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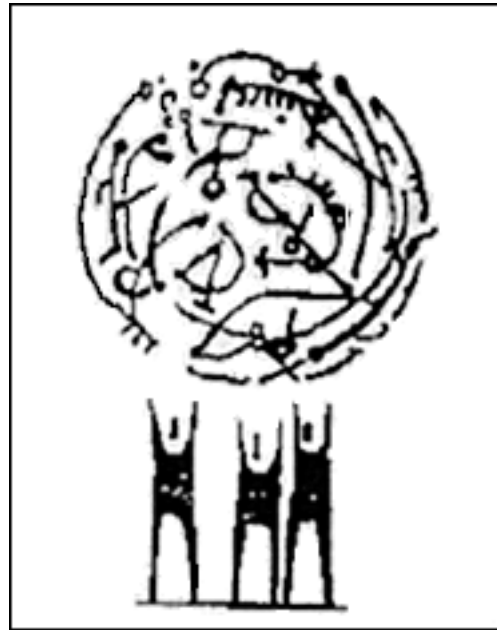


Table of Contents

1. **Erik Eisel** - ["In the Beginning was the Word..": The Question of the Origin of Language in Goethe's *Faust*](#)
2. **William Mishler** - [The Question of the Origin of Language in René Girard, Eric Gans, and Kenneth Burke](#)
3. **Herbert Plutschow** - [An Anthropological Perspective on the Japanese Tea Ceremony](#)
4. **Eric Gans** - [The Little Bang: The Early Origin of Language](#)
5. [Benchmarks](#)

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"In the Beginning was the Word...": The Question of the Origin of Language in Goethe's *Faust*

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Beginning with the Age of Goethe, the history of the question of the origin of language follows from the general questions, "What is man?" "What is culture?" and "What is language?" (1) The Berlin Academy of Sciences conjectured in its *Preisfrage* of 1769 whether human beings, "abandoned to their natural faculties," are capable of inventing language. In response, the first sentence of Johann Gottfried Herder's winning "Essay on the Origin of Language" gives the starting point for new anthropological thinking in the eighteenth century, changing the history of this question: "Already as an animal the human being has language." (2) As Helmut Mueller-Sievers, the author of *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800*, points out, Herder's rhetorical procedure is an attempt to deny both empirical and divine origins of language while unifying his philosophical project within the domain of language:

The quest for a satisfactory explanation for the origin and status of language at the end of the eighteenth century is, historically and structurally, related to the debate about the origin of living beings. As one of the more popular themes for academy competitions it was discussed with intense public participation and had split the *monde savant* into opposing camps of those who argued that the origin of language was natural (or animalistic) and those who insisted it was divine. (93)

Without determining the validity of Herder's hypothetical scene of origin, such as his story of the bleating sheep designed to match the scenarios of Condillac, Rousseau, and Suessmilch, it is important to stress that the response to this *Preisfrage* proposes the existence of a *literary* human being. Instead of viewing language as the product of instinct and evolution and favoring a gradual emergence of human language, Herder demonstrates the humanity of language by seeking the "necessary genetic cause [*Grund*] for the emergence of language" (108). As a literary response to the question of the origin of language, Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust*--specifically the episodes relating the professor's experiment with the macrocosm sign, his conjuration of the Earth Spirit in "Night," and his free translation of the *logos* script in "Study I"--represents a reorientation of anthropological thinking around 1800 and the creation of a new *literary* human being who rejects his own desire for knowledge.

Although Mueller-Sievers and others have described the history of the question of the origin of language in the Age of Goethe, no one has yet explained the cultural significance of Herder's philosophical response or Goethe's dramatic response to this question by offering a competing theory of the origin of language.⁽³⁾ From the standpoint of anthropology as the foundational human science, the *Preisfrage* of 1769, Herder's essay, and Goethe's drama are a confirmation of scientific principles from within the world of humanistic discourse around 1800. Rousseau's *Discourses*, Herder's longer essay, *Ideas for a Philosophy of History*, and Kant's little-known anthropological writing, *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*, make an attempt to dissolve the classical problems of metaphysics and to translate our humanistic paradoxes, such as the origin of language, into terms accessible to rational thought. In the same manner, recent anthropological approaches present us with the paradox that narrative non-performance--the actual breakdown of conventional meaning--reveals the dynamic of narrative self-generation. Whether in Wolfgang Iser's "literary anthropology" or Eric Gans's "generative anthropology" the problematic evolutionary development of culture calls for a conscious description of the origin of narrative forms. Iser provides an "exploratory" approach to literary study by denying an anterior referent, such as society or culture, to the act of representation. The "doubling structure of fictionality" defers the positioning of cultural forms within the "blank space" of the literary text. In comparison, Gans' "explanatory" approach to literature--based more on literature's effect to reduce social violence--recalls the subject's desire of a sacred object in a hypothetical scene of origin or "originary scene." Iser and Gans thus propose models for different types of narratives that "explore" or "explain" the cultural phenomena of literary "innovations" and "theories of language."

2

Goethe's response to the paradox of language origin wonders about the possibility of compensating for a cultural "deficiency" (*Mangel*) (*Faust I* 1215). In the episode, "Study I," Faust prefaces his translation of the *logos* script, "In the beginning was the word," with indecision. Will the appropriation of this primal sentence into his own primal writing scene establish a pattern of continued undifferentiation? Or a hoped-for self-differentiation?

Why does the river rest so soon, and dry up, and
 Leave us to languish in the sand?
 How well I know frustration!
 This want, however, we can overwhelm:
 We turn to the supernatural realm,
 We long for the light of revelation. (1212-17)⁽⁴⁾

Faust's "desire" (*sehnen*) for revelation is not to be grouped with the other alternatives to metaphysics that show the Faustian attempt to circumvent thinking and knowing. According to Albrecht Schöne, this episode is a return to rational thought first announced in line 1198: "Reason again begins to speak." Like Luther, Faust wants to see a pattern in history that governs the formation of cultural types and compensates for the "deficiency" of evolutionary concepts that explain the progress from representation (*das Wort*) to action (*die Tat*) (1224-37). Commenting on the significance of lines 1210-16, Schöne quotes Goethe's letter written to Zelter on November 14, 1816:

[Luther recognized] in the Old and New Testament the symbol of the great being of the world that always repeats itself, [so that] the Lutheran church could never be united with the Catholic church; it is not antagonistic to pure

reason, as soon as it decides to consider the Bible as a mirror to the world, which in any case should not be difficult for it to do. (*FA I: 7: 2: 247*; my translation)(5)

Faust is indecisive, since he is not sure that his imitation of Luther and his translation of the Bible from Greek to German carries the same historical significance. Unlike Luther, he cannot decide whether his translation of "word" into "act" establishes a pattern for the emergence of culture that differentiates him from tradition--or from the former self that he wants to escape.

As a narrative form, the preface to the translation of the Gospel reacts to the conventions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conversion narratives. In this context, Goethe's German is more compelling than the English translation. "Davon hab ich soviel Erfahrung" [I have so much *experience* with this] (1213) is an expression of frustration, but it also represents his skepticism that language will represent conversion. Language is regarded as inadequate to signify the divine, conversion is problematic, and, in this sense, the conversion narrative becomes self-deconstructing. We do not need to look beyond the text for Faust's experience with conversion and "anti-conversion" narratives.(6) Before "Study I," the scene of Faust's translation of the Bible, and "Study II," the scene of Faust's "wager" with the Mephistopheles, we count three prefaces to the play: "Dedication," "Prelude in the Theater," and "Prologue in Heaven." In addition, Faust presents three clear alternatives to Kantian categorical thinking in the Macrocosm scene, the conjuration of the Earth Spirit, and the suicide attempt interrupted by a clumsy *deus ex machina*. Finally, in the scene, "Before the City Gate," Faust announces to Wagner an excuse for his "frustration:"

Two souls, alas, are welling in my breast,
And one is striving to forsake its brother.
Unto the world in grossly loving zest,
With clinging tendrils one adheres;
The other rises forcibly in quest
Of rarefied ancestral spheres. (1112-17)

The many prefaces, including the numerous "excuses" Faust gives for his frustration, act together to construct Goethe's "anti-conversion" narrative. The inversion of the traditional Faust material is Goethe's deferral of his own response to the question of language origin. Goethe maintains that his character of Faust is less an "idea," more an attempt to understand this character within the temporal unfolding of his own narrative. As Goethe famously remarked in a conversation with Eckermann on May 6, 1827, *Faust* reverses the direction of traditional allegory but does not offer an allegorical explanation:

They come to me and ask, what idea I sought to embody in my 'Faust'. As if I could know that myself! 'From heaven through the world to hell'--that would be a place to start; but that is not an idea, rather it is the progression of the plot.

As a narrative that deconstructs itself, breaking down, inverting, and deferring dramatic action, *Faust* develops its own sense of paradox. It becomes intertextual when it asks the questions, What is man? What is culture? and What is language?--in exactly this form and in exactly this order.

3

As an intertextual example of this narrative of language origin, Herder's philosophical project in *The Origin of Language* denies the fundamental difference between human language and animal

communication and then restores this difference by postulating a hypothetical scene of origin. The historical context for Herder's scene of origin is a reorientation of the original question of the *Preisfrage* of 1769 towards the "necessary genetic cause (*Grund*)" that would bring the question of language within the realm of pure reason and freedom. In Kant's opinion, the transition from inarticulate *cri de passion* to the general concept is an impossible basis for guaranteeing the category of identity through language. In comparison, Herder argues that language is a product or "innovation" of human culture and an assertion of man's freedom against the idea of necessity: "Language has been invented! Invented as naturally and necessarily to the human being as the human being was a human being" (118). As an alternative to Kantian categorical thinking, i.e., "I think," Herder's own assertion, "I speak," follows not only from a hypothetical scene of origin, whether real or imaginary, but also from a narrative that shows the evolution of forms of expression.

The scene of origin is hypothetical because its scientific status depends on his demonstration that the sign--in this case, Herder's "name of the sheep"--is a necessary condition for representation. Herder does not explain the historical and cultural phenomenon, but imagines something that Eric Gans calls an "originary scene." In this scene, the human being reflects on the possibility of the original sign, whether *cri de passion* or "bleating of a sheep," becoming a general communicative concept:

The sound of bleating apprehended by a human soul as the distinguishing mark became, by virtue of this reflection, [the] name of the sheep, even if no tongue had tried to stammer it. He recognized the sheep by its bleating: this was a conceived (*gefasstes*) sign, through which the soul reflected distinctly upon an idea--and what is that other than a word? And what is the entire human language other than a collection of such words? (118)

Naturally, Herder's "originary scene" does not provide sufficient explanatory power to fulfill the requirements of a scientific proof. Importantly, he does not try to erase the difference between man and animal. His "proof" simply states the limits of man's perception in his capacity as a sensible animal. The notion of difference, the "distinguishing mark," translates the sign into a concept:

No sensuous creature can feel outside itself [without a distinguishing mark] for there are always feelings which it has to repress, annihilate as it were, since it can forever apprehend the difference between two only by means of a third. Thus through a distinguishing mark? And what was that other than an interior distinguishing word (*innerliches Merkwort*)? (117)

In this manner, the narrative of linguistic representation proceeds from the notion of an inner characteristic mark (*Merkmal*), i.e., the sound of bleating, to the inner characteristic word or concept (*innerliches Merkwort*), i.e., the name of the sheep, and then on to the external communicative word (*Mitteilungswort*).

Although Herder's narrative is compelling, deconstructionists criticize him on this point for "logocentrism" much as Derrida originally criticized Rousseau's own hypothetical scene of origin. For example, Mueller-Sievers argues that the process of translation, the becoming-sign of the sign, substantially "erases" contradictions between the scene of origin and the developing argument of the narrative of language origin:

To make [the necessary condition of the hypothetical scene of origin] plausible,

however, the distinction between word, characteristic mark (*Merkmal*), and concept has to be erased. [...] The logical problems of Herder's example and the argument he draws from it--inherent in any reconstruction of a scene of unprecedented recognition--can be overcome only with the help of such an erasure. (Mueller-Sievers 97)

Despite these objections, however, Herder continues to provide a model for Goethe who cannot conceive of responding to the question of language origin without offering his own representation of the hypothetical scene of origin in the scene of Faust's translation of the *logos* script. For Goethe, translation is the preferred method of creating a literary space where his literary creation, Faust, rebels against the Kantian universe with which he is familiar. Goethe shows that the scene of language origin requires paradox and a love of contradiction in order to preserve the fundamental difference between man and animal, the human and the sacred. Words can be "erased," but, for ethical reasons, these differences should not be erased.

Instead of employing a technique of free translation, Goethe depicts Faust using the literary technique of appropriation in order to transform the "original text" (*Grundtext*) of the Bible into a personal response to the question of language origin. Whereas Kant and Herder are accused of "logocentrism" for their different versions of linguistic philosophy--"I think" versus "I speak"--Goethe makes the fundamental difference between sacred and profane texts the key to Faust's translation of the Gospel of John. Once more, Goethe prefaces the scene, "Study I," by emphasizing that translation results from a "personal desire" (*mich draengt's*) to make something one's own, "in mein geliebtes Deutsch zu uebertragen":

I would for once like to determine--
Because I am sincerely perplexed--
How the sacred original text
Could be translated into my beloved German. (1220-23)

4

But before translating a word, Faust is interrupted by the drama itself. For this translation scene, "setting the stage" means a conscious reflection on its historical significance--i.e., that Faust imitates Luther--as well as its local significance. Faust's translation is not mere soliloquy. Since it involves his entire physical being, the act is marred by hesitation. The stage direction, "He opens the tome and sharpens his pen" (Er schlaegt ein Volum auf und schickt sich an,) presents the image of a writer eager to put pen to paper, but the hesitation is almost immediate. The translation is a false start that portends writer's block. Unlike Herder's scene of origin, Goethe's scene of origin is full of friction:

It says: 'In the beginning was the *Word*.'
Already I am stopped. It seems absurd.
The *Word* does not deserve the highest prize,
I must translate it otherwise
If I am well inspired and not blind. (1224-28)

The threat of non-performance in this ordinary narrative represented by the emphasis of scenic details over verbal ones demonstrates Goethe's desire to supplant formalism with a language philosophy that encompasses the whole human being. Faust's expressed desire to translate "otherwise" shows off a sensitivity to the absolute difference dividing the "sacred original text" from the multiple dialects of

human language, "my beloved German." The writing of personal narrative responds to the mystery that threatens to undo his personal identity.

Contrary to expectations, Faust is not greeted with the original *logos* script when he opens the sacred text and reads the first line. Faust must be reading the Greek, yet he reports finding that his "beloved German" has taken the place of Greek: "Geschrieben steht: 'Im Anfang war das Wort'" [It says: 'In the beginning was the Word.']. Since the text has already undergone one translation, the quotation marks signal the fact that this passage represents neither the reality of the time, nor the actual beginning of his own attempt at translation. He soliloquizes about a possible translation and merely recapitulates the Lutheran translation: "Und das wort ward fleisch, und wohnete unter uns" [And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us] (*Joh. I, 14*). Aware that the concept of *logos* could find several equivalents in German, he hesitates to equate the act of representation with an empty predicate. He calls Luther's translation into question. By abstracting the *logos* from its Christian context, he understands the sacred "Word" in relation to human language, mere "words." The free translation that follows generates a number of other possible translations, including "Mind" (*Sinn*), "Force" (*Kraft*), and finally "Act" (*Tat*). Moving away from the "logocentric" narratives of Kant and Herder, he breaks down the transcendental signifier into a narrative of his own making: "I write: In the beginning was the *Act*." Or, in German, "Ich schreibe: Im Anfang war die *Tat*" (1237).

Although Hitler would praise Goethe for giving such prominence to "deeds" over "words," Faust's signature, embodied in the phrase, "I write," cannot convince us of his originality. Albrecht Schöne reminds us that Faust's reflection on the mystery of the sacred text involves Goethe's own assimilation of similar comments made by Herder regarding the concept of *logos*. Schöne identifies Herder's profound influence on Goethe, thus adding one more layer to the complex notion of translation inherent to the writing of this hypothetical scene of origin:

Translating into words that are completely his own, [Goethe] follows Herder's lead. In 1774 Herder wrote the following in response to the opening passage of the Gospel of John: 'Word! But the German word does not express what the [Greek] translation says'; 'no idea can encompass [the Holy Spirit]: no word name Him.' And 1775: 'To be comprehensible to man, the divine did not choose a symbol outside of us, but the most internal, holy, divine, effective, deep idea He chose, the image of God in the human soul, Idea! Word! Will! Act! Love!' (*FA I: 7: 2: 247*; my translation)

Since affixing his personal signature is another attempt to appropriate what seems attractive and useful within his culture, it functions only as another method of deferral of action. The act of representation enables Faust to write a personal narrative, but there is no guarantee that this narrative will not be separated from him, entering his words into a system of infinite exchange. As a symbol of appropriation, the signature makes the translation secondary to Faust's search for personal freedom.

The first edition of *Faust*, commonly known as the *Urfaust*, did not contain the Faust translation of the Gospel of John, so that it was not until the publication of the second and final edition in 1805 that Goethe presented his response to the question of the origin of language. In his wide-ranging work, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900 (Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900)*, Friedrich Kittler notes the significance of Goethe's lateness in his response to this question. He organizes his own master narrative of European culture for the past two hundred years around one binary notion, "1800/1900," and around another binary

notion, "performance/non-performance." For Kittler, the theatricality of performance is the general condition within which--and depending on the technology used--something like "fiction," "literature" or "narrative" can take place. It is not Faust's proverbial thirst for knowledge that makes him an interesting case study for his diagnosis of a European "discourse network," but his love of spectacle and of the physical affect of astonishment. Upon discovering the magic sign of the Macrocosm, Faust shouts out, "What play! Yet but a play, however vast!" (454). Despite reservations about the superficial character of spectacle, he wants more of it, since it commands a sublimity not to be found in the drabness of his Gothic library. In Kittler's opinion, this appetite for the sublime is something conditioned by the cultural media of the Enlightenment. Faust's preference for theatrical gesture over linguistic expression grows out of a personal "resentment" against the word (Kittler 13). Accordingly, Kittler interprets the crisis of conventionality in the late Enlightenment as provoking the efforts of a new generation of Romantic writers to initiate a "paradigm shift" within the traditional pedagogical scene that Faust describes in the opening lines of his monologue (83).

5

Kittler counts neither Goethe nor his younger disciples, Karl Philipp Moritz and Jean Paul Richter, among the Romantics, but he does recognize that Goethe's staging of Faust's free translation of *logos* inspired a Romantic model of the public sphere around 1800 (19). Kittler underlines the importance of other scenes within the play, specifically the Macrocosm scene and the conjuration of the Earth Spirit, in which Goethe's "stage direction" commands Faust to open Nostradamus's book and to pronounce the magic ideogram or "name of the Ghost" "in a mysterious fashion." The pronunciation of this unspeakable, unnamable, and untranslatable "word" on the stage is a sign that the eighteenth-century's crisis of conventionality has been resolved. The "non-performable stage direction" (*undurchfuehrbare Regieanweisung*) indicates a synthesis of word and image, so that the letters of the page are like the Goethean symbol whose significance is "infinite" (13). Kittler explains, however, that the "discourse network 1800"--to which contemporaries can trace the most modern notions of writing--is threatened by the fact that the minimal condition of cultural performance, translation, and assimilation is cultural non-performance, interruption, resignation. The introductory chapter of Kittler's work, entitled the "Scholar's Tragedy," thus exemplifies his brand of deconstruction through his choice of opening quotation, Faust's famous opening sigh, "Ach!"

I have, alas, studied philosophy,
Jurisprudence and medicine, too,
And, worst of all, theology
With keen endeavor, through and through-
[...]And see that for all our science and art
We can know nothing. It burns my heart. (354-58; 364-65)

He calls Faust's opening monologue the "beginning of German literature" because it is a beginning without a beginning and, infinitely deferred, a beginning without an end: "German literature begins with a sigh" (Kittler 1). Devoid of a dramatic narrator or the statement of a unique style beyond the folksy *Knittelvers*, Goethe's *Faust* depicts a primal writing scene and a hypothetical scene of origin that refuses its originary status. This writing scene is the result of a collaboration or forces that merely "locate" the writing subject within a discourse network (2). Following the motto, *il n'y a pas hors-texte*, Kittler situates Faust, the writing subject, after the signifier.

An "untimely meditation" if there ever was one, the melancholic sigh in the opening monologue of Goethe's play is an expression of Faust's obvious disgust with the uncomfortable, high-vaulted Gothic den where he lives and works. It is, moreover, an indictment of the circulation of words and books being endlessly renewed within the Republic of Scholars and the Four Faculties. According to Kittler, the beginning of German literature is the dismantling of this obsolete discourse network and the self-generation of a narrative newly oriented towards the reader's bodily experience of the text and of language. Faust undertakes a more solitary semantic quest for the transcendental signified by means of rhetorical variation. He differentiates himself from the Republic of Scholars whose resistance-free circulation of signs shows their indifference to the structural meaning of difference, crossing out not only the producer of texts, but also their consumer. Thus Faust's "story" is the one he initiates in the primal writing scene that culminates in his eccentric translation of the Gospel of John:

The sheet of paper on which Faust wrote must have looked something like this:

the Act

the Force

the Mind

In the Beginning was the Word

These crossings-out distinguish hermeneutical translation from rhetorical paraphrase. (Kittler 12)

As a response to the question of the origin of language, hermeneutical translation around 1800 qualifies as one version of what Eric Gans, using the terms of generative anthropology, calls "originary narrative." (7) As Kittler's explication of the scene demonstrates, the "transcendental signified, however remote from language it may seem, arises technically or grammatologically from a sequence of reiterated crossings-out" (11). The particular scene that Kittler chooses to foreground as the origin of German literature is convenient, but does not comply with his overall thesis that "theatricality" is the general condition of writing. Although the free translation of the concept of *logos* takes place on stage, it is, in fact, one of the rare scenes not treated as a scene, a play within a play or *mise en abyme*. For this reason, free translation--the physical act of crossing out--should be considered as only one version of an "originary narrative" that investigates the origin of narrative forms. In this version, the "staging" of language involves more the product of the text than the producer.

6

In the opening monologues of *Faust*, the untheatrical staging of Faust's free translation of *logos* compares favorably with the more self-conscious staging of the other experiments with language which appeared in the original *Urfaust*, the sign of the Macrocosm and the conjuration of the Earth Spirit. Whereas Kittler separates Faust's earlier experiments with the book of Nostradamus in "Nacht" from the later experiment with the Gospel text in "Study I," this episode precedes the Gospel episode not only in terms of the history of the genesis of *Faust* but also in terms of its grammatical complexity. The narrative quest for the transcendental signified does not begin and end with the crossing out or *rature* of the *logos* script. As a "hermeneutical translation," this crossing out cannot restore the absolute difference between the secular and the sacred, the human and the divine, that is the purpose of Faust's "originary" narrative. Although the Gospel episode more or less unselfconsciously stages Faust's primal writing scene within the cultural

context of Luther's translation of the Bible from Greek to German, it suggests the Nostradamus episode in which Faust completely fails in his pronunciation of the Hebrew sign of the Macrocosmos. The scene is narrated from the standpoint of a series of stage directions rather than from Faust's standpoint:

He opens the book and sees the symbol of the Macrocosm.

He contemplates the symbol.

In disgust, he turns some pages and beholds the symbol of the Earth Spirit.

He seizes the book and mysteriously pronounces the symbol of the spirit. A reddish flame flashes, and the Spirit appears in the flame.

As an example of a failed translation or mistranslation, this personal narrative misappropriates the Other that generates discourse and is generated by it. In this experiment, Faust wants to establish an identity between the Hebrew sign and his German soul, but the Earth Spirit knows better, rejecting and belittling him:

You have implored me to appear,
 Make known my voice, reveal my face;
 Your soul's entreaty won my grace:
 Here I am! What abject fear
 Grasps you, oh superman! [...] (486-90)

The "mysterious" sign opens an unbridgeable, untranslatable gap between Hebrew and German. The symbolic figuration of this gap will depend on originary forms of representation, "before the signifier."

Instead of thematizing the translation of the declarative form into another declarative form of narrative, "In the Beginning was the Word, Mind, Force, Act, whatever..." Goethe structures the scene in "Nacht" around the notions of "performance" and "non-performance," interrupting the temporal progression of the dramatic narrative. Kittler argues convincingly that the "mysterious" pronunciation of the sign at line 481 is "the first non-performable stage direction (*undurchfuerhbare Regieanweisung*) in European theatrical history" (6). The failure of this experiment, which leads eventually to Faust's suicide attempt, does not mask his true intentions:

'Mysteriously' indeed. This event, speaking out loud, is possible for books composed of letters, but not for a collection of magic ideograms, especially when the ideograms combine unsayable figures and equally unsayable Hebrew letters. Magical signs exist to be copied under the midnight moon, not to be spoken out loud. But the Faustian experiment consists in turning the semiological treasury of signifiers into the oral reserves of the reader. (6)

Taking this "non-performable stage direction" as evidence, Kittler draws conclusions about the failure of Faust's experiment. Since all culture is textual, his dream of an oral culture before written culture reduces the act of reading to an "elementary and infantile form of consumption" (7). In an anthropological approach to narrative, however, the distinction between oral culture and written culture is secondary. More importantly, Kittler's deconstructionist example of a "non-performable stage direction" consists of two separate actions--or, rather, two separate language experiments--that must now be subjected to an "originary analysis" of narrative. In this manner, we can judge the success (or failure) of Goethe's

response to the question of the origin of language. Before Faust seizes the book and "mysteriously" pronounces the foreign sign, he asks an important question that Kittler unfortunately glosses over:

Was it a God that made these symbols be
That soothe my feverish unrest,
Filling with joy my anxious breast,
And with mysterious potency
Make nature's hidden powers around me, manifest?
Am I a God? [...] (434-439)

7

Because Faust sees himself as a "superman" (*Ueberschensch*), this question thematizes the absolute difference between man and the sacred being he renounces. The gesture of appropriation of the Other that recognizes this difference demystifies Faust's "mysterious" invocation of the Spirit and refers to the temporal difference implicit in that which Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser define as originary narrative.

According to the terms of generative anthropology, the originary hypothesis concerning the origin of language proposes the minimal conditions for which originary narrative enacts the cultural deferral of violence. Eric Gans postulates an "originary scene" for which "such activities as hunting generate plausible settings," and in which "fear of conflict" is the sole necessary motivation for the "abortion of the original gesture of appropriation" (*End of Culture* 20). Mimetic or Girardian theory provides the greatest possible explanatory force with regard to language origin because it foregrounds the most common characteristic of human culture: its tendency to resort to internecine violence. With regard to the killed animal a ritual has to be imposed so that the huntsman do not kill each other in deciding who gets the prey. The establishment of ritual prohibitions ensures the continuous self-differentiation of culture and provides a pattern for the emergence of cultural institutions, including literature. In order to recognize this pattern, Gans distinguishes the "detemporalizing" moment of the originary sign from overlapping "temporal" narrative forms. He associates narrative performance with the mimetic rivalry of subjects about to appropriate the sacred object's centrality:

[...] humanity is not originally constituted by narrative but by text, [...] the originary sign is not temporal but detemporalizing. Human beings cannot do without narrative; but narrative is only conceivable as the interpretation of text.
(*Originary Thinking* 100)

If "text" refers to the absolute difference implicit in originary narrative, "narrative" provides the path from the "emission of the sign to the resolution of the originary crisis in communal appetitive satisfaction" (101). Nevertheless, in a recent essay, entitled "Originary Narrative," Gans re-evaluates the preference which he gives textuality over narrativity. Calling into question the accepted notion of narrative based on the notion of an historical present, he demonstrates how temporality becomes atemporal and how performance also "mimetically suggests non-performance, renunciation."

According to this definition, originary narrative is the "story of the emission of the sign," of the "deferred gesture of appropriation"--or, to put it in more popular terms, the story of *différance*. From this perspective, we recognize "staging" as an anthropological category that responds to the question of the origin of language or, using the terms of Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology, "imagines" a narrative beginning in the "blank space" of the literary text (Iser, "The Use of Fiction"). The binary notion,

"performance/non-performance," presents itself as an active reflection on the originary forms of representation, before the institution of the signifier. As Gans describes it, this operation works in opposition to the sign's actual intention:

[In its capacity as ostensive representation] the sign denies the conditions of its emergence in order to present itself as a passive reflection of what was 'always already' there...The [ostensive sign] requests no performance but mimetically suggests non-performance, renunciation. [The originary narrative], the becoming-sign of the sign, is excluded from our reading of the sign itself; it is part of its "unconscious." The ostensive sign is the negation of narrative; it defers history because it anticipates it as destructive violence. [Originary narrative is not even the "zero degree" but the negation of narrativity. (Gans, "Originary Narrative")]

With the benefit of this re-definition of the historical "process" of narrative, the "staging" of Faust's opening monologues in "Nacht" and "Study I" foregrounds the "unhearable" translation of Hebrew into German in the Nostradamus episode. Made "hearable" by the fact that it is in Faust's "beloved German," the episode containing the translation of the Gospel text is pushed into the background. As non-performance, the "staging" of the "non-performable stage direction" assumes the function of the ostensive sign of originary narrative. As ostensive sign-at once renouncing and designating the sacred center-the "non-performable stage direction" produces "readings" of the absolute difference between man and God that cannot be organized in the formalized structure of narrative, either the declarative syntax of the *logos* or, as Kittler would have it, its free translation.

In the originary model that Wolfgang Iser provides in his version of literary anthropology, the triadic relationship of the fictive, the real, and the imaginary describes the emergence of the "performative character of representation" as non-performance. The "energizing force" of literature interrupts cultural ideology, it moves beyond the linguistic dimension of the human, and it testifies to the human need for communication ("The Use of Fiction"). Although Iser criticizes the "totalizing" effect of the "originary scene" of generative anthropology, he agrees that the minimalism of the scene helps to explain the essential but problematic difference that separates the writing subject from the scene of representation (*The Fictive* xii). According to Iser, the performative nature of representation repeats itself in the semantic quest for the transcendental signified and the removal of difference (296). It is this repetition, triggered by the recognition that performance leads to non-performance (and vice versa), that initiates the movement of originary narrative from the aborted gesture of appropriation to the "fictive" translation of the "imaginary" into the "real."

8

Using an anthropological approach, we can describe the emergence of narrative forms such as Goethe's response to the paradox of language origin, which begins with the refusal of translation and ends with the assimilation of the declarative syntax of *logos* into a personal narrative. As a response to the question of the origin of language, the Faustian narrative leads from the ostensive origin of the imaginary to the imaginary institution of the first linguistic sign. As an originary narrative at the level of declarative syntax--or that which Iser calls the "fictive"--the ostensive sign of appropriation leads to a further repetition of the imaginary origin through a negation of the imperative. As the "unconscious" of language, the imaginary--the representation of something indeterminate but nevertheless

powerful--"allows [the subject] to first conceive what it is toward which [the linguistic sign] points" (2). As the "unconscious" of narrative form, the ostensive origin of the imaginary interdicts appropriative desire of the sacred object and, at the same time, triggers the originary narrative that progresses--or, rather, returns-to "culture" and the "real." If, as Cornelius Castoriadis argues, the foundation of all cultural institutions is the imaginary, the invention of words transfers the subject's consciousness to the consciousness of the group who shares in the performative act of representation. In this manner, representation, defined as the articulation of a shared figuration--or, more simply, as the presentification of an absence--becomes the foundational charter of a group.

As a result of their shared belief in the performative nature of representation, Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser can demonstrate the anthropological power of "staging" within an originary model that transforms the "blank space" of the literary text that competes with the real despite its unreality. However, as an anthropological category, "staging" also burdens the originary narrative in its function as the foundational charter of the group. Once the narrative is complete, the mimetic result of the narrative performance risks fetishization and totalization, making it indistinguishable from Kittler's "discourse network" or the context of nature that produced it. For instance, Goethe's original Faust play, the so-called *Urfaust*, critiques the pure staging of discourse generated by the Four Faculties when it laments that "staging" has become a game created for the sole purpose of removing differences and producing an endless circulation of signifiers:

What play! Yet but a play, however vast!
 Where, boundless nature, can I hold you fast?
 And where you, breasts? Wells that sustain
 All life--the heaven and the earth are nursed. (454-57)

Even Faust cannot abide the removal of absolute difference between man and God epitomized in the foundational charter of Western civilization, the Gospel of John. His free translation of the *logos* script in which he purposefully crosses out and generates his own possible iterations should be read as an attempt to restore this absolute difference within a personal narrative. On the one hand, Friedrich Kittler's deconstructionist approach does not give Faust credit for being the producer of his own text: each crossing out sets Faust up for another trap. Neither the producer, nor the consumer of his own text, Faust is a mere signifier in a text he neither reads, nor writes, nor hears. Kittler's brief return to the origin of German literature is a denial of the origin. On the other hand, the anthropological approach of Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser offers Faust the possibility of becoming a true *literary* human being, both producer and consumer of his own text. Since the originary models that they propose turn out to be only a "partial" explanation of the generation of discourse, the non-performance of performance makes the repetition of the originary narrative possible (*The Fictive* 296). As non-performance, "staging" guarantees the proliferation of new "readings" of this text and an openness to difference. In the beginning was... the Word, Force, Mind, Act, and on and on and on... With the death of literature, we have the option of "explaining" these new readings or "exploring" the secondary worlds which they engender.

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Notes

1. In our own time, cultural anthropology comes closest to taking these three questions seriously when it proposes that culture is not something added to an emerging subject; it is not a supplement; it is the continuation of a cultural performance that repeats, but also modifies the terms of all previous cultural events. Whereas cultural studies speaks of representations in the plural and thus avoids the theory of representation, anthropological thinking, exemplified by Clifford Geertz, understands the relevance of the question "What is language?" in a master narrative attempting to answer the question "What is culture?" In the essay, "Differences," Eric Gans clarifies the importance of asking "What is...?" questions, especially these three questions, in spite of a critical climate that reflexively distrusts this type of question. On the other hand, the eighteenth century loved "What is...?" questions and big money questions of all types. ([back](#))
2. Herder, J.G., and J.J. Rousseau. *On the Origin of Language*, p.87. Since this is the English translation

of Herder's essay, I will quote it parenthetically in my essay.[\(back\)](#)

3. See *Self-Generation*. Mueller-Sievers does not offer a competing theory as much as a deconstruction of Herder's "originary scene." In this regard, Friedrich Kittler, who will be discussed later in the essay, is an important figure for Mueller-Sievers' brand of deconstruction.[\(back\)](#)

4. Because of the general makeup of the audience of *Anthropoetics*, all quotes from Goethe's *Faust* will be taken from Walter Kaufmann's English translation.[\(back\)](#)

5. I have decided to translate the quotes collected from Goethe's text, because I believe that my translation is more accurate.[\(back\)](#)

6. One of the recurring themes of Goethe's drama, the "wager" between Faust and the devil, plays with the notion of a promise of salvation. Even Albrecht Schöne cannot decide the debate about whether the penultimate lines of the drama, "Whoever strives with all his power/ We are allowed to save," should be read with or without quotation marks.[\(back\)](#)

7. See Gans, "Originary Narrative." Originary narrative is the narrative of the "sign becoming the sign." The first sign is the ostensive or the gesture of appropriation, the second stage in the formation of the sign is the imperative, i.e. "Mommy!" and the declarative, according to Gans, is formed as the result of the negation of the imperative, i.e. "Hammer!"-"No!"[\(back\)](#)

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The Question of the Origin of Language in René Girard, Eric Gans, and Kenneth Burke

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According to a recent article by Eric Gans,⁽¹⁾ the question of the origin of language, after a century-long ban by the disciplines of history and linguistics, and a decades-long interdict as a non-question by the deconstructionists, is once again receiving attention from the academy. "Today," states Gans, "there are dozens of books and thousands of articles. The Language Origins Society or LOS will hold its fifteenth annual meeting this year. Language origin study has become an interdisciplinary subfield of the human sciences." In this renewed pursuit of the question, the humanities, however, continue to be relegated to the sidelines by sciences like biology and neurology, which view human language as the product of instinct and evolution and favor a gradualist view of its emergence. Against these, Gans, citing the historical record, particularly that of this century, argues that mimetic theory provides the best source of insight into the origin of language because it puts in relief the primary feature of human culture: its propensity to degenerate into internecine violence. Before language could have served as a means of communication, he reasons, its first function must have been to mitigate violence within the group. Otherwise there simply would not have been a human culture.

In this paper I will not attempt to assess the scientific plausibility of mimetic theory's contribution to the language-origin question, but will compare its two main versions as formulated by René Girard and Eric Gans. My purpose is not to champion one against the other, but rather to articulate some of the issues at stake between them. To this end I have found that Kenneth Burke's independent speculations on this question offer a useful third viewpoint on the question, in that they offer a means to formulate and negotiate the differences between Girard and Gans. At this point in the development of mimetic theory, it has perhaps reached the point where, rather than an orthodoxy, it can be seen as a hypothesis that can be fruitfully unfolded in a variety of modes, for as René Girard has frequently declared, the mimetic factor in human behavior is by no means his exclusive discovery. Rather, again as he has suggested, it is to be found revealed in foundational religious texts and in major works of world literature. Girard's particular exploit was to develop his insight into the mimetic aspect of individual behavior into a general theory of human culture. By taking the quantum step from individual (or "interindividual") to group psychology, he fashioned a flexible hermeneutic susceptible to an open-ended process of refinement and development. Thus in this paper, I will begin with Girard's account of the origin of language, and then juxtapose it to Gans's account, and finally look at both of these from the vantage of Burke's speculation on the origins of

language.

Girard and the Origin of Language

In the section entitled *Fundamental Anthropology* in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, René Girard distinguishes several steps in proto-humanity's accession to language. The first step occurred, he writes, when the increase of mimetic rivalry in the group had exceeded the point where it could be contained by dominance patterns:

We have to show that the intensification of mimetic rivalry, which is already very much in evidence at the level of primates, destroyed dominance patterns and gave rise to progressively more elaborate and humanized forms of culture through the intermediary of the surrogate victim. At the point when mimetic conflict becomes sufficiently intense to prohibit the direct solutions that give rise to the forms of animal sociality, the first 'crisis' or series of crises would then occur as the mechanism that produces the differentiated, symbolic, and human forms of culture. (Girard, 94)

The second step in the development of the signifier, and so of language, occurs when mimetic rivalry has generated a degree of chaos and indifferentiation within the group such as to lead it to cast about for a means of release. Obscurely, the group looks for a victim upon which to affix the burden of chaos it is experiencing:

I think that even the most elementary form of the victimage mechanism, prior to the emergence of the sign, should be seen as an exceptionally powerful means of creating a new degree of attention, the first non-instinctual attention. Once it has reached a certain degree of frenzy, the mimetic polarization becomes fixed on a single victim. After having been released against the victim, the violence necessarily abates and silence follows the mayhem. This maximal contrast between the release of violence and its cessation, between agitation and tranquillity, creates the most favourable conditions possible for the emergence of this new attention. Since the victim is a common victim it will be at that instant the focal point for all members of the community. Consequently, beyond the purely instinctual object, the alimentary or sexual object or the dominant individual, there is the cadaver of the collective victim and this cadaver constitutes the first object for this new type of attention. (Girard, 99)

2

What is important to note in this account is that though it postulates the body of the victim as an object of the group's attention, Girard states *that it is not yet a sign*. Instead, he suggests that the group somehow stores the scenario and the emotions associated with it in its lengthy approach to full consciousness. He writes: "It is necessary to conceive of stages, however, which were perhaps the longest in all human history, in which the signifying effects have still not truly taken shape." But, a few sentences later he adds, "Nonetheless, even the most rudimentary signifying effects result from the necessity of controlling excessive mimesis; as soon as we grant that these effects can be in the slightest degree cumulative, we will have recognized them as forerunners of human culture." (Girard, 100). So, in sum, if we are willing

to "cut a long story short" for purposes of definitional clarity, the body of the victim does indeed at some point in human development emerge as the first signifier:

Because of the victim, in so far as it seems to emerge from the community and the community seems to emerge from it, for the first time there can be something like an inside and an outside, a before and after, a community and the sacred. We have already noted that the victim appears to be simultaneously good and evil, peaceable and violent, a life that brings death and a death that guarantees life. Every possible significant element seems to have its outline in the sacred and at the same time to be transcended by it. In this sense the victim does seem to constitute a universal signifier. (Girard, 102)

A little earlier in his discussion Girard had prefaced his remarks on the victim as the signifier by stating that it fulfills this function not only thanks to the plenitude of contradictory meanings contained within it, but also because within the group this body is the one thing that is critically different; indeed, it is the factor in the situation that gives rise to difference as such: "This is the model of the exception that is still in the process of emerging, the single trait that stands out against a confused mass or still unsorted multiplicity." (Girard, 100) Finally, Girard concludes his discussion of the victim as signifier by carefully stating that it is not in fact the *true* transcendental signifier, but merely an early place-holder or stand-in for this latter. The victim gathers meanings to itself which will later be unfolded and clarified in the course of human culture: "The signified constitutes all actual and potential meaning the community confers on the victim and, through its intermediacy, on all things." (Girard, 103)

Why, one might wonder, after he has plausibly pursued the process which leads from the situation of hyper-mimetic violence to the signifying function of the body of the victim, does Girard take care to distinguish this signifier from the *true* transcendental signifier? As the factor in the scene that embodies difference, from which all articulated meaning in essence derives, does it not thereby "transcend" all the other elements in the scene? Let us leave the question unanswered for the moment and turn to Eric Gans's narrative of a similar scene of origin, similar insofar as it is faithful to Girard's notion of mimetic conflict, but divergent in its view of the effect of this conflict's consequences.

Eric Gans and the Origin of Language

Of the many accounts Gans has given of the origin of the human sign, I am quoting the one from *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (1993) because of its succinctness. Gans invites us to imagine that:

a circle of protohumans, possibly after a successful hunt, surround an appetitively attractive object, for example, the body of a large animal. Such an object is potentially a focus of conflict, since the appetites of all are directed to something that cannot belong to all.

...

But at the moment of crisis, the strength of the appetitive drive has been increased by appetitive mimesis, the propensity to imitate one's fellows in their choice of an object of appropriation, to such a point that the dominance hierarchy can no longer counteract the symmetry of the situation. (Gans, 1993)

Thus far, Gans is in complete agreement with Girard: mimetic desire brings human beings into conflict,

but then Gans departs from Girard as to the effect of the mimetic crisis. Rather than culminating in an uncontrollably violent melee, Gans sees conflicting mimetic desire producing a pregnant moment of stasis:

all hands reach for the object; but at the same time each is deterred from appropriating it by the sight of all the others reaching in the same direction. The "fearful symmetry" of the situation makes it impossible for any one participant to defy the others and pursue the gesture to its conclusion. The center of the circle appears to possess a repellent, sacred force that prevents its occupation by the members of the group, that converts the gesture of appropriation into a gesture of designation, that is, into an ostensive sign. Thus the sign arises as an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that comes to designate the object rather than attempting to capture it. The sign is an economical substitute for its inaccessible referent. (Gans, 1993, 9)

3

Once the sign has been generated by the gesturing humans, and registered within the consciousness of the group's members, the spell of arrested movement can give way to two different scenarios: either to an equitable sharing of the object--this is the scenario envisaged in *Originary Thinking*--or in the revised scenario of Gans's 1997 work, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*, to a scene of violence, of "sparagmos" (rending of the victim) more in accord with the scene as originally envisaged by Girard. It is important to note, however, that no matter how closely Gans adapts his scene of violence to Girard's original vision, it is still separated from the latter by an essential gap. In Girard, the destruction (or in an alternative version, expulsion) of the victim is the act that gives rise to the sign. Here violence is generative, producing the sign as its end result. In Gans's account, on the other hand, the sign is brought into being through the arresting of violence. Stasis, produced by the countervailing energy of many desires in balancing opposition to each other, opens a force field around the universally desired object, and it is here that the sign is born. In other words, for Gans, the sign is generated by peace, or at least a moment of peace, which must be full of a kind of thought and not the tumultuous frenzy of unthinking Girardian war, which is full of exacerbated passion. This chaotic birth, I think, accounts for Girard's view of the human sign as never fully transcendent. No matter how abstract and rarefied it eventually becomes through usage, the human signifier forever carries with it a whiff of the sweat and blood of its moment of origin. Or to formulate this opposition slightly differently, for Girard the production of the sign is a collective enterprise, the result of an unthinking collective frenzy. For Gans, on the other hand, the sign, though generated by the pressure of the collective, is born in the "interior scene of representation," as Gans calls it, within each member of the conflicted group. For Gans, this immaterial and immaculate sign is the first object to be humanly shared, while for Girard, again, it is the bloody and not fully cognized experience of murder that is shared.

In sum, from the identical cause, i.e., mimetic rivalry, two distinct scenarios unfold. On the one hand mimetic rivalry leads directly to violent conflict which generates the sign, on the other it leads to a moment of stasis which generates the sign. What are the stakes involved in these competing scenes? First and foremost there is the question of verisimilitude, of likelihood. But to try to decide on the basis of our present sensibilities which of these scenarios was more likely to have occurred at the dawn of culture is a fruitless task. Whatever their scientific aspirations, both Gans's and Girard's accounts are primarily useful as heuristic narratives not unlike Freud's in *Totem and Taboo*. Of the two, Gans seems less interested in

fictional plausibility and more in the rigor of a logical argument, for he places only those elements in the scene that he feels are strictly necessary for later extrapolation as culture unfolds in history. Girard, on the other hand, seems more interested in verisimilitude. If violence is the keynote of our present existence, both in the form of end results and efficient cause, then perhaps it served the same functions at the start.

Against this, however, Gans argues that Girard's scenario commits the logical error of positing a signifier prior to signification, as if there might be such a thing as a word before there was such a thing as language. Gans asks how Girard's reconciling victim could perform its cultural function prior to the advent of human culture. Summarizing Girard's scenario, Gans concludes:

Only at the end of this process, after the aggressive energy of the group has been purged through the victim's murder, can the phenomena of human culture emerge.

The most obvious weakness of this model is that, like its Freudian ancestor in *Totem and Taboo*, it generates a humanity for which language is epiphenomenal. The origin of the human is the origin of language. For violence to be part of the originary event, it must be situated *after* the emission of the sign expressing renunciation of appropriation by individual members of the group, at the moment in which the central object is divided among them as participants in the new human community. The moment of division discharges the mimetic tension that had been redirected from their fellow participants to the central object in the form of originary resentment. This aggressive discharge is the equivalent of the scapegoating aggression of Girard's scheme, but located now subsequent to the invention/discovery of the linguistic sign, that is, within the originary event of generative anthropology. (Gans, 1997, 134)

What Gans seems to be stating here is that violence could not be *known* to be violence unless it was preceded by a sign that would make such knowledge accessible. In nature of course there is no violence. What looks like violence to us, for example the predatory behavior of animals, is simply feeding strategy. Thus if violence cannot be known to be violence in nature, then neither could the peace or relief that ensued from its cessation. Gans argues that the violence-leading-to-scapegoat scenario could not have had the demarcating and pacifying effect attributed to by Girard it unless it was capable of being recovered via the signifier. "Raw" violence in which protohumans hypothetically fell on each other under the sway of mimetic rivalry could not, says Gans, have blossomed into language unless it first gave rise to a designating mark that attached itself to the object. "The sign expels violence from the group by concentrating it against the central figure." (Gans, 1997, 134).

Only when the sign has been brought into being through general "ostensive" (pointing) attention can the ensuing violence and its cessation start to take on meaning for humans.

The minimal scene is thus not merely a minimal deferral of violence against the center [as Gans had suggested earlier], but a minimal mastering of the original movement toward generalized mimetic violence. In the sparagmos, where the violence of each is directed toward the object rather than the other participants, the state of prelinguistic chaos is *almost* reintroduced. But this is violence

contained within the peace brought by the center. Disorder is contained within order, evil within good. (Gans, 1997, 135)

4

The "good" to which Gans refers is the peace and justice of the equitably shared signifier, the mental representation of the object in the interior scene of representation. Such notional sharing, no matter how brief, allows for the object to be "possessed" by all equally. Thus, in an important alternative to Girard's notion of the scene, Gans allows that the object in dispute could have been equitably shared. Its apportionment could have been peaceably negotiated. Although the potential for a frenzied "sparagmos" must always have been great, the primal scene might conceivably have unfolded in perfect peace. For the essence of the human signifier, as Gans never tires of stating, is to defer violence through representation. Thus for Gans the human signifier is truly "transcendent" in a way that it never is for Girard. It rises "vertically" above the "horizontal" object by replacing it and making itself equally available to all.

Against Gans's logical claim that the signifier cannot precede language, Girard had suggested, as we saw, that there might indeed have been something like a pre-linguistic signifier. We saw in Girard's view of the hominization process that the body of the victim did indeed become significant, in the sense that it was both differentiated and a source of difference, before it emerged as a full blown sign, i.e., before it was abstracted to the level of a repeatable immaterial signifier. Girard suggests that ritual, with its roots in prehuman animal societies, must have functioned as the bridge between collectively meaningful routines and genuine human signifiers. As protohumans repeatedly extracted themselves from the chaos of mimetically induced aggression through the expedient of the killing of a victim, the functional significance accruing to the process must have "stuck," so to speak, in the habitual repertory of a group's resources before making its way into the clear awareness of anyone in particular. Perhaps under threat of renewed violence a group might have proceeded to a "ritual" reenactment of murder, either in fact or by proxy, without being driven to it "as if for the first time." In short, although for both Girard and Gans the gap between nature and culture is one of radical difference, Girard nevertheless appears to be open to the notion of a temporal period of preparation when the victim could have carried out its meaningfully pacifying role before there was a fully conscious medium capable of accomplishing this mediation. Time is an important factor here. As Girard points out, the process took place over millions of years:

Between what can be strictly termed animal nature on the one hand and developing humanity on the other there is a true rupture, which is collective murder, and it alone is capable of providing for kinds of organization, no matter how embryonic, based on prohibition and ritual. It is therefore possible to inscribe the genesis of human culture in nature and to relate it to a natural mechanism without depriving culture of what is specifically, exclusively, human. (Girard, 97)

And again:

Animal rites of this kind provide us with everything necessary for an understanding of the transition, based on sacrificial religion, from animal sociality to human sociality. (Girard, 98)

What is at issue between Gans's and Girard's scenarios?

Rather than simply being a question of historical verisimilitude, i.e., of which version seems more likely

to have actually occurred, I would suggest that the point at issue here concerns divergent understandings of the mechanics of violence. Both Gans and Girard agree that violence springs from mimetic desire, but part company concerning the role and function of the desired object. For Girard, once the conflict has been engaged, the object that served as its source tends to lose importance and fade from the consciousness of the disputants:

We know that the ineradicable character of mimetic rivalry means that the importance of any object as a stake in conflict will ultimately be annulled and surpassed and the acquisitive mimesis, which sets members of the community against each other, will give way to antagonistic mimesis, which eventually unites and reconciles all members of a community at the expense of the victim. (Girard, 95)

In other words, for Girard the energy structuring the triangle of mimetic conflict is always prone to fall away from the object and to locate itself along the axis joining the subject to his mediator/rival. "Pointless" aggression (in the sense of not being really anchored in the object) is the keynote of the mimetic structure as Girard envisages it. Violence truly comes into its own in the deadlock instigated by the model/opponent who designated the object of desire. So fascinating does this figure become to the subject of desire that he/she can come to the point of preferring death rather than disengaging from it.

For Gans, on the other hand, it is not the model/obstacle but the object that remains primary. All the energy in his model is located at the center of the scene, where it remains, even in the absence of the object. Thus for Gans the generative energy of the mimetic situation is not overt violence but covert resentment. In his scenario, the crucial moment is when the object has assembled the group around it and fixated its attention.

The birth of the self within the communal context defines it against this context. Even before we can speak of the liberating force of the originary exchange economy, the individual language user has internalized the context of the originary event in a *scene of representation*, a private imaginary space independent of the community. The contrast between the private and public scenes, between imaginary fulfillment and real alienation from the center, gives rise to the *originary resentment* that is the first mode of self-consciousness. The center, the object of a given participant's desire, is inaccessible for the very reason that it is desirable, and therefore also the object of the convergent desires of others. **Yet originary resentment does not focus on the other peripheral humans, but on the center that refuses itself to desire.** The center appears to be the only actor in the scene; it is the locus of divinity, which provides a model for human personhood. (Gans, 1993, 18)

5

Here, I think, is a clear statement of the point where Gans parts company with Girard. Frustrated resentment of the magic center gives rise to the sign, and the sign in turn to culture and language, with no victim or scapegoat required. Nor is violence strictly required, no matter how likely its presence. Despite Gans's recent rapprochement to Girardian theory in his *Signs of Paradox*, where he dwells at length on the significance of the immolation of the victim, violence remains for him--as he claims the sign is for Girard--epiphenomenal, i.e., not essential to the model.

Rather than try to adjudicate the difference between Girard and Gans, let us now turn to the independent viewpoint of Kenneth Burke, which will serve to suggest that perhaps the clue to their differences has to do with their frames of reference. As we stated, René Girard's starting point was individual (or interindividual) psychology (ontogeny), which then shifted to anthropology. Gans has proceeded in the inverse direction, beginning with anthropology (phylogeny) and using its framework to understand the individual.

Kenneth Burke and the Origins of Language

One of the reasons why the writings of Kenneth Burke offer an interesting vantage on the differences dividing Girard and Gans is because he is less consistent than either. He clearly definitely a "fox" of theory to their "hedgehogs," to cite Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between the two basic types of theorists. Burke coined the terms "logology" and "dramatism" for the kind of rhetorical/cultural criticism he engaged in, which we might understand as a sort of meta-rhetoric and ritual analysis respectively. Burke locates the focus for his investigations neither in the psychology of interpersonal human relations (like Girard) nor in the anthropology of the group (like Gans), but rather in both, which in turn are viewed from the perspective of language as such. That is to say that Burke takes language as a given, not in the sense of a transcendent given, but as a historical cultural entity animated by its own suprapersonal dynamic. Looking at the difference between Girard's and Gans's view of the origin of language from the vantage of Burke, one can sense the importance played by their primary frames of reference. Burke's starting point is not so radical as Girard's or Gans's but it is akin to theirs. He too is concerned with the violence that characterizes human culture and attempts to find a heuristic model with which to understand it. Rather than contrive one, he finds his model in drama, an aesthetic form which offers a partial glimpse of its scene of origin in ritual. Thus in his own way he accomplished a parallel move to Gans and Girard, except that for him his model could serve equally well as an "originary" or "culminating" hypothesis.

The general perspective that is interwoven with our methodology of analysis might be summarily characterized as a *theory of drama*. We propose to take *ritual drama* as the Ur-form, the "hub," with all the other aspects of *human* action treated as spokes radiating from this hub. That is, the social sphere is considered in terms of situations and acts, in contrast with the physical sphere, which is considered in mechanistic terms, idealized as flat cause and effect or stimulus-and-response relationship. Ritual drama is considered as the culminating form, from this point of view, and any other form is to be considered as the "efficient" overstressing of one or another of the ingredients in ritual drama. (Burke, 1957, 87)

Though we have not the space to demonstrate it in detail, Burke finds in ritual drama the same motives, logics, and features of the human scene as do Gans and Girard, i.e., mimesis, mimetic rivalry, and scapegoating; but the difference between Burke on the one hand and Girard and Gans on the other is that Burke does not particularly concern himself with the order of filiation of these phenomena. They can reveal themselves as fully in their original as in their "culminating form." And by "culminating form" Burke means that for purposes of cultural understanding, the essence or "core" reality of a phenomenon may be equally likely to reveal itself at the end of the dialectical process as at the origin:

The objection may be raised that "historically" the ritual drama is not the

Ur-form. If one does not conceive of ritual drama in a restricted sense (but allows for a "broad interpretation" whereby a Greek goat-song and a savage rain dance to tom-toms in behalf of fertility, rain or victory could be put in the same bin), a good argument could be adduced, even on the historical, or genetic, interpretation of the Ur-form. However, from my point of view, even if it were proved beyond all question that the ritual drama is not by any means the prototype from which all other forms of poetic and critical expression have successively broken off (as dissociated fragments each made "efficient" within its own rights), my proposal would be in no way impaired. Let ritual drama be proved for instance, to be the *last* form historically developed; or let it be proved to have arisen anywhere along the line. There would be no embarrassment: we could contend, for instance, that the earlier forms were but groping towards it, as rough drafts, with the ritual drama as the perfection of these trends-while subsequent forms could be treated as "departures" from it, a kind of "aesthetic fall." (Burke, 1957, 90)

6

To this declaration of principle Gans might object that Burke has not conceived his undertaking in a sufficiently radical fashion. He attempts to understand culture from within the frame of culture, and thus prohibits himself from piercing the amnesiac veil with which culture shrouds its origins. Perhaps Girard might concur with this view, though less strenuously, for Girard shares with Burke the notion that culture can uncover itself, reveal its essential working, as much in Apocalypse as in Genesis, though in the former the understanding would obviously prove fatal. But Burke could counter the objection to this "dramatistic" understanding with a "logological" rejoinder. In Burke's view, language and culture do indeed exhibit a feature which leads the researcher to intuit, if not the scene, then the process of origin. This feature is the linguistic negative, i.e., the "not" of a declarative statement of non-identity, but first and foremost the active "no" of interdiction. In Burke's view, the human distinguishes itself from the non-human by an act of refusal, a gesture of demarcation which has its roots in the animal world, which is then raised up to the status of a signifier in language.

Let me briefly review Burke's demonstration from his essay "A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language and Postscripts on the Negative," in his volume *Language as Symbolic Action*.

Taking his cue from Bergson (and Hegel) that the negative is nowhere to be found in nature, each thing or situation being positively what it is, Burke concludes that the negative is purely linguistic. In fact, since the negative it is only to be found in language, it can in turn be taken to language's distinctive feature, as well as a clue to its origin. As Burke conducts his argument he moves back and forth between historical and "cumulative" perspectives. "Cumulatively" speaking, says Burke, the negative reveals itself most fully in the Decalogue, the "thou shalt nots" regulating the moral and ethical behavior of humans. Hunting for clues to the negative's historical origin, Burke finds them in the "negative" behavior of animals, which, of course, is not really negative, but a kind of forerunner. Grunts of rejection or disgust, acts of aversion, acts of flight, these, although again they are simple positives taken in and of themselves, give evidence of acts of discrimination that can later "flower" as negative judgments in human language. The human body of course is the link to the animal sphere. And it too, says Burke, with its visceral rejections and aversions stands as source of negation that precedes the negative of language.

In a move surprisingly akin to Gans, Burke places the true human origin of the negative, and hence of language, in a kind of negative ostensive. For Burke, it would have to be a verb, a sound, and not, as with Gans, a gesture, but it is a sound that both "points" and is full of implication, just as does Gans's mute gesture:

This sound would come to have a deterrent or pejorative meaning because the calling of attention to *danger* is of greater significance than the calling of attention just to *something*-something that our verb *look out* usually has admonitory connotations, though it need not have...

Once this "verbal demonstrative" for "attitudinally calling attention to" had come to signify attention in the specifically sinister sense, it would be translatable by some such expressions as *Beware!* or *Caution!* Note that it would *not* be a negative in the *formal* sense at all. But it would have the *force* of a negative command, insofar as it implied: "Stop what you are doing," or "Change your ways of doing what you are doing." (424)

Burke's intuition parallels Gans's, for the difference between an animal grunt and an admonitory command is to be found in its effect upon the actions of others who are present at the scene. It calls attention to the object by commanding the group not to touch it. And like Gans, Burke sees in this negative focusing of attention the nucleus of language and culture:

We have postulated a prehistorical beginning of language in which a word such as *no* meant something positive like "Look at this," or "Look at that." Insofar as it called attention in the admonitory sense, while *implying* a negative it would still not be felt as an out-and-out negative command. It was as positive as any word like *run*, or *eat*, or *fight*, and the like, except that it had a hortatory nature which such words do not primarily possess. We can imagine it containing in germ a range of meanings as different as these: thou, look, don't, there, give, one, a, the, that. (Burke, 1966, 424)

Burke's sense of this primary scene diverges from Gans's, however, in his understanding of the effect of the collective negative injunction. For Gans interdiction arrests action and fixes attention; for Burke it places a burden on the individual members of the group that could be said to be the historical forerunner of guilt. The implicit command not to touch the object becomes so oppressive that at some point it causes the group to cast about for an innocent victim on whom to discharge it, i.e., the scapegoat. This outcome, of course, brings the scenario, originally Gansian before the fact, more into alignment with the Girardian scene of origin:

Victimage is another variant of the negative lurking in the quasi-positive. For the victim is positively there, in the most thoroughly materialistic sense. Yet insofar as the victim is a scapegoat, being symbolically or ritually laden by the victimizer's conscience-ridden response to the Great Negations of his tribe. "Our sins, in all their negativity as regards our tendency to trespass upon the thou-shalt-not's, are positively out there, in the enemy. Let us organize against them." (435)

For his part, Gans denies that there could be such a thing as a "negative ostensive," (2) but, as the above quotation concerning the positive effect of negative admonition shows, whatever their strict terminological differences, Burke and Gans share a very similar intuition into the negative effect of the group's gesture of pointing. Burke sees the effect of the group's prohibition as the very thing that causes language to blossom from mere signal behavior:

For whereas, if you condition an animal to yes and no, then jam the two conditionings together, the animal falls into a fit, not knowing which course to choose, precisely at that point humanity blossoms with symbol-using, and atop threatened stoppages erects its meditative systems, that may eventually be studied in appreciation and hypochondriasis, lovingly and clinically, on the chance that we may eventually cease to feel the need to slaughter one another.

Before reaching this "phylogenetic" conclusion to his essay, Gansian in both its linguistic and ethical intuition, Burke advanced a remarkable suggestion concerning the symbiotic nature of language teaching and learning which involves the perspectives of both phylogeny and ontogeny, and animated by a keen sense of the mimetic factor involved in language learning:

Evolution-wise, we would even incline to believe that most rudiments of language were taught to adults by children, as the mother imitated the child's sounds in the efforts to communicate with him. But "entelechy-wise" we would incline to believe that *no* was the peculiarly "mature" contribution to language, the "moralistic" non sensory "idea" that adults imposed upon children.

Conclusion

My purpose in this essay has been to bring to light some of the seeming contradictions in mimetic theory by considering Girard's and Gans's heuristic descriptions of the scene or process that gave rise to human language, and to offer a fresh perspective on them by bringing to bear Kenneth Burke's reflections on the same topic. I think Burke helps us to understand that it is their frames of reference rather than a fundamental disagreement that separate Gans and Girard. In turn, Burke's kindred but independent thinking might perhaps be fruitfully incorporated into mimetic theory. In addition to his views concerning the evolutionary process of language development and its hypothetical scene of origin, Burke never forgets the presence of the non-human animal and the human physical body as conditioning factors that continue to operate in all aspects of human culture. In short, he offers a perspective or a method which bridges the gradualist and punctual view of the scene of origin of language. And finally, as I hope to have indicated, his flexible method of analysis, moving from "logological," (proto-Gansian) to "dramatistic" (proto-Girardian) perspectives as the argument requires, offers a model for deploying mimetic theory's basic concepts in a creative and productive manner.

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Notes

1. Eric Gans, *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*: "The Origin of Language II: Scientific Perspectives." No. 167: Saturday, May 1, 1999. ([back](#))
2. See *The Origin of Language*, p. 144. ([back](#))

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An Anthropological Perspective on the Japanese Tea Ceremony

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Nowadays, many Japanese practice the tea ceremony (Jap. *Chanoyu*; also designated simply as Tea) according to various agendas. Because Tea avails itself of traditional Japanese architecture, gardening, dress, and food, some seek in Tea their national and cultural identity, especially vis-à-vis the West. Because of the Taoist/Buddhist background of Tea, some practice it as a form of Zen meditation. There are also some who bring to Tea their antiquarian interests in collecting Tea utensils and in studying their use in Tea. They tend to go to tea ceremonies for the esthetic pleasures they provide. Whatever their agenda, the modern Japanese practice Tea as an important social event from which they draw a sense of national and real or desired socio-economic belonging.

In the past, however, the Japanese used Tea for different purposes. In times of war, say during the Warring States period (1467-1572), when the *daimyo* fought among each other for military/political supremacy, Tea was used to create consensus and peace; in times of peace, say after the reunification of the nation in 1591 and the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunal government in 1603, however, it was used to affirm the new socio-political order. In each period, it seems, Tea was used to fulfill some immediate, that is, local and contemporary needs. Adapting itself constantly to new social, political and consequently cultural situations, Tea is a dynamic system much like ancient ritual, myth included. Looking at the transformations Tea underwent in the course of history, from its introduction to Japan at the end of the twelfth century until today, we realize that Tea is a ritual which, like other ritual, relates to reality in a multi-dimensional symbolic way. In order to understand Tea as ritual, which is the aim of this paper, we must refer to recent scholarship to point out the areas in which Tea relates particularly well to ritual.

Given the strict rules of conduct to which Tea subjects hosts and guests, Tea seems to correspond to the rules of conduct in the presence of the sacred that Emile Durkheim discovered in ritual. To define what Durkheim meant by "sacred" would go beyond the limits of this paper. Suffice it to say that Tea uses a sacred space where sacred symbols are on display. Tea, however, does not call any deity into presence and is not performed to please any deities other than perhaps the great Tea master Sen Rikyu (1521-1591), whose tragic death ordered by the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) made him in the eyes of subsequent Tea masters the unquestioned tutelary deity of Tea. The worship of Rikyu is not innate to Tea, but rather an exception or, according to some, an aberration. The "sacred" in Tea is not a separate entity but rather the entire *communitas* assembled in the sacred space of the tearoom. Therefore,

the guests must undergo purification--usually by washing their hands and rinsing their mouths at the washing basins along the *roji* path that leads up to the teahut--to be able to enter into the sacred ground and participate in the sacred activity of Tea. It is the participants who constitute the sacred. To explain the conspicuous absence of deities in the tearoom, one must refer to Buddhism, on the basis of which Tea developed. Buddhism sees the sacred as not outside but inside the human.

Arnold van Gennep asserted that rituals have social, political and legal dimensions. This understanding of ritual is particularly fertile in Tea, as we know how much political leaders of the sixteenth and subsequent centuries used Tea as a ritual of peace and consensus, as well as of social ordering. What allowed Tea to assume such functions is that it contains, like many other rituals, a system of symbolic relations with the outside world.⁽¹⁾ Victor Turner maintained that ritual symbolized a larger cultural context by multivocal symbols that allow the individual periodically to readapt to the basic conditions and axiomatic values of human social life.⁽²⁾ For him, ritual is a kind of normative system. Clifford Geertz also understood ritual as such a system "... which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence..." According to Geertz, the symbols of ritual create a common understanding of reality; ritual is a means to overcome the anxiety that life is meaningless and absurd.⁽³⁾ It associates reality with a cosmic order by means of symbols. Ritual makes life meaningful as it links up with a cosmic order and as it extends that order into reality.

One has merely to read some of the major works on Tea written during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) to realize that awareness of Tea as a politically and socially beneficial ritual began early in Japanese history. Such Tokugawa period (1600-1868) *daimyo* as Kobori Enshu (1579-1647), Katagiri Sekishu (1605-1673), Matsudaira Fumai (1751-1818), and Ii Naosuke (1815-1860) saw Tea as forming the necessary behavior to become an ideal ruler and citizen. People looked upon it as an ideal way of human communication and, through the arts, of cultivating the human mind. The way Geertz interprets ritual is therefore particularly relevant to Tea, as Tea is a ritual/symbolic form of human interaction based on a macrocosmic, ideal order of things, reimposed onto reality.

2

Esthetics is an essential feature of all rituals. Like ritual, the ritual arts such as dance and song were understood as a gift of the gods and to repeat this "gift" was to reactivate the divine in ritual. Many cultures take it as a fact that their ritual arts had *in illo tempore* been taught to mankind by the deities themselves not only as a divine and esthetic means of expression but as the only way men can communicate or commune with the gods. The Japanese imperial myths as recorded in the *Kojiki* of 712 and the *Nihon Shoki* of 720 make it unmistakably clear that the ritual arts have been means of communication between man and god. Japanese pictorial arts and literature, dance and song started as ritual and were only gradually secularized, that is, like Tea, turned into expressions of men to men, or man to men.

Since all rituals had and still have a social dimension, ritual esthetics aims at emotionally uniting diverse people under uniform cultural norms, that is, creating unity and harmony within diversity. Ritual achieved this goal by creating a common culture that all members of a community shared. Ritual required universal emotional participation in a common culture. This definition of ritual arts seems to benefit Tea so well that it is difficult to consider Tea as anything else but a ritual. The reason why Tea was accepted as an "art" is precisely because it is ritual action confined to sacred, ritual space.

Tea utensils are works of art that owe their "beauty" to the fact that they mediate between man and the sacred. Eric Gans has pointed out that, as a supplement to ritual, a work of art is inseparable from sacrality.⁽⁴⁾ Unlike ritual objects discarded as taboo after use in ritual, these utensils could be used over and over again, hence their desirability to anyone with a vested interest in ritual. Tea utensils draw their economic value from their nature as ritual implements without which the ritual cannot be carried out.

Another theory equally important for Tea is René Girard's understanding of ritual as a means to create order over the lurking dangers of violence and chaos. This would trace the birth of ritual to a reaction to something dangerous and negative, that is, ritual assumes the role of avoiding violence by creating an order in which humans can live peacefully, an order that would subject violence to ritual controls and limits. Were it not for ritual's regulative effect, potentially disruptive and chaotic behavior might otherwise get the upper hand in society.⁽⁵⁾ Girard's theory is relevant to the Tea we know to have developed in the disruptive Warring States period in order to avoid violence and to create consensus.

One of the very basic *raison d'être* of ritual was limiting and controlling violence. As a ritual, even early war was structured in such a way as to limit (but not to abolish) violence. Until the advent of "total war," war was subject to ritual rules (*e.g.* gentlemen's war), aimed at containing violence. When in Africa and Papua New Guinea, hostile tribes meet once a year to engage each other in a war game in which they take turns at killing one victim, they engage in fact in a ritual, limited war. Conversely, Tea was a ritual of total peace. Teahuts and rooms became the antipodes of war and violence. They were known to be the only places where members of the leading samurai class left their swords outside. Instruments of violence had no place in a ritual setting of social and political harmony. Battlefields and tearooms were strict opposites, symbolizing respectively war and peace. As far as we know, no one has ever been assassinated in a tearoom; by participating in Tea, warriors expressed their desire for consensus and non-violence.

Norman J. Girardot echoes Girard in his understanding of ritual, especially Taoist ritual, as a means of transforming temporarily or permanently some significant ill in the cosmological or existential order. For him, ritual presents a salvation from potential chaos (1983:6) and the cosmos is the cultivated persona of chaos (1983:5).⁽⁶⁾ Ritual tries to overcome chaos and to convey a perception of order. This also applies to Tea which expresses this order in the notions of harmony, respect, purity and tranquillity (*wa kei sei jaku*) that all Tea practitioners are constantly reminded of in the calligraphy displayed in the tearooms and in Tea instructions.

Japanese Tea takes place in a space that is structurally separate from the ordinary, everyday space of human activity and, therefore, seems to correspond to the liminal space Victor Turner discovered in many rituals. As Turner pointed out, ritual often takes place in an area which is not central but peripheral to the community. He called this area "liminal," which means "marginal." Tea was and still is practiced, geographically and structurally, in areas liminal to the centers of human society. Liminality is in many cultures, including the tearoom, a mystical meeting place of the human and divine worlds. Liminal space allows one to separate from one's normal, everyday "milieu," a separation which is preliminary to reflecting upon and restoring the human order. Myths, symbols, philosophical works, and art have been essentially products of liminality. As liminal spaces, tearooms are discursive, that is, miniature, symbolic loci of human equality or ideal social structure. What happens in these spaces provides man with models on the basis of which he is able to take distance from and measure his own society.

There are various ways in which Japanese architects and gardeners separated sacred space from ordinary

space. Some of the famous Japanese pavilions such as the Golden (built in 1397), Silver (built in 1483), and Hiun (Floating Cloud, built in the years 1586-87)--all in Kyoto--can be accessed only by proceeding across a pond or river, however narrow and shallow, or across stepping stones. These are symbolic demarcation points and lines between the ordinary and the divine worlds. Tea gardens usually come with a path called *roji*, referring to the Buddhist parable of escaping from the burning house which is the world, and a middle gate beyond which one is supposed to leave the mundane world behind. This separation is not only physical but also ontological because this space is so structured as to provide the impression (or the illusion) of entering an extraordinary space filled with symbols. The symbolic use of this space and the way in which the Tea ritualists direct these symbols back to the ordinary world remind us strongly of the properties of rituals in many cultures.

3

Tea and Victor Turner's liminality have much more in common. In Tea, as in ritual, people try to establish a symbolic *communitas* in which the "I" and "Thou" are able to merge, where the "Thou" becomes the "I" and vice-versa. The distance between self and other, which upholds life in normal times, disappears in favor of unity. "I" and "Thou" become "we," a "we" established and strengthened by ritual *communitas*. Tea is sacred activity precisely because it creates this kind of *communitas*. On the other hand, it can also separate and create hierarchy between the "I" and "Thou."⁽⁷⁾ As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, ritual has the power of differentiating between those who perform the ritual and the people who do not or those who are kept outside its perimeters.⁽⁸⁾

Particularly relevant to Tea is the fact that ritual involves learning by the body rather than by intellect. It prefers to use non-verbal forms of communicating values rather than verbal ones, and when verbal forms are used, they take on the highly ordered forms of song/poetry and rhythmic recitation. Ritual is basically action--dance and mimicry, singing; it can be substituted or represented by language (*e.g.*, myths and other forms of story-telling and recitation), but its "grammar" is different from that of ordinary language.

In order better to understand Japanese ritual and ritual behavior, let us juxtapose ritual and ordinary behavior, as it appears in Tea, in the following graph:

	RITUAL BEHAVIOR	ORDINARY BEHAVIOR
Food	rice	lower crops
Drink	<i>sake</i> , tea	water
Space	liminal, restricted	ordinary, human space
Behavior	ceremonial, dance	non-structured
Speech	song, poetry, recitative	ordinary
Viewing	contemplative	ordinary

What distinguishes ritual from ordinary behavior is art. Artistic behavior is what defines Tea. Through such highly ordered artistic forms of behavior, Tea seeks to order humans and society.

Functioning in ritual, the artist is a powerful ritual manipulator, powerful because he can change procedures to favor and legitimize one or another power faction. He can deliberately change ritual procedures, perhaps like the shaman who, through oracles he claims to be spontaneous and legitimate, potentially destabilizes the state. Hence the need to control ritual, to place it under political authority.

Since ritual can order humans, it is important that the ritual means to do so be entrusted not to random behavior but to professional or semi-professional ritual experts, like the *doboshu* of the Ashikaga shoguns and, later, the grand Tea masters. This is already evident in earlier periods of Japanese civilization. For example, in the Heian period (794-1185), when government positions gradually became the hereditary rights of separate families, government officials kept diaries to instruct their descendants in ritual-political precedence. Ritual is an art heavily dependent on precedence and this is certainly true for Tea and the functions of the grand Tea masters (*iemoto*). Change in ritual procedures and protocol was only possible in crisis, or when radically changed conditions required new ritual procedures

The practice of Tea and the *iemoto* system went hand in glove. Beginning roughly at the end of the eighteenth century, the grand masters became Tea promoters and guardian-leaders, imbued with the authority of defining not only what Tea is, but also what the rules of its pursuit should be and how they should be observed. *Iemoto* authority is an outgrowth of ritual. As we have learned above, since ritual was able to restore the world, ritual procedures assumed an importance that could not have been entrusted to non-professionals, especially not in a developed state. To fall out of harmony in the music and dances performed each new year at the Chinese court could have been interpreted by political rivals as heaven's sign that the state and heaven are no longer in harmony, that a rebellion is called for. Hence the attempts of states like China and Japan to regulate the ritual arts so that no unskilled person could breach the procedures and disrupt the harmony. Hence also the attempts to subject the ritual arts to strict rules and regulations and to impose on them rigorous training and critical supervision. The perfection the ritual arts reached in Japan in, say, poetry or the Noh theater, or in Tea, resulted from the concerns accompanying all ritual performance on which state welfare is believed to depend.

4

State sponsorship of professionals or semi-professionals in the ritual arts is an early form of the *iemoto* system. During the Heian period, for example, the heads of the imperial bureau of poetry (*waka-dokoro*) and that of music saw to it that high standards would be met and maintained, especially at important ceremonial occasions. The poetry that went into the twenty-one imperial collections (*chokusenshu*) between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries was carefully selected as to its suitability and representation of seasonal changes and human sentiments. Inauspicious poetry was excluded as a threat to the state. The decline of the court in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries resulted in a heightened level of criticism and ritual professionalism, as if to say that the state depends on the artistic perfection of ritual. Only a handful of poets were believed to be able to uphold the highest standards. Prominent families of poets allied themselves with political power factions, exposing themselves to political fate. Supported by land holdings bestowed on them in perpetuity, these official or semi-official poets allied themselves with political power groups and court factions and monopolized the compilation of imperial collections of poetry. By doing so, however, they willingly exposed themselves to the leaders' politico-ritual needs. The heads of these schools became the first *iemoto*. There were *iemoto* before but, as in the case of traditional families of imperial cooking or kickball, they did not appeal to a larger public and accepted no disciples other than from among family members. Some schools of poetry, however, taught poetry to family outsiders while at the same time maintaining a degree of control and leadership over teacher-disciple relationship and poetic diction that was beneficial to the state. What differs from the modern *iemoto* system is that the disciples, once given a license, could teach without referring back to the head schools and without paying them portions of student fees. Teacher-disciple relations formed the backbone of this system, which fed on the feudal lord-vassal relationship system instituted at the end of the twelfth century. Even outside the *iemoto* system, the teacher-student relationship tended to be regulated under a

system called *kokin denju*, that is, imparting the student with some poetic secrets with no regard of how this teaching would be transmitted in the future. In the Middle Ages (*chusei*, 1185-1600) with a very limited number of disciples, this system was sufficient to secure transmission of certain traditions at a sufficiently satisfactory level. This is why early Tea masters such as Sen Rikyu adopted this system.

Let us now discuss what Tea owes to specific East Asian ritual and ritual cosmology, because only after having done this can we better understand the specific uses of Tea as a socio-political ritual in sixteenth-century Japan.

On the basis of Taoism, the ancient Chinese established entire systems of classification and cosmology. They divided the universe into Five Elements (wood, fire, water, metal, earth) and in turn subjected them to the yin-yang system of attributing to all perceivable phenomena a male-female taxonomy, similar perhaps to the masculine, feminine and, in certain cases, neutral articles of Indo-European languages. Yang is male, active, light, hot. Yin, on the other hand, is female, passive, dark and cold. This taxonomy was used for divination, but also constituted the principles of government, court ceremonies, military science, medicine and pharmacology, and the arts. Major events in human life have been interpreted on the basis of this system. It became a system of reference helping people to understand their universe, their lives, and the events that happened to them. In the *Book of Changes (I-ching)*, attributed to Confucius, 551-479 BCE), yin and yang emerged from the primordial chaos. Yang ascended to heaven, whereas yin descended to become earth. In and by themselves, neither of these two elements could engender anything; they could create only if they came together. It is out of their union that the many things in the world have come into being. When they come together, not only do they create many things, such as earth, mountain, water, wind, thunder, fire, marsh, and heaven, but they subject the things they created to constant change, the permutations of which undergo certain measurable patterns and are therefore predictable. These patterns are subject to ritual manipulation.

The Five Elements are not fixed and isolated elements in the Taoist universe. They constantly interact in a dynamic relationship of transformation:

Water engenders wood.
 Wood engenders fire.
 Fire engenders earth.
 Earth engenders metal.
 Metal engenders water.

Yet, each element overpowers the other:

Water overcomes fire.
 Fire overcomes metal.
 Metal overcomes wood.
 Wood overcomes earth.
 Earth overcomes water.[\(9\)](#)

There is no element that does not overcome another in an eternal rotatory transformation. Of course, these five elements are not the only ones subject to transformation; the entire universe hangs on them. This philosophy is basic to the emphasis the Chinese have always placed on balance rather than on extremes.

The Japanese tearoom is structured strictly according to the forces of yin and yang and the Five Elements; certain portions of the room are either yin or yang and the utensils and people occupying such space are identified with these elements. The way in which the host prepares Tea accords with the Five Elements. Charcoal "wood" is used to build a "fire" which is used to boil "water" in an iron kettle "metal" which, in turn, is used to make Tea in a bowl "earth." "Earth" is furthermore represented in the ashes surrounding the burning charcoal and, in some forms of Tea, in the brazier. The teascoop and ladle also represent "wood" and, because Tea is made in harmony with all these elements, it becomes the essence of the universe.

Tea ritual draws as much from Buddhism as from Taoism. Buddhism is the earliest of the world's great soteriological religions, preceding Christianity by half and Islam by a full millennium. Born as a north-Indian royal prince, the Buddha (meaning the "Enlightened One," a title given him by his disciples) had taught that self-discipline leads to enlightenment, the prerequisite for escaping life which was, for him, in any of its numerous forms, a living hell. Drawing from the Brahman notion of reincarnation (or rebirth), the Buddhist ideal is to escape from life and, through enlightenment, to be reborn in *nirvana*, never to be reincarnated anymore. According to Zen teachings, imitating the life-style of the Buddha was the best guarantee for enlightenment. All living things carry in themselves the seeds for enlightenment but, in the absence of a universally applicable teaching, each individual must find his own path towards enlightenment. This central Buddhist notion is often represented in paintings representing the two seventh-century Chinese monks Han-shan (Jap. Kanzan) and Shih-te (Jap. Shitoku), both enlightened, one by sweeping the floor, the other by studying. Any activity can potentially lead toward enlightenment.

Tea seeks social harmony not merely through esthetic contemplation, but through self-discipline and personal discovery. It combines ritual's social agenda with a personal desire for salvation. Whereas Tea requires a degree of contemplation of, and concentration on, beautiful ritual action, it also invites the participant to look into himself or herself, to discover a self that is no longer separate and potentially antagonistic but in harmony with the environment and all others.

Whereas the tearoom is structured according to Taoist principles, it also bears the traces of Buddhism, especially in the choice of size. Before we discuss the Buddhist small room, we must contrast it, because the small room was indeed meant to be a contrast, with the large reception rooms called *shoin* (study). The Ashikaga shoguns (ruling between 1336 and 1572) used large reception rooms for their banquets. Especially in this setting, the shoguns displayed Chinese utensils and paintings as an expression of power and social status. With its ranked seating arrangements, *shoin* Tea became an expression of social differences and hierarchical order. The *shoin* will maintain this function in the centuries to come but it will have to compete with another ritual setting, more originally Buddhist, that of human equality in the "small room."

From the time of fifth Ashikaga shogun Yoshimasa onward, the much smaller four-and-a-half mat room came to be used. Yoshimasa's Dojinsai, a four-and-a-half mat small room located in a building of the Silver Pavilion called Togu-do (Seeking Way Hall) is, by contrast, a humble statement of human equality before the Buddhas. Perhaps it was the Buddhist legend of Vimalakirti's ten-foot-by-ten-foot room where he invited 84000 bodhisattvas (*Vimalakirti-nirdesa-sutra*) which prompted the building of small rooms. For Vimalakirti the small room contained infinite space. The small room symbolizes the non-existence of space for the enlightened. It is a world unto itself, where continuity of ordinary space and time,

dependent on our physical existence, ceases to exist. Within such a room, one is a disembodied spirit, unencumbered by material limitations. In such a room, there is no absolute time, only the ever changing "now." This is similar to the paradoxical Zen *koan* (parable) of a mighty mountain in a poppy seed.

Freedom through restriction is one of the Zen principles applied to both Tea space and training. Freedom is sought not in large space or in unrestricted behavior but, on the contrary, by accepting and "overcoming" restrictions. There is freedom through meditation and other forms of self-discipline. For a person trained in Zen, a small, cramped room like a four-and-a-half mat room can be overcome to represent infinite space and freedom. This new type of teahut or room represented a kind of ritual anti-structure to the large *shoin*-style reception rooms of the shoguns.

Murata Juko (1423-1502), one of Rikyu's predecessors, was the first merchant Tea master to build a small teahut with a four-and-a-half mat room in the city of Kyoto, thereby creating a liminal space structurally and geographically differentiated from regular city dwelling and merchant shops. Despite its central location, his hut remained essentially "liminal." Juko was hearkening back to the Chinese "saint" of Tea Lu Yu (?-804, author of the *Cha Jing*, the first extant Chinese comprehensive book on Tea) who practiced Tea in a separate environment especially fashioned for Tea and the enjoyment of other noble arts. His motive for building a teahut in the middle of the city was, to offer a ritual explanation, as a way to juxtapose, with minimal distance separating the two, the symbolic ritual world with reality. He was in fact bringing liminality close to the center of society. The "mountain hut" of Takeno Jo'o (1502-1555), Rikyu's teacher, and Rikyu's "Yamazato" (Mountain Village) were also small rooms.

6

Smaller size tearooms also coincide with the advent and popularity of the *wabi* esthetic which marked a turn back to the Buddhist essence of frugality, simplicity, even poverty and ultimately to human equality vis-à-vis the Buddhas. *Wabi* was in sharp contrast with the *shoin* setting. Hence the custom to use only natural elements such as bamboo, reed, and clay in building these simple *wabi* tearooms. The *tokonoma* (alcove) posts were installed with the bark still on, to give the tearoom a rustic look. This also coincided with the simplification of display. Aiming at social harmony, Tea developed the *wabi* esthetics of minimal beauty. *Wabi* Tea seeks harmony by creating equality; conversely, *shoin* ritually confirms the existing social order. It is clear that *wabi* Tea, with its emphasis on non-differentiation, appears more spiritual than *shoin* Tea. Let us now elaborate more on the meaning of *wabi* and the arts it engendered.

Often called the esthetic of poverty, *wabi* developed a predilection for crude, unglazed, irregularly shaped, even cracked or repaired utensils and mountain hut-type hermitages in which only fragile, natural objects were used, often leaving posts and ceilings in their natural state. With the use of such natural, unpretentious utensils, this new environment was more congenial to promoting equality than the ornate, elaborate Tea of the shoguns who used only precious Chinese utensils.

Wabi creates a simple, unpretentious beauty, with which all participants can identify. It is not the ostentatious, opulent beauty of the wealthy and powerful or those who identify or comply with it. It is, like the stone garden of the Ryoan-ji temple in Kyoto, a reduction of phenomenal variety to some fundamental, simple elements, such as stones and sand, suggestive of the basic unity and simplicity that underlie all things and which we all share, wherever we may be or whatever position in society we may occupy.

What is more, *wabi* invites humility, that is, a negation of self in the absorption in something else as

expressed in the Buddhist notion of *muichibutsu*. This concept can mean many things. It points to the Buddhist notion of "nothingness," "emptiness," or the original unity of all things. In Rikyu's time, *muichibutsu* referred to *wabi* people who did not possess nor covet one single utensil. *Muichibutsu* people were supposed to be free from any attachments and passion for possession.

Responding to ritual needs, *wabi* tended to become a locus of esthetic contemplation. Yet the esthetic objects were different from those of *shoin*. They were the *wabi*-style *wamono*, Japanese-made simple, unpretentious objects. *Wabi* and *wamono* went hand in hand, hence the understanding, still maintained today by Tea devotees, that *wabi* is Japanese cultural heritage at its best.

As we have seen above, during times of peace, say before 1467 and after 1591, military and political leaders tended to use the Tea ritual as a reaffirmation of social and political order. While recognizing the unchanged ritual properties of the tearooms and their space, they achieved this by seating their guests (allies) according to the dominant hierarchy the ritual was meant, symbolically, to perpetuate. In times of war, however, when Tea particularly flourished, leaders/ritualists sought strict human equality in the tearooms. By inviting potential enemies to Tea, they tried to create harmony and consensus by breaking down social difference and by promoting equality and intimacy between host and guests.

This relates well to Evan M. Zuesse's theory that rituals can be divided into "confirmatory" and "transformatory." Whereas *wabi* Tea was transformatory, *shoin* and *daimyo* teas were confirmatory because their aim was no longer to "establish" human equality, but to "confirm" the established social order.⁽¹⁰⁾ Because it opposed mainstream social structure, transformatory Tea could not assume that function without being at the same time an anti-structural and counter-ideological "transgression." Throughout most Tea history, both systems coexisted in ways conformable with the emphasis certain people or groups placed on either equal consensus or hierarchical confirmation. Under such religious leaders as priest Sojun and Tea devotees such as Murata Juko, Takeno Jo'o, and Sen Rikyu, *wabi* Tea, with its soteriological purpose, functioned as a transformatory Tea, that is, aiming at changing humans, making all equal. Yet, such Tea could also function as a confirmatory one, once the transformation has been achieved and the transformatory has developed into a set ritual culture in its own right. If Tea ritual aims at overcoming violence by creating peace and consensus, it maintains a degree of transformatory function.

The Tea ritual also assumes a confirmatory function when members of a certain social class practice it in ways so as to affirm class belonging and allegiance. However, the Tea ritual can assume both functions at the same time, especially when it functions to initiate the individual into his social group or helps a political leader to legitimize his authority. Tea can be used to transform the individual in a religious or social context and to conform and reconfirm the status quo. Lu Yu, for example, saw in Tea a ritual of social belonging, for the Confucian gentleman to affirm, by class-specific protocol, his proper place in the universal order. In this sense, the Heian period nobles under emperor Saga (786-842) in particular imbibed Tea to confirm and reconfirm their allegiance to the then fashionable trends of Chinese culture. Hence the numerous Chinese poems Japanese nobles composed on the subject of Tea at the start of the ninth century.

Particularly between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Tea functioned as a highly charged socio-political ritual. The question of why a period as disruptive as the Warring States period (1467-1572), certainly one of the most destructive in Japanese history, was able to produce such a refined culture as Tea continues to puzzle scholars. If one looks at Tea's function as a socio-political ritual during

this time, however, it no longer surprises us to realize that, to ritually overcome the turmoil, Tea *had* to become such a highly refined ritual art. By placing itself at the opposite spectrum of war and to balance out the destruction, Tea of this period was meant to be a kind of ritual anti-structure. By creating such a structure, Tea helped create a balance, mediating ritually and symbolically between the extremes of war and art, chaos and cosmos. In this way, it helped to maintain some sanity in an otherwise sick age.

7

Let us now look at some concrete examples of the transformatory use of Tea in sixteenth-century Japan when warlords such as Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi reunified the nation. In 1568, the *daimyo* Oda Nobunaga obtained from Ashikaga no Yoshiaki (1537-1597) permission to expel from central Japan the Miyoshi clan and to free the cities of Kyoto, Nara, and Sakai. Nobunaga then installed Yoshiaki as fifteenth (and last Ashikaga) shogun but, in fact, placed these cities and their surrounding regions under his control. He levied a military "Arrow" tax on these cities, two thousand *monme* from Sakai alone. Sakai, which continued to support the Miyoshi clan, refused. Nobunaga threatened to attack Sakai. The Egoshu, a kind of guild association of Sakai merchants, split into two factions, one supporting Nobunaga, the other (*e.g.*, Notoya and Beniya, "ya" meaning "shop") opposing him. The opposing faction financed both the defense of the city as well as a Miyoshi comeback. But the opponents underestimated Nobunaga's power. The other faction, including the teamen Imai Sokyū (Naya, 1520-1593) and Tsuda Sogyū (Tennojiya, ?-1591) tried to compromise with Nobunaga and invited "one hundred" of Nobunaga's generals to tea parties in Sakai. One can imagine how difficult and tiring it must have been for Tsuda Sogyū to entertain at his home that many people in one day. They managed to offer Nobunaga the famous and precious "Matsushima" tea jar and a tea caddy, which both had once belonged to Jo'o. This was in 1568/10/2. This gift indicates the use of Tea utensils not only as objects of exceptional value, but also as instruments of peace. Nobunaga was about to go on a hunt for famous Tea utensils (*meibutsu-gari*). When the Hongan-ji temple submitted to Nobunaga, they handed over to him a number of precious utensils including Chinese paintings. Handing over precious Tea utensils to Nobunaga was a kind of surrender ritual, a custom Hideyoshi continued in the next generation of military leaders. One *daimyo*, Matsunaga Hisahide (1510-1577), refused to give his famous Tea kettle to Nobunaga saying that he would rather take it with him to hell. When, under attack by Nobunaga, he decided to kill himself, he threw the kettle against the wall and set his castle afire. This happened in 1577/10/10. The kettle had become too much a part of himself and parting with it was too painful.

Beyond its meaning as a surrender ritual, hunting for the famous utensils was also a means to redistribute them to important allies. As "personal" gifts, Nobunaga gave Jo'o's tea caddy back to Sakai merchant Tsuda Sogyū who, after Nobunaga's death, handed it over to Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi again returned it to Sogyū whose descendants eventually gave it to third Tokugawa shogun Iemitsu (1604-1651). In reward for military service, Nobunaga gave Hideyoshi a painting by Mu-ch'i and again in 1576/4/7 the kettle "Otogose" with a turned-in mouth, also referred to as *ubaguchi* (hag's mouth). Returning a "hunted" utensil was thus an important token of political alliance and this was only possible because utensils were ritual implements and, as such, ontological extensions or representations of their owners. They were important ritual signifiers and, as such, yielded considerable political and economic value.

Hideyoshi inherited from Nobunaga a passion to hunt for famous *meibutsu* utensils. In 1581/12/22, he received twelve pieces from Nobunaga's collection and, five days later, eight additional pieces. When, in 1583/6/20 Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunal government) gave him the Tea container "First Flower" (Hatsuhana), this was no doubt a political gesture to soothe and gain

time. Hideyoshi used this in his tea party of 7/2 to celebrate the inauguration of his Osaka castle. In 9/16, he held his first party to display all the precious utensils he was able to assemble by that time. In 10/11 he received the tea container "Kyogoku Nasu" that had once belonged to the extravagant warrior Sasaki Doyo (1295-1373). Sokyū gave him another Jo'o had once used. Whenever such utensils fell into Hideyoshi's hands, a tea party, that is, a public or at least a semi-public display was called for. Imitating the Ashikaga shogun's public display of horses (*Uma-zoroe*), Hideyoshi organized a famous utensil display (*Dogu-zoroe*) at Osaka castle in 1583(?)9/16, inviting six guests including Sogyū and Soeki. This *zoroe* served as a pretext to force others to give up theirs and present them to Hideyoshi.

In 1583/interc.1/5, Hideyoshi invited Sokyū, Sogyū, Soeki, and three other Sakai teamen to the Yamazaki castle and displayed Nobunaga's favorite jar "Pine Flower" and the tea container "Clouds over the Ocean," as well as the "Otogose" and a Korean *ido* bowl. For the first time, he himself prepared and served the Tea. With this party, Hideyoshi meant to proclaim that, even in matters of his Tea masters, he was following strictly in his former master's footsteps.

Hideyoshi use of Tea did not stop at politics and diplomacy, it extended to his Tea masters who, like Tea itself, became political go-betweens. After a compromise had been reached with a former enemy and Hideyoshi returned to Osaka, he ordered a large-scale tea party, inviting the major teamen of his day (1583/10/15) including Rikyū and the poet *daimyō* Hosokawa Yusai (1534-1610). On the nineteenth, Hideyoshi invited Ieyasu's general as main, Soeki and Sogyū as additional guests. In 2/8 of the following year, Hideyoshi's half-brother Hidenaga (1540-1591) called for a party during which he displayed Yuan Wu's calligraphy, which passed hands from the merchant Beniya Soyo (sixteenth century teaman and merchant) to Hideyoshi and eventually to Hideyoshi's half-brother Hidenaga. It was during this party, or in the preparation thereof, that Hidenaga became one of Rikyū's foremost protectors. In 2/20, Oda Nobunaga's son Nobukatsu (1558-1630) and his youngest brother Nobumasu, the later teaman Urakusai (1547-1621), came to Osaka with peaceful intentions and were lavishly entertained by Hideyoshi in one of the castle's large reception rooms, with the "Kyogoku Nasu," a Korean *ido* bowl. Later that month, Hideyoshi served them himself in the Yamazato. Next day he went to Kyoto, bought the "Hyogo" jar for one thousand five hundred *monme* and presented it to Nobukatsu as a gift. Nobukatsu paid a visit to the *daimyō* who had installed themselves at the foot of the Osaka castle, but refused to drink any tea for fear of being poisoned.

In 3/5, Hideyoshi staged another of his grand tea parties requesting the presence of all teamen and those who possessed famous utensils. In order to make such large-scale parties politically viable and successful, Hideyoshi resorted to making it the law that all Tea people be present. Poor attendance would have sent the wrong political signal to the rest of the nation. Alone from the city of Kyoto, about fifty people attended. Sogyū and Soeki determined the display of Hideyoshi's tea utensils.

8

By this time Hideyoshi had brought most of central Japan under his hegemony. The periphery such as the Northeast and Kyushu remained unstable. Much was at stake for Hideyoshi in Kyushu, especially Portuguese trade. In 1585/2/26, having been attacked by the forces of the Satsuma province, Otomo Sorin (Yoshishige, 1530-1587) sought Hideyoshi's help and in 5/2 sent him as a gift the famous "Higo Nasu" (also Nitari Nasu). Prior to committing any troops to the distant island of Kyushu, Hideyoshi tried all he could to reconcile the two opponents diplomatically. In 10/2, Hideyoshi instructed his Tea master Rikyū and Hosokawa Yusai to draft a letter addressed to Ijuin Tadamune (?-1599), the chief retainer of

the Satsuma clan.

We are writing you a few lines on what we have heard about the *kanpaku's* secret intentions in connection with the clashes between your province and that of Bungo [Otomo Sorin's province].

In recent years he has pacified revolts in the capital and provinces, and most of the country has adhered to peace. On this account even the imperial court respects him. Accordingly he was appointed *naidaijin* and entrusted with this office. Therefore he has been firmly instructed, according to the terms of the imperial wishes, to issue commands to the north, south, east and west.

As regards Kyushu, we have heard that mutual enmity has not ceased and that there have recently been disputes. First of all they [the parties concerned] should abandon everything and follow the imperial order so that a state of peace and friendship may prevail. He [Hideyoshi] has been good enough to inform all the parties concerned in writing that at such a time the borders of the provinces will be judged according to the merits of each case. If they do not comply, he secretly intends to have them dealt with. Needless to say, would it not be advisable for them to use their better judgment this time? As the *taishu* [Shimazu Yoshihisa] has been ordered to come to the capital in recent years, we are notifying you secretly by letter first. When we receive your answer, we will inform you further.[\(11\)](#)

The relationship between Rikyu and Hosokawa Yusai with Ijuin is not just diplomatic, as this letter may suggest. Ijuin was in fact Rikyu's disciple in matters of Tea and received instruction in poetry from the *daimyo* Hosokawa Yusai. These artistic relationships are being exploited for diplomatic use. Such was the advantage of having prestigious artists as political go-betweens. This letter also reveals the importance of such go-betweens as apparently neutral parties mediating, in this case, between Hideyoshi and Satsuma province without any overt partiality, simply conveying "Hideyoshi's secret intentions" in Satsuma's and not necessarily Hideyoshi's interest. Rikyu provided a kind of second, unofficial but highly reliable channel of communication beyond the "stern facades" the warriors often had to adopt to maintain respectability.

By this time, it became sufficiently clear to the imperial court in Kyoto that, among all other *daimyo*, Hideyoshi had the greatest potential for the national unification in which it had a stake. In 3/10, therefore, the emperor Ogimachi bestowed on Hideyoshi the imperial title of Minister of the Interior (Naidaijin) and, after Konoe Sakihisa (1536-1612) made him his adopted son, the court bestowed on him the highest title under the emperor, Kanpaku (Chief Minister of State). This title helped Hideyoshi, who was an upstart of peasant origins, to legitimize his power and overcome his sense of social inferiority. In recognition, Hideyoshi ordered Rikyu to prepare an offertory Tea at the imperial palace, something that had never occurred before. After some preliminary preparations, Hideyoshi decided to invite emperor Ogimachi and six additional nobles to Tea in 1585/9/7, in a portion of the imperial palace called Kogoshō (lit. Small Palace) to the north of the Shishinden palace. With a Tea devotee like Hideyoshi having been given high court rank, the imperial and other noble families developed an interest in Tea which hitherto had not figured as part of traditional court culture.

In 10/7, Hideyoshi invited the emperor to Tea once more but, this time, in a golden teahut he had Rikyu

design and install in the imperial palace. Hideyoshi prepared the tea and served it to the emperor. Afterwards, the teahut was dismantled and transported to Osaka castle to be reconstructed. When, in 1586/4, Otomo Sorin came to Osaka castle to thank Hideyoshi for his intervention vis-à-vis Satsuma, Hideyoshi first received Sorin at the large reception room, then took him to the golden tearoom. Sorin also inspected the famous utensils Hideyoshi had displayed for him.

After Hideyoshi had subjugated Kyushu, he moved into his now finished Kyoto castle, the Jurakutei, and, soon after, announced his famous Kitano Grand Tea Party. It was announced for 1587/10/1-10. By that time, the Kitano shrine, dedicated to the statesman and poet Sugawara no Michizane (845-903), had become a center of poetry and Noh. Hideyoshi's invitation of all Tea practitioners, including poor *wabi* people, is a clear indication of the need for universal participation in ritual. He warned all teamen that, should they fail to attend, they would no longer be permitted to practice Tea. This was to show off his taste and possessions, as well as the respect he enjoyed among the nation's Tea people. By attending his tea party, Hideyoshi forced all teamen to acknowledge his absolute authority in the Tea ritual. He intended this show to make it clear that he was the only ritual authority, the prime ritual manipulator in the land. He invited the rich and poor, even those who could not afford Tea. Here is how his public announcement read:

9

1. Beginning in 10/1 and, depending on the weather, lasting until 10/10, Lord [Hideyoshi] will hold a large Tea in the forest of Kitano [shrine] and display all his famous utensils in order to show them to the *suki* experts and amateurs.

2. All Tea practitioners, regardless of whether they are warrior attendants, townsmen or peasants, or people of lower status should bring a kettle, a *tsurube*, and a bowl, and even if they have no tea, they should all come even though they may only serve *kogashi* (powdered roast rice and parched salt).

3. As for the *zasshiki*, as long as they are in the forest, two-mat arrangements are appropriate. However, *wabi* people may simply spread out straw mats or rice-hull bags [to accommodate their guests] where they please.

4. Not only Japanese, but Chinese and Koreans with an interest in Tea must participate.

5. So that even those who come from far away can see it, the Lord will keep his collection on display until the tenth.

6. All *wabi* people who, despite this order, refuse to participate, will no longer be allowed to serve Tea, let alone *kogashi*. The same applies to their disciples.

7. Lord Hideyoshi will serve Tea to all *wabi* people, regardless from how far they came. [\(12\)](#)

A number of nobles including Yoshida Kanemi (1535-1610) built teahuts, despite the cost. Kanemi had to purchase a Rikyu-style kettle at the cost of one hundred rolls of cloth. One can only imagine the cost involved in building the huts. Some eight hundred structures had been built within a few days. From Nara alone, thirty-six teamen including temple and shrine priests and merchants came. Matsuya

Hisamasa (?-1598) brought his "Heron" by Hsu Hsi. One Nara man, however, came too late and, shut out from the lottery, committed suicide. Rikyu ordered the Sakai teamen to come too and assigned them to a particular area in the grove. Hideyoshi displayed his golden tearoom and many of his most famous utensils, including his "Temple Bell in the Evening" painted by Yu Ch'ien. Others also brought their famous utensils. Sokyu displayed his famous "Autumn Moon" by Mu Ch'i. One can only imagine how busy Sogyu and Rikyu were preparing the event. At the start of the party, a lottery determined who would be able to drink Hideyoshi's, Rikyu's, Sokyu's, or Sogyu's Tea. Nobles such as Yoshida Kanemi, Karasuma Mitsunobu (1549-1611) and others drew no. 4 and were therefore served by Imai Sokyu. Nara people such as Matsuya Hisamasa was luckier--he drew the Hideyoshi lot. Hideyoshi is said to have served two hundred and three guests, including Ieyasu and Hidenaga, before he quit at noon. In the afternoon Rikyu guided him around the premises showing him some of the most spectacular arrangements. An unprecedented number of famous utensils, all Hideyoshi was able to hunt up so far, were displayed. One of the attractions was an extreme *wabi* teaman named Hechikan (dates unknown) who installed a red umbrella projecting an approximately two-mat shadow on the ground where his guest sat and drank his Tea. Another, Ikka (dates unknown), hung straw mats from pine trees and, by spreading sand on the ground and tiles around a hearth, fashioned a natural, out-door tea parlor.

After only one day, Hideyoshi called off the party. His pretext was an uprising in Kyushu, but the real reason was probably that it was too much, even for Hideyoshi, to serve so many. By noon that day, 803 people had already entered the grounds and received tea from Hideyoshi and others. Hideyoshi intended the party to be a kind of democratic gesture uniting under his ritual authority all those who were practicing Tea.

Although we do not know the exact reasons why Hideyoshi forced Rikyu into suicide soon after this event, it is possible that it was a conflict over the use of Tea as a mirror of the new social order that he tried to establish after he managed to unify the nation under his hegemony. After Rikyu's death in 1591, the *daimyo* Furuta Oribe (1544-1615) took over as Hideyoshi's Tea master. He immediately changed Tea procedures to reconfirm Hideyoshi's social hierarchy. With Rikyu's death, Tea changed from an egalitarian, transformatory ritual to a "confirmatory" one. Rikyu was a product of the Warring States period whereas Oribe and his successors were products of national unity. As ritual, Tea had to adapt itself to these changes. Perhaps Rikyu failed to realize quickly enough that his period had come to an end and died tragically as a consequence.

What are, from what we have learned above, some of the deeper implications of the Tea ritual for Generative Anthropology? There is enough evidence in the history of Tea to confirm GA's theory of the ritual center and the need for political leaders to occupy it, to manipulate it. Ancient Japanese politics can be understood as competition for the control of the ritual center. He who is able to do so, like Hideyoshi, controls the emperor as well as the rest of the population. Of course, by that time in Japanese history, Tea was not the only center; there were many more. But it was an important one in the sense that it brought in the emperor, the aristocrats, warriors, and merchants, that is, the most prominent social classes. All the leading figures, including the emperor, his most important nobles, and the leading warriors, were willing to participate in Tea and thereby to let themselves be ritually manipulated. Tea was therefore the most important socio-political ritual in sixteenth century Japan.

10

As a ritual of peace, Tea served to restrict violent behavior and to leave a door open for political

consensus and social ordering. Tea created a ritual locus for the conquest of crisis. Without Tea, the destruction of the Warring States period might have been much worse.

Interestingly, Tea is a ritual involving food and drink. As such, it reminds one of the ritual banquets of many peoples and tribes. However remotely, it also reminds us of sacrificial ritual, the tea having replaced over time the sacrificial victims, whether humans or animals, in compliance with the Confucian tenet to let esthetic behavior substitute for violent behavior in ritual. Having replaced the sacrificial blood on which ancient communities renewed themselves, it seems as if Tea was a substitute for ancient blood ritual. What has not changed is the communal revitalization as well as the centrality of this ritual and its socio-political ramifications.

In more than a single aspect, Tea contains striking similarities with the Catholic Mass. Whereas the wine represents the blood of Christ, the tea is at once the center of the universe and a means to harmonize with the essence of things. Tea is a communal event in which all, high and low, daimyo and merchants were able to participate. This is like the Holy Communion in the Mass which kings shared with the commoners. Unlike the Mass, however, Tea is not based on a particular historical remembrance, such as Christ's Last Supper, and does not re-present a given event in the past. The two rituals are similar, however, in the way they create *communitas* through direct participation.

Moreover, Tea confirms GA's understanding of history as anthropology. As we have seen, events in sixteenth-century Japan reveal the fact that history evolves and revolves around the ritual center and its implements, the occupation and possession of which are an essential objective of rule.

Notes

1. "Un ethnographe oublié du XVIIe siècle: J. N. Demeunier," *Revue des Idées* 7, pp. 18-28.[\(back\)](#)
2. *Forest of Symbols*, 1967, p. 43.[\(back\)](#)
3. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973, p. 108ff.[\(back\)](#)
4. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*, Stanford UP, 1993, pp. 119-24.[\(back\)](#)
5. *Violence and the Sacred*, 1977.[\(back\)](#)
6. *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos*, 1983, pp. 5-6.[\(back\)](#)
7. *The Ritual Process*, 1969, pp. 94-130.[\(back\)](#)
8. *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 117.[\(back\)](#)
9. The "engenders" theory stems from Dong Zhongshu (176-104 BCE) in his book *Chunggiu Fanlu* and the "overcomes" theory, from Zuio Qiuming, a contemporary of Confucius, who wrote the book *Chunggiu Zuozhuan*.[\(back\)](#)
10. "Ritual," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (1987), pp. 405-422, particularly p. 414.[\(back\)](#)
11. Trans. by Beatrice M. Bodard, "Tea and Council--The Political Role of Sen Rikyu," *Monumenta*

Nipponica XXXII, 1, pp. 53-54. See also Luise Allison Cort, "The Grand Kitano Tea Meeting," *Chanoyu Quarterly*, no. 31, pp. 15-44.[\(back\)](#)

12. Reprinted in Haga Koshiro, *Sen Rikyu*, 1963, pp. 209-10.[\(back\)](#)

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The Little Bang: The Early Origin of Language

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Recently I was asked to review applicants at UCLA for a postdoctoral fellowship. The competition was based, along with the usual CV and recommendation letters, on a project proposal relevant to this year's topic: the sacred. There were some sixty applicants working in the modern period since 1800; these new PhD's included literary scholars, philosophers, historians, a few anthropologists, even a musicologist. I was taken aback to discover that not a single one of these projects made reference to the name or ideas of René Girard. When I remarked on this to the director of the program, a professor of English with a solid background in philosophy and literary theory, he offered the explanation that these ideas had had a vogue twenty years ago, but were no longer in fashion today.

However exaggerated and shortsighted it may be, I take this judgment on the part of an astute and reasonably unbiased observer as a call to action. Like it or not, the academic world, the university, is the center of American intellectual life. The ideas that motivate COV&R emerged from the university and, however powerful they may become and remain outside it, it is important for their survival that they retain their visibility within it. Thus it is important that we put aside any differences that may divide us in the pursuit of this goal that I know we all share. I will return to this point at the end of my talk.

What is the origin of language? This question is not only one of formulating hypotheses about the origin, but of deciding what it is that we mean by the question itself. Recent advances in neuroscience, cognitive science, speech physiology, paleontology, primatology, linguistics, and related fields make this question both easier and harder to answer than when I wrote *The Origin of Language* over twenty years ago.

I can say at the outset that nothing I have learned in the course of my research dissuades me as a humanist from venturing into an area in which the dominant voices are no longer those of linguists and prehistorians, but those of neuroscientists. As they have always done, scientific advances permit those concerned with the human, "anthropologists" in the broadest sense of the term, to redraw the boundaries of the domain within which anthropological reflection truly belongs. This position is not one widely held by the scientists themselves, who generally share an Enlightenment view for which all thinking not subject to scientific method, particularly that of religion, is a primitive survival condemned to, and deserving of, the fate of alchemy and Aristotelian cosmology. In this view, my—I think I can say,

"our"—kind of anthropology is not a respectable field of inquiry at all. The hypothetical attribution of an originary function to an event or scene considered memorable in itself is not—yet—understood as a necessary methodological tool in the human sciences. Yet a scientific method expanded to include events would not have to put religion within brackets as an expression of the irrational or explain it by an ad hoc theory of psychological expediency, but would begin to integrate within itself the understanding of the human that it has been the historical function of religion to provide.

I do not think we need accept the Enlightenment vision of history as the story of the continued advance of science into domains progressively vacated by unscientific thought. No doubt we no longer rely on religion to supply the basis for cosmology or for natural science in general. And as our knowledge of the brain continues to progress, it may no longer be necessary to rely on metaphysical philosophy in order to understand the processes of language and thought. But human culture is not centrally concerned with natural phenomena or even with logic or linguistic structure. It is concerned with the regulation of human interaction, with ethics, and however much science can help provide ethical thought with options, it can never usurp its central cultural function.

This last point is usually expressed by the old saw that you can't get to "ought" from "is." Science tells us how it is, not how it ought to be. I have no quarrel with this formulation as a practical rule of thumb. But its simple dichotomy oversimplifies human reality and encourages a certain complacency on both sides. It goes hand in hand with the relegation of religion to a shallow notion of "faith"—generally combined with the familiar platitude about religion's value in maintaining morality. What must be understood is rather how this dichotomy came about in the first place, and how it is linked to the human possession of language. How is it that the same creatures who alone are capable of scientific thought are also alone capable of—some would say, culpable of—forms of thinking that cannot be reduced to scientific thought? Why, in a word, is the origin of language also the origin of the sacred? The failure of the scientists of this past century even to ask this question, let alone to answer it, is all the proof we need that anthropological thinking in the sense that you and I understand it, what I call "originary thinking," has a central and irreplaceable role to play in the ongoing effort to understand human origins.

What then *is* the origin of language? The question may be split into two parts, each of which has evoked in the scientific discourse of recent years a very different kind of response. We may call them the hard originary part and the less hard (but not easy) prehistoric part. The first, hard, part of the question addresses what I myself have always taken for essential: the moment, whether or not drawn out in actual time, of the emergence of language from non-language, which is also to my mind the moment of the emergence of the human from the non-human. The second, easier, part is concerned with reconstructing the intermediate stages between this origin and language as we know it.

2

The second part of the question has generated a vast amount of research over the past two decades. As a result, our understanding of the parameters that define the physical and mental capacity for human language and their possible emergence in the course of primate evolution has become ever more precise. I will share some of these results with you in a moment. But on the hard part of the question that I attempted to address in *The Origin of Language*, that of the specific motivation and occasion of the origin of language and the human, there is a near-silence that grows in embarrassment in proportion to the anthropological intuition and semiotic sophistication of the writer. This is, in a way, a form of

progress. Only the naïve or retrograde still dismiss the importance of this question, as was common a generation ago, by proposing that human language emerged over a long period of time through the gradual improvement of primate communication systems. As our understanding of the underlying neurological means by which language evolves, is learned, and is transmitted becomes more precise, and as, accordingly, its radical difference from all other forms of animal communication is appreciated, the source of what one writer calls the "magic moment" in which language began becomes all the more mysterious. I will speak to you later of a partial exception to this rule: a scholar whose solution to this enigma, as we shall see, strongly resembles that proposed in *The Origin of Language*, although it stops before reaching the unique scene of origin postulated by the "originary hypothesis" on the basis of the theory of mimetic desire.

How then should we envisage this unique scene? The difference between human language and animal communication is most simply defined by what Fernand de Saussure called the "arbitrariness of the signifier," the fact that the word "cow" has no resemblance to a cow. This arbitrariness affects even signs born from natural perception: Saussure cites the word "pigeon," whose onomatopoeic origin in the Latin *pipio* has been forgotten. The reason why signs become arbitrary even when they once were not is that, in contrast with animal signals, signs subsist not in the real world but in a language- world that lies "above" the real world and in which it can be represented. We may symbolize this difference by saying that the signal relates to its object "horizontally," whereas the sign relates to it "vertically."

What makes the origin of language of particular interest to us is that the generation of the vertical signification of language from the horizontal, appetitive relationships of the real world may be described in terms of the Girardian triangle of mimetic desire. Normally we imitate each other's appetitive acts by performing the same action on a different object: when I see you pick an apple, I pick an apple of my own. But since mimetic desire makes me suspect that your apple was better than mine, my gesture and yours are destined to converge one day on the same object. At this point, mimesis is blocked; the appropriative gesture is aborted. The only way to avoid destructive violence is to refocus our attention from the human model to the object toward which his gesture points. Although this unique object of desire cannot itself be reproduced, it may be represented by a reproducible sign of human language. Hence, in the terms of Generative Anthropology, the "aborted gesture of appropriation" becomes the originary sign.

But although the mimetic triangle contains all the elements necessary for the emergence of the sign, language as the foundation of the human community must have arisen in a collective event where mimetic tension is intensified by the multiplicity of the participants. The object desired by all members of the group—say, the carcass of a large animal brought down by a hunting party—becomes the center of a circle surrounded by peripheral individuals who act as the mediators of each other's desire. The originary sign provides the solution to or, more precisely, the *deferral* of a "mimetic crisis" in which the group's very existence is menaced by the potential violence of rivalry over the central object. The emission of the first sign is the founding event of the human community.

How is this hypothetical scene to be situated in the course of biological evolution? Over the years my thinking on this subject has evolved; or perhaps I should say: has been purified. When I wrote *The Origin of Language*, I was uniquely concerned to develop the consequences of the hypothesis that language originated in a self-conscious event or scene. Thus I made no reference to the specific historical

circumstances or even to the geological era in which such an event might have taken place. From the perspective of an empirical scientist, this would have been inconceivable, but I considered it the humanist's duty to develop the logical consequences of the idea of the human as the possessor of language independently of the vagaries of empirical data. I sought to construct a hypothesis limited by Ockham's razor to the minimal conditions of the emergence of the human. I might add that, at the time, over twenty years ago, scholars were far less in agreement than they are today about the moment of prehuman evolution at which language first appeared; among the tentative time-frames proposed, I simply chose not to choose.

There were then and, for the moment at least, still are two views of the time at which language originated; we may call them the "early" and "late" hypotheses. The dominant early hypothesis is that language in some form, what some writers call "symbolic" activity and I prefer to call "representation," appeared at the same time as the genus *Homo*, whose emergence from *Australopithecus* around two million years ago coincides with the first evidence of stone tools—the so-called Oldowan technology. In this hypothesis, the increase in brain size from *Homo habilis* through *Homo erectus* to the Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* was itself the product of language.

The late hypothesis, which still has a few supporters today, was constructed to explain the contrast between what appeared to be extreme technological stagnation over some two million years of tool-making and the "take-off" of about 50,000 years ago that produced more sophisticated technologies, cave art, evidence of ritual burials, and eventually the Neolithic invention of agriculture that in ten or twelve thousand short years made us what we are today. More than tool technology, it is the appearance at this time of the first indubitable signs of "culture"—that is, ritual, religious culture—that gave this hypothesis its plausibility.

With respect to the choice between the early and late hypotheses, I admit to having displayed a mild degree of what psychologists call "dissociation." I was far more concerned to defend the single origin of humanity against the once-popular multiple-origin hypothesis than to decide at what moment this single origin might have taken place. By not choosing between early or late language origin, I was able to retain features of each without really reflecting on their incompatibility.

3

The early hypothesis seemed dictated by simple logic. According to the late hypothesis, the first speakers were the so-called Cro-Magnons, *Homo sapiens* genetically identical with ourselves. The late hypothesis could therefore be maintained only if one assumed that our modern brain and speech-production apparatus could have evolved independently of language. In this case, language would arise as what Stephen Gould calls an "exaptation," a mere accidental byproduct of the interaction between cognitive evolution and pre-linguistic communication systems. (Chomskian linguists are fond of this position because it seems to justify their idea of a "language module" evolving independently of any overt human behavior.) In contrast, the originary hypothesis presupposed that language as the first human act would arise among creatures with *no* prior brain and vocal tract adaptations and would itself drive their acquisition of these adaptations. This is the logic of all evolutionary modifications; the first ancestor of the whale to take to the ocean would not have had fins designed in advance for this contingency.

Yet, despite all this, I was attracted to the late hypothesis because it seemed to solidify the link between language and ritual culture that my own perspective emphasized. In this regard, the (perhaps exaggerated) technological stagnation and absence of evidence of "symbolic" cultural activity in early

Homo—one writer wondered what such creatures could possibly find to talk about—seemed convincing arguments. Mere stone tools were no proof of language, especially after it was realized that the intricate, lozenge-shaped flint "choppers" were not products of refined craftsmanship but cores left behind after the simple blades were chipped off. Since the paleontologists didn't find it absurd that all our physical and presumably even our mental evolution could take place before we acquired language, I accepted the possibility as a real one.

A possible cure for my dissociation was the compromise hypothesis proposed by Derek Bickerton, one of the major figures in the study of language origin. Bickerton is best known for his 1981 book, *The Roots of Language*, where he proposes that the universal basic syntax of "creoles"—languages that arise when crude multilingual dialects called "pidgins" come to be spoken as native languages by the children of the original speakers—demonstrates the existence of something like Chomsky's "grammar module." Bickerton's more recent *Language and Species* (1990) proposes, on the analogy of the distinction between ungrammatical pidgin and grammatical creole, both an early *and* a late origin for language. The early origin, at the time of *Homo habilis*, would have involved the emergence of "symbolic reference," the linguistic sign, but not syntactic structure. Syntax, in Bickerton's view, could not have evolved gradually, since there are no examples of a language intermediate in syntactic complexity between pidgins, which he finds comparable to the utterances of young children as well as to those of apes instructed in human language, and the natural languages of today. (It is a tenet of modern linguistics that all known languages, from those of the Australian Aborigines to contemporary English, are equally "advanced" and permit in principle of reciprocal translation.) Thus the emergence of syntactically mature language as we know it, which Bickerton situates at the time of late origin around 50,000 years ago, would have reflected evolutionary developments in the brain that were realized in language all at once in some inexplicable final mutation.

Just as the child's aptitude for learning language demonstrates the existence of "something like" Chomsky's grammar module without however answering the key question of exactly how his brain is adapted to this learning process, the contrast between, on the one hand, the language of creatures whose brain was not yet specifically adapted to language, whose material cultures were apparently stable over hundreds of thousands of years, and who gave no evidence of symbolic activity, and, on the other hand, the language of people anatomically identical to ourselves, (relatively) innovative in their tool kit, and who buried their dead and drew pictures on cave walls, demonstrates that "something like" Bickerton's dichotomy must be true, but without giving evidence either for or against its dichotomous nature. The fact that no intermediate forms of language exist today is no more proof that modern syntax emerged all at once than the absence of intermediate forms between lizards and snakes proves that the latter lost their legs all at once. Even if all modern languages derive from a common ancestor spoken around 50,000 years ago, there is no need to assume that this *Ursprache* itself emerged in a single mutational leap beyond primitive pidgin-type languages. Students of sign language suggest persuasively that the link may be provided by gesture.

Today I have emerged from my dissociative state; I accept the theory of early origin and reject that of late origin. Far from presenting a threat to the originary hypothesis, early origin makes it all the more plausible. It is a failure of imagination to conceive the first language as anything like the language of today. It would be unfaithful to Ockham's razor to attribute to the originary sign anything but a minimal difference that separates human language from animal means of communication. I will go into more detail on this point in a moment, but first I want to make more explicit the consequences of early origin

for the fundamental reflection, based on the mimetic theory of desire, that I call Generative Anthropology.

The originary hypothesis is an attempt to come to grips with the most salient truth about human language: that language as we know it, the language of the sign rather than the signal, represents not a gradual development of animal communication but a radical break from it. When I wrote *The Origin of Language*, I was aware of no other researcher who took this position. Even today, most writers on the subject have not yet grasped the difficulty it poses. Bickerton and Terrence Deacon—whose ideas on the subject I will discuss shortly—are virtually alone even now in treating this radical break as a problem for evolutionary theory. But not even Deacon, and you will see how tantalizingly close he comes to the positions of Generative Anthropology, has taken the final logical step consonant with this position.

The core of the originary hypothesis is not the hunting scenario I have suggested as the scene of the origin of language but the simple affirmation that there *was* an event, a minimally unique scene of origin of the human defined by language. The originary hypothesis proposes that the linguistic sign, unlike all previous modes of information transfer, from the persistence of subatomic structures through the genetic code to the evolution of signal systems among mammals, depends neither on hard-wired connections nor on learned associations but on the memory of a *historically specific* founding event. Animals learn from the past and plan for the future, but only humans experience *events*. To the deconstructive critique that one cannot be "present" at human events because they are mediated by language, I would answer that it is precisely this mediation that defines them as events. The fact that events exist only insofar as they are commemorated through representation only means that the originary event is the event of the first commemoration.

All culture is scenic in the sense of evoking the tension between the desiring periphery and the desired center of a collective scene. This has been noted by a few anthropologists, notably the late Victor Turner. An isolated individual can evoke the scene in imagination only because it has already existed in public reality. Language too, as the core of the system of representations that is human culture, evokes such a public scene. And since from the first this scene was by definition memorable, the intuition of memorability inherited from this scene allows us to offer a hypothesis of its constitution consonant with our empirical knowledge on the one hand and the principle of parsimony or Ockham's razor on the other.

4

Since the possibility of confirmation is remote indeed, our hypothesis is fated to remain speculative. What purpose then is served by enunciating it? We recall that the primary point of the hypothesis is not the reconstruction of the scene of origin but the postulation that there *was* a scene. But if this point is worthy of consideration, then our hypothetical reconstitution of the first scene will not be altogether unhelpful in articulating its various moments. For once we agree to entertain the idea that there really was a scene of the origin of language, then this origin is not simply that of language, but of human culture in general—of the sacred, in the first place, and of everything that the sacred implies: desire, resentment, sacrifice, and what might be called the three E's: ethics, economics, esthetics (spelled in the French manner without an "a"). To articulate all these categories in a single scene has been the chief goal of my writings on Generative Anthropology.

Before pursuing this argument further, I would like to make myself very clear on one point. The originary hypothesis is neither a social contract nor a variant of what the political philosopher John Rawls calls the "original position." It is not, in other words, a fictional schema but a hypothesis, a

"scientific" hypothesis, if that word is useful. The difference between these two categories is less obvious than at first glance, but it is nonetheless real. Hobbes's or Rousseau's "social contract" and even Rawls's "original position" present, as the outcome of a scenic confrontation among potentially conflicting parties, ideal versions of social hierarchies that in reality evolved through various historical stages. The rationale for such patent fictions, and the reason why we take them seriously, is that we can only justify the generation of a social order involving human inequality out of what we conceive intuitively as "natural" human equality as the result of an implicit unanimous agreement to suspend this equality. But the otherwise unexplained source of our intuition of equality is precisely, according to the originary hypothesis that alone explains it, the model of the reciprocal exchange of language in the originary scene. Hence the fictive "contract" is not, as some would claim, the original of which the originary hypothesis is a copy but, on the contrary, an example of our recourse to the originary scene to provide an ethical *raison d'être* for the structure of the human community. But whereas hierarchical or indirectly egalitarian structures may be justified by social contract scenes that have no pretensions at reflecting an even hypothetical reality, the originary hypothesis describes an egalitarian scene that is as close as we can make it to "what really happened."

Taking a position for the early origin of language sharpens the radical implications of the originary hypothesis that were mitigated by leaving the moment of origin indeterminate. The originary scene of which we speak must be the origin not just of language but of all the fundamental categories of the human. If we are permitted to retain in our imagination the images of our Cro-Magnon ancestors hunting mammoth, burying their dead, and creating cave-paintings, statuettes, and carved bone tools, it becomes much easier to conceive a scene of origin in which all the categories of human culture have their common root. If, on the contrary, we reject any such imagery and accept that the first moment of language must have taken place among creatures not yet adapted to it in either brain nor behavior, who looked and behaved more like bipedal apes than humans, whose very first "word" may well have been a gesture lacking any phonic component, then we are forced to face up to just how radical our hypothesis really is. But far from putting the entire enterprise in doubt, the striking rapprochement between this minimal formulation of the originary hypothesis and the conclusions of recent scientific research make it not only plausible but even, I regret to say, almost respectable.

It is well and good that early origin forces us to abandon our Cro-Magnon imagery because this imagery hides what is most difficult to assimilate in the hypothetical scene of origin: that it is a unique occurrence in Darwinian biology, a "speciation event" that is truly an event—"punctuated equilibrium" with a vengeance! Yet this conclusion is inescapable. Those who until very recently affirmed against all logic or precedent the multiple origin of our species were merely inverting the exceptionalism of human origin that they thought they were escaping. If human monogenesis seems uncomfortably close to the Biblical creation of man, it is because the Biblical narrative expresses, in however unscientific a form, a truth of human origin that science has not yet faced up to: that it must have taken place in and as an event. The origin of the sign is the origin of a new symbolic consciousness, and this consciousness, even in its most rudimentary form, could not have emerged unconsciously.

What does it mean to say that the origin of language was a "speciation event"? Clearly the genetic constitution of the participants themselves was not modified. But from this modest but not imperceptible beginning, the creators of the new symbolic culture separated themselves off from other bands of hominids who did not have such a culture. The advantage of this culture that fashioned our ancestors into a new species was, to cite the one-sentence formula of the originary hypothesis, that culture effects "the

deferral of violence through representation." There are two complementary elements in the hypothesis that scientific research has not yet assimilated: the origin of the human sign in an event, and the function of the sign as the representation of the sacred, which is, as Girard has taught us, the externalization of the human potential for self-destructive mimetic violence. We cannot understand the one without the other. For the sign to commemorate an event as the origin of the human community, this event must be both absolutely and minimally memorable. I will speak in a moment about its minimality. But its memorability implies the absolute necessity of the event for the group's survival, which is to say, the deferral of its mimetic self-destruction and its establishment as a human community.

This does not mean that all other groups of hominids who did not create language or adopt it from those who did were destroyed by internal conflict. Because the language users, who were also culture users, had at their disposal a more stable bulwark against internal violence, they were able to acquire more potent and potentially dangerous means of violence. Such means include not only improved weaponry but more elaborate ethical structures involving differential roles protected by laws, including the marriage laws that characterize all human societies and that are often referred to in rather misleading terms either as "incest prohibitions" or as rules for the "exchange of women." Human societies governed by sacred interdictions could withstand mimetic pressures that in non-human societies would lead either to breakdown in violence or to the abandonment of communal unity. Hence over the course of generations the neo-humans would inevitably absorb, kill off, or drive away their prehuman rivals.

Understood in this manner, early origin only strengthens the originary hypothesis. The idea that the members of a society that evolved apparently little over hundreds of thousands of years would have had "nothing to talk about" is true only if we think of language as primarily a means of conveying information about the world. But if we understand it as first and foremost a means of deferring violence through the designation of a sacred mediator, then it becomes perfectly plausible that it could evolve very slowly without lacking in functionality at any stage. Ritual activity, like artistic activity, always contains information about the world, but this information is subordinate to the human order it subserves. As the brain became increasingly adapted to language, language itself could become increasingly complex both in vocabulary and in syntax. The complexity of society could not overstep the limits of the symbolic culture of which language was the formal underpinning, but the existence of such a culture would continually move natural selection in the direction of the language-culture adaptation, with more complex and efficient social orders continually driving out, killing off, or absorbing their rivals.

5

Nor, incidentally, does the fact that language reached maturity with the fully evolved Cro-Magnon brain imply that language since that time has remained in a steady state. This Chomskian dogma, reinforced by the fear of appearing to acquiesce in the colonialist stigmatization of "primitive" languages, has only recently been breached. We know of no "primitive" languages; given the appropriate lexicon, all extant and historically attested languages are equally capable of expressing all thoughts. But, as Bernard Bichakjian has observed, all languages of whose historical development we are aware have evolved irreversibly from a more to a less highly inflected state (for example, from Latin to French) and, in general—this is Bichakjian's major thesis—in the direction of being assimilable by children at an increasingly early age.

What is not explained by this attractive hypothesis is, if Bickerton's creole studies demonstrate that we "naturally" adopt a subject-verb-object word-order-based syntax, and if, as Bichakjian observes, children

learn this type of language more easily than any other, why the older generation of languages was so highly inflected. I would suggest that this gives credence to the idea that language was, until the relatively recent time of the cultural take-off that inspired the late origin hypothesis, designed specifically (which does not mean consciously) to be *difficult* for children—or adults—to learn. Vestiges of linguistic initiation rites remain in the institutions of religiously oriented language instruction in our own society—Church Latin for Catholics, Biblical Hebrew for Jews, Koranic Arabic for Moslems, not to speak of the sacrosanct Latin and Greek of Eton and Oxford. The take-off itself, rather than being attributable to our sudden acquisition of a "syntax module," is perhaps preferably explained in the inverse fashion as a product of the final liberation of language from the strict confines of the sacred and its extension to more general social usage.

The foregoing has given you an idea of the originary hypothesis and of its compatibility with the early origin of human language. In the time I have remaining, I would like to suggest how, thus situated, the hypothesis provides the key to beginning the arduous process of integrating the humanities, including religious thinking, with the social sciences.

Let me begin by saying a few words about an important book that appeared in 1997, Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species*. Deacon is a neuroscientist whose presentation of the emergence of human language is founded on ongoing research into the structure and evolution of the brain; but unlike most laboratory scientists, Deacon also has a real grasp of the relevant anthropological issues. He is keenly aware of the qualitative difference between human language and animal systems, a difference that he expresses in the terms of Charles S. Peirce as that between *indexical* signs—those learned through association with their object, as in Pavlov's famous experiment where a dog is taught to make the ringing of a bell an "index" of the presence of food—and the *symbolic* signs of language, which are, as Saussure called them, "arbitrary" because their reference to a worldly object is mediated through a sign-*system* in which the signs are interrelated with each other. Finally, whereas Bickerton views language and thinking strictly from the perspective of the individual speaker, even refusing Chomsky-like to define language as a mode of communication, Deacon is sensitive to language's communal nature.

Deacon's central point, that the human brain with its unusually large prefrontal cortex evolved as a result of language rather than being the cause of its emergence, is not new, although it has never before been presented in such persuasive detail. But in the domains of greatest concern to the *Colloquium on Violence and Religion*, Deacon's work makes a number of decisive advances. His knowledge of the brain's "Darwinian" internal structure—dictated not by a genetic blueprint but by the "survival of the fittest" synapses—frees him from the monolithic Chomskian view of syntax to which Bickerton's double-emergence theory still pays tribute. Above all, Deacon dismisses the traditional "pragmatic" scenarios for language origin and comes very close to my own originary hypothesis.

Deacon's explanation for the origin of symbolic representation begins with the dependency of proto-human societies on meat, procured by all-male hunting and scavenging parties whose activities would oblige them to be away from home for long periods of time. Under such circumstances, these societies would be highly motivated to maintain female fidelity by creating a symbolic bond of marriage as opposed to the merely "associative" bond of animal monogamy. Such symbolic reinforcement would have clearly advantageous effects on reproductive fitness, the driving force of evolution.

Deacon's reasoning, amazingly daring and subtle by the standards of the social sciences, does not lead

him to propose an originary event as such. But his discussion includes many key components of such an event:

1. meat-eating and sharing as essential to proto-human survival
2. the difficult necessity of maintaining peace among members of the male hunting group
3. the necessity that hunters refrain from eating their prey on the spot but bring it home to their mates and offspring
4. the first sign as functioning to establish an ethical institution
5. the collective nature of the meanings of language
6. the reinforcement of symbolic reference through ritual

If we combine these six points in a scene of ritually repeated renouncement-followed-by-division, mediated by the sign, of the meat of the sacred animal/victim, we have, for all intents and purposes, the generative hypothesis of the origin of language.

Reading Deacon's book aroused in me mixed feelings. Although I was gratified to see so many elements of the hypothesis I had constructed on the basis of the theory of mimetic desire replicated by an empirical scientist who had not the least inkling of this theory, I wondered whether empirical research was now reaching the point at which it could replace humanistic thinking in the same way that modern chemistry replaced alchemy. But on reflection I realized that, on the contrary, the ever-progressing scientific work in this area provides us with what the Greeks called a *kairos*, a critical moment of opportunity for us as representatives of humanistic and/or religious thinking grounded on the mimetic theory of desire.

6

In the course of my university career, I have seen the practice of textual criticism by which the humanities are defined rise to become a model for the "softer" social sciences, then go into a decline that corresponds to that of the cultural category of literature itself. These developments have coincided, I think not coincidentally, with René Girard's discovery within a literary context of the paradoxical structure of human mimesis and his subsequent construction on this basis of a fundamental anthropology. Girard's insistence that the masterpieces of Western literature from the Greeks through Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Proust provide a sharper understanding of desire than modern "theory," notably Freudian theory, is undoubtedly justified, but it is an affirmation whose very truth contains its own closure. To announce this closure is not to affirm apocalyptically the "end of literature," but merely to observe that the literature, cinema, television and what have you of our time no longer provide us with new, as yet untheorized lessons about the fundamental nature of desire. The result is the end, not of literature, but of a certain conception of literature. Girard's revelation about mimesis is both a tribute to the power of this conception and a harbinger of its disappearance.

In this context, as the recent history of the question of the origin of language illustrates, the anthropological initiative seems fated to pass from the humanities to the social sciences. Yet humanistic thinking has, precisely on this point, a central contribution to make. Humanistic thinking is paradoxical thinking. In the heyday of the New Criticism, the highest compliment one could pay a literary work was to show it was a repository of paradoxes. I would claim that the paradox that made this text-centered criticism possible and toward which its discourse was always hinting is nothing other than the paradoxical structure of mimesis that culture had always "known" but that was first explicitly articulated

by René Girard.

Of the many consequences of mimetic paradox, the most significant is the domain of signification itself, the world of language. The originary hypothesis describes nothing other than the "resolution" of the paradox of mimesis through the deferral effected by the sign, whose substitution for its sacred, inaccessible referent is the defining gesture of humanity itself. An intellectually curious scientist like Terrence Deacon can come very close to bringing together the necessary conditions for the birth of language. But the birth scene of the linguistic or "symbolic" sign eludes him because positive, scientific discourse does not contain the category of paradox. The French thinker Jacques Derrida, who denies the very validity of the notion of an "origin of language," supplies nonetheless a necessary ingredient of our hypothesis in his "non-concept" of *différance*, which means "at the same time" (an expression itself paradoxical) *deferral* and *differentiation*. To understand the emergence of the sign is to understand the collective non-act of deferral that is "at the same time" the emission of a gesture or sound that "means" the scene and its central object because it does not, like an animal signal, call the others to action, but on the contrary, becomes a substitute for action, realizes its deferral by differentiating the members of the group from the object and from each other.

If the originary hypothesis is indeed the best explanation of the origin of language, this truth cannot remain hidden from positive science. It would be absurd to conclude that, because the roots of the originary hypothesis lie in the humanities, mimetic theory and Generative Anthropology are of interest only to humanists. On the contrary, the rapprochement between the empirical sciences and Generative Anthropology that Deacon's work appears to presage offers us a crucial opportunity to integrate the paradoxical thinking of the humanities with the positive thinking of the sciences in a mode of thought that I have no compunctions about calling, in the French fashion, "human science."

What lends substance to this conclusion is the most profoundly paradoxical consequence of the paradox of mimesis: that what I call "humanistic" thought is ultimately indistinguishable, not from scientific thought about the human, but from a way of thinking that does not appear focused on the human at all: that of religion. I entitled one of my books *Science and Faith* in an effort to stress that religion and science are not condemned to a dialogue of the deaf but constitute complementary and interacting means of understanding the human. Scientific thinking can be carried out only under conditions of metaphysical peace; in the ethical reality of human social life, faith is what maintains the preconditions of this peace.

Although we have learned since the Renaissance that religion is not very useful for thinking about the gravitational interaction of celestial bodies, it remains indispensable for thinking about the ethical interaction of human beings. The fact that we commonly say that religion is "about God" rather than humanity reflects the structure of the originary scene, in which what we call humanity was constituted, literally, "about" God as the center of the human circle. Once it is admitted, as the logic of mimetic theory demands, that the originary sign is equivalent to the name-of-God, the science of human origin is obliged to take into itself as a hypothesis—that is, in the scientific version of faith—the co-emergence and co-existence of the human with what can only be understood as subsisting in "another world" because it is inaccessible to us: the sacred, which we can grasp without violence only through the medium of the sign.

Is Generative Anthropology then some kind of secular equivalent of religion? Let me provide a mnemonic tool to help tell them apart. The originary hypothesis has sometimes been described as a "big bang" theory of culture, by analogy with the cosmological "big bang" in which the universe emerged or

was created. The analogy is appealing, but it is inaccurate. It is not the originary hypothesis that begins with "In the beginning, the Lord created the heavens and the earth." It is *religion* that should be called the "big bang" hypothesis of human origin, if only because it is time that we realized that the Biblical creation story too is a hypothesis whose presentation of the event of origin reflects an understanding not yet mastered by science.

If the originary hypothesis of Generative Anthropology is not a "big bang," then what is it? I think it is more accurately described as a "little bang." The originary event was a bootstrapping operation that by definition could not announce itself with the dramatic power available at later stages of culture. Yet neither could such an event be imperceptible. It was not a big but a little bang. Its "littleness" brings it into accord with the scientific requirement of Ockham's razor, to simplify or minimize one's hypotheses as much as possible. At the same time, the "bang" cannot, as positive science wishes it could, be minimized out of existence. If you just remember the term "little bang," you will recall to mind the link between Generative Anthropology and religion, and you will understand why I am so very glad to have had the opportunity to speak to you today.

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Herbert Plutschow's article on the Japanese Tea ceremony, based partly on a talk given to the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion**, was prepared specially for *Anthropoetics*. **Erik Eisel's** article is an expanded version of a contribution to a recent conference at UC Irvine honoring **Wolfgang Iser**. **William Mishler's** and **Eric Gans's** articles were revised from their talks at the annual **COV&R** meeting in Atlanta in June, 1999.

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

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