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Table of Contents

1. **Thomas F. Bertonneau** - [The Acts of an Oedipus: Power, Language, and Sacrifice in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*](#)
2. **Scott Sprenger** - [In the End was the Word: Balzac's Modernist Absolute](#)
3. **Gabor Varga** - [The Emergence of Logical Thought: How to Interpret Contradiction and Consistency in Early Greek Culture \(Part 1. Homer\)](#)
4. **Peter Goldman** - [Hamlet's Ghost: A Review Article](#)
(Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton UP, 2001)
5. [Benchmarks](#)

[Return to Anthropoetics home page](#)

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Last updated:

The Acts of an Oedipus: Power, Language, and Sacrifice in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

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In our analysis, the rhetoric of mastery is derivative of the primary form of rhetoric, which emerges from the periphery as a denunciation of those who usurp the center: the outsider, or the collectivity of outsiders, undermines the position of the insider. By the basic geometry of the center-periphery opposition, rhetoric is a "majoritary" phenomenon; the peripheral denouncers are more numerous than their central targets. But the essential features of the circle are derived from those of the mimetic triangle, where numbers are irrelevant. . . . The rhetoric of mastery retains the fundamental geometry of the mimetic triangle. . . (Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox* [176])

I was forced to [an] awareness [of my relation to American society as a whole] through my struggles with the craft of fiction; yes, and by my attraction (soon rejected) to Marxist political theory, which was my response to the inferior status which society sought to impose on me (I did not then, now, or ever consider myself inferior). I did not know my true relationship to America . . . but I did know and accept how I felt inside. And I also knew, thanks to the Renaissance Man, what I expected of myself in the matter of personal discipline and creative quality. . . . I rejected all negative definitions imposed on me by others. (Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* [XXI-XXII])

Ralph Ellison, novelist and essayist, could both see color and see through it. It was more important, finally, to see through it, he decided. Formed intellectually in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Ellison approached the phenomenon of race by demoting it, by insisting that the dignity of the individual outweighed the mess of ascriptive designations by which, increasingly, this or that ideological dispensation sought to define--and to restrict--the human being. In articulating his case for individual dignity, Ellison explored a number of explicitly anthropological themes, not least the centrality of language in the constitution of humanity and the dependency of undifferentiated or primitive communities on rituals of sacrifice. Like a number of his contemporaries, Ellison sensed that modernity was in many ways a cultural atavism, in which hard-earned truths about justice and liberty were threatened by the seductions of myth, scapegoating, and transient solidarity wrought by hysterical masses at the expense of arbitrarily selected victims. Beginning in the mid-1940s, Ellison began the composition of a novel based on his sense that ethical progress required the acknowledgment above all of the individual, not exactly in the abstract, but outside the categories that clamored to subsume him. And yet, in Ellison's analysis, any awareness of the sanctity of discrete persons depended (quite tragically, perhaps), on a prior historical experience of domination. Before the new generation might be liberated from the structures of bondage, those structures must have existed, and must have produced, over a long

period, the heightened contradictions that throw injustice into relief and permit its abolition. The story of freedom can only begin in the description of enslavement. But who is enslaved? And how, before tasting liberty, does he grasp his servitude?

2

Expelled from the Eden of the southern black college where he studies to be an engineer, the protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947) finds himself naked and helpless in that modern city-of-the-plain, New York, where every outsider, it appears, runs the risk of being someone else's victim and where the way "inside," the way to social integration and economic prosperity, either remains a mystery or stands arbitrarily blocked. The very notion of the "inside" or the "outside" falls into confusion. The city is the site of a perpetual and probably unassuageable crisis: "Moving into the subway, I was pushed along by the milling salt-and-pepper mob" (*Invisible Man* 157). The word *milling* is carefully chosen, implying as it does the relentless undifferentiation of the individual as the mass absorbs and crushes him. The Invisible Man feels "shock and fear" (159). His expectations do not match the stream of novel sights and encounters. Who belongs to what category, who is "in" and who is "out," and to which of the categories is it most advantageous to belong? Something so simple as a casual stroll down the sidewalk can provoke these dilemmas. The one who thinks himself "inside" discovers that he has been "outside" all along, and that the insiders plan on keeping him there until, finally, the scorned individual retains himself only, his ego a bastion against revilement by the world, its sovereignty peculiarly affirmed by the hostility ranged against it. It is a strange modification, not quite an inversion, of Emerson's idea of Self-Reliance: The Self-Reliance of the subject under siege, a mild form of paranoia, a neurotic tic as an adaptation to inimical conditions. Thus Ellison compares his protagonist, "ever so distantly," as he carefully puts it, "with the narrator of *Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground*" (*IM* xix), one of the founding statements of that modern dilemma of the individual versus the system. Existence, according to Ellison, amounts to a great fatal labyrinth whose purpose, nothing less than the sacrifice of dignity to power, cannot be defeated by a contrary power, but only by guile, a kind of casuistry, in combination with moral integrity and a clever tongue. (And it would be hard to say which trumps which, morality or cleverness. "Let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth" seems to be the appropriate formula.) As the ultimate minority is the minority of one, no one can avoid becoming enmeshed in one sacrificial trap after another, so that survival (psychic survival, at least) depends on the victim's discovery of how to overcome the particularly devious sacrificial trap of unwitting collaboration with one's persecutors. An individual's most insidious sacrificer, in the world of *Invisible Man*, is invariably himself; and the "pulverized individual" of the modern age does not salvage himself from sin, Ellison writes, "through his identification with the guilty acts of an Oedipus, a Macbeth or a Medea . . . but [rather] with those who are indeed defeated" (*Shadow and Act* 40). Ellison invokes metaphors of the bull in the arena or the fish on the line (40) to make his point.

Expulsion and isolation together constitute a trial by means of which the subject transcends his persecution and grows stronger. Ellison never calls it *Imitatio Christi*, but that is what it is in effect. Preparing for his first full day in the city, the Invisible Man thinks back on a homely image: "Family prayer . . . gathering around the stove at mealtime and kneeling with heads bowed over the seats of our chairs" (162). Finding a Gideon Bible in his room at the Men's House, he picks it up with the thought of reading in Genesis, but is too distracted by his desperation to do so. In his fascinating essay, "On Initiation Rites and Power" (1969), Ellison writes, apropos of *Invisible Man*, that "the narrator of the story goes through a number of rites of passage, rites of initiation," many of them physically dangerous and spiritually harrowing, with the result that he "achieve[s] a sense of self-consciousness through [his]

own efforts" (*Going to the Territory* 40).

One such "rite" is the gruesome "Battle Royal." On the promise that it entails a college scholarship, the teenaged Invisible Man (in his "pre-invisible days" [IM 18]) enters what he believes to be a speaking engagement at a white businessman's club. When he shows up for the event, however, he discovers that, before he or anyone else speaks, he will have to don boxing gloves and duke it out, blindfolded, with a group of black toughs. The businessmen have set up a ring in the center of the dining hall. The atmosphere is gladiatorial and orgiastic. Before the fight, for example, the businessmen make the protagonist and his compeers watch a lewd performance by a blonde stripper, which shocks and humiliates them. In the perverse ethos of Jim Crow, it also sets them up, because it embroils them willy-nilly in a racial-sexual scenario in which they fill the role of lascivious onlookers. On the street, should any of them stare at a white woman, stripper or *bourgeoise*, he would run the risk of accusation and be under the lethal threat of the outraged mob. It is a formula for lynching. Structurally, then, the Invisible Man and his companions in the *imbroglio* would seem to be ocular abusers of the stripper, but of course they themselves form the real object of exploitation, as the businessmen, with lusty amusement, watch them watching the ecdysiast. One circle is contained within another. The fight itself is a bloody *mêlée*, anticipating the race-riot at the novel's climax:

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked. Blows landed below the belt and kidney, with the gloves open as well as closed, and with my eye partially opened now there was not so much terror. . . . The smoke [from the cigar-smoking onlookers] was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun around me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth, blood spattering on my chest. (23)

3

Ellison creates a remarkably vivid image of the Girardian *crise sacrificielle*. "It was complete anarchy" and "everybody fought everybody else." The perfume of tobacco smoke sanctifies the spectacle like a wafting of incense and makes it all the more ritualistic. The *swirling* quality of the mix-up anticipates the metaphor of *milling* later applied to the scene of the Invisible Man's first day in New York. After the fight, the men invite the boxers to pick up their money, in the form of coins which they have scattered over the floor. When he grabs the first coin, however, the Invisible Man gets a nasty shock: The carpet has been electrified to provide additional entertainment for the gleeful audience. Bloodied and dazed and with no one listening, the Invisible Man nevertheless gives his speech.

Surprisingly, in the essay on initiation rites, Ellison describes the cruel joke in other than denunciatory terms. On the one hand, the "Battle Royal" constitutes "a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority. On the other hand, as a literary person trying to make up stories out of recognizable experience, and as one who was reading a lot about myth and the function of myth and ritual in literature, it was necessary that I see the . . . situation as something more than a group of white men having sadistic fun with a group of Negro boys" (*GT* 49-50). Understood as the equivalent in a deritualized age of a "rite," Ellison argues, the "Battle Royal" corresponds to a type of practical joke known as a Fool's Errand, and such jokes fulfill the

function, in a progressively deritualized society, of jolting the naive out of their naivety. They insult in the way that strengthens--of which phenomenon Ellison elsewhere eloquently speaks. Neither Ellison nor his Invisible Man wallows in the pity of the experience: both comprehend it under the notions of awakening and spiritual growth. (Forced growth, certainly, but growth nevertheless: *Was mich nicht umbringt*, as a certain hammer-wielder once said.) That is not to justify the affront, but rather to assimilate it to something positive and to wrest it from the intentions of those who stage it. "To become less--in order to become more" (354) is Ellison's formula. In a social world that conspicuously lacks explicit rituals, but which seems to be in the thrall of implicit ones, such diminutions of assumed status have an almost occult importance: to cull from the victim a disposition which is the opposite of victimary. The Invisible Man thus avoids the temptation of what Eric Gans calls *victimary rhetoric*, that claim of "exclusion from the center" (*Signs of Paradox* 177) that has gradually become the dominant discourse of contemporary Western society. The Invisible Man appears to understand that, in Gansian terms, "the rhetoric of invidious comparison belongs to the context of social revolution" (177), whereas what he wants is not to overthrow the existing order by organized mass revenge, but simply the dignity of his independence from the mimetic mandates of the collective.

Significantly, Ellison at first conceived a superficially quite different novel concerning the trials of a black airman shot down behind German lines who becomes the ranking officer and therefore the *de jure* spokesman for the mass of other POWs. Part of the prisoner's struggle, as Ellison explains, would have consisted in his agonized attempt to receive, from those whom he outranked, acknowledgment of his actual merit while they--their perception deformed by color-prejudice--refused to make the (necessarily verbal) acknowledgment of that merit. Ellison crowds *The Invisible Man* with obvious Hegelian imagery, and his treatment of consciousness, although tricked out in Emersonian phraseology, derives from the Master-Slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*. "Self-consciousness," as Hegel puts it, "exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged":

The Notion of this its unity in its duplication embraces many and varied meanings. Its moments, then, must on the one hand be held strictly apart, and on the other hand must in this differentiation at the same time also be taken and known as not distinct, or in their opposite significance. The twofold significance of the distinct moments has the nature of self-consciousness to be infinite, or directly the opposite of the determinateness in which it is posited. (111 [Section 178])

As Ellison himself avowed autobiographically *apropos* of literary creation: "One ha[s] to be conscious" (*GT* 40), where *consciousness* means acknowledging the world, and where it especially means acknowledging the high-cultural world of letters in which insight about the anthropological verities is most carefully recorded. The Invisible Man's speech after the "Battle Royal" consists almost entirely of clichés, but these at least indicate that he is not an illiterate. He has set down his taproots, so to speak, in the intellectual soil. As consciousness is temporal and historical, the dialogue with the other that it requires must embrace those voices out of the past that are, in their peculiar way, the only thing that we know. In the ur-scenario for *Invisible Man*, the white POWs refuse to acknowledge their black superior; in modernity, with its conceit of originality, novelty, and autonomy, the present consciousness refuses to acknowledge the past consciousness. The delusion of self-sufficiency is, indeed, the very negation of consciousness; and at its center lies the implicit annihilation of the mass of previous persons. Since all knowledge is rooted in the past, discarding the tradition is also the model of stupidity. Denial and stupidity go together in the Ellisonian scheme.

Invisible Man is a novel about truth, an attempt to represent the verities of the actually existing world. What might be called the ontologically pre-given world (the world before and despite theory) is whatever exists prior to perception and prior to evaluation (the excellence of a man, for example, or the evil of another); but truth in the human sense does not become truth until it finds precise verbal expression about which there is reasoned agreement in conformance with what is ontologically pre-given. Once that is achieved, truth only remains truth if it does not become a mere proposition. Ethical language, for Ellison, is language that remains in contact with the world. The existential problem that Ellison sets himself in *Invisible Man* is, then, precisely the problem of "conscience and consciousness" (xix) and the ability of the "hyperconscious [individual] to articulate the issues which [have] tortured [him]" (xix). Language, Ellison argues, ought to be the living medium of truth, of self-discovery, of friendship, and of reasoned communal bonds; but it has become, instead, the turbid medium of lies and the abused utensil of cynical power-seekers like those in the Brotherhood (of which more later), who traduce the protagonist in the second half of the tale. "For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free," Ellison writes in an essay on "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," it can likewise "blind, imprison and destroy" (GT 24). Betrayed in turn by the president of his college, by the low-level managers of the paint factory where he finds his first job, and finally by the inhuman machinations of the Brotherhood (which exploits him, ironically, for his ability to speak), Ellison's hero becomes a universal figure standing for the struggle, in the twentieth century, between individual dignity and the systematic power of the ideological state or party. Ideology, by its nature, consistently sacrifices the actual to the potential, the existent to the non-existent. No area of life remains untouched by this struggle, not even those areas in which the quest for truth is nominally the commission.

Like all forms of rhetoric, ideology stems from an unassimilated resentment; it constitutes, as Gans has written, an "antidemocratic inversion of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic" entailing "terrible consequences" because "its real target is not the slave at all, nor even his proletarian counterpart, but his bourgeois employer" (189). Ellison knows what Gans knows. In the latter's words, there is "violence latent in this inversion" (189). The slave may rise up and subdue his master, but that does not institute justice; it merely reverses the roles. One must beware the seduction in the promise of liberation because envy given license becomes a quest for absolute revenge against the putative oppressors:

The bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class of society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society. (Marx, *Communist Manifesto* 93)

As always in *myth*, what begins as critique ends up as accusation--and worse, as a call for annihilation. *Ecrasez l'infâme!* The Communist order that ultimately supersedes the bourgeois or capitalist order will be a paradise of equality and creativity, but it will remain founded upon "the vanishing of capital" (100). The family, as Marx says, "will vanish" along with the insult of property. The nastiness lies concealed under the useful vagueness of the verb *to vanish*. Revolutionary theory amounts, in Marx's rhetoric, to "a new social Gospel" (116), but one which despite the euphemism will be founded on murder.

Not all ideologies are ideologies of the Left, although they are invariably collectivist in character. The secondary reality of utopian doctrine can manifest itself on the Right as Fascism or the *Caudillo* state or, as is sometimes the case, in politically neutral garb. Once, as the story goes, there was Camelot, or the Golden Age. Once there was innocence. Then catastrophe happened and the long decline into disorder began. Or, in a variant of the tale, there was an illusion of innocence which was dispelled and about which the putatively disillusioned consciousness is now ambiguous. Ignorance, it weighs, might be bliss. Consider, for example, the brutally disrupted idyll of the Invisible Man's academic life. "It was a beautiful college," the Invisible Man reminisces: "The buildings were old and covered with vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun. Honeysuckle and purple wisteria hung heavy from the trees and white magnolias mixed with their scents in the bee-humming air" (34). So does the Invisible Man describe the outward form of his Eden. He uses a species of romantic imagery ("honeysuckle and purple wisteria") that might be drawn, say, from Margaret Mitchell, or some other Southern writer, an employment which itself makes the scene profoundly suspect. The beauty of the campus, which would seem to conduce to the intellectual development of the students, conceals a parochialism that turns out to be deliberately imposed and jealously guarded by Chancellor Bledsoe and the other officials of the institution. Tony Tanner has noted in "The Music of Invisibility" that as Ellison's protagonist "manages to extract himself from a series of fixed environments, so the author manifests a comparable suppleness by avoiding getting trapped in one style" (Bloom 48). I would emphasize the Invisible Man's changing perception rather than Ellison's shifting style. But the changes in tone, diction, and syntactical structure from section to section in the novel remain important. In his Introduction, Ellison insists on the "ironic" intellectual quality of his protagonist, whom he visualizes as a "blues-toned laugher-at-wounds who include[s] himself in his indictment of the human condition" (xviii). Indeed, then, the Invisible Man intends the idyllic diction at the beginning of Chapter Two to denote a false perception, a delusion, which has since been rendered transparent. This does not preclude a genuine sense of loss, of course, but it insists on measuring the sweetness lost against the lucidity gained. When the train of memory reaches the limits of the campus, that point of transition "where the road turned off to the insane asylum" (35), the Invisible Man begins to underline the falseness of the foregone perception, or rather of the memory of that perception: "I always come this far [in the reminiscence]," he says, "and open my eyes" (35). After describing the contiguity of the campus and the local insane asylum, he remarks elegiacally that:

It's so long ago and far away that here in my invisibility I wonder if it happened at all. Then in my mind's eye I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding. (36)

In the context of the then-and-there, the implicit meaning of the statue is positive: education lifts the veil of ignorance from enthralled eyes so that, at last, they can see as eyes are meant to see. But a more powerful revelation comes into play to supersede the obvious one. The *opening of the eyes* in the profoundest sense has always been accompanied in Western literature by penetrating affliction, as in the case of Oedipus, for whom illumination is coincident with blinding and expulsion. In the context of the then-and-there, one accepts implicitly that, the veil of ignorance lifted, the "kneeling slave" will rise, to

stand as an equal with the godlike Founder. Speaking of the august Founder (known by no other name), the college trustee Mr. Norton later says that "he had the power of a king, or in a sense, of a god" (45), a delivering god. Nevertheless, as a frozen image, the statue remains the depiction of a gross inequality: The genuflecting wretch who grovels beneath the erect Founder. From his "distance," Ellison's Invisible Man notes that, in its frozenness ("cold Father"), the image does not indicate its direction of movement. Is the veil being "lifted" or "lowered"? Is it a case of "revelation" or of "more efficient blinding"? If one means of Self-Reliance is, in Thoreau's term, *to front life directly*, is this what the slave will rise to do? Or will he merely front the Founder and so receive his ideas about life indirectly? The absurd conversation between the Invisible Man and Mr. Norton during the automobile ride that precipitates the former into his travails, bears on this. Norton wants the Invisible Man to tell him his "fate." "Only you can tell me what it really is" (42), Mr. Norton says. The trustee has also wished aloud that the Invisible Man might find for himself "a pleasant fate" (40). The invocation of that heavily weighted word, fate, reminds the Invisible Man of the classical notion of tragedy, where the cosmic dispensation takes the form of a destroying Ananke or Nemesis. "How could anyone's fate be pleasant? I had always thought of it as something painful. No one spoke of it as pleasant--not even Woodridge, who made us read Greek plays" (40).

6

In the *Oedipus*, Sophocles makes ironic use of the word *oida*, meaning both "to know" and (etymologically) "to see." Oedipus seeks to know the identity of Laius' murderer and through investigating the crime comes to know that the perpetrator is himself, whereupon, his eyes opened at last, he blinds himself and goes into exile from Thebes. What Oedipus thought of as real (his remoteness from the crime) has turned out, on close inspection, to be the very perfection of falsehood, for he is the criminal whom he has sought: When he had eyes, he was blind; and in the moment of knowledge, his every assumption about himself destroyed, he puts out his eyes as useless, depriving himself of the exterior vision. Thus Ellison's allusion constitutes a sinister foreshadowing of the Invisible Man's own unpleasant, but terribly insightful, fate. Destiny, in *Invisible Man*, consists paradoxically in the abdication of the self in favor of theories and ideologies about what one is or is supposed to be. One elects fate by rejecting oneself, by abdicating one's moral will, by making some verbal formula one's master. Ellison intends the statue of the Founder to represent fate in the form of man-made systems, even well-intentioned ones, that subsume the men who made them and issue not in liberation but in misery. The college itself forms part of such a system: although it was founded to fulfill the Emersonian program of Self Reliance, to make Americans out of ex-slaves, it actually functions to limit and restrain intellectual development. The black man is not delivered but preserved in the enchanting simulacrum of deliverance and therefore maintained in subjugation. Mr. Norton explains to the Invisible Man why his fate is important to him (to Norton): "You are important because if you fail I have failed by one individual, one defective cog" (45). In Mr. Norton's eyes, the individual student is but a cog in the systematic machine; and once we have invoked machinery, we are close again to the metaphoric chain *milling* and *pulverization*. And what precisely does Norton forfeit if the Invisible Man should "fail"? The answer is not apparent. The statement seems purely rhetorical, a pious instance of self-assuagement. Like just about everyone else's affirmations in the novel, Norton's claim of charity turns out to be so much ideological double-talk. What he really believes in is not the reality of other people (or their dignity, which would follow), but the secondary reality of abstractions which demotes persons to "cogs" and makes a fetish of his own moral rectitude. The truth of the situation stands inadvertently revealed.

The Jim Trueblood episode underscores the "truth problem" that will soon turn Ellison's protagonist into

a scapegoat and drive him into exile, thus fulfilling the tragic program that the allusion to Greek drama has already anticipated. Trueblood is a sharecropper living near the college who has become notorious for a sexual assault on his own daughter. In a reductive but real sense, Trueblood is someone who tells the truth, in this case the truth about his incestuous relation with his daughter. According to normative values, Trueblood should at the very least have become a pariah in the community; perhaps he should be charged, prosecuted, and, if convicted, punished. His wife thinks so; she vehemently berates him for his "wicked sin befo' the eyes of God" (67). Instead, however, he becomes the object of a perverse cult, supported by the local whites who find in his behavior the confirmation of their preformed and zealously held judgments about blacks. "That's what I don't understand," Trueblood says; "I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. Except that my wife an' daughter won't speak to me, I'm better off than I ever was before" (67).

Mr. Norton, too, that follower of Emerson and trustee of the college, appears fascinated in a morbid and voyeuristic way by Trueblood's saga of incest. Immediately after hearing it, Mr. Norton announces to the Invisible Man his need for a "stimulant" (69), a strange way of referring to alcohol, whose effects are normally narcotic. The vet's words at the Golden Day, the bar-*cum*-brothel where Mr. Norton's craving for drink at last unluckily brings him, thus make a certain (insane) sense: "To some you are the great white father," the vet says to Norton, "to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come unto the Golden Day" (93). The vet, who prefigures what the Invisible Man will become (an ironist who at any rate *appears* insane to others), has a diagnosis for him, too, saying cryptically to Norton (and obliquely to the student) that the Invisible Man:

has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but he short-circuits with his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it . . . He's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man! (94)

7

So also has Doctor Bledsoe, the glowering, cynical President of the college, learned to repress his humanity. Acting like the tyrant that he is (the administrative personality filling the narrow limits of his office as though they were the walls of the universe itself), Bledsoe arbitrarily accuses the Invisible Man of having forgotten "how to lie" and then immediately chastises him for lying (139). Power, it seems, depends on a confusion of terms, on a certain distortion in the casual epistemology according to which people live their lives--and live them, in the main, successfully. Ellison suggests the etiology of Bledsoe's massive repression-- the double racial standard intrinsic to Jim Crow--but the point is that *whatever its origin*, whether sociological, psychological, or economic, the repression still produces a gross deformation, a pathology, and it eventuates in the radically unjust treatment--the betrayal, the denial--that Bledsoe metes out to the perfectly innocent young man. Bledsoe sacrifices the Invisible Man to power, to his (Bledsoe's) own power, and he says so quite explicitly during his combined tirade against and condemnation of the Invisible Man: "Negroes don't control this school," he catechizes, "nor white folks either. True, they support it, but I control it" (142). "Control" is the operative concept. Likening himself to the Founder, Bledsoe refers to himself royally (the Invisible Man is thus engaged in yet another

"Battle Royal," this time with a black man, rather than white society, as his persecutor):

I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. . . . When you buck up against me, you're bucking up against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power-- which means government power. (142)

The wronged youngster has threatened to publicize Mr. Norton's promise that no harm should befall him on account of the mishap at the Golden Day. Bledsoe tells the youngster that he can "go ahead, go tell [his] story" and so "match your truth against my truth" (144). Thus, along with the confusion of regular terms, power also insists on a radical relativism of claims. Truth becomes entirely perspectival, something to be imposed by *force majeure*. It all strikes the lad as a "disgusting sea of words" (144) and he echoes Pilate's ironic commentary on the trial of Jesus: "Truth, truth, what was truth?" (144). To complete his destruction of the erstwhile star-student, Bledsoe gives him the eight sealed letters which will insure the exile's incapacity when he arrives in New York, whither Bledsoe sends him on the false hope of his eventual return. But Bledsoe is one father who will not welcome home his prodigal son; he expels the Invisible Man irrevocably and the sorry emissary, cursed and foredoomed, shall never return. The Invisible Man, meanwhile, goes on playing the role of Oedipal scapegoat and self-immolating sacrifice: "Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment" (147). Yet what the "code" might be has never adequately been explained except negatively through Bledsoe's sinister invocation of power, by which he seeks to realize his own possibilities at the expense of everyone else's. *Code* is Ellison's word for "theory" and for "ideology" insofar as these obfuscate reality and induce delusion in the subject. When Bledsoe refers to "*my truth*," rather than simply the truth, his aspiration toward the center at the expense of everyone on the periphery, his delusion of godhood, becomes obvious. Perhaps it is simply the case, as William Barrett has observed in *The Death of the Soul*, that power and possibility have assumed an ever more pronounced and dominant role in twentieth century thinking, until they have indeed become the dominant marks by which modern people would understand Being *in and of itself*, Being as *all that is*, including the *human* element in all that is. That, it might be said, is Bledsoe's ideology, however prettily or pragmatically he puts it. In fact, he puts it brutally enough, but the whiff of justification hints at a certain unease in his declaration. Under this vision, the universe becomes nothing but a great Theater of Power in which the power-holder wishes to remain at center-stage. Anthropologically, this amounts to the arrogation by a single subject of the sign, which belongs, originally, to the community as a whole. "The truth of the originary sign," Gans writes, "is the birth of the human":

The sign is what protects the human community against its potential annihilation in mimetic conflict. In the face of this danger, its truth as a gesture of representation rather than a gesture of appropriation is not a foregone conclusion. It is only because the members of the originary community accepted this truth as the revelation of central Being that we are here to speculate about it. (42-53).

8

Bledsoe, usurping the unoccupied center, subverts the symmetry of the communal designation. He imitates the projected "central Being" whose presence guarantees reciprocal, hence peaceful, relations

along the periphery. He imitates the master and can only sustain the imitation by coercing others to take the role of slave. This is the paradigm of the demonic.

The statue of the Founder, with its suggestion of the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic later taken over by Marx, thus becomes the *Leitmotif* of Ellison's novel. If *Invisible Man's* first half, culminating in the expulsion, resembles the narrative of Paradise in Genesis, then the second half, culminating in the Harlem race-riot, fomented in large part by the Brotherhood, resembles a Dantesque *descensus*, a version of the Inferno in existential terms for the mid-twentieth century and still valid as a new century dawns. It also reminds us of the "Battle Royal" at the beginning of the novel, where the Invisible Man finds no succor in the Bible: "I turned to Genesis," he reports, "but could not read." If power is all, then truth is naught, and the Bible, despite its claims to revelation, is no longer truth, but mere verbiage. Morality disappears ("vanishes," as Marx would say), along with truth. In this context, we should contrast the figure of the Founder, towering over the slave, with the family image that the Invisible Man remembers in the moment when he finds that he cannot concentrate on Scripture--that of his father and mother and siblings *all* kneeling, with heads bowed, in prayer. They bow to no man, but to the victim-redeemer who renounces power and eschews any temporal kingdom.

Thus, in the context of racialized class-warfare and left-wing politics, Ellison's narrator finds that a certain Nietzschean prophecy has been fulfilled. Given that God is dead and that human existence amounts to no more than a ceaseless *bellum omnium contra omnes*, then nothing remains but a coercive dissimulation of the misery. "A valid and obligatory designation of things is invented" which, enforced by the most powerful, others agree to obey; and when someone "abuses the fixed conventions," perhaps by calling attention to their arbitrariness, "society will no longer trust him but exclude him":

What, then, is truth? [Nietzsche asks] A mobile army of metaphors, metonym[ies], and anthropomorphisms--in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (The Portable Nietzsche 47)

Nietzsche is certainly cognizant of echoing Pilate, which ought to coax us not to take this widely current *aperçu* as endorsing what it describes. What it describes is the chaos that afflicts concepts, especially the ethical ones, when rhetoricians invoke the figures of power and class resentment. Thus do the college's "Great Traditions" (37), which the Invisible Man formerly venerated, now appear to him under this type of revelation, as do indeed all institutions and the "sum of human relations," as Nietzsche says. The Whitmanesque-elegiac passage following the initial description of the campus in Chapter Two refers to the protagonist's disillusionment: "Oh, long green stretch of campus, Oh, quiet songs at dusk, Oh, moon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights, Oh, bugle that called in the morning, Oh, drum that marched us militarily at noon--what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream?" (36). Note the metaphorical progression from Edenic verdancy, through the simple community implicit in choral song, to romantic visual imagery, and finally to military symbols like bugle and drum whose function is to transmit the signals of command. While it is true that the security of the college life has proven itself radically insecure, this does not mean, however, that the sum and total of the Invisible Man's experiences there have been false. In dismissing it all as an unmitigated mendacity, he is being

uncritical; he is allowing his resentment to revise his prior experience without any mitigation, and this amounts to a dissimulation of what in actuality must have been a complicated experience. But the point is that the injection of power-rhetoric into plain observation and casual reason deforms those activities and deprives the subject of stable concepts. Abused by a pervert (Bledsoe), the Invisible Man experiences a kind of ethical vertigo. Once again, is the Founder lifting the veil from the slave's head or lowering it over him? By the time that he arrives in New York, the Invisible Man has come to suspect that he is lowering it, although he still naively clings to what he will later regard as an outmoded hope, namely, that he can rise by his own effort in a milieu that recognizes merit without reference to color. (Merit is a moral concept with no place in an order determined by power.) He now indeed himself begins to employ military metaphors; ensconced in the Men's House, he says, "I began to plan my campaign for the next day" (163), a campaign--note the military, the *power* terminology--that is foredoomed to fail. Damned by Bledsoe's letters, which he foolishly disdains to inspect, he experiences one rejection after another until Emerson Junior reveals the crushing truth to him by showing him Bledsoe's declaration:

9

"The bearer of this letter is a former student of ours (I say former because he shall never again, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment.

Due, however, to circumstances the nature of which I shall explain to you in person on the occasion of the next meeting of the board, it is to the best interests of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his expulsion. For it is indeed his hope to return here to his classes in the fall. However, it is to the best interests of the great work which we are dedicated to perform, that he continue undisturbed in these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst." (191)

Emerson Junior affirms that "you'll never return . . . There is no point in blinding yourself to the truth" (192).

But even Emerson Junior is out for something. His invitation to the Invisible Man to join his other "guests" at "the Calamus [Club]" is an overture to homosexual seduction. (Kerry McSweeney agrees [*Race and Identity* 71]). "Perhaps you'd like to be my valet?" the seducer asks. (192). The revelation, however, that the received values are false (in Nietzsche's sense) *is itself false*. The most indubitable truth is the ostensive truth, the *thing* or *condition* to which we point and which we all acknowledge. As Gans argues, propositional truths move us away from the immediacy of the ostensive, building up a linguistic reality that is "self-sufficient"; the proposition "locates the object within a linguistic model" (53) and so removes it from reality. Mischief occurs when the origin of the propositional object in the real world toward which we point loses its effectiveness. "Not only is language capable of misleading, but even when true, it constructs a fictional world separate from reality" (62). Ideology might well be described as the intensification of "deferral" to the point where the substrate of reality recedes into oblivion and a purely propositional reality takes its place. The discourses of power typically enact just such a break with reality. The Invisible Man, through no fault of his own save youth and confusion, tacitly accepts Bledsoe's claim that power is all and that he (Bledsoe) is the power. What is false is the claim that certain basic intuitions, like the intuition that human relations ought to be reciprocal, correspond merely to

palliative metaphors.

The only honest human being whom the Invisible Man meets on his disastrous first day in New York is the blues-singing push-cart man, who appears to take people as they are and to use language creatively and truthfully:

"Well, daddy-o, it's been good talking with a youngster from the old country but I got to leave you now. This here's one of them good ole downhill streets. I can coast a while and won't be worn out at the end of the day. Damn if I'm a-let 'em run me into my grave. I be seeing you again sometime--And you know something?"

"What's that?"

"I thought you was trying to deny me at first, but now I be pretty glad to see you . . ." (175-76)

The theme of denial is once again Biblical or, more specifically, from the Gospels. To the Roman soldiers (at the behest of power), Simon Peter betrays the whereabouts of Christ and, in so doing, treats the non-arbitrary human relation as though it were arbitrary; this act leads directly to the death of Jesus on the Cross at Golgotha. The Invisible Man has himself been *denied* (a word whose root sense is "negation") by the falsely godlike Bledsoe; the push-cart man reveals to the Invisible Man that he, too, (the Invisible Man, that is), possesses the capacity to deny. But as the push-cart man affirms, the Invisible Man has not denied *him*. In treating the eccentric at least formally as a moral equal, the Invisible Man has observed the rule of reciprocity and has thus, if only tentatively, rejected the ideological substitute-reality of power, with its mandatory gesture of denial. This chance encounter, seemingly trivial, thus acquires major significance in Ellison's narrative, since it effectively models the (positive) situation which is typologically opposite to that which has thrust the Invisible Man into the New Babylon of *polemos* and deceit. Bledsoe despised the Invisible Man as something less than human (he calls him by the dehumanizing term *nigger* [139]) and wishes never to see him again. Bledsoe thus indulges in the exercise of unadulterated power, of *libido dominandi*, and becomes indistinguishable from the white authority behind Jim Crow. The push-cart man engages the exile in simple conversation, spiced by slang and song, and wishes (sincerely enough as one must believe) to see him again: "I be seeing you again sometime," he says, pushing his load of discarded blueprints down the street. But the model of open interaction, the blueprint for honest relations, remains unfulfilled. A promise of open relations is not the same as the establishment of them. Having exhausted his possibilities of upscale employment, the Invisible Man has recourse to the paint factory (the "Liberty" paint factory!) and ends up in the comic-hellish boiler room with the clownish madman Lucius Brockway. If Mr. Norton had figured the Invisible Man as a "cog," then the Dantesque boiler-room seems to validate the metaphor. Like the workers in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, which might well be one of the sources of Ellison's imagery, and where the social asymmetry is redeemed in the end by an act of charity, the Invisible Man's task is restricted to reading dials and twisting valves; he is little more than part of the machinery. The social structure at the paint factory grimly resembles that at the campus, as Ellison's protagonist latterly has come to understand it. The college has its Founder and the paint factory has its "Old Man" (208).

10

The paint factory indeed has a legion of Old Men, from the alienating managers, to Brockway, to the

Union members who, in one of the novel's many paradigmatic scapegoating scenes, arbitrarily and automatically treat the Invisible Man as an informer. Ellison once again poses the sacrificial question of the inside and the outside: "This fellow could be a fink, even if he was hired right this minute!" (221), the Union-members conclude in reference to the Invisible Man. The reasoning that they adduce to support the charge illustrates the breakdown in thinking that stems from the belief that power is all: "Maybe he ain't a fink . . . but brothers, I want to remind you that nobody knows it. . . . Hell, I've made a study of Finkism. Finkism is *born* into some guys" (221). Ellison stresses the spontaneous unanimity of the group, who assent volubly to the absurd allegations. Once again the Invisible Man becomes the object of "violent" (221) stares. He is the reviled center-of-attention.

The Invisible Man seems to have stepped into a position formerly occupied by Brockway, who works in the depths of the paint factory. Brockway is another eccentric, like the push-cart man, but he lacks friendliness; persecution has warped him until he shows as much hostility and self-absorption as Bledsoe. Bearing the signs of the scapegoat, he naturally attracts free-floating ire, and this warps him all the more. Brockway's cognomen of "Lucius" is, significantly, a classic slave-name, a Latin appellation imposed on his chattel by a master. The name is the mark of the master's power. Power corrupts, truly enough; it corrupts the perpetrator and the victim alike because it defers humanity for the sake of naked dominance.

Ellison hints at the psychic trauma that results in a phenomenon like Brockway. Abuse leads to confusion, a drastic breakdown of the ego. The Invisible Man himself endures something like this after the revelation of the content in Bledsoe's letter:

I lay shaking with anger. It was no good. I thought of young Emerson. What if he'd lied out of some ulterior motive of his own? Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. What was young Emerson's plan--and why should it have included me? Who was I anyway? I tossed fitfully. Perhaps it was a test of my good will and faith--but that's a lie, I thought. It's a lie and you know it's a lie. I had seen the letter and it had practically ordered me killed. By slow degrees . . . (194).

It is on this occasion that he conceives the remainder of his life as "revenge." Brockway, too, moves between the two poles of humiliation and a desire for revenge, until those conditions finally set the limit to his consciousness. The old man sees all others as enemies and can find no opening into communion with his fellow men. He finally leaves the Invisible Man to die in a deliberately engineered explosion among the distillation equipment deep in the bowels of the factory. The Invisible Man remembers it later as "a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension. Then a great weight landed upon me and I seemed to sprawl in an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery, my head pressed back against a huge wheel, my body splattered with stinking goo" (230). He is Norton's "cog," broken, he is Christ crucified, he is a slave stretched over a barrel, all at once. But he also intuits in it a "clear instant of consciousness" in which he "open[s] his eyes" (230). His electroshock therapy in the factory hospital confirms the vet's prediction that he would become, if he was not already, "a walking personification of the negative[,] a mechanical man!" (242)--and thus akin to a statue, to *the* statue, or rather to the portion of it that represents the slave. As always in Ellison's novel, insight springs from even as it is overwhelmed by humiliation.

Helped back toward health and sanity by Mary Rambo, his kindly landlady, the Invisible Man does not yet succeed in reintegrating himself with society (something which he in fact never quite does); he hardly

even manages to reintegrate with himself (a capacity which he does possess). Mary belongs to the network of Gospel allusions that surfaces everywhere in Ellison's densely referential novel. She provides the exemplar of generosity and decency: "Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. . . . Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive" (258). Yet, in the moment, the Invisible Man remains oddly unaware of her. If wounding precedes strengthening, if we acquire consciousness through an offense to our dignity which arouses our resentment, the Invisible Man has not yet received a sufficient insult to have gained into the reality, the co-equality, of the other. He still imagines that *his* suffering is unique and fails to identify, metaphorically, with the bull in the arena or the fish on the line. He wanders the streets. He talks to himself. He is like some medieval fool setting himself on itinerant display. (And Ellison indeed invokes "the Fool's Errand," as we have seen.) But witnessing the eviction of the elderly couple by the marshals stimulates him to renewed consciousness and action. Eviction, a form of expulsion, is a mode of sacrifice, and it would be legitimate to say that sacrifice, the degree-zero of injustice, is the basis of the Invisible Man's consciousness once it springs forth out of his immiseration. Meanwhile a man in the crowd brandishes a weapon and threatens to shoot. The Invisible Man makes a speech. He calls on all parties to obey the "laws" (278), in both the moral and the legal sense, law being the negation of power, a set of concepts to which everyone equally and convergently defers. The evictees have asked the police if they can spend fifteen more minutes inside their dispossessed apartment in order to pray there one last time. Their request, which the officials deny, links them to the familiar image that the Invisible Man remembers from his own childhood, of the family at prayer around the dinner table:

11

"Look at them [he says of the old couple], not a shack to pray in or an alley to sing the blues! They're facing a gun and we're facing it with them. They don't want the world, but only Jesus. They only want Jesus, just fifteen minutes of Jesus on the rug-bare floor. . . . How about it, Mr. Law? Do we get our fifteen minutes worth of Jesus? You got the world, can we have our Jesus?" (279)

Unfortunately, the Invisible Man also uses a spontaneous phrase--*what is to be done?*--which is the title of a notorious tract by Lenin, and this usage, as much as his nascent persuasiveness as a speaker, has the effect of drawing the sinister attention of the Brotherhood, who have infiltrated the crowd. (They have, as the Invisible Man says, an "ulterior motive.") The Brotherhood are, of course, the Communists, with whom Ellison, like so many other writers of his generation, had an early, later abrogated, relation. (Ellison's term is "rejected.") But their name links them to that other power-mongering conspiracy, the hooded brothers of the Ku Klux Klan, not imported but native to American shores: the proof of this is that, in the end, they take to lynching as readily and with as much monstrous gusto as their *lumpen* counterparts. In his projected earlier version of *Invisible Man*, according to Ellison himself, "the devil . . . was to have been a Machiavellian Nazi prison-camp official who spent his time pitting the black American against the white Americans" (GT 41). In the novel's realized form, the Brotherhood assumes this "Machiavellian" function. Brother Jack's initial conversation with the Invisible Man contains numerous indications of why Ellison rejected the ideas of revolution and class-warfare.

In the first place, Brother Jack's language conforms to a sacrificial, a mythic, rhetoric. Of the elderly couple being evicted from their apartment, Brother Jack says that "they're agrarian types" (290), or a class of people outmoded by history (whatever that might mean) on whom the Invisible Man "mustn't

waste his emotions" (291). Marx, of course, had referred to *the idiocy of rural life*, and Lenin and Stalin had focused the early phases of the Soviet class-war against the *Kulaks*, the peasant-farmers. In the ideological dispensation of the Brotherhood, such people "don't count":

[T]hey're already dead, defunct. History has passed them by. Unfortunately, but there's nothing to be done about them. They're like dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway. Better the storm should hit them-- (291)

Phrases like "the storms of history" and "there's nothing to be done" purge the situation of pathos and exempt potential interveners from *getting involved*, as one says. The old couple qualify only as "dead limbs," not again as *people* who have a fundamental claim on reciprocal relations with others. In refraining from his impulse to help them, the Invisible Man *denies* the charity advanced to him by the saintly Mary, who has nursed him back to health after the disaster in the paint factory. Ellison has invented a startling scene of false consciousness. The old ones are "incapable," says Brother Jack, "of rising to the necessity of the historical situation" (291). Note how the low-high, oblique-erect, metaphor in Brother Jack's diction corresponds formally to the *Leitmotif* of the Founder in relation to the slave. Is Brother Jack lifting the veil, or lowering it? If the Invisible Man feels fondly toward the old pair, Brother Jack claims, then he is "mistaken and sentimental" (291). What Brother Jack calls *history* (291) is the godlike abstract principle to which he is willing to offer other people, without compunction. But Brother Jack's implicit definition of the term *history* deserves examination, since it inverts the normative understanding of the concept. Normatively, history refers to the record of what has happened. History thus refers to the significant events that have shaped the present, that have resulted in the actual world, but it is not an agent or a force that itself acts; only men act, in varying degrees of incertitude about the future. But Brother Jack appears to mean by history a possibility that has not yet been realized, a known end, to attain which any means is permissible. The word *people*, too, is for Brother Jack a purely abstract term, since what he describes as "duty toward the people" necessitates the abandonment as "already dead" of individuals who remain, in fact, indubitably alive, often in dire straits. Then Czech dissident and later President Vaclav Havel once wrote, in an essay "On the Power of the Powerless" (1978), that it was a characteristic of totalitarian systems to treat power as though it were an anonymous force propitiated through dictatorially mandated ritual; in such societies "individuals are almost dissolved in the ritual," Havel argues, and the result is a kind of "automatism" (*Open Letters* 139-40). Everything is reduced to slogans, to mere words, and "all genuine problems and matters of critical importance are hidden beneath a thick crust of lies" (150). Endorsing the lie, a requirement of the system, conduces inevitably to a denial of the human. All of Brother Jack's, all of the Brotherhood's, terms are, in fact, instruments of *denial* both in the sense in which Ellison uses that term and in the sense in which Havel intends it in his description of Stalinist society in (then) Czechoslovakia. The Invisible Man's decision to work for the Brotherhood entails immediately that he should deny Mary, a woman to whom he owes a profound human debt. He must treat her as though she were dead, putting her outside the moral intuition that people confront each other in the mode of reciprocity, and that the breach of reciprocity puts the abrogating party illegitimately outside and above his community. The Brotherhood, in claiming to act on behalf of the oppressed even when it insists on ignoring their plight, itself appropriates the victimary role, and does so to justify a planned revenge against the social order as a whole. Shortly after learning of the contents of Bledsoe's letter, the Invisible Man has succumbed to his own resentment: "I could hardly sleep," he says, "for dreaming of revenge" (195). But the dream of retribution directly makes a slave, an automaton, of the subject. Gans' discussion of the radical rejection of universality bears on this and is worth quoting:

Victimary rhetoric is able to blackmail traditional liberalism because it hides its ontology behind an empirical mask. The universalist opponent is ostensibly denied his discursive position only until such time as the victimary position has been abolished. What is not generally recognized is that the basis of this rhetoric is the denial of the universal as such, that is, of any discursive position not implicated in victimization on one side or the other. The claim to take such a position is ipso facto proof that one is on the side of the victimizers. (SP 181)

Brother Jack's exposition to the Invisible Man illustrates the analysis. Brother Jack claims that the present is a moment "of indecision when all the old answers are proven false" (306); he claims, using the apocalyptic language of Marx, "that we stand at a terminal point in history, at a moment of supreme world crisis" and "destruction lies ahead unless things are changed" (307). According to Brother Jack, in words echoing those of Rousseau and Marx, "the enemies of man are dispossessing the world!" (307). Despite the Brotherhood's insistence that its terminology is "scientific" (308), then, it more accurately resembles the language of an ancient power cult, of a devotion that requires a blood-offering on its altar. Obsolete social types like the elderly couple being evicted from their apartment might be "dead," but

[I]t would be a great mistake to assume that the dead are absolutely powerless. They are powerless only to give the full answer to the new questions posed for the living by history. But they try! Whenever they hear the imperious cries of the people in a crisis, the dead respond. (306)

There is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon . . . but whatever you call it the reality of the world in crisis is a fact. We are all realists here, and materialists. It is a question of who shall determine the direction of events . . . (307)

The Invisible Man vacillates between the seduction of Brother Jack's talk and his sense that its very abstractness is an insult, an attempt to make him once more a cog in a machine: "I looked at them, fighting a sense of unreality . . . only this was real and now was the time for me to decide or to say I thought they were crazy and go back to Mary's" (308). He explains his debt to her. One of the Brothers asks what her "educational background" is and when the Invisible Man admits that "she's had very little" his examiner says of her that she is "more or less like the old couple that was evicted" (308). In the Brotherhood's terms, Mary exists no more than they do: "You must put aside your past," Brother Jack says; and then, touching the Invisible Man's glass with his own, he toasts (absurdly, chillingly) "to History" (309-10).

The Invisible Man's first assignment is to make a speech on the topic of evictions to a large Harlem audience. He proves himself a natural orator and soon makes real human contact with his audience. Sensing something close to a religious epiphany, he tells the audience, who are responding to him as though he were a preacher, that "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human":

Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong, I feel able to get things done! I can feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of the militant fraternity. . . . I am a

new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land. I feel that here tonight, in this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived. In each of you, in me, in us all. (346)

13

The repeated invocation of *feeling*, of *affect*, and the emphasis on the interpersonal (hence the reciprocal) character of the moment, arise authentically from the Invisible Man's best self; but they contradict the Brotherhood's ban against sentiment and individuality. *Feeling*, as a synonym of *empathy*, also guarantees that the Invisible Man has not entirely divorced his sense of the real from his intoxication by the propositional. He knows that real people are listening to them, that many of them originate in the same milieu as he, and that the religious style means something to them. The revivalist tone particularly rankles the Brotherhood. They, after all, are "realists" and "materialists." In a group-assessment after the event in which the novice agitator must submit to vituperative criticism by the other Brothers, the Invisible Man becomes the target of ritual chastisement. In a musty room at the center of his admonishers, the Invisible Man finds that he has taken on a whole new set of masters. A husky Brother who seems to enjoy abusing the new adherent of the cause eventually sums up the criticism in a single damning word: "In my opinion the speech was wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous," he snapped. "And worse than that, it was *incorrect!*" He pronounced 'incorrect' as though the term described the most heinous crime imaginable, and I stared at him openmouthed, feeling a vague guilt" (349). Brother Wrestrum (drop the W and exchange the U for two Os) agrees with his burly comrade: "I think the brother's speech was backward and reactionary" (350). The Invisible Man looks into Brother Wrestrum's face and sees "hate-burning eyes" (350), but he does not defend the element of *charity* in his speech that made the crowd respond to it. He denies, therefore, the immediate truth of what he has experienced. The *ad hoc* committee decides, therefore, that the Invisible Man must undergo ideological reconstruction ("training," they call it [351]) under the politically trustworthy mentorship of Brother Hambro. Submitting to the imposition (like Oedipus submitting to expulsion), the Invisible Man deludes himself with the consideration that "my possibilities were suddenly broadened" (353). Later, however, he has other thoughts:

Words, phrases, skipped through my mind. . . . What had I meant by saying that I had become "more human"? Was it a phrase that I had picked up from some preceding speaker, or a slip of the tongue? For a moment I thought of my grandfather and quickly dismissed him. What had an old slave to do with humanity? Perhaps it was something that Woodridge had said in the literature class back at college. I could see him vividly, half-drunk on words and full of contempt and exultation, pacing before the blackboard chalked with quotations from Joyce and Yeats and Sean O'Casey; thin, nervous, neat, pacing as though he walked a high wire of meaning upon which none of us would ever dare venture. (354)

The *ad hoc* committee corresponds to what Milan Kundera, in a commentary on Kafka, calls "the tribunal," and which he identifies as a characteristic anti-institution of the totalitarian century:

Tribunal: this does not signify the juridical institution for punishing people who have violated the laws of the state; the tribunal (or court) in Kafka's sense is a power that judges, that judges because it is a power; its power and nothing but

its power is what confers legitimacy on the tribunal. . . . The trial brought by the tribunal [moreover] is always absolute; meaning that it does not concern an isolated act, a specific crime (theft, fraud, rape), but rather concerns the character of the accused in its entirety. (*Testaments Betrayed* 227)

Internal dissensions, rivalries, and resentments characterize the closed society (the totalizing, sacrificial system) of the Brotherhood; so, too, do various opportunities for betrayal and for the staging of tribunals, in Kundera's sense. The Invisible Man indeed runs afoul of this malevolent, well-nigh Kafkaesque anti-system, in which everyone constantly maneuvers to gain power by denouncing someone else. In a crucially important scene which resembles the Union meeting in the paint factory, the Brotherhood's inner circle declares their new front-man guilty of subversion. No evidence exists to support this charge, or the accompanying claim that the Invisible Man has become an enemy of the organization, but the suspicion itself serves as sufficient grounds to convict him. "The Brotherhood is bigger than all of us," Brother MacAfee explains; "none of us as individuals count[s] when its safety is questioned" (405). In relation to Brother Jack's conception of history as, in its virtue, a new god whose arrival must be hastened, each member of the Brotherhood stands as the Bondsman stands to the Lord Hegel's dialectic, or as the slave to the Founder in the statuary icon. A comment by the historian of philosophy William Barrett will be appropriate here. Barrett notes that "Marxist manuals of philosophy refer to all philosophies that deal with the human subject as forms of 'irrationalism.' Their rationalism, of course, consists in technical intelligence, in the power over things (and over men considered simply as things); and this exalting of the technical intelligence over every other human attribute becomes demoniacal in action, as recent history has shown" (*Irrational Man* 274).

14

Sensing something rather like Barrett's insight, the Invisible Man's alienation from the Brotherhood now begins. One event in particular catalyzes this alienation. It is Brother Tod Clifton's death. It is with Clifton that the Invisible Man has formed his most human relationship during his period of subservience to the Brotherhood; the two fought Ras the Exhorter's gang together. But Clifton has disappeared and no one seems to know his whereabouts. While pounding the pavement in search of a new pair of shoes (a completely arbitrary impulse and yet one of his own), the Invisible Man notices a street-vendor selling obscene "Sambo" dolls on the sidewalk. This turns out to be Clifton, who has changed his status as radically as possible. The dolls themselves possess a symbolic significance related both to the Master-Slave dialectic and to the vet's description of the Invisible Man (Chapter Three) as an automaton, a "mechanical man." The manikin reduces the Master-Slave relation to its utmost hellish parody, with the Slave reduced to absolute thinghood; it is also, therefore, to be derived from the novel's *Leitmotif*, the statue of the Founder. But in its very obscenity it speaks to the Invisible Man, who has begun to comprehend that he has been dangled and exploited (like a hooked fish!) by the Brotherhood. Because Clifton is apparently an unlicensed vendor, the police intervene to shut down his operation. They arrest him, with undue force, pushing and jolting him:

I could see the cop push Clifton again [the Invisible man says], stepping solidly forward in his black shirt, his arm shooting out stiffly, sending him in a head-snapping forward stumble until he caught himself, saying something over his shoulder again, the two moving in a kind of march that I'd seen many times, but never with anyone like Clifton. (436)

Here again Ellison depicts power, in the person of the policeman, coercing involuntary acknowledgment of its plenipotentiary commission by main force; but the attempt is not entirely successful, because Clifton talks back to his assailant (speech as the medium of self-assertion) and refuses to be summarily marched off. Instead of the frozen image of Hegel's Lord and the Bondsman, Ellison now gives his readers a macabre "dance." A reversal is in progress, through the medium of this "dance," and Clifton now indeed completes the Hegelian dialectic--whose first phase the statue signified by depicting the subjection of the Slave to the Master--by refusing the imposed status of thinghood; he wheels about and catches the cop with an uppercut, whereupon the cop falls backward into the street. One must visualize the statuary icon of slave and Founder yet again, but as if animated and in a moment of radical exchange, as if the kneeling slave had abruptly arisen to strike down the haughty Founder. Of course, the completion lasts only for a moment because the felled Master, the police officer, pulls his gun and fires with lethal effect. But the mere fact that the reversal has taken place, even though it has been only fleeting, grants it an irreducible importance in the sequence of Ellison's narrative. As a flock of epiphanic pigeons flies for cover at the sound:

[Clifton] fell forward on his knees, like a man saying his prayers[,] just as a heavy-set man in a hat with a turned-down brim stepped from around the newsstand and yelled a protest. I couldn't move. The sun seemed to scream an inch above my head. Someone shouted. A few men were staring into the street. The cop was standing now and looking down at Clifton as though surprised, the gun in his hand. (436)

The reversal appears to have been reversed, but what cannot be reversed is the fact that the original configuration achieved its impression of permanency only through the application of power. Earlier, speaking of a gun-wielding marshal at the eviction of the elderly couple from their apartment, the Invisible Man had said: "He'll shoot us down . . . he thinks he's God" (279). Bledsoe, too, his nemesis, had thought himself God. The Invisible Man now explicitly questions the Brotherhood's dogmas. Attaining full consciousness at last, he sees a bunch of jive-speaking boys in a subway station (reminiscent in their speech of the push-cart man), and they provoke the thought that, maybe, the Brotherhood's idea of history is a sham. "What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and [what if] the [jive-talking] boys [were history's] ace in the hole. . . . For they were on the outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominant stand" (441). The parenthetical "Tod, Tod" appears to be a cross-language pun on the German *Todt*, or "death." Death is real; it involves the living *via* the negation of their life. Death is violent, often enough, and messy. Yet the Brotherhood speaks of whole classes of actual people (like the old couple evicted from their premises) as though they were already dead so that they can be erased from the memory as though they had never existed. The Invisible Man speaks eloquently at Clifton's funeral. The Brotherhood remain coldly, stonily, calculatingly, and dogmatically unimpressed. The speaker's emotional style is still unacceptably "incorrect" and is thus anathema considered in the context of the Brotherhood's goals.

15

The confrontation between the Invisible Man and the Brotherhood that Ellison sets out in Chapter Twenty-Two shows the Invisible Man asserting his "personal responsibility" (463), at long last, against their collective judgment about the idea of historical necessity. Crowds, like the Harlem crowd, are just

so much in the way of "raw materials," Brother Jack explains, and what the Brotherhood demands is "sacrifice, sacrifice, SACRIFICE!" (475). Later, Brother Hambro tells the Invisible Man that the latter's recruits to the movement "will have to be sacrificed" (501). The Invisible Man retorts that "everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good--only they were the ones that benefited. And now we start on the old sacrificial merry-go-round. At what point do we stop?" (505). It dawns on the Invisible Man that the Brotherhood wants nothing less from him than that he should lie about the total human scene in Harlem:

I was to be a justifier, my task would be to deny the unpredictable human element of all Harlem so that [the Brotherhood] could ignore it when it in any way interfered with their plans. I was to keep ever before them the picture of a bright, passive, good-humored, receptive mass ever willing to accept their every scheme. When situations arose in which others would respond with righteous anger I would say that we were calm and unruffled (if it suited them to have us angry, then it was simple enough to create anger for us by stating it in their propaganda; the facts were unimportant, unreal); and if other people were confused by their maneuvering I was to reassure them that we perceived the truth with x-ray insight. . . . [I]llusion was creating counter-illusion. (514-15)

It adds up to the Bledsoe betrayal all over again. "The facts were unimportant, unreal," the Invisible Man says. His job is "to deny." The verbal, the theoretical model, trumps facts, trumps the actual life of existing people. On the street, in a moment of self-loathing and conversion, the Invisible Man shakes with rage (507): "It was all a swindle, an obscene swindle!" (507). The race-riot follows, cleverly fomented by the Brotherhood who have all along exacerbated black-white tensions and have secretly goaded Ras the Exhorter toward violence. It is an apocalypse of lies, an orgy of immolation, and the only possible good to come of it, the burning of a rotten building whose landlord leaves a slum, is purely destructive, hence profoundly ambiguous. The Invisible Man himself stumbles into a sewer at the height of the *mêlée*. In the pitch darkness, he ritually burns various papers and documents that signify the relations he is now decisively dissolving. These flickering subterranean flames become a kind of anti-sacrifice marking the climax of the Invisible Man's initiation into his own identity. "Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning" (571).

Invisible Man is a sprawling, dense novel, rich in metaphor, filled with manifold and erudite allusions, and any attempt to account for it remains necessarily limited and leaves a great deal to be said. Ellison wanted to write a "Black" novel, but also clearly he wanted to write a universal novel, as his introductory remarks about his literary relation to Dostoevsky, James, Eliot, and others make plain. In what, then, does the universality of *Invisible Man* consist? First and foremost, *Invisible Man* is a novel about the meaning of humanity for a century in which humanity suffered unprecedented assaults. As technically advanced as it might be, the twentieth century nevertheless saw a recursion to grossly sacrificial behaviors of the most primitive kind: the Turkish pogrom against the Armenians, the Nazi pogrom against the Jews, the Stalinist and Maoist pogroms against everyone. The West has stood against these affronts, but even in the United States there was, throughout the middle decades of the century, a recalcitrant middle-class resistance against the full integration of the nation's minority constituents. One does not want to relativize the totalitarian crimes of the last century into equivalency with the lesser but still significant problem of American racial intolerance. Not even during the worst period of Jim Crow

did American Apartheid approach the systematic ferocity of the Holocaust or the gulag. But neither can the American case be left off the roster. All have a common root: for such crimes and such indignities have been made possible by fundamental distortions of reality which disrupt the transparent communication between consciousness and existence, including the existence of other conscious beings. The acknowledgment that the other person is a conscious identity like oneself constitutes the fundamental prerequisite to positive human relations. Sacrifice, the term which surfaces in the final chapters of *Invisible Man* as a no-longer-latent but indeed central theme, is the opposite of this crucial and humane acknowledgment of other people as formal equals.

16

Power, to return to it, requires sacrifice, or the repression and destruction of the other, if it is to produce its desired effect of aggrandizing its wielder. Language aids power in the sacrificial repression of the other by preparing the way for the initiation of force: by mucking up the clear perceptions on which true statements and just assessments depend. It is terribly significant, in this respect, that bigoted and repressive institutions such as slavery or Jim Crow could not exist silently in and of themselves, but required massive and sustained verbal justification, right down to their respective extinctions in the 1860s and 1960s. The argument made on behalf of Jim Crow, for instance, was that blacks were different--ontologically different--from whites, and so demanded separate legal consideration. Every reasonable person knows intuitively that this argument was and remains false, and yet few understand precisely why and in what way it was false. The truth is that no person belonging to an excluded category was ever persecuted because he was different; rather, he was persecuted because he was obviously and in every way the same as his persecutors. His sameness is real; the claim of his difference is what is false. His ex-slave grandfather, says the Invisible Man, "never had any doubts about his humanity" (580). Since power rests on an implicit claim of difference (ontological Mastery and ontological Slavery), and since reality subverts this claim, power can only sustain itself as an unremitting assault against reality, entailing the destruction of others who refuse to be requisitely other. "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies," as the Invisible Man says, "I speak for you?" (581)

In *The Illusion of Technique* (1979), William Barrett writes a brief reminiscence of Philip Rahv, editor of *The Partisan Review*, the left-wing journal on whose staff, at one time, Barrett worked. Barrett recounts the central lesson of his early Marxist period: "THE ESSENCE OF MARXISM LIES IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE!" (346). This was drilled into him continuously, Barrett says. "My mentors were warning me, against my own temptations of mind, not to get lost in the subtleties of theory to the point that I lose sight of the human center of the whole doctrine. And this center, plain enough for the downtrodden and uneducated to understand, was the war between the haves and the have-nots" (346). That was during the Depression. Ten years subsequent, in the aftermath of World War Two, when Barrett had begun to nurse "some theoretical doubts about Marxism as a whole" (347), Rahv was telling him the same thing: "The 'existential core' of Marxism was the class struggle, and I must hold fast to that" (347). Note how Barrett's mentors, including Rahv, pared down the "theoretical subtleties" of their doctrine, insisting on what amounted to the power-struggle between the classes as the salient issue. Yet Marxism (including its contemporary derivatives) is nothing if it is not a complex theory of class-relations. The implication is clear enough: The theoretical side of Marxism (which can stand, if one likes, for any political dogma) functions to provide a rationalistic aura around the fundamentally untheoretical kernel of the doctrine, namely that an avant-garde must seize power in the name of "History." In his account of American Communism in the 1930s, Ellison remarks that the CPUSA "fostered the myth that Communism was twentieth century Americanism" (GT 296). But it became clear, Ellison writes, that "to be a twentieth

century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That's how they lost the Negroes. The Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy" (296). Blacks "were made expedient" (296) in these machinations, Ellison concludes. His perception of Marxism's intellectual illegitimacy thus converges on Barrett's. "What strikes me now," Barrett latterly records as he continues to meditate on his own long-since-abrogated affiliation with Marxism:

is the peculiar historical irony of those conversations. We were operating with the political tags of our childhood and adolescence that had already become obsolete. For us as children of the thirties the existence of the Soviet Union as the first socialist state still seemed a fragile and unlikely miracle; and we tended to look on the problems of Marxist socialism as those of coming to power, of a movement on the make. The abominations of Stalinism had seemed to us an accidental excrescence on the true nature of socialism. (347)

17

In retrospect, and after a kind of political conversion similar to that experienced by other ex-radicals such as George Orwell and Arthur Koestler, Barrett came to the conclusion that it was absolutely necessary "to detach the phenomenon of Marxism from those earlier delusions and see it in a larger and more significant perspective" (348), namely as the central expression of the idea of technique (of power) in the twentieth century, and as the source of massive error and colossal suffering. According to Barrett's analysis, Marxism translates the crudest version of science, science as the purely pragmatic investigation into and control over nature, to the human sphere. "Marx spoke of the conquest of human nature as the essential humanistic goal. Conquest implies war, and this particular war had to be total in order to satisfy human needs" (353). The Polish expatriate Czeslaw Milosz argues very similarly, in *The Captive Mind* (1953), that:

Dialectical materialism, Russian-style, is nothing more than nineteenth century science vulgarized to the second power. Its emotional and didactic components are so strong that they change all proportions. Although the Method was scientific in its origins, when it is applied to humanistic disciplines it often transforms them into edifying stories adapted to the needs of the moment. . . . [Dialectical materialism] gives the illusion of full knowledge; it supplies answers to all questions, answers which merely run around in a circle repeating a few formulas. (200-201)

The rhetoric of the Brotherhood in Ellison's novel illustrates that Ellison shared and to some extent anticipated Barrett's insight, and that his appreciation of the intellectual trap constituted by so-called revolutionary thinking, by what I have called ideology, runs in parallel to that of Milosz. The Invisible Man gets caught up in the totalizing vision of the zealots. When the Brotherhood anathematize him, he divulges that, as he understands it in the moment, "there was a logic to what [they] said" (405). His anathematizers are wrong--and he is right--about his intentions in respect to their cause (he regards himself as still a part of the fellowship), but the Invisible Man is willing to be "made expedient" while they proceed to discover their error. Or so he thinks. But this very attitude contains the implicit concession, made by the accused to his accusers, that something in the situation or even in his behavior might have produced the appearance of a crime, and that the accusers can therefore claim justification.

Commentators on the grand political show-trials of the mid-century invariably record the insidious way in which the victims concede elements of the charge to their persecutors and so unwittingly follow the slippery path that leads into victimary self-immolation. In another comment on Kafka, Kundera notes that a certain induced "self-criticism" greatly aids in the conviction of those falsely accused: "It is not a matter of criticism (distinguishing good features from bad with the aim of correcting faults); it is a matter of finding your offense to let you help your accuser, let you help and ratify the accusation" (*TB* 211-12).

Of course, in the case of the accusers of Ellison's protagonist, they never discover any error on their part; no possibility of their being in error exists for them or could ever exist for them. They perfectly resemble those implacable judges of whom Kundera remarks that they judge because they constitute a power; and their power and nothing but their power is what grants efficacy to their judgments. The *ad hoc* committee consummately fills the role of those infinitely sagacious adjudicators of whom Milosz remarks that their philosophy gives them "full knowledge" and thus removes them forever from the humiliating tendency to error. Having exploited the Invisible Man, having commodified him, the Brotherhood simply throw him away. In Barrett's analysis, to switch back to him, it follows inevitably from the fundamental premises and real agenda of dialectical materialism that:

All citizens must be organized effectively within the ranks of this struggle. Everything that exists--man as well as natural resources--is to be placed within the framework of technical-scientific planning. Human beings, as they fall within this framework, become calculable objects for management. Economics does indeed emerge here, as Marxists had wanted it, as basic to every social reality. And what is economics but efficient technical management? (353)

18

Indeed, the Brotherhood commodify the Invisible Man, just as they commodify the old and the sick and anyone else who fails to fit in their vision of the world. But, as Barrett points out, Marxism tends regularly to violate its own metaphysics and to produce its own antithesis. That is to say, despite its claim to satisfy human nature and to produce a new, authentic type of freedom, it issues in practice in gross repression, the *gulag*, and universal misery. People are "made expedient," to use Ellison's compressed but telling phrase. More recent events only confirm Barrett's diagnosis. At their first opportunity to throw out their ideologue-overlords, the people of the ex-Soviet Union and its satellite states did so, acting out the most remarkable political event in the twentieth century. As Havel notes, most people find living a lie intolerable, and both to obtain power and retain it, the political followers of Marx exploited Titanic lies. They had to, since their assessment of ordinary people stood at radical variance with the ordinary person's assessment of himself. According to Marxism, the ordinary person is the despicable victim of "false consciousness" and therefore irremediably lacks the ability to tell whether he is happy or not (indeed whether his existence is justified or not); what pass for satisfactions (or justifications) in the bourgeois milieu are mere delusions. The ordinary person, needless to say, rarely shares this sinister and degrading conviction. Yet it remains possible, in the right circumstances, to convince people of their unhappiness by appealing to base motives like resentment. And resentment, in turn, demands an object. The consolidation of power requires, then, an external enemy, on whom the unhappiness of the ordinary person can be blamed. It requires a scapegoat, is sacrificial. "Socialist rhetoric," Barrett writes, "had battered on the image of the evil capitalist. The more you inflate this evil, the more you siphon off all other human evils into this one monstrous figure, the more your hearers become convinced that its mere disappearance must lead to some paradisiacal state" (357). Thus Marxist totalitarianism (and Marxism in

power has never been anything else than totalitarian) resembles a species of "economic fantasy" (357). While it claims to redeem humanity from the alienation of private property, Marxism in fact profoundly alienates its subjects from reality itself: it produces a form of collective dissociation. The theory of class-warfare leads to both a rhetoric and a practice that sacrifices reality to abstract images deferred, inevitably, to the far future for their realization. Marxism is a rhetoric and a practice that sacrifices the actual to the potential. What motivates its advocates to initialize such a program?

The answer is power conceived of as a type of "original sin." That human beings have power fantasies is attested by myth, whose gods can be grasped, in one sense at least, as projections of power by means of which human beings experience representationally the transcendence of their limitations. But power is inimical to the net happiness of the community and therefore to the probable personal happiness of any given individual in the community. Law, as Plato demonstrates in *Gorgias*, is the consent by all the members of the community to limit their quest for power (the Invisible Man speaks of law when the elderly couple is being ejected); laws must exist because there are always some members of the community who refuse to curtail that quest. If the "Will to Power," as Nietzsche called it, is innate in human beings, a preconscious or unconscious urge, then society and its institutions become comprehensible as conscious attempts to address the anti-social, power-seeking component of the human reality. We inaugurate culture when we *abort* the gesture of appropriation. It follows from this that, despite the actual happiness made possible by society, all human beings will occasionally feel resentment at the rules which prohibit them, as individuals, from exerting their will, however they wish, over others. When Freud spoke of the inherent discontentment of civilization, he addressed the same phenomenon. The most just societies, those with the wisest laws and the fairest distribution of goods, should on this model produce, perhaps paradoxically, the highest frequency of resentment.

Thus the Dream of Power, of Personal Godhood, dies hard. And hence, I would argue, the popularity of power-discourse among contemporary American intellectuals, a group uniquely unmoved by the pathos of mid-century Marxist totalitarianism and uniquely unaware (so it seems to me) of Marxism's apocalyptic meltdown. All of the contemporary variations of power-analysis--feminism, multiculturalism, "new historicism"--derive from the sentence in *The Communist Manifesto*, Part I, that divides the world into the Manichean categories of oppressors and oppressed:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open, fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or the common ruin of the contending classes. (79)

19

All of the variations of power-analysis similarly draw on Marx's notion that, in order to effect utopia, in order to hasten history toward its apocalypse, certain classes, especially the bourgeoisie, must be swept away (the phraseology belongs to Marx himself). As Camille Paglia, one of the more perspicacious debunkers of this type of contemporary discourse, puts it:

Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault are the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality, trapped in verbal formulas and perennially defeated by

circumstance. They offer a self-exculpating cosmic explanation for the normal professorial state of resentment, alienation, dithery passivity, and inaction. (211)

Translations of Lacan and Derrida [and Foucault!] are pored over by earnest Americans, fatuously taking as literal truth statements that were merely the malicious *boutades* of the *flaneur*. . . . Our French acolytes, making themselves the lackeys of a foreign fascism, have advertised their intellectual emptiness to the world. (215)

Paglia's rhetorically dramatic comparison of structuralist/post-structuralist power-discourse to cocaine (Foucauldian discourse is the cocaine of academia, she says), which occurs in the same essay, deserves to be taken seriously. For verbal formulas, especially when obsessively repeated, can have a kind of intoxicating effect; that is how delusions, based on verbal formulas, work. In a related assessment in *Out of Control*, Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued that the twentieth century has been the century of the "metamyth." According to Brzezinski, a "metamyth" is "a grand transcendental fiction . . . to be understood as an irrational but compelling blend of the religious impulse to seek salvation, of the nationalistic self-identification as being superior to outsiders, and of utopian social doctrines reduced to the level of populist slogans. Permitting escape from unsatisfactory reality through a commitment to an imaginary reality yet to be achieved, metamyth served to galvanize and channel mass passions . . . making feasible the infliction of death on a scale without precedent in human history" (19-20). A "metamyth," in other words, is the verbal preamble to a murder; it is as myth is to sacrifice. The claim that everything is power (central to Foucault's discourse, for example) validates the power-claims of the individual; if power is everything, then the individual cannot rationally be restrained and is licensed, a priori, to do what he will. Power corrupts, truly enough; but it corrupts first through psychic intoxication. It is no coincidence that the hotel where the Invisible Man's early meetings with the Brotherhood occur bears the name of the Chthonian. The chthonic is the Dionysian, the sparagmatic, the sacrificial; it is what delights in destruction and gorges itself on raw flesh and blood.

I come back, then, to the issues of power, language, and sacrifice in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Humanity might be deviled by its secret "Will to Power," but it is simultaneously blessed by the conscious ability to override that Will. From this ability arise all those positive behaviors, stemming paradoxically from prohibitions, which human beings as ethical creatures have learned to assert as their central values: love, friendship, honesty, creativity. (I am tempted to say that all of these institutions, if that is what they are, stem from the Biblical injunction against the bearing of false witness, or, in Ellison's terms, *denial*.) It is too infrequently noted, however, that before an ethics can be formulated, certain axioms of an epistemological character have to be acknowledged. The most fundamental of these axioms was summed up by Heraclitus, the Ionian thinker of the sixth century B.C. "There is one world," Heraclitus said, "and it is the same for everyone." The same Heraclitus later hectored the Ephesians for failing to see the excellence of a certain Hermodorus, the best among them (as Heraclitus said), whom they had petulantly expelled, blaming him for their troubles. This world, endowed with its peculiar characteristics, is prior to anyone's assessment of it or desire in relation to it; it includes the human portion of the world. Human beings exist--they are not mere malleable stuff without intrinsic characteristics, without innate needs, as likely to do anything as nothing--and the precise characteristics of their existence must be acknowledged by every just society. The very term "just society" implies an acknowledgment of that selfsame objective anthropology. Every moral individual must, in some fundamental sense, acknowledge the reality of every other individual prior to any judgment about him. Again, the very term "moral individual" implies such

an acknowledgment. We might judge individuals in varying ways (saint or murderer), but prior to the judgment is the fundamental acknowledgment of existence. Verbal formulas which interdict this acknowledgment sacrifice reality to the most ignoble of whims, the desire, to wit, not to be a human being, but to be a god, from which all manner of evil swiftly follows. *Invisible Man* might be a "black novel," a "Negro novel," as Ellison calls it in his essays, but its significance transcends any mere ethnic category. Since it is the nature of sacrifice to seize on its victims arbitrarily, everyone is a potential scapegoat. In a digression on Hemingway, Ellison remarks apropos of Hemingway's interest in the bullfight as a paradigm of ritual violence, of scapegoating, that the apostle of *machismo* "might have studied that [same type of] ritual violence closer to home, [he might have studied] that ritual in which the sacrifice is that of a human scapegoat, the lynching bee. Certainly," Ellison concludes, "this rite is not confined to the rope as agency, not to the South as scene, nor even to the Negro as victim" (SA 37).

20

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In the End was the Word: Balzac's Modernist Absolute

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The word has nothing absolute about it: we act more on the word than it acts on us; its force is due to the images we have acquired and associate with it.

Balzac, *Louis Lambert*

Couldn't one write a beautiful book by telling the life and adventures of a word?

Balzac, *Louis Lambert*

Balzac's *The Search for the Absolute* ends with one of the most gripping yet mystifying scenes in the *Comédie humaine*: Balthazar Claës, in the throes of death after exhausting his life's energies, his marriage, and several family fortunes in search of "the absolute," unexpectedly sits erect with the flash of insight needed to solve his mystery. Yet instead of uttering the word that might convey his insight, he produces an inarticulate groan, collapses to his death, and takes his secret to his grave:

All of a sudden, the dying man sat up on his two fists, threw a glance at his frightened children, which struck them like of bolt of lightning; the hair on the back of his neck moved, his wrinkles twitched, his face became animated with a spirit of fire, a breath of air passed over this face and rendered it sublime; he lifted a hand clenched by his rage and shouted in a ringing voice Archimedes' famous word: EUREKA! (*I have found it*). He fell back to his bed with the heavy thud of an inert body; he died while producing a horrible groan; and his convulsed eyes expressed, until the moment the doctor shut them, the regret of not having bequeathed to science the key word (*le mot d'une énigme*) whose veil was belatedly ripped away by the fleshless fingers of Death.(299)(1)

Having convinced readers that the novel is plotted to reveal the object of Balthazar's scientific research (and thus the hidden cause of all the sacrifice and destruction), Balzac's open-ended conclusion provides little intellectual satisfaction. He leaves us to speculate: What is the meaning of "the absolute"? What final "word" would Balthazar have uttered? Why, indeed, does the novelist go to such exaggerated lengths to prevent his character from speaking at the moment of illumination? Note that not only does the

chemist's death implausibly coincide with his final discovery, but verbal communication had already been structurally impeded by another improbable event: Balthazar's "paralysis of the tongue."

2

Although the aporia produced by Balthazar's linguistic paralysis and premature death appears to render his eleventh-hour "discovery" a permanent mystery and the nature of his mental status consequently undecidable (scientific genius or charlatan?), this obviously *strategic* deferral of meaning may contain a deeper theoretical purpose: to focus attention on the contagious effects of mimetic desire and on the impossibility of capturing its paradoxical structure *in a single word*. He points, in other words, to the Gansian insight that desire and language stand in a paradoxical relation: that language works as a harmonious solution to mimetic rivalry over scarce objects (such as the sacred centrality implied by "the absolute") through deferred appropriation and symbolic substitution.(2)

Nearly universally overlooked in previous critical analyses of *The Search* is the fact that Balthazar's passion for science has less to do with a desire for empirical knowledge of a chemical absolute (however it may be construed) than it does with his mimetic attraction to, and rivalry with, his original mediator of knowledge, Adam de Wierzschownia.(3) What Adam mediates to Balthazar is not so much an object of knowledge, or even a concrete idea of an object, but the desire for knowledge suggested by a "word." Paradoxically, Adam functions both as Balthazar's mediator to the "absolute" and the obstacle preventing him from attaining it. But it is this obstacle of mediation--the very obstacle that the reader confronts at the end of the novel--that forces Balthazar, and the reader as well, to circle back and finally to understand the mimetic origins of his verbal passion.

Balzac, of course, never directly says this to his reader; he demonstrates his insight by strategically arousing competing desires for the absolute through the promise of appropriation, but then he breaks this promise through ironic deferral; he points to an (illusory) position of transcendence, but simultaneously displaces desire from center to periphery through the obstacle of renewed mediation. Left unrevealed, the spiral of desire and symbolic responses generated by this mimetic paradox could, theoretically, stretch to infinity. Yet, over time, the accumulation of failed appropriations (Balthazar's, previous readers', our own) should eventually reveal to readers, as it finally was revealed to Balthazar, that the search for the absolute is a stumbling block--or what Girard, and Kierkegaard before him, call a *skandalon*. The "absolute" scandalizes because its object is none other than the intersubjective and infinitely contagious movement of desire itself. Any attempt by readers to speak (or write) in the space of Balthazar's (that is, Balzac's) silence, to name the sacred center that he leaves unnamed, merely perpetuates the eternal chain of mimetic effects--we simply add more language to the pile without grasping the underlying causal mechanism.(4)

The mimetic/anthropological dimension of this novel can be easily missed because Balzac appears to historicize the question of the absolute by embedding its referent in a specific science from the early nineteenth century--unitary chemistry. Once we observe Balthazar receive "word" of the absolute from his mediator, the narrator quickly deflects our attention away from the event of mediation to the details of Balthazar's chemical theories and experimental activities, the fortunes he squanders on chemical substances and equipment, the dilemmas he causes his family, and so on. What is more, in response to the dichotomy established between Balthazar-as-misunderstood-genius and the simpletons that are his family and community, we naturally (but incorrectly) side with the "genius" against the community and anxiously cast about for a solution to his mystery. The standard assumption, based on a traditional realist

view of Balzac and encouragement by a double-dealing narrator, is that the clues to the mystery are located somewhere in the descriptions of Balthazar's chemical theories and activities. This leads to erudite speculation about the various (pseudo-) scientific sources Balzac drew upon to construct his fictional scientist, the historical fidelity of his representation, and the like.

3

Though obviously illuminating in many ways, the flaw in this approach (deconstructive critique notwithstanding) is that it overlooks the internally-mediated origins of Balthazar's desire. Thus even if the "referent" of the absolute can be found to correspond to some early nineteenth-century science, this approach fails to consider that *for Balthazar* its primary significance is the illusion of transcendence that he imagines he will attain by its appropriation. More than anything, what Adam communicates to his disciple is his infectious enthusiasm for the possibility of absolute knowledge, the effect of which is to arouse in Balthazar (and in some readers) the desire to search, although he (we) has (have) no precise idea of what the absolute is or where to find it.

Balzac telegraphs this point to us in one of Balthazar's fleeting moments of rationality:

--No, *it's not an idea*, my angel, that sent me down this beautiful path, *it's a man*. --A man! she cried out in terror. --Do you remember, Pépita, the Polish officer who stayed with us in 1809? --You ask if I remember?!. . . --[T]here was something passionate and concentrated [in Adam] *that words cannot express*. . . [H]e told me in confidence and with a solemn voice words of which I can remember only the general meaning, but he said them with such powerful and warm inflexions and forceful gestures that he shook my soul and struck my comprehension as a hammer strikes iron on an anvil. This is a summary of the reasoning that was for me the hot coal that God put on Isaiah's tongue, because my studies with Lavoisier allowed me to feel its full scope. Tears of rage flowed over this man's hollow cheeks while he threw the fire of this reasoning into my soul . . . (110; my emphasis).

Balthazar's study with Lavoisier aside, we have cause to wonder: what exactly did he understand from this encounter? Although Balthazar goes on to explain some of the technical details of Adam's chemical theory, and although he gives the impression of being an authority on the subject, his feelings of passion (over a "voice") combined with the Isaiah analogy suggest more a religious conversion than an authentic chemistry lesson.⁽⁵⁾

To see, in fact, that the scientific stakes in this text are more important than an antiquarian interest in nineteenth-century chemistry, we have only to consider this novel's place within the broader context of the *Philosophical Studies*, the aim of which, as Balzac repeatedly insisted, was to reveal the secret causes of the *social* behaviors (effects) portrayed in his better-known group of novels, the *Studies of Manners*.⁽⁶⁾ The fact that various other mad geniuses in the *Philosophical Studies* fail similarly at opera, symphony, painting, and philosophy (always accompanied by a corresponding marital or sexual catastrophe) suggests that chemistry is merely one expression among many of a more common human motivation: spiritualized paternal creation, simultaneously fictionalized and theorized by Balzac in this set of "studies." The novelist's own genius, arguably, is precisely his uncanny ability to conceal the repetition of the same basic idea in diverse forms.

Let us then shift our attention from an historicized conception of the absolute back to the more fundamental anthropological issue of the mediated/linguistic origin of Balthazar's desire for the absolute and the pathological and violent effects that ensue from this origin. Similar to the "originary scene" postulated by Gans, Balzac postulates the birth of Balthazar's desire as a minimal scene of mimetic attraction to / rivalry with a mediator (Adam de Wierzschownia) over the sacred center of knowledge implied by the appropriation of the absolute. Despite the scarcity of this object/position (only one can *discover* it), no violence occurs at this point because the rivalry that lurks behind Balthazar's attraction is deferred by its vertical displacement onto the empty signifier "absolute." The word stands in for the idea they project onto it and displaces their desires away from each other as obstacles. Thus while the potential for violence is present from the beginning, it remains initially imperceptible due to the simultaneity of desire's arousal and linguistic deferral. Balzac quietly underscores his understanding of the violence-deferring mechanism of language by making the original object of mimetic desire/rivalry a piece of language--a word.

4

If the word "absolute" initially works like Gans's originary "ostensive" to defer mimetic violence, Balzac's scenario later diverges when delayed violent effects crop up between Balthazar and his family and community. As the narrator foreshadows early on, the violence will slowly trickle out, until it is unleashed in a mad frenzy at the end. The key point, however, is Balzac's indication of a hidden cause-effect unity underlying the violence: "[T]he spiritual malady of her husband came in phases and only gradually worked its way toward the intolerable violence that destroyed the happiness of her household" (65). On the surface, violence appears to erupt because of the contradiction between Balthazar's insatiable appetite for scientific equipment and chemical compounds and the limited family funds to finance this appetite. But more than a contradiction between science and family, it is the double displacement of mediated desire that constitutes the deeper structural and linguistic reasons for the destruction. That is, once Balthazar's mimetic desire fastens onto the (pseudo-) verticality of the signifier "absolute," it simultaneously passes back into the horizontal object-world of chemical research in search of transcendental expression. Balthazar is thus perpetually frustrated because the linguistic illusion of transcendence he unwittingly seeks is radically discontinuous with the experimental techniques he employs in his research. The more he searches, the more he distances his founding dream (and the event of mediation behind it) from conscious reflection, which, in turn, only intensifies his original desire to conduct research, requiring ever more funds, and so on. It also explains why the correspondence theory of referentiality underlying the traditional realist interpretation is epistemologically inadequate: it merely piggy-backs onto Balthazar's delusion, mistaking a fictional character's mimetically-constructed word-object for a "real" historical referent.

Despite its speculative foundations, Generative Anthropology offers a useful alternative for elucidating the paradoxical structure of Balzac's realism; and it finds surprising textual support. To take another example, after the tiresome speech by Balthazar concerning the technical merits of Adam's chemistry lesson (the founding moment of his desire to search for the absolute), P  pita (or rather Balzac through P  pita) distills the anthropological essence of her husband's encounter with a few brief questions: "What? By spending only one night under our roof, this man (Adam) stole your affections from us? He destroyed with a single phrase, *a single word*, a family's happiness? . . . From this day forward, you have no longer been a father, husband, or head of the household. (110, 116-7; my emphasis).

Isolated by P  pita in this scene (if we interpret it allegorically) is the precise originary event of the

linguistic displacement of Balthazar's desire onto a "word" and the importance this displacement plays in his subsequent social actions and object desires. Isolated also is the fact that behind this word lies a violent force of mimetic attraction, more powerful than the desire for conventional marital or sexual union or the natural bond between a father and his offspring. Balzac demonstrates this simple fact by having Balthazar sacrifice his familial relations, social relations, and even his own life for the dream of transcendence held out by Adam's word. If Adam's force of mimetic attraction works simultaneously as a violent force of repulsion/propulsion, it is because his "word" creates an asymptotic barrier between Balthazar's desire and his imagined object. Balthazar's unyielding desire to destroy this barrier is the motor of both his genius (the discoveries made along the way are by-products of this deeper *linguistic* fixation) and his madness (no final Word is available in the modern representational order to exhaust his desire for the sacred center).

5

From Being to Having the Phallus

Given Balthazar's self-confessed attraction to Adam and P pita's improbable terror that "a man!" stands behind her husband's "scientific research," we may be tempted at this point to extrapolate a homoerotic dimension to Balthazar's desire.⁽⁷⁾ Several clues, in fact, seem to point in this direction, including the scientist's unusual affection for his "lab assistant" Lemulquinier (they spend day and night in Balthazar's laboratory, a.k.a. "the workshop of seduction"; P pita suspects that Balthazar prefers Lemulquinier to herself; the two men live as a married couple after P pita's death); the homosocial coding of the laboratory (only men are permitted entry; the principal piece of equipment is a "pneumatic machine"; analogies can be drawn between Balthazar's lab activity and homoerotic and onanistic activity) and Balthazar's strategic choice of spouse. Balthazar sought out P pita quite explicitly for her self-sacrificing devotion and submissiveness (to protect his secret?), but also for her male appearance--"the trait that lent the most distinction to *this male face* . . ." (38; my emphasis); P pita seduces her husband with the prosthesis of phallic-shaped tulips;⁽⁸⁾ and as the text clearly states: "[Balthazar] no doubt had some peculiar ideas about marriage because he was accused from his youth of not walking in the common path" (49).

There is no denying that, like Balzac's other mad geniuses, Balthazar Cla s is irresistibly drawn to males and male- or phallic-looking objects. Yet to consider Balthazar's object desires in purely modern and sexual terms alone would be to overlook the Old-Regime Christian/patriarchal identification that inflects them and whose hidden psychological operations Balzac is quietly reconstructing for the reader. Contrary to P pita's claim (and to the view offered by the surface-level narrative) that Balthazar's desire for the absolute stands in radical opposition to his marital/paternal desire, both desires share the same origin in a Christo- and phallogo-centric ideal of marital union and paternity. He seeks to satisfy in the laboratory an ideal desire for "creative knowledge," which was traditionally satisfied within the Old Regime sacramental marriage, but which he unconsciously displaces into a problem of scientific research.⁽⁹⁾

As a preliminary indication, we might recall that the knowledge Balthazar claims to be seeking in the "absolute" is the "principle of all fecundation" and the point from which "creation descends"--desires easily traceable to a sacred paternal ideal. Also noteworthy in this connection is Balthazar's Adamic "fall" (or spiritual death) at the precise moment that he makes his "discovery" in the final pages: he realizes only when it is too late that the condition of idealized marital/paternal knowledge in the modern

secular order is the permanent repression of his "real" sexual desire.

The Anthropology of Marriage

But to better situate our claim, and to see its deeper anthropological significance, we must first bring into tighter focus the crucial distinction between the pre-Revolutionary "marriage sacrament" and the post-Revolutionary, secularized version of marriage, the "marriage contract." What I will show in a later section is that the two principal motivating desires throughout Balthazar's adult life--the desire for mystical/sexual union and for sacred centrality--derive from his internalization of pre-Revolutionary views of marriage and paternity. His problem is essentially that he attempts to satisfy these absolutist desires in a secularized context in which the dream of mystical union and paternal transcendence are no longer culturally operative.

Let us simplify the complex differences between secular and sacred marriage to the three essential points useful for our purposes:

6

(1) The "marriage contract" is a written mediation of two competing wills under the authority of the law, while the "marriage sacrament," grounded in Christ-mediated "grace," magically fuses two bodies and two souls into one. As a visible reflection of the invisible, mystical union between Christ and the Church and between God and the individual's soul, sacramental union was thought to be metaphysically indissoluble.[\(10\)](#) Put in mimetic terms, the marriage sacrament cut through the paradox of desire by spiritualizing the "other" into the "same": as both a "Word" (the word-made-flesh) and mediator of love/grace, Christ-as-mystical spouse dissolved the model-obstacle problem by conceiving marriage as an essentially non-mediated (or internally-mediated) relation.[\(11\)](#)

(2) The founding fathers of Catholicism, beginning with St. Paul, conceived of sacralized marriage as a means to "spiritualize" intercourse so that sexual desire could be expressed "chastely" and with divine purpose. According to St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and St. Jerome, the marital ideal was a direct, mystical union between the human soul and God without the intermediary of a female. Since sexual desire is for most people unavoidable, sacralized marriage was invented as a "remedy." As Jean-Claude Bologne writes: "To live chastely does not mean abstinence, but a sexuality channeled by marriage; as for procreation, for the Christian, it can be done spiritually but not carnally (83). . . . The original marriage in paradise, that of Adam and Eve before the fall, did not know of concupiscence" (86).

(3) The traditional patriarchal position was considered both central and sacred, and it was guaranteed by the mystical "effect" of the marriage sacrament. According to J. Mulliez, for example: "What characterizes paternity on the eve of the Revolution is its dependence on the sacramental nature of marriage. According to canon law, which until the law of September 20, 1792 presides over these questions, as soon as marriage, and it alone, legitimizes copulation, the child appears as a necessary effect of marriage" (Delumeau 291). "The norm is constituted by marriage: only the husband is a father" (Delumeau 47). The designation of father is above all "a religious act" (49). As Mulliez further points out, the question of marriage bore a direct relation to paternal "will" (*la volonté*). In the pre-Revolutionary era, the desire for a stable paternal identity did not require an effort of will; every husband was granted sacred centrality within the household by virtue of the distributive logic of the sacramental union. The husband/father was considered a God or monarch within his household-kingdom:

[Paternity] is an effect of marriage: no manifestation of will is necessary" (51). "The father is the image of God on earth, respected sovereign at the heart of the well structured family unit. . . . He is associated with the paternity of God" (11-12).

And to the question: "How to articulate [the difference between] biological paternity and spiritual paternity?" (164), the answer given by Old Regime theologians is: imitation of the Holy father, Joseph, and the imitation of Jesus (164, 166).

Let us return now to Balthazar Claës's situation in *The Search for the Absolute*: married in 1795, just three years after the abolition of the marriage sacrament, Balthazar was radically severed from the pre-1792 Christocentric order in which his marital and paternal ideas were shaped and found their affective roots. We know from the dates of events that Balthazar is the first generation of his patriarchal line to have crossed the cultural divide from sacred to secular orders. But the narrator also insists on the historical and social reasons for Balthazar's need to repress his Old Regime identity: "[T]he vanity of the Belgian bourgeoisie was superior to Castilian pride. Thus, when the civil state was instituted, Balthazar left behind the tatters of his Spanish nobility" (29). Or: "The young Claës found [in Paris] some relatives and friends who initiated him into this great [noble] world at the moment that this great world was going to collapse" (48).

7

Despite the obvious psychological blow of being shut out of the promised land at the moment of entry, Balthazar appears initially to have taken it in stride. Over time, however, his efforts to "modernize" (evidenced by the concession of his noble identity, his attempt to succeed at chemistry in Paris, and so on) could not hold in place the repression of his old-world attachments:

The dream of success didn't last long; after breathing the Parisian air, Balthazar left, tired of the empty life that corresponded neither to his burning soul nor to his loving heart. . . . One needs to be without home or country to stay in Paris. Paris is the city of the cosmopolitan, of men who have married the world and embrace it incessantly with the arms of science, art or power. The child of Flanders came back to Douai like La Fontaine's pigeon to his nest, he cried tears of joy upon returning the day of the Gayant promenade. . . . [H]e felt the need to get married in order to fulfill the happy existence with which religions envelop this need. (49)

Balthazar's trouble, of course, is that by the time he returns home, the Revolution will have fundamentally displaced the metaphysics grounding his desires. To use Balzac's metaphor: Balthazar finds himself caught between two impossible "marriages": he lacks the force of character to "marry the world" via science, but his secularized marriage to a woman will prove equally difficult and disappointing. We know, for example, that sexual relations between Balthazar and his wife were severely strained. But we also find references to an internal *spiritual* distance within the union (for example, "the unknown abyss that eternally separated her from the Claës of the early days," 66; compare also 72, 77, 122, 165), suggesting that the sacramental union of souls that Balthazar sought in marriage was not realized. This would explain why Balthazar's spiritual and sexual desires appear to split off: Balthazar continues, intermittently, to have sexual relations with his wife, but only when he is not a scientist. And when he is engaged in science, his wife no longer physically exists for him. (12) What he seeks in his "mistress," Science, in other words, is the *spiritualized* eroticism unavailable in the marriage contract.

Thus when Balzac characterizes Balthazar as "walking on an uncommon path" and having "particular ideas on marriage," this need not imply a latent homosexuality; it means rather that he is fixated on a form of spiritualized/patriarchal marriage no longer supported by communal belief. The phallogocentric foundation of the traditional marriage--that is, Christ's mediated love/grace--explains why Balthazar gravitates toward masculine-appearing objects. Balthazar's object choices necessarily appear to modern eyes as homoerotic, but his choices are ultimately rooted in an Old Regime/Catholic conception of male love.

If we return now to Adam's mediation of the absolute in 1809, we see that rather than "stealing" or "destroying" Balthazar's conjugal and paternal desires, as P epita charged, Adam--considered here allegorically as humanity's ideal "first father" and discoverer of God's secret of creation--merely lifts an earlier repression of them. The cultural habits, desires, and dreams instilled in Balthazar in childhood and that had once been centered vertically on the sacred Word (Christ) are unconsciously transferred to Adam and to the pseudo-verticality of the word "absolute." The horizontal infinity of scientific research permits Balthazar to express, at least temporarily, his vertically-centered marital/paternal desire in displaced form:

We see evidence of this transference mechanism in the following passages:

The cultural habits of this man had to be pure, his word was sacred, his friendship seemed constant, his devotion complete; but the will that [normally] activates these qualities in the interest of the homeland, the world and of the family *had been fatally shifted elsewhere*. This citizen . . . lived outside of his duties and his affections in the exercise of some familiar talent. (45; my emphasis)

This man's love for his wife and children was not merely immense, it was *infinite*. These feelings *could not be abolished*; they were no doubt enhanced by reproducing themselves *in another form* (82-3; my emphasis).

Even though he espoused the philosophical principles of the eighteenth century, he took on a live-in Catholic priest until 1801, in order to avoid thwarting the Spanish fanaticism for Roman Catholicism that his wife had imbibed with her mother's milk; then, when the Church was reestablished in France, he accompanied his wife to mass every Sunday. Never did his attachment depart from the forms of the Passion. (56)

8

Later the transference will become more obvious as Balthazar's "marriage" to Science will manifest itself as a direct rival to his real marriage to P epita--a point to which I shall return shortly.

Readers familiar with *The Search for the Absolute* may object at this point to this emphasis on the religious and cultural dimension of Balthazar's search, since his scientific genius seems unmistakable and the opposition between science and family self-evident. However, if we read the novel as *Balzac's* communication of a human-scientific theory (anthropology) rather than as a realist work *about* science, we must conclude that Balthazar is not an authentic genius, that he makes no real discoveries (Balzac merely transposed well-known experiments of his time) and the final discovery--the one that might have put Balthazar's name in the annals of chemistry--was irretrievably (and strategically) lost. The purpose of

the deception is to attract (via desiring mimesis) the attention of serious readers so that as we scour the descriptions of Balthazar's secret lab activities we discover evidence for Balzac's embedded theorization of the structural "causes" of Balthazar's pathological desire to search. The interpretive stumbling block for most readers is that the evidence for both the primary narrative (Balthazar-as-genius) and the theoretical counter-narrative (causes of his pathology) is precisely the same: like a Janus-face, the way we interpret the evidence depends on the narrative perspective (genius or madness?) we adopt.

The key to reversing the genius side of this Janus-faced narrative, as Balzac tells us, is *doubt*: "Doubt, so dramatic in love, is the secret of this meticulously detailed analysis" (51). As with the cheated lover, the first crack of doubt fuels further doubt, making a skeptic and a careful detective of an even the least suspicious minds. Yet the reality of this counter-interpretive process is more complicated, because, again like the cheated lover, we do not so easily free ourselves from our initial affection. And for good reason: the narrator's aim is not to have us exchange one narrative paradigm for another (genius for madman); it is to demonstrate the causes and effects of mimetic desire through a vicarious, esthetic *experience* of identification and disenchantment with an illusion of transcendence. To be properly understood, the two poles of the sequence must remain in tension: too much identification leads to permanent mystification (we see only genius); too much doubt will either block or dialectically overturn the mimetic/mystification process (we see nothing).

In any case, once doubt sets in, we are naturally motivated to reexamine the text for evidence of how and why Balzac has duped us. His principal trick is to play on our intellectual vanity--to invite a (false) transcendence into the sphere of the genius by contrasting simple or vulgar observation with sophisticated, genius-caliber observation, but without any detailed explanation of which is which. To take just one example, as Balthazar at one point exits his lab in "spotted" and "half-unbuttoned" and "torn-up" clothing (44), the narrator adds this: "Too often vice and genius produce similar effects which confound the vulgar [observer]" (44). In response to this, most "serious" readers wishing to avoid the charge of vulgarity will assume that spots and torn clothing signify "genius" and will make the evidence fit their preconceived image of Balthazar. But it is, in fact, the other way around: Balthazar's unkempt appearance and bizarre behaviors are evidence of a "vice" that, in turn, should be observed in light of Balthazar's deeper cultural problem of displaced mystical/sexual desire. As mentioned earlier, Balzac encodes the "science" conducted in the "workshop of seduction" as homoeroticism and onanism. But he does this not to suggest "real" sexual activity; rather, the sexual metaphors are used in the manner of Christian mystics to portray an abstract drama of spiritual union--in this case, a drama of failed or impossible union.

9

To follow up on this point, we later get a chance to view the lab's interior, which we are certain will provide clues for understanding Balthazar's science. But this time Marguerite catches her father in a pose that strikes terror in her. Balthazar was "unclothed, [his] arms bare like those of a worker, [his] exposed chest . . . covered with hairs silvered like those on his head. His vacant eyes were riveted on a pneumatic machine. . . . [H]er father . . . in an almost-kneeling position before his machine, was bathed in a vertical stream of sunlight. . . (212).

Although Marguerite concludes without hesitation that her father is "mad" (212), the narrative's dominant "scientific" hermeneutic leads the reader to assume "vulgarity" on her part. It is only when we doubt Balthazar's genius that we begin to wonder: why the insistence on exposed body parts? Why the

obsession with the "pneumatic machine" and the streams of light? What are the madness-inducing "manipulations" that Lemulquinier assists Balthazar with?(13) What is the "goal of research" that keeps slipping from his hand? Finally, why, if real chemistry is at issue, does Balthazar react so violently when the females of his family attempt to enter his "workshop of seduction"? What does he fear they will see?

Balthazar's secret, critics have traditionally assumed, requires sophisticated scientific and historical erudition to be understood. But a counter-reading suggests that P pita, Lemulquinier, Marguerite, and even the younger children either understand, or are ultimately capable of understanding, Balthazar's secret activity.(14) Balthazar is no doubt the best judge of this: for example, just before the local kids shower him with mud and stones, they mock his science by suggesting with lewd hand gestures that his "gold" and "diamonds" come from "a [body] part that young schoolboys show so often as a sign of scorn" (294). This event may seem inconsequential until we discover one page later that Balthazar is terrified that his own children may be able figure him out: "The old man's return was a horrible spectacle; he was struggling less against death than against the terror of seeing his children penetrate the secret of his misery" (295).

Why is Balthazar after so many years of confident research suddenly fearful of losing his secret? What do the children's mocking gestures reveal that he had not previously understood? His fear seems to indicate that his secret activity is understandable by *anybody*, which, in turn, means that the traditional "realist" or history-of-science approach is largely beside the point. Even if Balthazar conducts "real" scientific experiments, the secret he withholds is not specialized scientific information incomprehensible by common minds but information that is common yet potentially scandalous if publicly revealed.

Balzac's narrator, as I have briefly tried to show, is highly duplicitous. But his cat-and-mouse strategy of narration is no mere game; it corresponds to a serious epistemological and moral problem confronting the anthropologist, namely: How to communicate an archaic, religiously-grounded set of desires in the modern and secularized context, especially if, in this case, the misdirected sexualized expression of them would appear scandalously deviant to modern (or at least to nineteenth-century) eyes? How are we to bring together the causes and effects of Balthazar's actions if their internal division corresponds to a general, historical displacement (religion by cultural modernity) that most modern readers would unquestioningly accept? In normal conditions, the discourses of history or intellectual biography would be sufficient to understand the hidden connections between Balthazar's ancestral dreams and wishes and his adult actions. But the radical historical and cultural discontinuity produced by the Revolutionary experience renders Balthazar's past (and therefore his present) nearly undecipherable without a careful and sympathetic reconstruction of the Christian/patriarchal habits, codes and beliefs into which he was initiated. Let us not forget that Balthazar was constructed as an "individualized type" (the strategy of characterization in the *Philosophical Studies*), not as an "individual typified" (the strategy of characterization in the *Studies of Manners*). Which means that the proper way to interpret Balthazar's actions is not as a "modern" and "unique" individual (the romantic genius) held back by a conservative and backward-looking community, but as the opposite, a banal *type* (the Catholic patriarch) stranded like a piece of archaeological refuse in a modern--or rapidly modernizing--social context. He *looks* unique to modern eyes because his "will" is attached to an absolute value for which he is prepared to sacrifice everything, including his life--something the modern bourgeois would never do.

Like Rousseau, L vi-Strauss, or Freud, meaningful anthropological knowledge for Balzac cannot be

derived directly from phenomenological observation;(15) it comes from theorizing the discontinuities *between* orders of reality--or more specifically, by reducing surface-level differences to a fundamental order or event that accounts for these differences in structural or causal terms.(16) Rousseau theorized a natural order of humanity based on the myth of the noble savage whom he imagined to lie uncontaminated beneath the accretions of culture, and Freud and Lévi-Strauss conceived of humanity in terms of geological or archaeological layers where the oldest and deepest layers structure and explain the visible topology. Balzac's anthropology, likewise, appeals to the "layered" epistemologies and methods of inquiry of geology and archaeology, but unlike Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, or Freud, Balzac does not attempt to reconstruct a pre- or extra-cultural order. Instead, he theorizes anthropological constants from specific instantiations of French culture along a time-space continuum from the Catholic Middle Ages, living examples of which were still available in remote regions of France, to Parisian modernity. To be sure, Balzac frequently uses the terms "nature" and "primitive," but these terms most often apply to provincial ways of life which, because frozen in time, continue to reflect pre-modern habits and mentalities into the post-Revolutionary present. According to this scenario, Brittany would be the most archaic or primitive layer of French culture, Paris the most "civilized," and everything else in various stages in between. Balzac makes this point in an infrequently read novel called *Béatrix*:

Anybody who would like to travel as an archaeologist of mores and observe men instead of rocks could find an image of the century of Louis XV in some village in Provence, that of Louis XIV in Poitou, that of even more remote times in the far reaches of Brittany. Most of these cities have fallen from some splendor that historians, more preoccupied with dates than customs, no longer speak of, but whose memory lives on, such as in Brittany, where the national character scarcely accepts the forgetting of what this country is fundamentally about. . . All [of these cities] have their primitive character (25-6).

To return to *The Search for the Absolute*, we might say that the *Maison Claës* is the Brittany of Flanders: it is one of the last strongholds of traditional religious and patriarchal values, stubbornly resistant to the forces of modernity sweeping through the rest of Douai (21). If Balzac devotes scores of pages to describing the "archaeological" details of the house's architecture, the family's traditional practices, and its medieval mentality, it is not, as is customarily assumed, to serve as a contrastive backdrop to Balthazar's scientific "modernity," but rather to reveal the paradoxically "sacred" origins of Balthazar's scientific behavior--a point that Balzac reveals in a theoretical aphorism on the first page of the novel:

[P]erhaps we need to establish . . . the necessity of these didactic preparations against which certain ignorant and voracious persons, who prefer emotions without experiencing their generative principle, the flower without the seed, the baby without the gestation process, might protest. Are we to believe that art might be stronger than nature?

The events of human life, whether public or private, are so intimately linked to architecture that most observers can reconstruct nations *or individuals* in all the truth of their habits from the remains of their public monuments or from their domestic relics. Archaeology is to social nature what comparative anatomy is to organized nature. A mosaic reveals an entire society, just as a skeleton of an ichthyosaur suggests an entire creation. Everything is deducible, everything is linked. The cause allows one to guess the effect, just as each effect allows one

to reconstruct a cause. The scientist can resuscitate in this manner even the warts of ancient times. From this comes without doubt the prodigious interest that an architectural description can inspire when the writer's fantasy is faithful to its basic elements. Cannot each person reattach it to its past by rigorous deductions? And as for man, does not the past singularly resemble the future? Tell him what was and is this not almost always the same thing as telling him what will be? (22; my emphasis)

11

This passage seeks to justify the boredom the reader might endure when poring over the lengthy archaeological descriptions of traditional Douai and, in particular, the Claës household; but it also lays bare the cause-effect organization of the narrative. The key points to retain are that (1) archaeology is not merely a realist *description* of things past but a "hypothesis" concerning the rigorous relation between observable effects and an *unknown* causal origin (2) this hypothesis is admittedly a circular loop or bootstrapping operation and, most importantly, (3) the hypothesis can be applied to individuals. The *anthropological* import of Balzac's examination of a singular life derives, again, from the fact that individuals in the *Philosophical Studies* are constructed as *types*, as an extension of the social order. The internal drama of the individual, in other words, allegorically reflects the broader cultural and social tensions of the period.

In order to see that the meaningful discontinuity to be examined here is not the one we first imagine between Balthazar (as modern "genius") and his surrounding community (as backward-looking and traditional), we must discover that Balthazar's affections are tied to the obsolete past while Douai is, relatively speaking, on the side of modernity. To be sure, Douai is not Paris. Yet by the time the events of this story occur, Douai has modernized to the point of identifying more with the customs of Paris than it does with its own traditions. This point is easily missed because it is delivered in a fleeting aside at the end of a very long description of Douai's traditional ways:

But the sweet poetries of this patriarchal life will be found in the portrait of one of the last houses which, at the time when this story begins, still maintained the character of Douai. . . . Of all the towns in the North Department, Douai is, alas! the one that is modernizing the most, where the innovative spirit has made its most rapid conquests, where the love of social progress is the most widely developed. There, the old dwellings are disappearing each day, the old customs are being effaced. The fashions and ways of Paris dominate. . . . The well-to-do appearance of Dutch forms will have ceded to the changing elegance of French fashion (26-7).

Two Orders of Culture

Let us now examine some of the hidden connections between Balthazar's search for the "absolute" (effect) and the Catholic/patriarchal customs and emotions he internalized during his Old Regime upbringing (cause). Such an approach will reveal that the binary opposition between family/religion and science can be reduced to a paradoxical origin--that Balthazar's scientific desire for the absolute is in fact a repression and displacement of its opposite (the Catholic/patriarchal ideal grounded in the Word), and

that this repressed ideal Word is what Balthazar rediscovers in his final traumatic crisis.

The internal connections between the two orders of Balthazar's existence are numerous and complexly intertwined. I will limit my demonstration to three distinct but overlapping issues: **(1) the sacrality of space:** the sacrality of the traditional Claës household and how Balthazar liquidates it in the marketplace while at the same time attempting to sacralize the laboratory and his lab activities; **(2) mystical union:** Balthazar's traditional desire for an unmediated mystical/sexual union with Pépita and how this desire resurfaces as a "chaste" pursuit of creative knowledge in the sacred space of the laboratory; and **(3) sacred positionality:** Balthazar's desire for the sacred center of the household and how this becomes a desire to occupy the absolute center of universal knowledge through the discovery of an abstract principle of creation or fecundation.

12

1. The Sacrality of Space. Sacred spaces and the emotional attachments people develop in relation to such spaces play an important role in understanding the affective life of Balzac's characters, as is articulated in this theoretical aside: "Nobody has yet noticed that emotions have a life of their own, a nature that proceeds from the circumstances in which they are born; they keep both the physiognomy of the places where they were developed and the mark of the ideas that influenced their development (162).

In this case, the role of the Claës household as a sacred space and locus of deep attachment is made clear by its cathedral-like features, including external crosses, gargoyles, and a large rose-window (30-31); but also in details such as the sunlight that "lent a *mysterious grace* to [the house's] figures and slightest details" (33). We discover also that the household had once possessed a living "soul" but that it died with Pépita (176). At its origin, the household (and, by extension, the community) was founded on a violent sacrifice of the first patriarch of the Claës family, Van Claës, who was executed as a rebel during a revolt against the tyranny of Charles V--a death that was later viewed by the liberated townspeople as a self-sacrifice for their own freedom: "Of all the seeds entrusted to the earth, the spilt blood of martyrs is the one that gives the quickest harvest" (28). This violence constituted the sacred foundation of the household and community, and was commemorated by a set of wood panels, carved for the Van Claës family by Van Huysium de Bruges. Although the panels existed before the execution/sacrifice, they were delivered after it and therefore function, along with his portrait, as a symbol of the household's origins (34-5). After this founding event, each generation of Claës patriarchs made similar offerings of art objects, portraits, furniture, silver, jewels, and so on, until, after two hundred years of accumulation, "it seemed difficult to add anything worthy of what was already there" (62). If we recall that Balthazar is the first patriarch of the secular era, we realize that the narrator here indirectly explains Balthazar's turn to science for a contribution "worthy" of his ancestors. Paradoxically, Balthazar will destroy or sell off the sacred collection of the patriarchal household--including the original panels--in order to contribute to the family's sacred collection; thus he simultaneously desecralizes the household on one level by turning it over to the marketplace while attempting to resacralize it on another in the name of Science--a fact that becomes fully perceptible only in the final paroxysm of Balthazar's desire:

The admirable panels sculpted by Van Huysium and the portrait of the President had been sold, it was said, to Lord Spencer. The dining room was empty, there were only two wicker chairs and a common table on which Marguerite glimpsed in terror two plates, two bowls, two silver place-settings and a serving plate with the remains of a kippered herring that Claës and his

chamber servant had no doubt just shared. She ran quickly through the house, each room of which offered the sad spectacle of an emptiness similar to the parlor and dining room. *The idea of the absolute had passed through everywhere like a fire. . . .* The slightest object of value in the house, everything, even the kitchen utensils, had been sold. (289; my emphasis)(17)

But perhaps the best piece of evidence for the household's sacrality is the respect it commanded in the community: "The inhabitants of the town had a sort of religious respect for this family, which for them was a prejudice. The undying honesty, the stainless loyalty of the Claës, their unchanging decorum made of them a superstition as deep-rooted as that of the Feast of Gayant, and was succinctly expressed by this name: la Maison Claës. The spirit of [medieval] Flanders breathed throughout this dwelling" (29).

13

This positive valence of the community's religious feeling is emphasized throughout the novel but is transformed into a superstitious fear and morbid fascination by the end. This reversal occurs in direct response to Balthazar's attempt to shift the locus of the household's sacrality from its museum-like objects and potlatch-style feasts to his own extravagant pursuit of an Idea in the laboratory. The family Claës, we are told, was legendary for outbidding the other families with ever-increasing levels of luxury and expense in its feasts (127). And this ritualized "waste" was traditionally accepted by this normally ultra-frugal community because, in Mauss-like fashion, they intuitively perceived that it nourished their communal ties. The fact that the community derived an obvious pleasure from the sacrifice is secondary to this deeper social function. Balthazar's ritualized waste in the name of Science, on the other hand, is rejected by the community because it is incomprehensible from either a technical or a socio-economic point of view. This incomprehension gives way to a sacrificial paranoia as the community eventually perceives the displacement, if not the destruction, of the household's (and, by extension, its own) sacred origins.(18)

For the whole society Balthazar was a man to ban, a bad father who had devoured six fortunes, millions, and was looking for the philosopher's stone in the nineteenth century, this enlightened century, this unbelieving century, this century, etc. . . . A lot of people came before the *maison* Claës to point out the rose-window of the attic where so much gold and coal had been burnt up. . . . The feelings of the entire town were thus generally hostile to this great old man and his companion (291-2)

The mock sacrifice discussed earlier immediately follows this expression of hostility.

The cathedral-like rose window mentioned above is, significantly, the window of Balthazar's laboratory, indicating not only a symbolic equivalence between religion and science, but a concentration of the household's sacrality in the lab.(19) Balzac sacralizes the lab (and the secret activities in it) in other ways as well. As Gans points out, sacrality is not an intrinsic characteristic of Being; it is constituted by an object's inaccessibility or deferred access (92). Balthazar's diligent protection of his inner sanctum, doubled by a near absence of description by the narrator, work as a *de facto* sacralization. The narrator offers only two furtive glances inside the lab (one of which was discussed earlier), indexical or symbolic clues (such as Balthazar's appearance as he exits, verbal testimony of what occurs there), and structural parallels such as that between the lab and the inaccessible space of Pépita's "sacred" bedroom (106).

Pépita's seduction of Balthazar in her inner sanctum helps us to infer the secret activity of Balthazar's "workshop of seduction."[\(20\)](#) To round this out, in the following passage Balzac describes Balthazar's attachment to the lab as a set of sacramentally supported hopes (spiritual union, immortality, transcendence), as evidenced by the marriage metaphor, the life-or-death stakes of his "union," and the reference to heaven:

[Balthazar's] life depended for all intents and purposes on the places with which he had identified; his thought, *married to his laboratory* and to his house, had rendered these places indispensable There lay his hopes, there descended from heaven the only atmosphere in which his lungs could breathe vital air. This marriage between men and places (and things), so powerful in weak-natured people, becomes nearly tyrannical in men of science or study. For Balthazar, to leave the house meant renouncing science, his research, it meant death.[\(21\)](#) (249)

13

2. Mystical Union. Earlier we discussed Pépita's "masculine" features to which Balthazar appears to be particularly drawn, such as her face and her special way with tulips. But the text gives a sacred dimension to these forms by insisting on Pépita's deep connection to Christian mysticism through the "mystical education" she received as a nun (59); the description of her love for Balthazar as "the truly mysterious passion, a heated embrace of souls, a feeling for which the day of disenchantment never arrives" (58); in her "Eve-like" devotion to her spouse (60); and in her elevation of Balthazar into God's sphere (60, 82). Balthazar calls further attention to this point by describing Pépita's personal priest and life-long confidant, l'abbé de Solis, as an ecstatic mystic and enthusiast of St. Theresa (148-9).

This insistence on Pépita's mystical ties, her possession of a beautiful and *marriageable soul* (50-53) and her exposure to the erotic spirituality of St. Theresa, thematizes an important aspect of her desirability for Balthazar, especially because she is otherwise characterized as physically unattractive and even "defective." More precisely, it thematizes the type of idealized--two equals one--spiritual fusion and social transcendence that the couple would have realized before the 1792 marriage law. The experience of their union as a "wound" (77) or an "abyss" (66) internally dividing them is comprehensible, in my view, only within the context of the displacement of France's traditional sacred order.

Both Balthazar and Pépita sensed this internal division early in the marriage: "[Pépita] plumb[ed] the depths of the unknown abyss that separated her forever from Claës from the very first days" (66).[\(22\)](#) Yet while Pépita will sacrifice everything including normal sexual relations, the well-being of her children, and even her life to uphold the dream of a complete union (60-1), Balthazar finds an alternative outlet in Science. Such a displacement of desire explains his obsession with Adam's secret of creation, the (homo-) eroticization of his lab activity (the mystical spouse, God or Christ, is gendered male while the souls of human males are gendered female), his attachment to his valet, Lemulquinier, as well as Pépita's implausible jealousy of / rivalry with Balthazar's new "mistress." Balthazar's transfer of marital desire to a search for purely idealized knowledge of paternal creation effectively shuts Pépita--as material object of affection--out of the relation:

The feelings of this Spanish woman roiled inside her when she discovered a rival in science, which was stealing her husband. . . . How to kill an invisible

rival? How can a woman of limited power struggle with an idea whose joys (*jouissances*) are infinite and whose appeal is ever renewed? . . . [H]is wife wanted at least to stay beside him, lock herself up with him in the attic where he withdrew, engage in hand-to-hand battle with her rival during the long hours that her husband lavished on this terrible mistress. (72-3)

Another related issue, previously unexplored, is the onanistic dimension of Balthazar's expression of desire. This aspect of his secret activity is encoded in a strategic use of the "pathological" symptoms of onanism, which Balzac no doubt lifted from a vast contemporaneous medical literature devoted to explaining the dangers of this practice.⁽²³⁾ It would be tedious to line up systematically all of the evidence here. Suffice it to say that the repeated references to Balthazar's physical and moral degradation, his sunken eyes, hollow face and cheeks, heavy and inclined head, excessive tears, heavy sweating, blank stares, dilated pupils, infantile behaviors, loss of sensory perception such as hearing or speech (Balthazar goes deaf and dumb at the end), impotence, madness, and so on, all correspond to onanistic symptoms discussed in early nineteenth-century medical literature. Balthazar is also guilty of committing the dangerous acts that onanism was thought to cause: he turns away from marriage and society.

14

I mention these onanistic symptoms not for their prurient interest but because they help "diagnose" the pathological pleasure Balthazar takes in conducting experiments, his absence of desire for P  pita while a chemist, the frequent references to Balthazar's finding or communicating his secret with his "hands,"⁽²⁴⁾ and, more importantly, the various characteristics of the absolute. It is referred to as a "preoccupation," a "habit," a "liquid," the "principle of creation," "the principle of fecundation," and an "ethereal matter that is projected." This onanistic perspective also throws into sharp relief what I take to be the novel's main theme: if Balthazar's desire to be an ideal spouse and father-creator has been displaced onto science, then Balzac's distillation of this problem to its graphic essence in misdirected insemination renders this theme unmistakable.

Despite their mutual love and best intentions, we can understand from the foregoing discussion why Balthazar's and P  pita's union devolved toward this: "A complete separation. . . . Cla  s slept far from his wife, got up first thing in the morning, and locked himself up in the laboratory or his office. . . . These two beings, formerly accustomed to thinking together, no longer had--were further and further removed from--these moments of communication (165).

We see the mirror-image of Balthazar's (failed) mystical union to P  pita in his homosocial union with Lemulquinier. The following passage, for example, serves as an index of Balthazar's transfer of his marital sentiments to his servant: "These two old people enveloped by an idea . . . , animated by the same breath--one represented the envelope, the other the soul of their common existence--formed a spectacle both horrible and touching (267).

3. Sacred Positionality. If traditional sacramental marriage accorded males a position of sacred centrality within the household, then the desire for this position after the abolition of the marriage sacrament is, by definition, *without object*. Which is why, once this desire is expressed in terms of scientific research, there is nothing to stop it. No single discovery could effectuate the metaphysical exhaustion of desire in the same way that the marriage sacrament could have--a point demonstrated by Balthazar's perpetual dissatisfaction with his experimental results (even when he is successful).

To see that Balthazar's scientific objective is at bottom sacred transcendence, we might turn to Balthazar's response to P  pita's accusation that he has abandoned his patriarchal role: "What! . . . You blame your husband for elevating himself above other men in order to throw at your feet the divine purple of glory, as a minimal offering next to the treasures of your heart? You have no idea what I've been doing for the past three years?" (117). Or his later response to a similar accusation by Marguerite: "You will be like a queen. Bah! Nature in all its plenitude will belong to us, we will be above everything" (225).

Despite the numerous technical descriptions of the "absolute," the subtext that continually surfaces and that better explains Balthazar's motivation is the central "position" that he hopes to gain through discovery. For example, when he thinks he has nearly solved his technical problems, he describes this success in terms of a physical "distance": "I didn't dare tell you that between me and the absolute there is hardly a hair's distance" (140).

P  pita, too, describes Balthazar's science in terms of "elevation": "Science is more powerful in you than you are, and its flight has carried you too high for you ever to come back down and be the companion of a poor wife" (120). More specifically, she imagines Balthazar reaching for God's position: "You forget, Cla  s, that you are committing the sin of pride of which Satan was guilty. You are attacking God" (119). This idea is echoed by Lemulquinier: "We almost put our hand on the secret. . . . Ah! What a man! He's almost in God's pants [*chausses*]" (216).

15

The anthropological significance of Balthazar's behavior is revealed primarily in the mystified reaction to him (negative and positive) by others. If, as mentioned above, Balthazar ends up arousing fear, resentment, and eventually (mock) sacrificial violence, it is because his continued reach for power and radical social differentiation within his modern and desacralized context appears illegitimate. According to historians Daniel Roche and Jean Delumeau, the social effects produced by the desacralization of marriage in 1792 are clear: "In the flash of an instant, the utopia transformed the relations between fathers and their families, and therefore their place in society, by means of a juridical upheaval. The old edifice was shaken due to the disappearance of paternal power, the legalization of divorce, and the abolition of the distinction between people, children, spouses" (243).

Because of the family's firm rooting in Old Regime structures, the Cla  s family does not immediately experience the violent effects of desacralization. Even if the 1792 law had effectively destroyed the metaphysical guarantee of the family's traditional beliefs (intuited by P  pita in her feeling of the "abyss"), tradition prolonged the patriarchal illusion well into the nineteenth century. It is only when Balthazar's repeated dilapidation of the family wealth and patrimonial heritage threatens the children's existence that P  pita's illusion cracks (82). Too weak herself to challenge Balthazar's power, her half-efforts merely defer the inevitable conflict onto the eldest daughter, Marguerite. Foreseeing an Oedipal rivalry and eventual parricide if she reveals to Marguerite the truth of Balthazar's decadence, she goes the other way and attempts to instill in her daughter a pious respect. Marguerite, however, sees through this, divines the causes of her father's fall, and eventually takes the measures necessary to save the family: she exiles her father to Brittany, has the other children educated, and through shrewd financial maneuvering is able to restore the family's squandered wealth. At this point, the social leveling described by Roche and Delumeau becomes visible as Marguerite becomes the *de facto* patriarch. Eventually she returns her father to his former position, but only after he has been effectively stripped of

his "real" power. As the text makes clear: "[Marguerite] was going to be father, and he the child" (242).

The Modernist Absolute

Everything is bilateral in the domain of thought. Ideas are binary. Janus is the myth of criticism and the symbol of genius. Only God is triangular!

Balzac, *Illusions perdues*

Dramatized through this toppling of Balthazar and the reversal of family positions are the delayed effects of France's *formal* desacralization of the social order--a legal event that had, in fact, occurred many years prior. The radical social leveling and the rivalries that emerged between the Claës family and Balthazar should thus be viewed as a microcosmic "effect" of a macrocosmic displacement of Old Regime structures by the modern bourgeoisie and market economy. To be sure, the process of cultural modernization was slow and gradual, and it occurred at noticeably different rates within France according to geographical region. But according to Balzac, the bourgeois revolution of 1830--an event that corresponds directly to Balthazar's dramatic "fall"--unleashed the pent-up mimetic rivalries and violence that had formerly been stratified by the traditional order. As Balzac indicates in a brief aside, once this illusion is shattered, desire suddenly shifts from its vertical axis to a horizontal one, thereby producing a nation of violent rivals:

For two years, the town's social order had been divided into two enemy camps. The nobility had formed one circle and the bourgeoisie a second, naturally very hostile to the first. This sudden separation which occurred throughout France and divided it into two enemy nations, whose jealous irritations only increased, was one of the principal reasons that the provinces participated in the July 1830 revolution. (238)

16

If the text casts Balthazar's search for the "absolute" in terms of a purely scientific endeavor, what he finally discovers, or rather what we discover through his failure, has substantially nothing to do with chemistry: Balthazar's patriarchal position had been irreversibly displaced and his continued attempt to exhaust the desire for paternal/creative transcendence via a "word" led to an extreme form of

desirelessness, impotence, and (from an external point of view) madness

On a first reading, Balzac manages temporarily to mystify his readers because we are convinced that the word "absolute" contains deep meaning, even if only for Balthazar or Balzac. What Balzac shows, however, is that the "absolute" is just a word--an empty and infinitely displaceable signifier onto which Balthazar erroneously projects his hopes, desires, dreams, and emotions from the Old Regime (see epigraph #1).

Balzac reveals Balthazar's internal discovery in two different ways, following the double (mystical-sexual / linguistic) trajectory of the problem. Earlier we mentioned that Balthazar appears to have become self-conscious of the repressed eroticism of his lab activities and of his symbolic impotence when mocked by the young children and their crude hand gestures. This impression is reinforced if we examine the (mock) sacrificial scene. It is here that Balthazar realizes that the foundation of his phallogentric power/identity has been radically displaced, that his desire for mystical-sexual-linguistic unity is impossible:

All of the children ran up like a flock of birds and surrounded the two chemists. . . . The children, feeling supported [by the community], threw their projectiles, which struck the two old men. . . . The blow was struck. Balthazar, whose faculties had been preserved by the natural chastity of scientists for whom the preoccupation with discovery has annihilated the passions, guessed, through a mechanism of intussusception [*invagination*], the secret of this scene (294-5).

Balzac's eroticization of this sacrificial scene reveals that Balzathar's social/spiritual "deflowering" comes in an imaginary penetration of his soul by a mob of children, a clear metaphor for the uncultivated "masses" of the modern (post-1830) order. In other words, the mob's penetration means that the phallus lies on the side of the modern social order, not with the traditional patriarch. The general physical "paralysis" that Balthazar suffers from this experience marks thematically his social impotence. Which is why after this symbolic transfer of power, the (now modern and equalitarian) community is prepared to venerate him. [\(25\)](#)

The second part of Balthazar's discovery brings us back to the issue of language and to Balzac's thoughts on the emotional impact of "words." To understand the linguistic component of the final revelation scene, it is useful to consider Adam's seduction of Balthazar with the "absolute" in light of the narrator's comments on Pierquin's attempted seduction of Marguerite with amorous words. Interpretive clues can be gleaned from the common emphasis on the impact of the look, the voice, and bodily gestures: "Whatever one does, whatever one says, there exists an admirable magnetism whose effects do not deceive. The sound of a voice, a look, the passionate gestures of a loving man can be imitated, a young girl can be deceived by a clever actor, but to succeed, doesn't he need to be alone" (186)? This passage takes on added significance if we recall Balthazar's heated "passion" during his single night alone with Adam (discussing chemistry).

17

We find similar commentary later when Pierquin shifts his attention to Félicie, another Claës daughter. This again could easily apply to Balthazar: "Félicie [...] listened to this language, always so sweet even when it is deceptive; *she took emptiness for profundity . . .*" (240; my emphasis).

After the mob scene, Balthazar's paralysis reduced him to a state of "infancy" (295) and eventually his paralysis narrowed to his "tongue" (295). Effectively silenced by the crowd, Balthazar finds alternative means of communication, namely via his hands and his eyes. To be properly understood, the significance of this communication must be interpreted in light of Balthazar's misdirected mystical/sexual (that is, "chaste") form of expression. First, the hands: "When seeing her, Balthazar blushed, his eyes welled up without shedding any tears. He could squeeze his daughter's hand with his cold fingers, and he put in this squeeze all of the feelings and ideas that he could not express (verbally)" (296). Let us recall that this "squeezing" of Marguerite's hands resembles in a striking way Balthazar's earlier squeezing of Pépita's hands when he communicated Adam's secret to her. The strategic repetition of this hand gesture clearly establishes a hidden link between Balthazar's "bodily expression" and the absolute.

Now the eyes:

[Balthazar] was constantly affectionate in his glances, through which he could manifest his feelings; his eyes contracted suddenly such a great variety of expression that they produced an easy-to-understand language of light. . . . The old man began moving with an incredible force to shake off the chains of his paralysis; he wanted to speak and moved his tongue but without being able to produce sounds; *his eyes projected his thoughts* . . . he sweated in huge droplets. (297-8; my emphasis).

This passage, too, becomes more meaningful if we recall the narrator's explicit signifying equation between "projected matter" and the absolute: "'Ethereal matter that is projected,' said Claës, 'and that is without doubt the word of the absolute'" (119). According to this formula, the projected matter *is* the word; the absolute is therefore the ineffable and unmasterable emotion/desire associated with the matter. To ensure that we do not miss this point, Balzac insists on it again in his Introduction to the *Philosophical Studies*: "Bring together these scattered fragments from the beautiful pages where Balthazar Claës explains the chemical absolute to his wife as: '. . . our feelings are the effects of a gas that is projected,' don't you perceive in this the elements of a scientific work whose flashes of light spurt out in spite of the author?" (1212).

If the signifier of the absolute is the materiality of the projected light, then we can conclude that Balthazar's body in fact communicates what his mouth cannot, but that this communication must be contextualized within an sacred order of signification no longer directly available to the reader.

The final event that contributes to the triggering of Balthazar's "Eureka!" is his discovery in the newspaper that the absolute had been "sold" by Adam de Wierzschoonia. At the precise moment Balthazar hears (or sees?) the printed words *découverte de l'absolu*, his lingering crisis explodes into a final paroxysm of bodily expression. The significance of this event clearly lies in the fact that the sign that Balthazar had believed could exhaust his desire for sexual and spiritual union and that exclusively grounded his deepest paternal emotions and belief had been co-opted by the market. If the "absolute" can, after all, be bought and sold by anybody, no one can any longer claim exclusive access; the sacred position he seeks is, in fact, secularized and infinitely displaceable.

That Balthazar discovers the final meaning of the absolute in the most banal and widely-diffused form of communication merely drives home the point that the "absolute" is in the end a word like another other. This discovery of the materiality of the word, insisted on by the italics ("he saw the words, *discovery of the absolute*," 298), reveals in the flash of an instant the spatial and temporal *différance* between Adam's originary verbal revelation of the absolute and its written iteration in the infinitely reproducible medium of moveable type. This deconstruction of Balthazar's illusion works to lift the repression of his spiritual and sexual desires, but it at the same time tragically casts him (Adam-like) into the fray of humanity. Balthazar's genius and his madness is to have spent his life trying to hold up a sacred center that was no longer there to be held. He sacrificed his wife, his family, and his life for a meaningless word.

Notes

1. All translations from the original French are my own. ([back](#))
2. To realize that resentment against the "great man" was a concern for Balzac, we need only glance at his non-fictional commentaries. In a series of documents called "On Artists," for example, he explicitly refers to this problem, and he cites the resentment against Christ as the most striking example of the sacrificial mechanism: "We have tried to demonstrate, in considering the artist both as creator and creature, that he was already himself a great obstacle to his social cohesion. Everything repels a man whose quick passage to the center of the world upsets others, things, and ideas. The moral of these observations can be summed up in a word: *A great man must be unhappy*. . . . In this respect, Christ is the most admirable example. This man receiving Death for the price of the divine light that he radiated on the earth and for climbing on a cross where he will be transformed into God, offers an immense spectacle: there's more there than a religion; it's an eternal type of glory. . . . Christ on the cross, dying in order to be reborn, shedding his mortal flesh to reign in the heavens. Man and God: man first, God after; man, for the majority; God, for the few faithful; little understood, then all of a sudden adored; finally, becoming God only when he's been baptized in blood"

(289-290). [\(back\)](#)

3. Josué Harari's article on *La Recherche de l'absolu* is one exception. Much of this current piece was, in fact, originally inspired by this article and by a graduate seminar at The Johns Hopkins University on the structure of desire and knowledge in Balzac's *Etudes philosophiques*. Susan Derwin's reading of *La Recherche* is also very illuminating and touches on several of the issues I will explore here, most notably mimesis, subjectivity, and language. Guided primarily by Freud and Lukacs, Derwin does not, however, focus on the issue of mimetic desire, nor does she attempt to theorize Balthazar's behaviors from an historical/cultural or anthropological point of view. [\(back\)](#)

4. It is interesting to note that despite Balthazar's linguistic paralysis, he manages to articulate the word "EUREKA"--a fact that suggests that he could have uttered, if he had wished it, the content of his deathbed revelation. I do not point out this contradiction to criticize Balzac for carelessness in his construction of the novel; on the contrary, his contradiction underscores the fact that Balthazar's silence is self-conscious and strategic. There is deep significance in the fact that Balzac has his character pull back and withhold the final word. [\(back\)](#)

5. The "content" of Adam's discourse also suggests a religious dimension. His unusual emphasis on the number "three" and the triadic structure of his chemical theory points quite clearly to the Trinity. [\(back\)](#)

6. Balzac: "The *Study of Manners* will represent all the social effects While the second part is the *Philosophical Studies*, because after the *effects* come the *causes*" (*Lettres à Madame Hanska*, 204). [\(back\)](#)

7. This is Christopher Fox's claim: "The implication, of course, is that Balthazar not only has neglected his wife in favor of a homosocial activity in the laboratory, but also has relocated the source of his most intense pleasures not in science, but in a man, such that, at the source of his homosocial activity lies an implied homosexual activity, an implication which persists, as I argue, well after Joséphine's death" (684). [\(back\)](#)

8. Here are some examples of Balthazar's bizarre attachment to tulips and Pépita's "knowing" use of them: "Balthazar Claës's passion for his wife, and that his wife knew how to perpetuate, seemed, as he observed himself, to harness its innate constancy in the culture of happiness that was equal in value to his passion for tulips for which he had a penchant stemming from childhood" (64). Later when Pépita makes it clear that she wants to make love with Balthazar, the text describes the effects of the tulip arrangement in her bedroom: "The lavish gaiety of a triumphant woman exploded in the splendid colors of the tulips that rose, cleverly arranged, from the long neck of big, Chinese porcelain vase The secret of these preparations, was him, always him! . . . Joséphine couldn't have said more eloquently to Balthazar that he was always the principle of her joys and pains" (107). The phallic form of tulips is obvious from common sense, but Balzac insists on it here: "The stem was enormous, erect, firm . . ." (103). [\(back\)](#)

20

9. Gaston Bachelard takes a psychoanalytic approach to the question of Balthazar's displacement of sexual desire into science. His argument, though interesting, is largely anachronistic in that it fails to take into account the cultural and religious inflection of Balthazar's sexual desire. [\(back\)](#)

10. Cf. Bologne 134. [\(back\)](#)

11. Josué Harari explains the contradiction between desire and object in terms of a displacement between philosophical and scientific orders of knowledge: "This 'scientific' knowledge which will deliver up nature's secret is, to be sure, knowledge relative to the act of creation: that is Balthazar's objective. His language is that of experimentation but his quest is entirely in the philosophic realm. . . . In philosophic terms, it is the point where all that is multiple finds its unity and where unity manifests itself as the point from which all diversity is created. In other words, this is precisely the focal point where God is situated" (151). Formally, I agree with each of the points that Harari makes. But what he describes as "philosophical" is more properly called "religious," a fact that his reference to "God" betrays. Harari's description of Balthazar's lab activity in terms of "praying to the divine illumination" (152) also reveals this deeper religious dimension. By situating Balthazar's problem within a religious problematic, we can perhaps see more clearly the relation between marriage/paternity and the "act of creation" Balthazar would like to produce in the scientific realm. The mystical concept of non-mediated union also would account for Harari's description of Balthazar's essential desire to be the "man of desire without relation" (155). ([back](#))

12. One can observe this logic in passages such as this: "After becoming once again father and husband, the chemist took his last child from his wife's lap . . ." (95). Or: "[H]e had become once again a father, reason had chased away science. . ." (223). ([back](#))

13. "By helping Balthazar in his manipulations, he had espoused his madness. Either he had seized the scope of his research in the explanations that escaped the chemist when the goal slipped from his hands, or the innate penchant in man to imitate made him adopt the ideas of the one in whose atmosphere he lived . . ." (101). ([back](#))

14. Here are some indications that various characters have understood Balthazar's secret: "In spite of Madame de Claës' discretion, her daughter imperceptibly discovered, thread by thread, the mysterious weave of this domestic drama" (145). "I [Balthazar] am talking about Lemulquinier, he has finally understood me and is a big help. The poor guy, he is so devoted to me!" (272). "The trip was sufficiently long for Marguerite to become increasingly lucid about the situation in which her father and Lemulquinier found themselves" (272). ([back](#))

15. Despite the clichés handed down from generation to generation about Balzac's realism being grounded in a naïve mimesis of external referents, Balzac himself criticizes the "copy" theory of representation: "A mediocre painter who in this instance would have copied this woman . . ." The implication is that the Balzacian narrator is not mediocre, and thus is doing something more sophisticated than merely copying observable reality. ([back](#))

16. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that, like Balzac (and Freud), Lévi-Strauss grounded his structural anthropology in an epistemological model of temporal "layers" similar to the archaeological model--geology. Anthropology for Lévi-Strauss is the discovery of constants across radically different orders of human existence:

Every landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos [But] the most majestic meaning of all is surely that which precedes and, commands and, to a large extent, explains the others. . . . [My aim is] to recapture the master-meaning, which may be obscure but of which each of the others is a partial or distorted transposition. . . . I quite naturally looked upon [Freud's theories] as the

application to the human being of a method the basic pattern of which is represented by geology. . . . [Marxism, psychoanalysis and geology] demonstrate that understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another; that the true reality is never the most obvious; and that the nature of truth is already indicated by the care it takes to remain elusive. . . . But I had learned from my three sources of inspiration that the transition between one order and the other is discontinuous; that to reach reality one has first to reject experience, and then subsequently to reintegrate it into an objective synthesis devoid of any sentimentality (56-58). ([back](#))

21

17. On the sacrality of the bedroom: "A long time before English manners had consecrated the woman's bedroom as a sacred space, the Flemish woman's bedroom was impenetrable" (106). The impenetrable space of P  pita's bedroom is structurally analogous to the impenetrability of Balthazar's lab. This structural symmetry suggests that the activities that occur in each of the spaces are likewise symmetrical. ([back](#))

18. Let us note parenthetically that this final burst is accompanied by a homosocial coupling of Balthazar and Lemulquinier. Although Marguerite's "terror" once again suggests a purely sexual relation, the reader's exterior perspective can see that this coupling, along with the sacrificial wasting of its contents, reflects Balthazar's residual dream of a spiritualized (non-material, non-mediated) union with a paternal ideal. ([back](#))

19. Although Balthazar, too, sponsored such feasts, and was able for fifteen years to maintain the respect of the community for them, his "modern" expression of extravagance in scientific research transforms sacred respect into superstitious fear. Balzac demonstrates this displacement and reversal of the traditional sacred during Balthazar's final feast: a letter arrives announcing Adam de Wierzschownia's death, accompanied by ideas pertaining to the search for the absolute. This letter sends Balthazar into a deep depression because, as P  pita's fearful reaction indicates, it was the "death" of Balthazar as a functional patriarch: "This feast, during which the Maison Cla  s sparkled for the last time, had something somber and sad about it amidst so much magnificence, so many curiosities amassed by six generations, each of which had had its mania, and that the inhabitants of Douai would admire for the last time" (128). ([back](#))

20. Cf. Harari p. 152 for an interesting discussion of Balthazar as a God-figure. ([back](#))

21. A page later, the narrator describes his emotions at his forced departure as those of a man "condemned to death before going to the guillotine" (251). ([back](#))

22. Also: "[P  pita] soon wondered if Cla  s hadn't married her in order to have a slave, if he didn't have some secret imperfections that obliged him to be content with a poor and disgraced young woman" (53). Or: "The weakness in my heart, yes, I often wished I wasn't a mother so that I could unite myself more intimately with your soul, to your life!" (122). ([back](#))

23. Cf. *Histoire d'une grande peur: la masturbation* (Stengers and Van Neck) and more recently *Solitary Pleasures* (Bennett and Rosario II) for a historical account of masturbation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. Both works also provide lists of the various symptoms for diagnosing this

activity. ([back](#))

24. Balthazar's explanation of Adam's scientific communication to Pépita, for example, borrows heavily from this onanistic metaphoric: "My Pépita, said Balthazar as he squeezed her hand, tears of rage flowed over the hollow cheeks of this man while he was throwing into my soul the fire of his reasoning that Lavoisier had already timidly done, without daring to let himself go" (116). ([back](#))

25. "By a law, unknown until this time, that directs the affections of the masses, this event brought all souls to Mr. Claës. In a single moment, he became a great man, he excited the admiration and obtained all the feelings that he was denied the previous evening" (296). ([back](#))

22

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The Emergence of Logical Thought: How to Interpret Contradiction and Consistency in Early Greek Culture

Part 1. Homer

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Introduction

The role of writing in the development of rational thought has been frequently discussed in studies on orality and literacy. In them, many attempts have been made to shed light on the differences between the "oral" and "written" mode of thinking.⁽¹⁾ Concerning Greek culture, the "great divide" theory of Eric A. Havelock⁽²⁾--according to which there is a sizeable gap between the oral and written modes of thinking--has been criticized in comparative anthropological and psychological investigations. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole are among the most influential opponents of the "great divide" theory. The theory suggests that the use of a developed writing system furthers the ability to think logically and to detect contradictions in the tradition. The two scholars made a field study among the Vai in Liberia. Having compared the thought processes of the literate and the illiterate population, they concluded that neither the use of the Vai syllabic script nor Arabic literacy has an effect on the development of logical operations.⁽³⁾ Although David R. Olson pointed out that the full implications of literacy cannot be grasped by simply comparing readers and non-readers because of the complex, culturally embedded nature of writing, the continual criticism of the "orality/literacy" theory seems to have rendered its original formulations obsolete and irrelevant.

Our present study attempts to refine these formulations about the mind-shaping nature of the practice of reading and writing through an analysis of the role and characteristics of contradiction and consistency in the Homeric poems; we discuss the various forms of contradiction and describe the nature and functions of "oral consistency."

In a previous study ("[Orality and Literacy : The Development of Philosophy into Logical Thought](#)," *Anthropoetics* 5,2) we examined one particular structure (if "p" then "q") in the Homeric epic poems and in some of the works of the early Greek theorists. We demonstrated that the transition from an oral to a written mode of thought occurred along the same lines as those J. L. Austin intuitively suggested in the elaboration of his performative-constative distinction.⁽⁴⁾ One of the most important characteristics of his

performative utterances is that their meaning and usage are always determined by the *circumstances* in which they are uttered. By contrast, the "pure" *constative* utterance has to be explainable without consideration of the circumstances of its utterance. As he says: "We aim at the ideal of what would be right to say in all circumstances for any purpose, to any audience . . ." (5). Austin did not elaborate this insight any further. By examining the usage of the "logical" structure (if "p" then "q") we demonstrated that the distinction Austin made between these categories of utterances is subject to historical development. The investigated structure is gradually transformed from a "situational" to a truly logical pattern of thought.

2

In our present work, we continue to pursue the investigation suggested by Austin; however, our perspective is slightly different from that of our former study. Here, our first step is to examine the nature of contradiction and consistency in the epic poems. The characteristics we uncover are likely to determine the practice of any complex thought pattern in the most elementary way. In a following study we shall examine the changes the perception of contradiction and consistency brought about in Herodotus and the Presocratic philosophers.

In the terminology of Generative Anthropology, our study pursues the development of language from its originary form--which can be only interpreted in situations--to its metaphysical use. In Homeric language, "performative" speech acts are dominant--invocations, imperatives, ostensives, and so on--and depend on the place where they are uttered. Accordingly, the interpretation of consistency and contradiction has to take into account the particular situation the speech act is embedded in. If we move forward toward metaphysical discourse, declarative sentences or propositions gradually banish the original utterances, the elementary linguistic forms. As Eric Gans puts it in "[Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought](#)" (*Anthropoetics*, 2, 2): "Metaphysics, by denying the existence of an utterance-form more primitive than the declarative, incarnates the refusal to think of the origin of language as an event." In the originary scene of language, the *ostensive* sign defers the violence caused by desires converging on a common object and offers an imaginary substitute in place of the thing. By contrast, this ostensive sign is replaced in Plato's work by the *Idea* or *concept*, which is purportedly without origin or history.

For our enterprise, it is important that the contents of the principal concepts emerging in Plato's philosophy be tested continually for their (textual) consistency with the relevant context. In fact, the contexts themselves are shaped in the course of metaphysical discourses. This endeavor to achieve textual consistency disrupts the old "situational" thinking and replaces it with "conceptual thought." In the present study we shed light on the main characteristics of oral *situational thinking* by examining the nature of contradiction and consistency in Homer's work. In a second part we will pursue the changes that "oral" thought underwent in the work of some of the early Greek theorists, which ushered in and ultimately made possible the conceptual thought of Plato.

Textual consistency and the role of speech situation in the Homeric epic poems

Looking for textual inconsistencies in the Homeric poems is a very intriguing task. In the past, scholars tried to explain away the importance of this phenomenon. But Albert B. Lord suggests an explanation for our bewilderment regarding this question:

...the ordinary singer is not always critical, is not looking for that consistency which has become almost a fetish with literary scholars. Bowra, in his book *Tradition and Design in the Iliad*, has attributed some of the narrative inconsistencies to the fact that the poet was concentrating on one episode at a time. This is close to the truth but does not give the whole picture. It is not merely that the singer is concentrating on each episode as he sings it. Each episode has rather its own consistency. (6)

Lord doesn't elaborate on this remark. To come closer to the nature of "Homeric consistency" we have to take a closer look at a few epic scenes.

3

Contradictions not fulfilling a role in the Homeric epic poems

In the *Odyssey*, Helen appears differently in different speech situations that concern her role in the Trojan war. For example, when Telemachus is searching for his missing father, he visits Menelaus. Menelaus assures Telemachus of his friendship with Odysseus, praises the missing hero, and evokes a tearful reaction in the audience. At this point Helen casts a drug into their wine to "ease pain and strife," and recalls her adventure with Odysseus that took place during the siege of Troy: after the hero had disguised himself as a beggar, he came to Troy to spy on and cause damage to the Trojan warriors. Helen recognized him and, after she swore not to denounce him to the Trojans, Odysseus disclosed the Achaeans' plans to her. Then the hero slaughtered some of the Trojans and went back to the Achaeans. Now Helen describes her own feelings at that time:

"Then the other Trojan women wailed aloud, but my soul was glad, for already my heart was turned to go back to my home, and I groaned for the blindness that Aphrodite gave me, when she led me there from my dear native land, forsaking my child and my bridal chamber, and my husband, a man who lacked nothing, whether in wisdom or in looks." (Od.4.259-264)(7)

It is easy to read between the lines of this story. Helen was the cause of the Trojan war and, indirectly, was responsible for Odysseus' disappearance. It is no coincidence that the drug she cast into the wine not only soothed pain but also dissipated anger. The story Helen relates emphasizes her loyalty to the Achaeans. It suggests that she collaborated with them. So the story is a kind of *self-justification*.

Helen's story is accepted by the audience. Menelaus praises his wife for speaking properly (*kata moiran*) and then relates a story in which he praises Odysseus for his composure and confirms the excellence of his friend. The event he relates occurred at the end of the Trojan war. Some of the Achaeans were sitting in the wooden horse and waiting for their chance to come out unobserved. At this moment Helen came to examine the strange horse:

"You came there then, and it must be that you were bidden by some god who wished to grant glory to the Trojans; and godlike Deiphobus followed you on your way. Three times did you circle the hollow ambush, trying it with your touch, and you named aloud the chieftains of the Danaans by their names, likening your voice to the voices of wives of all the Argives. Now I and the son of Tydeus and noble Odysseus sat there in the midst and heard how you called,

and we two were eager to rise up and come out, or else to answer at once from inside, but Odysseus held us back and stopped us, in spite of our eagerness. Then all the other sons of the Achaeans kept quiet, but Anticlus alone wished to speak and answer you; but Odysseus firmly closed his mouth with strong hands, and saved all the Achaeans, and held him thus until Pallas Athene led you away." (Od.4.274-289)

If we put the two stories side by side, it is obvious that Helen is portrayed in different ways. In the first story, Helen is loyal to the Achaeans, in the second, she endangers the life of many of them. In the story of Menelaus, Odysseus doesn't trust Helen and he doesn't disclose any information about himself and his companions to her. This stands in contrast to his attitude in the story related earlier by Helen.

4

The two portrayals are in textual *inconsistency* with each other. Did the original performer or audience recognize this discrepancy? This is doubtful. Such textual comparison and scrutiny are completely foreign to the character of the Homeric epic poems. In the course of a performance, many speech situations emerge that contain concatenations which serve to hold together the whole performance, the whole story. The internal glue of the two stories or speech situations examined above is *the purpose of praising Odysseus*. This purpose overshadows all other circumstances in the above scene and so hides the highlighted inconsistency. We call this characteristic of the Homeric poems *situational consistency*. This consistency arises from the nature of performance. The aim of Homeric oral performance is not to establish textual consistency but to delight the audience. The performance itself comes into being along with concrete, continuously changing speech situations. In the course of the performance, there is no unbiased meta-observer who can dissect the speech situations and constrain them to the requirements of textual consistency. The performer and the audience are parts of the performance. They merge into the story; they don't have the possibility of examining it objectively as we do. Textual consistency or inconsistency in the Homeric poems appears to the participants of a performance as an secondary corollary of situational consistency. The performer, the audience, and the story are permanently interacting with each other while the story is continually being reshaped to the purposes of the performer. David Herige grasps the substance of this problem in the same way:

. . . performers' most valuable assets have been a sensitivity to their listeners' wants and an ability to improvise, embellish, excel, and ultimately, please. Without these traits there would be no role for them to play. . . . Losing their listeners' interest is not the aim of most oral performers, who will learn quickly enough that fidelity to a particular text for the sake of consistency and accuracy is likely only to bore, frustrate, and antagonize an audience intent on new experiences. Embellishing a core of stock phrases, set formulas, and standard plots is forever necessary if the performer is to continue to capture and retain his audience's friendly attention.(8)

A few examples will give us a feeling for the nature of this situational consistency.

After Hector's death Helen mourns him:

"Hector, far dearest to my heart of all my husband's brothers! In truth my husband is godlike Alexander, who brought me to the land of Troy--I wish I

had died before then! For this is now the twentieth year from the time when I went from there and have been gone from my native land, but never yet have I heard an evil or spiteful word from you; but if any other spoke reproachfully of me in the halls, a brother of yours or a sister, or brother's fair-robed wife, or your mother--*but the father-in-law is always gentle as if he were the real father*(9) (*ekuros de pater hoos epios aiei*)--yet you would turn them with speech and restrain them by your gentleness and your gentle words. So I wail alike for you and for my unlucky self with grief at heart; for *no longer have I anyone else (allos) in broad Troy who is gentle (epios) to me or kind; but all men shudder at me.*" (Il.24.762-775)(10)

5

The contradiction between the highlighted passages is apparent. The first general statement assumes that the father-in-law is *always (aiei)* gentle. The second statement suggests that no person who is gentle to Helen still exists. What is the explanation for this discrepancy? As Helen bewails Hector, she describes her miserable fortune and, what is more, she bewails herself rather than Hector. The deceased hero had defended her against the malicious attacks of the family. She adds that her father-in-law is always gentle. If we consider the particular purpose of this speech, we can realize that this general statement is an excellent device for avoiding an overt confrontation with the head of the family, her father-in-law, Priam. Helen uses a universal statement in order not to steal Hector's limelight. The second highlighted statement exaggerates, emphasizes, and dramatizes Helen's grief over her cruel fate. This expression of her hopeless fortune also overshadows the first universal statement. For this reason we cannot say that the two statements contradict each other from the audience's point of view. Here are two micro-situations in a dynamic interaction that fulfill different roles in the speech act, and so the contradiction detected by us is meaningless for the oral performer and audience.

In another scene, Achilles sends Patroclus to Nestor to inquire about the wounded soldier he rescued with his chariot. Before Patroclus arrived, Nestor had started to eat. The narrator meticulously describes the meal and mentions how easily Nestor lifted the heavy cup:

"Another man could barely budge that cup from the table when it was full, but old Nestor would lift it easily." (Il.11.636-637)

A little later Patroclus arrives and recognizes that the wounded hero is Machaon. When Patroclus is about to leave, Nestor takes the opportunity to describe the difficult situation of their army to him:

"Why now does Achilles have such pity for the sons of the Achaeans, all those who have been struck with missiles? He does not know at all what grief has arisen throughout the camp; for the best men lie among the ships struck by arrows or wounded with spear-thrust. . . . Yet Achilles, noble though he is, cares not for the Danaans, nor pities them. Does he wait indeed until the swift ships near the sea, in spite of the Argives, blaze with consuming fire, and we ourselves are slain one after the other? For my strength is not such as it once was in my supple limbs." (Il.11.656-669)

The two highlighted passages are obviously in contradiction. In the first, Nestor is described as strong and hardly surpassable; in the second he is weak and in need of help. However, the contradiction can be

resolved by analyzing the speech situations. In the first section, the narrator *is praising* Nestor, who fought vehemently to rescue the wounded hero. In the second section, Nestor's purpose is to persuade Achilles to support the Achaean warriors. Nestor reproaches Achilles with being indifferent to the sufferings and death of the Achaeans, and then the hero contrasts his present weakness with his youthful strength so that he can emphasize his inability to ward off the enemy. It is clear that Nestor intends *to evoke the pity* of Achilles by stressing his weakness. The purposes and aims of the two speech situations are radically different. For this reason it is inappropriate to speak of textual inconsistency in this case because the relative incoherence of the two speech situations is determined by the *situational consistency* which we can best grasp by describing the inner purposes of the respective speakers. If a given momentary purpose changes--this can occur without a change in speakers, as we have seen in the case of Helen's lamentation--or one of the innumerable components of the given circumstance becomes different, then the attention will be so heavily immersed in the new situation that potential references breaking the frames of the speech situations and detected by the literate mind will be irrelevant.

6

Textual inconsistency can arise out of warm feelings between the characters. After the shipwrecked Odysseus and Nausicaa meet at the riverbank, Nausicaa invites the hero to the house of her family. But the beautiful girl doesn't let him accompany her in the city, fearing the slander of the people:

"It is their evil speech I shun, that hereafter some man may taunt me, for indeed there are insolent folk among the people,..." (Od.6.273-174)

This is an *excuse* for not personally showing the way to Odysseus. Odysseus has to follow Nausicaa at a distance. Odysseus finally arrives alone at the house of Alcinous with the help of a child. Then Arete, the wife of the king, recognizes that the hero is wearing clothes that she has formerly woven. She then inquires where he is coming from and asks about the clothes he wears. Odysseus tells her of his shipwreck and his encounter with Nausicaa, and that he obtained food and clothes from her. Then the king criticizes his daughter for her behavior:

"Stranger, truly my daughter did not judge rightly in this, that she did not bring you to our house with her maidens, when it was to her first that you made your prayer." (Od.7.299-301)

Odysseus, however, defends Nausicaa:

"Hero, do not rebuke for this your flawless daughter, I pray you. *She did indeed bid me follow with her maidens, but I refused* for fear and shame, thinking perchance your heart might darken with wrath when you saw it; for we are quick to anger, we tribes of men upon the earth." (Od.7.303-307)

Odysseus lies on behalf of Nausicaa. What he says is the direct opposite of what the girl stated. She had asked him not to accompany her because of her fear of public opinion. Odysseus takes over the responsibility for this. For this reason, the hero's speech act can be labeled as a *benign lie*. Interestingly, Odysseus' story is not doubted by the audience. This lie is placed so naturally within the speech situation that an indication of its inaccuracy would only disturb the harmony of the situation, defined by the fact that Odysseus is doing everything to maintain the impeccability of his rescuer, Nausicaa. In this effort Odysseus is supported by the whole audience. This case makes clear that in the pursuit of situational consistency, a lack of textual consistency becomes irrelevant. More important are emerging purposes in

the course of the given speech situation. In this case, we may say that the requirements of situational consistency trigger textual inconsistency. In the Homeric epics, the concepts that indicate truth or falsehood are not allocated according to the requirements of textual consistency. The speech situation, the trustworthiness and the interests and purposes of the actors are the factors that determine the usage of these concepts.

The performer of the Homeric stories has to entertain the audience. Odysseus' performance before Eumaeus gives an insight into the structure of an impressive story. When Odysseus arrives on his native island, he first disguises himself as a beggar and goes to his swineherd Eumaeus. He relates a fabricated story of his life and hides his real identity. According to this story, he is a rich pirate coming from Crete. In a foray into Egypt, he was captured and became a prisoner, then he was a supplicant for a while with the king of Egypt. After that, a tradesman persuaded him to come and live in Phoenicia. And so the story goes on:

"There I remained with him for a full year. But when at length the months and the days were being brought to fulfillment, as the year rolled round and the seasons came on, he set me on a seafaring ship bound for Libya, having given lying counsel (*pseudea bouleusas*) to the end that I should convey a cargo with him, but in truth so that, when there, he might sell me and get a vast price. I went with him on board the ship, suspecting his guile, yet perforce." (Od. 14.292-298)

7

Then a serious storm breaks out, the ship sinks, and everybody but Odysseus dies in the water. The hero rescues himself by grasping the mast. In the story a textual inconsistency reveals itself. How did Odysseus know that the tradesman wanted to sell him as a slave, that he had lied to him concerning his true intentions (*pseudea bouleusas*)? The *tradesman* hadn't had the opportunity to sell him and he *didn't treat him as if he were a slave*, in fact he had said that he needed him as an assistant. Later, when Odysseus was picked up by sailors, he was treated as a slave, he was stripped of his clothes, dressed in rags, and fettered, so it was clear from the circumstances that they wanted to sell him as a slave. We can understand this discrepancy by examining the speech situation in which this story is embedded. As a beggar, Odysseus has to explain his situation to Eumaeus. If we consider the whole story, we can observe that the life of the hero up to the foray in Egypt gradually gets better. First he appears as a poor boy bereft of his bequest, then he marries a rich girl and gains a fortune through his numerous predatory raids, and he even comes back unscathed from the Trojan War. Then he enjoys his family and wealth for one month. From this time on, however, he gradually suffers greater and greater calamities. After his raid in Egypt, he will be a supplier, then he appears--as we have seen--almost as a slave, later he will be a real slave, then he flees from the sailors and will become a beggar. This story is designed with a wonderful symmetrical structure. With this structure, Odysseus wanted *to elicit the pity* of Eumaeus and, moreover, wanted to *entertain* him. The requirements of this symmetrical structure forced Odysseus to say that he was considered a slave by the Phoenician tradesman. And this explains the textual inconsistency we have examined. Our interpretation is corroborated by Eumaeus, who describes the skills of the hero to Penelope as follows:

"I would, queen, that the Achaeans would keep silence, for he speaks such words as would charm (*thelgioto*) your very soul. Three nights I had him by

me, and three days I kept him in my hut, for to me first he came when he fled by stealth from a ship, but he had not yet ended the tale of his sufferings. Just as when a man gazes upon a minstrel who sings to mortals songs of longing (*epe' himeroenta*) that the gods have taught him, and their desire to hear him has no end, whenever he sings, even so he charmed (*ethelge*) me when he sat in my hall." (Od.17.513-521)

This performance by Odysseus reminds Eumaeus of the performance of a minstrel. The hero amazes his swineherd with his masterfully constructed performance and for this reason, Eumaeus does not cast doubt on the trustworthiness of Odysseus' story. The textual inconsistency above is an unnoticed part of the artistic presentation for it is an essential corollary of the symmetrical, progressive structure. The oral audience judges the performance by the artistic structure it is built upon alone and not by the requirements of textual coherence. Here also, the only criterion for the acceptance of the performance is its adjustment to the requirements of situational consistency. And situational consistency can best be described by the inherent purpose of the actual performance. The purpose of the minstrel's performance--in this case, Odysseus'--is to entertain the audience, and this purpose overshadows textual consistency and makes its pursuit unimportant and impossible. The performer has to adapt to the actual situation of the performance, to the expectations of the audience and, if he is successful, the audience will be willing to abandon themselves to the spell of the presentation. If the situational harmony described above is attained, then there is no doubt about the truthfulness of the actual performance.

Textual inconsistency is also conspicuous when we examine the role of the beggar. After Eumaeus guided Odysseus to the suitors, one of them, Antinous, reproaches the swineherd for intentionally calling the beggar to their feast. Then Eumaeus retorts:

"Antinous, no fair words are these you speak, noble though you are. Who, pray, of himself ever seeks out and invites a stranger from abroad, unless it is one of those that are masters of some public craft (*demioergoi*), a prophet, or a healer of ills, or a builder, or perhaps a divine minstrel, who gives delight with his song? For these men are invited all over the boundless earth. Yet *a beggar would no man invite to be a burden to himself*. But you are always harsh above all the suitors to the slaves of Odysseus, and most of all to me . . ." (Od.17.381-389)

8

Eumaeus wants to defend himself against these malicious accusations. He suggests that only people who are useful (*demioergoi*) to the public are deliberately invited. We have seen that Eumaeus also compares Odysseus to a minstrel and the minstrel is included among the useful occupations here. Why doesn't the swineherd praise Odysseus for his artful performance at this juncture? Surely he would then elicit more mockery from the suitor. Instead, Eumaeus answers aphoristically, for this form of speech is very hard to discredit because of its impersonal character. Popular wisdom is not to be criticized. But this unchallenged popular wisdom shows itself to be an unnoticed *textual incongruency* when compared to Eumaeus' praise of Odysseus and with other speech acts.

Later, the suitors mock Telemachus and his guest Odysseus for his prophecy about their impending death and they suggest that Telemachus should sell the two beggars, Irus and Odysseus:

". . . all the suitors, looking at one another, tried to provoke (*erethizon*) Telemachus by laughing at his guests. And thus would one of the proud youths speak:

"Telemachus, no man is more unlucky in his guests than you, seeing that you keep such a filthy vagabond as this man here, always wanting bread and wine, and skilled neither in the works of peace nor those of war, but a mere burden on the earth. And then *this other fellow stood up to prophesy (manteuesthai)*. No, if you would listen to me it would be better far: let us throw these strangers on board a benched ship and send them to the Sicilians, something which would bring you a worthwhile gain." (Od.20. 373-383)

According to the aphorism of Eumaeus, it is not a shame to invite a prophet, for his craft is useful. The content of this *mockery* is a latent textual contradiction to *the retort* of the swineherd, although the differences in the speech situations render the textual comparison of the two speeches irrelevant. But concerning the role of the beggars, there is another inconsistency in the Homeric text. The first beggar mentioned above is described as follows:

"Now there came up a public beggar who was accustomed to beg through the town of Ithaca, and was known for his greedy belly, eating and drinking without end. No strength had he nor might, but in bulk was big indeed to look upon. Arnaeus was his name, for this name his honored mother had given him at his birth; but Irus all the young men called him, because *he used to run on errands (epaggelleske kioon)* when anyone bade him." (Od.18. 1-7)

Here Arnaeus, the beggar, is characterized as useless but he performs a useful activity: delivering messages. He is sometimes called on to provide services. And Penelope calls the messengers people who accomplish useful activities for the public (*demioergoi*) (Od.19.135). Eumaeus' aphorism is not true for Arnaeus because, despite being a beggar, he provides useful services to the public. It is clear that the textual comparison of Eumaeus' aphorism with other cases is arbitrary and unwarranted. The actual speech situation is not to be converted into a "textual situation" which can be dissected and compared with other texts belonging to other speech acts.

Contradictory aphorisms are not rare in the Homeric epics. Odysseus, who is led to his house by Eumaeus, notices his old dog lying in the dung, whereupon the swineherd explains:

"this is the dog of a man who has died in a far land. If he were but in form and action such as he was when Odysseus left him and went to Troy, you would soon be amazed at seeing his speed and his strength. No creature that he started in the depths of the thick wood could escape him, and in tracking too he was keen of scent. But now he is in evil plight, and his master has perished far from his native land, and the heedless women give him no care. *Slaves, when their masters cease to direct them, no longer wish to do their work properly, for Zeus, whose voice is borne afar, takes away half his worth from a man, when the day of slavery comes upon him.*" (Od.17. 312-323)

The highlighted aphorism is to be interpreted exclusively in this speech situation. Eumaeus, himself a

slave, behaves contrarily to his aphorism, as Odysseus formerly observed. The swineherd doesn't sleep inside his house but near the boars:

"But the swineherd was not content with a bed there, that he should lie down away from the boars; instead he made ready to go outside. And Odysseus was glad that he took such care of his master's property while he was far off."
(Od.14. 524-527)

This inconsistency is also hidden from the audience. In the first speech situation the swineherd emphasizes his *loyalty to* and *longing for his master, Odysseus*, by pointing out and reproaching the careless slaves. In the second speech situation, the narrator emphasizes Eumaeus' conscientiousness regarding Odysseus' property by describing his careful behavior. It is interesting that the two speech acts have, by and large, the same purpose although they are textually contradictory. The means of achieving this purpose are overshadowed by the purpose itself and thus the textual contradictions inherent in them are overshadowed as well.

Concerning Penelope's role in the poems, we find another contradictory aphorism. Athene comes to the house of Menelaus to urge Telemachus to return home by reminding him of an aphorism which emphasizes the unreliability of women who are without a spouse, hinting at Penelope:

"you know what sort of a spirit there is in a woman's breast; *she wishes to increase the house of the man who marries her, but of her former children and staunch spouse (kouridioio philoio) she takes no thought (ouketi memnetai), when once he is dead, and asks no longer concerning them.* No, go, and yourself put all your possessions in the charge of whoever of the handmaids seems to you the best, until the gods shall show you your honored bride."
(Od.15.20-26)

This aphorism is used to back up Athene's *persuasion, advice* that the fortune of Odysseus has to be entrusted to reliable persons. Later Penelope makes arrangements for a bow competition and encourages the suitors as follows:

"But come now, you suitors, since here is your prize plain before you. I will set as your contest the great bow of godlike Odysseus, and whoever shall most easily string the bow in his hands and shoot an arrow through all twelve axes, with him will I go, and *forsake the house of my wedded life (dooma kouridion), a house most beautiful and filled with wealth, which, I think, I shall always remember (memnesestai oiomai), even in my dreams.*" (Od.21.73-79)

Here Penelope, contrary to the opinion of Athene, states that she won't forget about her old house, and this implies that she will remain faithful to the memory of Odysseus. This implication is very obvious for she attaches the same epithet to her house as Athene does, indirectly, to Odysseus: *kouridios* (faithful, wedded). The content of Athene's *persuasion* and Penelope's statement that *confirms her faithfulness* are in contradiction, but this contradiction only appears when we abstract the contents from the concrete speech situations, and this is impossible in a pure oral medium.

Much philosophical wisdom is to be found in the Homeric epics about human life and fate, among other things: death is unavoidable. Achilles formulates this thought as he *refuses* the delegation sent by Agamemnon:

"I will speak what seems to me to be best. Not me, I think, will Atreus' son, Agamemnon, persuade, nor yet will the other Danaans, since it is clear there was to be no thanks for warring against the foe without respite. A like portion has he who stays back, and he who wars his best, and in honor are held both the coward and the brave; *death comes alike to the idle man and to him who works much*. Nor has it brought me any profit that I suffered woes at heart, constantly staking my life in fight." (Il.9.314-322)

10

Achilles is backing *his refusal* with an aphorism which denies the immortality of human beings. When Hector *comforts* his anxious wife he is applying the same aphorism as Achilles although in a modified form:

"Dear wife, in no way, I beg you, grieve excessively at heart for me; no man beyond what is fated shall send me to Hades; but *his fate, say I, no man has ever escaped (moiran d' ou tina phemi pephygmenon emmenai androon), whether he is base or noble, when once he has been born.*" (Il.6.486-489)

Hector obviously intends to soothe his wife by pointing out that his impending death is natural. But the idea of the inevitability of human death *is in contradiction* with Zeus's opinion. Before Patroclus kills Sarpedon, the son of Zeus, Zeus ponders the possibility of rescuing his son from the death for *he pities him* very much:

"Ah, woe is me, since *it is fated that Sarpedon, dearest of men to me, be vanquished by Patroclus, son of Menoetius!* And my heart is divided in counsel as *I ponder in my thought whether I shall snatch him up while yet he lives and set him afar from the tearful war* in the rich land of Lycia, or whether I shall let him be vanquished now at the hands of the son of Menoetius." (Il.16.433-438)

Zeus is confident that he is able to change this human fate. This has to be taken seriously because what Zeus says is always fulfilled, and his wife, Hera, does not doubt this possibility but only disagrees with it:

"Most dread son of Cronos, what a word have you said! Are you minded to free from dolorous death a mortal man, one doomed long since by fate? Do it; but you can be sure we other gods do not all assent to it." (Il.16. 440-443)

Zeus *in his sorrow* ponders the possibility of rescuing Hector from the fate of death as well:

"Well now! Truly a well-loved man do my eyes look on pursued around the wall; and my heart is grieved for Hector, who has burned for me many thighs of oxen on the crests of many-ridged Ida, and at other times on the topmost citadel; but now again is noble Achilles pursuing him with swift feet around the city of Priam. But come, you gods, consider and take counsel whether we shall save him from death, or now at length shall vanquish him, good man though he is, at the hand of Achilles, son of Peleus. " (Il.22.168-176)

Athene replies to this proposal with the same words as Hera did before. The aphorisms concerning the inevitability of human death are in textual inconsistency with Zeus's ability to alter human fate. Of course, this inconsistency is also meaningless in the contexts of the given speech situations.

The aphorism concerning the psychic life of the gods at the end of the Iliad is also interesting. After Achilles bewails his father, he tries to comfort Priam who is in the same plight as his father at home:

"Ah, unhappy man, many indeed are the evils you have endured in your heart. How could you bring yourself to come alone to the ships of the Achaeans, to meet the eyes of me who have slain your sons many and noble? Of iron surely is your heart. But come, sit on a seat, and our woes let us allow to rest in our hearts, for all our sorrow; for no profit comes of chill lament. For *so have the gods spun the thread for wretched mortals, that they should live among sorrows; and they themselves are without care (akedees).*" (Il.24.518-526)

11

The highlighted section is intended to be a universal statement which is to alleviate Priam's pain by pointing out that human life is full of sorrow. Priam is not an exception, only the gods live without sorrow and pain. However this universal statement contradicts the sorrow and pain of the goddess, Thetis. When Zeus sends Iris for Thetis she answers to the call and alludes to the impending death of her son, Achilles, with the following words:

"Why does the great god summon me? I feel shame to mingle in the company of the immortals, *since I have measureless griefs at heart (echoo d' ache' akrita thumoo).* But I will go, and his word will not be vain, whatever he says." (Il.24.90-92)

When Thetis arrives at the seat of Zeus, the king of gods receives her with sympathy:

"You have come to Olympus, goddess Thetis, *for all your sorrow (kedomene per), though you have accursed grief (penthos) on your mind;* I know of it myself . . ." (Il.24.104-105)

The cause of Thetis' sorrow is similar to that of Priam's. The above aphorism is not valid in Thetis' case, for she although she is a goddess, she sorrows. Thetis' case is not alone in the epics. Among others, we hear about the wounded Ares that he "bellowed loud" (*ebrache*) in his pain (Il.5.859) and that he begged Zeus to alleviate his pain for he was "grieved at heart" (*thumon acheuoon*) (Il.5.869). Ares also felt pain (*pema*) (Il.15.110) when he heard of the death of his son, Ascalaphus and then he spoke before the gods "with wailing" (*olophuromenos*) (Il.15.114). So it is clear that the aphorism examined above is only valid in its original speech situation; it is not true in every concrete case or situation. In the epics it is not possible to use an aphorism, a general truth, as a universal premise.

Finally, it is interesting to examine the judgments about Hector's behavior. When Hecabe, Priam's wife, learns about her spouse's intention to go to Achilles and redeem their dead son, Hector, from him, *she desperately tries to dissuade* Priam from his dangerous enterprise:

"How are you minded to go to the ships of the Achaeans alone to meet the eyes of the man who has slain your sons, many and noble? Of iron surely is your

heart. For if he gets you in his power and his eyes look on you, so savage and faithless is the man, he will neither pity you nor respect you. Let us now make our lament far from him we mourn, staying here in the hall. In this way for him did resistless Fate spin with her thread at his birth, when I myself bore him, that he should glut swift-footed dogs far from his parents, in the power of a violent man, in whose inmost heart I wish I could fix my teeth and feed on it; then might deeds of requital be done for my son, since *in no way while playing the coward was he slain by him, but while standing in defense of the men and deep-bosomed women of Troy, with no thought of shelter or flight.*" (24.203-216)

The sorrowful Hecabe is *praising* and, what is more, *glorifying* her deceased son, Hector. According to this description, Hector showed no sign of cowardice on his last day. However when we look at the narration of Hector's death scene, we find a description which contradicts that of Hecabe:

"But *trembling (tromos)* seized Hector when he caught sight of him, and he dared no longer remain where he was, but left the gates behind him, *and fled in fear (phobetheis)*; and the son of Peleus rushed after him, trusting in his fleetness of foot." (Il.22.136-138)

12

The narrator intends here *to dramatize* the fatal meeting of the heroes, *to enhance and prolong the tension*. Athene is only able to stop Hector from fleeing with a trick: she pretends to be Deiphobus, Hector's brother, and assures him of her help in averting Achilles. Only after this encouragement is Hector willing to face overt combat with Achilles. The two speech acts are in textual inconsistency and serve only the purpose of the actual speech situation.

Priam's undertaking is successful. He redeems his dead son and conveys him on a carriage to the town. Cassandra is the first who sees them arriving in Troy and *she cries (kookusen) in her astonishment and joy*:

"Come, men and women of Troy, and look on Hector, if ever while he still lived you rejoiced at his coming back from battle; since *great joy (charma) was he to the city and to all the people.*" (Il.24.704-706)

If we examine Hector's death scene again we will find that he didn't consider himself a "joy to the people."

"Ah, me, if I go inside the gates and the walls, Polydamas will be the first to put reproach on me, since he told me to lead the Trojans to the city during that fatal night when noble Achilles rose up. But I did not listen--surely it would have been far better! But now, since *I have brought the army to ruin through my blind folly, I feel shame before the Trojans*, and the Trojans' wives with trailing robes, lest *perhaps some other, baser than I, may say: 'Hector, trusting in his own might, brought ruin on the army.'*" (Il.22.99-107)

Here Hector appears as a man who caused damage to and, what is more, ruined the Trojans. Hector is afraid of the reproach and contempt of the Trojan people for he sees himself as the major cause of the

defeat of his army. This fear was prompted by the actual situation and so Hector's speech cannot be detached from it. Textually, this speech act is in contradiction with Cassandra's joyful cry but, of course, the two speech acts are not to be compared textually because their purposes and settings are different.

In this section, we examined speech acts whose textual inconsistencies were either apparent or--as was mostly the case--not apparent to the narrator and the audience. In most cases, the given inconsistency was imperceptible to the narrator and the audience because the compared speech acts had a distinctive function only in their respective speech situations and so were not valid outside this frame of reference. The contradictions that were possibly apparent--as in the story of Odysseus and Nausicaa--were perceivable because the speech situations containing the compared statements were, in a way, overlapping as a result of a common purpose that overrode the chain of consecutive speech situations. But, also in the latter case, the disclosure of the textual differences had no function and so never occurred. To sum up, the apparent or unapparent textual contradictions examined above did not fulfill a specific role in the epics and were therefore left undisclosed.

Contradictions that fulfill a role in the Homeric poems

Some speech situations occur in the Homeric epic poems in which a contradiction performs some kind of a role. One frequent form this kind of contradiction takes occurs when an actor reproaches another actor for not fulfilling his/her promise, that is, the act or behavior of the person who is being reproached is not in harmony with his his/her own prior pledge or behavior. This occurs when Apollo refuses to fight with Poseidon and, for this reason, Artemis reproaches Apollo:

"Fleeing are you, god who works from afar, and to Poseidon have you utterly yielded the victory, and given him glory for nothing? Fool, why are you holding a bow as worthless as wind? After this *let me not hear you in the halls of our father boasting as you did earlier among the immortal gods that you would fight in open combat with Poseidon.*" (Il.21.472-477)

13

This contradiction is prompted by a *reproach*, *scolding*, and *urging*, and because of this it is not to be detached from the actual speech situation which determines its frame of reference.

The next type of contradiction which fulfills a specific role can be named as the *criticism of public opinion*. It is a widely accepted view that public opinion is not to be questioned in the Homeric poems. However, this view cannot be accepted without qualification. There are speech situations that manifest a contradiction between public opinion and an individual view. One example of contradiction occurs when Tlepolemus, the grandson of Zeus, fights with Sarpedon, the son of Zeus:

And when they had come near as they advanced against each other, the one the son, the other the grandson of Zeus the cloud-gatherer, then Tlepolemus was first to speak, saying: "Sarpedon, counselor of the Lycians, why must you be skulking here, you who are a man unskilled in battle? *They lie when they say (pseudomenos de se phasi) you are sprung from Zeus who bears the aegis, since (epoi) you are inferior far to those warriors who were sprung from Zeus in the days of men of old.*" (Il.5.630-637)

Because the narrator previously mentioned the ancestry of the fighters, the contradiction is very striking. Tlepolemus' purpose is obviously *to challenge, abuse, and disparage* his adversary. This is the sole purpose of the contradiction and so it cannot be interpreted outside of this speech situation.

A similar case appears when Patroclus returns from his visit to Nestor and informs Achilles--who is refraining from combat because of his resentment of Agamemnon--about the desolate condition of the Greek army, about the many wounded and dead warriors; he then *reproaches* Achilles:

"Never on me let such wrath lay hold, as the wrath you cherish, you whose valor causes harm! How will any other yet to be born have profit of you, if you do not ward off loathsome destruction from the Argives? *Pitiless one, your father, it appears was not the horseman Peleus, nor was Thetis your mother, but the gray sea bore you, and the sheer cliffs, since your mind is unbending.*" (Il.16.30-35)

Patroclus *reproaches* Achilles with harsh words. He calls his parents into question, thus creating a contradiction between the commonly accepted view and his own allegation. His statement concerning Achilles' progenitors seems to be absurd and should be seen in the light of the whole speech situation. With his reproach Patroclus wants *to shake up* Achilles, to *urge* him to change his attitude towards the combat. Patroclus intends to emphasize his personal consternation about the dismal battle situation with the created contradiction and so it is undetachable from the actual setting.

On one occasion, Odysseus criticizes public opinion as well. After Thersites scolded Agamemnon and accused him of being cowardly and greedy, Odysseus rises to the defense of the chief by *threatening* Thersites with "harsh words" (*chalepoo enipape muthoo*) (Il.2.245):

". . . you now continually revile Atreus' son, Agamemnon, shepherd of men, because the Danaan warriors give him very many gifts; and you hold forth with mockery. But I will speak out to you, and this will surely come to pass: if I find you again playing the fool, as you are doing now, then may the head of Odysseus rest no more on his shoulders, and *may I no more be called the father of Telemachus, if I do not take you and strip off your clothes, your cloak and tunic, that cover your nakedness, and send you yourself wailing to the swift ships, driven out of the place of assembly with shameful blows.*" (Il.2.254-264)

14

Odysseus is threatening Thersites and he is emphasizing his words with a pledge. If he does not fulfill his promise of beating Thersites when and if he misbehaves, he will deny the public knowledge that he is the father of Telemachus. In this case it is particularly clear that the contradiction between public opinion and Odysseus' pledge is virtual. The purpose of this absurd contradiction is to *frighten* Thersites by emphasizing the earnestness of Odysseus' intention.

In the epics, criticism of public opinion serves multifarious purposes but is never underpinned by logical, deductive evidence. The criticism is always embedded in the actual speech situation and so it is not restricted to one special kind of statement. It can be, for example, a pledge, a wish, or a promise, as in the case of Alcinous, who promises Achilles that he will guide him home safely and quickly:

"as for your conveyance, that you may know it surely, *I appoint (tekmaïromai)*

a time for it, namely, tomorrow. Then shall you lie down, overcome by sleep, and they shall row you over the calm sea until you come to your country and your house, or to whatever place you will, even if it is much farther off than Euboea, which those of our people who saw it when they carried fair-haired Rhadamanthus to visit Tityus, the son of Earth, say (phas) is the farthest of lands." (Od.7.317-324)

Alcinous' *promise* contains an *exaggeration*, according to which his sailors can carry him to the farthest places on earth. Some of the sailors consider Euboea the farthest spot on earth, but Alcinous assures Odysseus that his sailors are able to carry Odysseus "much farther" than Euboea. This exaggeration or boasting embedded in a supposition implicitly criticizes the opinion of those who consider Euboea as the farthest spot on earth. However, this supposition is not to be construed as a logical constraint which refutes certain views about the position of Euboea, because it is undetachable from the actual speech situation where this expresses a promise, boast or exaggeration. The exclusive role of the supposition is to enhance the effect and to stress the earnestness of the promise.

We can find in the epics that different nations may have contradictory opinions about the same matter. In the empire of the dead, Teiresias gives advice to Odysseus regarding his future behavior so that Odysseus will be able to appease the wrath of Poseidon, which he incurred by blinding his son:

"But when you have slain the suitors in your halls, whether by guile or openly with the sharp sword, then *go abroad, taking a shapely oar, until you come to men that know nothing of the sea* and eat their food unmixed with salt, who in fact know nothing of ships with ruddy cheeks, or of shapely oars which are a vessel's wings. And I will tell you a most certain sign, which will not escape you: *when another wayfarer, on meeting you, shall say that you have a winnowing fan on your stout shoulder*, then fix in the earth your shapely oar and make handsome offerings to the lord Poseidon." (Od.11.119-130)

There is a contradiction between the opinion of people living far from the seashore and the view of the seafaring people regarding the oar in the *advice* of Teiresias. The purpose of this contradiction is, however, not to criticize one of the views and to construct a textually consistent narration but to instruct the protagonist about his proper behavior in the future, under circumstances when he has to "fix the oar in the earth." Consequently, this contradiction is not to be isolated from the speech situation, from the advice and divination of Teiresias. It is interesting that Herodotus later will use the same kind of contradiction to emphasize the relativity of ideas among different nations concerning the same matter. It is a widely accepted view that this was due to his extensive travels; however, as we can see, the preconditions of this approach are given in Homeric thought. The differences between Homeric and the Herodotean thinking--as we shall see--have to be seen in terms of the different media in which they were formulated.

15

It often happens that a universal statement is opposed to a special contradicting case in the Homeric poems. In these cases, the universal statement can be considered a crystallized, publicly accepted opinion. After Menelaus killed an Achaean hero, he boasts about his victim and then *he scolds* the Trojan people:

"Of all things is there satiety, of sleep, and love, and sweet song, and the incomparable dance; of these things surely a man hopes to have his fill rather than of war; *but the Trojans are insatiate of battle.*" (Il.13.636-639)

In this scolding, a universal statement--"of all things is there satiety"--is in contradiction with the special case of the Trojans: "but the Trojans are insatiate of battle." The purpose of this contradiction is to emphasize the monstrous behavior of the Trojans. The special example of the Trojans is not meant to invalidate universal wisdom, but to stress their abnormal behavior, and so the contradiction is not to be seen independently of the speech situation. The contradiction is constructed to enhance the effect of the scolding of Menelaus.

Utterances that carry universal validity are not restricted to so called dispassionate statements that are either true or false. In the Homeric poems the same universality may be attributed to wishful thinking as to a universal "dispassionate" statement. After Thetis reminded her son Achilles of the proximity of his death, the hero answers her "in great agitation":

"Immediately let me die, since I was not to protect my comrade at his slaying. Far, far from his own land has he fallen, and had need of me to be a warder off of ruin. Now therefore, since I will not return to my dear native land, nor proved in any way a light of deliverance to Patroclus or to my other comrades, those many who have been slain by noble Hector, but sit here by the ships, a profitless burden on the earth--I who in war am such as is no other of the bronze-clad Achaeans, though in council there are others better--*may strife perish from among gods and men, and anger that sets a man on to rage, though he be very wise, and that, sweeter far than trickling honey, increases like smoke in the breasts of men; just as but now the lord of men, Agamemnon, moved me to rage.*" (Il.18.98-111)

Achilles first laments the death of Patroclus and feels himself responsible for it, then he constructs a world that he wishes for in which there isn't any strife or discord "among gods and men." This ideal, desired world *contradicts* his particular case, because Agamemnon incited anger in him, a feeling that the ideal world is devoid of. Achilles wants to erase his own negative case, of course without success, with this positive desire. But this unsuccessful attempt is designed to elucidate Achilles' great remorse for his former behavior, for his rage against Agamemnon that held him back from helping the Achaeans. This rage ultimately caused the death of his friend, Patroclus. The role of the contradiction between the universal request and the particular example is to alleviate Achilles' pain; he is trying to free himself for one moment from the consequences of his behavior in the realm of desire. The frame of reference of this contradiction is strictly determined by the purpose of Achilles' speech. This example shows clearly that in the Homeric poems the wish is at the same level as, for example, an "objective statement"; the frame of reference of the various speech acts is not detachable from the actual speech situation. In the Homeric poems the various speech acts--wishes, exclamations, oaths, descriptions, warnings, threats, promises, and so on--are mutually compatible, given that they participate with each other in the same speech situation. A particular speech act, according to its purpose, can relate very different kinds of assertions, as we have seen above. A writer who intends to eliminate textual inconsistencies has to break up the borderlines of the various speech situations that serve various purposes and relate the statements to each other without their original settings. This procedure, however, involves the selection of assertions which do not have the vestiges of the originary scene and so it leaves aside utterances that have an openly

emotional, personal character--for example, wishes or curses. For the Homeric mentality this procedure is impossible, for it cannot detach itself from the speech acts that is actually performed.

16

The actual purpose of the actors determines the form, the content and the frame of reference of the contradiction. Achilles, after he kills Hector, remembers his dead friend, Patroclus, with the following words:

"There lies by the ships a dead man unwept, unburied--Patroclus; him will I not forget so long as I am among the living, and my knees are quick. And *even if in the house of Hades men forget their dead, yet will I even there remember my dear comrade.*" (Il.22.386-390)

In the highlighted section Achilles opposes a universal statement to a particular case. This contradiction is to be interpreted in the frame of the speech situation. Achilles *pledges* that he will always remember his friend, even after his death. This statement obviously contradicts the universal popular wisdom, according to which mortals forget about the things that happened in their lifetime after they die. Achilles' special case is not to deny the validity of the universal wisdom--this would be the case in a text, where the validity of the argument is detached from the actual speech situation--but to confess the hero's deep sorrow over his deceased friend. The contradiction between the universal and the special statements is designed to emphasize Achilles' affection towards Patroclus and not to deprive one of the statements of its validity by means of textual analysis.

Homeric contradictory statements can refer to different times without infringing upon their contradictory character. Before Athene asks Zeus to release Odysseus from the captivity imposed on him by Calypso, she characterizes Odysseus and the behavior of the people in Ithaca toward Zeus with the following words:

"Father Zeus, and you other blessed gods that are forever, *never henceforward let a sceptered king with a ready heart be kind and gentle, no, let him heed righteousness in his mind; but let him ever be harsh, and deal unjustly, seeing that no one remembers divine Odysseus of the people whose lord he was, although gentle was he as a father.*" (Od.5.7-12)

Athene creates a contradiction between her *wish*--that there would never be gentle kings in the future--and the "real" case of Odysseus--he was a gentle king. The goddess created the contradiction to emphasize her indignation about the people in Ithaca who do not consider and value the gentleness of their absent king. Normally the two assertions, the universal and the specific, do not influence each other's validity, for one of them is pertaining to the past and the other to the present, and what is more, one of them is not a "factual" statement, but a mere desire. In the above speech situation, however, they are related in a manner that stresses their contradictory character. The contradiction between the two assertions is not meant to deny the validity of an assertion but to fulfill a personal purpose of the speaker: *to reproach* the people in Ithaca, to curse them for their wrong conduct. They should experience the reign of a rough king so that they may appreciate the gentleness of Odysseus.[\(11\)](#) This is the second case in which we find that, according to the norms of formal logical thinking, there are two independent assertions that are in *some way* related to each other as if they were contradictory. Therefore, "oral contradiction" can exist between a reference to the past and a wish pertaining to the future. Egbert

Bakker tries to grasp this problem in terms of oral performance:

Outside memory, in fact, the past does not even exist in oral societies, and without the "mind act" of remembering, the speech act of poetry would be impossible. With regard to this experience of the past as something-to-be-performed, our usual notion of past tense, geared as it is to reference, the correspondence between language and facts in the past, is particularly inappropriate. If the past is something that is remembered, it does not exist in recorded form but owes its existence to the verbalizing, introverted consciousness of the performer that draws it into the present. The past in fact becomes "present," both in a temporal and in a spatial sense it is turned from "then" into "now" and "here" within the context of a special social event and through the actions of a special, authoritative speaker. (15) What is located in time is not so much the event referred to as *the act of verbalization here and now*, whereas the epic event itself is not referred to but instantiated, commemorated. (27) The epic singer is not concerned with *excluding* an event from the present, but with *including* the present statement in the accumulated mass of tradition. The singer does not deal with what is distant for its own sake, referring "objectively" to it, but insofar it can be made "near." Epic discourse, then, as the language of myth and ritual, is to a certain degree *tenseless* . . . (28)

17

Our interpretation is corroborated by Bakker's insights: an assertion that pertains to the past and a wish that points to the future are to be interpreted in the present, in the actual speech situation, in the actual performance, because the *raison d'être* of the assertions in question is ultimately the *reproach*, the *curse* of Athene. *In the course of the performance, tenses and different modes of assertion (curses, wishes, threats, promises) are melted into the intention of the actual speech act.*

The above paradox sheds light on the fact that oral structures are incompatible with "written" logical structures that are designed for argumentation. Consequently, the concept of the "oral contradiction" is fundamentally different from the concept of "logical contradiction," which appears only later in the age of writing in support of the construction of textually consistent stories and argumentations. The oral narrator is not, however, conscious of the requirements of the textual consistency; he is conscious only of the requirements of the actual speech situation.

In the Homeric epics, the frame of reference of universal statements is strictly confined by the actual purpose of the speaker and in some cases such statements paradoxically support the validity of a contradicting and related particular example. Odysseus describes his meeting with Nausicaa to Alcinous as follows:

"Then I saw the handmaids of your daughter upon the shore at play, and amid them was she, looking like a goddess. To her I made my prayer; and *she in no way fell short of excellent understanding*, such as you would not expect a young person meeting you to act upon; *for younger people are always (aiei) thoughtless.*" (Od.7.290-29)

Odysseus is praising the daughter of Alcinous. His praise is accentuated by a contradiction: he says that

the girl has an "excellent understanding" but, shortly afterwards, he mentions that generally "younger people are always (*aiei*) thoughtless." This is a contradiction from a modern point of view as well. However, this fact can be neglected in our case--as in the cases of Homeric contradictions generally--because it is only a coincidence. This is in no way a more perfect instance of an oral contradiction than those previously mentioned where the contradiction does *not* fulfill the requirement of a formally logical contradiction. In an oral performance, contradictions are defined only by the actual speech act, by the aims and purposes of the actors. In this speech, Odysseus intends to exaggerate his praise by contrasting the particular statement with the universal assertion. This contradiction is not designed to eliminate--in accordance with the requirements of the textual consistency--one of the conflicting statements but to stress a particular statement in the background of a contradictory universal statement. "Oral contradictions" exist only virtually from the point of view of formal logic, the laws of which are incompatible with the rules of oral thinking.

We can find a similar contradiction designed by Circe. After Odysseus and his companions return from Hades, the goddess cannot hide her shock:

"Stubborn men, who have gone down alive to the house of Hades to meet death twice, while other (*hote t' alloi*) men die but once." (Od.12.21-22)

Here Circe expresses her *surprise and consternation*. Her astonishment is emphasized by a contradiction: while "all other men die only once," Odysseus and his companions can die twice. This contradiction doesn't fulfill the requirements of formal logical thinking, because the general statement doesn't include the particular case of the visitors of Hades. However, the function of this "contradiction" is similar to that of the ones examined earlier: to exaggerate, to support a feeling, a purpose of the speaker by contrasting a general and a particular assertion. The oral audience couldn't differentiate a formal logical contradiction from other types of oppositions, for the practice of formal logical thinking did not exist.

18

Here it is instructive to perform a thought experiment. If a historian such as Herodotus examined this "contradiction" and removed it from the speech situation it is embedded in, he would probably compare the general and the particular statement and arrive at the conclusion that the general statement should be widened--with the help of a minor linguistic change--to a truly universal assertion, so that all men would be included in that statement, Odysseus and his companions as well. Then the history writer could resort to the now truly universal assertion and put forward that Odysseus and his companions could not die twice because this would be a contradiction to the accepted general statement, the truth of which is acknowledged by common sense, and assertions that contradict universal statements supported by common sense are too implausible to be true. This practice was by and large employed by Herodotus. This thought experiment also sheds light on the incompatibility of "oral" and "written" contradictions.

We examined above under what circumstances certain sayings of universal wisdom occur as part of an oral contradiction. Lastly, we shall look at a common type of oral contradiction that is supposed to be "objective."

As Nestor hears the approaching horses of Odysseus and Diomedes, who have been sent to the enemy to spy out their plans about the future, he tells his companions:

"My friends, leaders and rulers of the Argives, *will I be mistaken, or be speaking truly (pseudomai e etumon ereoo)?* My heart tells me to speak. The

sound of swift-footed horses strikes my ears. *I hope that so speedily Odysseus and the mighty Diomedes have driven (ai gar elasaiato) here singlehoofed horses out from among the Trojans;* but dreadfully do I fear in my heart that those best of the Argives have suffered some harm through the battle din of the Trojans." (Il.10.533-539)

At first glance it seems that Nestor is expressing the abstract rule of contradiction: he will say either the truth or the non-truth--which are mutually exclusive--regarding the same thing, and there are no other options besides these two alternatives. But if we examine the purpose of this "contradiction," we arrive at a different result. Nestor uses the above contradiction to express his doubt so that he may defend his authority in case his suggestion will appear to be wrong. The ambience of hesitation and misgiving is enhanced by the fact that the doubt, that is, the contradiction, is pertaining to a wish, a desire. Consequently, the meaning of the contradiction cannot be grasped without consideration of the circumstances it is embedded in: the authoritative personality of Nestor, and the anxiety-filled situation of concern. Without these conditions, the contradiction cannot be interpreted.

Reasoning based on "consistency of situation"

Up to now we have investigated the role of contradictions in the Homeric epics. In this section we will examine the forms of reasoning that under "normal" circumstances are based on textual consistency and on the exclusion of contradictions. An oral society is not deprived of the forms of logical thinking, that is, deductions, inductions, syllogisms; however, they follow different rules than in a culture where the manipulation of written materials is routine.

Several times in the epics an actor underpins, validates a general statement by a particular example or examples. I call this procedure *induction*.

19

Patroclus, after Achilles allowed him to help the Achaean warriors, injures, among others, one of the sons of Priam, the charioteer of Hector, who falls out of the chariot lifeless. Then, Patroclus *mocks* him:

"Well now! *Nimble is the man for sure; how easily he dives!* I think if he were in the teeming deep, this man would satisfy many by seeking for oysters, leaping from his ship even if the sea were stormy, since now on the plain he dives easily from his chariot. *Surely among the Trojans too there are men who dive.*" (Il.16.745-750)

Patroclus speaks *disdainfully* to the dead Cebriones. The formal frame of his scolding speech is an induction. He reasons from the particular case that Cebriones fell easily out of the chariot that "there are divers among the Trojans as well." It can be easily realized that the aim of this "induction" is *to mock*, not only the dead Cebriones, but the Trojan people as a whole. The validity and so the frame of reference of the *induction* cannot be detached from this purpose of the speech act.

After Patroclus is killed by Hector, his spirit appears to Achilles and asks him to burn and bury his dead body. Achilles springs up *in astonishment* (*taphoon*; Il.23.101) and *speaks sadly* (*epos d' olophudnon eeipen*; Il.23.102):

"Well now! *Even in the house of Hades there is something--spirit and*

phantom--though there is no mind at all; for (gar) the whole night long has the spirit of unlucky Patroclus stood over me, weeping and wailing, and charged me concerning each thing, and was marvelously like his very self." (Il. 23.103-107)

Achilles induces (*gar*) a general statement from the apparition of the dead Patroclus: there are spirits and phantoms in Hades. This induction is valid however only in the actual setting. Achilles *wonders* at the strange incident, he articulates his *astonishment*. The particular case and the induced universal statement are embedded in this amazement, this situation is their frame of reference.

When Priam is on his way to Achilles to redeem his son, he meets Hermes, who is disguising himself as a Myrmidon warrior. Priam asks him about his dead son and the god answers that the body of Hector is unscathed, the injuries have disappeared and the worms are not damaging the body despite the long time since Hector's death. Then Priam induces the following wisdom:

"My child, a good thing truly (*e r'*) is to give to the immortals such gifts as are due them; for (*epei*) never did my son--if ever in fact he was--forget in our halls the gods who hold Olympus; so they have remembered this for him, even he is in the doom of death." (24.425-428)

Hector revered the gods during his lifetime and, according to Priam, this prompted the benevolence of the gods after his death. Hector's behavior supported the general wisdom that "a good thing is to give to the immortals such gifts as are due them." The purpose, the aim of the speech act, however, is not to substantiate a universal truth with a particular case, but, for one thing, to express Priam's *pleasure* about the unscathed body of his son, and, for another, to *praise* the generosity of the gods and to *articulate his thanks* for this generosity. This is the sole purpose of the induction embedded in the speech situation.

There are occasions where not only one but more particular cases support a universal statement. When in the *Odyssey* Hermes acquaints Calypso with the order of Zeus, according to which she has to release Odysseus, Calypso answers *disappointedlly*:

"*Cruel (schetlioi) are you, you gods, and quick to envy above all others, seeing that you begrudge goddesses that they should mate with men openly, if any takes a mortal as her own bedfellow. Thus, when (hoos men ot') rosy-fingered Dawn took to herself Orion, you gods that live at ease begrudged her, till in Ortygia chaste Artemis of the golden throne assailed him with her gentle shafts and slew him. Thus too (hoos d' opot'), when fair-dressed Demeter, yielding to her passion, lay in love with Iasion in the thrice-plowed fallow land, Zeus was not long without knowledge of it, but smote him with his bright thunderbolt and slew him. And in this way again do you now begrudge me (hoos d' au nun moi agasthe), you gods, that a mortal man should be my companion. Him I saved when he was bestriding the keel and all alone, for Zeus had struck his swift ship with his bright thunderbolt and had shattered it in the midst of the wine-dark sea. There all the rest of his noble comrades perished, but as for him, the wind and the waves, as they bore him, brought him here. Him I welcomed kindly and gave him food, and said that I would make him immortal and ageless all his days." (Od.5.118-136)*

Calypso overtly *reproaches* the gods for their envy. Her reproach is couched in a complex induction. According to her view, the Olympian gods are made jealous by the goddesses who are looking for a male human partner. She supports this general statement with three concrete cases. The evidence Calypso resorts to might seem "objective" and compelling, but the goddess might have easily found cases in the epic tradition that would refute the general truth she supports. For instance, Thetis' case in the Iliad is an interesting denial of the promoted wisdom. She was not envied by the gods for marrying a mortal man, Peleus, and, what is more, her son Achilles alleged that she was thrown against her will (*embalon*; Il.18.85) on the bed of her husband by the gods, which caused his mother, Thetis, deep, long lasting sorrow, for she will have to bewail her mortal son. Achilles wishes his mother a better fate:

"I wish you had remained where you were among the immortal maidens of the sea, and that Peleus had taken to his home a mortal bride. But now--it was so that you too might have measureless grief at heart for your dead son, whom you will never again welcome back to his home" (18.86-90)

It is obvious that Calypso is very biased in her selection of the supporting cases. She intends to corroborate her reproach and not to establish a general truth valid outside the actual speech situation. The validity of the general statement is confined by the reproach and indignation of Calypso. The general statements or aphorisms are only focused on the actual speech situation they are embedded in and would lose their meaning and role in other locations and settings.

Demodocus chants the love story of Aphrodite and Ares in the house of Antinous, according to which they had been betrayed by Helios to Hephaestus, the husband of Aphrodite, who forged a chain and fastened the two lovers together in the bed and called the gods to behold the "*laughable matter*" (*erga gelasta*) (Od.8.307). The assembled gods burst into "*unquenchable laughter*" and one of them summarized what happened:

"*Ill deeds do not win out (ouk aretai kaka erga). The slow catches the swift; just as now (hoos kai nun) Hephaestus, slow as he is, has caught Ares even though he is swiftest of the gods who hold Olympus. Lame, he has caught him by craft. Ares must pay for his adultery.*" (Od.329-332)

The god who spoke maintained the view that "ill deeds do not win out." This general statement is supported by and induced from the particular case of Hermes and Aphrodite. The speech act expresses the *mockery* and the *joy* of seeing the two gods in an uncomfortable situation. The validity of the induction is not detachable from the actual aim of the speech act. This is obvious from the *joke* of Apollo, who enquired of Hermes if he wanted to be in the place of Ares. Hermes, who is eager to sleep with Aphrodite, responds with a wish:

"Would that this might happen, lord Apollo, far-shooter--that thrice as many ineluctable bonds might clasp me about and you gods, yes, and all the goddesses too might be looking on, but that I might sleep by the side of golden Aphrodite." (Od.8.339-342)

It is apparent that Hermes' *desire* contradicts the idea behind the above induction. Hermes' case is not compatible with that of Ares. For Hermes the supposed "ill deed," despite the subsequent inconvenience, is the best thing he can think of. Consequently, the aphorism, "ill deeds do not win out" does not fit the

supposed case of Hermes. The induction works only in its original speech situation; its role in which does not fit Hermes' case

21

When Eumaeus, the swineherd, is guiding Odysseus, who disguised himself as a beggar, to the town, they meet Melantheus, another herdsman, who *scorns* and *insults* (*neikessen*) them (Od.17.215) with "terrible and unseemly" (*ekpaglon kai aeikes*) (Od.17.216) words:

"Here now in very truth comes the vile leading the vile. As ever, (hoos aiei) the god is bringing like and like together. Whither, pray, are you leading this filthy glutton, you miserable swineherd, this nuisance of a beggar to spoil our feasts?"
(Od.17.217-220)

Melantheus induces from the particular case of Odysseus and Eumaeus the general wisdom that "the god always brings like and like together." The frame of reference of the induction is determined by the intention of Melantheus to *scorn*, *revile*, and *disdain* the swineherd and the "beggar." Melantheus' scornful description of them makes his purpose unambiguous.

As Odysseus is slaughtering the suitors, Leiodes the seer tries to save his life by a *supplication* (*lissomenos*) (Od.22.311):

"By your knees I beseech you, Odysseus; respect me and have pity. For I declare to you that never yet have I wronged one of the women in your halls by wanton word or deed; no, I tried to check the other suitors, when any would do such things. But they would not listen to me to withhold their hands from evil, and so through their wanton folly they have met a cruel doom. Yet I, their soothsayer, that have done no wrong, shall be laid low (keisomai) along with them; so true is it (hoos) that there is no gratitude afterwards for good deeds done." (Od.22.312-319)

Leiodes is *begging* for his life. Speaking of his own possible death, he describes a case which supports an absurd aphorism: "there is no gratitude afterwards for good deeds done." The aim of the induction is to influence Odysseus with its bizarre consequence. Leiodes wants Odysseus to refute the general statement by not presenting a particular example that supports it. This case illuminates yet more the point that the validity of Homeric "reasoning" is always dependent on the actual speech situation. The induction in question is a struggle against its validation by Odysseus. In the end Odysseus does not yield to the supplication, he does not believe in the guiltless of Leiodes and kills him. From Odysseus' point of view, this does not mean that the induction is validated but--on the contrary--the hero called the honesty of Leiodes' allegations into question and thus the truthfulness of the whole speech act, the whole induction. After Leiodes' death the *raison d'être* of the speech act ceased to exist, because the purpose of it was to prevent his death.

Somewhat later, Telemachus himself is trying to save the life of Medon, the herald, and tells Odysseus not to kill him, for he has behaved loyally. After that, Medon comes out of his refuge and beseeches Telemachus to protect him against Odysseus' rage. Odysseus hears Medon's speech and then he *smiles* and *encourages* him:

"Be of good cheer, for he has delivered you and saved you, that you may know

in your heart and tell also to another, how *far better is the doing of good deeds than of evil.*" (Od.22.372-374)

In his speech Odysseus acknowledges Medon's innocence and thus validates his entreaty. From the particular case of Medon, that he is rewarded for his loyalty with his life, Odysseus induces the aphorism that "far better is the doing of good deeds than of evil." Odysseus *enjoins* Medon to accept the aphorism and to promulgate it. The purpose of this induction is to *give* Medon *confidence* that he won't be slaughtered as were the suitors. Odysseus smiles in order to strengthen this confidence in Medon. The frame of reference of the induction is thus confined by the purpose it fulfills. It is interesting to note that the last two aphorisms discussed are in open contradiction, but because they belong to two different speech situations, their contradictory character is hidden from the oral observers since their respective frame of references do not overlap.

22

In our following investigation we shed light on the cases in the epic poems that could be characterized as oral deductions, which occur when a particular example is derived from a general statement or aphorism.

When Eurycleia realizes how many people Odysseus slaughtered, she wants to cry out in her infinite happiness, but Odysseus *admonishes* her for her inappropriate behavior:

"In your own heart rejoice, old woman, but refrain yourself and do not cry aloud: an unholy thing is to boast over slain men." (Od.22.411-412)

Odysseus enjoins his servant to be silent, because the popular wisdom "an unholy thing is to boast over slain men" forbids delight at the sight of the dead suitors. Odysseus derives the proper conduct in a particular case from a general wisdom. The deduction could easily be cast in the form of a syllogism, where the conclusion would be Odysseus' *injunction*, for it seems to be obvious to the oral audience that "unholy things" are to be avoided. Without the authority of Odysseus and the compelling force of the dreadful situation, however, the "syllogism" would not work. For this reason, the deduction is not to be interpreted without the speech situation.

We can find even more explicit *syllogisms* in the epic poems. As Odysseus and Diomedes are on the way to spy on the Trojans in the darkness, Athene sends them a bird "on their right" which implicates a good omen. The spies hear the cry of the bird and Odysseus happily realizes the meaning of the auspicious omen and prays to Athene:

"Hear me, *child of Zeus*, who bears the aegis, *you who always stand by my side in all manner of toils*, nor am I unseen by you wherever I move; *now again show your love, Athene, as never you did before, and grant that with noble renown we come back to the ships, having performed a great deed that will be a sorrow to the Trojans.*" (Il.10.278-282)

The *supplication* of Odysseus can be seen as a *syllogism*. It follows from the general statement that Athene always stands by the side of Odysseus in "all manner of toils" that now, as the hero is in a very hard "toil"--this "proposition" can be added by reference to the actual situation: Athene has to help Odysseus. The conclusion is a *request*. From the fact that the conclusion is not a statement, derived exclusively from the propositions, but a request, it is clear that the "propositions" are not enough to provide support for a conclusion. The general statement that Athene helps Odysseus in every hard

situation is only there to *remind* Athene of the past and *urge* her to help the hero, so it does not accomplish the role of a logical proposition. This is the reason why Odysseus has to pray and make supplications to the goddess and request her help. The help of the goddess does not follow from the compelling propositions, but from the personal relationship of Odysseus and Athene and, for this reason, Odysseus is appealing to the goddess personally. The validity of the deduction is undetachable from the actual speech situation; it is valid only in the frame of reference of Odysseus' personal ambition or immediate purpose.

A similar *prayer* is employed by Odysseus when his raft is destroyed by a storm and he is swimming to a river flowing out of an unknown island. Odysseus is *praying* (*euxato*) (Od.5.444) to the river-god:

"Hear me, king, whoever you are. As to one greatly longed for do I come to you seeking to escape out of the sea from the threats of Poseidon. *Reverend even in the eyes of the immortal gods is that man who comes as a wanderer, as I have come to your stream and to your knees, after many toils. Pity me, king; I declare myself your suppliant.*" (Od.5.445-450)

23

First Odysseus declares the general truth that "reverend even in the eyes of the immortal gods is that man who comes as a wanderer," then he refers to his particular case, which fits the general statement: "I am coming as a wanderer." Odysseus does not draw the normal conclusion that he is now accordingly "reverend in the eyes of the immortal gods" and so in the eyes of the actual river-god, but he *requests* that the god pity him in what is equivalent to a request for reverence and for rescue. It is obvious that the convincing force of the propositions is not sufficient for a formal conclusion that would guarantee Odysseus' rescue. The propositions are only to remind the god of his natural duty, to strengthen the effect of the request. The propositions work interpersonally and not textually. Accordingly, the "conclusion" does not follow from the propositions, but it is a request directed to the river-god who has formerly been "persuaded" by these propositions to fulfill this request. For this reason, the elements of the syllogisms are not to be construed independently of the actual speech situation, of the *prayer*.

Odysseus employs oral deductions in multifarious situations, using widely differing speech acts. After the Phaeacian sailors bring the sleeping Odysseus to his native land, he awakens and does not recognize Ithaca. He thinks that the sailors deceived him and brought him to another place. In his first anger he *curse*s the Phaeacians:

"May Zeus, the suppliant's god, requite (*tisaito*) them, he who watches over all men, and punishes him (*allous anthropous*) who transgresses."
(Od.13.213-214)

According to the general statement, "Zeus punishes wrongdoers." Odysseus, however, does not conclude from this that the Phaeacians, who are wrongdoers, shall be punished by Zeus, but he curses them, he wishes that they should be punished by the father of the gods. The "conclusion" does not follow from the propositions, but from the actual speech situation, the rage and distress of Odysseus, for it is not an emotionless statement, detached from the circumstances. The general wisdom here is also a concealed plea that should motivate Zeus. The propositions--the general statement and the allegation that the Phaeacians are criminals--have no logical relationship to the curse but, notwithstanding, they are organically part of the curse, of the whole speech act. Consequently, this "oral syllogism"--like all other

sylogisms already discussed--is only to be construed in the frame of reference of the underlying speech situation.

Generally, we may conclude that all the assertions, contradictions, and inferences in the Homeric epics are to be construed in their actual speech situations. A conscious endeavor to build a textually consistent system uninfluenced by the *underlying circumstances* cannot be found in the epics. One cannot manipulate statements and inferences in accordance with formal logical rules until one has acquired the means to transcend perhaps the most important limitation of oral language, its dependency on the speech situation.

My thanks are due to Eric Gans and Linda E. Wright for their painstaking correction work.

24

Notes

1. For a detailed overview see: Goody, J. *The interface between the oral and the written*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1987. Olson, D. R. *The World on Paper*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. ([back](#))
2. Havelock, E. A. *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1963. ([back](#))
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7. Translated by A. T. Murray. In: Homer: The Odyssey. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press. 1995. ([back](#))
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9. Translated by me. ([back](#))
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11. "Storytelling in the Future: Truth, Time, and Tense in Homeric Epic." In: *Written Voices, Spoken Signs*, Ed. Egbert Bakker, Ahuria Kahane, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997. ([back](#))

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Hamlet's Ghost: A Review Article

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton UP, 2001.

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"Remember me." Hamlet's Ghost calls out to us across the space of four hundred years, and by all evidence we are in no danger of forgetting him. Scholars have tended to focus their attention on the character of young Hamlet, but the Ghost of King Hamlet is arguably the interpretive crux of Shakespeare's play. We must decide, along with young Hamlet, whether the Ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damned." In this paradigmatically modern play, the Ghost hearkens back to the late medieval world of magic and superstition, the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory--as well as the generic conventions of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy. In a crucial way the whole plot of *Hamlet* depends upon the Ghost. Yet some critics have questioned the reality claim of the Ghost within the world of the play, along with the ethics of his call for revenge--just as, indeed, young Hamlet himself feels compelled to test the truth of the Ghost's accusation through "The Mousetrap," the play within the play. The Ghost also raises larger questions about the role of the supernatural within early modern culture. For all these reasons, Stephen Greenblatt's new book *Hamlet in Purgatory* is especially welcome.

"I began with a desire to speak with the dead." One of the most striking openings of any book of literary criticism, Greenblatt introduces thus his book *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988). In his more recent work on *Hamlet*, Greenblatt examines that same desire to speak with the dead in Shakespeare and his audience, a desire, he argues, in which we ourselves, as fans of *Hamlet*, participate. Not only do we desire to speak with the dead, but the dead also desire to speak with us; or, more precisely, they seem to fear the oblivion of forgetfulness. Significantly, Hamlet's Ghost asks for remembrance (1.5.92) as well as revenge. Although the term "Purgatory" is never mentioned in *Hamlet* (such a reference might well have run afoul of Elizabethan censors), the Ghost clearly implies that he has returned from Purgatory. He is "Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in days of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (1.5.11-14).

In recent years New Historicists have been exploring the complex ways in which Renaissance drama appropriated the power of weakened or damaged traditional religious institutions. Purgatory, for example, was at the center of vast web of institutional rituals and customs, and these practices had been forcibly repressed by the Church of England for almost forty years when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first performed. Leading Protestants in England sought to minimize the purely ceremonial dimensions of late medieval worship; in this effort many of the hallowed images, the statues, carvings, and the furniture of

the parish churches were destroyed or defaced with ill-advised haste and violence. Reformers often rushed to discard age-old customs and practices that had acquired the familiarity and authority of ancient tradition. The iconoclasm of the Reformation left an enormous gap in the cultural and spiritual life of the English people, and Renaissance drama stepped in to help fill that gap. It is worthwhile noting in this regard that the rise of the Elizabethan theater followed immediately on the Protestant suppression of the annual mystery play cycles, a rich element of late medieval culture. The more tradition-minded laity found the bare austerities of the Protestant worship service, centered on preaching and biblical exegesis, dissatisfying and inaccessible. Protestant worship in its most rigorous forms was intellectually and morally strenuous. Shakespeare's theater, according to New Historicists, was able to appropriate and transform the spiritual "energy" or charisma associated with forbidden Catholic practices such as exorcism or services for the dead. The attacks on Catholic ceremonies commonly associated them with both magic and theater. The repression of Purgatory was part of a larger attack on the belief in ghosts in general. Efforts to eliminate magic and superstition added to the cultural vacuum created by the forces of modernity.

2

Secularization, as Greenblatt recognizes, is not a process of evacuating religious beliefs and institutions of their sacred contents, leaving for modernity only the secular forms. It is precisely the ritual forms that are left behind; traditional ceremonies such as the Mass for the dead or ritual exorcism were abandoned, while the psychic energy invested therein continued in new forms, including art. The sacred does not simply evaporate in the modern era; it is rather integrated into the fabric of our culture, integrated so profoundly that we hardly recognize it as such any more.

This is not to elide the significant differences between art and religion, and before returning to *Hamlet* it will be worthwhile to dwell briefly on this important point. New Historicists commonly assert that the boundaries between art, religion, and other cultural practices are fluid. What counts for "literature," for example, is a matter of historical convention. For this reason, New Historicists have participated in the widespread trend towards interdisciplinary research, examining the relationships between seemingly discrete discursive fields. This is undeniably a healthy trend, but this approach sometimes ignores the significant differences between fields such as art and religion. The strength of Greenblatt's work is that he is very sensitive to the relevant distinctions between different cultural practices. For example, comparing the medieval mystery plays to Marlowe's *Faustus*, Greenblatt writes,

there is, to be sure, fear and trembling in the mysteries and moralities of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but a dread bound up with the fate of particular situated individuals is largely absent, and the audience shares its grief and joy in a collective experience that serves either to ward off or to absorb private emotions. Marlowe's *Faustus*, by contrast, though it appears conventional enough in its plot and overarching religious ideology, seems like a startling departure from everything that has preceded it precisely because the dramatist has heightened and individuated anxiety to an unprecedented degree and because he has contrived to implicate his audience as individuals in that anxiety. (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 133)

The experience of the audience in an Elizabethan theater is not collective in quite the same sense as in a religious ritual, or even as in a quasi-ritual such as the mystery plays. An individual's personal response to a religious ritual is often irrelevant--what validates the ritual is the institution itself and the participation of the community. Participation in an ecclesiastical ritual constitutes submission to the

institutional authority of the church. And in early modern England, of course, church attendance was mandatory. The essence of the ritual is the individual's submersion in the religious community as a whole. In a theater, by contrast, each individual is free to applaud or not. Watching a play seems to be a more passive experience than participating in a religious ceremony, and in one sense it is. But aesthetic response, in a secular context, is also more individuating, less constrained by institutional pressures, as Greenblatt recognizes. To put this point schematically, the modern theater creates a community of individuals, not a cosmic hierarchy. A certain freedom is gained, but the security of a stable cosmos is sacrificed.

In Greenblatt's work, however, the distinction between theater and ritual remains without any theoretical grounding, anthropological or otherwise. New Historicism shares with Generative Anthropology the typically modern desire to minimize our theoretical presuppositions. But this healthy desire does not free us from the necessity of defining our object of study. Culture is defined by representation, as Greenblatt well knows. This, I take it, is the import of Clifford Geertz's famous conception of culture as semiotic (Geertz 5), a conception which Greenblatt acknowledges as the basis for his practice (*Practicing New Historicism* 20-31). But Geertz's semiotic concept of culture remains at best a description of culture, not a rigorous definition. As a whole, New Historicism is severely limited by its lack of any solid theoretical foundation. Its anthropological insights can be articulated only on an ad hoc basis. Nonetheless, there is a powerful anthropological intuition at work in Greenblatt, despite the lack of theoretical support, and his recent book deserves our careful attention.

3

In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt argues that the Ghost of Hamlet is not simply a plot device, a generic convention of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, as sometimes assumed. Its power, both for the audience and for young Hamlet, goes far beyond its function as a plot catalyst. Rather the figure of the Ghost expresses (1) a widespread fear among the living of being forgotten after death and (2) bereavement for those already dead. The Ghost, in brief, inhabits the imaginative space left open by the English Reformation's banishment of Purgatory in 1563. The Ghost returns from Purgatory, and in effect brings Purgatory back with him, albeit in a fictionalized and thereby transformed shape. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as Greenblatt puts it, participates in "a cult of the dead" (203, 257), and we as readers and viewers continue this cult--one with important social functions that he explores at length. Only on this cultic basis can we account for *Hamlet's* powerful and continued fascination. The primary imperative of the Ghost is to "Remember," not to "Revenge," as commonly thought. In this sense, Greenblatt's interpretation shares common concerns with the readings of René Girard and Eric Gans, for both of whom also revenge is secondary to the refusal or delay of revenge. In Greenblatt's reading, the imperative for memory at the cost of revenge accounts for Hamlet's delay that has so puzzled critics over the centuries, as indeed Hamlet himself (in his soliloquies) is puzzled and frustrated by his lack of ready action. In this reading of the play, the problem is not delay but rather revenge itself: the Ghost *does* call out for revenge, and Hamlet eventually fulfills that requirement, if not, perhaps, in exactly the way envisioned by King Hamlet. The problem for Greenblatt's interpretation, as he puts it, is that "Sticking a sword into someone's body turns out to be a very tricky way of remembering the dead" (225). If the play is primarily an expression of the "desire to speak with the dead," and the fear, on the part of the living, of being forgotten after death, then how do we account for the elements of revenge at all? We cannot deny that the play, like all revenge tragedies, ends with a bloodbath. And at least part of the aesthetic experience of the play is the conventional anticipation of revenge. As Greenblatt observes, "Purgatory, along with theological language of communion (houceling), deathbed confession (appointment), and anointing

(aneling), while compatible with a Christian (and, specifically, a Catholic) call for remembrance, is utterly incompatible with a Senecan call for vengeance" (237). Ghosts from Purgatory typically ask for prayers to hasten their way to Heaven. How, in other words, do we reconcile revenge and remembrance? In order to see how Greenblatt answers this question, we will need to review briefly the argument of his book.

The larger part of Greenblatt's book is devoted to reconstructing two important contexts for *Hamlet*: the Renaissance controversies over the doctrine of Purgatory in the wake of the Reformation, and representations of Purgatory in paintings, manuscript illuminations, prints, and narratives--for example, the medieval legend of "St. Patrick's Purgatory" in Ireland (73-101). We remember here Hamlet's excited oath to Horatio early in the play, "by Saint Patrick" (1.5.42), and editors duly note that Saint Patrick is regarded as the keeper of Purgatory. In this popular legend, widely disseminated by vernacular translations and medieval sermons, Saint Patrick discovers a physical entrance into Purgatory in a cave at Lough Derg, Donegal, in Ireland, and then establishes an abbey on the site. An English knight, Owein, comes to the abbey desiring to repent his sins and avoid punishment in the afterlife. He enters physically into Purgatory, has various adventures there including conversations with the devils, suffers punishments appropriate to his sins, and finally, like Dante (two centuries later), achieves a vision of Paradise. He returns to earth to tell his story, giving Purgatory the authority of an eyewitness account, an authority Purgatory was much in need of, given its lack of any ancient authority. The abbey that was built around the entry to Purgatory in a cave was an important destination for late medieval pilgrimages until English Protestants dismantled the site in the 17th century. "St. Patrick's Purgatory" is a significant, yet little known, chapter in the history of lay devotion during the medieval and Renaissance periods. Greenblatt's account is enlightening, not least for the close reading skills he brings to this text, as well as his analysis of the social and institutional functions served by the legends surrounding Purgatory. To a large extent, this is the familiar story of how anxiety is aroused only to be channeled and allayed through appropriate institutional means, thus affirming a particular social hierarchy and cultural economy. Greenblatt's larger purpose in this chapter is to establish the importance of Purgatory in the late medieval imagination, and hence the trauma surrounding its official elimination in 1563, a trauma which found expression through Shakespeare's play.

4

Another fascinating piece of lay devotion examined at length by Greenblatt is the popular story of "The Gast [Ghost] of Gy," about a widow in France during the 14th century who is haunted by the Ghost of her departed husband (105-133). A Dominican monk is called in to examine the Ghost in order to determine its nature and the reason for the haunting. What follows is a long dialogue, "which is in effect the transcript of a scholastic disputatio between the cleric and the specter" (105). The rhetorical effect of this dialogue is ambiguous, as Greenblatt notes. The figure of the Ghost himself is highly ambivalent; while he is destined for heaven, he says, "I am a wicked Ghost, as unto my wicked pain that I suffer" (112). The dialogue also attempts to resolve, not entirely satisfactorily, some of the theological difficulties surrounding Purgatory. And finally, the monk is presented as rather simple-minded and limited in comparison to the Ghost, so that the authority of the church in dealing with ghosts seems questionable. The story reveals that the main reason for the haunting is the Ghost's attachment to his wife. The Ghost of Gy says, "I love more my wife / Than any other man alive, / And therefore first to her I went" (qtd. by Greenblatt 130). The haunting turns out to be a touching scene of domestic affection, not unlike the solicitude exhibited by King Hamlet's Ghost for Gertrude, especially during the "closet scene" in the third act (scene four). Purgatory therefore is associated with the private and domestic, important

indicators of modernity. Greenblatt's discussion of Purgatory ghosts and monks parallels his account of "Shakespeare and the Exorcists" (in reference to *King Lear*), the possessed and their demons, in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (94-128). In institutional terms, ghosts and demons are liminal phenomena; official doctrine sanctions them, and institutional means existed to deal with these spirits, but hauntings and possessions tended to arise outside of conventional ritual contexts, and they attracted charismatic figures (spiritual "experts") who existed on the fringes of the official institutions. Hauntings and possessions also permitted active lay participation, with unpredictable results. For these reasons, Reformers seeking to consolidate the power of the church found them threatening. Ghosts were ambivalent and controversial, and they always threatened to escape the bounds of official control.

Given the importance of ghosts in the Renaissance imagination, we might well ask how and why credulous belief in ghosts came to such a sudden end in the seventeenth century. As Greenblatt puts it, "How did it all come to an end? How were the dead killed off? And did they go quietly?" (133). In Greenblatt's account, the ghosts inhabiting Purgatory were forcibly evicted by zealous Protestant reformers, and they did not go quietly: conservatives, speaking on behalf of the dead, protested long and loud. In addition to Renaissance representations of Purgatory, Greenblatt also examines the controversies surrounding this Catholic institution during the English Reformation. For this purpose he examines closely Simon Fish's attack on Purgatory in "A Supplication for the Beggars" (1529), a tract which argues that the vast resources spent on relieving souls in Purgatory would be better spent on relieving the living beggars of the realm. In response to Fish, Sir Thomas More wrote "The Supplication of Souls" (1529), framed as a plea from the dead to save them from the painful fires of Purgatory. For More and other conservatives, the devotional practices surrounding Purgatory were invaluable, not only for the aid of the suffering ghosts, but also as a means of creating a sense of community among the living, a community which included the dead who had not been forgotten. The dead lingered in the memories of the living, just as they lingered in the liminal space of Purgatory. These suffering souls still existed in a relationship of reciprocal exchange and occasional communication with the living. John Donne's obsession with death and dying is examined to good effect in this light, notably his famous Meditation #17 from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, "For Whom the Bell Tolls." As Donne points out, "No man is an island." We are part of vast community that includes both the living and the dead. Purgatory was a valuable means of maintaining this sense of continuity and community, and its elimination was a genuine loss to Renaissance culture. Greenblatt, agreeing with revisionist historians of the Reformation, points out rightly that late medieval devotional practices were not quite the dead letter that Protestant polemics portrayed. The traditions of Catholicism were still living and vital, and Protestant piety took root in the fertile ground prepared by late medieval developments such as Confession and Purgatory. An intellectual elite imposed many of the Protestant reforms from above; they did not always emerge spontaneously from below as a grass-roots movement, as sometimes claimed. (The question that revisionist historians beg, however, is why the reformers were so successful if they did not have substantial popular support. The sweeping changes inaugurated by the English Reformation required *both* an active faction of reformers and widespread popular support, even if that support was sometimes limited to popular resentment toward the corruption of the clergy. Contrary to the claims of Christopher Haigh [56-74], the importance of anticlericalism for the Reformation can hardly be overestimated.) *Hamlet*, according to Greenblatt, participates in the debate about Purgatory, although not in any simple fashion. The play in effect stages this debate without necessarily taking sides.

For a Renaissance audience, the dramatic representation of a ghost from Purgatory would evoke a rich

context of legends and lore that have for the most part been lost to modern audiences. Ghost stories, for instance, were a frequent element of medieval sermons. Greenblatt does an admirable job of recreating that context and demonstrating the semantic richness of the Ghost for a Renaissance audience. In this he explains all the ways in which Hamlet's Ghost exceeds the generic traditions of the revenge tragedy. Greenblatt also considers other representations of ghosts in Renaissance drama, including revenge tragedies, noting that Shakespeare's use of ghosts is rather unique in the ways that he was able to effectively exploit the supernatural for dramatic purposes. In his valuable discussion of Shakespeare's use of ghosts (in all his plays), Greenblatt charts "three fundamental perspectives to which Shakespeare repeatedly returns: the Ghost as a figure of false surmise, the Ghost as a figure of history's nightmare, and the Ghost as a figure of deep psychic disturbance. Half-hidden is all of these is a fourth perspective: the Ghost as figure of theater" (157). Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, Greenblatt points out, does not fall neatly into the categories of either skepticism or simple belief. He argues that Shakespeare took ghostly spirits quite seriously. Although Shakespeare's attitude is educated and modern, his drama suggests that the claim of the supernatural upon us is real and substantial. To the extent that we take his drama seriously, we must also take the supernatural seriously. Shakespeare's deployment of ghosts goes beyond "special effects" or theatrical entertainment. The moral universe inhabited by Shakespeare's heroes and heroines suggests that the supernatural is part of the very warp and woof of the *human* cosmos. Ghostly spirits, in Shakespeare, tell us something valuable and irreplaceable about *this* world, if not the life after death. What that something is, however, remains considerably ambiguous.

This brings us back to Hamlet's Ghost and the apparent contradiction between the call to revenge and the call to remembrance. Greenblatt attempts to finesse this contradiction by appealing to ambiguity itself. Shakespeare deliberately left the status of the Ghost ambiguous and open to interpretation, and this is in effect the meaning of the Ghost (239-40). Shakespeare, then, exploits to dramatic purpose the ongoing controversy and uncertainty about ghosts in Elizabethan society. The very ambiguity of the Ghost, according to Greenblatt, is the key to its dramatic power. The thesis of undecidability has much to recommend it. A case could be made that what constitutes a "classic" is that it draws on a large variety of rich semantic contexts. The dense ambiguity of a classic text allows for a variety of plausible interpretations, and thus for the formation of an ongoing interpretive community surrounding the text. As Greenblatt points out, the banishment of Purgatory left a vacuum in Renaissance culture which required the development of new cultural forms, including, for example, the interpretive community surrounding texts such as *Hamlet*, a community in which Greenblatt's readers participate. The problem with this thesis is that it is too general to account for *Hamlet's* specific role in Western culture. Ambiguity is one of those things such that if you are looking for it, you will find it. To the extent that Greenblatt attempts to resolve the contradiction between revenge and memory, he seems to come down on the side of memory, suggesting that vengeance is really secondary to the imperative for remembrance. *Hamlet*, Greenblatt suggests, is fundamentally conservative in its nostalgia for Purgatory. But then, we might ask, why is *Hamlet* often considered paradigmatically modern, and Hamlet a prototypical modern hero? If the play is backwards-looking, then why does it continue to hold the fascination that it does? Greenblatt overextends his thesis about the Ghost. Purgatory is never mentioned explicitly in the play, and it constitutes only a minor context that fails to account for the play's immense cultural power. Young Hamlet does not seem especially concerned about the eternal destiny of his father. And at the end of the play, as Greenblatt notes, the Ghost is essentially forgotten (226). With considerable ingenuity, Greenblatt takes the forgetting of the Ghost as evidence for the play's larger shift away from revenge. Yet according to Greenblatt, the shift away from revenge is motivated by the turn to memory, so it does not make sense that the Ghost's emphasis on memory would result finally in his own forgetting. Greenblatt

attempts to get around this problem by appealing to Hamlet's request for Horatio to tell his story, another example of remembrance. But the absence of Hamlet's Ghost from the end of the play seriously undermines Greenblatt's main line of argument.

6

In defending his thesis of ambiguity, Greenblatt discusses what might be called the Protestant elements of *Hamlet* (240-244), notably Hamlet's skepticism about the Ghost that motivates the staging of the play within the play, "The Mousetrap." Greenblatt calls our attention to Hamlet's insistence on physical materiality, for example in his remark to Claudius that Polonius is "At supper . . . Not where he eats but where 'a is eaten" (4.3.17, 19). As Greenblatt insightfully notes, the supper where one does not eat but is eaten suggests the Lord's Supper. In an outstanding feat of cultural poetics, Greenblatt compares the Reformation controversies over this sacrament with Hamlet's discourse on the physical process of dying and death. The Catholics insisted that during the Mass the bread and wine were physically transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ, through the miracle of transubstantiation. Protestants, in contrast, argued that the Mass, which they preferred to call The Lord's Supper, was merely symbolic and memorial in nature. No literal transformation took place. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation made necessary elaborate ceremonial precautions to avoid profaning the body and blood of God. The laity, for example, were not given the Chalice during the late medieval period because they might spill some of the blood of God. Protestants delightedly pounced on the logical absurdities involved in transubstantiation, continually taunting the Catholics that the body of Christ must then be chewed, swallowed, and digested, making "a progress through the guts of a beggar." Likewise, a mouse or rat might catch some leftover crumbs and feast on God's body. Greenblatt points out that Hamlet's language insistently recalls these Protestant polemics against the Mass. "A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him [Polonius]," Hamlet tells Claudius; "We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots" (4.3.19-23). Hamlet continues with the logic typical of Protestant polemics against the Catholic Mass: "A man may fish with a worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that had fed of that worm," thus "a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.27-32). By the same logic, Hamlet demonstrates to Horatio how "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.213-214). In a passage that deserves to be quoted at length, Greenblatt writes,

Hamlet is disgusted by the grossness whose emblem here [3.3.80] is the bread in his father's stomach, a grossness figured as well by drinking, sleeping, sexual intercourse, and above all perhaps by woman's flesh. The play enacts and reenacts queasy rituals of defilement and revulsion, an obsession with a corporeality that reduces everything to appetite and excretion. . . . Here, as in the line about the king's progress through the guts of a beggar, the revulsion is mingled with a sense of drastic leveling, the collapse of order and distinction into polymorphous, endlessly recycled materiality. Claudius, with his reechy kisses and paddling fingers, is a paddock, a bat, a gib, and this unclean beast, like the priapic priest of Protestant polemics, has poisoned the entire social and symbolic system. Hamlet's response is not to attempt to shore it up but to draw it altogether into the writhing of maggots. . . .

The spirit can be healed only by refusing all compromise and by plunging the imagination unflinchingly into the rank corruption of the ulcerous place. Such a

conviction led the Reformers to dwell on the progress of the Host through the guts of a mouse, and a comparable conviction, born of intertwining theological and psychological obsessions, leads Hamlet to the clay pit and the decayed leftovers that the gravediggers bring to light. . . . This is the primary and elemental nausea provoked by the vulnerability of matter This revulsion is not an end in itself; it is the spiritual precondition of a liberated spirit that finds a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, sacrificially fulfills the father's design and declares that the readiness is all. (243-44)

This is a very insightful way of understanding Hamlet's disgust with sex, drink, food, and physicality in general. For Greenblatt, however, this insight serves merely to support his thesis of ambiguity. He does not seem to notice how the Protestant elements of Hamlet's character contradict his emphasis on Catholic remembrance. As David Bevington has demonstrated, Hamlet is iconoclastic in relation to traditional rituals (173-187). He does not seem inclined towards the public ceremonies surrounding death, rituals intended for devout recollection. Hamlet, we remember, has "that within which passes show" (1.2.85). Although he dresses in black, he despises the merely ceremonial "trappings and suits of woe," the purely formal "shapes of grief": "For they are actions that a man might play" (1.2.86, 82, 84). Many critics have noted the numerous "maimed rites" in *Hamlet*, from the opening ceremony at Claudius' court to Ophelia's funeral to the ostentatious staging of the final fencing match. The play's antipathy towards ritual, ceremony, and hierarchy poses serious problems for Greenblatt's argument about Purgatory, which was at the center of a vast network of rituals and ceremonies. Hamlet's Protestant skepticism could very well put him at odds with the Ghost and the whole revenge plot in which Hamlet finds himself.

7

By drawing our attention away from revenge, Greenblatt's interpretation shares some affinities with René Girard's pioneering interpretation in *A Theater of Envy* (271-289). For Girard, the problem of the play is not Hamlet's delay, but precisely the question of revenge. Whereas for most critics, Greenblatt included, revenge is an unaccountable holdover from the revenge tragedy tradition, Girard, from his anthropological perspective, sees revenge as another version of the sacrificial, the translation of resentment into action. While revenge might cloak itself within a façade of necessary justice, from an ethical point of view the need for violent personal retribution is banal and ultimately puerile.

Under this definition, revenge is in effect a universal problem for human culture, not simply a theme of Elizabethan drama. Girard's "Fundamental Anthropology" is grounded in his theory of mimetic or conflictual desire. In this view, what distinguishes the human species are our mimetic tendencies. In evolutionary terms, mimesis or imitation is an adaptive learning behavior, a form of intelligence, but mimesis, when transferred to desire and the appropriation of desirable or "sacred" objects, leads to conflict--just as Hamlet, for example, comes into conflict with Laertes at the grave of Ophelia. Our mimetic heritage is distinctly ambivalent: it creates a temptation to violence, but it also serves as the basis for language or representation itself, the distinctly human form of mimesis or imitation.

In Girard's view, Hamlet is modern because he understands revenge; he understands how "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" it is. King Hamlet represents the ancient/medieval world of honor, pride, and heroic combat, while young Hamlet represents the Christian or modern skepticism towards mimetic rivalry in its various traditional forms. In Girard's view, the violence of the ending is a concession to the requirements of a popular, bloodthirsty audience. Girard argues that Hamlet's revenge is morally

unjustifiable, as Hamlet in effect realizes, because the poisoned King is just as guilty of murder as Claudius. His purgatorial punishments, as well his slaying of King Fortinbras, demonstrate his guilt. A sophisticated audience, familiar with Shakespeare's "theater of envy" (that is, his critique of mimetic desire), would see through the atavistic elements of the ending. Girard resolves the conflict between pagan revenge and Christian forgiveness by positing a dual audience for Shakespeare's plays. Hamlet's internal conflict, what Girard calls his "unnamable paralysis of the will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit" (284), can be healed only by a complete renunciation of violence.

The problem with Girard's interpretation, however, as Eric Gans points out, is that the elimination of revenge is a utopian solution to the problem of conflictual desire, a solution inappropriate to a modern world which feeds on the social energies released by competition (rivalry) and desire (*Chronicles* #141). Girard sees Christianity as a revelation of the victimary (and hence unjustifiable) basis of the sacrificial, both in ritual and classic tragedy, a moral revelation which demands the radical renunciation of revenge. But insofar as the structure of mimetic desire is inherently sacrificial (the satisfaction of triangular desire would mean the sacrificial destruction of the human obstacles to that desire), the apocalypse entailed by satisfied desire can be only deferred indefinitely. As the very basis of culture, desire, and hence the *possibility* of violence, cannot be coherently refused, only sublimated and thus deferred. Gans writes, "In the last analysis, Girard no more than the other critics can consonance Hamlet's indefinite delay. The difference, and it is entirely to his credit, is that where our pseudo-Nietzscheans impatiently urge Hamlet to wreak vengeance on the patriarchy, Girard wants him to follow the Christian road of renunciation" (*Chronicles* #141).

Gans is able to give a whole new interpretation of Hamlet's delay as a function of his "delight in 'words, words, words.'" Unlike Fortinbras or Laertes, the Danish prince is an "intellectual who glories in his mastery of language as a means to defer as long as possible the contact of ideas with practical reality" (*Chronicles* #141). Hamlet is modern, in Gans's view, because he would rather linger at the margins of the Danish court--making fun of the other characters, dramatizing his situation in soliloquies--than plunge straightforward towards revenge. Hamlet's linguistic delaying tactics form a valuable, presciently modern alternative to the ancient/medieval world of revenge, embodied in the figure of the Ghost. "[T]he Ghost's objective existence [is] dubious," Gans writes, an illusion created by the mimetic rivalries of the play (*Chronicles* #141).

8

Gans agrees with Girard that the problem of *Hamlet* is fundamentally ethical in nature, the integration of Christian moral values into classical tragedy, but he defines the problem of this combination in different terms (*Originary Thinking* 156-160). His basic model of aesthetic analysis is *the scene of representation*, defined by a [sacred] center and [human] periphery. Centrality denotes significance, but this significance is vulnerable to resentment (hence sacrificial violence) and therefore stands always in need of justification. The classical aesthetic is distinguished by an *agon* between superhuman heroes whose significance was unquestioned. Christianity, however, reveals the humanity of the sacred center, that is, the essential equivalence of center and periphery. Christianity involves a leveling of the vertical hierarchy implied by classical art. The Neo-classical (early modern or Renaissance) aesthetic remains ambivalently attached to the classical scene of representation, just as Hamlet remains perversely attached to the ceremonial scene of the Danish court. Hamlet defines himself in opposition to the classical scene of representation, yet he is unable to find any coherent alternative. A romantic Hamlet might well elope with Ophelia to Paris or England. The romantic hero would transcend the classical *agon* by internalizing

it within himself through a narrative of redemptive suffering. "Hamlet's delight in righteous indignation prefigures the romantic heroes for whom he serves as the primary model" (Gans, *Chronicles* #141). Shakespeare's play complicates, yet still participates in the classical, aristocratic conception of the tragic-heroic. *Hamlet* stages the classical scene of representation, demystifying it, opening it up to questioning and reciprocal exchange, but without creating an independent alternative.

It is this finely nuanced sense of cultural history that distinguishes Gans's analysis from Greenblatt's. Greenblatt can be seen as broadly in line with Girard and Gans, in that the focus of his interpretation is on the mechanisms that bring about the delay of revenge rather than the imperative for revenge itself. Greenblatt adds to our understanding of *Hamlet*, but his reading by no means supplants Gans's reading because it is not grounded in any coherent theory of human culture in its historical development. This limitation becomes evident when Greenblatt overemphasizes the importance of Purgatory and remembrance at the expense of Hamlet's Protestant skepticism. Greenblatt does not have a clear sense of what makes *Hamlet* modern. The weakness of New Historicism, ironically, is that it lacks any strong sense of history. A more complete reading of *Hamlet* would further explore the ways in which the play works "against revenge." Hamlet not only turns away from revenge, he also resists the rituals and hierarchy that legitimate revenge. The heart of Hamlet's mystery remains to be explored as a process of iconoclastic skepticism.

9

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Anthropoetics VII, 1 Benchmarks

All the authors in this issue have already published in *Anthropoetics*. **Tom Bertonneau's** article on **Ralph Ellison**, his sixth for *Anthropoetics*, adds to his impressive bibliography on American literature. **Scott Sprenger's** article on **Balzac's *La recherche de l'absolu*** is a companion piece to his study of the same author's *Louis Lambert*, which appeared in *Anthropoetics* VI, 1. **Gabor Varga's** examination of the emergence of logical thought in **Homer** builds on his previous article on "Orality and Literacy" in *Anthropoetics* V, 2. Finally, **Peter Goldman**, who has written on **John Bunyan** (III, 2) and **Jacques Derrida** (IV, 1), offers a review article on **Stephen Greenblatt's** latest Shakespearean study, *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

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

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