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Table of Contents

1. **Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll** - [Notes on Generative Anthropology: Towards an Ethics of the Hypothesis](#)
2. **Thomas Bertonneau** - [Post-Imperium: The Rhetoric of Liberation and the Return of Sacrifice in the Work of V. S. Naipaul](#)
3. **Douglas Collins** - [The Great Effects of Small Things: Insignificance With Immanence in Critical Theory](#)
4. **Raoul Eshelman** - [Performatism in the Movies \(1997-2003\)](#)
5. **Matthew Schneider** - ["What matters is the system!" The Beatles, the "Passover Plot," and Conspiratorial Narrativity](#)
6. [Benchmarks](#)

[Return to Anthropoetics home page](#)

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Notes on Generative Anthropology: Towards an Ethics of the Hypothesis

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1. Eric Gans, the Hypothesis, and the Humanities

Scholars in the human sciences (the arts, liberal thought, and the verstehen varieties of social sciences) are often called upon to supply new modes of thinking to meet the challenges of a post-Marxist, post-modern, even post-humanist world. A new cartography of methodological expectations and possibilities within the purview of these human sciences would now appear desirable. Never has the world of thought-about-thought been required to perform so much, and only rarely, regrettably, has it offered so little. An interesting exception to this is formed by a small group of thinkers inspired by the writing of René Girard and, among these, especially the author of *Signs of Paradox*, Eric Gans. At the outset of that work, drawing together threads of previous books and articles in the field of generative anthropology, Gans himself reflects on the humanities in the following way:

At the origin, language coincides with the human reality to which it refers because it undecidably generates this reality and is generated by it. The originary hypothesis that is the foundation of generative anthropology is the first rigorous theorization of this originary moment, the common basis of both the humanities and the social sciences. (3)

At one level the observation on disciplines may appear banal: what else, after all, would the human sciences be about? Perhaps one might venture that scholars in the humanities intermittently need reminding of this fact. But there is also a claim that the human itself has a

definable and describable genesis, capable of being thought within the disciplinary matrix of the humanities. That is, for Gans, the origin and definition of what it actually is to be human centers on the moment language itself comes into being. By the standards of contemporary cultural theory it is a breathtaking hypothesis, one whose very boldness raises questions about the possibility of the hypothesis as such on the one hand, and what we colloquially might call its ethico-political dimensions on the other.

For some, the very attempt to theorize at this level of generality is out of step with the times, and affronts current intellectual habits. The boldness itself, however, has to do with both methodology and claims made. Each of these is enmeshed with a renewal of the form and promise of the hypothesis. Although not an explicit resource, in one sense the methodological dimension of Gans could be seen to stand in the tradition of the Husserlian reduction (and the Derridean deconstruction). The pursuit of the "scene of the human" is, if anything, a grander project than Husserl's transcendental pursuit of eidetic objects, as in the important fragment titled "The Origin of Geometry." More critically, the "tradition" exists as an underestimated influence of Husserl's "reductive" method in Derrida's own initial conceptions of deconstruction. A nascent form of deconstruction appears in an unstated form even in the book-length work about Husserl's essay. In this work, and in *Of Grammatology*, the reduction appears within a negative, even prohibitional, idiom (whereby deconstruction pursues without anticipation of adequation the most irreducible moment or event or scene). The "reduction" reappears in Gans, especially in the *Origin of Language and Signs of Paradox*. In the process, though, a further shift of focus occurs: the Gansian version of analysis offers the promise of a hypothetical movement beyond, to a scene of "origin."

The Husserlian provenance enables us to see the Gansian and Derridean analyses as branchings of a similar "methodological" tree, but with very different trajectories and performances. Indeed, much as Derrida developed his deconstructionist approach out of a critique of Husserl's "Origin of Geometry," a parallel can be made with the appurtenances, even genesis, of Gans's own originary hypothesis. For Gans himself, the work of Girard is crucial to this "project." When we turn back to Girard, however, we find this interesting acknowledgement--and explanation of the significance--of the origin of his variety of analysis. In response to a question as to why he had termed his variety of anthropology a "transcendental anthropology," he replied

I meant transcendental in the Husserlian sense, because I said at the same time there was an empirical referent. I meant "transcendental" in the sense that there is a relation [between any particular aspect of culture and some original] ritual, however distant. But, since the origin of the ritual has not been witnessed by the people who repeat it, or who manifest its meaning, what I'm talking about is on another level, a reconstructed level. "Transcendental" refers to that level. I mean "transcendental" in the philosophical and not in the religious sense. ("The Logic of the Undecidable" 15).

This clearly is the terrain of Gans's originary hypothesis, and indeed, generative anthropology. The repeated ritual exists as a trace-reminder of a past event; the originary hypothesis is a "reconstruction" directed at understanding the nature, history, and structure of its emergence and ongoing significance.

In welcoming the renewal of this variety of hypothesis, we see a special value and purchase for it within the domain of the human sciences. Beyond the above account, its features are readily described. It is above all parsimonious, "minimal" to use Gans's preferred designation. Second, though, and partly because of this first feature, it is readily graspable and is therefore easily communicated. Whether one designates this as communicative efficacy or epistemological simplicity is a matter of emphasis. What emerges from this second feature of the Gans-style hypothesis is that it is simple enough to afford great explanatory power, or more precisely, it maximizes explanation relative to the extent of theoretical postulates. Third, this explanatory force can only happen, however, if the hypothesis is proposed in a certain knowing and above all, tentative, idiom. Its explanations will be provisional. But this then leads to the final defining feature of the renewed hypothesis. It is vulnerable. As it is simple enough to generate enormous explanation and even greater discussion, it can also be criticized (although we should read this epistemological vulnerability in a certain way, as will be discussed shortly).⁽¹⁾

This essay, then, is not simply about Gans's specific hypothesis, but about a new version of the hypothesis per se. What follows is gathered by our attempt to explain its nature and to indicate its ethico-political place. We begin, in fact, with Derrida's insight in *Of Grammatology* that, despite his good intentions, Lévi-Strauss's rejection of his predecessors was based on participation in ethnocentric and even Romantic conceptions of otherness grounded in Rousseau. Yet Tobin Siebers, in his perceptive work *The Ethics of Criticism*, has shown that in many pragmatic regards, there is little reason to prefer the later account. Clearly some critical facility is needed, especially when Siebers goes on to suggest that Derrida's reading "over the shoulder of Lévi-Strauss's shoulder" in the deconstructionist idiom itself leads to Rousseauism. There is, as we shall see, a world of difference between the "first anthropologists [who] placed themselves among 'primitives' in a 'missionary' capacity" (92), the devout, at least in his belief of the anti-ethnocentrism of his project, but still guilt-ridden Lévi-Strauss (92), and the questionable ethical dimensions of Derrida's own attack on Lévi-Strauss's double standards (83, 93). This difficult terrain is one we seek less to resolve than to view as the theoretical backdrop to our own ethically framed proposals.

Siebers is correct in his identification of a half-century of a certain "ethical attempt to prohibit the unjust treatment of other peoples" (92). For us, one of the more striking areas of failure of these attempts (structural anthropology, deconstruction) lies in their procedural operations within a framework of "prohibitory thinking" (cf. 92). Within this context of prohibitionism, Siebers finds deep homologies: Lévi-Strauss prohibits Rousseauism for its attempt at Western self-grounding in an ethical hypothesis of nature (94); Derrida, a "disciple of Rousseau at his most radical" condemns Lévi-Strauss for his false gesture of humility that disavows and yet

claims the center (97).

Such ethical prohibitionism appears to be grounded in a chivalric model under whose logics a Western or highly Westernized critic "rescues" a marginalized figure and, thereby, rescues him or herself. In his *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard remarks on the long-standing nature of the tendency:

For about two centuries, the only vigorous bodies of thought have been critical and destructive ones. In my view, the positive common denominator of their efforts was a struggle (though they have never taken it to a conclusion) against mythological thinking; the witness to this has been, first and foremost, what we refer to as the text of persecution . . . What marks our various forms of discourse--even those that appear the most playful and benevolent, or those that like to think of themselves as hardly significant at all--is their radically polemical character. The victims are always there, and everyone is always sharpening his weapon for use against his neighbor in a desperate attempt to win himself somewhere--even if only in an indefinite, Utopian future--a plot of innocence that he can inhabit on his own, or in the company of a regenerate human race. (439-40)

The latest prohibitory form of this long-standing violent intellectuality indicates appurtenances with even earlier moralistic codes of behavior. So perhaps we cannot do otherwise. But we can at least try. In this respect, we can add to Girard's observation the following comments by Serres on the "judgmental" idiom of inquiry that has been the model of humanities scholarship in general. Serres's criticism-about-criticism is that it is very often modeled on juridical idioms, setting itself up as arbiter of propositions:

New things are extraordinarily difficult to invent. If philosophy's worth an hour's work, it's in order to discover these things--or better yet, to invent them--rather than to evaluate what is already being done. Playing is better than blowing the referee's whistle. The philosophies you're talking about [philosophies of suspicion] always place themselves on the side of judgment; thus they make decisions about the truth and clarity of a proposition, about its rationality, its modernity, about its faithfulness to existence. In this, they are academic: they classify and exclude, recognize and note. But it seems to me that the judge's real work or respect for the law lies elsewhere. (136)

3

Ensnared in a mode of discourse that is itself simultaneously somewhat juridical and paranoid of judgment, Serres probably overstates the prospect for moving away from habits of judgment, for everyday life calls upon us to do it at each turn. But in our view, there is a need for an emphasis on approaches that are enabling, that afford the possibility of saying new things, of responding in ways that are heuristic and positive. In this respect, the subsequent critic has

often been a figure who admonishes, a judge if not a cleric. We are not, in our view, so much "admonishing" or even disputing the earlier writers, as we are seeking a new theatre of conversation, one that occurs in the knowledge of what has gone before, but which does not seek to take place by refutation alone.

Our approach, it is true, would stand in very direct contrast to contemporary practices within the humanities (but not beyond). That is, the current courtroom tendencies lead to complex theoretical edifices on the one hand, or more often, even more complexly "anti-theoretical theory" on the other. Works of the former kind, like the baroque and bizarrely beautiful Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism by Fredric Jameson, or of the latter, Derrida's own *Of Grammatology*, may hold our affections as scholars, but seem to have little force in a world they seek, with increasingly complex maneuvers, to explain (in the former case) or refuse to explain (in the latter). One might observe, somewhat controversially with Girard, that "faith in the progress of knowledge has been replaced by faith in the progress of ignorance"; one might also hope then "that this second faith will prove to be as unfounded as the first one was" ("*Theory and its Terrors*" 236).

If our views are accepted, even provisionally, it is not so much a question of such writers being "wrong" as it is of the need--and desire--for a new theatre of conversation. Writing after Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, after Jameson, after Girard and Gans too for that matter, involves no requirement for negating "judgment" and prohibition. On the contrary, we write in the knowledge of the achievements of these writers. What we call for is a new way of conversing. In this respect, Gans himself has remarked of his "originary hypothesis" that we can

Take one step farther. What I have called the heuristic function of the originary hypothesis may also be put in terms of dialogue: whether or not we agree that it took place or even that it is meaningful to ask the question, the originary event provides us with a minimal subject of conversation. Whatever our skepticism about the event's historical reality, if we want to speak together as human beings, the principle of parsimony entails that this event is the minimal object on which we can exercise our respective imaginations. (6)

The minimal hypothesis, on the other hand, with tremendous explanatory force and vulnerabilities written across its front door, has in our view an ethico-political value even as an heuristic device that the more cumbersome theories cannot match. This essay, then, is an appeal for a new kind of scholarship, a new kind of "conversation."

A word on what follows. We open our analysis with two discussions of the discipline of anthropology. The first discussion sketches: an inter-relationship between the originary hypothesis we find in all of Gans's work since the *Origin of Language*; the possibilities, problems, and prospects of a "secondary" field of hypotheses (outlined in tantalizing detail in the *End of Culture*); and the traditional postmodern critiques of the discipline that have arisen since the mid-eighties. If some of this involves criticism not just of the Cliffordesque tradition,

but also of Gans's own analyses at this point in time, the purpose of this section is to illustrate how, in our view, Gans is right to envision a terrain of originary and secondary hypothesizing. After establishing the nature of the Gansian promise, we then seek to turn these insights upon the writing-work of anthropology itself, the discipline par excellence of disavowal of the center, of emphatic marginality. We do this in a discussion of the scene of the writing lesson in *Of Grammatology*. In addition, we consider a complex join between disciplinarily "traditional" (albeit narrowly-defined and conventionally understood) anthropology, its structuralist critique and development, Derridean deconstruction, and Gansian generative anthropology. Expanding upon the communicational and ethical dimensions of this "scene," we explore the issue of the scene itself as a theoretical formation that both links and distinguishes the works of Gans and Girard on the one hand, and Derrida on the other. From this discussion, we take up key "scenes" and "hypotheses" as they are handled by Gans, especially the work on mimesis, language, and the human. We conclude with some observations on the orthodox dread of hypothesizing, of the possibility of knowing, or even of straying beyond certain protocols of language.

2. Anthropology as Discipline

One year after the death of the great collaborator, Frederick Engels wrote and published his best known work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and State* (1884). But it is not the thought of the great critic and comrade that pervades this work. Instead, it is that of the all-but-forgotten anthropologist Lewis Morgan whose studies in anthropology and the ethnographic recording of other cultures form the basis of Engels' incisive slice through civilization and capitalism in that book-length essay. So taken with Morgan's work is Engels that he actually concludes with "Morgan's verdict on civilization":

Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding, and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. (cited by Engels 334)

4

As we stand in the confusing proliferation of cultural and social formations, there is no disputing the need for study. Morgan is right to acknowledge this bewilderment, and in many regards his discipline's highest promise was the systematic understanding of the criss-crossing of who and what we are, whence we came, and perhaps where we might one day be going. Beyond these "Enlightenment" sorts of claims, the discipline finds its deepest realization in projects like Engels', where, on the basis of its learning, prospects for political and economic justice are outlined. Small wonder then that the work of anthropology is useful to both critical and speculative thought, no matter which culture we stand within.

But we must proceed carefully now, as we seek not to be restricted by a still newer wave of anthropological auto-critique. We too must view anthropology in its contexts of emergence: that is, we too can say that it was framed and engendered by an imperial order, and that Lewis Morgan was part of this context. Augmenting the early historical legacy was the ongoing practice of twentieth century anthropology-as-discipline that in its ever more specialized incarnations produced "alterity expertise" in the name of science. This clearly cannot stand. Nor did it. By the mid-eighties, writers like James Clifford applied post-structural critiques to the issues of knowledge and discipline to such an extent that every story was seen as partial, every knowledge as limited.

Taken at the letter, this self-proscription in retrospect seems absurd, an Inquisition-like farce of textual protocols, preventing any kind of effective criticism (the work of Engels, for instance, would have been impossible in such a terrain). So in many ways it was. Perhaps, though, we need to remember the wellspring of the objection before condemning the condemnation. Even before the chic Clifford "classic-postmodern" version of anthropology, we had plain objections like this appearing:

During the four years in which I have lived among many anthropologists, I have seen very clearly that in reality they use the information they collect from us to write books and in this way achieve fame and money. They have made us the objects of their studies, but we cannot share in the results. They generally look upon us as the informants and nothing more . . . anthropology is very limited in its understanding of our world. Whilst we indigenous peoples are not ourselves studying our past and becoming conscious of our social and cultural situation . . . then anthropology will give a false, at times even ridiculous, impression of us (Jiménez, 71-2)

Note the ingredients here: first, the anthropologists are emissaries of a cultural formation that does not respect the people they study; second, they travel among marginal peoples in order to produce foundational works for their own cultures; third, their works do not usually help the peoples studied; fourth, their works are usually factually wrong. We will shortly consider these remarks, both in relation to the discipline (this section) and in relation to the constitution of epistemological fields (next section).

The very first thing we need to do is note a schism between this variety of postcolonial writing and that of the Clifford-style anthropologists. Where Clifford will insist that all knowledges are partial, limited, and, in the case of Western writing, ethnocentric, Jiménez, on the contrary, insists that there is such a thing as a "false" account, and by implication, therefore, the possibility of a "true" account. For those who have been oppressed by others (Western or otherwise), there is no doubt about the positive fact of the oppression, the deceitfulness or stupidity of the misrepresentations, and so on. In the upside down world of postcolonial studies, it seems, the only place to find attempts to record positive cultural accounts is in the realm of the ex-colonized. We can be quite sure that whenever we encounter monikers like "partial

knowledge," "decentring," or even "ethnocentrism" we have patronage under a new name. That is, the disavowing performance comes from the same Western center that produced the original oppression. The most unfortunate consequence of this self-sanctifying dance of disavowal is that the very possibility of talking about material cultural form and transformation in cultures other than one's own has receded. In tandem with this, in an age of profound migration and transformation, we witness the retreat of humanities and social science scholars from anything that might be seen as an "other." The possibility that hypotheses can as a matter of course be respectfully ventured in a pluralistic academy, cross-argued and thought through, seems to have been replaced by elaborate protocols of self-abnegation and sterilization lest anything of import be said.

There were of course clear historical reasons for the conceptual "retreat." It bears saying that we do not wish to throw the achievements of "postmodern anthropology" out with the bathwater of its rule-driven axiomatics and prohibition. Some time ago, we read with great amusement Terry Eagleton's furious attack on Gayatri Spivak and postcolonial writing in general. We certainly agree with him that much "postmodern" and "postcolonial" writing comprises a "flamboyant theoretical avant-gardism [that conceals] a rather modest political agenda" (4). The same of course can be said for much of his own Marxist theory. But in both his and the case he describes, we would prefer to situate rather than eliminate these important moments in cultural theory. For us, be it Spivak and Bhabha or Clifford and Johannes Fabian, we find valuable critiques of practice. And returning to the above cited passage which precedes the advent of postmodern anthropology as such, we do not have to deny the possibility of cultural exchange and commentary to make this very basic observation about Jiménez's remarks: every one of his objections to anthropology-as-practiced has a particular historical validity. Today, within a Hellenic-style imperium dominated by the modern democratic Alexander, there remain broad structural impediments to scholarly reciprocities (the difference between a Fijian studying the behavior of stockbrokers and a New Yorker doing fieldwork in Kadavu). But these are not insurmountable, especially if--in light of the above--the study is conducted within the purview of a critical framework, if the marginal work is understood as epistemological in character, if the results are shared, and if there are sufficient local anthropologists to generate self-knowledges that can be tallied with the outsiders' claims.

5

In the welter of self-condemnation and apparent disavowal, a series of remarkable achievements have been eclipsed, and could even be lost. Let us note these achievements. First, the mono-discourse of the Anglo-American academy has been pluralized. Writers like Homi Bhabha are as important as writers like Fredric Jameson, and even if Bhabha has made a science of writing from the margins, this does not mean that he is a marginal writer. Second, there are now indigenous and local anthropologists; anthropological knowledge is not ridiculous and wrong (and any European who produces a text filled with errors will discover this sooner rather than later). Third, the ground and need for a philosophically "secondary" anthropology based upon something like an "originary" field of hypothesis and thence axiom-devising

generative anthropology is now clear. But this latter field still hangs in the balance, and awaits its fullest potentials.

Now all these positive transformations are actually weakened by a claim based tenuously in postmodern thought that all cultures exist somehow on the same level, that there are no grounds for comparative understanding. We wish to illustrate this claim by looking first at the possibility of an "Engels today," before taking up the most problematic of Gans's own texts to explain where we stand. We begin with Engels. Let us imagine that Morgan had situated his work and culture vis-à-vis those he studied, that he had a clear sense of how his marginality was significant to the European center, that he worked not just for Britain, but also for those he studied. And let us imagine a modern-day Engels taking up this work, and using it to think about the historical genesis of the family, its role in a swath of world history, its ongoing role in contemporary analogues as well as and especially in his own society. Surely this project would be as valuable today as it was when it was first generated. Even if Morgan's work was flawed, Engels' analysis was used by colonized peoples themselves to dream of social and economic change; it is a historical fact that Marxism--that Western thing--did reach across the divides, and it did so at least partly because of its ability to think about and beyond the hegemonic culture, to think in terms of this culture's genesis, and to think of other systems of distribution and knowing. Thus we can say with confidence that the potential for an anthropology grounded in reciprocities of knowledge as well as in a speculative order of history such as that which Engels (and even Morgan himself) deployed is conceivable. And if we would have questioned even and especially in its time the absurdities of the Marxist utopias and futures, we would still accept the value of their empirical and communicational ethics of provisionality; these values would appear to us to be obvious. For this reason, Marx and Engels themselves were, in our view, generative anthropologists. Marx's more systematic reflections on philosophy and political economy--contained, for instance, in works like *Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and *The German Ideology*--are predicated on a highly specific philosophical anthropology: a materialist ontology of the human as *homo faber*. Not only that, but in their full dimension as writers, their generative anthropological aspect remains the only noteworthy feature of value in their wide range of social and cultural studies.

This brings us to the particularities of the relationship between generative anthropology and the discipline of anthropology (in the next section we discuss the general significance of anthropology-as-avowed-margin-space and its writing practices). To proceed, we wish to take up two works, Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* and Gans's *End of Culture*. *Time and the Other* attacks the refusal of "coevalness" by Western anthropology. That is, Fabian condemns the tendency to situate the "primitive" other as the Western self's historical antecedent ("their present is our past"). He shows how the spatio-temporal displacement worked seamlessly and self-confirmingly for all, and through all, the early anthropologists in whose hands cultural hierarchization occurred in and through totalizing cultural descriptions situated in the bubbles of time and space. For Fabian, neither "political Space, nor political Time" are "natural resources" (144). Fabian singles out for special treatment the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss whose taxonomies of culture would seem to avoid this charge. Fabian is strangely insistent that Lévi-

Strauss, in his displacement of the category to a taxonomic spatializing practice, still predicates selfhood on the other in the same way. For Fabian, Lévi-Strauss is determined to preserve certain anthropological habits, like fieldwork, in order to guarantee a distinction between "the anthropologist [and] the historian" and accomplishing "the scientific feat of reducing that concrete world [of the other] to its most general and universal principles" (61). He concludes that structuralism itself is part of the habit of Western ethnocentric classification, "never . . . just a neutral classificatory act, but a powerful rhetorical figure" (63).

Now despite everything he finds, Fabian tells us he believes the discipline of anthropology will and should continue to exist. But his conception of how it might so exist is very strange. Fabian (like Lévi-Strauss) posits a continuing anthropology, founded on somehow meeting in the "same time." At first, the aim seems reasonable, even modest. But this idea could be the most colonizing idea of all: it involves flattening out all cultural time for an axiomatic face-to-face that is itself a culture-specific hallucination. And even within that purview (as fiction from Cervantes through Joyce to Robert Dessaix has shown), consciousness and time exist in a complex weave in which the enablement of imaginary meeting points is part and parcel of knowing. This is true even at the most banal level of commentary: how, indeed, can Fabian himself "talk to" Lévi-Strauss's account when the latter occurred in another cultural framework, answering different critical questions, and so on? Such apparently ridiculous questions pose rather more difficulty for Fabian's utopianist pronouncements on time and the other. But perhaps the most problematic aspect of the entire work concerns his vision for the future. Fabian's mystifying final throwaway lines for the future of the discipline would have anthropological theory-work (after Foucault) not just understood, but actually deployed as a series of practices that are somehow operationally equivalent to the practices of the society or group being engaged. The exchange, he says, will be "frontal," the "relationships must be on the same plane" (164). Knowledge will no longer entail abstracting our "general knowledge from [their] concrete experience" because in order to claim that a particular social group is the reality and "our conceptualizations the theory, one must keep standing anthropology on its head" (165). In the final sentence of the book, he goes so far as to argue that

6

Renewed interest in the history of our discipline and disciplined inquiry into the history of confrontation between anthropology and its other are therefore not escapes from empiry [sic]; they are practical and realistic. They are ways to meet the Other on the same ground, in the same Time. (165)

In these pages, Fabian offers anthropology that sort of reflexivity that has become a popular ritual--an anthropology that never leaves the Derrida and Foucault-protected library of evil anthropological white uncles and aunties, Malinowski, Mead, Lévi-Strauss et al.

Gans clearly occupies an unpopular position in relation to these serried ranks of librarian-guardians. We wish to take up his most direct (and extreme) form of engagement with this

debate in order to show that even if some claims would be better rephrased or qualified, there remains a terrain worthy of hypothesis. In the *End of Culture*, Gans remarks of these habits:

Ethnological humility should not be exaggerated. It is a paltry tribute to human creativity to measure our superiority to stone-age tribes only in technical and military terms, without mentioning the cultural achievement of Western society. But if these achievements are not merely ornamental, they must be in some sense the products of a higher ethic. (146-47)

Given that Gans wrote against the background of debates we have outlined above, these lines seem cavalier. But it does not mean they are wrong. In fact, we can now see that he is right to seek to avoid the reciprocal resentments that characterized these arguments, and his insistence that we need to understand not just technical and military prowess, but also, the astonishing array of Western modernity as a cultural formation is absolutely sustainable.

But this is not all he says. His use of the word "higher" requires a unilineal hierarchy of some sort. When Gans says that they must "in some sense" be "higher," he is quite explicit in his meaning:

Because social evolution takes place in a universe of competing societies, it may be explained on the basis of the Darwinian "null-hypothesis" of the survival of the fittest. The competitive process forces us to judge societies by economic, and above all, military criteria, for these are the chief modes of competition among societies. (147)

In this regard, it bears noting that he departs from Girard's work, which, in its more explicitly Christian framing, is preferable. This part of the *End of Culture*, like many of the tutor-texts of Derrida's (which purport to operate within the secular realm but lapse into theologism) seeks to make its arguments on secular and philosophical terrain. Unlike many such texts, of course, Gans has framed his analyses as minimal hypotheses, and if all he were saying had to do with the fact of one culture's survival "after" another, a relation of temporal subsequence (with all the issues that might involve), the Darwinian aspect would not attract our attention in this way. But for us the fact of survival does not "explain" anything other than the ability to survive. Gans's deployment of the Darwinian "null hypothesis" in this instance entails considerable equivocation of the term "success" which permits something of a conflation of one pole of its etymological meaning (temporal succession) with the pole concerned with the evaluation of moral perspicacity. Of course, the problem is not that this case cannot be made for the ethical desirability of a certain Judeo-Christian ethic (however much the Roman Empire evinced--or failed to evince--this ethic)--nor is it a position that the authors necessarily disavow. It's simply that "survival of the fittest" does not provide the intellectual resources for such an assertion. The conceptual repertoire to which Gans has availed himself here will not supply the axiological schema he desires without some enormous metaphorical displacement. It's not that the two senses (of ethical and evolutionary "success") fail to exhibit a perfectly isomorphic relationship--

that the movement between senses is a too pronounced for a "useful" equivocation; nor is it necessarily that this equivocation is not signaled by Gans. It's that these two senses of "success," in many important respects, are actually the inverse of each other. A central problem with any account for cultural change via a recourse to underspecified notions of the "survival of the fittest" is that cultures themselves unfailingly break the most fundamental law of genetics: that acquired characteristics cannot be inherited. [\(2\)](#)

Ultimately, though, we believe that elsewhere in Gans's own work (even elsewhere in this very book) we find the best rejoinder to the position he proposes at this point. For us, the Gansian hypothesis is always plural. That is, sites of cultural emergence are always scenic, and hence plural. No sense can be made of Greek geometrical achievement without the backdrop of the achievement itself: the previous Egyptian mathematics, the Babylonians, and so on. For us, at this secondary level of speculation, the counter-hypothesis would concern the radical imbrication of cultures. In the world today there are no cultures that exist in discontinuity with others. This includes what might best be called the "modern primitive" societies (the first adjective alerts us to the fact that the second is a deeply modern value). So when he says that there exist "today groups of men whose culture has progressed little since Palaeolithic times" (146), we see no reason to concur (and this from experience). But the claim is linked to the Darwinian "null hypothesis" cited above. In this scheme of things, Gans adds his own unique twist, by displacing the development to the field of ethics; thus, "ethical evolution is the most fundamental, most nearly continuous factor in social evolution" (148). It also bears saying, that one has to wonder what happened to those "chief modes of competition" of "social evolution": "economic, and above all, military criteria" (The End of Culture 147). Then, when Gans goes on to suggest that Rome "finally succumbed to more primitive competition because it lacked competition on its own level" (148), he seems to be moving to admit a notion of radical cultural plurality. But this too is overarched by the wider ethical progress that he argues in any event took place. [\(3\)](#)

7

Now if we have questioned the mix of Darwin and ethics, seeking instead other bases for hypothesizing, the situation is a little different with Gans's attempts to explain the Western self. We are relegating rather than denying the value of such hypotheses entirely: we agree that there is a place for an inquiry into the West on its own terms or, put differently, a tracing of emergence of "our values from others." But this would be a parochial variety of analysis, even in this spectacular case. A far more difficult variety of analysis has to do with radical plurality, such that when a scene is sketched historically, the principal work involves the outlining of backgrounds, what Gans calls scenes. Anthropologists, like philosophers, have always underestimated how much culture travels, and how ingenious our ancestors were in their travels. If Gans is right to suggest that the current "one world imbrication" is unprecedented, the phenomenon of imbricated worlds is the way the world has always been. Where some, like Derrida, see this always already plural structure as the endpoint of a deconstruction, however, we believe on the contrary that this is no more than a beginning.

This, we believe, is what the Gansian a posteriori variety of secondary hypotheses could offer. And this is why, even if we disagree with Gans's estimation of the state of cultures today or in times past (a question of anthropology in the limited sense), we nevertheless find common cause with this framing of the level of the inquiry.⁽⁴⁾ That is, like Gans's version of the field, "our" anthropology would ask: against which specific scene did this representational schema emerge? Where did this ethics, utterly new under the sun (new precisely by virtue of its relationship to all that stands around it, before it, after it) come from? When, like Girard, Gans insists that culture itself is "primarily not a celebration of order but a response to disorder" (26), we get the wellspring of a general form of historical hypothesizing.

So there still remains the need for something like a positive grammatology, much of which--we contend--would be consistent with what Gans has called generative anthropology. That is, we seek a terrain for communicational hypothesis that can offer minimal scenes for analysis. In seeking this, some might fear the resurgence of an old ethnocentrism. But this need not be so. We have seen that even under the British imperial formation, the works of anthropologists like Morgan and others were deployed by Frederick Engels in an effort to explain and to change the world. Gans may not appear a likely successor to writers like Engels or Nietzsche. In our view, however, the unstated principle that guides the communicational ethics we have been outlining for the vulnerable and parsimonious Gansian hypothesis in the applied field of anthropology-as-discipline is simple: let us better understand Morgan's "bewildering" world (be it of property-rights or whichever general inquiry) and thereby make it a better place for all of its inhabitants.

3. Margin Work: The Meaning of Anthropological Writing

Anthropologists have, as we have seen, been themselves the subject of anthropological scrutiny. Jiménez's angry remark that "During the four years in which I have lived among many anthropologists, I have seen very clearly that in reality they use the information they collect from us to write books and in this way achieve fame and money. They have made us the objects of their studies, but we cannot share in the results" (71). The claim may appear far-fetched. What is the nature of the fame that an anthropological hack-writer can glean from the presentation of a paper at a conference of peers? What is the money that attaches to an academic position in the face of the triumphs of sports stars (or internet whiz-kids for that matter)? On this level, the fear is misplaced. And yet, the experience of being studied is part of a very serious and much more insidious process than these objections can counter. It has to do with the nature and meaning of marginality itself.

In this regard, even after all the critiques, we still must pose a very difficult question: can we do other than think from the margins? Derrida is surely more correct than even he realized when, in that extraordinary meditation on presence and the ear, the essay on the "Tympan" which opens the collection titled *Margins of Philosophy*, he takes up the very issue of making (philosophical) sense:

Gnawing away at the border which should make this question into a particular case, they are to blur the line which separates a text from its controlled margin. They interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determined text inscribed in a general text, enclosed in the representation of its own margin. Which compels us not only to reckon with the entire logic of the margin, but also to take an entirely other reckoning; which is doubtless to recall that beyond the philosophical text there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text . . . (xxiii)

If making sense is always at the price of the marginalized other--including those replete texts of the margins always treated as if blank and yet themselves the actual condition of the supposedly mainstream sense--then the idea emerges that the margin is nearly always constitutive of the center.

8

Perhaps these thoughts about the margin are not as controversial as they seemed when they first appeared. In the strangely errant criss-crossings of the works of Girard, Derrida, and Gans, the role of marginality is a recurring theoretical motif. The major thing that joins Derrida's analysis with the work of Gans and Girard is the idea that the marginalized, the excluded, and the periphery are actual conditions of sense. In each of the three writers' work, a scene of representation is at stake. Gans, following Girard, sees it as no less than the exigent co-occurrence of the origin of the human and of language. Derrida calls it writing-in-general, arche-writing. The treatments are not identical, of course, and neither are they directed to equivalent ends. But all see a link between violence and its relationship to representation. (5) Even for Derrida, writing at its most irreducible (which includes oral systems of proper names and kinship) is linked to violence. For all three writers, this violence isn't derivative, but is constitutive of the whole scene. And this is why it is not just anthropology-the-discipline that we must cover, but its inherited conception of writing.

So it is that we begin with writing and other lessons. Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of the Nambikwara comprises a series of meditations that emerge out of reflections on South American antiquity. His "Writing Lesson" is a poignant description of the exchange of values and the relations of power between a European colonial culture and a South American indigenous one. The account of the Nambikwara chief seeking to imitate the anthropologist's writing activity depicts a scene in which the knowing European seeks, for reasons of sensitivity, not to offend his counterpart:

I handed out sheets of paper and pencils. At first they did nothing with them, then one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy horizontal lines. I wondered what they were trying to do, then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing, or to be more accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way as I did mine . . . The majority did this, and no more, but the chief had further

ambitions. No doubt he was the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing. So he called for a writing pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face. But he never admitted this, and there was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher. (388)

To start with, could Lévi-Strauss and Derrida both have missed something here? [\(6\)](#) It seems unlikely from the account itself. But let us recall the logics of this scene-as-writing. To start with, the account was written by the anthropologist. And if we recall that the anthropologist was himself disturbed by what he had instigated, perhaps he missed the possibility that the chief was himself playing a joke of his own, leading the anthropologist on. Irrespective of this particular case, the double possibility in this scene is a common one: the foreign and empowered anthropologist takes earnest notes on a scene (or asks questions) that provoke that variety of resisting humor that is grounded in resentment of an occupying force.

But let us imagine that Lévi-Strauss's account is modally correct. Anyone reading this passage can feel the uneasiness permeating the writing. The deception being perpetrated is but one aspect of the imbalance in relations of power and understanding. If the overt level of Lévi-Strauss's text documents his fear that a wonderful oral culture was fading before his eyes, there are other, deeper anxieties here at work. But let us begin with what the words tell us. That is, by Lévi-Strauss's overt account, the writing lesson is evidence of a tragic passage and a record of a loss. Already, then, two levels of writing lesson are emerging clearly. The first is the lesson to the chief given by the anthropologist. The second is the lesson to the West that Lévi-Strauss feels his lesson teaches him. But this then leads to a third lesson, the one Derrida wants to teach us, using Lévi-Strauss's own account. This lesson is different in kind from the first two. Applying, indeed, to an extent actually devising, the strategy of deconstruction, he argues that far from Lévi-Strauss mounting an effective critique of Western influence, instead, he was in these "in many respects remarkable; very fine pages" (103) actually complicit with and part of a wider Western ethnocentrism which always reads its others as "nature," so as to efface its own hegemonic assertion of selfhood. So an "epistemological phonologism" based upon a linguistic and metaphysical phonologism is as much at work in Lévi-Strauss as it was in those he appeared to criticize. The "deconstruction" which, in the preceding discussion of Saussure, appears initially as a revealing of tension between stated intent and what is done is therefore applicable to Lévi-Strauss, despite the writer's apparent and oft-stated good intentions. This writing lesson needs little qualification: ethnocentrism--even blatant racism--is often embedded in discourse, no matter what the intentions of the writers. The further lesson Derrida proffers, that the priority given to voice-based significance by Lévi-Strauss can be displaced, is useful as far as it goes. The graphic systems Derrida gleans from the account given by Lévi-Strauss can be shown to be more originary than the speech Lévi-Strauss goes on to posit as pure presence.

Perhaps Derrida's own unstated axiom is that any claim of communicational adequation would lapse into metaphysical logocentrism or even theology. We do not know, for the trajectory of the inquiry entails the inhabiting and interrogation of texts like Lévi-Strauss's which participate in the hierarchy of subordination implicit in Western thought.

9

Now Derrida's contribution to this field is obviously important for another reason. His Grammatology is unique for its treatment of anthropology as part and parcel of a wider philosophical formation (rather, than as is usually the case, an attempt by writers critical of anthropology to draw in links to philosophical frameworks). For, as works like David Goldberg's *Racist Culture* have repeatedly pointed out, there is a join between disciplines like anthropology and "Western" knowledge itself. The difference is that Derrida is one of the few writers in the philosophical tradition to take the work of mainstream anthropology seriously enough to use it as a theoretico-critical lynchpin. But as Gans and Girard have repeatedly pointed out, we need to be wary of any writing that claims the space of the margins. This is not a comment on Derrida in particular. He, after all, is the one who showed that, in the case of Lévi-Strauss, a knight-advocate of the margins can actually, by all his chivalric codes, be a self-serving, even if at time unwitting, representative of the realm.

What is at stake is something wider. Perhaps the very process of knowing is a simultaneous act of pretending or somehow staging margins in order to repeatedly define new centers (what were structuralism and deconstruction if not formations of the center?). The margins are important for good and obvious reasons. For as John Romm's wonderful little book on the interrelationship of ancient Greek speculative geography, fiction, and knowledge, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* remarks:

Perhaps the most fundamental act by which the archaic Greeks defined their world was to give it boundaries, marking off a finite stretch of earth from the otherwise formless expanse surrounding it. Without such boundaries both land and sea would become apeiron, boundless . . . The epithet attests to the cognitive discomfort which an unlimited extent of space could inspire . . . the word implies a formlessness and diffusion that are the enemies of order and hierarchy. The "boundless" earth therefore had to be given boundaries before it could be made intelligible. (10-11)

In this work, Romm shows how a variety of textual genres (from geography to fictional fantasy) produced a stable sense of center by positing outlandish and extraordinary other-worldly margins in the fast flowing River of Ocean in which it was held that islands of paradise and other non-quotidian anti-realities "existed." Physical space sufficed to hold everything from antichthon with counter-balancing continents and all the assorted flora and fauna of nightmare and fantasy alike. Sometimes--as with Plato's Atlantis--the spatial displacement occurred in tandem with a displacement in time (a golden age, when soils, and the peoples who lived on

them, were contrastively better). These were imagined physical displacements and as such, they allowed this thought to take place.

But where do we find ourselves now? Are we not far from anthropology, the discipline?

We are. We will not even speculate about a join between the ancient Greek conception of "anthropology" and more modern and Western notions. And yet Romm's words offer us this challenge: what are the distinct spatial and temporal displacements of anthropology, how have they worked, and how are we to view them in relation to generative anthropology? Romm suggests that only by defining the "edges" of what we call "our" world can we be sure about what we think are our "centers." Let us look again at what anthropologists do. Let us recall the specter of Malinowski in his tent in PNG. What is he actually doing there? Or Lévi-Strauss, the savior, in South American hinterlands--what is he doing? They are doing margin-work, they are literally drawing the boundaries Romm described.

Their margin-work has to do with the knowledge-system. That is, while they produce texts about and from margins, their work is actually constitutive of the center. But is Derrida exempt from this? What is he doing? On one level, of course, he is simply doing the same thing as we are: he seeks to show the importance of the margin. But this is not all he is doing. In the account of the Nambikwara, Derrida seems to write about writing; in the book bearing the title *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida's margins often seem to concern the edges of pages or the footnotes to texts. But very few have missed the applicability to the theatres of alienation and marginalization more generally. Lest the point be missed by dint of sheer obviousness: Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida were not just important thinkers in their time, but were (for want of a better word) utterly paradigmatic thinkers of their respective times and sites. In this regard, Gans and Girard have a somewhat different status. Yet perhaps what makes Gans and Girard threatening is their direct thematisation of the marginal as the privileged route to knowledge (an inversion of the archetypal Whiggish view of history) in a (post) Christian culture. But their modes of expressing this are not isomorphic to the contents they theorize: although both are marginal, neither offers their own subject position as corroborating the veracity of their thinking. That is, they refuse a central, if implicit, imperative: It is not enough to analyze the margins: we are supposed to pretend to that same very status "ourselves." All this marks generative and fundamental anthropology off from most of their antecedents, including structural anthropology and deconstruction. But it does not yet let us see how it relates to "traditional" anthropological margin-work as such.

10

Let us try to draw these two discussions of anthropology to a close. We have explored the link between generative anthropology and anthropology in particular on the one hand, and the way this relates to general issues of marginality on the other. We saw to start with that, in *Time and the Other*, Fabian has raised valid issues that go to the heart of anthropological hypothesizing. Yet we also found that the response from generative anthropological inquiry called for a new,

and less judicial idiom of assessment: in this regard, there is nothing whatsoever wrong with an inquiry into the genesis of one's own socio-cultural ethical formation so long as that inquiry does not think it is the only one worthy of pursuit under the sun. And we have seen that in the chain of negations from Rousseau onwards, there is no privileged place to stand. In fact, the principle of theoretical coeval moralizing, or even of the Derridean trace (or whichever device) does not guarantee writerly ethics any more than Rousseau's or Lévi-Strauss's good intentions did. Deconstruction, one angry respondent pointed out to one of us in a "third world" context, like structural anthropology, could in certain hands be another tool of colonial disempowerment, bamboozlement, and sophistry, just as surely as semiotics or even in his time the functionalist Malinowski inscriber of the Trobriands. In this regard, there is little to divide the practitioners of postmodern anthropology from those of structural anthropology, or we might allow in advance, generative anthropology.

But we believe we have also found that the development of hypotheses of this Gansian kind is far more courageous and useful an activity than the fence-building work of postmodern anthropology. That is, whatever its merits (and we have seen many), texts like Fabian's not only works to prohibit the conceptual apparatuses of the bad old discipline, but also, they attack any sort of positive or generalizing inquiry, including presumably, generative anthropology. And this brings us to the more general formation of hypotheses. In privileging epistemological proscription over prescription, Fabian participates in a certain mob heuristic whose mode has been well captured by Girard:

. . . the most unavoidable process of abstraction, the very type of generalization that makes you able to walk into the street without being run over by a car, is already tainted with the impurity of reductionism. You are a "reductionist" above all if you pursue the type of goal that any researcher outside the Humanities takes for granted that he should pursue. ("Origins" 31)

In fact, if Fabian never quite allows himself to say the words, the idea that new learning could take place seems to have evaporated, for there is nothing at all written to guide the anthropologist seeking to engage in a fieldwork practice that occurred "coevally"--that is, in the same time, frontally. He carefully avoids any kind of claim to positive information on the one hand and, like so many other writers on the topic, he conflates and rejects categories of generality and universality. But can Fabian do these things? For things do happen in the world; they happen all the time, little banal ordinary things--like our lives--that are in every sense of the word "positive." To contend otherwise is probably ridiculous. It is, of course true that there are worthy questions and problems of description and explanation, but this does not mean that the things and events don't exist, still less that work on actual practices should simply be proscribed because it is informed by a guiding or even provisionally totalizing theoretical orientation. For us, on the contrary, when Fabian like so many others, lashes out at any effort to abstract general information from concrete experience, he stands on extremely vulnerable ground (164); apart from anything else, the directive to eschew generality is a general imperative of the most restrictive kind. The movement from concrete particulars to more

general levels is an extremely valuable and powerful process, and is one hardly confined to anthropology or the university. While generalizing can (and historically has) been associated with universalizing tendencies (the view that this is the way it always has and ought to have been), it need not be so, and often is not so. We would contend, as Gans contends when he thinks about what language itself is in *Signs of Paradox*, that not only is language a positive existent, but also, there is no society on earth that does not deploy generalizing tendencies, for these are the grounds of any kind of collective knowability.

* * *

We have engaged with anthropology-as-discipline in order to indicate how, on the one hand, this most problematically ethnocentric and racially grounded discipline in history has like all fields of knowledge disavowed the center, finding (a) "true self" in the margins. In the same movement, however, we have suggested that it can be linked with wider philosophical tendencies that include most obviously the imbricated fields of structuralism and deconstruction. Ironically, then, Girard and Gans stand provisionally aside from these problems mainly because they see the fold of marginality itself as constitutive of thought, as its founding condition. But when we see writers like Fabian not only venturing the auto-critique of the ethnocentrism of anthropology, but also in their practice denying any sort of positive or general inquiry, we would like to join, provisionally at least, Gans and Girard on what seems to have become the farthest shore. In the discussions which follow, on the scene and then, its place in relation to the hypothesis, we would like to indicate why we have taken this position.

11

4. The Scene, the Hypothesis and "Positive" Knowledge

For us, Gans's most important contribution to the rethinking of the hypothesis lies in the way he thinks about the scene. We have seen already that he believes there are different orders of hypothesis. We have outlined our response to these, and even if we believe aspects of the actual secondary hypothesis need modifying, we have argued that Gans has opened a decisive new vista. The originary hypothetical domain is an anthropology of thought itself: it concerns the inquiry into the very question of what it is to be human. In this terrain, Gans's most brilliant excursions have actually been proposed by the use of the scene. But if it is still under-theorized, he has also re-opened doors long slammed shut on specific anthropological historicizing by thinking of these as secondary order hypotheses. Without recourse to the scene, we have already tried to indicate how these hypotheses might work, might actually be made operational. But to go any further, we must now take up the question of the scene, its types, and the resultant varieties of hypotheses.

To start with, for Gans, a scene is more important than a theory (*Signs* 6). So it is that we open with an edifice. The "tent" (*skene*) or modest wooden hut from which actors could emerge, defined a backdrop, painted perhaps with an appropriate "scene," against which the action of

the play could take place. "Scene" in English, as in French, has an etymological derivation from ancient Greek, the nature of which the following account makes clear:

The center of it was the orchestra ("dancing place"), a circular space . . . Round more than half of the orchestra, forming a kind of horse-shoe, was the theatron ("seeing-place") proper, circular tiers of seats . . . Behind the orchestra and facing the audience was the skene, originally a wooden structure, a façade with three doors, through which, when the drama had developed . . . the actors made their entrances. (Harvey 422-23)

The scene in this picture, creates the three dimensional space before it. It is one of those curious ironies of history that the modern theatrical concept of the scene does not include the backdrop (even though the idea of a scene in colloquial usage retains the original sense of a background view). This space, while viewed, is positive. But what about when we "recall" or otherwise imagine it? Given its ethno-specific formations, can we say that what we construct within it "exists"? And if so, how?

Now Gans is hardly the first to use the term this way. Derrida, and Girard also deploy the "scene." All three writers presuppose the concrete three-dimensionality of that humble "tent" at the rear of the stage. Of the three writers, only Gans is clear about what, in theoretical terms, he means by the term:

Why a scene rather than a theory? But the minimal anthropological "theory"--in Greek, an overview, a scenic perspective--is derived from a single scene. Because the birth of the human coincides with the birth of the scenic, it cannot be conceived as a series of non-scenic changes of state. (6)

Played out before the ancient Greek scene was the drama which, for Aristotle consisted of certain essential elements (in the case of tragedy, plot, character, diction, thought and so on), as well as in many cases, the three unities of place, time, and action. In the theatre of scenic thought, Gans also offers a minimal version of the scene: he identifies the essential constituents as eventness (6), a plural/public siting (18), an apodictically available hypothesizability (14), and of course, the three-dimensionality of a place, a world, such as we find on the Greek stage. In sum, about the scene as such, there is little dispute between the three writers. Motivating all three is the complex ethical demand of the contemporary critical situation we have (following Siebers) already outlined.

What appears to distinguish Derrida's version of the scene is that for him, all scenes are either always already inherited, or if there are origins, we cannot know what they are. That is, a scene is always a site of inheritance traffic:

The origin is a speculation. Whence the "myth" and the hypothesis . . . all the

methodological procedures amount to [reviennent à] hypotheses . . . Rushing to extract a fragment of it, to retain only its discursive content--a "hypothesis," a "theory," a "myth," all three at once, for such are his own words in the lines preceding the citations--completely preoccupied by the consideration of this fragment, which moreover he has punctured with ellipses after lifting it out of the body of the text, Freud seems barely attentive to what the Symposium puts on stage or hides from view in its theater. He is interested in this theater as barely as possible. (370-71)

12

But let us trace this more carefully. Derrida here is attacking an illustrative scene, an important adjunct to Freud's intriguingly framed "speculations." On stage Derrida insists, are characters Freud sees as irrelevant, but which disturb at least the picture he seeks to paint. For Derrida indeed, the speculation on a scene of origin that Freud seeks to proffer, is itself problematic, for it finds itself always, even in its exemplifications, in uncontrollable scenes of inheritance. Now it is certainly true that Freud is "interested in this theatre as barely as possible" (371). But this is as it should be, not just for the illustration to the speculation, but also for the speculations themselves. For as Derrida himself is well aware, this is a brilliant and suggestive excursion, projecting, hypothesizing, legating, inheriting, philosophizing. In this regard, the only criticism we would seek to venture of Freud's approach is that there is at times a lack of clarity about the status of particular claims made, something that Derrida uses to undermine the entire edifice. But if the psychologico-philosophical scenes are not shown rigorously, they are, in our view, for the most part proposed in the hypothetico-speculative idiom appropriate to the emerging fields we envisage Gans as having opened.

But there is something else. These scenes are not ordinary in nature. They are secondary hypotheses. That is to say, they involve situations which are inherently palimpsestic in nature. Derrida appears to believe that the entire speculation is entirely negated by dint of mere expansion of the palimpsest. So while all three writers acknowledge apodictic dimensions to the scene, for Derrida, this is a negative claim: for him scenes are always so interpenetrative that any given scene of writing will always already be a scene of inheritance and, therefore, boundless. This allows him the liberty of disrupting the scene-work and hypothesizing Freud performs for the reader. He feels free to insert characters Freud has left out back onto the stage, to move the sets around, to change the lighting. And after he has done so, we see something else . . . Socrates, an image from Matthew Paris from medieval Europe, Edgar Allan Poe, a post office. But these too are scenes. We see all of them, we see them as insertions, as transformations, but we see them above all else, as counter-hypotheses with a positive force of their own. It is an intriguing twist of the Derridean pursuit of irreducibility, even if this is always so as to show a scene of inheritance in a claimed scene of origin. And yet Freud does not posit an origin at this point. In this regard, Derrida's deployment of the scene of inheritance against the Freudian speculative-hypothetical scene leaves him strangely in the "same" scene.

For what Gans has shown is that hypotheses developed out of this variety of scene will inevitably exist in a plurality (we have ourselves seen the consequences in the discussions of anthropology above). But a mish-mash of plurality is not a scene. Rather, the scene is a product of the actively apodictically oriented subsequent analyst sketching the minimal requirements needed to give a hypothesis life. If Freud's "Pleasure Principle" essay were reframed as a Gansian scene (and it is already very close), it would be no objection at all to point to other figures in the palimpsest (and further resulting hypotheses). That is to miss the point entirely. Instead, what matters about Freud's essay is that it still speaks to us, despite Derrida's "refutation."

About the originary scene and the resulting originary hypothesis, we need add very little to what Gans himself has said. Obviously Derrida does not accept it as a possibility. Yet even in this regard, we observe Richard van Oort who in this journal has gone so far as to argue that

The unthematizable deconstructive aporia belongs most fundamentally to the origin of language, not in our contemporary discourse. The Derridean performative of differance must have been performed at the origin of humanity as the first historical moment. (1)

In our view, a scene of origin, proposed hypothetically, allows thought to take place. This is so in the case of the originary hypothesis which allows Gans his unprecedented anthropology of thought in general. But even if one does not accept this vista, it is also true in the less lofty sites of anthropology wherein we find new ways of speaking about the world, its prospects, its past, and its myriad of futures. Therein lies its promise.

As for the status of the hypothesis that results from this form of the scene, we can make a few observations. Its knowledge is provisional (such perhaps its violence). The scene-in-general for Gans, for Derrida, for Girard, comprises the event, a plurality, and a physical three-dimensionality. For Gans and Girard, it can be described minimally; for Derrida, it cannot.

Perhaps, though, it would be better to witness the hypothetical dimension that these scenes generate. In all these cases, the scenic is the hypothetical mode par excellence, as strange as that may appear to those habituated to Derrida's easy usage of both the term "scene" and thereby what might best be called the approach. A scenic approach actually allows Derrida to counter-hypothesize while not appearing to do so. This because it forsakes poetics for dramaturgy. In Derrida's hands, it gives rise to the disruptive "extra character" or "prop." But it can also give witness to theory in a subjunctive mode. In the act of scenic imagining, "knowing" occurs outside the terrain of the declarative-positive or even contractually based if this, then that idiom of the conditional. In this respect, we agree with Victor Turner, who, following van Gennep, claims that performance necessarily invokes a register of communication concerned with possibility and hypothesis: the subjunctive operates with a logic of "'if it were so,' not 'it is so'" (Turner 83).

There will be those who see generative and fundamental anthropology as a nascent positivism. The kind of resentment provoked by figures such as Girard and Gans is well characterized by Thomas F. Bertonneau, who points out that positive knowledge appears as a conspiracy, "is tantamount to a plan for self-apotheosis" (Bertonneau 1996). To be sure, we can say that things happen (events), they happen in a dimension of inevitable eventness (*événementialité*), and this eventness only occurs because of the reflective and deferring quality of language. Yet, there is a crucial difference between the two "positive" knowledges being considered: where traditional positivism in its various forms assumes a conspicuously juridical function and is determined to set out in advance conditions for intelligibility (one thinks here of something like the Vienna Circle's criteria of meaningfulness) the positive knowledge of Gans and Girard operates through a process of scenic supersession. One does not outflank rival explanations primarily through refutation or accruing purported anomalies, but by producing the best interpretation. (It is interesting to note that neither Girard nor Gans have produced a *Language, Truth and Logic*--or an *Archaeology of Knowledge*, for that matter). But, epistemologically speaking, this is not an additivity in the sense of psychoanalysis, which, when faced with anomalies that its (originally) parsimonious model couldn't accommodate, simply added to its theoretical armature. This is a model of supersession that is always obliged to maximize its heuristic and hermeneutic plausibility in relation to its number and complexity of its presuppositions.

5. Machines for Crushing Butterflies

Many literature students will recall the brilliant and complex scholarly work of René Wellek, especially his *Theory of Literature*. It is one of those ironies of retrospect that the breadth and depth of scholarship in that work is rare in equivalent university primers in the human sciences today. When we consider how truly marginal this variety of inquiry has become, it seems bizarre that a work like this one was so fiercely attacked. Given the relatively minor status of such theorists in the contemporary scene, the ire they provoke seems at the least a little overblown. We both laughed heartily when we encountered Virgil Nemoianu's remark about the way in which Wellek has been caricatured and reduced to a straw doll figure: "First, we are struck by the very oddness of the contentiousness. A relatively minor issue produces an enormously overblown reaction. A few eccentrics choose to play with form . . . and this causes harsh anger. Huge machineries are set up to smash harmless butterflies" (Nemoianu 42). So too have Girard and Gans been processed (the former more than the latter), despite the fact that their work exists as a series of serious questions about what passes as contemporary cultural theory.

In advocating for the new version of the hypothesis, one might imagine (and take stock of) the variety of contrivances invented to crush it. As was the case with Hayden White's often-cited critique of Girard, these contrivances often deploy, quite paradoxically, concretely positivist assumptions and operate at a higher level of generality than the kind of theory at which they take offense. Noting the fact that cultural empiricists often desert their cultural empiricism at

the point of evaluating rival theories, Girard notes the fact that the worth of a hypothesis--in this case, his--should not be decided a priori: "I find it distressing that many people condemn it or even sometimes applaud it with no reference to the data, as if its merit or lack of merit depended on some intrinsic virtue" (Girard 39).

As we have suggested, generative anthropology not only attempts to situate the ethical in a hypothetical scene of human origin, but attempts to enact this ethical imperative through its own theoretical operations. It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that the greatest hazard of minimal thinking, in this sense, is its very attempt to furnish knowledge; it is perhaps an irony that the hypothetical mode itself, which is inherently vulnerable, is read as the displaced representative of dogmatism. The resentment provoked by a form of thinking that claims the center for itself, even only provisionally, is out of step with current poetics of thinking. As Gil Bailie notes, about the only "sweeping theory that has recently found favor is one that holds that sweeping theories are no longer possible" (*Violence Unveiled* 5). Bailie's statement is more than the expression of a simple resentment: it is an anthropological observation that suggests that the only way high levels of generality can now hold favor is through an explicit disavowal of what is implicitly endorsed; general claims cannot be directly confessed, despite their presence and persistence. Somehow this dis- or non-avowal presents itself to many as a kind of intellectual "freedom"; the very idea that cultural phenomena have foundations that are amenable to hypothetical specification is equated by the contemporary academy with "restriction."

Perhaps stranger still, the contemporary humanities find no problem in drawing extensively on several of the grand theoretical schemes of the nineteenth century; the presence of a certain theoretical postmodernism has in no way dimmed our appetites for the thinking of Freud and Marx and--when circumstance deems it appropriate--Darwin; if anything, it has increased them. One could well understand some of the attractions. A dessicated Engels or a scholastic Marx, for instance--like a New Age religion--makes few real political (or spiritual) demands on us. In this sense, contemporary postmodern Marxists have lost more than the rigid epistemological hierarchy of base-superstructure. Marx's aim of creating a revolutionary consciousness is no longer necessarily tied to the capacity for actualizing it; indeed, the revolutionary consciousness functions as a surrogate, a replacement, for the concrete social conditions which it originally attempted to actualize. A certain kind of postmodern Marx gives us the opportunity to denounce "the bourgeois" while simultaneously neither demanding any concrete shift in social relations nor that the theorist be subservient to Marx as "master." Quite the contrary: drawing on theorists like Marx and Freud offers us the opportunity to reiterate their schemes--or rather, themes--while minimizing our resentment towards them as theorists.

14

But herein lies the bad faith of the maneuver. There are very good reasons, as we observed above, for the demise of Marxism, even in the nineteenth century. But if we admitted its merits: a generative anthropological approach to human culture, politics, and economics, a positive

desire to explain and to transform oppression, then it must also be said that postmodern Marxism has none of these. It does not seek to change anything, and has in fact explained and changed nothing. Like so much of the other criticism that it criticizes, it legitimates not so much the transhistorical relevance of a hypothesis, but a generic license to condemn, often coterminous with a playing out of a certain chivalric fantasy of justice, as already noted. With the qualifier "strategic essentialism," any grand theoretical matrix can be wheeled in the service of "praxis," which will allow us our scapegoats while simultaneously relieving us of the burden of theorizing injustices with any kind of rigor whatsoever.

It may be objected that we are ourselves deploying that same variety of straw doll scapegoating of harmless enemies that characterizes everything else we have described. But this is precisely not what we are doing: for Marxism was the only significant generative anthropological analytic of the twentieth century. In observing its failure to metamorphose into a genuinely positive generative anthropology characterized by an open hypothetical system, we are commenting on academic tendencies far wider than these texts of the Marxist-Baroque-bronze phase. We bear witness instead to a progression: after an initial burst of pre-Marxist "communist" political exchanges, the already vitriolic open system was closed down by Marx and Engels themselves via stratagems in the International and via a deluge of overblown "political economy" in the later works. But even at this stage, the claim of a positive and generative anthropology lived on. Only when the materials passed into the hands of the Marxists, from Lenin onwards, did positive science cloy into dogma. After its early and dramatic failure in the 1920s, the only real engines of Marxism were to be found in the West, where the thought took the form of increasingly prohibitionist protocols involving a dance of making reality appear to conform to a theory. One might well wonder at its extended bronze era. However, the tendency is not something localized (and Marxism was almost the only thing that looked like thought in the twentieth century). Instead, as we have already suggested, the prohibitionism itself has come to define thinking as such. Girard has remarked that

This complete skepticism, this nihilism with regard to knowledge is often put across just as dogmatically as the various dogmatisms that preceded it. Nowadays people disclaim any certain knowledge and any authority, but with a more assured and authoritarian tone than ever before. (Things Hidden 441-42)

The elaborate protocols for making statements of any non-condemnatory variety or even of any positive kind have made, as Girard puts it, for the sense that "We hope to find refuge in some sort of intellectual regionalism, and perhaps to give up thought altogether" (441). Certainly, however admirable the bronze-wrought delicacy of late Marxism, it serves no purpose other than its own formation. These kinds of theories no longer attempt to describe a world. Their function rather would appear to be to compete with it. Jamesonian Marxism, for instance, stages a mimetic operation whereby the de-centered complexity of postmodern culture, with its manifold exits and entrances, its disorienting whirl of shifting preoccupations and manifest depthlessness, is replicated in the theoretical operation itself. The Bonaventure Hotel captures not simply postmodern culture, but Jameson's whole theoretical project and practice; the

theoretical analysis-contrivance is itself just as resistant to comprehension as the objects of its theoretical gaze; here we have another Borges-like scenario: the map competes with the territory for complexity and our interest. And after all is said and done, we find what Borges' "extract" already described:

Less Addicted to the Study of Geography, the Following Generations comprehended that this dilated Map was useless and, not without Impiety, delivered it to the inclemencies of the Sun and of the Winters. In the Western Deserts there remain piecemeal Ruins of the Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars. In the entire rest of the Country there is no vestige left of the Geographical Disciplines. (125)

This is not to say that Jameson operates with no level of generality; it is merely that when the overarching presuppositions and theses of his analysis are made manifest, it becomes difficult to distinguish generality from banality. And as for the resulting prohibitions on any form of speculative or positive knowledges, we believe it time to mark a departure of sorts. False theoretical modesty--the avoidance of hypothesis--minimizes our resentment towards a theorist; adopting the postmodernist flight from the center towards the periphery, opting for content over form, for semantics over syntax, might ultimately be at least aesthetically pleasing, but this is no ultimate justification for continuing with it. As Gans puts it, "Postmodernism is aware of form because it no longer believes in it" (Signs 211). But this, in our view, will no longer do.

15

Now despite all this, there is no real necessity to side with "the systematizers" over "postmodernists." For instance, Andrew McKenna has very ably pointed out the kinds of theoretical resonances that exist between many of the theoretical preoccupations of Girard and Derrida; McKenna works to repeatedly emphasize the thematic concerns that reverberate between the two without playing them off against each other. Girard, too, has not been blind to homologies between his own and Derrida's work. In "Origins: A View from the Literature," Girard makes some comparisons between his own interpretation of mythical texts and Derrida's grammatology. He argues that the deconstructive critique of origins is not at all incompatible with his own theory of cultural formation. Girard himself shows striking parallels between his reading of myth and Derrida's "logic of the supplement." The emergence of the scapegoat is coterminous with their depiction as an outsider or visitor who threatens the community and so is killed or driven away. In light of this, Girard indicates the supplementary logic at work: "If the community is in a position to be visited by someone, at the beginning of these myths, it must already exist. And yet it must not exist since, after the stranger is expelled, he is perceived as the god or divine ancestor without whom the community would not be what it is, or even would not be at all" ("Origins" 28).⁽⁷⁾ In other words, although the community ostensibly precedes the scapegoat, ritual formation and the totemic system are attributable to them; the accidental emerges as an essential ground. This structure is also to be found in scapegoating in general: the outsider, the impure, marginal element, constitutes the mob's internal cohesion, is central to

it, in fact--it is the original "pillar of the community."

The implication of Girard's thesis is that the logic of the supplement is a source of knowledge, not its negation. Girard argues that in deconstruction, in struggle with its idealistic forebears (primarily German idealism and phenomenology) the uncovering of the logic of the supplement must necessarily serve a negative, apodictic function; but in ethnology, the logic of the supplement is actually a key to comprehension: ". . . the same observation that looks like a curse to philosophy, seems like a blessing in mythology. In the rational context of philosophy, the supplement seems like disorder; in the irrational context of myth, it looks like a potential source of order" ("Origins" 30). It is not simply logical inconsistency that interests Girard, but the consistency of that inconsistency; inconsistencies are patterned. It would be a mistake, then, to miss the opportunity for this logic to furnish positive knowledge; to ignore this would be to remain subject to the production of a new universal scheme that is "still the child of rationalism in the sense that it contradicts its conception of reason only in the manner that this reason expects to be contradicted" ("Origins" 32).

Thus, for Girard (and Gans as well), the determination of "undecidability" in a text, the recognition that philosophy is *polemos*, even that it is in certain respects continuous with mythology, are not insights complete in themselves; they are starting points. To the contemporary mind, the idea that mythology has paradoxical and internally incoherent elements is banal; why should we remain satisfied with a comparable insight into certain kinds of theoretical discourse? In this sense, Derrida is right to critique the principle of identity always at work in Lévi-Strauss that renders all contradictions mute by assimilating them to a principle of identity--a theoretical operation that transposes all mythical systems as transparent modes of rational thought--but perhaps he errs equally in his insistence on the seeming singularity of these contradictions. The supplement isn't simply the undoing of a text, but a hermeneutic key to seeing its systematic distortions.

So is it really the case that the preoccupations or even the provisional "conclusions" of Girard and Gans are not shared by other scholars in the Humanities, or is the real point of contention the fact that they present conclusions at all? As we have suggested, one of the chief virtues of Gansian "minimal thinking" is its ability to think the connections between epistemological rigor and communicative ethics, between parsimonious explanation and parsimonious communication, and then enact that reflection through its own critical practices. But this style of theory is, quite literally, on the margins in the contemporary academy.

Both Girard and Gans challenge through their theories the current mode of "scientific impartiality" favored in the Humanities: the refusal to hypothesize at all. The preponderance of academic conferences should not obscure from us the fact that the dominant ethical imperative of much contemporary scholarship is not one of reciprocity but of privacy; the logic seems to go: if no substantive hypothesis or concrete problematic of cultural formation is entertained, then there is no danger of this being imposed on others; in the absence of such a concrete problematic, there is (seemingly) nothing to impose. Hayden White's critique of Girard reveals

concerns about a theoretical project simultaneously too speculative and reductive. How else are we to make sense of the author of *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse* enlisting a positivist criterion of meaning (falsification) in order to judge the worth of Girard's project?

Resentment needs, in our view, to give way to sympathetic inquiry; and we have to be aware of the possibility that knowledge itself can become a kind of victim, subject to expulsion during times of cultural upheaval. Knowledge then becomes either one of the symptoms of a crisis or a casualty--a scapegoat or a "quasi-victim"--of the convulsions of social decay (*Scapegoat* 100). Such then is our challenge. We commend it to you.

16

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17

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Notes

1. By "vulnerability," we are referring to an epistemological openness, not a weakness-as-drawback, intrinsic to the theory. ([back](#))

2. Cultures are not "blind and purposeless"; they possess proximate teleologies (or at least constituent elements of them do)--they do things for reasons--and they possess properly normative elements. Inversely, the development of an ethics or a morality cannot be attributed to the "ends" of survival and reproduction, as there is, strictly (naturalistically) speaking, no "end" to which evolution "aims." It makes little sense to talk of "random variations" in a culture

analogous in any significant way to genetic drift. ([back](#))

18

3. This historical claim--that Rome "lacked competition on its own level"--is in the very least, highly contentious. ([back](#))

4. This approach originates in Girard's work and assumes that "realism" should not be the result of an a priori philosophical commitment that a research program needs to assume in order that its "findings" be realized. The "reality" of the phenomena that Girard documents, rather, is required for the adequate interpretation of data; it is a posteriori insofar as referentiality is a finding of the research, rather than a (philosophical) assumption (The Scapegoat 1-99). Girard's approach brackets (in the phenomenological sense) not simply "realism" but "antirealism" for the purposes of reading texts. No one can know whether referentiality--or indeed, broad theoretical synthesis itself--is possible until this operation has been completed. ([back](#))

5. One should not conflate Gans's and Derrida's views of this relationship. Where, for Derrida, violence inheres in representation itself, for Gans, representation functions to defer violence. ([back](#))

6. Cf. Chris Fleming's essay on the possibility in relation to madness. ([back](#))

7. The example Girard draws on for this example is the myth of Tikarau, a visitor to the land of Tikopia, who though welcomed at first, is then perceived as a cheat and thief who must be driven away. Tikarau is the "dangerous supplement": although the community supposedly precedes him, he is the principal figure in the totemic system; the cultural system as such is attributed to him; the paradoxical element in this suggests that the supplement is originary. The "original origin" isn't sufficient to ground the system, and the unnecessary becomes its necessary ground ("Origins" 29). ([back](#))

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Post-Imperium: The Rhetoric of Liberation and the Return of Sacrifice in the Work of V. S. Naipaul

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Speaking about political religions and construing the movements of our times not only as political but also, and primarily, as religious movements is not accepted as a matter of course yet, even though the factual situation would force the attentive observer to take this stand.

- Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions* (1938)

I

The work of Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul, a Trinidadian of Hindu origin long resident in Great Britain, tries the patience of the prevailing liberal sentiment. Quite apart from his work, the man himself (born 1932) tests liberalism's limit of tolerance, as he refuses to acquiesce in, let alone endorse, its postures and vocabularies. He is strongly allergic to ideology in any form and is unembarrassed to refer to his novelistic profession as a search for truth. At an academic conference in New Delhi in 2002 shortly after he had received the acknowledgment of the Nobel Committee, he made headlines by interrupting another speaker from his panel. According to an account by Fiachra Gibbons writing in the British newspaper *Guardian*:

Sir Vidia, in the land of his ancestors to celebrate his Nobel prize for literature, cut loose after listening to Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sehgal--a niece of Nehru, India's first prime minister--debate how gender oppression had affected their work.

As the pair moved on to talk about the harmful influence of English on Indian literature, Naipaul's famously short fuse exploded: "Banality irritates me. My life is short. I can't listen to banality. This thing about colonialism, this thing about gender oppression, the very word oppression wearies me." (22 February 2002 [online])

To describe Sir Vidia as having a "short fuse" is, of course, a prejudicial way of stating it, for Naipaul might well be studiously reticent and the provocation of him annoyingly inveterate and personal. Equally parti pris was writer and film-maker Ruchir Joshi's admonition to the Nobel laureate: "You're being obnoxious!" In fact, Naipaul was being critical. As he himself said: "If writers talk about oppression, they don't do much writing." He amplified the idea in his Nobel acceptance speech: "Where jargon turns living issues into abstractions, and where jargon ends by competing with jargon, people don't have causes"; but rather, "they only have enemies" (Guardian 7 December 2001 [online]). A half-century had passed, Naipaul added, pressing to Deshpande and Sehgal: "What colonialism are you talking about?" Naipaul's fame as a publicly prominent intellectual given to explosions--the choice of words belongs to Gibbons--is really about his refusal to submit to what has become a ritual requirement of belletristic and departmental discourse. Victim status, to which Deshpande and Sehgal have both staked a claim, functions to guarantee authority and therefore also truth in the modern milieu and so sets the claimant out of reach of candid (or of any) interrogation. One could even impute to Gibbons a subtle invocation of caste. Sehgal, she inserts, is "a niece of Nehru, India's first prime minister," the implication being that, as she is such, it constitutes *lèse majesté* to impugn her. That the Nobel Committee had acclaimed Naipaul perhaps rankled his two rivals in the imbroglio, who could aspire neither to his audience nor to his now officially vetted artistic achievement. Deshpande's frosty codicil, after Vikram Seth had calmed the waters, suggests an attempt to retaliate rhetorically against Naipaul's unfettered judgment: "When I was listening to [Sir Vidia's] talk about the anguish of the exile, I was really cool about it." Sir Vidia, in other words, is just as banal as I. In her round-about way Deshpande was insisting on her equivalence in status with Naipaul while at the same time she underlined her role as the suffering party.

It is not simply Indian feminist novelists, however, who would coldly dismiss Naipaul; he owns the distinction of inciting frigid enmity wherever he goes. Under the title "An Intellectual Catastrophe," no less a critical lawgiver than Eduard Said has proclaimed the word:

He is a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to an implied audience of disenchanting Western liberals who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths--national liberation movements, revolutionary goals, the evils of colonialism--which in Naipaul's opinion do nothing to explain the sorry state of African and Asian countries who are sinking under poverty, native impotence, badly learned, unabsorbed Western ideas like industrialisation and modernisation. (MSA News, Issue 389, 6-12 August 1998 [online])

2

Said presumably means that Naipaul sends back dispatches to Western intellectuals who can never hear enough bad things about the Third World. Said presumably also means to an audience rather than "to an implied audience," as hypothetical people neither buy nor read

books. What Naipaul says in his "dispatches" would then constitute the "Third World myths" to which Said refers. In erecting his Manichaeic dichotomy of "the West" and "the Third World," in which a universal mankind ceases to exist, Said casually reduces Naipaul's careful empirical discussion of actual places, in his fiction and nonfiction alike, to the status of so much disposable "opinion." Remarking on two of Naipaul's non-fiction books, *Among Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998), Said cites his target's real offense: "He recently has said that the worst calamity in India's history was the advent and later presence of Islam which disfigured the country's history. Unlike most writers he makes not one but two journeys to 'Islam' in order to confirm his deep antipathy to the religion, its people, and its ideas." Add to this another infraction, one, as it were, by association: "In Paris . . . Sonia Rykiel's fancy showrooms on windows on the Boulevard St Germain are filled with copies of the French translation of *Beyond Belief*, intermixed with the scarves, belts and handbags." Naipaul participates in and belongs to the market. He succeeds on his own terms, as confirmed by the fact that, despite its difficulty, his work sells--even in the glassy ostentation of chic Parisian boutiques. In these gestures even more than in his "obnoxious" behavior, Naipaul defies the prevailing correctitude. Yet Said must himself have knowledge (it would seem first-hand knowledge) of "Sonia Rykiel's fancy showrooms." The allusion suggests snobbism, which one would think would be detrimental to the indictment. This does not enter in the calculation.

Said's dispensation by no means remains confined to him but finds abundant, even eager, confirmation from others. In a review of what at the time were Naipaul's two most recent books, *Between Father and Son: Family Letters* and *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (both 2000), Caryl Phillips echoes Said in branding Sir Vidia a bigot (she refers to "his bigotry") who panders to a Pharisaical readership always ready to have its narrow worldview affirmed. Naipaul suffers, Phillips writes, from an "antipathy towards people and ideas that are not in tune with his own" and an "inability to hold his own prejudices in check" (*The New Republic*, 29 May 2000 [online]). Phillips outdoes Said in her penchant for contumely:

[Naipaul's] chosen theme is himself, his singular struggle, and the necessity of his having to create a subject for himself where none (or so he claims) existed. Naipaul's exacting tone is that of a man mired in certainty, a man afraid of ambiguity and incapable of stooping to the kind of doubt that fuels great imaginative writing. As he seeks to convince us of "the great shadow" that hangs over his life, there can be no room for ambivalence. It is unlikely that Naipaul will produce another novel, for fiction requires curiosity and generosity, and it is many years now since Naipaul has had anything to offer in those departments.

It is perhaps Phillips' excitement that has mixed her metaphors; Said's prose, too, when he addresses the same subject, shows a number of solecisms. Immediately after Phillips' review appeared, Naipaul defied likelihood by issuing a new novel, *Half a Life*. "Despite the brickbats of many Third World critics and writers," Phillips says, "Naipaul has enjoyed"--just as he continues to enjoy--"a much-acclaimed career." Note what Phillips adds to Said's condemnation of a man of the Third World, so called, who has betrayed his origins; in her indictment, Naipaul is also

guilty of subjectivism in the form of commercial self-promotion and paradoxically of "certainty" rather than "doubt." He is, finally, lacking in "curiosity and generosity." As the Maenads say to Orpheus, in a mood full of certainty rather than doubt, in Book XI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Hic est nostri contemptor!"

What does one get, essentially, in putting Said's and Phillips' views of Naipaul together? One gets an offensive individual (the subject of his alleged subjectivism) who has self-servingly dissociated himself from the group to which a mysterious law permanently and involuntarily assigns him, the prescribed attitudes and determinations of which a lawfully inalterable identity then compels him to share. In defying the mandatory assignment of his proper identification, the offender shows himself as both greedy (for this is what the imputed lack of "generosity" means) and ambitious. Greed and ambition together have motivated his choice of the market over the minority enclave. Accusing Naipaul of an incapacity for doubt contributes an odd wrinkle to the case. Refusing, after an examination, to accept the intellectual and moral limits of the natal community indeed gives positive evidence of the subject's having resolutely exercised "doubt," rendering the claim of his incapacity for it absurd. Naipaul once told Jonathan Rosen that "people can live very simple lives . . . tucked away without thinking. I think the world is what you enter when you think--when you become educated, when you question--because you can be in the big world and be utterly provincial" (*The Paris Review*, Fall 1998, 47). If *dubito ergo sum*, then emphatically Naipaul est.

3

Sir Vidia's real transgression nevertheless lies elsewhere, in the man's questioning what the accuser, either Said or Phillips, invests with absolute certainty: the accident of birth having assigned one to a milieu, one is then obliged to stay put and have no truck with anything outside the milieu, except if one's native circumstance were majoritarian or especially male and Western, in which case one would be obliged to denounce it; the market is the external force, inseparable from the West, that ceaselessly oppresses the milieu, which functions as the center-and-locus of an existential authenticity. Phillips' remark that Naipaul claims not originally to have had a "subject" (a self), and that in finding his "subject" he has actually repressed it, articulates the assumption. In Phillips' view, Naipaul has made himself inauthentic. Along with its Marxist categories, post-modern criticism rehashes many such quaint themes from mid-twentieth century existentialism. Said's ascription to Naipaul of a fear of "ambivalence" or of "ambiguity" provides another example: in a sweeping moral and intellectual relativism all answers are postponed, the questions themselves are disrupted, are marked in advance as illegitimate, and what persists is a weird commitment to the new mystical cloud of vehement unknowing. Having chastised Naipaul for rejecting his minority-within-a-minority origins, Said then chastises him again for asserting of non-Arab Muslims that Islam has separated them "from their traditions, leaving them neither here nor there," a statement whose empirical status is indisputable. Naipaul does, in fact, say this. What Said seems not to notice is that, in saying it, Naipaul makes himself a defender of eradicated origins, of the locality over the imperium, and an advocate of the eradicated against the eradicator. One might say that he makes himself

an advocate of the oppressed against their oppressors. Committed to the dogma of a devilish West and a saintly Third World, Said naturally shows no awareness of the contradiction.

The analysis can delve even deeper than this, for the charges tell much more about those who make them than they do about him against whom they are made, who in any case speaks eloquently for himself. In *Signs of Paradox* (1997), in a discussion of "Originary and Victimary Rhetoric," Eric Gans argues that postmodern discourse transforms "the unique supernatural status of the sacrificial victim" into a "victimary rhetoric" whose central figure is not individual but "collective" (178). Thus, in Gans's formulation, "the minority collective takes the place of the crucified savior" (178). Of course, the model of postmodern discourse, Marxism, already similarly "binarizes," to use Gans's term, the human world, but so does any myth in its insistence on the basic emissary structure of unanimity-minus-one. That postmodern discourse, whatever particular mode it assumes, has the obfuscating and cause-reversing character of a myth might be connoted when Gans writes that the

accusation [of victimary rhetoric] is not neglect or even mistreatment but persecution, as such terms as "sexism" and "racism" strongly imply. Neglect or avoidance of the victim only give proof of an unconscious mimetic obsession. This claim is no doubt best exemplified by the term "homophobia," which denotes not merely obsessive fear of homosexuals, but fear of them as bearers of one's own secret homosexuality. The minority's marginalization becomes the equivalent of victimary centralization . . . Once the victimary status of [any] distinction has been confirmed, the role of persecutor is then extended to all those who do not suffer from it. (178)

Victimary "binarism" is explicit in both Said's and Phillips' treatment of Naipaul, in both of which he serves as the spokesman for an aggressive and exploitative--a persecutorial--West, all the more despicable and dangerous because he physically resembles, just as he stems from, the victims of the projection. Without coining the term, both Said and Phillips label Naipaul an Islamophobe, some such construction being necessary in their all-too-familiar rhetoric for assimilating alleged persecutors under a generic sign. The Said-Phillips postmodern attack on Naipaul illustrates another, important characteristic of contemporary Western-liberal discourse: the neo-Marxist language of persecutors and victims does not move, as have all previous new species of discourse in Gans's Generative Anthropological dialectic, away from mythic compactness in the direction of ever further analytic differentiation of the idea of humanity; it moves, rather, in retrograde, from intellectual differentiation back into mythic compactness. Whereas, in the Greek philosophic and poetic discourse that superseded myth, a whole range of human phenomena achieve articulation and are therefore made available to analysis; and whereas, in the continuity of Hebrew and Christian revelation, morality becomes ever more individual and ever more a matter of conscience rather than ritual obligation, in victimary rhetoric, by contrast, all these achievements dissolve into a murk of rivalry and denunciation. There are those who belong to "fraternité et égalité" and there are those who do not. Complexity vanishes. With his critics in mind, Naipaul has this to say: "blaming colonialism is a

very safe chant" (Paris Review 58). Victimary rhetoric, which defines itself as political, is, in fact, nothing secular or sophisticated at all but rather something religious in the primitive sense, a matter of mystique and participation, of the binary and immiscible inside and outside of the sodality. This does not mean that those who espouse it do not do so by invoking the future; on the contrary, a postponed utopia belongs to the enthusiasm. When critics like Said or Phillips side with an Islamicized Tiers monde against the market and its representatives, as against Naipaul, they act, as one would predict given the preceding analysis, as agents of what the political philosopher Eric Voegelin has called, from as early as 1938, political religion.

4

That politics since the eighteenth century at least has been ersatz religion, and that the results have been murderous, is perhaps the axial proposition in Voegelin's ample and wide-ranging work. It is necessary to qualify the statement because Voegelin sees the roots of modern political religion--he sees the roots of modernity as political religion--as far back as the Twelfth Century in certain symbols of immanence, as he calls them. In Joachim of Flora's (1145 - 1202) *Tractatus super quatuor evangelica*, to cite what Voegelin sees as the primary text of the phenomenon, one finds a new image of history in which chronology is for the first time is divided into three ages: that of the Father, that of the Son, and that of the Holy Spirit. Joachim believed himself to be living in the senescence of the second age; the third age, he argued, was about to dawn and would be the final age of history, now seen as a closed system. Joachim's tripartite construction reappears monotonously in European speculation, as does his notion of a dux and his cadre who will refashion the world according to their inspired vision. There is the Machiavellian "Prince," the Puritanical "Godded Man," the Nietzschean "Superman." All occupy the realm beyond good and evil and are uniquely gifted to see the extra-moral justification of their own acts. Voegelin calls attention to the way that Joachim's doctrine rejects Pauline Christianity's indefinite postponement of the Last Judgment, and of salvation through a transcendental divinity, in favor of the audacious assertion that humanity can reorder existence, making good all the deficiencies, and redeem itself through the actions and worldly grace of its charismatic leaders. A Joachimite vehemence attends the events of 1789 and immediately thereafter. Auguste Comte projected a scheme similar to Flora's, going him one better in ascribing the role of dux-and-redeemer to himself, while introducing coinages like "altruism" and "positivism" that became current in all political schemes styling themselves "progressive," not least Marxism, that pit an agenda against individual conscience. In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin writes of Comte's politico-religious projection that:

There were provided [in it] honorific degrees of . . . immortality, and the highest honor would be the reception of the meritorious contributor into the calendar of positivistic saints. But what should in this order of things become of men who would rather follow God than the new Augustus Comte? Such miscreants who were not inclined to make their social contributions according to Comtean standards would simply be committed to the hell of social oblivion. The idea deserves attention. Here is a gnostic paraclete setting himself up as the world-

immanent Last Judgment of mankind, deciding on immortality or annihilation of every human being. (Collected Works V. 5 194).

The construction of a Third World, an idea indispensable to postmodern discourse *soi disant*, closely resembles prior quasi-religious constructions such as the Joachitic "Third Realm," the Liberal-Socialist "Third Way," the Neo-Conservative-Libertarian "Third Wave," or the National Socialist "Third Reich." The putative Third World identity is inextricably tied to victimary claims, which sanctify and elect the claimant, whether he stakes the claim himself or has it staked for him by some supervisor. "Just as in the Nineteenth Century," writes Paul Johnson of what he calls in *Modern Times* (1982) "the Bandung Generation," "idealists had seen the oppressed proletariat as the repository of moral excellence--and a prospective proletarian state as Utopia--so now the very fact of a colonial past, and a non-white skin, were seen as title-deeds to international esteem" (477). Johnson, whose analysis is consistent with Voegelin's, points out "the political religiosity" (477) of early "Third World" discourse in the speeches of Nehru, Sukarno, Sihanouk, Nkrumah, and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem at the Afro-Asian Conference in the Indonesian city of Bandung in 1955. Sukarno said on the occasion that "we, the people of Asia and Africa . . . can mobilize . . . the moral violence of nations in favor of peace" (Johnson 477), conjoining the ideas of "violence" and "peace" ominously. The novelist Richard Wright, also in attendance, summed up the apocalyptic character of the event, as understood by the participants: "This is the human race speaking" (477). Human and all too human. The term postmodern thus itself turns out to be, if not an immediate derivation from the Bandung coinage of "post-colonial," then thoroughly infused by it. "Post-colonial," in turn, carried at the time (as it still does) the same charge as the final element in Comte's ancient-medieval-modern division, beyond which, because it reduces to closure what cannot in fact be closed--namely history--there is no real innovation. The users of postmodern require their prefix because the cumulus of recent historical evidence undermines the promise of immediate redemption in the Marxist political revelation. The "post" in postmodern tactically hedges the bet, defends against questions, and rationalizes in advance the indefinite revolution, or trans-valuation of all values.

The liberal excoriation of Naipaul thus has a long established context. That Naipaul is keenly aware of this context--that he is sharply conscious of the primitive religiosity of his accusers and of their politics--no doubt exacerbates their determination to consign him, in the style of Comte's positivistic dispensation, to the oblivion of incorrectness. He is a scandal preventing the realization of the multicultural parousia. His presence thwarts the necessary unanimity; it irritates. Naipaul knows one more thing: that the sacrament of the political religion consists mainly in the immolation of token betrayers according to the hoary pattern familiar to all readers of René Girard, under the aegis of an inchoate *dieu de lynchage*.

II

5

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) gives the most articulate formulation of his case. All the

themes discussed above are present in this novel: the hierarchy of communities and of social development; the intellectual effect of displacement from a less developed to a more developed society, or what A Bend calls "a difference in civilization" (153); the workings of resentment within both the developed societies and the former colonial dependencies of those societies, or what Naipaul names "the wish not to give political satisfaction" (44); resentment, in the form of ideology, as the final disastrous "export" from the colonizers to the colonized, received eagerly by the latter, and expressed in the idea of "revolution" (29, 164, 206); the persistence of a romantic view, on the part of Westerners, of non-Western peoples, whom they see as uncorrupt, hence as peculiarly authentic, under the slogan, pronounced by one character, that Africa "is where it's at" (110); the religiosity of post-colonial politics, including the specific religiosity of the Bandung Conference's apocalypse of color, translated into a corrosive lingua franca of revolutionary insurgency, as in the dictator's "Africanism" (187) and his cult of "the African Madonna" (185); the distinction between religio-political dogmatism and the market, thrown into relief when the dictator orders shopkeepers to sell his book of sayings (195); the descent, called liberation, from the structure of law into the structure of mob rivalry ending in sacrifice, as in the large-scale slaughter, all the more terrible for being off-stage, in the novel's fourth and final part.

As for sacrifice, which emerges as the cynosure of this thematic cluster, Naipaul's work has always included it under its different forms. One of his earliest memories, as he reports in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1976), is of "family rituals that lasted into my childhood" (x). Naipaul invokes "the beauty of sacrifice, so important to the Aryans," for "sacrifice turned the cooking of food into a ritual: the first cooked thing--usually a small round of unleavened bread, a miniature, especially made--was always for the fire, the god" (x). This is sacrifice in the purely representational sense, as it appears in all the higher religions--for example, in the Christian Eucharist. Such rituals preserve the distinctive "sense of the past" (x) of a people, so that Naipaul regrets the passing of custom, as happened among the Hindus in Trinidad. He understands, as well, the substitutive implication of such practices:

Why was it necessary for a male hand to hold the knife with which a pumpkin was cut open? It seemed to me at one time--because of the appearance of the pumpkin halved downward--that there was some sexual element in the rite. The truth is more frightening . . . The pumpkin, in Bengal and adjoining areas, is a vegetable substitute for a living sacrifice: the male hand was therefore necessary. (x-xi).

To make the replacement of pumpkin-substitute for "living sacrifice" defines the minimal ethical achievement of a people and marks off those who achieve it from those who do not. The danger in forgetting the domestic rituals lies also in forgetting the importance of the harmless substitution for the flesh-and-blood victim. In his *Paris Review* colloquy, as in his *A Way in the World* (1998), Naipaul recalls an incident from the Trinidadian *entre-deux-guerres*, during the locally epochal oil workers' strike of 1937. To the strike-leader, Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler, both the workers themselves and the intellectuals who came out to support them attributed "almost

miraculous powers," treating him as though he were "some kind of messiah" (A Way 82). The same people, Naipaul argues, also understood that Butler "was a crazed and uneducated African preacher" (82), yet this knowledge did not break the spell, which the strikers and their confederates wanted to enter and wished to sustain. Under Butler's agitation (anyone representing authority qualified as the enemy) a police constable from Port of Spain "was burned alive in the oil field area" (81). "Calypso and folk memory," Naipaul writes, immediately and paradoxically transformed the victim, Charlie King, turning him into "a special sacrificial figure, as famous as Uriah Butler himself" (82). The scene of King's immolation gained prestige as "a sanctified place" (82). Naipaul says to his Paris Review interviewer: "It's very curious, isn't it--the same people who burned a policeman alive would dance and sing and tell a funny story about it" (PR 53). The change in valence nevertheless occurred, King's odiousness to the mob switching to its opposite before hardly a day had passed, the mob's mood likewise having leapt to its antipode.

As for Butler: "He attracted . . . many radicals, people who described themselves as socialists or communists" (A Way 80) but later constituted "an embarrassment to the lawyers and others who had drawn strength from him in the great days of 1937" (82). Thus Butler, like King, also undergoes a change in valence for la foule. King is first malefactor and Butler benefactor and then vice versa. The unified peace of song succeeds the unifying paroxysm of murder. Yet the aura of "insurrection" (81), despite the destructiveness of the strike and its attached phenomena, persisted on the island. The luster of violence seems inexpugnable. Returning home after ten years in Great Britain, Naipaul observed in 1960 a nighttime rally of local radicals in the main square of Port of Spain. He remarks, in recalling the throng, that what the speeches and agitation had fomented appeared "more like religion" (31) than like politics.

6

Toward the end of Naipaul's first major novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), the protagonist's cousin, Owad, returns from medical school in Britain full of Leninist rhetoric. Soon "the whole house had fallen under Owad's spell" (516) and one or another member of the Biswas and Tulsi families is mimicking Owad's "great antipathy for Krishna Menon" (516) or his dislike for T. S. Eliot, "a man I simply loathe" (521). The topical flavor of these pronouncements belongs to the pervasive comedy of *A House*, but Naipaul hints at something less savory. Owad is willing to invest in bloody animosity not his own: "They fought for it," he says of the Bolsheviks and their paradise, "you should hear what they did to the Czar" (521). The violence in the image fascinates him and nothing in the context interferes with the assumption that Owad sees this violence as good and that as bad. Naipaul's Nobel acceptance speech (2001) bears on this point. In Argentina during the Perón comeback of the early 1970s, Naipaul met victims of torture and violence from all sides of that nation's fractured politics:

The country was full of hate. Peronists were waiting to settle old scores. One such man said to me, "There is good torture and bad torture." Good torture was what you did to the enemies of the people. Bad torture was what the enemies of the

people did to you. People on the other side were saying the same thing. There was no true debate about anything. There was only passion and the borrowed political jargon of Europe.

Owad's all at once thick-skinned and enthusiastic remark about the murders at Yekaterinburg in 1918 shows him investing in the exculpatory notion of a good violence justified through its infliction on "enemies" and about which there is, as Naipaul says, "no debate"; with his other remarks, the same casual expression shows his vulnerability to the mimetic phenomenon of invidious rhetoric--of false witness or "jargon."

It will be instructive to compare Owad's phraseology or the urgings of the Argentine factions with the Big Man's radio address about two thirds of the way through *A Bend*. The Big Man is a synthesis of Mobutu, Nkrumah, and Kaunda--the first generation of African leaders after the withdrawal of the colonial powers--and like all of them he runs a one-party police state. The broadcast pronunciamento is a good place to begin the discussion of Naipaul's novel. An analysis of the address, and of the response to it, will provide the framework for understanding the larger construction of the narrative, with its remarkable counterpoint of anthropological and political insights. Naipaul's narrator, Salim, is aware that a violent spasm is in the offing; he has already seen one of them, shortly after coming to the town ten years earlier to take over the business, really only a shop, that he bought from a family friend. The fictional events have their model in actual events in Zaire, in the 1970s, under Mobutu. As Naipaul writes in his essay on Zaire, "A New King for the Congo" (1975), whenever Mobutu invoked what he called "radicalization of the revolution," the whole country "was nervous" (*The Writer and the World* 207). Salim, like Naipaul, knows the signs.

The Big Man has previously favored the region in which the town is situated, endowing it in true "Big Man" fashion with tokens of his largesse, but criticism of his regime emanating from local dissidents has soured his generosity. A Youth-Guard march to display copies of the Big Man's maxims, in the form of a little book in the style of Chairman Mao, exhibited insufficient enthusiasm. "The Youth Guard had never recovered their prestige after the failure of the book march" (207). A statue of the leader's mother, cradling the leader as bambino, has been found toppled from its pedestal in the polytechnic "Domain" just beyond the town limits in reclaimed bush, "as the colonial statues had once been smashed" (211). From iconoclasm, popular dissatisfaction in an atmosphere of "crisis" (210) moves to homicide and one of the Youth Guard becomes the chance victim of pervasive tensions:

It had begun as a squabble with some pavement sleepers who had barred off a stretch of pavement in a semi-permanent way with concrete blocks looted from a building site. And it could easily have ended as a shouting match, no more. But the officer had stumbled and fallen. By that fall, that momentary appearance of helplessness, he had invited the first blow with one of the concrete blocks; and the sight of blood had encouraged a sudden, frenzied act of murder by dozens of small hands. (207)

The political disintegration in the town thus assumes the form of a classic sacrificial crisis, as those who feel threatened and dispersed by arbitrary dispensations of power find desperate cohesion in spontaneous deadly concert against embodiments of that power. Ordinarily, such a dispute would have ended in words ("a shouting match"); but the crisis has slipped beyond the mediating reach of locutions and now expresses itself in the imitative blood-deed of the "frenzied act" carried out "by dozens of small hands." The Big Man's first counter-blow is to disband the Youth Guard, as, in his indictment, "they had forgotten their duty to the people" (207). For committing this infraction, Salim reports, "they would be banished from the town and sent back to the bush" where "they would learn the wisdom of the monkey" (207). The Big Man's ire is not confined merely to the Youth Guard, however; he is addressing those who would attack or even criticize (for true-believers there is never a difference) any branch of his regime. Naipaul makes Salim note that, although "the President was talking in the African language that most of the people who lived along the river understood," the words "citoyens and citoyennes . . . were used again and again, for musical effect, now run together in a rippling phrase, now called out separately, every syllable spaced, to create the effect of a solemn drumbeat" (205). These words, which derive from the political argot of 1789 and carry a whiff of the Terror, betoken the regime's rhetorically revolutionary character. Earlier, Salim has mentioned in passing that "Monsieur and Madame and boy had been officially outlawed" by the President, who "had decreed us all to be citoyens and citoyennes" (163). The speech touches on "the need to strengthen the revolution" (206), which in the past has meant violent suppression of perceived apostasy from the leader's doctrines. He speaks again of the link between "sacrifice and the bright future" (206).

7

The term "sacrifice," as employed in this context by Naipaul, is deliberately equivocal; it might mean frugality, but it might, with even greater likelihood, mean killing. In an earlier insurgency, known locally as "the time of madness" (66), the Big Man sent his European mercenaries to the town to kill a local Colonel who has conspicuously not exercised the required brutality against the river tribes. The official account refers to this euphemistically as "settling the old army" (112). Many others were shot or banished. It is classic purge of the officers, as in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The Big Man "sent a message to Colonel Yenyi telling him to stay at the barracks and to welcome the commander of the mercenaries" (112); when the Colonel came out of his quarters to greet them, "they shot him as he walked" (112). The Big Man has European advisors and can speak French. He went to school and served in the army, as a non-commissioned officer, under the Belgians. He often in the past has cultivated the presentation of a sophisticated, non-African personality, in suit and tie, with knowledge of economic and development policy. Now, ominously, "the African language that the President [had] chosen for his speeches was a mixed and simple language, and he simplified it further, making it the language of the drinking booth and the street brawl, converting himself, while he spoke, this man who kept everybody dangling and imitated the etiquette of royalty and the graces of de Gaulle, into the lowest of the low" (205).

The Big Man is especially upset "with those black men in the towns who dreamed of waking up one day as white men" and he stresses "the need for Africans to be African, to go back without shame to their democratic and socialist ways, to rediscover the virtues of the diet and medicines of their grandfathers and not go running like children after things in imported tins and bottles" (206). The first part of this complaint resembles--rather startlingly--Said's excoriation of Naipaul himself for being "a man of the Third World" who rejects his origins; but concepts like *négritude* and Africa for Africans were part and parcel of the vocabulary of independence in the ex-colonies in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference. Johnson points out, in *Modern Times*, that these and similar coinages resembled nothing so much as the Boer motto of the South African National Party in 1948, *Afrika voor de Afrikaners*. While "from independence onward, most black African states practiced anti-white discrimination as a matter of policy," Johnson adds, "the commonest, indeed the universal, form of racism in black Africa was inter-tribal" (527) and partook in the notion of "leadership by charismatic personalities" (512). Naipaul's "President" fits the model. Indeed, it is for the purposes of regenerating lost charisma that he uses the brutal patois of the street, wanting to appear as the ultimate street-brawler compatriot of those he would win back to his party, or assimilate again by fear. The Big Man's oration resolves finally into a thinly veiled threat:

"Citoyens-citoyennes, monkey smart. Monkey smart like shit. Monkey can talk. You didn't know that? Well, I tell you now. Monkey can talk, but he keep it quiet. Monkey know that if he talk in front of man, man going to catch him and beat him and make him work. Make him carry load in hot sun. Make him paddle boat. Citoyens! Citoyennes! We will teach these people to be like monkey. We will send them to the bush and let them work their arse off." (208)

The speech also contains references to "the petit people, as he liked to call them" and to their "oppressors" (208), whose punishment the parable of the monkey forecasts. The monkey-metaphor is as crudely racist as it seems; it is a vile remark on the stature of the townspeople, who belong to a tribe whose people tend to be smaller than those of the tribes in the South. Under the colonial government, the national project was summed up in the Latin motto, *Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*: "He approves of the mingling of the people and of their bonds of union" (62). Since independence, the Big Man has set one group against the other in a strategy of divide and rule. In the context, then, the hint of genocidal retribution must be taken seriously. In fact, the dissolution of the Youth Guard appears to constitute the first stage of the Big Man's chastisement of the rebellious region. "We had all thought of the Youth Guard as a menace . . . But it was after the disbanding . . . that things began to get bad in our town" (208). A "crisis" exists in which "peace was something you had to buy afresh every day" (210) by bribing those who would otherwise do harm; Salim reports "any number of violent outbursts" (211). Says Salim: "Stable relationships were not possible" (210). Everything is in a flux of "popular frenzy" (210) like that which ignited spontaneously when the Youth Guard officer slipped and fell before the people he was attempting, heavy-handedly, to police; but this "frenzy" is on a larger scale and is socially pervasive. As the Big Man's retribution increases in its severity, the generalized opposition to it acquires a similar renewed coherence.

Salim speculates that "some prophecy, perhaps, had been making the rounds of the cités and shanty towns and had found confirmation in the dreams of some people" (211).

Naipaul's insertion of the word "prophecy" is not accidental; it belongs to a conscious and consistent analytical strand in *A Bend*. When Salim comes across a pamphlet issued by "the Liberation Army" under the title "The Ancestors Shriek" (211), Naipaul returns to the problem of political sanctimony. The pamphlet challenges the Big Man by amplifying his own terms and uses a quasi-religious vocabulary mirroring the quasi-religiosity in the cult that its designated "ENEMY" (211) has constructed around himself. "Many false gods have come to this land," the pamphlet urges, "but none have been as false as the gods of today" (211). The propagandist concludes by insisting that "OUR PEOPLE must understand the struggle," which he has defined as a conflict of true and false cults, and adds that the always generalized people "must learn to die with us" (212). The call for martyrs--for that is what it is--far from alienating its audience, makes an effect on them and gains partisans for the dissidents.

8

As the Trinidadian mob had gone from lynching Charlie King to celebrating him, in the episode that Naipaul recounts from the history of his native island, so now, in *A Bend*, do the local people sympathize with the same Youth Guard that they had once, "while they had been serving the President" (212), despised. Able, after their banishment, to appeal to their victimary status, the Youth Guard cadre can now offer themselves "as defenders of the people . . . And the people were responding" (212). The motility of allegiance belongs to the ubiquitous flux and uncertainty of the situation. The resentment of the locals gains in strength from the fact of the Big Man's non-presence. He speaks from the Capital, in the South; his voice comes out of the air, emphasizing his charisma and semi-deity. It is impossible to respond to him directly, and from this arises the necessity to find suitable surrogates for his disembodied authority. The prophetic character of the anti-Big Man feeling among the townspeople--an intuition "confirmed," as Salim speculates, only "in someone's dream"--indicates again that this is something massively other than procedural politics and that it is inspired by something just as massively other than a transparent political science. We are in the realm of the numinous, of a pervasive anxiety that appears, as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in the form of phantoms, prodigies, and sayings of sooth: "The ancestors are shrieking . . . The law encourages crime . . . We know only the TRUTH, and we acknowledge this land as the land of the people whose ancestors now shriek over it" (211).

The shared rhetoric of the Big Man and of the organized opposition that he inspires is rich with implication for an understanding of the relation between politics and religion, between liberation so-called and sacrificial violence, in the modern period. In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin summarizes the recurrent rhetorical technique of revolutionary movements since the English Civil War, whose Puritan agitators he takes as prototypical practitioners of politics-as-religion. The man with a "cause," writes Voegelin, borrowing key terms from Richard Hooker, who ran afoul of Calvinist zealotry, "will . . . indulge in severe criticisms of social evils and in particular

the conduct of the upper classes" (198). A successful propagandist will also lay claim to "singular integrity, zeal, and holiness, for only men who are singularly good can be so deeply offended by evil" (198). Next comes the attempt to focus "popular ill-will on the established government" (198), or on the rival establishment, the internal enemy, whose liquidation the "cause" seeks:

This task can be psychologically performed by attributing all fault and corruption, as it exists in the world because of human frailty, to the action or inaction of the government. By such imputation of evil to a specific institution the speakers prove their wisdom to the multitude of men who by themselves would never have thought of such a connection; and at the same time they show the point that must be attacked if evil shall be removed from this world. After such a preparation, the time will be ripe for recommending a new form of government as the "sovereign remedy of all evils." (CW V. 5 198)

Johnson, in commenting on Bandung-Conference rhetoric as it spilled over into Third World politics during the decades after independence, notes the importance that the new national movements placed on the "idea . . . implicit in Leninism, which endowed vanguard élites (and their guiding spirit) with quasi-sacral insights into the historical process" (Modern Times 512). Nkrumah, for example, encouraged his followers "to refer to him as Osagyefo, 'the Redeemer'" (513) and declared that, as he personally represented and spoke for Africa, "no African can have an opinion that differs from mine" (513). Kenneth Kaunda, in Zambia, declared of "Zambian Humanism," that it "aims at eradicating all evil tendencies in Man," followed by a long list of particulars and the promise that completion of the program would result in "the attainment of human perfection" (531). Voegelin's analysis refers to the revolutionary agenda of those not yet in power who wish to topple an established government, but the revolutionary-totalitarian insurgencies have invariably continued to implement the same agenda once in power as a means of preventing the consolidation of internal rivals. In such a case, what Voegelin calls a new form of government becomes an intensification of the prevailing form of government. Girard sees Stalin's "Show Trials" of the mid-1930s this way: "In totalitarian systems, the rulers tend towards this status of incarnation. They write only infallible books and articulate only inspired words" (Job 116). Girard refers to "the powerful return of the scapegoating process in both terrorism and totalitarianism" (117).

Naipaul, who lived in Uganda in 1966 and who has spent much time in the Francophone nations of Central Africa, has based much of his fiction on the appearance, in these places, of the most debased elements of Western politics, from Marxism-Leninism to Apartheid (the brainchild of the "holist" philosopher and military notable, General Jan Smuts); Naipaul also grasps how the withdrawal of what, in an essay, he calls "The Universal Civilization" opens the field to the natural brutality of human beings, whatever their stature or color, in their atavistic revolt against the painfully accumulated institutions of civil society. Not coincidentally does Naipaul's Big Man find his inspiration in his own resentment of the market, formulated as his disposition for "socialism." So do the pamphleteers, who share his "socialism" and who judge its antithesis

as odious and intolerable: "By the ENEMY we mean the powers of imperialism, the multi-nationals and the puppet-powers that be, the false gods, the capitalists, the priests and teachers who give false interpretations" (211). In rhetoric, this gesture bears the name of reversal. The selfsame enemies against whom the Big Man inveighs the pamphleteers would assimilate to the Big Man, trumping his socialism by identifying it with "the capitalists." It is not thinking. "Blaming colonialism," Naipaul says, "is a very safe chant."

9

Naipaul--like Voegelin, Girard, and Gans--sees all of these murderous deformations of politics and of the spirit as arising from perverse misinterpretations of Christianity, particularly from impoverished versions of the Gospel message that cannot come to terms with its transcendental element. Gans's formulation is lucid: "Victimary rhetoric reaffirms the reciprocity of the Christian moral utopia, not as universal love, but in the resentful mode of 'the last shall be the first,' the 'last' being defined as the collective victims of historic injustice" (Signs of Paradox 181). Naipaul is not a Christian. He is secular and skeptical, lately grown nostalgic for the refined Hinduism of his remote ancestors before the Muslim conquests, but hardly a convert to any faith. He grasps, however, on the basis of the painful evidence, that the transcendental concept in the higher religions (the argument need not be confined to Christianity, as it holds as well, in his argument, for Hinduism or even for Islam) is what has insured the morality that in turn, even if imperfectly, has grounded the social order and prevented the disintegration into primitive spontaneity. This was apparent to him forty years ago when he presented the character of Owad, in his Stalinist conversion, in the final chapter-sequence of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. In Salim's account of his life, in *A Bend*, Naipaul allows his readers to see the stages of the disastrous religio-politics of the ex-colonial nations leading to the lapse into colossal mimetic violence, as happened in Uganda in the 1960s, again in Nigeria in the 1970s, and most recently in Rwanda in 1994 during the slaughter of the Tutsis by the Hutu-Power Government. Salim himself is a naïf until late in his own story, but others, such as his childhood friend Indar or the academic, Raymond, are men of fierce, if dissimulated, resentments who have adopted doctrines and who seek the opportunity in the mess of "independence" to put them into effect. The paradoxical result of dressing a dictatorship in the garb of theory is to inculcate the conviction that all within the realm are, as Salim says, "dependent on the President" so that "whatever job we did and however much we thought we were working for ourselves--we were all serving him" (184).

Gans writes of the classic "Big Man" of the Pacific Northwest that he seeks "a privileged status in ritual distribution comparable to and, no doubt, associated with that of the central sacred being as source of communal appetitive satisfaction" (*The End of Culture* 152). Salim puts it in a way that highlights the difference between the ritual distributor of largesse in a semi-sedentary stone-age society and the socialist-Third World supreme leader of the post-colonial era: he senses the Big Man's puissance as "a personal thing, to which we were all attached as with strings, which he might pull or dangle" (185). According to its arguers, "independence" should have propelled the nation into full partnership with the modern market. There was a

scheme, for example, to use the country's hardwood to make furniture for the world; the Big Man placed great stock in this idea, but dropped it after enjoying the discussion of it. Instead, independence has sent the nation reeling backwards into pre-market social conditions--indeed, into an endless round of sacrificial crises--a relentless homicidal mill grinding people into so much blood and bone.

III

Salim stems from the Asians--the Indians, either Muslim or Hindu--of "the coast." This means the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa, where the Arabs had established a Muslim presence as early as the Ninth Century of the Christian Era and where they traded, in goods and slaves. The Asians have long constituted the mercantile class in their adopted country, which, Salim says, "was not truly African" but "an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really a people of the Indian Ocean" (10). Among Muslims, Salim's family "were a special group . . . in our customs and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus of Northwestern India, from which we had originally come" (11). Salim believes that his ancestors might have participated in the Arab slave-trade within the Indian Ocean littoral, down to the grandparental generation: "I remember hearing from my grandfather that he had once shipped a boatful of slaves as a cargo of rubber" (11). Belonging to a minority community, the Asians live in "insecurity" when, after World War Two, the Europeans commence their departure and the era of independence dawns. "Events in this part of Africa began to move fast," Salim remembers: "To the north there was a bloody rebellion of an upcountry tribe which the British seemed unable to put down; and there were explosions of disobedience and rage in other places as well" (16). Neither Naipaul nor his narrator regards the colonizers with nostalgia: "The Europeans wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else; but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves" (17). But Salim does not make colonial avarice his sole theme: "Being an intelligent and energetic people, and at the peak of their powers, they could express both sides of their civilization; and they got both the slaves and the statues" (17).

Salim's people live in a "compound" with a separate house for erstwhile servants who have become partly assimilated to the family. Among Salim's boyhood friends is Indar, who goes away to Great Britain for his schooling, and who reappears later in the novel. Nazruddin, a kind of uncle to Salim, sells Salim the shop that a rebellion, with its attendant chaos, forced him to abandon. He has since been living and trading in Uganda, but still holds the old title, not only to the shop itself but to certain "agencies" (24). "They aren't worth anything now," Nazruddin tells Salim, "but they will be again" (24). Salim, in his early twenties, makes the thousand-mile drive to the nameless town in the nameless region at the eponymous bend in the river:

10

When I arrived I found that the town from which Nazruddin had brought back his tales had been destroyed, had returned to the bush . . .

It was hard to get the simplest food; and if you wanted vegetables you either had to get them out of an old--and expensive--tin, or you grew them yourself. The Africans who had abandoned the town and gone back to their villages were better off; they at least had gone back to their traditional life and were more or less self-sufficient. But for the rest of us in the town, who needed shops and services--a few Belgians, some Greeks and Italians, a handful of Indians--it was a stripped Robinson Crusoe kind of existence . . . The shops were empty; water was a problem; electricity was erratic; and petrol was often short. (25)

Much in the town is also simply rubble. A spasm of anti-European violence had given expression of an indigenous wish "to get rid of the old, to wipe out the memory of the intruder" (26). The European neighborhood, which might have passed for a Brussels suburb, perished in a wave of systematic arson, after each house had been stripped of its accoutrements: "the ruins, spreading over so many acres, seemed to speak of a final catastrophe" (27). Yet for Salim, "the civilization" betokened by the wrack "wasn't dead" because "it was the civilization I existed in and in fact was still working towards" (27). Salim finds his living quarters and opens his shop (the wares are mostly intact) for business. At this moment, however, disturbing news arrives from the coast: "There was an uprising; and the Arabs--men almost as African as their servants--had been finally laid low" (29). He learns a short time later of the killings. One of the family servants makes his way to Salim and describes "arms and legs bleeding and lying about." (32). People known to Salim died, "as if a pack of dogs had gone into a butcher's stall" (32). For his own family there is now "no place for us on the coast" (29). A revolutionary government has taken over private houses belonging to the hated merchant class. Indar, when he reappears in Salim's life some years on, asks: "You remember our house? They've painted it in the party colours" (112). As in the case of the Trinidadian oil-strike murder, slaughter or expulsion is followed by esthetic commemoration--in the one case Calypso song-and-dance and in the other festive decoration of the house from which the owners have been rudely driven.

Consistently, in *A Bend*, Naipaul attributes to the market the power to sustain peace; people cannot make war and make trade with each other at the same time. The market does not supply love, it is true, and it does not make people into moral paragons; but in imposing its minimal rules and its etiquette of the transaction it creates pacific relations among sellers and buyers. Salim's first customer, Zabeth, is a woman from the bush; she buys galvanized basins and other simple implements to resell from her dugout canoe along the river. Salim respects her, despite her primitive characteristics, as "a good and direct business woman" (6). Equally consistently, Naipaul shows the market, in the persons of the merchant class, as the chief object of national political ire when independence arrives. The smashed signs of the Belgian presence suggest an irrational resentment whose direct consequences run diametrically counter to the interests of the perpetrators. Those who might inherit the boon--the market, the law, a functioning physical infrastructure--cannot distinguish the institutions from those who have implemented and run them; they show little meaningful interest in sustaining wealth-production or the protections of an impartial judiciary once they have chased out the "intruders," in Salim's

terminology.

In "A New King for the Congo," Naipaul reports on an actual and extreme manifestation of the phenomenon. Shortly after the Belgians had gone home, hastened on their way by the United Nations under Dag Hammarskjöld, a patchwork of civil wars broke out, with regional leaders vying with Mobutu for national control. One of the regional rebels, Pierre Mulele, "camped at Stanleyville and established a reign of terror" (*The Writer and the World* 221). In its particular details, Mulele's awful wrath forecasts Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime of a decade later:

Everyone who could read and write had been taken out to the little park and shot; everyone who wore a tie had been shot . . . Nine thousand people are said to have died in Mulele's rebellion. What did Mulele want? What was the purpose of the killings? [A] forty-year-old African who had spent some time in the United States laughed and said, "Nobody knows. He was against everything. He wanted to start again from the beginning." (221)

In his essay, Naipaul speculates about "resentments, which appear to contradict . . . ambitions" and which "can be converted into a wish to wipe out and undo, an African nihilism" (221). One detail of Mulele's rampage--the deliberate selective murder of those who were literate--suggests that the violence is metaphysical in its intent; it is a frustrated try at realizing the Kaunda program of "eradicating all evil tendencies in Man." The irritant is not the physical infrastructure or the functioning management of the nation but, rather, a type of consciousness deemed antithetic to the indigenous and therefore authentic consciousness. Sartre writes in *Existence and Truth* (1948), by no means neutralizing what he observes, that "if Peter points out the table to me, I see it through Peter's consciousness" (6). It is the other, not in his somatic but in his noetic manifestation who makes a scandal for the condemner of the "inauthentic." Mobutu himself did not lag behind Mulele in this form of resentment. He was, as Naipaul records, obsessed by "authenticity." Naipaul quotes Mobutu's words from an official University of Zaire publication: "I no longer have a borrowed conscience" nor "a borrowed soul" (*The Writer and the World* 222).

11

If it were a case of metaphysical attributes that must be expelled, then what one was witnessing would be a religious manifestation. Like Nkrumah, Mobutu saw himself as a redeemer who revealed a creed of salvation to his subjects. A mixture of Marx and Sartre, of communism and existentialism, this creed invoked the ancient spirits of the land and promised a utopia of milk and honey without work. While traveling in Kinshasa, Naipaul met a spokesman for "Mobutuism." "Our religion," the man said in a speech to teachers, "is based on belief in God the creator and the worship of our ancestors" (222). Henceforth there would be "no need . . . for the Christian saints, or Christianity" because "Christ was the prophet of the Jews and he is dead"; but "Mobutu is the prophet of the Africans . . . and Mobutu's glorious mother, Mama Yemo, should also be honored, as the Holy Virgin was honored" (222). In *A Bend*, Naipaul

transforms "Mobutuism" into the Big Man's "Africanism" with its cult of "the African Madonna." He transforms it again into the Big Man's appetite for something that is difficult to name without verbal awkwardness. Perhaps the phrase Western anti-Westernism conveys its flavor, for Naipaul's "African nihilism" is nothing other than European nihilism, from Nietzsche forward, dressed up comically in equatorial garb. If a man would be God then he must appear as creator, for creation ex nihilo is the exclusive and therefore identifying trait of God. But men live in a world that none of them has created; creation is prior to any individual. The colonial state, for example, is prior to the independent state. Existence itself becomes a stumbling block. The would-be deity must therefore eradicate the signs of prior creation, replacing them with his own mock creation. He must especially eradicate objectors to his construction of an egophanic pseudo-reality so that his coercion of a mass following suffers no interruption.

Thus, in the moment when they spasmodically, indeed murderously, reject the European presence, the indigenous rebels, those founders of their own "independence," absolutely require an imported ideological framework. They require, in other words, a political religion, the purpose of which is to annihilate a sense of reality and proportion and to justify the multiplication of victims according to a conviction of insuperable victimization. Thus the Third World's rejection of Europe is only Europe's resentful rejection of itself in the outward form of victimary rhetoric. The Big Man's threat against "those black men in the towns who dreamed of waking up one day as white men" becomes explicable under this hypothesis. The stultifying paradox of requiring the West in order to expel it is summed up in A Bend in the Big Man's creation of "the Domain" and in his manipulation of his Western--his European--advisors in his playing-off of one region, or tribe, of his nation against the other. Naipaul offers a thesis bound to earn him the spite of his academic critics. No less than that those responsible for the misery of the post-colonial Third World are the Western academicians: the "anti-imperialist" intelligentsia, the professional denouncers of bourgeois morality, and the deletors of private production and self-regulating exchange. They, too, so full of high-flown and scientific rhetoric, constitute not a "positive" or an "objective" but a religious phenomenon of the sacrificial type.

That none of these characters properly thinks, furthermore, but swims in a low-grade delirium of sparagmatic intoxication, is suggested by words to describe the fascination exercised by the Big Man:

"He is the great African chief, and he is also the man of the people. He is the modernizer and he is also the African who has rediscovered the African soul. He's conservative, revolutionary, everything. He's going back to the old ways, and he's also the man who's going to make the country a world power by the year 2000."
(138)

In the speaker's fevered imagination--articulated, so to speak, in the language of one who awaits a fabled millennium--the Big Man becomes a perfect emblem of sacrificial confusion: a mass of contradictory qualities, nonsensical in any pragmatic terms, who fuses opposites in his mythic compactness. In the little encomium, Naipaul makes it evident that the Big Man is the

projection of the crisis that, in the actual world, the theoreticians and power-worshippers refuse to see. The Big Man's charismatic effect on the intellectual characters in Naipaul's novel illustrates Johnson's remark, in his study of the intelligentsia, that "the association of intellectuals with violence occurs too often to be dismissed as an aberration" and that "often it takes the form of admiring those 'men of action' who practice violence" (Intellectuals 319). Conquest and repression strike such people as inherently more interesting than the details of voluntary exchange.

The "Domain," based on Mobutu's Presidential Domain at Nsele and linked to the Mobutu-inspired cult of "the African Madonna," represents the antithesis of the market. The construction of the Domain commences with the finishing-up, so to speak, of the pillaging and wreckage of the old European suburb: "The ruins which had seemed permanent were being leveled by bulldozers; new avenues were being laid out. It was the Big Man's doing" (99). The "little town" (100) that springs up on the site draws its financing from a nationalized copper-mining industry, the nation's only real source of income. "No one was sure, even after some of the houses were furnished, what the Domain was to be used for" (100), Salim says. He grasps its symbolic purpose, however, no matter what pragmatic aim it might serve. The Big Man "was creating an area where he and his flag were supreme" (100). Foreign magazines, "published in Europe but subsidized by governments like ours" (100), run picture-articles on the Domain explaining how, "under the rule of our new President the miracle had occurred: Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass . . . The President wished to show us a new Africa" (101). Characteristically, a promised enterprise--a farm--languishes and "the six tractors that some foreign government had given remained in a neat line in the open and rusted, and the grass grew high about them" (101-102). The Big Man finally announces that the Domain is to be "a university city and a research center" at which time the parade of "lecturers and professors began to come from the capital, and soon from other countries" (101). Students begin to materialize, too. Ferdinand, the teenaged son of Salim's customer-marchande, Zabeth, has graduated from the local, barely functioning lycée and receives a scholarship to attend the Domain's polytechnic. Many similar boys come out of the bush to become matriculates of the polytechnic. It is at this stage of the narrative that Naipaul brings back Salim's boyhood friend Indar, through whom Salim meets the professorial celebrity of the Domain, Raymond, as well as Raymond's (much younger) wife Yvette. Indar is "staying at the State Domain . . . attached to the polytechnic for a term" (113) as a lecturer.

12

Indar expresses a number of alarming ideas. His experience of being an outsider in London has heightened his sense of resentment against the perception that others might regard him as inferior. But this heightened sense of the contempt of others towards him finds its target not in those who might be the perpetrators of it; it seizes, rather, on Indar's own past. It mutates into a peculiar, imitative self-contempt. He tells Salim, "We have to learn to trample on the past" (141). The reason that Indar gives--it is not a particularly explanatory one--is that "everywhere" in the modern world "men are in movement, the world is in movement, and the past can only

cause pain" (141). The idea of "movement" corresponds with the notion of "frenzy" elsewhere in *A Bend*. It points to a conception of the world as ceaselessly in crisis; the assertion that to solve the crisis one must "trample" on the source of difficulties has obvious sacrificial connotations in the brutal sense. In London, Indar met a rich American "interested in Africa" (153-54) who agreed to bankroll Indar's think-tank for Third World political--not economic--development. He says to Salim: "I became aware of all the organizations that were using the surplus wealth of the Western world" (154), and he has determined to use some of it for himself. His main idea is to shift "refugees, first-generation intellectuals" (154) from one African country, where they are threatened by the regime, to another. "If Africa had a future," Indar reasoned, "it lay with those refugees" who, given the opportunity, would "make a start on the true African revolution" (154).

Indar's conviction that the past must be trampled belongs, then, to his revolutionary orientation to a postponed future. It also represents an outgrowth of the nihilism already described. In reference to his consultancy, Indar tells Salim:

"To work for an outfit like this is to live in a construct--you don't have to tell me that. But all men live in constructs. Civilization is a construct. And this construct is my own. Within it, I am of value, just as I am. I have to put nothing on. I exploit myself. I allow no one to exploit me." (155)

Indar, the consummate type of the intellectual, seeks authenticity, that being "of value, just as I am," and he despises the past or anything else that would interfere with his "construction," as he says, of himself. Indar fails to calculate how thoroughly dependent he is on the "tyranny" that he claims to oppose. Of the Big Man phenomenon as an anthropological category, Gans writes that: "the big-man is already a charismatic leader; it only remains for war, famine, or some other disequilibrating pressure to turn him into a tyrant" (*The End of Culture* 152). What Naipaul sees (and the same insight must be credited to Johnson) is that, in the modern period, "charismatic leaders" who have come to believe in their own charisma have learned how to foment that "disequilibrating pressure." Their method is the one so superbly summed up by Voegelin in the passage, drawing on Hooker's observations of England's Puritan insurgency, already cited. "I'm a lucky man," Indar says to Salim; "I carry the world within me" (155). Voegelin would recognize in Indar what he calls the gnostic deformation of one who has "interpreted the transcendent God as the projection of what is best in man" and who then "draws his projection back into himself" only to become convinced "that he himself is God, when as a consequence man is transfigured into the superman" (*Modernity without Restraint* 190). The gnostic experience, Voegelin writes, might be "primarily intellectual and assume the form of speculative penetration of the mystery of form and existence . . . or primarily volitional and assume the form of activist redemption of man and society, as in the instance of revolutionary activists like Comte, Marx, or Hitler" (189).

In Indar's remark that "in this world beggars are the only people who can be choosers" (*A Bend* 155) the connection between Voegelin's diagnosis of paracletic sectarianism as the spiritual-

political disease of the prevailing age and Gans's analysis of victimary rhetoric as the parlance of that age begins to be evident. In *Signs of Paradox*, Gans writes of how: "Victimary rhetoric is able to blackmail traditional liberalism"--represented in Naipaul's novel by Indar's American millionaire--"because it hides its ontology behind an empirical mask" (181). Victimary rhetoric's real "ontology," as Gans says, is anti-universal, for it "affirms the reciprocity of the Christian moral utopia, not as universal love, but in the resentful mode of 'the last shall be the first,' the 'last' being defined as the collective victims of historic injustice" (181). Thus, while "the universalist opponent is ostensibly denied his discursive position only until such time as the victimary difference has been abolished," the real goal is "the denial of the universal as such" (181). As Indar says, "I'm tired of being on the losing side" (*A Bend* 155), so that the aim of his "construct" is to promote him into the position of "first." He sees himself, in a kind of egophany, playing a leading part in the "true revolution" that he foresees and that involves trampling on the past. The past is a scandal standing in the way of authenticity. Under the Big Man's regime, however, only one "paracletic sectarian" can be authentic, can be first. One must be constantly cognizant, in reading these and other exchanges--between Salim and those associated either with the Big Man's regime or with the Domain--that he, Salim, naïf though he be, unlike these others, engages in an activity that requires the cooperation of second parties and demands for its justification neither theory nor rhetoric. In the exchange of goods, the two parties mutually agree on questions of "value." The ego does not enter in the transaction. Once again, the market establishes the ethical minimum, and audacious redemptory schemes take on a suspicious glint in the market's light.

13

Of great interest in Naipaul's presentation of the anti-universal struggle of his self-constructing characters is the seminar led by Indar and witnessed by Salim at the polytechnic, in which Zabeth's son, Ferdinand, takes a role. The Big Man has recruited these young men to be part of his cadre. They belong to the "magic of the Domain" (119), they participate in the "romance of [its] idea" (120), and they have dedicated themselves to the program of creating "the new man" (119) of independence. In the Domain, "everyone became locked in an idea of glory and newness" and "everywhere the President's photograph looked down on us" (120)--not, as formerly, "in army uniform, but in a chief's leopard-skin cap, a short-sleeved jacket and a polka-dotted cravat" (121). Salim at first feels the tug of the carefully arranged numen but later suspects that it amounts to little more than "the Africa of words" (123), his common-sense demotion of Indar's jargon-like "construct." Indar's lecture is about Africa as an idea, then about "the coup in Uganda, and about the tribal and religious differences there," and after that "generally about religion in Africa" (121).

After Indar concludes, Ferdinand rises to pose a question: "Would the honorable visitor state whether he feels that Africans have been depersonalized by Christianity" (121). Indar replies somewhat evasively, noting that Islam, for example, is "not African" and posing in return whether Ferdinand would argue "that Africans have been depersonalized" by Islam or by Coptic Christianity (121). Indar modifies the question: "I suppose you are really asking whether Africa

can be served by a religion which is not African" (121). Ferdinand protests that "the honorable visitor knows very well that this is a direct question to him about the relevance or otherwise of African religion" (121-22). Ferdinand believes that African religions have suffered demotion under Christianity and he is, in his limited way, staking a victimary claim on behalf of repressed cults and creeds. The claim of Christianity, that the willingness of God to forego sacrifice by undergoing it guarantees the sanctity of persons in an unprecedented and inimitable way, never enters the dialectic. Indar, who is educated, might be acquainted with it, but shows no inkling of such knowledge. What Indar believes can be inferred from his attitude to the past--that custom and inherited faith are impediments to "the true revolution." His subsequent remarks have the goal of mystifying Ferdinand, who drops his inquiry when the terms have grown too "complicated" (122).

Indar, the secular activist, thinks he is paving the way for his own program. In dismissing both revealed religion (Christianity and Islam) and the native cults and creeds, however, he is really paving the way for the Big Man's political religion, with the Big Man himself as tribal chief and high priest, as the embodiment of "all Africa" (134), or what Ferdinand has earlier called "the god of Africans" (83). The Big Man sees himself as this god. He institutes a piety about his own mother and causes to be erected in the Domain and elsewhere statues showing "a mother and child" (173). If his mother were the Madonna then, clearly, the Big Man would be the redeemer. That this cult "is a parody of Christianity" (194) is evident to the Big Man's European advisors, but even they argue that, "at the heart of this extraordinary cult is an immense idea about the redemption of the woman of Africa" (194), thus justifying it. They, too, invest in authenticity conceived under the idea that whatever is non-African, or rather Western, is a priori inauthentic.

The man who pronounces frankly on the "African Madonna" but who at the same time excuses it is Raymond, a scholar of the country since at the period before independence, known in the capital as "the Big Man's white man" (125). After the seminar at the polytechnic, Indar invites Salim to a party at Raymond's house in the Domain. Like the seminar, the evening at Raymond's figures importantly in Naipaul's presentation moral and intellectual decay in the Big Man's realm. Raymond's wife, Yvette, a youngish woman in her late twenties, greets them, as Raymond is in his study, working on his comprehensive history of the nation. Indar, with his parochial and vaguely Muslim background, "had never been in a room before where men and women danced for mutual pleasure, and out of pleasure in one another's company" (127) and is immediately entranced by the occasion. The music that Yvette had set playing on the stereo casts a particular spell on him. "Joan Baez," Indar explains to Salim; "she's very famous in the States" (127). Indar will eventually cast off the spell, but it lingers about him for a long time. Naipaul, who has been briefly a university professor in the United States and in Africa, in Uganda in 1966, knows the milieu well and has chosen his details tellingly. Salim hears only the attractive voice and the dance rhythms. Baez's lyrics, however, consist of almost nothing but victimary rhetoric and her example shows how this rhetoric had already penetrated Western popular culture by the mid-1960s. Baez is exactly the popular entertainment that one would associate with the faculty soiree of the time; she is emblematic of an intellectual mediocrity, a

self-righteous parochialism inevitably of the Left, that Naipaul wishes his readers to confront in the narrative of *A Bend*. To the same setting belongs a comment about "Muller's article" (130), just published in a venue that has turned Raymond down. Indar is the speaker:

"I thought it [the article] was a lot of rubbish. Every kind of cliché parading as new wisdom. The Azande, that's a tribal uprising. The Bapende, that's just economic oppression, rubber business. They're to be lumped with the Budja and the Babwa. And you do that by playing down the religious side. Which is just what makes the Bapende dust-up so wonderful. It's just the kind of thing that happens when people turn to Africa to make the fast academic buck." (130)

14

While denouncing "clichés," Indar employs them: the Marxist-academic locutions of "economic oppression" and of colonialists, even scholarly ones, exploiting the underdeveloped world for a "fast buck." Of particular interest is the oblique remark implying that the scandalous Muller has analyzed a violent episode in the country's history by emphasizing its "religious side." Raymond would never do such a thing.

It is unsurprising, then, that despite Raymond's exalted reputation--Indar describes him glowingly as "the only man our President reads" (131)--he turns out to be a nullity. When Salim reads the scholar's articles, his summary makes them appear as what in recent years has taken the name of the New Historicism, that fussy concern with documentary minutiae out of the archives. One essay is "a review of an American book about African inheritance laws" while another, "quite long, with footnotes and tables, seemed to be a ward-by-ward analysis of tribal voting patterns in the local council elections in the big mining town in the south just before independence" (180). Then there is "Riot at a Football Match" which concerns "a race riot in the capital in the 1930s that had led to the formation of the first African political club" (180); and there is another, longish article on the attempt of Christian missionaries in the Nineteenth to ransom slaves from Arab slavers. Salim hopes, as he reads, that Raymond will "go beyond newspaper stories and editorials and try to get at real events" (181), but concludes that the scholar "wasn't interested in that side" (181). The writer "didn't seem to have gone to any of the places he wrote about" and "he hadn't tried to talk to anybody" (182). For Raymond, as one might say, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. The judgment is a harsh:

He knew so much, had researched so much. He must have spent weeks on each article. But he had less true knowledge of Africa, less feel for it, than Indar or Nazruddin . . . Yet he had made Africa his subject. He had devoted years to those boxes of documents in his study that I had heard about from Indar. Perhaps he had made Africa his subject because he had come to Africa and because he was a scholar, used to working with papers, and had found this place full of new papers. (182)

Raymond's confinement within the "construct," as Indar might say, of dubious archives is consistent with the way Naipaul portrays him. He is only ever temporarily present as a conversationalist or participant in society. Readers encounter him either emerging from or reentering the darkened room that serves him for a study. He is a casebook dweller in Plato's cave. Raymond is currently at work on a selection of the President's speeches: "Such a work," he says, "if adequately prepared, might well become the handbook for true revolution throughout the continent" (136). So Naipaul reveals Raymond, like Indar, to be a low-grade gnostic desiring and despairing in his project to recreate reality by conjuration, by word-magic. This is the man who has been the Big Man's advisor and mentor since the time prior to independence. In his study of the Rwandan massacres of 1994, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families* (1998), Philip Gourevitch devotes considerable discussion to Mobutu, who abetted the Hutu Power movement and was eventually undone by a chain-reaction of events stemming from the genocide. Gourevitch notes that "Mobutu liked to appear on television in clips that showed him walking among the clouds in his trade-mark leopard-skin hat and dark glasses, claiming the Adamic power of renaming all of his subjects--or, at least, requiring them to abandon their Christian names and take up African ones" (283). In the name of "authenticity," Mobutu systematically plundered Zaire. Gourevitch notes that "an alarming number of Westerners took cynical solace in the conviction that this state of affairs was about as authentic as Africa gets" (284). In *A Bend*, when Naipaul has Raymond comment approvingly on the Big Man's "African Madonna," he makes him say these words in description of his political patron, the one who will shortly betray him: "I don't think many people know that earlier this year he and his entire government made a pilgrimage to the village of that woman of Africa . . . This act of piety is something that brings tears to the eyes" (136). For the sentimentalist who lives in words and not in the world, "piety" trumps all. It is an abandonment of criticism, of thinking. This, too, belongs to victimary rhetoric, and, in its deliberate turning from reality, it abets something beyond rhetoric--killing and more killing.

IV

Naipaul's critics--I have drawn on Said and Phillips as exemplars of the category--fault him for peculiar vices. Here is Phillips, from the same review-article cited earlier:

In the 1960s Naipaul began to travel, first to the Caribbean region for *The Middle Passage* (1962), and then to India for *An Area of Darkness* (1964). Alongside his constructed sense of himself as a writer, he was now beginning to construct his subject-matter, his "two spheres of darkness." He "investigated" this darkness, promoting his own vision as the only beacon of light that could penetrate these "half-made societies." And he seemed incapable of confining his often clichéd and ill-informed commentary to the pages of his books; he reveled also in providing sharp copy for Western journalists, all the while insisting on how stupid non-white, non-Western people really are.

Phillips finds Naipaul's work uncreative, hence appropriate to dismiss, because his recent fictional works are "autobiographical memoirs masquerading as fiction." In *A Bend in the River*, of course, Naipaul attributes stupidity primarily to infatuated Westerners like Raymond; the Africans he sees as victims will-they or nill-they of Western liberal schemes rooted not in reality but in the "romance" of non-Western people. As for his novels being "autobiographical": what this really means is that they are founded on empirical observation; they are only "autobiographical" in the sense that every novelist must have a point of view and that point of view must be founded in himself, in his own acumen and honesty. *A Bend*, for example, transforms documentary features of Mobutu and Zaire, verifiable by anyone willing to make the effort, in a narrative form. Naipaul's *Guerrillas* (1975) makes similar use of the "Michael X" killings in Trinidad in 1972. Unconsciously implicit in Phillips' remarks (a divulgence in spite of herself) is the complaint that Naipaul reports on reality rather than on the "construct" (the word is hers) that Phillips would prefer in place of reality. Voegelin offers a precise formula for this type of deferral: "Gnosticism as a counterexistential dream world can perhaps be made intelligible as the extreme expression of an experience that is universally human, that is, of a horror of existence and a desire to escape from it" (*Modernity without Restraint* 224). In Phillips's case, reality is the condition in which Naipaul enjoys literary success and receives the Nobel Prize, so that his existence scandalizes her and must be rhetorically diminished. It is simple resentment, restricted to the pages of literary criticism where petty egos eternally clash. Yet there is a continuity linking such harmless invidiousness to wounding enormities. Some years ago certain literary critics in the Iranian city of Homs issued a fatwa against author Salman Rushdie for having offended Islam in his fantastic novel *The Satanic Verses*. This death-decree has never been rescinded and Rushdie continues to live a furtive life.

Said, that other exemplary Naipaul-critic, the one who accuses the author of *A Bend in the River* of being a man of the Third World who has insultingly rejected his native identity, was, within three or four years, photographed participating in a lapidation and is one of those who joined the chorus of equivocation in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. The same charge that one has unforgivably betrayed one's ontological status turns up in the lyric of a Rwandan popular song promoted during the massacres under the Hutu Power regime. The song's objet de scandale is not, oddly enough, the Tutsis, even though they were the overwhelming target of Hutu president Habyaramina's carefully prepared genocide. Let the lyricist, a Hutu quoted by Gourevitch, speak for himself: "I hate these Hutus, these arrogant Hutus, braggarts, who / scorn other Hutus, dear comrades . . . / I hate these Hutus, these de-Hutuized Hutus, who have disowned their identity, dear comrades" (100). The genocide would not be complete until those Hutus who had refused to participate in it were also submitted to what the Hutu Power government called "the final solution" (94). They were, in their way, less tolerable to "true" Hutus than the reviled Tutsis. Hic est nostri contemptor! Gourevitch makes a relevant summary observation on the Rwandan slaughter:

Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community building. A vigorous totalitarian order requires that the people be invested in the leaders' scheme, and while

genocide may be the most pervasive and ambitious means to this end, it is also the most comprehensive . . . In fact, the genocide was the product of order, authoritarianism, decades of modern political theorizing and indoctrination, and one of the most meticulously administered states in history. And strange as it may sound, the ideology--or what Rwandans call the "logic"--of genocide was promoted as a way not to create suffering but to alleviate it. (95)

The Rwandan catastrophe took place six short years before the millennium, but it had roots in waves of tribally articulated, regime-manipulated violence in Zaire under Mobutu, the apostle of authenticity, in the 1960s and 70s. These waves are the subject of Naipaul's *A Bend*. They reflect what Tutsi refugees in Zaire said of Mobutu when they began to be murdered in the displaced person camps to which they had fled for their lives. "Every time Mobutu has domestic opposition," a refugee told Gourevitch, "he allows a civil conflict, then puts it down, and says, 'Voilà, peace'" (282). So, in the final days of his regime, Mobutu tried to regenerate la *sodalité Zaïroise* by turning le *petit peuple* against Tutsi asylum-seekers, exemplary victims of the paradigmatic sacrificial crisis. Naipaul's essayistic conclusion on the decay of Zaire under Mobutu converges with Gourevitch's on Rwanda under Habyaramina: "Borrowed ideas--about colonialism and alienation, the consumer society and the decline of the West--are made to serve the African cult of authenticity; and the dream of an ancestral past restored is allied to a dream of a future of magical power" (*The Writer and the World* 224). A parallel presents itself in Achmad Sukarno's Indonesian regime of "Nasionalisme, Agame, and Komunisme" (*Johnson Modern Times* 479), the middle term meaning "faith" or "religion." Johnson writes that Sukarno, when "faced with a problem . . . solved it with a phrase" (479). Whether it is Julius Nyerere's Ujaama ("familyhood") or Sukarno's ever-changing *konsepsi*, one confronts the identical error: that description is prior to reality. Naipaul, in *A Bend*, is thus discussing what Gans, in *Signs of Paradox*, calls binarism:

So Mobutuism simplifies the world, the concept of responsibility and the state, and simplifies the people. Zaire's accession to power and glory has been made to appear so easy; the plundering of the inherited Belgian state has been so easy, the confiscations and nationalizations, the distribution of big shadow jobs. Creativity itself now begins to appear as something that might be looted, brought into being by decree. (226)

16

In the novel, the "boom" associated with the putting down of the first rebellion and the subsequent lavishing of the Domain turns out to be no real increase in wealth but only a shifting of plundered wealth from South to North temporarily. Indar, at the end of his tenure, departs hastily on the steamer, in a panic to get away, his self-inflating dignity no longer in evidence. Raymond's edition of the President's speeches does not appear; another, simpler book is published in its place and the President abandons Raymond. Just before his own desperate exit, Indar tells Salim: "Raymond is in a bit of a mess" (139); Yvette explains that the

Big Man "broke with Raymond when he decided he didn't need him, that in the new direction he was taking the white man was an embarrassment to him in the capital" (187). As civic order in the town breaks down, Salim decides to make a visit to London to visit Nazruddin, who has found a new and settled life there. He also learns that Indar's consultancy "has folded" (241) and that Indar is living in bitter disillusionment. When Salim returns, after a few weeks, to Africa he discovers that his shop has been nationalized and now belongs to Citoyen Théotime. Salim learns that: "The President made a speech a fortnight back," in which "he said he was radicalizing and taking everything away from everybody" (254). His friend Mahesh tells him that "the President issued a statement just to let everybody know that what the Big Man gives the Big Man can take away . . . He gives and he takes back" (257). Salim becomes Théotime's manager under a new arrangement; Théotime presumes increasingly, making Salim his chauffeur, and after that "looking for new ways to assert himself" (262). Salim understands that while Théotime wants to act his role of shopkeeper without Salim's assistance, he knows nothing about commerce and knows that he knows nothing. Théotime has not done what Phillips accuses Naipaul of doing. She writes that Naipaul's "chosen theme is himself, his singular struggle, and the necessity of his having to create a subject for himself where none (or so he claims) existed." Naipaul's "self" is his commercial self, the one who sells in the literary market. Salim, who knows how to negotiate happily with people, with Zabeth for instance, also qualifies as a commercial personality. The seller must not presume on the buyer. The sale rests on the fact, not the dissimulation, of their equality as assessors of value. Théotime (the name means something like Proud in God and thus invokes once again the novel's religious theme) is unable to sell himself in this sense. Because Salim is now an unbearable ontological scandal, Théotime must get him out of the way; he reports Salim to the police as a private trader in illegal gold and ivory, and the police arrest Salim and jail him. He is to be kept behind bars until the president has made a visit to the town and returned to the capital.

Ferdinand, now a commissioner in the region (he has long since graduated from the polytechnic), saves Salim, even while he suspects that he himself is on a death-list for killing in a new tide of radicalization to be unleashed by the Big Man. He tells Salim to leave the country. Of himself he says:

"You mustn't think it's bad for just you. It's bad for everybody. That's the terrible thing . . . We're all going to hell, and every man knows this in his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning . . . It's a nightmare." (272)

Should the Big Man himself not execute Ferdinand, the Liberation Army, the ones who distributed the pamphlet under the title "The Ancestors Shriek," might. The opposition to the President has gained strength: "At first they were going to have people's courts," says Ali, "and shoot people in the square," but "now they say they have to do a lot more killing, and everybody will have to dip their hands in blood" (275). Salim gets aboard the steamer just before the fatal collision of indistinguishable regime and anti-regime in the town. Soldiers-- whose it is impossible to say--seize the barge towed behind the steamer but fail in capturing the steamer itself. The barge drifts away, armed men pointing guns at the passengers on deck.

The final image is of a searchlight illuminating hosts of night-insects from the bush. Gunshots rattle in the darkness. The worst of all worlds have combined in the Big Man's realm: the future is destroyed and Salim escapes with his life and his story and nothing more. It was Naipaul's judgment in 1975, four years before *A Bend Sinister* saw publication, that while "Mobutu's power will inevitably be extinguished . . . there can be no going back on the principles of Mobutuism," which had, he concluded, "established the pattern . . . of nihilistic assertion" (*The Writer and the World* 228). Phillips finds it intolerable that Naipaul should have said, in an interview with Elisabeth Hardwick, that "Africa has no future," but the prediction of "nihilist assertion" has been proven many times over since 1979, not least in the current slide into bloody chaos in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

It should be stressed that Naipaul does not want Africa to fail: when he addresses the subject, the basis of his judgment is empirical and causal. Western political fantasies, introduced into materially and intellectually minimally developed countries inevitably produce calamity. Voegelin's analysis of the rebellion against reality is again useful:

Gnostic societies and their leaders will recognize dangers to their existence when they develop, but such danger will not be met by appropriate actions in the world of reality. They will be met by magical operations in the dream world, such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intention, resolutions, appeals to the opinion of mankind, branding of enemies as aggressors, outlawing of war, propaganda for world peace and world government, etc. The intellectual and moral corruption that expresses itself in the aggregate of such magic operations may pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum, as we experience it in our time in the Western crisis. (*Modernity without Restraint* 227).

17

It is Ferdinand's "nightmare." The victimary rhetoric under whose aegis not only sacrifice but genocide finds its theoretical justification originates not in the peripheral nations of the increasingly universal Western civilization but in that civilization's central nations. This is the meaning of the depressingly familiar evening at Raymond's house in the Domain, when Yvette entertains the houseguests with the record of Joan Baez. The utopian project to remake an imperfect humanity under the sign of perfection has been a deformation of the Western, Judeo-Christian civilization for centuries and, if Voegelin were right, would be implicit in the gnostic heresies that competed with Christianity in the period of Late Antiquity. In his most recent book, Girard devotes a chapter to Apollonius of Tyana, known in his day as the Pagan Christ, and a case-study of the gnostic type. When the crisis afflicts Tyana, what is Apollonius' solution? He picks out a blind beggar to be the scapegoat and "orders the Ephesians to gather stones" (*I see Satan fall like Lightning* 56). He next "denounces the beggar as an 'enemy of the gods'" so as to "demonize" him (56). Once Apollonius has goaded the Ephesians to cast the proverbial first stone, the cajoler can "take a nap or whatever, for now violence and deceit are

bound to triumph" (56). In Rwanda, reports Gourevitch, "massacres were invariably preceded by political 'consciousness-raising' meetings at which local leaders, usually with a higher officer of the provincial or national government at their side, described the Tutsis as devils--horns, hoofs, tails, and all--and gave the order to kill them, according to the old revolutionary lingo, as a 'work' assignment" (94). The pattern is always the same.

On the basis of an analysis of utopian discourse similar to Voegelin's, Gans writes, in *Signs of Paradox*, in a passage on the Holocaust, that the meaning of Hitler's sanguine enormity "is not simply that we must abolish antisemitism or even 'prejudice' in general; what must be abandoned are all variants, including the Marxian-socialist variant, of the utopian model of total reconciliation, of universal harmony" (166). In Gans's opinion, "the socialist and fascist utopias are cut from the same poisoned cloth" (167) in that they equally deny the one-on-one negotiations of the market in favor of a ritual, ultimately sacrificial, idea of the state--or, more likely, its leader--as immanent deity. Naipaul says something similar in a modest essay on "Our Universal Civilization" (1992):

The universal civilization has been a long time in the making. It wasn't always universal; it wasn't always as attractive as it is today. The expansion of Europe gave it for at least three centuries a racial tint, which still causes pain. In Trinidad I grew up in the last days of that kind of racialism. And that, perhaps, has given me a greater appreciation of the immense changes that have taken place since the end of the war, the extraordinary attempt of this civilization to accommodate the rest of the world, and all the currents of the world's thought. (*The Writer and the World* 516)

Naipaul wonders whether "it is sufficient merely to hold a worldview, an ethical view, intensely?" (516) The answer, he says, is "double-edged" (516) because a further question always exist about what ethos one has "intensely" espoused. Many a prevailing "worldview" amounts to "philosophical hysteria" (513): "for that reason they can also be seen as a reaching out to a far-off and sometimes hostile system of fixed belief"; but "they can also be seen as an aspect of the universality of our civilization at this period" (517), parodying its tolerance the way the cult of the African Madonna parodies Christianity. Meditating on his Trinidadian-Hindu childhood and his move, as he says, "from the periphery to the center" (517) of civilization, he remarks that he "may have felt certain things more freshly than people to whom those things were everyday" (517). One of these is "the Christian precept, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," which strikes him so poignantly because "there was no such consolation in the Hinduism I grew up with, and--although I have never had any religious faith--the simple idea was, and is, dazzling to me, perfect as a guide to human behavior" (517). Another such dazzling idea is "the pursuit of happiness," as "so much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement" (517). The two ideas together amount to a vaccination against ideology because the pair of them "cannot be reduced to a fixed system" and "it cannot generate fanaticism" (517). V. S. Naipaul is the literary successor in English to Joseph Conrad and an

anthropological and political-moral thinker who belongs in company with Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Twentieth Century.

18

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The Great Effects of Small Things: Insignificance With Immanence in Critical Theory

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It is the minute detail that blocks the infinite invasion.
Bataille, Manet

You know of the expression: "The trembling of a branch against the sky is more important than Hitler."
Malraux, Les Chênes qu'on abat

Who didn't find shelter in the huge looks to the small.
Adam Zagajewski, "Kierkegaard and Hegel"

The mandate was minutiae--specks on or against the horizon of angry process. At the point of near invisibility, garrulously joined is the diversity of art's ethical claims, expressed in the only way they can be, through the temporalities of negligibility, the visibilities and agencies of negative increment. Things almost no things, oppositely pulling the connective tissue of the mass, now whim and now woe, those that take and those that unknow the measure of the responsibility for calamitous change, the ones causing to be unnecessary a story that others--with the status of blood debt--to scare us tell. King and economy-sized smalls, belittling littles of the "big house"--evidence of merited suffering--and those of its revolving door, the bread crumbs or body parts with which Hegel's return path to self-love is strewn. There was the sequence that made a point, and the point that unmade the sequence of Hegel's negativity cycle, the blazing appearance and disappearance of the master--small of the vanishing point and small of the missing of the point of vanishing. Small minus the recall of a splendid atrocity, and small as caput mortuum, the forensic small--the too-much-too-soon that became the too-little-too-late. A splitting of the function--memory of a mistake, the small as baleful vestige of an arrogance that had invited an overcoming, or the mistake of memory, small of explanation, small of interpretation, fine print of the dialectic. To them attached are differently tasked, as differently timed, the now dispersed, now coalesced, more and less ritualizable possibilities of

insolent unconcern. There at the flex point of the life cycle of negativity, always. Always about surface construction, the detail--but inviting in and out, or slickening to touch and go? "Hero dust" (Byron)--indelibility of the reminder remainder, the tainted remnant of the festive bounty of the post-prandial group can--context depending--wheel to become the sign of the muddling of what had been the moral clarity of the unforgiving choice celebrated in collective feast. The small is always the sign of a splitting of a difference, but to contrasting effect, either its liquidation or proliferation, mediation either of the self-love that was the torpor of the compact many, or that of the invulnerably animated one. Broker of recursion, always, but for the one or the many does it cause the world to disappear? The near nothing was the trophy or the undoing of whose persecutorial zeal?

A comfort, always, these auspicious omens, but for whom?--had through murderous trial or the mistrial of the innocencing finding of what had never been lost? Pathetic evidence of the action of a social law of gravity or the sign of its transformation into untroubled forward movement? Some smalls mock the process that others (those that have earned their humility) cause to fearfully serve. A detail chauvinism, art is a nanotechnology, minutely perceptive of the spoils of, or what spoils into, the absence of a fight. "What is the virtue of reduction either of scale or in number of properties?" asks Lévi-Strauss. (1) Upon an agency of insignificance does the answer depend. What separates the small from the small--the long from the short of the sequence of negativity, longest or shortest shadow of a reversible cruelty--is what serves or spares the cognition of violent potential. The site of fallibility--it is either within the form, or what the witness, from the vantage of his or her misery, is summoned to foresee as the result of whose ambivalently imagined doing?

2

A small thing is one of the locations of greatness, Bachelard said. (2) But whose greatness? we will really need to know. The greatness of America? "The beauty of the American landscape: even the smallest of its segments is inscribed, as its expression, with the immensity of the whole country." (3) Nothing good about this mocking fund, for Adorno, stash vault of smalls in the rapture of big love: "If . . . oneness . . . inevitably implies the use of force against the many . . . then it follows that the many must also fear oneness. Oneness is like the ephemeral but alluring images of nature in ancient myth. The unity of logos is caught up in a complex of blame because it tends to mutilate what it unifies." (4) Size matters, Heidegger said--art was about relative scale, about seeing oneself against what was larger, a larger that did not become smaller. It is in poetry that "man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being." (5) The temporality, that is, the stringency of comparison eluding him, the entire economics of it did as well. The presence or absence of guilt will be about the timing of the sizing of self-enjoyment, the spacing of the pulse of negativity. Nanaesthetics was the study of the hemophobic art that was the business of charismatic disincentive--the small that had never been anything other than itself. None of either your, or my own doing--the stork brought it.

The antidote to the small of American monstrosity was France, Adorno said. There was no getting over the greatness-guilt relation, feature as it was of negativity itself, but the redeeming mitigation of a sublimation seemed to have its home address:

The idea of greatness as a rule is bound up with the element of unity, sometimes at the cost of its relation to the nonidentical; for this reason the concept of greatness itself is dubious in art. The authoritarian effect of great artworks, especially in architecture, both legitimates and indicts them. Integral form is inseparable from domination, though it sublimates it; the instinct against it is specifically French. Greatness is the guilt that works bear, but without this guilt they would remain insufficient. This is perhaps the reason for the superiority of major fragments, and the fragmentary character of others that are more finished, over complete works. This has always been registered by various types of form that are not among the most highly regarded. [\(6\)](#) (my emphasis)

Everything happens here. The small--final light that permits seeing that confounds with not seeing--mediates a self-appreciation to differing "American" or "French" effect. Scene of an intersection anxiety, the small is the crack through which there is passing back and forth from a zero-sum affective economy to one of infinite good. What frees into distraction can also be rallied to form the crust that exposes to avenging fracture, that guilty imagination of the great that is the coming to appearance of the small that we see coming, as a result of a going, small that was the experience of the disappearance of the great. (This the fate of the opportunistic small--André Green: "The search for greatness requires that one make oneself small before it." [\(7\)](#)) Free smalls, strong only through their scattered fragilities, root out the trace of development from the image imposed by the "climactic" small, small as relic of the short work of the impassioned community, cautionary memory, reminder/remainder of dissolutive process. If there is an "iconology of the interval," as Aby Warburg said, [\(8\)](#) correspondingly there is an "interval of the icon," the disastrous becoming of the image, or the timeless, hence guilt-free unknowing of the violent embarrassment of an offending greatness.

The processual small was the sign of the terrible work you have already done, or could flip to be that of the work (of resentment) you will never know, much less do. It can be the sign of what, in the unknowing of transfer anger, is always mine, or that of the unmediated relation that was once yours. The small takes time in both senses of the phrase. [\(9\)](#) Oppositely transnarcissistic smalls, mediating passage from the narcissism of the one to the compact many, or from the one to the dispersed many, unaccountable smalls and those spread abroad but charged with the memory of the violent conditions of their dispersal. Opposed, in smalls of construction, and those of accident that cause surface and depth to not connect, the time sensitivities of the destruction of objects, the two bodies of Freud's ego ideal and the relations with the world attached. The evidence of the almost-not-seen is the indispensable reference in the encounter.

I begin my summary of what will follow with Lyotard, who speaks of "the accomplishment of the

loss of the object without which there is no literature." (10) This is to be put in touch with the point of Lévi-Strauss who argues that the aesthetic always has a relation to the miniature. The pleasure attached to it has to do with the absence of effort: "Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being quantitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified. More exactly, this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance." (11) The small would be the object that is the sign of the absence of an object, the end of effort communicating the pleasure of the end of a degrading irritation of a desiring attention. But does not Lévi-Strauss's argument immediately prove vulnerable to the vast evidence of the monumental? His point is rescued with reference to Generative Anthropology's knowledge of the relation of the aesthetic to resentment. What is great is always imagined by me to have been violently replaced. Key in the experience of art is the presence or the absence of the transition to the small, the presence or absence of a temporality, an agency of reduction. This sense that my happiness--that is, my absence of effort due to my experience of the small before me--is or is not due to a violent replacement in turn determines the extent to which I learn or do not learn the lesson of the reversibility of my potential violence, the lesson that my insistence upon my personal centrality, as a replacement centrality, will prove contagious to my terminal disadvantage.

3

Art happens at the point of interaction of a witness's desire for a missing strength with the illusion of a narcissistic form's power to compensate for this lack. The small is the indication that a humiliating identification with this ambivalently viewed structure has come to an end, that the illusion of a compensation for personal failure has been revealed as such, and that self-love has been restored through the liquidation of the external power upon which, at least for a moment, I had come to depend. In this sequence--that mirrors Hegel's negativity cycle--everything hinges on how this condition of anobjectality (that is communicated through one's relation to the small) is imagined to have been brought about, the agency of that success that is the disappearance of the obstacle for which the small stands, whether or not I imagine myself to be or not to be a guilty party in its disappearance. Decisive is the presence or absence of a locatable agency of the distress of a narcissism that once provocatively contrasted with my own perceived inadequacy--whether violence is perceived to be immanent to the form, or is something for which I imagine that I am responsible. Aesthetic theory is gap analysis, the study of the source of the trouble that is the condition of my self-reconnection.

To say that in representation the object is at once present and not is to say that involved are at once an identification and its negation. Contrasting smalls are the products of contrasting regimes of representation that differently manage the relation of identification to its end: one that spaces the moments of its onset and end and one that destages the split by causing the identification and its end to appear to occur at the same time. While in one case the moments of identification and its conclusion are markedly spaced, in the other the two moments blur into indistinction. Critical theory is about the search for a vocabulary to describe this split, and to

demonize one form of identification to the advantage of the other.

I illustrate my point with two scenes of destruction from Bataille, scenes oppositely socializing, illuminating in their confusions of the destructions of the self involved. In the first passage there is the lesson of the reversibility of violence: "On the basis of the principle of negation that one finds in Sade, it is strange to notice that the unlimited negation of the other amounts to the negation of one's own self." (12) But modern poetry is not the same thing as this interpersonal struggle: "The profound importance of poetry consists in the fact that from the sacrifice of words and images, and on the very account of the misery of this sacrifice (and in this respect poetry is no different from any other sacrifice), there is a gliding that takes one from the impotent sacrifice of objects to that of the subject. What Rimbaud sacrificed was not only poetry as object but the poet as subject at the same time." (13) In one case there is a violence emerging from without, while in the other, the violence is always already present in the misery of the form. Two sacrifices here--the distinction being that between the becoming-small and the already small. Two negations of the subject--while in the Sade case one is negated as antisocial, negated back into the social, in the other one is negated as social--through the identification with useless junk--but one is preserved as antisocial, resident alien. Two identification regimes: "identify then don't identify" versus--through the mediation of the miserable thing--the simultaneity of the two moments ("identify/don't identify"). If it is indeed the case that the small "maintains itself as the energy of disappearance," (14) it can do so to contrastive effect, either--through the becoming small--by imposing the brutal news of the necessity of the reversibility of violence, or--through what is always already small--by indemnifying the witness through the unschooling that is the agencylessness of the violence that makes possible its (now unbloody) pass through Hegel's negativity rotation.

To continue my preview of what follows, it will be my eventual point that at the same time that Critical Theory discovered its task to be that of posing the timelessness of the "identify/don't identify" pattern against the "identify then don't identify" narrative, it became anxiously aware of the antagonistic complicity that characterized the relation between the two, the fragility of the border that separated one from the other. Derrida and Adorno, and, as we have just seen, Bataille before them, were all aware of the how their favored lesser negativities seemed an excruciatingly vulnerable resource, always in the process of slipping into the modernly inadmissible greater. The cunning of what was always already insignificant, the discovery of the shrinkability of negativities, proved an insufficient power, threatening in its volatility, at least on its own, in that--and this was the no less the whole point of Deconstruction than it was that of "the negative dialectic"--it was always in the process of fainting into the pattern from which it had been emancipated, into a return of the sacred, or history in the strong sense, those regressions into the market-dissolving lessons of the reversibility of violence. The company of an ideal of immanence--rather than the entire collapse into it!--was then sought to block the potential to slide, to disconnect one negativity from another, one of Bataille's sacrifices from the other. The goal was the discovery of the Eldorado of that reliability of a lesser negativity reservoir, the stabilized affectivities of which were the condition of the existence of a market. In the company of immanence, Critical Theory, we shall see, discovered its hybrid vigor--not the

liquidation of negativity but the negativity cap. Critical Theory seeks a final disconnect from the controlled or uncontrolled, overfocused spasms of its Dark Side by becoming a heterology, finding alliance without dissolving into that selectively exploited blessing that was its opposite. In anticipation, an example of the blur of moral sympathy and contempt from Susan Sontag: "Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character.' . . . Camp is a tender feeling." (15)

4

Our "good" small is not big enough to finish the job it had been assigned--the selectivity of the exclusion of exclusion. Post-modern logic involves the cross action of yoked safeties: two ends of the end--two forms of identification harnessed to block a third--"identify/don't identify" in no elapsed time, bonds with but does not dissolve into the imperative to seamlessly, timelessly "identify," in order to discipline the "identify then don't identify" pattern. With the friendly ghost of immanence--containing, without proceeding to entirely dissolve negativity's stray from its grace--at once narrowing and exploding the range of the expression of negativity, limiting its vertical leap while unlimiting the energies of its lateral animation, the small, now the perfect crime, achieves the status of resident rather than excludable alien, a negativity at once widely suffused yet strongly repressed. The negativity cap--the imperative to "identify" (the endlessness of it)--is summoned by the "identify/don't identify" regime to assist in an outflanking operation, summoned to put the "identify then don't identify" pattern into a box from which its antieconomic volatilities cannot emerge, while at once allowing to the lesser negativity--now the constancy of a practical negativity--the fullest display of its animating potential. For the A Team of Critical Theory, negativity was a snap. Our eventual point--the lack of correspondence between the body parts of Critical Theory, between its defensive jouissance and its victimology, is the mirror of the heterology of the market itself.

The small was said to be the greatness of Proust. "A little patch of yellow wall." murmurs the fading Bergotte, "a little patch of yellow wall with an awning." (16) The critic expires in the course of a final visit to the Vermeer he so admired. A dash into a world he said that he had loved but a single day and from which he had long shied was motivated less, pointedly, by the requirement of the Dutch villagescape as anchoring whole than by the need to borrow final spontaneity from a single dab that had a diffident life of its own within the "View of Delft," a spot not near-lost into a hoarding, but neglected into indifferent availability--inalienable possession for each and all, inalienable out of indifference. Neither the great public rooms of the hotel at Balbec nor the structure of the building itself sustain attention. In full scurry, details not turned towards the expressionless face of the ego ideal in an architecture in flight from itself: "One was moved," instead, "to a greater level of curiosity by the tiny rooms which, without regard for symmetry, were scattered around the main hall, which, numberless and astonished, fled in all directions. . . ." (17)

Swarming through the novel, these and their unincorporated like leave one poised for assent when told that "In Proust . . . the relationship of the whole to the detail is not that of an overall

architectonic plan to the specifics that fill it in: it is against precisely that, against the brutal untruth of a subsuming form forced from above, that Proust revolted." (18) But there is not, here, just the model of Bergotte's détournement of the painting. The novel's activities chaotically resist the flattening of the drama upon which Adorno in his remark insists, where discouraged is acknowledgment of the split decision that is instead foundational, a garbling of microallegiances, a conflicted deployment, a two-way traffic of smalls, the richness of a tense exchange between details saddled to contrary purpose, some fuzzing the outlines that others produce, tokens of differently plotted redemptions, each differently assembling a moral world, undoing the education offered by the contending other, each summoned before the judgment of the other, abridged and unabridged forms of the sequence.

Louis Marin spotted this elasticity, this close-quartered struggle, in his notice of what he called the "opacities" of painting--its spots of colors, textures, varnish effects, fluxes, explosions, viscosities, drops. Fluid loyalties, the variously treacherous nothings, wholly owned subsidiaries, "made" and unmaking smalls, can be taken in either direction--liberated from or galvanized into the service of a story. Nothings that precede representation in painting are that through which the whole is constructed and perceived. They can be recruited to dissolve into the transparency, the remainderlessness of the sign in classical communication. But the truancy of modern painting, allergic to this service, autonomizes "those opacities that have, in artistic practice, the characteristic of--through the processes of representation--subverting the transitive operations of representation." (19) Able to express only themselves, the details are available in no-fault release. The result: the unmediated relation absent the necessity of exposure to the intimidating lesson attached to the transfer of happiness that occurs in the course of a zero-sum game.

Sartre: "The smallest piece is several, but, inversely, the largest plurality seems to be one. For the multiple requires distinct individualities which frankly oppose each other." (20) Volatile frontier of artistic and moral risk, the small comes large and small, happy and unhappy to drift in resolute, gaseous diffusion--there is the "wrong note" small with no known address, no visible means of support, and the ingratiating small basking in reflected celebrity, the integrated part relating to the general rule in the mode of mere illustration or example (something that can always be "cut out"), the harmonistic small that hastens a maddeningly gorged fund to its reckoning, priming it with a destiny, death-bound difference, this the small as feature of a tale of repossession that poisons the prosperity of the whole and its unsensed witness with a shared fate--weapon-grade insignificance--detail as plenipotentiary of a whole in which the particularity of the particular is effaced, extinguishing itself as it carries out the synthesis that is its humble work, integrated by a formal law and thereby confirming of it. Met with indeed is what Adorno hoped exclusively to see--heterozygous twins, the ones for which the question of power is not posed, ones that insist that there is no fantasy behind their (or our) happiness. But we can only be aware of others staked against it: the shape-serving smallnesses of a red-bordered roundness of the self-love that is the charismatic focus of the morbid longings of the noneconomic mass, those working smalls of connected space and time that one can only feel less free to describe in Adorno's insufficiently complicated terms.

Of Proust's Bergotte: "C'était surtout un homme qui au fond n'aimait vraiment que certains images. . . (comme une miniature au fond d'un coffret.) [He was above all a man who in the last analysis loved nothing but certain images . . . (such as a miniature at the bottom of a jewelry box)]" (21) Was this lost small, plunged in after, the same as the found small, with the same scattered status of "les petits faits vrais," those discrete challenges to massiveness and nostalgic concentration favored by ("the first") Swann? But to no single effect does the adjective of the dying author--used with near comic frequency passim--spray through *A la recherche*. It is from "la petite madeleine" that the novel as conquering whole is born, its crumbs compared to "les petites boules de papier japonais [little Japanese paper balls]" that when dropped into a cup of water produce a world in miniature. It is less Vinteuil's sonata than it is "la petite phrase" that moves Swann, but this fragment, steadied in a whole, stands in for a now inaccessible, subordinating reality, as does the centripetal "petit chapeau plat d'Albertine," the church at Balbec described as "une petite vieille de pierre," or "le petit concert" offered to Marcel by the flies on a summer day. But often triage is just not possible. In fluid patterns of exchange there emerge overlapping, ambivalent cases--the distinctions between smallnesses are often in the process of being diluted and washed away.

A la recherche is the site of the struggle where jostling small things fall short, or play big, fluctuating as signs of unschooled happiness, or, as forfeit objects, of the existence of a symphonically presiding whole. The novel, based as it is upon the centrality of the almost nothing, is always splitting, blurring judgment over its proper use. Indignant before the pressures attached to Elstir's little painting of a wretched vegetable, Basin de Guermantes complains to wife Oriane:

Swann had the nerve of trying to talk us into buying "A Bunch of Asparagus." That was the only thing that there is in the picture, a bunch of asparagus, no different from what you are dining on at this minute. But I refused to go for these asparagus by Elstir. He is asking 300 francs for it. 300 francs for a bunch of asparagus. It's worth a louis at most.

Lessing condemned the painting of miniatures because the attention of the viewer strayed alarmingly from the referent, fixing instead upon the materiality of the sign. The small could tend against the story, but didn't have to be its absence. That scale was not itself the problem, is clear, as the Duke preempts the charge of undivided prejudice:

Given this genre I much prefer that small study by M. Vibert that we saw at the watercolor exhibition. It's nothing, I know, you could hold it in the palm of your hand.

But there is an infinite amount of wit in this picture of an emaciated missionary before this insipid priest who is playing with his little dog. It's a whole little poem

of shrewdness and profundity. [\(22\)](#)

The whole little poem was the whole little story that the other was not. The perspective of objects decreasing in scale within a visual field of shifting remove constitutes an experience that is morally identical to that which occurs in narrative. And therefore decisive will be the intimidations attached or not to smalls, telling details, details of depth and intrigue, the smalls at the end of an angry space or time path, details of untelling, the smalls of suspended animation that annul laws of perspective, avoiding thus a wedge aesthetic, unmoralizing the going-outside-oneself, unmoralizing negativity. Dots--connectable and not; the small as synecdoche versus the small as syncope. There is the small that is the residue of our time-line, indication of the completion of its mortal transfer, the small of the trouble of the becoming small. The becoming visible of the small was the relief attached to the becoming invisible of the great. Adorno: "Enlightenment leaves practically nothing of the metaphysical content of truth--presque rien, to use a modern musical term. That which recedes keeps getting smaller and smaller. . . ." [\(23\)](#) Through storm or stealth, the small is variously involved in our two economies, the determining role being the presence or absence of a temporality and culpable force of disappearance. The causality, the presence or absence of a narrative of lessness, will be the basis for all relevant distinctions. At issue will be the socioeconomic work of the renunciation of objectality within objectality that expresses those different relations between proximity and distance that communicate contrasting relations between delinquency and punishment.

Herder said that the fable was the paradigm of original and direct aesthetic creation because it is a miniature. Gans supplies a basis for this, taking note of an evolution that assumes the form of a reduction in elapsed time of an experience of resentment:

When narrative discourse replaces the final division of the sacrificial spoils, then the life and death of the victim-hero will be expressed in the narrative in the short-term temporality borrowed from ritual. As discourse becomes rationalized, and the violent collective component attenuated, the mythic "biography" of the hero, whether terminated by death or a symbolic substitute, remains bounded by these same temporal limits; the hero as we find him, say, in Homer, has his "story" whose telling occupies a similarly brief period of time. For the hearer of the narrative, the concentration of the significant events of the hero's life span into these limits is a source of aesthetic satisfaction. (my emphasis)

6

Resentment is time critical. De Man's remark on this trajectory's destination--"It is the persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment" [\(24\)](#)--must be understood as ethically related to the critique of a succession of which Nietzsche here speaks: "Ressentiment itself, if it should appear in the noble man, consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction,

and therefore does not poison." (25) Through use of a contrastive ego-ideal-interrupting small, made possible is a knotting of preconditions and consequences that results in the avoidance of the lumbering acknowledgment of destructive impulse. The achievement struggled for is that of the wizardry of the spontaneity that emerges from minimizing the umbrage that would be incompatible with dynamic patterns of social development.

"The parasite produces small oscillations of the system, small differences. . . ." (26) And Serres continues: "[T]he parasite is always small; it never exceeds the size of insects. . . . In fact, the most numerous are protozoa or bacteria or viruses. Their small effects are usually well-tolerated by the organisms, which quickly rediscover their health, that is to say, their silence (at least relatively). This equilibrium that is well taken care of, thanks to the defense systems, is more solid than the preceding one." (27) This last mentioned structure would be the scarifying sequence, involving the small of the story, undone by the stealth of the self-countervailing of distance and proximity in interaction with another collapse, that of self-pleasure and protection, of the subterfuge of a form that is in a dialectical relationship with itself, rather than with other elements in a contrasting social field, making possible "a small consciousness upon waking, a small creak, a short run to safety and then immediate return." (28) The goal of this minimal pass through a threshold of visibility will be to produce the "soft" sequence that decouples, that suppresses the historically vital element of the dialectic while striving at once to give autonomous life to the economic.

"Envy down," a "mimetics of social inferiority" (Kenneth Burke) brings about the immediate return of desire to the self, a return unschooled in violence because unmediated by violence. Listing taboo figures, Freud overlaps omnipotences that are to be distinguished: "The king or chief arouses envy on account of his privileges: everyone, perhaps, would like to be a king. Dead men, new-born babies and women menstruating or in labor stimulate desire by their special helplessness." (29) And in the 1914 essay on narcissism, contrasted with impressive cases of self-enjoyment are those relatively pale figures, also constituted narcissistically, that provoke the shrug or laughter instead--infants, cats, comedians. No explanation is offered as to why these last are described weakly as "charming," but the reason is clear enough. The infant, or kitten's indifference is already demystified, its claim enfeebled by the certainty that subhumanity embarrasses the co-present illusion of autonomy. The powerless figures are the negative, inert mirrors of omnipotence, but figures of omnipotence just the same. These mutilated tyrants marked at once by deficiency and self-completion are osmotic of the threat posed by any anticipated rival. The two smalls, it will be my point to develop, are the two mediations for achievement of these oppositely corrected self-appreciations. From small to small--the story of the ritually targeted one who cannot tell the difference, is replaced with the absence of the story, or deritualizing indifference to the one who cannot tell the difference.

"The immaterialization of the thing--its becoming invisible--that is what modern art, in its most radical gesture, seeks to make visible." (30) Nothing--hence my italics--could be more misleading. There is only sequence--the aesthetic always involves commitment to contingency,

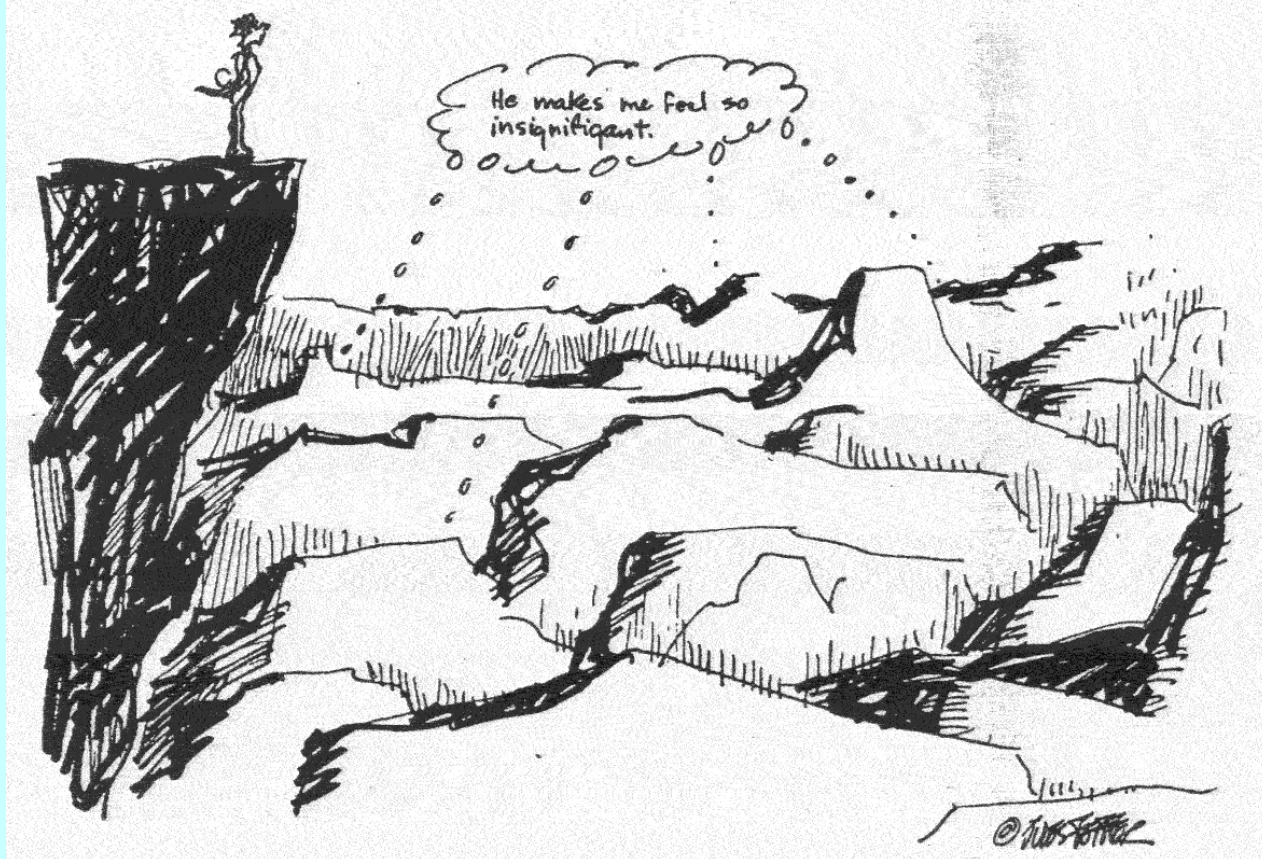
but the vicissitudes surrounding its demonstration are what matter. The specificity of the literature of the successfully freest market is to be found in the occulting of the process falsely underscored here as characteristic. Edmund Burke wrote that: "A great beautiful thing, is a manner of expression scarcely ever used." (31) But reason for uneasiness emerges when it is added that: "We submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance." (32) Unsettling is that contrast is centralized in this centralization of the small: "Beautiful objects are comparatively small." (33) (my emphasis) Thus the small here does not rescue from a narcissism in (of) crisis. An indifference is achieved through a process, instead of being found there at the beginning. Burke was not able to take what would soon become a commonplace notice of a double life of the small.

The vanishing point absent the painful process of vanishing--a come-upon rather than the schooling of the come-to, inversely matched to the scale of my malice. In Kafka's letter to his father we learn of two smalls: "Two possibilities: making oneself infinitely small or being so. The second is perfection, that is to say inactivity, the first is being, that is to say action." (emphasis added) The same distinction between smalls of shrinking and those preshrunk had already been the basis of Kant's Third Critique, minus the ranking that now appears. Schlegel remarked that many works of antiquity have become fragments, but many modern works are fragments at the moment of their birth. A conflict of the smalls, then, over whether or not they are seen to be processual between the poles of the visible and the invisible. "Endosmosis" (Bergson's term for spatialization (34)) versus temporalization, shifts the location of ego ideal, and the social costs of its realization. The temporalities of disengagement: The good-as-gone that mediates our location within the humbling of a corrective unfolding, is replaced by good as almost gone. Crucial are conditions of arrival, the business of how reduction of scale is achieved. One detail seeks and finds refuge in itself from the other; one will be harvested, the detail that is an anticipation of violence to come, that the other, a disconnected happiness, causes us to unknow, its lesson unlearned. The experience of comparative scale is the vehicle of transfer, and the transfer is the rude school of the limits that constrict my individual powers, Melanie Klein's "envious superego." If indifference is to be subtracted from a zero-sum game--if I am to see small, but to appear small as I see it, risk avoidance through risk inflation--the small needs to be subdivided away from the small of catastrophic temporality.

Op-Art

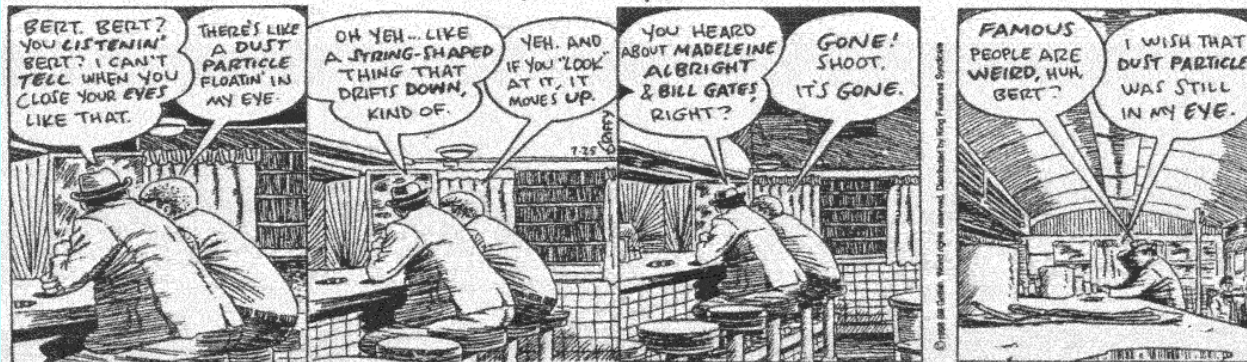
JULES FEIFFER

Bill Gates Visits the Grand Canyon



ZIPPY By Bill Griffith

"EYE.YI.YI"



7

Just how much fun is the small and whose fun is it? Northwest humor helps in seeing that the issue is whether it serves as a passage to a shared or a hoarded indifference. We find in Jules Feiffer--in the becoming small of the immense, thus the detail of transfer--a parody of the

sequence-based sublime that stands brutal forfeit. This is a small that doesn't measure up, product as it is of the work of a sizing up and down. Bill Griffith focuses instead on that which is already small, appearing in his last frame as the no-longer-available talisman that wards off figural distraction, dividing one away from it without incident. The small is used against the becoming small. Through the small of a not-knowing, one becomes invulnerable to a seduction. Freedom is available from charismatic bearings through the collapse of distance and proximity--one catches the sun that the other enables us not to know.

Smalls in Breton and Flaubert clarify the contrast. The issue in the passages below is the assignment of the privilege of seeing small--in the former it is the beloved, in the latter it is the reader; in Breton, one, in Flaubert, all. Their details broker differently addressed, differently fated self-satisfactions--those contrasting and those not. Whose detail settles whose indifference. From *Nadja*: "I am but an atom that dies if not allowed to breathe at the corner of your lips." (35) The small here, in dependency absolutely threatened, is an eagerly recombinatory deficiency, and thus not forfeit is the sentence to anxiety. From the scene of the fiacre in *Madame Bovary*, in the midst of the description of the rounds of the amorously turbulent coach: "Continuing on its way, it passed by Saint-Sever, by the Quai des Curandiers, by the Quai aux Meules, and once again by the bridge, by the parade grounds, and behind the gardens of the old folks' home, where black-jacketed old men strolled in the sun, along the terrace entirely greened with ivy." (36) More than simply dishing up the coarse fun, Flaubert graciously provides the disengaging specks that atomize happiness for the reader, causing her or him not to look *amare conspectu* upon any image of happiness not shared. These details bring an egalitarian, atomized indifference, achieved by the reader at the moment that it is also experienced by the reciprocally absorbed lovers. In terms of Freud's "On Narcissism," this small permits the unknowing of the ego ideal, because one now is the ego ideal, but, as we shall see, in the form of "his majesty the baby." The blessing of Percec: "To force the flattening of attention." (37)--the small of undedicated focus, of generalized substitution and accelerating displacements that put at one's disposal a uniformly indistinct world of the interchangeability of the objects of (the absence of) desire, dizzying one into all innocence, and out of the conviction of the existence of a morally consequential event, evenly allowing the joy in the world as an undifferentiated state, that of the indifference of not being able to tell the difference.

Homeopathic identification, then, a.k.a. Adorno's "mimesis,"--an identification, through an effect of scale, that solves the problem of identification. Flaubert's list of insignificant places does for the reader the trick noticed by Beckett, who anticipates the Bill Griffith point that the small enables avoidance of identification, the horror of belief and stable group formation: "And without the company of these little objects that I have picked up by chance in the course of my wanderings. . . I would have perhaps been reduced to associating with decent folk, or to seeking solace in some religion. . . ." (38)

Baudelaire on a derelict commotion, the relation of the detail to a proper group, confirming the point while reversing Beckett's valuation. The artist who lies down with the small fails in his concentrating duty to impose conquest over chaotic insurrection:

An artist having the sense of form, but having the habit of exercising especially his memory and imagination, now finds himself assaulted by a riot of details, each of which cries out for justice with all the fury of the crowd in love with the idea of absolute equality. All justice here finds itself necessarily violated and all harmony destroyed, sacrificed. Every trivial thing becomes enormous, each trivial thing becomes a usurper. The more the artist impartially focuses upon, the more the anarchy is increased. Whether he be presbyopic or myopic, for him there disappears all subordination and all hierarchy. [\(39\)](#)

This older hostility survived in the influential Paul Bourget who, recalling the upset of Baudelaire, saw in this errant matter an affront to a compact community that was a symptom of la décadence: "A decadent style is one in which the unity of the book is undone in favor of the independence of the page, in which the page is less important than the autonomy of the sentence, a sentence that decomposes in favor of the word." This misused language in turn is the mirror of "a society that reduces itself to a collection of individuals." [\(40\)](#) The point was taken up by the careful Bourget reader Nietzsche, who noticed that "The preferred theme of the moment is the great effect of very small things." [\(41\)](#) An excess of dexterity was no mastery:

What is the sign of every literary decadence? That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole--the whole is no longer a whole. But this is the simile of every style of decadence: every time, the anarchy of atoms, disaggregation of the will, "freedom of the individual," to use moral terms--expanded into political theory, "equal rights for all." Life, equal vitality, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest forms. [\(42\)](#)

8

But then for Nietzsche, who could marshal the strength to turn, Wagner remained worthy, not as a charismatic, but only as a composer of details that had acquired their own rights: "Wagner is admirable and gracious only in the invention of what is smallest, in spinning out the details. Here one is entirely justified in proclaiming him a master of the first rank, as our greatest miniaturist in music. . . ." [\(43\)](#) "But quite apart from the magnétiseur and fresco-painter Wagner, there is another Wagner who lays aside small gems. . . ." [\(44\)](#) "What can be done well today, can be masterly, is only what is small. Here alone integrity is still possible." [\(45\)](#) And Adorno explains the basis of the dignity that requires the reversal of the judgment of Bourget: "The detail can be understood as the representative of the individual, and the whole as the universal, namely that which has received social approbation. . . ." [\(46\)](#)

When so much is there, so much is missing. The small employed against the becoming small is

the small against the group. Adorno's affection for the reduced scale in Proust had to do with its deployment for undoing the crowd so despised by the novelist. (Proust writes that "The spirit of imitation and the absence of courage govern society just as it does the crowd." (47))

Interrupting the ego-ideal food chain, the small separates imitation from imitation, dissolving reversal of the mass. Bataille, author of "Le Petit" (that interested Derrida), wrote of "The misunderstood sovereignty of the small, the divinity of its impossible certainty." (48) And he added, in unpublished notes: "There is the sense that society in no way touches the core of being, that one can touch it only as an individual. Hence the meaning of the sovereignty of the small, and its impossibility in society." (49) At once it conjures away the nondetachable indignities of imitation and the group. Vico, anticipating Proust and Derrida, saw the small as an instrument of unherding, noting that an index of modern detachment from the senses, from a primordial "sympathetic nature," was use of "diminutive signs." (50)

Horkheimer made the general point concerning the relation between the small and the group--undoing "pure" aesthetic feeling of Kant:

In the modern period . . . sculpture and painting were dissociated from town and building, and the creation of these arts reduced to a size suitable to any interior; during the same historical process, aesthetic feeling acquired independent status, separate from fear, awe, exuberance, prestige. . . . It became "pure." The purely aesthetic feeling is the reaction of the private atomic subject. It is the judgment of an individual who abstracts from prevailing standards. The definition of the beautiful as an object of disinterested pleasure had its roots in this relation. (51)

Hegel, upon whom this is based, had complained of the deceit involved in the focus upon the insignificant, and remarked approvingly that in ancient Greece public spaces were adorned and described as beautiful, while private areas were barren of aestheticizing intent. Perpetuated here was an old critique--the ancients did not usually admit, or at least encourage attention to diminished forms. Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics) said that greatness of soul implies impressive size. Small things may be neat and well-proportioned, but they cannot be described as beautiful. The shaming of curiositas that extended from early Christian thought to the late seventeenth century, and beyond, to Heidegger, prominently involved criticism of attention to the small. Augustine, in the Confessions, associates the vice with a pleasure involving reduced scale. The small was a problem because it could not be used, he argued elsewhere, anticipating Kant's point. The condition of an unmoralized self-love: The return of love to the self, following the brevity of its investment in the insignificant, because this inconsequential thing is already diminished, diminished not on account of my own real or imagined violence. La Bruyère continues the tradition in defining curiosity: "It is not an amusement but a passion, and often so violent that it yields nothing to love and ambition except in the diminutiveness of its object." (52) The man for whom "The whole is the untrue" noticed the problem of the bad small in Hegel and the solution to it:

The philosophical call for immersion in detail, a demand not to be steered by any philosophy from above or by any intentions infiltrated into it, was Hegel's one side already. Only, in his case the execution caught in a tautology: as by prearrangement, his kind of immersion in detail brings forth that spirit which from the outset was posited as total and absolute. Opposing this tautology was Benjamin's intent--developed by the metaphysicist in the preface to *Origins of German Tragedy*--to save inductive reasoning. When Benjamin writes that the smallest cell of visualized reality outweighs the rest of the world, this line already attests to the self-consciousness of our present state of experience, and it does so with particular authenticity because it was shaped outside the domain of the so-called "great philosophical issues" which a changed concept of dialectics calls upon us to distrust. (53)

But Frankfurt School smalls had been already understood by Hegel, those smalls from which nothing could come--smalls just too small. The drive to conceptualize could be blocked through effects of scale: "Physics with its molecules and particles suffers from the atom, this principle of extreme externality, which is thus utterly devoid of the Notion, just as much as does the theory of the State which starts from the particular will of individuals." (54) And: "[The artist] must omit little hairs, pores, little scars, blemishes, and grasp and represent the subject in its universal character." (55)

9

But before we misread this dismissal as grounds for finding Hegel to be at odds with those who preceded and immediately followed, we must notice that it is easy to imagine how, given his terms, a beautiful small thing could be said to exist. A divinity's detail might well qualify. Jean-Paul Richter offers a view of its function: "The aesthetic sublimity of the action . . . always stands in inverse relationship to the importance of the sensuous sign. Thus, while the person and great actions of the god Jupiter may be merely majestic, it is only the smallest twitching of the god's eyebrow that is worthy of being termed sublime." The eyebrow, as germ of the heliotropic plague of the charismatic, draws into an identification based upon contrast, as does that of Burke. His and Kant's approval of the small do not seem distant from Hegel's condemnation. Kant is more advanced in that the charismatic result he seeks (society-wide in the beautiful, pan-species in the sublime) is achieved in the absence of (figural) charismatic conditions. But, as noted in Burke, the small could be turned to for perpetuation of contrast, and represent a continuation of the Hegelian position by other means.

Kant was reluctant to remain anything other than (furtively) contrastive in focus. Aesthetic judgment upon the sublime "is a might enabling us to assert our independence as against the influence of nature, to degrade what is great in respect of the latter to the level of what is little, and thus to locate the absolutely great only in the proper state of the subject." (56) Examples of the beautiful tend also be reduced in scale: "Our sympathy with the mirth of a dear little

creature is confused with the beauty of its song." (57) In Kant there is always the small--both Kafka's what is small and what becomes small (the sublime). The beautiful is said to be in the object because it was always already small, and thus one is little tempted to match, best or borrow its limited strength. But the sublime comes to reside in the subject because it, the subject, has been agitated into stealing power from an object that becomes small through forcible transfer of authority. We here answer Derrida's question: "Why would the sublime be the absolutely large and not the absolutely small? Why would the absolute excess of dimension, or rather quantity, be schematized on the side of largeness and not of smallness?" (58)

Smallness alone, then, does not do the job as it can be a simple transposition, allowing for a change in address of enormity. Size is not everything--contrast here remains. There can be a shift in the location of its framing, of an arrogant vantage. But simply to shift scale is not so much to attack an idealizing transference as it is to alter the address of its occurrence. And thus refinement was required in the habits of smallness. The small would contain the virus of the contrast unless it could be self-divided. To complete the undoing of idealizing transference, the small had to be split, freeing one small to be activated against that other that makes of us the witness of the successful work of invidious process.

A small ever more insistently divided against itself is required, and hence checked must be any praise that might appear to be indiscriminating. Nancy, revealingly confused, on the now familiar triage:

Fragment: not the part fallen from a whole that has become disassembled or broken, but instead the eruption of what is neither immanent nor transcendent. Not the part that has fallen, or even less, something dethroned, but the part that just happens to have your way, that is to say comes to you through, or supplied by devolution. Devolution is passing on, sharing, destination, transmission, transfer through development (de-volere), through an unfolding and coming apart. Fragment: devolved being.

The scraps, refuse, shards, shreds, remainders, left-overs, rubbish, innards, the excrements of which contemporary art is full and that it vomits up, are all posed and exposed at the limit, infinitely narrow, that separates the falling in caste from the being-your-due, that separates the loss of prestige from the abandon of abandonment itself. (59)

And, reminding of Marin: "There would thus be two extremes in fragment types: the one of exhaustion and finishing, the other being that of the event and presentation." (60)

The small is the name of a proliferation--"rhopography." (61) A constellation of smalls, filling an entire landscape: "Little wheels, little stars, little screws, little worms, little nails, gobs and gobs of thingamabobs, little springs, sparrows wings, cigarettes. . . ."; Derrida is happy to quote

Genet. [\(62\)](#) Thinking today is necessarily compelled "to abide with minutiae," Adorno said. [\(63\)](#) Here, as in Baudrillard, there is relation between the small and the Kantian beautiful: "[Miniatures are] liberated from human reference." [\(64\)](#) Metaphysics and theology, which once had the power to contest worldly absolutes, Adorno argued, have migrated into secular consciousness where they survive only as the most minute and inconsequential particulars. Anticipating the practice of Deleuze and Derrida: "Micrology is the place where metaphysics finds a haven from totality." [\(65\)](#) And, with another Third Critique-related point: "The infinitesimal, that which escapes the concept." [\(66\)](#) The insubordinate because inassimilable small avoids reification, exposing the fraud that the particular is merely an example of the universal, so goes Frankfurt School logic. In Adorno with Horkheimer, the break-away miniature is promoted as disorganizing an oppression: "When the detail won its freedom, it became rebellious, and in the period from romanticism to expressionism asserted itself as free expression, as a vehicle of protest against the organization." [\(67\)](#) Not the small of exclusive possession (eyebrow of the god), but that of possibility. We know that Lévi-Strauss is not with Kant and Burke when he says that only the small can be beautiful, for he remarks of the viewer of miniatures: "In a confused way, he feels himself to be their creator with more right than the creator himself because the latter abandoned them in excluding them from his creation." [\(68\)](#) Brevity was the soul of critical theory--it was about how to guarantee the authorless arrival of the small--more and more eyebrows, but not those belonging to a god.

10

Tocqueville said that in democratic America "Short works will be commoner than long books, wit than erudition, imagination than depth." Ionesco: "Art brings a tiny, a very tiny light, a tiny grayish light, a little tiny beginning of illumination." Barthes describes himself and adds the politics: "Propensity for division: fragments, miniatures, partitions, glittering details. . . . This propensity is labeled progressive: art of the rising classes proceeds by just such framing." Chiming with Adorno, he notices that reduction of size constitutes a designification--it results in "an excision which removes the flourish of meaning." Malraux: "Classical aesthetics proceeded from the part to the whole. Ours, after proceeding from the whole to the fragment, finds a precious ally in photographic reproduction." [\(69\)](#) And Barthes too saw photography as involved with the small--the punctum. [\(70\)](#) Derrida describes this as the basis of alliance with Barthes: "Like him, I sought the freshness of a reading that was associated with the detail." [\(71\)](#) "My interest in the detail was also his." [\(72\)](#) The affection expressed in his synonyms: "sting, little hole, little stain, little cut." [\(73\)](#)

The insignificant telescopes a great cluster of issues. In its work of calling the small so many things, theory appears a pointillism, capable of renewing itself exclusively through the recycling of the motif in a fresh scattering of synonyms whose numbers only grow luxuriantly. Benjamin, in affection for the citational mode, approved of Giedion's saying that montage played the role of the unconscious of the nineteenth century. [\(74\)](#) Could the substitution of the word small permit a justification and amplification of the point? Sorting through the sheer embarrassment

of examples: "Le petit récit" of Lyotard is to be used against the homogenizing powers of "le grand." (75) Oppressive structures are said to be given the slip if we accept the advice: "Seek always the molecular, or even the submolecular particle, with which we can make alliance." (76) Deleuze and Guattari praise the "minor qualities of minor characters--part of the project of a literature that wants to be deliberately minor and draws its revolutionary force from that." (77) "Only the minor is grand and revolutionary." (78) Appearing also to justify the supplement to the point is Deleuze and Guattari's contention that Kafka's desire to be a small animal constitutes deculturation. They quote from "The Bucket Rider: "In the thick, hard frozen snow, I walk along the tracks of small arctic dogs, my movement has lost all direction." The comment, recalling Kafka's own description of the relation of the small to process:

Kafka is fascinated by everything that is small. If he doesn't seem to like children that is because they are caught in an irreversible becoming-big; the animal kingdom, in contrast, involves smallness and imperceptibility. But, even more, in Kafka, the molecular multiplicity tends itself to become integrated with, or make room for, a machine, or rather a machinic assemblage, the parts of which are independent of each other. . . . (79)

And Foucault on Deleuze, recalling Hegel's own view of its function: "To reverse Platonism with Deleuze is to displace oneself insidiously within it, to descend to its smallest gestures. . . . To pervert Platonism is to search out the smallest details, to descend (with the natural gravitation of humor) as far as its crop of hair or the dirt under its fingernails--those things that were never hallowed by an idea." (80) And : "He points out its interruptions, its gaps, those small things of little value that were neglected by philosophical discourse. He carefully reintroduces the barely perceptible omissions, knowing full well that they imply a fundamental negligence." (81)

Designed to sustain the myopia of which Baudelaire complained, an attention that is only a squinting, that does not become a squinting after having been something else, to guarantee an indifferentiation in the ubiquity of the small, that there is no shifting in scale, that the small substitutes only for another small, is enthusiasm for such matters as embarrassment concerning "the substantialist illusion," "the subject that would be almost invisible," the search for a minimal term, heightened present consciousness, literature as the question of itself, narrative as an act of language, the suspension of narrative movement that causes details to be focused upon for themselves, the intricate, small, smart moves of theory, the project of demonstrating how at every moment a discourse loses strength it was presumed to possess (versus the biography of the hero in which strength is lost at the end), the writer's erasure of his or her own capacity to adhere to statements, an interest in the material features of writing (or art's focus upon its own instrumentalities, in general), the minutiae of everyday speech, and other examples of intentional banality (the cliché, bêtise, the exhaustion of forms), the effort to isolate and identify the minimal units of narrative, parataxis, the insistence upon the image as the most prominent dimension of style, an ideal of style itself. (See Queneau who described the literature of OULIPO as "une petite musique chinoise," (82) and Céline, who referred to his

"petite musique.") There was the ellipse, the search for the mytheme, flat characterization, consciously contrived plots, noncausal and antilinear sequences of events, Benjamin's allegory and his "distracted perception," or Deconstruction's efforts to name the smallest differential event. Also Bakhtin's vocabulary: "the microdialogic," the "intra-atomic counterpoint." Also, the supposed decline of the cultural place of narrative, narrative seen as an act of language rather than plot and character. The small umbrellas the idea that a text can be decomposed into a set of interwoven fragments that belie definitive reconstitution as an intentional whole, the idea of the work that divests itself critically of all the determinants not immanent to its own form.

11

Bengt Hasselrot readies us for a versatility of temperament, compressions of mercy and contempt. In a study of the diminutive in the Romance languages, he describes "the multiplicity of qualities that diminutive suffixes express: smallness, perhaps, but also and especially admiration, love, affection, compassion, modesty, scorn, irony, obsequiousness." The downsize-seeing Nietzsche and Bourget found that the crisis of the modern spirit was to be noted in terms of the perversity of effects of scale. Valéry: "the universe is breaking up, losing all prospect of being viewed as a unity. The world of extreme smallness seems strangely different from the big world of which it forms a part. Even the identity of bodies is being lost in the process. . . ." (83) In "The Age of the World Picture," Heidegger, recalling Hegel's example, writes that "Everywhere and in the most varied forms and disguises the gigantic is making its appearance. In so doing, it evidences itself simultaneously as the increasingly small. We have only to think of numbers in atomic physics. The gigantic presses forward in a form that actually seems to make it disappear." The essay can be said to concern the small, the problem of the becoming small. We are said to live in the age of the reduction of experience to the picture, a project of conquest. Man has become a certain kind of depicting animal, the agency of the becoming small. The position reminds of Foucault, always attentive to the sinister use of detail, the micro-physical strategies unflaggingly employed to objectify and manipulate: "A meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men, emerge through the classical age bearing with them a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and knowledge, descriptions, plans and data. And from such trifles, no doubt, the man of modern humanism was born." (84) While Adorno associates the small with the victim, he can also be found linking it with the violent equivalence of the malevolently normal: "Freud and Rank have pointed out that in fairy tales, small animals such as bees and ants 'would be the brothers in the primal horde,' just as in the same way in dream symbolism insects or vermin signify brothers and sisters (contemptuously considered as babies)." (85)

"Why the small?" Nancy asks, "this, of course, requires reflection." (86) Survival is its first instinct, we would guess from the frequency with which such point is made. Insisting upon the primacy of the defensive crouch, here is Quignard with the beginning of an answer: "The fragment is a hedgehog." (87) Canetti describes Kafka as an honorary member of the ancient

Chinese civilization that so enjoyed tales of small animals and insects, and in particular produced a tradition of games and stories surrounding the cricket. A predilection for small things (the creature in "The Burrow," "Josephine the Mouse Singer," etc.) is described as protection. Dreading involvement in the great unison currents of his time, Canetti writes, recalling Beckett's argument, "[Kafka] trained himself to disappear." "By means of physical diminution, he withdrew power from himself, and thus had less part in it; this asceticism . . . was directed against power. The same penchant for disappearing reveals itself in his relation to his own name." [\(88\)](#)

Since he abominated violence, but did not credit himself with the strength to combat it, he enlarged the distance between the stronger entity and himself by becoming smaller and smaller in relation to it. Through this shrinkage he gained two advantages: he evaded the threat by becoming too diminutive for it, and he freed himself from all exceptional means of violence; the small animals into which he liked to transform himself were harmless ones. [\(89\)](#)

Deleuze: "A force would not survive if it did not first of all borrow the features of the forces with which it struggles." [\(90\)](#) Bataille quotes Nietzsche: "If someone aspires to greatness, he thereby betrays himself. The most substantial of men aspire to smallness." [\(91\)](#) Cioran: "While works die, fragments, never having lived, cannot further die." [\(92\)](#) Deleuze: "You can never get rid of ants, because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed." [\(93\)](#) And similar lines in Adorno: "What guarantees the aesthetic quality of modern art? It is the scars of damage and disruption inflicted by them on the smooth surface of the immutable." [\(94\)](#) "Art partakes of weakness no less than strength. In fact, the unconditional surrender of dignity may even become a vehicle of strength in modern art." [\(95\)](#) "Modern art would become the subject of ridicule if it were to affect the pose of solemnity or of grandeur and power." [\(96\)](#) Was this the strategy of family romance, in which the new aristocratic parent bore the trace of a humble real one? Apotropaic synergy of omnipotence and failure.

Already Brandes described romanticism's glorification of desire as involving an argument for "impotence as a power." [\(97\)](#) Here is Giovanni Vattimo: "The techniques of art, for example, and perhaps above all else poetic versification, can be seen as stratagems--which themselves are, not coincidentally, minutely institutionalized and monumentalized--that transform the work of art into a residue and into a monument capable of enduring because from the outset it is produced in the form of that which is dead. It is capable of enduring not because of its force, in other words, but because of its weakness." [\(98\)](#) Invulnerability also had appeal for Derrida, quoting Bataille, from *Le Petit*: "I am myself the 'little one,' I have only a hidden place." [\(99\)](#) Genet, quoted by Derrida: "Nevertheless, I was sure that this puny and most humble object would hold its own against them; by its mere presence it would be able to exasperate all of the police in the world; it would draw down upon itself contempt, hatred, white and dumb rages." [\(100\)](#) And there is a relation between the small as redoubt to literature in general.

Derrida writes: "Life negates itself in literature, in order to be better able to survive."[\(101\)](#)

Wallace Stevens: "[Poetry] is a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without."[\(102\)](#) Bobin:

What I do is very small, of the order of the minuscule, the infinitesimal. To the question "What do you do in life?" this is how I would like to respond, this is how I dare not respond: I do what is very small. I bear witness for a blade of grass. The world as it is goes badly, and I suffer this perhaps less than do you, having taken up residence beneath a blade of grass where one is protected from many things.[\(103\)](#)

12

"The philosophy of fragments is a by-product of war but equally a technique of conservation. Museums are stuffed with bits and pieces, with disparate members," Serres writes. And here on the anxious destroyer:

Let's take a vase or some object that is more solid, more constructed, larger. The larger it is, the more fragile it is. If you break it, the smaller the fragment is, the more resistant it is. Consequently, when you create a fragment, you seek refuge in places, in localities, which are more resistant than a global construction. The destroyer himself fears destruction, since he can only keep what is least destructible. In the end the particle is indivisible; the element is invincible--united as we know, by an enormous force. So, the philosophy of fragments is hyperdefensive; it is the result of hypercriticism, of polemics, of battle and hatred. It produces what is the most resistant to the strongest aggression.[\(104\)](#) (my emphasis)

Constituted of what would otherwise be its overthrow, the small contains its own safety, confiscating violence in avoidance of external threat, like "the self-punishing paranoid" of Lacan, who kills the eminent person she wants to be and is simultaneously cured of the obsession, punishing herself at the very instant of the execution of the crime. This immanent shaming is termed in Freud "the reversal of an instinct into its opposite," or "the turning round of an instinct upon the subject."[\(105\)](#) The beleaguered organism, the argument goes, seeks to remain in an unstimulated condition. A kind of peace is purchased by transforming this threat into its own thing, by taking it under its jurisdiction, by remaking stimulus into instinct: "The instincts are, at least in part, the precipitates of different forms of external stimulation. . . ."[\(106\)](#) Through tactical capitulation to external irritant, the noxious effects of stimuli are indeed regularized, but a definitive escape from the threatening pressure is quite impossible because of the imperfectly mastering interiorization of the threat. "As it makes its attack not from without but from within the organism, it follows that no flight can avail against it."[\(107\)](#)

Related is Freud's analysis of the psychosomatic epilepsy of Dostoevsky, where offered is a model of the endosmosis of the story of the individual who negates the other, and is then self-punished for the crime. In the case of the novelist, the significance of the attack of epilepsy lies in the victim's identification with a resented father. It is against the background of a wish to see him dead that this identification occurs. The epilepsy of the novelist is said to realize both the parricidal wish as well as the imagined retribution. The seizure expresses that one has wished another dead, and now is this other person and is dead already. This autoregulatory, gridlock sublime that is the small, contains the passionate entropy that is sacrifice in both senses of the word "contain," while not exposing either in either sense of the word "expose."

Each of these figures becomes then a kind of armored beast, protected as immobilized by an immanent death. The assimilation of violence by the small, the completion and reversal of paranoia, has the character and motivation of instinct formation. All of this amounts to saying, as does Nancy, that the small is the undoing of ritual violence: "The fragment is the opposite of sacrifice, because it is the opposite of this continuity, this cohesion of essence that the Western representation of sacrifice seeks to present (that of the Eucharist that brings together and incorporates the fragments of its grace)." (108) And Sartre's words for this: "To introduce the notion of the fragile into the world. What is fragile resists synthesis and, when pressed by force to form a whole, always tends towards the multiplicity of juxtaposition." (109) Adorno praised "Berg's principle of the infinitesimal; the principle of the smallest transition." (110) And thus the logic of his cringe at what happens in Stravinsky, where music submits "to the rhythmic blows dealt it from an external source." (111)

What is already small, by preserving a mobility that lessens distinctions within "a field of variable distance," is continuously involved in a struggle to resist its own moralizability. Robert Musil, from his story "The Mouse": "But that's all for this little story, that had already come to an end every time you tried to end it." (112) The issue of the location, source, temporality of the crisis of nonparticipation in a whole has an ethical consequence. Benjamin: "Real time is not experienced in the dialectical image as lived time. . . . It rather enters in most reduced form possible." (113) As narrative is punishment, the struggle between the smalls will be about subtracting time from space. Adorno, referring to Parsifal: "What Gurnemanz says about time becoming space is true of art-works, those of the so-called temporal arts included." "Everything happens by way of a shortcut. . . ." (Mallarmé, "Un Coup de dés") (114) It was all a matter of collapse. To tell the difference between classical and modern comedy, Hegel says, we must be sensitive to "Whether the folly and one-sidedness of the dramatis personae appears laughable to the audience only or to themselves as well, whether therefore the characters in the comedy can be mocked solely by the audience or by themselves also." (115)

Was the small merely a widow tied to a railroad track, just a bagatelle contre un massacre? "On how many occasions," asks Bachelard, "has not the poet or the painter . . . escaped through a crack in the wall?" (116) (Slip through a crack in time, rather.) Does the small merely predict rude acts and scheme its precautions? Is it merely this palliative struck with circumspection, a

figure of self-beset resiliency realizing itself only in retreat, in so far as it packs the forces of its undoing? Is it only homeopathic, merely an apotropaic stoop, the frontloading of disenchantment, the incompetent because internalized lightning on the brow of Harry Potter? Serving what end is genius for lying low?

13

Could it at once be a wealth, and if so, of what might it consist, and how could it and this misery be a single thing? Not to lose can only be half a strategy--multiple are "the tasks of the least." (117) We have it from another, more complicated hedgehog that the contempt built into smallness is inseparable from self-pleasure. Walzer's recluse has a flair for self-enjoyment:

Hedgehog: I am puny. My spines, what's more, are mockery itself; they mock me.

Stork: So you're mocked by what seems called upon to shield you. I love you all the more for your forsakenness.

Hedgehog: But I'm in enormously good spirits. You have no idea how splendidly one can live inside a covering that's laughable. My well-being is unspeakably original. The assurance that I look pretty streams through me. (118)

Unavailable to ritual through the contraction of its moments, the attrition of sheltering modesty, Derrida's hedgehog, metaphor for poetry, at worst is candidate for Kant's roadkill status--natural form slaughtered by the automatism of human proxy: "This thing that at once exposes itself to and protects itself from death--in a word, the skill, the withdrawal of the hedgehog, like an animal that rolls itself into a ball on the highway. The temptation is to take it into one's hands, to instruct and to understand it, to keep it for oneself, near to oneself." (119) "The accident that can happen to a hedgehog is without the status of sacrifice, for sacrifice is never an accident." (120) Not entirely unprovoked is any threat it averts--cf. the sufficiency with which the imagery is charged. But the creature is a provocation minimalist: "The propensity to amplify the disastrous quality of the accident is foreign to what I have called the humility of the poetic aspect of the hedgehog: low, very low, close to the ground, humble (humilis)." (121) The simultaneity of the double satisfaction.

Nietzsche's hedgehog is a "poor doctor of the spirit," figure of a stabilized, because embarrassing happiness:

What he seeks is to live nameless and lightly mocked at, too humble to awaken envy or hostility, with a head free of fever, equipped with a handful of knowledge and a bagful of experience, as it were a poor-doctor of the spirit aiding those whose head is confused by opinions without their being really aware who has aided them! Not desiring to maintain his own opinion or celebrate a victory over

them, but to address them in such a way that, after the slightest of imperceptible hints or contradictions, they themselves arrive at the truth and go away proud of the fact! To be like a little inn which rejects no one who is in need but which is afterwards forgotten or ridiculed! To possess no advantage, neither better food nor purer air nor a more joyful spirit--but to give away, to give back, to communicate, to grow poorer! To be able to be humble, so as to be accessible to many and humiliating to none! To have much injustice done him, and to have crept through the worm-holes of errors of every kind, so as to be able to reach many hidden souls on their secret paths! Forever in a kind of love and forever in a kind of selfishness and self-enjoyment. To be in possession of a dominion and at the same time concealed and renouncing! To lie continually in the sunshine and gentleness of grace, and yet to know that the paths that rise up to the sublime are close by! That would be a reason for a long life![\(122\)](#)

Innocuously does the small give all access to its not entirely unmalicious self. And relating to another Nietzschean theme, that of the eternal return: repetition is reflexivity (i.e., self-enjoyment) lived without decisive incident--the temporality of hedgehog happiness.

"The point is the space that does not take up space," Derrida says, "the place that does not take place; it suppresses and replaces the place, it takes the place of the space that it negates and conserves. It spatially negates space."[\(123\)](#) The question we must answer, however, is how to then translate this negation of space by what is almost not space into the terms of social experience, that is, into the terms of the sacred and the profane. For what groups and individuals and to what effect can the point be allowed to undo space; in other terms, can there be access to an object that is the sign of the end of objects of desiring attention?

Michel Serres argues for the centrality of size: "There is no such thing as the attractive and the unattractive, the beautiful and the ugly: there are large scales and small scales."[\(124\)](#) And this would be the point made in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in effect an entire nanoaesthetic founded in relative size, a logic that parallels the bimetalism of the Third Critique. Mirth, Freud insists, always involves the revelation of the small. "Brevity is the body and soul of wit, it is its very self," Jean-Paul is quoted.[\(125\)](#) And so is Spencer, adding the experience of sequence that will be resisted and cause what it produces to be no joke: "Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small. . . ."[\(126\)](#) (my emphasis)

14

Attention to the small is said by Freud to permit laughter in two ways. There is the censor function:

Among displacements are to be counted not merely diversions from a train of

thought but every sort of indirect representation as well, and in particular the replacement of an important but objectionable element by one that is indifferent and that appears innocent to the censorship, something that seems like a very remote allusion to the other one--substitution by a piece of symbolism, or an analogy, or something small. [\(127\)](#)

But if transfer of consciousness from great things to small were simply defensive, then it would not provoke hilarity, since we laugh only when inhibitions have been released. Required is an economy in the expenditure of affect, when there is impression of effortless satisfaction, when a cathexis that was formerly present has ceased to exist. In a passage of the greatest interest for us, Freud (seeming to reproduce an argument of Burke) contrasts the sublime with the relation to small forms:

What is sublime is something large in the figurative, psychical sense; and I should like to suggest . . . that, like what is somatically large, it is represented by an increased expenditure. It requires little observation to establish that when I speak of something sublime I innervate my speech in a different way. I make different facial expressions, and I try to bring the whole way in which I hold myself in harmony with the dignity of what I am having an idea of. I impose a solemn restraint upon myself--not very different from what I should adopt if I were to enter the presence of an exalted personality, a monarch, or a prince of science. I shall hardly be wrong in assuming that this different innervation in my ideational mimetics corresponds to an increased expenditure. [\(128\)](#)

And elsewhere this behavior is explained:

Direct observation shows that human beings are in the habit of expressing the attributes of largeness and smallness in the contents of their ideas by means of varying expenditure in a kind of ideational mimetics. If a child or a man from the common people, or a member of certain races, narrates or describes something, it is easy to see that he is not content to make his idea plain to the hearer by the choice of clear words, but he also represents its subject matter in his expressive movements: he combines the mimetic and the verbal forms of representation. And he especially demonstrates quantities and intensities: "a high mountain"--and he raises his hand over his head, "a little dwarf" and he holds it near the ground. He may have broken himself of the habit of painting with his hands, yet for that reason he will do it with his voice; and if he exercises self-control in this too, it may be wagered that he will open his eyes wide when he describes something large and squeeze them shut when he comes to something small. What he is thus expressing is not his affects but actually the content of what he is having an idea of. [\(129\)](#)

Eliciting a gesture that takes in the scale of what is witnessed, "The idea of something large demands more expenditure than the idea of something small." (130) Blind spots--smalls that permits the seeing of oneself as not seeing are the "more than enough:"

[T]he grimace characteristic of smiling, which twists up the corners of the mouth, appears first in an infant at the breast when it is satisfied and satiated and lets go of the breast as it falls asleep. Here it is a genuine expression of the emotions, for it corresponds to a decision to take no more nourishment, and represents as it were an "enough" or rather a "more than enough." This original meaning of pleasurable satiety may have brought the smile which is after all the basic phenomenon of laughter. . . . (131)

And the book concludes that the small involves reliving of that period in life when "we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy--the mood of our childhood when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humor to make us feel happy in our life." (132) An omnipotence that does not have to be exercised, invulnerable as it is the atomization of the forgetting of the world, a forgetting that does not occur before deprived witnesses. In the face of that which is small we close our eyes, Freud wrote, we become windowless monads, desire having come to an end. And energy is the issue for Nietzsche as well. On free spirits: "They expend as little energy as possible on all . . . things. . . . Such a spirit prefers be happy to take in only the fringes of an event; he does not love things in all the breadth and vastness of their folds; for he does not want to entangle himself in them." (133)

15

Agency of infantilization, this impairment: "The man with a looking glass," noticed Bachelard, "is an innocent glance at a new object. The magnifying glass of the botanist is childhood rediscovered." (134) Other terms are used by Lyotard to make the point of Freud: "The eye is the symbol of desire--its perpetual movement is the movement of desire." (135) The small does the work of transfer for you; it is, through incorporation, the agency of the transfer of the absence of expenditure, and thus minimizes the extent to which one is conscious of one's own grievance. And, as noticed by Nietzsche, diminished in the same stroke is the resentment of the other: before the small power need not manifest itself as such--expressing itself as a passivity, it appears as an invulnerability. The small was about the location of still life. As it makes available to each co-child a uniform, indistinct world in which no power need be exercised, it is the unresentful undoing of the experience of virtuosic skill, of talent that is unshared efficiency, the effortlessness of the contrasting one, not your worklessness, but another's to be gawked at from the perspective of the loss of our self-loving life. Benjamin quotes Nietzsche: "The economy of art has as its origin the masking of work." (136) (Mauss and Hubert said "mana" expressed "automatic efficacy.") But it is always more or less about the charismatic dissimulation of work. "One must try . . . to see in order to see, and no longer in order to act,"

Bergson said.(137) The deritualized small is the infinite good of the effect, not the memory of its intimidating passage, the injurious transfer of the status of still life from one point to another.

Derrida would appear to be making the point of Freud. Before writing, because it is a miniature, as it is experienced at a distance, and does not penetrate me violently, Derrida writes, "One can more naturally close one's eyes or distract his glance than avoid listening. Let us not forget that this natural situation is primarily that of the child at the breast." (138) "Man has thus put out his eyes, he blinds himself [with writing]." (139) And he too takes notice of the issue of effort unknown: "Yes, it was from a detail that I demanded a revelatory ecstasy, a direct channel to the one and only Roland Barthes, grace-filled access to that which is alien to all labor" (140) (my emphasis). Derrida approvingly quotes Ponge's Proem: "If I prefer La Fontaine--the slightest fable--to Schopenhauer or Hegel, I certainly know why. It seems to me . . . less tiring . . ." (141) The temporality of punishment is not present--as this is infantile omnipotence, Freud's "his majesty the baby."

Important, as Freud notices, is "the position of the unproductive one," (142) who is without effort, and the means for achievement of this enviable position. Theory is not the comic because it involves no downward movement of the becoming small. Thus Derrida unsequences it--the small never having been other than itself. There is a split in the object function--symmetrical reversal of the splitting of the paternal function--what places it close to hand rather than at vulnerable distance. And of this Freud makes us aware when he writes of a process-oriented experience of reduced scale that recalls the degradation that occurs in Kant's sublime: "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him. . . ." (143) These remarks we must see in terms of the following:

Thus a uniform explanation is provided of the fact that a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure. . . ; and it cannot be denied that . . . our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him. If the relation . . . is reversed--if the other person's . . . expenditure is found to be less than ours. . . --then we no longer laugh, we are filled with astonishment and admiration. (144)

The separating issues are the temporality and agency of the small. Critical theory is no joke--no revelation of the small--for the small is always already. While one small blocks catastrophe and lives spontaneously by conjuring up (through incorporation) its neutralized image, the other leaves us unshielded from exposure to the contrast that is disaster's provocation. The same instinct that caused Adorno to say that Mahler's vast compositions were simply frames for saving particulars, has the author of Grammatology arguing that the book is always a miniature: "Writing reduces the dimensions of presence in its sign. The miniature is not reserved to illuminated capitals; it is, understood in its derivative sense, the very form of writing. The history of writing would then follow the continuous and linear progress of the techniques of

abbreviation." (145) There is not the voice against writing, as the voice is always already writing. In Derrida there is no progress towards closed eyes. Eyes don't close at the end of a story of degradation. There can be no process of disillusionment--this is the entire logic of Deconstruction.

While the small might always have "the quality of always being destroyed," there is the possibility of neutralizing culpability through the elimination of an unfolding embarrassment, the disappearance of a specific culpable agency. The small of Derrida is a joke without a punch line, for he detemporalizes it, removing it from a stage of contrast by describing it as always already existing in a condition of reduced scale. The small may be the sign of an identification come to an end, but the ending can never be distinguished from its beginning. Différance cannot be defined through its oppositional relation to presence. Described as "older" than presence, différance is within auto-affection. Derrida: "In opposition to a metaphysical, dialectical and Hegelian interpretation of the economic movement of différance, one must allow for a game in which the loser wins, and in which one at once wins and loses on each occasion." (146) If there is only the small there is no experience of a successor still life and the learning curve that it is the intimidated product of. There is winning and losing in this small, but the moments are experienced in simultaneity. As there is only the noncustodial volatility of the small, there is no prevailing of one element over another, disclosure of the small in time, relay relation, no interruption of the life of one ego ideal for the sake of giving birth to another.

16

Barthes was praised by Derrida for focus upon the small, but the alliance is finally based on common insistence upon seeing it uncontrastively. We have noted Barthes happily describing Japan as the land of miniatures. Here "all is small." Consequent with himself he praises it as the utopia of permanently closed eyes. Where the diminutive reigns we find "eyes lowered, eyes closed, eyes 'asleep,' a closed line closes further in a lowering of the eyelids which is never ended." Opposed is said to be "the Western eye . . . subject to a whole mythology of the soul, central and secret, whose fire, sheltered in the orbital cavity, radiates toward a fleshy, sensuous, passional exterior." (147) Adorno: "Art can do no better than close its eyes." (148) And now Blanchot, alive to the requirement of the rescheduled small, also saying that there should only be the small, one that does not lure into a domesticating sequence that is always finally the biography of the hero: "All beauty lies in details: so Valéry said. . . . But this would be true only if there were only an art of details that would no longer have the art of the whole for its context." (149)

The whole point made by Beckett: "I can see me quite tiny the same as now more or less only tinier quite tiny no more objects." (150) The small allows me to see myself as not seeing, as in the case of the experience of the angry god of Lacan, but one is now not involved in a shift in the location of happiness. The small does not disperse the imperative "identify/don't identify" over several persons--the imperatives are collapsed, caused to appear in each individual at

once. In the blindness before the small--I do not see indifference, for that is what I myself am, more certainly than with Hegel's master, for before the small there is the possibility of the parallel experiences of indifference, the parity of being fulfilled in every instant. The co-achievement of this still life subtracts from it the terror before the Other who would seek to occupy my exclusive space. In a field of contiguous self-appreciations, a there is becomes indistinguishable from an uncontested I am. That happiness in the observer position is the Freud/Derrida confirming point made by Bachelard as he writes that the small "causes there to be a shift from the experience of the image that one sees to the condition of the image that one lives." (151) The small always permits me to see myself as not seeing--to occupy the still-life position--but its timeline settles the matter of whether or not there is a threat of shift in location of happiness.

Reconciled are positions noticed here as Lyotard quotes Heraclitus: "Those who are awake (vigilant) share a single, common world, but every sleeper falls back upon his own idiom." (152) Proust locates the genius of Impressionism in its having produced an atomized squinting. In Jean Santeuil, writing of the project of Monet who seeks to share an inability to see, in this case to ascertain whether a ship, depicted as sailing in a fog, does or does not have port-holes: "In this place in the picture there is a painting neither of what one sees, for one sees nothing, nor of what one does not see, for one must paint only what one sees, but rather a painting of the experience of a not seeing, a painting of the failing of the eye unable to cut through the fog that is imposed in the picture as it is on the river. This is really beautiful." (153) Instead of the seeing who is not seeing, one is doing the not seeing oneself. When shared is a not seeing, there is no seeing, imagining seeing the becoming small. The function of critical theory has been that of saturating the field with the small, to the exclusion of the process of becoming small--an identification with a prehumiliation vs. the identification with an agency of humiliation that is always subject to at least the imagination of the reversibility of its violence. Absent is thrust towards the vanishing point, gone the killing lines of approach. The relation of viewer to form now constitutes a "flat organization." Absence of effort is lived simultaneously as omnipotence and sheltering inadequacy. (154) There is only a successor blindness in the aesthetic, but it becomes unpunitive when the small is always already small, when it makes possible a not seeing that is not a punishment of a not seeing.

Hand-Eye Coordination

This split in the experience parallels the one in the undecidable function. Distance is required for spontaneity--the path to the free subject being through the free object. Writing of Kant, Zizek speaks of "his fundamental insight according to which I retain my capacity of a spontaneous-autonomous agent precisely and only insofar as I am not accessible to myself as a Thing." (155) A familiar Frankfurt School position, here. As in Adorno, for example: "Natural beauty is defined by its undefinability, which is an aspect of the object as well as of the concept thereof. As an indeterminate something, natural beauty is hostile to all definition." (156) The hostility excites a hostility, as we see in Hazlitt, who says that not just any remove can assure the stability of

difference:

Whatever is placed beyond the reach of sense and knowledge, whatever is imperfectly discerned, the fancy pieces out at its leisure; and all but the present moment, but the present spot, passion claims for its own, and brooding over it with wings outspread, stamps it with an image of itself. Passion is lord of infinite space, and distant objects please because they border on its confines, and are molded by its touch. [\(157\)](#)

17

Discernible here is our familiar envious superego pattern. Precious spontaneity cannot be guaranteed by exciting the traumatic antagonism attached to the process of the descending of an incongruity. But there is the double bind of distance, the issue of the durability, the vulnerability of this power one acquires through contact with variously scaled obstacles to knowledge.

Balthus liked to quote Ingres: "What one knows, one knows sword in hand." [\(158\)](#) An example from Hegel, who sees only this reification in cognition:

Indeed, the grasp of an object consists in nothing else but that an I will make the object its own, will penetrate it, and will bring it into its own form, i.e., into the universality which immediately is definition, or into definition, which immediately is universality. In visuality, or even in visualization, the object is still something external and strange. By grasping it, the being-in-and-for-itself which the object has in visuality and visualization is transformed into posited being; the I penetrates it in thought. Yet the object is in and for itself as it is in thought; it is phenomenal as it is in visuality and visualization; thinking voids the immediacy of our first encounter with it and thus turns it into a posited being. . . .

The goal is for the object to be a feature of self-consciousness, to have "no other moments or definitions than the I itself." [\(159\)](#) Conquest of the strange assures no spontaneity, for the possibility of mastering seizure surely rebounds against any subject proving successful in any work of seizure. The anxious knowledge of Critical Theory. It is through an object that is no object, the availability of which is not contested, either by another or by itself, that one is not accessible to oneself as a thing. In this situation, one will not risk being gutted of one's difference. Derrida: "'I' can only save an inner self by placing it in 'me,' separate from myself, outside." [\(160\)](#)

Malebranche's *De la Recherche de la vérité* has a role in the history of the legitimation of curiosity, for found here, albeit in dismissal, is an alternative to difference as self-limiting trap, as set-up moment of the experience of the reversibility of violence:

There is nothing so difficult than to apply oneself to a thing for a long time without wonder, the animal spirits not carrying themselves easily to the necessary places in order to represent it. . . . It is necessary that we deceive our imagination in order to awaken our spirits, and that we represent the subject upon which we wish to meditate in a new way, so as to excite in us some movement of wonder. [\(161\)](#)

Insistence--in this civil war of strangeness--is on coarsening rules of engagement, heightening competitive metabolism, a hardening of resolve that is the condition of the reversibility of violence, of the maintenance of a tension that risks being resolved, ultimately, to my own disadvantage. In order for an object to have a role in a scientific story, an important degree of difficulty needs to be retained, it has to "stand up" to scrutiny, that is, to supply the killer with energies required for redeeming death. Awe must command wonder in order to block the meeting with unmastered materials, unmastered merely as unworthy of my self-defeating strength. Descartes describes as condemnable "those who seek out rarities simply in order to wonder at them and not in order to know them." "When we are astonished in looking at things which merit little or no consideration, this may entirely prevent or pervert the use of reason." [\(162\)](#) Deweaponization of attention--an incompetent curiosity, curiosity denied its juice, disinclination to the projection of force, the blessing of a defense from defense. [\(163\)](#)

There is only the playing off the object's challenge. Assuring fullest pursuit, die-hard difference supplies ardor for a hungry ascendance. Valéry: "I cannot see, feel or depict anything to myself without there being some sense of greatness. Willing, doing and perceiving, each have something to do with greatness." [\(164\)](#) And then, Bachelard: "In scientific work, one must first of all, psychologically, digest the surprise." [\(165\)](#) (my emphasis) The climbing point is developed by Malebranche who held that the object had to be artificially charged with difference if it were to not corrupt into that inert response attached to what would be the lazy infinity of Hegel. [\(166\)](#) And what is the obdurate material of the oddity that stood its ground, provoking the failure of tenacity, if not the unmediated relation as not yet detached from the provocation of a hoarding matrix? A ramping up of wonder for the sake of its productive beating down. The mind inflames itself in order to move to adequately maddened levels of manipulative intelligence.

"The forms of objects call for the hand and the grasp," Levinas said. "Vision moves into grasp." [\(167\)](#) This the hunger of what Blanchot termed "persecutive prehension." [\(168\)](#) "At certain moments, this hand feels a very great need to grasp: it must take the pencil, this is necessary, this is an order, an imperious requirement." [\(169\)](#) It is in the nature of the teaser to excite us "to examine things with the highest level of exactitude." [\(170\)](#) But if wonder proves minimally robust there is not this hot pursuit, but rather the stalling into an indolence not motorized into a controlling drive. When wonder was rather just the incompetence of strangeness, strangeness as pathos, enticed was the soul to "enjoy its riches rather than to dissipate them" [\(171\)](#) in vigorous inquiry. On either side of the catastrophe--that will occur, or

will be avoided because of catastrophe's immanence in the contraction of the moments of sequence--there is elation/depression, the mix differing in each instance according to the intensity of destructive agency that strangeness solicits. The enervation of the merely puzzled response protects me from myself, feed-back loop that starves attention of suicide energies, the easy way around negativity's bend, the rising to a near pulselessness of challenge, the sleep of the envious superego, ethically, but not economically disengaged self-love.

18

Two ways were there, then, for an object to be reassuringly disappointing, and to each a distinct pattern of self-recovery is attached. The degenerate object, a strange form that sheds the epistemological altitude of reversibility, failing to provoke an action, liquidates degenerative potential. Before the form intact in its misery, a wonder gap results in a ferocity gap--underemployed is the witness, absent a violence in the contracting response. When the eye is not the agent of an object's infirmity, it is not infirmed by this infirmity. I am always at once diminished and strengthened by an object's infirmity, but in varied measure according to the temporalities of its infirmity, temporalities that moralize to differently stringent, incapacitating and capacitating social result. Wonder, lazying rather than busying, could be occasion for the inefficiency of that self-pleasure that had been austere noticed by Augustine and La Bruyère.

Towards prolepsis. Insignificance was the sequence accelerator. Reflection assuming the form of deflection, banality is the warp speed of sequence. Simone Weil: "To rob desires of their energy by subtracting from them their temporal orientation." (172) To remove the time is to lift the haunting, that is, the effect of the reversibility of violence. The splitting of curiositas, therefore, between passive and aggressive versions, this last in which we are invited to overkill the prey. Who or what is making difficulty easy, and over what interval? The distinction to be made between the materials of reflection--whose desire do they aid to send home, and at the expense, or nonexpense, of whom?

An opacity on strike! The Malebranche nightmare of "A Jellyfish." Marianne Moore: "Visible, invisible,/A fluctuating charm/. . . you had meant/To catch it, and it quivers;/You abandon your intent." (173) Unstoried attention is worklessly half-amazed before a strangeness that only half holds its ground. Obtuse wonder is absence of degenerative potential, subtracting the process from mystery. Barthes: "Obtusus means that which is blunted, rounded in form." "The obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason . . . Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories(the trivial, the futile. . . ." "[O]btuse meaning is discontinuous, indifferent to the story." It is "the epitome of counter-narrative." It "can only come and go, appearing and disappearing." (174) By underserving the drive, it generates low-yield narcissism. The lazying of attention, the obtuse only looks dumb, declining to participate as it does in its becoming familiar. The double action of the strange, then (its synchronicity an Enlightenment feature)--a matter of the efficiency of self-love, through objects of action and those of inaction.

Usable and unusable forms of intimidation are to be put in touch with those of G. H. Mead, expanding upon what Whitehead called "the pushiness of things." (175) There is agreement with Freud, in notice of "the identification of the inner effort of the organism with the matter of the object." (176) A thing is said to arouse an organism to act in the same manner that the thing acts upon the organism. Recalling the electric relations that characterize ritual process, he tells us that the action of the thing is the organism's resistance to pressure that arises when a hard object is firmly grasped by the agitated hand. The difficulties of the precategorical object, through which it brings itself into hurting range, excite the very best efforts of the hand. "The distant object, setting in train the responses of grasping and manipulation, calls out in the organism its own inner nature of resistance." (177) The hand responds, its forces concentrated, irritably reaching, only as much as its reference moves. "The vision of the distant object is not only the stimulus to movement toward it. It is also, in its changing distance values, a continual control of the act of approach. The contours of the object determine the organization of the act in its seizure." (178) And thus the significance of the properties specific to the thing--the intensity of a predatory relation depending upon the extent to which the features are epistemologically aphrodisiac. Hence Adorno's anxiety before simply replacing a subject with an object. This distinction was required: "But it is not the purpose of critical thought to place the object on the orphaned throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol. The purpose of critical thought is to abolish the hierarchy." (179) The object hefty with mystery can turn a knowledge of it against the knower. As knowledge had the structure of a leveraged buy-out, negativity's bouncing off the bottom will replace its bouncing off the top.

Before the irritant "disqualified nature becomes the chaotic matter of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes mere possession--abstract identity." (180) How banalizing the consequences of the strong difference were finally discovered to be! Ponge: "That is why man, out of a resentment against that immensity that humiliates him, rushes towards those shores or intersections where he can discover great things to define." (181) Because "transgression does not transgress," the choice is for the insignificant. Differently resistant forms differently deliver self-love. The replacement of the subject by the resistant object--in the rehabilitation of nature in the eighteenth century--does indeed involve a weakening of envious superego. But opacity invites our pattern reversibility--the drive excited will be that to which one will fall victim oneself. The self-satisfied subject as well as, to an albeit lesser extent, its stand-in object, share the horror of mediating the witness subject's self-initiated death. The enthroned object retains the status of *caput mortuum*.

19

Now Mead's support of Malebranche has the virtue of alerting to the trap, one organizing the entire anxiety system of critical theory, to be noticed especially in that distinction it makes between imitation and mimesis. Through attention to Mead on the exotic form, we see that

distance is something that participates in its own overcoming. Why is it that "We cannot eliminate from the dialectics of the extant what is experienced in consciousness as an alien thing." (182) Distance, we have seen, there must be, if there is to be a free subject: "There is truly no identity without something nonidentical." (183) And it is the duty of art to base itself in this understanding: "[M]odern art is constantly practicing the impossible trick of trying to identify the non-identical." (184) But if this distance is to not be the deceit of drawing one onto the rocks by the power of its solicitation, it can broker no killing repair. Because it moralizes access to strangeness, there can be no happiness in capturing power. Adorno:

The spell cast by the subject becomes equally a spell cast over the subject. . . . The subject is spent and impoverished in its categorical performance; to be able to define and articulate what it confronts . . . the subject must dilute itself to the point of mere universality, for the sake of the objective validity of those definitions. . . . The objectifying subject contracts into a point of abstract reason, and finally into logical noncontradictoriness, which in turn means nothing except to a definite object. (185) (my emphasis)

And: "The more autocratically the I rises above the entity, the greater its imperceptible objectification and ironic retraction of its constitutive role." (186) "In so far as there are social acts, there are social objects, and . . . social control is bringing the act of the individual into relation with this social object." (187) And what is the social object? The distant object, because it produces envious superego. Thus distance is required, distance is impossible.

The guile--to preserve the remote without sparking process in the unhauntedly self-enjoying paralysis of depthless attention. The preshrunk wonder of Lyotard: "To touch the object that is at a distance, without having it." (188) But pace Lyotard, this cannot be his touted sublime, for we read in the Third Critique that it is the reversibility of a counterpoise to the beautiful "because our effort and attempt to move to a grasp of the object awakens in us a feeling of our own greatness and strength." (189) Precisely our iron-rich, gaze-hardening Malebranche point, one without which it is impossible to read Kant politically. The crisis generated in the relation with the distant is to be stroked rather than consummated. If "[W]e recognize the identity of resistance and effort," (190) how to frustrate distance from participating in its own, autonomy-ruining overcoming? The object must be a prelude to a release from the object--this is the sequence: "The primacy of the object, as the potential freedom from domination of what is, manifests itself in art as its freedom from objects." (191) But not just any provocative object will do, for the harsh loop must be unkillingly lived. If there is to be a yielding to the object, required will be the support of the object itself, Malebranche noticed, the eye moving to the extent to which its reference does. There must be "the primacy of the object," but this has to be experienced by the subject "against its own omnipotence" (192) if avoided is to be the unfolding of a muscular corrective. The danger is that of which Kant spoke, in his description of what occurs in the sublime, of "a certain . . . substitution of a respect for the Object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self--the Subject." (193) The choice: Be the always

already small, or Be the agent (and victim) of its forcible, preachy revelation in time. For there to be otiose wonder, time must be subtracted from the experience of distance so that the small will not appear as the byproduct of a hostile takeover. The indiscrimination of distance and proximity, banalization of distance, the defamiliarization of the proximate, the small is wonder divided against itself, the self-distance, the diplomatic immunity, the soft regime, of distance.

Vanished is succession anxiety as anesthetized is capturing instinct, lazied the movement outside the self. "Two basic qualities," the artist must possess, Diderot said, "morality and perspective." (194) We now understand the relation, perspective being an example of the margin of disappointment. "There is both a technical and moral side to the imitation of nature," he said. "The artistic fire is of two kinds: that of the soul and that of the craft." (195) The relation between morality and perspective is that between difficulty and disappearance. Lévi-Strauss:

What gives trompe l'oeil its power of enchantment? The latter results from the seemingly miraculous coalescence of the indefinable and fleeting aspects of the sensible world, as obtained by technical procedures that, after considerable intellectual labor and a slowly acquired mastery, allow these aspects to be reconstituted and permanently fixed. "Our understanding revels in imitation as of something that belongs to it," Plutarch said. Rousseau was opposed to this extremely difficult art form, condemning "conventional standards of beauty whose sole merit lies with the difficulty overcome." To which Chabanon, his contemporary, rightly replied: "In the theory of the Arts, it is wrong to pretend that the difficulty to be overcome counts for nothing; on the contrary, it plays a considerable part in the pleasure procured by the Arts." (196)

"Slowly acquired mastery," through the sense of the progressive dimension of victory, suggests that the agency of the control of conditions of disappearance belongs to a force that is external to the challenged form. Lévi-Strauss is wrong to argue that collage is simply another form of trompe l'oeil. (197) As there is here lessened the sense of difficulty overcome, lessened is the ethical charge. Revelatory is the philistine complaint that "anybody could have done it," for it communicates the sequence anxiety that caused Benjamin to notice that story-telling is no longer possible.

20

Lévi-Strauss says that representation and the small are inextricable. (198) We are now in a position to notice the moral dimension of the equation. "Representation is hatred, someone takes the place of someone else," Serres writes. (199) But the distinctive feature of this hatred can only be grasped if the factor of illusion is added to the mix. Representation is the taking the place of a taking of a place. The judgment of judgment--autoimmunity of judgment.

Enthusiast of Cézanne's "little sensations," (200) "the minute thrills" provoked by "the chromatic sands" of Rothko, the "little objects" of Pol Bury, (201) Lyotard describes a hand to match, a left hand, to (un)match Mead's rapacious right. Writing of the depiction of the open hand, hand of no bounty, in the paintings of Valerio Adami:

The hand of rescipience, which says, "I give up. I have surrendered my weapons, my concepts; come and see." A hand lying horizontal, holding nothing. The hollow palm of surrender is a refutation of its obverse, or the aspect which appears when the hand grasps the object, suddenly clasps it, captures it, measures it and violates it. The hidden side to it, the hollow palm that is usually concealed by the gesture of intrigue. Intriguing means not opening your hand, holding things in the present. . . . A hand is like an eye; in order to seize something, it closes, takes aim, focuses, grasps. When it is open wide, extended, fingers spread, it reveals its susceptibility, the vacant gaze that awaits the caress it promises. When it is in recline, it has already received. It has already both admitted and denied the crime, the drama and the intrigue of its poignant closure. It has freed the gaze from the grip of the present. (202)

Rescipience from rescipience, finally. The opened eyes here void the view that the closed make acutely possible. Valéry: "To make the hand free in the sense of the eye, one must take away its freedom in the sense of the muscles." (203) If the hand is at one with itself it is because there is no galvanizing hiddenness--it is not in command of its objects. The inside/outside juxtaposition is "intrigue," undone by the open, abandoning hand. The open hand abandons, and as we saw in Lévi-Strauss, the small is produced through an effect of abandonment that causes it be, nonexclusively, my thing: "In a confused way, he feels himself to be their creator with more right than the creator himself because the latter abandoned them in excluding them from his creation." (204) The small is released by the open hand and makes possible the open hand. And the open hand is related to an eye that does not see, crime "admitted and denied." The small is not the sign of domination but of a dispossession that is at once possession. The take-it-or-leave-it hand produces an open series of take-it-or-leave-it hands. The subject attached to this open hand is spontaneous as dispossessed, as dispossessing.

Ponge on the ridiculous success of "The Shrimp," jellyfish relative:

Through lively, sudden, successive and choppy leaps, now forwards, and now back, it escapes at once from the devouring jaws that rush forward in a straight line, from all slightly sustained attention, from all ideal possession that might be a little satisfying. (205)

Single silly survival of any "gesture of intrigue" makes for double success--in spite of his best efforts, the predator wins as well. Adorno on part of the why of it:

The primacy of subjectivity is a spiritualized continuation of Darwin's struggle for existence. The suppression of nature for human ends is a mere natural relationship, which is why the supremacy of nature-controlling reason and its principle is a delusion. When the subject proclaims itself a Baconian master of all things, and finally their idealistic creator, it takes an epistemological and metaphysical part in this delusion. The practice of its rule makes it a part of what it thinks it is ruling; it succumbs like the Hegelian master. It reveals the extent to which in consuming the object it is beholden to the object. What it does is the spell of that to which the subject believes under its own spell. The subject's desperate self-exaltation is its reaction to the experience of its impotence, which prevents self-reflection. Absolute consciousness is unconscious. [\(206\)](#)

Valéry sees the syllogism: "Man can fool his desire, by directing himself toward the object, brushing against it without definitive intention, and without irreversible act--And to the extent to which it is in this way that he approaches it--the desire that up to that point is satisfied, does not cause him to suffer, nor does it cause any rival of this desire to protest." [\(207\)](#) Derrida:

Almost nothing remains (to me): neither the thing, nor its existence, nor mine, neither the pure object nor the pure subject, no interest of anything that is in anything that is. . . . I do not like, but I take pleasure in what does not interest me, in something of which it is at least a matter of indifference whether I like it or not. . . . And yet there is pleasure, some still remains, there is, es gibt, it gives the pleasure is what it gives; to nobody but some remains and it's the best, the purest. [\(208\)](#)

21

Packed is the choice of the inconsequential: the movement outside communicates need, a need the experience of which is partially undone by the undesirability of the form held in so easily distracted embrace.

The small that is not the detail of the windowless citadel discloses the function of the depthlessness that Jameson says is the supreme trait of postmodern--buffered difference, it persuades the eye to be no hunter, but produces no hunter as response. And this may be another way of saying that pleasure replaces fantasy. The predatory movement of attention is blocked by insistence upon an intimate alterity, distance perceived to be immanently undone. We thus readily understand why Anthony Cascardi can notice that "[S]ome of the most interesting efforts in philosophy after Kant have attempted to preserve the experience of alterity that is transmitted in the sublime--the strangeness that incites reflective judgment--while reducing its alliance with the play of mastery." [\(209\)](#) Heidegger would be an example, as he spoke of the idea of a return "into that nearest, which we invariably rush past, which surprises us anew each time we get sight of it." [\(210\)](#) There should be the respectful relation with the

nearest, but the nearest as mystery: "That which is ontically closest and well known, is ontologically the farthest and not known at all; and its ontological signification is constantly overlooked." (211) Required were efforts to preserve the world of readiness-to-hand for thought, as most of the time it is "overtaken" by philosophical recognition. This would be coherent with his blurring of what Aristotle sets at the decisive temporal distance. Heidegger writes that great art reveals "what is holy and what unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what lofty and what flighty, what master and what slave." (212) But in the small, pianissimo, all this happens at once; all battle is (un)joined, invisibly within the form itself: translating as the incompetence to conclude, contraction of the energies of the narratable and those that will bring story to an end, that which departs from concepts, not pursued by contrasting weakness that can barely now tell the difference between identification and its end. Benjamin famously spoke of the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be. And coherent was fondness for allegory, as here the world is exalted and depreciated at the same time. Adorno: "That is the landscape of the late Mahler. For this firmament has the blackness of Japanese lacquer boxes with the golden moon painted on, a precious, yet . . . all too common, worn out thing." (213) Klein aber mein.

On the trap of counterviolence and what escapes the irony attached to reversal, Adorno on Goethe's Iphigenie:

The deep dialectic of the drama . . . should be sought in the fact that through his harsh antithesis to myth Orestes threatens to fall prey to myth. By condemning myth as something he is distant from, if not something he has fled from, Orestes identifies himself with the principle of domination through which, in and through Enlightenment, the mythic doom is prolonged. Enlightenment that flees from itself, that does not preserve in self-reflection the natural context from which it separates itself through freedom, turns into guilt toward nature and becomes a piece of mythic entanglement in nature. (214)

Adorno quotes the character Thoas from the play: "The Greek often turns his covetous eye/To the distant treasures of the barbarians,/ The golden fleece, horses, beautiful daughters,/ But violence and cunning did not always/ Bring them safely home with the goods they had won" (215) In opposition, Adorno mentions the story of the new Melusina:

During the periods when she withdraws from her impetuous and virtually barbaric lover, Melusina disappears into a kingdom within a little chest. It is a phantasmagoria of blissful smallness, which the beloved, who is received there in a friendly fashion, cannot tolerate and causes to be destroyed by violence so that he can return to earth. The little chest in the Melusina story . . . is the counterauthority to myth; it does not attack myth but rather undercuts it through nonviolence. . . .

Here: "It is not the optical, objective Goethe, an accomplice in the domination of nature up to the very end of Faust, who stands beyond myth, but a passive Goethe who is no longer willing to engage in the deed that was supposed to have been there in the beginning. . . ." [\(216\)](#)

There is the focus upon the proximate as strange in the Russian Formalists, the Surrealists, Bataille and Derrida, etc. (Bataille: "If poetry introduces the strange, it does so via the path of the familiar. The poetic is the familiar dissolving itself into the strange, and dissolving us with it. It never dispossesses us entirely, for words . . . contain emotions already felt, attached to objects that link them to the known." [\(217\)](#)) From his friend Blanchot: "Always these two sides are found together, the everyday with its aspect that is fastidious, tedious and sordid (the amorphous, the stagnant), and the everyday that is inexhaustible, . . . always unfinished and ever escaping forms and structures (in particular those of political society, governmental machinery, parties)." There is the expression of Cavell: the "quotidian as forever fantastic." [\(218\)](#) Deleuze praises Foucault, finding in him "this conversion of the faraway and the near," "an inner space, that will be entirely co-present with an outside." Here, "To think . . . is to layer an innerspace with an outside with which it is coextensive." [\(219\)](#) Serres praises Hergé's creation on the same basis: "Tintin . . . reduces distance and makes of the far a thing that is near." [\(220\)](#) The unbounded (unrivalrous) self is the result: "The self, porous and mixed, accumulates presence and absence, sows together the near and the far . . . separates and connects the here and the there." [\(221\)](#) Seeing small is renewal of perception through which there is recovery of natural existence, socially unburdened self-appreciation.

22

Kojève:

The analysis of "thought," "reason," "understanding," and so on--in general, of the cognitive, contemplative, passive behavior of a being or a "knowing subject" never reveals the why or the how of the birth of the word "I," and consequently of self-consciousness--that is, of the human reality. The man who contemplates is "absorbed" by what he contemplates; the "knowing subject" "loses" himself in the object that is known. Contemplation reveals the object, not the subject. The object, and not the subject, is what shows itself to him in and by--or better, as--the act of knowing. The man who is "absorbed" by the object that he is contemplating can be brought back to himself" [rappelé à lui] only by a Desire; by the desire to eat, for example. The conscious Desire of being is what constitutes that being as I and reveals it as such by moving it to say "I" . . . [\(222\)](#)

This condition of absorption implies a certain type of object, one not strong enough to be understood as generating a drive that is compensatory for lost power. Unless the object is poor, Kojève's two moments would not be opposed.

To posit a form in which the near and the far are reciprocally dissolved is to make available this passivity before the irreducible felt to be the guarantee of spontaneity: "Contemplation without violence, the source of all the joy of truth, presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distanced nearness." (223) "The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, . . . beyond that which is one's own." (224) Intention to appropriate or not is anticipatorily contained within the object itself. And it is the form's insignificance that makes possible this passivity: "But a cognition that is to bear fruit will throw itself to the objects à fond perdu." (225) It is up to the thing to masterfully renounce activity:

As radiant things give up their magic claims, renounce the power with which the subject invested them and hoped with their help himself to wield, they become transformed into images of gentleness, promises of a happiness cured of domination over nature . . . In the magic of what reveals itself in absolute powerlessness, of beauty, at once perfection and nothingness, the illusion of omnipotence is mirrored negatively as hope. It has eclipsed every trial of strength. (226)

Through this relation the subject is spontaneous as dispossessed, dispossessing. Through the nonobject, whose availability is not contested, one is not accessible to oneself as a thing. Enlightenment cannot allow red-meat difference to define itself as ideal.

All this clarifies a struggle internal to Adorno and Horkheimer, one that exposes a fragility of found-object logic that will cause it to become eventually vulnerable to the appeal of immanence. The attempt to describe Enlightenment as monolithic thing, which includes cunning, involves one in the confusion of our two patterns of identification. This cunning produces the "identify/don't identify," replacing the markedly temporalized version. And continuous with this cunning is the shrewdness of the small, that we have seen repeatedly offered by the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the only available resource to be deployed against the crushing forces they associate with modern society. ("To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion. . . . The destruction of gods and qualities alike is insisted upon." On objects: "He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them." (227))

If Enlightenment is described as including the self-camouflage of cunning, it must be understood as critically inhabited by something older than Enlightenment--the umbrella movement of the neoclassical, that force that drives towards the collapse of victimage and the values that oppose the jacketing of the community through exclusion, ending with the neoclassical revisionist breast that solves the problem of the dangerous luster of the ego ideal, not through its negation, but the spraying of its ingredients throughout all of life. As the small is this unknowing through dispersion, and as the logic of the Frankfurt School strictly associates its

negative dialectic with the critical potential of the small against the sequence, we see that its members--at least in this early essay--prove not entirely sensitive to their role in the autocritique of Enlightenment. Frankfurt School poses the small against the Enlightenment when it is clear that the small (as "interest") is one of the Enlightenment's major achievements. If the Enlightenment is what the authors say it is, then the small is its moment of immanent self-correction, a feature of an internal self-differentiation, a critique of victimage born before it, but preserved within. Seeing this, we can only agree with Cascardi in his noting of "the self-criticism of the Enlightenment that originates in Kant's third Critique," (228) and in his remarking "that a contemporary critique of the Enlightenment originates from within the Enlightenment itself and must be understood as a consequence or continuation of the Enlightenment, and not as a rejection of its critical program." (229)

23

The two Goethes stood for the two cardinal features of Enlightenment. The Adorno of Aesthetic Theory notices that the idea of Enlightenment folds into itself respect for a passive relation: "Thrown back on itself, Enlightenment distances itself from the guileless objectivity that it would like to achieve: that is why, under the compulsion of its own ideal of truth, it is conjoined with the pressure to hold on to what it has condemned in the name of truth." (230) How and why so? Enlightenment ambivalence, double bind of sequence, as necessary, as impossible, involving a push-pull--coexistence of Malebranche effects--blocking an entropic pattern that would otherwise be the fate of any knowing that would be exclusively manipulative. Incorrectly, Adorno and Horkheimer once said that "Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsidership is the very source of fear." (231) Strangeness needed to be a renewable resource, Lévi-Strauss said, and as Schumpeter said before him, if the hot culture was not to follow the path of the undynamic cold.

Adorno:

Mimetic behavior does not imitate something but assimilates itself to that something. Works of art take it upon themselves to realize this assimilation. They do not imitate the impulses of an individual in the medium of expression, much less those of the artist himself. If they do, they immediately fall prey to replication and objectification of the kind which their mimetic impulse reacts against. At the same time, artistic expression carries out the judgment of history which has condemned mimesis as an archaic mode of behavior, a judgment that finds mimesis falling short of cognition; that finds mimetic assimilation falling short of true identity; that finds mimesis falling short period--except in art, which absorbs both the mimetic impulse and the critique of that impulse by objectifying it. (232)

The small, communicating objectality and objectality's end, gives the body to this paradox, as it simultaneously preserves and undoes imitation. Aestheticized, the small is both--it cannot tell

the difference between imitation and mimesis--it is the small of the custodial and the unstoried breast, the various insignificant objectalities promoted by the divergent Enlightenment likes of John Law, Voltaire, and Rousseau, and as such is the dialectic of the Enlightenment, the collapse of the interests of administration and those of would-be autonomous entities.

Ritually unintelligible because of its extreme narrative shorthand, the self-violent small congeals into objectality the experience of the unreality of the image, of mere appearance, mere seeming, as it provocatively drops away from a pattern of reified forms, negating itself in the process. Delicate firewall that blocks the spreading of the lava of the compact group that is the liquefaction of the one into the many, it causes desire to wash back to the self and immediately drives it guiltlessly forwards, gathering us together and then with all modesty, pointing immediately elsewhere. Here, in a condition of continuous creation, the ever new, that which provokes desire contains within itself a mechanism that liberates from the desire that is generated, and sends it traveling along a potentially endless horizontal axis containing an infinite number of such provocations, contemporaneous compulsions to attach and permissions to detach. Musset on the remobilization effect: "Le plus chétif objet suffit pour me changer en abeille et me fait voltiger çà et là avec un plaisir toujours nouveau" [The frailest object suffices to change me into a bee and makes me flit hither and thither with an ever-renewed pleasure]. (233) The synergism of its fused effects overriding the listlessness of the energies emerging from the clearest disjunction between irreconcilable components and their claims to priority causes the constitutive roles in aesthetic phenomena of individual mastery and correction to escape detection, to escape their modernly inadmissible consequences. The small, according to Pascal: "We do not sustain ourselves in virtue by resorting to our own strength alone, but rather through the counterbalancing of opposing vices that hold us upright, as if supported by oppositely blowing winds." (234)

Ponge: "Curious antagonism and link . . . between abundance and abandon," (235) the small takes all parts and makes short work of itself. The sequence, accelerated into an imagination of invulnerable fragility, unhappens by happening all at once--synchronic totemism. Through anticipatory accommodation, the temporal unfolding of the scene of ritual dissolves as opposing forms of violence are compressed into indistinguishability. Here, in Adorno, it takes the form of "taste":

[T]he horror of the ending lights up the deception of the origin. --It is the fortune and limitation of French art never to have entirely eradicated the pride in making little pictures. . . . In countless significant manifestations it casts a conciliatory glance at what pleases because it was skillfully made: sublime artistry keeps a hold on sensuous life by a moment of harmless pleasure in the bien fait. While the absolute claim of perfection without becoming, the dialectic of truth and appearance, is thus renounced, the untruth of those dubbed by Haydn the Grand Moguls is also avoided. . . . Taste is the ability to keep in balance the contradiction in art between the made and the apparent not-having-become. (236) (my emphasis)

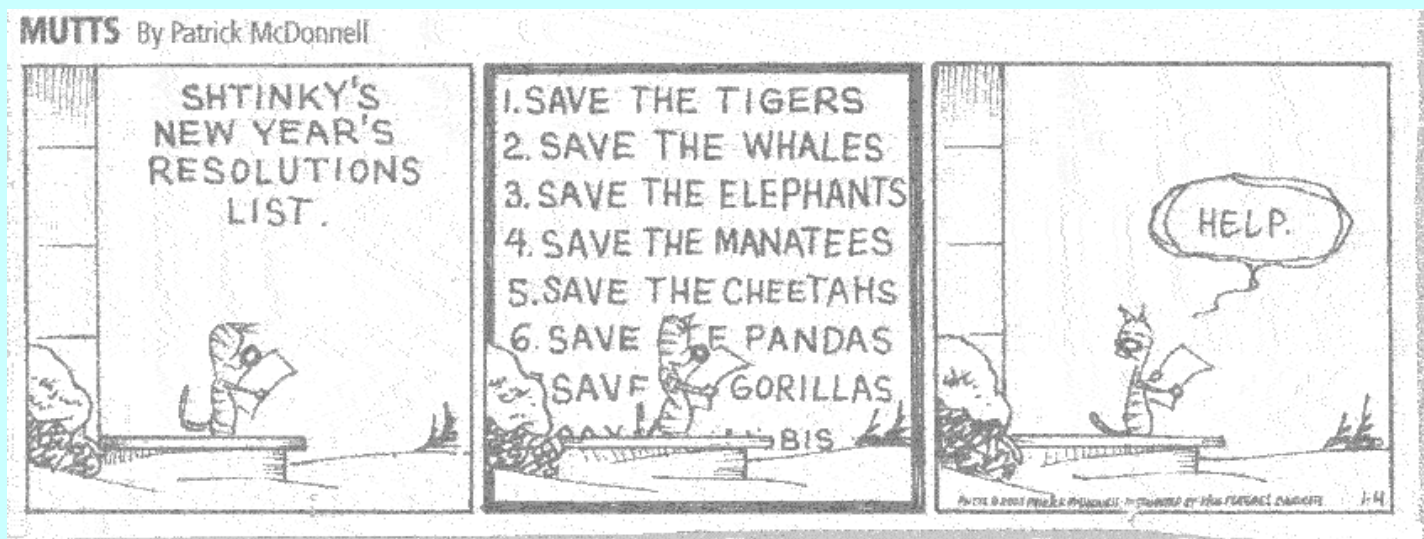
One keeps the company of the small, then, rather than being responsible for its production. The small, the unimagining of the becoming insignificant, does not emerge at the conclusion of a self-limitingly triumphalistic desire rotation. In this immanence that is the perdition of the ritual division of labor, preserved and negated are the separability of opposing, consecutively revealed terms--the dialectic is seized up because sized down. The collapse of complimentary absurdities, the small realizes every ambition, says everything at once. Less a dissolving agency than a double effacement, or double preterition, a spatialized irony, figure of internal torsion, that dissolves the force and consequences of the contrast, that resembles neither and that will thus frustrate the formulation of decisive questions by insuring that the anthropological/social-psychological ground will remain unperceived. Pseudomorph of the sequence that negates the moral eventfulness of the turnaround, synergy of omnipotence and failure, it doubly negates the outside--the outside of desire, the outside of revenge. Protectively yet provocatively luckless, releasing as it regulates, powerlessness destroys the contrast between perfection and nothingness.

In terms of the metapsychology of Freud, the small collapses the chronological succession of founding episodes of totemic society into a single moment. Coiled back into a single figure are all of the events of the story that describes the relation of the band of brothers to their preposterous father. This all-possessing patriarch, indifferent to his sons, is libidinally organized like the narcissistic leader of the essay on group psychology. Sacrificed by the brothers, his body is broken apart, turned into something small, and redistributed among the first triumphant but then guilty and dependent parricides. In the small the sublime is revealed, humiliated, its powers retained and redistributed in a flash. Marked at once by lack and possession, these mutilated tyrants survive as osmotic of the threat posed by the rivalry Freud describes them as engendering. Idempotent, the narcissisms our small generates are unchanged after multiplication. Diaspora of self-content--through the faintest impropriety, smallest thinkable unit of removal, one gets to keep one's distance.

The making naïve of negativity, the small embarrasses as it randomizes its stream. Safe passage of still life, miracle of repay with no delay, hassle-free refund of self-love, the busiest little oxymoron, it steers clear of the calamity of the group's pride, the unassisted passage through the life cycle of the sequence. One can't tell the difference between where it begins and where it ends, barely noticeable happiness, barely distinguishable from a barely noticed demoralization. Insoluble indifference conjures away the impasse of Civilization and its Discontents--the incompatibility of individual gratification and social survival. The small--it was over as soon as it started. Sacrifice has gotten ahead of itself; speed-reading of the stations of its cross, it meets itself coming and going--preconditions and consequences strike their bargain, insensibly combined, the tangling of narcissisms communicating through reciprocal sabotage. Resilience sustained by the interiority of its tensions, that socializes as it unsocializes, the contraction supporting social practices independent of hieratic institutions, regulating

themselves not on the basis of the threat of external correction. Quasi-objectality that approximates a no-fault anobjectality, a self-confounding narcissism--the happiness of ego ideal minus its fate. Our rising and falling arc of the learning curve is replaced by the innocuousness of an amoralizingly distracting incident overload. One decision at a time is replaced by all decisions all the time--the small means never having to say you're sorry--a narcissism in just too many places at once. The contemporaneousness of fascination and disillusion, mix-up of now you see it and now you don't, art's saving itself from art, always dying, never dead, hairpin turn of negativity, the imperceptibility of transition, good as almost gone replacing good as going, good as gone--fastest unbreaking story, needlepoint of negativity, self-love and its correction in a state of reciprocal betrayal. The discovery--that the entitlements of visibly perishable limited-good supremacies dispossess of everything worth having--results in the conclusion that the problem posed by the remote object can only be solved by replacing it with one that sustains the resource of its remoteness with dulling proximity, cipher of the system of autoregulatory differences that is the market. (The less there is distinction between the sequence stages, the greater the profit margin.) Perfect anticipation, sequentialist overdrive, invisibilizing warp speed of justice, the sublime, now an unnoticeably internal predicament, struggles through the eye of a needle and emerges, no longer recognizable to itself, as economics. "Where's Waldo" of ritualized death, emancipating figure of the low-intensity abrasions of "interest" and the fused antagonistic complicities of Schumpeter, the unphasing that is the unfazing, parodic objectality is both parodic crime and parodic punishment--Totem and Taboo rewritten on the head of a pin.

Doctrine of Containment: Preemption Plus



The above, however, is but half of the absence of the story. Identification, Derrida said, nothing better, nothing worse, "the worst of temptations, the most indecent, the most murderous." (237) Derrida has described his warm feelings for the Frankfurt School, and it is in his exaltation of a passive against an aggressive identification that we find the basis of the alliance (with Adorno's ideal of "mimesis" that is posed against "identification.") Given the fact that both Deconstruction and the Frankfurt School describe the Hegelian negativity cycle as the unavoidable way of the world, one can understand how passivity before the insignificant thing

would appear to be the only resource against interpersonal violence. As they find that the problem can only be solved within the terms of negativity, there may be applied to their logic the legal expression "imperfect necessity"--the use of small crime to block the possibility of a greater.

25

"The new wants non-identity," Adorno said, "yet intention reduces it to identity." (238) Exposed in this remark is the sense of the fragility of the lesser negativity as solution to the threat posed by those full-bore versions that when awoken from their slumber produce compact groups that are stultifyingly allergic to those animated patterns of desire upon which the market must depend. It is a vigilance concerning lability that focuses the fears of the market, and its Critical Theory mirror, the danger represented by the endless threat of the fall upwards of the lesser to the greater negativity--that pattern of negativity that Max Weber called the charismatic, and that he described as the opposite of the market: "Pure charisma is opposed to all systematic economic activities, in fact it is the strongest anti-economic force. . . ." (239) "Charisma is basically an extraordinary and hence necessarily non-economic power." (240) Within the regime of the lesser negativity clouds of charismatics cloud the charismatic.

The question of questions for Critical Theory, was, however, regarding the forms of lesser negativity: Would the banalization of strangeness alone guarantee the perfect drift away from the charismatic, block the always menacing glide from the one, functional, small to the economically dysfunctional other? There was the suspicion that mitigated strangeness of insignificant mystery could not alone suffice to be the perfect scourge of the charismatic, could not alone do the work of obstructing passage between the always collapsing scales of self-love. The second safety would be recruited to brace the first.

And thus there developed the immanence partnership, the use of immanence as "minder." Joseph Schumpeter said that the market needed to be protected from itself, that its freedom required the support of the flying buttresses of premodern values that would soften the savageries that might otherwise result in arousing dysfunctionalizing indignations against its animating inequalities. This would be a different way of putting the point of Weber. But, obviously, distinctions had to be made between past ethical worlds. What Schumpeter clearly had in mind is the advantage that Judeo-Christian patterns of identification have demonstrated over the rigidities of sacrificially organized groups. But for Critical Theory a refinement was required: the Judeo-Christian tradition proved to be insufficiently rigorous in its critique of sacrifice, and had to be stripped of its residual charismatic features, its ironic structure, its signature use of the charismatic against the charismatic. The radicalization of external mediation that is at the core of Judeo-Christian logic is nudged aside by an unmediated empathy, one supported by a notion of seamless participation in divine substance. Thus summoned from its sleep is an ideal of immanence that would seem to have no relation the lesser negativity that it is nonetheless called upon to protect.

The current has not gone unnoticed. The present French Minister of Education, Luc Ferry, writes in his *L'homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie*: "We live today . . . in a period when the processes of the divinization of man and the humanization of God are in the process of intersecting." (241) And Derrida has himself turned to the expression "l'homme-Dieu" to explain what he feels to be the major mood of the contemporary West. We live a culture of pardon, he says, and this "convulsive theater of pardon" can only be sustained as supported by a planetarily shared immanence ideal. (242) To argue, as he does, that immanence makes possible a world pardon project, is to support the argument I have sought to make concerning how the lesser negativity fortifies itself with the company of immanence that traps negativity in the status of the lesser. Pardon is the nonviolent conclusion of an identification, the soft landing of self-love after its pass through the negativity cycle, a self-love that has landed lightly. A universe of pardon--one of the allowability of a certain threshold of antisocial demonstration, "downward definition of deviance," one of a mitigated, unbloodied negativity--would be one in which there would be minimized the extent to which I would be haunted by the reversibility of my own violence.

In Daniel Sibony we find another clarifying example of the immanence obligato, of an immanence-assisted effort to snap the communication between the two negativities, allowing the free life of the lesser by attaching it to a pattern of identification that is foreign to it. First, we find a restatement of the narcissistic force of insignificance, now accompanied by awareness of its Christian roots:

A narcissistic being is a more severe critic of the image than is either you or I. Narcissism is a critique of the image that is fairly desperate; it is a belief in an image that is missing, one that, if exhibited, would be the final image. It is a belief in the true encounter with the image that would be the true image. The paradox of narcissism is well known. Well before psychoanalysis the mystics were aware of the immense pride attached to the imagery of having no pride, in the pretension of pretending to nothing. (243)

And below we find immanence yoked together with a strategy of the attenuation of the spectacle of self-love through building failure into this image. A etiolated identification nonviolently come and and gone blurs with one that knows no end; the check that is the steadying grace of immanence:

Narcissism is the fleeting disappearance of the other, causing you to forget that this other also faces obstacles. But to fully relocate the other in the midst of the dramaturgy of his or her frustrations is to escape his or her hatreds and attacks. But how would this be possible without embracing a notion of the love of being? Hardly the love of the other--and just why would one offer love in exchange for the hatred he or she feels for us? Rather the environment is altered through reference to the love of being, the sharing of being that allows one the possibility of living the confrontation of narcissisms without reducing oneself to them. Like a

scene in a long play, and not like a final event. That said, it is impossible to pass through the field of the other without narcissistic support. A certain connivance with being would involve a transcending of what one is, of not being completely forgotten by being, not being reduced to oneself. (244) (my emphasis)

26

The usual, apotropaic, awareness, here, of the necessity of the vision of the other as constituted of built-in insufficiencies. But the identify/don't identify produced, against the identify then don't identify mentioned in the first sentence, is described as requiring the bracing supplied by a third pattern: Identify. This relation is not described as bringing the experience of negativity to a close, but as that which makes possible its sustainable everydayness.

A paraplegia of negativity--a negativity frozen on one side, the nanism of negativity. From Clément Rosset another case of an augmented lesser negativity, a different labiability of narcissisms, the postmodernly "good" labiability. Rosset exalts what he terms "the real," easily recognizable as the redoubt of our modest singularity, possessing all virtue as through it "the other is not convoked." (245) "Allégresse" is the emotion before the insignificant: "Such is in effect the real, and this is its most general definition: an unclosed gathering of nonidentifiable objects. Identification consists in the reduction of the unknown to the known. An operation that is impossible in the case of the real." (246) Representation is violence, the image that hoards the real, causing it to disappearingly recoil into a provocatively invisible depth. (247) "The real," mediation of the unmediated relation, is always present, not at any remove, and is thus our predictable banality of strangeness. But, as in Sibony, prehumiliation tips over into a related but entirely different pattern of identification. Conjointly and antithetically are these points made:

Desire, without doubt, in order play a trick on its hunger, can solve its problem by attaching itself to something that is undesirable, while ignoring the undesirable character of the thing and thus becoming as absurdly low as the object that is coveted, as fragile as it is, as uninteresting. But is there to this an alternative that can be also offered to desire? Can one imagine a desire that is attached to the undesirable with a love that is unconditional and without reservation, one implying a full awareness of the object's status as undesirable? If such a desire exists it would present to philosophy the most serious of questions, perhaps the only serious question. (248)

Handily summarized here in this harnessing of insignificance and immanence is the conclusion of the work that characterizes the neoclassical project in general. The goal is that of producing a double loss of tension in which the contrasting naïve and sentimental outflank and cause to appear morally repulsive the now doubly discredited lesson of the reversibility of violence. This yoking of an identification with no beginning or end with one whose beginning is indistinguishable from its end, in turn mirrors the solution of the market to its own woes,

endlessly pressured as it is to at once create and mitigate the tensions upon which it feeds.

Understandable within this context are an array of what would otherwise appear to be odd moments in modern thought. Tristes tropiques ends in such a way as to leave one suspended within an incompatibility of identification regimes. Silliness here, in harness with cosmic elation, yoked towards the unknowing of interpersonal struggle:

When the spectrum or rainbow of human cultures has finally sunk into the void created by our frenzy [there becomes possible] a privilege coveted by every society, whatever its beliefs, its political system or its level of civilization; a privilege to which it attaches its leisure, its pleasure, its peace of mind and its freedom; the possibility, vital for life, of unhitching, which consists--Oh! fond farewell to savages and explorations!--in grasping, during the brief intervals in which our species can bring itself to interrupt its hive-like activity, the essence of what it was and continues to be, below the threshold of thought and over and above society: in the contemplation of a mineral more beautiful than all of our creations; in the scent that can be smelt at the heart of a lily and is more imbued with learning than all our books; or in the brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that, through some involuntary understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat. [\(249\)](#)

There may be the Kantian beautiful here--in the lily and the cat--but certainly not his sublime, that involves a final triumph over a now humiliated nature that was once humiliating. Kant's excluding sublime, being the ghost of the "identify then don't identify" pattern, finds itself in this text excluded by the sacrifice-outflanking forces of the exclusion of exclusion.

Adorno with Deleuze and Derrida are the most rigorous of supporters of the lesser negativity. But for each of their smalls, "home alone" was not an option. Consistent with our pattern, Deleuze's enthusiasm of the free smalls of literary modernity was matched only by his energy for praising the immanence of Spinoza. Adorno's relation to immanence is discovered in his ambivalence towards Kant, whom he at once praises for rehabilitating an identification with nature, but whom he at once criticizes for including in his idea of the sublime the idea of a detaching victory over that thing with which we first came to identify.

27

The hedgehog might have had a privileged role for Derrida, but it wasn't the only animal he loved. Deconstruction's tireless insistence upon the lesser negativity as our fragile grace is now shadowed by catch-up work on behalf of an empathic perspective that includes a necessity of vegetarianism as a logical support for the postmodern insistence upon the priority of the part over the whole. Derrida's passivity before the undecidable now finds itself retrofitted with a morality that might seem not immediately to square with the one implied by the lesser negativity of his nanoaestheticism: "This industrial, scientific, and technological violence cannot

be tolerated for much longer, either in actual fact or legally. It will find itself more and more discredited. The relations between man and animals must change. They must change in both two senses--in the 'ontological' sense as well as in the sense of 'ethical' responsibility." (250) Reminding us of the Freud of the final pages of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Derrida says that this will occur inevitably out of our growing sympathy for animals. "Regardless of how one qualifies this, the violence that we inflict upon animals will not be lacking in profound consequences (either conscious or unconscious) upon the image that men have of themselves. This violence, I believe, will become less and less acceptable." (251) Less and less acceptable because of the increasing impossibility of the lesson of the reversibility of violence. Less and less tolerable because of the growing necessity of a cross-pressuring against the charismatic--a redundancy in the critique that causes a slipping of the gear of the transmission from one negativity to another. The wounded animal was the charismatically impaired negativity--the indelibility of its benign face.

Immanence was called upon not for the task of the liquidation of negativity, but to serve as its loyal opposition, a filtering agency to give reliable separation that is the security of the lesser negativity supply, the atomization of its suspension, the blocking of its aspiration towards the unanimity of its expression, the productivity of the tension between self- and public interest. The work upon negativity of the neighborly, selectively pardoning immanence--the freest dispersal of the downward calibration of the energies of its display, the restriction of the range of its expressions to an atomization of compressions, inseparably and illimitably exploding as it does so the array of possible differences it can assume, a misting that shifts negativity from an economy of zero sum to one of infinite good. In economic negativity the timed and spaced negativity cycles of history and ritual are unavoidably maintained, but are now invisibilized, everywhere gone as soon as come. Unlike Girard, whose critique of sacrifice is leveled from the single vantage of the imperative to "identify," Critical Theory discovers the principle of the redundant critique of sacrifice, that augmented power that causes it to be finally recognizable as a neoconservative logic. Where, without its supplement, there was a perpetually menacing aspiring, a true arrow with the charismatic as its destination, there was now a bifurcation, a breaking into levels, and the blocking of passage from one to the other. Negativity lite: from religious horror to shopper's remorse. To mitigate the force of its sacrificially haunting superego, the burden of its defensive work, our allowable negativity hands itself over to a colloidal relation--suspension of finely divided particles in a continuous medium. The relation is lyophobic--there is a lack of attraction between the colloid medium and the dispersion medium in a colloidal system. Happinesses could now be atomistically coincident. This selective appropriation of immanence worked towards guaranteeing the free life of the small, that immanentization that now unoppressively lived the death that was the death of the entropic mass, the frustration of the torpor that was its entire hope. It was the customer who required these deaths, that is, this privatization of negativity, the kindler, gentler negativity, and, as we know, it is the customer who is always right.

Notes

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108. "L'art, fragment," p. 171. [\(back\)](#)
109. Cahiers pour une morale (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 57. [\(back\)](#)
110. "Berg and Webern--Schönberg's Heirs," Modern Music, Vol. 8 No. 2 (January/February 1931), p. 32. [\(back\)](#)
- 32
111. Philosophy of Modern Music, pp. 156-57. [\(back\)](#)
112. "The Mouse," Posthumous Papers of a Living Author , trans. Peter Wortsman (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 30. [\(back\)](#)
113. Paris, capitale du XIXe, (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996), p. 863. [\(back\)](#)
114. Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 455. [\(back\)](#)
115. Aesthetics, Vol. II, p. 1220. "La tragédie moderne . . . n'a ni premier plan ni arrière-plan épiques. Le héros existe et meurt par ses propres actes." Pierre Klossowski, on "Traduction d'Antigone de Kierkegaard," in Denis Hollier, ed. Le Collège de Sociologie 1937-1939 (Paris:

Gallimard, 1995), p. 263. [\(back\)](#)

116. La Poétique de l'espace (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970), pp. 141-42. [\(back\)](#)

117. An expression of Ruskin. [\(back\)](#)

118. Selected Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982).

And from Osip Mandelstam:

I am growing smaller here--no one notices me anymore,

But in caressing books and children's games

I will rise from the dead to say the sun is shining.

Selected Poems, trans. David McDuff (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975), p. 133.

[\(back\)](#)

119. "Che cos'è la poesia?" Points de suspension (Paris: Galilée, 1992), p. 305. [\(back\)](#)

120. Derrida and Catherine Malabou, La Contre-allée (Paris: La Quinzaine Littéraire, 1998), p. 210. [\(back\)](#)

121. "Che cos'è la poesia?" p. 319. [\(back\)](#)

122. Daybreak, trans. Michael Tanner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 189 [\(back\)](#)

123. Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 41-42. [\(back\)](#)

124. Eclaircissements. Entretiens avec Bruno Latour, p. 178. [\(back\)](#)

125. Trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 28. [\(back\)](#)

126. Jokes, p. 146. [\(back\)](#)

127. Jokes, p. 171. [\(back\)](#)

128. P. 200. The influence here of Bergson, who said that dream involved the usual mental activity minus the tension of effort. [\(back\)](#)

129. Jokes, p. 193. [\(back\)](#)

130. Jokes, p. 191. [\(back\)](#)

131. Jokes, pp. 148-149. [\(back\)](#)

132. Jokes, p. 236. [\(back\)](#)

133. Human All too Human, I, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 173. Baudrillard also associates the small with efficiency and speed. See *Le Système des objets*, p. 73. [\(back\)](#)

33

134. [\(back\)](#)

135. *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), p. 128. [\(back\)](#)

136. Quoted by Benjamin, in *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 684. [\(back\)](#)

137. *L'Evolution créatrice*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959), p. 747. [\(back\)](#)

138. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 235-36. [\(back\)](#)

139. *Of Grammatology*, p. 148. [\(back\)](#)

140. "Les Morts de Roland Barthes," in *Psyché* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 277. [\(back\)](#)

141. *Signéponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 32. Bataille sees the eternal return of Nietzsche: "En lui la répercussion infini du retour eut un sens: . . . Absence d'effort!" *Sur Nietzsche*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. VI (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 159. [\(back\)](#)

142. Jokes, p. 186. [\(back\)](#)

143. Jokes, p. 103. [\(back\)](#)

144. Jokes, p. 195. [\(back\)](#)

145. *Grammatology*, p. 39. ([back](#))

146. *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 22. ([back](#))

147. *L'Empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970), p. 24. ([back](#))

148. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 321. ([back](#))

149. *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 62. ([back](#))

150. *How it Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 17. ([back](#))

151. *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 142. ([back](#))

152. "Anamnesis of the Visible, or Candour," trans. David Macey, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Blackwell, 1989), p. 232. ([back](#))

153. Jean Santeuil, ed. Pierre Clarac (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 896. Nietzsche: "Art is based in the imprecision of sight." *Le Livre du philosophe*, p. 71. ([back](#))

154. Barthes in *Camera lucida* writes: "Ultimately--or at the limit--in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes." And then he quotes a remark made to Kafka: "The necessary condition for an image is sight," Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes." Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 72. ([back](#))

155. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 15. ([back](#))

156. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 107. ([back](#))

157. "Why Distant Objects Please," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Ronald Blythe (New York: Penguin, 1970), p. 148. ([back](#))

158. Quoted by Balthus, in *Balthus*, by Claude Roy (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 257. ([back](#))

34

159. Quoted in *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 174-75. ([back](#))

160. Quoted by Blanchot, in *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 60 [\(back\)](#)
161. *De la Recherche de la vérité* [1674-75], 5.8, 6th ed. [1712], in *Oeuvres*, Vol. 2, p. 204. *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, ed. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962-67), Vol. 2, p. 204. [\(back\)](#)
162. *The Passions of the Soul*, p. 355. [\(back\)](#)
163. From the Dada Manifesto of 1918: "What we need are strong, straightforward, precise works which will be forever misunderstood." According to the Malebranche logic, banality is thus the indispensable ally. [\(back\)](#)
164. *Cahiers 1894-1914*, Vol. VII (1902-03) ed. Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 97. [\(back\)](#)
165. *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970), p. 146. [\(back\)](#)
166. Adorno on the same distinction: "Amazement is rediscovered, but it is an astonishment at individual things, not a Platonic amazement; an amazement saturated with nominalism and also emphatically opposed to the power of convention, which is a dingy lens in front of the eye and a layer of dust on the object. Audacious reflection wants to give thought what cautious reflection drove out of it--naïveté." "The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience," in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. II, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 219. [\(back\)](#)
167. *Totality and Infinity*, p. 191. [\(back\)](#)
168. "The Essential Solitude," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis and others, ed. George Quasha (Barytown, N. Y.: Station Hill, 1999), p. 405. [\(back\)](#)
169. "The Essential Solitude," p. 405. [\(back\)](#)
170. *De la Recherche de la vérité*, p. 205. [\(back\)](#)
171. *De la Recherche de la vérité*, p. 207. [\(back\)](#)
172. *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Agora, 1974), p. 138. [\(back\)](#)

173. The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore (New York: Viking, 1981). [\(back\)](#)
174. "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in A Barthes Reader, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 320, 324, 326, 328. [\(back\)](#)
175. The Philosophy of the Present, p. 121. [\(back\)](#)
176. The Philosophy of the Present, p. 124. [\(back\)](#)
177. The Philosophy of the Present, p. 123. [\(back\)](#)
178. The Philosophy of the Present, p. 191. [\(back\)](#)
179. Negative Dialectics, p. 78. [\(back\)](#)
180. Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 10. [\(back\)](#)
181. Tome premier, Le Parti pris des choses, p. 64. [\(back\)](#)
182. Negative Dialectics, p. 191. [\(back\)](#)
183. Negative Dialectics, p. 120. [\(back\)](#)
- 35
184. Aesthetic Theory, p. 33. [\(back\)](#)
185. Negative Dialectics, p. 139. [\(back\)](#)
186. Negative Dialectics, p. 177. [\(back\)](#)
187. The Philosophy of the Present, p. 191 [\(back\)](#)
188. Discours, figure, p. 284. [\(back\)](#)
189. Critique of Judgment, p. 264. [\(back\)](#)
190. The Philosophy of the Present, p. 126. [\(back\)](#)

191. Aesthetic Theory, p. 259. [\(back\)](#)
192. Negative Dialectics, p. 188. [\(back\)](#)
193. Critique of Judgment, p. 106. [\(back\)](#)
194. "Essais sur la peinture," in Oeuvres esthétiques (Paris: Garnier, 1959), p. 718. [\(back\)](#)
195. "Essais sur la peinture," p. 765. [\(back\)](#)
196. Look, Listen, Read, trans. Brian C. J. Singer (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 28. [\(back\)](#)
197. Look, Listen, Read, p. 27. [\(back\)](#)
198. The Savage Mind, p. 23. [\(back\)](#)
199. Genesis, p. 76. [\(back\)](#)
200. "Anamnesis of the Visible, or Candour," in The Lyotard Reader, ed. Andrew Benjamin; trans. David Macey (London: Blackwell, 1989), p. 207. [\(back\)](#)
201. "Acinema," in The Lyotard Reader, p. 179. [\(back\)](#)
202. "Anamnesis of the Visible, or Candour," p. 225. [\(back\)](#)
203. Cahiers (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 945. [\(back\)](#)
204. The Savage Mind, p. 24. [\(back\)](#)
205. "La Crevette dans tous ses états," in Le Grand Recueil, Pièces (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 17. [\(back\)](#)
206. Negative Dialectics p. 179. [\(back\)](#)
207. Cahiers 1894-1914, Vol. V (1902-03) ed. Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 310. "L'homme peut tromper son désir, en se conduisant lui-même vers l'objet, en le frôlant sans intention définitive et sans acte irréversible--Et tant qu'il s'en rapproche de la sorte--le désir qui jusque-là , est satisfait, ne le fait souffrir, ni l'adversaire du désir ne proteste." [\(back\)](#)

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209. Consequences of Enlightenment, pp. 260-261. [\(back\)](#)

210. Unterwegs Zur Sprache, in Gesamtausgabe: Ausgabe letzter Hand, Vol. 12, ed. Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt:), p. 94. [\(back\)](#)

211. Gesamtausgabe: Ausgabe letzter Hand, Vol. 20, p. 204. [\(back\)](#)

36

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217. L'Expérience intérieure, in Oeuvres complètes, Vol. V (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 17. [\(back\)](#)

218. "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 154. [\(back\)](#)

219. Foucault (Paris: Minuit, 1986), p. 127. [\(back\)](#)

220. Atlas (Paris: Julliard, 1994), p. 254 [\(back\)](#)

221. Atlas, p. 83. [\(back\)](#)

222. Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 3. [\(back\)](#)

223. Minima Moralia, pp. 89-90. [\(back\)](#)

224. Negative Dialectics, p. 191. John Cage: "The enjoyment of things as they come, as they happen, rather than as they are possessed or kept or forced to be." "How the Piano Came to be Prepared," in Empty Words (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), p. 8. [\(back\)](#)

225. Negative Dialectics, p. 33. [\(back\)](#)

226. Minima Moralia, p. 224. The logic behind Adorno's recommending "conspicuously and willfully ceding to crude material." Aesthetic Theory, p. 258. [\(back\)](#)

227. Dialectic of Enlightenment, pp. 8, 9. [\(back\)](#)

228. Consequences of Enlightenment, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 57. [\(back\)](#)

229. Consequences of Enlightenment, p. 49. [\(back\)](#)

230. Aesthetic Theory, p. 80. [\(back\)](#)

231. Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 16. [\(back\)](#)

232. Aesthetic Theory, p. 162. [\(back\)](#)

233. Fantasio [\(back\)](#)

234. Pensées, p. 151. [\(back\)](#)

235. Comment une figure de paroles et pourquoi (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 18. [\(back\)](#)

236. Minima Moralia, p. 226-27. [\(back\)](#)

237. "Les Morts de Roland Barthes," in Psyché: Inventions de l'autre (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 277. [\(back\)](#)

37

238. Aesthetic Theory, p. 23. [\(back\)](#)

239. "The Nature and Impact of Charisma," in Economy and Society, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Vol. II , p. 1113. [\(back\)](#)

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241. Paris: Grasset, 1996, pp. 246-47. [\(back\)](#)
242. Foi et savoir suivi de Le Siècle et le pardon (Paris: Seuil, 2000). [\(back\)](#)
243. Le "Racisme" ou la haine identitaire (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1997), p. 386. [\(back\)](#)
244. Le "Racisme" ou la haine identitaire, p. 386. [\(back\)](#)
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246. L'Objet singulier, p. 22. [\(back\)](#)
247. Le Réel: Traité de l'idiotie (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 112. [\(back\)](#)
248. L'Objet singulier, p. 96-97. [\(back\)](#)
249. Tristes tropiques, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 473-74. [\(back\)](#)
250. De quoi demain. . . Dialogue (Paris: Fayard/Galilée, 2001), p. 108. [\(back\)](#)
251. De quoi demain. . . Dialogue, p. 109. [\(back\)](#)

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Performatism in the Movies (1997-2003)

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In the study of culture, a short span of time can sometimes make a big difference. If I had set out to write a survey of artistically ambitious movies six or seven years ago, my article would no doubt have been heavily skewed towards a discussion of otherness, undecidability, belatedness and ironic regress--in short, towards the devices and ways of knowing normally associated with postmodernism. As examples, I might have singled out movies like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* (1989), Lars von Trier's *Europa* (1990), Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink* (1991). And, had I ventured a glance into the future, I would almost certainly have predicted that the ironic perspective, deferred identifications and metaphysical pessimism of these films would continue on seamlessly into an endless posthistorical future. Beginning sometime in the mid-to-late 1990s, however, a massive sea change in the subject matter and focus of independently made movies began to take place. These movies, which all bore the imprint of sophisticated auteur sensibility, began to do unusual things. They started treating themes of identity, reconciliation, and belief. They forced viewers to identify with single-minded characters and their sacrificial, redemptive acts. And, as if all this were not enough, they began to set up dramatically staged, emotionally moving denouements. As milestones in this development you could cite productions like Lars von Trier's *Idiots* (1997) and Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998); Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog* (1999); Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1999); and, in mainstream cinema, the Oscar-winning *American Beauty* (1999). Before the year 2000, it might still have been possible to write off this sort of movie as a sentimental aberration. Since then, however, dozens of important and striking films have appeared that follow this same threefold pattern. Indeed, it has become increasingly hard to find serious movies wholly committed to postmodernist themes and strategies, and it is becoming increasingly hard to apply poststructuralist theory in a positive way to the new type of film.

Several years ago, in an attempt to wend my way out of postmodernism, I set forth the notion of performatism, which can be thought of as an application of Eric Gans's generative anthropology. Regular readers of *Anthropoetics* need hardly be reminded of GA's basic premise, which is that all culture begins with the emission of a simple (ostensive) sign formed by spontaneous agreement between two or more protohumans caught up in a situation of mimetic rivalry. The emission of the ostensive sign creates an originary, sacral word, the name-of-God, which defers violence and lays the foundation for all later human culture. The root idea behind performatism is that in recent years, as a reaction to postmodern culture, there has been a

massive shift of attention back to ostensive signs, as well as to the dense or opaque subjects using them and the scenes of transcendence around them. Instead of being swept away in a sea of duplicitous, unreliable signs, viewers are now "framed"--forced to identify with a central, often sacrificial figure (in drama) or with unexpected, constructed modes of reconciliation (in comedy). Although this sort of involuntary identification sounds terribly conventional--Hollywood movies, after all, have been doing something similar for years--in practice it is anything but. The forced focus on the simple, irrefutable truth of ostensive signs, on annoyingly dense or opaque characters, and on incredible acts of transcendence bores or irritates mainstream moviegoers accustomed to the easy identifications offered by Hollywood genres. Conversely, postmodern viewers tend to write off performatist films as "banal," "trite," or "melodramatic" for not engaging in the intellectual ludism and ironic regress expected of postmodern discourse.

When talking about movies systematically in any way, you are usually faced at some point with the choice between mainstream Hollywood productions and so-called art movies. As it turned out, the nature of my topic--epoch-making artistic innovation--didn't allow for much leeway. Hollywood undeniably turns out innovative movies, but for the most part tends to sugarcoat the themes and devices I'm interested in (Tom Hanks movies like *Forrest Gump*, *Cast Away*, and *The Green Mile* are a case in point). The main problem with art movies, by contrast, is accessibility. Not being a festival-hopping professional critic, I decided to concentrate on European movies and North American independent productions that are readily available on video or DVD. For comparison's sake, though, I've included in my collection at least one bona fide mainstream Hollywood movie, David Fincher's *Panic Room*. I've also avoided treating the hard-to-get Russian and Czech movies which are my normal stock in trade, the one exception being Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Kukushka* (*The Cuckoo*); readers interested in a discussion of performatism in Czech cinema may refer to Eshelman 2002.

2

The best way to describe the shift from postmodernism to performatism is to start with the notion of the frame. This refers less to the term used by Derrida in his *The Truth in Painting* (1987) than to the American sociologist Erving Goffman's "frame analysis," which studies ritualized microsituations, or frames, in everyday life. Like Derrida, Goffman places a premium on the meta-analysis of disruptions and permutations in such frames, for which some think him cynical. However, unlike Derrida, Goffman also makes very clear that human interaction is rooted in a "common focus on a physical scene of action" prior to language (Collins 1988, 51). For Goffman, language is always anchored in some way in such scenes by means of indexical or deictic signs ("that there," "this here," etc.) not immediately applicable to other situations. And, unlike the Derridean concept, which begins and ends with a notion of frame-as-paradox, Goffman's approach is generative and originary: he suggests the existence of "primary frameworks," out of which develop still further, more complex frames or modulations of those frames. Especially interesting from the perspective of GA is that the primary frameworks, which allow us to ascribe a basic meaning to things, include an explicit sacral dimension--the "astounding complex," which serves to determine whether things have a supernatural origin

(Goffman 1974, 28-30). Other primary frameworks relate to "stunts," "flubs," "fortuitousness," and the potentially embarrassing "tension" between social norms and bodily functions (Goffman 1974, 28-39). The frameworks help us decide, for example, whether the quick upward flip of someone's right arm is a religious blessing, a move in sport, an accident, or a natural reflex. Goffman's frames, in other words, are more than just accidental, transient incisions in the stream of human discourse. In fact, you could say that they are anchored in reality in a way comparable to Gans's notion of the originary scene, which is based on a spontaneous agreement to defer mimetic rivalry through the emission of an ostensive sign (also a kind of index sign pointing to a concrete, present thing and surrounded by a frame of social consensus). Taken this way, the ostensive scene would provide the originary ground missing from Goffman's theory, which does not try to explain how the the "astounding complex" came about in the first place, or why it is even a *primus inter pares* within its own category. [\(1\)](#) Conversely, Goffman's theory and observations serve to remind us that ritual and sacrality continue to play a key role in everyday behavior.

While it would probably be possible to describe performatist works of art using the entire range of Goffman's categories, I do not wish to do so here. For one, I am not trying to found a sociology of narrative fiction. For another, Goffman's own terminology draws heavily on theatrical and fictional metaphors that create a kind of undecidable continuity between reality and fiction (in this sense Goffman is still very much rooted in postmodern thinking). Instead, in keeping with the minimalist ethic proposed by Gans, I suggest we can reduce the kinds of frame necessary for a description of any work of narrative art to three types: primary (or ostensive) frames; intermediate frames; and outer (or work) frames.

Primary or ostensive frames are analogous to the originary ostensive scene in that they create a constructed or artificial proximity to things, people, or simple physical acts. As with the original ostensive scene, they can be thought of as having both an anthropological and a transcendent or divine motivation. In their anthropological guise they form by more-or-less spontaneous agreement among characters and tend to be unstable. When the two lovers in Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* meet to copulate without exchanging words, they create precisely this kind of scene in an erotic, human mode. When Amélie (in the eponymous movie) "plays God" by returning a small box of toys to the lonely man who as a child once hid them away, then she creates a revelatory scene which is accepted by the man as an everyday miracle. When the seven unfortunate characters in the science-fiction thriller *Cube* wake up for no good reason in a very large and extremely dangerous labyrinth of interconnected boxes, this theist scene challenges them to act in an ethically coherent way to get out. The frame itself remains an ineffable origin, as if God-given; the characters in it show their humanity--or lack of it--in trying to overcome its lethal traps.

The thing-related closure experienced in such primary scenes acts as a ground for the rest of the plot. To work, the constructed ur-scene must be confirmed somewhere else on the higher, authorial level of the outer frame (I will return to this in the discussion further below). If this occurs, it enables the protagonists and ourselves to experience such scenes as part of a

greater, transcendent frame, and thus as ethical, beautiful, or sublime. Beauty and sublimity are constructed, for example, when Ricky Fitts deifies a white plastic bag in *American Beauty*, and a kind of ethical beauty is generated when Amélie sets up her little traps in which people "discover" small objects that bring happiness to them. One of the most poignant such ethical moments, in Lars von Trier's *Idiots*, involves two Hell's Angels, an exposed penis and an act of urination--you have to see it to believe it. (2) Depending on theme and plot, however, many other variations are possible, including suspense and comedy. In David Fincher's slick Hollywood production *Panic Room*, for example, the primary frame is a trap, with the designer of the safe room trying to break back into his own creation. In Spike Jonze's brilliant, bizarre comedy *Being John Malkovich*, the primary frame--John Malkovich himself--is patently absurd, as are the transcendent principles governing its usage.

3

Primary frames in themselves do not necessarily lead to greater realism, and certainly not to any sort of authenticity. The sex practiced by the breathless, physically rather ordinary couple in *Intimacy* may appear "realistic" to us against the background of dreamily filmed sex scenes. However, there is nothing particularly authentic or natural about their trysts, which are based on a kind of contractual agreement which dissolves as the movie goes on. Similarly, there is nothing intrinsically authentic about the digitalized movie of a plastic bag whipping around in the wind in *American Beauty* or about Amélie's little pranks, which take place in an idealized Montmartre and are based on well-meant deceit. Artistic ostensivity involves a performance that creates ethical beauty or sublimity and occludes meaning. However, this is possible only because of a "fit" between an inner scene and a higher, authorial will that causes that ethical beauty or sublimity to occur, or that meaning to be shut out. There is nothing at all authentic about this spontaneous agreement, and indeed it is always accompanied by resentful suspicion that someone is benefiting from it more than he or she should. Performatist art tries to frame and contain this resentment, to create scenes or constructs in which viewers or peripheral characters can identify with a central, often sacrificial experience to the point where they can benefit from it themselves. The point of performatism is not to restore the dogmatic authority of the center, but rather to return, if only temporarily, to the originary scene as way of restoring to culture the originary experience of love, beauty and reconciliation.

I cannot emphasize enough that this "return" to the originary scene is an artificially arranged journey subject to ironic twists and turns of its own. One of the most effective and moving attempts to portray a lengthy sojourn in ostensivity is the Russian movie *Kukushka* (*The Cuckoo*), which, unfortunately, has not been widely distributed in the West. In *Kukushka*, the circumstances of the Russo-Finnish war in 1944 throw together three people who don't understand one another's language: a young Lapp woman whose husband is lost in the war, a Russian officer (who has been betrayed to the secret police by a trusted underling), and a Finnish sniper fighting for the Germans (who have betrayed him). Unable to explain the nuances of their political and personal plight to the others, all have to make do with purely ostensive means of communication (dubbed-in oral translations allow us to understand what the

Finnish and Lapp characters are actually saying). Trying to demonstrate to the Russian that he is a former student and not a Nazi, for example, the Finn helplessly yells at him using the only Russian words that he knows: "Tolstoy--War and Peace! Dostoevsky--The Idiot!" Not surprisingly, this sort of ostensive communication doesn't lead to any natural sort of rapprochement. In fact, just before he learns the war is over the Russian grievously wounds the Finn, who he thinks is a convinced Nazi. The movie vividly demonstrates the multiple ironies that arise when we, as creatures of semiotic complexity and nuance, are forced to return to direct, non-narrative modes of communication. The movie could have chosen to make a shambles out of this irony: instead, it presents us with a happy ending based on feeling and being rather than on knowing. At the movie's conclusion, the young Lapp woman tells her two twin sons (who could have been fathered by either the Finn or the Russian) an idealized--and false--version of who their fathers were and how they got along. This falsification isn't intentional: the Lapp woman simply never did understand the things that happened out of her immediate line of sight and that were "explained" to her in Finnish or Russian. None of the three characters, in fact, will ever understand exactly what happened to them in the ostensive situation; all, however, are able to overcome the resentment and rivalry inherent in it. As viewers, we know that the characters lack this understanding, but we identify with their ability to transcend all the same. The postmodern moment of knowing is contained in the aesthetic gesture of the movie; it is simply not intended to be the last word.

Just how the resentment arising out of a primary or ostensive scene is dealt with in narrative is a problem of intermediate frames. In analogy to Gans's typology of language, you might say that intermediate frames form the declarative language of performatist narrative: they involve abstraction, individuation, imagination, contradiction, complexity, and so on. In short, they are the stuff of which human conflict (and plots) are made. Intermediate frames "compete" in a certain sense with the primary frames established by or around key characters. Examples of a fatal competition would be that between the Samurai frame of Ghost Dog in the eponymous movie and the Mafia frame of his "master" Louie. Through Ghost Dog's self-sacrifice at the end of the movie, however, it is clear that the competition is one-sided. Although the Mafia code triumphs in a purely physical sense, Ghost Dog's samurai ethos is successfully carried over to a little girl, who will presumably continue the struggle in a non-violent, more spiritualized way. This sort of struggle is even more intense in Cube, where six differently "framed" characters--an architect, an escape artist, a policeman, an autistic, etc.--help and hinder one another trying to get out of an enormous, inexplicable labyrinth. The beneficiary of this process is person with the simplest frame, the autistic Kazan, who at the same time represents a new, minimal origin. Once more, it is absolutely imperative that the inner frame "lock" into the outer one, creating a coherent event or denouement within the work in question.

When postmodernists misinterpret performatist works it is almost always because they think that there is only kind of legitimate frame: the intermediate one. This corresponds, in effect, to the Derridian notion of frame: it is that which mediates between inside and out while being reducible to neither. (3) The irreducible frame (a.k.a. *différance*, *pharmakon*, *hymen*, *trace*, *gramme* etc.) becomes the focal point of interest, even though (or, more likely, exactly

because) it itself does not represent anything in particular and fails to bring about the closure it seems to promise. Performatist works of art, of course, also allow contradictory and/or deceptive intermediate frames to develop. However, if the work is to remain performatist, such frames must always be locked into a kind of full nelson between the primary and the outer frame, which do represent binding ethical and aesthetic positions within the world of the narrative. The existence of such a basic narrative "lock" or "fit" between outside and in is the crucial element defining a performatist work, and, from a postmodernist point of view, its most disturbing and unacceptable feature. (4)

4

Outer frames (or work frames) give performatist works their peculiar unpostmodern fit or feel. The outer frame deliberately creates a monolithic point of view forcing the viewer back "into" the work (in this sense you could say that the movie itself becomes one giant ostensive sign which the viewer must accept or reject in one fell swoop). Instead of constantly intertwining the inner space of the work with the endless outer space of the context, as Derrida prescribes, the outer frame drives a wedge between the work and its context: it forces us, at least temporarily, to perceive the outer space as a blank, transcendent Beyond, and it forces us to focus back in on and privilege certain objects, acts, or persons in the work. The outer frame, in short, creates the temporarily binding conditions that cause mundane objects, acts, or people to become beautiful or ethical, sanctified or sublime. For example, the famous white plastic bag in *American Beauty* that Ricky Fitts thinks is beautiful would not appear so to us if it did not turn up again in the outer frame of the movie narrated by the now deified Lester Burnham. Similarly, in Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* you would not give a hoot about a half-blind Czech factory worker, her money troubles, or her passion for schmaltzy musicals if she did not sacrifice herself in such an ostentatious and "fitting" way at the end of the movie (she foregoes the money needed for her defense so that it may be used for her son's eye operation).

Postmodernists, by contrast, tend to think of outer frames as either instruments of hegemonic repression or supplemental frippery that can be ignored at will. This applies to anyone, for example, who thinks *American Beauty* is nothing more than a scathing deconstruction of American middle-class life. If you believe this, you will also believe that the frame represented by the deified narrator is little more than an odd device that helps wrap up the social criticism practiced within the movie (interestingly enough, if you do so, you will be taking the position Derrida ascribed to Kant in *The Truth in Painting*, that is, you will write off the sacralizing frame as a mere ornament). Performatist outer frames always do something to a viewer, and this performance--at least temporarily--resists being sucked up in the infinite regress of discourse so crucial to postmodernism. In keeping with Goffman and Gans, you could say that the outer frame (in its "lock" with the inner one) makes the work itself into a scene to which the viewer or reader reacts in a cult-like, ritualistic way. The scene or frame of the performatist work "buys time" for viewers to plunge back into the scene and be affected by it once more, rather than leading them out into an endless tangle of spatial and temporal traces from which there is no return.

Ultimately, of course, the performatist outer frame is not impermeable or inviolable. Performatist works, in fact, are probably no less rich in citations and allusions than any others (a notable example is *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which draws heavily and obviously on noir classics like *Murder, My Lovely* and *Double Indemnity*). Also, the rigid outer frame cannot and should not be exempted from ideological and metaphysical critiques. As a general rule of thumb, though, the more closed and restrictive the narrative outer frame, the more performatist it will "feel" to the viewer, and the greater will be its aesthetic-ritualistic impact. In this sense performatist movies tend towards the "closed" type of film described by Leo Braudy (1976, 44-51). In such movies, as Braudy suggests, "plot and pattern seem imposed from above," (48) and the viewer has the feeling of being entrapped and manipulated. However, unlike the rather malevolent atmosphere projected in the movies of Braudy's "closed" directors like Hitchcock and Lang, performatist films use rigid outer frames to suggest the existence of a redeeming transcendency, of a purifying Beyond outside the film. When the exposed and humiliated child-abusing patriarch in Vinterberg's *The Celebration* voluntarily leaves the family gathering to exit forever into the blinding glare of the morning sun, then this is just such a redemptive ending. The toppled patriarch has now become the scapegoat of the family collective; his expulsion from the group is not just an act of belated justice, but also one of sacralization in the sense used by Girard (1987, 48-49). The evil patriarch will become a Danish family deity; he will be transported into a realm of "white" myth from which the regrouped collective will continue to derive solace and inner strength from having defeated him. Here, a poststructuralist might object that the collective is simply whitewashing a trauma in order to preserve the paternal, phallic order. Indeed, as Derrida likes to say, there is no way of preventing anyone from taking this kind of stance. However, such a viewer will have missed the point of the movie, which is to make us identify with the ability of a lifelong victim to transcend his victimary status in a way that is also productive for the community around him. The performatist work shows how it feels to be a victim of incest, and it shows how a corrupted social frame can be rejuvenated in order to accommodate what evidently remains a very basic problem of human interaction. This rejuvenation, in turn, can only be done by framing--by artificially focusing in on--the victim's debasement, which is revealed and ritually reenacted before the eyes of all. In *The Celebration*, Christian's revelation of his own victimization causes him to be temporarily expelled from the group, thus offering himself as a scapegoat--but also as a medium of redemption for the family, who tacitly aided and abetted the father. By contrast, in Derrida's way of thinking, which transforms everything from defloration to the threat of nuclear war into an endless skein of discursive paradoxes, the victim's psychological and physical plight is never made the focus of a centered identification. Instead, victims are compensated with a privileged, elusive position allowing them to act as the critical, incontrovertible Other of whatever hegemonic force happens to be weighing down on them. In a Derridean world, Christian's victimary experience would have been intellectualized and sublimated in a network of decentered sign relations rather than played out again in a simplistic and rather obvious ritual; the Derridean dynamic would never allow a performance or scene which you could identify with directly.

Performatism also has "open" films. However, these are constructed differently than postmodern conundrums or the sort of cinematic waltzes through reality described by Siegfried Kracauer. Examples of fairly open performatist films would be the Norwegian comedy *Elling*, Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich*, and Tom Tykwer's *The Princess and the Warrior*. *Elling*'s hero, a self-proclaimed "mother's son," must be pulled out of a closet by the police after his dominating mother dies. Cast out of a mental institution into the world, he gradually acquires the ability to overcome the spatial and social frames confining him. In the end, he walks the city streets at night--still a "mother's son," as he says, but now also an unknown urban poet (he publishes by placing his poetry in miniature frames--boxes of sauerkraut that he buys and returns to the supermarket). *Elling* has transcended the series of closed institutional spaces confining him, yet still remains true to the kernel of his own closed-in self, which is the result of an imposed matriarchal order and not an authentic state of being or knowledge. In *Being John Malkovich* the openness is rooted in the absurd outer frame of the movie, which suggests that human "vessels" can be occupied by other people, thus allowing them to live forever. At the end, a new vessel--a little girl--is ogled by the old vessel--John Malkovich--and the film gives us to understand that the framing process will be continued on ad infinitum. And, in Tykwer's *The Princess and the Warrior*, the two main characters, having successfully fled from a sanatorium where the "Princess" works, escape to a cottage facing out onto the vast, sublime expanse of an open, unmarked body of water--itself a larger incarnation of the life-saving pond into which the two lovers leapt from the hospital rooftop. This kind of leap into transcendence is even more pronounced (or overdone, as the case may be) in Tykwer's *Heaven*, in which the two fleeing protagonists hijack a police helicopter and literally disappear into the sky. Openness in Tykwer's movies is practically identical with the experience of sublimity, of a transcendent, unfathomable limit.

Openness can also result from ambivalence in the outer frame (not to be confused with undecidability, which as an aesthetic device rubs your nose in the fact that you can never definitively know what is going on in a movie's plot). Intimacy doesn't really end happily--the two lovers Claire and Jay part forever--but it seems clear that Jay, whose jealousy and curiosity destroyed the silent relationship, has actually fallen in love with Claire; their last meeting is "consecrated," as it were, by the near presence of the gay French bartender Ian, who is the only person in the movie with a positive attitude toward human relationships (earlier on, when Jay cynically "confesses" that he meets a woman just to copulate with her in silence, Ian earnestly replies that "it's not often you come across somebody who wants the same thing"). It's not clear what will happen to the protagonists--hence the openness--but the movie does suggest that it is possible to love, even if the realization comes belatedly.

In theological terms, you could think of the shift from postmodernism to performatism as one from a radically deist notion of the world to a radically theist one. Regarding film, this theological subtext must be taken quite literally. This is because the most incisive and comprehensive postmodern theory of film, that of Gilles Deleuze (1986 and 1989, orig. 1983

and 1985), is based on an entirely conscious use of the deist metaphysics developed by Leibniz and continued later by Bergson. In this tradition, the notion of a personal God is replaced by a dynamic, constantly shifting relation between parts and a whole. By definition, the whole represents a virtual field of possibility that the parts actualize in their own dynamic, individual ways. Leibniz, whose frame of reference is purely metaphysical, calls the virtual whole "God" and the parts "monads." For Bergson the virtual whole becomes Time; for Deleuze, "cinema" or "meta-cinema." Unlike his predecessors, Deleuze considers the parts to be fairly arbitrary; they can be just about anything that is physically set off from the never-ending flow of energy coursing through the world. Deleuze, for example, treats "frames" (*mise en scène*), "shots," "images," and even "faces" in pretty much the same way that Leibniz speaks of monads. Each part actualizes the virtual whole of the movie (or the virtual whole of all movies); at the same time, the virtual whole is constituted by the specific inner dynamic of the image unfolding within it. The part, which represents a certain segment of movement through the whole, is defined by the whole, while the whole, in its virtual plenitude, eludes anything but partial, constantly shifting perceptions of what it might be in toto. Deleuzian concepts reverberate with this radically relational, decentered logic, which is meant to cut through our spatially fixed concepts and tap into the virtual, open Whole of relations around them--much in the same way that Bergson wants us to cut through our spatially fixed concepts in the *durée* and tap into a rather static, diffuse kind of virtual Time (in reality the simultaneity of all dynamic, immanent relations, or the deist God).

The point here is not to belittle Deleuze's theory, which is a brilliantly conceived work of applied philosophy and a useful tool for thinking about movies. Film is a fluid and temporal medium, and practically no theorist today--let alone practitioner--would want to return to an aesthetic based on still photography or the ironclad type of montage practiced by Eisenstein. However, I think we have to realize that the flowing, endlessly open, deist world of postmodern film effectively described by Deleuze is now being exposed to strategies of framing, centering, and ordering that are comparable to those found in theist cosmologies. (5) In short, filmmakers are beginning to impose closed, monistically organized narrative frames on what is by nature a moving, fluid medium. Rather than being based on abstract or impersonal part/whole relationships, fictional worlds are now shown to be set in a world that appears to have been "framed" or formed by a personal creator, who may appear explicitly or implicitly. Also, within this framed world, characters tend to act like personal creators in their relations with other people. Worlds constructed in this way become ethical by definition (whether subjects really act ethically in that world is another matter--deceit is always possible). What is important, however, is no longer the relation of a part to a whole, but rather of one framed subject to another framed subject within the greater frame of the narrative world--a situation that is specifically ethical and aesthetic in the way used by Kant, and specifically anthropological in the way used by Gans. (6) Performatism, you could say, seeks to restore a space where transcendence, goodness, and beauty can be experienced vicariously, by identifying with fictional ostensive scenes (inner frames) and with the possibility of transcendence as such (outer frames). In this kind of "framed" art, we can all appreciate and be moved by incredible events even if we "know better"--that is, even if we know they don't apply in the practical world.

The problem of framing is closely tied to that of the subject. Once more, it is useful to draw on Goffman to build a bridge between postmodernism and performatism. At first, Goffman's subject might appear to be postmodern--the mere effect of a multitude of overlapping and conflicting frames not reducible to one single kernel or core. However, the "Goffperson" is never so consumed by the discourse it uses so much as to lose all sense of orientation or decorum (Collins 1988, 59-60). As Goffman nicely says at the beginning of *Frame Analysis*, "all the world is not a stage" (1974, 1). Just because we slip in and out of complex sets of overlapping roles doesn't mean that we get hopelessly lost in them, or that fact and fiction are really equivalent, or that the possibility that something can be fabricated means that our everyday faith in it must be vitiated. Our ability to find a firm "footing" or "anchoring" (Goffman's term) in social interaction is possible because, unlike the poststructuralists, Goffman also sees social frames in a ritual, sacral dimension (cf. Goffman 1967, esp. 47-95, "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor"). This is rather different from a commonsense, namby-pamby trust in convention, which a poststructuralist would have no problem confirming as a fact of social life. Indeed, Goffman, following Durkheim, goes so far as to say that social interaction hinges on a tacit agreement in everyday interactions to deify individual subjects: "Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance" (Goffman 1967, 95). In other words, society is held together by individual subjects using frames in a way that both enhance their own "holy" status and uphold the decorum necessary to allow others to do the same. (7)

This mutual respect for the sanctity of the individual can be made into a element of plot, even in rather unconventional, violent situations. In *Panic Room*, for example, the theist creator of the saferoom Burnham, played by Forest Whitaker, is driven by a double dose of resentment: he resents Meg's having a three-story Manhattan townhouse--the loot from a messy divorce--and he needs the millions hidden in the panic room to resolve a nasty custody battle of his own. After successfully getting into the room, however, his respect for the human object of desire (the child in the custody case, equivalent to his own) causes him to aid Meg's daughter, to whom he administers a badly needed insulin shot. Ultimately, Burnham will shoot the evil, faceless Raoul to save both mother and daughter; at the end of the movie, the cornered burglar stands with arms spread, Christ-like, as 22 million dollars in ill-gotten bank deeds flutter away in the wind. The rather more cynical and complex Cube is less sanguine about how human nature reacts in a closed, threatening frame. At the end of the movie, only the resentment-free autistic Kazan manages to get out of the Cube, with all the other characters either falling prey to their own hubris or to resentful rivalry. The movie suggests that an act of transcendence--escaping the Cube--can come about only through a transpersonal mixture of rivalry and cooperation, of intentionality and disinterestedness. The movie ends by deifying a new, "simple" origin represented by a cowed, stuttering character who fears the color red--the color of blood--above all else. And, as in *The Celebration* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the hero stumbles out into a blinding white light suggesting the infinite openness and sublimity of experience beyond the

outer work frame. The deification of the subject, though hardly noticed in everyday life, is now being brought to the forefront in narrative arts like the cinema.

The performatist subject, like Goffman's, is a constructed or framed one. Unlike Goffman's facile and highly adaptive social actor, however, performatist heroes and heroines are, at least at the beginning of their development, locked into a tight "fit" with a single, set frame. These fits can be more or less self-imposed, as in *Idiots*, *Ghost Dog*, and *American Beauty* or, as more usually seems to be the case, involuntary, as in *Amélie*, *Elling*, *The Celebration*, *Being John Malkovich*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *The Princess and the Warrior*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *The Cider House Rules*, *Panic Room*, *Cube*... In these movies it is up to the subject to transcend the constraining frame in some way, often with the aid of "fortuitous" happenings suggesting the handiwork of a theistic creator (i.e., an omnipotent but unreliable author intervening at odd times in the plot). Almost always, the framed subject is forced to become a theist creator itself, though always in a vulnerable, peculiarly human way. Conversely, it is possible for theist creators to "fall" into a personal, vulnerable mode. *Panic Room*, for one, uses these ironic switches very effectively to create suspense. At first, the weak, seemingly powerless mother and daughter reside in the powerful center frame, with the designer of the safe room helplessly trying to get in; the roles of weak and strong switch back and forth as the film progresses. As it turns out, the true objects of identification in the movie aren't the victims--the edgy, vengeful Jodie Foster character Meg and her know-it-all daughter--but the theist burglar Burnham, who combines the languid spirituality of Forest Whitaker's *Ghost Dog* persona with the involuntary self-sacrifice carried out by Burnham's namesake in *American Beauty*. By the end of the movie, everyone left alive has been redeemed through the Forest Whitaker character, albeit indirectly. Meg's unfaithful husband gets badly beaten up (by Burnham's unwanted accomplice Raoul) while trying to help her, and Meg and her daughter, seated on a Central Park bench, begin to look for an apartment suited more to their modest living needs than to draining the bank account of her battered ex-husband.

In my original formulation of performatism, I suggested that the prototypical performatist subject is dense or opaque. The former quality must not be taken too literally--performatist characters don't necessarily have to be fools or play at being them. Performatist heroes and heroines are, however, almost invariably opaque, since their initial identity is the result of a too tight fit between their selves and a primary frame. *Amélie*, for example, is at first caught up in an isolated personal frame caused by her father's mistaken diagnosis of a dangerous heart condition. Cissy, the "Princess" in Tykwer's movie, practically grows up in the mental institution where her father is incarcerated and has trouble interacting with men in non-institutional settings. Homer Wells, of *The Cider House Rules*, who grows up in an orphanage, is a "creation" of the institute's theistically inclined director, Dr. Larch, who named him and later trained him as a doctor in his own mold.

7

As in Goffman's frame analysis, the problems inherent in this "fit" between subject and frame

usually become apparent only after something goes wrong with or within the frame--hence the great role played by theistically motivated "accidents," which often have a liberating effect on the subjects inside. In the case of the Princess, it is a traffic accident which allows the Warrior to penetrate and literally breathe life into her by way of a tracheotomy--theist symbolism doesn't get much more explicit than this. For Amélie it is the death of Lady Di, which through a series of small coincidences causes Amélie to step into the role of a benevolent theist prankster bringing happiness to others. The break can, however, be brought about willfully. Homer Wells, for example, leaves the orphanage and Dr. Larch after a conflict over abortion--an especially drastic and ethically controversial kind of theist intervention. After being faced with an serious ethical dilemma of his own in the outside world (he carries out an abortion on behalf of a woman impregnated by her father), Homer accepts his theist responsibility and returns to take over the role of the by now deceased Dr. Larch. With credentials faked by the good doctor, Homer becomes the new director of an institution devoted to turning out ever more opaque, constructed subjects. You don't have to have studied poststructuralist rocket science to figure out that the whole theist, paternalistic order behind the orphanage is a giant, albeit benevolent, scam. In a typical performatist ploy, the movie affirms this deceit while at the same time forcing us to identify with its two theist heroes in spite of our better knowledge. In this way deconstruction is given its due--and at the same time defused for good. The point is not to know, but to identify with someone caught up in a frame that will always be generating intractable ethical problems.

In comedy, there are many ways of playing around with this sort of opaque character and its theist frame. In *Being John Malkovich*, the whole idea of a framed personality is carried ad absurdum by making John Malkovich himself into a "vessel" that can be entered for fifteen minutes at a time (at one point the hero and heroine charge \$200 a shot for this). The point is not that the characters involved experience continually unfolding alterity or multifarious shifts in gender, as poststructuralist philosophy of self proposes. Rather, they enter into an artificial, opaque mode of being, a frame which allows them to transcend their own social position and/or gender in one fell swoop. Thus Maxine is able to have Lotte's baby (conceived while the latter was in John Malkovich), and Craig, a talented but unsuccessful puppeteer, is able to manipulate John Malkovich while inside him, using Malkovich's renown to make himself into the famous puppeteer Craig always wanted to be. The point is not that Lotte or Craig are experiencing otherness in an especially extravagant or subversive way; the point is that otherness can be appropriated by invading the "holy"--and whole--frame of someone else, in this case the hapless John Malkovich. You might call this a cynical version of the performatist or Goffmanian self: being involves role-playing or getting into an opaque frame in the present, within a certain time frame, and exploiting that frame to its utmost. Lotte, Craig and the others who inhabit John Malkovich do not really experience otherness in the way envisioned by someone like Judith Butler, that is, as a belated, constantly unfolding play with bits and pieces of gender having no natural, preordained configuration. Rather, the characters get to buy into a whole, though temporary, otherness by being John Malkovich for fifteen minutes at a time. The grotesque point of the movie is that people don't revel in otherness for sheer pleasure or to escape some hegemonic dictate of society; instead, they want to control and inhabit others so that they may

live forever as their own selves. Ideal selfness, in other words, consists in appropriating otherness (understood as someone else's whole frame) for your own ends. Conversely, as the movie makes clear, you can't achieve ideal selfness through oneness with yourself. When John Malkovich finally gets wind of what is going on and enters his own portal, he is aghast to find a world in which everyone is John Malkovich and in which "John Malkovich" is the only word spoken--a nightmarish world of asocial, redundant self-deification. (8) Being John Malkovich brilliantly parodies a basic, insoluble problem of theism: namely that as a theist creator, you need someone else in order to be yourself. Fashioning someone in your own likeness inevitably involves creating someone weaker than you and dependent on your own self (it is no accident that the hero is a puppeteer). Conversely, a character striving for deification will also attempt to mold others in his own image and manipulate them as much as possible according to his own needs. Much more reconciliatory, on the other hand, is the movie's wildly dark suggestion that this kind of manipulation can be carried out by a collective (at the end, a group of genteel-looking elderly people enter the actor and proclaim: "we are John Malkovich!"). Actually, we don't even mind this sort of appropriation, since John Malkovich, with his vaguely malevolent persona and his postmodern ability to slip into any role whatsoever, is the ideal vehicle for it: we do not mourn the "loss" of a personality that is opaque and infinitely adaptable to begin with.

It is probably too premature to make any sweeping claims about performatist cinematography. Its most memorable individual devices--jumpy use of hand-held cameras (the Dogma movies), black-and-white noir-style photography (The Man Who Wasn't There), rhythmic use of fade-outs (Memento), etc.--are quite familiar in formal terms and are in themselves not enough to define an epochal shift. What does seem to hold true for most performatist cinematography is a double strategy that is "predicted" by the double nature of the originary frame: performatist movies can be said to anthropologize time-space relations on the one hand and to sacralize them on the other.

8

Just how this works becomes clearer when considered against the background of Deleuzian, deist cosmology. In the deist tradition everything in the world takes place on a single, immanent plane: psychomechanically defined impulses of energy on the one side are processed by psychomechanically defined consciousness on the other. Deleuze, for example, speaks of cinema as a "spiritual automaton" (1989, 263); the brain is for him "nothing but . . . an interval, a gap between an action and a reaction" (1986, 62). Our consciousness is a material extension of reality and reality a spiritual extension of our consciousness. The two are different expressions of the same thing, although by definition they are always somewhat out of sync--you are not what you perceive in the world and the world's energy will always have flowed a bit farther down the line by the time your perception of it gels into a fixed concept. Rather than running after reality trying to paste cut-out concepts back onto it, deists try to bring the two disparate types of immanence to meet in the way they think best fits the metaphysical flux of the world, that is, in terms of time and relationality. Because this happy meeting of mind and

world must still take place in the vulgar confines of space, this is easier said than done. Bergson, for example, rejects film as a mechanical deceit because his radical intuitivism rules out any positively defined semiotic mediation between mind and matter; for similar reasons he is unable to make any coherent statements about aesthetics or poetic method. Deleuze, by contrast, is a good deal more flexible on this point, arguing--quite plausibly--that consciousness and world can be thought of as converging in the medium of film (Deleuze 1986, 20). Because Deleuze thinks of film as either conveying something of the essence of fluid materiality (the "movement-image" (9)) or as the direct apprehension of time caused by the disruption of coherence and teleology (the "time-image" (10)), this leads to two basic types of movie, depending on what kind of image is emphasized. In discussing film's historical development, Deleuze likes to speak of an "action-image" on one hand and a "crystal-image" on the other. Stripped to its barest essentials, the action-image can be thought of as a focal point capturing primary human emotions and the binary conflicts growing out of them; the latter, in turn, can unfold either in large, epic forms (as an integral) or in small, ethical ones (as a differential). The action-image and its many variants form the basis for the practices dominating pre-World War II narrative cinema. The crystal-image, by contrast, breaks away from the chronological, motivated representation of affect and conflict in order to tap into the virtual Whole of the world (Leibniz's God and Bergson's Time). This Whole is an endlessly open Other, the virtual, constantly unfolding totality of all moving relations. The "crystal-image" refracts and reflects, plays with sound and sensuality, causes characters to be "swallowed up" in non-localizable relations (Deleuze 1989, 41). Deleuze relates this quite convincingly to the techniques of postmodern cinema, beginning with postwar cinema in Italy and the French Nouvelle Vague of the 1960's. There is no doubt that these concepts lead to very subtle and productive insights on film, and there is no doubt about their basic compatibility with postmodern and/or poststructuralist thought.

Unfortunately, Deleuze's concepts have the same effect on cultural history as do all other basic strategies of postmodernism: they choke off any further attempt to describe cultural development above or beyond them. If you force the crystal-image still further, you will plunge even deeper into the depths of postmodernist virtuality; if you fall back on the action-image, you will be doing little more than ironically (or naively) citing tried-and-true techniques of pre-war cinema. As a matter of fact, if you stick with the concept of image as the filmic and metaphysical nexus between reality and consciousness, you will be condemned to shuttle back and forth endlessly between part and whole, as is the case in Deleuze's deism. The point is not to rework the concept of image, but to start thinking of cinematography in terms of a human/theist perspective. There are indications that just such a change is occurring right now on the practical level in performatist cinema.

As suggested above, performatist cinema likes to approach the world in terms of fixed, boxed-in spaces and bought or apportioned time. This approach is neither a repetition nor a citation of grandpa's narrative cinema, nor does it mark a return to the cookie-cutter type of montage common to the early days of film. Its focal point is once more the frame, which must be understood as a temporal, spatial or ethical limit imposed on someone. As outlined above, the

frame itself may be thought of as being theist or sacral on the one hand and anthropological or human on the other. The theist side of the frame impinges on, crimps, or temporarily cuts off the continuous passage from one state of affairs to another in an authoritative way. Such frames are imposed from above or without and cannot be easily overcome or placed in doubt. They are, for the most part, onerous givens that--like theist cosmologies everywhere--subject the characters within them to severe tests of faith, courage, or perseverance. The flip, or inner, side of the sacral frames is that their constraining character sets off an impulse to transcend in the human characters locked up inside of them. The "bound" characters, in other words, react to their incarceration by trying to break out of, rework, or somehow overcome the frames confining them. The force exerted by the theist frame and the intensity of the human reactions to it materialize directly in plot and cinematographic technique. For in film we are simultaneously confronted with the impassive, fear-evoking authority of theist time-space and the emotional pathos of human time-space trying to overcome it. Perhaps the most effective allegory of this situation is *Cube*, in which the unforgiving theist space makes purely human time--the time before hunger and thirst are going to incapacitate the six would-be escapees--into the measure of all things. Whereas the deist space-time continuum provides consolation by letting you tap into the infinitely unfolding otherness of the world, theist space puts the heat on you, challenging you to use your own time to become like the higher, ineffable will that is bearing down on you from above.

9

One of the most striking examples of how temporal framing works in the new cinematography is the Coen Brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There*. At first, the viewer might be inclined to see the movie as nothing more than a lengthy, ironic citation--the movie fastidiously imitates noir conventions both in its camera work and in its depiction of a criminal case unfolding in a Californian town of 1949. Although there are admittedly certain breaks and discrepancies within the movie's period style, they do not interfere with our perception of it as a whole slice of time. (Real noir films, for example, never mixed science fiction and detective plots, as happens here, and the Production Code would not have allowed a young girl to make a sexually explicit pass at an older man, as happens between Birdie Abundas and Ed Crane, the hero. Neither device, however, represents a break with the paranoid ambience and sexual forthrightness common to noir.) The question remains, however, as to just how this slice of time acts upon us as viewers.

Given the similarities between *The Man Who Wasn't There* and various other films of the Coen Brothers, you could, I suppose, make a case for the movie being a postmodern critique of 1950-ish American mores. The society in which Ed Crane lives is founded on politically incorrect norms clearly tailored to empowering white, male, Anglo-Saxon heterosexuals. Either you're a real man, like Big Dave Brewster (who is killed by Ed), or a "pansy" like Creighton Tolliver (the traveling salesman killed by Big Dave). Sexually mature women like Ed's wife Doris are defined by nylons, lace underwear, perfume and the like; "innocent" girls like Birdie Abundas wear bobby sox and v-neck sweaters. In terms of language the white, Anglo-Saxon culture sets the tone: Japanese are "Nips," Germans "heinies," and Italians "wops"; a Jewish lawyer and a fat

Frenchman of color also don't come off too well. These two hegemonic orders--the white, Anglo-Saxon one and the male, heterosexual one--meet ideally in the form of Big Dave Brewster, a ladies' man who has made his reputation mowing down "Japs" in World War II.

As in their previous movies, the Coen brothers expose the grotesque inconsistencies and flagrant rule-bending peculiar to this order. Big Dave, for example, gladly dons an apron in order to spend some time washing dishes with his mistress, Ed's wife Doris. Doris, who is herself of impeccable Italian lineage, hates "wops" and tries to assimilate as much as possible. The teenage girl, Birdie Abundas, proves to be anything but innocent. And, as a hired detective later discovers, Big Dave's heroism in the war is a fabrication designed to further his business career.

If the Coens were really only concerned with exposing the falsity and hypocrisy of 1950s America or exhaustively citing noir norms, the movie would hardly be very memorable. What in fact makes the film remarkable is its focus on transcendence and the hero's--and our--gradual realization that such a transcendence might be possible and desirable.

This can be better understood if you think of the whole movie as a temporal frame. We perceive this frame as a homogenous chunk of concrete time, rather than as the diffuse apprehension of virtual time peculiar to postmodernism (as an example of this you could take David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, which deliberately mixes up styles taken from the fifties, sixties and seventies to create a Deleuzian, vaguely paranoid feeling of a Time existing outside of space and chronology). In addition to being homogeneous, time in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is also depicted as both historical and obsolete: details like the wearing of fedoras and the use of politically incorrect language mark it as irrevocably passé. This historicity creates in us a feeling of distance to the time frame: we, who neither wear fedoras nor verbally abuse minorities, can easily feel superior to it. This is theist time, which at first appears well-defined and set: like theist creators or authors we stand outside of it looking in. At first, theist time would seem to stand in simple contrast to Ed's personal or human time, which is measured by the heads of hair he cuts and the inexorable, step-by-step unfolding of the plot. So far, these two types of time--the authorial and the personal--are part of standard narrative procedure and not in themselves noteworthy. What keeps *The Man Who Wasn't There* from being just another remake of a noir "action-image" plot is the way we (and Ed) are made to reverse our apprehension of the two types of time. In the course of the movie, our feeling of temporal superiority to Ed gradually changes to one of identification, whereas Ed's feeling of living incrementally gradually becomes more and more expansive and spiritual, until he disappears completely into the transcendental whiteness of the screen.

This interplay of theist and anthropological time takes place in several ways. Originally, Ed's scheme to blackmail Big Dave in order to co-finance a dry-cleaning franchise (run by a homosexual traveling salesman) seems petty and emotionally almost unmotivated--he and Doris carry on what appears to be a marriage of convenience, and he isn't all that perturbed by being two-timed ("I guess, somewhere, that pinched a little, too" [Coen & Coen 2001, 26]). Gradually,

however, we discover that Ed's attempts to escape his time frame are motivated by a vaguely felt kind of spiritual quest. Dry cleaning, which is touted with preacher-like fervor by Creighton Tolliver ("You heard me right, brother, 'dry cleaning,'--wash without water, no suds, no tumble, no stress on the clothes" [Coen & Coen 2001, 12]), appears as the first step in a search for ways to achieve a spiritual cleansing not possible in the cramped social setting of the late 1940s. Here, our theistic superiority to Ed's time frame helps provide a moment of involuntary identification: we know that dry cleaning is not a scam, just as we know that there is a way out of the 1940s-style mindset with its wops and pansies. We know, in other words, that we can transcend.⁽¹¹⁾ At the same time, the wall-to-wall noir cinematography causes us to experience 1940s-style temporality as an inescapable, sensual fact: as spectators, we are outside the time frame intellectually but in it emotionally and visually. This makes it possible for us to take Ed's last words before he is executed entirely seriously, as the prophetic expression of a transcendent longing which may also be our own:

10

I don't know where I'm being taken. I don't know what waits for me, beyond the earth and sky. But I'm not afraid to go. Maybe the things I don't understand will be clearer there, like when a fog blows away . . . Maybe Doris will be there. . . And maybe I can tell her all those things they don't have words for here. (Coen & Coen 2001, 104-105)

The question posed at the end of the movie is not so much "who is Ed Crane?" but rather "who are we?" One, quite plausible answer might be that we are postmodernists. That would mean that we are stuck in an ironic bind of always already possessing partial knowledge about the conditions necessary for achieving transcendence but never quite being able to experience it ourselves. Taking this a step farther, you might argue that Ed Crane died for nothing. Had he lived to transcend his own time frame he would have wound up in ours, in which a premium is placed on ironic reflection rather than on the search for "things they don't have words for here." The movie, however, anticipates this argument and counters it using a split appeal to our theist and human ways of identifying with Ed. The crucial scene takes place in Doris's cell (based on circumstantial evidence she has been falsely accused of murdering Big Dave). Her attorney, a cynical, money-hungry, obviously Jewish lawyer named Freddy Riedenschneider, suggests a defense based on his version of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle:

They got this guy, in Germany. Fritz something-or-other. Or is it. Maybe it's Werner. Anyway, he's got this theory, you wanna test something, you know, scientifically--how the planets go round the sun, what sunspots are made of, why the water comes out of the tap--well, you gotta look at it. But sometimes, you look at it, your looking changes it. Ya can't know the reality of what happened, or what would've happened if you hadden a stuck in your own goddamn schnozz. So there is no "what happened," not in any sense that we can grasp with our puny minds. Because our minds . . . our minds get in the way. Looking at something

changes it. They call it the "Uncertainty Principle." Sure, it sounds screwy, but even Einstein says the guy's on to something. (Coen & Coen 2001, 66-67)

From our theist vantage point this sounds like a parody of postmodern sophistry, as also does Riedenschneider's later defense of Ed ("He told them to look not at the facts but at the meaning of the facts, and then he said the facts had no meaning. It was a pretty good speech, and even had me going . . ." [Coen & Coen 2001, 100-101]). In terms of noir visual devices Riedenschneider is deliberately cast in a bad light: as he talks, he moves in and out of sunbeams flooding in starkly from above the cell; in the moment that he ends his speech he turns away from the light, his face utterly black and no longer visible. With Riedenschneider, the Coen brothers use the incarnation of an anti-Semitic stereotype to debunk the notion of posthistoire--i.e., the idea that "there is no 'what happened.'" However, this kind of ad hominem argumentation remains completely acceptable because we experience it as having been set in a time frame we have transcended--thus proving that "something has happened" after all. Placed in the proper theist frame, any form of ugliness can become ethically good, aesthetically appealing, and sublime.

The noir cinematography in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is quite obviously a gimmick--an effective, though one-time thing. [\(12\)](#) Gimmickry of this sort is not absolutely necessary, but it does seem to crop up frequently as a side-effect of performatist attempts to make transcendence visible and palpable. The most famous such gimmickry is, of course, enshrined in the Dogma 95 manifesto. Widely misunderstood in postmodern circles as a misguided attempt to return to authenticity, the Dogma 95 credo is really nothing more than a theist frame set up so that humans may transcend it or, alternately, so that theist moviemakers may be humbled by having to assume a crudely human perspective. Lars von Trier's *Idiots* takes the latter route: until the very last scene of the movie, which makes everything fall into place, you may have felt yourself in the presence of an "idiotic," literally unfocused director. In truth, of course, the sloppy camera work is a (tiring) gimmick setting you up for a carefully planned denouement deifying a meek heroine. The much more artful *Celebration*, by contrast, uses a break with the anthropological, hand-held camera perspective to suggest the possibility of transcendence: in one scene, oddly shot from a bathroom ceiling, we are suddenly shown a perspective that can only be that of Christian's dead sister, whose suicide was the driving force behind the hero's decision to confront his father (appropriately, Vinterberg "broke" the Dogma 95 vow of chastity and used a crane to make the shot). Gimmicks abound, too, in the other movies mentioned--the director of *Amélie* uses digital techniques to show the heroine's heart pounding away in her chest when she falls in love, and the people who climb into the John Malkovich portal view the world through a slit at the top of the screen that represents his seeing-eye view. Taken together, these devices do not, of course, an epoch make. However, it is important to take them seriously as part of the performatist play with immanence and transcendence, with the theist and the human.

One of the most radical exercises in performatist cinematography can be found in a movie that remains, when viewed as a whole, with at least one foot still firmly planted in postmodernism. This is Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, by now something of a cult classic. The main conceit behind the film is that the hero, Leonard Shelby, is suffering from a memory disorder caused by a blow to the head received while he was trying to defend his wife, who he repeatedly states was raped and murdered. As a result, Leonard has only a short-term memory; he can remember his life before the attack, but forgets everything else after about fifteen minutes. The movie presents his basic story as a series of 22 slightly overlapping temporal frames or scenes documenting how he tries to seek revenge. This, however, is not all. *Memento* splits up into two times: Leonard's stunted, framed time, and chronological time, which, in an act of theist willfulness, has been set to run backwards. The movie begins with the end of Leonard's attempts to find and kill the murderer of his wife; as it progresses (backwards), frame by overlapping frame, we learn more and more about how Leonard's final act of vengeance came about. The hero experiences a series of framed presences in terms of a dysfunctional human time, while we experience the accumulation of these presences in terms of both his time and a theist, authorial time. In the beginning, these two times are practically identical: in the first few scenes we are as confused as Leonard is as to what is going on. This feeling of absolute bewilderment caused by a cruelly limited frame forces the viewer, at least at first, into a close identification with the hero--we, too, experience an odd, frantic kind of need to overcome the frames confining us and to find out what the things around us mean. Gradually, however, a distinct split in experience and knowledge develops. For, as our theist time accumulates, we begin to realize that Leonard, who knows that he forgets things, has set himself up by writing (not very reliable) notes instructing himself what to do and whom to trust or avoid. The man he kills at the beginning of the movie, a corrupt cop named Teddy, is by all appearances probably not the murderer; he's someone who tried to manipulate Leonard and whom Leonard decided to make the scapegoat for his wife's murder. Leonard, who is stuck in a hellishly limited personal time, becomes the self-appointed executor of an impersonal vengeance that will always be seeking new victims or scapegoats. In a way, Leonard is the prototype of all participants in mimetic rivalry: he embodies a kind of minimal human consciousness programmed to seek revenge over and over again--the acts of vengeance being his performances, his way of transcending what he experiences as one, severely limited, time frame or present. This view of human consciousness, though limited and pessimistic, could at least be considered the ground of a primary, monist frame. (13) Nolan, however, complicates things by adding a second set of frames to his movie: he intersperses the backtracking color frames recounting the murder story with backtracking black-and-white frames in which Leonard recalls a character named Sammy Jankis, who suffers from the same mental condition as he. Without going into all the details, it will suffice to say that Sammy kills his diabetic wife without being aware of it and then falls apart; we seem him sitting in a mental institution--and for a split second we see in his place Leonard Shelby. A neurophysiological, monist origin becomes a psychoanalytical, double one: just as we think we are about to get the hang of Leonard Shelby's original motive, we are told that he is, psychologically speaking, someone else. Whether or not this basic confusion about who Leonard is makes *Memento* a better movie is a matter of some debate. (14) *Memento*, however, remains interesting as a case study because the dividing line

separating postmodernism from performatism runs right through it. As long as the frame has an ontological, anthropological ground it is performatist; as soon as the ground is made into a conundrum or double origin the frame becomes postmodern.

Memento reminds us that we are still in a transition period from postmodernism to performatism. There are movies that start off with a seemingly firm performatist premise but then fade back into postmodern murkiness, and there are movies that have a primary, "grounded" frame but hide it in what at first seems to be an undecidable tangle of double attributions. As an example of the first type of movie you could take David Fincher's *Fight Club*, whose yuppie, Caspar-Milquetoast narrator (Edward Norton) teams up with a subversive and willfully cruel character named Tyler Durden (a slumming Brad Pitt). The two begin by founding a "fight club" devoted to bloody, bare-handed fisticuffs; eventually, the Brad Pitt character moves on to organize an urban prankster group called Project Mayhem (this is one movie that could not have been made after 9/11--it ends with two towers of an unnamed, ostensibly empty financial center collapsing into themselves after a bomb attack by the Project). The fight club and the prankster-like terror group are evidently meant to re-empower the raw-knuckled kind of masculinity that was repressed for so long by effeminate postmodern culture (this is the avowed intention of Chuck Palahniuk, who wrote the book on which the movie is based). Seen in terms of GA, though, the movie is naive: it would like to take us back to before the originary scene, to a state of pure, signless mimetic conflict in which resentment is purged through the application of brute force and not through signification (one of the rules of the *Fight Club*, in fact, is that you're not allowed to talk about it). As in *Memento*, the movie ends by swatting us over the head with a postmodern red herring that it has been dragging through the plot the whole time: Tyler Durden, as it turns out, is the narrator's evil alter ego. Although the narrator believes he has purged himself of Durden by the movie's end, the last frame of the movie suggests that quite the opposite is true--Durden enjoyed splicing snippets of porno movies into family films to disturb viewers subliminally, and this is just what we see (though not quite subliminally) at the movie's very end. The cruel prankster Durden, in other words, is still in control of the frame.

12

By contrast, movies like David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and Alejandro Amenábar's *Open Your Eyes* (the Spanish movie on which *Vanilla Sky* is based) seem at first to offer us nothing more than a spectacular off-and-on between two undecidable, highly confusing perspectives. As Eric Gans has, however, shown in his *Chronicle 269*, one perspective in *Mulholland Drive* does turn out to be real--it acts as a psychological ground for the bizarre fantasy sequence with which the movie begins. Lynch's movie, though still exuding postmodern paranoia, turns out to be devoted to a surprisingly unparanoid theme--that of unrequited love. *Open Your Eyes* also confronts us with the interplay of two seemingly undecidable perspectives: it concerns a handsome young Spaniard and his grotesquely disfigured alter ego, who continuously, and seemingly senselessly, replace one another as the film rolls along. Just before the confused hero (and the viewer) are about to give up in despair, the movie provides a watertight,

reconciliatory explanation: the hero, it seems, has died, but a futuristic society has developed a process allowing him to dream his own life through again even in death. The disconcerting appearances of his disfigured self can be willed away in the next cycle of the dream, which begins with the hero jumping from a rooftop and landing unscathed below. The character, in other words, has the power to be both theist and human; he can frame his own life-after-death in the transcendent reality of the dream.

I don't pretend to have described the transition from postmodernism to performatism in a comprehensive way. There are no doubt dozens of other contemporary movies that fit the performatist bill, and there are numerous films that in the early and mid-1990s were already edging away from postmodern themes--Eric Gans has noted this development in several of his *Chronicles* (see, for example, No. 42, "Tarantino Transcendence," or No. 80, "Triangular Utopias"). However, I believe that the broadly drawn borderline of 1997-1999, which in my view marks the beginning of performatism, will hold up to further scrutiny. The thematic and cinematographic innovations introduced by the films in this period have not only caught on, but are also being constantly reapplied and renewed. As such, I have no doubt whatsoever that the performatist devices and themes just described will continue to develop in exciting new ways in the coming few years, even as the tried-and-true postmodern ones wither and fade. Much less easy to predict is when film critics and theorists will begin to jettison their increasingly unworkable poststructuralist concepts and begin to apply more fitting, monist ones to the new epoch. But that, of course, is where an already well-developed theory of performatism can lend a helping hand.

13

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14

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Notes

1. The surprisingly good "fit" between Gans's and Goffman's theories is undoubtedly a result of their common Durkheimian heritage. For more on Goffman's indebtedness to Durkheim see Collins 1988; for more on Gans's appraisal of Durkheim see Gans 2000. ([back](#))
2. A commune member pretending to be mentally retarded is left by his "attendant" in the company of several fierce-looking motorcycle gang members, who interpret his grunting attempt to leave them as a wish to use the toilet. Assuming that he is truly severely retarded, they have no qualms about helping him urinate. ([back](#))
3. The Derridean approach to framing aims to show that there is no way to discuss intrinsic, inner space without including extrinsic, outer space in it. Hence the frame, which is where inside and outside meet, constitutes itself out of an irreducible duality which, for Derrida, is the paradoxical point of departure and end point of all analysis. ([back](#))
4. It is interesting to note that Goffman's notion of face-to-face interaction works in a similar way. The reliability of interaction is made possible by the "fit" between the self (inner frame) and an outer frame (meaning the physical world, the social ecology and the institutional setting): "only if the larger frame is properly handled can conversation take place" (Collins

1988, 51). ([back](#))

5. Buddhism, which also plays a role in performatism, is a special case. Although dispensing with the notion of a personal God, Buddhist-influenced fictions such as *Ghost Dog* and *American Beauty* suggest no less than Western theist fictions that reality is constructed around a subject, and that the subject, in order to transcend, must merge with that construct. ([back](#))

6. As outlined in *Chronicles* 260, 261, 262, and 271, which Gans has brought together in the as yet unpublished article "Orinary and/or Kantian Aesthetics." ([back](#))

7. From Goffman's point of view this type of agreement is based on more than simple adherence to convention. For convention, taken as a set of rules, is easily susceptible to the kind of critique practiced by Derrida in *Limited Inc.*: even as you try to set the limits of convention, you wind up incorporating still more conditions into your own convention, which require still more conditions that open out into an endless, uncontrollable flux of what turn out to be rather unconventional traces. (Indeed, Goffman, in a very similar kind of argument, shows how something similar can happen when using quotation marks to bracket a phrase--cf. Goffman 1974, 16-20.) The best way of interpreting Goffman's notion of convention would be to describe it as performatist. It does not seek to describe rules, exceptions to the rules, and exceptions to the exceptions to the rules, but rather spontaneously arrived at agreements or adjustments among participants in a face-to-face interaction rituals, or frames. Although they are not completely impervious to description, these tacit adjustments or spontaneous agreements within the frame resist simple codification; indeed, the charm of Goffman's own studies derive from his attempts to capture the "traces" showing just how these little daily performances work. ([back](#))

8. Goffman (1967, 58) even warns of this: "If the individual could give himself the deference he desired there might be a tendency for society to disintegrate into islands inhabited by solitary cultish men, each in continuous worship at his own shrine." ([back](#))

9. Cf. Deleuze (1986, 23): "the essence of the cinematographic movement-image lies in extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their essence." ([back](#))

15

10. Cf. Deleuze (1989, 40-41): "the sensory-motor schema is no longer in operation, but at the same time it is not overtaken or overcome. It is shattered from the inside. That is, perceptions and actions cease to be linked together, and spaces are now neither co-ordinated nor filled. . . . It is here that the reversal is produced: movement is no longer simply aberrant, aberration is now valid in itself and designates time as its direct cause. 'Time is out of joint': it is off the hinges assigned to it by behavior in the world, but also by movements of world." ([back](#))

11. A friend of mine, Sven Spieker of the University of California at Santa Barbara, suggested to me that Ed Crane's longing for a transcendent world is caused by his being homosexual. At first, this doesn't seem convincing at all. Ed rejects a pass made by Creighton Tolliver, and, if anything, seems to be asexual--he doesn't sleep with his wife and crashes his car after Birdie Abundas makes him an unambiguous offer. However, some small clues indicate that a repressed sense of gender plays a major role in his spiritual quest. For example, before Ed is electrocuted, a patch of his leg is shaved in the exact way that Ed shaved a patch of Doris's leg earlier on, suggesting that the only way a man could be treated like a woman in the 1940s is in the death chamber. Also, Ed is writing his story for a men's magazine featuring pictures of half-naked, muscular hunks on the cover--the only type of venue where repressed homosexuality could "safely" be expressed in the 1940s. If Sven's theory is true, Ed would not be looking to express his homosexuality in 1940s-style terms--as a "pansy" like Creighton Tolliver--but in transcendent ones as yet unknown to himself, and in fact also to us. Doris (with her masculine, blunt personality and anti-Italian self hatred) and Ed would then be reunited in a Great Beyond where all gender and ethnic distinctions have been overcome for good. ([back](#))

12. As Gans notes in his Chronicle 83, "Film Open and Closed," the universalization of color in movies and TV "makes impossible the abstract shadow-world of the film noir and its closed predecessors." By making an "impossible" movie, the Coen Brothers suggest the possibility that any frame of reference can be transcended--as a one-time performance. ([back](#))

13. You could probably also argue with Deleuze that Leonard's type of consciousness is a "spiritual automaton," i.e., a highly restricted reaction to outside impulses directed by a single, deeply embedded memory. However, in Deleuzian and Bergsonian terms Leonard's condition embodies "bad" time--a series of presents that are chopped out of the flow of time and then pasted back together again. It is only in the pathological dysfunctionality of this minimal setting that the theist and deist conceptions can meet. ([back](#))

14. Andy Klein of Salon Magazine (Klein 2001), who invested enough energy for five film reviews in trying to untangle Memento's plot, came to the conclusion that it doesn't work even on its own terms: "the only way to reconcile everything is to assume huge inconsistencies in the nature of Leonard's disorder. In fact, in real life, such inconsistencies apparently exist, if Oliver Sacks is to be believed. But to build the plot around them without giving us some hints seems like dirty pool." ([back](#))

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"What matters is the *system!*" The Beatles, the "Passover Plot," and Conspiratorial Narrativity

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[John Lennon] was a countercultural revolutionary, and the government takes that kind of shit really seriously historically. He was dangerous to the government. If he had said, "Bomb the White House tomorrow," there would have been ten thousand people who would have done it. These pacifist revolutionaries are historically killed by the government, and anybody who thinks that Mark Chapman was just some crazy guy who killed my dad for his personal interests is insane, I think, or very naïve, or hasn't thought about it clearly. It was in the best interests of the United States to have my dad killed, definitely. And, you know, that worked against them, to be honest, because once he died his powers grew. So, I mean, fuck them. They didn't get what they wanted.

Sean Lennon, quoted in *The New Yorker*, April 20, 1998

In music and *Weltanschauung*, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Not only has Sean Lennon followed his father John in seeking pop music fame, but the son of the founder of history's most successful rock group seems to have inherited his father's penchant for viewing history conspiratorially. According to Albert Goldman, John Lennon revealed this facet of his personality during the televised appeal hearings for James Earl Ray in the early 1970s. Asked by a family friend "What's the real story behind the murder of Martin Luther King?" Lennon exploded, "Who the hell cares . . .? What matters is the system!" To Lennon, Goldman continues, James Earl Ray was "a guy who was framed. The Ray hearings fascinated Lennon. . . . 'Look at him,' Lennon would yell. 'It's obvious! He doesn't have to ask for a glass

of water or take a leak. He's drugged!" (1)

How do we account for otherwise high-functioning, even clever people holding these sorts of opinions? Is conspiracy theorizing--as memorably portrayed in Jerry, Mel Gibson's character in the 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory*--a mental illness, falling somewhere in terms of severity between obsessive-compulsive disorder and full-blown paranoid schizophrenia? Or is it just the result of the irrationality and gullibility of an under-educated, tabloid-gobbling populace both here in America and abroad, tens of millions of whom believe that Elvis Presley faked his death in 1977, or that the U.S. government continues to cover up evidence of the 1948 crash of an alien spacecraft outside of Roswell, New Mexico? It's tempting to cite the idea that British secret service agents engineered Princess Diana's fatal car crash (www.londonnet.co.uk/ln/talk/news/diana_conspiracy_theories.html), or that in 1977 the United States government invented AIDS in a biochemical weapons laboratory (www.boydgraves.com/flowchart), as nothing more than proof that there's a sucker born every minute. But in our ridicule of the odd mix of credulousness with wacky skepticism we should not overlook how conspiracy theorizing--which has flourished, via the Internet, into a veritable cottage industry--reveals with glittering clarity the essential structure and purpose of originary narrative. Conspiracy theories are the myths of our age, in which the random and chaotic events of life are retrospectively ordered into a story with an explanatory purpose.

2

What is a myth? In *Originary Thinking*, Eric Gans writes that "myth is etiological: it explains the origin of a custom or technique through divine activities and desires." (2) René Girard also sees myth as essentially explanatory: "Myths are the retrospective transfigurations of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in light of the cultural order that has arisen from them." (3) Combining these two definitions enables us to see how conspiracy theories bloom particularly in the aftermath of an event sudden and violent enough to instigate a cultural crisis. The more severe the crisis--that is, the more public or beloved the figure involved or the higher the death toll--the more dire the need for an explanation. But despite their functional similarities, there is an important difference between a myth and a conspiracy theory. From their origins in collective crises, myths retain traces of the all-against-one event they commemorate. (4) Conspiracy theories invert this all-against-one structure. Where myths implicitly expiate a community's guilt by heaping first blame and then praise upon the central figure for bringing about and resolving the cultural crisis, conspiracy theories blame everyone but the victim, even to the point of rejecting the possibility of actions independently conceived and carried out. Myths deny collective responsibility; conspiracy theories deny individual responsibility. Thus both Sean and John Lennon, like legions of Kennedy assassination theorists, dismiss as "naïve" or "insane" any lone gunman hypothesis. Instead, James Earl Ray and Mark Chapman are pawns or patsies for a covert network of coordinated agents, who together form what Sean Lennon calls "the government" and John Lennon calls "the system." In the words of Lennon fils, it is obviously in the "best interests" of the system to eliminate its dissidents ("My

dad was a countercultural revolutionary. . . . If he had said, 'Bomb the White House tomorrow,' there would have been ten thousand people who would have done it.'). And since discovery of the system's operations would necessarily vitiate its power, the system employs elaborate measures to hide its involvement--a conspiracy theory is scarcely conceivable without a cover-up.

My aim in this essay is neither to debunk nor corroborate Sean Lennon or any of the scores of others who have propounded conspiracy theories about the murder of John Lennon. Instead, I want to examine how the Beatles helped to give reflex conspiracy theorizing a surprisingly ubiquitous presence in contemporary culture. Its similarities with mythic thinking show that conspiracy theorizing is as old as humanity itself. But as with so many other aspects of our age, the conspiratorial worldview reached a new plateau in the 1960s, when the pace of cultural transformation seemed suddenly to accelerate. The effect of the Beatles on the music of that era is well known. Less widely understood is how the semi-legendary status the Beatles acquired in the public imagination during their seven years together both revealed and contributed to the social disruptions of those tumultuous times.

The starting point for the Beatles' careers as both creators and objects of conspiracy theories was the "bigger than Jesus" controversy of the summer of 1966. This episode in pop culture history was more than just the flash point for long-smoldering anxieties about the relevance of religion to postwar Anglo-American society. The uproar that erupted over John Lennon's statement that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" demonstrated for this pop-star cum social commentator that outbursts of hysterical celebrity worship--like the Beatlemania that greeted the group around the world from 1964-66--originated in the same psychic and cultural forces that in the past had produced periods of mass religious fervor. This Lennon learned by comparing his first-hand experiences of Beatlemania with the picture of first-century Palestine he found in Hugh Schonfield's 1965 book *The Passover Plot*, which Lennon read shortly before uttering his infamous remarks. Schonfield also taught Lennon, however, to view history conspiratorially--that is, to look for the ways in which the powerful weave the chaotic profusion of events, conflicting interests, and contradictory testimonies into an apparently seamless eschatological narrative. To manifest and capitalize on their quasi-religious importance in the lives of their fans, Lennon realized, the Beatles needed merely to provide a plenitude of tantalizing, apparently disjointed details; their adherents, like the early church fathers, could be counted on eagerly to weave from those data a personally and culturally meaningful narrative. Two aspects of the Beatles' later career--the iconographic and musical experimentalism of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and the "Paul is Dead" myth--show the two main varieties of conspiratorial thinking. In its positive mode, conspiratorial thinking reflects a particular kind of intellectual ingenuity--the ability to assemble an interesting, even pleasing mosaic from the randomness of events as they happen. But because conspiratorial thinking assumes that some overarching purpose is always at work--the "system" has its aims--intellectual ingenuity gives way, eventually, to paranoia. This is the inevitable drift of conspiratorial narrativity. No matter how playfully begun, conspiratorial thinking invariably raises the avenging specter of the sacred.

This story begins in early March of 1966, when John Lennon, comfortably ensconced in a mock-Tudor mansion in suburban London's "Stockbroker Belt," gave an interview to his old friend Maureen Cleave, pop music reporter for the London Evening Standard. Cleave's article, titled "How does a Beatle live? John Lennon lives like this," ran on March 4; her theme was Lennon's transformation--now that he had reached the ripe old age of twenty-five--from teeny-bopper idol to public intellectual:

Experience has sown few seeds of doubt in him; not that his mind is closed, but it's closed round whatever he believes at the time. "Christianity will go," he said. "It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that. I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first--rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me." He is reading extensively about religion. (5)

3

The statement went unnoticed in Britain; as Mark Lewisohn has observed, "People were used to [Lennon's] caustic remarks, and besides, it was a valid comment." (6) On July 29, however, just two weeks before the scheduled start of the Beatles' annual U.S. summer tour, the American teen magazine *Datebook* reprinted extracts from Cleave's article, using the quotation's most volatile phrase--"I don't know which will go first--rock 'n' roll or Christianity"--as its page one banner. Within three days, Lennon's remarks were front-page news throughout the United States.

Popular versions of Beatles' history portray the "bigger than Jesus" flap as the scandal from which the group's fortunes never entirely recovered and the real reason why the Beatles never gave a public concert after August 29, 1966. For reasons I'll return to, the episode was a turning point for the group; but the public outcry was not nearly as widespread as one might assume from frequently replayed newsreel footage of young people tossing publicity photos and album sleeves onto bonfires. In the United States, expressions of outrage were more frequent in the South. In Nashville, for example, the Ku Klux Klan organized an anti-Beatle demonstration that drew 8,000 to a locale across the street from where the Beatles played two sold-out concerts to a total of more than 24,000 paying customers. Outside of the Bible belt, though, reactions ran the gamut from amusement to pedantry. The *Washington Post* wryly noted that in the two years since their last appearance in the capital city, the Beatles had acquired a couple of "reluctant theologians." Radio station KRLA in Los Angeles, a sponsor of the Beatles' August 28th appearance at Dodger Stadium, used the controversy to give its listeners a lesson in constitutional history: "If you remember . . . , a group of British subjects came to America to avoid public censure of their religious beliefs. After many hardships, they won . . . religious freedom," a freedom which "Americans . . . still enjoy. Therefore, we here at KRLA do not believe it is our right to question the religious beliefs of the Beatles or any other

talent." [\(7\)](#)

There can be little doubt that at any other time Lennon's remarks would have aroused indignation, especially in those parts of the United States where public avowals of Christian fideism had not yet acquired the patina of low-class enthusiasm they wore in the more sophisticated cities of the north and West. John's comments were, nevertheless, particularly ill-timed, for in the summer of 1966 the United States was a jittery nation. The previous summer had seen race riots in several major cities, including Washington D.C., Detroit, and Los Angeles, and in the three weeks immediately prior to the start of the Beatles' tour, the country found itself having to absorb two shocking instances of mass murder. On July 14 eight student nurses were found strangled in a hospital-owned apartment house on the south side of Chicago. A petty criminal and mental patient named Richard Speck, identified by a survivor who remembered that he had the phrase "Born to Raise Hell" tattooed on his left upper arm, was eventually caught and charged with the crime. On August 1, a heavily armed former U.S. Marine, Charles Lee Whitman, killed 13 in a 45-minute shooting spree from the top of the bell tower at the University of Texas at Austin.

Though the media drew no direct connections between religion and the summer's outburst of violence, it was a short step for Americans to go from their own growing awareness of being in the midst of a spiritual decline to the horrors of Speck and Whitman. In April, 1966, the cover of Time magazine asked, "Is God Dead?" and the events of the summer, along with Lennon's statement, seemed to answer the question in the affirmative. Moreover, that the "bigger than Jesus" statement issued from the lips of a man who had experienced first hand the fastest and most intense onrush of fame the world had ever seen lent Lennon's statement a certain credibility. Despite his northern English solecisms ("It's them twisting it. . ."), this young pop singer had put his finger on an emerging cultural trend: in the future, it seemed, cycles of hysterical celebrity worship would increasingly satisfy the transcendental longings that traditionally were the pretext and province of religion. The faithful were offended, in other words, not so much by the blasphemous drift of Lennon's comments as by their accuracy in describing the contemporary state of religious faith not only in America, but around the world. And though Lennon later said that at the time he was "terrified" by the anti-Beatles rhetoric in the U.S., at press conferences in nearly all of the 14 cities the Beatles played that summer he stubbornly maintained that his observations were accurate. In Chicago, a nervous, but clearly exasperated John told assembled reporters that

Originally I pointed out that fact in reference to England, that we meant more to kids than Jesus did, or religion, at that time. I wasn't knocking it or putting it down, I was just saying it as a fact. And it's true more for England than here. I'm not saying that we're better or greater, or comparing us with Jesus Christ as a person or God as a thing or whatever it is. You know, I just said what I said, and it was wrong. Or it was taken wrong. And now it's all this. [\(8\)](#)

That "popularity" suggested itself to Lennon as the basis of his comparison shows how the

Beatles and Beatlemania had by 1966 already altered the Anglo-American cultural landscape. The unprecedented financial success of the Beatles and the other entertainers that followed in their wake appeared to suggest that celebrity had, once and for all, established itself as the indisputable sign of cultural significance, and that henceforward, society would anchor its conceptions of worth more firmly than ever in the quantifiable realm of the market. But Lennon was prompted to make his offending comparison by more than just his having caught the spirit of his age. The immediate impetus for the comments, as Maureen Cleave reminded her readers, was Lennon's "extensive" reading about religion, which, it turns out, was probably not all that extensive, since it seems to have consisted of one book: Hugh Schonfield's 1965 bestseller *The Passover Plot*.

4

Schonfield's controversial bestseller argues that the fictional premise "used. . . by George Moore in *The Brook Kerith* and by D.H. Lawrence in *The Man who Died*" (9)--that Jesus survived the crucifixion--really happened. To the task of proving this thesis, Schonfield brought a prodigious command of scripture, new insights (largely gleaned from the recently published *Dead Sea Scrolls*) into the Jewish sectarianism of first-century Palestine, and forty years' experience studying and teaching (at Oxford University) early Christian history. He also brought a conspiratorial worldview that prompted him to weave from all the ancient sources available to him a story that explained on entirely rational grounds all of the events mentioned in the Gospels. The miracles and mysteries that serve to establish Christ's divinity in the church's official narrative are to Schonfield telltale signs of a plot--masterminded by Jesus himself--the purpose of which was to prove that this son of a Galilean carpenter was the Messiah whose coming had been predicted by certain Jewish sects since about a century and a half before his birth. Steeped from his youth in the religious ferment of his day, Schonfield's Jesus gradually becomes convinced that it was incumbent upon him to manifest his Messiahship by ensuring that his demise conformed to the prophesied pattern. To this end, writes Schonfield, Jesus minutely planned and orchestrated the events of Passion Week so they would culminate in his crucifixion on Friday afternoon. For the *Passover Plot*, timing is everything; delaying the Messiah's predicted ordeal until just before the Sabbath, writes Schonfield, would enable Jesus to survive crucifixion by faking his death. The custom of removing the bodies of the crucified from their crosses before the Sabbath meant that Jesus' time on the cross would be minimized, allowing him to receive quickly the medical attention he would need. And by appearing to die on his own Jesus would be spared having his legs broken, the usual means by which the Romans hastened the deaths of crucifixion victims. Every conspiracy theory needs a leap of faith; Schonfield's is the precise means he thinks Jesus used to fake his death. Jesus' words "I am thirsty," writes Schonfield, were a signal to Joseph of Arimathea, who dispatched a servant with a vinegar-soaked sponge on the end of a twig of hyssop. But, says Schonfield, there was more than just vinegar in this sponge. Had this liquid consisted of the "the normal wine vinegar diluted with water," he writes, "the effect would have been stimulating. In this case it was exactly the opposite. Jesus lapsed quickly into complete unconsciousness. His body sagged. His head lolled on his breast, and to all intents and purposes he was a dead man" (191-2). As John

Lennon might have said had he witnessed the scene as Schonfield drew it, "He's drugged!"

Having created the illusion of premature death, Schonfield's Jesus is taken down from the cross and immediately laid in the tomb. Sometime on Saturday night, however, Jesus' confederates return to the tomb to carry out, in Schonfield's words, "the entirely legitimate purpose of reviving him" (196). The Roman soldier's lance thrust, however, had made Jesus' chances of recovery "slender"; after regaining "consciousness temporarily," Schonfield writes, Jesus "finally succumbed" (196). It being "much too risky, and perhaps too late, to take the body back to the tomb, replace the bandages left there, roll the stone across the entrance, and try to create the impression that everything was as it had been on Friday evening," Jesus' co-conspirators "quickly and reverently" interred the remains elsewhere, "leaving the puzzle of the empty tomb" (196-7).

This enticing puzzle, continues Schonfield, may accurately be seen as the real basis of Christianity, since from it the early church, by tying together a quilt of conflicting eyewitness accounts, bits of unrelated historic data, and even snatches from works of fiction like Lucius Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, wove its authoritative and authorizing narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection. If phase one of the Passover Plot was engineered by Jesus himself, phase two consists in the early church's "official" narrative of Christ's death and resurrection. Phase two ties together and tidies up the loose ends and unaccountable details left behind by Jesus' own, partially successful, conspiracy, producing, by about the third century, a myth capable in Schonfield's opinion of instituting a great world religion. But as that myth was reverently scrutinized, accumulating through the years a weighty interpretive tradition, its loose ends continued to turn up and demand explanation. As Christianity spread after about 300 C.E. to an increasingly educated and intellectually sophisticated populace, the need for a stable originary narrative--capable of withstanding the skepticism of friend and foe alike--became more urgent. Schonfield argues that the early church stabilized the myth of Jesus' life and worked first by obliterating any lingering traces of the Passover Plot, and finally by mining the Old Testament for every possible prophetic detail until the two parts of the Bible, taken together, constituted a seamless cosmological narrative. To Schonfield, though, in the end this is just a story, carefully and tendentiously abstracted from a chaos of events related only by their having occurred in roughly the same region at about the same time. Those events are capable of being woven into a different narrative, and this is precisely what Schonfield did.

This is what struck Lennon more than anything else in Schonfield's book. The insights John took from *The Passover Plot* were more cognitive and historiographic than theological: at no time did Lennon state that he believed Schonfield's hypothesis in all its particulars. Rather, as the *Evening Standard* interview suggests, reading the book seems to have impelled Lennon to consider his own fame and the phenomenon of Beatlemania in their broader cultural and historic contexts, and to conclude that the psychic, political, and cultural forces that went into the making of Christianity had been revived by Beatlemania. The world of Jesus' birth was characterized, in Schonfield's words, by "an extraordinary fervour and religiosity in which almost every event, political, social, and economic, was seized upon, scrutinized, and analyzed,

to discover how and in what way it represented a Sign of the Times and threw light on the approach of the End of The Days. The whole condition of the Jewish people was psychologically abnormal. . . . People were on edge, neurotic. There were hot disputes, rivalries and recriminations" (30). That Beatlemania rose to the level of neuroticism was made apparent by the spectacle of the Beatles being greeted by hundreds of screaming fans at airports around the world. George Harrison has said that in the 1960s, "the world used [the Beatles] as an excuse to go mad, and then blamed us for their madness." Other experiences no doubt also contributed to Lennon's sense that the Beatles had aroused another era of psychological abnormality. Ringo Starr has recalled that during their tours, the Beatles frequently found themselves presented with the sick and afflicted:

5

Crippled people were constantly being brought backstage to be touched by "a Beatle," and it was very strange. It happened in Britain as well, not only overseas. There were some really bad cases, God help them. There were some poor little children who would be brought in in baskets. And also some really sad Thalidomide kids with little broken bodies and no arms, no legs, and little feet. [\(10\)](#)

A few weeks before the flap over John's "bigger than Jesus" statement broke in the U.S., the Beatles experienced the scariest event in their touring history. After performing for sell-out--and extremely well-behaved--crowds in Japan, the Beatles went to the Philippines, where they found themselves, after receiving their usual enthusiastic airport greeting, *personae non gratae* for refusing an invitation to dine with Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos at the presidential palace. Though they played two sold-out concerts in Manila, the Beatles were virtually imprisoned on an island compound (which they were told was their hotel) in Manila Bay, and members of the group's entourage were punched and kicked by a gauntlet of police officers on the way to their plane at the end of their stay. Only after paying a "transport tax" equal to the total of their concert receipts were the Beatles allowed to leave the country. To Lennon, fresh from reading Schonfield's minute-by-minute account of Holy Week, these events no doubt bore a chilling resemblance to Jerusalem's violent swing from adulation to excoriation of Jesus between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Perhaps this is why Lennon refused to recant his statements during the U.S. tour, since each day presented further proof that his original intuition--that Beatlemania and Schonfield's version of Christianity were parallel phenomena--was on target.

There was more to this parallel, however, than just Jesus' and the Beatles' shared identity as foci of adoration and scorn. By 1966 the Beatles' longevity--unprecedented for pop stars at the time--had made them and their music objects of the kind of scrutiny and study previously reserved for venerated religious figures and sacred texts. After reading Schonfield, Lennon realized that the Beatlemaniac's insatiable thirst for every scrap of information about her idols was functionally identical to the religious acolyte's hunger for a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of the godhead. Both are satisfied only by obsessively

poring over every available tidbit, which is tirelessly studied for hidden messages and archetypal significances. Schonfield also showed Lennon that such an understanding was always predicated on a story--that is, a purposeful narrative stitched together from life's jumble of contingencies. These two realizations, combined with the "bigger than Jesus" controversy and its aftermath, pointed out a new direction for the Beatles, one in which they could broaden their cultural significance by exploiting and amplifying--rather than obscuring or repudiating--their quasi-religious status. The first step they took toward manifesting this new identity was to withdraw from the public--after their performance at Candlestick Park in San Francisco on August 29, 1966, the Beatles played no more public concerts. Though the immediate reasons for this decision were exhaustion and disgust with the madness of touring, not appearing in public had another accidental but welcome effect. In violation of accepted showbiz wisdom, which held that artists who didn't tour were quickly forgotten, withdrawing from the public eye only heightened the aura of sacredness that had grown up around the Beatles. Disappearing for several months added mystery and anticipation to the group's bag of entertainment tricks. "What will they do next?" wondered their millions of fans, patiently, even faithfully, awaiting the release of the next record.

Deciding not to play in public also reflected the degree to which--after only three years in the limelight--the Beatles felt entitled by their success to reject the entertainment-industry formulas on which they had built their success in order to forge for themselves new identities as full-fledged poets. After the summer of 1966, no longer would the Beatles wear matching stage suits; no longer would John Lennon struggle myopically through public appearances because his teeny-bopper fan base presumably wouldn't tolerate seeing their idol wearing eyeglasses. When the Beatles emerged from their self-imposed hiatus nearly a year after their last concert with a new album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, they were a different group: all four sported new hairstyles, drooping moustaches, and wore vaguely psychedelic parodies of the quasi-military uniforms customarily used by members of northern English community brass bands. Most important, John Lennon proudly wears his National Health-issued round spectacles as a sign of the bookishness that he had, presumably, concealed to protect his image. These iconographic alterations were meant to signal that the Beatles had transformed themselves from history's most successful purveyors of rock and pop for teenagers into artists--that is, weavers of complex, subtle, and deep narratives about humankind's enduring questions.

6

But despite these signals and the hoopla that greeted the new album, the music on Sgt. Pepper wasn't any deeper, more evocative, or more experimental than what the group had been doing for the previous year and a half. The music seemed more meaningful and capable of sustaining a more sophisticated interpretive inquiry, though, because of the care that had been taken with the album's ancillary features--particularly the sleeve design, which appears carefully composed to communicate a manifestly grand message. But even this aspect of the record is deceptive. Though now frequently identified as pop music's first "concept" album and a "manifesto of the 1960s," Sgt. Pepper, by its creators' admission, was a musical hodgepodge, tied together only

by the title song and a brief repeat of that song in the penultimate track. "All my contributions to the album," said John Lennon, "have absolutely nothing to do with this idea of Sgt. Pepper and his band; but it works, because we said it worked, and that's how the album appeared. But it was not put together as it sounds, except for Sgt. Pepper introducing Billy Shears, and the so-called reprise. Every other song could have been on any other album." (11) Lacking real thematic and conceptual unity, Sgt. Pepper nevertheless "works" because its very randomness evokes High Modern obscurantism. As was the case for the conspiratorial view of history Lennon learned from Schonfield, what matters is the system: the appearance of merely accidental or chance relations between elements is, in this way of thinking, the surest indicator of the presence of a hidden story, waiting to be brought to light by the sort of thoroughgoing exegesis practiced on a manifestly important cultural artifacts, like Schonfield's Dead Sea Scrolls.

The impression of high modern seriousness was immediately apparent in the album's famous cover [http://\[www.hillsboro.k12.nd.us/schools/students/sarah/sgt_pepper.htm\]](http://www.hillsboro.k12.nd.us/schools/students/sarah/sgt_pepper.htm). The sleeve art for previous albums had largely consisted of head shots of the Beatles as figures against a patterned or solid ground--four mop-tops staring at the camera. (12) The cover of Sgt. Pepper presents a hermeneutic puzzle: the customary configuration of Beatles as the image's focus gives way to a mosaic of faces in which the Beatles, though foregrounded, appear as members of some sort of community. But what unites this community? Who is the man in dark glasses (French film star Jean-Paul Belmondo)? What is his relation to Sonny Liston, Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Marlene Dietrich, and Shirley Temple? What story does the quilt of faces tell, and what role in that story is played by the other objects in the picture, such as the small television set on the right? Turn the sleeve over, and you encounter the second quasi-religious dimension of Sgt. Pepper: for the first time on a pop album, all the words to the songs are transcribed. The lyrics thus acquire the stable, fixed status of sacred text, which can now be pored over and studied with the kind of Talmudic intensity that the Beatles knew their fans possessed.

When Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band was issued as a compact disc in 1987, it came with a key that matched the faces on the cover with their names, spoiling the fun of a new generation of Beatle fans who otherwise could have experienced the thrill of recognizing in the sea of faces such notables as Aleister Crowley and Fred Astaire. The LP didn't have such a key, because the album's original buyers were meant to derive additional aesthetic enjoyment from having figured out for themselves who these people were and why they made it to the cover--and why others didn't. A key cheats the viewer of one of the chief pleasures of a visual text like this--the satisfaction gained from having solved the puzzle. This is the benign starting point for conspiratorial narrative: a jumble of discrete images, unified only by their proximity. Though presented as a whole, the iconographic density of the Sgt Pepper cover invites sequential perusal of its details. At the end of this process the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the image as a whole is increased by the labor expended in identifying its parts.

As an interpretive tradition accumulates around the object, however, the meaning of a complex, manifestly serious image like this one inevitably grows more sinister. Words and

pictures tied together only by their spatial propinquity begin to be related by cause and effect; they acquire the systematic interrelationship that in his Poetics Aristotle identified as the indispensable characteristic of a plot. The more public the object--that is, the greater the number of people who study it--the more elaborate the plot, since each brings a new interpreter who builds on prior elucidations of the "hidden messages" which, taken together, constitute a narrative. Lennon's reading of The Passover Plot showed him that culturally rich narratives were strung together from assortments of details. It followed, therefore, that the artist's task is merely to provide the details; the consumers of the art object can be counted on to weave the narrative.

7

And this is precisely what Beatle fans did, eventually elaborating a Byzantine conspiracy theory cum hero's resurrection myth: the "Paul is Dead" rumor, which reached its crescendo in November 1969. Shortly after the release of Abbey Road, a Detroit disc jockey announced on the air that he had received a mysterious phone call reporting that McCartney's death was being surreptitiously communicated by the new album's cover photo, a famous and often-imitated shot of the four Beatles crossing a street. This innocent looking image, said the caller, was actually a funeral procession, with Paul's status as corpse covertly indicated by several details: he's barefoot (an allusion to the practice of interring people without shoes), he holds an unlit cigarette in his right hand (a symbol of a life "snuffed out"), and a license plate on a car in the background reads "28IF"--meaning McCartney would have been "28 if" he were still alive. (13) Spread by other disc jockeys and through the huge network of Beatle fans, the rumors were taken seriously enough to prompt McCartney to appear on the cover of Life magazine before the end of the year, announcing that he felt "fine." Throughout that autumn and after, though, the story persisted and became more labyrinthine, as fans pored over their Beatle records, playing them word by word and backwards and forwards in the search for more clues. In its most evolved form, the story was that after Paul McCartney died in a November 1966 auto accident, he was replaced by a look-alike. In memory of their lost comrade, however, the surviving Beatles supposedly laced their songs and album covers with intimations of the manner and circumstances of Paul's death. Displaying astonishing ingenuity, Beatlemaniacs over the years have identified hundreds of "clues," both visual and auditory, throughout the band's oeuvre. The most famous of these are the instances of "backward masking" on the White Album. The repeated phrase "number nine" in "Revolution 9," for example, supposedly says "Turn me on, dead man" when played in reverse on a turntable. (14) But it was to the busy pop-art of Sgt. Pepper, supposedly the first album completed after Paul's death, that Beatle fanatics turned for the lion's share of clues. On the back cover, for instance, George Harrison stands with his right index finger inexplicably outstretched. Closer examination shows that it points to a line from the song "She's Leaving Home": "Wednesday morning at five o'clock as the day begins." Moving to the column immediately to the left, the corresponding line, from "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," is "Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly." The column to the right reads "life goes on within you and without you," and the next column yields "And you're on your own you're in the street." Adherents of the "Paul is Dead" theory

assembled these juxtaposed lines into an account of an accident in the early morning, a mortally injured Paul lying alone in the street unable to speak, and the Beatles going on without their fallen friend.

Also on the back cover, the three Beatles other than Paul face forward; Paul stands with his back to the camera, supposedly to indicate his non-presence. On the inside of the sleeve is a large photograph of the four smiling Beatles in their brightly colored Sgt. Pepper band uniforms. On Paul's left sleeve, where on a military uniform one might find a rank insignia, is a patch that reads "O.P.D." "Paul is Dead" theoreticians argue that this patch is an abbreviation for "Officially Pronounced Dead," the British equivalent of the American phrase "dead on arrival." And in the song "A Day in the Life," the theoreticians contend, John Lennon tells of the auto accident that took his bandmate's life:

He blew his mind out in a car
He didn't notice that the lights had changed.
A crowd of people stood and stared.
They'd seen his face before.
Nobody was really sure if he was from the House of Lords.

This combination of sortilege and close reading--typical of "Paul is dead" evidentiary reasoning--illustrates my point with particular clarity. Conspiracy theorizing is a mode of Gnosticism that can be counted on to arise spontaneously in the presence of any spatially or chronologically linked sequence of events lacking a self-evident originator and purpose. As it did on the originary scene, the mind abhors the cognitive vacuum of effects without causes; and where those causes are not glaringly apparent (and sometimes even where they are), a story will be concocted to account for them. To John Lennon (who ought to know) Hugh Schonfield was the unacknowledged master theorist of Beatlemania, for this shy and retiring Oxford don quite unintentionally, but accurately, pointed to the mythopoetic potentialities lurking in contemporary celebrity worship. Sadly, Lennon little suspected, as he sprinkled his songs and album covers with tantalizing details, that he would someday be the subject of his own son's hazy conspiracy theory, which emerges as the nightmarish incarnation of the myths woven in this media-saturated age around our celebrities. The deluge of information that both creates and is created by the mechanisms of contemporary celebrity falls sequentially into the ubiquitous scene of public representation. The jumble of evanescent images, publicity, rumor, anecdote, and conflicting eyewitness testimony that surrounds celebrities cries out to be arranged into a story that makes sense, a narrative. The more information that accumulates, the more conspiratorial or paranoid the narrative, as all the details need to be accounted for. But this is nothing new. René Girard has taught us that all myths are, to a degree, conspiratorial: by making the surrogate victim both the cause and the solution of the sacrificial crisis, myths mingle naïve faith with paranoid suspicion. I couldn't ask for a better illustration of the essential similarity between contemporary conspiracy theorizing and ancient myth than the last few sentences of the quotation from Sean Lennon with which I began this essay. Both conspiracy theory and myth say that "the system," in the final analysis, both does and doesn't

achieve its nefarious ends: "It was in the best interests of the United States to have my dad killed, definitely. And, you know, that worked against them, to be honest, because once he died his powers grew. So, I mean, fuck them. They didn't get what they wanted."

8

Notes

1. Goldman, Albert. *The Lives of John Lennon*. New York: Morrow, 1988, p. 14. [\(back\)](#)
2. Gans, Eric. *Originary Thinking*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 95. [\(back\)](#)
3. Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p. 64. [\(back\)](#)
4. For an example of how the myth of Oedipus both covers up and reveals his innocence of the oracular charges laid against Thebes' unpunished murdered, see Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, chapter 3. [\(back\)](#)
5. Reprinted in *The Lennon Companion*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York: Schirmer, 1996), pp. 71-75. [\(back\)](#)
6. Lewisohn, Mark. *The Beatles Day by Day*. London: Macmillan, 1988, p. 212. [\(back\)](#)
7. *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1966. [\(back\)](#)
8. *The Beatles Anthology*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000, p. 226. [\(back\)](#)
9. Schonfield, Hugh. *The Passover Plot*. Dorset: Element, 1996, p. 187. Further references to this book will be made parenthetically in the text. [\(back\)](#)
10. *The Beatles Anthology*, p. 142. [\(back\)](#)
11. *Ibid.*, p. 241. [\(back\)](#)
12. See the covers for [With the Beatles](#), [A Hard Day's Night](#), and [Beatles for Sale](#). [\(back\)](#)
13. Actually, McCartney "would have been" 27 when the album came out: he was born June 18, 1942, and *Abbey Road* was released in the U.S. on October 1, 1969. This fact did not stop "Paul is Dead" conspiracy theorists, however. They explained that in certain (unnamed) "Eskimo

societies," years of a life are numbered from birth, so that a child begins at age 1. And how is McCartney related to Eskimos? On the cover of Magical Mystery Tour, one of the Beatles wears a walrus mask, and in the song "Glass Onion," John Lennon sings, "Here's another clue for you all: the walrus was Paul." Since walruses inhabit the Arctic along with Eskimos, we are meant to number McCartney's years in the "Eskimo" manner. For a listing of some of other "clues," see <http://www.beatlesagain.com/bpidnew.html> . [\(back\)](#)

14. To hear, go to <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Cabaret/8444/9rebmun.wav> . [\(back\)](#)

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Anthropoetics VIII, 2 Benchmarks

This issue of Anthropoetics is unusual both for its dimensions--five articles full-length or longer--and for the variety of theoretical perspectives it contains.

We welcome new contributors **Chris Fleming** and **John O'Carroll** from the University of Western Sydney, whose wide-ranging essay is one of all too few discussions by professional anthropologists of GA's place in anthropology.

The rest of the issue features work by seasoned veterans. **Tom Bertonneau**, in his seventh contribution to Anthropoetics, defends the very un-PC Nobelist **V. S. Naipaul** against his PC critics, just as in VII, 1 he defended **Ralph Ellison** against victimary sanitization. **Doug Collins**, in his fourth and most far-reaching Anthropoetics article, trains his GA-inspired epistemology with unique subtlety and vast erudition on the century-long enterprise of "critical theory."

In provocative contrast to Collins' focus on the postmodern, **Raoul Eshelman**, in his third article for this journal, persuasively elaborates in the field of cinema the "post-millennial" concept of performatism that he had previously focused on the novel and on architecture. And **Matt Schneider**, in his sixth article for Anthropoetics and his second on the **Beatles**, explores the fascinating connection between narrative, popular culture, and conspiracy theories.

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Tom Bertonneau teaches in English at SUNY Oswego and remains affiliated with the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, in Michigan. An original member of the GA seminar, Tom has published over fifty articles on a variety of topics including poetry and the novel, political science, religion, and science fiction, and literacy. His short stories, set in the Santa Monica Mountains, have appeared in Arcturus. He reviews regularly for The University Bookman, and has articles forthcoming in Modern Age, Praesidium, and a symposium on "Augustine and Literature" to be published in 2004. He is the author of the 1996 study "Declining Standards at Michigan Public Universities." Tom hails from the beach at Malibu.

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[Matthew Schneider](#), a founding member of the GA seminar (who has managed to attend some portion of the seminar every year it has been given), holds an MA from Chicago and received his PhD in English from UCLA in 1991. The author of *Original Ambivalence: Violence and Autobiography in Thomas De Quincey* (Peter Lang, 1995), Schneider has also published essays on Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, John Keats, and critical theory. He is associate professor of English and Chair of English and Comparative Literature at Chapman University (Orange, California).

[Return to Anthropoetics home page](#) | [Return to Anthropoetics VIII, 2](#)

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