "fall" of metaphysics, for in the absence of metaphysics "there is no longer anything to limit the conflictiveness of existence, the struggle between the weak and the strong for supremacy" that knows no other criterion than force (58). Beyond the failure to justify his own redescriptive prescriptions that Vattimo associates with the "irrationalism of hermeneutics" (*Beyond Interpretation* 99) lies Rorty's failure to come to grips with the conflictual reality of existence that metaphysics and religion help to control. Rorty does not wish to deal with the fundamental realities of human interaction and the role that representation and the sacred play in mediating this interaction. It is not insignificant that Rorty's ironist-artist hero focuses on private ambitions rather than on a relationship to the public and its recognition or rejection. Liberals like Orwell who wish to change the world function for the general good in the public sphere, where private ambitions for success would be out of place. In *Achieving* the liberal is an artist and the artist is a liberal.

Although unaware of its relationship to desire, Rorty is not unaware of the danger of violence, which he

defines rather as a quality of individual action than as a collective phenomenon. This quality goes by different names in the progression from *Contingency* to *Achieving*. In *Contingency*'s liberal utopia, "cruelty" is the destructive force threatening solidarity that must be kept at bay. As anyone who has read René Girard knows, "cruelty" is another word for the violent manifestation of mimetic desire. In ritual societies, violence is checked by sacrificial rites that focus a diffuse violence on a central victim. Rorty's implied notion that sanctioned inequality is the cause of the violence is erroneous. As Girard has demonstrated, the more highly differentiated the society, the greater the control over the contagion of violence.

Lacking any notion of or respect for sacrificial mechanisms or the sacred, for these would be part of the unenlightened past, Rorty's secularized, de-divinised liberal utopia faces in cruelty an unresolvable problem, one with which his anti-foundationalist thought is unprepared to cope in the absence of a notion of the self "that goes all the way down." For this reason, Rorty displaces the focus of violence-avoidance from the private in *Contingency* to the public in *Achieving*. If in the first book the avoidance of cruelty was the basic principle of utopian social organization, now the problem of cruelty, which he now calls "sadism," is overshadowed by an overt commitment to doing away with the effects of selfishness—as he admits, government can in some ways correct selfishness, but not sadism (*Achieving* 99). Rorty relocates his society of "free consensus" within a larger conception of social justice based on the elimination of "castes or classes, since the kind of self-respect which is needed for free participation in democratic deliberation is incompatible with such social divisions" (*Achieving* 30), and he nods in agreement with an idea of a civic religion centered around "substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's principal goal" (*Achieving* 101). Social justice à la Rorty is ultimately the other side of the cruelty coin, for the liberal sees social justice in terms of equality, even at the expense of individual freedom. But alas, once again, this is simply trading one problem for another, since lack of individual freedom critically infringes on the private ambitions of the ironist.

Rorty's movement toward equality implies that desires frustrated in the hierarchical system will be fulfilled in the "democratic" system, his new guiding light. Yet Gans's examination of Pericles' *Funeral Oration* makes clear that the founders of the first democracy were acutely aware of the resentment generated by broad access to positions of privilege.⁽⁹⁾ "Contrary to what might appear at first glance, fairness is inversely proportional to objectivity. The fairer one wants to be, the more specific the evaluation one must make for the specific task at hand, and the more unpredictable the results.... Hence the fairer the society, the more an individual who is not chosen for a particular task is likely to disagree with the society's judgment" (2). An equal society is not a resentment-free society; on the contrary. The more "social justice" as a guiding value prevails, the more the less capable are likely to be humiliated and the more capable to become resentful.

6

The shift from the emphasis on cruelty to that of social justice reveals the weakness of a model of society conceived on the basis of a single and ambiguously defined value. The formula for Rorty's hypothetical social glue is faulty; Rorty assumes that individual efforts at optimal self-creation do not conflict (*Contingency* 84), that they will not be predicated on limiting others's chances or on publicly humiliating others through redescription. Rorty's ironist hero Proust created biting accurate portraits of many of his contemporaries who were deeply offended to recognize their own traits in Proust's composite characters.

Rorty's coda that "peace, wealth, and certain 'bourgeois freedoms'" are necessary for this to occur begs the question. Even Rorty's impossible utopia--still peopled by human beings after all--must have a mechanism for expelling or deferring cruelty.

Since neither version of his utopia provides Rorty with a means of controlling either cruelty or inequality, the logic of this shift bears closer examination. Both models implicitly rely on a rational self that can recognize and intellectualize its own cruel and selfish impulses. In the first vision, cruelty emerges as the principal vice to be conquered, an end to be accomplished primarily by trying to see the other "as one of us" in hopes that the resulting compassion will cause us to work toward solidarity in our public lives.⁽¹⁰⁾ Yet seeing the other as one of us does not necessarily have a positive valence and it offers no principle of practical social organization. Cruelty does not rein itself in just because it is the worst thing we do. Rorty's shift in emphasis from cruelty on the bottom of the list (the worst) to social justice on the top of the list (the best) suggests that he believes cruelty to stem from social inequalities that must be corrected.

Those who are in pain, for example, are humiliated because they do not have the language to speak and must rely on the liberal to speak for them. Yet, as Rorty acknowledges, "The redescribing ironist, by threatening one's final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than hers, suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, *powerless*. Redescription often humiliates" (90). Rorty's response to this problem is to attempt to implicate metaphysics in the negative effects of ironism: "But notice that redescription and possible humiliation are no more closely connected with ironism than with metaphysics" (90). Rather than dealing with the unhappy realities of liberal-ironist redescription-humiliation, Rorty merely alleges that this same combination exists in a world of metaphysical foundations: the metaphysician, who is not an ironist, redescribes too, and implicitly, the metaphysician's redescription can humiliate.

But as Rorty himself admits, the ironist arouses special resentment because "when [the ironist] claims that her redescription is better, she cannot give the term "better" the reassuring weight the metaphysician gives it when he explicates it as 'in better correspondance with reality'" (91). Since ironic redescription is the intellectual's own medium for private self-actualization, Rorty cannot deny that it gives him a privileged means to cruelly humiliate anyone he chooses to redescribe. Rorty builds a structure of humiliation and resentment into his utopia in the division between the intellectuals, who are ironists and redescribers of others, and the nonintellectuals, who are commonsensical-by definition not ironic-and, we presume, liberal. One group is plainly equipped to dominate and humiliate the other group. Even if we look at the matter realistically and understand the infinite incremental variations that are bound to exist between these two categories, we still must cope with the hierarchization of society without a theoretical mechanism to help us.

"May God, or the ironic contemplation of his absence, save us from the utopian search for final solutions." (Signs of Paradox 74)

Rorty's notion of moral and intellectual progress clearly implies the opposition between a more primitive past and a more enlightened future. As he sees it, we are moving beyond the need for metaphysics, beyond the need for religion and, we hope, beyond a world of cruelty and obdurate thinking. The future society Rorty seems to have in mind is what Vattimo calls an "accomplished nihilism" in which the stable structures of Being are weakened, but unlike Rorty, Vattimo recognizes the potential for violence that accompanies this weakening. In contrast, the only explanation we can extrapolate from Rorty's

writing as to why ritual societies were more cruel than modern society is simply that modern society knows better. From the perspective of originary thinking, such a vision of history neglects the most important (and interesting) aspects of human existence, the evolution and proliferation of strategies for creating the representations that defer violence. What Rorty reads as modernity's greater understanding is rather the omniscience of the mature market system in which desires are generated and deferred in a continual process of exchange of both goods and representations.

Rorty's belief that religion becomes increasingly less necessary neglects the diffusion of the sacred in its concentrated form into circulating heterotopias. As Vattimo has suggested most recently in a criticism specifically aimed at Rorty's redescription, the secularization of Western thought should not be misread as the decline of religion, for which art becomes a suitable substitute (*Beyond* 56-57), since any such substitute only "mirrors, expresses, repeats and interprets this [that of metaphysics] experience of transcendence" (53). For Vattimo, "a different and more powerful type of global theory continues to stand in opposition to that modelled on the plurality of the artistic 'openings,' namely, the world of religious doctrines and churches" (56). It is impossible to think modernity without thinking the sacred, for it is the very secularization of Christianity that has liberated "the plurality of myths" and relegitimated religion (54).

Vattimo's critique allows us to understand, as Rorty does not, the inextricable dependency of Western utopian thought on Christianity. Originary thinking allows us to develop a still sharper notion of utopia by understanding it as a function of *remembering* toward the horizon of the future rather than, as Rorty uses the term, simply thinking whose *telos* is the future. The originary event is the origin of utopia. As Gans says, "Because the scene of representation solved the problem of averting conflict over the appropriation of the central object, its reproduction made it appear as the model of a world without conflict, a momentary golden age" (*End of Culture* 126). All subsequent representational acts are attempts to recover this originary moment, which can only be re-enacted and never definitively established as Rorty would like. This moment of perfect reciprocity, which establishes our notion of the moral and hence the impulse toward fairness, is the only "true" utopia, the model of the always-already that deconstruction seeks to avoid. As Marin has indicated, it is precisely in the unnatural neutrality of utopian space that the *supplément* of utopian discourse reveals itself: utopia exists only as a figure of the transcendence of all figuration. Rorty's reliance on "supplementary" redescription prevents him from recognizing either the originary connection of this ur-figure to the metaphysics of presence or its denial of mimetic anthropological reality.

7

Marin justifies his choice of utopian texts for analysis--from the 16th to the 18th century--because this is a period of historical break between the feudal and capitalist (10) economies. It is Marin's contention that the contradictions between nascent capitalism and dying feudalism are figured in these utopias but that they are not theorized and do not reach the level of a concept. Rorty's two conceptions of social organization--before and after the fall of metaphysics--correspond roughly to Marin's distinction, or to Gans's opposition between ritual and market society. These two types of organization are not just political but economic as well, yet for all of his talk about conversation, in no meaningful sense does Rorty ever deal with other modes of exchange. The essential change between the feudal and capitalist modes is the proliferation of centers of significance prompted by the Christian revelation and the modern heterotopia. The ubiquity of mature consumer society reveals the exchange-relation at the heart of every human interaction. Hence Tobin Siebers' suggestion that "the new model of community is based on the

romantic couple" (9). Within the omniscient market, this minimal configuration offers the closest approximation to the ideals of nonmimetic desire formerly represented in utopias. Elena Illouz' *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* makes explicit the interpenetration of individual desire in the couple's "producing" and "consuming" one another. Gans sees this as a model that can function without a third party through the mediation of desire within the configuration of the couple:

The phenomenon of romantic love as we know it since the feudal era extends to the erotic sphere the Christian revelation of the equivalence between divine and human personhood. In love, the object of desire is revealed as not simply a troubling otherness that attracts our desire by withdrawing from it, but as an other subject. The so-called overestimation of the sexual object is not an illusion but, on the contrary, a realization that the structure of desire is essentially interpersonal rather than objectal. The erotic couple attempts to expel the mediating other from the scene of representation, to substitute a dual reciprocity, a mutual mediation, for the circulation of the mimetic triangle. Triangularity haunts erotic desire as its origin and inevitable temptation, but it is not the structure of the erotic in itself. (*Signs of Paradox* 114)

Utopia and Linguistic Truth

We are now prepared to address the question of the usefulness of distinguishing utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia in an anthropological vocabulary. Whereas Vattimo rightly sees utopia and dystopia as the represented consciousness of different moments in the history of metaphysics, examination of these categories in the light of mimetic theory allows us better to understand their critical relationship to society.

Classic utopias are situated outside of narrative. We may visit there or hear tales of visits there, but typically there is no means for us to emigrate there. Similarly, Rorty tells us where he thinks we would like to go and what he thinks it would be like there, but he offers us no viable method for getting there. The reason for this impossibility is not that an imagined society cannot reconcile apparently irreconcilable opposites, but that not even an imagined society of human beings can eliminate mimetic desire. The lesson of the originary hypothesis is that humanity itself is a function of mimetic desire and of representation's capacity to defer--not end--violence. As Gans points out, "In the nonviolent utopia of universal love, there would be no means available to carry out the essential cultural operation of *différance*: deferral through differentiation" (*Signs* 166). Or as Siebers posits in his introduction to *Heterotopia*, "Utopian desire is the desire to desire differently, which includes the desire to abandon such desire" (3). Expressed more explicitly in the vocabulary of mimetic desire, to desire differently is to desire unmimetically, but when all desire is one, there is no alternative to mimesis. However, Siebers' contention that utopian desire cannot be distinguished from dystopian desire (3) bears further exploration in light of the generative model. The definition of utopia as happy and dystopia as unhappy is not only ultimately too subjective and variable a criterion to be useful, but it fails to address the desire at the root of all utopian and dystopian thought. If we speak in terms of desire and all desire is one, then matters of sentiment are largely irrelevant. The question is not whether we are "happy" or "unhappy," but to what degree culture is successful in deferring violence.

Vattimo's definition of dystopia as a scenario of "irremediable unhappiness" is perhaps less useful than the post-apocalyptic examples he cites like *Blade Runner* and *Planet of the Apes*. In these films, as in Rorty's examples of *1984*, *Snow Crash*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *The Fire Next Time*, we see a world

radically changed that is nonetheless, at bottom, recognizable as at least partly human. These worlds are thinkable in a way that utopia is not: as optimal rationalizations of existing potentialities. There is always a sense that this could happen here. Rorty emphasizes this in both *Contingency* (184-85) and *Achieving* (87), where he warns that these scenarios are not altogether far-fetched. These dystopias, however improbable, do not suffer from the immovable contradictions upon which utopia is built. The topographical problem posed by dystopia is not how to get there, but how to get back to a world previously known. This potential of either return or forward movement gives the dystopia narrative possibilities missing in the utopia, which cannot budge by creating a temporal space.

This is made evident in the respective consumption of the two genres; utopia is typically "boring" while the dystopian film and novel attract an enthusiastic public. Fourier was never a best-seller and More's *Utopia* has never been made into a film. The public is able to identify with dystopian desire in a way that is structurally impossible in utopia; a "suspension of disbelief" or, as Gans would put it, an indefinitely deferred question of truth maintains the dystopia as an esthetic object whose experience can be renewed. The dystopia is fiction, but as such, it is not subject to verifiable truth conditions beyond its ability to perpetuate itself as an object of desire. The public is able to experience the horror of a maximal manifestation of mimetic desire and put itself in the place of the dystopian hero.

In contrast, the utopian construction is neither narrative nor concept nor even plausible hypothesis but a figure of unrealizable desire. Deleuze and Guattari note in *What is Philosophy?* that utopia is a "bad concept," (110) and Gérard Raulet has argued that it is the "simulacrum of a concept." In Gansian terms, it dwells neither in the world of the signifier or the signified, but tries unsuccessfully to straddle the two. Utopia is a figure, dystopia is a narrative. Dystopia is an anxious consciousness of mimetic desire, and utopia its illusory elimination. The esthetic experience of utopia can only be akin to the soulless uniformity thematized by dystopia.

8

Vattimo's historical tracing of the movement of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia reveals the mimetic grounds of these concepts. Just as Marin's 16th-18th century utopias reflect the contradictions of the transition from a feudal economy to a capitalist one (10), the utopian movements characteristic of the nineteenth century are a form of overt or implicit romantic resistance to the contaminated, manufactured desires of burgeoning consumer society. Both retreats from this society (Fourierism) and movements toward a new world (Saint-Simonism) are governed by a vision of absence of conflict; desires either attain satisfaction through simplification or are made obsolete by technology. If, as Vattimo claims, dystopia becomes more prevalent as metaphysics weakens, this process coincides with the growing awareness of the realities of mature market society: no one is immune to mimetic desire and the structural dynamics of the market pervade every aspect of our lives. As an expression of fear of the self's disappearance in a world of enforced conformity, dystopia represents and confronts the extrapolated consequences of the ubiquity of the market. The increase in dystopias reflects a *prise de conscience* of mimetic desire unavailable within a utopian context. At the same time, the continued generation of new mediations for desire and the increased degrees of freedom brought about by mature market society enable the proliferation of personally-scaled heterotopias that marks the late twentieth century.

After the Holocaust: Utopian visions, dystopian representations

According to Gans's view of history, the Holocaust is a watershed in the understanding of the Christian ethic and its representational possibilities. The Holocaust is the logical *reductio ad absurdum* of utopian

thinking:

The horror of the camps is their scenelessness; for the first time in history, a central policy of violence is deliberately excluded from the scenic structure of culture ... Thus, what makes the Holocaust exemplary of a newly radical category of evil is not the multiplicity of its victims, but their lack of esthetic exemplarity ... Like a carnivore killing off the species it feeds on, the Nazi model was not meant to express antisemitism, but to abolish the need for it. The more Nazi society revealed its mimetic obsessions with "ugly images," whether of Jews or of "decadent" art, the more desperately it sought the final expulsion of these images, after which its obsessions would presumably be lifted. This was history's most radical attempt to expunge the Pauline revelation of the centrality of the victim in the cause of reserving the center for the positive figure of Aryan exemplarity.

(*Signs of Paradox* 164)

After the Holocaust, each is obliged to figure himself in the place of the arbitrary victim. But the overwhelming realization that to be the victim is also to be the center of significance makes the representational insufficiency of utopia even clearer. The previously tentative and ambiguous mutation of utopia into dystopia becomes formalized in the figure of the Holocaust as exemplary anti-utopia. Utopia having been turned into its horrible opposite, the dystopian text, structurally sounder in its narrative possibilities, becomes the locus of the renewed identification between public and central victim. Ironically, Rorty's ideal poet-hero is not realized in his liberal utopia but is in fact generated as an oppositional figure within dystopia.[\(11\)](#)

If Rorty's own utopia is difficult to imagine, the dystopias that he analyzes from *Contingency* to *Achieving* are quite vivid to the mind's eye. They are intelligible within the originary post-Holocaust model. His choice of *1984* in *Contingency* conforms well to Vattimo's definition of utopia/dystopia as "optimality by way of rational design," for, as Rorty says, "Orwell thought of our century as the period in which 'human equality became technically possible'" (169), providing the necessary conditions of possibility for totalitarian repression. Rorty claims that in thinking about Orwell, it is not useful to consider *1984* as having stripped away appearance to show reality but that it should be read "as a redescription of what may happen or has been happening" (173), as an alternative perspective. The world of *1984* is "*dangerous*" and "*possible*" (176). Rorty titles his chapter "The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty" (*Contingency* 169) a play on Rorty's observation that "The provisional title of *1984* was *The Last Man in Europe* (170). But Orwell was the "last intellectual" precisely because he alone of Europe's intellectuals refused the current version of the utopia of the Left.

In *Achieving* Rorty makes a distinction between an earlier generation of socialist novels--*The Jungle*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*--and a second generation--*Snow Crash* and *Almanac of the Dead*. The earlier generation represent hope based on the possibility of transformation "necessary because the rise of industrial capitalism had made the individualist rhetoric of America's first century obsolete" (*Achieving* 8). The second generation are "descriptions of what America will be like in the twenty-first century... written in tones of either self-mockery or of self-disgust" (*Achieving* 4) and symptomatic of the critical immobility of the late-twentieth-century intellectual. In *Snow Crash*, Rorty's example of "self-mockery," government gives way to business in an America in which the market has become all-powerful. Rorty notes that this novel capitalizes on the belief that corporations and

government "now make all the important decisions" (5). In *Almanac of the Dead*, a work of "self-disgust," racial-ethnic identities become the focus rather than consumer society. The white race is seen as a plague whose destiny is to be squelched by the descendants of the America's native peoples in the riotous chaos of the collapse of the US government.

Admittedly, these are dark views, but views that become more clearly outlined when considered in terms of the resentment that inspires and drives them. As implicit acknowledgments of resentment, they also are able to work through their own phobias, which is ultimately healthier than utopian denial. For example, *Snow Crash* explores our fear of the market and provides a necessary contrast between those who have mastered the market (the former Americans) and the Raft people. The structural instability of the scenario provides what is ultimately, for the reader, hope for change in the possible open-endedness of history. *Almanac of the Dead* is a sacrificial novel in which resentment is purged in the destruction of the central victim--the white American. As representations of resentment, these works ironically do more to defer violence than to provoke it.

9

Similarly, James Baldwin's novel, *The Fire Next Time*, incidentally the source of the title of Rorty's *Achieving*,⁽¹²⁾ offers an example of a "process of decision," in which "we raise questions about our individual or national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will do next, what we will try to become" (11). In this narrative the prophet Elijah Muhammad represents in the extreme the unwillingness, shared in part by Baldwin, to forgive white America for its sins, whose only explanation can be that the "white people started out as homunculi created by a diabolical scientist" (12), while Baldwin's ultimate decision is not to forgive but to look forward toward solidarity of the races despite the huge obstacles that must be overcome. Baldwin's novel offers a choice between a past-oriented and a future-oriented vision of history. The future here is not cast in utopian terms; history conceived as future is history whose course must be forcibly changed. As Baldwin says, "we may be able... to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (*Achieving* 13).

While Ernst Bloch's view of utopia is consistently one of hope and ultimately revolution, his understanding of the "artist" self, what Vattimo calls his "reappropriated subject," is modelled on the clown (*End* 39) and based in the end on irony. Bloch's preferred vehicle for the discourse of hope is *colportage*, which his translators and editors describe as "the genre of popular literature comprising adventure story, picaresque tale and thriller..." (1: 352). Unlike Rorty's ironist, Bloch's *colporteur* tells a tale that overtly reveals the utopian nature of his own desires. This narrative conception of the extremities of desire, realized by playing against other discourses of desire, thematizes utopian desire rather than trying to actualize it. Quite tellingly, Rorty comments on one of his favorite ironists and his relationship to his ideas: "Nabokov's best novels are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas" (*Contingency* 168).

* * * * *

Utopia Limited, a little-known Gilbert and Sullivan opera first performed at the Savoy in 1893, relies on irony that thematizes its own impossibility. Paramount, King of Utopia, presides over a ritual structure of government in which his word is absolute and his subjects have no need to desire on their own, for he defines their desires. He is the absolute ruler in the center of Utopian society, but like Frazer's sacrificial kings, he is accountable to two Utopian judges who can have him exploded by the Public Exploder at their whim. Paramount desperately wants his country to emulate the English in every way possible, and

he enlists his daughter who has studied in England to assist him with her imported advisors, the Flowers of Progress. British clothes and manners are introduced, but the most significant addition is the concept of the limited liability joint stock corporation. When each Utopian declares his worth and becomes a corporation, the King becomes free from the ritual system of order, for the judges do not have the power to explode a corporation. But all is not well in Utopia, for the complete prosperity and peace brought about by Anglicization has put many Utopians out of work. All that remains is to add the missing ingredient: government by party. This sharp satiric narrative does what Rorty's description of utopia cannot: it puts its own seriousness into question.

Perhaps Habermas is correct that Rorty's protean efforts to elaborate a convincing liberal utopia can best be characterized as a romantic nostalgia-resentment for a metaphysics that has disappointed and disillusioned him. But the impact made by his work suggests a more focused explanation.

Rorty's utopian vision is so close to garden-variety left-liberalism that one is tempted to ask: "Why all this talk about utopia? The society you are calling for is pretty much the one we have already, one that includes political mechanisms for solving the problems you remain upset about. Why insist on unworkable utopias when your program is essentially that of the dominant wing of the Democratic party?" But Rorty is not speaking to an audience of politicians, or even of political scientists. His base in the academic world is in the Humanities, and professors of the Humanities remain largely on the far Left, hostile to capitalism and American democracy. Rorty's influence comes from his ability to speak the language of this group. In *Achieving Our Country*, he makes what despite its philosophical vagueness is ultimately a useful attempt to sell to his audience as utopia the dystopia that is American democracy—the "worst form of government imaginable, except for all the others that have been tried so far." (13) At the end of the twentieth century, dystopia is the only structure of hope.

10

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11

Notes

1. Quoted from Carlin Romano's *Nation* review of Rorty's *Truth and Progress*.[\(back\)](#)

2. As Keith Topper puts it: "Rorty's invocation of contingency moves between a restatement of the undeniable fact that human beings and human history are something more than the combined effects of culture and nature and a voluntarist notion that the only impediments to human change and transformation are those set by the human will itself" ("Richard Rorty, liberalism and the politics of redescription").[\(back\)](#)

3. T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton (London, 1973), p. 408 (amended translation), quoted in Habermas.[\(back\)](#)

4. Vattimo makes a sharp distinction between the two--we are not at the end of history, but at the end of historicity (*End* 5).[\(back\)](#)

5. Cited in Hetherington (viii). M. Foucault, "Of Other spaces," *Diacritics* 16(1): 22-7.[\(back\)](#)

6. J. Law, *Organizing Modernity*, Oxford, Blackwell. 1994.[\(back\)](#)

7. See Alexandra Aldridge, *The Scientific World View in Dystopia*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1984.[\(back\)](#)

8. After Judith Shklar's designation in *Ordinary Vices*.[\(back\)](#)

9. "Democracy and the Critique of Pure Fairness" (forthcoming).[\(back\)](#)

10. Rorty borrows the idea of the gentle liberal from Judith Shklar's book *Ordinary Vices*, but basing his "liberal utopia" on the avoidance of this single "vice" severely narrows the implications of Shklar's discussion of a number of vices and how they should perhaps be ranked in importance. There is a considerable leap from placing cruelty first on the list of vices to avoid because it englobes more than the others to the tacit assumption that it is the vice from which all others stem.[\(back\)](#)

11. This is not the place for the development of a theory of "narrative fiction as dystopia," but it seems reasonable to

suggest this possibility.[\(back\)](#)

12. "If we--and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others--do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (quoted in *Achieving* 12-13).[\(back\)](#)
 13. This famous dictum of Winston Churchill is quoted by Rorty himself in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 29.[\(back\)](#)
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Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume IV, number 2 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999)

ISSN 1083-7264

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

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The Nowhere Man and Mother Nature's Son: Collaboration and Resentment in the *Lyrical Ballads* and the Beatles

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Thirty-five years have passed since an English vicar half-seriously blessed his nation's obsession with a music group called the Beatles by requesting that the quartet record "O Come All Ye Faithful, Yeah Yeah Yeah" for his Christmas congregation (Norman 182). Two hundred years have passed since a provincial bookseller unwittingly effected a revolution in the form and function of English poetry by publishing a slim volume of "experimental" poems entitled *Lyrical Ballads*. At first glance, the Beatles and *Lyrical Ballads* would seem to have little in common. The former were arguably the most famous entertainment celebrities in world history, the latter a book of verse now encountered almost solely in college English courses. Yet both were hugely influential, and behind both was an uncannily similar set of parallel lives. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the obscure poets who composed the *Lyrical Ballads*, like Paul McCartney and John Lennon, the creative core of the Beatles, saw their friendship and common artistic aspirations ultimately shattered by disagreements surrounding (among other things) money and drugs. Though frequently represented as collaborators, all (for the most part) composed independently, turning to the other only for occasional assistance or criticism. And for both pairs the loss of the other's companionship was artistically crippling. When they were in daily contact with one another, the Wordsworth/Coleridge and Lennon/McCartney teams produced groundbreaking, fresh, and vital work. But the compositions that came out of their eagerly-sought solo careers couldn't approach the revolutionary vigor of what they achieved together. For both pairs, the team's creativity was immeasurably greater than the sum of its parts.

The truism that Romanticism is a game for the young is often trotted out to explain sad spectacles such as Wordsworth's poetic decline after 1807 and the thoroughgoing banality of the voluminous work Lennon and McCartney did after the Beatles broke up in 1970. The conventionality, political conservatism, and religious orthodoxy that age typically brings, it is said, dull Romanticism's cutting edge. Wordsworth's burnout in particular has been the subject of several articles and at least one book-length study;⁽¹⁾ but none of these takes sufficient notice of the fact that the lyric muse and Coleridge left Wordsworth at almost exactly the same time. This is conventionally seen as a temporal coincidence; but that something remarkably similar happened to another famous pair of competitive collaborators--whose relationship in

many respects mirrored that between Wordsworth and Coleridge--some 170 years later hints at the presence of an abiding psychological or existential pattern that underlies lyric excellence, a pattern that generative anthropology is uniquely capable of discerning.

Like that of their precursors Coleridge and Wordsworth, the creativity of John Lennon and Paul McCartney was fueled by mimetic fascination and resentment. Behind lyric, as Eric Gans has written, is "the ever-present possibility of asserting the significance of one's own individuality" (*End of Culture* 273). Collaboration helps lyric aspirants like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lennon, and McCartney realize this all-important possibility, since for each, the opposite temperament of the other serves as both a goad to greatness and a source of ontic and aesthetic completion. In effect, each says to himself, "My lyric vision will be enriched to the degree I can absorb and reconfigure on my own aesthetic terms the opposite worldview of my partner." To his partner, each becomes an object of what René Girard calls "metaphysical desire," giving lyric collaboration the characteristic shape of the classic tragic agon. At first, a "model of otherness" is useful because it provides a contrasting background against which the unique aspects of the self stand out more clearly. But when implications of dependency--as they must--begin to creep into this relationship, resentment flares up, turning the beneficial "model of otherness" into an obstacle to self-fulfillment. Eventually this resentment builds to intolerable levels, and breaks out into the kind of open conflict that is inevitably fatal to continued partnership. But separating from the partner, which appears to each collaborator as the natural path to self-realization, leads to aesthetic complacency. Romantic fervor fades not because aesthetic, personal, and political radicals lose their edginess as they age, but because the mimetic struggles that lie hidden beneath Romanticism's myths of the parthenogenesis of the imagination cannot continue indefinitely. When the Romantic revolts against his collaborator, he cuts himself off from his most reliable and powerful source of creative inspiration.

2

That the Wordsworth-Coleridge relationship recurs in Lennon and McCartney--who between them wrote more than 160 songs for the Beatles--shows that, despite claims that we live in the "postmodern" age, our popular culture remains unapologetically Romantic. Lennon and McCartney are the English lyric poets whose untutored language, formal experimentalism, rebellious image, and persistent return in their songs to the personal--by exploring love, childhood, and memory--transformed pop music from polite entertainment into our era's dominant medium for the establishment of a poetic individuality. Like Lennon and McCartney, today's pop stars present themselves as poets in the making; and our poetically-inclined young men and women no longer retire into solitude with pen and paper, but pick up guitars (descendants of the lyre), and pour out their private thoughts and feelings in song for the patrons of coffee bars and nightclubs. Lennon and McCartney inherited this poetic mode from Wordsworth and Coleridge and established it as the model of current poetic practice; the Beatles' astonishing longevity in the public eye testifies to the world's willingness to honor them as the founders of contemporary literary culture. Nearly thirty years after they split up, and nearly twenty years after the death of their founder forever foreclosed the possibility of a reunion, the world still cannot get enough of the Beatles. In 1993, twenty-five years after its composition, "Yesterday" became the world's most popular song, having been played on U.S. radio more than 6 million times. A two-CD set of previously unreleased radio performances, *The Beatles Live at the BBC*, debuted at number three on the charts when it came out in December 1994. In the fall of 1995, another two-CD set of previously uncollected material--rehearsals, outtakes, demos, and live performances--was released, timed to accompany the 6-hour documentary "The Beatles Anthology" broadcast during Thanksgiving week on ABC television. It sold 450,000 copies on

its first day, the most single-day sales ever for an album, and threatened for a time (though it eventually did not) to break the single-week sales record of 950,000 set by Pearl Jam in 1993. The combined total sales of volumes 1-3 of *The Beatles Anthology* eventually reached more than 20 million, with more than 40% of those records purchased by teenagers--that is, people who were born at least ten years after the group broke up. Beatle-related tourism now generates nearly \$100 million annually for their hometown of Liverpool.[\(2\)](#)

The world still loves the Beatles, but the Beatles did not love each other. Through the eleven years of the group's existence, however, the group managed to hide their personal feuds and fallings-out, presenting a remarkably cheerful and harmonious public image, in which each individual presented a distinct identity while remaining unmistakably "a Beatle." Many of the early published attempts to account for the hysteria that followed the group wherever they went attributed their appeal to this harmony, a concept which was stretched to include both the group's music and its unique blend of personalities. Beatle songs, wrote the London *Times*' music critic, give one "the impression that they think simultaneously of harmony and melody, so firmly are the major tonic sevenths and ninths built into their tunes, and the flat submediant key switches. . . (27 December 1963). This compliment was lost on the Beatles, since none could read music; but the critic was, in his way, right: the naturally complex harmonies both originated in and expressed the group's winsome array of human types. There was George, the quiet one, Ringo, the cuddly one, and, at the band's creative core, John and Paul, whose vocal harmony, writes Philip Norman, "derived its freshness and energy from the contest being waged within it" (257). The history of both the Beatles' rise to worldwide superstardom and their bitter disintegration some six years later is the story of how that extraordinary harmony was insufficient to withstand the inevitably divergent tendencies of its constituent tones.

Paul McCartney met John Lennon in July, 1957, when he went to hear John's band, The Quarry Men, play for the annual St. Peter's parish church summer carnival in the Liverpool suburb of Woolton. They became friends almost immediately, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their opposite personalities. "No two temperaments," says Philip Norman, "could have been more unlike. John, dour and blisteringly direct, fought against authority and inhibition in any form. Paul, baby-faced and virtuous, hated to be on anybody's wrong side" (45). These thoroughgoing differences are nowhere more pronounced than in their songs. As novice performers dreaming of fame, Lennon and McCartney agreed early on that any song written by either of them would carry both their names. Putting "Words and Music by John Lennon and Paul McCartney" on all their songs was the pair's way of arrogating to themselves, while still schoolboys, the panache of great songwriting teams like George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart, and Gilbert and Sullivan. But Lennon and McCartney only rarely actually collaborated.[\(3\)](#) Each composed his songs independently, the other occasionally providing assistance or suggestions for improvement of the "middle eight." The effect each had on the other was thus more the result of indirect temperamental influence than resolute artistic cooperation, the result of which was a balance all the more appealing for its fragility: "[a] song would be John's aggression held in check by Paul's decorum; it would be Paul's occasionally cloying sentiment cut back by John's unmerciful cynicism" (Norman 257).

Lennon's and McCartney's individual temperaments began to manifest themselves more openly in 1965, particularly in the music they wrote for the film *Help!* The title song, written by Lennon, as well as "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away" and "Ticket to Ride," hint at the Byronic world-weariness and melancholy which would within the next year and a half evolve into his controversial fascination with marginal states of consciousness and "experimental" modes of musical composition, which reached their

zenith in the conceptual art piece "Revolution 9." McCartney's optimistic and upbeat contributions to the score, especially "Another Girl" and "The Night Before," on the other hand, show a lyric and melodic cheerfulness absent in even the sunniest of his earlier tunes, and which would reach its zenith in post-Beatle pop hits like "Silly Love Songs" (1976).

3

These differences became increasingly pronounced in work produced after the summer of 1966, when the group gave its last public performance. No longer subjected to the other's constant presence by the stifling propinquity of tour buses, airplanes, and dressing rooms, Lennon and McCartney felt freer to explore their individual lyric visions. The culmination of this divergence was *Beatles '68*, better known as the White Album, the glaring inconsistencies of which showed that what had been in the early years a creative contest was now a "war" (Norman 257). Alternating with Lennon's evocations of black despair, as in "I'm So Tired" and "Yer Blues" were McCartney's mawkish love songs and hymns to domestic happiness, such as "I Will," "Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da," and "Martha My Dear," which he wrote to his sheepdog. So long as the Beatles were together in some form, it seemed, their harmony was capable of reasserting itself, as it did on their final album, *Abbey Road*. When, however, the war between Lennon and McCartney moved from the recording studio to the corporate boardroom, the group broke up. (4)

Temperamentally and poetically, Lennon is to McCartney as Coleridge is to Wordsworth: John's cynical melancholy is the ground against which Paul composed his optimistically buoyant figures, as can be seen in some representative lyrics. Lennon's "Yer Blues," like Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," evokes the paralysis of intellectual and moral despair to which persons of their shared disposition seem to have been prone:

Black cloud crossed my mind;
 Blue mist round my soul;
 Feel so suicidal,
 Even hate my rock and roll!
 Wanna die, yeah, wanna die;
 If I ain't dead already,
 Ooh girl you know the reason why.

(*Beatles Complete* 394-395)

Compare this passage from Coleridge's lovesick ode to Sara Hutchinson, the woman (and William Wordsworth's sister-in-law) for whom he had conceived an extra-marital passion:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
 A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
 Which finds no natural outlet, no relief
 In word, or sigh, or tear--

(*Poetry and Prose* 116)

Even that aspect of Lennon's later Beatles work for which he became most infamous--his attempts to depict musically his drug-induced hallucinations--has its Coleridgian antecedents. "Kubla Khan," which Coleridge claimed came to him in a dream he had after taking "an anodyne," follows the course of a river "five miles meandering" from a "stately pleasure dome" to "a lifeless ocean" (64). In "Tomorrow Never

Knows" (1966), Lennon urges his auditor to "turn off your mind, relax and float downstream" and "play the game 'Existence' to the end of the beginning" (*Beatles* 246-247); and in "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" (1967), he invites his listener to "picture yourself on a boat on a river, with tangerine trees and marmalade skies" (287).

The pairing works equally well in the case of Wordsworth and McCartney. Consider "Mother Nature's Son":

Born a poor young country boy--Mother Nature's son
 All day long I'm sitting singing songs for everyone.
 Sit beside a mountain stream--see her waters rise
 Listen to the pretty sound of music as she flies.
 Find me in my field of grass--Mother Nature's son
 Swaying daisies sing a lazy song beneath the sun.

(*Beatles* 376)

4

This lyric's Wordsworthian feel is unmistakable, and seems, if not specifically, at least incidentally to recall the famous "I wandered lonely as a cloud":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
 When all at once I saw a crowd,
 A host, of golden daffodils;
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
 Continuous as the stars that shine
 And twinkle on the milky way,
 They stretched in never-ending line
 Along the margin of a bay:
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
 Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

(*Poetical Works* 311)

At first, temperamentally opposed styles like these appear happily to complement each other, to harmonize through their equal attention to both sides of the post-Kantian world's depiction of phenomena as the result of creative conflict between categorical opposites--as in Blake's "innocence and experience." When the innocence of Wordsworth/McCartney encounters the experience of Coleridge/Lennon, the comprehensiveness of each's vision is increased through the labor of coming to terms (as much as possible) with the opposing view of the other. At its best, this process yields a complex and subtle dialogue, like that between "Tintern Abbey" and "Frost at Midnight," both written in 1798, when the friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge was strongest and the two were in almost daily contact. Both lyrics place the speaker in a situation in which a present perception awakes a significant memory. Revisiting the Wye River valley in Wales after an absence of five years, Wordsworth's sight of "steep and lofty cliffs" reminds him of how often he has derived from the memory of this landscape "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, / And passing even into my purer mind, / With tranquil

restoration" (*Lyrical Ballads* 209). Alone in his cottage on a silent winter night, Coleridge's sight of a fluttering ash on the fireplace grate returns him to his school days when, "pent 'mid cloisters dim," he had longed for a visit from a "townsman, aunt, or sister more beloved" to interrupt the habitual gloom of his life in "the great city" (*Poetry and Prose* 75). Most important, though, both poems obliquely homage the temperamental keynote of the other. Wordsworth's celebration in "Tintern Abbey" of the restorative powers of imagination and nature is tinged with a Coleridgian melancholy and skepticism about the final reliability of the human sensorium. "The picture of the mind revives again," says Wordsworth, but with "somewhat of a sad perplexity" (211). Coleridge's imaginary revival of the sadness of his city-bound childhood concludes with an uncharacteristically optimistic apostrophe to the infant son lying cradled at his side: "But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds" (75).

Much of the power of these lyrics--like the best Beatle songs--comes from this blending of contrasting voices, or the harmony that can result from the struggle to assimilate an opposite point of view. That struggle carries with it, however, a tragic countertendency. Instead of reinforcing the need for a continuation of the subtle dialogue that brought them into being, magnificent successes like "Tintern Abbey," "Frost at Midnight" convince their creators of their artistic self-sufficiency. This is especially true for self-assured poets like Wordsworth and McCartney. However valuable Coleridge's temperamental differences were in bringing his poetic distinctiveness into sharper relief, Wordsworth eventually felt the need to disengage even from implicit dialogue with the Coleridgian sensibility. In this regard Lennon and McCartney both resembled Wordsworth, for as their songwriting became more self-consciously poetic, they felt increasingly limited rather than liberated by their artistic and temperamental differences. This is shown by the struggle that developed between Wordsworth and Coleridge over the publication in the second and subsequent editions of *Lyrical Ballads* of what has become one of the best-known and most widely reprinted English poems: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Wordsworth and Coleridge originally conceived of *Lyrical Ballads* as a moneymaking scheme: needing a little cash to finance a walking tour to the Valley of Stones, a late eighteenth-century tourist destination in western England, they thought they might co-write a few poems for publication in magazines. But the more they cogitated the notion of writing together, the more serious and systematic the project became, until, as Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria* (1815):

The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them when they present themselves (168).

It fell to Coleridge, the nowhere man, to write the first class of poems, and to Wordsworth, mother

nature's son, to write the second class. Coleridge wrote four poems and Wordsworth nineteen; but the most memorable and momentous of Coleridge's works "directed to persons and characters supernatural" was *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the pseudo-medieval tale of a sailor haunted by the ghostly consequences of his thoughtless killing of an albatross.

For the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which was published anonymously, Wordsworth wrote a brief introductory "Advertisement" in which he carefully avoided suggesting that the collection was the product of two poets. After highlighting his own poems "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," "The Thorn," and "Expostulation and Reply," Wordsworth wrote that "THE RIME OF THE ANCYENT MARINER was professedly written in imitation of the *style* as well as of the spirit of the elder poets," as if this Coleridge composition had been produced by the same hand.⁽⁵⁾ Of the first edition's approximately three thousand lines of verse, about one third was written by Coleridge, and *Ancient Mariner* occupied the pole position in the collection, which sold out in about a year. For the two-volume second edition, however, Wordsworth wrote all the additional poems, and his name--not Coleridge's--appeared on the title page as the author. Moreover, *Ancient Mariner* was moved from the first position to near the end of volume I. Wordsworth also appended a note to this edition only, in which he distanced himself from *Ancient Mariner*, claiming that he had agreed to reprint the poem against the wishes of the still unnamed "Author," who, because of his "knowledge that many persons had been much displeased with it," had expressed his wish that the *Ancient Mariner* be "suppressed" (*Lyrical Ballads* 39). "The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects," wrote Wordsworth, but because it also was graced with "many delicate touches of passion," some "beautiful images," and "an unusual felicity of language," he had been able to prevail upon this "Friend" to permit him to republish it.

Wordsworth's ostensible reason for including this note--which appeared only in the 1800 edition--was his impression that *Ancient Mariner*'s prominence of place in the first edition had hurt sales (an odd conclusion, since the edition had sold out). On 24 June 1799, he wrote to his publisher:

You tell me the poems have not sold ill If it is possible, I should wish to know *what number* have been sold. From what I can gather it seems that The Ancyent Marinere has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on. If the volume should come to a second edition I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste (*Early Letters* 226-227).

This anxiety to "suit the common taste" belies the confidence of Wordsworth's declaration in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that the poems would "create the taste by which they were to be enjoyed." But Wordsworth's growing discomfort with the *Ancient Mariner* did not really arise from the supposedly off-putting "strangeness" of its language. Rather, its theme and tone jarred with what Wordsworth increasingly saw as the consistency of "his" *Lyrical Ballads*. This was the reason for his decision to excise *Christabel*, another mock-medieval tale of the supernatural that Coleridge wanted to include--unfinished, as if it were discovered in fragment form--in the second edition. "It is my wish and determination that (whatever the expence may be, which I hereby take upon myself) such Pages of the Poem of Christabel as have been printed. . .be cancelled," Wordsworth wrote his publisher in early 1800. "I mean to have other poems substituted." His reason for this request was straightforward: the "Style of this Poem was so discordant from my own that it could not be printed along with my poems with any propriety" (quoted in Gill 187).

In fairness, it must be granted that readers of the *Lyrical Ballads* faced a substantial challenge in having to negotiate the tonal shift from *Ancient Mariner's* depiction of "Life-in-Death" steering a ghost ship crewed by reanimated dead sailors to Wordsworth's

It is the first mild day of March
 Each minute sweeter than before
 The red-breast sings from the tall larch
 That stands beside our door.

(*Poetical Works*, 82)

Beatle fans face a similar challenge from the drastic mood swings of the White Album, which ranges from the Wordsworthian sweetness of McCartney's "Martha My Dear" to the Coleridgean weirdness of Lennon's "Revolution 9." But Wordsworth's attempts to muscle Coleridge out of *Lyrical Ballads* stem from more than just their aesthetic differences. As Wordsworth's confidence in his voice grew, the temperamental dichotomy that had initially stimulated him changed into a source of annoyance. No doubt Coleridge's tendency to fawn on Wordsworth's superior poetic powers exacerbated this tendency. From the start, their outwardly mutual admiration had in fact been uneven: "Wordsworth is a very great man," wrote Coleridge shortly after they met, "the only man to whom *at all times & in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior" (letter to Robert Southey, quoted in Gill 143). In late 1800 he wrote to Francis Wrangham that Wordsworth "is a great, a true Poet--I am only a kind of a Metaphysician" (*Letters* I 698). By the turn of the century Coleridge effectively conceded victory to his collaborator/opponent, telling William Godwin in 1801 that "The Poet is dead in me" (quoted in Gill 200).

6

But this supposedly dead writer would be pricked into composing verse one more time by his rival before lapsing into poetic silence for good. In 1805, Coleridge, his opium addiction worsening and his domestic life a shambles, traveled to the Mediterranean to get away from his family and try to recover his health. This proved a vain effort, and after two years he returned to the Lake District. During his absence, Coleridge found, Wordsworth had completed the long autobiographical poem he had been contemplating since 1799: the *Prelude*. Over the course of several evenings, Wordsworth read the poem to Coleridge, who was moved by the experience to respond with a poem of his own. In "To William Wordsworth," tellingly subtitled "Composed on the night after his recitation of a poem on the growth of an *individual* mind" (italics mine), Coleridge describes with touching honesty the confusion of elation and self-castigation roused in him by Wordsworth's achievement:

Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,
 The pulses of my being beat anew:
 And even as life returns upon the drowned,
 Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains--
 Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe
 Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart;
 And fears self-willed, that shunned the eye of Hope;
 And Hope that scarce would know itself from Fear;
 Sense of past Youth, and Manhood come in vain,
 And Genius given, and Knowledge won in vain.

(Poetry and Prose 86)

Here "Frost at Midnight"'s "cradled infant"--a Wordsworthian child that is father to the man--wakes from his peaceful sleep, and will not be comforted. However he might have intended them, it is difficult to miss what must have struck Coleridge as the cruelty of Wordsworth's actions: the "great poet" welcomes his one-time soul mate back to a cherished home and hearth with some seven thousand lines on the "individual mind." Wordsworth's most momentous act of poetic self-definition to date repeated the callous expulsion of Coleridge first accomplished by ridding the *Lyrical Ballads* of the "discordant" *Christabel* and *Ancient Mariner*.

If this gesture's aim was to purify Wordsworth's lyric voice by purging its Coleridgian discordancies, it sadly missed the mark: by expelling the internalized Coleridge Wordsworth dried up the most vital wellspring of his creativity. By the end of 1807, Coleridge had left the Lake District for good, and Wordsworth began a poetic decline that continued until his death in 1850. Though he achieved a modicum of popular success with the publication of *The Excursion* in 1814, his reputation among his Victorian admirers and today's readers has relied almost entirely on verse written between 1797 and 1807, not coincidentally the period of his greatest intimacy--and struggle--with Coleridge. This decline in poetic power is generally viewed as an unfortunate but necessary product of age--like all of us, as Wordsworth got older, he lost his youthful creative fire, and settled into an easy conventionality and conservatism. While there can be little doubt that this played some role in the decline, the contemporaneous departure of Coleridge and poetry suggests that on some level, Wordsworth's struggle with his "realizing opposition"--his resentment--was the key to his lyric excellence. But by giving in to that resentment, and ridding himself of what increasingly appeared to be Coleridge's ontological obstacles to self-realization, Wordsworth unwittingly invited what Thomas De Quincey called this poet's "extreme, intense, unparalleled *onesidedness*" (190) to hold unchecked sway over his life and works. The absence of Coleridge as a "model of otherness" severely vitiated Wordsworth's lyric powers: no amount of interpretive ingenuity can uncover in the "Duddon River Sonnets" the undeniable power of the "Lucy" poems or the "Intimations" ode. Coleridge made "Tintern Abbey" possible, just as Lennon made McCartney's "Yesterday" (the most recorded song in the history of popular music) possible. In both cases, friction against the other honed disparateness into an energetic harmony.

In the early 1970s Mick Jagger was asked whether his band would ever break up. He replied that, like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones would probably disband someday, but when they did he hoped they wouldn't be "quite so bitchy about it" (Brown and Gaines 345). In their solo recordings of the first few post-Beatle years, McCartney and Lennon traded musical recriminations and insults with much of the energy and wit that had initially contributed so vitally to their popularity. "Dear Boy, I hope you never know how much you miss [me]," sang Paul to John on *Ram* (1970). "The sound you make is Muzak in my ears," replied John on *Imagine* (1971). As their mimetic fascination with each other lessened through the mid and late seventies, the one-sidedness of both Lennon and McCartney became more pronounced: Paul turned more commercial, releasing several disco-inflected hits, and John took a five-year hiatus from recording before coming out with the disappointing *Double Fantasy* shortly before his death in 1980. In 1810 Coleridge learned that Wordsworth had denounced him to a mutual friend as an "absolute nuisance" and a "rotten drunkard" (Gill 288). To his notebook Coleridge confided an anguished response, recalling how "fourteen years" of "reverential admiration" for Wordsworth, had cost him his "own literary reputation," and resulted in his passing "among those, who were most disposed to think highly of me, for a deluded

Fanatic on account of my firmness in maintaining and my vehemence and enthusiasm in displaying, the moral & intellectual Superiority of my Friend" (*Notebooks* 4006). Like that of his last great poem, this apostrophe's poignancy derives from the deeply conflicted feelings that Wordsworth aroused in Coleridge: a paralyzing convolution of resentment and self-recrimination, that, paradoxically, produced some of his most moving poetic language. This leads to a counterintuitive conclusion: lyric, exalted by post-Romantic culture as the best available means of manifesting a self-sufficient individuality, thrives on resentment. Lyric is the product of a struggle with an *other*; but, *contra* Harold Bloom and Emmanuel Levinas, that other is not necessarily a long-dead literary precursor or an ideal being into whom you cast all your fears and self-doubts. He may be the man living in the cottage over the hill, with whom you tramp through the woods talking philosophy, or he may be the man on the other side of the stage, who wears the same suit and the same haircut that you do. Their resentful flights from a consciousness of artistic and existential indebtedness to their realizing opposition blinded Coleridge, Lennon, McCartney, and especially Wordsworth to the literary necessity of resentment.

7

Notes

1. See, for example, Carson C. Hamilton, *Wordsworth's Decline in Poetic Power: Prophet into High Priest* (New York: Exposition Press, 1963).[\(back\)](#)
2. *U.S. News and World Report*, March 3, 1997.[\(back\)](#)
3. After a John Lennon composition, "Please Please Me," went to number one on the British charts in early 1963, Lennon and McCartney wrote three songs--all of which were smash hits--together: "From Me to You," "She Loves You," and "I Want to Hold Your Hand." After the last of these, however, there were no true 50-50 collaborations between the two.[\(back\)](#)
4. Beatles legend holds that the much-villified Yoko Ono, whom Lennon met in 1967, broke up the Beatles by "coming between" John and Paul. Ironically, however, the disintegration of the group (though a long time coming) was precipitated by mistrust between the group's two major players that resulted from Sir Lew Grade's attempt at a hostile takeover of Lennon and McCartney's music publishing company in 1968. Though Grade's attempt failed, Lennon learned during strategy meetings that McCartney had behind his partner's back purchased what amounted to a controlling interest in the corporation (Northern Songs, Ltd.). Lennon formed the Plastic Ono Band in the Spring of 1969--which "officially" disbanded the Beatles--because he felt he could no longer trust McCartney concerning the band's business dealings. See Peter Brown and Steven Gaines, *The Love You Make*, especially pages 312-315 and 369-371.[\(back\)](#)
5. In Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge claimed sole authorship of "The Ancient Mariner." *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. D. and S. Coleridge (1852), tells a slightly different story, however. A reprinted letter from the Rev. Alexander Dyce to Hartley Coleridge tells of meeting Wordsworth, who stated that "'The Ancient Mariner' was founded on a strange dream, which a friend of Coleridge had, who fancied he saw a skeleton ship, with figures in it. We had both determined to write some poetry for a monthly magazine, the profits of which were to defray the expenses of a little excursion we were to make together. 'The Ancient Mariner' was intended for this periodical, but was too long. I had very little share in the composition of it, for I soon found that the style of Coleridge and

myself would not assimilate. Besides the lines (in the fourth part),

'And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribbed sea-sand,'
I wrote the stanza (in the first part),
'He holds him with his glittering eye
--The wedding guest stood still,
And listens like a three-years' child:
The Mariner hath his will,'

and four or five lines more in different parts of the poem, which I could not now point out. The idea of 'shooting an albatross' was mine; for I had been reading Shelvlocke's *Voyages*, which probably Coleridge never saw. I also suggested the reanimation of the dead bodies, to work the ship" (quoted in *Lyrical Ballads* 367-368).[\(back\)](#)

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Schneider

Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume IV, number 2 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999)

ISSN 1083-7264

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

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The Hero Who Wouldn't Be: Coriolanus and the Scene of Tragic Paradox

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Coriolanus is the most paradoxical of Shakespearean tragic heroes. Unsurpassed in valor and indispensable to Rome's military supremacy, he returns home after each conquest a garlanded hero praised by patrician and plebeian alike. During these moments of public triumph, Coriolanus's occupation of the coveted center appears all but guaranteed. Yet paradoxically it is precisely these moments of ceremonial fanfare and public recognition that Coriolanus cannot tolerate. To his patrician friends who seek to honor him, he can barely maintain his civility. And to the plebeians upon whom he depends for his election to the consulship he expresses unmitigated resentment. Ultimately his stubborn refusal to cooperate in even the simplest acts of ceremony brings about, not his triumph, but his ignominious downfall; he is spun abruptly from the public center and exiled from Rome altogether.

In refusing to accept the centralizing gesture of his fellows, Coriolanus seeks to reject the linguistic sign upon which all representation depends. It is the resentfulness of this gesture that Shakespeare's play focuses on. In denying to others the possibility that his actions should be linguistically represented, Coriolanus articulates, however negatively, the paradox of the originary sign. The sign makes possible the perception of the central object as desirable. But this very perception is at once also a dispossession; to desire the object is not to possess it. The individual's response to this experience of dispossession is resentment.

Coriolanus is sacrificed for this act of resentment. By taunting the plebes in the scene of his own centralization, he paradoxically invites his expulsion from the adulated center to the ignominious periphery. In this gesture, one senses a romantic desire to be free of the center altogether in order to find the peace of the solitary wanderer far from the demands of the public realm. But in tragedy this private desire never achieves the romantic resolution in which the individual triumphs over the tyranny of society. On the contrary, in tragedy the protagonist is overwhelmed by the limitations imposed by the social order. Despite his yearning to transcend these limitations, Coriolanus is ultimately unable to conceive his relationship to Rome other than in the traditional military terms that constitute his entire being. In the final act of the play, he returns to Rome to seek his revenge. Leading an army of Rome's mortal enemies, the Volscians, he encircles and prepares to vanquish the city that had once turned its back on him. Only the pleas of his mother finally save Rome from its otherwise assured destruction. But in listening to his mother, Coriolanus ensures his own destruction at the hands of Aufidius and his henchmen; he is accused of betraying the Volscian interest and murdered. Exiled by Rome and murdered

by the Volscians, Coriolanus emerges as the victim of both public centers.

Because resentment is always directed *at* the center *from* the periphery, its thematization as a defining condition of the protagonist demonstrates an awareness that centrality is not given but depends rather on the surrounding periphery. To experience resentment, the protagonist must be aware of his peripherality with respect to the center. It is the thematization of this awareness that separates neoclassical drama from its classical precursors. Whereas the classical protagonist's centrality is assured merely by virtue of his appearing on stage, the neoclassical protagonist is conscious that his centrality, far from being self-evident, is mediated by the periphery from which he himself emerges. But this formal consideration is in fact a mirror image of Coriolanus's specific predicament. He resents the fact that his heroism, far from being self-evident, must instead be *represented*. Hence his stubborn but ultimately futile refusal to participate in all scenes that seek to represent this heroism. Shakespeare's genius is to turn the protagonist's resentful gesture of refusal into the formal fulfillment of the tragedy itself. Coriolanus is a hero who is in effect sacrificed for refusing to be represented as a hero. This is a very ironic vision of tragedy, and not surprisingly *Coriolanus* comes late in Shakespeare's *oeuvre*. In critiquing tragedy so thoroughly, Shakespeare exhausted its possibilities. At the end of his career, he was to turn to the romantic optimism of the late romances.

2

Election to the Center

That Coriolanus deserves public recognition is not to be questioned. Cominius's long speech to the Senate in II, ii represents Coriolanus's worthiness to be elected to the consulship:

I shall lack voice: the deeds of Coriolanus
 Should not be uttered feebly. It is held
 That valor is the chiefest virtue and
 Most dignifies the haver. If it be,
 the man I speak of cannot in the world
 Be singly counterpoised. At sixteen years,
 When Tarquin made a head for Rome, he fought
 Beyond the mark of others. Our then dictator,
 Whom with all praise I point at, saw him fight,
 When with his Amazonian chin he drove
 The bristled lips before him. He bestrid
 An o'erpressed Roman, and i' th' consul's view
 Slew three opposers; Tarquin's self he met,
 And struck him on his knee. In that day's feats,
 When he might act the woman in the scene,
 He proved best man i' th' field, and for his meed
 Was brow-bound with the oak. His pupil age
 Man-entered thus, he waxèd like a sea;
 And, in the brunt of seventeen battles since,
 He lurched all swords of the garland. For this last,
 Before and in Corioles, let me say,
 I cannot speak him home. He stopped the fliers,

And by his rare example made the coward
 Turn terror into sport; as weeds before
 A vessel under sail, so men objected
 And fell below his stem. His sword, death's stamp,
 Where it did mark, it took; from face to foot
 He was a thing of blood, whose every motion
 Was timed with dying cries. Alone he ent'red
 the mortal gate of th' city, which he painted
 With shunless destiny; aidless came off,
 And with a sudden reinforcement struck
 Corioles like a planet. Now, all's his,
 When by and by the din of war 'gan pierce
 His ready sense, then straight his double spirit
 Requick'ned what in flesh was fatigate,
 And to the battle came he; where he did
 Run reeking o'er the lives of men, as if
 'Twere a perpetual spoil; and till we called
 Both field and city ours, he never stood
 To ease his breast with panting.

(2.2.82-122)(1)

This speech, which is the second longest in the play, reconstructs not only the events of the recent battle with the Volscians but the whole of Coriolanus's illustrious career as the "best" among Rome's fighters. Its function is to legitimate Coriolanus's "election" to the center, figured in the vacancy of the position of the consulship. Like an epic poet, Cominius is doing no more than represent to his audience the preeminent centrality of his protagonist.

3

And his audience is more than ready to accept his endorsement. At this moment in the play, Coriolanus is the darling of Rome. Even the plebes, whom he despises and never ceases to antagonize, forget their feud with him and applaud him alongside his patrician friends. The tribune Brutus, who has good reasons for being less thrilled with Coriolanus's popularity than Cominius, offers this bitter commentary on Coriolanus's unthwarted accession to centrality:

All tongues speak of him, and the bleared sights
 Are spectacled to see him. Your prattling nurse
 Into a rapture lets her baby cry
 While she chats him; the kitchen malkin pins
 Her richest lockram 'bout her reechy neck,
 Clamb'ring the walls to eye him. Stalls, bulks, windows,
 Are smothered up, leads filled and ridges horsed
 With variable complexions, all agreeing
 In earnestness to see him. Seld-shown flamens
 Do press among the popular throngs, and puff
 To win a vulgar station. Our veiled dames
 Commit the war of white and damask in

Their nicely gawded cheeks to th' wanton spoil
 Of Phoebus' burning kisses. Such a pother,
 As if that whatsoever god who leads him
 Were slyly crept into his human powers,
 And gave him graceful posture.
 (2.1.208-224)

In contrast to Cominius's straightforward encomium, Brutus's far more self-conscious remarks serve as a metacommentary on the scene of Coriolanus's representation. Where Cominius seeks merely to justify Coriolanus's centrality, Brutus thematizes the resentful position of the observer himself with respect to the central figure. From the point of view of the periphery the central figure is dependent upon the adoring spectators who surround him, a dependence that Brutus and his fellow tribune Sicinius will exploit to the utmost in order to plot Coriolanus's downfall. As Brutus observes, for a brief moment Coriolanus is *like* a god. All eyes are turned to catch a glimpse of this larger-than-life figure who has committed such heroic deeds; his every move appears touched by the grace of divinity. But because Coriolanus's centrality is dependent upon a fickle audience for whom the central figure holds only a momentary fascination, this dependence can be exploited. The final wry remark about the "whatsoever god who leads him" merely enforces this anthropological dependence. Coriolanus is enjoying the locus traditionally reserved for the gods. But it is his human powers and the human observers on the periphery that the politically astute Brutus is more concerned about. The god himself is relegated to mere "as if" status -- that is to say, to a *fiction*. Whether the gods exist or not is irrelevant from Brutus's resolutely political viewpoint.

Despite Cominius's high praise for Coriolanus, Brutus's more self-conscious commentary suggests that Coriolanus's centrality is far from secure. For the truth is that military valor is appreciated only in times of war. In peacetime, the value of the military career is less apparent. The high point of Coriolanus's career come in those scenes immediately following the victory at Corioles. Named after the city he has vanquished, his fame and deeds are immortalized. Cominius's speech to the patricians is the crowning moment of his glory. But Rome is not forever at war. It is during peace that Coriolanus's tragedy emerges.

The deferral of violence is a peacetime occupation. When war breaks out, it is because nonviolent methods for deferring violence have proved unsuccessful. War is thus the supreme enactment of mimetic violence. In war, blow is exchanged for blow until one of the combatants falls. As a man of war, Coriolanus understands this most primitive form of mimesis. In fact he understands it all too well. Even in peace, he can focus on nothing but the violent mimetic center generated by the field of combat. The internal political problems of Rome -- notably, the unrest among the plebes who have accused the patricians of withholding corn despite the latter's argument that it is in fact famine, not self-interest, that is responsible for the dearth -- are mere irritations that Coriolanus regards as a distraction from the main business of fighting. If he could have his way he would deal with the plebeians in a far less compromising fashion:

Would the nobility lay aside their ruth [compassion],
 And let me use my sword, I'd make a quarry
 With thousands of these quartered slaves, as high
 As I could pick my lance.
 (1.1.199-202)

We should not dismiss this threat as mere bravado. Coriolanus generally makes a point of standing by his word. The plebes and their political representatives, the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius, have every reason to fear Coriolanus. The possibility that he may become a real political force and be elected to the consulship is not something they cherish.

4

Not surprisingly, the sudden news in I, i that the Volscians have armed to attack Rome brings joy to the restless Coriolanus because he is now provided with an opportunity to shed what he calls the "musty superfluity" of peace (1.1.228). Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt about the underlying mimetic nature of the conflict with the Volscians. Coriolanus's desire to fight is mediated by his mimetic double, the Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius:

Coriolanus:

They have a leader,
Tullus Aufidius, that will put you to't.
I sin in envying his nobility;
And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he.

Cominius:

You have fought together.

Coriolanus:

Were half to half the world by th' ears, and he
Upon my party, I'd revolt, to make
Only my wars with him. He is a lion
That I am proud to hunt.
(1.1. 230-38)

Again, Coriolanus is not exaggerating or bragging in these comments to his commanding officer. We must take seriously his monomaniacal obsession with Aufidius. The latter functions as a classic Girardian mimetic double. Aufidius is the only man capable of matching Coriolanus in battle. Therefore, all other things being equal, in a match that placed Coriolanus and Aufidius on the same side, Coriolanus would still rather fight against Aufidius than with him. Coriolanus's remarks to Cominius reveal his dependence upon Aufidius. Like Coriolanus, Aufidius makes his name by fighting. Aufidius is thus a mirror image of Coriolanus -- both are professional fighters. But, more importantly, Aufidius mediates Coriolanus's desire by providing him with a concrete model to emulate. Aufidius's presence on the scene allows Coriolanus to generate a sense of self and, ultimately, a sense of value. The more times Coriolanus can vanquish Aufidius, the higher Coriolanus's stock will rise in the marketplace of military valor. According to Aufidius, Coriolanus has beaten him on twelve separate occasions (4.5.126).

We cannot, however, accuse Coriolanus of boasting. Coriolanus is in fact incapable of boasting. More than any other Shakespearean hero, Coriolanus is bound to his words by a kind of grim literality. The worst name he can think to call Aufidius when he encounters him on the battlefield is a "promise-breaker" (1.8.2). The same sentiment lies behind his extreme hatred for the Roman mob which he calls the "many-headed multitude" because it is incapable of sincerity, that is, of keeping its word. What Coriolanus despises is the mob's lack of individuality. Because sincerity requires a commitment to

individual identity, the disappearance of this identity within the collective mob is by definition an act of insincerity.

Originary Sincerity

The basis of Coriolanus's obsessive attachment to sincerity lies in his refusal to accept the self's dependence on the public scene made possible by the origin of the sign. Without the sign the self is powerless because it cannot represent itself. But the return to the sign by the self is at once also a devaluation of the self because the very existence of the sign precludes the possibility of the self's monadic existence. Paradoxically, the "privacy" of the self is inseparable from the "publicity" of the center.

The concept of sincerity, so indispensable to modern discussions of language-use, is inseparable from the originary conception of the self. The self is constituted by the fundamentally paradoxical operation of attraction for and repulsion from the center.⁽²⁾ In the first moment of attraction the self imagines itself at the center of the significance it desires. But in the second moment the self is thrust rudely from this imagined centrality and reminded of its own real peripherality with respect to the center. For the "reality" of the center is inaccessible; ultimately its existence is wholly internal to the scene of representation which, like God, is nowhere and everywhere at once. But the self cannot tolerate the inaccessibility of the center. In a defining gesture of resentment it imagines itself free of all paradox, the inheritor of ultimate freedom and transcendence.

5

The foregoing remarks provide us with a preliminary understanding of the originary paradox that underpins modern (Cartesian) conceptions of the "sincere" speaker. In the originary context, the condition of sincerity demands that the self fulfill its desire to become the sole occupant of the center. To be sincere is to enjoy unmediated access to the center, to forego the intervening obstacle of the public sign which serves merely to thwart the desires of the private self. But to forego the obstacle of the sign is, in the originary context, to forego the deferral of violence and return to the reciprocal violence of the mimetic crisis. In order to fulfill "sincerely" the desires of the self, it is necessary to forego language altogether. But the sign only emerges in the context of the deferral of mimetic conflict. To accept the sign is to defer, even if only for a moment, the reality of the object for its imaginary equivalent, the "being" conferred on the object by the sign. This being has two poles. On the one hand, the passage from the sign to the object sacralizes the object which is subsequently conceived to possess an independent and transcendent being or reality. But, on the other, being is in fact dependent upon the object's prior mediation by the sign. From the latter more minimal perspective, being is a mere signified possessed only in the individual's internal imagination.

Here we encounter the crux of originary sincerity. The sign -- in order to be a sign -- can only be conceived when it is accepted as formally independent of its referent. This separation is essentially unstable because it is fundamentally paradoxical. On the one hand, the criterion of sincerity demands that the sign be conceived as identical with its referent, that the self be identical with the central locus of its desire. But the sign is founded on the deferral of its referent. And so is the self. Because deferral is intrinsic to all language use, so is the possibility of insincerity. In the final analysis, it is always impossible to decide *at the time of the utterance* if the speaker is sincere or insincere. The uncompromising verticality of the sign prohibits the total reduction of this verticality to the horizontal indifferenciation of the mimetic crisis. In the latter realm, unmediated by the verticality of the sign,

subject and object merge into one. To collapse the sign into the referent in the name of sincerity is to invite the tragedy of indifferenciation that is the mimetic crisis. For Coriolanus, language is anathema because it defers the conflict to which he is nonetheless mimetically drawn.

No doubt this mimeticism creates problems for an exclusively psychological or ontogenetic analysis of the play. For the latter in fact seeks to base its entire account on an unjustified commitment to the ontology of the self. But the self is coeval with the collective scene of mimetic interaction, apart from which its origin cannot be properly understood. By the same token, comedy and tragedy, if they are indeed to be regarded as fundamental categories of human experience, must be referred to their minimal origin in the scene of representation.

The pertinence of these theoretical remarks can be borne out by contrasting Coriolanus's tragic sincerity with Falstaff's comic bragging. In contrast to the latter, Coriolanus's fate is tragic precisely because he is unable to separate his private intentions from his public persona. What distinguishes the sincere tragic hero from the braggart of comedy is the fact that the language of the former is ultimately bound to the uncompromising truth of the mimetic center. His fateful trajectory reflects the tragic path of all mimetic desire; the hero unavoidably clashes with the rival desires of others. Their violent convergence on the center marks the moment when he is killed or expelled from the community which cannot otherwise safely contain his overreaching or uncontainable desire. No doubt the hero may try to defer his contact with the center for as long as possible -- as Hamlet in fact seeks to do -- but his tragedy is always that ultimately violence will prevail. In contrast, in the case of comedy we cannot accept the comic figure's language as truly sincere or serious because we cannot accept his legitimacy at the center. Falstaff is a braggart because he is incapable of the noble actions that alone would legitimate his usurpation of the center. As all tragedy makes clear, the price of true nobility is the disaster that overpowers the protagonist.

From the tragic viewpoint, the freedom inherent in the use of the sign is circumscribed by the unfreedom inherent to nonlinguistic mimesis. The idea of "tragic irony" comes from the sense that even the best laid plans are not free of the fate of mimetic conflict. The brilliance of Sophocles' *Oedipus* lies in the fullness of its articulation of this irony. Oedipus is an acute interpreter of the sign who strives to take maximal advantage of its inherent freedom. He consults and then acts on the words of the oracle by leaving Corinth to avoid the truth of its prophecy. In Thebes, he relieves the city from its subjugation by the Sphinx by successfully interpreting the words of the riddle. When Thebes is again struck with a crisis, he vows to act on the words of the oracle, pursuing its enigmatic instructions with all the vigor of a modern-day detective. But the central irony of the play is that the freedom he gains from his use of language in fact only draws him closer to the violence that he strives to avoid. In seeking to leave his home, he in fact arrives at it. In seeking to avoid the crimes of patricide and incest, he in fact fulfills them. In seeking to save Thebes from the crisis, he in fact damns it.

Shakespeare takes this dialectic one step further. Whereas Oedipus is wholly unaware of his mimetic relationship to the scenic center, Coriolanus is obsessed with emulating the violence of the center. In the figure of Coriolanus, Shakespeare presents us with a hero fully transparent to the unfreedom of mimetic conflict. It is this transparency that makes Coriolanus's character so difficult to comprehend. Coriolanus's perverse refusal to participate in any scene in which his significance must be designated beforehand borders on the ridiculous. Such eccentric behavior seems more appropriate to the comic figure than to the tragic hero (one thinks of Moliere's misanthrope). No doubt this is the intuition behind Bernard Shaw's remark that *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's "finest comedy." The source of this intuition, which must

otherwise present a stumbling block to critics who seek to motivate their explanation for Coriolanus's aberrance by appealing to his perverse character, lies in the underlying anthropological structure of tragedy. Coriolanus -- rather ostentatiously I think -- becomes for Shakespeare a vehicle for undermining the sacrificial assumptions of tragedy itself. These assumptions have to do with the mimetic conflict at the heart of all tragedy. Coriolanus is mimetic to the point of divorcing himself from all forms of (linguistic) mediation. In Coriolanus we have an attempt to reduce tragedy to its most minimal ingredients: the scene of the originary mimetic crisis. The terseness and reticence of Coriolanus's language indicate a suspicion of all action that is linguistically mediated. Coriolanus cannot stand being represented other than in the actual arena of the battlefield which he erroneously assumes to be free of the mediating function of language. It is this error that contributes to his downfall.

6

Unsurprisingly, Coriolanus's most sustained lines come in his diatribes against the plebes, before whom he cannot contain himself. As Menenius observes, Coriolanus's "heart's his mouth:/ What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent" (3.1.256-57). One always has the impression that Coriolanus's resentful outbursts are a hair's breadth away from descending into actual physical blows. The security generated by the deferring structure of the sign is never guaranteed in Coriolanus whose hypermimeticism constantly threatens to undermine the sign's stability. When it comes to blows, Coriolanus is invincible and he knows it. He is both the most mimetic and the most taciturn of Shakespearean heroes. Significantly, we never catch Coriolanus in a soliloquy. Unlike Hamlet, Coriolanus's problem is never one of "thinking too precisely on the event." Coriolanus is not given to indulging the fictive powers of his imagination. Whereas Hamlet spends much of his time gleefully exploiting his paradoxical relation to the scandalous centrality of the other, Coriolanus never accepts anything other than centrality itself. Hamlet's greater self-consciousness of the center's permeability to the periphery encourages him to defer his appropriation of the center for as long as possible. If Hamlet would rather indulge his scenic imagination than actually usurp the reality of the mimetic center, Coriolanus would rather possess the violence of the center all for himself. It is no accident that the former is a consummate role player and joker, while the latter cannot even maintain the simplest facade of civility. Not that we should accept Hamlet's case as *prima facie* the ethically superior one. On the contrary, both protagonists ultimately succumb to the same tragic violence of the mimetic center. The difference is that whereas Hamlet suspends violence only to bring about greater violence by the play's end, Coriolanus's more primitive relationship to the center prevents him from deferring his relationship to it long enough to unleash anything but the most localized form of conflict. While Coriolanus kills his rivals one by one, Hamlet must wait until a final blood bath.

The Public Scene of Representation

The path from the private realm of the individual imagination to the public one of social significance is mediated by language -- that is, by the scene of representation. The major theme explored by *Coriolanus* is this tension between the private imagination and the public scene of significance. Coriolanus imagines himself -- quite rightly -- indispensable to Rome's military strength. But he also imagines himself -- quite wrongly -- as a "natural" inheritor to the scene of public significance. He has no doubt that he deserves election to the consulship of Rome. But what he doesn't realize is that his indisputable skill as a fighter is mediated not merely by other fighters or mimetic doubles such as Aufidius, whom he has no difficulty overcoming, but by the entire Roman community which includes both nobles and commoners. By dismissing the plebeian masses, he openly displays his resentment toward those upon whom he is also at

once dependent. It is in fact this dependence that is the motivation for Coriolanus's resentment. What Coriolanus cannot stomach is the notion that his public significance is constituted by the participation of the plebes on the scene. Coriolanus is man of action who refuses to acknowledge the necessary mediation of his actions by the most general scene of all -- that is, the scene of linguistic representation. The central irony of the play is that Coriolanus, despite his affected distaste for ceremony and ritual, in fact relies on this very same scene for public recognition.

For example, from the victory at Corioles, he earns his new name: Coriolanus. The public fanfare climaxes in this act of naming, an act that publicly acknowledges the significance of Coriolanus's heroic deeds by renaming him for the place he has successfully conquered. Usually we give to places the names of their founders or discoverers or conquerors, but in this case things go the other way around. Here significance derives not from the person but from the place. It is as if Shakespeare wanted to reify Coriolanus as much as possible. The latter has become so thoroughly immersed in his profession that his identity changes to match the product of his work. Henceforth he is known not by his birth name but by the city he has conquered; Caius Marcius's entire persona has been reduced to a single moment in his history as a professional soldier. There is no higher honor than to be named after the site of his most daring act of violence: his single-handed storm of the city of Corioles.

But Coriolanus continues to affect ostentatious distaste for all public ceremony. He only grudgingly accepts the war spoils from Cominius after the victory at Corioles. Likewise he expresses extreme discomfort when Cominius prepares to recount for the benefit of the Roman senate his daring acts of bravery. "When blows have made me stay, I fled from words," he says to Brutus (2.2.72).

Coriolanus cannot bear the limelight shed on him by the medium of language. Language generates our desire for the object by imposing on it the paradoxical form of significance in general. The linguistic referent is not merely a material object; it is also situated within the central locus of our desire on the scene of representation. By contrast, fighting, which Coriolanus excels at, requires no preconstituted scene of representation. It is both the most mimetic and most unconstrained of human activities. In combat the only rule is dual or imitative mimesis. If you do not respond immediately to the other's raised hand by raising your own, you risk losing everything. Coriolanus does not fear the battlefield, because here his skill as a fighter allows him to dominate the stage. He in effect creates his own center simply by virtue of his unsurpassed fighting abilities. Like Michael Jordan in a basketball game, there is never any doubt whom to watch during the fighting.

7

Shakespeare underlines this fact by dividing the battle into six different moments or "scenes" in which Coriolanus is the central figure in all but one which, not a true combat scene in any case, represents rather the general Lartius securing the vanquished city. Like a modern-day film camera, the Shakespearean stage follows the progress of Coriolanus throughout the fighting. The first scene reveals him outside Corioles where he and Lartius have been stationed with a force in order to take the city. Coriolanus is impatient, and his main worry is that Cominius, who remains at the Roman camp to await the arrival of an external Volscian army, has engaged in battle before him. Coriolanus cannot bear the idea that he is not at the center of the action. Suddenly the gates open and the Volscians launch an attack on the Romans who are beaten back to their trenches. Coriolanus is furious at this setback and he curses the cowardice of his men, swearing that he'll put them to the sword if they do not stand their positions. The gates are reopened and Coriolanus unhesitatingly follows the Volscians into the city. His men stand

back aghast at his fearlessness, refusing to follow him to what they think is certain death. But Coriolanus miraculously reemerges covered in the blood of his enemies. The astonished Romans take heart; the city is entered and taken.

But with the mission accomplished, Coriolanus is not satisfied. He knows that the fighting continues elsewhere and the constant noise of the battle alarum in the distance only increases his appetite for more conflict. Lartius gives Coriolanus leave to join Cominius's forces outside the city. The scene switches to Cominius who has been beaten back by the Volscians led by Aufidius. But when Coriolanus arrives on the scene, he immediately leads an offensive against the Volscians in which he encounters and overcomes their leader Aufidius. Once again, thanks to Coriolanus, the Romans are victorious.

Coriolanus thus easily emerges as the central figure in all the battle scenes. Wherever he appears, the fighting tilts in Rome's favor. But the depiction of such heroism is not designed merely to reveal Coriolanus's godlike strength. More pertinently, it reveals how dependent Rome is on Coriolanus. Without Coriolanus, Rome is nothing. In war there is never any question that Coriolanus must play a role in order to pander to preexisting institutions. On the battlefield, Coriolanus exists, to use the Hegelian terminology, for himself and in himself.

But outside the domain of war, things are not so clear-cut. Coriolanus is a man of action who shrinks from the mediation provided by the universe of words. His impatience toward all discursive commentary is the paradigm case of the anti-intellectual; while the policy makers stand around talking, he gets things done. But what Coriolanus doesn't realize is that his wordless actions are not free of the mediating structure of the scene of representation. On the contrary, his actions are all the more tragic for failing to grasp the deferring structure of the sign which exists precisely to mitigate, rather than exacerbate, the mimetic conflict from which tragedy is always but a hair's breadth away. The more impatience he expresses toward linguistic mediation, the more mimetic his actions become and the more the conflict escalates. If Coriolanus could have his way, all disagreement would be settled by physical combat rather than dialogue.

There is a tiny incident that reflects the constitutive hypocrisy of Coriolanus's position. It takes place immediately after the Romans have taken Corioles and Cominius has publicly declared Coriolanus's heroism by bestowing on him the honor of his new name. Coriolanus remembers a good deed that had been done to him by one of the Volscian citizens who has now been taken prisoner. He begs Cominius for a favor, namely, the release of this prisoner. But when Cominius unhesitatingly grants the favor and asks Coriolanus for the man's name so he may be released, Coriolanus cannot remember it. Suddenly, Coriolanus finds himself forced to acknowledge the importance of a name. He has himself received universal recognition by being renamed, but now he cannot remember the name of a poor man who has treated him kindly and deserves his attention. Without the name, the man presumably is destined to be sold into slavery.

Tragic Paradox

Coriolanus is an example of the hero who refuses to be represented as a hero. But this refusal is not motivated by an overdeveloped sense of modesty or egalitarian morality. Coriolanus's unprecedented scorn toward the plebes should dispel any temptation we might have to attribute to him the ethic of a romantic revolutionary. On the contrary, in its dependence on valor Coriolanus's ethic is premodern rather than modern, Roman rather than Christian. What Shakespeare's play thematizes is the impossibility of maintaining this ethic in a world that has experienced the upheaval of the center by the

egalitarian periphery. When the center is in principle accessible to everyone, centrality can no longer be justified, as it could in Homer's day, by being the "best" among fighters. What Coriolanus resents is the appearance of the plebes on the scene of his representation. For once centrality is no longer decided on the battlefield, it loses its significance for the fighter and becomes a mere plaything in the hands of the spin doctors. It is this more discursive, less violent form of heroism that Coriolanus fears and resents because it threatens his own more violent claim for sole occupation of the center.

8

This fear lies at the basis of Coriolanus's otherwise "perverse" refusal to accept any commendation. After the blows of battle have died away in I, ix, the soldiers throw their caps and lances in the air and cry out Coriolanus's name to the general fanfare of trumpets and bugles. But instead of being flattered by this display of approbation, Coriolanus has nothing but scorn for it:

May these same instruments, which you profane,
 Never sound more! When drums and trumpets shall
 I' th' field prove flatterers, let courts and cities be
 Made all of false-faced soothing!
 When steel grows soft as the parasite's silk,
 Let him be made a coverture for th' wars!
 No more, I say! For that I have not washed
 My nose that bled, or foiled some debile wretch,
 Which without note here's many else have done,
 You shout me forth
 In acclamations hyperbolical;
 As if I loved my little should be dieted
 In praises sauced with lies.
 (1.9.41-53)

This is no doubt an alarming and extreme reaction, but our hypothesis can easily account for it. To Coriolanus, the scene of representation is anathema because it reminds him of his own dependence on it. As soon as the fighting is over, Coriolanus feels his power slipping away from him. The fanfare of which he is the object serves as an unwelcome reminder that his own significance is dependent, not on himself, but upon the designations of others. Paradoxically, all the ceremony and fanfare merely serve to remind him of his ultimate *insignificance*. His actions are constantly being hauled under the umbrella of a scene in which he himself has no power.

The most striking example of this paradox takes place in the election scene. Coriolanus stands before the senate who must approve his election to the consulship. Cominius comes forward to report in the long speech already cited Coriolanus's worthiness for the position, but Coriolanus, who cannot bear to hear his "nothings monstered" (2.2.73), abruptly leaves and Cominius is left to make his report without the latter being present. Once again, Coriolanus's absurd reaction to an innocent enough scene cannot be explained by attributing to him a deeply held modesty that is embarrassed by all forms of public commendation. On the contrary, modest behavior would require him to maintain his presence on the scene instead of rudely turning his back on it, particularly as he has been specifically asked by one of the senators to stay. What Coriolanus cannot bear is, not the praise itself, but the fact that this praise comes to him in mediated form. Coriolanus cannot bear to be represented by someone else, in this case by his friend and leader

Cominius. The latter's words merely serve to aggravate him because they remind him of his own real peripherality. This peripherality is more obvious in the case of drama than in the purely textual scenes of, for example, the novel. For in the worldly context of dramatic performance, all eyes really are focused on Cominius rather than Coriolanus. For as long as Cominius speaks, Coriolanus only exists as a character in Cominius's narrative. His only choice is to evacuate the scene altogether. Hence his abrupt departure from the room.

Coriolanus is an Oedipus who has suddenly become aware of his presence on the scene of representation. Unlike Oedipus, whose crimes are committed in complete ignorance, Coriolanus is aware of his paradoxical relation to the scene in which he appears. Resentful of this dependence, Coriolanus seeks every means to free himself from it. Fighting offers him a partial release because he is not required to act a predetermined role over which he has no power but can instead create it for himself. The election scenes in Rome, however, are a different matter. In the case of Cominius's speech to the senators, Coriolanus becomes the protagonist of a narrative over which he has no power. Instead he is at the mercy of the narrator Cominius, who in effect becomes the author of Coriolanus's significance. Coriolanus's self is mediated by Cominius. The former has become a mere functionary of the latter's representation.

Coriolanus's election scene is the paradigm case of the neoclassical aesthetic's self-conscious relationship to the scene of representation.⁽³⁾ Whereas classical protagonists are not aware of their scenic presence on stage, the neoclassical aesthetic is forced by the uncompromising reciprocity of Christian morality to justify the legitimacy of its central figures. But once centrality is no longer granted a priori, the center's dependence on the periphery becomes itself an object for thematization. The neoclassical protagonist cannot ignore, as the classical protagonist before him could, the dependence of his existence on the representations that constitute him. *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's most thorough reflection on the incompatibility between the old classical ethic and Christian morality. Coriolanus, whose prototype is Achilles, craves immortality by being the best fighter in the world. But just when his apotheosis appears guaranteed, he is thwarted by the recognition that this immortalization is in fact a construct of the scene in which he himself is merely an actor. Coriolanus's uncompromising sincerity is a product of his resistance to the notion that he is in the final analysis a mere actor in a scene already constituted before his arrival.

9

No doubt to our own postmodern sensibilities the radicality of this recognition is hard to grasp. Surely significance is inseparable from representation? How then can Coriolanus desire that it be otherwise? Indeed. But we must not confuse our own aesthetic sensibilities with those of a tragic neoclassical protagonist. The unwillingness of the latter to enter the world of pure representation is a vestige of the sacrality of the center which refuses to acknowledge its debt to the sign-using periphery. If Shakespeare is certainly aware of his character's "mere" fictionality, Coriolanus certainly is not. And the distance between the author and his protagonist is precisely the distance necessary to allow the latter to become a vehicle for the deferral of our resentment. Once the author becomes indistinguishable from the protagonist, the fictional world loses its capacity to indulge our desire free of the danger of worldly resentment. For once the protagonist becomes a mere thin facade for the actual author, there is indeed no reason why we should privilege his story over somebody else's.

The End of Tragedy

Shakespeare's play is ultimately an anthropological reflection on the dependence of the individual tragic

protagonist on the constructions of his public audience. In Coriolanus's case, this dependence is figured in the three distinct parties -- the nobles, the plebes, and the Volscians -- who all participate in some manner in his expulsion and sacrifice.

In exposing the complicity of the group in the sacrifice of the hero-victim, the play thematizes the inadequacy of the old ritual means for deferring conflict. The emergence of an ethic based on the power of each individual to create significance for himself independent of preexisting ritual institutions, as reflected in the widespread success of Protestantism -- and, more particularly for the socioeconomic sphere, in the emergence of the bourgeoisie -- is at odds with the basic conservatism of ritual constraint. Why indeed should Coriolanus have to prove his military superiority before the masses in a ceremony that merely mimics the reality of the fight itself? What is the point of a ritual in which he must display the scars of his war wounds and request the support of the plebes? No one doubts for a moment his skill as a warrior. Nor would such doubt, if it did exist, interfere with the basic structure of the rite. As one citizen astutely observes, the ritual itself leaves no room for dissent. Even if the plebes wished to deny Coriolanus their "voices," the rules of the ceremony require them to respond in kind to his formulaic request: "if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them; so, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them" (2.3.6-9).

It is often remarked that by willfully botching the ceremony Coriolanus merely demonstrates his immaturity when it comes to the political affairs of the state. The first rule of political office is to dispense with all sincerity. The successful politician reflects not his own desires, but those of his constituents. Coriolanus's refusal to pander to the plebes is put down to his failure to control his excessive egoism.

But Coriolanus's inability to go through the basic motions of the indoctrination ceremony for the consulship cannot be explained purely on the basis of egoism. Nor should we appeal to Shakespeare's "postmodern" awareness of the socially constructed nature of the bourgeois subject. Rather, what is at stake in this opposition between self and society is the conflict between two competing ethical systems. Once the individual is revealed to be an equal participant in the competition for the coveted difference of the mimetic center whence all significant differences emerge, then the old ritual guarantees that sacralize this difference as forbidden to human usurpation are rendered obsolete. Henceforth socially significant or hierarchical difference must be explained and explored by alternative -- in particular, fictional and ultimately theoretical -- means. The more universal appeal of the aesthetic over its ritual competitors is a consequence of its more minimal and thus more originary sympathies. Relative to ritual, the aesthetic scene has a much lower cultural overhead. Whereas ritual remains tied to the particular historical context of its believing participants, the aesthetic scene generates significance by virtue of its fictional content alone. This is not to say that aesthetic works lack historical or cultural specificity. On the contrary, their continued relevance is explained by their success as specific responses to the ethical dilemmas provided by human history. But the aesthetic scene privileges what ritual can never concede -- the fact that sacrality is mediated by the imaginary scene of representation. In the most revelatory cases, as in Shakespeare, this fact is consciously thematized in the content of the work. *Coriolanus* explores the problem of the leader who has no scene to fall back on other than the one on which he is himself constituted.

In the climatic moment of III, iii Coriolanus responds to his expulsion from Rome by banishing his banishers: "I banish you" he declares in an attempt to throw back upon his banishers the self-same speech

act of which he is the target (3.3.124). Confident in his ability to exist independently of the public scene of Roman sociopolitical life, Coriolanus declares his independence from the city:

Despising
 For you the city, thus I turn my back,
 There is a world elsewhere.
 (3.3.134-36)

10

But there is no world elsewhere for Coriolanus. On the contrary, he seeks his revenge not by deferring it to the transcendent world of the afterlife but by returning to Rome, this time with the Volscians at his side. His only thought is to vanquish the city that banished him. Coriolanus's momentary exile from the public center of Rome lacks the *Aufhebung* of a true solution. The latter would not in fact emerge until the romantics displaced the public center altogether by resituating it within the privacy of the individual. In contrast, Coriolanus, for all his individual heroism, can imagine no scene other than that provided by the traditional public center. His return to this center in order to destroy it once and for all is the archetypal fantasy of the resentful self. Coriolanus's tragedy lies precisely in his inability to think himself out of this paradox. He is conscious of it, but this consciousness remains fundamentally incomplete. It can only express itself only in a frustrated resentment toward all representations of his being. Rather than deferring mimetic violence, Coriolanus tragically succumbs to it. He repeatedly returns to the public center in the vain attempt to inhabit its imagined sacralty free of the mediating structure of representation.

Like Oedipus before him, Coriolanus is tragically destined to fulfill the violence of the mimetic center. To avoid this violence altogether for the "world elsewhere" of the solitary individual is a solution unavailable to the tragic figure whose dramatic presence remains strictly bound to the sacrificial context inherited from collective ritual (even if this context remains wholly fictional). The arrival of the romantic solution would spell the end of tragedy. Significantly, after *Coriolanus* Shakespeare turned from tragedy to the genre of romance. In this turn he seems to have intuited, well before his time, the power of the romantic revolution.

Notes

1. All Shakespeare quotations come from *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt, 1963).[\(back\)](#)
2. For a description of the originary emergence of the self, see Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), pp. 18-20.[\(back\)](#)
3. See Gans, *Originary Thinking*, p. 151: "The neoclassical esthetic is uniquely characterized by what it adds to the classical: the representation of the scene of representation itself as the locus of significance of its content. The unquestioned exemplarity that separates the classical protagonist from the world of the spectator is no longer sufficient. Significance is no longer self-evident; it must be explicitly derived from the locus of the scene." [\(back\)](#)

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Anthropoetics - The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology

Volume IV, number 2 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999)

ISSN 1083-7264

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Anthropoetics IV, 2 Benchmarks

Tom Bertonneau's article on *The Golden Bowl*, a companion piece to [his analysis of James' *The Bostonians* in *Anthropoetics I, 1*](#), was written for a collection of essays on American literature. **Matt Schneider's** text is a selection from the book he is currently finishing on the Beatles and the lyric tradition. **Richard van Oort's** study of *Coriolanus* is adapted from a term paper for the GA seminar in Spring 1997. **Stacey Meeker's** article on Richard Rorty and utopia is adapted from a seminar paper.

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Tom Bertonneau, an original member of the GA seminar, received his Ph.D. from UCLA in Comparative Literature in 1990. His dissertation applied GA to the study of the modern epic: William Carlos Williams' Paterson and Stéphane Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés..." Since then he has published and presented papers on Williams, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and other American authors, as well as on theoretical topics (and science fiction). Tom has also written for *Heterodoxy*, *Chronicles*, *Academic Questions*, and *National Review*, and is well known in Michigan for his controversial writings on college English teaching. He is Executive Director of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics.

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Last updated 3/1/99