

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

No. 1: Thursday July 6, 1995

I promised in the last **News & Views** page to begin a column that would provide views rather than just news. I have decided to call it **Chronicles of Love and Resentment** because these are the two poles of human interaction. They are of the utmost theoretical importance precisely because they are not abstract concepts distilled by thought from our lived experience, but realities--the most powerful human realities--of our daily lives.

Perhaps the most useful way to describe the difference between **GA** and Girard's system is that the latter begins with resentment whereas **GA** begins with love. Human violence is as violent as it is only because the first human act is the deferral of violence. Resentment preoccupies us more than love because it poses problems to be solved, but our problems repose on a basis of human solidarity. This is not an expression of optimism, but a reminder of our ontology. One (more) thing the Oedipus myth is about is human survival through love, minimally defined as the deferral of violence. Oedipus is the infant that his father could not kill, that his mother could not abandon to his death; loved as a child by his adopted parents, he leaves the scene, accompanied by his loving daughter Antigone, to die a holy man at Colonus. It is not to make little of life's tragedies to affirm that they are part of *la comédie humaine*.

Of all our personal experiences, that of love is the most profound--in the vocabulary of **GA**, the most originary. So much so that it cannot fully be articulated, no more than the believer can fully articulate his faith. The foundation of language cannot be directly expressed in language. Resentment, on the other hand, rests on a foundation of love; the resenter is a child who breaks his toys knowing his parents are there to pick up the pieces. And thus it can be articulated with great sharpness. Its danger lies precisely in this ease of communication.

The most powerful expression of resentment I can think of is **Jenny's song** from Brecht-Weill's *Dreigroschenoper*. I am no great admirer of Brecht's work, let alone of his persona, but one cannot deny the genius that reveals itself in this expression of resentment. I can never hear this song without thinking of that other genius of resentment whose *Mein Kampf* was written at about the same time. One line best sums up the whole:

Und sie wissen nicht mit wem sie reden.
(And they don't know whom they're talking to.)

How many times have my experiences in the academic world made me think of that line!

And yet the bottom line, there as elsewhere, is still love; how could I hate an institution that pays me to work on **Generative Anthropology**?

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

No. 2: Saturday July 15, 1995

In my previous column, I said that resentment, because it is less originary than love, can be articulated more sharply. **Jenny's song**, from which I quoted a line, ends with the heroine sailing off in the ship that has left her the sole survivor of the city that humiliated her--a fantasy nearly identical to one expressed by Achilles to Patroclus in the **Iliad**. Nothing in the domain of love can bear comparison with the concreteness of resentment. But the dream of destruction, even in its intellectual prolongation as deconstruction, not merely presupposes a prior construction, but tacitly anticipates that it will survive the dream. Not even the Nazis could make Jenny's fantasy altogether a reality.

Odi et amo, I hate and (yet) I love, as Catullus said (though I misattributed the quote to Ovid in **Originary Thinking**). All hate is frustrated love. Resentment follows the model of the child who wishes his parents dead precisely because the wish cannot lead to the reality. Hamlet's fascination with the scene of his mother's adultery, Alceste with that of Célimène's salon in **Le misanthrope** are instances of that "early modern" form of resentment in which the defenders of the traditional order find themselves caught up in the desires acted out by its demolishers.

The same is true at the origin. In a recent exchange, **James Williams** of Syracuse University (Executive Secretary of the *COV&R*) pointed out that Girard's position is really consonant with mine, because the point of departure for both is mimesis, and mimesis at bottom is love. I can't quarrel with that: originary resentment depends on originary love. The problem is that when one bases one's anthropology on the self-exhaustion of mimetic rivalry rather than on its deferral, one presupposes that this self-exhaustion is bound to take place. Girard never explains why the emissary murder puts an end to violence. If scapegoating does not occur among animals, why does it occur in humans? The only Girardian precondition of the human is a greater degree of mimesis. But although this precondition explains mimetic concentration of desire on a single desire-object, it fails to explain why this concentration first manifests itself as the concentration of aggression on a single scapegoat. The scapegoat phenomenon provides a persuasive model for sacrifice; but what must be explained in the Girardian system is not the origin of sacrifice, but the origin of the human in sacrifice.

Or to put it in terms of love and resentment: the love for the central victim that reveals it as sacred must precede the resentment aroused by its centrality. But then why did it become a victim, which is to say, a communal focus of resentment, in the first place?

Love cannot express itself with the concreteness of resentment; but precisely for this reason, its expression is a model of the community-creating function of language. The formula "*I love you*" offers insights into originary language. More about this next week.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

No. 3: Saturday July 29, 1995

This column is dedicated to the memory of **Nicholas Collaros**, my deeply regretted young colleague in the UCLA French Department, who died on Sunday, July 23.

I haven't forgotten James Williams' reply to my point that resentment can be expressed more sharply than love. I must thank him for giving me the opportunity to sharpen my own language. I certainly didn't mean to imply that expressions of resentment are more powerful than acts of love, although in the absence of the former, the latter lose their urgency as acts, as reader preferences for the *Inferno* over the *Paradiso*, or for Milton's Satan over his Christ suggest. I was referring not to the concreteness of such acts, but to their inarticulateness in contrast with the resentful imagination. Since resentment is a reaction to an already-constituted scene, it is representational from the outset and lends itself to precise articulation. Jenny can even tell us the number of sails and cannon on the ship that will come to avenge her.

Jim's examples illustrate this very point. The scene of Christ kissing the Inquisitor--or even better, the one where Father Zossima bows down before Dmitri--derives its power as an expression of love precisely from its ostensivity, its showing rather than telling. In contrast to Jenny's dream of vengeance, these gestures of love involve representation not as already constituted in words but as a primal act of designation. The makers of these gestures could not have expressed their love in words. Such an act is not a use of language but a founding of language. The sign is a new form of the originary name-of-God, addressed to a sinner in whom Christ or his surrogate discerns our human identity with the figure whose act of self-sacrifice is our civilization's most significant archetype of the act of love.

To make the comparison in more rigorous terms, we may say that **love is to the ostensive as resentment is to the declarative**. Love defines a new significance, whereas resentment is parasitic on an old one. This is pretty close to Jim's description of the distinction in terms of the relative originarity of human relationships; we need only remind ourselves that the fundamental forms of human relationships are precisely those we find incarnated in the forms of representation.

The point above about sacrifice reminds us of Girard's insistence that the Crucifixion is not a sacrifice but the demystification of all sacrifice. We should not conceive of God as a father sacrificing his son for the benefit of mankind. But neither should we see the latter as a passive victim of human violence. Jesus on the cross figures the founding paradox of the human. On the one hand, he is wholly a man, suffering as one who cannot help but suffer. But we must also think of him as God, that is, as Being with no need to incarnate himself in human flesh, one whose endurance of suffering is wholly voluntary. The act of love embodied in the Crucifixion can be figured only by the most paradoxical, and therefore the most foundational of images, the one that inspired the phrase *credo quia absurdum*. The crucified's words, most notably his *Eli, Eli...*, are secondary to his deed. What matters is not the representation he creates, but the paradoxical representation he **becomes**: that of the sacrificial victim as God--a figure who inspires not compassion but **tenderness**, as I will explain in another column. The mob, in contrast, sees in the

Crucifixion the satisfaction of its desire: the image of Jesus on the cross, paradoxical as a figure of love, is unambiguous as a figure of resentment.

Once again, the moment of love is the moment of ostension, of presence and renunciation. The moment of resentment, in contrast, occurs after the sign has been emitted, when peace is assured, at which point adoration of central Being is transformed into the desire to obliterate it, to defigure the figure that preserved the community from violence. But the resentful dream of defiguration is parasitic, as are all such dreams, on the figure that concentrates in itself the mimetic power the resentful subject wishes to destroy.

I shall conclude this column with some reflections that Nick Collaros's death and funeral service inspired.

I have always insisted that our unique knowledge of our own mortality is a product of the originary event; because humanity threatens to become the cause of its own death, death must be deferred by human action. Our Heideggerian "living for death" originates in our awareness of the necessity of this deferral.

In a powerful passage, Pascal described humanity as a group of prisoners some of whom are put to death every day in front of the others, who await their turn with no hope of being spared. The Greek Orthodox priest at Nick's funeral service expressed this same vision with a quite different metaphor: because we were, as he said, all "**terminal**," Nick's death offers all of us an opportunity to reflect on the final value of our own lives. Pascal's prisoners must wager on God because their lives are worthless without the hope of salvation. This "no atheists in the foxholes" argument supports the originary hypothesis; prayer *in extremis* repeats the use of the sign to defer violence and death in the originary scene. There in the church, we each entered a personal foxhole in which we saw the vision of our own death.

My own reaction provides existential proof of the underlying identity of the priest's and Pascal's vision. At the ceremony I had been aware of the uncomfortable presence of a colleague with whom I had never gotten along. The effect of the priest's words was to make me feel impelled to overcome my resentment and make toward him a gesture of friendship. The *memento mori* didn't make me feel like seeking to prolong my life-span by improving my diet or exercising more assiduously; it made me feel the need to avert conflict with my fellow man.

The power of the central being of the originary scene to defer our conflicts is not founded on guilt at his murder, as in Freud's view, or in the exhaustion of our aggressive energy, as in Girard's, but on the love, the reflection of our own mimetic desire, that emanates from the center. How petty our little quarrels seem in the face of death! But we do not hope to avoid physical death through loving each other. The immortality in which the scene of death inspires us to participate is not that of our individual selves, but of the shared world of signs that is the foundation of the human community. Nick's death is exemplary as a figure not of fear but of shared renunciation; by abandoning life in the world, he becomes a representation of immortal Being, just as the originary central object, defigured in the *sparagmos*, reveals to us the permanence of the Being--undecidably person and Idea--that sustains the human.

In my previous column, I promised to analyze the expression "*I love you*" in the light of the relationship between love and originary language; I will get back to this next week.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

"I love you"

No. 4: Saturday August 5, 1995

Here, finally, is my promised analysis of **I love you**.

In **How to Do Things With Words**, J. R. Austin divided sentences into two types. A **constative** tells you something about the world that is presumably already there before the statement is made; as Marx noted, philosophers have been doing this for a long time. But without becoming Marxists, philosophers and others can change the world with language. Sentences that accomplish this are called **performatives**: "I now pronounce you man and wife," "I swear to tell the truth...", "I promise to ..." A couple are unmarried until the appropriate person in the appropriate context pronounces the sentence that marries them. My promise does not exist until I make it.

Linguistic practices are not always this simple. If I say "it's getting cold in here," I'm probably inviting you to do something about it, like shut the window. Austin generalized this apparent exception to constative objectivity into the theory of **speech-acts**, in which the intended effect of my words on my interlocutor is formalized as the **illocutory force** of my utterance. In so doing, he turned the attention of analytic philosophers to the reality of speech (*la parole*) as opposed to language "as such" (*la langue*). The *langue* / *parole* distinction does not oppose, as is sometimes thought, language in the street to language in the dictionary, but rather the linguistic formalization of a limited set of syntactic and semantic categories to the uncountable uses of language in human interaction. Formalization is an expensive operation, analogous to creating a new tool; the tools of language are relatively few in number in comparison to the uses to which they may be adapted.

But at the origin of language, the distinction between tool and use, *langue* and *parole*, cannot be made. The first linguistic sign is both performative and constative. On one hand, in the characteristic mode of the constative, what is designated is present independently of the sign that designates it. But on the other hand, the sign is the bearer of human meaning. Before the object became the referent of the sign, it was merely one focus of appetitive interest among others; now it is singled out as the unique object of significance. Thus we may call the first sign the **name of God**. God is someone to whom we give a name only in order to affirm that it is *he* who names himself to *us*.

We have all experienced for ourselves this originary operation of language: when we say **I love you**.

I love you is a formula with exact equivalents in all modern Western languages. Its form is constative, and in antiquity, it seems to have been limited to this constative sense. Love stated as a mere fact is involuntary, a curse of Venus, as is Phaedra's love for Hippolytus.

Yet the modern sense of **I love you** is always latent, since to state the "curse" of love is after all to affirm it, to participate in it. This sense becomes generally accepted only in the nineteenth century, when it acquires its institutional basis in voluntary marriage and its later derivative, sexual partnership without marriage, which depends on it still more directly: a couple repeating **I love you** to each other has wed

each other *de facto* for so long as the expression can be repeated. Many couples, married or not, regularly, even obsessively renew their vows by the exchange of **I love you**.

The performative component of **I love you**, unlike that of "I now pronounce you man and wife," cannot be made precise; it creates the truth it ostensibly reflects. By admitting the feeling I already have, I affirm it as central. My declaration of love is my confession of faith, the verbal transformation of an emotion passively felt into a value actively defended. It is a model of the genesis of human significance out of animal appetite in the originary scene of language.

The medieval inventors/discoverers of romantic love understood that we are made aware of the sacred through our experiences of desire. In what we call the Romantic era, when **I love you** acquired its present usage, the terms of this relationship between private and public sacralty are reversed: it is our experience of love that gives most of us our sense of the sacred, not our attendance at weekend rites.

To say **I love you** is to consecrate someone as the object of a care greater than that for my own life. It is to pledge that person eternal fidelity, not as a mere gift, but as an act of faith, that is, as an act performed from within the faith I confess. **I love you** carries the meaning of "I promise to love you forever." But it does not *say* that; what it says is that the feeling it expresses endures forever by the very fact of its expression. That is, the feeling acquires, because it already possesses, **significance**, the permanent status of the sign. It is in this sense that **I love you** provides a model for the originary use of language.

Generative anthropology, as this example shows, is anything but bloodless speculation on the unknowable. Its quest for a fundamental understanding of the human is dedicated to the cause of promoting, in the face of resentment, the uniquely human union of appetite and intellect that we call love.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Simpson Trial

No. 5: Saturday August 12, 1995

During a conversation with **Matt Schneider** the other day, the question arose as to what **GA** can add to our understanding of our most visible current event: **the Simpson trial**. Or better put, what can the Simpson trial add to our understanding of originary anthropology?

The OJ trial is a contingent event, not an esthetic object created for our satisfaction. Social scientists are forever establishing statistical measures of significance where philosophers simply oppose contingency and necessity. But originary thinkers understand that in an event, significance emerges *out of* worldly contingency. This emergence is not a regrettable problem of methodology; it is the originary essence of the human.

Our sense of justice derives from the resentment we feel when we are treated unjustly. But no social order can operate according to the model of perfect reciprocity that the sense of justice holds up to it. Just as the deferral of mimetic crisis was the origin of the human, the deferral of resentment is the function of human culture.

Murder trials, like all cultural events, provide occasions for us to purge our resentment by identifying with the protagonists of an *agon* that does not concern us directly. The focus of our desire is the accused murderer, who, unlike his victims, has become famous while still alive. (We suspect that murderers kill for publicity, like **Herostratus** burning down the temple of Diana at Ephesus so that his name would not be forgotten; as you see, he was successful.) This scandal nourishes the drama of the trial. Either our desire for justice seeks to avenge less the murder than the celebrity of the murderer, or else a resentful identification with the latter's victimary status predominates and we hope that, now that his immortality is assured and the murder therefore no longer necessary, he will be declared innocent.

We thus condemn or acquit the central figure of the murder trial for his very centrality. As the primitive meaning of *trial* recalls, our judicial system originates in sacrificial ritual; trial by fire is older than trial by jury. But for the trial to purge us of our resentment, its verdict must be rationally motivated; we must be assured that if the accused is punished or released, it is not as an effect of our desires, but because he is indeed guilty or innocent. Although our sense of justice is discovered through resentment, the justice that restores the peaceful equality of the originary scene is a precondition for the reciprocity of love. (My article in [Anthropoetics I, no. 1](#) touches on these questions.)

We normally envy the fame a murder trial accords to the accused murderer. But this is no ordinary murder trial. O. J. Simpson may well be the most famous person ever accused of a private, violent crime; he, of all people, had no need of Herostratus' example. His central position at the trial--where he is constantly on camera although he plays no active role--strikes us as scandalously irreconcilable with the celebrity he had already achieved. OJ's detractors are doubly hostile because his fame has eliminated their secret point of identification with him, while his defenders take the very incongruity of his situation

as proof of his innocence. Tensions are equally exacerbated by the race/sex configuration. As an accused wife-beater, OJ is a figure of domination; yet as a Black man first married to and then obsessed with a white woman, he plays the role of the victim.

Generative anthropology is founded on the idea that language originated as the solution to the pragmatic paradox created by the convergence of multiple desires on a single central object. The incongruities of the celebrity as criminal, the Black man as a figure of hegemony, are not paradoxes in a logical sense, but they sufficiently perturb our normal set of responses to create a crisis in social logic. As a result, the trial becomes a drama in which the rational component, instead of presiding over the whole, becomes just one contending force among others. The rational view of the judicial process as the search for truth contends with a political view of it as the plaything of power-relations. At a time when we are debating the wisdom of group-centered policies founded on the notion that politics is a more powerful social force than reason, we seem to have come upon a public drama that neatly opposes the two.

But the situation is complicated by the fact that the *rational* outcome of the trial, which would be to find the evidence more than sufficient for conviction, would also be understood as a *political* triumph of the universalist majority over the victimary minority. For this reason, OJ is a dangerous hero for the minority cause. In closing its case by impeaching a detective's use of racial epithets rather than addressing the murder itself, the defense is promoting the triumph of resentment over rationality. If, as most expect, OJ is not convicted, the result will only encourage the majority to dismiss the minority's sense of justice as the product of resentment unconfirmed by reason. It is a risky game for a minority to emphasize the political over the rational; once the majority feels it has reason on its side, it will soon discover it has political preponderance as well.

But the trial is precisely not a part of the political process. It is a trial in yet another sense, a dry run for the **negotiation of resentments** that defines political life in democracy. If indeed the outcome is a triumph of resentment over reason, it is preferable that it occur in a venue that has no direct effect on our lives, where it can be discussed and assimilated rather than turned into public policy.

The Simpson trial is an example of what **Douglas Collins** of the University of Washington calls the **pre-humiliated** character of our public protagonists, whom we allow to occupy center stage only upon proof of their unworthiness. By reducing the public scene of representation to the *petit écran*, television insures our sense of superiority to the action that takes place before us. But what is the alternative? The reality of social crisis and the violence that attends it? We are surely better off learning our lessons in ethics from the TV dramas of our unheroic postmodern world.

I hope you have borne with me during this excursion into alien territory. I'll return to the domain of the originary next week.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Resentment and Love

No. 6: Saturday August 19, 1995

As might have been expected, last week's Simpson column aroused more interest than usual. I may have more to say on the subject next week. The present column returns to less topical matters.

Why is resentment so easy and love so difficult?

Alone, I am the *man of resentment*. All worldly presence does me injustice, not because it is unaware of its own existence, as Sartre's Roquentin would like us to believe, but because of its scandalous indifference to mine. Even when my fellow man does not esteem himself over me, he betrays me by admiring another above myself. The least object I encounter in my path, a scrap of newsprint not consecrated to me, an advertisement in another's image, a street-sign bearing a name not my own; the entire world and everything within it is a complicit witness to my unjust exclusion from the center of significance.

What is there then for me to love? To love what refuses to acknowledge my infinite power to love would be the ultimate abjection, the relinquishment of my claim of centrality.

But now we are two and in love; all things in the world become beneficiaries of our happiness. Not only those who smile on us, but those who fail to smile--we pity them: they have never been in love! By centering my little world on another, I am fulfilled by proximity to its center; I forget the world's indifference in my beloved's eyes.

Is not love's springtime the moment when the libido conspires to perpetuate the species? But our love is not the expression of an impersonal life-force. It is, like all truly human things, a transcendence of appetite mediated by the center of human significance. My beloved and I are not so consumed by desire that we forget the universe; on the contrary, our love opens us to the universe. What resentment saw as obstacles to our being have become extensions of it. Lovers are humble; their love, so much greater than either of them alone, reveals to them the source of their own meaning in the community of meaning that surrounds them.

For the man of resentment, the center of the universe--the place of God--is the only place. No degree of worldly eminence is enough; although, to be fair, there are probably many degrees between God's eminence and his own that he has not experienced. The man of resentment suffers from his finitude, not because he knows his life is finite, but because he feels his significance is finite. He, at least, knows what is meant by immortality; it is what would purge him of his resentment.

But then to fall in love is to become immortal. The lover discovers that, freed from resentment, he has lost his fear of death; his present is full of eternity. Yet love is not idolatry of an image invulnerable to death, but tenderness for a vulnerability that mirrors his own.

Aimez ce que jamais vous ne verrez deux fois! Love what you will never see twice! Vigny's line directs us to love not the eternally renewed ephemerality of nature, but our human historicity. By raising my fellow mortal to the source of meaning, I recreate the permanence of *langue* from the scenic event of *parole*. The ultimate lesson of Christianity, and indeed, of all religion, is that the human person, the user of language, fully possesses the quality of divinity that human language was created to represent. Fully to possess the quality of God is not to *be* God as a unique central being, it is to be human. We learn this lesson from our experience of love.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Body Sacrificial

No. 7: Saturday August 26, 1995

A search of the **WWW** will not uncover a plethora of information concerning **originary anthropology**. Not directly, that is. For all cultural activities inform us of our origins. Does not the greatness of market society lie precisely in its indifference to theory and its concentration on the cutting edge where history is made? Or on the focusing of that edge into a point, in the curious activity of **body-piercing**.

We are privileged to observe the emergence within our own culture of a sacrificial phenomenon of the sort that ethnologists have traveled thousands of miles and endured unspeakable conditions to experience *in medias res* in societies they can never fully understand. The pioneer Australian ethnologists **Spencer** and **Gillen**, in order to become more fully integrated into Aboriginal culture, underwent an initiation rite that included subincision of the penis. What would they say to be able to examine at the click of a mouse the [ceremonial jewelry](#) worn by young Americans in their body's most intimate recesses?

Body art compels our interest because it is sacrificial, or in other terms, **irreversible**. A paste-on tattoo is as trivial as a sculpture made out of modeling clay. A hole in one's anatomy, on the other hand, is a serious matter. The body has many nooks and crannies, and we cannot help but identify with what happens to them and in them, since our bodies are mutually mimetic. Instead of imprinting on the body a predetermined *structure* as **Lévi-Strauss** theorized about the Amazonian Indians he described in *Tristes tropiques*, piercing inscribes a message of personal identity.

Considering the number of different places to pierce and the various types and sizes of jewelry wearable in them, piercing encodes a message of considerable informational content. No corporeal activity, except perhaps tatooing, which in men at least is not new, has the capacity to generate so much information. Even if we assume a modest total of 100 mutually independent pierces including the jewelry, 2^{100} is a 30 digit number. But information of this sort cannot be measured in bits. What counts is how long, how often, and with what effect one can maintain the interest of one's audience, sharing with some, shocking others, arousing the curiosity of still more, especially their erotic curiosity. The healing problems, the need for continued care, the possibility of enlargement leading to new gauges of rings (gauge measurements figure prominently in this literature--the smaller the gauge, the larger the size), the [narratability](#) and [photographability](#) of the piercing operation and its results generate an immense wealth of data. For the investment in time and effort, a generally nondescript adolescent is compensated by a payoff in significance far exceeding what he or she could dream of obtaining by more conventional means.

How is such significance generated? Mere difference from the norm does not suffice. A short time ago, any body-piercing at all would have been stigmatized as weird, and the Saussurean difference between

one pierce and another, merely ignored. The phenomenon must be sufficiently abnormal to arouse a sense of social danger, but not enough to be simply unacceptable. On the frontier, negotiation proceeds anonymously, following the **market model**: children with parents, lovers with lovers, workers with employers... At first the single male earring is introduced by a fashion-setting minority, then multiple ear piercings, then nose rings... At each step, there are obstacles; the body's topography is uneven and the forces flow along the lines of least resistance.

The end of the fad is also clearly predictable. The banalization of the activity, which despite the infinite variety of detail is quite monotonous in its overall result, leads to boredom with others' stories, with repeating one's own, with displaying and soliciting interest. The real payoff is, after all, quite limited; a bit of erotic stimulation at the price of possible infection, partial stigmatization, and (I imagine) just plain inconvenience in having that ring there to put in and take out, to wash around, etc. One day, the whole phenomenon is exposed as a **Ponzi scheme** built on the expectation of further gain from drawing others into the semantic orbit into which one has been seduced. The trend collapses, and another, unpredictable until that moment, begins its take-off.

As with any market phenomenon, the sudden rise of body-piercing results from the confluence of numerous factors. Perhaps the most historically specific is the imperative of *control over one's body* in the era of **Roe vs Wade**. Parents are confronted with a new kind of demand for self-determination. Instead of a girl's negotiating for the traditional symbols of adulthood, or something easily reversible like a punk hairstyle, she requests permission to wear a ring in her nose--or insists on it, or has it done without parental consent. The mark of adolescent revolt is borne as an ornament that leaves a permanent scar.

The new freedom is not one of pleasure but of pain; this is a sacrificial practice, a personal **initiation rite**. To undergo the operation and care for the wound, to enlarge the aperture in the hope of a larger gauge, these things call for self-discipline and the cultivation of pain. The gratuity of the practice may strike us as narcissistic, but its actuality is ascetic. Like saints climbing pillars, one suffers for effect, but one suffers nonetheless.

I will spare the reader the usual recitation of youthful alienation and hopelessness. I will even spare the usual condemnation. I can claim impartiality. Not only am I too old for piercing, I would never have engaged in it; it is too transparent an example of the **conformist nonconformity** that has defined adolescent culture since the romantic era.

But only one person can discover the origin of language, while many can experience the meaningfulness of piercing. This sacrificial, ultimately **sacral** claim for recognition makes a visceral case for human solidarity. We must give significance to our bodies, to their pain. The underground man's aching tooth trumps the crystal palace of science. Just as there are no atheists in the foxholes, there are no indifferent viewers of the body's capacity to be wounded, to be **pierced**.

In an earlier column, I defined love as **tenderness** for the **vulnerability** I share with the one I love. By both enhancing and controlling this vulnerability, body piercing plays on the familiar but ever-renewable **paradox of mimetic desire**: I control my pain, so I don't need your love, yet my vulnerability is revealed in the wound I so proudly display. Like all other human activities, however charged with **resentment**, body-piercing is a plea for **love**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Above Politics?

No. 8: Saturday September 2, 1995

After [body-piercing](#), what is left to write about but **politics**?

Is it possible to be **above politics**? Clearly this is not just a theoretical question on the American scene today. The hope of an independent presidential candidate, be he **Colin Powell** or even the ineffable **Ross Perot**, is that he will face the nation's problems free from the narrow partisanship of the two parties, dominated, as it is not unfairly claimed, by their extremes.

It is easy to be skeptical. A "non-ideological" stance grants no particular ability to make the right decisions. Nor does it magically immunize anyone to the interest groups that attempt to influence these decisions. Should we unthinkingly assume that our political system is corrupt in some special way in which the rest of society is not?

The two most characteristic institutions of modern democracies are the **elective political system** and the **free market**. Politics is ostensibly an ethical activity, one involving human values. In contrast, the monetary evaluations of the market are considered to be without ethical content. This was not always the case. Before the bourgeois era, when the doctrine of **just price** prevailed, prices were set outside the marketplace on the authority of the reigning monarch. Money was looked upon with suspicion, and the notion of **universal fungibility** was unthinkable. Even today, certain services are not payable in money. When one is invited to dinner, one brings a bottle of wine; it would be altogether improper to give one's host the equivalent in cash. Such symbolic exchanges are marginalized today, but they were once the essence of the social exchange-system: *do ut des*, I give to you so that you may give to me.

A market is nothing but the resultant of the decisions of its participants. I try to anticipate its movement, as does everyone else. But because market value is determined by neither unthinking desires nor preestablished "just prices" but by judgments like my own, no individual can anticipate it more than marginally and temporarily better than another. Some are more intelligent and better informed, and that is where investment counselors earn their commission; but absent "insider trading," there is no knowledge and intelligence so uniquely powerful that others cannot duplicate it. The market is a model, not of utopian uniformity, but of **human equality in action**.

In the stock market, when I claim that a stock is worth a certain amount, the mechanism of the market may force me to revise my claim, sometimes quite drastically. Yet I do not feel that my integrity has been compromised. In the political world, on the other hand, I consider whatever claims I make to be dictated by a set of **ethical principles**, and I vote for politicians who purport to share these principles. Principles are qualitative, **non-negotiable**. Even quantifiable financial expenditures express support for policies, and if I am unalterably opposed to a certain policy, I may consider even a penny to be too much.

Yet because my fellow citizens and I differ in our principles, our representatives are compelled to arrive at compromises, just as a stock price is a compromise of the claims of its buyers and sellers, as described by the **law of supply and demand**. Some politicians are more powerful or more persuasive than others, but no individual, not the **President** nor even the **Speaker of the House**, possesses the power to dictate the outcome of the process. The Republican Congress has not been able to fulfill the contract signed by a majority of House Republicans. Politics in a democracy is an art of negotiation; "absolute" principles must be placed on the table along with all other claims.

If democratic politics is conceived on the model of market negotiation, then **to stand above politics** should mean to uphold one's convictions in opposition to the process of compromise. Yet the prevalence of strongly-held convictions on both sides of the aisle is precisely what has led independent voters to seek an alternative to the two-party system. The prime qualification for a third-party candidate is a **pragmatic lack of ideological commitment**.

What this suggests is that being **above politics** is in fact the last thing the independent electorate desires. What frustrates this group is less the corruptness of the political process than its blockage by **true believers**, whether of right or left. There is no **ideology of the center** except insofar as the center is the bargaining table where all parties must meet to thrash out their differences. In setting its sights on someone untainted by association with Washington, the independent bloc seeks not purity of principle but **faith in the political marketplace**.

Yet third-party activists are no more likely than those of the traditional parties to accept my analogy between politics and the market. Any such talk would be condemned as the most extreme cynicism.

Such are the illusions of **mimetic desire**. No doubt the third-party ideal is not the proverbial **man on horseback**, the incarnation of what Rousseau called the **general will**. He has the more modest bearing of the *honnête homme* whose freedom from ideology will lead him to solutions unavailable to those who wear the blinkers of partisan extremism. But he is not to be a **wheeler-dealer**: we want his decisions to express the resultant of our values and desires without his having to bargain for or against any of them.

In other words, we want a leader who can give us the market's pragmatic results without its messy reality. But like the genius who can pick the winner of a horse race in advance, such a person is a dream rather than a reality. The market system cannot be incarnated in a single "clean" figure. As **Mandeville** taught us about the economic marketplace in his 18th-century *Fable of the Bees*, the system operates effectively by permitting the not-so-spotless rest of us to express our conflicting values and desires within it.

My first impulse was to conclude by saying that despite its naïveté, the third-party movement reflects a new understanding of the **paradoxical structure** of the operation of politics in a democracy, where ideological convictions, however sincerely held, have political value not as moral absolutes but as bargaining chips in the **negotiation of resentments** that is the critical function--and the real strength--of democratic politics.

But such a conclusion would itself be too unparadoxical. The awareness of the market-structure of politics is not a single burning revelation that transforms history. It is an idea that advances and recedes through discussions and counterdiscussions. Markets become paradoxical as soon as they deal with something other than mere commodities; and in consumer society, there are few "mere commodities." In a market world, principle is a powerful bargaining tool; and those who know it make use of their knowledge as well as of their principles.

This being said, the breadth of third-party feeling may well be a sign of a **new level of political consciousness** concomitant with the inability of our current political institutions to deal with the oscillations generated by political paradox. I'll clarify what I mean by **paradoxical structures** in my next column.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Paradoxes of Love and Resentment

No. 9: Saturday, September 9, 1995

Plants and animals that survive in crises where others perish are gifted with the quality of **robustness**, the ability to adapt to new conditions. The same is true of ideas, of stories, of artworks: a few are immortal, the vast majority do not outlast their own time.

But there is a species of thought-structures that survive not as a models of reality, but because they cannot be thought away. These are the structures of **paradox**.

Paradox depends on **self-reference**. Structures are paradoxical when they refer, directly or indirectly, to themselves. But everything human is self-referential. Our consciousness necessarily includes itself in what it is conscious of. Unlike animal appetite, human desire is enacted on an **imaginary scene** where I see myself through the eyes of the community that gives value to my choice. But to desire and to see oneself desire are contradictory operations. The fulfillment I envisage in the first case is incompatible with the second, where I imagine myself on the periphery of a circle with the object of my desire at the inaccessible center.

Let us examine the two polar forms of human desire we know so well, **resentment** and **love**.

Hamlet at Claudius's court, **Alceste**, Molière's *Misanthrope*, in Célimène's salon, **Rousseau** just about anywhere--these resentful figures are drawn to scenes centered on persons whose authority they find scandalously illegitimate. Ostensibly in order to destroy this illegitimate power, resentment attaches itself to the scene on which this power is exercised; but the destruction is incompatible with the attachment. The **man of resentment** is in contradiction with himself. He is dependent on the object of his hostility; he lives in secret fear that his desire will be granted and the scene of his resentment will be abolished.

But if resentment is paradoxical, how can this be the case for love, where desire is harmony itself?

Love is the converse of resentment. The resenter dreams of destroying someone who appears invulnerable. The lover, on the contrary, makes every effort to fortify his beloved against the mortality he shares with her. The lover does not fetishize the beloved's power; yet like the resenter he is attached to the scene of his desire. In the less noble forms of love, I am anxious for the world's approval, even its envy; but even when, in love's most sublime moments, I lose myself in my beloved's eyes, I find myself again, reflected in their tiny microcosm.

Thus even as I work for my beloved's infinite happiness, I cannot wish that this happiness not continue to require my care. Were my love's aim fulfilled and my beloved rendered invulnerable to death, the scene of my love would vanish.

Thus love and resentment have the same basic structure--the structure of all desire. But their symmetry is not perfect. Vulnerability is the lot of all mortal creatures. However much energy I expend in caring for

my beloved, my care will never abolish the human scene on which it acts. There is paradox at the **horizon** of my love, where my ultimate aim is to free my beloved from the ills of the human condition; but my efforts can never do more than defer her suffering and death. In contrast, resentment is paradox **here and now**. The pathology of Hamlet's delay in murdering Claudius is already revealed in Act I, where he wears mourning in council and affects to regard the new King with disdain. If he really disdained the King's court, he would go back to Wittenberg. If Alceste really hated hypocrisy, he would marry Eliante and forget about Célimène's soirées.

Desire, of which love and resentment are the extremes, is **robust** because it is paradoxical: we cannot help thinking about it, but it cannot be thought away. When an image will not leave my imagination, we call it an **obsession**; but we never explain what property of the image produces this effect. It is not because of some physiological presence of the image in our brains; it is because we cannot renounce our dependency on the scene where our paradoxical desire unendingly abolishes itself.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Vive le WWW!

No. 10: Saturday, September 16, 1995

This being the tenth of these columns, I thought it appropriate to put it a good word for the institution that makes it possible.

Ever since market society began in earnest--and all society is always already market society--people have been heard to complain that **popularity** in the marketplace is a sign of **vulgarity**--the words have the same root meaning--rather than quality. One variant of this dilemma is the greater popularity of the facile over the profound in the realm of ideas. Those the public adopts as its thinkers are generally journalists rather than philosophers.

But philosophers don't really have to compete with journalists. They become tenured professors whose salary is independent--luckily for us--of the meager revenues brought in by their books, the publication of which is subsidized by foundations or university presses. The reward of popularity in the academic world is not obtained from paying customers but, on the contrary, from taxpayer subsidies.

As a senior member of the academic profession (in the sense used by the waiter who asked me the other day if I wanted to order from the *senior menu*), I can recall when the academic world was more like a club than a marketplace. The profession was much smaller; the few full professors all knew, and pretended to respect, each other. As a result, their professional value had a low level of fungibility. The rare move from one campus to another was either a necessity (the result of scandal or of loss in a long-standing feud) or a promotion--say, from the Big Ten to the Ivy League.

But because the alternatives to the market partake of the overall structure of market society, they tend to return to the norm by becoming clones, or caricatures, of the economic marketplace. This is certainly true of today's larger, more impersonal, chronically underfunded academic environment. Faculty are less loyal to institutions, as are institutions to their faculties. As the competition has grown fiercer, the old-boy system has been replaced by a more clearsightedly self-interested network of cliques who regulate the distribution of scarce resources. Particularly crucial is control over the academic *media*, the channels by which ideas are distributed: scholarly journals, conferences, colloquia. University presses publish fewer books, and the more prestigious periodicals and conferences tend to reward interpersonal skills more than intellectual ones. As the academic world obeys with increasing rigor the laws of the market, one who refuses the current values of the academic marketplace resembles less a pure artist faithful to his ideal than a stubborn manufacturer whose product no one wants to buy.

But it is a general rule of market society that when one becomes able to formulate a problem, some way of deferring its impact is not far behind. The new mechanism that acts as a safety valve for the academic market is the rise of **electronic media**, and in the first place, the **WWW**. Without the **Web**, creating *Anthropoetics* would have been several degrees more difficult, and the *Chronicles* column would have been unthinkable. Whether or not these are the most heavily accessed pages on the **WWW**, they are far

more available there than in libraries, and **Web** activity among the notoriously computer-semiliterate intelligentsia is only just beginning.

By relieving the scarcity of channels that assimilates the academic world to the economic world, electronic communications level the playing-field for intellectual competition. Presence on the **WWW** is no guarantee of quality or of readership, but the most one can expect of any medium is that it facilitate the existence of a true **marketplace of ideas** unencumbered by institutional inertia.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Spirit of the Humanities

No. 11: Saturday, September 30, 1995

This week's column is the text of a brief talk I gave at a symposium at **UCLA** in honor of the centennial of the Iranian philosopher and theologian **Ostad Elahi**.

Good morning. I am greatly honored to be able to say a few words to open this symposium commemorating the work of Ostad Elahi. It is fitting to remember those who have insisted on the primacy of the spirit in human affairs.

Let me begin by informing you of the recent creation of the **Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA**. The Center will begin operation this Fall on **Thursday, November 16 at 6 PM in the UCLA Faculty Center** with a talk on *Religion in the Global Village* by the eminent religious and anthropological thinker **René Girard**; other events will shortly be announced. On behalf of the **Center**, I urge you to take an active interest in its activities; our intention is to serve the Los Angeles community as well as the academic community.

There is a significant point about the **Center** that is directly relevant to my remarks: that it is lodged within the **Humanities Division**. The **College of Letters and Science** that houses the academic departments at UCLA comprises four divisions: **Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences**. Religion is clearly not a physical science, and although it may be for many a science of life, the Life Sciences division is concerned with the life of the body rather than that of the spirit. But one might well expect the study of religion to fall within the social sciences. Is not religion an essentially social phenomenon, one that indeed provides the basis of social organization? **Emile Durkheim**, the founder of scientific sociology, considered religion to be the fundamental expression of communal solidarity. Yet I think it quite appropriate that our center has been located among the **Humanities**. As one who works in that division, I think of it as the domain of knowledge most profoundly concerned with, and characteristic of, the human spirit.

The simplest definition of the humanities is that it comprises those branches of learning that are concerned with the study of **texts**. The first texts to be studied were **sacred texts**: the **Vedic hymns**, the **Bible**, the **Koran**--texts that continue to occupy the lives of scholars in both religious and secular institutions. Just as the idea that religion is the primary expression of the social order is the founding conception of the social sciences, the idea that **secular texts**--poems, plays, novels--are worthy of the same *close reading* as religious texts is the founding idea of the humanities. **Durkheim's** justification for sociology was that although religious ritual and myth expressed more or less transparently the communal unity of primitive societies, the absence of such direct expressions in the modern world obliges us to seek evidence of the changing social order in statistical studies of the trends and correlations of everyday behavior. A similar case may be made for the humanities: in the age of the *death of God*, we can understand humanity only through works of secular literature.

It might appear ironic that having created a domain or "division" of knowledge by displacing studious reverence from religious to secular texts, we now desire to incorporate the study of religion and its texts within this domain. Does this mean that we intend, in the terms of an idea popular some years ago, to read *the Bible as literature*--that is, to study religious texts as examples of narrative technique rather than as expressions of revealed truth? There may be some who conceive the study of religion in this fashion, but it does not correspond to my conception of **the spirit of the humanities**.

This spirit should not be confused with that of *secular humanism*, the view that religion exists merely to provide a mythical basis for ethical values that in fact require no other foundation than human nature and human reason. Voltairean reductionism is not representative of the humanistic spirit. How do we know this? The true spirit of humanistic study is revealed in the fact that it accords its supreme prestige neither to our "natural" effusions nor to logical constructions but to texts that exemplify the categories of **irony** and **paradox**--categories that, incidentally, are no strangers to Voltaire's own writings.

In **irony**, one says the opposite of what one means; in **paradox**, one negates what one says in the process of saying it. The father of all paradoxes is the so-called *Liar paradox*: the sentence *This sentence is false*. In the sciences, including the social sciences, irony is inappropriate and paradox is a sign of error. Philosophy treats paradox with more respect but ultimately rejects it: how could a discipline grounded on logic do otherwise? Avoidance of paradox is thus the fundamental criterion of philosophical rigor. But among literary humanists, irony is cherished and paradox revered. The more ironic we find a literary work, the more greatly we esteem it. The term *paradox* is less often used, but the thing itself is no less appreciated. In the greatest masterpieces of all, works like *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Phèdre*, *Don Quixote*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, irony distills from every line. Self-reference, *mise en abyme*, the very stuff of paradox, are features of all great literature. It is no accident that all these archetypes of irony are marked by paradoxes of self-inclusion--Hamlet's play within the play, Oedipus' oracle, Phèdre's labyrinth, Quixote's encounter, in the second part of the novel, with persons who have read the first part, and most centrally of all, Proust's generation of the novelistic text from within the world which that text has created.

Irony and paradox have the same fundamental structure. Words that mean their opposite or that include their own negation make us suspicious of the simple difference between signs and things, between representations and what they represent. This difference cannot be dispensed with; it is what guarantees the objectivity of scientific discourse. But to accept unquestioningly the difference between signs and things is to refuse to examine the mystery of the origin of that difference, or of the species that both creates and discovers that difference--the species I refer to is of course our own.

What then is the **spirit of the humanities**? It is not merely the reverent study of texts, but more specifically, the elucidation of what texts show us about the problematic nature of the human condition. The humanist's fondness for irony and paradox reflects our intuition that these structures, or rather, these ways by which structure puts itself into question, are more profoundly central to our condition than logical thought--that they are in fact what enable the existence of logical thought. **Structure putting itself into question** may indeed be the simplest way to define *the human*.

The work of the humanities, whether undertaken by believers or unbelievers, is not an activity to which the notion of revealed truth is directly relevant. A humanistic reading of a text pushes its coherence to the point at which it puts itself in doubt, as the literary text casts doubt upon the false assurances provided by the less openly paradoxical texts such as laws and oracles that it includes within itself. Reading *the Bible*

as literature is false to the spirit of the humanities, not because it fails to show proper reverence to the biblical text, but because it fails to show proper humility before texts in general. It is not wrong to claim that the Bible is like a work of literature; but it is illegitimate to deduce from this that the workings of either the Bible or of a secular literary work are understandable as products of something like **narrative technique**. On the contrary, comparison of the Bible with a literary work makes us aware that in either case the text reveals the limitations of any technique that would provide a positive, instrumental understanding of human language and thought.

For many people, such signs of human limitations give proof of the existence of a higher power who has imposed them on us without being itself bound by them. The text points beyond itself to a source of coherence that it can neither realize nor formulate; how then could it have come into being if not through divine inspiration?

For others, however, it suffices that texts leave us with a sense of mystery, of inexhaustibility. Their inherent irony reflects the contrast between the need for closure that defines our practical intelligence and the infinity of desire that language has the power to arouse in us. Whether or not we give a personal name to this power, the very fact that we all know and in some sense understand the word *God* shows that there can be no simple answer to the question raised by the humanistic spirit as to the origin of the human and its limits.

In order to remain faithful to this spirit, we cannot treat as an end in itself the positive exploration of different religious customs and beliefs, however profound the revelations that emerge within them. The fundamental benefit of the study of religion is rather the awareness it provides us of the necessary incompleteness of our human self-understanding. This incompleteness arises not from our mind's respect for predetermined restrictions but from its paradoxical resistance to closure of any kind, including religious closure--by which I mean the blockage by dogma of humanity's unending movement toward self-knowledge. The social sciences, including psychoanalysis, offer us a wide selection of positive anthropologies, but only in the humanities will we find the proper respect for the paradox that lies at the heart of the human spirit--the paradox that most often goes by the name of **freedom**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Sour Grapes

No. 12: Saturday, October 7, 1995

Paradoxes are not bizarre anomalies but the very stuff of language. The structure of the simplest narrative is paradoxical.

The simplest model of language recognizes only practical or instrumental discourse: "Where is the pencil?" "It's on the table." "How do you turn on the motor?" "Flip the switch on the back." These conversations are what Wittgenstein calls *language games*. But as I showed in *The Origin of Language*, far from being a primitive form of language, the original **interrogative** is an **imperative** that our verbal answer disappoints rather than fulfills: "[Give me the] pencil!" "It's on the table" (*i.e.*, **get it yourself!**). Practical dialogue originates as a paradoxical structure where one uses a sign to ask for a thing (**pencil!**) and one is answered with a sign that is a model of the thing (**pencil-on-table**). The imperative word that was to be exchanged "horizontally" for the object it represents is shown to be only its "vertical" representative.

The paradoxical nature of instrumental dialogue is a part of its constitution, but not of our experience of it. But there is a second type of language whose paradoxicality is an end in itself. This is the **esthetic** or **cultural** use of language. Cultural language is not instrumental. When I listen to a story, I am not acquiring information. I hear a series of sentences and construct a series of actions on the scene of my imagination. These imaginary actions are irreversible; only the most self-conscious postmodernity violates this rule. The end of the story throws us out of our imaginary world, reminding us that only the language of the storyteller permitted this world to exist.

But an effective story must give us the *sense of an ending*: something within the story-world must justify the end of the story-language in our world. All stories in all cultures provide this sense of closure.

In a **fable**, the simplest kind of narrative, the story consists of an incident in which a **moral** is revealed. A fox sees some grapes; he tries to grasp them; he can't reach them; he calls them sour: end of story. The fox will live on, but his grape-experience is closed. Yet had he simply walked away, the experience would end without producing a story. The fox's story exists only because he deconstructs it; it has an ending because he denies its beginning. If the fox had **originally known** the grapes to be sour, he would never have tried to reach them, and there would be no story. On the other hand, had he really **discovered** them to be sour, his activity would have been useful, instrumental, and there would be no story either. In the first case, his act would be absurd; in the second, it would be rational. The elimination of both possibilities creates narrative as paradox.

Here the paradox is easily seen (through): we laugh at the fox, denouncing his deconstruction as an error in logic. In claiming that *the grapes are sour*, the fox makes culture triumph over nature. He heroically closes off the world of desire in which the lost succulence would be cause for regret. The fox is foolish only in thinking that his denial can regain the time misspent in leaping at the grapes. His ending closes

off narrative time by absurdly switching to a new register, a transformation which is that of the joke, but a joke on the protagonist. **Marcel Proust's** 3000-page epic is a longer version of the same tale, where the fox makes an additional turn toward lucidity and tells the joke on himself.

An instrumental series tells no story because it says nothing about **desire** as distinct from mere **appetite**. The point of fable--and the point of its animal cast of characters--is the irony of seeing animal appetite transformed into human desire through the use of language. We tell stories about animals that talk because in one way or another their talk distinguishes their actions from the animal activities they appear to be. **Culture** is the denial of **nature**, but not its annulment, for it is both nature and its cultural denial that the story **tells**.

What is the moral of this fable? That we should not make alibis for failure; if we do, fables will be told about us. (In primitive times, there was no such thing as **good** publicity.) But to make such alibis is the universal and unique role of culture. Renunciation of desire, its **deferral through representation**, is what language and culture are all about. The fable cautions us as individuals from trying to create our own culture, from assigning meanings to defer our own desire, telling our own stories instead of limiting ourselves to the sacred tales consecrated by the community. In this most primitive form of secular narrative, we see the ridiculousness and yet the inevitability of adopting the sacred power of language to give meaning to our own individual lives.

For the fox gazing at the inaccessible grapes, as for the original group of humans surrounding the untouchable object of desire, the trick is to think of **something to say**, to redirect one's energies from the **horizontal** world of appetite to the **vertical** world of representation. The paradox is the same here as at the **origin of language**; *the first time as tragedy, the second as farce*.

Political discourses purport to be instrumental, and in some cases they are. But as a general rule, discussions about *values* perform a cultural task in proportion as their participants insist on the instrumental nature of their language. This is akin to the fox's denial of the terms of his narrative; but here there is no fabulist to propose the alternative of silence. More about this next week.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Abelard and Heloise

No. 13: Saturday, October 14, 1995

This quarter I've been teaching an undergraduate seminar on *Ideas of Love*, a topic not unrelated to that of this column. In the context of our readings, I thought I'd say a few words about the Middle Ages' most celebrated romantic couple.

Readers familiar with French literature will remember Villon's lines:

Où est la très sage Héloïs
 Pour qui fut châtré et puis moine
 Pierre Abélard à Saint-Denys
 Pour son amour eut cet essoyne
 [Where is the very good/wise Heloise
 For whom was castrated and then a monk
 Pierre Abelard at Saint-Denis
 For his love he paid that penalty.]

Abelard (1079-1142), the perfecter of *nominalism*, the basis of modern empiricism, was arguably the first modern thinker. He was recognized as the most brilliant man of his time; students flocked to his lectures. **Heloise** (1101-1164), his junior by 22 years, was an unusually well-educated young woman, the pride of her uncle **canon Fulbert**. Abelard, attracted by her reputation, made use of his own to persuade Fulbert to let him give her lessons, and then to persuade his pupil to turn these lessons into a more agreeable form of activity (*We exchanged more kisses than learned propositions; my hands returned more often to her bosom than to our books.*) The uncle was not happy on discovering their relationship, which led to a child named **Astrolabe**--a high-tech name if there ever was one! Although they married--against Heloise's will, for she preferred the title of *lover* to that of *wife*--Abelard kept the marriage secret and sent Heloise off to a convent; this was the time when a church career was becoming incompatible with marriage. Interpreting this situation as a disgrace for his niece, Fulbert sent his men to perform on her husband the painful operation.

Yet to read Abelard's own version of these events, his *Historia calamitatum*, one is struck less by the element of **love** than by that of **resentment**. As the first thinker to put his own intellect above the traditional respect owed one's elders, Abelard constantly provoked the wrath of his masters and their other disciples. Here is the first of many examples:

I began to frequent [Guillaume de Champeaux'] school, but I soon became very unwelcome, for I attempted to refute some of his theses, argued against him, and sometimes won. My successes provoked among the cleverest of my fellow pupils an indignation all the greater because I was the youngest and the most recently arrived. **It is from this moment that I date the beginning of my misfortunes [*calamitatum*], from which I still suffer today.** My

renown grew daily: envy flamed up against me.

Abelard's *calamities* begin, in other words, not with his great **love**, but with the great **resentment** he provoked in his colleagues.

Except for a few specialists in medieval philosophy, the writings that contain Abelard's resentment-inducing thought have been forgotten; today we read his tale of woe only because it contains the story of his love. Can this calamitous conjunction of **resentment and love** be nothing but a coincidence?

Abelard and Heloise were in their own world a **star couple**; each knew the other by reputation before they met, and if Abelard claims to have planned in advance to seduce Heloise, in her part of their correspondence she speaks of her pride in attracting this man who held an irresistible attraction for women, attributable to his talent as a composer of love-songs, one of the many strings to his bow.

The most insistent theme in the letters they exchanged is the **status of women**. Heloise claims that women are inferior to men and require their protection; Abelard insists that, on the contrary, God hears women's prayers more readily than men's; both cite numerous biblical passages as evidence--Heloise mostly from the **Old Testament**, Abelard, from the **New**.

As the first "modern," Abelard was no longer protected by the ritual hierarchy that assures the smooth succession of generations. His relation to his masters recalls the **Oedipus myth**, indeed, may well be its first modern, proto-Freudian incarnation. Impatient to demonstrate his mental abilities in a context unbound by ecclesial tradition, then in the process of breaking down under the pressure of the rediscovered **Aristotelian dialectic**, Abelard threw the masculine society of medieval philosophy into a Hobbesian *war of all against all*, or rather, of all against *him*. The marketplace of bourgeois competition had begun in the domain of thought, but it had not yet engendered the institutional basis (notably the **University**) within which this competition could be channeled. Abelard's public persona therefore aroused resentment on an unprecedented scale.

In such circumstances, there could be no solace in the **Greek model** of a public homosexual *eros* between older and younger men. The only means of deferring the competitiveness of the **public world** was the valorization of the **private world** of the heterosexual couple--a world that had always existed, in Greece as elsewhere, but which could not acquire significance in pre-Christian slave societies. Abelard and Heloise, contemporaries of the first troubadours, lived in the early days of *courtly love*. Their adventure helps explain the rise of this attitude, which has by no means lost its influence on relations between the sexes. When masculine equals can only oppose each other "dialectically," the inequality between men and women comes to be revalorized as an unordered difference (as in *vive la différence!*) rather than a simple superiority.

No doubt this is not the ultimate step of women's progress toward full equality with men, but one may well claim it to be the most important. Heloise treats Abelard as her superior, as in intellect and learning--and years--no doubt he was, just as he was superior to his masculine contemporaries. But his claim that God hears women's prayers before men's is neither a mere alibi for his neglect of his wife after his *calamity* nor a simple example of the Christian doctrine that *the meek shall inherit the earth*, just as the contemporary propensity for *putting women on pedestals* was not simply a hypocritical mirror-image of the contempt for and oppression of women that dominated everyday life in the Middle Ages. If Heloise admired the genius of her lover, we should take seriously the evidence that he admired her as

well, as even today men admire the women they love regardless of their standing in the professional world.

Abelard and Heloise, for all their limitations, engaged in **the first modern love affair**. Unlike the fictional **Tristan and Isolde**, whose relationship still reflected the **love=curse** mentality of archaic myth, they enjoyed each other both sexually and intellectually. Yes, theirs was essentially a teacher-student relationship--a phenomenon not exactly unknown in universities today. In its early stages, it was not even devoid of *sexual harassment*: Abelard claims to have beaten Heloise to force her to cede to his advances, although her letters express an unabashed sensuality that will surprise those who think female orgasm was discovered around 1950. But in this relationship, for arguably the first time, the intimate world of heterosexual affection becomes of comparable significance to the public masculine one. As a counterweight to the nascent bourgeois society that would generate ever more resentment, there would grow up the private world of mutual **love**.

Although they never lived together as husband and wife, it is indeed significant that the couple did marry and have a child (albeit not in that order). **Abelard and Heloise**, their love all too literally cut short, deserve to be called the creators of the **modern ideal of marriage** founded on the voluntarily shared tenderness of a couple who shelter each other from the harshly competitive world of the marketplace.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Guest columnist: Richard van Oort

Mimeticism and Feminism

No. 14: Saturday, October 21, 1995

Where are the Women in the Originary Scene?

The **mimetic theory**, both in its classic Girardian formulation and in Gans's revised *origin-of-language* model, invites, if somewhat ambiguously, feminist criticism. After all, a model founded on the assumption that internal violence is what most characteristically threatens our species seems to beg for a more "nurturing" vision of human interaction. This desire is natural enough. For why indeed should violence be seen as the decisive factor? What about love? What about the mother's nurturing instinct for her child?

But in fact this polarization of violence and love--the instinct for death and the instinct for life--is a false portrayal of the mimetic scene of origin. What characterizes the scene of origin is, not the supremacy of (male) violence over (female) love, but precisely the inclusion of both elements.

What then lies behind the feminist objection that the scene of mimetic crisis is an ideological imposition of male violence that ignores the counter-thesis of the mother's love and care? For an answer we must look to the **romantic** conception of society that recognizes only two actors in its anthropology: the **self** and the **other**. Here society is conceived as an eternal battle between contrary opposites. In **Hegel's** dialectic between master and slave, or in **Marx's** owner and worker, the social order originates in hierarchy. The narrative of history thus becomes the constant struggle between two dialectical forces. We can choose between the conservative Hegel or the radical Marx as to which party we want to back--the status quo of those in power or the underprivileged masses--but either way our vision of the human remains fundamentally binary.

How does this relate to the feminist critique of mimetology? To undermine the Girardian and Gansian theories, the feminist position must point to an imbalance conceived in terms of gender: male versus female. The stress on violence is clearly all too male. What is lacking is the feminine element, the qualities of love and care and life. But we must take care here. The desire to counter or balance a perceived imbalance by asserting its opposite does not render the opposition neutral. On the contrary, it is an endorsement for its continuation. If the founding principle of the human community is hierarchical and oppositional, a struggle between opposing individuals, classes, or peoples, how are we expected to free ourselves from bondage without reinforcing precisely the opposition we are trying to usurp?

This is not mere intellectual sophistry; it points to the paradox at the heart of human consciousness. A hypothesis that presents humanity as already culturally divided--be it along racial, gender, or simply political lines--is necessarily incomplete. For before humans could represent themselves as culturally distinct from one another, they would have to learn how to represent at all.

It is this latter problem that **generative anthropology** takes as its focus. The **originary hypothesis** is a

theory of how and why difference is generated--namely, to defer the ultimate threat of intraspecific violence. This hypothesis is not structural, but generative, originary. It stands at the origin of all structural differentiation, including the differentiation between gendered man and woman.

The first thing to realize about the Girardian and Gansian models is that they are not, in fact, binary but **triangular**. The triangular model shows us why the binary-hierarchical model is inadequate, why it can (and should) be deconstructed. But problems emerge when the same criticism is levelled at the originary hypothesis. In the spirit of deconstruction, feminist criticism generally interprets the triangular hypothesis in binary terms. But the triangular, or more generally **scenic**, configuration of the originary scene reveals that **originary resentment**, though experienced individually, is directed, not ultimately toward a dominating human other, but collectively toward an empty, nonhuman center. It is because all eyes are focused on the center that we can imagine the center to be so desirable. Originary difference is not between individuals, but between the collectivity of individuals and a non-attainable center.

This difference is anterior to binary hierarchy. Before culture can engage in socially constructed differentiation, it must have a model of differentiation to go by. The originary hypothesis proposes that this difference is provided by nothing less than the formal structure of representation. And because the formal capacity to represent is a universal characteristic of our species, the proposed model for the origin of representation must be conceived of as opposing the entire human community to something **absolutely other**, utterly beyond the realm of the human. This *other* cannot be another human, a victim, since victimhood already assumes the presence of cultural awareness--which is to say, it already assumes the presence of representation. The ultimate difference that precedes all other (human) differences is the difference between humanity and God, between the secular peripheral designators and the sacred, unapproachable center of infinite desire.

Admittedly, Girard's formulation, when seen in purely oppositional terms between victim and victimizer, does lend itself to deconstruction, notably feminist deconstruction. This oppositional formulation benefits from a more rigorous conception of the originary scene based on an original act of language.

Accordingly, the opposition of victimizer versus victim becomes a supplementary cultural reproduction of the foundational difference that opposed, not a victim against a collectivity of victimizers, but the universal community of language-users against an unapproachable object of infinite desire. In the latter, more specifically generative model, it is precisely because each individual renounces his or her appetitive instinct that the entire community can participate in the common communication of the absolute difference of the forbidden and sacred center. This model of origin does have a space for **love**--the collective presence of linguistic consciousness. Love, not violence, is what sustains a community. But this is only to admit the threat of violence that must be continually deferred.

A while ago, there was some discussion on the **GAlist** about the form-content dichotomy and how it relates to the originary scene. As **Tobin Siebers** indicated, the originary hypothesis is a formal hypothesis. It does not and cannot serve as an example of what content we would like to see placed on our own scenes of representation. This formal assumption may be completely erroneous. Perhaps all we have are our own idiosyncratic scenes, and the notion of a universal origin for these individual ones is simply mistaken. But this argument itself makes a demand that requires us to step beyond our own individual scenes and share in a minimal hypothesis of universal relevance--namely, that we do **not** in fact share such a universal scene.

The originary hypothesis likewise asks us to share a minimal object for mutual dialogue. If the object is

found wanting, the spectator (cf. *theorizer*, the *one who sees*) is free to propose an alternative formulation. But he or she must accept the consequences of his or her hypothesis. If the human community is conceived as originating in difference and hierarchy, then this difference becomes the ultimate measure of the human community, an invitation to dogmatists and hierarchists of every stripe and colour. The lesson of the originary hypothesis, on the other hand, is that this (ossified) difference is the cultural by-product of an anterior generative difference, one that opposes the total human community to a transcendental and vacant center. The trick is, not to abolish difference in the hope of establishing the true utopian community, but to keep moving, to stay one step ahead of what lies at the other end of the same utopian vision, the war of all against all, the undifferentiated crisis which originary difference--representation--arose to defer.

Where, then, are the women in the originary scene? The answer is nowhere. But neither are the men. We are all nevertheless inheritors of the self-same scene. The claim to possess its center is as illusory today as it was at the origin.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Tel qu'en lui-même...

No. 15: Saturday, October 28, 1995

Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'Eternité le change
 Le Poète suscite avec un glaive nu
 Son siècle épouvanté de n'avoir pas connu
 Que la mort triomphait dans cette voix étrange!

[At last changed by Eternity into himself
 The poet arouses with a naked sword
 His century terrified not to have known
 That death triumphed in that strange voice.]

What do we become after we are dead? Many think this the key religious question. We like to imagine ourselves living in some kind of **afterlife**, heaven or hell, or, in the hopeful Catholic institution of **purgatory**, where we can rid ourselves of the sins we are unlikely to have sufficiently purged during our lifetime. We try to imagine what **paradise** might be like; what enjoyments are available to the blessed? (The torments of **hell** need little imaginary effort; we've already experienced enough of these on earth.)

Yet it isn't difficult to conceive what will happen to us after we are dead; the model for the afterlife, as of all supernatural phenomena, of all transcendence, is the **verticality** of the sign's relation to its referent.

If **I** am nothing but this mortal body and its associated sensations, then there is indeed no way to imagine an afterlife. After its death, the body cannot continue to live. What survives, it is usually said, is our **soul** or **spirit**. In today's vocabulary, we may call this our **self**.

Let us recall how the death of others is experienced. In the case of our family and personal friends, we rehearse our memories of them, we cherish objects associated with them. For those who have had a more general impact, we remember their **works**: the companies they built, the devices they invented, the treaties they signed, the books or music they composed.

Where is the **self** in all this? Mallarmé wrote the poem quoted above for the unveiling of a monument in honor of **Edgar Allan Poe**. Poe was an alcoholic who had led an unhappy, dissolute life. But his death makes such facts secondary; as he lives in our memory, it is in his art that Poe is truly *Lui-même*. Nor is this a sentimental figure of speech; it is a matter of historical fact. Perhaps Poe himself might have preferred to survive in some other guise, but we do not memorialize the dead in answer to their wishes. The *himself* that history makes of him is a function of his public image. It is subject to modification, but the dead person himself is no longer in control of this modification.

Death is a fact of life for all higher animals. What then could lead human beings at some point in history to begin to commemorate it? *Poe* is a **name**, a **proper noun**. The **name** is coeval with the **self**, which is

in the first place a self-for-others; others give me my name, and call me by it. The idea that we have a self that survives our death depends on the existence of signs; in Greek, the word for both tomb and sign is the same: *sêma*. If we honor the dead, it is because death is a moment of crisis, when the referent of a public meaning, a proper name, is no longer directly available. What we fear is not the mere fact of death itself, but the extinction of a communally agreed-upon meaning. Death is the sign of a violence perpetrated against the community.

What then do I become after death? What I **mean** to others. Before, I had the potential to modify this meaning, even if I could not define it. Now that I am dead, I have no further chance to reposition myself in the marketplace of meaning--although my position within it will continue to evolve, modified by factors beyond my control.

Is this *immortality*? Today, market rationalization has caught up with the afterlife; the contemporary vision of the soul's transcendent permanence is as **fame**. The pathos revealed in the horrors of daytime talk-shows reflects our hunger for what **Andy Warhol** so prophetically called our **fifteen minutes of fame**--hopefully enough to get us a footnote in a history book. The traditional ideas of heaven and hell belong to stable communities who can expect to remember their ancestors "forever"; industrial market society has changed all that.

Yet it has not changed the essence of our situation. Animals do not want to die, but they have no desire for, or concept of, immortality. That is a human trait, and like all human traits it is the result of our possession of **language**. We can only desire to survive beyond our death because we conceive of an **essence**, an **Idea** that corresponds to the name we are called by and yet does not die with us. If words have *signifieds* that survive the death of whatever they refer to, why not we?

The struggling artist in a garret is a familiar **nineteenth-century** model of cultural integrity. While others enjoy the fruits of their sell-out to the hated *bourgeoisie*, the authentic creator endures poverty and anonymity, confident that future generations will recognize his greatness. The culture of market society despises the marketplace, but puts its confidence in that future state of it that it calls *posterity*.

This idea still lives in today's world of market-driven art. But **theory** has become the crucial testing-ground for the deferral of success that tested the artist's mettle a century ago. I'll try to give these ideas some theoretical polish next week.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Posterity Will Absolve Me

No. 16: Saturday, November 4, 1995

Last week I promised to pursue the idea that although the avant-garde artist despises the marketplace, he nevertheless expects his work to be recognized by it at some future date. This apparently natural attitude is all the more paradoxical in that it includes the idea that bourgeois society, increasingly dominated by the market at the expense of traditional values, is constantly degenerating. **Emile Zola** was naively courageous enough to construct for this outlook a historical correlate in which the process of degeneration was reversed by the collapse of the Second Empire in the **Franco-Prussian War** of 1870. Purged by this humiliating defeat, French society, as depicted in Zola's last novels, reverts to an agrarian utopia where men till the fields and women give birth to countless offspring. (Most of us would prefer the world of *Nana*.) The fantastic unreality of this myth--which wholly denies the reality of the Third Republic--reflects the paradox it must incarnate.

A less ambitious model accepts the separation of the lived and the esthetic spheres: the bourgeois world gets worse, but its art gets better. My unrecognized masterpieces will be accepted not first by the Philistines, but by artists and connoisseurs, starting from the most authentic and going down the scale. Tomorrow's bourgeois, be he yet more vulgar than today's, will accept my work on the say-so of his esthetic betters. What guarantees my ultimate success is, in other words, **mimetic desire**. But this is precisely the curse of the bourgeois marketplace, the agent of social degeneration. There is no escape from the paradox of seeking salvation in the future from the very institution one condemns in the present.

But as [last week's column](#) suggests, our faith is not really directed to our fellow humans, but to a **transcendental** agency, one that traditionally bears the name of **God**, although the necessity of this naming must be deferred for our thought to call itself **anthropological**. Slogans like *the end justifies the means* or *history will absolve me* situate their apocalypse within history, but the concept of transcendence is founded on the **verticality** of the sign. What guarantees our sense that there is indeed an *end* to justify the means is the subsistence of the **sign** and its meaning independently of its time-bound referent.

Thus when the artist resists the temptation of the hated bourgeoisie, the vindication he seeks is not really that of his future admirers, but of the *eternity* that **Mallarmé** refers to in his poem. The admirers will be there, of course, but only as a confirmation of salvation, just as worldly success confirms salvation for a Calvinist.

But this structure isn't just a simple given. Some of the [GAlist](#) discussion concerning my "immortality" column has centered on the **resurrection of the body**: the idea that it's not enough for eternity to change us into the **signified** of our name, the living Poe into "**Poe**," that what faith tells us is that "in the fullness of time" not merely our body, but the totality of our life-experiences will be regenerated into eternal life, and all death and forgetting abolished. Yes, this is what faith tells us; our yearning is not to become a mere signified--although few of us would not find consolation in the certitude of becoming a **household**

name for future generations, a **Leonardo da Vinci**, an **Einstein**, a **Marilyn Monroe**. My point--and one has not understood **generative anthropology** until one has grasped this point--is not that language holds the solution to all our problems, or that the exchange of things (the **market**) is neatly modeled on the exchange of words, so that market-society is truly the **Kingdom of God**. The point is rather that language indeed provides our model of transcendence, of the emergence of the vertical from the horizontal, but only as a **formal structure** which human culture ever seeks to incarnate in **material reality**. Why? Because the verticality of language emerged from this horizontal reality in the **originary scene**. I have entitled these columns *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* because the two forces that dominate our lives are the **resentment** of the inaccessible object of this transcendence and the experience of **love** by means of which this transcendence is reestablished.

In my "teaser" for this column last week, I suggested that today the opposition between selling out and authenticity has migrated from the world of the visual arts to that of **theory**. Why was it so closely associated with **painting** to begin with, rather than, say, music or literature? Clearly because of the particular economic structure of the painter's world. Where the starving poet can publish his work in small journals and editions, and the musician can perform his alone or with a few friends, the painter, who creates not a reproducible form but an **art-object** that he must sell once and for all, depends more directly than the others on the marketplace.

But for that very reason, the contemporary artist is no longer concerned with selling out. Beginning with **cubism** and continuing through **abstract expressionism**, the mimetic forces of the market have eliminated the difference in values between the unregenerate *bourgeois* and the enlightenend *connoisseur*. The market prices of artworks no longer permit of the distinction between real quality and that favored by the marketplace; a good artist is one whose works can be expected to rise in value, a great artist, one for whom this expectation is close to certitude.

How can **theory** replace plastic art in this paradigm, although theory creates no *objets d'art* and its dissemination is almost completely subsidized--by academic salaries, university presses, even the **Internet**? The answer is that not all markets are simply economic. The 19th century artist suffered from bourgeois esthetic prejudices and their effect on the state commission apparatus so central to artistic life in France. The contemporary theorist suffers from **PC intellectual prejudices** and their comparable effect on the **university conference circuit** so central to academic life in the United States. In the one case, the financial market offers rewards that discourage genuine art; in the other, the intellectual market offers rewards that **discourage genuine thinking**.

The art market has not so much **evolved** as been **rationalized**; prejudices have not disappeared, but they are factored into a calculus of long-term expectation. It is not unreasonable to assume that the secular trend of the intellectual marketplace is in the same direction. Long-term investment in ideas has always been the norm; it is the current trendiness that is the exception. When the dust has settled, most people, even academics, prefer ideas that future generations can take seriously to those that belong in the appendix to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Academics too, after all, will be changed *by eternity into themselves*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Perfide Manon!

No. 17: Saturday, November 11, 1995

Since my last column tilted a bit to the side of resentment, I thought I'd even the score this week by borrowing another topic from my seminar on Ideas of Love.

Manon Lescaut is one of those literary figures, like **Faust**, **Don Quixote**, **Don Juan**, **Carmen**, **Madame Bovary**... that transcend the works in which they appear and take their place in a pantheon of characteristic types. Manon's love is never in doubt, but she cares more for luxury than for fidelity. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* contains a similar type, played in the film by **Marilyn Monroe**.

Is Manon simply a practical young woman whose contribution to the family budget is well beyond her lover's earning capacity? Or is her taste for luxury a kind of perversion? Is her crime to sell her favors, or to deceive her beloved?

Manon is the central figure in a love-story that explores the new possibilities opened to love in the emerging market society of the **18th century**. Prostitution may well be the *oldest profession*, but it is only with the movement toward a true market economy that sexual attractiveness in itself acquires a generally agreed-on market value. This value need not be realized literally in an act of exchange, but it is implicit in the rationalization of desire by the marketplace. The principle of exchange-value allows for a systematic measurement of a woman's--or man's--desirability. (As a student in the seminar pointed out, Manon's brother offers the **Chevalier des Grieux**, Manon's lover, a trick as a gigolo--an opportunity that he, unlike Manon, indignantly declines.)

The Chevalier's love for Manon and hers for him are only conceivable against the backdrop of market relations. This new kind of love, which leads the young nobleman to follow his beloved to the wilds of **Louisiana**, evolves in counterpoint to the capitalization of desire in the rest of society. The Chevalier's love, and Manon's as well, contains within it an implicit understanding of the beloved's market value. Des Grieux and the dirty old **M. de G... M...** see Manon with the same vision of rationalized desire. But where G... M... thereupon offers Manon fair market price for her favors, the Chevalier gives himself up "absolutely" to love.

In the **17th century**, desire was identical to the search for transcendence, with the unfortunate result that as soon as the desire was consummated, the lover--**Don Juan** is the classic example--had to seek transcendence elsewhere. Once desire becomes a market transaction and the possession of its object is no longer an all-or-nothing proposition, transcendence can no longer be equated with mere inaccessibility. One transcends market relations by offering the other an irreversible good; not one's money, but one's life.

In the **19th century**, this element too would be factored into the market relationship, with the result that the courtesan could supplement her "objective" market value by the manipulation of her lover's

"absolute" desire. No matter how much he pays, the lover only truly demonstrates his love when he has gone bankrupt. **Emile Zola's Nana** exemplifies the functioning of this market.

In the prerevolutionary era of **l'Abbé Prévost's Manon Lescaut** (first published in 1731), love was opposed to mere lust as the transcendent to the worldly. Yet were there no interference between these two domains, there would be no story. Manon's penchant for luxury is not a mere psychological quirk; it is a recognition of her market value. If the evaluation of Manon's beauty in the marketplace guarantees a love that transcends the marketplace, Manon herself shares this evaluation. The *crux* of the novel, and of Manon's character, is the revelation that the Chevalier's absolute love is dependent on the vulgar fact of his beloved's market value. "Since his true love exists only in response to the sexual marketplace," a more reflective Manon might say, "there is no real contradiction between true love and the market."

But the true lover cannot accept sharing his beloved with another; his love in such circumstances would no longer be absolute but market-driven. Manon's participation in the sexual market can only be excused as a revelatory gesture if, within the love-relationship itself, it is presented as naive and susceptible to correction.

Hence the moral movement of the novel is no mere artifice of the plot. In contrast with the myth, the "real" Manon is physically unfaithful to her beloved only in a single case, the first, where she goes off with the rich **M. de B...** and betrays the poor Chevalier to his family. After she returns to him, she uses her beauty as an instrument of seduction on two occasions, but flees each time before delivering the goods. Unfortunately, this attempt to reconcile market activity with the exclusive relationship of love is itself naive; Manon's market position depends precisely on the delivery of the "goods" in question. She cannot expect her potential customers to treat her with the absolute devotion of the Chevalier or of **Nana's** pathetic lover **Count Muffat**.

When they arrive in America, Manon declares herself completely changed. She no longer sheds tears for her own sufferings, only for those of her Chevalier. The elimination of the market for her charms leads her to understand the transcendent value of reciprocal affection. Manon, the prodigal daughter, arrives at a nearly modern conception of love-as-tenderness only after having tested both her own and her lover's value in the marketplace. Because he has been willing to share her punishment for having "unfairly" exploited the marketplace for the benefit of love, she will not merely prefer him to all others as a lover, but prefer his happiness to her own. Henceforth her own desire, the rationalization of which is the very basis of the market economy, is fixed outside the market in the intimate world of the couple.

But the utopia of love cannot last. The couple's attempt to return through marriage to the premarket world of ritual is ironically the moment in which they discover, with mortal consequences for Manon, that this world, unlike "corrupt" market society, allows no *jeu*, no space of freedom, within which their love can survive.

The story touches us only because of *perfidie Manon's* conversion to devoted faithfulness. But by the same token, when we recall the story, we remember Manon in her unconverted state, so that we can reap once more the profits from her conversion.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

God told me to...

No. 18: Saturday, November 25, 1995

The death of **Itzhak Rabin** at the hands of a religious fanatic leads one to think about the deadly rhetoric of acting *in God's name*. Although even for the vast majority of the Israeli right, Yigal Amir's act was evil rather than righteous, it is an Enlightenment fantasy to think that "fanaticism" can be eliminated and Reason enthroned. The human is the realm of reason, but also that of paradox which makes reason inadequate. The entry-point of the transcendent into human affairs cannot be fixed in advance nor legislated permanently. This is the greatness and the horror of the human.

For if **God** could not be evoked as the guarantee of Amir's murderous deed, neither could he be evoked as the source of the **Law**. To banish the language of divine sanction from human affairs is to banish the human itself. This is in no way to excuse this particular use of divine justification. But it is humanity that must finally judge such deeds. God's judgment is never available to us except as the horizon of our own.

We generally have a sense that the age of revelation came to an end in the West with the founding of **Christianity**, or at the latest, with **Islam**; the present is supposed to be a more ecumenical, more tolerant age. Hence we have been surprised and troubled by the recent sharp upswing in religious fundamentalism. The parallel between Jewish and Moslem fanatics in the Middle East has often been noted, and fundamentalist Christianity is also on the rise, along with a myriad of lesser sects all over the world. The most obvious common point of such movements is their rhetoric: if the rules one obeys are God's own word, there is no recourse against them, surely not that of reason or common sense. This rhetoric reflects in counterpoint the fuzzy ecumenism of cosmopolitan society. The flaccidity of the peace of compromise is shown up by the voice of militancy.

Although they even now appear to the naive as unfortunate contradictions, Western thought ever since **Heracleitus** has recognized the inevitability of such tensions. *Universalism generates particularism*. Those who decry the prospective **MacDonaldization** of the world are oblivious to the countervailing growth of local or "ethnic" markets in customs and ideas. The unity of the global village is accompanied by the disunity of intensified tribalism. And the world-wide rationalization of communications goes hand-in-hand with the rise not only of religious fanaticism but of particularistic rhetorics of every kind, even the comically vulgar language of the talk-shows ("I just have to sleep with my daughter's girl friends"; "I have this thing about incest"). In a world of **winner-take-all rationality**, the vast majority has more to gain by emphasizing its eccentricity than from direct competition in the universal arena. There is no absolute meta-rule that obliges us to play by the rules that govern the world marketplace. What sells in the market is rather what resists than what follows its anticipation, and this resistance is made easier by the reinforcement provided by one's neighbors. Tightly-knit religious groups not only preserve their values in the face of the temptations of consumption, they may also--like the **Mormons**--succeed in the marketplace. But even economically backward communities are reinforced in their particularity by the very visibility of the forces arrayed against them.

Thus the sectarian mind-set of **Yigal Amir**, **David Koresh**, the **Aum Shinri Kyo**, the **Ayatollah Khomeini** and even **Pat Robertson** are "secreted" as it were by the market system. The *paleo-conservative* view that the market is the destroyer of moral values has been largely marginalized in American intellectual circles by the *neo-conservative* position that the market is the guardian of these values. Both are right; the answer depends on whether one attributes to the exchange system itself the inevitable reactions it provokes among its participants.

Within the freedom available to this system, what can be done to minimize the resentments that lead to the worst sectarian excesses? Perhaps we should begin by recognizing the overweening arrogance implicit in such a question. If "we" all got together to eliminate fanaticism and initiate the rule of reason, things would quickly get much worse. The degrees of freedom eliminated high-mindedly from the system would come back to haunt us in other, more pernicious ways, as they did in the **French Revolution**, in the **Russian Revolution**, and in what the **Fascists** and the **Nazis** rightly called their revolutions.

Does this mean we must complacently accept the horror of murderers who claim without remorse that God has approved and even commanded their deed? Not at all. It implies only that we should be careful to protect ourselves, as the Israeli security services tragically failed to protect the life of their Prime Minister, rather than expect the words of reason to prevail over the forces of resentment. We are condemned to this kind of relativism, not because, as our **PC** friends like to think, one cannot reason about the human in universal terms, but because there is nothing in the terms of this reasoning that can establish a priori rules of behavior. The killer of **Rabin** is infamous; the killer of **Hitler** would have been a hero. We can only accept the greatness and the horror of the human, and unlike Rabin, wear a bulletproof vest.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Amo quia absurdum

No. 19: Saturday, December 2, 1995

The early Christian theologian **Tertullian**, when asked how he could believe in a God who allowed himself to suffer the supreme humiliation of crucifixion, is said to have answered: *Credo quia absurdum*--I believe it because it is absurd.

This statement makes a central point, not just about Christianity, but about religion in general. Western intellectuals, heirs of the Enlightenment, are generally impatient with the "absurdities" of religion: virgin birth, resurrection, reincarnation, heaven and hell, all these seem transparent projections of our wishes and fears rather than testable hypotheses about reality. Nor does even the epistemological refinement of **generative anthropology**, which "brackets" the non-anthropological elements of theology, make it a more acceptable substitute for religious faith than the cruder anthropologies of the *philosophes*. Even the most satisfactory explanation of religious phenomena can only explain why they are effective, not explain away their effectiveness.

Conversely, the rationalized theologies that have been developed in the hope of converting intellectuals to religious faith have had little effect. To believe in reason is not to **believe** at all. God exists not to resolve intellectual dilemmas, but to help us in **crises**, that is, in predicaments to which no rational solution is apparent. If reason could prevail, there would be no crisis, and therefore no need for faith. Science and technology have provided means to reinterpret crises involving natural phenomena like disease and earthquakes, but the fundamental model of crisis is human, not natural, and after all the rational solutions have been exhausted and the threat of violence still looms, we need belief, not reason.

But this column is not really about religion, but about **love**.

Love is a form of faith. It is no coincidence that the word *love*, taken by itself, is assumed to refer to its most exalted form. Parents' love for their children probably absorbs ten times as much energy as the romantic love we hear so much about, but we take our definition from the latter, not the former. This is because we understand that the most human form of love is that which is **most absurd**: most like faith and least like animal instinct. It is more absurd to love another with whom one has at first no family ties than to love those who share one's genetic heritage. Romantic love has its social and biological functions, but it makes these functions dependent on its **leap of faith**.

Thus the truest love is not between persons whom everyone sees as *ideally suited* to each other. To love someone else is not to love oneself in the mirror. It is the **difference** of the other that we love, because we cannot ever comprehend it from within. We love the other in her or his unassimilable otherness. Each moment is a stab in the dark, a test of our faith that we will act in the interest of this person whose interests we are so far from understanding directly.

The infinite difference of the beloved teaches us in the human sphere the same lesson as our infinite

difference from God. The **Neo-Platonists** of the Renaissance understood human love, such as that of **Dante** for **Beatrice** or **Petrarch** for **Laura**, as an *intimation of immortality*, a worldly prefiguration of divine love. But the secularizing force of history allows us to invert this hierarchy: love of God may be seen as a prefiguration of human love, not love of humanity in general, but of our **Other**, the one we love.

Love for an individual person cannot come first; the human is in the first place cultural, communal. God as the originary object of human love is also the originary person. But from the minimalist perspective of **generative anthropology**, this originary person is not understood as human. Personhood is not in the first place characteristic of me, but of the sacred Other whose humanity is not primordial, as our romantico-existentialists would have us believe, but derived. Like the **equality of the sexes** which a hasty feminism would situate at the origin, the humanity of the Other gains rather than loses by being deferred, by standing at the end rather than the beginning of history as a horizon that can never quite be attained because it can never be fully understood and defined.

What does it really mean to love another person *absurdly*, as the church father loved his crucified God? It means to attribute to that person, without the possibility of full understanding, and in the face of her/his demonstrated vulnerability, the infinite power, not to stay the sun or part the Red Sea, but to give meaning to my world. I cannot inhabit my beloved's mind, see the world through her eyes. But through dialogue and observation, I can come to share with her a **mutual** world of meaning. What matters is not simply learning how she sees the world, but her knowing that my actions reflect my desire and effort for this learning.

But here is where human love shows itself superior to divine. The absurdity of human love cannot exist without **reciprocation**. To learn to share the other's perceptions would be mere idolatry without the belief that s/he too is learning to share mine. The dialogue of words and acts that makes human love worthwhile--and in comparison with which, as **Manon's** lover the **Chevalier des Grieux** already knew, our dialogue with God is thin indeed--can only maintain itself if both partners share its absurd adventure.

The reciprocity of love is not something we can observe from without as a sterile symmetry. The central fact of my leap of faith is that I am loved in return, that each of us, in perhaps very different ways, serves as an extrawordly source of value to the other. It is the foundation of the intimate world within which we affirm our own significance in the face of the impersonal world of the marketplace--an affirmation without which the dynamic of market society itself could not operate.

But human love should not be seen as serving the marketplace any more than as serving God. It is as much the end of human existence as a means to the survival of our species. To rationalize it is to forget its roots in the originary leap of faith by which humanity constituted itself by transcending its "rational" appetitive goals. Love can function only thus:

Amo quia absurdum.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Toujours l'amour

No. 20: Saturday, December 9, 1995

My undergraduate seminar on love ended in a peculiar way. About half way into the class, I distributed the usual student evaluation forms, then left the room while they were being filled out. When I returned some 15 minutes later, the students were gone; they had misunderstood me and thought class was over. This is the first time this has happened in over 25 years at UCLA.

Thus did fate prevent me from drawing conclusions about love from the books we read in the course, which ranged from **Plato's** indispensable *Symposium* to my favorite postwar French novel, **Marguerite Duras's** *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. But I know readers of these *Chronicles* will understand any conclusions I might draw in the context of my overall view that the very essence of the human is to continue to evolve in all its aspects. There can be no final explanation of any aspect of the human, unless it is an aspect we are willing to part with, to return to "nature." Thus, for example, we may wish to do without astrology and study the stars without immediate reference to ourselves (but newspaper columns make clear that astrology retains its cultural authority even if we no longer "believe in" it). But we would hardly want to do without **love**.

Love is the quintessential human activity; the **little world** of the couple is directly analogous to the human world as a whole. For love remains alive only as long as it defies final explanations, as it retains an element of **unpredictability**. Cliché would have it that, as they come to know each other increasingly well over the years, couples necessarily "fall out of love," while nonetheless continuing to love each other. But if love is truly the center of one's life, then falling out of love is really the end of love. Successful couples are those who stay in love, whose love matures and changes its forms of expression, but remains as intense as ever. There need be no end to these changes; the more the couple have experienced together, the more material they have for the little dialogical games lovers never tire of playing with each other.

When sceptics ask how the open-endedness of **generative anthropology** is consistent with its formulation of an **originary scene** of language, we answer that love too begins with a **scene**--not necessarily the dramatic one of the *coup de foudre*, love at first sight, but the necessary moment of realization that one is indeed **in love**. At this point, the relationship is just beginning, yet its entire potential is latent in it. The couple discovers throughout their lives the possibilities that were inherent in this first moment, not because they were there preformed as early geneticists thought babies were in the egg, but because their potential for life's interactions was already there. The richer the possibilities, the more creative and unpredictable the life that follows is likely to be. Potentiality is not preformation, but the disposition to creativity; it allows us to anticipate new degrees of freedom, not precisely what they will be.

How do these observations fit in with the idea, expressed at the beginning of my course as well as in

these columns, that the relation between those who love each other is best characterized as **tenderness**? What indeed is the link between tenderness and **generative anthropology**?

At the origin, the **sign** representing the central figure permits the participants to act without coming into conflict. Instead of a paradoxical situation that cannot be resolved without violence, emission of the sign is a behavior all can participate in. The **central being** as the mediator of this common activity of communication is consequently the recipient of a new form of attraction, which we may already call **love**. For we desire its presence without, for the moment at least, wishing to appropriate it for ourselves. Its being-there is our guarantee that the peaceful, violence-deferring exchange of signs between me and my fellows will continue.

I cannot be said to feel tenderness for an object that stands against me as something invulnerable, inaccessible. But the central being is not a transcendental abstraction, but a real creature, and in that guise, it cannot remain invulnerable to our appetites. The *sparagmos* or rending-apart of the sacrificial victim is the fate of the material being that stands in the center; its sacredness cannot remain incarnate in it, but must be understood as residing permanently in a transcendental realm.

The sacred is transcendental, but its manifestation is in **this being** that I love, which has brought peace to the community. It is when I understand that what I love is impermanent, mortal like myself, that I feel **tenderness**; but I would not love it were it not the worldly presence of the sacred. It is this truth that is expressed in Christianity by the **Incarnation** of God in the person of the Son. But one need not be a Christian to be inspired by the union of meaningfulness and mortality in another human being to the tenderness of love.

It is indeed tenderness that attunes me to my beloved's mutability. The richness of experience is not an open-ended unfolding; life is finite. If mortality for the young is an abstraction, age allows us to experience it in detail well before the final moment. What we love in the Other is not mere variety, but a trajectory that cannot return to its earlier moments. Vigny's line, already quoted here, *Aimez ce que jamais vous ne verrez deux fois* refers not merely to the person we love, but to every moment we have shared together. And it is this care for every moment of human existence as an element of the sacred that inspires the doctrine (so eloquently defended recently on the **GAlist** by **James Williams**) of **resurrection**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Liberal or Conservative?

No. 21: Saturday, December 16, 1995

Why does it seem so natural for **intellectuals** to be **liberals**? A **Marxist** analysis might tell us that intellectuals' distance from the productive infrastructure allows them to produce utopian ideas that justify the existence of a class incapable of producing anything else. But under the guise of unveiling the truth of the *capitalist* order, this analysis deprives us of any chance at understanding the general anthropological consequences of that order, which is denounced in true utopian fashion as merely a transitional aberration.

Generative anthropology is often considered a conservative ideology because it rejects utopianism. Yet given the essential political symmetry of right and left, we must be suspicious of any doctrine that absolutely favors one side over the other. Market systems cannot operate that way; **mimetic rivalry** is the rule, and even the greatest differences are never essential, only temporary and strategic. Improbable as the thought may appear today, ordinary thinkers will inevitably find it appropriate some day to vote for the party of the left, although it will most likely bear little resemblance to the current **Democratic** party, whose disarray is measured by the refusal of its leaders to call themselves *liberals*.

Thus although for the moment **GA's** affinities are on the right, we should make only strategic alliances, not declarations of political faith. Our politics, like our anthropology, are governed by **minimality**. And even the superficial minimality of *less government* surely implies a more revelatory anthropology than the old **New Deal** model. Corporate welfare is neither very nice nor very necessary, but it is considerably more epiphenomenal to the Republican model than ordinary welfare is to the Democrat. **Conservatives**, whatever their degree of hypocrisy, understand that a model of society in which the political market must increasingly correct the "injustices" of the economic market is ultimately unstable and unviable. Now that the Democrats too are speaking of balancing the budget, this basic point seems to be universally accepted. Deficit spending is not so much a matter of *robbing our children* as of robbing humanity of the chance to move toward a viable postindustrial social order. The self-correcting tendencies of the marketplace must be respected because they are the only conceivable basis for such an order. Politics will remain, but if we understand that it too is a market, one that is ancillary to the economic market and not the central institution of society, then we will put the symbolism of balancing the budget in its proper perspective.

For the debate between liberals and conservatives is ultimately a contest between **politics** and **economics** for the role of the **dominant social model**. This was not the case in the 19th century, when the right supported a ritual or religious model (still that of the so-called *paleoconservatives* and an important element of the appropriately-named *religious right*), the left a radically political (i.e., **socialist**) one, and the liberals, as their name suggests, the free market system. But after World War II, the old right essentially disappeared and **liberals**, without being socialists, came to believe in the primacy of the political model within market society. This is ultimately an untenable position; if one does not believe in

the political model enough to want to do away with the market, then one cannot believe in the viability of open-ended political corrections to the market. Politics in a market system can only operate in the margins of the marketplace, not maintain itself as a continually expanding enterprise.

Liberals have told us for decades, let us say, since **Keynes**, that the political system should have not merely an ameliorative or "safety net" function, but a **proactive** one in dictating the course of the economy. But a market system is not simply a set of economic exchanges. As **Professor Robert Lucas** of the **University of Chicago** received the **Nobel Prize** this year for telling us, the market discounts the political information it receives as well as it does directly economic information. The notion that the government can *fine-tune* the economy presupposes that feedback into the system from knowledge of this fine-tuning activity is negligible. Only an elitist like Keynes--and most liberal theorists have been in this mold--could take the relative ignorance of the market participant for granted, as though he lived in **Huxley's** *Brave New World*, where the *deltas* could never fathom the thinking of the *alphas*.

Generative anthropology is anything but a "conservative" doctrine; it is the most radical, the most liberating form of thinking conceivable. Our task in the political sphere is to promote those forces that best incarnate this kind of thinking. In certain periods, the most radical thinking is that of the **Left**, which expresses the resentment toward the social order of those least successful in the economic sphere, who are therefore most dependent on the political process. Left-wing thinking reminds us of the **fundamental equality** of all humans as users of language, of our drive toward a **distributional equality** that would correspond to our **semiotic equality**. At other times, it is the thought of the **Right**, which expresses the resentments of the more economically successful toward the redistributive operations of the political process, that is most radical in reminding us that human culture cannot be defined **negatively** by the goal of the **removal of inequality**, but only **positively**, by the generation of **new degrees of freedom** that dissolve the old hierarchies.

Yesterday, we might have been liberals; today, we are conservatives; tomorrow, we cannot know, because the bi-stability of left and right hides the transformations these groupings undergo. What we must remember is that our fundamental interest is not **political** but **ethical**: the promotion not of material equality but of **omnicentricity**, the condition in which each person is a center of significance for every other, so that in every interaction, **love** wins a triumph over **resentment**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Simplicity or Complexity?

No. 22: Saturday, December 23, 1995

Simplicity is the greatest of intellectual virtues. It is enshrined in the *principle of minimality*, also known as *Ockham's razor* after the 14th century English philosopher **William of Ockham**: *mental entities should not be multiplied without necessity*. There are an infinite number of possible theoretical models for a given set of observations; all other things being equal, the simplest is the best.

The essential innovation of **generative anthropology** is nothing other than the radical application of the principle of minimality. Instead of looking at the human empirically as a fuzzy collection of various traits, **GA** takes seriously attempts at definition like **Aristotle's** *zoon logon exon*. Why, after all, even think of defining the human? Would anyone try to **define** a dog or an elephant? The human is subject to definition because it is not a mere empirical biological entity. For **philosophy**, unproblematically up to **Kant**, problematically thereafter, what I call the human was defined as **Reason** (*Vernunft*) or **Spirit** (*Geist*). Unlike philosophy, **GA** does not renounce the specificity of the human for the simplicity of the concept because it recognizes that the **generation** of entities like Reason or Spirit is anything but simple. The **originary hypothesis** conceives of the human in minimal terms as emerging from a **single event** in a prehuman world.

Ockham's razor only operates when the explanatory goal is independent of the means to accomplish it. Intellectual simplicity is analogous to **cost-effectiveness** in the market. If greater efficiency allows me to sell for \$1 a widget for which my competitor cannot charge less than \$1.50, I will win away his customers because they have no reason to prefer his widget to mine. But in the **cultural** sphere, the virtue of simplicity is less unambiguous. Culture is not a matter of setting goals and then finding the most efficient way to reach them. The purpose of culture, from films to religious rites, is the **deferral of violence**, or in **Pascal's** term, *le divertissement* -- diversion, entertainment. Even if all narratives perform essentially the same cultural function, one cannot argue that a short story is therefore preferable to a novel because it accomplishes this function more efficiently. On the contrary, our tendency is to value the novel more highly because it keeps us entertained longer. It takes a sophisticated reader to value a sonnet by Mallarmé as much as a 300-page novel.

Science is not supposed to be a cultural operation; its goal is to construct explanatory models, the simpler the better. But "*theory*," the contemporary synonym for what I call **anthropology**, is a more problematic object. Is theory science or culture? I have spoken in these columns about the "*spirit of the humanities*" that respects the paradoxical generation of the human. But **paradox** is not normally considered to be simple; one might say, on the contrary, that paradox is another name for **indefinite complexity**.

Generative anthropology may well be the first theory that claims maximal simplicity for a structure that it understands as paradoxical. It is the same simplicity of paradox that one finds in religious rhetoric, in statements like the recently discussed *credo quia absurdum*. The statement is pithy, its content

paradoxical. But this is not **theory**, certainly not rigorous theory, any more than other **sublime** cultural moments are theory. **GA** is concerned with **rigor**, not pithiness; but a rigorously minimal model of the human must include **the paradox from which the human emerged** and which is reconstructed in every subsequent emergence of the human--in every meaningful human act.

We may now explain the anomalous conjunction of **GA's minimal simplicity** and the **maximal resistance** it tends to arouse.

The cloying self-righteousness of the **politically correct** should not prevent us from recognizing the significance of **multiculturalism** in contemporary society. The real point of multiculturalism is that culture is in itself a multiple activity. Since its point is to create complexity, it cannot be reduced to a fixed **canon** without losing its effectiveness; it must be continually renewed. Whether contemporary Western society can or should continue to pursue effectively the noble goals of the High Culture created by the Greeks is a controversial question--one we should probably answer in the negative. But **High** or **low**, culture must evolve or die. Multiculturalism offers a simple solution to the problem of cultural multiplicity: *the more the merrier*.

This position looks as innocuous as the inclusion of different kinds of music in one's record collection. But even the most frivolous culture contains an implicit anthropology; it is impossible wholly to separate culture from the theory of culture. As **Pope** put it, "the proper study of mankind is man," where the word *proper* means not merely *appropriate* but *characteristic*. Humanity is properly understood as **the species that studies itself**. And thus it should not surprise us that not merely cultural but theoretical works might follow the cultural logic of multiplicity and deferral rather than the scientific one of explicative simplicity.

Where does this leave **generative anthropology**? We cannot know the answer to this question *a priori*. **Originary thinking** must take its chances in the world. But as we practice it, we must recognize the possibility--perhaps a first in human history--that the most rigorous theory of the human might prove itself unacceptable, and even be forgotten, on the grounds of its insufficiency as a cultural phenomenon, of its **untenable simplicity**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Brave New World?

No. 23: Saturday, December 30, 1995

Since this is my last column of 1995, it seems an appropriate moment to take stock of the world situation.

The recent political developments summed up in an article in last Sunday's *Los Angeles Times* by **Walter Russell Mead** suggest that the *end of history* is having some difficulties getting under way. **East bloc** voters are electing (ex-?)communists, **French** workers are, or were, on strike, and even in the market-oriented **USA**, voters are not lining up to renounce Federal benefits in the spirit of balancing the budget. **Socialism** has failed, as the author, perhaps regretfully, admits, and (as he neglects to add) **social democracy** is bankrupt; but the **market system** doesn't seem to be doing so well either.

Even worse, the rapid diffusion of information that increasingly rationalizes the marketplace has led to the phenomenon known as the *winner-take-all society* (discussed in a recent book by economists **Robert Frank** and **Philip Cook**), where great differential rewards go to vanishingly small differences in ability and performance. Ours appears to have become a **three-tiered** social order consisting of the **big winners**, the **technologically skilled** who can at least dream of the big time, and **hamburger-flipping** for the rest. This model of the social order resembles **Aldous Huxley's** *Brave New World* with its *alphas* and *betas*, with the *gammas* rapidly being replaced by *epsilons*.

But **Huxley's** *epsilons* were programmed to accept their place; ours are not. Since they have been relatively--by some accounts, absolutely--excluded from the benefits of economic progress, it is not surprising that they express their resentment by supporting socialist parties even after the demise of socialism. Yet the votes for communism in Eastern Europe and the unanticipated public support for the strikes in France are not harbingers of new revolutions, but nostalgic reactions to the demise of the welfare state, whether in its pernicious communist or its more benign social-democratic variety.

Are these truly *intractable* problems? Wasn't market society supposed to be about to attain *end-of-history* perfection, with just the last wrinkles to be ironed out before the **great utopia** descends on us? Someone will discover how to prevent aging, and we will all live forever, watching daytime TV as the robots sweep up the peanut shells and recyclable Twinkie wrappers. Or we will all travel on time warps to other solar systems to create new versions of the wonderful world we have left behind. **Ho hum!** The conception of a society without essential problems is deadening, inhuman. We are fortunate that market society presents *intractable* difficulties. For these are precisely the kind that inspire new levels of innovation. Like the *intractable* problems of our proto-human ancestors that could only be solved by **becoming human**.

What kind of solution is conceivable for the increasing stratification of post-industrial societies? Those who despair are like those who despaired of the **pauperization of the proletariat** in an earlier time. The latter were not simply wrong; but the market system eventually prospered, both by providing a social-democratic *safety net* on the model of **Bismarck's** original social security programs and, above all,

by **making workers into consumers** and lifting most of them, or their descendants, out of the working class altogether. Not very long ago the **boredom of assembly-line labor** was considered a menace to the future of industrial society. Today, on the contrary, we lament that our jobs are **too interesting** for the unwashed masses.

Why should we assume that the **new immigrants** and **minority members** who make up the proletariat of our era are mired in *epsilon* status and incapable of adapting to the needs of the *information age*? Or that these needs, more broadly conceived, cannot adapt to *them*? It is impossible to miss the connection between despair about stratification and the tendency of contemporary liberalism to see the losers of economic battles as **hapless victims** of the winners rather than people who need to learn, or have their children learn, **how to do better next time**. The safety net is there to facilitate this learning, not to provide, as it does for too many here and in Europe, a way of life.

The idea that the market system inevitably moves toward the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a tiny elite is an unwarranted extrapolation from specific moments of modern history. The birth of new techniques, whether the **industrial** ones of the mid-nineteenth century or the **cybernetic** ones of the postwar era, is bound to benefit the wealthier and better-educated disproportionately at first. But already today **computers**, once mysterious except to seasoned hackers, have become popular commodity items and **levelers of the playing field** of information exchange. In a word, they have become **sources of general prosperity**, just as the **family car** was in an earlier time.

Humanity must always continue to **generate** itself; that is what **generative anthropology** is all about!

With my very best wishes for a **Happy New Year** and a **healthy and prosperous 1996!**

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Originary Thinking in a Nutshell

No. 24: Saturday, January 6, 1996

I'd like to use this first column of the year to tell my readers why they should be interested in **generative anthropology**.

Although the most spectacular element of **originary thinking** is the notion that the human is born in an **originary scene**, the importance of the scene is as the locus for the self-conscious emergence of human **significance** or **transcendence**. Whatever unconscious and imperceptible developments may have prepared the way for humanity, **the human** is characterized by the **conscious use of signs**.

GA is a rethinking of the human as a **single category of being** characterized by transcendence and modeled by the use of signs. In all the essential aspects of culture there is a second level of reality that models the first. **Language** is the most fundamental human institution, but the others, **religion**, **art**, **morality** and **ethics**, as well as such non-institutionalized features of human interaction as **desire**, **love**, and **resentment**, are likewise transcendental in nature.

This vision of the unity of the human experience permits an enormous simplification of the models by which we understand ourselves. In particular, it allows us to understand such apparently disparate concepts as **God**, **immortality**, the **beautiful/sublime**, the **good**, by reference to the simple, explicit, and familiar model of the **linguistic sign**.

Use of language involves two levels of being. On the one hand, there is the world to which the sign refers, on the other, the world in which the sign itself subsists. In the simplest model of language, a sign refers to a thing. But whereas signs and things are both material objects, the use of one to refer to the other adds a new category of meanings to the prehuman epistemology of appetite. For although signs are things like anything else, they do not signify as things, but as **tokens** of a universal model. When I pronounce or write the word *tree*, I have created a "thing," but the word *tree* itself is not a thing, since the existence of a word is independent of any specific instance of it.

And just as the word *tree* is not a thing, neither is the **meaning** of the word. Trees are perishable material objects, but the meaning *tree* is not. This meaning is what **Ferdinand de Saussure** called the *signified* of the sign.

The two essential characteristics of the human sign are thus **type-token reproduceability** and **meaningfulness**, the subsistence of their meaning beyond the concrete referential universe. Any description of the originary scene of language must account for these features, although the need for such an accounting has not been generally understood. The persistence of meaning as it emerges in this scene is the model for all cultural phenomena. God's and our soul's **immortality**, and, even more directly, the transcendent status of **Plato's Ideas**, may be understood on the model of the meanings of language. When **Plato** speaks of **the Good**, he is referring to the commonly accepted meaning of the word, and his social

optimism--that no one willingly does evil, that true knowledge necessarily produces a conflict-free social order--stems from his extrapolation from this common acceptance of the word and its meaning to the common acceptance of social norms.

Let us consider the more interesting case of **the soul's immortality**.

In **Christian** doctrine, the notion of immortality is one of the **eternal presence** of the whole of one's existence. (**James Williams'** recent messages to the **GAlist** have developed this perspective.) In mainstream **Buddhism**, as I understand it, the ideal is seemingly the opposite: to lose all earthly ties and become one with the Universal. But both models of the afterlife are readily understandable, and mutually opposable, in terms of the linguistic model suggested above.

In the Christian case, all the material elements of our lives, especially our morally significant interactions with others, are preserved as though they had the same status as meanings. When we seek to do something *meaningful*, we hope to transcend the materiality of our act to make a permanent contribution to humanity, to preserve our *good name* (see [Column No. 15](#) for an earlier state of this discussion). Thus the "Western" approach to immortality is to make every act significant, meaningful, to forget nothing and to preserve everything, lest some infinitesimal contribution to the course of human events be lost.

The "Eastern" view is closer to this than first appears. The soul's need to attain the domain of permanent significance is expressed in the language of liberation rather than in that of constructive achievement. Worldly appetite ties us to the impermanent; to accede to the domain of pure meaningfulness, we must free ourselves from our worldly attachments. In this perspective, the essence of our worldly activity is not interaction with others, but material appetite. But what is valued in both cases is what produced the peaceful resolution of the originary scene of language: **the renunciation of material appetite as the potential source of mimetic conflict and its replacement by the meaningful sign**. In one case, the worldly becomes meaningful; in the other, meaningfulness leaves the worldly behind--but in both cases, the **meaningful** stands in relation to the **worldly** as the Saussurean **signified** stands to the word's material **referent**.

If you can follow this line of thinking, then you have understood the essence of **generative anthropology**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Culture Against the Market

No. 25: Saturday, January 13, 1996

The market, the locus of exchange, is the most general model of human interaction. **Conversations** are markets, **professions** are markets: markets are everywhere human beings interact. Each brings his or her contribution for the evaluation of the whole. In a *free market*, no one has an exclusive right to make these evaluations; but even when someone does, we need not discard the market model: *monopolies* (e.g., of speech) and *monopsonies* (e.g., of listening and approving) exist in the conversational as well as the economic world. The **economic market** is not the basis of all our interactions, but the **market model** goes far beyond the economic.

Yet one cannot work in an academic environment very long without noticing the depth of the **intelligentsia's** hostility to the market. For example, one might describe the democratic political process as a *political market* where representatives of different constituencies try to determine the public interest by negotiating the resentments the economic market generates. But intellectuals do not habitually speak of politics this way; they disdain the market model and feel a more general repugnance for the marketplace itself.

Culture against the market describes Western society since the Romantic period. Esthetes object to the reign of **money**: wealth does not guarantee good taste, neither individual wealth nor the aggregate wealth of the masses. But there is a more profound **opposition between culture and the marketplace**, an opposition that we can now begin to see as the central feature of our postmodern era.

Market and culture, the market model and the "scenic" model, are engaged in a struggle for dominance of human society in which the latter is giving way to the former. The future appears to lie with market-structured rather than scene-structured institutions.

Here is an interesting indication of this, inspired by my family's science-fiction-fantasy book store. Whether **science fiction** depicts the future, or **fantasy** a fabulous past, the social order is almost inevitably **feudal**. Whether the action is set in 10000 BC or in 100000 AD, the world is divided between evil lords and nice lords whose role is to defend humanity against the others. Yet with minor exceptions, there are no such lords today; the despots who reign over backward countries with pathological national cultures, **North Korea** or **Iraq**, are **military putschistes** or their immediate descendants, not the strangely legitimate **kings** and **emperors** of the fantasy-world.

Whence comes this tacit agreement that **industrial market society** is a mere **epiphenomenon** of the feudal, pre-industrial social order? From **culture's hostility to the market**. The literary imagination is loath to conceive market-oriented fantasies; its deepest desire is to flee the market. This was already the case in the **Romantic era**, when **Voltaire's** amusingly philosophical **Persians** and **Chinese** were replaced with passionate **Corsicans** and **Spaniards**. The farther a society was from capitalism, the more *literogenic* it was. The only change has been that today the distance is measured not in miles but in

light-years.

Is culture *agoraphobic* (the real meaning of *agora* is marketplace) because the market constrains the freedom that culture celebrates? The truth is quite the opposite. It is the esthetic-cultural imagination that has a fondness for tyranny, because tyranny provides effective mimetic models, **good shows**. The market is not about shows, but about the organization of human efforts toward satisfying our desires and generating new ones, in the unceasing, and, we hope, unending effort to stay a step ahead of the resentments it generates. It is these resentments that the cultural sphere was supposed to *purge* (**Aristotle's** famous *catharsis*), but culture in the postmodern era, although ubiquitous, has largely been degraded to the **adolescent acting-out** of violent fantasies that (whatever the hype) little resemble life in a productive society. The modern adult no longer has a culture of his own; his culture is **nostalgia**, whether for the world of **Bach** or that of the **Grateful Dead**.

How about this as a fantasy of our future? With the expansion of electronic communications, the marketplace and society in general become increasingly responsive to, and interactive with, the desires of the general public--the basest as well as the noblest desires. Individuals are concerned more with creating their own esthetic identity from ethnic and other components than with passively consuming the products of culture creators. Wars continue to flare up and be settled tentatively by international agencies. Ecological crises come to a head and are deferred by the application of new technologies. Over the long haul, individual freedom increases, the population is better educated, careers become more fulfilling, information processing allows us to treat things more and more like signs. Human beings live, and love, and die, with richer, more varied lives--yet they are no happier than before, still resenting chances missed more than appreciating blessings received, still hoping that the ever-expanding marketplace will offer their children opportunities they were denied...

Ah, but how boring! Let's rather imagine the thrill of rescuing **Princess Leia** from the clutches of **Darth Vader**...

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The *Honnête Homme*

No. 26: Saturday, January 20, 1996

Blaise Pascal, who lived at a time when mathematics was beginning its qualitative advance beyond the Greeks in modeling the real world, was the last great mathematician who was also a great thinker in the **Continental** tradition. (This qualification avoids arguments over whether, say, **Bertrand Russell** was a "great thinker.") My article in the first issue of [Anthropoetics](#) dealt with his most fascinating mathematico-philosophical construction, the *pari* or *wager* on the existence of God, an application of the theory of probability to the question of faith.

A less spectacular but comparably fascinating construction is that of the *honnête homme*. This term is difficult to translate, since the notion of *honnêteté*, although related to that of honesty, is focused differently, closer to its roots in the aristocratic notion of **honor**. *Honesty* is a kind of **neutrality**; to be honest is to tell the truth, to let reality reveal itself without tampering with it. The French version applies this trait to social behavior rather than truth-telling, just as Continental philosophy applies its insights to human behavior in general rather than limiting them to the analysis of propositions. The *honnête homme* is not a truth-teller, but one who does "the right thing." But Pascal's definition of this character is more elegant.

Les gens universels ne sont appelés ni poètes, ni géomètres, etc.; mais ils sont tout cela, et juges de tous ceux-là. On ne les devine point. Ils parleront de ce qu'on parlait quand ils sont entrés. On ne s'aperçoit point en eux d'une qualité plutôt que d'une autre, hors de la nécessité de la mettre en usage; mais alors on s'en souvient [...]

Il faut qu'on n'en puisse [dire], ni : "Il est mathématicien," ni "prédicateur" [...] mais "il est honnête homme." Cette qualité universelle me plaît seule.

Universal people are not called poets or geometers; but they are both, and judges of both. One doesn't notice them (or: one cannot second-guess them). They will talk about whatever was being talked about when they came in. One doesn't notice in them one talent rather than another, except when there is need to make use of it; but then one remembers it [...]

One should not be able to say either "He is a mathematician" or "a preacher" [...] but "He is an *honnête homme*." Only this universal quality pleases me.

The *honnête homme* will talk about whatever subject was under discussion when he entered the room. How different from either the **star**, who monopolizes the group's attention, or the **romantic hero**, who attracts attention by the counter-strategy of turning his back on the group and basking in his own sublime individuality. The *honnête homme* is a **minimalist** model of social interaction.

The sentence *On ne les devine point* is particularly intriguing. *Deviner* means *to guess*, but it's not clear

exactly what we can't guess about them. Each of the two translations/interpretations makes a different point about anthropological minimalism.

We don't notice them, we don't guess that they are present. Not to be noticed is not to attract resentment. In **Pascal's** time, as in **Proust's**, the *salons* were little laboratories of sociability, **interpersonal marketplaces** with no function other than to position their participants in the community. Poets, geometers, and the like touted their wares at these sessions, seeking the approval of those who could further their careers. What **Pascal**--like **Proust** first a sociable, then a reclusive man (and some say, a homosexual) of profound anthropological intuition--seeks in these laboratories is the model of a harmonious society, a worldly counterpart of the **Kingdom of God**.

A society of poets or mathematicians each experts in their specialty alone corresponds much more closely to the model put forth by **modern market society**--as exemplified, say, by a **university faculty**. Faculties are divided into departments, and the latter into specializations, so that each may be an expert in his/her own domain. (Today, this "gentlemanly" structure has broken down under the pressures of mass demography; the **networkers** eschew both the traditional specialties and, even more, Pascal's ideal of universality--they are specialists in **diversity**.) But what disturbs Pascal in specializations is that they are worn like uniforms, noticeable to all. His ideal individual would blend in with the crowd. In a society composed of such people, none would be more visible than any other.

But the other trait of the *honnête homme*, that expressed in the alternate translation of *On ne les devine pas*, is what gives this figure its intriguing **paradoxicality**. **You can't outguess or second-guess them**; you can't figure them out. They are, in other words, incarnations of the market itself, always more intelligent than any of its participants, since it discounts their intelligence by its very operation. This quality has **sacred** overtones. The *honnête homme* is, after all, a universal expert: a better poet than the poet, a better geometer than the geometer. You notice his talents only when you need them, but then... One thinks of the legendary heroes whose unknown abilities are revealed in crises, of the masked (hidden, unnoticed) **Lone Ranger**, or of bland **Clark Kent** transformed by crisis into **Superman**...

In this version of the *honnête homme*, Pascal's exemplary individual is equally unresented, because at the moment when his talents are needed, our attention is focused not on him but on the problem to be solved. No one questions **Theseus'** personal morals when he is slaying the **Minotaur**.

Yet when the crisis is over, we recall the previously unnoticed *honnête homme*, for his poetry, his geometry, whatever was required at the moment--and knowing he is neither poet nor geometer, we infer that he would equally have stood out had he been put to the test in another domain. But there is no better recipe than **universal superiority** for being **universally resented**. The *honnête homme*, the individual exemplar of the ideal society, is thus a **paradoxical figure**, the incarnation of Pascal's vision of the **paradoxical human condition**, the only conceivable resolution of which we cannot know, but must **wager** on: divine, transcendent **Grace**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

No More Masterpieces?

No. 27: Saturday, January 27, 1996

Can we still create **masterpieces**? Culture is everywhere, but great artworks seem to be things of the past.

The reason is not that our artists or writers have become less proficient. Why should our current artists have less native talent than their historical predecessors? What they really lack is **faith**. To compose masterpieces, one must first believe in them. Today we no longer believe in masterpieces, because we have no desire to admire those who produce them. It is the growth of **democracy**, and concomitantly, of **resentment**, that eliminates the need for great art.

Masterpieces are **monuments**, centers of desire and resentment that obstruct the flow of goods and signs. It is because our general esthetic level is so high that we can afford to do without masterpieces. Automobiles, magazines, furniture, storefronts - we live in a world of **stylishness**. If Los Angeles is a more stylish place than most, the accouterments of daily life in most places in the industrialized world are increasingly on a comparable level of quality. The societies that produced great art knew degrees of social distinction that exist today only in the most backward countries. It is the **democratic esthetic** of daily life that has replaced the esthetic focus on the unique masterpiece, just as the **omnicentric** world in which all are worthy of respect and love is supposed to replace the old social hierarchies.

We are entering an unpretentious age, in which the only pretense is not to have one. The only affirmation we are allowed to make--and I think we are tiring of it--is of our status as **victims**. The point of **PC** is to head off criticism by apologizing in advance for any self-affirmations one might inadvertently commit.

Does this mean that we must be pessimistic toward the future of art, that we are fated to mediocrity? Not necessarily.

Before about 1800, the arrogance of artists was limited to their professional setting. The creators who had flourished in the **Italian Renaissance** saw themselves as men of discovery and progress, more as **scientists** than as incarnations of *genius*. The **romantic artist** was the first to consider himself gifted with **prophetic insight**. In the sense in which we still use the term, his were the first *masterpieces*; he was the first to think of artworks, his own or those of his predecessors, as possessing a **transcendent value** beyond all worldly objects. The romantic artist thought himself the successor of the religious leaders of the past--**Moses, Mohammed, even Jesus**.

It is easy to mock the romantic's naive arrogance. My favorite quote in this vein (as my students know all too well) is from **Victor Hugo's** preface to his greatest poetry collection, *Les contemplations* (known here mostly for *Les misérables*, **Hugo** is best remembered in France as a **poet**, the uncontested leader of the romantic school): "... *quand je parle de moi, je parle de vous. Insensé qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!*" -- "When I speak of myself, I speak of you; senseless one who think I am not you!" The poet talks

of himself, but he speaks for us all. He need not ask us for our permission. As the hyperbole shows, Hugo's reader has begun to **resist** the artist's genius--*Les contemplations* is romantic poetry published in the postromantic era. But **Baudelaire**, and his successor **Mallarmé**, had visions of the artist's role yet more exalted than Hugo's. **Mallarmé** no longer spoke for the bourgeois reader; the artist had become, as for **Heidegger**, a **guardian of being**.

It is easy to mock; but these artists had a point. With the decline of the old ritual society after the **French Revolution**, the nineteenth-century artist supplied not only insights into the human condition, but a vision of the social order that was not available elsewhere. It was **Balzac** who revealed the social atmosphere of early capitalism; it was **Flaubert** who uncovered the structures of desire that underlie what we call *consumer society*. **Esthetic creation** was the leading **anthropological discovery procedure** of the time. This is no longer true in the postmodern era; the horrors of the twentieth century have taught us to be wary of revelations of human truth in **images**.

Today, we no longer desire masterpieces. But we can still enjoy art. The **popular arts** are more vigorous than those of the waning "**high culture**," but elements of the latter gain vigor from imitating the forms, and more fundamentally, the unpretentiousness of the former. The broad success of, for example, **minimalist music**--which has rejuvenated **opera**, a form not long ago considered a nineteenth-century relic--stems not from its imitation of specific themes or techniques of popular music but from its renunciation of *avant-garde* incomprehensibility.

Hence although we are truly at the "**end of culture**," if the latter be understood in the romantic sense as the source of our ultimate revelations about ourselves, we are also entering an era extremely **rich in culture**, understood more modestly as **entertainment** that defers our resentments until we are ready to recycle them within our productive lives.

This more modest role for art does not mean that the art of the present need be of modest quality. When **Bach** was composing, he thought of himself as a **top professional**--closer to an **engineer's** self-image than that of an *artist*. Nor did **Mozart** see himself very differently. It was with **Beethoven** that the composer took on the figure of *transcendent genius*. Today's composers have come full circle and returned to the modesty of **Bach** rather than the flamboyance of **Beethoven**. They could do a lot worse. **Bach** never wrote *masterpieces*, no doubt, but he did produce the *Saint Matthew's Passion*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Public Resentment, Private Love

No. 28: Saturday, February 3, 1996

I began these columns, and gave them their title, as an attempt to affirm **love over resentment**. But a glance at the news should convince anyone that it is **resentment** rather than **love** that makes the world go 'round. There is no need to list the slaughters that take place daily, and which from the **Holocaust** to **Rwanda-Burundi** to **Bosnia** to Wednesday's suicide bombing in **Sri Lanka** are primarily motivated by resentment. The **classical model** of violence is found in **La Fontaine's** *Le loup et l'agneau*, where the wolf claims the lamb is muddying the water simply as a pretext for eating him. Today we understand these matters better. The killers are not motivated by a cynical desire to further their self-interest by fabricating grievances against their victims. The truth is **just the opposite**: it is not self-interest that disguises itself as a sense of injustice, but a **sense of injustice** that teaches people their "self-interest." The resentment comes first; profiting from it comes later, if at all--suicide bombers profit little from their work. Nor does resentment usually result in massacres; they are but the tip of the iceberg.

And how often are the examples of "love" in the news nothing but resentment in disguise? Celebrity marriages, **Di's** or **Clinton's** adulteries are pretexts for *Schadenfreude*. At best the public self can shower pity on some pathetic figure--a child who needs a new kidney, a whale lost in a river--that *even we* can feel superior to.

Yet these visible phenomena give a distorted view of our social reality. Precisely because they involve the **media-mediated** center of our **public scene of representation**, they cannot reveal the decentralized, *omnicentric* relations of **love** that dominate our lives, that hold our world together just a bit more than the force of resentment tears it apart. We live in a world where public recognition is increasingly depreciated, where in order to maintain oneself in the center of public attention one must increasingly display **victimary** rather than **heroic** qualities. If our society lacks heroes, it is because we are not disposed to hero-worship. The apparent exceptions only confirm the rule. **Colin Powell** receives general admiration, not simply "because of his race," but because his race supplies the victimary element that permits us to admire him. What athlete today inspires the worshipful affection that surrounded a **Babe Ruth** or a **Joe Louis** in their day? Perhaps **Magic Johnson**, with his little-boy cheerfulness, especially now that he has become **HIV-positive**. Sports reporting incites us rather to envy athletes' **salaries** than to admire their athletic accomplishments.

The pursuit of fame will continue to tempt us, but as demography makes it increasingly more difficult to attain, the force of **mimetic rivalry** will assure that the famous are **increasingly less heroic**. This phenomenon trickles down from the center of the public stage into the various subordinate arenas within which we operate. The **heavies** in my own little corner of the academic world exercise power under cover of **victimary disguises**. Like so many little **Trotskys**, they mask their ruthlessness with a passion for the *oppressed*. Yet more ominously, they are **networkers** who can only occupy the center **in a crowd**.

The spate of **talk-shows** where people bare the seamy side of their souls and bodies for **Warhol's** *fifteen minutes* is a caricature of our desire for fame, and has often been denounced as such. But we should look at it from the other side. The fleeting fame granted by these people's unsavory sex lives is a sign that it is **fame itself**, not those who pathetically court it, that is no longer a viable option. There is too much resentment in the public arena for it to be able to measure our true value. We must conclude that in our **advanced market society**, the desire for public visibility that has always been the driving force of human achievement is in the process of losing its attractiveness.

One symbolic indication of the decline of the motivating value of the public scene is the recent tendency of **politicians leaving Washington** *to spend more time with their family*. We need not believe in the sincerity of all these declarations to see in them a meaningful trend. The politician may be leaving to use his acquired contacts in a well-paid consultancy or to write a **celebrity book**; but his declaration that his family is the most important thing in his life pays homage to the life-styles of those who will never be on prime-time news.

One is only *l'homme (or la femme) du ressentiment* for as long as one accepts the verdict of the public scene. Once we realize that the high level of resentment that surrounds it makes the scene itself an unattractive place, we learn to put aside our **dreams of celebrity** and devote ourselves to **doing our jobs** as well as we can and to caring for **those who really matter in our lives**.

To sum it all up in an image: **television** is the key locus of the public scene today, and it is impossible to behave *authentically* on television. The Heideggerian idea of **authenticity** is dangerous enough for its death not to appear as a *good thing*. But perhaps it is a *good thing* in a way I had not anticipated.

Authenticity can be salvaged as an ideal if it respects the **human marketplace** without however being dependent on public acclaim. The marketplace itself has always operated this way. One does not seek immediate satisfaction in the market; one **defers satisfaction** and invests one's capital in the hope of establishing a local or even universal **monopoly**. Today we think of this capital less as money than as education, experience, time spent creating something the market will be forced to appreciate. To win in the market is less to win today than to anticipate its movements tomorrow.

In the long run, we will all be dead, as **Keynes** put it. But it is when we are dead that we can afford to be famous. All the clownishness and victimary posturing are unnecessary after death. Death is the only dignified means of attaining victimary status.

It used to be fairly common to hear of *creating for posterity*; **Stendhal**, writing in the **1830s**, used to speak about being *read in 1880*, or even in *1930*. Today, how many people speak about being *read in 2090*? The word *posterity* makes most people smile.

Rira bien qui rira le dernier, as **Rameau's nephew** used to say: *he who laughs last laughs best*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Abortion Debate

No. 29: Saturday, February 10, 1996

If **generative anthropology** is indeed a better way to think about *the human*, then it should be able to shed light on contemporary moral controversies on issues such as **homosexuality**, **assisted suicide**, or **genetic engineering**. This does not mean that **GA** should come down on one side or another of these debates, but that it should clarify the positions of both sides, revealing them to be **anthropological hypotheses** rather than conflicting affirmations of **moral absolutes**.

Abortion is the most politically potent of these controversies because it has the greatest anthropological significance. What is at stake in the *pro-choice* vs *pro-life* opposition is the very nature of the most fundamental of our differences, **the difference between men and women**.

How should this difference be understood from the standpoint of originary anthropology? There are two types of relations with others: **external** and **internal**. Men can only relate to others externally, as beings physically separated from oneself. Womanhood may be defined as the capacity for another kind of relation with another, one that we may call *internal otherness*. The pregnant woman has within her body a potential human being. We may call it the *internal other* because it has a human identity different from that of the mother.

According to the **originary hypothesis**, the **birth of human language** took place in order to defer **mimetic conflict** among **external others**. I have assumed the participants in the originary scene of language to be men because it is male externality that tends to mimetic rivalry and violence, not the peaceful relation of internal otherness. Because women and children do not stand essentially in a relationship of mimetic rivalry, they do not need language in order to avert conflict. Cultural logic reflects the logic of natural selection; the biological investment in female internality is incompatible with destructive violence. **Richard van Oort** dealt with the hypothetical absence of women from the originary scene of language in *Chronicles 14*; this is not my subject here.

But the abortion issue forces us to reflect on the origin of culture because the participants in the abortion debate are the two parties to the relation of *internal otherness*: the **woman** and the **fetus**. *Woman and fetus* has nothing of the warmth of *mother and child*; the internal relation is only potentially a fully human interaction.

Any reader of the *Gospels* knows that **Jesus** constantly evokes the image of **the child**. The child is not simply a picture of innocence; he exemplifies the inability to function unaided in the world. The Latin *infans*, as we have heard many times, means *unspeaking*: the infant is one incapable of speech. Many ritual societies have practiced **infanticide**, where the child's inability to speak justifies its exclusion from humanity. **Christian morality**, the doctrine of **universal reciprocity**, of what I have called *omnicentricity*, is concerned with maximally extending the category of the human. The child obliges us to take the extra step in its direction. Its humanity is still **potential**; we must solicit it, making up from

our own supply what it still lacks. This is a relationship devoid of mimetic rivalry. The **Gospels** propose a **universal relation of internal otherness**, a community modeled on the nurturing relation of mother and child.

Thus the category of the fully human is extended downward to the most hapless and helpless members of our species, from **publicans and sinners** to the **child**, and from the child to the **yet unborn**. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why the **Catholic Church** and other **traditional Christians** are opposed to abortion.

But on the other side of the relation of internal otherness is the **pregnant woman**. Human culture is constituted by external relations. Women have historically not been granted full access to the culture constituted by these relations because of the internal relation that they alone maintain. But in one of the critical developments of the postmodern age, women have been able successfully to claim this access. Now that human conflicts can no longer be settled by the use of **maximal violence** in war, the sex defined by its exclusive externality can no longer claim cultural dominance: **humanity is no longer man**.

Women's problems in external relations are peripheral; the physical or even mental differences consonant with internality do not prevent women from interacting with external others. It is even possible to place men and women on an equal footing with regard to child-raising, granting **paternity leaves** along with maternity leaves. Whether or not this is "natural" in the long term, it is a demonstration that women can no longer be denied **full participation in human culture**.

But the regulation of internal relations is another story. Once the child is born, the father can give it its bottle, but only the mother can nourish it in the womb. When the state mandates external relations, they are **fungible**; a father is required to provide **child support**, not to care for the child himself. But a pregnant woman cannot delegate someone else to care for her child. **Internal otherness** is scandalous because it is a **biological relation** that has at the same time been **culturally imposed**. To extend the category of full humanity to women, this imposition cannot be maintained.

The simplest solution is to consider all human relations as **external**; the woman's relationship to the fetus is therefore not a human relation, but that of a human being to an **alien being** within her body. Whence the analogy sometimes heard in extreme cases between the fetus and a **parasite** or a tumor. But to make internal otherness the equivalent of disease is to deny the **specificity of womanhood** and its contribution to the human, culturally as well as biologically. The more reflective pro-choice position is that, in order that women be fully integrated into human culture, they must have the **right to choose** to exercise this specificity: the **right to abortion** is better understood as **the freedom to choose to bear a child**, to participate in the relation of *internal otherness*.

Seen in this light, the gap between the two sides is remarkably narrow. No one sees abortion as a good thing; no one wants a woman to bear a child she hates. In the ideal--**and most frequent**--case, **pro-choice** and **pro-life** are one: the woman chooses to bear her child.

Why do all but the most extreme pro-lifers make an exception for **children of rape and incest**? The logic of these exceptions is that the woman forced to bear a child under these conditions has been humiliated beyond a humanly acceptable point; she is being treated as a biological vessel. Under such conditions, internal otherness is **no longer a human relation**. The preservation of the child's humanity is the equivalent of the mother's expulsion from humanity.

But even in this extreme case, having the right to terminate the pregnancy need not mean exercising it.

The free choice to bear the child is an **act of love** that transcends the **resentment** against its father. One thing the abortion debate has taught us is that **abortion need not be an act of resentment**, but that **the free choice to bear a child is an act of love**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Self-Righteousness

No. 30: Saturday, February 17, 1996

The first group one thinks of on hearing the term **self-righteousness** is what is known today as the *Christian Right*. One imagines **Jesse Helms** fulminating against obscene artworks, or **Pat Robertson** condemning homosexuality. But my thirty years in the academic world have taught me that the most self-righteous people of all are on the Left. No one is so certain of standing at the right hand of God as the--probably unbelieving--**university-based liberal**. The **religious person**, even the *true believer*, always harbors some doubt about his salvation; his very vituperativeness is a reflection of his incertitude. In contrast, the **liberal** is untroubled by doubts. His unrelieved contempt for his political opponents is grounded on his serene conviction that they are not merely stupid but above all criminally selfish. Liberal self-righteousness is grounded on **faith in altruism**.

In the old days, the philosophies of the Left were **universalist**, which means they included oneself. But we have all learned **Marx's** lesson about the hypocrisy of the revolutionary bourgeoisie who equated their own interests with those of mankind. Now that this lesson has been translated into the victimary language of the **PC** era, the academic liberal has learned to have **no self-interest at all**. He is on the side of *the oppressed*, whether this be a social class, an ethnic group, a species of animals, or the planet as a whole. His own unavoidable complicity with the oppressors provokes in him *white guilt*, whose whiteness, whether or not it correspond to his skin color, is that of the non-particular, the **non-minority**. But *white guilt*, unlike his Christian counterpart's sense of **original sin**, is activated only in the presence of **victims**. In relation to **ordinary people** it produces a powerful rush of superiority. For one so aware of his own complicity with oppression, a **Ronald Reagan** voter is beyond the pale. **Pat Robertson** will tell someone whose conduct he disapproves of that he *hates the sin and not the sinner*; liberals do not make this distinction toward the sinners on the right.

Our two self-righteous camps have few kind words for each other. Yet both are heirs to the **Christian moral ideal** that **René Girard** has characterized succinctly and powerfully as the defense of the victim. The academic liberal imagines his ideals to be *secular*, but they derive from the **Christian revelation**, and the **Judeo-Christian tradition**, as much as those of his political enemies.

Today the market system has caught up with the Christian ideal. Two thousand years of humble love for *the victim* have led to two kinds of **Phariseeism**: that of the religious conservative who rejects modernity, and that of the liberal who embraces *white guilt*, the one condemning the *ungodly* in the name of the original victim, the other ever seeking new victims to protect from their persecutors. (The breakdown of this protection, in the form of the **welfare system**, reflects that of the cult of the victim in general.)

To reveal the persecution of the sacrificial victim is a great moral revelation, historically perhaps the greatest of all. But it cannot be the final revelation. If **generative anthropology** has a role to play in

allowing us to transcend self-righteousness toward the ultimate horizon of mutual understanding, it is in showing us that society is not founded on victimization but on **language and the deferral of violence**, and that there is no absolute dichotomy, as Christian thought suggests, between sacrificial and non-sacrificial social orders. Putting oneself *on the side of the victim* cannot constitute a permanent **moral discovery-principle** for right action.

What will improve the moral atmosphere is not *compromise* or *tolerance* in the vapid ecumenical sense of *seeing the other side's point of view*, but a new understanding of the common root of all our moral positions. As human beings, we all share the same origin; what we fight over are **hypotheses**, not **foundations**.

Those of the **Christian right** should remind themselves that the world cannot return to the human immediacy of Christ's day, or of their grandparents'. Phenomena like the homosexual lifestyle, abortion, pornography, need not enter everyone's life, but they are part of the modern world and must be accommodated to. Human desire is everywhere the same; we should encourage the reciprocity of love and resist the violence of resentment in all our interactions. As I tried to show in my last column, if access to abortion leads to the destruction of potential lives, it also permits the mother to **freely choose the life of her child**. From my academic vantage-point, **liberal self-righteousness** is a more troublesome phenomenon. The flaw of liberalism is that it is based on an **anthropology of difference**; liberalism is a kind of **inverted colonialism**. Every culture is different; every ethnic subculture is different; every individual is different. It is imperialistic to expect members of other cultures to function in our culture as well as we do. Hence any attempt to submit everyone to the same standards leads to outcries of **discrimination**.

But this anthropology is wrong. **We are all fundamentally the same**. Cultural differences supply enrichment upon a **common foundation**; that is how we are able to study foreign languages and cultures in the first place. To respect other people's differences is to treat them as choices we too could have made, not as **signs of victimage**.

What formula does GA propose to replace *take the side of the victim* in a world where everyone is **claiming victim status**? Let me suggest *take the side that is less self-righteous*. Self-righteousness is a sign of **resentment**, and resentment is the source of **human violence**.

Jesus preferred to hang around with (re)**publicans and sinners**, not because they were "*victims*"--publicans were tax-collectors--but because they were less likely than the **Pharisees** to feel and act morally superior to others. *Qui veut faire l'ange, fait la bête*, to quote our old friend **Pascal**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Love and Sexual Difference

No. 31: Saturday, February 24, 1996

The discussion started by Column No. 29 on the abortion issue gave me the idea of developing my ideas on sexual difference a little further.

I have resisted the temptation to call this column *Engendering GA*, not merely because the play on words is about as trite as **Yogi Berra's** quote about *déjà vu*, but because the term *gender* is used today to imply that there is no fundamental difference between the sexes, that feminine and masculine roles are socially determined. The traditional French reply to this utopian denial of the facts is *vive la différence!*

But in order to speak about this difference, we must first attempt to understand it in originary terms. **GA** has said little about sexuality. Its theory of desire, founded on the primary relation of **mimesis**, is suspicious of any attempt to specify the objects of desire.

In my *Abortion* column, I suggested the following definition of sexual difference: **Men relate to others externally; women have the additional potential of an internal relation to a human other.** To be biologically equipped to bear children is **what a woman is** (and **what a man is not**)--which does not mean that it need be the essential determinant of her (or his) behavior. The germ of the feminist argument that men resent female superiority is that women have a way of relating to others that is inaccessible to men. But this definition is not biological; it is **anthropological**. **Otherness** is an exclusively human category.

The abortion issue touches directly on the nature of this internal relation; when does the fetus become a **human other** and cease to be a mere part of the woman? But of far greater interest is the way in which this conception of sexual difference can enlighten us about the chief subject of these columns, which is **love**.

My original idea was to call this series *Chronicles of Resentment*. But as I especially emphasized in [Column No. 6](#), if there is one thing that saves us from resentment, it is love--sexual, **romantic love**. Clearly we can understand love up to a certain point without referring to sexual difference. Although the religious and literary tradition gives a quite different picture, in the **Athens** of **Plato's** time, the only culturally interesting form of love was **homosexual**. The expulsion of sexual difference from Greek *eros* is one of the founding gestures of mature Athenian culture, and certainly of philosophy. But the culture of sexual love in the West since the Middle Ages has returned to its heterosexual roots; modern homosexuality is best understood as a deviation from this norm.

The notion of love that I have attempted to develop in these columns, as well as in my recent seminar, is that love is essentially **tenderness**, the **caring awareness** by each of **the other's vulnerability**, and therefore of his or her need for love. The obvious source of this sentiment in the originary scene is mourning for the central being torn to pieces in the *sparagmos*. But the specific quality of the

love-relationship as it develops in Western culture reflects the integration within external human relations of the internal otherness of the **mother-child relationship**. This relationship is fundamentally **non-rivalrous**. Lovers can indeed become rivals; they are as subject to the mechanism of mimesis as anyone else. But what makes the love relationship tender is the **non-mimetic appreciation** of the other's **difference**. The infant in the womb--and for a long time afterward--is incapable of mimetic rivalry; this only begins with the assumption of full humanity in the possession of **language**. To engage in conflictive mimesis, as any two-year-old knows, it is essential to be able to say *no*.

The mother's tenderness for the child in the womb cannot be reciprocated; it is she who recognizes its need for her care. In contrast, the tenderness of lovers is **reciprocal**. (A relationship in which one party depends unilaterally on the other is unworthy to be called love.) Love is an external relationship between adults, yet it strives toward **mutual internality**, as if each were the nurturing mother of the other. Each treats the beloved not as a potential rival but as an object of asymmetrical **caring**. The love-relationship lacks the biological element of internality; it achieves cultural grandeur by attempting to reproduce in an external relationship the visceral necessity of an internal one. As the deaths of **Tristan and Isolde**, **Romeo and Juliet**, and countless others exemplify, the true lover cannot live without the beloved.

These reflections on romantic love lead us to examine the role of love in **Christianity**, the central cultural system of what **Hegel** called the *Romantic* era. The love of each for each, which I have qualified as *omnicentric*--each becomes a center for every other--is proposed in the **Gospels** as an alternative to the symmetrical opposition of rivals. *Turn the other cheek* rather than retaliate in kind; *go the extra mile* rather than draw a line in the sand. The moral duty of **asymmetry** is associated with maternity in the figure of **the other as a child** that recurs so frequently in the Gospels. A recent lecture by my UCLA colleague, historian **Scott Bartchy**, emphasized early Christianity's subversion of the symmetrical male relationships of the Roman empire. This suggests that we should understand Christian love (*agap *) as modeled on the asymmetrical caring relationship of **internal otherness**. What Jesus proposes is the *feminization* of external relations as a non-sacrificial means of deferring violence.

I will conclude with a reference to **Flaubert's** *Madame Bovary*, probably the most significant novel of the nineteenth century. The excesses that bring about **Emma's** downfall are more financial than sexual. She is the first literary character of **consumer society**. As the author might have said, *Madame Bovary, c'est nous*.

Emma ends badly, but her passion for consumer goods is prophetic of a society in which we can all differentiate ourselves without directly competing by using consumption to *make a statement* of our **social being**. Emma is unconcerned with rivalry in the real world; the mimetic models she finds in books and magazines provide her with **consumption patterns**--including **adultery**. If mature market society has resisted the *final conflict* predicted by **Marx** and so many others, this is the result of the rise of consumption as a mitigating factor in social confrontation.

Can we find a more specific linkage between the modern phenomenon of consumption that mediates between symmetrical rivalry and linear hierarchy and the relationship of **internal otherness**? **Emma** is disinterested in motherhood; she cares more for her possessions than her child. Can we say then that the **meaningful consumer goods** of consumer society are (like pets) **cultural substitutes for children** that allow us solace *within ourselves* from the rivalrous externality of the social world? These ideas require further reflection.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Use of Literature

No. 32: Saturday, March 2, 1996

What exactly does a literary work *do for us*? Is there a difference between art and entertainment in this regard?

Let us begin with **Aristotle's** classic definition of this function as *catharsis* or purgation, which reminds us of the **sacrificial** nature of culture. The negative emotions of *pity and terror* are *purged* by witnessing the simulation of the protagonist's suffering and death. Instead of participating in a real sacrifice, one watches it on stage; but the literary text of the tragedy (or comedy) does not merely reproduce the implicit or explicit text of the rite. Athenian drama made the tragic action explicable by obliging us to **identify** with all the characters in turn. Identification is no mystery; it is a mode of **mimesis**. As we see and hear human beings dealing with a crisis, we imagine ourselves in their place. Ritual sacrifice, because it uses a **real victim**, does not permit of dramatic identification. Its horror--all the more so if the victim is human--precludes the spectator's identifying with the circumstances of the myth that is being enacted. (Imagine how we would react to the verbal ironies of *Oedipus rex* in a performance where the actor would actually put his eyes out.)

Aristotle's definition is a good starting point, but it suggests a purely cyclical operation. Purgation of negative emotion is followed by a new buildup of this emotion, which is followed in turn by another purgation. This ritual pattern is preserved in the sequence of weekly church services and annual feast days. Such a periodic activity contributes to our *entertainment* in the etymological sense of the term: it keeps us going, *il nous entretient*, but it leaves no permanent residue to build on.

Yet the term *culture*, which derives from *agriculture*, *cultivation*, suggests that the higher forms of art add to our experience something **irreversible**. *Pedagogy* is the art of cultivating the young so that they blossom into cultured adults. The uncultured person is like a field overrun with weeds; he will produce poor fruit. These botanical metaphors point to an irreversible process of creating social value.

This suggests the following model: A piece of *entertainment* leaves the spectator as sacrificially inclined as before, it purges or *defers* only temporarily his appetite for sacrifice. The work of *high art*, on the other hand, *cultivates* us in turning us away from the brutality of sacrifice. Having identified ourselves with the position of the tragic protagonist as well as with the social forces that require his downfall, we are less eager to rejoice in such downfalls in the future.

There is another class of literary works specifically designed to teach us a *moral* often given explicitly in the text: the **fable** or moral tale. Fables are a part of oral culture that survives in our own. In an earlier column, I dealt with the "sour grapes" fable (*The Fox and the Grapes*); another favorite, particularly for connoisseurs of the French fabulist **La Fontaine**, is that of *The Fox and the Crow*, where by flattering the crow into singing, the fox makes him drop the cheese he was carrying in his beak. We are invited to apply these lessons to our own lives. Because we like to be flattered, and tend to denigrate honors we

cannot attain, fables are useful reminders of the likely unhappy consequences of giving in to these tendencies. Do we actually become less likely to succumb to them? A new element has been added to our self-reflection. But now that we have thematized it, we can resist it. Now that I know about *sour grapes*, I can deny its applicability. Or perhaps the fox's praise was sincere appreciation rather than flattery. No proposition about human interaction can specify the effect of its enunciation on the interaction it describes.

But if fables once produced an irreversible progress in our self-understanding, it is an ancient one. There are many collections of fables, but they all repeat the same lessons; **Æsop's** is the oldest available in the West, but surely not the first. Fables remain always *à propos*, they are not a part of sacrificial history, because they express a non-sacrificial vision of society, or to put it another way, they are blind to their own sacrificial nature. If the protagonist suffers, it is not because the social order--or the reader--requires his suffering, but because he has failed to understand the mimetic symmetry of human relations. The crow's enjoyment of the fox's flattery prevents him from reflecting on the fox's own self-interest. In a fable, the problems of human desire are *foibles*, weaknesses that can be pinpointed and resolved. The crow swears after losing the cheese that *on ne l'y reprendra plus*. But in tragedy, we are made to understand that the *hubris* that brings about the hero's suffering is not a foible but the **essence of the human**. Tragedy has no moral other than the paradoxical necessity of its sacrificial structure.

What then does literature do for us?

Entertainment teaches us about the **deferral of satisfaction**. We want the villain to get his comeuppance and the hero and heroine live happily forever after, but the work teaches us that it's more fun if we have to wait a bit.

High literature adds an additional lesson; that the roles of villain and hero are not so easily distinguished, that each has its ambiguities, so that the work's deferral of the final decision teaches us that such decisions were best avoided. To say that tragedy or art in general makes us *less sacrificial* is to claim that there is a progressive revelation of ethical truth in history. In modern novels and plays, we identify with the sufferings of ordinary people who would have been fit only for comedy in the classical age. The decline of high art in the postmodern era is associated with the **deconstruction of the sacrificial** by **victimary discourse**: now that everyone knows it's good to be *the victim*, everyone **claims** to be *the victim*. We no longer accept sacrifice because we each want to occupy the sacrificial center *for fifteen minutes* ourselves.

The great lesson of high culture was that however great its ambiguities, however intense our mourning for the tragic protagonist, sacrifice is an **absolute necessity**, the implicit foundation of the human order. Today we are no longer willing to accept this proposition. No doubt tragedy was *more dignified* than our incessant squabbling over who is the victim of whom, but such is the price of moral progress. High art has served its purpose; now we must find less dignified but less violent (dare I say **less masculine**?) means of deferring our resentment.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Male Generation

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One thing modern feminism has sensitized us to is the anomaly of **male generation**. The twin roots of our culture, the **Hebrew** and the **Greek**, both imperialistically attribute generation to the male where their ancestral cultures had more plausibly left it to the female or to some combination of the two.

We are all familiar with the creation scene in *Genesis 1*; yet in the original version of this scene the world is generated not by the word of the **one God** but by the sexual union of **Earth** and **Sky**. In the *Oresteia*, which could be called with some justification an Athenian creation-myth, the **Areopagus** declares **Orestes** free of the **Erinnyes'** curse on mother-killing, not because **Clytemnestra** had killed **Agamemnon** and therefore deserved to die, but because only the father is really the child's parent, the mother being only a vessel for his seed.

But to reveal the anomaly of these scenes is not to denounce them. Denying history may be fun for a while, but it isn't conducive to anthropological understanding. These developments, which lie at the foundation of Western civilization, that most successful of human enterprises, lend support to the originary hypothesis of **generative anthropology**, which alone can offer a useful explanation of them.

The **originary hypothesis** explains language and culture in general as primarily motivated by the need to defer the violent consequences of mimetic desire, and therefore as an essentially masculine creation. We should appreciate the historical irony of this discovery. A mere generation ago, when humanity was generally called "*man*," there was little question that culture was an essentially male domain that women contributed to only marginally. But the originary hypothesis could not have been formulated so long as (male) violence remained sacralized. It is only in the context of **postwar feminism**, when women **for the first time in history** are considered to merit equal opportunities with men in all cultural domains, that this hypothesis of the "masculine" origin of culture can be formulated.

Men have always been stronger than women, so their usurpation of women's generative capacity need not have awaited the beginnings of Western civilization. The idea that we all lived harmoniously under the civilization of the **Goddess** until the male Gods took over is an extension of the **Eden** myth as renewed by **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. The latter's utopia is a reference to primitive equalitarian society before the invention of sedentary agriculture, where there was no property to accumulate and therefore no powerful social hierarchy. The **Goddess**-world was presumably more advanced, but still peaceful and happy.

These utopian theories make light of the sacrificial nature of earlier societies, as though it were not the antisacrificial nature of the **Judeo-Christian tradition** that inspired their utopian ideals in the first place. As **Girard** has long pointed out, the idyllic descriptions of the ritual order of these societies are not written by their **sacrificial victims**.

The myth of paternal generation, however false to human biology, is a great conceptual advance.

Monotheism and **metaphysics**, the **Hebrew** and **Greek** components of Western thought, are so central to our way of thinking that no anthropology can ignore their importance. The *Bible* and the *Oresteia* present the concept of male generation differently, but for the purposes of this discussion we may consider them in agreement.

To begin with the more profound of the two documents: **God** is presented as a unique figure referred to in the masculine who **creates the world through words**. This point has never been given the explanation it deserves. **God** creates the world, and man, through language because in the originary scene, man and (the idea of) **God** created themselves through language. It is through pronouncing **the first linguistic sign**, the **name-of-God**, that the protohuman becomes human. Naming **God** gives meaning to **God**, but only if they who name **God** conceive of him as existing prior to their naming. Believers and nonbelievers still live within this paradoxical structure, the first group being defined not by its different vision of the present so much as by its hope for a future when we will see **God** *face to face*.

No doubt to understand the origin of the world linguistically commits what I would call the **cosmological fallacy**: that the natural world can be understood through the categories of anthropology. The suppression of biological generation, and of woman's role in it, is indeed **bad biology**, but it is **excellent anthropology**, and it is the latter, not the former, that is conducive to ethical progress, including the eventual recognition of the essential equality of men and women.

Thus although **God** is traditionally presented as masculine, gender is not really essential to "his" constitution, as has been demonstrated by various *de-gendering* operations on the Bible and related texts. Language may have been originated by men, but women are equally able to accede to it. The biblical creation scene offers a theory of the human qualitatively more rigorous than naturalistic myths, whatever gender-relationship they may involve. Once I understand that "*man*" creates "himself" through language, this understanding can be applied to women as well, and to the humanity they jointly create--just as the Biblical text applies it, by affirming the priority of **Adam** over **Eve** in one version of the creation story but not in the other.

Aeschylus' doctrine of male generation is more specifically "*sexist*." It affirms an unscientific doctrine of male dominance in the act of procreation of which feminist biologists have found traces well into our own (soon to be ended) century. But rather than basking in our moral superiority to the **benighted Athenians** who built the **Parthenon** and invented philosophy, we should give some thought to the anthropological value of this sexist biology.

Aeschylus was a contemporary of the **pre-Socratic philosophers** in whom **Karl Popper** sees the origin of **scientific hypothesis**. This has led some to remind us that, as opposed to maternity, paternity is itself a hypothesis, for reasons it is wise not to specify over the **Internet**. But this emphasis perversely privileges the **biological** domain that the whole point of the new doctrine is to subordinate to the **anthropological**. Certainly the reign of the *paternal hypothesis* is associated with patriarchal order and restrictions on women's sexuality, but that is not the fundamental point of the *Oresteia*. No one questions who Orestes' father was. It is rather that the **Athenian** system of justice, by annulling the *Mutterrecht* represented by the **Erinnyes**, declares itself heir to the **originary scene of language**. The Greek courts were, as far as we know, the first place where **logical reasoning** was cultivated. Philosophy originates as a dialectical antithesis of these courts, with the **Socratic elenchos** that opposes and denounces the **Sophists'** unprincipled use of language "*to make the worse cause appear the better*."

Why is this adjustment necessary? What does it tell us about the paternalist doctrine of the *Oresteia*? The

Athenian court made its decisions through **voting**; it was an **intellectual marketplace**. But in **Aeschylus'** world, the court is presided over by the **Gods**; its decisions are considered divinely inspired. The speaker before the tribunal is free to reason on behalf of his cause, yet constrained by the sacred aura that surrounds the court from uttering "sophisms," or expecting to win his case if he does. This double aspect of language, free and sacred, is preserved in the style and content of the fragments of pre-Socratic philosophizing that remain to us: they express hypotheses about the world, but in gnomic and mystical form, as if inspired by the Gods; **Parmenides'** hexameters make this explicit.

With the secularization of Athenian society, this contradiction became overt. Language and its sacred origin were split apart. It was then that **Socrates** and his pupil **Plato** created a doctrine in which the words themselves, in the form of the **Ideas**, incarnate the originary power to prevent conflict. "*The good*," Plato tells us to seek is not merely an empirically optimal social arrangement, it is an ideal whose "reality," if not its actualizability, is guaranteed by the fact that we have a word for it. And as in the *Genesis* story, Plato's *Republic* gives women a surprisingly equal role; once the "masculine" anthropology of the word is made explicit, there is no reason to exclude women from its province.

The **unequalled power** of these explanations inspires my certitude that some day the **originary hypothesis** will be generally accepted by both sexes--and all the *genders*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Free Market

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The recent comments on the **GAlist** concerning the ethical problems engendered by the market are a good illustration of the peculiar difficulty that attends any attempt to theorize this institution. The market system produces so many trees that it is hard to see the forest in the proper--**originary**--perspective.

The free market is one of humanity's great achievements. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the course of human history may be described as the **never-completable transition** from the **ritual system** of distribution inaugurated in the originary scene to the **market system**, where no central authority is necessary to mediate between human beings beyond the universal human order of representation through signs.

Nearly all those who deny the ethical validity of the market system agree that they are unable to conceive a better one. This suggests a return of the pendulum from the **immanence** of the Socialist utopia to a **transcendental** perspective for which **Satan** is the *ruler of this world* and the **good society** is only found in the **Kingdom of Heaven**. But the deritualization brought about by the market has always gone hand in hand with the "*Protestant Ethic*": the internalization of ritual constraints in harmony with the market. The **Mormon** church offers probably the best recent example.

Let us try to defetishize the notion of the market. The free market is not a **thing**; it has no existence independent of the decisions of its participants. Prices for goods and services are set by the interaction of buyers and sellers, as expressed (not prescribed) by the *law of supply and demand*. The market system, as **Marx** observed, is essentially dynamic, in contrast with ritual systems that change only accidentally.

Because it removes ritual restrictions on mimetic rivalry, the market system generates vast quantities of **resentment**, some but not all of which can be recycled into the system. Even the successful **A** is bitter that **B** is yet more successful, that **C** does as well without working as hard, that **D** is surviving without working at all. In a modern exchange system, there is no way to achieve the relative material equality of the originary human community without empowering the state to expropriate all private property--a solution that has been tried with disastrous results. Less drastic mechanisms for *leveling the playing field*--from **inheritance taxes** to **affirmative action**--are always both partial and controversial.

Consumer society offers means to make significant statements of style and posture that add dimensionality to the linear hierarchy of wealth. But this only defers the resentment generated by material inequality; it does not abolish it. The more openly information about the market's evaluations is made available, the more resentment is intensified, and the more the market itself is blamed for it. In contrast, the **human love** that exists within the market system--family and amorous intimacy as we know it are creations of this system--is commonly understood to be in non-dialectical, **Rousseauian** opposition to it, an expression of good human **nature** struggling against the evil of **culture**.

The originary point of departure of the market is the **potential exchangeability** of the parts of the central

object divided among the participants in the *sparagmos*. Because each element of the central being participates in sacred significance, it bears an **equivalent** value. This means that the market contains no **absolute** values, that its values are ultimately **quantifiable**. The exchange of goods and related values in the marketplace is complemented by the exchange of representations in the cultural sphere. The exchange of signs defers crisis; the exchange of goods operates within the space of this deferral. In **ritual** societies, equalitarian or hierarchical, the latter exchange is modeled more or less directly on the first: the exchange of things is dictated by the exchange of words. **Socialist** economies anachronistically attempted to operate in the same manner.

All political institutions may be traced to the linguistic reciprocity of the originary scene; this is the germ of truth in **social contract** theory. The human is originally equalitarian because the originary exchange of signs is reciprocal. Democracy has a powerful intuitive appeal because the principle of *one person, one vote* makes direct reference to this originary moral configuration. But **political democracy** does not arise as the result of a "*natural impulse*"; it has existed historically only as a **compensatory institution within market society**. The limited market society of **Athens** produced the first notions of a self-governing polity, and mature market society has for the first time enfranchised all adults, including women.

Those who point out the injustices of the market from within market society itself merely confirm the fact that the market system indefinitely defers the **end of history** (a subject for another column). The market's central contribution to human self-consciousness, to what I call *anthropology*, is in leading us to reject **apocalyptic** schemes of thought, whether the demonic one of **Hitler**, the deluded one of **Lenin**, or those of **millenarist** thinkers who exhort us to choose *once and for all* between peace and self-destruction, **love** and **resentment**.

No, we each make this choice many times a day, but there is no way for *us* to make *the* choice. We may break a few eggs, but we'll never taste that **great omelet in the sky**. Faith in the market-system is merely another term for faith in human history, the faith that the future we construct with our daily interactions will continue to teach us something of value about ourselves.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The End of History

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A few years ago, a political scientist named **Francis Fukuyama** achieved instant fame with an article proposing that the demise of the Soviet Union signaled the *end of history*, or in **Hegelian** terms, the achievement of **absolute self-consciousness**. Having seen that the Socialist utopia is untenable, we realize that **industrial capitalism**, the marriage of a market economy and a democratic political system, is the ultimate social order. Recent history had been dominated by history's final dialectical conflict; now only mopping-up operations remain. For the inhabitants of the ensuing **posthistorical age**, absent an extra-galactic threat or an errant asteroid, life will be pleasant but boring.

What is of value in Fukuyama's argument can be better understood from the perspective of **generative anthropology**. The **end of history** as an anthropological category means the end of the **human problematic**, which is that of man as the animal whose primary danger comes from itself. What has indeed come to an end in our era is **war** as a maximal operation. The human world could not support a full-scale war with the weapons currently available without either disappearing altogether or regressing to an unthinkable level. This means, in **originary** terms, that we are once again a single community whose violence can destroy it, a *global village*. Hence there is real weight behind the idea that the **end of war** is the **end of history**, that once maximal violence can no longer be exercised, humanity has solved its fundamental problem.

But this is a *solution* of a very peculiar sort. The weapons of mass destruction still exist, and even if eliminated, could be recreated--to destroy the knowledge that allows us to construct them, one would have to destroy the civilization that creates this knowledge, a destruction that only the weapons themselves could carry out. Hence there can never be any absolute guarantee that **World War III** will not take place, or--a more likely prospect--that **despots** and **terrorists** will not acquire the means to destroy human civilization. Humanity must live on "forever" in the shadow of possible self-destruction, in the face of the unresolved but indefinitely deferred **originary crisis**. We may well call our awareness of this situation **absolute anthropological self-consciousness**, but it is quite unlike the **Hegelian end of history** in which **Being** succeeds in wholly realizing itself. Only **GA** can really understand the inherent paradoxicality of the Hegelian ideal.

The great conflicts of the twentieth century, including the **Cold War**, may now be seen as impatient attempts to bypass the frustrations of the market system. The horrible and destructive attempt to create **ethnic community** and the less horrible but still more destructive attempt to create **distributional community** have both been revealed as misguided. Market society cannot avoid disequilibria with the moral model of human interaction that was bequeathed to all of us by our origin, but it will have to work these out for itself--no conceivable centralization of authority can transcend its limitations.

This having been said, the idea that we are at the *end of history* is more helpful in understanding our past

than our future. The shadow of nuclear destruction puts a limit on our exercise of violence, but not on the number of degrees of freedom that human society continues to generate. To say that society has reached its *final state* in the **democratic market system** is like saying that humans reach a final state when they pass from childhood to adulthood. If this system is a permanent acquisition of human society, that only means that future social evolution will take it for granted, just as we take agriculture and monogamy for granted. The market is a *minimal institution*, in contrast with *strong institutions* founded on ritual centrality. And so is political democracy. The resiliency of these systems, whose survival seemed so precarious less than 60 years ago, comes from the fact that both are means of reaching social decisions with **minimal coercion** from central authority. Nor do the principles of either market exchange or democracy find definitive expression in any particular set of institutions. Just as the end of the **Cold War** has seen the weakening of coalitions set up to defend market democracy against communism, the next decades may well see vast changes in the structure of democracy itself.

Imagine if a Renaissance visionary like **Leonardo** were told that in the late 20th century humans would fly, transmit sound and images instantly around the globe, design machines on computers... How could such blessed beings (with life expectancies of over 70 years) not be happy? how could the history of human conflict not come to an end? But even the achievement of world-wide prosperity on an **American** or **Japanese** scale would not put an end to our propensity to **mimetic conflict and resentment**.

What has indeed ended in human history is the innocence that allowed us to take our separate communities as absolutes and to use all means in our power to destroy our adversaries. As I pointed out in *The End of Culture*, the **battlefield** is really the first **marketplace**, the first situation where value / valor (the French word *valeur* means both) is established by results independently of ritual constraints. With the demise of this means of testing their relative strength, competition among societies must henceforth be limited to non-violent venues. This limitation has so far provoked both a **global movement of religious and cultural ecumenism** and **local movements of religious and cultural terrorism**. The outcome of this tension will remain no doubt forever undecidable.

But one thing that **generative anthropology** teaches us is that war is **not** an originary institution. The **origin of the human** is not the concentration or the externalization of violence, but its **deferral**. Now, at the *end of history*, we are able to understand that the human has from the start deferred its potentially self-destructive violence through the **exchange of signs** and the consequent **exchangeability of things**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Is GA Falsifiable?

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A recent post by **Jim Collins** to the **GAlist** asks a question fundamental to the intellectual status of **generative anthropology**: in what sense, if at all, is the **originary hypothesis** *falsifiable*?

Karl Popper's concept of *falsifiability* is a basic test of scientific hypotheses. A meaningful hypothesis about empirical reality must be falsifiable by empirical reality; otherwise, it makes no meaningful claim and can be shaved off by **Ockham's razor**. Popper points out that no hypothesis can ever be *confirmed* by reality. His favorite example is that if the hypothesis is *swans are white*, then finding a single black swan falsifies the hypothesis, whereas finding any number of white swans can only *corroborate*, but not *confirm* it, since there may still be a black one yet undiscovered.

Popper, whose central examples were drawn from **physics**, attacked **psychoanalysis** as unfalsifiable and therefore meaningless because there is no empirical test of the unconscious motivations it alleges. What would constitute evidence that X does not have an Oedipus complex? Popper's critique raises a methodological question that goes beyond the particulars of the Freudian system. Freudians are not interested in *falsifying* the Oedipus complex, but in using it as an explanatory mechanism. In the domain of **meaning**, which exists only in human language, *falsifiability* becomes a matter of **internal coherence**. A powerful explanation imposes its interpretative mechanism, obliging us to think in its terms. Freudian metapsychology is implausible and unwieldy, yet it is widely used because it provides some understanding of the mimetic structure of human desire, and in its **Lacanian** version, some insight into the relationship between desire and language.

We can turn Popper's hard-nosed critique against him. His fundamental idea is that no scientific hypothesis can ever be shown to be true, that we use the best hypotheses available in full knowledge that they will some day be falsified and replaced by better ones. But this makes falsification a relative matter. Even if **Newton's** equations fail to match the empirical data, we cannot discard them until we find a set (say, **Einstein's**) that improve the match. Finding one black swan may falsify the white-swan theory, but in practice one would seek an *ad hoc* explanation (a fall in a tar-pit?) before tossing it out altogether. By the same token, if the Oedipus complex offers a coherent explanation for certain aspects of human behavior, before worrying about *falsifying* it, we should first seek a better one.

We should not confuse **falsifiability** with **rigor**. In Popper's world, the **strongest** hypothesis is the most easily falsifiable one, the one that makes the most vulnerable claim on reality. In the anthropological world of meaning, the strength of a hypothesis is measured rather by its **minimality**. The more it explains with a minimum of presuppositions, the more powerful a claim it makes on our intuition. But we can make a still greater claim for minimality in the anthropological domain. The explanation of meanings and the meanings themselves are all part of the same anthropological universe. The minimal explanation is not simply the most efficient; in referring all meaningful events of human culture to a

minimal basis, it approaches the **historical** understanding of the origin of human meaning in a unique event.

By positing such an event, the **originary hypothesis** transcends the pre-generative techniques of humanistic interpretation. But no direct physical evidence for this hypothesis is conceivable under present conditions. The evidence for the scene of origin is not an unambiguous physical trace; it is the whole of human culture. And even if we had a film of an event that took place exactly as I have hypothesized, how could we tell it was the **first** such event? The claim that the originary hypothesis is the minimal hypothesis consonant with the existence of its object, humanity appeals not to empirical corroboration but to a **fundamental intuition**: that the sign cannot arise unconsciously, since its use implies consciousness. The rest of **GA**, in principle if not in detail, follows from this premise.

Hypotheses of biological human origin that concentrate that origin in a single place, like **African genesis** or the **"Eve" hypothesis**, tend to corroborate the originary hypothesis. Those that do not, for example, by postulating the independent origin of humanity on several different continents, seem to me to confuse nature with culture. Biological species-formation always takes place in a single population; to claim that various prehuman populations *became human* in different places is to recognize the specificity of human *cultural* origin and to deny it with the same breath. If a theory of this sort nonetheless became established, it would be incompatible with the uniqueness of the originary event, although not with the overall thrust of the originary hypothesis.

The difference between anthropology as I understand it and natural science is that at its core the former depends on a *mentalist* intuition of the human as understanding and creating meaning. Its faithfulness to this intuition makes **GA** not a new doctrine of positive anthropology, but a **new way of thinking**, neither social science nor humanistic interpretation, grounded on the **minimal defining condition of humanity**, the **use of representations**. **GA's** originary hypothesis is the first both to respect and to challenge on their own terrain **religious doctrines of human origin**, which remain the most powerful and universally influential. Religious thought insists on the specificity of the human, even if its postulation of transcendent figures and concepts makes it hard to find the minimal core of this specificity in our use of signs. Positive anthropology, in contrast, has been beating a retreat from foundational questions ever since the generation of **Durkheim**.

Even if human language began in ten places at once, even if its originary function was not the deferral of violence, the core of the hypothesis would remain: **we could not have begun to use language unawares**. Some, for example, would situate the origin of language in the interaction between mother and child. But can they constitute a plausible link from this intimate origin to the cultural activity of the community as a whole? **Freud** himself saw (in *Totem and Taboo*) the necessity of reconstructing the originary event. I invite Freudians to reflect for a moment whether one can explain the origin of human language and culture by observing the development of a child whose parents are already part of that culture.

When the intellectual community understands what is at stake in **GA**, it will not ask whether the originary hypothesis is *falsifiable*, but how human science has been able until now to resist formulating such an hypothesis. **GA** is a new way of thinking, but the challenge to which it responds is not of its own invention. Seen from its minimalist perspective, all previous modes of anthropological thought are founded on **implicit hypotheses of origin**. By making its own hypothesis explicit, **GA** acquires a rigor that adapts to the human world of meaning the **real spirit of Popper's criterion**: the formulation of the

most intellectually efficient hypothesis consonant with reality.

An explicit hypothesis of origin appears to many as a return to the naive absolutism of religious *myths of origin* that would prevent the **circulation** of cultural ideas essential to the generation of new degrees of freedom. But real diversity is not promoted by the refusal to see fundamental identities beneath superficial differences. Just as **freedom is the consciousness of necessity**, so **diversity is the consciousness of identity**. These **paradoxical** formulations pay tribute to the human power of thematization by means of signs. **GA** offers the first rigorous explanation of this paradoxicality that is the glory and the frustration of our never-ending enterprise of self-understanding.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Minimal Thinking

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Last week's column on falsification touched on the subject of **minimalism**, or *Ockham's razor*. In the realm of hard science, there is a trade-off between minimalism and falsification, simplicity and closeness of fit. Although it is **pragmatically** useful to assume that nature does things simply, we have no **intrinsic** reason to believe so. In contrast, in the domain of human self-reflection, where the object of thinking is thought itself, minimalism is tempered only by plausibility. If I can show a relationship between ideas, the simplicity of my explanation is central to its truth. The more minimal my explanation, the more truthful it is.

To translate the logical coherence of a system of ideas into a vision of history is a **Hegelian** mode of thought. The anti-Hegelian empiricism that has dominated our century has little to its credit on the anthropological front. Great progress has been made in understanding natural processes, but little in understanding our most deeply characteristic activities. There is even a widespread feeling that this goal itself is inappropriate; that each culture is a separate entity with its own values and that any attempt to impose a global theory smacks of *Western imperialism*.

Hegel's system lacks scientific credibility for the same reason that religious anthropologies do: for its lack of care in distinguishing between the **anthropological** and the *natural*. It is one thing to describe human history, including that of art, religion, and politics as a **dialectic** of ideas; it is another to describe the physical universe in terms of *Being* and *Becoming*. Hegel's **Idealism** has not yet thrown off the originary **anthropomorphism** that metaphysics inherited from religious thought. But where religion insists on the divine revelation that alone can ground its anthropology, metaphysics thinks it can avoid the overt paradox of revelation by eliminating the historic specificity of human origin in favor of Plato's **Ideas** or Kant's **Reason**. Philosophy is an anthropology that has sacrificed this specificity in exchange for the ability to reason from abstract postulates rather than revealed truths. Modern analytic philosophy in rejecting anthropomorphism sacrifices the human altogether, although it has recovered some of it through "ordinary language." And the poster/whipping boy for what it has sacrificed is Hegel; history's most powerful ratiocinator is reduced to a figure of fun.

But as the old master knew, intellectual history is **dialectical**; theses are replaced by antitheses and then by antitheses of the former antitheses, moving ever nearer the truth. If the nineteenth century erred by excess of systematic confidence, the twentieth has been characterized by an inordinate fear of the human universal. It is indeed possible to construct a **minimal anthropology** that can thematize the open-ended productivity of our manipulation of representations without pretending to anticipate its course. As my article in the second issue of **Anthropoetics** attempted to show, **mimesis** is the basis for minimal thinking about the human because it is the source of the paradox that makes us human.

Our century's empiricist particularism has allowed us to brush aside until now the mimetic themes that

nineteenth-century writers like **Baudelaire** and **Dostoevsky** developed so acutely in favor of an anthropology concentrated on the individual that confines interaction to the margin. We speak of our intelligence, even of our language, as though they were primarily directed to the natural world and only incidentally involved in human relations. But whatever else is included in intelligence, it centrally includes the capacity to learn from anothers' example. A student learns by reproducing in his mind structures of understanding learned from other human beings, whether present teachers or absent authors.

But our mimetic capacity cannot be limited to the behaviors our model wants us to imitate. You are happy when I learn by your example, but if I learn so well that I can replace you, I become a threat. In learning to perform a task, I learn its goal; but by sharing your goal, I become your **rival**. The fact that the vast majority of our intelligentsia resist these obvious truths is testimony to their radical power. People would far rather believe that they want to *sleep with their mother* and *kill their father* than admit that their desire imitates the desire of others and that their **resentment** of these others is the real source of their *aggression*. By keeping these passions in the family, the Freudian system softens their impact. I hate X because he reminds me of my father, not because I have secretly tried and failed to imitate his mastery.

It is to **Girard** that we owe these insights; yet he neglects the quality of human mimesis that separates us from the higher animals: mimesis is not merely **imitation**, it is **representation**. I don't just imitate you, I represent the object we both desire. Human beings imitate each other so well that they have devised in **language** a means for multiplying through imitation the objects on which their desires converge. Animals use signals, and can even be taught to use human signs, but they cannot understand the originary purpose of the sign as a replacement for an object made **sacred** by desire. (Or perhaps experimenters can teach religion to chimpanzees.)

Mimesis is a minimal function because it has no content in itself; unlike Freud's *Oedipus complex*, **mimetic desire** is defined not by its objects, but by the increasing **undefinition** of these objects. The circulation of desire, enhanced by the mechanisms of material exchange, is the true *motor of history*, the generating force of all the complexity of human culture. Through this mechanism, the material world is turned into an ensemble of **signs**. **Generative anthropology** has nothing to say about the material world in itself, but the signs we make of it embody meanings that can be traced to their source in the **originary scene**.

Yet **deconstruction** tells us that it is naive to imagine that human language emerged at some specific moment. Events never happen; they are only **traces** of something that has *always already* occurred.

There are good **heuristic** reasons for rejecting this view. The difference between **deconstruction** and **GA** in practice is that the former reduces all texts to the same **phallogocentric** paradigm, whereas **GA** constructs the historical specificity of both institutions and texts. But heuristics aside, I have no quarrel with the idea that presence is always a myth, that there is no **Event** of origin. Let us call it rather a *scene*. The scene is always conceptual rather than real, even at the moment in which *it* occurs. **GA** does not postulate that there once occurred a sacred moment henceforth ever remembered in a profane world. Every moment is profane in itself, yet sacred and revelatory in the universe of meaning--every use of language repeats the paradox of the originary scene. The originary event is **supplementary to itself**; everything we imagine through language is *always already* a construction rather than reality itself, for *reality itself*, as soon as we think it, is itself a construction of language.

It is not **GA** but **deconstruction** that is *naive* in thinking that it is meaningful to deny the reality of events

because they are never truly the events we think them to be. It is the child, or the **Romantic**, who denies reality because it fails to correspond to the *Ideal*. The adult is the one who understands that reality is the source of the Ideal that we pose as its horizon, of the language that transcends reality. This is a paradox that religious thinkers prefer to leave in the hands of **God**, but that mature human beings should be able to face with the help of a truly mature form of thought.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Ethical Mission of GA

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From the beginning, our use of representations has been **anthropological**. We seek the truth about ourselves in order to defer the violence through which we risk destroying ourselves. **Natural science** has advanced by expelling ethical considerations from its intellectual operations. But in **anthropology**, the ethical is intrinsic to these operations; the hypotheses we create about ourselves are the instruments of our quest for *the good*.

I have called **generative anthropology** a **new way of thinking**. But a *way of thinking* is nothing more than a **hypothesis** for solving our crucial problem of living together in peace--in a word, an *ethic*.

The ethic implicit in an intellectual activity is not always clear from the start. After twenty years or so of originary thinking I am now beginning to understand the ethic of **generative anthropology**. That this discovery coincides with the access of **GA** to a wider audience through the **WWW** is surely not fortuitous.

All ethics promote love over resentment, but we judge them by the sacrifices they entail in order to expel this resentment. **National Socialism** sought to promote love among Germans and other so-called *Aryans*, as **Fascism** had done for Italians. Not long ago these ethics seduced many, but we remember them rather for the horrors they perpetrated on those they excluded. The **Communist** rhetoric of inclusion was yet more seductive: "*the International Soviet will be the human race*." But this was taken to mean that those even implicitly inimical to the Soviet are **no longer part of the human race**: whence **Stalin's** and **Mao's** massacres and purges, and the killing fields of **Cambodia**.

These ethics that preach brotherhood but encourage resentment exemplify the phenomenon of *sacrificiality* that is far from having been exorcised with them. The **victimary discourse** of today is less virulent than Hitler's anti-Semitic tirades, but it unreflectively inverts their sacrificial structure. This phenomenon of **sacrificial inversion** has become so common that it is invisible even to *deconstructionists* whose very careers are built on the concept of deferral. To reveal the sacrificial in today's victimary discourse requires **originary thinking**.

The word *sacrifice* contains within itself the paradox of culture. Etymologically *to make sacred* (*sacer* + *facio*), it means both *to renounce* and *to kill*. Culture is about renouncing and making sacred, but it is also about killing in the service of these ends. In the **originary scene**, the central object of **mimetic desire** is **renounced-as-sacred** through being **named-as-sacred** by the sign that is the **name-of-God**; only once this mediating structure has been established can it be torn apart and eaten in the *sparagmos*.

Sacrificial thinking is designed to justify the necessary evil of this discharge of **resentment** toward the central being that can never fully incarnate the divinity and put an end to conflict rather than merely **defer** it. Sacrificial thinking is a necessity of **ritual society**, all the more so in its often repressive

hierarchical forms. But in **market society**, **political structures** come to supplant ritual structures in deferring the violent expression of resentment. Sacrificial thinking becomes counterproductive within the framework of democratic politics, as witness the results of fascist and communist contempt for the *parliamentary democracy* of the *bourgeois market system*. In today's **victimary thinking**, the object of this contempt has been extended from the market system, from which we can conceive no transcendence, to **humanity itself**.

The **ethical mission** of **originary thinking** is to provide us with a **post-sacrificial anthropology**.

Victimary rhetoric derives its power from the dynamic of the **originary scene**. What we resent in the other is his real or fancied proximity to the center. Because we are in principle equal exchangers of signs, we find it unjust that others surpass us in the exchange of things. Where victimary thinking goes wrong is not in denouncing injustice, but in assimilating it to **sacrificial victimage**. Reducing human relationships to that between **sacrificer** and **victim** denies the common humanity of both sides. Where **tragedy** suggests that life is never as the language of human desire wants it to be, **victimary discourse** affirms as life's sole value the **struggle against oppression**, which *mirabile dictu* has begun to bear fruit only today. All real social orders are weighed and found wanting against the absolute standard of our **originary moral model of reciprocity**.

Although the distant ancestor of victimary discourse is the oppositional view of the social order forged in the **French Revolution**, its specific rhetoric was born in the postwar reaction to the **Holocaust**. Between **Nazis** and **Jews**, there was no reciprocity; one side was innocent, the other guilty of unspeakable crime. The lesson of the **Holocaust** is to assimilate all collective resentments to this unambiguous model. The resulting faith in resentment generated the powerful social movements that achieved the abolition of **colonialism** and **racial segregation**, as well as **equal rights for women**.

But in the new world these movements have created, victimary discourse is no longer productive. The objectivizing jargon of **Foucault** can no longer hide the **scapegoating rhetoric of sacrifice** denounced by **Girard**. The denunciation of victimage has become a ritual gesture meant to absolve us--and this refers to all of us--of the guilt of our originary inheritance.

Originary thinking allows us to situate our drive toward **reciprocal equality** in the context of our supreme need to **defer mimetic conflict** and to trace the historical evolution of the social structures that realize reciprocity while insuring against violence. Humanity has been able to survive and prosper only because, whatever its lapses, its history has been guided more by **love** than by **resentment**. The ethical mission of our new mode of self-understanding is to help extend this guidance into the future.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Mimetic Simplicity

No. 39: Saturday, April 20, 1996

Why should we take **mimesis** as the specific difference of the human? Doesn't that imply that we all just **copy each other**?

René Girard will go down in history as the person who rediscovered this concept that reveals the unity of the human. Girard reminded us that mimesis generates difference as well as sameness, rivalry as well as harmony, indeed, that its intense human form falls so easily into rivalry that harmony becomes problematic and we create for ourselves a culture to defer it.

The richness of our culture and technology testify to the creativity of mimesis for good and for evil. We cannot all copy each other because that way lies **mimetic crisis**. On the contrary, because we copy each other so well, we must endlessly differentiate; this is the path that only our species has taken.

The simplicity and elegance of these basic ideas are signs of their power. But as mimetic theory tells us, power provokes **fear**. The empirical mind-set of the social sciences, concerned with collecting data on various behaviors in order to predict them marginally better than before, corresponds to the ancient wisdom of *ne quid nimis*, nothing in excess. **GA**, in comparison, by making global claims, sets itself above the marketplace of consumable ideas. Its simplicity inspires the fear that there might be **nothing left to think**. But understanding the centrality of mimesis brings order to our self-knowledge, not limits. Given the tool of **originary thinking**, our best minds would build we know not what edifices. If this mode of thought has enabled so few to say so much about so many things, how much more would a whole profession, or even a reasonable subset of it, be able to accomplish!

The question is whether we desire to understand how the **real world** of appetite and the **other world** of signs and culture are joined, or whether we prefer the existence of the latter to remain explicable only through faith, or simply left unexplained.

The social sciences tell us that a **sign** is simply one thing substituted for another. Signs are used by animals as well as humans; our sign system is merely more elaborate, not different in kind. We have **religion** because we are weak and observe the strength of the forces of nature, we are mortal and observe the permanence of the world beyond our death. And as for **culture**, animals too make beautiful displays, birds sing lovely songs, and who can say that whales don't tell each other stories...

Our choice is between these worthless explanations and **originary thinking**: there is no other **unified explanation** of these phenomena.

Signs "imitate" their object as we imitate each other. But the being that sustains the sign, its **Idea** or **Signified**, is not subject to the temporal decay of worldly objects. No materialist monism can deal with this truth. Ideas are **mental objects**, but they are not the equivalent of their correlate in our brain cells,

any more than our words are equivalent to their expression in print or in sound. There is a **mystery** to the origin of language and signification from a prelinguistic state that natural science cannot explain. To comprehend the mystery is not to eliminate its **leap of faith**, only to reduce it to its minimal core. Every science takes such a leap, clothed as it may be in the language of rationality. **First principles** cannot be demonstrated. We think of this as a merely formal necessity, without remarking that it is of the same kind as the undemonstrability of the **existence of God**. The mental world of signs subsists only within the human community of their users. It cannot be guaranteed by anything *out there* in the *real world*, yet we must seek the most plausible hypothesis for its emergence.

What stands behind the sign is not its immediate referent but an **atemporal being** that the referent incarnates. The one word that is most significant in all languages is a word whose referent can never be concretely instantiated: the **name-of-God**. Why would such a hypothetical being ever become useful to us? or conversely, why would **God** reveal himself to humanity? **GA** offers the first explanation of the emergence of the **God-concept** from the imitation of worldly behavior.

Mimesis is the key to understanding the sign-world because it provides the link between it and the world of nature. It is entirely understandable that higher animals can make marginal use of language through the use of their near-human mimetic powers. Our near-relatives are not far from being able to make the mysterious leap that separates them from the human. Their use of our linguistic symbols shows how close they can come. Animals, even plants have *concepts* in the sense of slots into which some phenomena fit but not others. A dog who sniffs my socks can distinguish me from anyone else; he possesses a *Gans-concept*. Chimpanzees can be taught to use sign-language to manipulate such concepts. But animal sign-manipulations are not only unspontaneous, they do not take off into culture. If language were merely an evolutionarily advantageous development, why is it not taken up and elaborated further by those chimps who learn it? Whatever level of sophistication they attain is possible only in communication with humans, not with other animals. Their mimetic capacities allow them to learn a repertory of manipulations that we reward, but never to experience the **sacred fear of mimetic conflict** that originally made these manipulations necessary.

The chimps' use of language is a *reductio ad absurdum* of **Skinner's** behaviorist theory of language. **Behaviorism** explains the language of the chimp, but it cannot explain the emergence of human language, let alone that of religion and the other phenomena of culture; it cannot thematize **human historicity**, the event-consciousness that alone explains this emergence.

The theorization of mimesis tells us many things, including why these insights are not yet generally accepted. Resistance to theory is fear of the sacred, fear of mimetic convergence. **Originary thinking** forces us to dissolve the barriers between our separate domains of expertise and admit the **real power of thought**.

The elegance of this way of thinking gives it a potential **market value** that cannot be indefinitely denied. In some form or other, **GA** will have its day. This day will come sooner if the readers of this column contribute to spreading, developing, and transforming its ideas within their own spheres of activity. This is our own peaceful version of **Marx's** demand that we participate in the **movement of history**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Victimary Culture

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The marketplace of ideas is increasingly dominated by **victimary experience**. Culture has always been **sacrificial**, but it has now become self-consciously so; its purpose seems no longer, as in the days of the **martyrs**, to reveal the sacred through suffering, but to affirm the sacrality of suffering in itself. Participation in sacred significance is our personal reenactment of the emergence of the human; we grant salvation to those we consider to have suffered for our benefit. These **mimetic structures**, so familiar to practitioners of **originary thinking**, rule culture in the information age just as they did in the Ice Age; what changes are the **mediations**.

Significance emerges from suffering; we celebrate **victims**. Just as primitive societies attribute every illness or death to a human cause, we are always anxious lest our lack of compassion turn victims of nature into our own. **Insensitivity**, which our **liberals** so enjoy attributing to **conservatives**, plays for us the role that in primitive cultures is attributed to an enemy's magic spells or **evil eye**.

But victimary culture does not revel in pure abjection. This culture is proof of "our" victims' ability to resist the sufferings we inflict upon them. By demonstrating that they are capable of lending significance to their lives, they incite us to affirm this significance as our own. The movement from upbeat stories of minority struggles to quasi-documentaries of minority pathologies, from *Raisin in the Sun* to *Mi Vida Loca*, like all advances of **realism**, reassures us--but never enough--that the story of our victims can still be told as a sacrificial tale, displaying the emergence of meaning from the chaos of mimetic conflict.

Sacrifice has always been with us, but **victimary thinking** is a romantic invention. The earliest expression I know of it is in **Chateaubriand's** early, barely post-Rousseauian *Essai sur les révolutions* (1797). The author, traveling in the area of Niagara Falls, encounters an Indian family:

The family was composed of two women, with two small children at the breast, and three warriors: two of them must have been between forty and forty-five years of age, although they appeared much older; the third was a young man.

The conversation soon became general, that is, by a few broken words on my part and by many gestures: an expressive language, which these nations understand marvelously well and which I had learned among them. The young man alone maintained an obstinate silence; he kept his eyes constantly fixed on me. Despite the black, red, blue stripes, the cut ears, the pearl hanging from his nose that disfigured him, it was easy to distinguish the nobility and the sensitivity that animated his face. *How grateful I was to him for not liking me!* [*Comme je lui savais gré de ne pas m'aimer!*] I seemed to read in his heart the history of all the ills with which the Europeans have burdened his fatherland.

Rousseau's noble savage is no longer a mere object of admiration or regret, but of **guilt; modern**

liberalism is born.

A later, more ironic and problematic version of this *topos* is found in **Baudelaire's** prose poem *Assommons les pauvres!*, written in 1865, two years before his death. The poet, applying the principle that the only person worthy of freedom is he who is able to conquer it, administers a beating to a beggar who asks him for alms. Finally the beggar strikes back in self-defense. When the poet has received sufficient punishment, he declares the beggar his equal and shares his purse with him, counseling him to administer the same lesson to his companions.

Thus the radical-thinking Baudelaire espouses a conservative view of *tough love*, where the old reactionary Chateaubriand prefigures the guilt-ridden liberal. The power of the **socialist utopia** was that it reduced all obstacles to its realization to economic terms. If Baudelaire's text sounds strangely old-fashioned in contrast with that of his predecessor, it is because, although it criticizes this utopia, it shares its optimism in presenting victimary difference in terms of **class** rather than the **ascriptive** (*i.e.*, unchangeable) categories of today's identity politics: **gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation**. Beggars are only of interest today as members of the victimary community of the *homeless*; beggars with apartments just fall between the cracks.

These nineteenth-century versions of victimary sensibility teach us that our guilty concern for the other enters our culture before it becomes a value in the political marketplace. Chateaubriand was not making a political point against other Europeans; Baudelaire's parable was conceived as a critique of utopianism, not as a lesson for the political party system.

But we should be happy that modern liberalism has **banalized** this sensibility by integrating it into the **political exchange system**. This integration, rather than signifying its triumph, signals its **loss of transcendental status**. The sacral notion of victimage loses its aura and becomes just another negotiating point. As proof we need look no farther than the current debate on **affirmative action**. This policy, untouchable a few years ago as a form of **divine justice**, must now be defended in the relative terms of **interests**.

Human difference requires a more nuanced model than the **zero-sum persecutor-victim relation**. Market society **generates** value; it does not merely **redistribute** it. **Identity politics**, as opposed to **victimary politics**, will increasingly enable us to understand society in terms of **exchange** rather than **domination**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Two Types of Denial

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Denial, Freud's *Verneinung*, or in French, *la dénégation*, is one of the more popular terms of our pop-psychology vocabulary. To be **in denial** is to refuse to accept one's responsibility for a problem by denying the problem's very existence.

Dogs and cats do not practice denial. Only when we have a means of representing reality are we able to represent reality falsely. As a pathology inherent in language, denial makes us realize that the latter's primary function is not to construct rational models, but to **defer conflict**. The fundamental operations of language are not those of propositional logic but of **ostensive sacralization**, removal from the represented object from the world of our desire as divinity and/or victim.

In *Being and Nothingness*, **Jean-Paul Sartre** describes a phenomenon very like denial. Sartre denounces as **bad faith** (*mauvaise foi*) treating oneself as an unfree thing (*en-soi*). This is the case, for example, of one who excuses his excessive drinking on the grounds that he suffers from the *disease* of alcoholism. *Alcoholism* becomes a magic word designed to absolve the drinker of responsibility for his actions, that defines him as a part of **nature** rather than **humanity**.

The alcoholic's physical coercion may well be real; perhaps he really can't live without a drink. This manipulation of the physical by the moral, the escape from the potentially conflictive world of **mimetic desire** into a **personal sacred**, is the chief reason for any kind of addiction. However mimetically I may have begun to drink, now I am no longer free to imitate the desires of others; I have regressed from desire to appetite. My designation as an *alcoholic* is a consecration of my strategy, a public acknowledgement that alcohol has become **my God**.

But to admit my regressive act of faith puts my strategy in doubt. What began as a means of liberation from mimetic desire becomes a source of vulnerability to the manipulations of others. The stigma that attaches to alcoholism despite the efforts of our victimary culture suggests that the cult of Bacchus is best concealed. Whence the strategy of **denial**. What I really deny in refusing to admit my dependency on alcohol is the power of others to define me by the apparent intentionality of my behavior. I assert my unalienable formal freedom as a user of language in the face of the alienation implicit in my actions. I have no "*alcohol problem*"; I simply "*enjoy a drink now and then*."

Denial presupposes the formulation of the proposition--"*I am an alcoholic*"--that is denied. (The important thing here is not the word *alcoholic*; any synonym--*problem drinker*--would do as well.) But denial bears witness to the sacred just as much as affirmation. As in the practice of **taboo**, by not mentioning a malevolent divinity, I avoid attracting its always dangerous attention. The denier is no more an unbelieving free spirit than the person of bad faith; his worship is merely secretive and fearful rather than overt.

Sartre explicitly defines bad faith as **denial of freedom**: we are, in his neo-Hegelian terminology, *for-itself*, not *in-itself*; we have no essence, but exist in freedom. But Sartre's analyses fail to catch the essential **paradox** of the human condition. The source of what Sartre calls our **freedom** is our possession of language, but it is through language that we deny this freedom. Our originary use of language is to renounce the object of our appetite and submit ourselves to the sacred. Language is not a simple sign of liberation from the animal state, of the passage from the **realm of necessity** to the **realm of freedom**; it is in the first place a means of **deferring mimetic violence**. The denier, like everyone else, uses language to carry out this deferral. What we accuse him of is not his denial, but what he denies: his worship of **false gods** that incarnate a perverse understanding of the relationship between language and violence. The drinker finds peace from mimetic violence by sacrificing the peace of his immediate surroundings. Whether he denies his dependency or affirms it as an ultimate truth, he stands on the side of disorder rather than order; his worship is a form of **Satanism**.

But just as language can be the instrument of our dependency, it can also liberate us from it. This may be done in two ways, corresponding to the two varieties of denial. In the simpler, I follow the Sartrean path of rejecting my designation as an alcoholic and detaching myself from my addiction. It would be a mistake to see this decision as independent of language. It is in language that I renounce my false god by thematizing both my prior dependency and my new-found resistance to it.

But in the more crucial case, I turn to **Alcoholics Anonymous**, where I will be forced to designate myself as *Eric Gans, an alcoholic* every time I speak. Here the word retains its sacred force, but it is used neither to deny dependency nor to excuse it. By thematizing my dependency on alcohol, I make the paradox of signification work for rather than against me. I recognize that my free acts have made me partially unfree, and put my unfreedom in words in order to **exorcize** it.

It is easy to denounce the denial of the alcoholic, but it is not always so easy to distinguish between false gods and true. Each step in the process of **desacralization** that liberates us from **bad faith** requires more evolved mechanisms of **deferral**. The absolute freedom that Sartre attributes to the human is indeed inherent in our possession of language, but its realization, even in thought, lies at the horizon of human history, a horizon that cannot be reached but only forever approached.

Let us now consider the two forms of opposition to the **originary hypothesis**. **Religious believers** affirm the origin of the human, but give it a **sacred name** that denies its anthropological status. **Unbelievers** deny the event of origin itself. In neither case can we glibly accuse our opponents of being **in denial**. The freedom to liberate ourselves from the sacred by thinking our origin as a **hypothesis** is surely an **ultimate possibility of language**. Is it a possibility of our time?

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Tarentino Transcendence

No. 42: Saturday, May 11, 1996

I have noticed in a number of contemporary films, particularly those written or directed by **Quentin Tarentino**, a new twist on the old cinematic conjunction of love and violence. To take *Pulp Fiction* as the most accomplished work of this genre, the emphasis is on displaying not vices but **virtue**, not resentment but **love**--but the love appears only within an antisocial context where violence is a sign of truth. The robber couple with whom the film begins and ends are not physically attractive or even particularly skilled at their trade, yet we are asked to see in their unshakeable loyalty to each other, even facing the gun of a professional killer, a model of human love. This love has includes sexuality, of course, but it is not erotic in the most important sense, for the spectator. Nor is the love between the professional killer (again) and the little girl in **Luc Besson's** *The Professional*, nor even that of the far more appealing young couple in *True Romance*, another Tarentino script. The finale here shows the couple with their child silhouetted against the sky on a paradisial beach; the basis of their relationship (funded by the drug money they take off with after all those who fight over it are dead) is not hedonism but **mutual commitment**.

A terrible resentment is expressed by someone brandishing a gun in a crowd. (One recalls that **André Breton** considered *shooting* into a crowd as the ultimate **surrealist** gesture.) In the past, Hollywood treated this resentment with condescending sympathy. How many times did a troubled gunman hand over his weapon to some paternal figure? Ah, the horror of the **patriarchy**. Now the gunmen have their revenge in films that wholly espouse the criminal's perspective according to which social relations are merely expressions of naked force and the rest of us who think otherwise deserve nothing but contempt. *Pulp Fiction* takes this perspective to a level of consistency that makes it almost a *Weltanschauung*. The underworld has honor, if only because any violation of its code of honor is punished by death. In this world alone is authentic interaction possible. The negotiations in the restaurant between the gunman and the robber couple are paradigmatic: they take place at gunpoint, where either party could presumably bring about the death of the other and his or her own. Meanwhile, the ordinary citizens hide under the tables. Everyone who is not a pathetic fool is a monstrous one, if we are to interpret as exemplary of *the rest of us* the perverts in the pawn shop. The gunman alone can love, because he is the **master of violence**.

And therefore he alone can **renounce violence**. The most interesting development of *Pulp Fiction* is the conversion of the black hitman (**Samuel Jackson**), a genuine case of the **prodigal son**. Is this conversion a **critique** of the ethical perspective of the film and of Tarentino's work up to this point? The most powerful criminal figure decides to change his life and simply disappears from the story, although not from the sequence of its narration. Thus he is present in the final scene, which chronologically follows directly on the first; but he has left the life and seems altogether forgotten by the time Travolta is killed by **Bruce Willis**. It is Willis, a master of violence but not a criminal, who replaces him as the film's protagonist. By saving the conversion scene until the end, even at the expense of its chronology, the

author gives it narrative finality while refusing to grant it reality in the world of the film.

It is scarcely a new phenomenon in cinema to depict the master of violence as superior to the *bourgeois* living in a contemptible world of illusion. What I think is a new departure is the **generation**, out of this world of criminal violence, of not merely a macho code of *honor among thieves*, but the values of **love** and even **religion**. As readers of this column may already suspect, there is something **originary** about this.

Popular culture differs from high culture by its naive appropriation of the sacrificial mechanism of ritual. **Crime stories** are exemplary of popular literature. We have all heard the cliché that the **detective story** reduces the world's problems to a single crime the solution of which expels the perturbing element and restores peace. Unfortunately this *profound* reflection fails to tell us in what way detective stories differ from art in general. **The esthetic is always sacrificial**; the difference is that high art forces us to identify our own desire with that of the "guilty" victim in such a way as to put the mechanism itself in question.

Through the *film noir*, the criminal was always aware of his guilt; aware, that is, that his defiance of the values of the larger society was a temporary deferral that would have no lasting effect. More recently we find films in which the criminals get away with their crimes, whether because the crimes are relatively venial, as in caper films, out of "*realism*," as in the *Godfather* series, or as a satire on the non-criminal world, as in the repulsive *Natural Born Killers* (also a **Tarentino** film that promotes, although in a less interesting way, the value of **true love**). But what we witness in *Pulp Fiction* is not the simple inversion of the values of the greater society, but their **regeneration**. Jackson does not invent his own religion, but his conversion is an act based on an experience wholly within his own world (the failure of the young man to hit either him or Travolta with six shots of a revolver) that involves no concession to the rest of society. And the act by which his conversion is expressed in the film is his peaceful resolution of the conflict with the robbers of the luncheonette where he and Travolta are dining. As he tells the husband, in the past, he would simply have shot him, whereas now he gives him the \$1500 in his wallet in exchange for the attache case he is carrying for his boss. Needless to say, this charitable act excludes from consideration the robbed and humiliated customers who cower on the floor throughout this dialogue.

Similarly, the love that appears in these films, even when it is benign toward the rest of society, makes no concessions to its ideas of respectability. The young couple in *True Romance* go from hell to paradise; they never fall into normalcy. *Pulp Fiction*'s more problematic treatment of these themes, particularly that of religion, reveals that popular culture's resentful turn to the criminal world can acquire epistemological sophistication. By dint of refusing not simply the return to the greater society but even an inverted version of it, the artist generate within the criminal world itself the fundamental violence-deferring institutions.

The superficial lesson of this development is that the population has grown so cynical (read: resentful) about the social order that it is ready to learn ethics from criminals. But it is more useful to observe the increased generativity of popular culture as a sign of its vitality. For the **sacrificial regeneration of our origin** is what culture is all about. Whether or not this film's modest problematization of its violent world signals a transference of cultural power from moribund high culture to vigorous popular culture, or even a major step in Tarentino's own esthetic evolution, remains to be seen.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Female Genital Mutilation: Cultural Relativism and Moral Absolutism

No. 43: Saturday, May 18, 1996

The recent discussion on the **GA**list initiated by **Yue-hong Zhang** concerning **Fauziya Kasinga**, a young Togolese woman who came to the US illegally to avoid **FGM** (*female genital mutilation* or "female circumcision") suggests that **GA** can be of use to professionals of *anthropos* as well as those of *humanitas*.

This case holds a double-edged lesson for those who think about the human, that is, for all of us. By revealing the limits of **victimary thinking**, it lends plausibility to a **generative** model of the relationship of morality to cultural otherness.

There have been two reactions to the practice of **FGM**. Sensitized by feminism to the unequal treatment of women, we condemn it as barbarous and inhuman. But there lurks in the Western mind, particularly in that of the ethnologist who has devoted years to tribal cultures, a guilty feeling that even with the best intentions and the clearest justification, the imposition of Western standards on these cultures is imperialistic and destructive.

The two attitudes, which I will call simply the **moral** and the **ethical**, are necessary components of a valid understanding of social phenomena. They can never be altogether reconciled; their interplay defines the ethical evolution of human society. We have become used to hearing that there is no such evolution, that things get worse rather than better, and that any moral progress the West may have realized is more than made up for by its depredations in the Third World and in the world of nature. Such victimary thinking is unhelpful.

Let us rather examine the relevance of both these models to our understanding of human societies in general. In the first case, this means judging all societies by the same standard, considering our moral intuition to be **universal** rather than *Western*. This young woman's appearance on our shores dramatizes the fact that we live in one world, that people choose every day with their feet which societies they find the most liveable. However respectful we may be of foreign customs, Kasinga's case for refugee status forces us to **enter into dialogue** with these customs concerning their moral significance. That she finds it in her interest to adopt our standards rather than those of "*her own*" culture makes clear that the relativistic model of cultures as the equivalent of **Leibniz's windowless monads** is no longer viable.

What then is the relevance of the second reaction--articulated on our list by **Kieran Shanahan**--that warns us to beware of condemning even the apparently barbarous customs of other societies lest we destroy these societies altogether? This is indeed a valuable attitude--but one that should be applied to societies we identify with as well as those we see as our victims, to the winners as well as the losers in the contests of history. No society fully incarnates the originary model of moral reciprocity, and no

society ever will. The greatest civilizations engaged in practices we find repugnant: **slavery**, **human sacrifice**, not to speak of those specifically directed at women such as **foot-binding** in China, **suttee** in India... But cultural relativism, rightly understood, obliges us to view all these practices in their socio-historical context. In order to progress to a time when slavery would be abolished and women would be given the vote and an equal chance in the job market, world civilization had to pass through certain stages.

Economics explains these stages in terms of the extraction and preservation of a surplus. Originary ethics explains them more profoundly in terms of mimetic relations. Practices like female circumcision that inscribe social restrictions on a woman's body have a biological basis in woman's reproductive capacity, but only insofar as it enters into the context of social interaction. Bodily mutilation, as Ms. Shanahan points out, occurs in both sexes for different cultural reasons; men are symbolically liberated from the material limits of their bodies, women confined within these limits. But however much women's bodies may be treated as objects, their minds remain gifted with the universal human capacity to participate in their own cultural dialogue. That it is women who generally initiate the practice of female circumcision for their younger relatives demonstrates their espousal of the norms of their society. If we feel obliged to respect their right to this espousal, we should be willing to show the same respect for the members of earlier phases of our own society.

Cultural relativism is a **structuralist** move, a form of *bracketing* that allows us to understand cultures as totalities by mentally cutting them off from moral dialogue with ourselves. It should not become a pretext for the abdication of moral responsibility in cases where dialogue is necessary, nor a means of defending historical losers against winners regardless of their relative merits.

An extreme example of cultural relativism misapplied is the contrast between our good will toward the **Aztecs** and our condemnatory attitude toward the Spanish conquistadors. **Montezuma** is a tragic hero, **Cortez** a bloodthirsty scoundrel. From an authentically cultural-relativistic viewpoint, it is no doubt useful to understand why the Aztecs carried out human sacrifice on so vast a scale. **Martin Harris** explains that in the absence of large edible animals in Central America, the value of humans as sources of concentrated protein became an important social fact: *noblesse oblige* required the socially important to offer tasty morsels to their clientele.

We need not approve human sacrifice to understand its structural utility. But we must take another step. Once we have understood why the Aztecs "*needed*" to sacrifice **10,000 human beings per year**, we should bite the bullet and agree that, whatever the defects of Cortez's brand of Christianity, it represented a **higher level of morality** than the society he defeated--something he could only have done with the collaboration of the Aztecs' neighbors, who had good reason to forgo ethnic solidarity with their butchers.

The moral and the ethical attitudes can never be altogether reconciled, but they may be usefully **articulated**. Insofar as we wish to understand societies in themselves as functioning entities, we must consider their sacrificial practices as factors of stability. At the same time, that both we and the members of these societies share the same fundamental moral model is demonstrated by the fact that over time, these practices are increasingly abandoned as morally repugnant--which is why we consider the **Nazis** worse than the **Aztecs**, and **slavery** worse in 19th-century **America** than in ancient **Athens**. Over the long haul, there is indeed morality in history; in the short term, the moral must make its peace with the ethical order. For we recall that the originary source of our moral intuition, the scene of the reciprocal

exchange of language that defines us as human, was in the first place a means to prevent us--and by "us" I mean especially males--from **killing each other**. The sublimity of our moral ideals and the worst horrors of our ethical organizations are bound together by this common origin.

To the extent that we are not merely students of society but participants in it, we cannot deny the validity of our moral intuition. Once Kasinga's case places us in dialogue with societies that practice FGM, we cannot shy away from judging those societies by the moral standards we apply to our own--not without noting the irony of a young woman fleeing genital mutilation to a country where young people of both sexes pay good money to have holes pierced and pieces of metal inserted into these same organs. (See [Chronicles VII](#).)

My proposal is to replace victimary thinking not by Western triumphalism, but by an understanding of the common originary source of all our moral intuitions. The case of Fauziya Kasinga, a harbinger of more to come, suggests that this faith will increasingly be a prerequisite for constructive engagement in the intercultural and interpersonal dialogues of our era.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Is GA Impossible?

No. 44: Saturday, May 25, 1996

People often ask why **GA** remains attached to the notion of an **originary event**, a hypothesis they find so strong that it resembles an act of faith. I have given many defenses of the plausibility of the hypothesis in my books and in these columns. But since **GA** purports to trace all human phenomena to their originary roots, it cannot dismiss the intuition that makes skeptics turn away from this hypothesis as epiphenomenal.

Unlike other theoretical modes, **GA** stands at the point of intersection of the **social sciences**, which deal essentially with repetitive phenomena, and the **humanities**, which deal with unique ones. This is a locus that until now only **religion** has occupied. This fact explains why the field of religious study is the one on which **GA** has thus far made its greatest impact. The principal organ of **Girardian** thought is the *Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R)*, and the place at **UCLA** where **GA** is the most welcome is in the *Center for the Study of Religion*, which has just concluded its first year of operation with a colloquium on **Buddhism and Christianity**. (Let me take this opportunity to express my appreciation and admiration to **David Rapoport** whose able and devoted direction has gotten the **Center** off to a flying start.)

But to say that **GA** occupies the place of religion is to evoke a danger. Those whom the Gods would make mad, they inspire to become their rivals. **Rivalry with Gods**, from **Lucifer** and **Adam** eating the apple to the **Tower of Babel** and the countless examples from Classical mythology, is the most critical religious theme. The distinction between **divine** and **human** is one that is continually challenged yet always preserved because it is the foundation of the human system of signification. To use the sign is to expel its object from our world, to defer its consumption long enough for it to be endowed with a **Being** that transcends its material incarnation. God is the sacred that remains after the sacrificial object has been divided up and assimilated. Without the separation between the transcendent world of meanings and the sublunar world of things, there can be no culture, no humanity.

Is it possible then for a mode of thought to occupy the locus of religion without incurring the penalties of rivalry? In **Euripides' Bacchae**, **Pentheus** is torn to pieces by the **Maenads** led by his own mother. As a character in the play, **Dionysos** is to blame for this violence, but this is only to say that Dionysos is a privileged projection of **human** violence. A challenge to the god is a challenge to his human followers, in this case the women of Thebes, whose Dionysian cult differs little from a rebellion. By claiming that its explanations of human phenomena neither ignore the cognitive value of religion nor defer to it, is **originary thinking** not making an equally hubristic challenge?

Apprehension of this challenge explains the resistance to the **originary hypothesis** on the part of persons who have no difficulty with the **big bang** theory of the origin of the universe or with the concept of *punctuated evolution* that rejects the old idea that new species emerge by differentiating themselves

imperceptibly from their predecessors. For it is one thing to claim that we are all descended from the same woman (the "*Eve*" hypothesis based on mitochondrial **RNA**), and another to speak of an **originary scene**. Here we come uncomfortably close to the singularities on which religions are founded; we recoil from their implicit rivalry. It is not really a matter of deciding whether the originary scene took place only once or whether it happened ten times in ten different places. If ten, why not a hundred, or a thousand? The real point is to submerge the event in a cloud of other events so that it becomes a **non-event**, deferring once more, in the manner of the social sciences, the **event-nature of human origin**.

Persons who think this way rarely claim they are doing so in deference to religion. The confidently atheistic scientist may well consider the **originary hypothesis** as *religion in disguise*. But Voltairean protestations to the contrary, this stance implicitly acquiesces in a **division of labor** that leaves it to religion to provide a narrative account of the scene of our origin. The denial that such a scene ever took place does not explain the religious reconstruction of such scenes. Indeed, the "*scientific*" study of religion, taken up with such confidence by **Max Mÿller** *et al* in the previous century, seems to have been quietly dropped from the agenda of the social sciences. The claim might be made that this is done out of "*sensitivity*" to personal beliefs that cannot be tested by science. But *sensitivity* is just another way of referring to the same old reluctance. The fear of offending others and the fear of **offending the gods** are variants of the same **deferral of mimetic rivalry** that generated the **name-of-God** in the first place.

Can one put **GA** in the place of religion without occupying the same place as the founders of religions? Can one conceive the **originary hypothesis** without *hubris*? Is not the inevitable result of its formulation to make of it, however impersonally expressed, a form of **personal witnessing**? (In a future column I will examine the problems of situating **GA** within the opposition between the intellectual asceticism of **Popper's falsifiability-criterion** and the textual memory of the humanities.) **Nietzsche** was the first to face this modern problematic: the need to occupy the central locus of thought puts the thinker in rivalry with the gods. As a result, Nietzsche went mad. Is **GA** a similar example of *la folie des grandeurs*?

But the very fact we can include such matters in rational dialogue is proof of **GA's** contribution to our self-understanding. **Originary thinking** is the only form of thought that can **think its own impossibility**. A form of thought that recognizes the utopian nature of its ambitions--through a deepening of **Kant's** conception of the *critical*--can help to wean us from the brutally self-confident utopias that have wrought such havoc throughout this century.

In the first issue of *Anthropoetics*, I suggested that religion and ethics are founded on **Pascal's** wager: we are all *embarquŽs*, all in the **foxholes**, all faced with **crisis**. **GA**, in contrast to these modes, discusses crisis from without, proposes no ethic other than the end of crisis, the deferral of violence. Its aim is to express the **objective truth** of the human, but by an analogy to **Heisenberg's uncertainty principle**, **objective truth** and **ethical functionality** are mutually limiting: like the position and momentum of a particle, beyond a certain point the truth and ethical value of an idea become inversely dependent on each other.

Yet this uncertainty diminishes over time, and cannot help but be diminished by the very fact of its formulation. **GA** is *impossible* because it is the first form of thought to recognize the **paradoxical** nature of thought. But paradox is stasis only within the **logic of identity**. Paradox, the non-structural structure of the Heraclitean-Hegelian **dialectic**, guarantees to human thought and history its eternal dynamism. To the extent that **GA** contributes to our understanding of this dynamism, it does not destroy it but drives it

to a higher level. This is something that religion, bound as it is to narrative form, cannot do.

The impossible rivalry of originary thinking with the sacred is the ultimate proof of its necessity as a **minimization** of the sacred. Indeed, it is so necessary that the present formulation of it need not be recognized in order for history to enact it. To take it as one person's thought would be to situate it in the very realm of **mimetic rivalry** that declares its impossibility. It can only become accepted as *always already* obvious, when people come to realize that they have been engaged in originary thinking *sans le savoir*. As it's unlikely I'll be around by that time, perhaps my name can be remembered as the acronym jokingly devised by **Ken Mayers** in the first **GA** seminar: **Generative Anthropology, the New Science**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Guest columnist: Richard van Oort

Science and Culture

or

How Real is Real? Reflections on the "Sokal Debate"

No. 45: Saturday, June 1, 1996

Recently, Yue-hong Zhang brought to the attention of the **GAlist** a controversy sparked by **Alan Sokal**, a physicist at New York University, who submitted to the journal *Social Text* a parodically intended essay relating postmodernism to quantum mechanics. Unwittingly, the editors of *Social Text* accepted and published the paper, only to be subsequently humiliated by Sokal's public disclosure that the entire piece was an elaborate ruse. Far from celebrating the demise of objectivity, truth, and the real world, Sokal believes strongly in these old-fashioned ideas. His essay was penned as a satirical attack on the incoherence of postmodern denials of fundamental scientific ontology. The editors' inability to catch the irony was, he suggested, evidence of the superficiality of the postmodern stance itself. In the pages of the popular media, there followed something of a "debate" in which the two parties--the postmodern and the scientific--exchanged viewpoints via quips and barely concealed insults. In the excerpts posted to the **GAlist** by Yue-hong Zhang, Sokal represents the commonsense view of scientific realism. On the other side, **Stanley Fish** emerges as the principal defender of the radical postmodern intellectuals.

Though I have no wish to take sides in this debate, I would like to comment on the fundamental philosophical and anthropological question buried beneath all the fireworks. What I want to suggest is that the debate, which reflects a traditional opposition between realism and idealism, provides us with a particularly good opportunity for some **originary analysis**. By referring to the **originary hypothesis**, we can not only unravel some of the confusions that seem to lie at the heart of the debate, but also show the kernel of truth in both scientific realism and cultural idealism.

The trick is to avoid thinking of the debate as an ontological standoff or stalemate. As long as we assume that we must either become scientific realists or cultural idealists, *i.e.*, as long as we believe we must accept the priority of the world or accept the priority of language, we remain in the presence of an ontological standoff. What is needed is an anthropological specification of the idealist's too simple rejection of nature and the real world. The real motivation behind the postmodern denial of nature is the human need for culture.

Culture--humanity--begins where biology ends. In the moment where the urge for biological satisfaction--the desire to eat--endangers the very social configuration of the group, this configuration must itself be represented. Imposed on the biological scene between subject and (appetitive) object is the minimal **linguistic triangle** between self, other and world. This is the formal basis of all human culture.

But this real anthropological and cultural insight is wasted when it is taken to imply that the cultural and the natural are on an ontological par. Postmodern critiques of science contribute little to the overall project of anthropological reflection. And as attacks on the scientific study of nature, they are utterly toothless.

How can this anthropological synthesis help us sort through some of the classical metaphysical oppositions so sensationally played out in Sokal's parodic prank and the response it generated? To begin to answer this question, let us turn to the cultural theorist's viewpoint. Since Stanley Fish is a key participant in the above mentioned debate, I'll take him as a (generalizable) example.

Fish pins his argument on the statement that "it is no contradiction to say that something is socially constructed and also real." He then provides us with an analogy much favoured by philosophers of social reality--the game. Baseball is clearly socially constructed, but it is also clearly real. Balls and strikes exist. Yet they only exist because we agree that they exist. So reality, Fish concludes, is socially constructed.

But the problem with this analogy is that it refers only to **institutional facts**. Baseball is a reality only so long as we agree that it is a meaningful sport to play and to watch. If overnight everyone decided that baseball was a pointless pastime, then baseball would drop out of our social reality. The concept of balls and strikes would not exist because they would be of no relevance to us.

But what about the real world? What about the stuff of natural science? Can we make the same analogy here as we did with the institution of baseball? If overnight everyone decided that H₂O was a meaningless signifier, would water cease to exist? Clearly not. The labels and models that we give to the world of nature may change; models and labels are after all human constructions. But the worldly facts to which these models and labels refer do not themselves vanish out of existence. Water would continue to exist even if we did not call it "water" or "H₂O" or whatever.

But then what is all the fuss about? Here's where a little originary analysis can help us out. The ace up the culturalist's sleeve (one that is flourished with alarming frequency as well as with mind-bogglingly unabashed confidence) is the fact that language itself is socially constructed. We can always deconstruct the metaphysics behind the realist's perspective by showing that the realist must rely on (socially constructed) language to point toward indubitable nature. In itself, however, this is but a trivial truth. The more powerful perspective is to understand the nature of the relation between the human, the world, and language without suggesting that the three terms may be reduced to a more primary ontology involving only one of them. This is in fact the real source of the idealist-realist debate. The naturalistic temptation is to reduce humanity and language to the brute causality of functions that are intrinsic to the natural world. The opposite temptation--that of the cultural theorist--is to make the facts of the external world internal to the creative and intentional categories of human language and culture. These opposing tendencies--and the ontological dualism implied by them--underpin the debate that has generated the controversy surrounding Sokal's recent "hoax."

How then is the link forged between humanity, language, and the world? Different disciplines study different aspects of this triadic relationship. But they are all ultimately related. The kernel of truth in the perspective of culturalists such as Fish is the assertion that the general human project begins with trust and agreement before any other derivative project can get underway. Be it baseball on a Sunday afternoon, or nuclear physics at the particle accelerator in Geneva, these projects exist only insofar as

human cooperation exists.

But this insight, which should lie at the core of a truly critical **anthropology**, evaporates wistfully into a mystical idealism when it is presented as a definitive rejection of the ontological assumptions of natural science. By demonstrating the observer-related objectivity of baseball, we have not levelled the playing field between natural science and sociology.

Nor should we accept the condescension implied by Fish's passive and pragmatic conclusion that the cardinal rule is to uphold our professional academic boundaries. Thus, where scientists must believe in the real world in order to continue their research, we culturalists must study this belief and expose the ideological assumptions behind it. In scenarios such as this, it is hard not to applaud Sokal's "transgression" into the culturalist's territory. We must not reduce the debate to the smug superiority of the observer whose research must be protected from falling into the hands of the observed. The scientist is not some exotic species whose activities must be sheltered from the harmfully enlightening observations of the onlooking culturalist. If the scientist gets the last laugh in this anthropological charade, one hopes that the culturalist has learnt his anthropological lesson.

This lesson is that we are ultimately in this together. The crucial question is to explain why cultural critics and scientists alike can engage in a discussion about representation and truth at all. That is, it is a question about the general anthropological scope of all cultural reflection.

What makes humans cultural beings is the necessity for such reflection. The model proposed by the originary hypothesis is that representation emerges as the minimal institution of human agreement--the agreement to defer crisis by designating an appetitive object as sacred. The minimal condition for an awareness of sacrality is that we have a language in which to conceive it. Hence the originary sign indicates not merely the worldly presence of the appetitive object; it is also a designation of the sacred--the signifier of what is henceforth forbidden to precultural, or wholly biological, appetite.

The culturalists are thus correct in their assumption that language and human thought are coeval. But they err when they hypostatize this insight as complete in itself. The originary sign is never complete, it is but an opening onto the reality of the external world. The sign designates sacrality, but it also points to the preexisting appetitive object. By pointing beyond itself to the sacred presence of the object, the sign creates the transcendent locus of human "otherness." This cultural construct is imposed on the **worldly reality** of the appetitive object. The object existed before and continues to exist after the sign has been created. Language originates as a transcendence of material reality, but it does not abolish it. The symbolic representation of the appetitive object leads to the reality of its eventual material distribution.

This double aspect of the sign--its designation of transcendental otherness and its indication of a materially present object--allows us to synthesize the twin perspectives of the culturalist and the scientist. In designating an object as other, the originary sign stands at the opening of the human project. The cultural spinoff from this minimal linguistic institution is infinite; there is no preset limit to the cultural objects that can be generated once the original act of symbolization has taken place. But it is a mistake to believe that the sign--representation--exists in itself like an a priori form devoid of all historical and worldly basis. The originary sign takes place on a concrete material scene. It does not merely create **anthropological meaning**--it also refers to a **worldly object**. It is the sign's **indicative** quality, its reference to an independently existing reality, that is a precondition of all representation. The cultural world emerges within the space of "otherness" created by the sign that separates it from its referent. But the referent nevertheless exists, and modern science presents its models in context of this fact. Language

is the origin of culture. But it is also the representation of a world existing prior to that representation. The current trend for "anthropologizing" science is best understood as an invitation to **originary thinking**. For it is here that human history truly begins, not in the ultimately fruitless deconstruction of the ontological assumptions of natural science.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Programming and Ponds

No. 46: Saturday, June 8, 1996

Few activities are as absorbing to the participant yet as uninteresting to the nonparticipant as computer programming. For a couple of years after I got my first computer in 1984 (a Kaypro 10 running **CP/M** on a 4 MHz Z-80), my wife suffered through many lengthy descriptions of programming techniques and implementations. After writing dozens of assembly-language programs, I briefly went into the software business with an associate, the only result of which was a TSR package that I wrote and he got paid for. But what turned me away from programming was the penetration of *Graphical User Interface* (**GUI**) from its Macintosh enclave into the PC world. DOS graphics was a simple affair where a window was just a box (you were supposed to save what was underneath), but with the advent of **Windows** and its multi-megabyte applications, the low-level programming I liked became impractical.

For several years, I limited myself to writing what may be the last **DOS graphic card games** (with cards that look like: [7h], except that DOS is kind enough to provide a little heart symbol), and putting together some **QBasic kludges** to calculate hit statistics for *Anthropoetics*. But now, thanks to **John DeCuir's** Computer Science Association's **Java** course, I have finally made the leap into **object-oriented programming** (OOP) and have learned how to put an "OK" button on the screen.

There is a lesson here about the flexibility of the market system. As I have often noted, as soon as one becomes frustrated with its limitations, it tends to generate new degrees of freedom that permit one to extend it, as you "extend" an object in **OOP**. If the academic community won't fund a journal, the **WWW** makes it possible to run a journal without funds. If software creation is taken over by twenty-programmer teams writing megabyte applications, the appearance of **Java** offers a little window of opportunity for amateurs to add applets to their Web pages. I have no illusions that my [DominoApplet](#) (selected for [Gamelan](#)'s annual "best applets" CD-ROM) will lead to a seven-figure salary. But the **WWW** adds enough degrees of freedom to our communication system to leave room for these little amateur efforts.

This leads to a few reflections on **Robert Frank's** recently popular *The Winner-Take-All Society*. In an earlier book, Frank described our society by the metaphor of *Choosing One's Pond*, noting that in each pond=place of business, the big fish must pay "rent" to the smaller fry: salaries for top producers are diminished by the need to reward less productive personnel for accepting their inferiority. This pattern privileges *local* prestige; people tend to choose their "ponds" by the degree to which they prefer to devote their energy either to acquiring status or to enjoying the pleasures of life made possible by the inflated salaries at the bottom of the ladder. (Of course these are lower than those at the top, but the salary differential is far less than the productivity differential.)

Frank's new book, written with Philip Cook, contradicts the earlier one. Now, he suggests, status has become *global*, so that rather than being available as the reward of hard work, it is a goal only few can

reach. If we are all stuck in one big pond, those on top have no need to reward the others lower down.

Surely there are trends in the contemporary marketplace that support the winner-take-all theory, notably the increase in salary differentials and the universalization of the **star-system**. But "ponds" still exist, and a more comprehensive theory inspired by **originary thinking** can synthesize these two apparently contradictory observations.

In the **winner-take-all** model, many compete for few prizes, and the losers' energy is wasted. In the days of **Herbert Spencer** and *Social Darwinism*, this was the common model of capitalism: *the survival of the fittest*. Traditional economic doctrine gives no reward for second place: if my firm makes widgets for a penny less than yours, I don't just make more profit than you, I drive you out of business.

How then did the *pond* become a metaphor for the **marketplace**? The pond world is a metaphor for **consumer society** ruled by the value of *prestige*, or **mimetic envy**. I must pay you a premium in exchange for the homage due one higher on the totem pole. In this situation, it is both worth my while to purchase prestige from you and worth your while to sell it. Since my higher status does you no good, it is understandable that you must be rewarded with the equivalent of bonus pay for undesirable shifts or work assignments.

But the star system does not operate on prestige, but on *celebrity*. How ever much we rail against those who are *famous for being famous*, celebrity is a not-so-distant derivative of the **sacred**. My boss's prestige confers no benefits on me, but the **star** sheds light on all of us. In providing a commonly recognized object for our **love and resentment**, the star performs the task allocated to sacred figures in all societies. When we speak of the expansion of the star system, we refer to the penetration of the aura of sacrality into formerly profane areas, to the *rationalization of sacrality* in the age of the mass media.

The little ponds we work in are increasingly less insulated from the winner-take-all world outside. Every day, in the academic world and elsewhere, more energy is devoted to *stardom*, the concentration of media attention and mimetic attraction on oneself. The pond system, which dilutes and spreads prestige, no longer affords protection against the invasion of sacrality--which, as all good Girardians know, is but another term for our potential **violence**.

But in a system where the intensity of competition sets the entry fee to the contests for stardom so high, the social order is willing to invest in means of relief. Which leads me back to **Java**, a new platform-independent language created by **Sun Microsystems** as the language of the **Internet**. If my little applet can be rewarded--not with money, but with *visibility* that might be of real financial value to a software developer in search of new contracts--this is because of the growth of the **Internet** as a demotically **interactive** means of communication. There are *hot* pages on the Net, but no **sacrality**: in **McLuhan's** terms, cyberspace is the *coolest* medium of all. The shift of marketing and other resources to the Net allows us to anticipate a welcome desacralization of the overheated world of the **one-way communications media**. In the meanwhile, keep checking my [Java page](#) for new applets.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Humanities Profession

No. 47: Saturday, June 15, 1996

The purpose of these columns has been not merely intellectual but spiritual: the subordination of **resentment** to **love**, the critical function of all cultural activities. Different institutions perform this function more or less sacrificially, that is, by conditioning love more or less by the discharge of resentment. But one can't just measure the sacrificiality of an institution by counting the bodies. The most useful criterion is **productivity**. The central premise of **GA** is that for human beings, in contrast to other species, the critical problem is with each other rather than with nature. In other words, we must stop fighting before we can start eating; our interest in **nature** is subordinated to our concern with **culture**. By the same token, our culturally mediated, reflective interest in the natural world is an indefinitely rich means of deferring our self-destructive discharge of resentment against one another.

Whence the usefulness of the productivity criterion. As a general rule, whether it be a marriage or a corporation, a successful institution deals with the world outside it ("eating") while an unsuccessful one is absorbed by its internal relations ("fighting"). Couples in love talk about their experiences; couples with problems talk about *the relationship*.

This paradigm applies to institutions much larger than couples: for example, to the **Humanities profession**, which in recent years seems more and more concerned with internal relations and less and less with productive reflection on the world outside. Last month, the graduate students of my own **UCLA French Department** organized probably the most elaborate and varied (if not the most expensive) conference in the Department's history. It is impressive to see our students performing these logistic feats; yet I look back with more than nostalgia to a time when the years of graduate study were conceived as training for writing books rather than organizing conferences.

But in most cases where institutions become inwardly-focused and stray from their productive mission, it is not because people have gotten worse (although in the long run, the personnel adapts to the institution), but because the institution's **form** has come to interfere with its productive **content**.

I can be more specific. I don't think there is much of a crisis in the **social sciences**, or in fields like **history**, **philosophy**, or **linguistics** that have a clearly defined subject matter. I would even venture to say that there is not much of a crisis in **English** departments, as compared with language departments like my own. With the increasing integration of France, Germany, and Italy into the larger structure of the European community, the corresponding departments lose their sense of purpose as autonomous units. As a result, professional success tends to go to those who can reach beyond the boundaries of these units. But since these boundaries remain, the reaching-beyond is carried out largely by informal means, that is, by personal **networking** with members of other units. The traditional serenity of academic life is sacrificed to the urgency of escaping claustrophobic isolation. Hours of reflection are replaced by hours on the phone, the slow maturing of books put aside in the rush of conference papers.

This problem is compounded by demography. For years, the expansion of graduate programs was fed less by demand from below than by the production of PhD's from above. With the withdrawal of confidence from academic institutions begun in the wake of 1968 and reinforced by the budgetary concerns of the 90s, this academic Ponzi scheme is slowly collapsing. As many formerly productive graduate and undergraduate programs fall below **critical mass**, large numbers of junior job-seekers struggle for survival. This situation is conducive to trendiness rather than originality or profundity. The intensification of competition in a context of a dwindling sense of professional mission tends to discredit traditional scholarship in favor of visible "**relevance.**"

Relevance has been sought largely in **victimary studies** or **PC** because of the fundamentally sacrificial nature of culture itself. Humanities professors are professionally interested in the idea that culture is important. But the culture of the postmodern era is essentially a **victimary counter-culture**. Those who care the most about culture are those who, rightly or wrongly, feel the most victimized. The recent passion for third-world or *post-colonial* culture reflects the fact that only in the third world is culture the **primary social product**. The cultural centrality and consequent richness of Haitian "voodoo" or **Vodou**, the subject of an impressive recent exhibit at UCLA (supervised by folklorist **Donald Cosentino**), reflects the worldly hopelessness of Haitian society. Conversely, the cultural poverty of roughly parallel phenomena like **Pentecostalism** in our own society reflects the marginality of culture in modern market economies.

This professional interest in victims is a convenient mask for power-seeking on the **Bolshevik** model: the Humanities professor as the **vanguard of the cultural proletariat**. The hold of extreme left-wing rhetoric on the profession has been little affected by the failure of Communism (I wonder how many colleagues are praying for a Communist victory in the Russian elections!) But as I have suggested before in these columns, by the time you begin complaining about something, you have already found the rhetoric that will subvert it. Thus I predict that the current victimary vogue doesn't have much longer to run. PC has lost its *raison-d'être*; the sensitivity it has taught us allows us to address our social differences without it.

But these differences can no longer be addressed in the cultural rhetorics of the old European nation-states. Not PC but awareness of reality leads us to abandon **Eurocentrism**. This does not mean that we should downplay the central importance of the legacy of the West in the modern world. **Japan's** full-fledged and **China's** tentative market economies derive directly from Western sources. But today this Western legacy belongs to the world as a whole.

Hence it seems clear that the next generation will learn to live with fewer professors of **French** or **German**. At present, I think the most practical measure would be to accelerate the merging of small units into large ones, partially dissolving the institutional isolation that privileges sociability over reflection. Such merging must reflect not ultimate but proximate compatibilities. Thus we may not see departments of **Generative Anthropology** in the near future, but I am sure there will soon spring up departments of **European Languages and Cultures**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Seinfeld and Sacrality

No. 48: Saturday, June 29, 1996

Just as history is seldom made by nice people, the **sacred** is rarely found in comfortable places. That is its cruelty, the cruelty of our own desire.

The masters of culture, which today means popular culture, are aware of the paradoxical tensions implicit in the displacement of the sacred. One of the most astute of these is **Jerry Seinfeld**, for the past several years the baby-boomers' favorite comedian. The vagaries of sacrality on his show reflect the historically unprecedented intensity of our **obsession with celebrity**. But the term *obsession* is pretentious in its implication that *we* are suffering from a mental disorder that *my* discourse would cure. Those who promote the return to traditional forms of sacrality find in such obsessions the mark of **decadence**. But our society as a whole cannot remain indifferent to the expanded interactions facilitated by the dynamic of the market system. We must seek the sacred, not idolatrously *within* this system, but by working through its operations of **transcendence**, the movement beyond material exchange that is the negative essence of the human, and which our systems of representation reveal to us.

A recent *Seinfeld* episode involved **George Costanza**, the most morally deficient of the series' characters, in a bizarrely improbable relationship with a popular young film actress whom I shall call **X** to avoid contaminating my own discourse with the sacrality of a name repeated in a quasi-incantatory manner throughout this episode. George, who is already engaged to an young woman far more desirable than he appears capable of attracting, is informed by an acquaintance that **X** is both lonely and predisposed to bald, funny little men of George's description. Overwhelmed by the news, he can think of nothing else; he will do anything to make **X's** acquaintance, including haranguing her friend immobilized in a hospital bed. And the actress herself indeed appears twice in the episode. At first she plays the materialization of George's fantasy as he watches for the nth time a video of one of her films. But the second time, she meets him in the flesh on a bench in Central Park, where she seems enchanted with his idiotic playing on the word "manure"--a no doubt unconscious reminder of the **Agricultural Fair** scene in *Madame Bovary*.

Thus the barrier between the sacred world of media celebrity and the profane world of anonymity is breached. *Seinfeld* continually plays on the paradoxical interplay between the eponymous hero's own contacts with the celebrity world and his participation in the anonymous community of the show. (**Kramer** too breaches this barrier on occasion without being affected by it, as when he appears in an episode of *Murphy Brown*.) In another episode, **Joe DiMaggio** is sighted dunking doughnuts at a nearby table. But the great man does not actually appear; he dwells in a higher circle of sacrality that cannot interact with the profane world.

The actress slaps George and walks off in disgust when she learns he is engaged, just as, several episodes later, she hangs up on him when he calls to ask her out on the day after (!) his late fiancée's funeral.

Nonetheless, she participates sufficiently in his life to give him a taste of the sacred denied the vast majority of the show's spectators. This differs from earlier-generation situation comedies, where celebrities were treated with unabashed hero-worship and maintained, as DiMaggio is here, strictly as *external mediators* of the show's characters. This formula extended even to such shows as *I Love Lucy* that dealt, like *Seinfeld*, with the world of show business. **Desi**, and **Lucy** on occasion, had a *show*, but that did not diminish the distance between them and their **star** guests. The **X** episode illustrates the passage from *external* to *internal* mediation, where the worship of celebrity has become contingent on imaginary participation in its aura.

My first reaction was to deplore the internalization of mediation as tending to increase the resentment of those whose desire for real contact with celebrity cannot so easily be satisfied. But *Seinfeld's* treatment of this issue, as of so many others, cuts both ways. No doubt to make **X** a possible date for **George Costanza**, as though the celebrity of **Jason Alexander** were that of the character he plays, cuts off the world of *Seinfeld* from that of the spectator. But by the same token, it banalizes celebrity as a sacred category. **X** behaves as any other woman would when confronted with George's moral abyss; her purported predilection for his "type" merely sets up her condemnation of his character. In traditional cultural forms, sacred figures, representatives of our originary model of moral reciprocity, enter as *dei ex machina* to preserve the social order. **X's** slap too affirms this order, but this is an affirmation any other woman could have made in her place.

Thus **X** only confirms our judgment that George is the exemplary *Seinfeld* character, a failed solipsist for whom others are not objects of love but unavowed mediators and ever-threatening rivals. Yet the four principal characters form a **community**. It is supremely reassuring that they return each week, having learned and forgotten nothing of their mutual inhumanity in the previous episode. Their threats to abandon the group, like their fleeting contacts with celebrity, express aspirations toward *real life* that we know they can never fulfill; like dysfunctional **Peter Pans**, they draw us into a world where we know that our crimes against each other will always be forgiven. Their constant association is in itself a sign of the mutual love that is the ultimate cement of any community. Thus in its deadpan cynicism, *Seinfeld*, like all significant cultural phenomena, promotes **love** over **resentment**.

Thanks to my friends **Lewis Weinberg** and **Pary Pezechkian** for showing me through their *Seinfeld* archives!

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Happy Anniversary!

No. 49: Saturday, July 6, 1996

This **first anniversary** of these *Chronicles* is an appropriate moment for taking stock. Has this column been of cultural value? in other words, has it helped to promote the cause of **love** over **resentment**?

The **GAlist** has grown from 35 to over 170, and in June the *Anthropoetics* WWW site reached a new high of over 3000 accesses, exclusive of images. This modest expansion shows that there is indeed an audience for **originary thinking** in, or in between, the **humanities** and the **social sciences**.

For this anniversary column, I thought it would be useful to discuss a few underlying preoccupations of originary anthropology not altogether apparent from the definition of the human as *the deferral of violence through representation*.

The Critique of Liberalism

Some of my best friends, many subscribers to this list, and the vast majority of the *intelligentsia* are **liberals**. But current debates about affirmative action, welfare, and balanced budgets reflect the **waning of liberalism**; its fundamental intuitions are becoming counter-productive. The clearest sign of this is the increasingly **sacrificial** nature of liberal rhetoric, its increasing **demonization of its opponents**.

Liberalism is a deliberately anti-sacrificial, anti-ritual outlook with roots in the **Enlightenment**. Its fundamental *discovery procedure* is to search for the traces of the sacrificial in secular society. Any sign of disadvantage is interpreted as *prima facie* evidence of **victimization**. In a liberal polity, the vocation of the political order is to make up for this victimization by the granting of material compensation.

Liberal **care for victims** is not a minor accomplishment. A critique of liberalism must offer an alternative procedure for rooting out the sacrificial residues in our society. When is it appropriate to identify a class of victims? If our fundamental criterion of humanity is *participation in the social dialogue*, we must applaud the presence in the political conversation of members of groups previously excluded. The "majority" can no longer speak about "minorities" as *external others*; everything said must be sayable in the presence of all. But the newly included cannot inherit **victimary rights** from the previously excluded, however recent the inclusion. Dialogue is a *postritual* activity; it may have *losers*, but no *victims*. The external rhetoric of victimage is never appropriate from within.

In the current context, the Republican--and now Clintonian--rhetoric about balancing the budget "*for the sake of our children*" signifies less a concern for budgets or children than a need to transcend the liberal rhetoric of victimary compensation, which we can only do by balancing the claims of one group of innocents with those of another. **Originary thinking** allows us to understand the trade-off in programs of group preference between the positive function of admitting new voices to the dialogue and the negative one of creating quasi-permanent categories of victims. It suggests that once the new conversation has

begun, victimary language must be excluded lest it legitimize racial and ethnic resentments potentially far more damaging to the social order from within than from without.

Religion and Culture

Is this a **historically progressive** critique of liberalism? This can be reformulated as a **religious question**: Is there an alternative to the binary opposition of **traditional religion** and **liberal secularism**? Can the fundamental moral intuition that defends us from mimetic violence be founded on an **anthropological hypothesis**? Does the understanding of the link between language and the transcendental that is the heart of **GA** allow us to dispense with traditional religion, or, on the contrary, does it force us to recognize the inevitable *specificity* of historical revelations, as opposed to revelation in general?

Much more reflection is required on the relationship between the semiotic and the cultural-religious spheres. It seems almost too obvious that ideas about **immortality**, **eternity**, and the like are attributes of the sign that we attach to our idea of the sacred, or in other terms, that these sacred attributes are revealed to us only through their manifestation in language.

This idea finds little resonance in the religious thinking of any epoch, including our own. Yet the critique of ritual sacrifice, which reaches its high point in Christianity but is clearly present in Buddhism and in all modern religions, is explicitly related to the equation of the sacred with the linguistic: "**In the beginning was the Word.**" The **Word** is what defines us as not living by bread alone; it affirms our essence as *spiritual* before it is *material*. The elimination of material sacrifice (Jesus driving the merchants out of the Temple) brings the indefinite multiplication of *goods* (bread and fishes) modeled on the reproduceability of *signs* as opposed to *things*: if we truly share the **Word**, our material problems will pose us no difficulty. Deconstruction's stab at this intuition was flawed by its naively victimary critique of *phallogocentrism*; in this, it followed the pattern of contemporary liberalism.

Love and Resentment

If **GA** would have us do without the consolations of religion, how does it help us to generate love from resentment? Does the originary understanding of the human grant us a deeper understanding of the role of **love-relationships** as oases and testing-grounds for the trials of the **universal marketplace**?

The current preoccupations of the intellectual world make it less rather than more eager to reflect on the unity of *mimesis*. As I wondered a few columns ago, is a generative hypothesis of the human possible? Is **GA's** understanding of its problematic status in the dialogue of either the **humanities** or the **social sciences** a sufficient basis on which to create, as it has shown some signs of doing, its own **dialogic space**?

These are questions I hope to explore with you in these *Chronicles* and on the **GAlist** during the coming year.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Really the End of Culture?

No. 50: Saturday, July 13, 1996

Ever since my schooldays I have been sympathetic to the proposition that great art is no longer conceivable, that we are reaching the *end of culture*. This is perhaps the simplest way of defining *postmodernity*.

But until recently I assumed that the energies that had fueled **high culture** would be diverted into an increasingly vital **popular culture**. Although the cultural sphere would no longer be the locus of the most profound discoveries concerning the human--this being reserved for **Generative Anthropology**--it would continue to be productive of new forms.

I wonder now if this attitude does not make too much of the distinction between high and low. There is indeed a difference: high culture problematizes the **ritual legacy of sacrifice** that popular culture simply adapts to its resentful ends. But this adaptation too is an **anthropological hypothesis**, and when such hypotheses become irrelevant, the source of their creativity is cut off. At the end of what our schoolbooks call the *1900s*, we seem to be witnessing an across-the-board decline in cultural creativity. Could this be the real *end of culture*?

The most vital of the popular arts is **music**, and the most profound influence on American popular music has long been the **Black minority**. But as my fellow cultural pessimist **Lewis Weinberg** pointed out to me recently, this music has largely stagnated over the past decade in its obsession with **hip-hop**. This mode eliminates the reconciling forces of melody and harmony--music proper--in favor of the driving energy of **rhythm**, the paroxystic expression of **minority resentment**. Our other musical forms--pop, jazz, rock, punk--are reduced to quotations from the past. This provides a model of popular culture reduced to ritualistic lowest terms: the *purgation of passions* by **visceral repetition**.

Proust or Porn?

Marcel Proust's 3000-page novel is of all narratives the most profoundly concerned with transcending the repetitious structure of narrative itself. The repetition of a tiny detail of experience such as the taste of the famous *petite madeleine* reveals the self's lost unity. Desire is one, Proust tells us, but only a lifetime of desire can teach that to us. *A la recherche du temps perdu* suggests a model of the esthetic where the purgation of desire is deferred as long as possible.

In contrast is the **porno film**, where the narrative is reduced to a quasi-ritualized sequence of sexual acts in fifteen-minute sequences. The marketplace gives evidence that this repetitious action is effective in stimulating and purging desire. Nor does the existence of thousands of such films prevent new ones from being shot; even minimal unpredictability attracts our desire.

If high culture found its culmination in the work of Proust and his contemporaries in **high modernism**,

today the porno film seems an increasingly appropriate model for culture in general. Both **minimalist music** and **rap** share its ritualistic emphasis on sameness rather than variance. So does the *genre fiction* that increasingly dominates the literary market. (The evolution of **cinema** in the direction of *virtual reality* suggests a new direction for culture that I'll discuss in a later column.) The cultural has come full circle from ritual origins through secularization to a **secularized version of ritual** in which the sacred is assimilated to a physical process. The Western conception of **incarnate divinity** is challenged by a Hindu-Buddhist emphasis on the **practices of self-purgation**.

The **porno model** does not imply the death of culture. On the contrary, by linking culture directly to its roots in desire, it explains why culture endures beyond its "end." In high culture, desire is a source of knowledge; but the biblical expression "carnal knowledge" reminds us that sexuality provides a minimalist epistemology of its own.

But this model is more problematic than first appears. Pornography is **shameful**, not because it is sinful in the eyes of our religious traditions, but because it is just a bit **ridiculous**. Expressions like *faire la bête à deux dos* mock the return to animality that sexual relations require. But that desire, seen from without, is **always** ridiculous is the central principle of **the comic**. A culture that no longer troubles to hide its purgative function is thus supremely open to **comedy**. Just as we need culture to purge our desires, we need comedy to affirm that we are not dupes of the cultural stereotypes to which we submit ourselves. The more our "serious" culture approximates the porno model, the more intense its comic antithesis becomes. Is it a coincidence that Saturday night cable fare seems almost equally divided between **soft-core pornography** and **satire**--which is often directed at the pornography?

Cultural irony is powerful only when it takes not itself but **its victims** seriously. Otherwise it becomes like the *nouveau roman*, whose narrative uncertainties are finally less disturbing than **boring**. There is no static position from which to look down with contempt upon the futile repetitiousness of desire. Far better if **postmodern self-referentiality** can make us **laugh**. We are condemned to take our desires seriously, but not so seriously as to prevent us from laughing at our seriousness. And the laughing is generally far more entertaining than what it mocks. So perhaps we haven't reached the *end of culture* after all.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Differences of Scale

No. 51: Saturday, July 20, 1996

Readers of **Pascal** will recall the famous passage about *les deux infinis*, the infinitely small and the infinitely great. Telescopes and microscopes revealed to Pascal's generation dimensions of the universe either too large or too small to grasp through analogy with our own experience.

But the caveat that analogy with experience is not always conducive to understanding applies in the human domain as well as the natural. Although a phenomenon too minute for us to grasp is no longer experience but physiology, there are temporal and spatial horizons of experience beyond our own. The intuition that serves us well in our immediate interactions with others may be counterproductive in a broader context. Even if we retain faith, as Pascal did, that our **moral sense** is ultimately correct, we are too limited to see evidence for ultimate, transcendent developments. We must suffer through the middle term with no guarantee or even expectation that moral acts will be rewarded in the practical world.

The potential dissonance between shorter- and longer-term values is a central problematic of any social order. Our moral intuition is based on a model of **face-to-face reciprocal relations**. How does this model apply to interactions that take place in a social rather than an intimate context? That the masters of the economic and political institutions of society put the welfare of these institutions--which is also their own--above moral reciprocity fuels the resentment of those less favored. In the long run, this resentment moves human institutions, whether by evolution or revolution, in the direction of greater reciprocity. In the middle term, however, the social order must remain operative, moral or not. History is not always, nor even generally, made by nice people.

Older cultures took for granted the dissonance between public and private behavior. They considered that daily life unavoidably involved us in acts of *pollution* that had to be purged periodically through sacrifice. Pollution is not a synonym of immorality; its criterion is perceived danger to the equilibrium of desire that preserves the social order. **Blood** signifies violence and therefore uncleanness to the ritual mind, whether it come from murder or menstruation. **Roman Catholicism** adapts the sacrificial principle to the Christian moral context by redefining the *impure* as the *sinful* and requiring regular confession and penance. But the **Protestant ethic** is averse to the easygoing notion of unavoidable but delible corruption. It tells us rather that our every act, public or private, is divinely judged by the criterion of moral reciprocity.

Why is this uncompromising moral attitude, one that no society could fully uphold, more conducive to the *spirit of capitalism* than the traditional approach of **pollution** and **purgation**? Wouldn't the entrepreneur work more efficiently in a less stressful moral atmosphere?

The superiority of the market system over the ritual order that purges corruption by sacrifice is that the latter fails to exploit the potential **value** of the moral tension between private and public relations. As the market system expands, it increasingly recycles private desires and resentments within the marketplace

rather than treating them as *impure* and purging them by ritual means. The old sacrificial systems didn't apologize to their victims; sacrifice, even human sacrifice, was presumed to bestow honor. The history of capitalism may well be filled with stories of greed and violence, but these are considered its failings rather than its glories. We are more sensitive to the market's hypocrisies because we hold it to a higher standard, one that, as **Michael Novak** and others have pointed out, is essentially that of the Gospels. The connection between Protestantism and capitalism is less an innovation than the emergence, in a time of economic and technological progress, of the underlying homology between Christianity and the market system.

The thrust of the evolution of market society is to diminish the difference between reciprocal private and hierarchical public behavior. However far we remain from this goal, it is difficult to deny that we are moving toward it on many fronts. Yet in the **cultural** realm, we have never been less certain of the correspondence between immediate and long-term values. Creators have never been less concerned with *posterity*; the creation of *immortal* works, the common aim of previous generations of artists (remember the *great American novel*?), is no longer an avowable goal. As we speed toward the horizon of universal reciprocity, we are less and less sure of our cultural identity. As our moral intuition tells us more about human reality, our esthetic intuition seems to tell us less.

The reason seems clear. The more transcendent the sacred, the more permanent its incarnations. In ritual society, not merely artworks but everyday acts are "*immortal*" because they are consecrated by the long-term values of the social order. Conversely, the more our private experience becomes the source of public values, the less the creations that reflect the specificity of this experience can be expected to be relevant to posterity.

Need there be **masterpieces** in our era, in any era? We should expect that the more society facilitates the conjunction of private and public, the less its artistic creations will claim permanent significance. There is greater freedom in **circulation** than in **incarnation**. What the future will treasure in the present will no doubt be its transitoriness rather than its universality; if our creations attain immortality, it will be not as **masterpieces**, but as **collectibles**.

The **Internet** is only the beginning of a parallel universe of interactive communications that seems certain to make obsolete the traditional conception of a standalone artwork created for the passive appreciation of an audience. The moral reciprocity we reach for in the real world will no longer be accessible in the cultural domain through passive vicariousness. As the dissonance of public ethics and private morality is reduced, we can anticipate an ever-greater participation of the private spectator in the consecrating act of esthetic creation.

All art is **virtual reality**, a human-created world of experience that brings Pascalian differences of scale within the scope of our intuition. We understand this only today, when art's reality has lost its sacred detachment from our own. The reduction of the dissonance between public and private relations signifies as well the breakdown of the separation between life and art, the *mimetic crisis* of our postmodern world.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Generative Paleoanthropology

No. 52: Saturday, July 27, 1996

When I was working on *The Origin of Language* in the late 1970s, the material available gave so vague an idea of the relation between language and **human evolution** that I decided to omit all discussion of the issue. In retrospect, that was a mistake, because it gave readers the impression that the originary hypothesis had no relevance to the scientific study of human origins.

For various reasons, this seems like an appropriate time to attempt a dialogue between **GA** and **empirical anthropology**. I am therefore presenting in the informal context of this column some preliminary and tentative conclusions. Those with expertise in the empirical study of human origins are invited to respond either via the [GAlist](#), or by [personal communication](#). The greatest benefit of the **Internet** for human thought is surely its growing capacity to make ideas accessible beyond the boundaries of academic specializations.

All the recent research confirms the existence of a **watershed** between Middle and Upper Paleolithic culture at about **35-40 kya** (thousand years ago) when traces of art and ritual appear along with more sophisticated tool-making. It is generally agreed that this watershed involved the emergence of a new form of language and associated "*symbolic behavior*." Although this linguistic newness is generally described as the achievement of **syntactical complexity** rather than as a **scenic revelation** as per the originary hypothesis, clearly no "revolution" in syntax can explain the birth of the symbolic behavior of **representation**. It is striking that all the digging has not unearthed a single unambiguous piece of evidence for human representation **before** the Upper Paleolithic. Some pieces bear scratches that may be interpreted in various ways, but there is not one **image**, whereas the Upper Paleolithic abounds in imagery, culminating in the cave-art that bears comparison with the products of advanced civilizations. The anthropological literature never addresses the fundamental theme of **GA**, the essential connection between **language**, **representation**, and **religion** as components of human culture.

One of the reasons that led me to reformulate **René Girard's** hypothesis of origin was the absence in Paleolithic art of images of the creatures that in his hypothesis would be first to be sacralized, that is, (male) human victims. Instead, the sacred figures are almost exclusively animal, and the occasional female figurines suggest rather private fertility charms than sacrificial images. But this is a minor objection to a theory to which we owe the groundbreaking theoretical insight that the crucial and therefore the originary function of human representation is the **deferral of mimetic conflict**. Sadly, empirical anthropology does not attempt to refute or even dismiss this idea; it is simply absent from the bibliography.

Although I have just begun to examine this material, for the purpose of stimulating discussion, here are a few suggestions for associating the central insights of **GA** with the empirical data:

1. I have at times been tempted by the hypothesis that the origin of language took place in two

historically distinct stages: (a) (100 - 200 kya) elementary language: ostensive + imperative; (b) (35-40 kya) mature language: declarative. But I think the data force us to reject this hypothesis, and to deny to the earlier forms of *homo (pre-)sapiens* the use of human language. "*Anatomically modern*" hominids predate the watershed event; the "modern" anatomy includes the wherewithal for speech and suggests that these hominids were selected for sound-articulating capacities. These creatures were far more advanced in areas like tool-making, hunting and gathering, and child-rearing than the apes of today. But their lack of a **scenic intuition of representation** is clear from the absence of any unambiguous evidence of graphic figuration or of ritual activity. Early hominid language must have been a complex signal system, not a language nourished by the scenic imagination derived from our hypothetical **originary event**. Their language must be considered prehuman, not because of its syntactic simplicity--although this was surely the case--but because its users lacked the human operation of *representation*.

2. The so-called *Out of Africa* or *Eve* hypothesis, founded on **mitochondrial DNA** (mtDNA) measurements, posits the total or near-total replacement of the Neandertal and related populations by "modern" African populations within a few thousand years of the watershed event. The radicality of this replacement creates difficulties in the minds of those who have examined the archaeological remains, many of whom adhere to the traditional *multiregional evolutionary* hypothesis. But the difficulties of the African hypothesis may be considerably reduced if it is understood that the true humans were characterized not simply by better genes but by a radically new form of social organization based on language and ritual culture. The qualitative nature of this change is more easily appreciated in the context of the originary hypothesis: a far higher level of mimetic activity, and therefore of economic and military power, is sustainable within a population that possesses mechanisms for the periodic **deferral of mimetic violence**. The persistence in modern populations of archaic local anatomical traits pointed to by the multiregionalists may be explained by hybridization with the prehuman population, since these populations' disappearance was due more to cultural than to genetic inferiority.

3. The relatively rapid dispersal of the early humans can be explained more easily if the tensions due to **mimetic rivalry** are taken into account. The reproductive success of dynamic human communities would generate population movements not merely for ecological reasons, but because the **greatest danger to humans comes from other humans**.

I will close with a caveat. Examining the results of empirical social science leads me to reflect on how **GA** differs from it. **GA** stands on **the frontier between the humanities and the social sciences**, in a place where until now only religion has been found. But only at the ultimate horizon of human thought can originary thinking wholly reconcile the intuitions generated by cultural phenomena on the one hand and scientific data on the other. I have always maintained, in the face of skepticism and worse, that the **originary hypothesis** is worth "believing in" in the sense that, as I recall, **Paul Feyerabend** advocated *believing in* scientific hypotheses: to call one's hypothesis *merely heuristic* makes it no less arbitrary, and it certainly makes one less disposed to expend energy in verifying it.

Yet the originary hypothesis is formulated as an a priori construction rather than a falsifiable prediction. What can justify such a formulation? Let me call it the *foxhole principle*. There are *no atheists in the foxholes* because in crisis we are returned to the critical origin of culture, the originary union of language and the sacred. The same principle, in a less immediate form, applies to the creation of ideas. Religion impatiently explains natural phenomena by means of the anthropomorphic analogies at hand because its responsibility to human order cannot wait for a better explanation. **GA's** impatience is confined to the scenic realm of human self-understanding. Paleontology keeps bringing us new data; but postmodernity

cannot wait for the definitive story of human evolution before attempting to bridge the gap between what **C. P. Snow** long ago called (from a sociological rather than an intellectual perspective) the *two cultures*. Nor do we have any reason to believe that, even once this story is told, a non-scenic "*objective*" knowledge of the human will become conceivable. I am less disturbed by the criticism that **GA** *sounds like religion* than I would be if it sounded, as do so many empirical studies of human origins, like **the print-out of a data-base**. The origin and nature of meaning can never be explained by reducing them to **structures of the meaningless**.

The **originary hypothesis** has an empirical core: empirically, we humans exist, and our existence is coextensive with our desire to understand ourselves. Human language and culture originated at some point in space-time, and rigorous reflection on the minimal conditions for this origin is as important in determining the nature of that point as the discovery of a Paleolithic site. Whence my hope that this column might help begin a fruitful dialogue between the students of *humanitas* and those of *anthropos*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Feminization of Sport Narrative

No. 53: Saturday, August 3, 1996

The **Olympic Games** supply an appropriate occasion to think about the cultural importance of sport. You didn't get to see much sport in **NBC's** coverage, but that too is relevant to our discussion.

Epic narrative, the account of glorious founding deeds, is the oldest literary form. Yet although the Renaissance reinvented tragedy, it could not resuscitate the epic. In **Schiller's** terms, epic was a *naive* form irreproducible in our *sentimental*, subjective age. Neoclassical tragedy internalizes the protagonist's relationship to the stage; it is always about playing roles, a play within a play. The epic could not lose its public focus without self-parody. Narrative was henceforth condemned to prose in both form and content, to the **novel of everyday life**. In the early nineteenth century, the personal narrative voice of **Balzac** or **Dickens** did its best to describe the complexities of market society in quasi-heroic terms, but in the great culminating masterpieces of the genre, from **Flaubert** to **Proust** and **Joyce**, this voice becomes the locus of an ironically "failed" totalizing operation that both reflects and transcends the limits of individual life in the market system.

In contrast, sport is not ironic but **heroic**; it renews the epic relation between narrative and critical action. In its origin, sport was a ritual procedure for designating sacrificial victims, as in those **Aztec** basketball games where the losers had their hearts cut out. Athletic contests, like games of chance, add an element of unpredictability that entertains the community of sacrificers by removing their collective guilt. But *entertainment* is just another word for *narrative*. All entertainment tells a story. We are entranced by the skill of an athlete, a juggler, a tightrope walker, because we experience over time the constantly renewed fragility of his mastery. Miss the shot, drop the ball, fall off the rope, and, as they used to say in **Tenochtitlán**, *you're dead meat*. By motivating the sacrificial mechanism, narrative renders it more effective in deferring mimetic conflict; the other secular arts emerge from ritual in essentially the same manner. Before becoming, as the cliché goes, a *metaphor for war*, sport is in the first place a metaphor for the **mimetic conflict** that cultures come into being to avert.

An athletic contest is structured like a narrative, but unlike a story with a known ending, the very unpredictability that makes it entertaining makes it incapable of "telling itself" as an esthetic totality. The sportscaster who comments on the events cannot know their significance in advance ("that missed extra point in the second quarter is starting to loom very large"). Whence the supplementary pleasure of a narrative constructed after the event. Sports, like battles, arouse in their witnesses a powerful hunger for narrative. Not only do many fans bring along radios and portable TVs, they devour the evening news highlights and the story in next day's newspaper. The heroic world of sport, like that of the conquerors of Troy, must have its **bards**; the witnesses of its feats must experience their significance through narrative.

But increasingly in recent Olympic coverage, and strikingly this year, each victory and defeat is surrounded by so many **backgrounders** and **interviews** that the athletic event itself is reduced to a

moment in the athlete's own narrative, his--or more often, her--**biography**. The **rationalization of the sports market** has turned most of these biographies into single-minded quests for medals. The hothouse training of young athletes that used to be exclusive to the "*People's Democracies*" is now the free-market choice of the children and their families; the fame and cash that go with a gold medal justify sacrificing all else. This provides a narrative framework so strong that the story of obtaining the medal, or failing to obtain it, comes to dominate the athletic event that provides its *dénouement*.

It is not coincidental that this biographical tendency is strongest in judged rather than directly competitive sports, particularly in **gymnastics** and **figure skating**, the primary summer and winter *sports féminins*. The contestants' youth exploits female biology to good narrative effect: sports suited to preadolescents become metaphors for **initiation rites**. (How many people care about the 30-year-old runners of the **women's marathon**?) Because the child training long hours for a shot at the gold has not yet entered either adulthood or the marketplace, hers is the most inspiring--and market-share-attracting--story.

In the competitions themselves, the subjective evaluation procedure sets the lone performer against the impersonal judges, like a fairy-tale heroine performing feats to win the prince's hand. We watch her (and her quasi-parental coach) nervously awaiting the verdict, then reacting with predictable emotions that more dignified societies would keep off camera. One suspects that the judges themselves, aware of the narratives swirling around them, act now and then to improve them.

This **feminization of sport** did not originate as a ratings ploy by **NBC**, although the network has shrewdly exploited and encouraged it. The sports market exemplifies the corrosive effect of rationalization in the cultural domain. **Culture** and the **market** are opposed not by **ideology** but by **structure**: culture has a center, the market does not. Selling culture always desacralizes it, and sport is no exception. Until little more than a decade ago, **professional athletes** reaped only modest rewards from their role in creating cultural narrative, making salaries comparable, considering their necessarily early retirement, to those of other highly skilled professionals. But a new breed of **lawyer-agents** convinced them that they deserve to be, and can be made to be, paid not just for their skills but for their **cultural role**, the way **Hollywood stars** are paid. The general disillusionment inspired by million-dollar salaries is based on more than simple resentment. It reflects the intuition that to discount by salary their sacrificial role in the cultural narrative devalues the narrative itself. We used to be able to experience vicariously the athletes' desire to win the **Series** or the **Super Bowl**; now that they are compensated for the drama they create, we have difficulty finding more in this desire than the quest to add another few million to next year's contract.

And so, disaffected from masculine sport narrative, we contribute to **NBC's** record ratings by turning to the feminine version, where athletic performance is endowed with personal meaning as a *rite de passage* into the marketplace. The **feminization of sport narrative** is just one more illustration of the principle that, in a rationalized exchange system, cultural significance is generated only at the margins.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Sacrificial Stories

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Last week's column on **sports narratives** touched on a subject that it is worthwhile to explore in more general terms: the central or **originary** function of narrative. As we have become increasingly aware that we are always telling stories, the *story-telling* model has come to dominate the human sciences. This is a good thing, a triumph of **humanism** over **positivism**. But just as no one ever explains why religion exists, no one ever explains why we tell stories. Readers of this column might guess that the two explanations should have something in common.

Let us begin from last week's example of those *sudden-death* **Aztec basketball games**. The games entertain by providing a motivation for the ensuing sacrifice; the losers having proved their unworthiness to live, the sacrificers are relieved of responsibility for their death. We should not equate **responsibility** with an internal sense of **guilt**. Killing makes one *unclean* because of the **mimetic contagion** of murder; letting the victims select themselves reduces the contagion. If the **Bulls** play the **Bears** to see who furnishes the sacrificial animal, the principle is the same; the victim is always a "person," an incarnation of the divinity. Human sacrifice is an extreme form of animal sacrifice where the players play themselves; the **Aztecs'** fondness for it has been explained by the lack of protein-rich animals in Central America.

There are faster ways of choosing victims than a basketball game. We say the game has a **narrative** structure because the motivation of sacrifice is revealed not instantly but in time. Narrative in the broadest sense encompasses all forms of entertainment, including sports and the circus. Watching a circus performer arouses the same vicarious danger as an adventure tale. The esthetic is a postponement or **deferral** of sacrifice, and narrative is the exemplary esthetic form because it **thematizes** deferral, makes it explicit. This was not understood in premodern times, when esthetic reflection focused on the *objet d'art* as the heir to sacred representation. The plastic arts are no longer at the center of our esthetic consciousness because the circulatory movement of the market system erodes the artwork's *aura*; paintings tend to become *collectibles*. Narratives, on the other hand--the same is true of music--cannot be reduced to objects; they can only be apprehended in time.

The point of **originary thinking** is to strip away uncritically posited "faculties"--for **religion**, for **art**, for **storytelling**--to examine the minimal conditions for their existence. Like **zero-based budgeting**, our vision of the human must start with the absolute minimum; the **originary scene** of language. In order to add a storytelling capacity, we must show that it is necessary to satisfy the minimal criterion of *deferral of violence through representation*. The originary representation of the central object saves the community from danger by "blaming" it for the scene of **mimetic crisis**; the extension of the sign into a story extends this moment of safety. If my story motivates the choice of victim, it lessens the danger of my going next. (Remember **Sheherazade**.)

So long as the story lasts, the "blame" has not yet been placed, the crisis has not been resolved. In the imaginary world of the story, we are still in danger. But in the real world where the story is being told, we remain out of danger by the very fact of the narration. Whence the two-tiered **form/content** nature of esthetic experience: we feel the emotions of crisis--the **content** of the story, but know that for the duration of the narrative, we are protected from crisis by the barrier of **esthetic form**.

All culture is **sacrificial**. Culture covers a lot of ground, from bear-baiting to attending a performance of *Saint Matthew's Passion*, but whether we savagely revel in the victim's sufferings or identify with them in the depths of our soul, culture is founded on them. The discovery of this central truth defines our **postmodern** era. But the postmodern *end of culture* is not its abolition but its universalization, made possible by the exchange system.

The market has its origin in the centered world of ritual, but market exchange takes place on the periphery; the *free market* has no scenic center, only a **communication network**. We can tell stories about the market, but market activity is not structurally equivalent to a story. Goods in the market do not remain, like the sacred victim, in the ritual center. They circulate like signs, whose effortless multiplication among the participants of the scene prefigures the victim's division into the multiple portions of the sacrificial feast. Things always will be scarcer than signs, but the circulatory drive of the market makes them ever more alike. And as goods become like signs, we increasingly construct **esthetic statements** from them. We each become the protagonist of an ongoing **tale of consumption** within which the esthetic experiences we choose play a privileged role; our story includes the stories we read, the paintings we see, the concerts we attend.

This leads me to a final thought about stories in a more formal sense. The heroic era of the **novel** ended with the great modernists, and that of the **cinema** in early (pre-1968) postmodernity. But cinema continues to evolve with respect to the **convincing recreation of reality**. Every development of film technology: sound, color, hand-held cameras, more sensitive film stocks, computerization., has been in the direction of provoking a richer sensory experience in the spectator. This capacity need not be used in the service of evoking the world as it is. All art, including music and abstract painting, creates a **virtual space-time** in which we experience the work **from within**. But some space-times are more inclusive than others. **Wagner's** pre-technological ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* conceived a "**total**" artform that would include all traditional esthetic experiences--music, drama, plastic art (decor). But the sound film, the realization of a double dream of the nineteenth century, is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of a kind Wagner could not have envisaged. The Wagnerian totality was placed at the service of ritual; the cinematic totality provides a deliberately **new** experience.

Thus far, cinema, even with **morphing**, remains wholly passive. In contrast, the *sine qua non* of **virtual reality** is *interactivity*. The continual recomputation of the spectator-participant's place in virtual space-time makes the experience of it no longer *esthetic* in the traditional sense; nor is it the constrained participation that ritual provides. *Virtual narrative* involves the **active participation**--whether physical or wholly mental--of the spectator. Thus the passivity of the *couch potato*--a term that reflects the extreme decadence of the medieval ideal of the *via contemplativa*--will be increasingly superseded by some form of interaction. No doubt the media stars of the future will be interactively gifted, **Sandra Bullocks** rather than **Greta Garbos**. As television, computers, and communications merge into that **one big screen** on the wall, mere vicarious spectatorship will decline and we will become the heroes and heroines of our own electronic stories. Some day **Forrest Gump** will shake hands with *us*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Terror in the Global Village

No. 55: Saturday, August 17, 1996

Despite recent high-profile incidents, the United States remains relatively invulnerable to terrorism. No terrorist can hope to modify our governmental system or even our foreign policy. Terror in the USA is a naked expression of **resentment**, an attack on an enemy with whom one is in secret complicity, for its demonized power provides an irreplaceable explanation for one's own failures. In the absence of a clear and feasible political goal, the creation of a climate of terror becomes an end in itself.

One often hears it said that "*the terrorist always wins*" because his act makes the rest of us more suspicious of one another. Terrorism exemplifies the contagion of violence, not in the acute form of the lynch mob, but in a more insidious slow-growth mode. Viruses that kill off their host, as in last year's **Ebola virus** outbreak in **Zaire**, are far less deadly than those like **HIV** that let the host survive long enough to spread them. The fear the terrorist generates cannot be purged by his capture or even by that of an entire network; we can never be sure that others are not already infected. In the past, terrorist groups claimed credit for their attacks, even appropriating incidents perpetrated by others, on the reasoning that the claim spreads fear of the group and leads ultimately to the satisfaction of its demands. The recent **Pan Am**, **World Trade Center**, and (apparent) **TWA** bombings have broken with this rule. Terrorist groups, like horror film directors, have learned that terror is greater the less its source is defined. When terrorists remain anonymous, they collectively reap the fear generated by their violence. They can do this even when the violence is not theirs at all. If the Pan Am 103 bombers had not kept silent, we would probably be far less ready to believe--in the absence of any evidence--that TWA 800 met the same fate.

The contagion of violence is no news to students of **René Girard**. Indiscriminate violence is just what the human social order exists to protect us from. In our relatively, perhaps maximally peaceful world, the terrorist brutally reminds us that we are never as far from crisis as we would like to think. Our peace is shattered less by the violent act itself than by the realization it forces on us that human violence can never be eliminated, only **deferred**.

I think we speak too quickly when we grant the terrorist an easy victory. By returning us to a state of **originary crisis**, contagious violence leads us to reassert the **universal human solidarity** that alone can hold it in check. An unavowed source of the passion behind the search for life on **Mars** and elsewhere is the dream of uniting all humanity against a common enemy, as in the recent action film *Independence Day*. A similar point may be made about terrorism. The terrorist, like the alien invader, is the enemy of us all; whatever his political aims, his actions are directed at an entire nation, ultimately, at all humankind. Even as the terrorist makes us suspect each other, his act unites us more than it divides us. The annoyance of heightened security measures is accompanied by a sense of pride in making a small sacrifice for one's country.

But because he is not an alien but *one of us*, the terrorist reveals the limits of human unity. The terrorist

brings violence to places where we do not expect to find it; he flourishes in a world without real war. It is no accident that the fountainheads of terrorism are **civil** rather than national conflicts: **Northern Ireland**, the **Near East**, **Afghanistan**. The **Intifada** began when it became clear that open warfare by the Arab countries against Israel was impossible.

In the *global village*, **all war is civil war**. The more we act alike, look alike, **are** alike, the more our remaining differences risk provoking resentment. The fanatical hatred that sets the terrorist off from the common soldier is a sign of belonging despite himself to the same world as his enemy. The terrorist cannot be controlled by normal incentives; he risks death, even gladly accepts it: *God is on his side*. As Israelis know, there is no good defense against a suicide bomber; once he is wired for death, the damage is already done.

This sobering fact should not lead to despair or fatalism. It suggests rather that the only long-term response to terrorism is the same as modern society's response to the other ills of resentment: finding means to **recycle resentment into the exchange system**. This is no easy task. The religious motivation of most terrorists is a form of resistance to the circulation of the market. Terrorists are the most fanatical of *paleoconservatives*; their hatred of the **Jews**, or the **West**, or the **federal government** is above all a fear of the universal exchange system that threatens the cultural identity of those not well adapted to it.

The marketplace has obvious enticements for the potential terrorist in the universal youth culture that gives adolescents the opportunity to dance and role-play away their victimary sentiments. But it is not enough to meet traditional values head on. In order to defer the resentment that leads to terrorism, the market system must find **new degrees of freedom** that will allow it to integrate within itself the upholders of these values. The American experience offers some useful examples; perhaps we should send a delegation of **Mormons** to **Teheran**.

The ultimate weapon against terrorism is **dialogue**, and the horizon of this dialogue between those eternal enemies, culture and the market, is the **shared understanding of our common origin**. The road to peace and to originary anthropology are one and the same.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Love and Transcendence

No. 56: Saturday, August 24, 1996

I turned fifty-five this week—the fateful age at which they begin to offer you *senior citizen* discounts and call you *fifty-five years young*. As a little compensatory birthday present to myself, and hopefully to you, dear reader, I thought I'd forget about **resentment** for a week and return to the primary and more pleasurable theme of these columns, **love**.

Love is our private experience of transcendence. There is nothing in our personal relationship with God that cannot be understood as a relationship with the beloved. It is not clear which one of these transcendental experiences has the most to teach the other.

Christianity has recognized this parallel in the equation *God is love*. God as a person—or three—is equated to love, an **interaction**. In the language of originary anthropology, God is not merely the central object-victim that brings the human community together, but the interrelationship mediated by this object between the members of this community. When we truly love each other in God, he no longer occupies a "center" that distracts us from each other. Yet to say that *God is love* is not merely to say, "the center is the periphery," but to recognize that without the center the periphery would never have existed.

Yet although a reading that appeals to our originary intuition for an explanation of what/who God is is useful anthropologically, it does us little good existentially. Among the modes of love that maintain solidarity in human communities—affection, friendship, sympathy, solidarity, parental love, fraternal love...—there is one that we call just **love tout court**, "romantic" love, the kind of love we don't merely feel but are *in*. Can we take *God is love* to express the association of this intense feeling of love with God?

Since love, like any transcendental experience, is paradoxical, it is easy to denounce it as illusory. If you read enough social science, you begin to think that transcendence of any kind is an illusion, that there are only things and more complex kinds of things, that even thinking about things is just creating new kinds of things. Social science doesn't explain transcendental phenomena like religion—or love. But it doesn't have to explain them; they are just empirically observed behaviors like any others, subject to natural selection. And our very desire to understand why we believe in God, or why we fall in love, is just another behavior, and the discourse that declares it a behavior, still another behavior... When the old metaphysics of **Plato** and **Descartes** was faced with the early stages of this kind of thinking, **Husserl** invented *phenomenology*, to which **Heidegger** gave the vocation of thinking the transcendental. And now we have in **generative anthropology** the means to integrate the transcendental with the empirical

But I digress (it's my birthday, after all).

How does human love differ from love of God? It's too easy to say that religion talks about *unverifiable*

beings and love does not. Love means treating another person *as* an unverifiable being, as something infinitely different from oneself. But not as an object on a pedestal; true love is not worship. Or rather, true worship is love; only sacrificial idols belong on pedestals.

Love is infinite care, reverence for what is vulnerable to time. The real object of this reverence is not the mortal body but the *immortal soul*, the essence that incarnates itself in the body. What does it mean to say we have a soul? Love grants us a concrete experience of the paradoxical opposition that our use of representation opens up between the empirical and the ideal. The relation of **tenderness** is the care for another that senses and seeks to repair the tension between ephemeral body and eternal soul. The *paradis artificiel* of the "afterlife" hides rather than reveals the nature of this tension. The immortality I see in my beloved is **now**, not hereafter. When I make her the goal of my action, I regard her being, her soul, as eternally significant. The one paradise we can really imagine is the paradise of love, extrapolated from the experience of eternity we have in those privileged instants when we are so close to each other that *the clock stops*... Instead, our dreams of an afterlife lamely attempt to convey the existential sense of immortality as a temporal experience of atemporal being in a paradise we cannot conceive without boredom.

In the days when the Church was a dominant social institution, the emulation of divine love by human love suffered from a disequilibrium. The doctrine of divine love was already fixed by the church fathers; only a few not-always-reputable mystics made it an object of direct experience. Human love alone was virgin territory to be explored. The **Neoplatonists** saw in the latter little more than an inkling of and an incentive toward divine bliss. Des Grieux' argument in *Manon Lescaut* that human love, because it can be conceived in the imagination, is a transcendental goal better suited to us than eternal salvation is perhaps the first expression of open revolt against this institutional priority. (See [Chronicles No. 17: "Perfide Manon"](#).)

Today, when religion is an individual experience and churches have no power beyond the collective will of their members, the experience of human love can teach the unbeliever—and perhaps the believer as well—what it means to love God. **God as love** is as vulnerable as humanity. The infinity we see in our beloved's eyes is something the lover of God must supply from imagination, at the risk of adoring an image. I prefer to think of God as the presence in which the two of us are present to each other, the guarantee that each ephemeral look or touch bears its meaning of infinite tenderness for all eternity.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Garrison Keillor and Cultural Irony

No. 57: Saturday, August 31, 1996

When I go running late Saturday afternoons I always listen to **Garrison Keillor's** *A Prairie Home Companion*, a sophisticated show designed to be heard out on the prairie by college-educated exurbanites from places like LA. Keillor's spoofs of private eyes and cowboys, his fake ads for animal calls, "duck" tape, *Mournful Oatmeal*, and rhubarb pie are so clever that I often burst out laughing in the middle of San Vicente Boulevard. The highlight of the show is the weekly narrative of life in **Lake Wobegon**, his fictional *home town*. These gentle satires of small-town life in Lutheran Minnesota nearly always succeed in making the listener reflect more in love than resentment on the ironies of desire.

Keillor's program is also a variety show. The other day, he introduced a young woman from Greenwich Village who had metamorphized herself into a Nashville-style country music singer and gone to live in the South. And then she sang a song about a girl who left the South to go north to the Big City but weeps with nostalgic longing for the Mississippi she left behind.

Toute notre culture est là. The lament of the displaced Southerner in the big city is *culturally correct*, but not the longing of the New Yorker for roots in a folk culture to which she doesn't belong. Yet there are probably fifty New Yorkers in the second case for every Southerner in the first. This cultural adoption of the victimary position is nothing new; it has its crude antecedents in those blackface minstrel shows that--it's hard to believe today--were still popular in the 1930s. But the difference between the prewar and postwar varieties is that the postwar generation wants to keep playing the role after the show is over.

I am old enough to remember the beginnings of this phenomenon. In the mid-50s, the age of **rock 'n' roll** began with **Elvis**, **Bill Haley**, **Little Richard** *et al.* Adolescents who had never been west of the Hudson River nor south of Staten Island suddenly started to talk, or at least to sing, with a Mississippi accent, just as a generation or two later they would put their caps on backward and pretend to be *homeys* from the *'hood*. In contrast, the black teenagers who imitate the styles of whites do so chiefly for economic, not cultural reasons.

These narratives illustrate the paradigmatic opposition of **culture** and the **market**. The Southern girl comes North to work; she moves from periphery to center. But whether she prospers or not, she regrets the folkways of the backward area she has left behind. The Northern girl goes South to find herself culturally, by adopting a folk identity she can sing about. (In the process, she is able to make a career for herself, and more money than she could have made by staying in the North, the economy of which seems to be slowly going South in any case.) The white kid envies and emulates the culture of the black minority; the black kid envies and, if he has the chance, emulates the socioeconomic advantages of the white majority. As with **love** and **cards**, one can't be lucky in both culture and the market; or rather, the *"lucky"* in the cultural marketplace are those who can market original or borrowed victimary stigmata.

The elusive but anthropologically real difference between **high** and **popular** culture is nicely caught by

their respective sensitivities to the irony of the New Yorker going South to sing of being haunted by Mississippi memories in the Big City up North. Think of what deliciously sinuous sentences **Proust** would have crafted to describe this situation. But today, there are no more Prousts, not even any **Becketts**; the difference is rather between **pop culture** and **postcultural irony**. What is increasingly held up as the *suite* of high culture is **victimary discourse**, edifyingly resentful tales of domination.

[Seinfeld](#), who would have caught the irony, is closer to the spirit of high culture than any of this. But Seinfeld is no Proust. The paradoxes of desire from which Proust patiently built his cathedral are today the stuff of a half-hour TV episode. High culture is made by ironizing unreflective desire, whether it be that of **Oedipus** seeking his father's murderer, or **Hamlet**, **Dmitri Karamazov**, or **Stephen Dedalus** doing pretty much the same. But the irony has to inspire us with fear and trembling as an originary revelation of the human. Our Greenwich village friend and those white boys with the backward caps are *killing their fathers* too, but we're no longer building cathedrals to house their tombs.

Today's *Kulturkampf* is a battle over the place of the victim. **The deferral of violence through representation**, like time and tide, wait for no man. No solitary individual, however profound his agony, can compete for the victimary spotlight with whole classes of people whose resentments, if left unchecked, would pose urgent problems to the social order.

As culture becomes a minority province, we are duty-bound to help it lose its sacrificial edge and become the vehicle for a dialogue to which we can all contribute. Once we become aware of our own sociohistorical particularity, we realize that *we're all minorities*, which also means that we're all equally valid examples of the human universal, heirs of our common scene of origin. **Garrison Keillor's** folksy sophistication, his ironic affirmation of his small-town roots as a cultural source rich as any other, show us that white Northerners don't have to sing their uniqueness in a Southern accent--but that they shouldn't turn up their noses on those who do: American culture is one of *different strokes for different folks*. I imagine that's why I always listen to *A Prairie Home Companion* while running on Saturday afternoons.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Conversation and Education

No. 58: Saturday, September 7, 1996

The minimal core of what is being sought, found, and denounced in the victimary discourse that dominates *cultural studies* today is **exclusion from dialogue**. The repeated accusations of sexism, racism, not to speak of ableism, ageism, sizeism... reflect--beyond fashion and self-interest--the resentment of those who, whatever their concrete sufferings, were until recently not invited to participate in conversations concerning them. The withering sarcasm of many of these analyses demonstrates with vengeful joy that the formerly excluded can wield the rapier of polemic discourse as well as the former excluders.

In the process, the historical parameters of failures of reciprocity tend to be given short shrift. Historical justifications, however plausible, lack conviction in our post-historical times. The postmodern era begins with the **Holocaust**, which demonstrates the obscenity of making historical excuses for antisemitism. But the same argument can be made for colonials, people "of color," women, homosexuals... Equanimity in the face of denial of reciprocity is no longer acceptable. The ethics of past and present must be held to the same moral test: the linguistic reciprocity of the originary scene, the free and equal exchange of signs.

The enduring contribution of contemporary victimary discourse is to force the reframing of our cultural conversation to include everyone. This trend reflects with new clarity the originary moral truth that discursive reciprocity is the *de facto* horizon of all cultural discourse, including political discourse. This does not imply economic equality, although the presence of all parties in the political debate surely influences economic policies. The radical change in the economic sphere is not that inequalities of status will be abolished, but that they will henceforth have to be explained, and in a sense, justified, to those who are disadvantaged by them.

This new understanding of public conversation is no abstraction; it is currently being imposed by the legal system. To choose an example from my own sphere of activity, University personnel dossiers that in the past contained confidential documents are now open to the party under evaluation. The principle is *if you intend to fire me, you have to tell me exactly why*.

The model of the social order this suggests is radically different from anything we might have conceived even a few decades ago. Status has been detached from conversational exclusion. We appear to be demonstrating that the moral reciprocity of the exchange of signs can be indefinitely extended without the nightmares entailed by attempting to impose the distributive equality of things. The right to participate in the conversation is not tantamount to political equality, let alone economic equality. But if it does not mean the elimination of all injustice, it does signal the expulsion of sacrificial, victimary structures from modern society.

This means a return to civility; arguments concerning perceived injustices should no longer impute

exclusionary intentions to one's opponents. But less obviously, the abolition of cultural restrictions to dialogue also implies that **market values** will increase in importance. Only the criteria of the marketplace can provide material for the objective evaluation of an employee who can read--and contest--the contents of his or her personnel dossier. Once all cultural values are equally "appreciated," the only remaining criterion of evaluation is that of the market--not the *monopoly capital* monolith of nineteenth century socialism, but the fragmented and indefinitely proliferating market of our own era. Our debt to the Holocaust and to the ensuing postwar liberation struggles tends to make us forget that the conditions for a post-sacrificial society are economic as well as social, and that only our **consumer society's** production of wealth provides the material mediations that allow us to respect each other's cultural diversity.

It is in this context that we should situate the current debate on **education**. The fundamental institution for transmitting to the next generation the means to enter into the general dialogue--the schools--is in crisis. It is significant that the education issue divides the two political parties more neatly and more programmatically than any other.

The Left wants to educate children directly for the newly universal cultural conversation. Hence it gives priority to fostering unconditional reciprocal recognition through such policies as including handicapped children in ordinary classrooms, promoting understanding for "non-standard" life-styles, emphasizing minority contributions to history, avoiding competition and hierarchy, making class advancement automatic, attributing failure to "learning disabilities." Ideally, these policies should be implemented in an all-inclusive public school system, so that the incipient dialogue include all children. Given the decline in the public teaching environment, however, most parents with money or ambition send their children to private schools, leaving the cultural emphasis of the public schools as a compensation for lack of achievement.

The Right's idea of education is limited to building a foundation for marketable skills ("the basics") while inculcating cultural knowledge and values that stress the unity and the underlying non-sacrificiality of the national culture. In order to make this agenda available to the general population, the Right favors voucher programs to permit pupils to attend private (or enhanced public) schools of their parents' choice.

For the marketplace to function effectively, it must operate within a society that not only shares a set of general norms, but has evolved means of negotiating cultural differences. But the Left's emphasis on mutual recognition over educational content neglects the mediations required between the (cultural) exchange of signs and the (economic) exchange of things. Differences in abilities should not be denied but encouraged. The value of ranking pupils in a given discipline includes helping the lower-ranked to find their place in another. But even if this is not possible, sacrificing the learning potential of the more gifted generates not mutual respect but resentment.

The decline of our educational level with respect to other industrialized countries should suffice to convince those not yet persuaded that it is urgent to invest our energies in preparing children for the marketplace. The postmodern *Zeitgeist*--and the continued expansion of consumer society--are far more effective than the schools in teaching not mere tolerance but **cultural interaction**. Those white kids with their caps on backward that I talked about last week didn't acquire their taste for minority culture in the classroom.

The very openness of its racial and ethnic tensions insures that the United States will remain a model of polycultural integration. Our cultural conversation is arguably richer than any other; we must educate our

children to profit from these riches in the world marketplace.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Beyond Suspicion

No. 59: Saturday, September 14, 1996

Nearly a half-century ago, the French novelist **Nathalie Sarraute** described our postwar era as *l'ère du soupçon*--the *age of suspicion*. Discourse, particularly narrative discourse, could no longer be taken at face value: it had to be **demystified**. The horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima led to the extension of the demystifying techniques of Marx and Freud to all social relations, and to the political, judicial, religious, or literary discourses that, directly or indirectly, justified them.

One of the central themes of originary thinking is that we can go beyond the rhetoric of demystification toward a less sacrificial one founded on our originary intuition of the human. This is still something of a visionary claim; the rhetorical change that accompanies a new way of thinking is not easily brought about, and I am sure that my own writing still bears traces of the old polemics. But there is reason to believe that the age of suspicion is nearing its end.

In the postwar era, it was urgent to denounce the openly discriminatory structures and practices that still flourished nearly undisturbed at the war's end. On the maps of the world I knew as a child, British colonies in red and French colonies in blue covered most of Africa and a good part of Asia. As late as the early 1960s, when I was a graduate student in Baltimore--barely south of the Mason-Dixon line--blacks were not permitted in "white" restaurants or movie theaters. *Nous avons changé tout cela*.

As feminism took up the torch from the civil rights movement, suspicion was cast on the apparently natural sexual division of labor, then on the still more apparently natural distinction between normal and perverse sexual orientations. But the clarity of the antisacrificial focus began to blur. The failure of the **Equal Rights Amendment** was not merely political; it reflected a new skepticism about the automatic application of the victimary model to human difference. A similar phenomenon is occurring today with respect to homosexuality; although the general public opposes discrimination for sexual orientation, it has not bought the argument that denying marriage to same-sex couples is discriminatory. Partisans may argue that resistance to these ideas is of the same type as that of old-line segregationists or misogynists, but I do not agree. Like **Thomas Kuhn's** scientific paradigms, social models and the rhetorics that go with them become problematic as they are extended to new areas ever farther from their original domain.

When new models replace old ones, the opposition between them is never one of horizontal symmetry. **Hegel's** historical dialectic has been abandoned by metaphysics, but it makes a great deal of sense as anthropology. The end of the age of suspicion does not mean the return to previous modes of discrimination and social domination, but the addition of a new layer of reflection that transforms the binary persecutor-victim model into a subtler, more interactive one.

It would be going too far to say that this post-victimary mode is already in place, but I think it we can see it emerging on the public scene in the current political debate over **welfare**. A relatively trivial budgetary expenditure, welfare is significant because it embodies the crucial ethical relation between participants

and nonparticipants in the exchange system, one that by all indications has greatly deteriorated under recent policies. The now generally discredited liberal line expressed the *Zeitgeist* of the age of suspicion: we should seek out victims and compensate them. The weakness of this thinking is by now clear as well: by privileging the class of victims, we assure its perpetuation.

Let us take a step back to the original meaning of *liberalism* in the nineteenth century, one still current in continental Europe: that of laissez-faire **social Darwinism**. As a political view, this apparently coherent doctrine runs up against the paradox of what Derrida calls the supplement: if the economic market really sufficed to govern the society as a whole, there wouldn't be any need for a political forum in which to affirm it. The very fact that politics exists in addition to the exchange system refutes the politics that we don't need anything but the exchange system. Like the Sabbath, the market was created for man and not man for the market.

The victimary politics of the twentieth century cuts a far wider swath than liberalism, but the amelioristic liberalism that flourished in the postwar era is the most benign form of victimary thinking. Rejecting the utopian attempts to transcend the market system that lead only to more virulent forms of victimage, the liberal attempts to make this system less sacrificial by interpreting as victims those unable to participate in it successfully. The modern liberal is a *dialectical* improvement on the laissez-faire liberal.

But now that we have seen the limits of the victimary model, how do we deal with the human failures of the market system? Granted, these are not "victims" in some obscure sacrificial sense. The wealth created by the market does not depend on their poverty, as the zero-sum *Weltanschauung* still shared by many intellectuals would have it.

(Permit me a digression on this subject. What is zero-sum in human relations is **rank**; in a linear ranking system, my gain is your loss. But this truism does not carry over to material wealth, or even to the domains of prestige, respect, and recognition. In Hegel's master-slave dialectic, the slave's recognition of the master, coming from one whom the latter considers less than fully human, is no recognition at all. In a society where all are prosperous and creative, all can have prestige in their own domain and respect in general even if ranking them by income would leave just as many in each percentile as before. Only through the eyes of resentment does my neighbor's prosperity diminish my own.)

A sign that we are leaving the victimary era is that our policies are beginning to take into account the paradoxical structure of human interaction in order to defer as much as possible the *perverse incentives* they create. This does not necessarily mean spending less money, but it means making it as difficult as possible to act in anticipation of *entitled* benefits.

The most obvious way to eliminate perverse incentives is simply to eliminate the benefits that foster them. But claiming that the **cold turkey** approach might work (but that we are too "soft" to administer it) is not merely callous but naive. In human affairs, *the end* of eliminating sacrificial behavior--the production of victims--can't justify *the means*, because the distinction between ends and means in human interaction is what defines sacrificial behavior. We have heard enough from both right and left in this century about *final solutions*. What is necessary is to create the effect of the cold turkey cure without actually administering it.

This is, I think, what recent attempts at welfare reform through workfare, benefit cuts, threats of cutoffs, refusal to pay for second children, etc. are reaching for. Whether or not benefits will really be taken away in 2 or 5 years is less important than making the recipient aware that they **could** be taken away because

the very purpose of these benefits is to help their beneficiaries enter or return to the job market.

My point is not that such programs are bound to succeed, but that they incarnate a post-liberal viewpoint that is not a simple return to social Darwinism. I think the adoption in essence **by both parties** of this new attitude, which I would call *neoconservative*, but others might like to call *neoliberal*, represents a new stage in the political dialectic of market society that marks the waning of the victimary thinking of the age of suspicion.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Civil Society

No. 60: Saturday, September 28, 1996

There has been much talk recently in conservative circles about *civil society*, the set of institutions intermediate between government and the individual. The vagueness of the term is not fortuitous; civil society is defined negatively rather than positively, by the non-authoritative nature of its components in contrast with the organized totalities of government. The church in the United States is part of civil society; the medieval Church was not. Conservatives contend that devolution of influence to this decentralized matrix of institutions will produce a more disciplined, self-reliant, and morally developed citizenry than the liberal panacea of central government. Civil society provides a guarantee against the tyrannical rationalization that prompted **Edmund Burke's** condemnation of the **French Revolution**.

But there is a difference, even a contradiction, between the contemporary notion of civil society and its origin in Burke's "*small battalions*." Burke opposed a set of tried and true institutions to the totalitarian utopias of ideologues like **Robespierre**. (In the heroic days of modern rationalism, **Descartes** drew the contrast between an old city with its maze of streets and a planned city with a grid laid out from scratch--**Washington DC**, ironically enough, is the most celebrated example of the latter.) The old structures have been shown to work, and their density and redundancy insures that even a disastrous change in one will not bring down the others, whereas a totalitarian system must either work perfectly or collapse in chaos and tyranny, as revolutionary institutions have been doing every since.

Burke's model is **ecological**; monoculture is less robust than polyculture. His appeal to conservatives reflects his insistence on tradition as a counterweight to revolutionary rationalism, but his idea of tradition is founded on **trial and error** rather than **divine right**. We need only relocate Burke's model in a more dynamic phase of market society for it to become the **social-Darwinist** doctrine of competition and *survival of the fittest*. Today's *paleoconservatives*, who rely on revealed truth rather than practice and reject Darwinian evolution even in the biological domain, are disciples of **Joseph de Maistre**, not Burke.

If Burke's *small battalions* were opposed to the revolutionary monolith, what is contemporary civil society opposed to? To "monolithic government," it might be answered. But modern liberalism, even in its worst moments, has little in common with the dreams of **Saint-Just** or **Mao Zedong/Tse-Tung**. What civil society is really supposed to shield us from is the marketplace, which, as **Marx** well knew, is fundamentally incompatible with traditional relations of any kind. When we evoke civil society as a remedy for pornography, drug abuse, and illegitimacy, we are asking it to do something quite different than protect us from big government, even from big government's welfare system. The failure of this system is patent, but it would be disingenuous--and unfaithful to the principles of any kind of conservatism--to attribute the ills it fails to correct to its own failed design. If civil society were able to check illegitimacy, welfare payments would not generate it. And if today's civil society is too weak to encourage moral behavior, the primary blame must be laid at the feet of market exchange itself, not its governmental superstructures. If illegitimacy is the fault of the welfare system, then what government

program is to blame for the proliferation of drugs?--unless it be, as some **libertarians** hold, the attempt to forbid their consumption.

The **circulatory** nature of the market system breaks down the traditional barriers between moral and immoral forms of consumption. But since a certain level of moral self-discipline is conducive to successful activity in the marketplace, there is an essential tension between the **productive** and the **consumptive** operations of the market system.

The role of civil society in the market system is less to defend against big government than to preserve the values of production from the temptations of consumption--temptations which are generated by this very process of production. Civil society both resists and contributes, contributes by resisting, to the operation of the market system. It is the institutional interface between production and consumption, the set of institutions that perform the function that Marx called the *reproduction of labor power*. There is no way to insure that these institutions all defend the *Protestant ethic* without an imposition of purpose from above--such as existed in the Soviet Union--that contradicts the very concept of civil society. When we rely on civil society to resolve the moral problems of "capitalism" we make the unwarranted assumption of its own inherent morality. **Inner-city gangs** and the **Mafia** are just as much institutions of civil society as the **Salvation Army** and the **Rotary Club**.

In a paradoxical conflation of de Maistre and Burke, it now appears that those civil institutions founded on the sacred deferral of violence in its most immediate forms--that is, in those ritual and doctrinal forms least susceptible to compromise with the ever-circulating values of the market--are the most successful in resisting the temptations of self-destructive consumption. The post-Burkean survival of the fittest leads to the unanticipated result that the most "irrational" institutions are those best suited to the mediating function of civil society in today's rationalized market system.

Civil society is a name for the human world that political thought cannot thematize. It is equally naive to see it either as a bulwark against market forces or as a mere reflection of these forces. Just as market society includes those institutions that resist it, the market model explains their necessity, their unique ability to survive where rationalistic attempts at moralizing fail. But it also explains why they cannot be imposed on society as a whole. As expected, we reach the paradox that universal moral values can function as such only locally, whereas in the larger society, they must operate within the give and take of the political marketplace. What have been called the *cultural contradictions of capitalism* are constantly being mediated by the market system itself.

The function attributed to the institutions of civil society by political thought is analogous to that of **originary anthropological reflection** for the individual within the market system. We cannot determine the effect of our thought on the system because its very enunciation adds a new degree of freedom to the system that makes it more powerful than the model we have constructed of it. But in turn, our awareness of this paradoxical operation strengthens our faith in the durability of our social order and thereby makes us more productive.

This parallel between **originary thinking** and civil society implies that the institutions of which the latter is composed should be understood as incarnating elements of the former, that is, as expressing anthropological truths inaccessible to the market system as a whole. This is particularly obvious in the case of the major religious institutions, but it is more critically true of the other components of civil society--of New Age cults like **Scientology**, and even of gangs and the Mafia.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Radical Thinking and Neopolitics

No. 61: Saturday, October 5, 1996

Originary thinking is radical thinking, not just in the etymological sense of the word *radical*, but in comparison with the timid thought modes of the day.

Contemporary thought, whatever label it goes under (cultural criticism, political science, philosophy, even anthropology), is dominated by simplistic political oppositions; nearly all thought today can be immediately classified as either of the Left or of the Right, as liberal or conservative. This binarism is a symptom of sterility; it invites a dismissive *plague on both your houses*. It differs from the progressive **Hegelian dialectic** of thesis, antithesis, synthesis by its lack of a vertical dimension. Seen from without, binary oppositions lie flat; within each separate discourse, this symmetry is hidden in a sacrificial construction predicated on the ultimate expulsion of the adversary.

But the *paleoconservative* who simply condemns the politicizing of contemporary thought exemplifies the most naive of all critical strategies, that of the *laudator temporis acti*: the golden age is past, the world is going to the dogs, you kids don't realize... The ineluctable deritualization of human society has always engendered this kind of thinking. When I say, "all thought is political today, but in the good old days..." I merely evoke the archetype of the **Fall of Man**. If all thought has indeed become political, the solution to its dreariness is not to return to a bygone era when it wasn't, but to forge ahead **through** the political to a higher, *metapolitical*, level.

This has been my overall view of **neoconservatism**. It has been my claim that its opposition to liberalism is not horizontal but dialectical, creating the Hegelian triad: laissez-faire liberalism -> modern liberalism => neoconservatism. But because this term, like the rarer kindred term *neoliberal*, is unavoidably politicized beyond the redeeming capacity of theoretical reflection, I will henceforth call **GA** not neoconservative but *neopolitical*. The advantage of this neologism is not merely euphemistic: at a time when the policies of the Clinton administration mimic those of the Right, there is in effect a **neopolitical consensus** within which the parties represent not so much nuances of doctrine as bridges to the more radical constituencies of Right and Left entrenched in different institutions, regions, and ethnic groups.

In the long term, the transcendence of liberalism cannot mean a return to the paleoconservative's religious fundamentalism or even to the typical neoconservative's Aristotelian essentialism. Originary thinking recognizes the **paradoxical** nature of social policy, the attempt to manipulate ourselves by creating incentives. Even the present state of our neopolitical self-consciousness is aware of this paradoxicality. When the liberal defines his beneficiary as a *victim*, he privileges this status and thereby inverts the sacrificial persecutor-victim relationship. But this inversion suffices to produce reciprocity only in the unambiguous case of victimization on the model of the **Holocaust**, not in the characteristic postmodern case where the *victim's* status results at least in part from his own acts. In contrast to the liberal who fails to take into account the transformation of the problem by its attempted solution, the

neopolitician seeks to safeguard interactivity and prevent the static anticipation of rewards for victimage.

If the point of neopolitics is to replace the binary persecutor-victim model of human interaction favored by liberalism with one that insists on the **agency** of all the participants, then the ideal neopolitician should be more identified with the process of dialogue than with any specific position within it. This emphasis on interactivity explains why the *unprincipled Clinton* is a more successful neopolitician than the *principled Dole*. Neopolitics is about process rather than principles, just as in the scene of human origin, the reciprocal exchange of signs must precede the interpretation of these signs. Neopolitics makes the political marketplace more like the economic marketplace. This does not imply the abandonment of principle in the larger society. The extremes of either party incarnate opposing principles of various kinds whose compromise must ultimately be negotiated in the political center. But neopolitics emphasizes the central importance less of the final results of these negotiations than of their continuing to take place.

Neopolitics does not always compromise. Its insistence on agency within dialogue leads it to favor the application of moral absolutes when these absolutes are indeed generally accepted, in contrast to the liberal subordination of moral positions to the victimary model. Thus neopolitics prefers a penal system that directly punishes crime to one focused on attempting to prevent crime in the future (deterrence) or to making the criminal less likely to return to crime (rehabilitation). Treating criminals as moral agents rather than as amoral creatures subject only to stimuli and conditioning provides both more effective deterrence by strengthening the causal link between crime and punishment and a better chance of rehabilitation by contributing to the criminal's self-respect.

But real neopolitical thought that takes into account the paradoxical nature of human interaction is rarely found in the political arena. Such thinking is less easily grasped and therefore less convincing than appeals to traditional ethical notions, which have the Burkean advantage of having stood the test of time. The neopolitical emphasis on the process of dialogue over its substance allows us to anticipate the perpetuation in the political arena of moralistic slogans at the expense of substantive debate. At the same time, we should also anticipate that the work of **originary thinking** in providing the ultimate justification for morality will slowly enter the general consciousness. When it will have done so, it might become appropriate to speak of the waning of the postmodern era, although one wonders what we could possibly put in its place.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Assisted Suicide: The Body as Internal Other

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Since the Supreme Court currently has on its docket a case involving **assisted suicide for the terminally ill**, it seems like an appropriate time for some **originary analysis** of the ethical problems involved.

In discussing of the [abortion controversy](#) a few months ago, I noted the paradox that the ideal situation, where the woman freely chooses to have her child, occurs only if abortion is in fact possible. (I was interested to hear this position articulated, perhaps inadvertently, by **Jack Kemp** in the recent Vice-Presidential debate.) Abortion creates controversy because the relation of *internal otherness* that obtains between the woman and the fetus makes their status of full humanity mutually exclusive. In the case of suicide, our respect for the other's humanity makes us condemn his act as a crime (all states presumably have laws against suicide) while not punishing him from exercising his inherent human freedom to attempt it. The paradox is *benign*, because we may be "pro-life" about suicide without really infringing on anyone's choice to end his own life. Anyone actually able to, that is. The real controversy begins when out of physical incapacity, fear, ignorance, or lack of opportunity, the potential suicide requires the assistance of another.

Unlike attempted suicide, assisted suicide has been until now a different crime altogether: that of **murder**. Murder is the most unambiguous crime because it is the most flagrant violation of moral reciprocity. Respect for the victim's intent is at best an attenuating circumstance, not a defense; by respecting his free will at this moment I prevent its exercise henceforth. My existence as a free human being makes my "criminal" destruction of my own freedom impossible to prevent, but I must be punished for helping to destroy that of another.

Thus far this argument has not been publicly contested in the general case. The Supreme Court is being asked to rule concerning the *terminally ill*, those for whom medical opinion predicts at most a few more months of life. The next step, most think, will be to extend the *right to die* to those who suffer from painful or incapacitating chronic diseases that severely diminish their capacity to enjoy life. Not even the [Hemlock Society](#) has yet affirmed a right to assisted suicide for those leading "normal" lives.

The idea is clearly that terminal illness and, by possible future extension, chronic pain and/or disability so impinge upon life that the sufferer can no longer behave as a full-fledged human being. We thereby permit an essential separation between his will and his physical existence--his soul and his body. In giving credence to the former, we treat the latter as not a full participant in humanity and therefore not deserving of the full protection of the law. Once the soul has thus been separated from the body, we can allow this soul to transfer at least part of its power of action to another without penalty.

Perhaps the most striking revelation of these controversies is the difficulty of defending traditional "pro-life" positions without recourse to the transcendental guarantee of **religion**. In the abortion issue, the

pro-life faction uses pictures of aborted fetuses the way **Brigitte Bardot** uses pictures of slaughtered baby seals. But the former pictures, unlike the latter, do not suffice to persuade us, because woman's right to participate in society as the equal of man depends on the total subordination of the *internal otherness* of the fetus to her capacity to maintain a reciprocal relation of *external otherness* with other members of society. Only a transcendental argument can deny the woman power over the contents of her body without denying the equality of her soul. In the case of assisted suicide, where there are no pictures to show, most non-believers find it absurd to deny a suffering invalid the right to shorten his life by a few painful months. Here the cumbersome *internal other* is one's own body, not another's; not a potential new life, but a radically diminished form of one's own.

For better or for worse, only religion affirms the full humanity of the individual human being while denying him or her full power over the body that makes possible the material reality of this participation. According to the **originary hypothesis**, the idea of God is understandable by analogy with the transcendent reality of the sign. The permanence of the sign-world that permits us to defer the rivalrous violence of the real world guarantees the "immortality" of the soul independently of the body, but always retaining the memory of its incarnation. Some months ago **James Williams** reminded me that, in Christian doctrine, belief in the immortality of the soul is accompanied by faith in the **resurrection of the body**. As I understand this, the soul does not participate in the realm of pure meaning independently of its inhabitation of a unique mortal body, which cannot, as transmigrationists believe, be replaced by another. In the Christian understanding, the body is the *internal other* of the soul. To legitimize suicide by assuring it the cooperation of the social order is to deny the sanctity of this otherness.

On the lower reaches of the *slippery slope*, we find the specter of **euthanasia**, where a third party is allowed to decide whether the body is still inhabited by a fully human soul, and if not, to put an end to it. If a soul can will the destruction of its own body, then another soul might conceivably be empowered to act in its place. If *external otherness* is considered the only truly human form of interaction, then failure of reciprocity as a result of age or illness becomes a *prima facie* reason for considering one as no longer fully human. The movement in industrialized countries toward legalizing assisted suicide thus takes a step beyond the broadly successful movement for abortion rights in desanctifying the relation of internal otherness.

These movements may be said to reflect the progress of secularization. But we can invert the direction of causality: the decline of the sacred reflects the loss of protection for internal otherness in a context where external otherness has become the unique model of human relations. This movement is understandable if the essential problem to which human language is the solution is the potential violence of external relations. (I will comment in a future column on some recent attempts to trace the origin of the human sign to the female promotion of child care by males, and thus to the priority of internal rather than external otherness to the preservation of the species.)

The permanence of the meaning of the sign after the destruction of its referent, which is our model for immortality, makes every user of the sign a participant in immortality. But the transcendental guarantee of this participation originates with the central victim that was the originary referent of the sign. It is Christianity that most unambiguously reveals the identity of the eternal meaning of the sign and its mortal referent. **Jesus's** mortal agony, by repeating the originary generation of immortal Being from mortal being, sacralizes the internal otherness of the body to the soul. Whence the Christian condemnation of the pagan practice of suicide.

By the same token, today's suspicion of internal otherness is at the same time suspicion of the transcendental model that sacralized it. But whereas in the abortion controversy, the desanctification of internal otherness could be couched as a claim of human equality, in the legalization of assisted suicide, this desanctification lifts our most fundamental taboo, the interdiction against killing an independently existing human being. It is therefore a far more radical development.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Age, Love, and Culture

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Since the beginning of the postmodern era after World War II, culture has increasingly been oriented toward youth. One of the defining experiences of my own youth back in the fifties, to which I have already alluded a few times too many, was the sudden shift from a popular culture for young adults, as exemplified by **Rodgers & Hammerstein** musicals, to the *Rock'n'Roll* world directed at adolescents. My generation will be the last to have known a world without **Elvis**.

But from my present vantage point, the difference between 15 and 25 is no longer terribly significant. As I continue to teach literature, I am forced to recognize that the principals are no longer in my age-group. The typical protagonist of a novel is a young man or woman entering the world. Novels are stories of *Bildung*, what ritual culture would call *initiation*. The idea is to live happily ever after by reproducing the species, or as the French say, *ils vécutent heureux et ils eurent beaucoup d'enfants*. If, as in most French novels, things don't turn out this way, the failure of initiation is in principle decided well before senior citizen time. Even Frédéric Moreau at the end of **Flaubert's** *L'éducation sentimentale* is only in his forties. Tragedy had lots of old men, from **Oedipus at Colonus** to **King Lear**, but the novel has few in major roles. Most novels are love stories, and romance is for the young. As for lyric poetry, *n'en parlons pas*.

Today, old people are presumed to have forgotten what it means to be young, whereas in the old days, the passage beyond the age of cultural initiation signaled that one had solved the problems of youth and could serve as a resource for those still at grips with them. Yet in my own experience, aging is neither the forgetting nor the transcending of youth. Life itself is youthfulness; while one still functions, one is always an aging adolescent, moving toward the ever-withdrawing horizon of *maturity*. What we *call* maturity in older people is the paradoxical state of having realized, as young people cannot, that the state of maturity does not exist, that one is forever in a state of **maturation**.

Let me attempt some *mature* wisdom about the central theme of these columns: **love**.

In a number of previous columns ([No. 56: Love and Transcendence](#); [No. 31: Love and Sexual Difference](#); [No. 28: Public Resentment, Private Love](#); [No. 20: Toujours l'amour](#); [No. 19: Amo quia absurdum](#); [No. 6: Resentment and Love](#); etc.), I have developed a theory of love as **tenderness**, as mutual caring for each other's vulnerability. But one might reproach this model its lack of connection with the socio-cultural function of love in the **reproduction of the species**. Any phenomenon we examine as **generative anthropologists** must be understood in terms of a minimal model of the human. No doubt, as I have proposed, love of the other has its cultural basis in the peripheral subject's attraction toward and identification with the central victim. But it is reproduction that privileges the other of sexual attraction in this role.

Men and women are minimally differentiated by the latter's capacity to experience the *internal otherness* of childbearing. This difference implies an asymmetry in the couple's mutual tenderness. Because the woman pays the biological price for sexuality, it is her vulnerability that is given priority, both in the social context ("*Women and children first*") and in the intimacy of the love-relationship. When **François Villon** speaks of the inevitable decay of the *corps féminin qui tant est tendre*, it is unclear whether he is speaking of a woman's body or of his own: tenderness and femininity are inseparable. Through the phenomenon of love, the mother's biological nurturing of the internal other is extended into a reciprocal cultural interaction. As we saw in last week's column, the very possession of a mortal body makes man as well as woman a vulnerable creature who can benefit from tenderness.

In simple Darwinian terms, the adaptive value of the love-relation--as of anything else--is measured by **reproductive fitness**; the more the man's tenderness assimilates the woman's vulnerability to that of the originary victim, the more he will invest in his relationship with her and the more their offspring will benefit from this investment. Much anthropological literature has been concerned with explaining the origin of this phenomenon, to which the *late encephalization* of the human fetus gives its species-specific *raison-d'être*.

The point is this: because nothing is more central to the emergence of humanity than the extended parental care without which our big brains could never have developed, human evolution in its crucial phase must have been driven by females' differential strategies for attracting male care. Aside from what in these times one hesitates to speak of as the esthetic of the female body, the most significant of these is woman's unique perpetual sexual availability without indication of ovulation. Under these conditions, the male can only insure reproductive success by remaining with the female throughout the month and, presumably, helping provide protection and life support for her children whether or not genetically his own.

Some have sought to explain the origin of the linguistic sign in woman's need to induce and maintain male presence; I have promised to deal with these theories in a future column. For the moment, I shall continue to assume the validity of the male-aggression version of the **originary hypothesis**--noting that the hypothesis in the general sense is independent of the specific scenario we construct. The question then is how the assimilation of the female Other to the central Being of the scene might have come about.

In a presumably all-male originary scene, the special prestige of the sacred would not be specifically associated with heterosexual attraction. (Similarly, the first self-conscious idea of love, as elaborated in **Plato's Symposium**, was between men; in order to become aware of itself, culture must oppose itself to biology.) But only what **Freud** called the *overestimation of the [hetero]sexual object* is clearly a cultural trait conducive to reproductive fitness. Although any object of desire may occupy the scenic center, and we may love another person, an animal or even an object to which we can attribute imaginary personhood, heterosexual love owes to its conjunction with human biology its role as the model for all other love relationships.

The Other always faces me as the vulnerable image of my own mortality. But it is when the Other's vulnerability is enhanced by the female capacity for internal otherness (and its prolongation in the child-rearing process) that the tenderness-love provoked by this image is most useful for the species. The bottom line is that whatever either our genetic predispositions or the demands of our specific culture, we are culturally predisposed toward heterosexual love. Toward *young* heterosexual love. Loving old couples are touching, but it is young love that sets the mimetic juices flowing. The old desire as well as

the young, but our desires are no longer culturally significant. A good reason for us to stay home from rock concerts and work on our **generative anthropology**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Avoiding Armageddon

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Judge **Robert Bork**, the conservative jurist best known for having been *Borked* by the Senate out of a seat on the Supreme Court, expresses in his recent book, *Slouching Toward Armageddon*, an apocalyptic view of American culture. But if the Right complains that traditional moral values are neglected, even mocked, the Left bewails our politicians' reluctance to use the *l-word* as a symptom of our selfish indifference to the deserving clients of liberalism. For the former, we have abandoned constraints on our individual desires; for the latter, we have... abandoned constraints on our individual desires. The difference between the two critiques is that the Right proposes rules for limiting the expression of these desires, whereas the Left proposes other ways to expend the social capital we now devote to them. Explicitly transcendental or not, the Right judges us by the inherent nature of our acts; historically determinist or not, the Left judges us by the presumed consequences of our acts. They are opposed as *a priori* vs *a posteriori*, being vs doing.

And both sides blame the market system; the first, because it encourages us to indulge our desires at the expense of moral restraint, the second, because it encourages us to indulge our desires at the expense of the rest of the human and natural world. *A la rigueur*, some of these condemners of the market will admit their own complicity in it, but none ever seem to envisage--as diehard revolutionary **Herbert Marcuse's** *One-Dimensional Man* did back in 1964--that their very condemnation is itself in complicity with it. Why, my hands are clean: I don't read pornography / invest in tobacco stocks. If it weren't for all those unreconstructed souls who do...

But the two positions I have been discussing are not altogether symmetrical. Transcendentally grounded wisdom, whether Christian or Confucian, never expects the real world to correspond altogether with the moral ideal. Transcendentalism is not utopianism; its ultimate truth is expressed by "*my kingdom is not of this world.*" But this vision does have a special category for what happens when *this world* and *my kingdom* become not merely distinct but altogether incompatible. Apocalypse or **Armageddon** occurs when the social order falls apart in violence, when the deferring function of culture is no longer operative. At this point, the transcendental takes over from the worldly, the paradox of the sacred realizes itself in the here and now of mimetic crisis.

In the immanentist vocabulary of the Left, this is the moment of **Revolution**, the *final conflict*. But the Left is farther adrift from its historically recent traditions than the Right from its far older ones. Ninety-five percent of Americans believe in God; how many, I wonder, still believe that *the International Soviet will be the human race*? Immanentism, rightly considered, is incompatible with apocalypses and final conflicts. These are prophesied from on high not as goals but threats, so that we may act to avoid them. A position that refuses the religious *credo quia absurdum* should not make claims about the end of history.

Cultural pessimism, like all our everyday social discourse, is historically naive, not because it cannot fulfill thought's ultimate goal to be fully conscious of itself, but because it does not realize the possibilities of self-reflection already available to it in the present moment. This kind of thinking is a step behind the postmodern era. That does not mean that the content of its moralism should be disregarded. But we have heard enough of the *dialogue de sourds* between the old-fashioned transcendental moralist and the new style immanentist moralist. Postmodern thought must be capable of understanding both discourses of cultural pessimism as themselves apotropaic gestures within the market system.

Is cultural optimism any less naive? Can it exist independently of the frenetic futurism that is really just another apocalyptic mode? Futurism may be optimistic, but only because it confidently awaits a technological Messiah to resolve problems insoluble by other means. Cultural optimism is the conviction that human society is capable of solving its own problems. The simplicity of this conviction need not reflect a naive anthropology. **GA** adds the significant nuance that the human capacity to *defer violence through representation* is dependent on our paradoxical relation with transcendence: the ability and the need to make the central focus of our desires the transcendental signifier of the sign is precisely what defines us as human.

GA is sometimes mistaken for an apocalyptic mode, its hypothesis turned inside out into a prophecy, as though the historical horizon of originary thinking were the return to the originary moment at which the metaphysical Idea of the Good and the God whose incarnation saves us from our own mimetic violence are one and the same.

But they will surely never again be one and the same. The horizon of originary thinking is ever-broadening. Believers and non-believers, social critics of the Left and Right will continue to coexist, to argue and occasionally war with each other over the future direction of society. True cultural optimism consists in accepting the perennity of conflict in the context of the deferral of ultimate violence.

Since optimism asserts the possibility of success, it is obliged to face the practical question of preventing failure. Any Armageddon in our future will most likely come not as brimstone poured from heaven on readers of pornography, but as the detonation of atomic, biological, or chemical warheads bearing the address of powers holding ethical views even more aprioristic than those of Professor Bork. We in the West, as beneficiaries of an effective socioeconomic system, can probably cope with our problems without destroying ourselves. The resentments of the less developed world are far more deadly.

The term **Armageddon** reminds us that the archetype of our cultural pessimism is that of the Hebrews. Can it be a coincidence that the reestablished nation of these same Hebrews is once again the focus, symbolic and real, of the world's most virulent and potentially dangerous social resentments? Cultural pessimists and other apocalyptics would do better to devote their energies to **Jesus's** original mission: to bring peace to humanity, beginning with the **Middle East**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Election Special: Two Points About the Presidential Campaign

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1

My first point about the current presidential campaign is that, more even than the last one, it is being reported from an almost exclusively **metapolitical** perspective. That is, instead of saying that the candidate expressed view X, the papers tell us that the candidate has decided to express view X in manner Y to audience Z. The emphasis is on form rather than content, strategy rather than substance. Armies of pundits and spin doctors pore over the (uniformly obnoxious) TV spots: where are they airing, what strategy do they exemplify.

And from this perspective, it is universally acknowledged that **Bob Dole** is no match for **Bill Clinton**. Even conservative publications have affirmed that Dole doesn't deserve to win because he has failed to articulate the reasons why he should be elected. To the extent that this critique of Dole is not merely tautological--if you can't be elected, you don't deserve to be--it reflects a significant change in our political criteria. Campaigning skill may win elections, but we do not traditionally judge the worthiness of candidates for office on this basis.

In a predictable meta-meta-political move, many deplore this vacuous fascination with campaign trivia at the expense of fundamental issues. But bemoaning what "we" do *malgré nous* is an unsatisfactory substitute for explaining it.

Clearly not only the chameleon-like Clinton is obsessed by tactics; Dole, trailing badly and short of resources, has to be even more concerned with them. He is often reproached with his failure to stay on message, particularly in reference to the **15% tax cut**. But the only substantive issue is whether Dole is telling the truth when he gives his word to cut taxes, not how often he repeats it; and the reason he doesn't repeat it is that sticking to substantive issues has not proved an effective strategy.

A key feature of our times is the fissure that has opened between the college-educated *upscale* and the less educated *downscale* populations. The increasingly **bimodal** distribution of consumer goods--**Pic 'n' Save** versus **Nieman-Marcus**--has hit hard traditional middle-class retailers like **Sears** and **J. C. Penney**. Although both political parties have attempted to turn this phenomenon to their advantage, no one seems to see its relationship to the metapolitical trend under discussion.

Americans are more *sophisticated* than they used to be because they are better educated than they used to be. There is objective content to this sophistication: one does learn a few things in college. But sophistication is more a relative than an absolute category: to be sophisticated, one must know more than what we suppose an ordinary person knows. Anxiety in this regard is at a minimum when the educated

class is either limited to a small elite or includes nearly everyone; it is bound to reach its maximum when the population is more or less equally divided, as it is in the United States, between *sophisticates* and *ordinary people*.

In such circumstances, no one knows exactly how much other people know. Instead of striving to acquire knowledge, with the less-than-sure chance of becoming more learned than my adversary, it's more effective simply trump his knowledge with cynicism. What you think you know, you do not really know, because you are too naive to see the power-relations that dictate the creation and transmission of your "knowledge." On campus, this kind of thinking is associated with **Michel Foucault**. But any grade-school dropout can acquire the rudiments of metapolitical cynicism. This in turn obliges the *real* sophisticates to keep a step ahead of the crowd by listening to the talking heads discuss spin on a daily basis.

2

My second point is that the **Democrats** have been remarkably successful in making themselves over from the liberal party driven out of office two years ago. The critique of **liberalism** presented in these columns is that it is essentially a means for acquiring for oneself a position of moral superiority. The liberal finds victims everywhere and presents himself as their champion in the face of the selfishness of his peers.

The postwar victimary era appears to be coming to a close. Issues like **affirmative action** still play on this theme, but the anticipated victory of California's **Civil Rights Initiative** may well be the beginning of the end of overt racial preferences. The present defense of affirmative action is driven more by the self-interest of potential beneficiaries (well over 50% of the population if all women are included) than by the *white guilt* it relied on in the past. But if--to speak like **Jack Kemp**--the Democrats have lost a few yards on affirmative action, they have scored a series of first downs by reminding the great middle class of a simple fact: government entitlements may benefit poor and minorities, deserving or not, but above all they benefit **you**. In their desire to end the victimary thrust of liberalism, the Republicans began to threaten, or appear to threaten, entitlement programs on which the majority of the population relies. The party's *petit-bourgeois* instincts, which had been politically effective in curbing the victimary excesses of liberalism, are inadequate in their raw form to deal with the subtleties of our relationship with government. Clinton's claims, however self-serving or misleading, that he has cut the size and budget of the bureaucracy while making it more sensitive to our needs cannot be answered by Dole's simple assertion that cutting taxes **gives us back our money** to spend it as we like.

Which brings me back to **my first point**. In a society where the sophisticated half of the population is concerned to retain its edge over the other half, the content of our political rhetoric must be able to resist being understood in terms of the strategy it serves rather than taken at face value. The cynicism of means over ends attacks the discourses of both parties equally, but it is a mistake to assume that they defend themselves equally.

Clinton's fabled effectiveness as a campaigner is largely based on his insistence on integrating local people and issues into his political speeches--something of which Dole seems pretty much incapable. Clinton will bend over backward to ingratiate himself with his audience, even if this means telling MTV *he regrets not having inhaled*, or that business group in Texas that *he's sorry he raised their taxes*. How

can you trust a man like that? Well, what the audience, and the public in general, appreciates is that you can trust him to get the local community and a few of its members on the national news. They get their 15 seconds of fame, and the rest of us feel we too might have our chance.

Cynical as it may be, this kind of appeal resists dismissal as mere strategy far better than Dole's repetition of slogans. For the integration of local elements into political discourse reshapes this discourse as one in which these elements become a necessary component. It forces politicians to present their policies in terms of their concrete advantages to their beneficiaries. The appeal to local and individual interests helps to reestablish the traditional dialogue between the government and the people that the altruistic cast of victimary liberalism had allowed to decay. It provides a more *neopolitical* antidote against liberalism than generalized hostility to **big government**.

This is not to say that skill at metapolitics justifies the moral laxity of the current administration. But history isn't always made by nice people. When things seem to be going pretty well and both parties agree on fundamental policies, there is an advantage to being the one less ideologically committed to these policies--balancing the budget, for instance--but more concerned to weave them into an integrative political discourse. It's the sort of performance that impresses the cynical pundits, and even a good number of the cynical voters. Let's see how well the Republicans can learn this lesson by 1998.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Generative Spirituality

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A number of readers of these columns have confided to me that they prefer those about **love** to the others. I think this is because love possesses **spirituality**. The *spirit* is the agency that preserves the shared meanings of language. In the Trinity, the **Holy Spirit** is the means of transmission of the Word of the Father (and Son, if we accept the *filioque* of the Roman church). If the Father is the center as inaccessible Being and the Son is the center as victim, the Spirit is the center as the locus not of figure but of meaning. Spirituality is communication in and through the transcendental guarantee of the spirit.

The function of human love as a means of facilitating spiritual communication is implicit in the earliest myths, such as the Babylonian creation story in which the sky-god impregnates the earth-goddess. In the Christian Middle Ages, the idea that my love for another human being provides in its very specificity a model of my love for God gives rise to a new human-based spirituality based on the nearly universal experience of love. In the richness of its reference to our common origin, it is ultimately immaterial whether the object of this love is human or divine.

But the spiritual life of society as a whole is not organized around our experience of finding God in our beloved's eyes. The locus of spirituality for most remains organized **religion**. The various religions incarnate historically different insights into the sacred basis of the human. Since the human is one, all religions share the same horizon; but in the critical urgency of deferring violence, each must make its decision before reaching this horizon. The *credo quia absurdum* is universal: all faiths require the *leap of faith*. No amount of interfaith dialogue can create a Hegelian synthesis of the different religions each attached to the historical specificity of its founding revelation, whether vouchsafed to an ancient prophet or to a contemporary guru.

Religion is a communal affair; but for the most part we no longer live in homogeneous religious communities. We must either accept other faiths as compatible with our own--*Jésus et Bouddha, même combat*--or withdraw into closed communities defined by religious orthodoxy. This situation has had a deleterious effect on contemporary religious reflection. When the cognitive value of religion is ignored by both sides and faith reduced to acceptance of dogma, our shared intuitions about the transcendental realm of meaning tend to wither away. In this climate, what passes for spirituality is often sought outside the traditional religions, in cults, sects, and *New Age* elucubrations of the most embarrassing naïveté. That this latter mode has invaded the very seat of power, from **Nancy Reagan's** astrology to **Hillary Clinton's** channeling, is a distressing sign of spiritual impoverishment. At least **Billy Graham**, the unofficial White House spiritual leader in the previous generation, was an arguably legitimate bearer of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Cult members suffer from spiritual impoverishment in the form of Durkheim's *anomie*: the loss of a set of clear rules of conduct that give meaning to life. They choose a charismatic leader not from the

Hobbesian need to end physical anarchy but to still the anarchy of their souls, pulled this way and that by myriad mediating forces. As the mediator of all in the group, the leader creates by fiat or example a set of transcendental meanings that make possible intense spiritual communion. The more aberrant these meanings appear to outsiders, the more the group's spiritual coherence is reaffirmed; since humans are their own greatest source of danger, we are more critically concerned with the spirituality that guarantees the nonviolent exchange of representations (roughly, Kant's *Vernunft* or *Reason*) than with our ability to manipulate the categories of external reality (the *Verstand* or *Understanding*). For those, less openly in crisis, who belong to a particular spiritual community but do not wish to sacrifice all else to spiritual intensity, the question is how to remain open to dialogue with others.

Originary thinking, as I see it, is not an ideology suitable for founding communities; its purpose is rather to provide a basis for dialogue among already-existing communities. Its attitude to human interaction is maximally ascetic; it defers the communal bond as long as necessary to be sure that all humanity may be included within it. The vision of love that I have articulated here as a minimal model of the human community is meant to sustain us in the course of this deferral; it is not suited to building its own spiritual community, but to allowing us to do without one. To the extent that originary thinkers form a group, it is rather a *meta-community* defined by its renunciation of any particular set of social meanings. The meanings we seek to make explicit by means of originary analysis are the minimal common sense of the entire human race. But we must theorize this totality unsupported by any communal spirituality; *race*, like *community*, applies to the totality of our species only metaphorically.

Originary thinking stands at the intersection of the transcendent and immanent modes of thought, the respective foundations of religious and positive spirituality; it is the only form of thinking that can translate between them. But it is not acceptable to offer both parties an imperialistic analysis that neither can accept. If some of my expositions of **GA** have seemed to present it in this way, *mea culpa*. Real thinking does not seek to conquer the minds of either side, but to help them better to think their own thoughts through dialogue with each other.

It is wrong to teach **GA** as a *doctrine*; it is the minimal component of all doctrines. The **originary hypothesis** is the **minimal hypothesis**--too minimal to found a human community, either at the origin or today. Its function is wholly spiritual, in the sense that the Holy Spirit, lacking both the material reality of the Son and the transcendental substance of the Father, is nothing but the **subsistence of meaning**. I hope to make this aspect and function of originary thinking clearer in the columns that follow.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

God and Woody Allen

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The other evening I was given another chance to understand why I don't like **Woody Allen**. His 1989 film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* follows two men--a successful ophthalmologist (**Martin Landau**), whose need to free himself from an obsessive mistress (the m-word is used in the film) leads him to have her *whacked*, and the inevitable, unbearable Allen character, a feckless documentary film maker who wants to leave his wife (who's refused to sleep with him for several months) for another woman (**Mia Farrow**), but who learns at the end, to his humiliation, that his beloved has become the fiancée of his *bête noire*, an egregiously successful producer played by **Alan Alda**.

In the final scene, the two protagonists meet at a wedding, and Landau, who has been racked by remorse over the murder, asks Allen if his story--which he tells in the third person--wouldn't make a good film plot. Allen says yes, but only if the guilty lover makes the story *tragic* by confessing to the murder. Whereupon Landau, repeating the words of his gangster-connected brother who arranged the hit, tells Allen that he has seen too many Hollywood movies, that in the real world, people just get over their guilt and go on with their lives. Suddenly cured of the remorse that has been dogging him, he walks off arm in arm with his wife to plan their own daughter's wedding, leaving the despairing Allen behind.

This film gives us all the expected insights into Allen's character, including his curious habit, prophetic in the light of later revelations, of confiding his amorous dreams to a teen-aged girl. But I'll let someone else psychoanalyze the guy. What struck me in this film is its treatment of religion.

Before the murder, Landau is paralyzed with fear that his wife and family will find out about his mistress, whose hysterical threats to confront them are essential to the plot. His brother, not he, suggests the *final solution*, and only after further provocation does he agree to let it be carried out. Afterward, he sees childhood visions of his father studying the Torah, telling him of God's omniscience. This sets up the key religious scene in the film. At a Passover Seder, a middle-aged woman rebukes another participant for reading the traditional Hebrew *Haggadah*, which tells the story of the Exodus. The **Holocaust**, she says, has shown that God doesn't exist, that religion is arbitrary nonsense. When Landau, who is standing apart from the group at the table, inquires about the divine consequences of murder, he is told that there's no such thing as divine punishment, that it's up to the murderer whether he wants to feel guilty or not.

Allen deserves credit for avoiding the sacrificial cop-out of a junk film like *Fatal Attraction* that fully demonizes the character who must be eliminated. Here she is monster enough to make her murder seem necessary, but not enough to make it either legal or emotionally satisfying. The moral seems to be that all this God stuff is just a way of avoiding responsibility. As Landau's brother tells him, people who live in *the real world* don't have the luxury of believing in God. We return to a familiar *shtick*: the Jews conjured up God, the imaginary embodiment of the *superego*, in order to justify their notorious need to

feel guilty. The film doesn't exactly recommend murder, but if you do have to do it, there's no point in tormenting yourself by evoking that *phallogocentric* paternal God who sees all and never forgets.

The Jews should get over their guilt trip: thus is the post-Holocaust *never again* that Israeli soldiers carry into battle transformed into a way of avoiding guilt for murder. The infantile understanding of religion reflected in this film is that of a Voltairean intelligentsia who inhabit a world devoid of what in [last week's column](#) I called **spirituality**. For these people, religion is a set of comic-book tales about a super-hero called God. Their rational, analytic minds feel not the slightest indebtedness to religion--*au contraire*. That we share language and culture, that we intuit and communicate meanings, rationally or irrationally--what can this have to do with the figure who flame-engraved those tablets for **Charlton Heston**?

The heritage I share with Woody Allen offers richer spiritual opportunities. The Jewish denial of incarnation that makes God unfigurable allows us a privileged insight--one that **Derrida**, for one, has profited from--into the fundamental connection between religion and language at the umbilical point of the human. As for God's presumed disapproval of murder, the point isn't that the bogey-man in the sky will get you, but that killing is a crime against the human-in-general only because it is in the first place a crime against the transcendental ground of the human-in-general--in a word, a *sin*. I'm not going to argue that the breakdown of religious community that turns God into *Nobodaddy* and guilt into a psychological hang-up makes us more likely to hire a hit man than in more pious times; the truth may be just the opposite. But this reduction of religion to infantile stereotypes, however tricked out in the pseudo-wisdom of the New York intellectual set, is a troubling sign of disequilibrium between mental and spiritual development.

One solution is to return to an obscurantist orthodoxy, or--the California approach--to invent an even more obscurantist orthodoxy. But there will presumably always exist those, believers as well as unbelievers, who want to *understand*. To these I would suggest that the road to understanding must take us back to the origin before it can lead us anywhere else. Believers and unbelievers don't have to toss hoary cliches back and forth. Without pretending to the certitude of revealed truth, **originary thinking** constructs hypotheses to explain the attributes of God.

Am I decrying the decline of our culture into the religious infanthood of Woody Allen? I have studied paradoxes too long to get caught up in what I will call the *Cassandra paradox*, a well-worn variation on that of **Epimenides the Cretan**. The latter, you may recall, used to say that *all Cretans are liars*; Cassandra cries incessantly that *all Trojans are deluded*. No, my point is just the opposite. Even the intelligentsia is growing up. Allen's religious childishness makes his film seem dated only seven years after it was made. **GA** may still be ahead of its time, but the world is gradually moving in our direction.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Minimal Ethic

No. 68: Saturday, November 23, 1996

The **originary hypothesis** is situated at the frontier of the humanities--the world of meaning--and the human sciences--the world of facts, at the point where transcendental meaningfulness emerges within the immanent world of appetite. The ethic of the originary scene is indifferently divine and human, coerced and free. The ethical imperative implicit in our hypothesis commands us to create within ourselves the intuitive equivalent of the outcome of this collective scene: *the deferral of violence through representation*.

The emergence of the human is the emergence of the transcendental in the life-world. By making this origin an object of hypothesis rather than dogma, we take a great ethical step. Seen in the context of their historical evolution, religious revelations are themselves hypotheses, in their way even minimal hypotheses. The act of faith *quia absurdum* reproduces within the individual imagination the originary state of crisis; its urgency reminds us that the worldly peace brought about by the deferral of violence depends upon the permanence of the transcendental Being that preserves the meaning of the sign. But faith does more than that; it affirms that our participation in this Being allows us an existential escape from the biological mortality that, *pace* Genesis, is not a consequence but a precondition of our resentfulness. The deferral of the originary crisis among human beings by means of the sign is the source of religious **transcendentalism**, the notion that the atemporal domain of meaning is a world that we can in some sense eternally inhabit.

The originary hypothesis, which takes our historical point of departure seriously, but minimally, is the basis for a minimal human ethic that implies the critical suspension of the otherworldly. In contrast, positive thought that elides the historicity of human origin can propose no ethical principle other than biological necessity.

The ethical imperative implicit in the originary hypothesis is that we must minimize the historical specificity of the moment of origin, as expressed in the supplementary existential content of the sacred Being that preserves the meaning of the originary sign. We may formulate this ethic as follows: *act in such a way as to make it indifferent whether, at the moment of origin, God created man or man created God*.

This formula has in common with the doctrines of the higher religions the virtue of being interpretable on many levels. On the simplest--I hope to deal with others in future columns--it cautions against the two extremes characterized by Corneille's **Polyeucte**, who seeks martyrdom in anticipation of eternal bliss, and Plato's **Calicles**, who anticipates **Nietzsche** in interpreting ethical laws as the weak's means of duping the strong. The unbeliever must act as though God will punish his sins; the believer, as though no God will reward his virtues.

How does this ethic compare with **René Girard**'s interpretation of Christian morality, which tells us to

minimize the sacrificiality of our conduct, to act so as to create as little victimage as possible? Sacrifice, the interpretation of God's will as the lynching of a scapegoat, is exposed and rejected in the **Passion**. The God who *lets his rain fall on the just as on the unjust* will not intervene in the world either to punish evil or to reward good. Only the human community, by choosing love over resentment, can bring about peace on earth.

This vision of Christianity goes a long way toward the minimality of the originary hypothesis. A God who refuses to intervene in human affairs is no longer very different from the hypothetical Being that guarantees the meaning generated by the originary sign. The remaining difference is the assimilation of natural to human crisis that makes the Being who masters human violence equally the master of the natural violence of death. For the man on the street, the *afterlife* is what religion is all about. A hypothesis cannot promise its adherents the resurrection of the body or even, in anything like an existential sense, the eternity of the soul.

But are these dogmatic elements not mere aids to belief rather than the substance of belief; are they not expressions of the originary hypothesis in a different vocabulary?

I think not. Religious anthromorphism guides our intuition along a different path than minimal thinking. We all share in Jesus' death, but Christ's glorious resurrection can only be promised us. The application to the human body of the transcendence provided by the sign is the last refuge of the sacred cosmology that extends to the heavens the powers of a Being whose only proven domain of action is the human community. A minimalist ethic must recalculate the payoff of Pascal's *pari*: we wager not on an eternity of existential bliss, but on sharing in the transcendent atemporality of human meaning.

The next step beyond religion is not the abolition of religion, but a new way of thinking that preserves the historical specificity of religious revelation while not itself participating in this specificity. Because the intuition of the originary scene is not divine revelation but hypothesis, it has no charismatic power. No doubt **originary thinking**, like Christianity, will gradually work out in history the lesson of its original revelation; but its origin, unlike that of Christianity, is a truly minimal event, **Deriddean** rather than **Girardian**, with no reality beyond its written trace. The ethic implicit in the originary hypothesis is to repeat on every occasion the minimality of this event--in practical terms, to suspect and reduce the signs of centrality. This is an esthetic more anti-heroic still than that of Christ on the cross--the protagonist's ultimate humiliation is to become invisible.

There has surely never been a time when the public scene of representation has been so discredited as today, even as it remains at the horizon of our accomplishments. Everyone seeks fame, yet there is no longer any legitimate way to be famous. The closest thing we have to a heroic figure in our public life is **Colin Powell**, whose minority status would have allowed him to occupy the center in the most unexclusionary way possible, but who turned down an excellent chance at the world's most prestigious job out of a healthy distrust of centrality under any circumstances. Powell is heroic by the very fact of having refused to take the heroic position, of having accepted to disappoint his potential admirers. In an age of such heroism, we can begin to appreciate the virtues of an ethic of minimality.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Richard van Oort and Eric Gans

A GA Conversation (I)

No. 69: Saturday, November 30, 1996

This week's column is the first in a projected series of exchanges on the subject of **Generative Anthropology**. Our purpose is to clarify the fundamental ideas involved, so your [feedback](#) will be particularly valuable.

RvO - In order to contextualize our remarks, and to get our conversation going, let me summarize the main points of generative anthropology before addressing some more specific questions.

Generative anthropology is committed to a foundational and unified conception of the human. In the face of a widespread skepticism currently pervading much of the theoretical work being done in the human sciences, it stubbornly rejects the notion that the question "What is the human?" cannot be a fit topic for discussion. When we observe the humanities today, it indeed seems remarkable that in an area of knowledge devoted to a particular subject, in this case the human, there should be so little dialogue about what exactly that means. In this respect, the notion of "the humanities" appears to be more a terminological convenience, of use perhaps to administrators, than a bona fide designation of some fundamental subject matter.

But perhaps there is more to our topic--the human--than mere academic pigeonholing. For is it not significant that we are at least asking the question? What is it that allows us to even **think** about this question in the first place? The fact that we can think, and more specifically, speak together on this issue suggests that preceding all division within humanity itself there must be some underlying unity that gives us the capacity to engage in conversation with one another. Why is it, in short, that we have language at all?

This is in fact where we propose to begin, that is, with language. Before there can be disagreement about what is being said--*i.e.*, about the content of language--there must be, at a much more fundamental level, a threshold of presemantic "presence" in which the gesture toward language and meaning can take place at all. This threshold of presence is not yet communicated as any specific content; it must be a purely formal moment of linguistic receptivity. This is in fact the form our hypothesis will take. The threshold of the human must begin with the threshold of language because it is only in language that the question of being human could arise. The originary hypothesis proposes that the question of humanity begins when humanity begins to represent. The discovery/invention of language defines the specific moment in which humanity originates. By referring to this originary scene we seek not to fill in a piece of objective history that is currently missing, but to actively participate in a dialogue with our origin that defines us as self-conscious language-users.

The crucial point about this form of thinking is to understand the implied dialogue we propose between ourselves and the original humans. Our predicament is ultimately shared by those at the origin. The first moment of language use occurs in the moment when it becomes impossible for humanity to exist without

language. Language evolves when the dominant mode of prehuman interaction--nonsymbolic imitation--threatens the very stability of the social order. At the prehuman level, imitation is the fundamental mode of transmitting information between community members. By copying the gestures of the adult, the young engage in apprenticeship for more complex tasks such as hunting, which amongst the higher animals can involve highly specialized collective behavior (*e.g.*, lions stalking their prey). But though direct imitation of a role model can transmit to the individual relatively complex collective behavior, such collective behavior lacks the formal criterion of language. In direct imitation I learn by imitating your gestures. But when I imitate your gesture toward the same object, my gesture is no longer simple but problematic. We cannot both appropriate the same object. Language emerges when mimetic appropriation becomes so intense that the presence of the object becomes too problematic for it to be included as the natural endpoint of imitation. Language is precisely the intervention between the imitating subject and the gesturing model of the problematic status of the desired object. Rather than understand the mimetic gesture as naturally fulfilled in the appropriation of the appetitive object, the intolerable nature of the mimetic situation forces the subject to understand the object as separate from his gesture. The gesture no longer leads to the object, but remains irrevocably separate from it. As such it is the first sign.

This crucial threshold in which language is hypothesized to take place is the event that specifies the particularity of the human. Given this framework for specifying the human, let us turn to some more particular questions concerning the efficacy of originary thinking. Many people will want to know how this model can influence our way of thinking about particular cultural institutions, especially those institutions, such as the economic and political, that appear to have particular relevance for us today. How can the hypothesis help us think pragmatically about our present political and cultural situation? What makes this theory more than simply another "academic" theory? In what way is it relevant to human thinking in general? How does it participate in our current historical moment?

EG - Some of these questions are more easily answered than others. I think you are right to begin with the most practical questions, and indeed, my attention has turned increasingly to them, without however turning away from the fundamental anthropological questions that were **GA**'s original concern.

At the outset, the originary hypothesis was meant as an extension of **Girard**'s model of the mimetic crisis to explain not merely the establishment of social order but the origin of language. I had never accepted either the positivist idea that human language is just an evolutionary development of ape language, nor the deconstructionist idea that it *always already* existed. On the contrary, precisely because it alone could conceive the *always already*, this was one phenomenon that could not always already exist; it could only come into existence self-consciously.

So my first idea was to propose a scenario for the **origin of language**. I haven't abandoned what could be called the empirical claims of the originary hypothesis, that the originary sign should be conceived as an "aborted gesture of appropriation," or that human language originated as a means for the deferral of violence. But although we may some day have means of verifying or "falsifying" the hypothesis in empirical reality, not only is their discovery beyond my professional competence, they are not directly relevant what I understand to be the primary function of **GA**.

A scientist might say at this point that the very principle of science is to make statements that will subsequently be falsified, that one can at best create a new paradigm for the understanding of empirical data. But the aim of originary thinking does not coincide with that of positive science. Along with

scientific paradigms for the analysis of empirical data, we have other models, "paradigms" if you like, that allow us to understand the fundamental human questions, those usually referred to under the rubric not of anthropology, but of ontology. These models cannot be positive because they take into account, as the positive ones cannot, our participation in them as objects as well as subjects.

The most fundamental questions are those posed not by anthropology, or even metaphysical philosophy, but by **religion**. I have never been a religious believer, although as an adolescent I had my period of fascination with the ritual aspects of religion. But I find it unsatisfactory to dismiss religion as a form of infantilism as our intellectual world tends to do--even the believers in our intellectual world.

Rather than a regrettable prolongation of infantile dependency, religion has been the only means available until now for thinking the historical specificity of human origin--and consequently, of the human. Its hypotheses may not--indeed, *cannot*--be presented as hypothetical, but they provide models for understanding how the transcendental world of the sign could have emerged as an event within the world of appetite. It is this that positive science denies; emergence must be gradual. Of course the emergence of anything is gradual if by "emergence" one means the entire course of historical evolution leading up to it. The originary event is always already deconstructed by the fact that the sign can never coincide with its referent either temporally or semantically. But an *event* is precisely what discounts, or takes into account, its own deconstruction. Its name names its occurrence; it is not a trace of a worldly thing, but neither is it a "pure" trace--it is the trace we retain of our leaving of the trace. Only religion has preserved this truth. As I said in *Science and Faith*, "creation science" may be a sham, but it has one point to make that evolutionists cannot answer, which is that the historical specificity, the event-nature of the emergence of the human is better explained by the **Bible** than by **Darwin**. It is absurd to claim that the separation between positive science and the reality of the human can be bridged by creation science, but this separation can be *articulated*--which is not the same thing--by **generative anthropology**.

This is an example of the kind of controversy that can be clarified by **GA**. It is not a matter of "resolving" the opposition between science and faith, but of constantly working to minimize the content under dispute. No doubt neither side would agree with originary thinking, but both would be obliged to admit that its formulation of the opposition comes closer than any other to reducing it to that between the critical need to define the originary moment and to live according to that definition--the religious position--and the scientist's duty to maintain the deferral of crisis while searching for empirical evidence of this moment, both before and after its occurrence. Perhaps we are too quick to assume that the faithful will not only refuse to deny their faith but will reject any anthropological justification for it; perhaps we are also too quick to assume that scientists, at least those of future generations, will continue to turn their backs on the paradox of the emergence of the sign--the paradoxicality of which has inspired not only Derridean deconstruction but the more naive always-already of **Jerry Fodor**, who considers himself obliged to believe that all meanings are innate because he cannot see under what circumstances they could possibly be generated.

As I think the thrust of these remarks makes clear, as I have worked through my original idea over the years, I have become increasingly attached to the general form rather than the specific content of the originary hypothesis. The hypothesis makes an empirical claim, but in the absence of empirical data, our claim must be as minimal as possible. Thus one other name for generative anthropology is *minimal anthropology*. GA's place in intellectual history is not, as I may have thought at first, to have *discovered the origin of language*--although this makes a nice slogan, it also makes us sound like crackpots. No, the purpose of originary thinking is to examine human problems in the context of the minimal anthropology

consonant with all the essential human characteristics associated with representation--language, of course, but also ritual and religion, desire, the esthetic, morality and ethics, and so on. The more one pursues this operation, the clearer it becomes that the different forms of transcendence that characterize each of these institutions, be it the form-content opposition of art, that between law and conduct in ethics, that between the world of Ideas and the real world for metaphysics, and most strikingly, that between the timeless realm of God ("heaven") and the temporal world of humanity--all these dichotomies are variants of the fundamental opposition between the transcendental sign and its worldly referent.

To be continued...

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Three Models of Culture

No. 70: Saturday, December 7, 1996

I

The depth of general resentment may be measured by most people's willing identification with the violent centrality of popular culture. **Mel Gibson's** self-directed performance in *Braveheart* is a particularly egregious example; combining any figures of mastery and martyrdom he could get his hands on, from **Moses** and **Napoleon** to **Jesus**, Gibson was rewarded with an Oscar for offering us an invitation to hero-worship.

Still more crudely sacrificial figures abound, faceless or individualized figures of evil whose sole *raison-d'être* is to justify their undoing. Within the category of *exploitation* films targeting youth, Blacks, women, etc., all members of the "dominant" (adult, white, male...) group are obligatorily portrayed as monsters. The other day I tried to watch *Trust* (Hal Hartley, 1991), a well-regarded film about the odd couple formed by a pregnant high-school dropout and a nerd-genius young man. In the 30 minutes I was able to stand, unfeeling father #1 dies of heart attack after becoming enraged at learning of pregnancy; unfeeling football-playing boyfriend--an apprentice adult--refuses to marry pregnant sweetheart because it would upset college plans; unfeeling mother coldly accuses daughter of murder at father's funeral and throws her out of house; unfeeling supervisor forces sensitive young man to repair shoddy electronic equipment--after which sensitive young man sticks supervisor's head in a vise and walks off the job; sadistic father #2 brutalizes son after making him clean the already-clean bathroom several times; crazy woman on bench tells girl of the horrible boredom of her marriage; repulsive storekeeper tries to take sexual advantage of (underage) girl when she tries to buy beer. This material is as steeped in resentment as anything the Nazis or the Weather Underground could conceive; it is praised for its *sensitivity* to a female character who is shown slapping--and indirectly killing--one man (her father who slapped her first) and sticking a lighted cigarette into the eye of another (the storekeeper who was forcing her to undress).

Every artwork incarnates an anthropology. The more it is founded on the unproblematic discharge of resentment, the more sacrificial the anthropology. Thus we should be able to judge a society by the sacrificiality of its art. The **Frankfurt school** condemned modern bourgeois society for attempting to distract the *people* from their quest for socialist utopia with the resentful satisfactions of mass art; but **Adorno** *u.s.w.* never disentangle ethical truth from esthetic distinction. Our own critique makes no reference to the suspiciously snobbish notion of *esthetic sensibility*. The only sensibility that I have referred to here is ethical. An artwork that flatters our resentment raises rather than lowers the level of sacrificial violence in its vicinity.

Today's critique of *violence in the media*, focused on content without concern for narrative structure, expresses in its mindless way the fundamental relationship between culture and violence: because

violence is contagious, it is spread by its very presence. The mindlessness is itself the product of the violence of our dominant popular culture; once the latter becomes a barely disguised expression of resentment, we can forget about the niceties of narrative structure. No doubt this kind of critique overlooks the culture's most egregious *moral* lapses, the twin evils of hero-worship and demonization in *Braveheart* and the like, which inhere not in violence *per se* but in the way its portrayal is justified. But we don't notice these lapses because we're not really following the story, just being borne along by the figures of violence. In condemning a work as pornographic, one doesn't care how the sex acts fit into the plot.

II

The task of the postmodern era is to create a post-sacrificial, post-charismatic culture. The other day I attended an expository talk on nature writing as a contemporary form of spirituality--something Markus Müller astutely called *Rousseau without resentment*. Following **Thoreau**, who created a uniquely *American* form of resentment, the return to a *sense of place* is a way of spreading ourselves out, deferring our concentration on a single center. The ecological model, in contrast with the central model of the consumer society of which it is a growing part, tells us to substitute natural for man-made differentiation. From connoisseurs of wine and clothes, we should become connoisseurs of rocks and flowers; for sale at *sustainable* prices, they nicely express our disdain for the marketplace. The talk concluded with a poem by a woman who tells of stopping to listen to some mockingbirds--but like **Robert Frost**, who can't *watch the woods fill up with snow* without pointing out that his neighbor is too *bourgeois* to do so, she noted at the outset that by listening to the birds, she was neglecting some other obligation. I imagined myself in her place, arriving a half-hour late to class because mockingbirds, unlike students, are figures of the Spirit.

Now that environmental writing is becoming big business, one wonders when the community of nature-worshippers will reach the critical mass at which the initiate's beatific sense of superiority to others (the *New Age* definition of spirituality) dissolves in the *agon* of internal competition. At that point, one hopes, the postmodern flight from anthropology, of which this is but one of many examples, will be revealed as just one more of the deferrals inherent in anthropology. Knowledge cannot be sidestepped indefinitely; lucidity always wins out in the end.

III

I suppose we should prefer desert landscapes to the mayhem on the TV screen, but the most powerful cultural medium of our time is neither of these, but the one we are currently sharing. All process and no substance, no *medium* to be the *message*, the **Internet** eliminates authority from emission and stasis from reception. It is no accident that **originary thinking** has found an audience on the Net. *No more masterpieces* was the cry of the modernist avant-garde, but the structure of the art-show centralizes whatever is shown there; showing "non-masterpiece" art is only a yet more scandalous variety of charismatic communication. The Internet, on the other hand, is anti-charismatic; no heroes on the **WWW**. For what is certainly the first time in history, the most powerful ideas can come to maturity without arousing a distorting attraction to the sacrificial center. Which is only to say that, for the first time, thinking about the origin of this center is truly possible.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Talking About God

No. 71: Saturday, December 14, 1996

Most talk about God is childishly **anthropomorphic**: God is pretty much like us, except that he is immortal, omniscient, etc. This lends credence to the facile Freudian idea that *God the father* is just a projection of one's real father. The semi-facetious denunciation of patriarchy as *phallogocentric* expresses the anthropological truth of Freudianism: as a Lacano-Derridean might put it, the *logos* supplements the absence of the *phallus*. But seeking God through sexual difference maintains the naive fiction that since we can understand the sacred only in human terms, we must seek it within the limits of individual experience.

A current example of the persistence of religious anthropomorphism is **Jack Miles' *God: A Biography***, which was awarded this year's Pulitzer Prize in its category. I will always be grateful to Miles, who as a former editor at the **University of California Press** was not only instrumental in publishing *The Origin of Language* and its sequel *The End of Culture*, but devised the term *generative anthropology* for what I had intended to qualify by the Gallicism "*genetic*." Miles's own picture of God is generative enough, but his model, neither originary anthropology nor psychoanalysis, is that of developmental psychology: God, like us, learns from experience. Perhaps there is no simpler way of understanding the emergence within the Judeo-Christian tradition of the understanding of mimetic desire that Girard refers to as *things hidden since the foundation of the world*. But this is hardly minimal thinking in our sense of the term. If we attribute to God a human psychology from the outset, we will never understand the emergence in the world of either God or humanity.

The most telling critique of the naive attitude toward God is that it fails to examine his role as subject of language. The Bible tells us that God created the world with words. The anthropomorphic vision of God is advanced to a higher level when God is no longer merely the object of the biographical narrative but its subject as well. To tell God's story in Miles's sense is to subordinate one's own discourse to a sacred text, the divine provenance of which is accepted on faith.

But how do we know what it means to be, like God, the *subject* of a discourse of creation? As **Gustave Flaubert** wrote at the age of fourteen in the epilogue to an early story: "Ecrire! oh! écrire, c'est s'emparer du monde, de ses préjugés, de ses vertus et le résumer dans un livre... [to write is to take hold of the world, its prejudices, its virtues and sum it all up in a book]"; and in a more famous passage from a letter of March 1857, "L'artiste doit être dans son oeuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout-puissant[;] qu'on le sente partout, mais qu'on ne le voie pas [The artist must be in his work like God in creation, invisible and omnipotent; we should feel him everywhere, but not see him]." Which is to say that in the nineteenth century, perhaps even today, the most culturally powerful way to model the discursive creativity of God is to write a **novel**.

Novels are not normally about God; but that is just the point. If all we can know about God is

anthropomorphic, then the way to know him best is to choose humanity as the subject of our story. The novelist creates a world through language. His experience tells us much about the possibilities of the Being whom we understand as having created humanity through language.

In the first place, it tells us about the limits imposed by narrative form. One might think that the interest of telling a good story is irrelevant to the ontology of creation through discourse. But culture is one. The Being that stands behind the originary sign also stands behind the cultural elaboration of this sign. If a novel is esthetically satisfying to us, its discourse must fulfill the same function as the sign, the deferral of violence. The novel must contain within itself the paradoxical self-generation of the originary scene--it must give *esthetic pleasure*. The only difference is that in the novel, as in any artwork, the esthetic oscillation between sign and imaginary reality must maintain itself on its own, in the absence of even ritualized violence. Literary discourse must create an imaginary world within which the internalized conflict we call *resentment* is deferred. This is **Aristotle's** *catharsis* of the passions.

In attempting to understand the world as God's creation, we encounter the so-called *problem of evil*: how can an all-powerful and benevolent God allow evil to exist? In originary terms: how can the humanity that preserves itself in the originary scene through the invention of the sign continue to experience conflict? If the sign's power to defer conflict is operative in this scene, why does it not forever remove all obstacles to the fulfillment of our desires?

There are those naive enough to consider the existence of evil as proof of God's nonexistence. Events like the **Lisbon earthquake** in the 18th century and the **Holocaust** fifty years ago have provoked such thoughts; **Woody Allen's** film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, as I pointed out in a [recent column](#), suggests that Allen has been traumatized by it. But the mature view is that evil is part of a plan whose benevolence we must take on faith since it transcends our power of understanding.

Our best model for God's understanding of human history is the storyteller's understanding of his story. Although the relationship between an unknowable transcendent plan and its worldly implementation derives from that between signs and objects in general, it is more closely modeled by the relationship between a story's author and its characters. The characters cannot know the outcome that the author knows from the outset because they exist respectively on the different levels of content and form. The homology between God's creation and the novelist's is neither miraculous nor fortuitous; it brings together two types of cultural agency made possible by the originary emergence of the sign. The strength of **originary thinking** is that it is able to reveal the central unity behind this and other cultural homologies.

The nineteenth-century novel in particular incarnates an ambition to provide a "total" picture of its time. This vision of the novel is most closely associated with **Honoré de Balzac**; but Balzac's decision to include all his major works in a single *Comédie Humaine* reflects the discovery that although *the novel* in general terms was a model of the creation, a single novel structured by an individual human biography could not accomplish this task. Another French writer, **Marcel Proust**, found both the solution and the *reductio ad absurdum* of this conundrum by combining the subject of the novel with its object: the content of Proust's unique novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* generates its formal subject. The novel is, in short, God's *autobiography*. Miles could not follow this model because no sacred text, let alone the Bible, could have furnished his material; the only examples are literary. But we can read every other novel in the light of Proust's unique experiment.

Proust's self-generating novel, as his critics love to point out, doesn't really generate itself at all, since the

protagonist as novelist cannot be shown, only told about. But this shows us the relationship between the novel's temporality and its constitution of the creative subject. When we talk about God anthropomorphically, we understand his motivations in terms of local human time, since for him to interact with us, he must operate within our temporal limitations even if his own understanding and capacity for action are instantaneous. (Similarly, **Superman** can only communicate with the inhabitants of Metropolis if he slows down to their speed.) But we have no simple anthropomorphic idea of the *spiritual* component of God's time, what **Heidegger** referred to under the rubric of *Ekstasis*, our projection of ourselves in time. The horizon of our action lies beyond the immediate moment in which we act; even the present as *present for us* is a projection. This is a structure of transcendence that language makes possible. The practical use of Plato's **Ideas**, emphasized in Aristotle's **Forms**, is in our projects of creation. The mental Form of a chair is the basis from which I construct a chair out of "formless" matter.

But God does not experience the temporality of human *praxis*; he can produce all the chairs he likes in no time at all. How then can we understand the project that presides over God's otherwise incomprehensible acts? Proust's novel suggests that God's purpose is his own revelation in human time, that is, the constitution in human time of the divine subject. The totalizing project of *A la recherche* is no less than the acquisition of immortality, the recuperation of every second lost in living within the timeless universe of meaning. If its necessary incompleteness testifies to our inability to create a perfect model of divine consciousness, the explicit nature of its quest for transcendence makes our esthetic pleasure in its achievement a model of the act of faith in God. For the difference between believer and nonbeliever is no more than the decision to attribute to God as reality the perfection that we can experience only as the horizon of our action. The believer begs the question of **Anselm's** *ontological proof* that the most perfect being must possess the "perfection" of existence.

Whether or not we believe in God's existence, we cannot expect to experience the foundations of this existence in worldly terms more convincingly than in the novel. For originary thinking, theology is vanishingly close to anthropology: when literature talks about the human, it is also talking about God.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Richard van Oort and Eric Gans

A GA Conversation (II)

No. 72: Saturday, December 21, 1996

RvO - Minimal anthropology. This is an important principle for **GA**. The idea that anthropological investigation should be guided by not an ontology, but by a *hypothesis*, the only epistemological principle of which is that it be construed minimally. You have already suggested that falsification in the empirical sense is not something that can be usefully applied to a hypothesis that explains the origin of language. The hypothesis is a construction that at the same time transcends the possibility of ever reconciling it with empirical data precisely because language itself emerges only as the irrevocable separation of the sign from the referent, of culture from nature.

So we appear to be caught in a paradox. We can only claim to have found a true representation of the origin of language by also claiming that its truth is unfalsifiable. But I take it that this paradox does not serve as a refutation of **GA**, but rather as its condition of possibility. Once it becomes possible to think of human origin in terms a construction that we as language-users collectively impose upon ourselves, it likewise becomes possible to formulate the "truth conditions" under which such a construction may be evaluated. These truth conditions, if I may call them that, are in the first place practical and ethical. The origin of language, of culture, is not a logical problem but a practical one, something that affects us as historically situated beings. The postulate of an **originary hypothesis** can only be justified if it helps to advance our self-understanding.

But isn't there a historical tension here that needs to be further considered? Once we have rejected both the positivist view that meaning is reducible to matter and the skeptical view that meaning is irreducible to origins of any kind, be they empirical or more generally "metaphysical," how are we to prevent our minimal anthropology--the originary hypothesis--from becoming itself a transcendental figure for all meaning? How, in other words, are we to mediate between, on the one hand, the desire that the originary hypothesis present us with some tangible practical and ethical consequences and, on the other, the natural resistance, postulated in the originary hypothesis as the deferring function of the sign, that any such transcendence occur? You already spoke of the durability of the *form* of the originary hypothesis as opposed to its specific content. Likewise you characterized the problem of transcendence in various cultural institutions as manifestations of the originary opposition between the sign and its referent. How does this originary hypothesis itself become a practical "solution" that explains concrete political and cultural institutions without at once also falling victim to the self-same desire that renders those same institutions as naive reproductions of the originary scene?

EG - The ultimate value of the originary hypothesis is, as you suggest, ethical. What then is the mediation between the anthropological knowledge made possible by the hypothesis and the ethical? For positive science, such a question presumably does not arise; we seek objective knowledge of facts. But anthropology as a positive science must maintain itself outside the area of potential crisis that is precisely where the human emerges. In situations that put into question critical anthropological values, objectivity

becomes impossible. For example, the emotions aroused by *The Bell Curve* reflect scandal at a hypothesis--however well or poorly substantiated--that appears to put into question the fundamental principle of human equality derived from the originary reciprocal exchange of signs. It is scandalous to suggest on whatever grounds that one group of humans is less capable of engaging in such exchange than another. If intellectual equality is accepted as an unfalsifiable proposition, ultimately from an ethical standpoint, then other parameters must be changed to accommodate it to the data. Positive science will always fail us when we reach the critical center of the human.

At the other pole from science is religion. Aside from technical practices like Yoga that distill the purgative functions of ritual for individual use, religious knowledge is not something to know objectively, but to accept as a community. That is, it is directly conducive to the deferral of violence. Religion's dogmatic affirmations about the real world are of significance only insofar as they contribute to this goal; they have the same status as ritual practices, and in fact come into being in order to explain ritual practices.

If I assert that God created the earth in six days, the only proof I can offer is ethical: the society organized by this belief outfunctions a society organized by another belief. That is, the belief is part of an ethical hypothesis. That does not mean the believer must think of it that way. But neither must the believer deny this anthropological interpretation, since I am not imposing it on the belief as a kind of psychoanalysis of its unconscious implications, but simply bracketing its real-world assertion as a statement beyond empirical proof. Whether believers or not, we understand the six days of creation, or the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake, as expressing anthropological truths, not in any useful sense as verifiable statements about the world. For example, a theologian might use the Biblical creation story to demonstrate the primacy of language in the creation of form out of prelinguistic chaos; this is a profound anthropological insight, arguably absent from other religious traditions (which tend to see creation as sexual), that might help to explain the success of Western civilization as well as its occasionally rash impatience with the "natural."

Religious discourse used to be far less cautious than today about its cosmological implications. When churchmen refused to look through Galileo's telescope because they didn't want to see spots on the sun, they revealed the vulnerability of their cosmological beliefs to the progress of scientific observation. The Pope's recent acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution may well be the endpoint of the process of accommodation. Skeptics take such cases as proof that theology is just bad cosmology, that scientific progress continually undermines religious belief. But theology may well be bad cosmology; the important thing is that it be good anthropology. In the anthropological domain, positive science cannot eliminate religious belief because it cannot provide epistemological tools to deal with what is not a positive matter, the paradoxical structure of human interaction mediated through signs.

The relation of religious cosmology to positive science no longer poses an epistemological problem. Not only have believers stopped denying sunspots, everyone understands why they must accept them. The Ptolemaic cosmology of the medieval Church has been rejected, but no new one has taken its place; it is simply understood that the Church has nothing to say about astronomical phenomena, which is tantamount to understanding that these phenomena are outside the purview of anthropology. Our nostalgia for the old cosmology is clear from the astrology pages in the newspapers; we'd like the entire universe to be concerned with us, but we no longer believe it.

The **originary hypothesis** is neither a falsifiable statement of positive science nor an act of faith. It is a

research program, not a belief system. Its aim is not to organize a community around a new or preexistent system of rites, but to provide a maximally universal, maximally neutral means of communication between all such systems.

What ethic is implicit in the originary hypothesis? In a recent column, I tried to define it as follows: *act in such a way as to minimize the difference between God's existence or his nonexistence*. To minimize the substantiality of the Being that guarantees our spiritual life, which is our capacity to share the meanings of language--is, in a word, to *decentralize*. This precept is in the spirit of **Girard's** reading of Christianity as the abolition of sacrifice. It has moreover the advantage that it does not simply invert the sacrificial procedure, with the risk of turning the self-styled "victim" into a new persecutor. Rather than invert our centralizing decision, it tells us to *minimize* it; the less we decide, the less we engage in violence. But minimality in ethical decision-making is only conceivable in the context of the decentered circulation of the exchange system, of the *marketplace*. Girard has no theory of modernity other than the Christian abolition of sacrifice. It is mediated exchange that replaces sacrifice, not immediate love. Of course there are ethical problems that cannot be mediated by the marketplace, but it is the marketplace that permits us to minimize them.

We will always have ethical problems, but we should consider how relatively marginal are the problems we do have: minority preferences, abortion, assisted suicide, gay marriage, or things like campaign financing. These are pretty peripheral questions in most of our lives. For the rest, the point is not so much that we tend to agree on what ethical conduct is as that most of our activities are in themselves ethically neutral; their value comes from the market. One's professional standing comes from one's ability to function in a certain corner of the marketplace, not from obedience to an ethic defined by a preordained set of rules. This is very different from the way things are done in ritual societies, whose essential economic activities are modeled on ritual repetition.

The ethical precept I propose tells us to act in such a way as to decentralize the exchange process as much as possible--which is emphatically not equivalent to abandoning ourselves to the exchange process as it is currently constituted. This precept is in the spirit of **Kant's** *categorical imperative*: to act from principles that may be universally applied, so that all human relations become reciprocal. But because we begin not with the *Categories* but from an originary model of moral reciprocity in the exchange of signs, our practical imperative intends not merely the moral absolute on the horizon, but the decentralization that permits us to evolve toward reciprocity in the exchange of things.

As for situating our ethical imperative in the contemporary political context, I prefer to postpone this to the end of our discussion, since it presupposes a more concrete ethical commitment than the agreement our readers have tacitly given us to explore the benefits of originary minimality.

To be continued...

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Public and Private

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Mimesis makes a solitary animal behave differently in the company of his fellows. But the collective context of animal ritual--for example, sexual combat in the mating season--never reaches the point of creating a public *scene*. The human is born in such a scene, which creates/reflects a structural difference between the hitherto non-critical "private" lives of the members of the group and their nascent communal life-in-crisis. In the scene itself, the members play both the public role of actor and the private one of spectator. In hierarchical society, these roles are separated; social functions are defined by their distance from the sacred center as locus of both power and sacrifice.

The tension between private and public informs the culture of market society. The novel is a story of private lives whose desires are not directly oriented to the unique center of public attention. At first, mediation between the characters' private world and the public world of meaning is a function of their role in the production process. The evolving market system generates a secondary system of meanings that allow consumers to express their social being as publicly accessible "messages." But the proliferation of individual messages that extends market society toward the horizon of *omnicentricity* proceeds in tandem with the increased centralization of media-mediated centers of attention. The technological facilitation of communication creates ever more broadly-based competition for these centers--a feature of the [winner take all society](#)--at the same time as the messages generated by individual life-choices are increasingly diversified. The result is to exacerbate the public-private tension beyond the point where it can be mediated, as in the nineteenth-century novel, by the revelation of exemplary "private" characters to the reading public. The private citizen's resentment can no longer be *purged* by the esthetic according to the formula of the classical high culture. All that remains are the deindividualizing pleasures of mass culture.

But as old forms of mediation decline, others emerge. What I would like to examine here is a new kind of mediation between private and public exemplified by these very *Chronicles* that you are reading.

Are these columns public or private? Measured by their accessibility, **WWW** pages are the most public documents of all. Millions of computer users all over the world can download them at the click of a mouse, at most by typing in a URL. No best-seller could be this accessible; unlimited free access is incompatible with market value.

Yet with respect to scenic presence, the role of even the most popular **Internet** sites is very modest. In the winner-take-all society, small-scale initiatives have little chance in the competition for public attention. The technology that permits me to operate this site with no demands on UCLA's generosity beyond a computer and server space also allows everyone over the age of ten to have his *personal home page* bearing his photograph and a listing of his favorite rock CDs. The proliferation of Internet information reestablishes the indifferentiation of crisis, where the only criteria for decision are the most

critical: **sex and violence**. In contrast, the capital and labor costs of even a modest journal of opinion, greater by several degrees of magnitude, provide a preliminary guarantee of professionalism. Someone looking for quality intellectual fare has a far better chance to find it by subscribing to *The New Republic* than by clicking on an Internet newsletter.

But winner-take-all pressures distort the criteria of the intellectual marketplace. Theory is supposed to be minimally charismatic; it creates models of desire by arousing the least desire possible. Yet as public attention becomes increasingly precious, increasingly less deferral is available for this procedure. Intelligence is invested in short-term rather than long-term goals, in seeking solutions with *les moyens du bord* rather than engaging in a process of radical reformulation. Academic publishing has always been separate from that of the mainstream, but only in order to preserve the needs of specialized branches of knowledge from the requirements of the mass market. Because the purview of **originary thinking**, on the contrary, is the human as a whole, it lacks a built-in clientele; its books are as ill-suited to being reviewed in learned periodicals as in the commercial press.

Minimal thinking cannot be popular thinking. The less it need offer a concrete object of desire, the more deeply it can understand the deferral of desire. Experience and reflection have led me to the conclusion that this enterprise is best nurtured and brought to maturity in the semi-public domain of the Internet. **GA** can prepare its *paradigm shift* protected by a non-charismatic medium whose full public accessibility keeps always open the pathway of integration into the public dialogue.

Our generation appears to have reached the limits of the strategy that seeks to abolish sacrificial centrality by espousing *the cause of the victim* only to reverse the roles of victim and sacrificer. As a result, Western society, together with the less successful ones of the third world, increasingly turns back to sacrificial forms of religion as indispensable means for understanding humanity-in-crisis. In contrast, the **originary hypothesis** reformulates the common horizon of human thought, religious and secular, as the deferral of the potential violence of human mimesis; its one-word message is *decentralization*. But in order to further the human aim it enunciates, this new content must be enunciated in a new form. Charisma cannot be denounced from a charismatic center. Or more precisely, the degree to which the center can be denounced depends on the degree to which its denunciation can avoid reestablishing a new center.

There is no fully decentered place of enunciation. But I think the Internet offers a new and unpredicted level of unauthoritarian reciprocity. Recently a subscriber to the [GAlist](#) suggested that we all abandon our personal email identities and just exchange our ideas through anonymous texts. Whether or not such an idea can or should be implemented, its very suggestion is in the non-charismatic spirit of both GA and the Internet, where our email addresses, even when they contain our "real" names, are no more than *monikers*. Viewed from cyberspace, the hierarchy of public and private, with its heroes and hero-worshippers, fascinating stars and mesmerized fans, belongs to a primitive stage of culture.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Gangsters and Jews

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The cinema constantly reminds us of the enduring role of gangsters in our popular culture. The other day I saw *Casino*, a drawn-out remake of *Goodfellas*, where **Joe Pesci** reprises his now-classic exemplification of ruthless violence. Physical violence exercised by one human being on another affects us because we can easily identify with both victim and perpetrator; we play at being the latter as a defense against seeing ourselves in the place of the former. But what fascinates in the phenomenon of gangsterism is its plausibility as a mode of social organization. Watching films like *The Godfather*, we find ourselves in a world where a small number of ruthless, well-organized conspirators are able to bend peaceful, productive individuals like ourselves to their will. The striking images of our vulnerability to *the mob* secretly present in our midst make us realize the fragility of our everyday world. These images are part of popular rather than high culture; the moment of crisis they evoke is not that of individual decision but of mass panic. With the intriguing exception of [Pulp Fiction](#), none of these films turns on an individual decision for good or evil; they portray an alternate world that we can react to only *en masse*, whether in affirmation or revulsion.

Reflecting on gangsterism as a model of the social order, one realizes that many societies operate under something very like gangland rule. **Hitler's** or **Lenin-Stalin's** terror tactics are hardly redeemed by their dependence on ideology. So-called *guerilla* groups like the **Sendero Luminoso** or the recently newsworthy **Tupac Amaru** are little more than criminal bands who use revolution as a fig-leaf for extortion and drug-dealing. The **Maffia** itself was once a Sicilian national liberation movement, but the mystique of its American branch depends on its indifference to any ostensibly redeeming political goal. For gangsterism as a social model is not quite an end in itself; as soon as it aspires to power, in the form of the totalitarian police state, it cannot function without recreating the sacred as a political ideology.

This ideology may be as elaborate as **Marxism**--or as simple as **antisemitism**. For the antisemite, the **Jews** are far more dangerous than the Mafia, because the "violence" they are presumed to exercise is invisible. One can imagine other conspiratorial groups seeking to control the world--cf. **Robert Ludlum** or the **James Bond** films--but the Jews are the group of choice, the only one accused seriously and persistently on a large scale. Even countries like **Japan**, where Jews are virtually unknown, regularly reprint the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Explanations of antisemitism that start with the idea, developed in **Jean-Paul Sartre's** *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1947), that the Jews are arbitrarily chosen scapegoats defined only by their Otherness to the persecuting majority, miss the essential point that it is the historical exemplarity of the Jews, the refusers of the human **Mediator**, that explains the phenomenon of antisemitism, not the reverse. The world offers plenty of genocidal hatreds and actual genocides to choose from, but the role of the Jews is unique, and this uniqueness makes antisemitism an inevitable temptation. We owe this understanding to the unusual respite obtained by the **Holocaust**, which now appears to be coming to an end.

Although there were once many Jewish gangsters, the gangster image is associated not with Jews but with **Italians** (and lately with the **Black** inner-city *gangsta*). The gangster is a romantic figure because his violence, although generally latent, remains close to the surface; he manipulates reality through immediate control of life and death. In contrast, *the Jew*, in the typical stereotype, manipulates the world through the most abstract of social mediations--**money**. *The Jew* does not engage in violence; he relies on the state to enforce his claims. This is his weakness, one exploited in antisemitic scenarios from **Marlowe** and **Shakespeare** to *Der Jude Süß*. Once the good citizens become aware of *the Jew's* secret manipulations, they can easily be rid of him. He survives only through the ignorance of the guardians of the social order, who fail to see that he is an exception to the social contract, a parasite on the body politic.

The Jew is not in some undefined sense a scapegoat for the larger society's frustrations. He serves as a *model* of the inexistent and unfigurable center of the market system. The gangster, a representative of past immediacy, is a living reproach to the mediated world of the market; *the Jew*, having rejected the Incarnation, incarnates the truly unincarnatable--mediation itself. Gangsters short-circuit the mediations of market society, extorting, as Pesci does in *Casino*, money from those who seek to conquer the world through the marketplace, but whose reliance on the intrinsic peacefulness of the market leads them to forget the human potential for violence that underlies all social organization.

When the antisemite calls *the Jew* a **monster**, he tempts us to return the accusation upon the accuser. But sacrificial thinking, even in its victimary inversion, remains within the world of ritual violence. If the horror inflicted by history's most virulent embodiment of gangsterism on the powerless Jews has served any historical purpose, it should have taught us the danger inherent in sacrificial categories that regress from the reality of the market system. In the postritual world of market exchange, *the Jew* is a paradoxical construction who regulates the self-regulating market, who fixes the prices determined by the interaction of supply and demand; we must eliminate him to gain control over this "inhuman" mechanism. But the only ways to exercise this control are either to abandon the mechanism altogether and run the economy from the center, creating in the name of Socialism what Marx himself called *oriental despotism*, or to empower a ruthless political entity to extort from the market what it desires. In either case, we have replaced *the Jew* with the gangster.

Casino, like *Goodfellas*, is a story of the Italian Mafia seen through the eyes of an outsider, who survives while true believer Pesci is destroyed by the real masters of the violence he thought he controlled. But the new twist is that the outsider is a Jew, who outlives not only Pesci but the demise of Mafia control over the Las Vegas casinos. The car bomb **Rothstein-De Niro** survives can, with a little imagination, be likened to the Holocaust; chastened, the Jewish spirit of the market lives on in the professional gambler, the eternal outsmarter of the odds. Some might read this as a story of Jewish success, or at least of Jewish survival; I wonder if it isn't an updated version of *the Jew*, the uncanny manipulator of mediations, the monstrous soul of the soulless market.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Evolution and the Human

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The current debate about **Darwinism** might surprise someone who thought that only obscurantists still resisted the theory of evolution. In its most general, that is, cosmological, sense, this theory requires only that the universe consist of stuff capable of varying degrees of organization over time: under these conditions, the "fittest" organizations will tend to survive. Cosmologists willing to entertain the unprovable hypothesis of the plurality of universes because they find "miraculous" that ours is so nearly at the *critical density* suffer from a profound naivete; the moment when reality becomes miraculous is the one in which one's theory has been *falsified*. If this is the only universe of which we can have knowledge, then our models must set the probability of its being created to **one**; naivete would be the mother of discovery only if data from other universes were somehow obtainable.

In the specific domain of living organisms, Darwinism adds a single critical condition to the quasi-tautology of *the survival of the fittest* (*= the survivors*): the distinction between **genotype** and **phenotype**, between a relatively stable and limited "code" and the mortal creatures that "express" it. (Cosmological Darwinism implies at least the possibility of such a code, since nothing in principle prevents the *varying degrees of organization* from reaching the level where self-replication is possible.) Although **Darwin** knew nothing of genetics, the genotype-phenotype distinction is as fundamental to Darwinism as it is incompatible with **Lamarckianism** (the inheritance of acquired characteristics). The notion of **natural selection** in the life-world implies this distinction so strongly that it may serve as the very definition of life. Even if in the first living creatures, the minimal realization of the *code* (the gene) is coextensive with its *expression* (the living organism), these "naked genes" would have to perform the two essentially different functions of assimilating matter and energy to build new copies of themselves and of reading the instructions for this building. They would thus be *phenotypes of themselves*, and selection pressure would inevitably lead to coding the construction of organs external to the code itself.

I don't think Darwinists like **Richard Dawkins** (*The Selfish Gene*) or **Daniel Dennett** (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*) would be unhappy with these remarks, which do not trivialize, let alone put into question, the idea of biological evolution. But if there is still a debate over evolution, it reflects something contemporary apologists of Darwin are not really capable of dealing with: the origin of **the human**--a subject on which, rightly considered, the *Bible* has more to say than *The Origin of Species*.

Not that **originary thinking** has an interest in what Dennett calls in his slightly cutesy style *skyhooks*, intrusions of *dei ex machina* to explain the emergence of human language and culture. Nothing in **GA** contradicts the Darwinian concept of evolution. But the problem isn't that evolution is "false," or even that it doesn't in the most general sense "imply" the emergence of language, just as it implied the origin of life. Why should creatures constructed according to the genetic code not eventually become able to represent the world in codes of their own? But even if we assume that the survival value of internal neuronal representations will be enhanced under a plausible set of circumstances by the elaboration of

external representations or signs, the question that should interest us most *as humans*, and which indeed has traditionally interested humanity--which massively participates in religion, not philosophy or positive science--is *what this plausible set of circumstances might be*. The difference between **GA** and the various Darwinisms is in the way it defines this question. Our own minimal model of the origin of language cannot be of a different nature from that of the first speakers themselves; human origin is historically continuous with the human present. The memorability of the sign without which language cannot be said to exist requires the condensation into the "signified" of a model of the scene in which the sign emerged. Religion deals with the reconstitution of this scene; it formulates **minimal models of the human**. This fundamental human task--the object of **originary thinking**--cannot be framed by positive anthropology as it is currently constituted.

One of the most highly regarded recent works on the origin of language, **Derek Bickerton's** *Roots of Language*, develops a theory of cognitive evolution that limits discussion of the actual origin of speech to a speculative footnote about what the author calls "crossing the Rubicon." The treatment of this subject by Chomsky and his followers is more perverse still, as though the most important evolutionary development since life itself were a more or less accidental byproduct of the physical evolution of the brain. No doubt positive science can only take on problems it can solve. But to treat the very essence of the human as an unaskable question is to make naive **creationism** a respectable alternative to rational thought.

A new epoch in anthropology begins with **René Girard's** insight that the crucial problem of our species is to defer the violence latent in our mimetic intelligence; linguistic structures evolve within the cultural environment defined by this deferral. The *primary* function of language is and has always been to defer mimetic conflict, not to deal cognitively with the environment.

The **originary hypothesis** is not incompatible either with synchronic linguistics or with the attempt to trace the evolution of the *language-acquisition device* that human infants clearly possess. It suggests to positive linguistics new avenues of research--testing in children the **ostensive-imperative-declarative** sequence discussed in *The Origin of Language*, or examining the specific traits of the ritual use of language. But its most important effect is to sensitivize us to the untranscendable **paradoxicality** of the human. The paradoxical structures of the esthetic and the sacred cannot be reduced to **Turing machines** either now or at the beginning of human time. We should neither despair of our inability to know ourselves nor glory in our infinite unknowability; our role is to add another turn to the spiral that brings us ever closer to the unreachable horizon of perfect self-knowledge.

Generative anthropology is neither simplistically scientific nor humanistic; it problematizes the frontier between the two. It is neither positive science nor cultural hermeneutic nor religion, open or concealed. It is the grandchild of **metaphysics** that tries to expel violence from language and the rebellious child of **deconstruction** that misunderstands language as violence. Is its practice conducive to the ultimate unity of positive, textual, religious, and metaphysical anthropologies? We need not speculate on the consequences of a hypothesis beyond what is necessary to persuade ourselves to explore it.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Richard van Oort and Eric Gans

A GA Conversation (III)

(see also parts [I](#) and [II](#))

No. 76: Saturday, January 18, 1997

RvO - By suggesting that the ultimate value of the **originary hypothesis** is ethical are we not suggesting that the hypothesis has more in common with religion than with science? Nevertheless you maintain that **generative anthropology** is a research program, not a belief system. What allows us to make this distinction? What makes generative anthropology not simply a belief system but a theory with a corresponding methodological program?

The claim is that we are dealing with hypothetical knowledge, not with revealed knowledge. The crucial difference between religion and **generative anthropology**, then, is the hypothetical status of the latter's model of the human. But the **originary hypothesis** still requires an "act of faith" of sorts, does it not? That is, one must accept the hypothesis as *prima facie* plausible in order to become acquainted with its heuristic power. The hypothesis itself is not something that can be rejected out of hand. Its particular formulation can be modified, even radically reconstructed, but the fact that the theory always begins with a minimal hypothesis is something that we have to accept at the outset. And this opening gesture is something that may be called a minimal act of faith.

So far, this seems uncontroversial. A theory must always be granted the courtesy of its central hypothesis before it can be evaluated. But at this point the scientist will object. For have we not said that the originary hypothesis, that minimal anthropological knowledge, is unfalsifiable? And if this is the case, then how can we claim scientific status for our theory? A hypothesis which cannot be disproved is something that cannot be objectively verified. Therefore its truth is something that can only be accepted, like religious revelation, on faith.

What then is scientific or methodological about the theory? The only methodological claim it appears we can make for the originary hypothesis is that it be constructed in minimal fashion. Does this criterion of minimality constitute a bona fide method? It certainly gives us an objective means by which to evaluate anthropological theories. But what motivates the criterion of parsimony? Is it merely a scientific principle that we accept as necessary? Or does it answer to a deeper anthropological need? In other words, in what way is minimal thinking also ethical thinking?

Throughout this dialogue, the suggestion has been that minimal thinking is not simply a reflection of an unquestioned faith in a certain scientific principle, but at once also a reflection of a certain historical narrative, namely, the rise of the international exchange system. Anthropologically speaking, minimality also means decentralization of the exchange process. It is the movement from "maximal" ritual acts of exchange to "minimal" secular acts of exchange. This is an ethical development. It designates the point where ethical control becomes truly self-regulating, where the social order is seen as anthropologically

motivated, not as somehow imposed from without the process of exchange in which the community is created.

So there appear to be three strands that we are trying to thread together: **minimality**, **method**, and **ethics**. With regard to the last two, it appears that in the case of method we are unlikely to satisfy the scientists, and in the case of ethics we are unlikely to satisfy the believer. But it is nevertheless via the first principle--minimality--that **GA** proposes both a method and an ethic, and thus a synthesis of two hitherto incompatible viewpoints.

EG - Originary anthropology takes us back to first principles in a more rigorous and systematic way than the critical philosophies of **Descartes** or **Kant**. Minimality as expressed by *Ockham's razor*, that is, as a principle of thinking and research, is also an ethical principle in a more general sense: the idea that the thinker should intervene as little as possible in the world he studies has clear analogies in the politico-economic sphere.

RvO - The issue of intervention suggests the *etic/emic* dilemma of the field anthropologist. How can the anthropologist truly understand the society being studied without at once becoming an integrated member of that society? But to become a member of that society completely is no longer to study it. So where does the anthropologist stand? As insider or outsider?

Fortunately, the situation is different for **GA**. Here the focus is not the local differences of individual "cultures," but the underlying representational scene upon which these differences depend. So the *etic/emic* distinction functions at a different level. Emically we must inevitably consider ourselves as common participants in the process of becoming-human. We share in common with the participants of the originary event the scene of representation. Our everyday linguistic acts illustrate this, but they do not explain it. For that we need a theory, a hypothesis. Hence the need to reconstruct "etically" the event in which our humanity first emerges. What makes our situation different from the original humans is that we have the benefit of history. Thus we are more than merely participants in the originary event--more than merely "spontaneous" language-users. We are also theorizers of this inheritance. But this discussion of minimality in terms of the *etic/emic* dilemma will not satisfy the demand for a hypothesis that is empirically falsifiable. What response is there to the methodological objection that the originary hypothesis is not falsifiable?

EG - The point of **Popper's** principle of *falsifiability* is that theories should avoid tautology and provide information. This is common sense expressed in an arresting manner. I don't think Popper's enunciation of the principle has had much effect on scientific practice; scientists have always wanted to measure and predict phenomena within as small a margin of error as possible. **Kuhn's** idea of *paradigms* has been more useful to scientists because it recognizes that their theories are hierarchical and that the highest level of even a physical theory can always be reconciled--via "epicycles"--with any given set of facts. **GA** is not a Popperian-falsifiable theory but a Kuhnian paradigm, a way of thinking about the human.

No way of thinking can allow us to live without making falsifiable predictions. Our economic and political decisions, indeed, all our life-decisions, are actualizations of implicit or explicit hypotheses. When the **Republicans** propose lower taxes whereas the **Democrats** propose new governmental programs, they are expressing rival hypotheses for the attainment of a "good society" whose general parameters both parties agree on. And when we decide whether to reelect a politician, we take a stand on the falsification of his hypothesis by history.

RvO - So an anthropological hypothesis is "falsified," not by a timeless reference to empirical data, but by the course of human history. The fortunes of political and economic models are constantly being "falsified" in this sense. In a fashion, they have to be. A model that was not falsifiable by history would be the end of history. We would have attained the scientific ideal of a closed and consistent system. There would be no new information, but only tautology. The challenge for an anthropological theory is not to predict the end of history by formulating ultimate truths about the human, but to present truth in terms of a historically specific event of the human-becoming-human, *i.e.*, in terms of a hypothesis that explains why we have such an ideal moral model of the human at all. Unlike the truth of a political party's doctrine--the "verification" of which is generally limited to a brief period of empirical politics (*i.e.*, the short span of time in which the party is in power)--**GA** posits no endpoint against which the theory may be verified. There is no eschatology to **GA**. But there is a minimal beginning.

EG - The usefulness of the **originary hypothesis** in, for example, political decision-making is in clarifying our idea of the "good society" that is the end of political activity. We hypothesize that our shared ethical ideal of the good society has its minimally necessary point of departure in the first human event, the first use of language, the first instance of culture. We can present no "falsifiable" physical evidence of such an event. But originary thinking is nontrivial in a more fundamental sense. To the skeptic who fails to see the need for our hypothesis, it asks: how then do *you* account for our general agreement that the good society is one that promotes human equality? Why do we all agree "instinctively" on the same model of reciprocal morality, the **Golden Rule**, *aimez-vous les uns les autres*? Animals don't think in such terms.

RvO - I think that this is one of the most powerful ideas of **GA**, *i.e.*, the idea that our status as language-users is the source of our intuition of our moral equality.

EG - This model is implied even by doctrines that preach something apparently different, like national or racial superiority. Even **Sade** cannot imagine a world without mutual recognition among the masters--and the reader! Nor can **Nietzsche**. The baseline of human morality can be taken as given; on the contrary, the refusal of moral standing to *the Other*--even the Other as victim and divinity--is found only as a complement to the group's own solidarity. **GA** reminds moral theorists that they should found their doctrine not on arbitrary "first principles" but on a *minimal hypothesis*. If the human is minimally constituted by language, the **reciprocity of linguistic exchange** must be the model for moral reciprocity in general. This explains the paradox that doctrines like that of Sade can only make their claim of domination to a reader who is *ipso facto* an equal partner in dialogue.

A **sociobiologist** might protest that our common moral values are the result of evolutionary adaptation. This is certainly true; it is even a truism. But what is missing in the biological approach to culture is... culture itself. If we had "instincts" to enforce morality, why would we need language and rules to do so? Our moral tendencies conflict with our biological tendencies--and it is precisely *this* that is adaptive. What sociobiologists fail to explain is not why our cultural traits are conducive to survival, but why they are cultural, or in other words, **human**, in the first place.

RvO - Indeed. The reductive theses of sociobiology promise to explain away the anthropological fundamentals of the human world. But once these have been explained away, so too is the only means by which the explanation can be imparted--*i.e.*, the scene of representation upon which the ability to theorize depends! So the sociobiologists are too minimal in their explanation. So minimal in fact, that they are prepared to forfeit their own status as persons for the sheer biology of the palpitating organism.

Curiously, in their neglect of representation, they perversely undermine their own theory of evolutionary adaptation. If language, morality, religion, etc., are irrelevant then why on earth were they ever present? Minimal thinking must be distinguished from reductionism. The key to understanding the human is not to reduce the human to the nonhuman, but to think minimally in terms of what in *means* to be human--to be both a participant in and a theorizer of human culture. Since our claim is that the human world is irreducible to the empirical world of biology, the burden of the argument lies with us--indeed with all those in the humanities--to agree on a set of minimal principles that defines this irreducible anthropological content. The construction of an originary hypothesis is thus simply the attempt to clarify this content in a nondogmatic, methodologically open fashion.

EG - But even if we win these arguments *in abstracto*, people remain skeptical as to **GA**'s usefulness. Next time, let's talk about the *practical* value of the **originary hypothesis** in designing concrete research programs.

To be continued...

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Resentment, Individual and Collective

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The most significant of generational watersheds may well fall between the prewar generation and that of the **baby-boomers**. It separates those of us whose primary experience of resentment is individual from those who suffer injustice by gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. But only retrospective contrast with the boomers makes me refer to my--nameless--generation. For me, resentment is *personal*. Even when I find myself *victimized* as a member of a group, my reaction is that my victimizers have done me a *personal* injustice in not recognizing my distinction from all other members of this group.

Collective resentment easily overpowers individual resentment; yet only the latter stimulates original, or originary, thoughts. The opposition between personal and collective resentment parallels that between high and popular culture, and the ambiguities of the latter distinction reflect those of the first. The *solitary* romantic hero becomes a figure of popular culture when his solitude is no longer a spontaneous reaction to the bourgeois world but is not yet debunked as a form of mimetic desire. The popular-romantic hero is solitary *like everyone else*, just as the participant in today's youth culture is, much less self-consciously, an uncompromising rebel *like everyone else*. Only the spirit who, like **Flaubert**, denounces romantic clichés as clichés, abandons the collective expression of resentment for his own.

The central event that separates the modern era from the postmodern is the **Holocaust**. The Nazi persecution of the Jews enshrined a victimary model that was applied in the years following World War II to a variety of unequal collective relationships, notably **colonialism**, which disappeared far more swiftly than anyone expected, and American **racial discrimination**, which was eliminated *de jure* by the mid-60s. These successes reinforced the prestige of the victimary model, which is only now coming into question, notably in the delegitimation of affirmative action.

The victimary model that emerged from the Holocaust was strictly collective, subsuming the individual victim within an objectively defined or *ascriptive* group. The Holocaust was not a *sui generis* phenomenon that changed the direction of history, but a climactic event that punctuated a change already under way. The feasibility of this uniquely systematic persecution implies that, beyond the blame for concrete disasters such as Germany's loss of World War I, the people-defined-as-an-individual--[*the Jew*](#)--was made to pay the price for the end of the era of individuality itself. Modern market society was reaching the point at which personal uniqueness would have to define itself within instead of outside the market; Nazi antisemitism was a desperate attempt to arrest this development.

The early consumer society of conspicuous consumption put a premium on quantitative excess, in dialectical correspondence with the excesses of the modernist imagination. The high culture of modernism seeks the most original expression of the most originary sense of the human, one by definition hostile to the bourgeois limitations of the market. At the same time, the rise of political

antisemitism focuses blame for the *contradictions of capitalism* on the particular group who, having refused the figure of the Mediator, is fantasized to be the secret master of the mediations of the market. The idea of the Jews as both a faceless mass and an individualized set of conspirators, each performing his specific task for the good of all--and the ruin of all others--makes *the Jew* the sole successful negotiator of the transition from individual to collective identity, and consequently the primary victim of the transition from individual to collective resentment.

One of the more endearingly pathological expressions of this transition is **Herbert Marcuse's** now-forgotten *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, just in time to foment the *Great Revolt* of **1968**. Marcuse complains that, in the USSR as in the USA, the Establishment has so seduced the population with tawdry wish-fulfillments that the *other-dimensional* revolutionary spirit has been killed off. This operation is particularly egregious in the cultural-intellectual sphere, where radical ideas are granted what he calls *repressive tolerance*, meaning that people are kept too busy with movies and sex to pay any attention to them. Here the old ideal of the free individual receives its final defense against the temptations of consumer society to which it is fast succumbing. The real horror of repressive tolerance is that it relocates individual self-definition within the marketplace. The economic failure of socialism was not yet apparent in 1964, but its ethical failure, and its eventual collapse, were prefigured in Marcuse's bizarre assimilation of the Soviet system to an abstractly defined consumerism.

The generation that has grown up since **WW II** feels its resentments collectively. It learns to do this in adolescence, when, as Marcuse--or **Alan Bloom**--might have put it, it is *seduced* by the youth culture that originated with **rock'n'roll** in the mid-50s into identifying itself as an oppressed collectivity excluded from adult society.

As adults, members of this generation differentiate themselves in exquisite detail through the refinements of the marketplace; their lives are consumed in learning what to buy and where to buy it. But in the absence of the spiritual individuality provided by personal resentment, the central core of their self lacks cultural content; it is limited to the **physical body**.

Whence the obsessive concern with **hygiene** that has led to the demonization of *secondary smoke*. An unreasoning fear of physical invasion by disease factors incites this ecology-minded generation to scandalous wastefulness. The very people who proudly *recycle* throw out food at the least chance of spoilage, use armfuls of paper products to clean the slightest mess, generate obscene quantities of laundry and dirty dishes. Many refuse to flush public toilets lest they come in contact with alien bacteria; leaving behind unpleasant sights and smells is as nothing to the chance of contagion. This excessive fear of "germs" reflects a weakened sense of the self as a naked body that can be protected from death only by a constant consumption of goods and energy.

But by uncanny analogy with the naked bodies who entered the **gas chambers**, this body denuded of culture bears nonetheless the sign of a *collective* identity. The Holocaust taught succeeding generations that our cultural identity emerges not from our soul but from our body; our body is what others can see, and kill. The *White guilt*-obsessed yuppie and the minority activist share this same vision of the self, because they react to the same defining event.

Sometimes I wonder if **generative anthropology** is not a pre-war individualist's last-ditch effort to define the world for himself before the *alphas* and *betas* of our *Brave New World* can get to it... But the human is fated to think about itself, and fundamental anthropological reflection can only be carried out by a form of thought that situates the manifold data of cultural life within the single focus of the

individual mind.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Optimists and Pessimists

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1. Optimists are irritated by pessimists who condemn the present as a fall from the past. But to criticize the pessimists is to condemn at least one class of people as inferior to those of the past, since for the optimist, the pessimists of the past had more to complain about.
2. Popular culture is commonly pessimistic. Everything is going wrong, things keep getting worse. This is absurd and self-indulgent. But isn't this absurd self-indulgence a demonstration that things are indeed getting worse?
3. Thus the optimist must say "things are getting better; you (who have gotten worse) are an aberration." Aberrations like you can flourish only *because* things have become so good. But this implies that the better things become, the more people enjoy finding that things have gotten worse. This expresses a far more pessimistic vision of the human condition than that of the pessimist, who believes our complaints are justified by bad conditions.
4. The optimist and the pessimist express *attitudes*, fundamental anthropological postures. The pessimist plays the originary central role of the victim. We say he does this to avoid blame for his failures and to gain our sympathy. But averting the resentment of others is the most critical human problem--not the most fundamental problem of human beings, who like any animals must eat and reproduce, but the most critical problem of *the human*, of the creature who defers violence through representation.
5. The dichotomy **optimism** vs. **pessimism** is a product of the emergence of the model of market exchange as a challenge to the ritual vision of society. **Voltaire's** famous critique of optimism in *Candide* attacks **Leibniz's** theodicy--whose "optimism" is in fact a translation of market-inspired openness into transcendental terms--on behalf of bourgeois realism. Candide and his friends at the end of the story, who cultivate their garden and sell its produce on the open market, have rejected optimism, but they are not pessimists: they are open to the never fully predictable verdict of the marketplace.
6. The optimist is a variety of pessimist--just as **Kojève** defines the bourgeois in Hegelian terms not as a master but as a *freed slave*. The bourgeois is optimistic because he has left the ritual world of persecutors and victims for the world of exchange.
7. Both optimism and pessimism are *about* the market, which means that neither can be contained *within* the market. A *bear* is no more a pessimist than a *bull*: he can sell his stock and get rich if he guesses right. The optimist and the pessimist argue whether the market system as a whole, no alternative to which appears to exist, is compatible with moral reciprocity.
8. The Romantic culture of the nineteenth century rejects both Leibniz and Voltaire; it defends the cultural-victimary model against the encroachment of the modern exchange system. It sides with popular culture, which has always been deeply pessimistic because it is based on a permanent state

of resentment. The bourgeois believer in *progress*, who belongs neither to the intellectual aristocracy nor to the people, is derided as a Philistine. The most crucial intellectual effort of the nineteenth century, that of **Marxism**, is devoted to reducing the new exchange model to the old ritual model, modernizing victimization as *exploitation*.

9. Today's intellectuals share the pessimism of the Romantics, but they no longer believe in high culture as a vehicle for the transcendence of individual resentment. Instead, they not only side with the people, they have joined them: *PC* also stands for *popular culture*.
10. The adherents of the old high culture now defend market society against the purveyors of the ritual-cultural model. They have become optimists not because they view the world positively, but because they view cultural pessimism negatively, being unable to profit from the victimary role that the postmodern era defines in collective terms. We should call them *neo-optimists*.
11. The pessimist resents--personalizes, demonizes--*the state of things*; the neo-optimist resents the fellow humans who profit from this demonization. In the face of the former's ritual attitude, the latter is tempted to forgo aprioristic value-judgments on *the state of things* and rely on the market's self-determination. This "Voltairean" position now finds itself opposed not to optimism but to pessimism.
12. The **saint** is without resentment, or rather, always alert to its danger. He is therefore neither a pessimist nor an optimist. He loves both and seeks to wean them from their resentment. He tells the pessimist: if things are so bad, work to make them better; to the optimist: if you think things are getting better, do something to prove it.
13. The idea of sainthood implies the possibility of a personal intuition of God's will, or in human terms, of an ability to judge *the state of things* objectively according to the model of moral reciprocity. The saint is he who has no need of the marketplace to tell him how to act. But the truths about the human revealed in the marketplace are unknowable a priori. The saint does not take himself for God--that would be just the opposite of sainthood. So the saint forbears to judge the state of things in general; he does so only in concrete situations that offend his moral sense. But when he puts his residual resentment in the service of defending *victims*, he must residually resent as well the recipients of his defense; otherwise, he becomes a fellow-traveler of the pessimists.
14. The **pragmatist** seeks to identify the dangers of violence that face the social order. But he has no better measure than his own moral intuition, which tells him what kinds of human difference are intolerable. The point at which transcendental values prevail over the pragmatic is itself pragmatically determined. But the sign that accomplished our originary *pragmatic* deferral of violence did so as the signifier of a transcendental Being. The pragmatist acts before the same horizon as the saint.
15. At the *end of history*, there will be neither optimists nor pessimists; we will stop caring about the future, because all human violence will have been abolished. But this can occur only with the abolition of our enemy, **us**. More even than socialism, the end of history is potentially the bloodiest utopia of all. Far better that we remain divided between optimists and pessimists.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Why the Humanities Need GA

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Humanistic study is under threat today in our universities. With the decline of Europe-centered Western high culture, it is no longer clear why we need a host of separate departments named for the languages of middle-sized European states. No doubt these states and their interaction generated the modern market system that has now evolved into the much-feared *global marketplace*. But our historical respect for these mature national cultures cannot stand up to the politico-cultural pressure from others now in the process of creation or rapid evolution. In order to defend and preserve the humanities, we must make not a political but an *intellectual* argument for the study of the unique Western experiment in high culture. This requires that we theorize this concept in both its historical specificity and its anthropological generality; and this, in turn, can only be done by means of **originary thinking**.

Secular high culture has not exhausted its anthropological lessons for us, but we can no longer take these lessons for granted as a supplementary benefit of the study of canonical texts. We can only understand the uniqueness of our cultural experiment in relation to an originary model of esthetic experience. On the basis of such a model we can also begin to examine the cultural specificity of other civilizations (Indian, Persian, Chinese, Amerindian) and pre-state societies. I call this procedure *originary analysis*.

Originary analysis is not a methodology but a heuristic: a way of finding the anthropologically significant core of a text. Its single rule of thumb is to trace each category of one's critical discourse to its root in the hypothesized originary event of language that inaugurates **the deferral of violence through representation**. To consider esthetic form as an end in itself, independently of its anthropological function, is mere idolatry. The ultimate model of every cultural operation is the originary emergence of the transcendent or "vertical" sign from the immanent or "horizontal" world of appetite. The end of cultural interpretation--providing a model of human desire as a means to defer violence--is no different from that of the cultural object it interprets.

Interpretation seeks to construct a cognitive or "reversible" model at the horizon of irreversible or revelatory esthetic experience. There are no fully "thematic" truths of the human for the same reason that there is no representation without paradox: the fact of formulating propositions about the human world modifies the world the proposition claimed to describe. Interpretation's movement toward anthropological truth begins at the same moment to falsify it. We may not know whether God exists, but we know that paradox exists, which God's existence alone could resolve.

We can only understand form in the context of more inclusive form. Originary analysis traces a given form back to a hypothetical model of the minimal and therefore most inclusive form of the human, the originary scene of language. The originary sign represents--designates and reproduces--and sanctifies--makes sacred and worships as already sacred--the communal object of desire, removing it from the arena of collective conflict. However intense appetites may have been before the emission of

the sign, *desire* comes into being only with representation. The sign creates its object as object-of-desire at the same time as it re-presents it as always-already existing.

The relationship between form and content makes explicit the hierarchical relation of containment that is latent in the dichotomy of signifier and signified, signs and things, *les mots et les choses*. *Form* is our translation of **Aristotle's** *eidos*, his praxis-oriented version of **Plato's** *idea*. The word both doubles and contains the thing; on one hand, "chair" is a mere supplement to preexisting chairs, on the other, no chair can exist without Chair as its form. The easy positivist idea that language is just a more advanced version of DNA code fails to acknowledge that it is itself expressed in language but not in DNA code.

The domain of content is that of worldly desire, where we identify mimetically with an explicit or implicit human subject. But we also identify, in the realm of form, with the transcendental subject of the work, the "author," whose goal is not to satisfy individual desire but to defer violence from the community. We can rely on our esthetic intuition to direct us to the crisis or *crux* in the content; but we must withdraw from this intuition to understand our formal identification with the work's subject. The comic conjunction of form and content that satisfies both individual desire and community is a marvelous category error, a confusion of levels that makes us laugh. But the more profound lesson of desire is that the accomplishment of the form requires the tragic sacrifice of its worldly subject.

The artwork realizes as experience the paradox that otherwise might seem a plaything for philosophers. The heart of interpretation is examining how the work's form is generated by its content, which generates the mimetic crisis out of which form emerges as its resolution. Tragedy requires the characters to suffer, but their suffering must not appear an arbitrary sacrifice imposed by the form; it must be motivated by the nature of their own desires. Yet no motivation of esthetic content can fully "justify," or reinvent, esthetic form, which is always in the last analysis imposed by the communal complicity of author and audience. Hence **Girard** denounces tragedy as sacrificial, an act of arbitrary scapegoating. But its arbitrariness is that of the esthetic in general; the emergence of form from content is a leap of faith, just as is the originary emergence of the sign from the tension of potential mimetic conflict. We cannot deduce it; we can only tell stories about it. The minimal hypothesis of generative anthropology is an attempt to tell this story minimally as a hypothesis. (For Girard, the Passion *is* this minimal story: Christian faith or any other faith is belief in an originary hypothesis.)

Esthetic interpretation is the construction of an anthropology. Our reading of the artwork formulates an originary hypothesis because, to turn things around, the originary scene is the minimal model of all future scenes, narrated as the minimal model of all future stories. We tell the story so that we can experience once again how the sign can emerge from the thing, how the reality of appetite can take on the meaning of desire. But once the story is told, we think with and about it, as we began to think with and about the sign, in order to find in it a normative model of human conduct, an ethic, not out of our inherent "desire for self-knowledge," but because of our crucial need to defer conflict. The first anthropology is ethics, and the first anthropological model is the originary symmetrical exchange of signs, the basis for reciprocal morality ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you").

There is currently only one widely-received theory that claims to find originary meaning in cultural productions: that of **Freud**, turned toward representation by **Lacan**, who replaces the *oral-anal-genital* by the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*. The popularity of Freudian hermeneutics reflects both our need for a generative model that relates cultural phenomena to the fundamentally, minimally human, and our discomfort with such models outside the realm of individual development. We so fear to condemn other

cultures as more primitive than ours that we have all but renounced the original project of ethnology--the defining field of anthropology: to provide insights into the originary form of human culture. (Only **paleontology** maintains this project, because it begins from ethology rather than ethnology.) Hence we prefer the mirror stage to the primal horde.

But human language and culture were not created by babies. To defend the humanities is to hypothesize that the creations of Western high culture reflect a higher level of human self-consciousness than the works of ritual-bound societies, just as Western science reflects a deeper understanding of the natural world. The danger in the current fad for *cultural studies* is not that it teaches students about popular culture, but that it teaches them to ignore the historical distinction between popular culture and high culture.

The only way to justify the literary curriculum of departments of "language and literature" is to affirm its unique value for the construction of what we will increasingly be calling *anthropological* models. To humanists who feel alienated by the theoretical climate of generative anthropology, I suggest they try explicating a few poems in the theoretical climate of their local social science departments.

In the works of high culture, the paradoxical tension between form and content reveals itself in an ironic self-consciousness of humanity as an open, dynamic, decentralizing enterprise. If we are unable to articulate this self-consciousness with a fundamental understanding of the human, we can only pray that a future generation able to do so will one day resuscitate the study of the Humanities.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Triangular Utopias

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This **Valentine's Day** column is about a new vision of love.

Can it be a coincidence that the last two French films I've seen, *French Twist* (*Gazon maudit*) and *Café au lait* (*Métisse*) end with the transformation of the traditionally tragic or melodramatic love triangle into a **triangular utopia**? At the end of **Mathieu Kassovitz'** film, the *café au lait* heroine, who has just given birth to a child, is flanked symmetrically by her black-Moslem and white-Jewish lovers (the latter played by Kassovitz himself), either of whom might be the father (cleverly, we hear the baby cry but it is not shown). After many fights and squabbles, the two men have become the best of friends, linked by their common bond to their mistress. **Josiane Balasko's** film is more complex. The triangle again has an attractive woman at the center, but the other two spaces are filled by her (formerly unfaithful) husband and her lesbian lover (played by Balasko herself). In order to cement the triangle, the lover gets the husband to give her a child, so that all three pairings in the triangle are represented. What is more, the film forbears to end on the obvious triangular shot *avec bébé*, but shows the husband making friends with a male homosexual, suggesting the next step in a utopian expansion.

The two works that can be said to inaugurate the triangular utopia are, on the literary front, **Marguerite Duras'** masterpiece *Le ravissement [ravishing/ecstasy] de Lol V. Stein* (1964), and in the cinema, **Truffaut's** *Jules et Jim* (1961). Duras' achievement is the more profound. Lol, jilted by her fiance on the night of her engagement, forms a new triangle by seducing the lover of an old friend who had witnessed her earlier discomfiture. Lol's aim is not to break up this couple, but keep it together under her control. Duras teaches us something new about the triangle of mimetic desire: that the position of the rejected woman, the excluded other, is the most stable and lucid, the position of the novelist herself--an idea sketched out in her 1962 short novel *10:30 on a Summer Night (Dix heures et demie du soir en été)*. But Lol's triangle is not yet a utopia; the three parties cannot form a community. The lover cannot share with his mistress his strange passion for Lol; the only stable configuration has lover and mistress together in bed and Lol secretly watching (over) them through the window. At the end of the novel, Lol falls asleep in this situation, having reached final contentment, but her satisfaction depends on the mimetic tension of the two others.

In *Jules et Jim*, we are a step closer to the utopian pattern of the woman loved by two friends, but the whole point of the film is that the configuration is interminably, and terminally, unstable. The series of separations and reconciliations, including notably Catherine's failed attempt to have a child by Jim (while married to Jules), comes to an end when, following the trio's chance reunion at a movie theater showing newsreels of Nazi bookburning, the heroine drives with Jim off the end of a ruined bridge. The murder-suicide demonstrates that the triangular community cannot survive an intensification of public violence; Catherine seems to fear that, galvanized by the spectacle, the two men--as so often occurs in 1930s French films--will band together to exclude *her*.

But today the triangle has become the *summum bonum* to which the action tends. *Café au lait* does this in all simplicity, as though all the triangular tragedies of history, from Adam, Eve, and the snake through Oedipus and Hamlet to Molly, Dedalus, and Bloom, had missed the point. At the outset, the black and white lovers are not merely rivals, they despise each other ethnically and socially, but they find communion in their common love. Kassovitz's film does not show us how the obvious non-father of the invisible baby will retain symmetry with his rival, or how sexual relations will be organized in the new "family." *French Twist* is much more explicit: it not only finds a way to link the two odd ends of the triangle but even suggests its future extension. This resembles the philosophy of "free love" we may remember from the first *Emmanuelle* (taken from a two-volume novel that contained far more "philosophy" than pornography); but the latter required a full-fledged conversion experience, whereas now the utopia seems able to extend itself by effortless contagion like the community of aliens in *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers*.

In the good old days of *l'amour courtois*, the love of a woman--Dante's **Beatrice** is the most glorious example--was a model of the love of God. Yet if we both love God, you and I do not fight, but commune. This makes one wonder why the triangular utopia has not seriously tempted us until now. Surely the answer is that the social order until now has depended on stable families on the one hand and stable social institutions on the other. These arrangements see the triangle as a threat, not only must men pair off with women, they must also "pair off" with each other, join together to avert the danger of woman-inspired mimetic rivalry. This is an obsessive theme in French films of the 1930s, from *A nous la liberté* to *La grande illusion*. At the (revised) end of Duvivier's *La belle équipe* (1936), husband and lover jointly reject the *femme fatale* and walk off arm in arm. In the atmosphere of pre-war crisis, male bonding is more important than family bonding, survival comes before reproduction. I think this explains the notorious misogyny of these films better than the usual generalizations about *patriarchy*, which implies not hostility toward women but their benign subordination to the *paterfamilias*, as was at least superficially the case in most Hollywood films of the era.

The postmodern dream is to make our understanding of the triangular nature of desire the basis for neither tragedy nor comedy, but neo-romantic idyll. Since desire is always triangular, why not include the three parties in a permanent arrangement? Perhaps we could adjust to the institutional adjustments required, if only the triangle could become truly stable. But on this point Duras and Truffaut are wiser than Kassovitz. The structures created by desire are unstable by nature; once they stabilize, they lose the attractive force that maintains their integrity. As the concluding sequence of Balasko's film suggests, these triangles tend to acquire new vertices. As one of two lovers of the same person, symmetry requires that I seek compensation elsewhere. The more I accept my rival's access to my beloved, the less my desire will be confined within the triangular situation.

A less rosy view of the contemporary triangular utopia is found in **Chantal Akerman's** *Night and Day* (1991). The film begins as an idyllic vision of a couple, but as it progresses, the woman comes to love another as well--a friend introduced to her by her taxi-driving lover, whose work leaves her to wander the Paris streets by night. At the end of the story, however, the woman drops both men; the last shot shows her striding off resolutely--presumably to find a job rather than a man to support her, as has been the case throughout the film. Akerman's conclusion leads me to wonder whether the triangular utopia--where the woman at the center doesn't work--isn't just an adaptation to the middle-class axiom that today it takes *two salaries* to support a family. With two working "husbands," a woman can stay home and bring up the kids.

Yet we know now that all utopias are chimerical; no new social arrangement can conquer the paradox of desire. We can defer it, not expel it once and for all. Beyond the triangular utopias lies this dawning realization, as reflected in a slow swing of the social pendulum back to the traditional couple as the tried and true arrangement for transmitting our culture to the next generation.

The real utopia of love is the couple, but it is one that never reaches stasis. True love includes its mediator within itself; it is both unending seduction and perpetual adoration. Just a thought for **Valentine's Day**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Questions of Interpretation

No. 81: Saturday, February 22, 1997

Humanities professors have so long considered artworks as objects for academic study that we tend to forget the naturalness of interpretation. Tear a couple of us away from our word processors and send us to the movies, and chances are we'll begin discussing the film as soon as we exit the theater, and may prolong our conversation for hours thereafter. One of the superiorities of film and theater--long considered the highest literary art--over the novel is that it is experienced collectively. Nineteenth-century novels were often read aloud *en famille*; today's electronic media have taken the place of these readings not because we are less "literate" than our grandparents, but because they allow us to share far more information with a potentially far greater set of Others. The tawdriest piece of news allows us to participate in an implicit dialogue with millions of interlocutors. There is no way to separate off my intrinsic interest in, say, the latest **O.J.** verdict from my knowledge that everyone else is interested in the same information. *Culture defers violence through representation* only when the latter is--explicitly or implicitly--shared.

But we do not interpret all narratives in the same manner. The difference between the O.J. story and the film is that the latter has a well-defined *text* and a *subject* to whom we can attribute responsibility for it. The conversation begins in either case with the binary question of whether we "liked" the verdict or the movie, but the second offers a clear referent for our like or dislike, however collective film authorship may be. (Film buffs attribute the film to the director-*auteur*, but the general public in its wisdom just attributes the film to an unnamed intention.) In both real and fictional events, our judgment bears not on the fictional but the real, which means, in the latter case, the creator rather than his creations. Hence our esthetic judgment of the film is independent of our moral judgment of its characters; it bears rather on how satisfactorily we feel the outcome realizes this judgment. In the simplest cases, this means defeat for the *bad guy* and success for the *good guy*. Professional academic criticism has not traditionally dealt with such works, which generate less talk about poetic justice than about *special effects*. We acknowledge their fulfillment of culture's fundamental purpose in the simplest way possible, as the deferral of violence through the representation... of violence.

The good guy-bad guy film lacks high-cultural value because it is *sacrificial*--it makes binary distinctions between good and evil beings in order to expel the latter. In these works, crisis turns our complex world into an atavistically ritualistic one; the only freedom is in the technique--*how* the hero will defeat his enemies. It is no accident that the social order depicted in popular fantasy and science fiction, whether set in the future or the past, almost inevitably lacks democratic institutions. The sacrificial model of human behavior is a more primitive ethic than our own; only after **Christianity** unmasks the arbitrary mechanism of sacrifice does the West evolve the open-ended structure of the modern exchange system. The sacrificial betrays itself by its failure to accept the reversibility of the roles of **victim** and **victimizer**. In a good guy-bad guy flick, the bad guys are presumably the victimizers. But in the esthetic economy of the story, it is they who are sacrificed so that the world may be once again fit to live in.

What we call high art is the product of a civilization in the process of transcending the sacrificial--the civilization that has endured, roughly speaking, from **Homer's** time to our own. Sacrifice is not eliminated, but the designation of the victim becomes problematic. Instead of taking the side of the good guy-sacrificer against the bad guy-victim, we are made to identify with the victim-protagonist himself, to share his *hamartia* or "tragic flaw." Our interpretive conversation centers on the justification this "flaw" provides for his unhappy end. Was **Oedipus'** downfall caused by his secret desire for his mother? his violent temper? his intellectual *hubris* in thinking he could solve all riddles as he had that of the Sphinx? his pride in affirming that he alone could save the city from plague? Or was it the fault of his parents who had left him for dead? or of a society in crisis seeking a scapegoat? Our answers are as much theories of human culture--anthropologies--as readings of **Sophocles'** play. They can never be definitive; form can never be justified by content. This is the paradox of representation. Form emerges from content in crisis; its truth cannot be formulated in the peaceful propositions of metaphysics.

And thus high culture, however self-consciously ironic and paradoxical, remains bound by sacrificial structure. Aristotle's common-sense division of dramatic works into *beginning*, *middle* and *end* masks the point that the *end* is also the end of the characters themselves. The content-world of the esthetic work is confined, as the performance of a rite is confined, within physical and/or temporal limits. These limits stand in contrast to the sacred immortality, or eternal significance, that the rite is meant to commemorate; in the strictest sense, as iconoclastic religions like **Judaism** and **Islam** recognize, there is no such thing as religious art.

This suggests that art is a secular substitute for ritual, a form of entertainment. The fictional character, be he **Hamlet** or an extra blown away in an **Arnold** epic, is just an imaginary version of the sacrificial victim. The ritual defers our resentment for a while; so does the esthetic work. In the old days, it also deferred our hunger--the victim was eaten; but hunger, more inevitably even than resentment, cannot be expelled, only deferred. Church services are held weekly; we see a new movie every weekend.

But the historical experiment in high culture intended the artwork as more than expendable entertainment. Its characters and its world were to possess "eternal" esthetic value, to take the place of the sacred Being itself, not merely its sacrificial representatives. The esthetic effect on the individual spectator became, at first implicitly, then overtly, a guarantee of the artwork's transhistorical value; its beauty was not imposed on us by the community, but experienced freely. Like most cults, the apogee of the cult of the esthetic occurred shortly before its end, in the late nineteenth-century movement of *l'art pour l'art*. Our professorial role as interpreters of texts is founded on that era's belief that art is the source of the most profound anthropological intuitions. In contrast to religious hermeneutic, esthetic interpretation is founded not on doctrinal tradition but on our own experience of the texts. It is, in other words, a direct extension of the "natural" interpretative activity I referred to above.

What has gone wrong with this process? What has made us flee the futility of interpretation for the security of the historical and the documentary? And why have we lost all embarrassment before the sacrificial so long as its victimary inversion appeals to our vaguely defined post-colonial guilt? Why in the world of contemporary humanism is **Mongo Beti** suddenly more marketable than **Balzac**, **Chinua Achebe** than **Dickens**?

Deconstruction was the last great, or not-so-great, movement of textual interpretation. It is a critique of textual violence, of the text's binary decisiveness (as **Girard** reminds us, *decidere*, to decide, originally meant to cut off, *sc.* the victim's head). The deconstruction of the literary text exposes the arbitrary

expulsion on which its formal closure is based. This is the theoretical undoing of high culture that corresponds to its ethical bankruptcy. High culture is based on the idea that although sacrifice must be maintained, sharing in it and talking about it defers its violence indefinitely. The unending dialogue over the impossible justification for Oedipus' or Hamlet's fate renders the victim/hero "immortal" and so compensates for the sacrifice he has endured. But the silence of the **Holocaust** undoes, deconstructs the Heideggerian *bavardage* (*Geplapper*) of the literary-academic world.

So today we reject Western high culture's subtleties for the frank resentment of the *peuple* toward the *classes possédantes*, or that of the ex-colonial toward his erstwhile master. Behind the posturing of **PC** is a healthy recognition that all culture is sacrificial. But once we recognize this, we can no longer expect the esthetic to guarantee our anthropological intuitions. Art can no longer furnish the basis of its own interpretation; the humanist's analysis of the text as *well-wrought urn* gives way to one grounded in human science. Yet it is not without consequence whether this science be founded on the myths of anti-Western resentment or on a minimal hypothesis of our common origin.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

George Soros and the Open Society

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Perhpas no periodical article since **Francis Fukuyama's** career-making piece on the "End of History" has aroused such widespread attention as **George Soros'** "The Capitalist Threat" in the February *Atlantic Monthly*. Self-made billionaire Soros sees a threat to his old master **Karl Popper's** postwar ideal of the **open society** in the growth of laissez-faire capitalism, both in the United States and in places like Russia where an anarchistic and gangster-ridden *capitalisme sauvage* has filled the gap left by the Soviet command economy.

I must express my admiration for Soros' understanding of what he calls the "reflexivity" of human institutions. Unlike social scientists who try to pretend that their models are independent of the object they are studying, this successful businessman has derived from his experience of the market system the fundamental anthropological truth that all models of the human condition are paradoxical because they both must and cannot include themselves within the system they model. Soros shares **GA's** insistence on the **generative** nature of the human and its creations.

What then of the "threat"? Soros cannot be accused of hostility to the market principle. What he criticizes is an ideology that makes the market the sole arbiter of social policy; such an ideology, as he sees it, defeats the open-society ideal by condemning the economically weak and neglecting the infrastructure. As this argument is often put, our interest in the *commons*, including the *safety net* for the needy, follows the **Prisoner's Dilemma** model: we are all better off if we all contribute to these causes, but no one has a marginal interest in contributing if the others don't. Laissez-faire, on both the individual and the state level, makes us "unwilling to make any sacrifices for the common good (53)."

Soros' point is to set the ideal of an open society in opposition, not merely to the totalitarian models that Popper had traced back to **Plato's Republic**, but to dogmatic belief in the infallibility of the market. No doubt such belief is unfounded; but it should be made clear that the dogmatism of the market is not merely more benign but on a different plane than the dogmatism that rejects the market. Where the latter poses the infallibility of a doctrine, which is really that of its omnipotent interpreters, market-worship emphasizes precisely the fallibility of human self-knowledge that Popper makes the foundation of the open society: since no one can know a priori the best allocation of resources, we must rely on the market to provide it. Dogmatic adherence to this reliance is dogmatic *openness*; by the same token, what corrects it is not more openness but partial closure. Soros himself hints at this toward the end of his essay by situating the open society midway between totalitarian despotism and anarchy.

Although we are ignorant about many things that we must leave to the market--which is nothing more than a mechanism for calculating the resultant of human value-judgments--those corrections that Soros would have us bring to the process are based not on economic ignorance but on moral belief. When we take a stand about income distribution or welfare, we are not tempering doctrinaire arrogance with

humility, but tempering doctrinaire submission to the dictates of the market with an affirmation of moral values.

No doubt the ultimate effect of this assertion is pragmatic. The good society is the only liveable society; the *moral model* of human reciprocity is not derived from some vaporous ideal, but repeats the originary reciprocity of which we are reminded every time we use language. But like religious belief, moral principles are pragmatic only because they go beyond the pragmatic in any narrow sense; it is because we are willing to subordinate material value to moral value that we can create material value in confidence. This solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma is the foundation of the human itself; and Soros is again close to GA's understanding of human paradoxicality in his insistence that the faith that sustains these values is a sign not of our "perfect knowledge" but of the contrary. The ultimate foundation of the open society is the "arbitrary" moral closure that creates the human community. It is only with respect to the survival of this closure in the virtual human community of today that openness has value.

I have sympathy for Soros' emphasis on the economy rather than the government, the private over the public sector, which stands in contrast to standard liberal political theory. Nonetheless, as Soros never seems to realize, his argument is about *politics*, not economics. Attuned to the paradoxical reflexivity of human institutions, he fails to note the paradoxical relationship between closure and openness in the laissez-faire ideology he attacks, and therefore gives short shrift to the political institutions within which this relationship is worked out. As a critic pointed out on a recent talk show, reliance on the market follows the *pendulum* model of most ideological trends--or of the stock market. Market thinking, having retreated under the assault of governmental intervention from the 1930s through the 70s, has only recently begun to recapture some of its old terrain, and the momentum is now in the laissez-faire direction. As a warning lest the pendulum swing too far, Soros' message makes its point; but it does not help us to rethink the articulation between the political and economic spheres in modern market society.

The political sector acts as a self-conscious check on the "blind" forces of the market. It dictates outcomes that are not the resultant of material desires but of a priori moral judgments. Because these are factors of closure rather than openness, the ideal of the open society is best served by assuring that these judgments too are subject to the open-ended interaction of a market-like process. **Representative democracy** creates a political market parallel with the economic market, in which outcomes must be negotiated even where "absolute" moral values are at stake. Even where such values seem irreconcilable, as for example in the abortion debate, workable compromises are reached and evolve over time.

An element of self-conscious moral closure is indispensable to maintaining the optimum of social openness. Open-ended economic circulation thrives on the conversion of resentment into economic energy, but sometimes--in Prisoner's Dilemma cases--this conversion cannot be made directly, but must be mediated by the political process. What must not be forgotten is that expanding and broadening the possibilities of human reciprocity through economic circulation, not instituting an a priori model of "social justice," is the end of democratic political activity. Democracy's superiority is that it minimizes political intervention in the market process by the optimizing effect of negotiation. We all have the same fundamental moral intuitions, although our interests and perceptions are different. The democratic process tests the commonality of these intuitions better than any other by reproducing originary chaos and resolution in a representational framework.

The political sector would like to see itself as imposing moral criteria on the amorality of the marketplace, but what it really does is to negotiate our various resentments toward the outcome of market

processes. The potential corruption of this sector by economic forces that the Democratic fund-raising scandals are recalling to our attention only gives us one more reason not to exalt the moral stance of the political over the economic. Like all social systems, liberal democracy spawns utopian models of how it *should* work, but the important thing is that is *does* work more or less adequately. Not only does corruption generate resentments of its own, as a look at the headlines makes clear, but it cannot prevent the political expression of other, more fundamental resentments within the body politic.

The current vogue for laissez-faire solutions is typical of the pendular fluctuations of the ideological marketplace. But the more fundamental point is that democratic institutions are optimal in the long run for controlling the amplitude of this pendulum. Soros' exhortation is not a critique of liberal democracy but a political gesture within it.

These remarks apply less directly to the problems of Russian and (briefly) East Asian capitalism raised in the article. But whether or not Soros' criticism of the West for its failure to mount a **Marshall Plan** for Russia is valid, the Russian robber capitalists are not comparable to the *robber barons* of the Gilded Age; they operate in a society whose political institutions are not only too weak to control economic activities but too weak to maintain social order. Kidnapping, murder, and extortion are not features of the classical market system even in its worst excesses. Economic gangsterism may be inevitable after years of centralized planning, but laissez-faire ideology is no more relevant to it than Marxism is to Peruvian guerilla movements.

In such circumstances, a strong central authority may do more than a weak democracy to impose the **rule of law** prerequisite to the market system; post-Pinochet **Chile** is now the envy of Latin America. But can free markets remain compatible in the long term with political repression? It is often suggested that, in the more communally confident East Asian environment, the Prisoner's Dilemma can be solved with less need for the negotiation of resentments. Yet this truism is thrown in doubt by the vulnerability of Asian democracies like **South Korea** and even **Japan** to politically influential mass demonstrations, a phenomenon unknown in the United States since the end of the **Vietnam War**. At the other extreme, China's political elite can most likely only maintain control over an expanding market sector by drifting toward a variety of **National Socialism** fed by resentment against the West. Not the excesses of laissez-faire but an unstable combination of third-world resentment and market-driven prosperity is potentially the most dangerous trend in the world today.

The recent superior performance of the market-oriented **US** to the **European welfare-state**, as demonstrated by a simple comparison of growth and unemployment rates, suggests that, in the debate over the open society, the burden of proof still lies with those who would impose restrictions on the marketplace. But I agree wholeheartedly with Soros' final point that, after 200 years of Enlightenment arrogance, "[t]he time is ripe for developing a conceptual framework based on our fallibility (58)." Soros has affirmed the propitiousness of **generative anthropology**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Film Open and Closed

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In **Leo Braudy's** minor classic of film theory, *The World in a Frame* (1976), the author establishes a dichotomy within classical cinema: **Renoir's** films are *open*, **Lang's** and **Hitchcock's**, *closed*. In one case, there is reality beyond the frame and the character's presence within it is essentially conscious and voluntary, as are the symbolic meanings attached to objects and actions in the film. In the other, the film world is self-contained and the characters are trapped within it, its symbols imposed upon them unaware.

Braudy does not prolong this distinction beyond the era that began with the talkies and came to an end with the **New Wave** in France and the decline of the studio system--and of pre-war adult popular culture--in the US. The very technology of more recent cinema--color, wide screen--makes the old closed forms unthinkable, and in the twenty years since the book's publication we have moved yet farther away from them. But the importance of this distinction in the formative years of the sound film makes us wonder both how it is to be articulated with the distinction between *naturalism* and *formalism* that is more traditional in both film practice (**Lumière** vs **Méliès**) and theory (**Kracauer** vs **Arnheim**), and what it tells us about film in contrast with other narrative forms such as the drama and the novel. Can these questions be approached via **originary analysis**?

The object designated by the originary linguistic sign is external to the protohuman group; the sign gives it meaning and assimilates it within the newly created boundary of human culture. But as the physical object of desire is assimilated, its Being remains as a permanent guarantee of the sign. The process of physical assimilation fundamental to life is given a sacred or transcendental meaning. Culture will open the human community to the world outside as the locus of its desire, so that it may nourish itself--literally and spiritually--from inexhaustible Being.

Even the most rigid ritual must engage in an outward assimilating movement toward the world before it can return upon itself. That is, the form of the rite must assimilate a new content. The open work emphasizes the newness of this content, whereas the closed work emphasizes the immutability of the form that encloses it. The closed work operates as a self-contained and reversible model of the originary event, whereas the open work reproduces the irreversible gesture of assimilating the outside world to its sacrificial structure. This dichotomy is reminiscent of **Nietzsche's** famous opposition between the *Dionysian* and the *Apollonian*, which great tragic art must maintain in perfect tension at the double risk of either succumbing to the rigidity of form or dissolving in the anarchy of content.

But the tension between ritual closure and the assimilation of external reality finds expression not only within rites and artworks but in the fundamental institutions of human behavior. In the broadest sense, **cultural** systems emphasize closure, whereas **economic** systems are concerned with assimilation. The open/closed dichotomy is realized on the highest level in the opposition, familiar to readers of these *Chronicles*, between **culture** and the **market**.

These categories provide an originary basis for Braudy's opposition, but they do not quite grasp its specificity. Certainly one might oppose *open* picaresque novels to *closed* Gothic novels, or claim that **Balzac's** writing is more open than **Zola's**, **Dickens'** than **Hardy's**. But these differences reflect chronological evolution rather than alternative formal possibilities. As particular to cinema as its mechanical mode of representation is the *lateness* of its history. Film is a postmodern art *avant la lettre*; created at a time when the other arts had matured and sprouted into modernism, it received at birth the multiple possibilities that they had worked through history to create. The full capacity of cinema emerges with the introduction of sound just after the great explosion of the modernist novel with **Proust** and **Joyce**. Not coincidentally, the coming of sound put an end to major experimental film-making and established the status of cinema as a popular art, liberating it from the constraint of historical tradition.

Neither cinema nor any other significant invention can be understood as a mere artifact of the autonomous evolution of technology. On the contrary, it is quite possible to understand cinema as an autonomous development of the art of narration in which technology is the servant of the esthetic. The early evolution of modern market society generated a nineteenth-century passion for increasingly convincing reproduction of experiential reality that produced not only photography but moving panoramas, magic lanterns, and increasingly elaborate stage sets that included live animals, cliffs and rivers, fires, floods, and explosions. This development is also reflected in the increasingly "cinematic" technique of the novel, which inspires Eisenstein to make his famous *rapprochement* of **Dickens** and **Griffith**.

Thus on the one hand, the lateness of film's appearance gives it a "posthistorical" choice of narrative modes among all those previously developed--but on the other, this lateness is the culmination of an historical progression toward the increasingly information-rich representation of reality as we see it. The first, **synchronic** perspective gives the tension between form and content, *formative* and *realistic* cinema theory and practice--**Lumière vs Méliès**. The other, **diachronic** perspective is not one of increasing *realism*, Lumière triumphing over his rival, but rather one of increasing *realisticity* or *effet de réel*, a development equally as visible, if not more so, in fantasy as in the depiction of the everyday. The technical difference between *King Kong* and *Jurassic Park* measures the progress made from the 30s to the 90s in reproducing the feel of lived experience.

Now we can understand why the closed-open *tension* inherent in the esthetic in general becomes a *dichotomy* in cinema: because it reflects the necessity of accepting or rejecting the opening toward the world implicit in the technological progress of the art itself. But this opening is anything but a local feature of cinema. The choice between closed and open films reflects a fundamental dichotomy in our view of reality. During the period around World War II, the industrialized West went through the agony of the *final conflict* between the closed ritual-based and open market-based models of the social order--**the last moment of the Renaissance**. The high-cultural version of the closed film esthetic is the last-gasp theatrical neoclassicism of the 20s and 30s, when playwrights from **Giraudoux**, **Cocteau**, and **Anouilh** to **O'Neill** were rewriting Greek tragedy.

The closed film implies that cinema, although the product of technological progress, remains nonetheless confined within the old sacrificial structures, just as technological progress as a whole seems incapable of freeing humanity from these structures. From 1930 to 1959, the black and white sound film could not yet be accused of imposing a closed vision through arbitrary technological retrogression. But the closed frame that refuses to let our desire be drawn to objects beyond its borders is incompatible with postwar consumerism. The universalization of color (in TV as well as film) makes impossible the abstract shadow-world of the *film noir* and its closed predecessors. Modern market society moves too fast to

permit the maintenance of closure in any but the most pathological forms of experience. There are claustrophobic films, but there are no more closed films in Braudy's sense--films in which we cannot sense the wealth of sights and sounds of which the closed universe is willfully deprived.

Originary analysis offers us a point of departure for research into esthetic problems, not by providing us with a technique for extracting the answer from an individual work, but by permitting us to construct our historical model of esthetic evolution on a minimally arbitrary foundation. **GA** does not allow us to dispense with history, but it permits us to factor out of it all but the categories indispensable to the task at hand.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Beyond Denial

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My friend and fellow *Anthropoetics* board member **Matt Schneider** had an interesting take on the first **OJ** trial, the outcome of which he predicted from the beginning. As he saw it, the acquittal wasn't so much a matter of race as of moral flaccidity: in the absence of an unimpeachable eye witness, we do not dare judge someone guilty of an act he baldly denies having committed.

O. J. Simpson, who is capable of denying under oath that he wears his own shoes, is clearly a special case. But the current occupants of the **White House** make use of the same technique. Whatever the accusation, the rule is never to admit guilt. Next to **Bill Clinton**, **Richard Nixon**, the most reviled of American presidents, is clearly an outdated model. Nixon belongs in those 30s crime films where the criminal admits and pays for his criminality, not in the 90s variety where, if he smiles nicely, he gets away with the girl and the loot. The contrast makes us realize that our confidence in the other's guilt depends, even in the absence of confession, on what we perceive as the traces of a **guilty conscience**. The reason why the general public remains supportive of Clinton despite the daily scandals is not our oft-cited cynicism, but our inability to discern in him any such traces. This was already true in 1992. No one really believes that Clinton didn't have an affair with **Gennifer Flowers**, or that he didn't expose himself to **Paula Jones**. Not his denial, but his utter lack of guilt for these acts paralyzes the accuser. As a journalist remarked recently, when Nixon lied, we could see beads of sweat on his upper lip, but nothing can put beads of sweat on Clinton's--or on OJ's--upper lip. Conservatives blame the liberal press for neglecting or playing down these scandals, but the press is surely more critical than the public itself.

My point is not to score political points against the president, but to expand on Matt's original insight. It is not uncommon for thinkers on the right to denounce the current state of public morality as corrupt, even to the point of questioning the legitimacy of the American "regime" to govern. But such denunciations are so constant throughout history ancient and modern that they are of little use in revealing real historical watersheds. Ritual is always already in decline, and each new stage of decline seems to guarantee the collapse of the social order. Occasionally, however, social orders do collapse. We cannot afford to neglect our **Cassandras**; they cry wolf many times, but the wolf does come eventually.

Lying has always been an option of representation. Where verification is in principle impossible--for example, in accounts of revelation--we cannot speak of truth and lying, only of a genuine or spurious revelatory experience. Even when the speaker seems to be making up his revelation as he goes along, we can only judge it on its moral content, not its form: language is always potentially divinely inspired. One might consider reports of revelation as a negligible function of language. But the link between language and transcendence is originary and indelible. Metaphysics, by turning its back on the ostensive or revelatory source of language, has made possible the empirical sciences of nature. But it can never comprehend or eliminate the spiritual dimension of linguistic usage without which language itself would never have come into being. Language is our everyday model of transcendence, and we cannot affirm

that the transcendental realm is a hypostasis of language with any more confidence than we can claim that language is a gift of the transcendental.

When **David Koresh** (remember him?) claimed to be a messenger of God, he wasn't *lying* any more than **Jesus** was lying. That the "truth" of his word was the basis of a community, however pathological, should remind us that the creation of community through the deferral of violence is the originary function of language. Jesus' superiority to Koresh was that of his doctrine and example for this purpose. A religious doctrine is like a hypothesis; it is never false in itself, only in comparison to a truer one.

When we *lie*, we are aware of the truth, which is to say, of the possibility of its being formulated in discourse by ourselves or others. When we reach the stage of *denial*, we refuse to recognize this possibility. At that point, it is useless to ask whether we "know the truth"; true or not, it is something we cannot permit to be formulated. To the extent that factual evidence of this truth is available, denial is irrational; but many facts are known only to ourselves and for all practical purposes inaccessible to others. One of the problems of contemporary public life is that facts which would meet this criterion in normal circumstances no longer do so. Thus deeds we deny because we classify them as deniable may be unexpectedly revealed by a curious reporter or a disaffected former confidant. Where Clinton has innovated is in continuing to maintain denial even after the revelation has been made.

The traditional source of conscience is God, the transcendental Being who guarantees the meaning of our words in their originary function of deferring violence. The proof that this guarantee is not altogether defunct even in the age of "the death of God" is given by the relative success of lie-detection. **Freudians** attribute our fear of lying to the *Superego* or *Name of the Father*, which is inexplicably implemented--albeit often defectively--even in the children of single mothers. But like all attempts to understand culture through individual psychology, psychoanalysis never tells us where the Superego came from in the first place. (Freud's own pioneering attempt at originary anthropology in *Totem and Taboo* has been generally ignored.)

Has the sacrality of language been lost? Has lying become as natural as telling the truth? The conservative critics who make this claim should realize that its implications are anything but conservative. To assert that the fundamental traits of human character are subject to corruption is to espouse the radicalism of **Rousseau**, who historicized the *Fall of Man* by teaching that we are corrupted by the social order. The real burden of the moral critique is sacrificial: to point a finger at the group that has perverted the general consciousness. In this vein, *Commentary's* March 1997 issue contains an entertaining diatribe by **David Gelernter** against *the intellectuals*. I shudder just a bit to see a Jewish journal attacking *the--cosmopolitan?-- intellectuals*. No, if we have all really become antinomians and liars to boot, there is nothing to blame but the originary constitution of humanity.

But rather than proposing that we kill ourselves off and start over, I prefer to think that the extension of denial to everyday political life--thus far, at least where the president is concerned, in relatively minor matters--is not a new norm but a temporary aberration, an extreme swing of the pendulum. It is at just the point where public discourse becomes indistinguishable from fiction that the transcendental guarantee of discourse becomes visible. The current return to traditional values of family and church is not merely a reaction against the age of denial, but a direct consequence of it. Faith in the inventor of a discourse independent of facts is, like **romantic love** in the late Middle Ages, a prefiguration of faith in a transcendent source of all discourse.

The consciencelessness peculiar to our times is a consequence of the postmodern proliferation of

victimary discourse, a phenomenon guaranteed by the **Holocaust** that put an end to the arrogance of modernism. Victimary discourse makes resentment an absolute guarantee: if I feel I am a victim of injustice, then *I am*. Whether justified or not, any accusation, by putting me in the place of the victim, is *ipso facto* victimization. In these circumstances, denial is the victim's righteous defense against his persecutor. Performing the victimary role with conviction is a skill that Clinton has mastered much better than OJ.

But victimary discourse is not permanently ingrained in our culture; it is on the defensive, and on the wane, within that very trend-setting intelligentsia that Gelernter fears. The most serious risk to the postmodern social order comes not from moral decline but from the uncontrolled spread of the means of violence to societies that define themselves by resentment of this order. We should be less concerned with the administration's truthfulness about accepting foreign campaign contributions than with what accepting these contributions reveals about its attitude toward this risk.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Guest columnist: Andrew McKenna

Cool GA

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Omigod, **GA** is cool.

Human life, like all life, is rooted in material needs, but human culture needs desire to propagate. **GA** builds on the fundamental insight into the behavior of our species first analyzed by **René Girard**, namely, that human desire is **mimetic**. The advertising industry today is one of the most transparent manifestations of this anthropological particular, for it focuses less on the quality of any commodity than on the prestige of its glamorous possessor, who models and mediates the consumer's desire for utterly superfluous goods. The March 17 *New Yorker* magazine includes coverage of the fashion scene that so glaringly reflects the dynamics of desire at the originary scene of language that if **GA** did not already exist, one would have to invent it to explain such market commodities phenomena.

In "The Coolhunt," **Malcolm Gladwell** observes the following about two market researchers, DeeDee and Baysie, who specialize in a kind of on-site investigation and interview analogous to what anthropologists do in remote villages. In his efforts to track the determinants of what is cool, of what sells to style conscious consumers of any economic strata, he dazzles the reader with paradoxes in which **GA** discovers the clearly structured mechanisms of desire:

The paradox, of course, is that the better coolhunters become at bringing the mainstream close to the cutting edge, the more elusive the cutting edge becomes. This is the first rule of cool: The quicker the chase, the quicker the flight. The act of discovering what's cool is what causes cool to move on, which explains the triumphant circularity of coolhunting: because we have coolhunters like DeeDee and Baysie, cool changes more quickly, and because cool changes more quickly, we need coohunters like DeeDee and Baysie.

Cool, then, has all the evanescence of the sacred as studied by **GA**, particularly as it concerns the sacred's migration or transformation to the self-reflexive dynamics of the market. Here the object of desire, of consumption, boasts no value beyond what its marketeers and their recondite informants in places like LA, New York, and Houston attach to it according to rules that work like **Keynes's** analysis of the market's self-fulfilling prophecies, as analyzed in an earlier *Chronicle* (No. 82) on **George Soros**. "Who knows?" is what Gladwell cites as the cardinal rule of cool, which is all about elusive and therefore transcendental differences; it is "a mystery," he says. Here all value is regulated by "the example and the opinions of neighbors and peers." The "sequence" (**GA** translates: the narrative) designating cool is "entirely interpersonal," that is to say, mediated by another's arcane designation.

The "definition of cool is doing something that nobody else is doing." Clearly, cool is about difference, but its dynamics are all Derridean *différance*, right down to the letter that you can see but cannot say, not at least so as to make a perceptible difference. **GA** argues the same point about the sacred as an object of endless deferral; its designation requires mimetic modelling on the one hand and deference to its

inappropriate otherness on the other. Stylish inimitability follows the same cues: "Fashion was at the mercy of those kids, whoever they were, and it was a wonderful thing if the kids picked you, but a scary thing too, because it meant that cool was something that you could not control. You needed someone to find cool and tell you what it was." So nothing *is* cool; cool isn't any thing but the uncanny--wonderful and scary--arbitration of difference, a relation of or to difference, for what matters the preposition as long as it undercuts any substance or substantive?

"Wonderful" and "scary" do not evoke the sacred accidentally, the sacred always being what must both attract and repel desire. One might respond to my harping on these antithetical adjectives by saying that I am trivializing the sacred, hyperbolizing a linguistic coincidence between **GA** and upscale journalism. **GA's** rebuttal is to observe that cool is just that, a trivial form of the sacred, which is to say that it is the form the sacred takes in the modern market society, because humans cannot live without the sacred, which culture transforms, deforms and disguises over history. The market trivializes the sacred, because the market's role is to defang, defuse, and diffuse its potential balefulness. It is in this sense that markets are benign, and preferable to more virulently sacrificial forms of the sacred. **GA** explains, too, while rivalry for a pair of sneakers can turn deadly, as has lamentably proven to be the case.

The central role of "kids" in all this merits reflection: their economic marginality is what paradoxically constitutes their centrality in the market system: they consume but do not produce; they have no responsibility--yet--for the *polis*, the *socius*, or for others, for a family, or to free market regulators like the **IRS**. Kids' desire has no material base, as the **Marxists** would say; unanchored, kids embody desire *par excellence* in its quintessential nomadism and leisure (a notion I'll return to later).

The author can only describe the dynamics of cool paradoxically, without ever getting to formulate the paradoxology that drives all culture since the linguistic-ostensive origin of our species as spelled out by **GA**, to wit, the designation of a victim at a sacred center whose unapproachability guarantees communal exchange at the human periphery. The journalist here is like the field anthropologist whose empirical data requires a theoretical formulation that is unavailable on site, the anthropological observer being necessarily contaminated by the dynamics of fascination governing the field. Our reporter is transparently fascinated by cool.

One paragraph in particular fairly glows with this fascination, as it correlates the antinomial rules of cool, which are the self-same rules of a sacred-generating desire as analyzed by **GA**:

Their non-coolhunter [that of a market research firm] just didn't have that certain instinct, the sense that told him when it was O.K. to deviate from the manual.

Instinct is a password for charisma or *tuchè*, a hieratic value alternatively attached to the sacred or its ministers, the priest or shaman. The manual, the textbook or template, the grammar so to speak, is presumably concerned with trends, rules, and patterns, whereas cool's only interest in them is to deviate from them, perhaps as speech can deviate and consequently reorder the language. Note in this regard cool's grammatical metamorphosis from adjective to substantive, as from a quality to an autonomous and yet unsubstantial agency. Cool's only rule is *misrule or dysrule*; its three rules, as portrayed by our reporter, obey a metarule, which is to break its own rules, which is another way of describing the transdeformations of a desire that must simultaneously attract and repel imitation.

The rest of this paragraph unwittingly spells out all the paradoxes of origin as they concern desire, including the paradox of desire as the origin of the origin, of desire as the origin of desire, whose origin

sooner or later--every few months with cool--must be "retailed" with the hieratic evanescence of the sacred. For the sake of discursive economy, I shall intercalate its logic in brackets:

Because he wasn't cool, he didn't know cool, and that is the essence of the third rule of cool: you have to be one to know one. That's why Baysie is still on top of this business at forty-one. "It's easier for me to tell you what kid is cool than to tell you what things are cool," she says [Cool's source is subjective, interpersonal, not objective]. But that's all she needs to know. In this sense, the third rule of cool fits perfectly into the second: the second rule says that cool cannot be manufactured, only observed, [The sacred is not made, but only designated, arcanelly elected.], and the third says that it can only be observed by those who are themselves cool [Cool can only be tautological and self-designating, having no being, no objectivity]. And, of course [This "of course" expresses ironic (self-) bewilderment, as in: whoopie, here's yet another paradox to come!], the first rule says that it cannot accurately be observed at all [It's all wizard of Oz and emperor's clothes here], because [because! ô Molière! See his *Bourgeois gentilhomme*] the act of discovering cool causes cool to take flight, so if you add all three together they describe a closed loop, the hermeneutic circle [This is ever the circle of the sacred and the desire that makes it so.] of coohunting, a phenomenon whereby not only can the uncool not see cool but cool cannot even be adequately described to them.

So a clearly hieratic, transcendent difference depends for its efficacy (which is real: it's profitable) on a mobility whose only rule or dynamic is evanescence, elusiveness, or Derridean *différance*, endless deferral; whose only rule is its self-(de)realizing evasion of all who attempt to grasp, name, or define it; whose only rule is its autonomous transcendence or transcendent autonomy as cryptically awarded by the community, or rather by its shamans whose election is equally enigmatic and must remain so: if you could say what or who is cool, it or he (this is a guy thing) would not be cool:

It's not possible to be cool, in other words, unless you are--in some larger sense--already cool, and so the phenomenon that the uncool cannot see and cannot have described to them is also something that they cannot ever attain, because if they did it would no longer be cool.

This desire abhors the models it generates. "Coolhunting," the paragraph concludes, "represents the ascendancy, in the marketplace, of high school" for reasons having to do with the interplay of center and periphery I've already mentioned, reasons that are unavailable to Gladwell, as evidenced by the note of scandal intended by his rhyming finial.

This paragraph is so unwittingly replete with the principles of **GA** as to merit further commentary, or **GA** paraphrase:

- The three rules of coolness are corollaries of and comments on each other, because they are various descriptions or definitions of the sacred as elusive and evanescent because thoroughly mediated; above all as ostensive, whose market equivalent is ostentation, more or less dazzling--or discrete, which is the same thing--representation for its own sake. Cool is all about the paradoxes of representation, and its observation and comment must needs return us to human culture's origin in language. (The strategically retro term "cool," on the other hand, (dys)embodies the sacred's evasion of linguistic determination, its allergy to retrievable representation, its transcendence vis-à-vis culture.)
- Coolness does not originate in any *thing* but in the imaginary and community-driven prestige of its

arbiters, whose arbitrary election is effectively disguised by the prestige awarded to things, which in turn are rendered all the more alluring for their ostensibly counter-cultural valence: you can go retro, with the result that **Hushpuppies** receive a fashion institute award; or go trans-sexual, so a new line of women's **Reeboks** are "butter" for a male cool kid--upsized them for males and you'll make a market comeback.

- Cool cannot be manufactured but only observed, according to rule 3, except that it isn't available to observation, which is rule 1, and which annuls rule 3. This antinomy is essential: if the rules didn't cancel each other out, if they stabilized in any procedural or logical order, they'd be available to imitation, which is just what cool is about the business of avoiding. The rules conform to the same double binds as the primitive sacred, whose first rule is to be unavailable to appropriation, representation or imitation: *noli me tangere* says the oxymoronic burning bush. It is **GA** that reminds us that the (para)logic of the origin must remain opaque to its beneficiaries for it to function as an origin, despite (and because) of the fact that the mimetic designation of its beneficiaries is alone what brings it into (non)being.
- If this concatenation and self-cancellation of cool rules call **GA** to mind, it is evidence of **GA's** contention that the originary scene of language is played out every day in the marketplace, whose real success depends on the opacity of its rules to its participants. Is it not in this sense too that **Gans** is able to say that the market is smarter than its participants? The emperor has no clothes, which is O.K. for a kid to say; culture survives that perception by making the kid the emperor.
- Still other **GA** reformulations are available from this *New Yorker* article, and especially from the paragraph glossed here. Every **GA** formulation is about the paradoxes of self-reference and reflexivity as generated by the originary scene of language. Cool is, after all, just a signifier whose market success reflects the opaquely hieratic origin of language, as I've suggested in my earlier remarks on its strategically retro style and grammatically skewed morphology.

Paradox is a logical scandal, which explains, scandalously in turn to adherents of **GA**, the resistance of humanists and social scientists to **GA's** perceptions. This may be why there is more to be learned about cultural dynamics from middle-pop culture than from PhD's, but that's only a hunch, and probably a resentful one at that. But it is perhaps more fruitful to be thematically conscious of one's resentment, which for **GA** is the motor of cultural achievement, than to endlessly engage in critiques of distinction while remaining opaque to one's own resentful motivations.

What is demonstrably true about paradox in **Higher Ed** is understandable in term of the success of deconstruction in literature departments: its counterintuitive *frisson* is the source of its appeal to humanists (especially, the object of their study being the most self-reflexively elusive, their study being the most conceptually fragile and mobile, namely, the human, which is to say the uniquely self-reflexive [non]being). Deconstruction is all paradox, dilating with a now-you-see-me-now-you-don't appeal to and defiance of the reader. The game is irresistible to a class of toilers whose cultural base, as **Joseph Pieper** observed decades ago, is leisure, a *fainéantise* we inherit from our origins in priestcraft, who literally and in every sense have no thing to do, nothing to make, *rien à faire*, except to patrol an ever elusive sacrality. This self-deprecating and sophomoric riff would have no interest if it did not get us to see the integral connection between our *fainéantise* as critics and the cultural vocation of kids, their *fainéantise* being recently elevated by market dynamics to a new and fairly transparent priestcraft.

This coolhunter article is followed by another one by **Hilton Als** on the fashion industry, on its infatuation with previously unfashionable Britain ("of course," Gladwell would add). Here a panicky

quest for difference (genre: "I'm sort of obsessed, basically, with things you can't get anymore," says Paul McCartney's daughter, now a would-be trend-setter) unabashedly betrays the morbidity that **GA** recognizes as crucial, as originary, to the sacred, whose prime signifier is a victim: "The most interesting [students of fashion] come [to a London fashion institute] from countries where there is little interest in fashion: 'I have students coming from Turkey, or Croatia--there is somebody from Slovenia at the moment--and I think they're fantastic!'" Here's the seal between our death's head, cadaveresque mannequins (typical specimens are arrayed in the mag) and deadly violence, which the market converts and translates as exotica, which is the fashion market's retailing of the nexus: **eros-thanatos** (the absolute Otherness of death providing the *frisson* necessary to hieratic difference). Here is **Nietzsche's** transvaluation of all values with a vengeance: the refugee, the victim is potential arbiter of market value.

Only **GA** has spelled out the Nietzschean analytic of resentment as proto-analytic of market dynamics. Nietzsche becomes available to us again as a hermeneutic once we realize he is describing modern market society rather than the Titanic agon he nostalgically fantasizes, and his really violent shrillness may just come, too, from the disconnection from his real socio-economic situation or experience as he only partly and painfully intuits it, as he only darkly perceives it. At the very least, Nietzsche's marketability in Higher Education has always depended on his value-defying coolness for PhD's (myself included, for years) who also misrecognize their market marginality for a titanic cultural struggle. Consider, for instance the Dionysian *hieros*-hysteria extolled by **Gilles Deleuze**, whose *Mille plateaux* wants to celebrate nomadic desire without a clue about the market's unanchored self-reflexivity that *generates* (as in **GA**) that nomadism.

In his recent book, *Sacrificing Commentary*, **Sandor Goodhart** describes Nietzschean truth as the "mimesis that wins and gets to call what it does truth and everything else mimesis." That is the very definition of cool, which depends on imitation on the one hand and defies it on the other, which gathers imitators by flaunting its inimitability. What Goodhart says about truth also applies to Nietzsche's *Will to Power* (which is the truth *secundum* Nietzsche) and to market success, which today is what we call truth, especially if we are Wall Street capitalists, who hold the market up as a transcendental institution--whereas, quite to the contrary, it is all about migration, nomadism, errancy, and even vagrancy. Cool is benign: it keeps kids off the streets, if only long enough to find the next Nike placeholder. It motivates and orients their leisure, even in the original sense of orientation as a return to the radiant sun-center-origin of human culture, to the Platonic Idea of truth, the source of light and vision which itself cannot be grasped or even seen. **GA** translates this as the originary scene of language, whose source is another's, any other's, desire.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Technological Realism

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A couple of *Chronicles* ago, I referred to the technological progression from nineteenth-century panoramas and magic lanterns to modern film (and recordings). With each generation, our ability to reproduce the feel of reality increases. Cinema adds sound, color, deep focus, wide screens, computer simulations... Films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *Jurassic Park* perform the Promethean feat of peopling human reality with the products of our reconstructive imagination or our childlike fantasy.

The point of **originary analysis** is to situate this "natural" human tendency in the scene of human origin. The minimal linguistic sign designating the central object contrasts with the reproduction of the scene as a whole in ritual. Minimal or formal representation is mediated by our understanding of the sign as *standing for* its referent--an understanding that reflects the sign's origin in an *aborted gesture of appropriation* of its unappropriable object. But the formal ostensive sign that represents the central object in its presence is inadequate to substitute for it in a reproduction of the scene. The absent object is "supplemented" by material elements that reproduce something of the sensuous effect of the originary crisis. The temporal-peripheral elements of music and dance recreate, as **Girard** has remarked, the rhythm of the *agon*, the "fearful symmetry" of the potential conflict that must be deferred. Ritual also includes synchronic representation of the central being itself in drawing, mask, statue. However formalized, these are material figures, not pure signs. They are, to use **C. S. Peirce's** term, *iconic*, resembling their referent in more or less detail.

But the creation of **photography** leads us to question the simplicity of the iconic category of signs. As Peirce himself observed, despite appearances, a photograph is not an icon, a man-made attempt at resemblance, but an *index* or "natural" sign, a *trace* produced by mechanical means. The distinction is not between two degrees of precision or detail, but two qualitatively different types of signs. This gives us an insight into the horizon of realism: it is not to reproduce the "real," the phenomenal stuff of human experience, with utmost accuracy, but to do so *independently of human desire*. This realist horizon defines the heroic tale of the high-cultural artist who learns painstakingly to copy the nuances of appearance by deferring or "sublimating" his own desiring relationship to the object.

A horizon is not a goal but an incentive; its attainment is not a realization but a transformation. The invention of photography, the first means of *mechanical reproduction*, gives the artist's tale an unexpected subjective twist that inaugurates the age of modernism. The modernist abandons the realism of shared experience for the incarnation of his own "pre-cultural" vision of Being; rather than sacrifice his desire, he sacrifices himself *to* his desire. This is a clever coda to the high-artistic narrative, but a dead end nonetheless. The horizon of iconic resemblance was "natural" resemblance--the ever-inaccessible *phenomenon in itself*. But once technology allows us to preserve an indexical trace of the object, this transcendental frontier of human effort becomes a banally mechanical reality; the sacrificial framework of artistic askesis is evacuated. Like **John Henry** fighting the steam drill, the

heroic artist must give way to a device to which the human concept of heroism is inapplicable.

In prephotographic times, the indexical sign was a *relic*: **Veronica's veil** or the **Shroud of Turin** as opposed to a mere image. **Walter Benjamin's** famous discussion of the loss of *aura* misses the essential point that the *mechanical reproduction* of the referent's own trace is the direct heir to the sacred aura of the object itself. Because it preserves a trace of its object, a photograph has *more* aura than a painting. We daydream for hours before artless old snapshots; they are precious relics of a time lost. Paintings, however valuable, evoke not a real but an imaginary world; they are traces, not of reality, but of human intention.

Yet photography, while ruining the heroic project of iconic realism, cannot occupy its esthetic terrain. The photograph tells the story of its object with no need for formalization beyond the framing of the scene. But the story that it tells is *true*; there is no such thing as *fiction photography*. I can draw a picture of a Biblical heroine or a Greek goddess, but I can't *take* her picture. Which is to say that photography, although it destroys the artist's narrative of askesis, does not disturb the fundamental iconicity of art itself.

What makes photographic fiction impossible is precisely what gives the photograph its aura: its **indexicality**. The heroic tale of the artist is incarnate in the artwork. The neo-Marxist notion (developed most notably by **Pierre Macherey**) that the "bourgeois" artwork *disguises* or *represses* its process of production is just an inversion of the silly socialist utopia where, in the absence of *exploitation*, reality corresponds with desire. The value of the artwork comes from the *care* that went into its production--a feature that **Heidegger**, for one, clearly recognized. That there isn't a lot of paint left slopped around as a trace of earlier stages of production doesn't mean that the production process has been *repressed*, merely that it's been treated as a means to a (socially acceptable) end. The opposite idea, as illustrated by the *process art* of the recently deceased **Willem de Kooning**, was anticipated in 1832 in **Balzac's** prophetic "Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu," but as folly rather than art. I hope you will forgive this old *dix-neuviémiste* for siding with Balzac.

A photograph can be set up with care, can be a kind of documentary artwork, but its fictional transformation can't embody the heroic deferral of desire that generates esthetic oscillation between the sign and an imaginary reality wholly dependent on it. The esthetic of the photograph is generated by the oscillation between the trace and an absent *reality*, which is a very different thing. A photograph may arguably be viewed as a portrait with the intentionality of the artist *en moins*, but the photograph of a model in costume that purported to be a historical or mythical scene would be ludicrous. It is the aura of *this woman* you find in the photograph, not that of **Cleopatra** or **Diana**. The photographer has not won through heroic askesis the right to transfigure her. He has not generated the transcendent from the immanent, merely added some superficial detail to the immanent before recording its trace. What in painting is the pathos of the iconic representation of the (necessarily) absent becomes in such photography the equivalent of a faked relic.

Hence photography, the mechanical making-present of the horizon of mimetic art, does not itself intrude upon art's "heroic tale," although it forces a change of plot. No one could have anticipated that showing a lot of photographs in quick succession would produce something altogether different. What **Lumière** may not have realized, **Méliès** and the rest of film history took advantage of: the cinema was not limited to documentation, it could represent **fictions**. The ascetic care-as-deferral unrealizable in the photograph could be realized in cinematic narrative as in any classical narrative form. A photograph is like a

painting, yet it cannot replace it in its esthetic function; cinema has no such limits.

Although film is just as indexical as still photography, filming the false Diana makes of her an actress if anything more believable than one on stage. Cinema's temporality allows an unfolding of the caring askesis short-circuited in the photograph. If we extend the temporality of the photograph, we see the model put on and take off her costume. Cinema defers this insertion of the actress in our own life-world; the world beyond *this* image is another image from the world of fiction, an image we understand as intended by the players, actors and director alike in "heroic" deferral of their own worldly desire. We react to film actors as we do to live actors; in this sense, cinema is always "filmed theater"--whereas photography conveys at best a theatrical moment--**Sarah Bernhardt as Lorenzaccio**.

We can now understand cinema's particular contribution to realism. As a derivative of photography, film is indexical, it aspires to the feel of reality. But like literary, dramatic, or pictorial narrative, and unlike still photography, the cinema is not bound by historical reality; its content possesses the freedom of art to represent what it at the same time creates.

Revolutions in narrative, like the French *New Novel*, come and go, revealing only that there can be no real revolution in the age-old sacrificial narrative structure. Since the beginning, revolutions in cinematic technique have been subordinated to this structure rather than the reverse. Those not too obtrusive, like **color** and **wide-screen**, become new standards for narrative cinema; novelties that distract from narrative, like **3-D** and **cinerama**, quickly fade. The same will no doubt be true of next century's **animated holograms** and whatever innovations the distant future reserves. The only way cinematic technique could transform narrative would be in the form of **virtual reality** that abolishes its ascetic, sacrificial structure altogether to provide visceral (no doubt largely **sexual**) wish-fulfillment. But so long as human society exists, it is inconceivable that the possibility of such satisfaction would put an end to traditional narrative, the temporal mode of our unceasingly renewed *deferral of violence through representation*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Herostratus Forever

No. 87: Saturday, April 5, 1997

The aspiring youth that fired the Ephesian dome
Outlives in fame the pious fool that raised it.
Colley Cibber: *Richard III*, act iii. sc. 1.

Äußerstes Herostratentum. - Es könnte Herostrate geben, welche den eignen Tempel anzündeten, in dem ihre Bilder verehrt werden. [*Ultimate Herostratism*: There might be Herostratuses who would set fire to the temple where their own images are worshipped.]
Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

They say that in 356 B.C., **Herostratus**, in order to insure his immortal fame, burned down the great temple of Diana (**Artemision**) at Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This is a major date in the history of resentment. To understand its relevance for our times, we should imagine the prosperous Ionian seaport as an early model of the "good society" and Herostratus himself as in no way oppressed or victimized. In contrast to **Achilles'** wrath (*menis*) over his slighting by **Agamemnon**, the very first word of the *Iliad* and of the high secular culture it inaugurates, Herostratus' resentment is not disguised as a titanic rivalry. Perhaps he did have a rival, or more than one, but it is no accident that we have not learned of them. For Herostratus knew that his life would be the subject of no biographies, that he would be remembered for one act and one act alone.

The legend tells us that in the attempt to obliterate his dangerous example, the city authorities forbade on penalty of death to pronounce his name. Yet the effort was as futile as its paradoxical structure leads us to expect: to forbid us to pronounce a name is *ipso facto* not merely to pronounce it but to write it. *Verba volant, scripta manent*; our post-Derridean understanding of language makes clear that expulsion from illusory presence can only be purchased at the price of a very real supplement of absence. What has immortalized Herostratus is not his deed itself but the impotent interdiction to which it gave rise; to name is both to expel and to preserve--in a word, to *sacralize*. The persistence of this name is the negative of that experienced in **Saul's** conversion on the road to Damascus, where he discovers that to persecute **Jesus** is to participate in his immortality.

Herostratus is remembered as the one society wants to forget. His act is a sacrilege, but its irrevocable effect is to render the sacred irrelevant. It is the emblematic event of secular society, the revelation of a potential for disorder that must henceforth be controlled by other than sacred means. At the same time, it reestablishes the sacred at the horizon of the worldly. Herostratus is not protesting distributional injustice but the inherent disequilibrium of the human condition that provides us with an infinity in signs and a finitude of things; as **Lamartine** put it, man is *Borné dans son destin, infini dans ses vœux* [limited in destiny, infinite in desire]. We possess the sign of the sacred because we must be refused the sacred Being itself. To destroy the mediation between the transcendental world and our own is to substitute oneself for it as its sign, and thereby to attain the immortality that belongs to the sign-world alone, that of the name *Herostratus*.

Or perhaps Herostratus never existed. That the temple is said to have burned down on the very day of the birth of **Alexander the Great** makes this attribution suspect; perhaps Alexander's achievement--the beginning of the end for the ancient temple-centered city-state--has been conflated with an accidental catastrophe in an apocryphal deed. But in either case, *Herostratus* names a newly discovered possibility for constituting the human subject.

Sardanapalus is said to have burned down his palace out of disgust with his mortal finitude. Such figures have traditionally illustrated the misery of the human condition; they are well suited to the late medieval *danse macabre*. Herostratus' act does not express the infinite *ennui* of the aristocrat whose awareness of mortality corrupts his worldly pleasures. Those who have known grandeur in their lifetime cannot measure his deed's existential purity. From the anonymity of the respectable middle class, he rises in one stroke above the human condition. Sardanapalus was indifferent to the immortality of his name; a king is recorded in history however his life ends. Having known all boredoms, including the boredom of fame, his act was no shot at immortality but an expression of nihilism in the face of the impossible passage from immanence to transcendence. Because he has not had the luxury of boredom, Herostratus understands the joy as well as the limits of "immortality": to be remembered by human society against its will.

Is it not remarkable that no one in history has equaled, let alone improved on, Herostratus' example? We have had assassinations of kings and presidents, terrorist attacks on buildings and airplanes, massacres of millions; but he alone is remembered for destroying the central sacred locus of his society. The world of the marketplace is no longer guaranteed by a temple. Burning down the **New York Stock Exchange** would scarcely register on the seismograph of the global economy.

Thus the protagonist of **Sartre's** short story *Erostrate* is a pathetic figure who, seeking immortality via the **Surrealist** recipe of *descendre dans la rue et tirer au hasard dans la foule* [go down into the street and shoot at random into the crowd], is arrested before he can even get off a shot. But the canonical modern treatment is that of **Dostoevsky**. Readers of the *Notes From Underground*--the first and best loved book of my adolescence--meet a white-collar version of Herostratus: the petty bureaucrat who "clanks his sword" to impress his clients with his authority, and who, in the **Crystal Palace** of rational perfection, stands up for "two plus two equals five."

Mid-nineteenth century Russia was anything but a place of universal prosperity, but its very distance from the horizon of market society allowed Dostoevsky to pose the "existential" problem of modernity in all its clarity, more acutely, because more interactively, even than **Kierkegaard** faced with **Hegel's end of history**. The existential problem is really a market problem, a problem of self-marketing. Let us stipulate, as the lawyers say, that everything is perfectly rational, and all talents are rewarded at their true market value. Then one whose rewards are mediocre is obliged to conclude, not that society oppresses or victimizes him, as two centuries of revolutionary rhetoric have accustomed him to hear, but simply that *he* is mediocre, and that his knowledge of his mediocrity, which in **Aristotle's** ethic would be man's highest wisdom (*aurea mediocritas* is the Latin for it), offers him no prospect of transcending his condition. It is this combination of "perfect" self-knowledge and imperfect marketability that generates the Herostratus figure. The more he realizes how justly the "rational" social order evaluates him, the greater his resentment against humanity and the cosmos in which it operates. **Alfred Jarry's** turn-of-the-century horrid-comic **Père Ubu** (*Ubu roi*, 1896) becomes "king of Poland" by acting out infantile-bourgeois fantasies of mayhem ("*à la trappe*") that prefigure the real horrors perpetrated by politicized resentment in the coming century.

The more rationalized the world economy, the greater the winner-take-all gaps between the truly successful and the rest, and the more resentment consumerist messages arouse in those with no reasonable hope of success. The optimist will note that Western market society has not followed the **Social Darwinist** model that seemed inevitable in the nineteenth century. The missing feedback loop between **Marx's** pauperized proletariat and the **consumer society** explains why the socialist dream has crumbled before the (relative) prosperity of advanced market economies. But as soon as barriers between classes are removed (*i.e.*, between middle-class and working-class), others rise to replace them (*i.e.*, between yuppie and middle-class). Market society levels distinctions only to produce new distinctions; this is the interactive basis of Marx's vision of "capitalism" as constantly compelled to destroy and create itself anew.

Utopians believe that this process can be stabilized, that some model of the "good society" can be approached, if not achieved. But the marketplace cannot multiply signs of distinction as it can material satisfactions, and the more "fairly" these signs are distributed on the basis of ability or achievement, the more intolerable it is for those who fail to obtain them. In an unfair world, the absence of worldly distinction may be proof of a higher moral standard; the fairer the world becomes, the less this stance can be maintained. Utopia generates dystopia. The only alternative is to burn down the temple.

Herostratus was an individualist, a loner, someone a **pre-baby-boomer** like myself can identify with. The victimary thinking of the postwar era neglects the resentment of the individual human-who-would-be-God to concentrate on the collective sense of injustice. But collective resentment, even when its motivations are similar, differs from individual resentment by the fact that on its local scene of operation, the resentful group is in the majority. Herostratus is alone against the world; the victimary collectivity oppressed by the World Out There focuses its resentment on scapegoats either real (**Jews** have been a long-time favorite) or figurative (burning **Uncle Sam** in effigy). Suicidal terrorists and the like act in a very different spirit from our Ephesian hero: their glory comes from their support group, not from the society as a whole *malgré elle*.

Yet the mobilization of group resentments in turn intensifies individual resentment. The more our victimary collectives are compensated, the more our Herostratuses become frustrated. The disgruntled petty bureaucrat a.k.a. **postal worker** takes an AK-47 to his local fast-food outlet in a last-ditch try for the **Guinness Book of World Records** by blowing away as many people as possible (usually including himself).

But there is another solution. Herostratic individuals sometimes give up their stance of one against all to form a community whose gods recognize them alone. These groups act in the opposite manner from terrorists: ignoring the larger society, they reestablish the lost relationship between humanity and the Order of the Universe. Some, impatient to cut all ties with an imperfect world, even hasten their departure via **UFO** for the transcendental Kingdom to which they truly belong. In such cases, the temple they destroy is their earthly selves.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Free Will and Cosmological Idiocy

No. 88: Saturday, April 12, 1997

There are few subjects that cry out for **originary thinking** as much as the relationship between religion and cosmology. The other evening I chanced on a National Public Radio (NPR) discussion about whether God just created the universe or whether he "intervenes" in it, making use of **quantum uncertainties** to avoid breaking the "laws of nature." Well, I thought, it's a good thing he planned for those uncertainties when he made the laws in the first place; I guess that's why he's God and we're not. The sheer idiocy of this line of thinking suggests that a version of the **uncertainty principle** indeed applies to the relation between scientific and religious cosmology: as one becomes more precise, the other becomes more inane.

One would think that if religion had learned one thing from the development of science since the Renaissance, it is that it should get out of the cosmology business. But the Enlightenment rupture between religion and anthropological reflection has led to a regression in religious self-consciousness. The religious population itself seems increasingly divided between **moderates** whose creed differs little from that of *secular humanism* and **radicals** whose beliefs fly in the face of scientific rationality--and common sense. **Tertullian's** *credo quia absurdum*, which originally applied in a strictly interactive, anthropological context--what is *absurd* is that the abject figure of the **Crucified** is the Son of God--is now understood without paradox, let alone irony, as requiring us to deny the results of human reasoning about the natural world. Meanwhile, the annointed scholars of religion are no more capable than the believers of articulating religion with science; anthropologically tone-deaf, they mindlessly conflate the human with the natural sciences. The received wisdom, as dutifully echoed on the NPR broadcast, is that although science and religion talk about the same things, they move along separate paths and can never come into conflict. Hostility in the past was regrettable; its persistence in the present is unnecessary. **Originary thinking** alone seems able to understand that although religion can tell us nothing of interest about cosmology, it has a great deal more to teach us about fundamental anthropology than the positive social sciences.

Only if we consider God strictly in relation to the human can we pose the question of his intervention in the universe in useful terms. We are sign-using creatures and we understand transcendent Being through our understanding of language. For this purpose, if **Gödel's** theorem at least provides a suggestive analogy, **Heisenberg's** uncertainty principle is useless. If God is the being that defers mimetic conflict among humans, then his intervention is never independent of human will. In the simplest case, a group on the edge of conflict that prays for peace achieves its wish by the very harmony of its prayer: by the very act of representing the same inaccessible locus of desire they achieve temporary participation in sacred being. God cannot, or will not, protect us from natural disasters, but he is always ready to help us confront our greatest danger, which is ourselves.

But is there not a problem of free will--God's and ours? Can we deny the **Laplacian** intuition that tells us

that each instant of the universe wholly determines the next? Are the molecules that make up the human body somehow liberated from physical necessity? Or is it *quantum uncertainty* that allows us to choose between good and evil?

I don't pretend to have the latest word on quantum theory, but my anthropological intuition is good enough to tell me that whether or not it can one day be reconciled with common sense, it will never tell us anything about either God or the problem of free will. The entrance of God into human affairs, or of man into divine, that marks the origin of the human was not a revolution in physics. God is our name for the Being whose naming permits us to survive by deferring conflict. Our own religious tradition emphasizes God's ability to create with language. In the *tohu-bohu* of originary chaos, by saying "let there be light" he creates the differentiating force of light. "Intervention" occurs here as the differentiation of the undifferentiated. This is not far from the **originary hypothesis**, for which the first human word, the name-of-God, by differentiating the central object as significant from the insignificant world around it, defers conflict among those who enunciate it. The divine intervenes to defer mimetic conflict by transforming an object of appropriation into a referent of sacred meaning. The sacredness of the object makes the sign meaningful; the meaningfulness of the sign makes the object sacred. But the sign is meaningful only because its enunciation is *free*; the sign is no longer enacted as an unthought index pointing to the object, but mindfully, as a *representation* of the object.

The freedom of linguistic consciousness, the model for all other freedoms, violates no laws of either modern or classical physics. What does it mean, after all, to say I lift my arm "voluntarily"? In order to make this judgment, I have to think about my act, which is also to say, think about not performing it; otherwise, it is no more "voluntary" than the similar movement of a lizard or an amoeba. But the real point of calling my movement *voluntary* is not simply that I deliberate whether to make it or not, but that in doing so, I can take into consideration other thoughts about it, such as *yours*. Thus the simplest definition of a "voluntary" act is one which, if I know you have predicted me to perform it, I can choose not to carry out. Without the *scene of representation* that defines the human, you cannot think the unfreedom, the determinedness of my act; but by the same token, my access in principle to this scene defines my freedom to act in defiance of any such determination.

Our first demonstration of God's freedom is his utterance of the word that creates the primordial difference from which all others derive. This difference exists here on earth, but it is guaranteed transcendently. Freedom is the link between the vertical world and the horizontal one, the world of signs and the world of things, and this link cannot be expressed within the world of things alone. The materialist denies the freedom of the thing-world along with the independence of the sign-world; but his denial is suspect because it is expressed in freely emitted signs rather than "emanating" involuntarily from the material reality whose sole reality it affirms. This does not mean that there is a "spirit world" that intervenes physically in this one. The dualism of **originary thinking** is not metaphysical, as though the physical universe held the sign in its entrails from the beginning, but historical: the human creates and is created by the sign in order to defer its own self-destruction.

In attempting to discover whether we act "freely" or "deterministically," we beg the question if we limit our model of action to the physical world. We can create models of determinism; we cannot create a model of freedom, or rather, a model of freedom is precisely what arises when a deterministic model is represented to its subject, who is then free to subvert it. God "intervenes" in this model as the originary guarantee of representation as such.

Generative anthropology is no fideism; it constructs a model of the emergence of the sacred in and with the human. But that the first word is the name-of-God tells us that significance is not a product of disinterested contemplation, but exists to defer the violence of crisis. I can refuse to countenance God's intervention in my everyday affairs, and tax with credulity the believer in the efficacy of prayer, but I cannot purge the human of its potentiality for mimetic crisis to which sacred deferral is the originary solution. The interventions of the transcendent in the immanent, whether as freedom or as divinity, are ungraspable by physical models that cannot account for the effect of our knowledge of the model on the behavior we are modeling. In one case, this is because we have the luxury of doing the opposite of what was predicted of us; in the other, it is because, in the face of mimetic crisis, we lack the luxury to detach our desire from the object that simultaneously arouses and defers it.

The **Enlightenment God** who just winds up the world and walks away, leaving us to wonder whether he comes back once in a while to adjust the escapement, is as deluded a picture of the sacred as humanity has ever produced. It is easy to understand why it is contested by religious visions, less sophisticated but more profound; what is harder to fathom is why the general consciousness of the NPR class has not progressed beyond it.

The other day I picked up a survey of social-science religious theory entitled *Seven Theories of Religion* (Daniel Pals, Oxford U.P., 1996); published twenty-four years after *La violence et le sacré*, it does not even have Girard in its index. I take this as a sign of the unique power and danger of these ideas. Averting danger, after all, is what the sacred is all about; however stultifying its consequences, ignorance does this a lot more gently than burning at the stake.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Heaven's Gate, Post Mortem

No. 89: Saturday, April 19, 1997

A couple of people have expressed surprise that the only reference in these *Chronicles* to the **Heaven's Gate** incident has been an oblique remark at the end of [Chronicle 87](#) (on **Herostratus**). My first reaction was that I had nothing to add to all the obvious remarks either pitying and/or condemning the suicides, or showing sympathy for their "spiritual quest." But I think my very reluctance reflects a feature of the incident that is worthy, if not of commentary, then of metacommentary.

The obvious reaction has been to condemn the mass suicide as monstrously deluded. Not only was the group's theology embarrassingly naive, but, after all, what worse thing could a cult do to people than kill them? Similar incidents in France have met with unanimous opprobrium in the press. Yet the first-level responses to the suicides have been condemned in turn by more sophisticated commentators; **Doug Collins** pointed out to me a couple of articles in the April 21 *New Republic* that may serve as examples.

Anthony Steel's piece on p. 25 is exemplary of the genre. Steel defends the Gaters with increasing sympathy, calling them "this ardent group of gentle souls who came together to seek fulfillment" and empathizing with "the millions who see something of their own unfulfilled longings in these searchers." But we should not forget that the article began by attacking the "extraordinary response" of the media, "bristling with self-righteous denunciation" yet rarely seeking to understand the horrified fascination that led these journalists, "as if they feared contamination," "to distance themselves as far as possible from the group's professed beliefs." For Steel, these beliefs are not "particularly unique or bizarre" but "firmly rooted in Christian theology." Like other sophisticates, Steel points out the parallels between the Gaters and the early Christians, some of whom practiced self-castration, as well as with earlier American millenarian groups like the **Shakers**. After all, is there really a difference between believing in a space-ship behind **Hale-Bopp** and believing that a communion wafer is the body of Christ? Etc., etc.

On p. 42, **Leon Wieseltier**, in a somewhat lighter vein, is equally dismissive of his fellow *plumitifs*; after expressing his own dismay at the "kitsch" of Gatist theology, he takes on a quartet of previous commentators on the event: a reporter, a science fiction writer, a liberal, a conservative, none of whom, needless to say, has grasped the essence of the situation, since "what all these commentators were trying to elide was the reality of the hunger of the soul." Kitsch or not, these people had acted "for a spiritual objective," and at the end, Wieseltier, after showing sympathy for castration ("Why not subdue the body, when the body is an idol?") concludes that, although the group's answers may have been wrong, at least they had asked "the right questions."

What then is my take on all this? Let's say my take is determined by my meta-take. I note that unlike natural disasters or feats of heroism or even **Tiger Woods** winning the **Masters**, this incident, rather than bringing us together as a community to deplore or celebrate, sets us against one another. I can't recall having seen a single commentary on the affair--and my own is surely no exception--that isn't an exercise

in one-upmanship of one kind or another, either directly at the expense of the thirty-nine or more obliquely at that of some predecessor taxed with naivete or insensitivity.

Why is this so? Because, whatever spiritual values may have motivated the Gaters to suicide, their final gesture of turning their backs on the world--our world--can only be interpreted from our standpoint as the ultimate act of *dandyism*. The dandy, as **Baudelaire** was well aware, was a kind of worldly ascetic whose motto was *nihil admirari*, which, properly understood, means "never find anything interesting." The dandy has found the definitive solution to the problem of mimetic desire: he feels, or in any case he expresses, no desire whatever. As a result, because he envies and imitates no one, all envy and imitate him: our petty pleasures turn to ashes at the sight of one wholly indifferent to them.

Dandyism to the point of suicide is dandyism with a vengeance. Either to condemn or to defend the Gaters is to appropriate a spiritual reality that excludes us. These people did not ask for our approbation. As far as they were concerned, it is we who are the deluded fools and spiritual failures. Hence, crazy or not, the thirty-nine provoke resentment on the part of those whose values have been rejected, whose mediation has been denied. The more naive--or we might say, the less neurotic--express this resentment through the familiar inversion of contempt, like the fox who finds the grapes out of reach. They retort in kind, forgetting that, in such exchanges, the second move ("So's yer old man!" "*Et ta soeur!*") is never very convincing. The more sophisticated, finding inversion too crude, take up the Gaters' cause against the benighted rest of us, which gives them the opportunity to display by contrast their religious learning and spiritual refinement. But there is a word for those who take the dandy as their model without becoming dandies themselves: they are called *snobs*. The dandy, deluded or not, pays his dues; the snob does not. He is content to wrap himself in the dandy's mantle in order to upstage his own less spiritual neighbors.

The spiritual value of an act for the larger community is best understood by observing its actual effect on this community. In the present case, the effect has been clearly negative. This mass suicide, whatever satisfaction it may have given its participants, has added resentment to the world rather than love. No one with more than a superficial understanding of Christianity can assimilate this deed to the *imitatio Christi* of martyrdom. The **Crucifixion** is a submission to human violence for the purpose of exposing and rejecting this violence. **Jesus** gave his life out of love for common humanity, not out of disdain for this world. No doubt Christianity has generated its share of Gnostic heresies, but, precisely, it condemns them as heresies because they are not expressions of its revelatory essence. The squabbling journalistic oneupmanship the Gaters' suicide has inspired reflects not our awe before a great spiritual conquest but our resentment of what we interpret *malgré nous* as a hostile act.

Spirituality is nothing more than the rising to the surface of the underlying function of all cultural phenomena. No single act can put an end to violence, but to offer one's life in this effort is to accede to the divinity of the originary victim. The horizon of Jesus' death is the turning-away from the sacred center toward the human periphery and the reciprocity of human love. If we would salvage some spiritual value from the thirty-nine suicides, we should let our pity and envy of their communal solidarity inspire us to give our love to those who still share the world with us.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Antisemitism, White and Black

No. 90: Saturday, April 26, 1997

In the spirit of knowing one's enemy, I recently read **Andrew Macdonald's** *The Turner Diaries* (1978), an eschatological tale of the White takeover of the US and the world--which requires "sterilizing" all of Asia east of the Urals. In a personally endearing moment, **UCLA faculty** are hanged from lampposts in an act of Aryan retribution. Compared to this, *Mein Kampf* is a sober work of political philosophy. Although I expected a great deal of racial paranoia, I was not quite ready for the **Nazi-strength** antisemitism. Indeed, this branch of the "ultra-right" is really neo-Nazism. For a truly apocalyptic racial vision, good old American racism is insufficient; the most virulent strain must be imported from abroad.

But if I was at least partly prepared to hear about *the Jew* in a work of white supremacist propaganda, I was altogether surprised to find him in a far more respectable American classic: **W. E. B. Du Bois'** *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), reproduced in its entirety in the new *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*. Du Bois' antisemitism is hardly obsessive, but it is not tangential either: there are a half-dozen derogatory references to Jews, including (twice) "the Jew," shown "squeezing blood" from Blacks; on three other occasions an exploitative landowner is referred to as "a Russian Jew," although no other White ethnic group (aside from "Yankees") is identified. If the readings in the *Norton Anthology* are as representative as they appear to be, Du Bois' work--three generations before **Louis Farrakhan**--is the origin of Black antisemitism.

Antisemitism is just about the only thing the White activist and the Black activist have in common. And, curiously enough, Macdonald's book helps make this understandable. Whereas *the Jew*, however vile, is shown as diabolically clever and untiring in his efforts--he is the evil double and, implicitly, the worthy adversary of the Aryan hero--Blacks are portrayed as savage brutes manipulated by Jews in exchange for being allowed to rape, plunder, and occasionally devour their White enemies. Farrakhan's picture of *the Jews* controlling Black sports and entertainment figures (as well as the NAACP) could be inserted into the book unchanged. If there is one thing a Black reader of *Turner* might be tempted to accept, it is its antisemitism.

Jews and Blacks are the two great victimary peoples--the sacred, if not the *chosen* peoples--of Western, and now of world civilization (thus there is now antisemitism in Japan). From the days of the spirituals through **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), American Blacks took the Hebrew slaves and their Exodus from Egypt as their model. The more recent **Afrocentric** identification of Black Africans with the Pharaonic Egyptians is more than a historical myth: it is an inversion of their former identification with the Hebrews. The repudiation of the Jewish model is also an important subtext in Blacks' attraction to Islam--and to leaders like Farrakhan. Afrocentrism is a post-**Holocaust** phenomenon. The Holocaust, as an unequivocal demonstration of the sacrificial nature of ethnic discrimination, provided the originary guarantee for the great postwar surge in victimary thought and rhetoric, among the accomplishments of which were the liberation of European colonies and the

American Civil Rights revolution. At the same time, this historical reiteration of Black dependency on the Jewish model of victimage has been a source of mimetic rivalry made all the more intense by the Jews' exemplary role as the bearers of *White guilt* in American society.

There is an un-Nazi-like ambivalence in Black antisemitism that reflects the impossibility of a victimary people fully identifying with the ruling class, be it American or Egyptian. Paradoxically, it is this ambivalence that gives Black antisemitism its special edge: not only does the Jew victimize the Black, he is the very source of his image of victimization. This feature is already present in Du Bois. His final reference to Jews in *Souls* occurs in the conclusion to Chapter 12, where he identifies the subject of his eulogy, the Black minister **Alexander Crummell**, with the crucified Jesus, described as "a dark and pierced Jew." This touching passage makes the reader want to forget the previous ones. The same cannot be said for Farrakhan's crudely schematic expression of the same ambivalence in the claim that "rich Jews" financed the Holocaust: "Little Jews died while big Jews made money." In Du Bois, the ambivalence can still be separated into two distinct emotions; in Farrakhan's post-Holocaust environment, any expressed sympathy for the imagined "little Jews" of the past serves only to fuel hatred for the real Jews of today.

Both Jews and Blacks are models of the tribal origin of Western Christian society: the Jew as the "superseded" precursor, the Black as the "primitive" ancestor. African societies, although not "savage," were indeed primitive by European standards; how else could they have been conquered so easily a century later? The horror of Western slavery was precisely its introduction of a practice typical of African society into a more advanced civilization. In the days of the slave trade, African slavery--still practiced, from what one hears, in the Sudan and elsewhere--was no more shocking than slavery in ancient Greece. But to justify its importation into the West required extrapolating from the lower historical level of African social development to an inferior Black racial essence, a sin against the Western ethical ideal that "all men are created equal." The African-American is the witness to our falling-away from universal reciprocity in order to profit from historical difference. Post-emancipation racism reaffirms the essential nature of this difference in the face of the norms of our own society, and in the days of the lynch mob (when Du Bois' work was written), obsession with racial difference provided a sacrificial justification of the distinct Southern social order despite its economic inferiority to the North.

But if the Black stands as a reminder to the Christian West of its unfulfilled promise of universal human reciprocity, the Jew will not let it forget that his tribal uniqueness stands at the origin of Western universality. By revealing the one God's unfigurability, the Jews created for themselves an irreversible priority. Hence in the nineteenth century, when each country wants to redraw God in the national image, *the Jew* comes to incarnate the resistance of the universalizing forces of Western society--notably its money-based exchange-system--to national solidarity. If anti-Black racism denies the West's guilt for abandoning its principle of ethical universality to profit from the historical advantage this very principle had given it, antisemitism would deny the historical origin of universality itself. The racist dreams of a new white world without Blacks; the antisemite can only dream of a new version of history in which Jews never existed.

For a time after the Holocaust, there was a general moratorium on antisemitism; this period has now come to an end. Its resurgence, for the moment more in thought than in action, demonstrates what one is tempted to call its structural necessity in Western culture. Just before completing this column, I read in the May 5 *New Republic* **Michael Kelly's** denunciation of the general tolerance of Farrakhan. I cannot agree more with Kelly's point that politicians and pundits should stop pandering to the **Nation of Islam**

and its leader. But implicit in his analysis is a sinister development that he never quite spells out: that the White establishment's acceptance of Farrakhan is a newly creative way of combining racism with antisemitism. Although the publisher of *The Turner Diaries* claims to have sold over 200,000 copies, its sympathizers are well beyond the pale of legitimate political discourse; the same cannot be said for antisemites in the Black community. By accepting a separatist Black nationalism, the broader society frees itself from the messy business of undoing the disastrous policy of *affirmative* racial preferences and integrating Blacks into the social mainstream. In this context, antisemitism provides a secret bond between the Nation of Islam and important forces in the greater society (those represented by **Robert Novak**, for example): Farrakhan and his emulators dare to express the eternal antisemitic "truths" that Whites cannot openly admit. As a result of this unavowed complicity, for the first time in history, antisemitism has acquired a significant constituency in American politics.

It is too easy to denounce racism and antisemitism; they reflect not merely our sinful nature but real problems of the social order. To incorporate into society the heirs of Black slavery and the bearers of Jewish historical uniqueness will take far more time and effort and love of our fellow humans than any isolated individual has patience for. These are not tasks that can ever be accomplished once and for all; they are exemplary goals that point out the horizon of the global society we are in the process of creating.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

States of Identity

No. 91: Saturday, May 3, 1997

Last weekend, the graduate students of the **UCLA Department of French** held their second annual conference, entitled *States of Identity*, complete with guest speaker, local faculty respondents, six panels, reception, refreshments, and a nicely printed program. As I noted on the same occasion last year, the students have once again mounted, with scrupulous professionalism, a far more elaborate academic gathering than anything the departmental faculty have ever put together. In the not-so-distant past, however, it was indeed the faculty that organized such things. If the trend continues, in another decade, the undergraduates will hold conferences at which the grads will give the keynote addresses. The obvious reason for this is the inevitable diminishing-returns one-upmanship of tight markets. Since the academic life is still pretty soft, there is plenty of room for added demonstrations of zeal. When I was a student, no one thought of giving papers or writing articles, but in those days, colleges would write to new PhDs urging them to come out for an on-campus visit. Today, when for a mere **MLA** interview, you may have to send out your **CV** to a hundred schools, you want to be sure there are some publications and conferences on it. Graduate student colloquia have a built-in clientele.

But I think there is another reason. In times of crisis, one has no time for idle speculation. Just as there are *no atheists in the foxholes*, so, with the endemic decline of funding for departments of Eurocentric high culture, there are no disbelievers in the Idols of the Tribe. In today's job market, it is essential that students learn to play variations on the themes that will serve them in conferences to come. The result is curiously similar to what happened when American popular music was transformed by youth culture in the fifties: mature thought has been replaced by the ideologies of youth. Like **rock'n'roll** lyrics, the victimary ideologies that the academy continues to serve up express resentments appropriate to adolescence. For a mature thinker to take seriously the binary articulations of the cultural world provided by the **phallogocentric patriarchy** and the **deconstructed subject**, and more recently, the **postcolonial body** and its various **inscriptions**, requires at the very least the incentive of a juicy foundation grant.

The days of the sage old professor are no more. There still remain distinguished scholars whose years have been spent deepening their knowledge of their field, but such figures have little to tell hurried and harried doctoral candidates, always in search of new **discursive practices** on which to practice their discourses. The real hotshots keep one step ahead of the market by ferreting out the latest victimary wrinkle. They know without ever daring to think it that resentment is the crucible of culture, and, by the same token, that the purpose of their theorizing is to disguise the resentment it exploits. To use the word "resentment" itself in reference to anyone but a member of the **religious right** would be the academic equivalent of **Eugène Rastignac's** fateful mention of *le père Goriot* in the Restauds' salon.

But now that the conference is over, I thought I might suggest how future members of the profession could use **originary thinking** to deepen their comprehension of a couple of all-too-familiar academic themes.

My first point concerns *phallogocentrism*--the idea that Western or perhaps all cultural discourse, or even language itself, presupposes and covertly legitimizes an ontology that treats men as humans-in-general while women are "marked" as **other**. Far from attempting to debunk this theory, intellectual vulgarity aside, I find it generally true. But *why* is cultural discourse essentially masculine? On this point, the psychoanalytic thinking that makes **Phallus** the new and supposedly concrete (aha!) synonym for **Being**, is about as helpful as the theories of phrenology quoted in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. The **originary hypothesis**, on the other hand, by conceiving the scene of culture as a means for deferring violence, explains its masculine bias--a feature for which **GA** has been criticized by some of the very feminists who denounce phallogocentrism.

Some [Chronicles](#) ago, I developed the idea that the difference between men and women could be minimally understood in anthropological terms by noting that, whereas the concept of *otherness* is founded on the *externality* of the participants of the originary scene, as preserved in ritual and in culture generally, women possess the potential for an *internal* otherness, that of gestation and childbirth, on which the survival of the species depends. That there is a "woman problem" in culture at all--something no feminist should want to deny--can be explained only in this manner. If, as some claim, language originated in interactions of mothers with their children, then only the resentment-blinded notion of *usurpation* could explain masculine domination of the cultural sphere. But if the originary function of language is to defer violence, then male domination is perfectly understandable: it is the sex that has no internal other to worry about that is most prone to mimetic violence, and that is biologically selected for its potential for physical violence.

This in no way implies that women must remain excluded from culture. The fundamental equivalence of all human subjects before language is not in question. On the contrary, the tension between this linguistic and therefore moral equivalence and the ethical need to protect and integrate the "internal other" as perceived by specific cultures is what generates the "woman problem" in the first place. The weakness of victimary thinking--guaranteed, as I have claimed, by the horror of the **Holocaust**, and encouraged by cleverly paranoid ideologies like the "power" theory of **Foucault**--is that it takes "domination" as self-explanatory. The scandalous contrast between our intuition that all human subjects are morally equivalent and the realities of gender difference--of social difference in general--are denounced but never *explained*. As a result, academic thinking on the subject of gender, and the politics it inspires, remains dominated by mindless mimeticism. We see one result of this mentality in the current eminently predictable sex scandals in the armed forces.

My second reference is to the "linguistic" idea of the human subject, defined by one conference participant as *a tissue of discourses*. Poor old **Descartes** has been taking it on the chin ever since **Sartre** rejected **Husserl's** *transcendental Ego*. I have always looked upon the "death of the subject" with suspicion, aware as perhaps only an old Bronxian can be of the intense egoism of those who proclaim it. This theorizing is a crude version of Girard's *vérité romanesque*, whose revelation that "my" desire is not unique is a sufficient shock to make "me" abandon "my" self altogether. Yes, we acquire our goals by mimesis, and all meaning comes through language; but **originary thinking** offers a hypothesis of *how* and *why* the human is immersed in a universe of language. What is more, as I tried to show in [Chronicles 88](#), **GA** provides an understanding of the moral-linguistic **free will** that lies at the heart of the "self" or "soul," inaccessible to the post-structuralist model of the language-traversed subject.

Contrary to what these theories claim, but in consonance with the upper-middle-class lives of the

theoreticians, our horrible **late-capitalist** consumer society, which **Baudrillard** many years ago understood as a system of *product-signs*, offers the subject-as-consumer an increasingly broad set of materials from which to compose his own "discourses." But consumption aside, we also produce new discursive models of the world. Descartes, after all, didn't just *think therefore he was*; he also invented **analytic geometry**. Scientists are still generating **new paradigms**, continually proving wrong those wet blankets who try to convince us that we have reached the *end of history* in chemistry, physics, or what have you. And even in the **humanities**, where our selves indeed feel like tissues of tired-out ideologies, we can develop new ways of thinking about human culture. But it might be a good idea to get tenure first.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

A Rembrandt in an Elevator

No. 92: Saturday, May 10, 1997

The most profound difference between **originary thinking** and the other forms of contemporary thought lies in its minimalist concentration on the mimetic foundation of human interaction, in contrast with the subject-centered narcissism inherited from the modernist era. The two principal models of the subject that emerged in this period, and that remain with us through all the metaphysical and sexual deconstructions of the postmodern age, are **Heidegger's** existential *Dasein* as human being-in-the-world and, more often seen today, the subject that comes into being in **Lacan's** fabled *mirror stage* in the impossible attempt to realize from within the external unity of its own image.

Because the individual confronts the work of art without the mediating force of the ritual community, the existential-psychological self is ostensibly appropriate to esthetics. In the empirical perspective of the worldly subject who comes upon an artwork, the apparently apposite categories are those it can relate to its own personal myth of emergence. Yet **originary thinking** suggests that the objects on which we confer value are most usefully understood, not as objectifications of our personal phantasms, but as foci of real or potential **mimetic rivalry**. Our private scene of representation cannot function without input from mediating others. The narcissistic vision of art forgets that the esthetic experience is itself mediated by the esthetic sign as the expression of an authorial subject. There is no desire aroused by the artwork that originates in the spectator/reader.

Let me try to show how the interpersonal perspective of **GA** can deepen our understanding of an esthetic phenomenon central to our age that has always been explained in the subject-object mode: that of **kitsch**.

In a brilliant doctoral dissertation that, among its other qualities, constitutes a kind of disseminated summa of (post)metaphysical esthetics, UCLA Film student **Nita Rollins** defines kitsch in metaphysical terms as the "**positive presentation of being's transcendence as finitude**," or again as the "**positive presentation of metaphysic[al totality] as historical (mis)taken for eternal**." Being itself is sought and missed in this phenomenon; in our naive desire for esthetic salvation, we commit the category-error of accepting the finite for the infinite, the historically bound for the eternal. How can originary thinking deepen our understanding of this archetypal modernist phenomenon?

The opposition between **high** and **popular** culture can best be expressed thus: high culture is the expression of the **center**, popular culture, of the **periphery**. One might, in **Girardian** terms, say that high culture is the expression of the central victim, and popular culture, of the peripheral crowd of persecutors. But the revelatory nature of this opposition is precisely what Girard would deny to **Hellenic** high culture, in contrast with the **Biblical** religions. The West is born from the convergence of two forms of identification with the sacrificial center--the Hebrew and the Greek--but only in the former does this reflection explicitly uncover and reverse the relation between victim and persecutor. Greek tragedies too let us identify with the central sufferer, but his sacrificial role is justified rather than denounced. No

doubt Girard's analysis, which sees tragedy as an imperfect unveiling of the sacrificial, misses the *eidōs* of the tragic esthetic: the self-constitution of the subject in its acceptance of personal responsibility for its structural role, its arbitrary victimary "destiny." The modern exchange system depends on such assumptions of mediated identity as well as on the moral vision of Christianity. But the fundamental distinction is nonetheless valid: the pagan identification with the victim never denounces its sacrifice.

Yet popular art is not kitsch. Kitsch is not a low but a *middlebrow* phenomenon, what *someone else* mistakes for high culture. Its scandalous existence is guaranteed by the marketplace; the very existence of the (in principle mass-produced) kitsch object demonstrates the existence of a category of people not offended by its tastelessness.

Thus we must supplement our category of high culture with that of *esthetic taste*, which permits evaluation of quality. Bad popular culture has nothing to recommend it, but bad high culture risks appealing to those unfamiliar with the appropriate criteria. For these criteria are not evident on the surface; a taste for this cultural mode must be acquired through an educational, in effect, an ascetic process--an *askesis*.

In originary terms, we first see the center from the standpoint of the periphery as an object of appetite we wish to possess. But the sacred center is a dangerous place. Cultural knowledge of this danger justifies the effort we make in learning to discipline our imagination to see the center of desire as a place of absence rather than plenitude, of suffering rather than bliss. High culture teaches us to respect esthetic form not merely as a barrier to physical possession but as a deferral of even *imaginary* possession in the service of the eternal renewal of desire. Kitsch strikes us as short-circuiting the process; it gives us some of the cheap imaginary satisfactions of the popular while pretending to keep us at the distance of high art: pictures not of women with big bosoms, but of girls with big eyes (and maybe just a bit of cleavage).

But to use the term *kitsch* is not simply to turn away from those awful eyes. It is to turn away, in pain or in laughter, from the eyes of the spectators who gaze back into them. It is to witness the comic abjection of a marketplace that caters to the taste of those who have not learned the *askesis* of art. And since this *askesis* is never finished and evolves with history, the eyes we call kitsch can become smaller and smaller, until we can (oh horror!) see them reflecting our own.

Is **Strauss** kitsch? **Tchaikovsky**? **Wagner**? **Couture**? **Ingres**? **Eugène Sue**? **Balzac**? **Dickens**? **Longfellow**? **Tennyson**? In the nineteenth century, when the term *kitsch* was invented (*cf.* the French *poncif*, which refers to the stencilled stereotypy of proto-mass-production), artists felt the hot breath of the marketplace on their necks. Surely **Mallarmé** at least is not kitsch, since no one can understand him.

But comes the twentieth century, and the high-cultural pundits of the **Frankfurt School**, and all of a sudden the problem is solved. Art has an *aura*, or it doesn't. **Mass reproduction**--stuff like movies, for example--is kitsch *ipso facto*, *res ipsa loquitur*, and *quod erat demonstrandum*. And it isn't the people's fault either, but that of those vile **capitalists** whose degradation of art is the least of their crimes. Kitsch now becomes an important category because it allegorizes in the realm of art the unfreedom of capitalism, just as the wondrous socialist utopia corresponds to art's masterpieces. (**Trotsky** said, it is worth recalling, that in the socialist paradise, your average Joe and Jane would be like **Shakespeare** and **Emily Dickinson**, and from that terrain "higher peaks shall rise." Ah, but then, Trotsky wasn't a member of the Frankfurt School.)

Where does that leave our idea (Idea?) of kitsch? Kitsch is a reassuring notion. If we set our sights low

enough on the scale, the relative becomes absolute, and our sense of superiority is jubilantly confirmed. Those big eyes don't really disgust us so much as endearingly justify all that money mom and dad spent on our college education. (This endearing quality is expressed directly in the gay-originated phenomenon of **camp**--which merits an analysis of its own--where kitsch is cultivated in postmodern style for its very kitschiness.) In today's ever-more-mimetic marketplace, kitsch is just a synonym for *downscale* (itself an upscale term for what we used to call *low-class*). Once **capuccino** is sold on every corner, **Denny's coffee** is kitsch. Once **blue jeans** or **sneakers** (pardon, **athletic shoes**) bear the names of **Klein** and **Nike**, the nameless ones are kitsch. Once **pasta** acquires a hundred varieties, **spaghetti** is kitsch--as **Charlie Sheen** tells his old man in *Wall Street*. **Taste askesis** spreads beyond art: never grab anything you can describe in English, always demand the brand name, the foreign word that connotes the learning process high culture requires.

How does this get us to the "positive presentation of being's transcendence as finitude"? Well, *being's transcendence*, or in other words, the *transcendent nature of Being*, derives from the sacred inaccessibility of the center, which the askesis of high art maintains inviolate. The kitsch object is "finite" because, as we have seen, it purports to provide this askesis while in effect it doesn't. We enjoy the cleavage and then return chastely to the crudely hyperbolic spirituality of the eyes. Or to take Nita's favorite example of "situational" kitsch, *a Rembrandt in an elevator*, we are *uplifted* by the cultural reference in a setting incompatible with esthetic contemplation.

But is our superiority to the spectator who thinks this is art really that of the **infinite** to the **finite**, the **historical** to the **eternal**? Isn't it our superior taste itself that sets the esthetic criteria for the eternal and infinite, so that a yet superior taste would relegate ours to the finite and historical? Our intersubjective mini-analysis of kitsch retains the philosophical content of its metaphysical definition, but situates it in the real context of culture. Askesis is not just for esthetes, after all; it is the very essence of the human which, as readers of this column should recall, is defined by *the deferral of violence through representation*. And the ultimate askesis to which the esthetic contributes, and which Nita might call *sublime* ("**Negative presentation of being's infinitude, transcendence**"), is to bring ourselves to recognize our fellow human, kitsch-lover or not, as our **Other** and not as our **Object**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Once More, the End of Culture

No. 93: Saturday, May 17, 1997

While talking with **Tom Bertonneau** the other day, the conversation turned to the obvious and therefore invisible fact that great nineteenth-century art of every kind, from poetry to painting, gave and still gives genuine pleasure to a broad spectrum of the public, whereas that of the twentieth century in general does not. Whence the reference to the "end of culture."

Since there is no reason to assume that techniques have declined, nor that the number of talented people in the arts has diminished, this result seems perverse. Why is it we must listen to **Beethoven** and **Wagner**, read **Dickens** and **Dostoevsky**, look at **Delacroix** or **Manet**, to experience real esthetic pleasure? Why do these works move us more than those created closer to our own time, where only the mass experience of popular art has a real rapport with the public?

Nothing is explained by evoking the "evolution" of the arts or by pseudoscientific references to cultural "memes." The overall evolution of human society, for which the Darwinian analogy is less problematic, is not driven by esthetic excellence: the arts, as **Marx** said, are part of the *superstructure*. But the *infrastructure* is not primarily economic but ethical. The mature exchange system is not autonomously driven by the "falling rate of profit," but by the mediation of human relations by ever-changing differential meanings increasingly incarnated in articles of consumption. Art reflects and reveals the fundamental cultural structures beneath these relations.

What makes great art impossible today is, quite simply, that we don't really need or want it. Just as humanity was born when apes became too mimetic to remain animals, so high art ends when humans become too mimetic to remain cultured. The great art of the nineteenth century is informed by an authoritative esthetic subjectivity--a musical or narrative voice, a painterly vision--that we can no longer tolerate today, even in the ironic premodern mode of **Baudelaire**, **Flaubert**, or **Mahler**. As we become connoisseurs of consumption, the sacred aura of art becomes an obstacle to the construction of the personal esthetic by which we demand reciprocity from others. We accord the artist the luxury of temporarily dominating our imaginations only because he is revealing to us a potential means of temporarily dominating that of others--that is, of making ourselves into an esthetic center. The particular wealth of pleasure we obtain from the art of early market society comes from the vast opportunities made available by the new Romantic esthetic of revelation through personal experience liberated from a priori ritual constraints. The personal authority of the esthetic subject is that of a guide who shows us how to integrate our experience of a historically-changing world.

But no cultural structure can contain the danger of mimesis once and for all. The greatness of nineteenth-century art is not static, not even to the extent that of the preceding century was static. It evolves rapidly from generation to generation through the "anxiety of influence" because it is revelatory not merely of the world but of the creative self's possibilities within the world. The barrier of esthetic

form guaranteed the Romantic expansion of the creative ego in the early days of the market system, when the desires that drove it could be conceived as essentially fixed, determined by "need"--all further consumption being condemned as the profligacy of the rich. But once this expansion, mediated through consumer production, comes to provide a model for the general public, the artist becomes for us an internal rival rather than an external model. Neither the hyperbolic snobbery of modernism nor the mock humility of postmodernism can reproduce the esthetic effect of the nourishing paternalism of the previous century. In the modernist era, art's elitist denial of the market leads to its ascetic denial of desire; in the postmodern, the populist-ironic acceptance of the market destroys desire by the opposite tack of saturation--a technique of which **Warhol**, with his sheets of Marilyns and soup-labels, and interminable films, was the supreme master.

To occupy the center stage in the post-Holocaust era, the artist must offer a guarantee that he poses no danger of mimetic contagion. Such an attitude is essentially incompatible with the authority of high art, which increasingly retreats from the public scene to niche markets of fellow specialists. (I hope to devote another *Chronicle* to the specific problem of writing **poetry** in an era when it is read and judged only by other poets.) Meanwhile, popular art, which can and does flourish, is appreciated for its very lack of revelatory density: for providing possibilities of **self-imaging** rather than **self-realization**. The poses imitated by the young Romantic were guaranteed by a substantial esthetic self; for today's consumer, image is all. This year's hot act, the **Spice Girls**, have netted some \$250,000,000 by marketing a playful image of female independence and strength--probably about as much as the combined salaries of the academics who make a living analyzing the *deep structures* of identity politics.

The postmodern decline of the high culture is undeniable, and the elite variants of popular culture, such as jazz and the art film, that once appeared poised to take its place have not fared as well as was once expected. Should we be ready then to say that we have definitively granted priority to our consumption-based self-constructions over the productions of art? Is the only authentic esthetic relationship that of the fellow consumer who casually exhibits his life-style to his entourage?

The real question, as always, is ethical. Whether or not one accepts Christianity, the modern world cannot accommodate the moral revelations of an exemplary figure like **Jesus**. Those who present themselves as his successors have at best founded successful sects; they have not revolutionized our ethical vision. Similar points could be made about the other major religions. This does not mean that there has been no ethical progress in the West since Jesus' time. But the very power of his exemplarity makes further exemplarity impossible; the true reciprocity of the Kingdom can be approximated on earth only by devaluing the center, with **Doug Collins'** "prehumiliation" replacing the more dignified humility of the *imitatio Christi*.

Why should the same not be true for art, which took the place of religion for a century or so (1848-1945) as the most profound spiritual activity of the bourgeois world? We will always have the beauty of nineteenth-century art to fall back on, but its revelations have now been absorbed into our own esthetic self-constructions. It is no coincidence that **Flaubert's** *Madame Bovary*, whose depersonalized narration marks the beginning of the end for the authoritarian 19th-century esthetic subject, is also the first novel that illustrates the creation of meaning through consumption. **Emma** is the first member of the consumer society to which all of us now belong; *Madame Bovary*, *c'est nous*.

The moral of the story, it seems to me, is not that we must take our models of human relations from those notorious afternoon talk shows, but rather that their very degradation should remind us that the scene of

19th-century "mimetic" art, with its unproblematic division between a personalized center and a passive periphery, is not an eternal but a historically bound form of interaction. We remain attached to 19th-century art because it allows us to reexperience the formation of the modern self as the incarnation of the originally human within the historical dynamism of market society. As we leave childhood for adolescence, we each experience our own Romantic era: *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*. A contemporary artwork that sought to duplicate the esthetic of that era would be both superfluous and historically false.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Love and Reciprocity

No. 94: Saturday, May 24, 1997

I too often let my readers forget that the original point of these columns was to chronicle a spiritual itinerary consisting, hopefully, of provisional triumphs of love over resentment. **Resentment** may be defined as the transformation of "horizontal" human difference into a "vertical" obstacle to central Being. **Love**, by actively deferring this transformation, lets us experience difference as a value, a source of interactive behaviors and mediations, notably including the activity that valorizes the most familiar human difference of all, the one that *vive la différence!* used to be said about.

My previous analyses of love have emphasized **tenderness** as care for the other's vulnerability as revealed in the originary event. We cannot protect against natural mortality, but we can defer violence toward each other. Tenderness is a gesture to one mortal from another only inconsequentially less so. It provokes reciprocity without demanding it; it is a gift the response to which may be indefinitely deferred.

In one of the earliest [Chronicles](#), I discussed the expression "*I love you*" as the performative affirmation of a modern, self-conscious variety of love. "*I love you*" does not simply refer to a preexisting sentiment, but neither does it simply promise the prolongation of that sentiment; it establishes a possibility of sexual relationship, and, at least in principle, solicits a reciprocal declaration. A couple who have exchanged "*I love you*"s is presumably ready, all other things being equal, to become a family unit and to produce and care for children. The common reciprocal use of this expression marks the integration of the **romantic love** of the troubadours into the bourgeois family.

Love is not always requited. The declaration solicits a symmetry, but in a necessarily asymmetrical manner. One does not declare love via "we love each other"; this can only be said after the exchange of "*I love you*"s. Thus the possibility of the declaration that solicits its reciprocation--and risks its denial--is also the possibility of its deferral. This is the stuff of romance narratives. Fearing rejection, one waits for confirming indices, or for a declaration from the other. When the pair finally exchange declarations of love, the story is at an end.

But sometimes no declaration is possible. Such mute relationships have a special poignancy, one that the 1993 film *Remains of the Day* delicately exploited. In such cases, one realizes that truly to care for the other requires one **not** provoke a reciprocal exchange. (**Stendhal** was obsessed by a particular variant of this mode, where the declaration of love can only occur in circumstances that make its actualization in the couple impossible. The purest example of this configuration occurs in his first novel, *Armance* (1827), where the presumably impotent hero confesses his love only because he thinks he is about to die of a wound received in a duel.) Where reciprocation is impossible, "*I love you*" is not truly a declaration of love at all, but, however sincerely meant, an statement of egregious desire. A piece of emotional **Kitsch**, in fact, since the noble association of the words is being used as a mask for appetite. Such embarrassing declarations may occur in romantic narratives as foils to those we are meant to take

seriously. But conversely, in the absence of a declaration, even the most inappropriate love retains its dignity. In such cases, we are shown the love in deed rather than word, so that we say (as generally the lover does not, even to himself) "he loves her." "*I love you*," in its implicit demand for reciprocity in both word and deed, imposes an obligation of acceptance or refusal that itself always risks being excessive, whereas the mute gesture of love imposes none. To demonstrate love non-thematically does not impede the future withdrawal of either giver or recipient, and therefore needs never to make the irrevocable decision that the declaration of love necessarily implies, that of whether or not to establish a monogamous family.

Is this analysis "sociobiological"? Some months ago, I lost a few readers when I outlined a [theory of sexual difference](#) based on the idea that men related to others externally but that women had in addition the potential of *internal otherness*, a relationship with the fetus that is prolonged in the extra-uterine relationship with a dependent child. Love is a relationship between equals, but its basic model involves not the necessity but what we may call the structural possibility of producing children--a possibility the absence of which provides an argument against homosexual marriage. Biology is not destiny, but it is the bedrock upon which we erect our cultural edifices. It is absurd to conceive of human love independently of its biological basis, as though the couple defined by reciprocal "*I love you*"s could have ever existed in the absence of its virtual childraising function. Without the need to perpetuate the species, there would be no sexual desire at all. A generative perspective must understand the limits of the cultural. The originary purpose of culture--to defer violence through representation--is an essentially negative one that, rather than taking the place of the biological-appetitive goals of the human animal, is meant to facilitate their attainment. (What is wrong with sociobiology is not its insistence on our biological nature, but its reduction of anthropology to ethology. This reduction is refuted by the simple fact that the animal world lacks the behavior of sociobiology; there are no animal **E. O. Wilsons** explaining their species' behavior by analogy with that of plants--there are no explanations at all.)

The exaltation of mutual love that provides a meaning to the world does so because it is ultimately grounded in biological rationality, and even the delicious deferral of sexuality during courtship is part of this rationality, since it provides a model of fidelity without immediate reward. To make a counter-argument out of the fact that "romantic love" originated outside of marriage is to underestimate the subtlety of the historical dialectic. **Tristan and Isolde** are fated not to marry and raise a family because the new model of love they exemplify cannot impose itself on the relatively immobile social institution of marriage until it has tightened its hold on the far less inertial public imagination. The historical demonstration of my argument is that today's married family-raisers speak to each other in the language of the fatal lovers rather than in that of the King Marks of their day, which has been all but forgotten.

But conversely, this implies that caring relationships that for whatever reason cannot be conceived according to the biological model should, whatever their intensity, forgo the exchange of vows. "I love you" demands a binary reciprocity only justifiable by the nature of human sexuality. Love as a pure gift of tenderness, even were the gift to be secretly reciprocated, is better left unspoken.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Futurism and Sexuality

No. 95: Saturday, May 31, 1997

In reaction to last week's column, **Bill Mishler** of the University of Minnesota remarks that "Medical science has shown itself capable of modifying the biological givens of the situation... babies can be produced in a variety of ways that have little to do with the seeming givens of 'biological rationality.'" This leads me to reflect on the question of what I would define as *futurism*: the notion that technological progress is an independent variable that can modify against our will the basic modalities of human interaction.

I have always found futurism suspicious because it implies not change, which is inevitable, but an ethical shock administered by technology, as though we might suddenly be thrust *malgré nous* into a "brave new world." This is the subject-matter of **science-fiction**, which as the co-owner of a [SF-Fantasy bookstore](#) I suppose I should encourage. But it is based on the fallacy that technology can impose ethical imperatives on people not yet ready for them. Technological developments emerge, for good or for ill, within a social order of great complexity and inertia. Unlike new diseases, which spread "naturally," a new technology can succeed only on the basis of human choice; if we don't like it, it can't come to dominate us in spite of ourselves.

More specifically, the futurist reproductive u/dystopia has not yet arrived. We can--or at least, could--travel to the moon; but the basic biological realities of human life and reproduction have not yet changed. Such practices as **artificial insemination** and even **in-vitro fertilization**, to which Bill is no doubt alluding, are still relatively minor modifications. But, he might answer, **cloning**, and the eventual possibility of the **test-tube babies** that have been spoken of for so long, would be far more radical changes. And who is to say what the future holds concerning the prolongation of life, brain-body transfers, etc. etc.? To this, I have two reactions, one on a **pragmatic** level, the other on that of **fundamental anthropology**.

My **pragmatic** reaction is one of measured skepticism for the foreseeable future. There is a strong moral reaction against practices like human cloning, which (unlike the proliferation of weapons, a far more disquieting problem) require an important technological infrastructure that cannot easily become the object of a basement industry. The possibilities of genetic manipulation will surely continue to be regulated. What is more, I am almost ready to claim that the current trend toward the dissolution of the nuclear family, which owes nothing to biotechnology, is in the process of being reversed. (Certainly among the young graduate students I know best, there are a lot more couples and babies and a lot less *amour libre* than even a decade ago.) Awareness of the generally deleterious consequences of single motherhood should lead to its partial restigmatization and decline, while "alternative families" like communes or homosexual couples will always remain marginal.

But the more fundamental point is that, in contrast with Bill's concern that it may not be "a good idea for

GA to base its thinking in this area on such a frangible basis," a **generative** approach to the human has no difficulty with this or any other kind of historical evolution. To say that the biological function of reproduction is at the origin of the couple-establishing performative "*I love you*" is not to say that this performative cannot be extended to other couples, or to the as yet inconceivable pairing or grouping arrangements that might become dominant if, in some distant future, the production of offspring is entirely detached from female pregnancy. **Originary thinking** reminds us of the source of cultural phenomena; it does not reduce the latter to the former.

The relevant point in last week's column, aside from the central theme that there are forms of *agape* that cannot support the admixture of *eros* that "*I love you*" inevitably suggests, was that the exclusive commitment of one person to another in a couple cannot be understood independently of its origin in animal sexual reproduction. This is hardly a controversial statement. What is of far greater interest is to grasp the interaction between the biological basis of human sexuality and the cultural scene on which it manifests itself. In a curious back-handed confirmation of the **originary hypothesis**, Freud's originary scene in *Totem and Taboo*, however sexual its motivation (the sons kill the father because he has denied them access to the group's women), takes place in a context of **male rivalry** and violence. Which is to say that, for the founder of psychoanalysis, the sexual pairing between man and woman does *not* provide the originary model of the cultural scene. The full-fledged entry of sexuality on this scene occurs only (in the West) in the Middle Ages, in the tradition of **romantic love**. Here the beloved's assimilation to the divinity is a supreme valorization of heterosexual and, however remotely, child-producing love, in contrast with the culture of antiquity, centered on male interaction, which saw sexual passion as a divine curse rather than a model of divine love. No doubt the troubadour singing of his *amor de lonh* was not thinking about raising a family, but the revolutionary cultural contribution of the troubadours and their Italian and other emulators was in associating sexual desire, however tenuous its experiential basis, with worship on the cultural scene of representation. Had sexuality stood at the origin of culture, such a revolution would never have needed to take place.

I am mindful of the fact that the first theoretical model of anything like romantic love in Western culture is the homosexual couple of **Plato's Symposium**. The simplest Other to theorize is that which is a mirror of the Self; in Plato's vision, the most important step is made when the lover stops caring for his beloved as an individual and begins to see in him a representative first of corporeal beauty, then of beauty in general (211b-c). This distinguishes Plato's model of sublimation from that of **Dante** and the Renaissance **neo-Platonists**. **Beatrice** in heaven retains her individuality; in Du Bellay's *Sonnet de l'Idée*, the "Idée" the poet expects to find in heaven is that of "la beauté qu'en ce monde j'adore," ["the beauty that/whom in this world I adore"] that is, of his beloved as an individual instead of / as well as Beauty as such. **Christianity**, by providing a model for the sacralization of the beloved as a *person*, provides the context for the cultural valorization of "practical," heterosexual love, the vulgar functionality of which is explicitly eschewed by Plato's notion of love--which, as is sometimes forgotten, excludes sexual satisfaction of any kind.

How is the specificity of "practical" sexual difference realized in the cultural matrix of love? The love-tradition, with only minor exceptions, takes **desire for the female body** as its model for love of the central divinity. (It is no small matter that **Sappho**, the first great love-poet, perhaps the most powerful of all, albeit lacking in the spirital dimension of the later tradition, begins from the same vantage-point, and indeed explicitly presents herself as a mimetic rival to her beloveds' husbands.) Women have no doubt written lyrics to men (**Pernette du Guillet** to **Maurice Scève**, or **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** to her husband, not coincidentally both poets themselves), but like male strip-tease and *Playgirl* magazine,

this proves only that humans are mimetic, not that their differences are reversible.

None of this should be construed as limiting our freedom to redistribute woman's traditional nurturing function. Today's young fathers make it a point to change as many diapers as their wives--or perhaps more, in recompense for the pain of childbirth. But the focus of desire on the female body continues to exist not merely as tradition, but as actuality. Unlike female birds, human females present themselves more insistently than males to the desiring eye--unless they are covered up by religious orthodoxies. (The fact that **California's** casuals and **Iran's** *chadors* reflect the *same* interest in the female body shows the inadequacy of "objective" data analysis in cultural matters.) A day on a college campus should convince anyone that sexual equality and even the sometimes-lamented "feminization" of our culture does not prevent the girls from spending a degree of magnitude more time and effort than the boys in making themselves alluringly distinct from one another. And however "socially constructed" the details of this behavior may be, one can hardly deny that it directly expresses its biological basis in the particular importance of the female body for nurturing the young in a species where they remain so long dependent.

I'm "sociobiological" enough to be skeptical of futurist transformations of the very foundations of our interactive behavior. The future will surely bring unanticipated change, but I cannot believe that technological progress in itself will force us to accept any innovations that we have not given our ethical consciousness time to assimilate.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Poetry After the End of Culture

No. 96: Saturday, June 7, 1997

As promised, here are some ideas on how the apparently high-cultural activity of writing poetry might survive the "end of culture."

The problem posed by high culture to our era is its one-many structure; we don't want to subordinate our individual imaginations to the mastery of an Artist. But if this problematizes the novel and the theater, it leaves an out for **lyric poetry**. For unlike epic narratives that address an undefined audience, or drama where the characters address each other before such an audience, lyric poetry is, not necessarily but typically, addressed to a single reader. Most poems, in other words, are "epistles." The most common type is the love-poem, where the poet writes to his beloved, but friends, the King, even nightingales, winds, and urns, are possible addressees. For the lyric originates in prayer directed from the human periphery to the sacred center, and the center is originally conceived as the source of language. As opposed to other literary forms, the lyric voice is in virtual dialogue with its interlocutor.

If I write a poem for someone, my writing is validated if *she* likes it, regardless of the rest of the world. (To write a novel for one's *bien-aimée* is not merely un-cost-effective, it's unfaithful to the structure of the genre.) Even if I don't send her the poem, my imagination of her reading it provides a testing-ground for judging its quality. Or when I address my poem to a nightingale, it becomes the incarnation of a divinity always potentially capable of responding. Anyone to whom I show my ode can stand in for this figure as my reader, or for the implied (single) reader if it is addressed to no-one in particular.

Let us pursue the reception of love-poetry a little farther. To imagine my beloved reading the poem in the way I would like is to think of her as being "impressed" by it. It must appear to her as a product of labor, neither a spontaneous expression of desire nor a facile piece of doggerel that rhymes "moon" with "June." Her "impression," one presumes, will allow her to interpret the sentiment it expresses as appropriately respectful of her freedom to respond to it. The poet's respect may be equally well described as directed to her as the reader-recipient of the poem or as its principal character.

The ostensibly concrete aim of most love-poetry is **seduction**. It is no accident that the best-known poem in the French language is **Ronsard's** "Mignonne, allons voir si la rose..." which, like **Marvell's** far superior "Had We But World Enough and Time," puts to good use the old theme of *carpe diem*. However, the seductive danger of the seduction model is that it appears to take the biological enterprise of sexual reproduction as a satisfactory goal for cultural activity. My "sociobiological" point in the last two *Chronicles* on this subject is not this at all. The biological basis for culture is its "goal" only in the external sense that the function of culture is to permit us to maintain this basis. But this explains the internal functioning of cultural phenomena about as well as saying that the aim of football is to let the spectators vent their aggressive impulses helps you to follow the **Superbowl**. Making a poem into a performative whose "illocutory force" is to get a woman into bed raises questions about the practical

efficacy of poetry as compared with flowers, strong drink, diamond necklaces, etc., but not about poetic technique or quality.

On the contrary, if we consider the origins of high-cultural love poetry in the West (and, once again, **Sappho** provides a powerful anticipatory model), the love-poem is typically written to someone far away, whose physical seduction is now, or has always been, unthinkable. *Sublimation* is the very stuff of love-poetry. What is exemplary about the "Mignonne" poem is that it is a *minimal* model of sublimation. The poet shows his beloved the short life-span of the rose as an inducement to "cueill[ir] votre jeunesse." Presumably she will appreciate his delicacy in not merely comparing her with the flower but in proposing that she use it as a model for her own freely chosen behavior. The Other is, as they say, *empowered* as an agent in "her" poem. The minimal nature of this empowerment coincides with a minimal degree of poetic elaboration: the discovery and, we might say, *cultivation* of the flower-metaphor. The agricultural figure inherent in the word "culture" reveals what has been the specific aim of high culture ever since the Greeks invented *paideia*, one that can be summed up as just the opposite of providing sexual satisfaction: as *askesis*, deferral of desire. This is what schooling is supposed to provide, and still does more often than we think, as the means of controlling the animal impulses of youth.

In the lyric poetry of the post-cultural era, we can continue to exercise askesis, but within the "bracketing" of one-on-one relationships. The category operates for everyone on his or her own level. (If, like Hugo's **Ruy Blas**, you are a "worm in love with a star," then you have to meet star-, not worm-criteria.) For those blessedly ignorant of Kitsch, less stringent standards apply, but any standard is one of an upward, sublimating movement toward cultivation.

The poetic marketplace today, unlike that which obtained in the Romantic and even the early Modernist eras, is highly insular, largely limited to poets themselves and a few camp followers, except in the few cases where some personal or collective factor, not necessarily linked to literary talent, sets a poet off from others and propels him or her to stardom. To the extent that awareness of the perennity of the lyric would lead to greater poetic output and more frequent reading of poetry by lovers, friends, etc., it would skew the poetry market away from the narcissism of (personal or collective) "self-expression" to the refinement of one-on-one communication. It would thus lead to a general improvement of poetic taste and, for published poets, a wider and more literate audience.

To give an example, I thought I'd end this week's *Chronicle* with a poem of my own. *Pour n'offenser personne*, it is addressed to my late mother.

Orphanage

Corpse
on
a
stone
table
chilled
to
latency
prime
object

of
my
dread
curiosity

Cadaver
at
the
altar
bride
of
entropy
my
last
kiss
bestow
anew
virginity

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Resentment, Guilt, Compassion, and Injustice

No. 97: Saturday, June 21, 1997

In her talk on "witnessing" that concluded the **UCLA GA - Religion** series last month, **Stacey Meeker** suggested an interesting paradigm. If we consider the scenic center in its capacity as the center of significance, the relation of the observing periphery to it is one of **resentment**. But the witness to "trauma," one of Stacey's two witnessing categories, is made to feel not resentment but **guilt**. The centrality of the victim is experienced primarily as undesirable; our feeling of guilt reflects our sense of dependency on the scene of cultural representation that we all share. Guilt is thus the inverse of resentment, which equally reflects this dependency. I resent the person in the center because I cannot help participating in the scene of which he is the center--which means that I cannot, or, in the self-conscious modern mode inaugurated by **Hamlet**, will not, put an end to his centrality. Similarly, I feel guilty because the centralized victim's sufferings, even if I have not caused them, generate cultural meanings from which I benefit. I participate in the victim's sacrifice just as I worship the central divinity, whether I do either overtly or not.

What is most interesting about guilt and resentment is that people do not generally admit to either of them. At Stacey's talk, a few people objected to the term "guilt" and wanted to speak rather of "compassion." Com-passion, fellow-feeling, **Rousseau's pitié**--these are "egalitarian" emotions that stem not from my coercion by the other's centrality but from my conscious or unconscious generosity in identifying with his sufferings. In other words, these emotions express unmediated desire; they are of **Girard's mensonge romantique**. The notion of compassion is only useful to describe my feeling for persons whose role in my world transcends their scene of suffering: a man may be said to show his wife compassion because he shares her impairment on all the scenes of his life, not just on the immediate scene of her suffering. (Even here, *sympathy* is a better term, and the husband himself would use neither but say that *he suffers to see her suffer*.) People resist terms like "guilt" and "resentment" because they make explicit the **mimetic** nature of desire that the free individual prefers to deny. Yet the ubiquity of "trauma witnessing" in advertising and propaganda suggests that it makes use of a mechanism inherent in the scene of representation itself. We are indeed free to resist our feelings of guilt or resentment, but only *après coup*. Indeed, it is best not to speak of these phenomena in psychological terms at all; they are not emotions but structural relations of the scene.

Compassion is an sentiment not lacking in political connotations. **Conservatives** tend to reject it; it is **liberals** who "feel your pain." The liberal emphasizes and cultivates compassion because he considers it a valid *discovery principle* for political action. When you feel compassion, you know there is a problem to be solved. **GA's** analysis takes no a priori stand on political matters, but by preferring the mimetic category of guilt to the ostensibly free-standing one of compassion, it undercuts this liberal epistemology. For if guilt is generated by the very mechanism of the "trauma" scene, this scene may then be used as a means of generating it. The question of what prior operations led, not to the sufferings we see, but to the fact that we see them, is one that the model of compassion does not pose, since it implies a free-floating

universal attention rather than admitting its dependency on a preestablished scenic organization.

A particular vigilance is required to overcome the inherent effect of the scene of representation. Even the most evidently self-serving display of beggary, for example, always generates a certain reaction, and a certain income, since, provided the suffering itself be genuine, the guilt it generates is prior to any reflection on the process of its generation. (In contrast, if the suffering is not merely theatrical but counterfeit, it will generate intense resentment, since the center has been unjustifiably usurped.) Thus a refusal based on cynical distrust of the terms of self-presentation alone, however flagrant, indicates deficient generosity--a fact that panhandlers exploit, for example, in addressing a man when he is with a woman he wishes to impress.

The scenic view of **GA** is critical of the liberal analysis of compassion, but it is not therefore identical with the conservative position. The latter rejects compassion as per se a sign of liberalism. Rather than analyzing it as guilt and proceeding to examine the scene on which it was produced, the conservative uses the sentiment itself as proof that such sentiments must be denied, thereby conferring on it, with colors reversed, the same epistemological value as his liberal adversary. But since the **Holocaust**, if not since the **Crucifixion**, certain victimary relations have been accepted as unambiguously authentic--whence the distressing effect on most people of "Holocaust denial." The guilt that is behind compassion, in other words, cannot simply be denied without mutilating one's conscience in the manner of **Nazi** death camp trainees. Conservatives' "**Nuke the whales**" bumper stickers pay homage to the scenic structure of guilt they would humorously have us deny. But this guilt must be acknowledged before it can be either implemented or resisted. This is the "deconstructive" truth of **originary analysis**.

If *compassion* is the romantic euphemism for guilt, that for resentment is *sense of injustice*. When I resent someone for his greater centrality on some scene or other, my first reaction is to condemn his advantage over me as *unjust*. In contrast to compassion, *injustice* is a term we can hardly do without. I explained in "[The Unique Source of Religion and Morality](#)" (*Anthropoetics* I, 1) that resentment is our epistemological guide, our sense-organ for injustice; one need make no utilitarian calculations to feel when one is getting shafted. No doubt most of the time the shafting is in the eye of the beholder, but whether it is or not, what we call our "sense of injustice" is indistinguishable from our resentment.

The dissymmetry between injustice and compassion becomes easier to understand when we realize that guilt too may take injustice for its object. If the other's suffering is indeed caused by an injustice that favors me, then my guilt has the inverse function of resentment: the unmasking of my own unjust privilege, about which I do well to feel guilty. But in either case, and this is the real point, injustice is not self-evident. No doubt the **Holocaust** was an injustice, **American slavery** was an injustice. But was the **Roman destruction of Carthage** or **Athenian slavery** an injustice? As compared to what? As a catch-all concept for the divergences that resentment reveals of ethical reality from the model of reciprocal morality, the notion of injustice provides a horizon of moral reflection, not a criterion of practical judgment. Thus it is easy to understand that resentment will discover a great deal more "injustice" than will guilt. Avowed guilt is problematic as an ethical concept; it implies the insistence of a moral critique of the ethical that appears in the West primarily in the Judeo-Christian moral tradition, e.g., in the prophet **Nathan's** "You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7) that arouses **David's** guilt for sending **Bathsheba's** husband **Uriah** to his death.

Both guilt and resentment see injustice from the outside in, giving respectively negative and positive valence to the central position. But there is a structural difference between the two attitudes. Resentment

is deluded in its essence; it can only be experienced as a sense of injustice, never *qua* resentment. One can become aware of one's own resentment, but the feeling itself cannot reflect on itself as a mere effect of scenic reality. To resent someone's greater centrality is to experience it as unjust, however easily one is able to justify it. In contrast, the sentiment of guilt is not in itself deluded. When I am sensitive to the immorality of my superiority to the central other, whether or not socially countenanced, I admit to feeling guilty. Otherwise, in the general case, I deny my feeling of guilt by calling it "compassion." This does not exclude the possibility of the same lucidity I referred to in the case of resentment. I may recognize that I have no reason to feel guilty because the object of my guilt is not suffering from an injustice in any way connected to me, yet realize that my sentiment is nonetheless one of guilt rather than compassion.

But for this to happen, I must have an understanding of the scenic structure of human experience--in a word, I must have at least an elementary notion of **Generative Anthropology**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Cultural Studies & GA

(First of a Series)

No. 98: Saturday, June 28, 1997

The phenomenon of **Cultural Studies (CS)** has been spreading through the **Humanities** like kudzu through our inland waterways. Although I'm no expert on the subject, I've been doing a little reading, and feel I know enough by now for a first *Chronicle*. More are planned for the future.

I'm not a *Realist* in the **Platonic** sense, but one does have to pay attention to language. When people complain about the lack of unity or "methodology" in cultural studies, one might start by looking at the words. Since everything human is "**cultural**," and "**studies**" says nothing specific about the mode of examination, it would be surprising if a field so named, whatever its beginnings, did not evolve into an infinite grab-bag. And so it has. Although in its British origins with **Raymond Williams**, cultural studies had a specific political agenda, which in Britain at least it has not altogether lost, the implicit caveat that "culture" refer to "popular" or "working-class" culture could not be sustained. No type of "culture," including "high culture," is outside the **CS** orbit. But better than a description or even a meta-description ("cultural studies is precisely what cannot be totalized in a [*sc* patriarchal] description"), I will provide a *functional model*. One advantage of this column over more serious scholarly publications is that first impressions are 90% accurate and save 90% of your time.

The chief reason for the success of **CS** is that it is an adaptation of the **Humanities** to the contemporary condition of the university. Most humanities professors, even recent PhDs, are trained in reasonably rigorous methods of literary scholarship, textual analysis, etc. Little of this is useful in **CS**. But the payoff, in contrast with the fabled dryness of the kind of scholarship we were trained for, is that **CS** involves ingenious, politically fashionable, and often popularly amusing subjects, and that the number of such subjects, unlike the traditional ones centered on the "canon," is for all practical purposes infinite. This infinite possibility is a more central factor than even the **PC** that adheres to the various **(post)Marxist** domains like "subaltern studies," "post-colonial studies," et al. (A simple measure of (post)Marxist dominance in a text is the number of times the term *late capitalism* appears per hundred words.) What is of primary interest is *interaction*, not domination; less dogmatic minds see the postcolonial as interacting with the metropolitan rather than suffering its oppressive domination or even, à la Williams, *resisting* it.

The bottom line of **CS** is that it vastly facilitates holding **conferences** to which one can invite one's *network*--the central preoccupation of 90s Humanities scholars. Instead of subjects that require well-defined, and therefore restrictive, expertise (e.g., the best known **Montaigne** or **Dante** scholars), **CS** subjects are ad hoc. No one is really an expert in them, and at the next conference they will be replaced by others. This puts a premium on **networking** rather than scholarly achievement as a criterion for selection. But precisely it is the networkers who set up the conferences in the first place. (**Dawkins**

disciples would consider conferencing a *meme* and networkers its *carriers*: a networker is just one conference meme's way of producing another.) Given the current **CS** vogue, the same people can reinvoke each other indefinitely without ever having to do in-depth scholarship on any subject.

Conferencing aside, there is a clear positive side to this development. The proliferation of different cultural approaches and *rapprochements* is a welcome alternative to the rigid textualism that had dominated literary study since the **New Criticism**, to which **deconstruction** added both a new philosophical sophistication and an often sophomoric perversity. The canonization of *Literature*, whatever works it was deemed to include, was an artificial move that corresponded more to the structure of the university than to any organic cultural reality. Or to put it more sharply, it corresponded to the absorption by the university of all the living force of the old high culture. Today, "classical" musicians and poets, even artists, are increasingly likely to be found on university faculties. But there is a far more vital cultural world beyond the campus borders that cannot be forced into the traditional categories of literary study.

The study of popular culture in its various ramifications is closer in general methodology and approach, insofar as generalization is possible, to **ethnology** than to literary scholarship. Literature is tautologically textual; aside from the details of literary history and the necessary factual background, the student of literature is expected to be sensitive to the various levels of intertwined structure that make up the text. On the contrary, studying ad hoc interconnections between different genres and places is essentially doing "**field work**," and indeed this term, which gave its name to the anthology I shall refer to below, comes up frequently as a kind of exotic professional marker--just as, conversely, in the heyday of deconstruction an ethnologist might have claimed to be studying the "**text**" of a tribal culture. This development signals not simply a shift in specialization, but a wholesale *despecialization*. Although the **CS** perspective is adaptable to the study of earlier centuries--particularly those involved in **colonization**--its real thrust is contemporary. As a result, the traditional historical fields of the humanities are sapped of their energy, and eventually, I fear, of their staffing.

The problem is particularly critical in the "language" departments, such as the one in which I am located. Although secondary in historical perspective and a minor specialty just a few years ago, third-world or *francophone* literature has become the hot field in French studies. This is not due to the brilliance of its literary production, although the former colonies are surely more vital today than the *métropole*, but to the **PC-CS** connection. **French**, at least, has a claim to the **CS** world; **German** and **Italian**, whose nations came too late to create colonial empires, are now, as if in vengeance for their savage reaction to this fact in **World War II**, approaching a position of quasi-extinction. When the current "language" faculty retires, it will surely not be replaced at anything like its current strength. The future of the Humanities points to "European Studies" programs that will be not only far smaller than the current ensemble of European language departments, but far less literary (as a local example, the **UCLA European Studies** program is heavily dominated by social science departments, especially **History**, which UCLA, I think rightly, classifies as a Social Science).

The debate on **CS** (such as in the recent **PMLA** Forum) goes back and forth on the literature *cum* history vs **CS** issue, which has important practical consequences for academic demography. But never does it pose the problem in **originary** terms, and rarely even in terms recognizable to standard anthropological theory. From the **GA** perspective, this is **CS's** most significant weakness. There is no lack of "theory" in **CS**, but its thinness is at times remarkable. I will take one example. In her article "The Made-Up and the Made-Real," in *Field Work: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies* (ed. Garber et al, London: Routledge,

1996), pp. 214-24, **Elaine Scarry** of *Body in Pain* fame develops a new phenomenology of "created things":

The difference between art objects and other objects can therefore be understood as follows: both undergo creation, but almost all artifacts other than art undergo a *second stage of creation* to which art is never subject (217; my emphasis).

Art, you see, is created, *point*. But, *mirabile dictu*, manufactured goods are created *twice*, once as things-in-themselves and again as elements of reality. A painting is just a created painting, but a car is (1) created as a car-thing and (2) created again as a driveable thing. This kind of analysis makes the Muses weep, not only because of its absurdity--as though the car wasn't created to be driven in the first place--but because it ignores, whether in ignorance (I hope) or arrogance, all the relevant writings on the subject by *Dead White Male* thinkers such as **Husserl**, **Heidegger**, and **Sartre**, not to mention **Plato** and **Aristotle**. It's as though now that the new era of **CS Conferences** has dawned, we can wipe the slate clean, or as the author puts it, demonstrating the admirable depth of her philosophical training:

In the past, *a solitary philosopher may have now and then emerged* to work on the nature of creation, but there never emerged a large assembly of people working in concert... (215; my emphasis)

To the extent that this example reflects **CS's** attempt to clear away the theoretical cobwebs that prevent us from seeing anew, it appears that **CS** will not only reinvent the wheel, but start out by making it square.

Now **GA** makes similar claims, but I would not wish to describe its theoretical superiority over Scarry's phenomenology as the mere result of a more thorough assimilation of the texts of Western philosophy. **GA**, as readers of both **Girard's** work and mine know, is not a branch of **metaphysics**. It is rather Scarry, and **CS** theory in general, even when less embarrassingly vacuous, that begins where classical philosophy begins, with **subjects** and **objects**, as though **CS's** relationship to classical thought were to have forgotten all of it except its weakest feature. **GA**, on the other hand, privileges **human interaction**, which is, curiously enough, precisely what **CS** tends to discover when it puts its theorizing behind it. But **originary thinking** provides an idea of *what culture is* that is not simply a working definition, of which the **CS** books have plenty, but an explanation of *what culture is for*. One would think that a hypothesis about what something *is for* might be useful to people who *study* it. Even Scarry, I am sure, understands that cars *are for* driving.

Thanks to **Stacey Meeker** and **Markus Müller** for their help in researching this *Chronicle*.

[to be continued]

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Ending the Era of Suspicion

No. 99: Saturday, July 5, 1997

Since this is my last *Chronicle* before reaching triple figures, I hope the reader will forgive me if it waxes a bit prophetic. The expression **Era of Suspicion** (*L'ère du soupçon*) is **Nathalie Sarraute's** characterization of modernity.

The contestatory tone of Western thought dates from the **Enlightenment**, when the *philosophe* claims an understanding of human reality superior to that incarnated in its ruling institutions. The Enlighteners were spokesmen for the rising bourgeoisie in contrast with the agro-ritual social organization of the old regime; perhaps naively, they intended their rationalist discourse not as a mere critique of traditional discourses but a substitute for them. The charm of 18th century satire, whose high point is **Voltaire's** *Candide*, is that it is only minimally resentful of the order it mocks.

Already in the following generation, **Rousseau** laid the foundation for the Romantic relocation of the resentful self *within* bourgeois society. But his critique is aimed at society in general, and his idea of the *good society*, as expressed in the *Social Contract*, is not historically situated in relation to what it must supersede. Rousseau is not yet a suspicious thinker; he finds anthropological truth in a universally available intuition of the "heart": *je sens mon coeur et je connais les hommes*.

It is **Karl Marx** who inaugurates the age of suspicion, and intellectuals ever since have made use of his method of **demystification**: the demonstration that the discourse of the "**ruling class**," or by extension, of the **patriarchy** or the **white race** or the **West**, not merely expresses the ruling group's self-interest but unwittingly *disguises* this self-interest as a **universal truth**. The very rational universality that the *philosophes* had fought for against the "obscurantism" of religion and tradition was now shown to be the expression of the values of one class--the **bourgeoisie**--in their struggle for the supremacy of their mode of *production relations*. What then were the truly universal values on the basis of which this demystification could be carried out? Those of the **proletariat**, in whose interest Marx claimed to write. Since bourgeois society makes obsolete the older divisions between nobles, clergy, and *tiers état*, the bourgeoisie is in fact the only "class" remaining; once the knell of private property has sounded, everyone will be a proletarian. Hence Marxism is only provisionally a class-bound truth; its historical destiny is to be the truth of, as they say nowadays, *humankind*.

Since the collapse of the Socialist bloc, it has become obvious that the bourgeois market is a *less* essentially inequitable mechanism for distributing goods and services than any centralized system, however ideologically committed to utopian ideals. Which is to say that the idea that demystificatory truth resides in a final, classless state has been disproved by history. But if this is so, then the extension of the demystificatory enterprise to other domains (race, gender, colonialism, etc.) is founded on a faulty epistemology. Marx criticized present society from the standpoint of a reasonably coherent view of the end of history, however flawed this has proved to be in hindsight. Lacking such a final perspective,

contemporary forms of suspicion can only fall back on our originary moral intuition, which cannot be analyzed as such in the context of the demystificatory model.

What this suggests is that the more recent forms of demystification implicitly depend upon the Marxian critique of "capitalism." It is this dependence that explains why, although socialism has been tried and, to put it euphemistically, found wanting, instead of celebrating the virtues of liberal market society or *à la rigueur* criticizing it in its own terms, the academy remains dominated by critical theorizing consecrated to demystifying the *hegemonic* discourses of *late capitalism*.

Reading **Antony Easthope's** well regarded *Literary into Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1991) for my **CS** series, I was appalled to discover that if, as we saw last week, ad hoc **CS** thinking is often airheaded, its serious variant is even worse. The eclecticism of **CS's** refusal to favor one kind of culture over another is mirrored in its attitude toward critical discourse. So instead of just **Foucault**, or **Lacan**, or **Marx**, or *la déconstruction*, or **feminism**, we get all of them at once. But seeing all the contemporary critical jargons together in one place made me realize how similar they are. They all are, or have been made to be, discourses of radical suspicion, which is to say, of **resentment**, since they all attack something that they have no substitute for. Their resentment remains internal to the structure they attack, and they sometimes theorize this internality, but never the resentment itself.

The system of critical suspicion is an intellectual perpetual-motion machine, a self-unfulfilling prophecy. It lacks a fundamental theory of how culture operates, because, absent the "classless" model provided by Marx's discredited utopia, its very method precludes such a theory. If the underlying model of the social order is a binary structure of domination, then no historically existing cultural institution or discourse can be of any value in revealing the moral horizon of non-dominated human relations, our intuition of which has presumably descended on us from the moon. Post-Marxian suspicion is a form of radical Rousseaueanism for which society has so blighted our original human essence that even our "heart" no longer retains its intuition of it. But the moral indignation that bubbles through all this writing demonstrates that our originary moral intuition is alive and well; it's just our theories that are unable to situate it in relation to the cultural forms they are so busy demystifying.

Whence the following modestly prophetic suggestion:

Let us declare an end to the *era of suspicion*. Let us study the operations and discourses of society, including in particular its cultural discourses, with a little humility, to see how they work, and not in order to hasten the demise of *late capitalism*, the *patriarchy*, and *Big Corporations*. Let us examine the expressions of political and other resentments within these discourses in the context of *their* operation, not as objects of our own resentful approval or denunciation.

In future columns I will attempt to enunciate and develop a **generative** approach to cultural criticism, and to **CS**, as an alternative to the demystifications of the era of suspicion. (As I pointed out in last week's column, because **CS**, although informed by the usual theories of suspicion, is driven by empirical curiosity rather than ideology--if only to find new topics for Conferences--it often goes far to realizing my suggestion in practice.) In the past, I have never elaborated a **GA methodology**, since from a generative perspective, no moment of history is reducible to any other and each cultural form must therefore be understood in terms of the scenic consciousness of its specific historical context. But in response to the critique of suspicion, it becomes necessary to define the activity of cultural criticism in a broader *ethical* context.

In a word, what is needed is a critique that begins from **love** rather than **resentment**: one that understands the components of culture as means of adding rather than subtracting from their audience's freedom, of **empowering** it rather than submitting it, whether or not through the ruses of what **Marcuse** called "repressive tolerance," to the oppression of whatever version of **Big Daddy** one desires to denounce.

I do not think this sort of criticism will be very hard to create. It will not require we throw away the strengths of what Easthope usefully calls the *modernist* (i.e., close) *reading* of texts, although it will require that we subordinate this reading's celebration of *well-wroughtness* to the *ethical* function of culture. Readers familiar with **GA** will recall that it defines the function of culture as "*the deferral of violence through representation*." What this means is not offering inauthentic substitutes to distract the audience from its genuine impulses of revolt, but recycling the audience's resentment into the system as a means of enrichment.

To give a brief example: in a little manual on *Madame Bovary* (G. K. Hall, 1989), I developed the idea that **Emma** is the first literary character to incarnate the values of what has come to be called **consumer society** (*la société de consommation*). Although Emma's life ends tragically, **Flaubert's** accomplishment is *malgré tout* an enrichment and empowerment of the desiring self, not just because Emma's own career illustrates increasing control over her circumstances (although this ultimately leads not to emancipation but suicide), but because her *praxis* uncovers new layers of meaning that readers can apply to their own lives. To understand the **semiotic** relation between Emma's purchases and her desires is not to repeat her failure, but to give oneself new options. It is sufficient demonstration of this point that market society has ever since emphatically followed Emma's (and the merchant **Lheureux**) lead, although the new system had no name in Flaubert's day and for several generations afterward and was not theorized on a comparable level of acumen until 1968 in **Jean Baudrillard's** *Le système des objets*.

I hope you, dear reader, will seriously consider implementing my "prophetic" suggestion in your own work, thereby transmitting it by example to others. Let us hope that, by the time of the new millennium, we will all have learned to speak with civility and (not uncritical) respect about the social order we profit from and to which, hopefully, we all wish to make a positive contribution.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Love, Resentment, and Generative Anthropology

No. 100: Saturday, July 12, 1997

When I began this series just two years ago, I never expected it to reach **one hundred**. But habits grow on you, and after a while, writing these columns began to structure my week and even my intellectual life. Although the number of subscribers and readers has grown respectably, it remains modest by media standards; one doesn't write a column like this as a means of attaining stardom or even "visibility." But it is an invaluable means to develop ideas of interest to me in the context of informal communication with friends, intellectual sympathizers, and other interested parties.

Some readers, astute or simply undiplomatic, have wondered what the connection is between the "*chronicles of love and resentment*"--a title that everyone seems to like--and "*generative anthropology*"--a slogan I didn't invent and that I in fact rather regret. **Resentment** has an important place in the theoretical framework developed in my books on **GA**, but the idea of "**love**" plays no role there.

How does one get from "the deferral of violence through representation" to "love and resentment"? In the course of these *Chronicles*, I have attempted a few explanations of the phenomenon from the standpoint of originary theory, but minimalistic originary speculations are not enough for **number 100**. So let me come at it from a different angle.

The term "love" can be made to apply to all sorts of human relations, but as I have used it in these *Chronicles*, it has a clear focus on "romantic" love, which, from my own masculine standpoint and that of culture generally, is directed to women. It would therefore not be altogether inappropriate to interpret "love and resentment" as a reference to the two sexes: love for women, resentment for men. In this case, as opposed to that of the hypothetical originary scene of language, it is the women who merit first place.

As the presupposed reference for the unqualified term "love," in these *Chronicles* as elsewhere, the **heterosexual couple** furnishes the exemplary model of mutual human caring. And whereas all other kinds of love can furnish metaphors of what we presume to be God's care for his creatures, "romantic love" alone, through the love-of-Other / love-of-God analogy elaborated in **neo-Platonism** and in more accessible form in lyric poetry from the troubadours on down, including the radical inversion of divine-human dominance in *Manon Lescaut* (see [Chronicle 17](#)), allows us a general understanding of our relationship to the **sacred**.

Over two centuries have reinforced the human priority over the divine in this analogy to such a point that I wonder how, outside the experience of love, one can claim any first-hand understanding of the sacred as Other, that is, as the **originary source of language**. The high point of religious consciousness realized in **Christianity** conceives of the human Other in general as sacred, as worthy of our care and reverence, but that is not quite the same thing. Although we must see **Christ** in every other person, romantic love offers our only normal chance at the uniqueness required to sustain an appropriate intensity of

identification. It is not enough to say that care takes time and energy, and that ours is limited. Care of the kind merited by the divinity is essentially *infinite*. The saintliest person cannot love his neighbor in a way approximating his love of God, because he has many neighbors and only one God, and because his devotion to God encompasses that to all his neighbors whereas the converse is not the case. This is not to say that our care for our neighbors is necessarily deficient in face of the ideal of considering each Other as divine. If my neighbor needs my help for a specific task, and I give it to him, it would do him no good and in fact would only embarrass him to treat him on top of that as an object of infinite care. And if I do this merely as a **spiritual exercise**, e.g., looking into his face and imagining **Jesus** in his place, then my relationship to him is not an ethical one at all.

But for the one person I care for most, the social institution of the couple, married or not, facilitates the exercise of infinite care. I won't rehearse the biological basis for coupling, but suffice it to say that a **Sirian** arriving here (in the Sirian planetary system there are 1.73 sexes and reproduction is carried out by computers) would be struck by our tendency to pair off even when raising children is not the object. Because couples share essentially their whole lives, the loved one may be conceived without practical inconvenience as the origin and goal of all one's activities. Personal mediation tends to take the place of the public mediating function of religion because it alone offers genuine interaction with the mediator.

The love relationship affords us a scenic understanding of the sacred otherwise unavailable save in the most intense revelatory experiences. Influenced by the thought of **Emmanuel Levinas**, a recent vogue emphasizes the **abjection** of the Other as an appeal to our care. But while recognizing (through "tenderness") the other's mortality which s/he shares with me, love never treats the Other--not even the **Crucified**--as denuded or abject, in a word, as *victimary*. What I see in the beloved Other, beyond mere human vulnerability, is her sacred power to give and take away meaning from my world.

This is a subject better explored through lyric poetry (see [Chronicle 96](#)) than theory. Because love is the most interactive of possible relationships with another (in contrast with the caricature of romantic love as **idolatry**, "putting woman on a pedestal"), it is the freest, the least theorizable a priori. This potentially infinite private richness offers a model for life and thought in the postmodern world that has tended to get lost among more highly publicized cries of collective resentment. I intend this third year of *Chronicles* to be devoted chiefly to the elaboration of this idea, particularly in its impingement on **critical theory** and on the practice of **Cultural Studies**.

For the moment, let me return to the beginning of the *Chronicles* in July 1995. It was, I will admit, something of an effort to insert the idea of "love" into a series I had originally intended to call *Chronicles of Resentment*. I had conceived it as an ironic narrative of the humiliations of everyday life, somewhat on the model of the diary of **Dostoevsky's** "*underground man*" that had been for me the literary equivalent of puberty. But it became clear that this formulation was too subjective and self-serving to be associated with an originary anthropology that begins, after all, from the deferral rather than from the enactment of violence--from love rather than resentment. And as a result of insisting and reflecting upon love over the past two years, I now feel ready, as last week's "prophetic" [Chronicle 99](#) suggests, to insist on it as the structuring principle of critical thinking and discourse. Of course we will always feel resentment. But the whole point of human culture is the **deferral** of resentment, and the "higher" the culture, the greater the effort expended in making us aware of the costs of our resentful satisfaction to its potential victims.

I think it is the duty of those of us who are privileged to spend comfortable tenured lives studying cultural phenomena to work for the triumph of love over resentment, not in a utopian **final conflict**, but

here and now, in every act. Today's academic conversation is saturated with overt and unapologetic resentment of a kind that not long ago would not have been tolerated in the political, let alone in the academic arena. Let us work, whatever our political views, to expunge the language of resentment from our own vocabulary and to encourage by our example our students and colleagues to do the same.

This is no profound analytic conclusion, merely the humble acceptance of moral truth; but it would not likely have occurred to me had I not originally been inspired to entitle this column "*Chronicles of Love and Resentment*."

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Comparative Literature and Global Culture

(*Cultural Studies* series no. 2)

No. 101: Saturday, July 19, 1997

As promised, I have been reading and thinking about **Cultural Studies** (CS), less in the context of the place of the Humanities in the contemporary university than in that of **originary thinking**. Intellectual activity necessarily takes place in an institutional context, but it is the worst *déformation professionnelle* to privilege that context over the content and ultimate purpose of one's activity. It is also very short-sighted from a practical standpoint. Humanities professors and even their deans are bound to a certain context, provosts and chancellors are not. If the only problem the Humanities can solve is that of finding busy work for themselves, forces beyond their control will soon relieve them of the problem itself.

The reader of the well-known report *cum* commentaries *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Johns Hopkins, 1995, ed. **Charles Bernheimer**) is struck by the parochiality of the near-totality of the discussion, as though the real problem is not, "what is the place of our activity of cultural analysis in its broader ethical context?" but "how should **Comparative Literature (CompLit)** departments adapt their curricula to new 'multicultural' conditions?" If only for accounting reasons (zero-based budgeting), let alone intellectual ones, the first, ethical, alternative should have priority. Yet of all the participants, only my fellow *Anthropoetics* editorial board member **Tobin Siebers** put the ethical question at the heart of his response. The term "age" in the title seems to have foreclosed discussion: if this is the age we live in, we had better adapt to it, or at most, resist it. It would have been preferable to reflect on the nature of the cultural in our era before imposing a label on it.

What provoked most of the other responses was the feeling that the old CompLit ethos, created by pre- and postwar Central European exiles around a "Eurocentric" (I shudder to use this term) conception of high culture, must be modified to reflect the new multicultural reality with which **cultural studies (CS)** is associated. Should our students learn non-European languages? Should we use team teaching to introduce new elements into the curriculum? Should the "literary" be retained as a central category, or should we include other "discursive practices"?... The more enthusiastic (e.g., **Mary Louise Pratt**) emphasize the liberating value of new options; the sadder and wiser (e.g., **Marjorie Perloff**), the constraints of time and cohesion.

But these natural responses miss the point of the challenge posed by the enlargement of the purview of CompLit. **GA** can always make the valid claim that before studying culture, one should construct an **originary hypothesis**; but the value of the claim in this particular context comes from the fact that the real change is not the "discovery" of new cultures or of their importance, but **the problematization of cultural identity**. The old CompLit corresponded to the coherent idea of a single international culture, that of the educated European, which no doubt could not be fully mastered by any one individual, so that

specialization in it required choices among languages and literatures, but which remained nonetheless a single culture. To that culture, one might add knowledge of, say, Chinese or Indian culture, without displacing its central importance.

But once world culture, including that of the Third World, is added to the mix, our difficulty in encompassing it is not just a function of the additional time required but of the very nature of this academic "encompassing." What corresponds in the "global marketplace" to the high Western culture that dominated the European sphere of influence? On the level of high culture, we can still live pretty well as Eurocentrics; there is little pressure to study, say, classical Chinese literature. The drive to include non-Western cultures is attracted rather to popular elements and thereby to **CS**. But inclusion of the popular poses a different problem. European scholars were familiar with local popular cultures; they simply didn't consider them relevant to the cultural identity that underlay the establishment of CompLit as a discipline. Why then should they be relevant now?

In a word, because "global culture" is not of the same nature as Western culture, the original basis for CompLit has disappeared, and the fundamental question is to determine the nature of the culture that has taken its place, not what curricula or job descriptions we should design.

I am the last to suggest despair. There is indeed a global culture roughly comparable in coherence to the Western culture of old. Where it is structured differently, thereby posing a problem to the academic structure of CompLit, is in the relation between its high and popular components. The importance of the popular is not an academic artifact of the intrusion of area studies and its politics into the CompLit orbit. There is no truly global high culture, and to the extent there is one at all, it is simply--pardon my Occidentocentrism--**Western high culture**. The West has provided the dominant thought-systems for the modern world, as well as--by no means coincidentally--its economic system. Culture is more democratic and pluralistic than economics or science, but we would do well to remind ourselves that the third-world resentment that sells so well in the cultural sphere cannot undo the historical triumph of the Western market system over its former global competitors, even if we forbear to speak of them as "Oriental."

The high culture that complements the ethic of the Western economic system has therefore a global viability--for example, **European classical music** has a presence in Japan or Taiwan, even in mainland China, incomparably greater than that of Chinese or Japanese music here. But today the overall context of this viability is not such as to justify maintaining the old CompLit curriculum unchanged. Western high culture is not so much defunct as inadequate to the task of providing a global civilization with a living basis. That the phenomena of popular culture have come increasingly to the fore, disturbing the old "elite" stability of the CompLit world, is a genuine cultural fact, independent of the ideological biases of the academy in our own society. Although skepticism in the face of ideology is the beginning of wisdom, ideology generally reflects a certain degree of truth.

To say that global culture is more amorphous than Western culture is merely to allude to its popular nature. High culture, *pace* two decades of resentful critique, cannot be understood as the locus for the hegemonic illusions of the ruling class; it proposes rather to society as a whole an esthetic askesis. To know this culture in its spatio-temporal extension, in the **exilic** consciousness that **Emily Apter** pertinently attributes to the founders of the specialty, is to possess the summa of its ethical wisdom as enacted in the--eminently portable--linguistic imagination: what **Erich Auerbach** could bring together in wartime Constantinople while writing *Mimesis*.

Today's global culture is equally portable, but no longer focused on askesis because no longer bound by

the confines of a single society, however broadly defined. The old high culture was, ultimately, a sacrificial system, a means of purging resentment from an ensemble that, however vast, was conceived as a totality. The global system is a proliferating, "rhizomatic" network, not a totality--at least, not yet. Following the lead of the musical fifties in the United States, its culture is primarily one of **youth**, whose relative uniformity across world cultures has not gone unremarked. The generalized semi-excluded (and therefore semi-victimary) status of youth gives it an enhanced need for cultural *rites de passage* and this function comes to dominate the entire cultural sphere.

On the basis of this analysis, how then should CompLit programs adapt to our age?

In the first place, although flexibility in opening up to the great cultures of Asia is a good thing, it should be recognized that today's global culture has its roots in Western civilization, not only because the United States has played a hegemonic role in the creation of the youth culture (a phenomenon largely due, as I suggest in my recent book *Signs of Paradox* [Stanford, 1997], to the creative interaction of youth and our culturally significant Black minority), but more profoundly, because the market system that has created the socio-economic conditions for the global culture is a creation of Western society. This implies that the central role played by classical Western civilization in CompLit should not be abandoned for the sake of "diversity." Whatever may be gained from studying Indian, Chinese, or Japanese culture, none of these has the same direct filiation with contemporary global culture.

But, **in the second place**, it is indeed important to study global popular culture. Popular culture is more uniform worldwide and far less difficult of access than high culture, and does not urgently require linguistic skills. One can acquire through translation a far higher degree of understanding of a Chinese popular song than of a Chinese poem. The focus on global popular culture, beyond the celebration of empirical diversity, should be on the creative interaction between its two originary elements, the Western and the local. As I have already noted in [Chronicles 98](#), this focus emerges naturally from the empirical richness of the material: CS's emphasis on content makes it "naturally" a critique of love rather than of resentment.

CompLit programs have therefore no need to disperse their curricula among endless choices. Their primary focus on European culture should be maintained, which need not exclude students with exclusive interest in non-European cultures. Above all, the fashionably victimary "post-colonial" mentality should not be allowed to obscure the primacy of Western civilization as the source of today's global culture, including the post-colonial ethic itself.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Critique of Love

No. 102: Saturday, July 26, 1997

In *Génie du christianisme* [Spirit of Christianity] (1802), his attempt to rekindle interest in Christianity after the "godless" century of the *philosophes*, **Chateaubriand** counseled a *critique des beautés* [criticism of "beauties," of good points], in contrast to the more traditional and less spiritual *critique des défauts* [criticism of defects]. Criticism, in this perspective, was to help the reader to appreciate the work rather than merely evaluate it. This paradoxical understanding of *critique* as a positive activity may be said to be the foundation of modern literary criticism, an activity associated in England with such as **Matthew Arnold** and later **T. S. Eliot** and **F. R. Leavis**, which consisted in choosing a **canon** of works to read and justifying one's choice. Today, after a generation dominated by demystification's ideological version of the *critique des défauts*, can we find our own *critique des beautés*? Or in the terms of this column, as presented in [Chronicle 99](#), can we formulate a **critique of love** to oppose to the **critique of resentment**?

In originary terms, **love** and **resentment** are relationships to **difference**. Resentment attacks (questions, suspects) difference because it sees it as invidious: the other's difference from me is a sign of his greater proximity to the center and its power, prestige, wealth, etc. Resentment sees only the "vertical" component of difference, that which distinguishes between greater or less sacrality.

Love, in contrast, sees difference in "horizontal" terms, as a non-hierarchical source of value. The essential symmetry of the love-relationship is founded on openness to difference, beginning from the sexual difference that is the foundation of the couple in the first place. The woman's childbearing role and all it entails requires of the man a particular care, in addition to the couple's other differences and similarities, and for which it provides a non-hierarchical model. I am not in competition for the center with the one I love; on the contrary, I freely choose to grant significance to ("sacralize") her desires and needs as a source of meaning for my own life, knowing in principle that she has made the same symmetric choice with regard to mine. Any differences in power, prestige, etc., between us are accepted without envy along with the others in the service of our relationship.

In the sphere of cultural, including textual, criticism, the critique of resentment is **demystification**. The literary work purports to liberate its reader by letting him participate freely in its imaginary universe. The demystifier then shows that this liberation is spurious--that, on the contrary, the reader is being surreptitiously made to participate in his own enslavement by assimilating a discourse the implicit presupposition of which is the domination of the dominated by the dominator. In the deconstructive variant, the implementation of this presupposition in the discourse itself is shown to be paradoxical, since its very immanence in the text as a "natural" truth is belied by its transcendental construction as a denial of the "unnatural." At its best, deconstruction is not mere demystification, but it tends to be pulled toward the familiar gender, race, ethnicity dichotomies and end up as a weapon in the war on patriarchy, hegemony, etc.

In contrast, the key to a critique of love is the notion of **empowerment**. The reader's imaginary liberation is not merely a vacation from reality; the pleasure in reading a literary work is the assimilation of what are ultimately new ethical possibilities, and the greater the work, the more significant and wide-reaching these possibilities. The critique of love may be defined as an interpretation of the work that elucidates these implicit possibilities, making explicit the liberating function of the text. In the case of the great works of the past, this is tantamount to writing cultural history, since the liberating function of such works lies in their ability to offer new models of behavior to their readers; the more significant the work, the more these models were overtly present in their social context. But the more subtle task of this form of criticism is to find, in less obvious cases, implicit models that may have reached public implementation only through the route of other works, or perhaps not (yet) at all. That a work has not had a direct social impact is no reason not to carry out this critique; empowerment however virtual remains a cultural datum whose potential impact has not been lost.

As a foretaste of the method this kind of critique requires, here are a few examples of this approach from previous *Chronicles*:

- My remarks about *Manon Lescaut* in [Chronicle 17](#) emphasized the Chevalier's love-relationship to Manon not, as has tended to be the case since feminist critics got hold of this work, in the context of Manon's destruction and death, but as a living relationship. The Chevalier's claim to his clerical friend Tiberge that Manon is a more effective divinity than the Christian God can be contested from within Christian theology itself--Christianity is after all the religion that tells us to love God in the human--but his example is nevertheless of importance as a model, not of polemical extravagance, as might have appeared at the time, but of modern attitudes and practices of love. I am sure a considerable percentage of men and women today would agree with the Chevalier, and surely a far lower percentage would agree with Tiberge than at the time of the book's publication in 1733.
- Similarly, my brief comments on *Madame Bovary* in [Chronicle 99](#) emphasize the semiotic richness of consumption rather than following Emma to her demise. Everyone makes fun of Emma for borrowing her models of desire from books, but they forget that she also constructs these models in a more active fashion from the imagery of her fashion magazines, and above all, they forget that their own lives are largely spent doing the same thing. One does not escape mimesis by denouncing it in others; one never escapes it at all, but one learns to master it by admitting to and understanding it, and **Flaubert's** novel is a means to such an understanding.
- I can also give the example of the extraordinary pregnancy of **Hamlet's** behavior (I believe I touched on this in an earlier *Chronicle*, but haven't been able to locate it). His delay may be attributed, as by **Girard**, to a lack of mimetic intensity, but the danger of that interpretation is that it makes Hamlet into Girard's own figure of the *mensonge romantique*, indifferent to others' desires. I think it more productive to see Hamlet as the prototype of the modern *homme de ressentiment*, and note that when Hamlet first appears in I, ii, he is not yet aware of the Ghost, but sits at the King's table wearing black, ignoring the proceedings, and showing disrespect for Claudius who is obliged to solicit his attention. This is already a Rousseauian or "romantic" attitude, copied by countless young 19th century bourgeois at their father's dinner tables. The play as a whole expands on this new behavioral productivity: the dramatic action, *avant la lettre* like that of *En attendant Godot*, is one of awaiting. The awaiting mode structures Hamlet's ironic attitude toward the other characters, whose worldly temporality makes them stand to him in the

same relation as Pozzo and Lucky to Vladimir and Estragon; this attitude, more attentive to language than action, is eminently "portable."

- Finally, my very brief remarks on **Ronsard's** "Mignonne" poem in [Chronicle 96](#) attempt to show that even in implementing the well-worn *carpe diem* seduction theme, the poet is obliged to empower his beloved by separating her consciousness from the flower that is her metaphor and allowing her the free choice to profit from its example.

I will attempt to give further examples of a critique of love in the coming months. But its fundamental principle stands in clear contrast with that of the critique of resentment. Instead of seeing the literary work as ultimately a form of propaganda that denies the freedom of its audience, the critique of love insists that, whatever discourses of domination may lurk behind the literary work, its effective operation on its audience is one of emancipation rather than enslavement.

Such a criticism has no clear political agenda, although the practitioners of demystification will no doubt accuse it for that very reason of reinforcing the status quo. But that is not its point at all. On the contrary, as **Doug Collins** remarked recently, it is the demystifiers who can with far more justification be accused of playing the game of the **Establishment**, by redirecting creative energies that might be used to enlarge the freedom of society as a whole into the narrow channels of "identity politics" and its resentful cultural agendas. "Repressive tolerance" is a two-edged sword, and it is after all the very ideologues who denounce *late capitalism* who are the Humanities' chief beneficiaries of corporate largess in the form of research grants and the like. Follow the money, as **Deep Throat** was wont to say.

The critique of love is empowering in ways that cannot be predicted precisely because it has no predefined constituency. Those who are liberated as individuals by art, and by love itself, are a far more powerful force for social evolution than the groups of victims that dominate our public consciousness. But we cannot be content merely to note this; some degree of "consciousness-raising" is required. On this too I shall attempt to elaborate in the coming months.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Models of Identity

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The concept of "identity" is no longer an easy one to define. The nineteenth-century idea of identity, as illustrated in the biographical cast of the novels of the period, was ever-evolving, but rarely problematic. The **Nervals** ("*je suis l'Autre*": [I am the Other]) and **Rimbauds** ("*je est un autre*" [I is another]) were limited to the poetic fringes. This solid notion of identity was grounded on a benign version of **Girard's** *mensonge romantique* that understood each individual's desire as essentially his own. It began to break down in the postromantic era of **Flaubert** and **Baudelaire**, when the beginnings of consumer society problematized the individual identity of desire by openly proposing both its generation and its satisfaction.

The postmodern era has been characterized by an extreme skepticism about personal identity. We have so imbibed **Barthes'** "death of the author" in the wake of **Nietzsche's** "death of God" that we forget that the *logique du supplément* cuts both ways. If insisting that something exists, as **Rousseau** does for the purity of our moral intuition, is a demonstration that this existence is already compromised (for why else would we need to insist on its existence?), insisting that something does not exist, as Barthes does for the author, is a demonstration that it still haunts us (for why else would we need to insist that it shouldn't?). And it is all too easy to remark that the authors of discourses denying the reality of the authorial subject inevitably add them to their CVs. In the heyday of **deconstruction**, personal identity was all but dismissed as a category of thought. Then the **Paul de Man** scandal undermined the prestige of this mode by showing that the ethical dereliction implicit in the denial of the responsible self went beyond simple inconsequence. If I cannot be identified as accountable for my acts, then all evil is possible.

Today, identity has been reestablished with a vengeance and, however collective and victimary it may be, this is on balance a good thing. The most resentful identity is better than none at all. Even if when you commit a crime you say "history will absolve me," you're a step ahead of one who says, as was claimed in defense of de Man--he was mercifully never called upon to say such things himself--that the continuity of self between the author of antisemitic articles and the Yale professor is so problematic as to make condemnation reflect more on the condemner than on the condemned. Nevertheless, collective identity is ultimately unsatisfactory. I say this not as a moralist, but as an originary thinker about culture. There is not enough content in collective identity to nourish the cultural function of deferring resentment. Collective identity is only functional in a political context, and politics is a "thin" activity, as opposed to the "thickness" of economic life. Only in times of revolutionary unrest does the political realm offer the general public a sufficient context for action. At others, we must look to our personal lives, which primarily means to our place within the system of production and exchange.

The thinness of political-collective identities is concomitant with their resentful nature. Although it is a tautology that there must exist dominant collectivities as well as dominated ones, one hears little about the former because, precisely because the rich and powerful generally have a more lucid idea than the

powerless of their collective self-interest, they need not identify their *selves* with it. Non-homeless people don't identify themselves as "the homed." It is those who find it harder to promote their interests within the exchange system who must turn to collective political action, and to the collective identity it presupposes, in order to turn their resentments into action.

I have often spoken in these columns about the ever-expanding capacity of consumer society to furnish elements of a discourse of identity to its members. Our clothing, foods, furnishings, cars, are bearers of messages that, although lacking in syntax, are filled with "lexical" meaning. However secondary and ephemeral these creations, they are real and freely chosen, in some cases with great care and self-consciousness. No doubt our desires are second-hand, but we all possess and react to this Girardian insight by some form of what he calls *l'ascèse pour le désir* [askesis for desire], ironizing, modifying, hiding or hyperbolizing our desire.

But in the esthetic realm, and particularly in literature, we find **models of individual identity** that we can apply not merely to the messages we construct from consumer products but to our historically existing selves as a whole, to what in more religious times we would have called our "souls." In contrast, those works that operate in terms of collective identities suffer from the fallacies of the "typical" that **Lukács** had already denounced two generations ago in *socialist realism*--a mode still alive today in various victimary guises.

Despite the hyperbole of the slogan "death of the author," Barthes was not wrong to emphasize the dynamic nature of *all* the identities literature creates, including the author's. The authorial self is not only constituted by the work in the external sense that the work is the author's mode of self-presentation to the world; it is no longer possible for a self-conscious author to distinguish a priori between his own constituted identity and the identities-in-process of his characters.

Let me suggest a paradigm of two literary models of individual identity, the **Proustian** and the **lyrical**.

Marcel Proust is arguably the writer who put the most of his personal life into his work, and in the most systematic fashion, yet it is impossible to derive from *A la recherche du temps perdu* [*Remembrance of Things Past*, or literally, *In Search of Lost Time*] a sense of the "identity" of the hero, in the sense that one has such a sense for nineteenth-century heroes, or even for Swann. Proust's is a universe without human love which therefore lacks the possibility of fulfillment through human interaction. Art is the only means of genuine communication with others. The goal pursued by the protagonist from the beginning is to accede to the realm of esthetic creation, which requires of him renunciation of worldly desires. His "identity" is defined by his search for salvation as an artist, the point of departure for which is the generative scene of the mother's kiss described in the first part of the novel, before the *petite madeleine* restores to him his memories of "lost time."

In this model of identity, "life" in itself is not a totality, but a mere multiplicity; it is the source of our identity only insofar as it is "transcended." Life is a trial; we are constantly subjected to desires, "temptations" like those that assailed Flaubert's patron saint Anthony, but not being saints, we do not simply reject these temptations, we fall into them, and through suffering the pains of jealousy and disillusion, we learn that our desires cannot find satisfaction in the human sphere. Once we have gone through this process, we can write our own novel of disillusion.

Proust's story both comes to a logical end and is cut off arbitrarily--by the war, by the narrator's illness, by his stepping on a loose paving-stone that reminds him of his visit with his mother to Venice, where he

saw a mosaic of the face of Christ in the Baptistry of Saint Mark. God, or the author, decides that the hero has learned enough; now he can leave the world to write. His identity includes all the content of the worldly desires he has transcended. Esthetic salvation does not reject the worldly, but lifts it to a higher sphere. The attractiveness of Proust's novel as a model for individual identity is that it understands the totality of our life, however sordid or self-indulgent its details, as an askesis and therefore as something valuable in its very lostness. But this is only possible through renunciation; we cannot remain bound to the world, even to our families and loved ones. The solitary narrator becomes a priest of art, as Proust himself did in his last years in his famous cork-lined room where he worked incessantly on the manuscript of his novel.

But there is only one Proust. If I try to salvage my "lost time" in the same manner, I am soon faced with the realization that the real secret of his novel is its **generative** structure, beginning with the scene of the mother's kiss. Thus even if I concoct such a scene for my own novel, I am only repeating what he has already done. The specificity of my content is irrelevant, as is my own askesis. For Proust does not in fact provide us with an ascetic *praxis*, merely with an abstract pattern that can be filled in arbitrarily. Certainly the scene of the novel grows darker toward the end, with Albertine's imprisonment and Charlus's increasingly open perversion, but there is no way of justifying within the fallen world itself the transcendental leap that will get the protagonist out of it. He has all along hoped for such an act of grace, and we are not surprised when it finally occurs, but because it is not generated from his life, it consecrates it only abstractly, as a lesson in futile snobbery and false hope. My own false hopes can therefore only be more of same.

The **lyrical** model, in contrast--that offered by lyric poetry--does not take a purely ascetic view of the world. The human world, the locus of human love, is meaningful in itself and not merely as material for art. The lyric, because it is addressed in the first place to a single reader through whom the assignment of meaning is potentially to be achieved, allows me to include the content of my life in a gesture not of immolation but of **consecration**. Snobbery and disillusion are not lessons in the vanity of human desire on our way to art, but lessons in the inadequacy of one stage of love in preparation for a higher stage. Art is necessary to communicate these lessons, but it is not their final solution; poetry is only possible because life is already virtual poetry. In this way, my identity as the synthesis of my experience retains its dynamism within the world rather than being defined from outside it by its negation. There is but one Proust; everyone is potentially a lyric poet.

Neither of these models of identity is political or otherwise collective; but they do not exclude politics or collective experience. When we hear the self spoken of as an "intersection" of different identity discourses on the model of the exilic or colonial traversal of boundaries, we should give some thought to the mode in which these discourses are synthesized. Is their diversity the occasion for Proustian cynicism about the world of desire, or for lyrical enrichment of experience? Perhaps the best indication might be the degree of concreteness with which love is evoked, for it is here, it seems to me, that the operation of cultural empowerment may be most fruitfully exercised. The models of identity that art procures for us must increasingly emphasize the intimate sphere because that is where the vast majority of us are best advised to seek satisfaction in a world whose public scene grows increasingly less glorious as it becomes more difficult of access .

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Love and Originary Violence

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GA aficionados may be a bit perturbed by the recent emphasis on love, knowing that the originary scene is supposed to turn on *the deferral of violence through representation*. So I thought for this week's *Chronicle* to return to some fundamental **GA** matters, in hopes of clarifying the familiar **Girard** vs **Gans** question of the originary status of violence. As it will appear, this clarification also makes clearer our originary notion of love.

For non-**GA** aficionados, I'll explain briefly that René Girard's originary model involves the deviation of the generalized aggression of mimetic crisis onto a marginal figure who comes to be unanimously blamed for whatever provoked the crisis, and whose destruction ("lynching") brings it to an end. For Girard, this scapegoat or **emissary victim** (which in neither Girard's scheme nor mine need be a human being, although Girard doesn't appear to accept this) inaugurates signification posthumously; his remains are the first **signified**. My view is that the originary scene of humanity can't be a scene of wordless violence. Because what makes us human is our use of representations, we become human upon emission of the first sign. In **GA's** originary scene, this occurs as the members of the group hesitate in their individual attempts to appropriate the central figure; as each sees the others move toward it (the "gesture of appropriation"), they each individually abort the gesture, which becomes by that very fact a **sign** of their renunciation of the center as an object of appetite, and thereby its **representation**. Within this minimal scene we may go on to situate the sacred, the religious, the moral, the economic, etc.

In my recent book, *Signs of Paradox* (Stanford, 1997), I announce a "return to Girard" in which I emphasize the violence of the **sparagmos** or tearing-apart of the central object subsequent to its representation or "naming" by the aborted gesture of appropriation. Once the sign has reassured the participants that they will not themselves suffer the victim's fate, they can appropriate it in approximately equal parts (**Homer's** "equal feast") in a way that provides the model for sacrificial ritual.

This is reasonable as far as it goes, but it can be recast in a more inclusive form if we note that the prehuman situation before the aborted gesture must have been characterized, by the very logic of my argument, by attempts to appropriate the central object *without* the prior reassurance given by the sign. Between the time when an alpha animal maintained the group's pecking order and the restoration of order through the reciprocal emission of the sign, there is an indeterminate period of "mimetic crisis," whether purely imaginary, or, as we may well follow Girard in assuming, real. The paralyzing fear of the rivalrous violence to which appropriation might lead, or in simply mimetic terms, the blockage of action through the impossibility of mutual imitation, could arise only subsequent to this crisis, to which this blockage puts an end. Thus we may conceive the sparagmatic violence of the group appropriating the object as surrounding the peaceful moment of language and deferral as an electron "surrounds" its nucleus; it is everywhere at once within a certain zone surrounding the center. The Girardian refocusing of the group's aggression on the emissary victim precedes the emission of the sign; the Gansian

sparagmos of the already-designated central figure follows it. But at a close enough proximity to the emission of the sign, both forms of sparagmos become indistinguishable.

In the hesitation introduced by the sign is all human language and culture, which matures as the representational element becomes more insistent and more elaborate. This is the originary moment of mutual **love** among the members of the group, but we should emphasize the mediation of this peripheral love by the central figure. At the moment of emission of the sign, this figure is not a mere scapegoat blamed for the crisis that provoked his selection, but a sacred object inaccessible to the participants. It is in this inaccessibility that we discover the sacred otherness of the Other that we later find in our fellow humans. The moment of language, signification, culture, in a word, of the human, is one of peaceful deferral surrounded by violence "on all sides." It is valuable to identify this moment as that of love in order to emphasize the priority of the sacred over the human in this intimate domain as in so many more clearly cultural ones; what is centralized is sacred before it is human, as the eighteenth-century thinkers **Vico** and **Rousseau** had already understood.

The difficulty of this originary concept of love is its distance from our own experience. The familiar complaint about the **pansexualization** of our culture reflects as it misinterprets our tendency to associate sexual desire with any intense experience of otherness. This tendency is indubitable, but to interpret it as a sign of superficiality is itself superficial. "Superficial" desire is that of the *mensonge romantique*, desire mimetically induced for an object seen only through illusion, such as **Emma Bovary's** desire for her lovers. On the contrary, I would claim that sexuality permits an authentic experience of originary love that would otherwise be limited to a spiritual elite. The most significant effect of pansexualization is not the spread of pornography, sexual harassment, or illegitimacy, but the generalized expectation of love in sexual relationships. This is anything but a pernicious development, even if it provides a less stable foundation for the family than the respect for lineage and the arranged marriages it motivates.

But what sexual love tells us about sacred love today was originally, and traditionally, learned by other means. It seems strange to us that the rise of sexuality to cultural predominance could be a "late" development, since sexuality is a fundamental biological phenomenon. The myths of **psychoanalysis** help us to cope with this disparity by anachronistically sexualizing human origin as they do individual ontogenesis. But sexuality is not in essence a collective phenomenon; the single center vs multiple periphery structure of the scene of representation is not natural to it. In this light, it is significant indeed that through the expedient of making all the women in the group into a single collective object under the control of the "father," **Freud's** own attempt at a sexually motivated scene of origin attributes to its "object" the divisibility characteristic of the edible rather than the sexual. This is not only contrary to current eth(n)ological knowledge, it is a maximal rather than a minimal hypothesis, requiring a tremendous tension between the hypothesized one-many structure of sexual relations and the one-on-one pairing to which demography would naturally conduce.

As I have stated in my books and articles on **GA**, a minimal hypothesis of human origin must situate its founding event at the most critical or vulnerable rather than the most biologically fundamental locus of the prehuman social order. Violent rivalry among males poses a real danger to the social order that has no analog in male-female sexual-reproductive relations. The emergence of sexual interdictions and patterns of exchange should be understood on the model of the originary interdiction of the sacred center rather than vice versa. Neither for **GA** nor for the **Bible** is the sexual shame experienced by **Adam** and **Eve** an originary sentiment. On the contrary, their shame is the result of their prior disobedience of the sacred interdiction of the tree of knowledge. Adam and Eve have not become human sign-users through a

mimetic intensification of sexuality; they are ashamed of their sexuality because they recognize it as provoking **desire**, which, as they have learned as a result of their disobedience, is dangerous and must be deferred--for example, by putting fig-leaves over the offending organs to defer both their sight and their activity.

We err by thinking of the originary scene as a kind of preformed embryo of human history. Our originary intuition of linguistic reciprocity explains our sense of morality just as our originary intuition of the inaccessibility of the center explains our sense of the sacred; but the joining of reciprocity and sacrality in human love is exemplary not of a lost originary fulfillment but of the inexhaustible capacity of human history to create new degrees of freedom and through them, new insights into our potentialities. In reconstructing the originary function of the different traits that characterize the human, we should not project onto the origin what only the pain of history has taught us to combine. The creation of the modern couple bound not merely by sexual desire but by the hope, and often the at least partial fulfillment, of mutual sacrality, is the really significant, if generally unheralded, achievement of our society's "pansexualism."

And for this, even if we must suffer the proliferation of Freudian and Lacanian myths of origin at the expense of **originary thinking**, it is a price worth paying. As our public rituals distance themselves from us more every day, we ever more desperately need the enrichment of intimacy that only the continuing evolution of love makes possible.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Laughing at Anthropology

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I have a graduate student, whose name will go here unmentioned, who snickers every time I mention words like "ritual" or "sacrifice," and breaks into a big smile at "anthropology," with or without "generative." My student smiles at **GA** in the same way as we react to the fanatic who gives the same answer to every question--say, the **antisemite** who blames everything on the **Jews**. In her perspective, "anthropology" is my **mantra**, "ritual" or "sacrifice" my a priori answer to every cultural question. This is the simplest form of comedy, what **Bergson** called *du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant* [the mechanical adhering to the living]; we anticipate the other's "mechanical" response and reward ourselves with laughter for our good judgment.

She is not unique; I still recall my late colleague **Joe Riddel** referring to **Girard's** *La violence et le sacré* as "the sacrifice book." People like Riddel belong to the world of demystifying "theory" within which, since the days of **Raymond Picard's** dinosaur-literary-historian *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture* (1965)--and its far milder equivalents here from text-respecting **New Critics**--there has been virtually no conflict. Some people attacked **deconstruction** when **Paul de Man** was found to have written that antisemitic article, but decon's mainstream critical successors in the various victimary-identity collectives have no quarrel with its attacks on "phallogocentrism," which they merely deflect in a more obviously political direction. "Theory" is not something to smile at; it is built on politically sensitive dichotomies that make each text into a minefield--woe be it to the neophyte who chooses **hegemony** over **oppression**, the **symbolic** over the **imaginary**... Its Manichean dualism violently rejects **GA's** minimalist monism.

Generative thinking strikes the impatient mind as **reductive** thinking, an arbitrary grid placed on the *blooming buzzing confusion* of empirical reality. Why not just be **cultural empiricists** and talk about stories, films, even religious rites, "in themselves," without any a priori preconceptions? If it's all "human" anyway, what do we gain by deciding before we start that the human has certain "originary" structures and hypothesizing what they might have been, or by reminding ourselves that esthetic forms derive historically from sacrificial ritual?

But the point isn't just to say "sacrificial," but to show *how* a given story is structured sacrificially. Tracing the cultural work's originary derivation doesn't rob it of its specificity but situates it in human history. This is the "Hegelian" aspect of **GA**; a historically existing reality is defined by its place in our open-ended movement of deepening ethical self-consciousness and the ever-new degrees of freedom it permits us to generate.

The skeptical cultural empiricist might reply that the visible traces of historical derivation contained in cultural works are sufficient to our understanding of them; those traces that have become so obscure that only cultural "archeology" can detect them are by that very fact no longer relevant. In analyzing a Hollywood film, it's only necessary to examine it in the context of other films to which it makes

reference; to go back to film's sources in literature, let alone in sacrificial ritual, just introduces extraneous categories that history has in fact refined out of existence. Sure, **Arnold** *blowing away bad guys* is a sacrificial gesture, but neither the filmmaker, the spectator nor, the empiricist will claim, the analyst, has to know about this, because it's been "discounted" by the film's cultural context. The term "sacrifice" adds nothing to "blowing away bad guys," because the latter implies all we need know of the sacrificial--all we need to know, that is, to produce the next Arnold film, where the bad guys' costumes and the technical means of their annihilation will be different but the formula will be the same.

This is not a trivial challenge. I would even say that it is more serious than the challenge posed by "theory," whose appetite for demystification is directed at a narrow university-based clientele. Cultural empiricism, in the person of my skeptical student, forces us to rethink the purpose of cultural analysis and how reference to the originary function of cultural phenomena ("originary analysis") can help us to accomplish it.

The answer clearly cannot be given in the abstract. If all we know about a film is that Arnold "blows away bad guys," a reference to the sacrificial can be no more than a pointer in the right direction. The value of **GA's** minimalist anthropological paradigm is not in reducing the diversity of the cultural to a predictable set of originary structures, but permitting us to grasp the consciousness of and concomitant *freedom within* the originary structure embodied by the cultural work. As I have been emphasizing in [recent columns](#), the cultural sphere functions only by supplying ever new degrees of freedom or "empowerment" to its audience. Some of these imaginary freedoms may be trivial indeed, but even Arnold's "blowing away" will not work at the box office unless there is some new technological or other wrinkle that enriches the spectator's imagination, his virtual toolbox of meanings.

Originary analysis cannot substitute for historical research; the more links one knows of the chain connecting the specific historical work to the origin, the more clearly one understands its unique contribution to the generative process. But without an anthropological paradigm, historical analysis has no overall point; it merely relates works to their ancestors by ad hoc criteria. **Originary analysis** allows us to see the persistence of the originary function of the work underneath its historical modifications and to understand these modifications as modes of cultural self-consciousness that permit the creation of ever-new meanings and means of meaning-production.

Some examples are in order. I'll first briefly remind the reader of my [recent discussion](#) of *Hamlet*. Here the sacrificial structure of tragedy is evident, but that's not what's interesting about this play. My student may snicker at "the deferral of violence through representation," but in *Hamlet* one sees this not merely in the overall structure of the play, but in the hero's new way of representing the scene of representation to himself, self-consciously deferring the violence of his revenge and thereby enriching the cultural imagination. Another case I've discussed is that of *Madame Bovary*. Here again, **Emma's** death at the end is "tragic," including a Romantic element of ironic disillusion--her deathbed laughter at hearing the blind beggar's song. But that's not the original feature of this novel, which lies rather in Emma's ability to defer her final self-sacrifice through her creativity in assigning significance to actions and persons with the aid of consumer goods. Hers is a less self-conscious reflection on the scene of desire, but it is a reflection nonetheless, one with a vast future ahead of it.

For a final and more probatory example, I take not a single work but a century of literary history dear to my scholarly heart. How can we understand the evolution of **nineteenth-century French lyric poetry** from **Romanticism** to **Symbolism**? No overview can do justice to any single poem. Yet such analyses

are necessary if we are to have any notion of literary history. When one reads a poem by **Lamartine** or by **Mallarmé**, one wants to have a preliminary idea of its place in the tradition to which it belongs. What is needed is a general framework within which the evolution of the various elements of lyric can be understood.

Arguably the central element in all this poetry is the elegiac celebration by the male poet of a victimary female figure. This is already a favorite theme of the 18th century (**Chénier**, **Parny**...), but it is given a new strength by **Lamartine**, whose *Méditations* (1820), 19th century France's first poetic best-seller, center on the poet's love for his late mistress. Of these twenty-four poems, one, "Le lac," is remembered far better than any other; it is structured as a scene of sacrifice in two temporal moments, the first, where the poet listens to his mistress lament the passage of time on the lake, and the second, when he returns, presumably after her death, to the lakeshore and "speaks" the poem. The lake's closure allows the poet to assimilate Nature to the scene of ritual generation of meaning.

If we now turn to **Mallarmé's** late poetry, written eighty years after the *Méditations*, we find scenes of a female and, finally, a male figure's sacrifice, often but not always through drowning, as the foundation of the symbolic order exemplified by the constellation **Ursa Major** (best known for the seven-star "big dipper"). The personal story of poet and mistress, the pictorial tableau, the appeal to nature are gone, replaced by the overtly speculative interrogation of an empty scene as the locus of a foundational sacrifice at the origin of meaning.

An empirical analysis could discover parallels in theme and structure between the two poets; but only from a generative standpoint can we understand the elimination of the personal as a deepening of anthropological self-consciousness, which is at the same time ethical self-consciousness. This deepening is concomitant with the sharpening of the poet's critique of the centralization of the object of sexual desire on which lyric poetry itself depends. Where Lamartine laments **Elvire's** "natural" death, Mallarmé describes this death as the result of violence. His final abandonment of the sacrificed female (siren, "nixe," or Amazon), implicitly condemning the male-voiced lyric tradition for its exploitation of the woman-Other's physical mortality, is thus a liberating or "empowering" gesture on the plane of gender relations.

Mallarmé's poetry is the clearest example of the informing of literary production by anthropological self-consciousness; he discovers and expels the sacrificial element within lyric in the course of reflection on lyric itself. The modernist lyric, on whose turning-away from love poetry Mallarmé (via such writers as **Valéry** and **Eliot**) was arguably the central influence, is still reluctant to return to it, no doubt for fear of endangering the empowerment he effected.

There is no formula for the generation of new cultural works; it is rather these works that generate new possibilities for giving meaning to experience. Works of popular culture, such as the latest Arnold epic, can be created without fundamental anthropological reflection; but only through such reflection can the process of creation be renewed through self-understanding and raised thereby to a higher ethical level. Whether or not this is now taking place, it is crucial to leave the possibility open for the future. In particular, as I have also been saying recently (see *Chronicles* [96](#) & [103](#)), I think the time is ripe for a post-Mallarmean renewal of the lyric tradition in the context of today's less sacrificial, more reciprocal gender relations. A prospect that even my skeptical student might find intriguing.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Cultural Elevation

(Cultural Studies series no. 3)

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If one thing has preoccupied me since my college days, it's the distinction between **high** and **popular** culture. I have never been impressed by theories that disparage this distinction as a deluded reflection of hegemonic oppression of one kind or another, nor by those that purport to oppose an authentic popular culture to the "mass" culture purveyed by the elite as *panem et circenses* or "repressive tolerance" in order to divert the proletariat from its true revolutionary vocation. On the contrary, the opposition of high to popular art belies demystifying analyses of the social order as a mask for the will to power. High art has an elevating quality that it seems to me churlish to deny; in contrast, popular art, whatever its pleasures, is self-indulgently resentful. This is not the end but the point of departure of my analysis, but I cannot accept a model of culture that fails to account for this opposition.

More recently, I have come to feel that the postmodern era no longer tolerates the notion of high art, and that what is left of its heritage--in music, poetry, the plastic arts--has become so narrow in its appeal to "specialists" that it can no longer claim to elevate the soul. This artistic heritage has retained the ascetic relation to desire that has always characterized high art, but the askesis it asks of us seems to prepare us less for a chastening of our desire in the real world than for a demonstration of our superior esthetic sophistication. Asceticism become its own *raison-d'être* is just inverted **hedonism**, as **Baudelaire** recalls to us in a deliberately archaic mode: *...la Sainteté / Comme en un lit de plume un délicat se vautre, / Dans les clous et le crin cherchant la volupté* [...Sainthood / As an esthete stretches himself in a featherbed / Seeking sensual pleasure in nails and horsehair]; and ultimately, the hedonism is transformed by the iron laws of mimesis into mere **snobbery**. No doubt this has been a feature of modern art since the days of Proust's **Mme Verdurin**, but by now this feature has come to dominate all others...

But the passage of the years (I turned 56 this week) has led me to revise this perspective. I would make a case for the persistence of the **impulse to elevation** rather than of high art *per se*. The notion of esthetic "height" that implies invidious comparison with "low" or popular art is no longer tolerable; an impulse to elevation is a **movement**, not a fixed location, a goal rather than an a priori given. Above all, the esthetic question of elevation comes down to the ethical one: what is elevation for? what model of human interaction does it contribute to? And once again, I find this model not, as in the past, in public relationships but in those of intimacy, as epitomized by the communication-structure of lyric poetry, although by no means limited to it.

The originary moment of high culture is the movement of renunciation, of deferral through representation; that of popular culture, the movement toward the division of the sacrificial spoils, the *sparagmos*. The latter is, we should not forget, still a movement-toward and not the real thing, although in the orgy of the "*carnavalesque*" it can get pretty close. Just as, in **Northrop Frye's** schema, the tragic

is part of a cycle represented *in toto* in "romance," the ascetic high-cultural moment is part of the same overall sacrificial movement as the appetitive popular one; hence its foregrounding calls forth accusations of hypocrisy. But high culture does not deny sacrificial violence; it merely asks us to stand back from it enough to accept our complicity in denying the (real or virtual) humanity of the victim, whose position it forces us to understand from within.

But the tragic lesson of high culture has been put in question by the postmodern age, when there is no locus of authority. The old high culture depended on the unreflective acceptance of the public esthetic scene, whose "classical" esthetic authority beyond the esthetic subject himself enforced the refusal of desire. This authority of the esthetic reached its highest point of tension in the modernist era and was destroyed, no doubt forever, in the Holocaust and its victimary aftermath.

But now that the dust has settled, we realize that we cannot simply renounce the high-cultural ideal. In the first place, we continue to cultivate its works as a "canon" that, whatever the contorsions of modern cultural politics, is far from abandoned. As has been pointed out by astute commentators, in recent years, **Hollywood** has given more emphasis to **Shakespeare** than many English major programs. Classical music continues to flourish, even if its audience is not vast. We must therefore ask ourselves into what ethical context the lessons of these high-cultural works are being inserted--without one, they would lose their audience and become mere objects of antiquarian study--and what works are being or might be created specifically for this context.

In recent *Chronicles* I've been developing some ideas on lyric poetry that I won't rehearse here in detail. The core of my argument is that our postmodern era is characterized by (1) **individual specialization**, which in itself requires of each individual a certain "elevation" above the general norm, and, concomitantly, (2) **globalized mass media**, which render the public scene incapable of giving the individual spectator more than "symbolic" hints of ethical liberation or, in other terms, whose "stars" can no longer be exemplary in any full-bodied ethical sense, so that (3) **the intimate world of the couple** becomes a minimal cultural unit required to generate its own set of meanings, supplying a new "**private-public**" model of cultural elevation to replace the traditional high-cultural public one lost to the mass media. The intimate world thereby becomes the ethical context for a new concept of cultural elevation centered on one's privileged conversation with the Other rather than the community as a whole. (More on this in future columns.)

In this model, lyric poetry, already structured by intimacy, becomes the exemplary high art of our time. But the model can and of necessity will be extended to the other arts. The apparent contradiction of an art that circulates among the public precisely because it denies its public nature is in fact a productive paradox typical of market society, which never tires of selling us the authenticity of the noncommercial--where "*the priceless costs a little more.*" The blare of the media brings to consciousness the "private-public" specificity of a genre like poetry. And the new medium of the [Internet](#) supplies the ideal means for "private-public" communication, of which, dear reader, this *Chronicle* is a perfect example--written for and read by a few hundred people, yet virtually accessible all over the world. Still in its infancy, the Internet's virtues as a medium are handicapped by the difficulty in finding and sorting what it makes available. As increasingly better indexing services develop in the coming years, theoretical activities like this column, as well as the Net's many and varied esthetic ventures (numerous in the domain of lyric poetry) will increasingly be matched with their potential audience.

What is the relevance of all this for **Cultural Studies (CS)**? The very name, historical considerations

aside, suggests the utopian ideal of a universal method for studying cultural phenomena, high, low, or "middlebrow," without an a priori judgment of status. In practice, of course, **CS** has tended to emphasize popular phenomena generally neglected by university scholars and, perhaps even more characteristically, has attempted to juxtapose these phenomena nonhierarchically to the works of traditional high culture. But these operations presuppose a still-unquestioned structure of scientific "study" in which the "**student**"--modeled on the (etic) ethnologist rather than on the (emic) interpreter of sacred texts--is fully independent of the "**culture**," even if the latter be the student's own--as if we could have our "own" culture in the postmodern age.

The place where "elevation" enters cultural consciousness is in the (emic) relationship between a member of a society and the sacred means by which that society defers violence. But with the decline of public high culture, the old "emic" style of cultural analysis declines as well. To study culture is increasingly to externalize it, to "eticize" it--in a word, to do **CS**.

But the very self-consciousness embodied in **CS** calls forth, in good **Hegelian** fashion, the antithetical self-consciousness of "emic" cultural intimacy. "My own" culture becomes the culture that cannot (yet) be studied, that mutates into ever-new forms as soon as the legions of **CS** catch up with and formalize it. This self-conscious doubling of the general anthropological relationship between the "irrational" cultural and the "rational" economic spheres implies a heightened cultural acceleration in which **CS** becomes the cultural self-consciousness of the rationalizing marketplace, killing and packaging a living culture that continually recreates itself anew.

Today it is only in the smallest units, for which the couple provides a minimal model, that the continuity of such creation can be assured. But this is also to say, in more positive terms, that increased economic rationalization provokes the indefinite proliferation of cultural creativity in these smallest units. An incipient "*post-postmodern*" era may well be devoted to working out the consequences of this new situation.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Originary Democracy

No. 107: Saturday, August 30, 1997

My colleague **David Rapoport** of the **UCLA Department of Political Science**, the founding director of our **Center for the Study of Religion**, was recently kind enough to invite me to an upcoming conference on democracy and violence. The following sketches an originary analysis of democracy along the lines of what I am preparing for this conference.

Modern **liberal democracy** was declared a few years ago by **Francis Fukuyama** in a famous article--and how many articles become famous?--to signify the "**end of history**." This rash and paradoxical Hegelian claim aroused much controversy. Whether it requires that historically existing liberal democracies succeed in the face of the resentment they generate among the less successful, or that they indefinitely avoid destructive conflict among themselves, these are points Hegelians may wish to debate (A: If the real is rational, historical success is indeed crucial; B: But at the "end of history," in the realm of freedom, the real need no longer be rational; history has taught us all we can know of rationality). But no one has really been able to attack the author's central thesis, which is, "history" aside, that liberal democracy is the ultimate form of social organization and cannot in principle be improved upon.

Liberal democracy contains two essential components: (1) a **free market economy**, however qualified by political intervention, and (2) a **democratic political system** in which sovereignty ultimately resides in the citizenry as a whole and is regularly expressed in elections. Whatever the details, the essential feature of democratic politics is that only elected officials exercise political (legislative or executive) power, and that their election is always for a limited term.

Political theorists generally ignore the analogy between these two central institutions. Both the market and the elective political order are decision-making mechanisms that produce unanticipated results by aggregating the inputs of many individual participants. Both market prices and election returns are the resultants of a multitude of individual decisions, and neither can be determined in advance. Just as each citizen casts his vote as he sees fit, each participant in the market buys and sells as he sees fit, in both cases, of course, within the limits of what is available to buy, sell, or elect. But where there is demand, whether for goods or for political programs, the principles of both institutions dictate that someone will attempt to supply it, since "the people"'s demand is the ultimate source of all power.

Why do these institutions fit so well together that we characterize the system that combines them as "ultimate"? In both cases, decisions are made in what seems intuitively to be the most "natural," least constrained manner. At a given moment, the best price or course of action might be one dictated by an enlightened despot; but in order for the latter to impose his choice, he must have means of affirming his legitimacy as decision-maker independent of the will of the citizenry, who have no outlet for their resentment if they disagree, whereas in an elective system, all have had their chance at electing him and

will soon have the opportunity to elect someone else in his place, and in a free market, buyers and sellers determine prices among themselves.

Democracy indeed seems more "natural" to us today than other systems, yet this was hardly the case in the past: in most places and periods of history, there have been no democracies at all, and people expected to be governed independently of their will by a single ruler and/or an elite oligarchy. If we feel able to affirm nonetheless that democracy is a "natural" institution, it is because we feel that any other system requires greater expenditure of real or potential physical violence in order to maintain itself. When we form voluntary organizations, our first impulse is to conduct business, whether as a collectivity or under the leadership of officials, according to the "one person, one vote" principle; any other procedure would reflect overt or implied coercion. Similarly, any spontaneous meeting of buyers and sellers will lead to a "free market," different only from the "capitalist" free market in its local nature which limits the knowledge of supply and demand accessible to the parties to the transaction.

This suggests that both markets and democracy are **minimal** institutions, points of least resistance or "valleys" in institutional space. But neither this assertion nor that of their compatibility is an empirical statement, however they may be supported by empirical evidence. The same is true of our "moral sense" that all persons are essentially equal and in the general case should have equal rights. We can construct a "social contract" or even, a la **John Rawls**, an "original position" to make this point, but our intuition of human equality clearly precedes these artificial constructions, which are only meant to permit us to explore the consequences of this intuition.

In contrast to these a posteriori constructions, **GA's originary hypothesis** constructs a plausible model of a minimal event that could indeed have given rise not only to our "moral sense" but to all the fundamental cultural elements--language, religion, art...--we share with other human beings. We need not "affirm" that such an event took place; we merely claim that its reconstruction offers the most parsimonious set of assumptions from which to derive what we know about the human-in-general. In the case at hand, in opposition to social-contract "scenes of origin" with which it is sometimes confused, the **originary hypothesis** explains *in actu* the connection between linguistic competence and moral equality that is implicit in the "natural" democratic slogan "one person, one vote." What is "natural" about both the market and democracy is that they embody originary human reciprocity, which is not a biological but a cultural trait, one inherent in the symmetrical interchange of language. Our hypothesis explains as well why the slogan was not long ago "one person" but "one *man*," in other words, why women were not only not included in the original notion of human equality but were denied voting rights in democracies until extremely recent times. In contrast, the a posteriori rationalism of the "original position" can only condemn earlier democracies for "sexism," as though the passage from "one man" to "one person" were the simple rectification of a moral error rather than the result of a rational historical process.

What is to be learned from the historical origin of democracy in the late sixth-century **Athenian polis**? Politics as a self-consciously independent activity does not exist in predemocratic societies, where relations of power are inextricable from the system of ritual distribution. In primitive hunter-gatherer societies, this system is symmetrical, "equalitarian"; with the advent of agriculture and the accumulation of surpluses of food and consequently of labor, the ritual center becomes a source of redistribution, controlled at first by local "big-men" and eventually by a palace hierarchy such as prevailed in Greece in the **Mycenaean** era. The key step in the creation of Athenian democracy was **Solon's** abolition of debt-enslavement (*seisachtheia*) at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.; the democratic citizen is "free" (*eleutheros*) because he has been freed from dependency on the ritual distribution system and its

persisting aristocratic remains. This is a historically new conception of human identity: the citizen is an independent producer who is the master of his labor and can only be imposed upon through democratic decisions of the community within which he participates equally.

For the first time, the alienation of individual freedom to the center that is a necessity of all social organization becomes a reflective, voluntary act rather than one imposed by the sacred necessity of deferring violence. But political liberation is achieved only through the prior economic liberation of the citizen from the remains of the ritual distribution system. Some features of this liberation anticipate and even exceed those of the Early Modern *homo economicus*. The Athenian citizen was not, like the Roman, subordinated to a family he was obliged to perpetuate. Athenian parents could disinherit their children; conversely, there was no equivalent to the Roman *patria potestas* that affirmed the authority of the father over his adult sons. (See Raphael Sealey, *The Athenian Republic*, Pennsylvania State UP: 1987, chap. 2.) No doubt the Athenian economy was not the ever-expanding free market of "capitalism," if only because it was largely driven by the need to bring in slaves from the empire to replace the free unpropertied citizens in performing labor for the rich. But the essential compatibility between economic and political freedom does not depend on capitalist accumulation; it suffices that the economy be composed of individual agents liberated from the preestablished identities defined by the old palace redistribution system and the aristocratic rule that followed it.

Athenian democracy is of world-historical importance because it is the first form of social organization that consciously implements our originary intuition of human linguistic reciprocity. In Athenian politics, the violent *agon* of physical conflict was deferred, not by ritual prescription, but by its systematic transformation into the peaceful *agon* of words. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* celebrates this revolution in human self-consciousness. Democracy is the ultimate political form because it directly implements the primary function of human culture: the deferral of violence through (the free exchange of) representation(s). But the Athenian experience shows that this is only made possible by the citizen's economic liberation from the constraint of ritual distribution. It is this originary potential connection between **democracy** and the **free market** that is realized in modern liberal democracy.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Celebrity

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The accidental death of **Princess Diana** leads naturally to a reflection on celebrity that we are obliged to take up for the very reason that "the crowd" has been reflecting on it and that we are all, in one way or another, part of the crowd. That there is no simple way to describe our form of participation in mass phenomena is perhaps the most significant revelation of such an event. One cannot ignore it; there is too much publicity. One can refuse to be deeply affected by it; but refusal is a marked position within the situation opened up by the event, the unmarked position being the expression of sorrow. Yet it is superficially arch to deduce from this our slavery to the media. The use of **GA** is precisely in shedding light on situations of this sort, where we are obliged to sort out the different layers of our relationship to the scene of representation.

The lowest level of discussion is exemplified by innumerable media pundits telling us how much "we" identified with / loved / will miss the Princess, who filled the necessary function of bringing glamour to "our" otherwise banal lives. This form of discourse is at best naive and usually condescending, since the pundit's celebrity identification exists only to permit him to speak for "us," as **Victor Hugo** spoke for the voiceless masses of the nineteenth century; we may take for granted that, unlike "ours," the pundit's life is something other than banal. As the pundit's listeners, we are told what "we" think; our very reaction to this "supplementary" telling, even if positive, deconstructs the superficial naivete of this mode of discourse.

A more sophisticated approach is exemplified by **William Pfaff's** column in the *Los Angeles Times* on Wednesday, September 3. Pfaff rejects the idea of involuntary "identification" as crudely condescending; he claims that "we" follow the lives of people like Di only because "it was a great story," and that indeed, if anyone's life is "empty" and needs filling, it is not ours but that of the celebrity, whose "narcissistic" addiction to the obsessive publicity represented by *stalkarazzi* has here led to a sad conclusion. While Pfaff is right in taking the naive we-sayers to task, I do detect a whiff of resentment in his paradoxical reversal of the dependency role. Most people would unreflectively consider the celebrity obsessed by public attention to be less mimetically dependent than the "fan" fascinated by the celebrity: if the first is a slave to mimetic desire, she is individualized by it in a way inaccessible to the second. There is indeed something abject about the public appetite for celebrity, although its specific nature has not been grasped by either of the above analyses.

An apparently more useful way to talk about celebrity from an anthropological perspective is to note its resemblance to the **sacred**. But the word "sacred," like the quality it designates, hides as much as it reveals. In particular, it hides its mimetically interactive character. Both the naive pundits and Pfaff construct a model of an essentially dual relationship between "the public" or "we" and a celebrity such as Princess Diana. Adding the term "sacred" does nothing to change this: to claim that "we" treat celebrities as sacred, or that on the contrary we just consider them sources of "great stories," does not answer the

question of why or how we relate to sacred beings at all. What good does it do me to "identify" with someone who knows nothing of me? to "believe" in a celebrity / divinity I have no contact with?

Readers of this column may have guessed that the inadequacy of these dyadic subject-object analyses lies in their failure to grasp the triadic nature of desire. My relationship to a celebrity, or to the sacred that he or she incarnates in however diluted a form, cannot be understood in dyadic terms. The value of celebrity, the sacral aspect of which is enhanced in the present case by the sacrificial resonance of accidental death, lies in making us aware by concrete example of the mimetic structure of our relationship to the sacred--but not so aware that this awareness does not require elucidation, since the triangularity of desire is always hidden from our experience even when we "know" it to be present.

Why do we "identify" with celebrities? Why shouldn't we simply resent those whose visibility, as the very word "celebrity" implies, need not be justified by any noteworthy achievement? If this person, arguably no more unusual than myself, is famous while I am not, what explains his or her value to me? The answer to this conundrum is that we identify with the celebrity *against* our own milieu. The teenager who takes a rock star as his "role model" in opposition to parental norms is a familiar example. But it should not be taken to imply that celebrities are useful only for purposes of generational or other group definition. The celebrity helps me to define myself even against my contemporaries who identify with that very same celebrity. In this case, our common relationship with the celebrity approximates our originary relation to the sacred, which is in principle the same for everyone. You and I worship the same God, but he mediates our relationship by lending to my actions a transcendental significance--even if he does the same thing for you. The sacred defers our potential mutual violence because the sacred is accessible only as (indefinitely reproducible) representation, not in its (scarce) reality.

The frustration I still recall from my childhood with a way of avoiding direct competition may well have been the original germ of my interest in **Girard's** mimetic theory of desire. It works this way: Suppose **Jane** scores 95 on a math test on which **Joe** scores 90. She expects Joe to show her the deference due her superior achievement; but instead, he tells her, "You're not so great; my friend **Jack** scored 99!" She expected to be able to profit from dyadic comparison with Joe, but discovers that, from his perspective, she is symmetrical not with him but with his other acquaintances, among whom she is not the best. Now Jack, who is best of the three at math, is a person of some rarity; we might even call him, on a local level, a *celebrity*. He may not really be Joe's friend, may not know him at all--indeed, he may not even exist--but his even imaginary existence is useful to Joe, not because he "identifies" with his success, but because he can use it as a weapon against Jane.

No matter how tenuous my connection to the celebrity, the simple invocation of a name preserves me from the direct competition of my fellows. Alice may be prettier than Betty; but Betty's movie magazine depicts the girls she "really" identifies with, who are, needless to say, far prettier than Alice. Charles is buffer than Dan, but the guys in Dan's physical culture magazine make Charles look skinny. One identifies with celebrities precisely to the extent that one feels the need to define oneself against one's own milieu. This is what is meant by the oft-stated opposition between the "emptiness of my life" and my fantasy of the celebrity's fairy-tale existence. But it isn't emptiness but *plenitude* that disturbs me--the plenitude of the world of Others. Celebrity-fantasy, indeed, any kind of fantasy, doesn't fill an empty space; on the contrary, it helps me separate myself from the evidence of my mediocrity that those close to me provide. If I were a hermit, I'd have no need to fantasize about celebrities.

None of this should lead us to deny that figures like Diana are loved, albeit not with the reciprocal human

love that has motivated these columns. The quasi-sacred presence of a celebrity makes us potentially more tolerant and even loving to the very neighbors with whom we would otherwise be in conflict, just as love of God makes humans potentially more tolerant and loving to each other. Yet neither can we deny that the celebrity-sacred, even or especially when practiced by the intelligentsia, is a degraded, "sacrificial" form of sacred, just as Arnold-movies and the like, even or especially when cultivated by the intelligentsia, are degraded, "sacrificial" forms of art. All the camp sophistication in the world can't make my "relationship" with someone like Diana more than a stylish version of Joe's ploy against Jane. The postmodern age is allergic to centralized exemplarity. Only in death--and especially in unnecessarily early death--can a celebrity come close to a moment of genuine consecration.

The real lesson to be learned from "our" cult of celebrity is that we cannot simply go without sacrality. Postmodern cynicism and demystification have lost their edge and become merely perverse forms of naivete. Yet traditional religions have their limits, and the newer religions strain our credulity.

But sacrality, properly understood, is nothing other than reverence for the personhood of what cannot simply be appropriated by our appetite. Christianity has already taught us that the highest form of worship is that which understands the humanity of the sacred center. The best way for us to extend the Christian lesson of post-sacrificial sacrality into the postmodern era is to conserve our worshipful energy for those closest to us, those alone whom we can really love because we can expect them to love us in return.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Carnal Knowledge

No. 109: Saturday, September 20, 1997

Last week's *New Republic* (September 8 & 15) contains a lengthy review (pp. 29-38) by **Margaret Talbot** of *Bettie Page: The Life of a Pin-Up Legend* by **Karen Essex** and **James Swanson** (General Publishing Group). Like the book itself, the review is a piece of nostalgia, including three photographs of Ms. Page, who flourished as "America's underground pin-up queen" from 1950 to 1957. Although I was sixteen in 1957, certainly old enough to appreciate such materials, I must admit having no memory of either the name or the body of Ms. Page, whose dark page-boy makes her look (especially in one photo with glasses) like my idea of **Lois Lane**. But my subject here is not Bettie Page, but the widespread nostalgia for a sexually more innocent age, as expressed with some poignancy in the article's final paragraph:

Finally [the Bettie Page photographs] are tinged with pathos, since they are survivals of a time when fetishism and exhibitionism and ordinary sexual adventure really meant something, when their setting was the cheesy chiaroscuro world of roadside motels with linoleum floors and vinyl furniture, not the fake expensive world of fashion magazines and rock videos, a time before pseudo-porn seeped into advertising and was made pleasant and normal. These images remind us what it was like when erotica was mostly hidden. There are many reasons to oppose repression, but in the universe of repression, one learned the twin arts of fantasy and mystery. Bettie Page always seemed so good when she was being so bad. It is a paradox made of distinctions that we have almost completely destroyed. Poor gluttoned smirking us. If we cannot be bad, how will we be good? (38)

Ah, how innocent things were back then! We have heard this so many times it sounds like a truism. But this kind of thinking is both pernicious and false. *Contra* Ms. Talbot, I think we are privileged with a far better chance than our fifties counterparts of transcending our "gluttoned smirking" side and of giving the "ordinary sexual adventure" we call **love** its best chance of success.

This way of writing about pornography is based on an extremely narrow idea of the erotic, one that could be summed up in the phrase "if you've seen one, you've seen them all." It implies that once one has seen a depiction of a normally hidden part of a woman's body or of some particular sex act, then that body part or that act loses its interest, no longer "really means something." There is an interesting *glissement* in this passage between the seepage of **pseudo-**, that is, **softcore** porn into advertising, videos, etc., and the general availability of **hardcore** porn which indeed is still set, *mutatis mutandis*, in the same "cheesy" world as the softer stuff of forty years ago--for that kind of erotica, although a lot easier to find than in the old days, is still "mostly hidden."

But my critique is independent of this nuance. Because Ms. Talbot has an understanding of sexuality divorced from the idea of love--which I am sure she considers a "good thing" to add to the sexual mix,

but clearly not an essential component--she not only fails to note the present era's progress on the sexual front, she fails to understand that pornography and even what used to be called "perversions" themselves pay homage to the sexual ideal of mutual love: the mutual gift of sexual pleasure without the abandonment of mutual care.

My first point is that the generalization of sexual knowledge--through the media and the education system as well as pornography--spells not the universalization but the end of the "smirking" attitude, which is predicated rather on the rarity of this knowledge. No doubt the distribution of sexual information to the young has its problems; sex education in the lower grades is offensive, less in my mind through any direct psychological damage to the children involved than through the disrespect of our educational institutions that this kind of instruction inspires in them. This aside, the advantage that accrues to society from the dissemination of sexual knowledge is in foregrounding the difference, which previous societies tended to elide, at least above the lowest social levels, between sexual knowledge in general and "carnal knowledge" in particular.

That in the good old days one had real knowledge only of one's presumably unique sexual partner--knowledge that such as Bettie Page hinted at but never revealed--is a limitation rather than an advantage. A look at the "marriage manuals" of past generations will convince anyone both that explicit sexual knowledge has always been of value and that the *pudeur* of the past made such knowledge difficult to obtain in a safe and respectable context.

What does one "know" when one sees a naked body or a sexual act? The general conformation of the organs, the general procedure of the act. But acts of love are not general but particular. One does not love the loved one's body less because one has prior knowledge of bodies in general. The generalization of sexual knowledge among adults is conducive to reverence for one's Other not as a generic sexual being but as a particular person who does not lose his or her individuality in moments of sexual intimacy. It is no doubt regrettable that some of this knowledge is obtained by means of posed images of real people: pornography is not a nice industry. But as a form of degradation, it is certainly preferable to the widespread prostitution that was the past century's way of spreading sexual knowledge to the male population, while keeping "respectable" women in the dark as much as possible.

Let me not be misunderstood: I am not writing "in favor of" the distribution of pornography. But this distribution is a fact of our lives, and, aside from keeping it out of the hands of small children, attempts to arrest it in the age of the **Internet** are bound to be ineffective and to produce more harm than good. I would suggest that, like many objectionable forms of knowledge, beginning with that obtained in the *felix culpa* of the **Fall of Man**, sexual knowledge is ultimately more a blessing than a curse.

My second point is that pornography, as well as perversions like **bondage**, **pedophilia**, and the like, however reprehensible or even criminal, should be considered as manifestations not of "evil instincts" but of deviated desires for love. This does not mean that all such acts should be tolerated; but if we understand them in this way, we are less apt to mislocate the source of human evil in sexuality instead of in our desiring nature in general--a tendency that has been paradoxically encouraged by the **Freudian** mythology that dominates our era. Even the aforementioned biblical scene of the Fall often alluded to in support of this view suggests quite the opposite. The eating of the forbidden fruit is in no way sexual; it is a simple act of resentment. Only after the Fall does sexual desire become dangerous and shameful. It is desire as such that is the human problem; sexuality, because it is desire for another person, intensifies the inherently problematic nature of human desire, but it is not its source.

We should see love as the "natural" *telos* of sexual activity, and understand perversions in terms of the deviated means they use to reach this telos. **Pedophilia**, to take a particularly distasteful example, deviates the exchange of love to a child whose innocence of sexual desire substitutes for innocence *within* sexual desire. The child is in this respect a "fetish," a sign of innocence used as an instrument rather than a person. We will condemn the pedophile with a better conscience, and perhaps even give him some hope of being cured, if we separate innocence from childhood and consider it as a rightful quality of sexuality rather than a naive illusion.

Similarly, **sexual bondage** perverts the mutual caring that is essential to sexual love. Here we are on more familiar cultural terrain; the complaints of **Petrarchian** poets about their love's cruelty are less controversial than **Humbert Humbert's** paean to **Lolita**. What lover would not suffer for his beloved? but asking her to whip him is, once more, "fetishizing" this suffering in a voluntary act as opposed to a context where suffering would serve a real purpose. (This is, to my mind, what "fetishism" really is; the current fascination for things and sexual organs that passes for a theory of fetishism is, on the contrary, fetishism itself. Sexuality, like all things human, is essentially interactive.)

When I look through the best-sellers in an airport news-stand or flip through the magazines at the supermarket check-out counter, I am always struck by the importance popular literature gives to **love**. In magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour*, it may be cloaked in a mask of hedonistic sexuality. But beyond the recipes for multiple orgasms, these publications are primarily focused on finding and keeping the right person, not merely as a spouse, but as one's "**true love**." However corny this term appears in an academic context, it sells in a popular one because true love, in all its simple transparency, is what people want--it is what we need.

In our time, when the decline of the institutional sacred puts an ever-greater burden on the couple, I think we should be grateful for any form of knowledge that allows us a better chance of seeing and valuing the uniqueness of another person. We should not abandon the ideal of sexual innocence--*au contraire*--but it should be asserted *en connaissance de cause*, after sexual knowledge rather than before; only thus can the superficial cynicism of the "glutted smirking" response be disarmed. It is preferable that we appreciate and defend the virtues of love out of knowledge--even knowledge obtained from the unsavory purveyors of post-Bettie Page erotica--rather than out of ignorance.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Resistance to GA

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Recently **Richard van Oort** (who needs no introduction to readers of these *Chronicles*) expressed some concern with what I shall call in **DeManian** terms the "*resistance to GA*." Why aren't students of culture convinced of the necessity of an **originary hypothesis**? Why do they choose the inelegance of cultural empiricism over the minimalism of originary thinking? Even independently of scenes of origin, why is the mimetic theory of desire not preferred to the mythical mishmash of **Freudian** doctrine with its **Lacanian** and feminist overlays?

The simplest answer is that the problem is essentially political: the intellectuals who study culture, if only to justify their status as intellectuals, are suspicious of any theory that appears to validate the hierarchical reality of the social order by deriving it from originary necessity. Hence they prefer to consider the ideal of reciprocal morality as an unexplained transcendental imperative against which all societies come up short rather than a model guaranteed by our originary use of language. As a result, they see history as moving toward an eschatological horizon defined by the establishment of a static egalitarian utopia rather than an unending dynamic process of deferring conflict through representations that provide the differential basis for further conflict and for new representations.

But Richard might still wonder why we need the minimalist hypothesizing of **GA** in order to defend the movement of history.

If the study of culture were truly a science, the debate over **GA** would be conducted quite differently. If the minimalism of the originary hypothesis has not been accepted, it is not because a more parsimonious hypothesis has been found, but rather because, in the matter of fundamental anthropology, "scientific" neutrality is felt to be better served by disallowing any hypothesis at all. That each is in fact operating under his own implicit--and no doubt far from minimal--hypothesis is acceptable, since under the circumstances, he can make no attempt to impose it on others.

This de facto situation is so close to the originary hypothesis in its more recent formulations as to make their essential difference all the more apparent. The hypothesis, contrary to what many think, does not require "belief" in a particular scenario of the originary event. It affirms rather that **the most parsimonious version of any given anthropology is the one that constructs such an event in such a way as to include all the elements that are essential to its vision of the human condition.**

The originary hypothesis is not reducible to any given scenario or set of scenarios. What it does affirm, and what is really the bone of contention, is that an analysis of cultural phenomena implies an anthropology the foundations of which may be specified. It is this specification that is felt as restrictive. But failure to do so is not an act of "freedom." However one proceeds in an analysis, one ends with a finished text from which an implicit anthropology or vision of the human may be inferred even if it was not thematized at the outset. As anyone who has ever written a doctoral dissertation knows, you write the

introduction last, and you often discover in writing it a set of basic principles rather different from the set you started out with.

To refuse to define basic principles at all is, in effect, to impose another set--quite often, in our still-modernist era, a set that has ostensibly little to do with anthropology. **GA's** problem is that it is indeed an anthropology, that it affirms that culture is made by people, "selves" if you like, whereas our cultural specialists have been deconstituting and deconstructing the Self--first the bourgeois Self, then any Self at all--for the last 150 years.

But you don't have to take my word for it. Here is a footnote from **Paul de Man** himself, the ultimate master of modernist criticism whose vast learning and extraordinary intellectual finesse (and, I might add, helpfulness to his students) were undeniable, whatever one thinks of his wartime publication record. This little gem is found in "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory: Riffaterre and Jauss" (in *Lyric Poetry Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, Cornell, 1985), a exemplarily enigmatic article that sheds considerable light on the master's denunciation of ethical readings of cultural texts as illusions of "blindness" that the critic's "insight" can discover only at the price of an unnamable "blindness" of his own. (**GA** does not find this paradox fearsome because it understands that culture deals with it not by endlessly going round in circles but, if one can pardon the **Hegelianism**, *dialectically*. Whether or not we eventually blow each other up, we know a bit more about ourselves than our ancestors, and we are better off putting this knowledge at the service of a constructive rather than a nihilist vision of the human.)

Rather than being a heightened version of sense experience, the erotic is a figure that makes such experience possible. We do not see what we love but we love in the hope of confirming the illusion that we are indeed seeing anything at all. (n. 14, p. 63)

De Man is speaking here not of a love affair but of a line from a poem by **Victor Hugo**, "*j'aime le carillon*" [I love/like the carillon]--whence his reference to the erotic as a "figure." Yet his text refers to the erotic in general; that is, it expresses an implicit anthropology.

The first sentence that calls the erotic a figure asserts a generality not incompatible with originary anthropology: the erotic is "figural" in de Man's vocabulary in the sense that it depends on representation, and therefore on the paradoxical interaction between representation and what it represents. To write "I love the carillon" is not to make the imaginary carillon more vivid ("*heightened version of sense experience*"), but to provoke in us the "transcendental" imagination that there "is" indeed a carillon rather than the mere signifier on the page.

But **the second sentence**, whatever the author's intention, goes beyond the realm of writing. "We do not see what we love" because love and seeing are on two different planes: we see materially but love transcendently, that is, love is mediated through signs. "Seeing anything at all" is an "illusion" because "anything" in this context belongs to the sign-world rather than the real world. "To see anything" in this sense means to have an experience of meaning, and for de Man, the conjunction of experience and meaning can only be illusion--the literary text simply makes the illusion convincing.

All these categories cry out for a **generative** explanation. Why? Because only thus can they be left in their DeManian paradoxicality while being understood at the same time in their human reality. No, we cannot have love without signs, but why do we have signs in the first place? How can it be said, without contradicting de Man's essential point, that **God is Love**? The transcendental realm of the sign is not,

cannot be, **simply independent of the human**, as de Man and, in the last analysis, all modernists think; but it is not, as humanists like to imagine, **simply human** either. The sign is both of us and beyond us. But this is a sterile paradox unless it is given meaning within our fundamental anthropology--unless, in a word, the transcendental can be shown to emerge from worldly immanence precisely in the locus, in the "moment," of the human. Which is the very content of the **originary hypothesis**.

I'm not sure how many **deconstructionists** the above argument would persuade, not to speak of their successors, the **multiculturalists** who would find its very sophistication a sign of Eurocentric bias. But I hope, at least, that I have persuaded **Richard van Oort**. If I can't convince Richard of the intellectual validity of **GA**, then I'm really in trouble!

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Personal Origins of GA: 1. Bronx Romanticism

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I have been arguing for the past twenty years or so that **Generative Anthropology** is, insofar as the term can be used in human science, essentially **true**. But the current trend of autobiographical "witnessing," far from a mere spinoff of the talk shows, reflects a central question of anthropological epistemology. So much must be taken on faith in using a model like that of **GA**, that however "objectively" such a model is presented, there is always a point in asking the question "*D'où parlez-vous?*" [Where are you speaking from?] Whence the interest of investigating **GA's** personal "origin" in my own hypothetical socio-psychological predisposition to such theories. This interest is not biographical, nor even ultimately sociological, since sociology has no way of discussing the overall human (anthropological) significance of the social formations it studies. But we must begin from these personal and sociological givens if we are to gain a meta-anthropological appreciation of **GA** capable of preventing its reduction to a reflection of the socio-psychological status of its inventor.

My first approximation to a self-definition will be as an example of "**Bronx romanticism**." Without speaking of anything like discrimination or "victimization," third-generation lower-middle-class Americans like myself were not well integrated into American culture. When I was born, ethnicity was still something one divested oneself of; back in the 30s, my uncle changed his (and my mother's) family name from **Finkelstein** to **Fintell**. My father finished college (**CCNY**) and law school, but never practiced law because of the depression and never acquired the esthetic tastes of a man of culture. Thus although I was comfortable enough with cultural materials to abandon mathematics for the Humanities, I was not enough at home in my own culture to study **English**, of whose *colonial* nature I am suspicious to this day, resenting less the colonization of the thirteen colonies than my own. Whence the attraction of a foreign language, particularly that of the country that helped us-- *Lafayette, nous voilà!*--to throw off the English yoke.

But the acquisition of **French** culture, and of culture in general, was of too great consequence for someone of my lowly but respectable social status to take lightly. Whence my intense and durable resentment of **modernism**--and the reason why I became a "*dix-neuviémiste*" [19th-century specialist] rather than a "*vingtiémiste*" [20th-c. ditto]. Modernism is a distillation of everything about culture that excludes me, not excepting a generous helping of **antisemitism**. The modernist, typically of upper bourgeois stock, despises the culture of the bourgeoisie and above all the lower "white collar" aspirants to this culture, who cannot afford to treat it with the contempt of those who already possess it.

Freudianism, and even more so, **Lacanianism**, is a form of modernism, the latter in its arrogant, mystifying style more so than even in its elusive content. The **mimetic theory of desire**, on the other hand, is founded not on **Nietzschean** arrogance but--however drastic the oversimplification--on **Christian** humility. The individual is not invited to make himself interesting via a personal myth--the primitive and essential function of Freud's "primal scene"--but to shed all pretensions of "originary"

uniqueness. The simple mimetic triangle offers the possibility of constructing a more convincing collective model of the origin of desire than Freud's attempt in *Totem and Taboo* to invent an originary scene on the basis of Oedipal frustration.

GA's minimalism, in contrast with the richer but less rigorous Freudian mythology, reflects the *tabula rasa* of a class lacking all cultural baggage beyond intelligence and self-discipline. In opposition to modernist mystification, **GA** simplifies. Its challenge is to avoid being reductive. Here a sociological analogy offers clarification. The meritocratic social model espoused by the white collar class is not "reductive"; in imposing intelligence as a criterion, it privileges and encourages the trait that best correlates with potential creativity, that is, the potential generation of new degrees of freedom. Similarly, **GA's** minimal model is all the richer in potentiality because its understanding of the human is bound by the fewest constraints.

Why is **GA** a manifestation of "Bronx romanticism"? It is, in the first place, the creation of one from the **Bronx**, that is, of one without a well-defined culture of his own; it sets human equality at the origin of all cultural phenomena. Because the path by which the universal reciprocity of the originary scene leads to such phenomena is always historically reversible, there is no culture, however aristocratic, from which I am in principle excluded. The opening-up of the cultural to one defined only by the desire and capacity to acquire it--the representative of white-collar respectability as opposed to blue-collar resentment--is an essential element of **GA**. But it is only one half of a diptych.

The other half, which adds to "Bronx" the qualifier of "*romantic*," can be revealed only in something of a confessional mode. (I will trust the readers of these *Chronicles* not to spread it to those among whom it would be likely to damage my reputation.) The romanticism of originary thinking depends on the simplest of paradoxes: in imposing the requirement of a minimal theory, which I am at the same time the first to create, I leave minimal room for competition. The richer the original content of the theory, the easier it is to participate in its elaboration; the quirks and absurdities of Freudianism have done anything but hamper its development. **GA's** generative structure makes this maximally difficult. Its minimalism is the maximal defense of my own contribution to anthropological theory.

At this point, the oxymoronic nature of the expression "Bronx romanticism" might seem to reflect the quasi-unviability of the theory it illustrates. It is here that my sociological argument must transcend itself in **anthropology**.

Like **Virgil** in the *Divine Comedy*, sociology can only take us so far. It is an "etic" theory, one that situates the theoretician in another world from the theorized. As even **George Soros** understands (see [Chronicle 82](#)), this is not the way human institutions really work; the etic model is justified only in "local" cases when contamination between the two universes can be limited. More typically, the highest level operates as a "market" on which the theoretician's views can be discounted. Such is the case, for example, with political opinions: pundits analyze the nation's political configuration, at the same time contributing to and thereby modifying that configuration--but there is no universal political truth to which these views tend.

But I am not providing sociological sources for my own ideas in order to pigeonhole them in a sociological grid. Rather than reducing **GA** to its sociological determinants along the lines of the "sociology of knowledge," my idea is rather to demonstrate the world-historical generativity of my own particular social origins. Some moments of historical space-time are more productive than others, and the present exploration of my own is founded on the assumption that the truth of **GA** is associated with a

certain social experience, not put into question by it.

I'll develop these points further in a future *Chronicle*, hopefully in an *Anthropoetics* article, perhaps even in a book. It seems to me that lack of previous social standing coupled with the desire to acquire cultural knowledge gives a pretty good approximation to the indefinite status, not only of the participants in **GA's** hypothetical originary scene, but of those in **John Rawls'** liberal-democratic "*original position*." Human culture is "for" everyone, but whether one seeks to understand how human culture arose or wishes to create a model of the "good society" to which it presumably tends, the best model of "everyone" must eliminate all a priori privilege, while at the same time requiring a genuine commitment to the social order that excludes such figures as **Sartre's** "least favored member of society"--no social order can be driven by the needs and desires of those with the least ability or commitment to offer it. The "Bronx romantic" is therefore not a bad approximation to "everyone." As we shall see, this figure's marginal position in the academic world is itself not without significance.

To be continued...

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

What is Postmodernism?

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The cleverest definition one might give of the postmodern is that it is the period that permits its thinkers the maximum of cleverness in defining it. Since the postmodern is the era of our own ever-changing present, that it resists definition reflects not so much its recalcitrance as our own impatience.

Instead of seeking to determine from within what postmodernity *is*, a paradoxical activity akin to starting a sentence with "This sentence is about...", I think it preferable to define it by the form of thought most suited to it: (you guessed it) **Generative Anthropology**. This suitability reflects more than the mere fact that **GA**, unlike earlier forms of anthropological thought (philosophy, religion, social science, and their reflection/anticipation in art), is a product of this very era. **GA** alone is able to theorize the paradoxical mechanism of transcendence that permits "history" to go on even in the era of the "end of history."

We've heard enough about the "end of history" recently, following on the **Nietzschean** "death of God" that **Jean-François Lyotard** rewrites as "the end of master narratives." All these expressions, to which one might add "the end of (high) culture," incorporate the healthy notion of human culture's self-(re)generation within the ungenerative framework of subject-object **metaphysics**, with the result that, instead of celebrating the creativity of human interaction, they turn it on its head into a destructive force, like **Marx's**--nonetheless admiring--vision of "capitalism" in the *Communist Manifesto*.

In contrast, **GA** understands culture as the continuous generation of transcendence. It exposes the eschatological idea that culture tends toward a utopian (or, what amounts to the same thing, a dystopian) end as a fallacy based on the fetishistic substitution of the product of generation for its process, which alone is permanent. The postmodern era has discovered this fallacy; the end of modernism is the age of generative--of minimal--thinking.

Postmodernism refers to an ethical attitude not superior--for then we would find an altogether new name--but merely posterior to that of **Modernism**. Modernism in turn must be distinguished from its predecessor, **Romanticism**. Both are internal reactions to the market system that more or less naively present themselves as external reactions--the first, relatively benign, the second, quite inhuman. Both have profound political implications; both generate "post-market" utopias that can be classified under the rubric of "Socialism." But Romanticism had its roots in the past; its name refers to the romances of the Middle Ages, to **Mme de Staël's Northern-Germanic-Romantic** as opposed to **Southern-Latin-Classical** cultures. Within living memory of the Old Regime, the Romantics thought post-Revolutionary bourgeois society an aberration, a historical hiatus that could be healed by a Restoration--either of the monarchy or of the Revolution itself. A century later, Modernists could have no such illusion; they could envisage the end of the market system only as the apocalyptic inauguration of socialist utopia. Distilled to its purest form, the resentment of the market and its institutions--a resentment generated by these very institutions--generates the political movements responsible for the

greatest mass murders in history.

Market society is "modern" in that it constantly renews itself. This is not merely an observed social fact, although culture often affects this elegiac view; market society renews itself because it constantly recirculates our own desire. Mature market society is **consumer society**, driven by the need to generate demand for new products and the "messages" they bear. But at the horizon of the commercially available objects of "mass reproduction" lies the unique artwork that bears not a message but a *revelation*, that speaks in an **ostensive** (pointing-to) rather than a **declarative** (talking-about) language. The modern artist's disdain for the market betrays, far more acutely than that of the Romantic, his need to deny not merely an implicit harmony of aims with the market but a homology of practice. Where the Romantic dandy's "narcissism" raises his value on the labor market, the modern artist's refusal to imitate is his means of assuring his mimetic uniqueness.

Consumer goods, whatever messages we may consider them as bearing, generally fill some practical function. We make a statement with the car we drive, but whatever model we choose, we expect it to run. Since the artwork is unencumbered by function, it is the supreme consumer good, the most "modern" because its value is most subject to the pure pressure for newness ("originality"). But for that very reason, it can be made to incarnate the supreme condemnation of the bourgeois exchange system, whose goods--"commodities"--can never attain to its pure originality. Insofar as he demands of the new that it save him from the common desires of the market system, the modern artist is a *Modernist*, an espouser of the cause of the modern.

It is this "*ism*" of Modernism, not its modernity, that is fatal. The modern, the new, is the unexpected, the undiscountable, that which one cannot *espouse* because one cannot know what it is. To espouse the new is in effect to express impatience with the old that precedes and to condemn the mechanisms of market society for their incapacity to absorb the newness created by the artist, which is precisely what gives his work value in this very society.

Why do we pay such attention, after all, to the Self of the artist? Because it is in effect a model for the Self of the bourgeois. If the Romantic is the bourgeois youth who "makes himself interesting" (*se rend intéressant*) before undertaking a bourgeois career, the Modernist is the ultrabourgeois, the absolute bourgeois, the innovator whose innovations, because they can never be recuperated by the exchange system, are destined to enjoy a special prestige and the attending surplus value within that exchange system. Which is to say that the artist is the archetype of the successful **entrepreneur**.

But this exemplary role is only efficacious to the extent that it is invisible; and its invisibility is catastrophic because it is the hiddenness to bourgeois society of its own reality. The "*ism*" in Modernism is the sign of this disastrous failure of self-consciousness, which is expressed in the political realm by the other *ism*, Socialism. In either case, the utopian horizon of market society is fetishized, conceived as an achievable reality when it is and can never be more than a horizon. In art, this can have no terrible consequences; not so in politics.

In the perspective just suggested, Postmodernism is not the "*ism*" of the postmodern but the "post" of Modernism--of "*ism*" as such, of which the *ism* of the new is the *reductio ad absurdum*. But it would be naive to found an ontology on such a distinction. It suffices to have learned the modernist lesson of the freedom of the signifier to predict that once we are posterior to Modernism, we will invent a postmodern of which we will attempt to espouse the *ism*, if only out of simple curiosity.

And why not? We need sacrifice no anthropological lucidity in espousing the cause of the postmodern. We are postmoderns and even Postmodernists so long as our movements toward the horizon do not incarnate belief in the reality of the horizon. The postmodern is the era without causes that accepts the paradox of affirming the cause of having no more causes. Only the unironic *refusal* of causes would be a cause with which it could not identify. This paradox is a mystery for metaphysics, and for religion as well--which prizes mystery more than metaphysics. It is clear only to the anthropology that begins from the paradoxical emergence of the vertical from the horizontal, the world of meaning from the world of things, desire from appetite, signs from mere realities. **GA** alone of all thought-systems it has no fear of paradox.

The **great fear** of modernity is that, to put it in **Heideggerian** terms, it will reduce **Being** to (market) **value**. This is the context of the tiresomely repeated Nietzscheism that God is dead and that all is henceforth nihilism, decadence, subjectivism, etc. Our fear of the decadence of ritual forms is fear of expanded competition from the other Selves liberated by this decadence; conversely, the myth that we need some or any specific set of forms to protect us from the war of all against all is a vestigial ritual belief.

GA's minimalism assures us that the "subjective" ethical principles of the modern age and the divinely revealed ones of earlier times are all products of the same generative schema. Once we do away with the utopian fetishism of the horizon, we are free to realize that the Being revealed / generated by the human use of the sign protects humanity, whatever the state of its ritual system, from falling out of transcendent verticality into the brutish state of horizontal immanence.

The "forgetting of Being" is only its rememoration under ever-new forms. The ism of Postmodernism is its faith in the transhistorical truth of this rememoration. But it must be sustained by a generative theory that permits us to rid ourselves of our traditional fear of the decadence of human institutions and opens our minds to humanity's admirable ability to transform itself.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Personal Origins of GA

2. Bronx Romanticism and Theoretical Minimalism

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Two weeks ago, in [Chronicle 111](#), I developed the idea of **GA** as an individual creation attributed to "**Bronx Romanticism**." Since the chances are that the reader is not from the Bronx, I thought it might be useful to give this term a more universal sense.

One consequence of living in the postmodern era is that it is no longer possible to dismiss ethical attitudes as simply out of date. This does not mean that we live in an era in which "anything is possible." It means simply that we must justify our actions by their ethical content and not by their apparent conformity with the direction of history. This applies, for example, to religious practices, the very focal point of **Nietzsche's** dictum that "God is dead." On the contrary, these practices are flourishing widely enough a century later to put in doubt the dogma, in force in the intellectual community since the Renaissance, that modernity goes hand in hand with "**secularization**." Similarly, postmodernity suggests we should doubt the demise of a more secular but supposedly equally obsolete notion: that of the unique individual **Self** and its destiny.

The "Bronx" I refer to as the homeland of my romanticism is less a place than a state of mind, specifically that of the post-**Depression** generation expected to find success in prosperous postwar America not just for themselves but for their parents. The **Bronx High School of Science (BHSS)**, when I attended it from 1954 to 1957, was composed in large majority of such persons, mostly male, and overwhelmingly Jewish. Very few of these people still live in the Bronx. The Bronx is a place of transition, and in the case of this particular generation, of transition deferred and thereby intensified.

Yet not all the inhabitants of this particular Bronx could be called Romantics. The typical BHSS graduate became a doctor or engineer and made a good living, without suffering too much angst as to his or her uniqueness. American society in the 1960s, even more than today, was *la carrière ouverte aux talents* [careers open to persons of talent]: there was a shortage of MD's and PhD's, and there's always a shortage of people with 150 IQs. But given that the intense pressure to succeed generated by the failed parental dreams of the Depression was comparable to that faced by the post-Revolutionary bourgeois youth depicted in **Balzac's** novels, it was not surprising that at least some of us would be more attracted to the structure of transcendence itself than to any possible worldly incarnation of it. To define oneself as unique in a mimetic world is **Girard's** *mensonge romantique* [romantic lie], but to *seek* this uniqueness is not a lie but a paradox, one I think Girard himself has lived as well as I.

The search to be recognized by others as unique might seem to be the ultimate in self-centeredness but, seen in a different perspective, it is the essential postmodern ethical act. In an arguably "posthistorical" world defined by its suffering less from the "positive-sum" and therefore solvable problems of poverty,

hunger, and pollution than from the apparently zero-sum game of mutual recognition, the individual's search for unique self-definition can be rewarded only insofar as it benefits the self-definition of others.

I touched on this point in my recent reflections on celebrity: the celebrity is "loved" not because we really identify with him/her, but because our "acquaintance" with the celebrity, however distantly mediated, serves as a weapon against the others within our own milieu. But this formulation is cynical because our relationship to celebrity is cynical. A celebrity, after all, is someone whose recognition is mediated through the mass media, that is, through a channel in which information flows only one way. (Which is not to say that the mass communication-system as a whole receives no feedback from its consumers. On the contrary, as **Gianni Vattimo** points out in *The Transparent Society* [Johns Hopkins, 1992/1989], providing this feedback is the very *raison-d'être* of the social sciences.) The requirements of the public stage are not those of self-definition in the common sense of the term, but of self-display, even self-mutilation. The public personality is not a "self" precisely to the extent that the costumes worn by stage performers differ from those suitable for everyday life.

Self-definition in the sense in which a Bronx Romantic uses the term is not the establishment of a stage persona, but the creation of a message of uncontested originality. At the same time, the viability of this message is paradoxically dependent on its capacity for contributing to the enrichment of the messages of others. There is a simple analogy to this in the market system. In the absence of monopoly, I will sell my goods only to the extent that others find buying from me beneficial. If the goods in question are themselves means of producing messages, as all goods potentially are in consumer society, the analogy is better. If the "goods" in question are *ideas*, the analogy is perfect. Whence my hope of creating a unique idea that at the same time would facilitate the creation of new ideas by others.

This simply stated goal already determines the key feature of **GA**: its **minimalism**. Minimalism is not merely an empirical feature of **GA** in contrast with other systems, in the sense that the mimetic theory of desire is more minimal than the psychoanalytic theory. Ockham's razor not only determines the evolution of the theory, it is the horizon of the theory itself. Which is to say that, rightly considered, there are no "personal features" of **GA** by which I as its "creator" could wish to be remembered. **GA** is a cultural theory / theory of culture that is vanishingly cultural and maximally theoretical--vanishingly creation and maximally discovery. The Bronx Romantic, like all Romantics, wants to be remembered. But because the Bronx contains nothing memorable, he devises a theory that lets him be remembered for having reduced memorability to a minimum.

The use of such a theory is in the adaptability of its explanatory model to all the phenomena of human culture, that is, to all uses of representation. Representation is never simply "expression": even when one "says what one feels," one represents oneself **as...** (**Erving Goffman** was one of the rare social scientists to appreciate the paradoxicality of this structure; **Gregory Bateson**, in a very different mode, was another.) Cultural interpretation is the creation of models for what lies behind or rather *within* the process of **representation-as**. Today we have put aside the old, naive models of cultural expression, but the new, cynical models, simplistically associated with postmodernity, simply imply that because there is nothing but representation-as, there is nothing to represent. Vattimo, in the book mentioned above, can only reject "patriarchal" monism for "chaotic" pluralism. But what we represent is not our fixed human essence but the focus of our mimetic interaction. We represent the object of our common desire in such a way as to avoid coming into conflict over it. We make it alternately the victim of our violence and the divinity that has deferred this violence. **GA** fosters respect for the minimal necessity of this deferral that makes human existence possible.

My UCLA colleague **Sara Melzer** ended her recent post to the **GAlist** by remarking that the **Internet** was the appropriate locus for the Bronx Romantic's appropriation of French literature to American placelessness. I think a generalization of this idea offers both a useful model of **GA** as well as an insight into the current **GA** presence on the **WWW**.

Think of the postmodern self as a **WWW site**, an extension of the near-ubiquitous **personal home page**. Your site contains links to other sites; you choose which sites to link to, but not the sites that link to you.

In this model of human self-representation, the "recognition" reflected in created links is always granted in function of one's own self-image. Each person constructs his own page, and links do not signify adoration of another image, but auxiliary means of enhancing one's own. No one wants his page to be nothing but a conduit to another page. Your user is not supposed to remain on the linked page, but to return to the page on which the link was found. If he doesn't hit the **Back** key, then your page must be redone.

Hence the more I might strive for substantive "celebrity" by loading my site with striking images, the less likely your user is to hit the Back key to return from my site to yours, and therefore the less useful it would be for you to link to my site in the first place. In order to obtain maximal recognition, I must provide a service that enhances the interest of your site while minimizing its chances of becoming your obtrusive rival. The most effective service, according to these criteria, is **GA**.

Minimization is close to **Doug Collins'** concept of "prehumiliation," which I have often found useful. But the difference is that whereas prehumiliation reenacts (or "**preenacts**") the primordial passage from victim to divinity, minimization reduces the divinity/victim differential to a minimum. **GA** is not so much prehumiliated as **preshrunk**. The Bronx Romantic seeks recognition for providing the least obtrusive mediation between the personal imageries of others.

Such imagery no doubt includes, on another level, his own; but this is expressed on another level of the Bronx Romantic personality and in another form, that of lyric poetry. And that is another story...

To be continued...

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

More On Celebrity

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[Chronicle 108](#), inspired by the death of **Princess Diana**, presented some reflections on celebrity and its mediating function in social relations. To sum up, my thesis was that we identify with the celebrity not because of the "emptiness" of our lives, but, on the contrary, in order to escape their over-fulness with others. Although I tried to remain on as high a level of generality as possible and avoided dwelling on this particular incident, a few readers reproached me with expressing too much interest in the Princess. Not unironically, as a result of my column, I participated in a panel discussion on her death at which a university audience appeared to find my interest far too tepid. Whence these further reflections on the topic of celebrity, whose paradoxes only **GA** can dominate.

What is the attraction of celebrity? The infamous *paparazzi-stalkerazzi* symbolize in their very predictability the celebrity's desire. Their noisy presence is obnoxious, but one fears the silence of their absence, with its ominous implication that they are busy elsewhere. The celebrity, like "the rest of us," fears being upstaged by celebrity, finding him/herself at the wrong vertex of the triangle of desire. The only person who cannot be upstaged by the real or evoked figure of a celebrity is another, still more celebrated celebrity.

We cannot escape the "lure of celebrity," not because of our vain desire for fame, but because the weapon of celebrity is always available to be used against us. This was not always the case. In the days before the mass media, celebrity was not necessarily favorable, and social status largely separate from it. The list of personages at Di's funeral is a sign of celebrity's cannibalization of all other forms of public social ranking; movie stars, opera singers, fashion designers, and statesmen all fall henceforth in the same category. If Di can be said to have had an effect on the world, it is the definitive subordination of monarchy to celebrity, the implicit if not conscious goal toward which she, more unswervingly than the other young royals of her generation, worked in life, and which she can be said to have accomplished by her death, as demonstrated by **Queen Elizabeth's** coerced gestures of mourning. Celebrity, like money, sets a quantitative measure in place of a jerry-built system of equivalences. And in the postmodern world, celebrity tends to achieve balance with monetary wealth. "Poor celebrity" sounds like an oxymoron; the criminals, victims, and occasional heroes who acquire temporary notoriety are excluded from the celebrity category by their very incapacity to profit from this notoriety--in talk show appearances, endorsements, book contracts--over the long term.

Celebrity as a "fungible" value like money creates a linear ranking rather than a simple binary opposition between the famous and the anonymous. Or rather, it creates both ranking and opposition, such that the sacred-profane duality of the latter defers resentment from the former. For the celebrity whose existence contrasts with our nonentity consoles us for our relative lack of prestige in our local setting. This is a more nuanced version of the basic ternary structure of compensation I outlined in [Chronicle 108](#). If the third person in a hierarchy identifies with the first to make up for his inferiority to the second, this

identification confers on its object a supplementary "externality" or sacrality, reflecting the fact the identification is an imaginary compensation for a real inferiority. This compensation is "inauthentic" not in its flight from reality into fiction, but, on the contrary, in its return from the fictional to the real, countering a "rational" hierarchy with an "irrational" transcendence.

The inauthenticity of the cult of celebrity led several readers of my previous column to contest my assertion that they were obliged one way or another to react to it. I share their dislike for the cult of celebrity and their avoidance of personal investment in it. But we should recognize that our disdain, far from striking a telling blow at the cult, in fact contributes to it. Every penny lost to the cult of celebrity through our intellectual sense of superiority generates dollars of countervailing contributions from the faithful. Just as groups such as the already half-forgotten **Heaven's Gaters** thrive on the contempt of outsiders, which they invert into proof of their own secret superiority, so does the mass cult of celebrity thrive on the contempt of the professional-intellectual class, whose status is exemplary of what the cult is meant to undermine in the first place--authority founded on the superior use of one's mental faculties. There is no more tenaciously significant resentment, because the difference it attacks puts in question the fundamental equality before language that is the foundation of human morality.

Celebrity, like all ethical categories, is not an essence that we recognize as a subject "intends" an object, but a form of mimetic interaction. If our neighbor's cult of Diana annoys us in its ostensibly irrational self-abasement, we should remind ourselves that when our teen-aged children pierce holes in their bodies and turn their music to deafening levels, their real motivation is less their own "visceral" pleasure than their parents' annoyance. And so we are swamped in a celebrity-aware reality, one from which we seek not without self-conscious irony to liberate ourselves by holding discussions that inevitably contribute to the very phenomenon we denounce.

Celebrity being a form of sacrality, it is no doubt natural that those fascinated by it wish to define its significance in transhistorical terms. **Jonathan Alter** did this in the September 15 *Newsweek* in prose that already seems delirious: "Diana is now the first woman to join a tiny group of 20th-century megastars in the English-speaking world: **Charles Lindbergh, Babe Ruth, Winston Churchill, Muhammad Ali, JFK, Elvis Presley, Michael Jordan...**" Wasn't **Greta Garbo** or **Marilyn Monroe** a "megastar"? Babe Ruth died nearly 50 years ago; who will remember Princess Di in 2047, and for what? No, the very point of **celebrity**, as opposed to **fame**--what distinguishes Di from the other names on the list--is that it is contestable and contentious.

Recognition of uncontested glory does not serve as a means for expressing resentment, but for transcending it. But the postmodern self--yours and mine--is no longer willing to lose itself in irreversible admiration. Our lack of "heroes" is a sign not of the lack of heroism in our age, but of our lack of interest in recognizing it. Thus our age prefers celebrity to fame.

The celebrity hovers between being famous and being "famous for being famous." A celebrity, after all, is always known for *something*. **Zsa Zsa Gabor** appeared in a number of major films (notably *Moulin Rouge*) and made a number of spectacular marriages. And Princess Di was at one point the future **Queen of England**. The important thing is that the celebrity's fame is never fully stable and justified. We must be able to question and belittle the fame we use as a weapon against our less-famous superiors. In this regard, Di's reputedly limited intelligence served her in good stead, as did her eating disorders and even her amatory self-indulgence. The inclusion of Di in the same category as Winston Churchill is a naively hyperbolic expression of the dynamism of celebrity. If she were really on Churchill's level, there would

be nothing to gain from asserting it; it would be a simple fact, not an act of faith.

History isn't usually made by nice people; morality is no guarantee of "world-historicity." But if I may be excused for exploiting a much-drawn contrast, I think what most people found refreshingly saintly in **Mother Theresa** is that her devotion to others requires neither special talent nor good fortune but is an example accessible to all of us. In combating the evils of the world, she put less of an emphasis on denouncing them than on engaging in positive action to correct them. Such is the way of love, which makes equals of all of us. If we would diminish the weight of celebrity in our lives, our best efforts should be devoted to acting out of love rather than resentment in our dealings with others; our neighbor's cult of distant celebrities is above all the expression of his resentment of us.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Phallogocentrism

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Un pauvre diable d'homme, qui a eu ce qu'on appelle une bonne fortune, est souvent bien infortuné, surtout s'il a le malheur de voir sa maîtresse tous les jours. Il y a une certaine amabilité qu'il est fort malaisé d'avoir à l'heure fixe ... Dire: J'aime, est beaucoup moins pénible que de le prouver, avec cela que chaque preuve que l'on en donne rend la suivante plus difficile.

A poor devil of a man who has had what we call a "good fortune" is often very unfortunate, especially if he is unhappy enough to see his mistress every day. There is a certain friendly gesture that it is very difficult to make at a fixed time... To say "I love you" is much less unpleasant than to prove it, and on top of that, each proof you give makes the next one more difficult.

Théophile Gautier, *Les Jeunes-France*, "Celle-ci et celle-là"

Anciennement, les tours, les pyramides, les cierges, les bornes de routes, et même des arbres avaient la signification de phallus, et pour Bouvard et Pécuchet, tout devint phallus. ... Quand on venait les voir, ils demandaient : "A quoi trouvez-vous que cela ressemble?" puis confiaient le mystère, et, si l'on se récriait, ils levaient de pitié les épaules.

In the old days, towers, pyramids, church tapers, road markers, and even trees had a phallic meaning, and for Bouvard and Pécuchet, everything became a phallus... When someone came to see them, they would ask, "What do you think this looks like?" and then revealed the secret, and if anyone protested, they shrugged their shoulders in pity.

Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ch. IV

It is one of the stranger features of late twentieth academia that it has made **Phallus** its preferred term for **Being**. To redefine the originary human invention/discovery of transcendence through the sign as phallus worship is a feat only a master mystifier like Lacan could pull off. But if you dare take the word "phallus" literally as designating a specific state of the male anatomy, you will be derided for the category error of associating the transcendent with the immanent. The secret is to understand it as exemplifying the paradoxical triumph of the Signifier; the Phallus has no referential meaning, it is the ultimate Subject/Object of desire in the universe of language. The non-identity of the Phallus with its anatomical counterpart is a colorful if misleading way of figuring the relation of sacred and profane, sign and referent, word and thing that is the constitutive opposition of the human. The Phallus is a scandalous means of revealing the paradoxical generation of transcendence from immanence--something **GA** does much more quietly and efficiently.

Seen as the "master trope" of a theory of signification that is ultimately a universal anthropology, the Phallus confuses the mind as it stimulates the imagination. The phenomenon might be called a textbook demonstration of the virtues of generative minimalism, although the textbooks are much more likely to refer to **phallogocentrism** than to the **originary hypothesis**. For only once we understand what is really at stake in the generation of the transcendent from the immanent--the origin of the human--are we ready

to attend to the specific sense in which the Phallus may be said to embody the transcendent. The more one makes the Phallus the synonym of transcendental Being, the less one is likely to recall what a phallus is, or why phalli were ever worshiped either for themselves or in ithyphallic representations of gods.

From an originary perspective, the source of the Phallus' potential sacrality is clear. We need not attribute to phallus-worshipers any reflection on fertility. If **GA** has taught us anything, it is that phenomena of nature become culturally significant through the dangers they pose to human interaction. Men do not worship the phallus because it produces children; they sacralize it because it incarnates the dangerous state of aroused desire that risks unleashing the destructive force of mimetic aggression, protection from which is the *sine qua non* of culture.

In the originary scene, it is not unreasonable to assume that the male participants, excited by the central object yet assured of peace by the deferral of its appropriation through the sign, were **ithyphallic**. (This provides unexpected support for the apparently extreme "queer theory" position that homosexual desire--which we must distinguish from appetite--is more primal than heterosexual--the theoretical justification of the term "homophobia.") But from an originary perspective, male sexual arousal is of less interest as *sexual* than as *arousal*, that is, arousal of desire. No doubt there is a link between the male position in sexual intercourse and male aggressivity, but the fetishization of the sexual not only lends itself to feminist deconstruction, it loses sight of the essential function of culture, which is to prevent the destruction of the community through the violence of mimetic desire.

In the real world, "having" or "being" a phallus is not a yes-or-no proposition, nor is the phallic relation a zero-sum game. The state of male sexual arousal is an obvious metaphor for significance because it is akin to the situation that generated significance in the first place. But the fact that sexual pleasure and its reproductive consequences are subordinate to the need for survival contribute to the comi-tragic fragility of this state. Whence the value of the phallic model in the domain of esthetic culture.

Unlike ritual, art must provide pleasure; where ritual is presumed efficacious in itself, art's efficacy is always questionable. The success of the imaginary enchantment of an artwork is analogous to the maintenance of arousal required to bring the sexual act to a successful conclusion. This does not mean that the artwork need provoke the tension-release pattern of sexual intercourse; **Ravel's** *Bolero* is the exception rather than the rule. But the phallic analogy gains interest when it is mirrored by a sexual theme in the work itself. The narrative of a love affair, for example, will be "sexier" according as it maintains its "phallic" tension.

Hard-core pornography makes reductive use of this narrative analogy by constructing the "plot" of each narrative segment as the creation, maintenance, and discharge of an erection. A more culturally significant example is **Théophile Gautier's** novella "Celle-ci et celle-là" ["This Woman and That"] in *Les Jeunes-France* (1833), where the "romantic" protagonist is less concerned to win the love of his beloved than to make her conquest as much like a romantic melodrama as possible. The ironic ease with which he achieves his ostensible objective makes the love-affair both valueless in itself and ineffective as a plot-mechanism. The inviability of the plot structure of seduction-as-conquest that had provided the basis for *Clarissa* and the later *Liaisons dangereuses* reflects the disappearance of sexual initiation--generally of a young woman--as a cultural value. The eighteenth-century "surprise of love" is now a prolonged adolescence that must be filled by "passion" rather than the punctual satisfaction of seduction. In Gautier's ironic tale, "phallic" tension cannot be maintained in the drama of love because neither character can play his or her role in unawareness of its mimetic nature. Desire for the abstract

figure of desire, "falling in love with love," is subjected to what might be called a "phallocritique": the character's as well as the narrative's "erection" is lost when the state of arousal itself takes the woman's place as the object of male desire.

Like the archetypal **pragmatic paradox** of the mother telling her child to "be spontaneous," the phallic state cannot be sought directly. What is "sexy" is roughly predictable, but the nuance that guarantees success cannot be preordained. (Thus in Gautier's story, the woman is expected to be a dark beauty of "Spanish or Italian" origin, supposedly more passionate than the cold beauties of the North. Finding a woman who fits this description provokes desire at first, but is not sufficient to maintain it.) Our use of the word "sexy" to describe consumer products makes the paradoxical generation of phallicity the measure of exchange-value.

Although sexiness is not limited to the male sex, the phallic metaphor is not arbitrary. In our age of self-conscious mimeticism, the phallus offers a rare visible proof of our success in proceeding from desire to appetite. The current obsession with it is, as the logic of the supplement suggests, the sign not of its presence but of its lack. Yet the inversion is not simple, for this lack must be remedied; desire must be generated even as we know its mediated arbitrariness. To equate the Phallus with Being is at the same time to expose postritual culture's sense of loss of contact between the transcendental and the everyday and to express each man's secret claim to rival the phallic god. To bowdlerize the Phallus by emphasizing its abstract role as the signifier of desire only contributes to the male organ's prestige. In the paradise of signification, the choice of a specific signifier to represent desired Being cannot by definition be "innocent."

The "phallogocentric" exists to be denounced by those who seek a space for utopian eschatology in an era that has increasingly shown it to be discredited. The physiological guarantee of desire is ironically glorified as the sole "real" in a world of simulation and at the same instant denounced as corruptible flesh masquerading as transcendence. But if the violence of masculine desire that is deferred by the sign is not primarily sexual, the sexualization of late twentieth-century thought of which Lacanianism is the most egregious symptom is the result of a development diametrically opposed to masculine violence: that of the personalization of desire and the rise of the sexual, albeit not necessarily heterosexual, couple as the privileged generating force of meaning in individual lives. (Such phenomena as the rise of the "men's movement" and the **Promise Keepers** reflect the reaffirmation and renegotiation in this new "feminine" context of the deferral of masculine violence that is the originary basis of culture.)

Derrida, to whom we owe the term, knows we cannot abolish **phallogocentrism**, for it is the human itself. But the deconstructors and their heirs fail to see that the phallic etymon in this word is a fetish, the mythical and therefore sacrificial exaltation of a physiological metaphor of the Being of the desired Other. **Sexy** is ultimately just another word for **lovable**, the designation of an independent being who shares my capacity for experiencing and manipulating desire, for joining me in an act of love where neither party is subordinate.

When we understand that the resentful term "phallogocentrism" reflects no more and no less than the originary urgency of deferring masculine violence, we will abandon the victimary structure of sexual and metaphysical binarism for a more self-aware and self-respecting mode of thought. This hope may appear distant today, but it is not utopian, for it proposes no *final solution* to resentment, merely its liberation from the straitjacket of sexual stereotypes.

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

External and Internal Mediation

No. 116: Saturday, November 8, 1997

GAlist subscribers who may recall my promise / threat to return once again to the **Princess Di** matter in the wake of the *UCLA Daily Bruin's* coverage of the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion's** recent mini-colloquium on the subject should not let today's title lead them to think I have forgotten them. On the contrary, the whole business is best understood as a lesson in the mediation of desire.

The terms "internal" and "external" mediation go back to **René Girard's** original exposition of the theory of mimetic desire in his 1961 classic *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*). Desire once defined as a triangular relation between subject, object, and a mediator who directs the subject's desire to the object, Girard's primary classification depends on whether the mediator is **external** or **internal** to the world of the desiring subject. External mediation by God, gods, demi-gods, heroes is conscious and socially reinforced. Internal mediation, whether by one's "peer group" or individuals felt to possess a secret charisma, is a less transparent matter. The closer the mediator to the self, the less one is willing or able to admit his influence. Girard demonstrates the historical internalization of novelistic mediation in a series of novels from *Don Quixote* to **Dostoevsky's** *Possessed* and *Brothers Karamazov*.

The relevance of Girard's dichotomy to my analysis of celebrity should be evident. This analysis included a major and a minor element. The first was that we are attached to the celebrity not because we enjoy filling our empty lives with the excitement he/she generates, but because we use the celebrity as a weapon in our relations with our neighbors. In Girard's terms, the celebrity is an external mediator who protects us against the pain of internal mediation, another name for which is **resentment**.

But the celebrity is not an unproblematic external mediator on the model of a god or even a culture hero. One becomes a celebrity when one's fame comes to outweigh the reasons for it, when one is "famous for being famous." The celebrity does not inhabit the same world as the worshiper, not by a long shot. But s/he has, as Di was adored for having, the "common touch." In other words, the anonymous celebrity-worshiper can "identify" with the celebrity because he is able to understand the latter's good fortune, whether or not due to inborn talent, as attributable to chance of birth or circumstance. "There," he says, "but for the grace of God go I."

The **originary hypothesis** is at bottom no more than a mechanism for generating external from internal mediation. The mimetic tension among the participants who surround the central object is projected onto the object itself as something or "someone" external to the community. But what is lacking in Girard's model is the dependency of the scene, and therefore of external mediation, on the discovery/invention of the **sign**. Why indeed must the origin of the sacred also be the origin of language? Because the mimetic rivalry among the potential appropriators of the object, of whom only one could be successful, gives way to the sign's imitation of the object of desire in which all can share.

The object is thus an external mediator not in degree but in kind. The external/internal opposition originates as that between the external signified and the internal (fellow) emitter of the sign. Here the sacralization of the object is understandable as an "exteriorization" or projection of the desires of the participants. The object's power to defer violence is due to its presence at the focal point of the group's desire rather than to any intrinsic quality. But in the absence of the sign, this "focal point" itself would not maintain itself invulnerable to the appetites of the group, as is the case in the prehuman world of appetite. In order to concentrate our attention on the sacred center of the scene, aggression is not sufficient; it is the deferral of aggression through the sign that alone makes the scene possible.

This is of profound consequence for the opposition between external and internal mediation in everyday life. This opposition is at first glance quantitative; one can imagine all degrees of "externality" and "internality." But this analysis is superficial: in fact, externality and internality of mediation are defined in mutual opposition. **Culture** is nothing but the social function that supplies to the members of society its panoply of external mediators. We generate these mediators in order to defer the danger of internal mediation, that is, of resentment.

In his analysis of the novel, Girard describes the use of externally mediating literary characters, who in relation to us inhabit the transcendental world of the sign, to model the internal mediation we encounter in the "real world." Since in the world we experience nothing but internal mediation, the novel is the literary form of "worldliness." But we also produce in the world models of extrawordly transcendence. External mediation can be figured in the "worldly" novel because the transcendental realm is available to any user of the sign. Within what Girard calls internal mediation we should therefore distinguish between the internal mediation of our desire by the desire of our fellows that is the "unconscious" component of resentment and the overt idolatry of our fellow as mediator.

The phenomenon of celebrity suggests that the proliferation of the former, resentful mediation in modern market society generates the institution of the latter, which we might call internal-external mediation. As our democratic world includes an ever larger proportion of our fellow humans, we tend to choose our "heroes" as well from within our world. The "prehumiliation" of such heroes reveals the ultimate source of the "heroic," that is, of the sacred, in human desire. Prehumiliation serves to remind us that without our mutual internal mediation, an external mediator would never have been needed. The suffering inflicted on the ritual victim operates on the basis of unquestioned exteriority; on the contrary, prehumiliation uncovers the roots of the sacred in the internal relations of the community.

Hence Diana's "common touch" is of the very essence of celebrity. The celebrity's "commonness" with us is revelatory and at the same time mystifying; it is, in a word, a form of deferral. "We" prefer to accept the homeopathic "prehumiliation" of our external mediator rather than reject external mediation altogether. Which leads me to my promised thoughts on our **Diana** colloquium and on the *UCLA Daily Bruin's* coverage of the event.

It offends people to talk about their internal mediation--their resentment. The humiliation of fawning over a celebrity is nothing in comparison to that of envying your neighbor. For the celebrity will never throw your humiliation back at you as your neighbor will. Internal mediators are partners in language; external mediators are not: they are the sacred "objects" language designates. Neighbors cannot be external mediators because they can participate with you in dialogue.

To speak of internal mediation is to expose to the world the secret constitution of the sacred center through mimetic desire. This is "shameful" not merely for me but for the human in general. By

"shamelessly" revealing the dependency of my own desire on my neighbor's, I help reveal as well the dependency of all our religious beliefs--of the sacred itself--on the mimetic desire that alone made them possible.

Hence it was not surprising that the *Bruin's* coverage of the Diana discussion emphasized external mediation by the celebrity rather than the internally mediated relationship among non-celebrities that provides its nourishment. Here is, verbatim, the description of (most of) my remarks from the *Daily Bruin*:

Having any connection with a celebrity helps us to tolerate any inferiorities we have. It makes us want celebrities to be shown as human, just like us. It makes up for the suprality [sic] of the person. A celebrity has to be vulnerable to a type of degeneration.

I indeed spoke of our desire that celebrities be seen as "human, just like me," but my main point is misleadingly summed up here as "tolerat[ing] any inferiorities we have." The articulation of these "internal" inferiorities with the externally situated celebrity is never made nor, I fear, understood. The point of my demonstration was that celebrity performs the cultural function of deferring resentment, that our connection with the celebrity does not simply make us feel better about our "inferiorities" but is part of a triangle of desire that includes the neighbor toward whom I experience these "inferiorities." The *Bruin* reporter understands why we need to find the celebrity's vulnerable points, but fails to see why we need celebrities in the first place.

The point of external mediation is to defer the pain of internal mediation. We should not therefore be surprised when this deferral functions even within discussions designed to elucidate the operations of desire. To discuss what celebrities mean to us is no mere frivolity, but an indirect way of discussing the real needs of society in its present state. To discuss, on the other hand, the operation of celebrity itself can only be helpful in a context of mutual respect so serene that celebrity, in that context at least, no longer performs a useful function. Such was perhaps once the case in the university, but it is clearly no longer so today.

The idea that academic life can stand above the conflicts of popular culture is no longer tenable. Thus it is not without significance that the title and central theme of the *Bruin* article was "**Role of Women Excluded in UC Discussion on Princess' Death**": what above all exercised **Ms Michelle Navarro**, the author of the article, was that all three speakers on the panel were (White) males, and of my remarks, the one that provoked the quoted exclamation "This is outrageous" was my daring to suggest that "women are not exempt from resentment."

So it looks as though I shouldn't have been so dismissive of **Princess Di**. Now that the university has been transformed from the ivory tower of reason to the battleground of victimary resentments, we will need all the celebrities we can get.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Problem of the Subject

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The other day a graduate student I consider intelligent referred to himself as *a locus traversed by a set of discourses*; or rather, it was not "himself" but "his self" to which he so referred. In more Girardian terms, he might have referred to himself as the locus of a set of mimetic desires, yet the reference would be no mere expression of mimetic desire, even if it were imitated from **Girard** himself. The self who speaks of himself as a set of discourses enunciates a meta-discourse not included within the set, even if that meta-discourse itself merely repeats the *doxa* of the day.

The nature of the subject of consciousness is the central question of modern philosophy, the transition to which was inaugurated with **Descartes'** famous *cogito ergo sum*. The key gesture of the "linguistic turn" in postmodern thought is the equation of the subject of consciousness with the subject of discourse, "s/he who says 'I.'" This equation is a great step forward in the anthropological conquest of the metaphysical domain; unfortunately it is also a great half-step backward into linguistic fetishism. Yes, language is central to the human, and the reformulation in linguistic terms of the ostensibly diverse forms of transcendence, from the "afterlife" to the esthetic to the charisma of celebrity, is an indispensable precondition of any generative anthropology. But this reformulation is possible only if language itself is understood within the context of human mimetic interaction.

Fetishizing language as a function independent of such interaction, for example as a "tool for knowing the natural world," gives us instrumentalist analyses of human thought that deny the paradoxical generation of the transcendental realm--that is, precisely what uniquely characterizes humanity. This is a **social-science** deformation, pedestrian but "objectively" reasonable. As my student's remark suggests, more common in the **humanities** is the opposite attitude, based on a tendentious reading of Thomas Kuhn's conceptualization of science: that discourses are examples of "paradigms" independent of instrumental reality but arbitrarily giving meaning to it, paradigms of whose origin it is useless to speak since there is no master paradigm that can provide a perspective on it. **GA** rejects this dogmatic idealism; the **originary hypothesis** is not indeed a "master paradigm" but a minimal kernel of human interaction from which we may hypothesize the paradigms of language to have originated.

To identify the subject of human consciousness with the subject of human language is no small accomplishment, but the subject who says "I" cannot be reduced to this formal feature alone. To be able to use language is to belong to a species that meets a set of minimal preconditions which the **originary hypothesis** attempts to formulate. The self that is able to define itself as a locus traversed by discourses has demonstrated its ability, even if itself mimetically inspired, to examine critically its dependence on these discourses at the very moment in which it is mimetically drawn to them.

The model of the subject I grew up with was just the reverse of the passive discourse-traversed "locus" of the nineties. To the intelligentsia of the fifties and sixties, **Sartrean** existentialism supplied the dominant

model of the human subject, defined by its absolute freedom. Perhaps because no one could fully live up to the existentialist model any more than to the Christian one, it was perceived by the generation who had survived **World War II** as morally true; the politicization of its ethical implications, leading to Sartre's decline into infantile leftism, was still in the future.

Although I never thought of myself as an existentialist, the idea that the human subject is defined by its freedom has never left me. (This was pointed out to me by **José Corti** when he published my book on **Musset's** theater back in 1974.) But **GA's** articulation of the notion of freedom is less metaphysical than Sartre's *néant* [nothingness]. The human subject is free to the extent that he is free to formulate his intention in language--at a negligible cost in worldly energy. Being free to speak is not the same as being free to act; but freedom of speech is the minimal freedom we can verify in our minds at any time, and freedom of action may always be understood as the translation of a linguistically formulated intention. In saying "I'll refuse to talk when I'm tortured by the Gestapo," I freely intend a course of action, even if when the time comes I find myself unable to carry it out. For when I decide to talk under torture (assuming that this is not the result of some involuntary drug-induced state), I am aware of making a decision--and therefore of bearing the guilt for this decision--to deviate from my previous statement. I need not keep my promises, but the freedom of the subject is conceivable only on the basis of the freedom to make promises, that is, to express in language what I claim my actions will be.

Thus Sartre's idea of freedom as the defining feature of the human subject depends on its use of language, our obsession with which two generations later, curiously enough, has led my student to speak of his "self" as the unfree locus of others' discourses. The latter statement indeed tells a truth about language: that its mimesis of the world *qua* representation is subordinate to its participatory status in mimetic interaction among humans. A graduate student confronted with the difficulty of finding his own "voice," of saying something original, easily becomes aware of the dependence of his discourse on the predecessors to which it seeks to respond. The awareness of mimesis is the beginning of wisdom; and the need for originality adds a complication to existentialism's moral ontology. When I choose "freely" to enunciate a discourse wholly derivative of another, I can claim it as my own decision but not as my own creation. The ethic of the modern world is not simply one of freedom, but of creativity, and in particular, of creativity in discourse. If I can say nothing new, then I cannot function authentically in the academic profession, which requires the "production of knowledge."

Nevertheless, Sartre's ontology is a better foundation for our anthropology than the student's more fashionable one. The mimetic dependency of our language on the language of others is not our primary relation to language. Human language is, on the contrary, a solution to the potential violence of the rivalries aroused by simple mimesis. What is new in human language is precisely that it mediates our mimetic relationship to our fellows by a neomimetic relationship to a central Being, deferring the rivalry of the gesture of appropriation by means of the universally repeatable sign.

Even when the child learns language by pointing at objects in his environment, he is not simply repeating passively the words he hears: he is performing a free act of ostension that recalls the originary act of language. Although to point to and name an object is an act that can be original only once, each repetition repeats the act's *originarity*. We do not "associate" the word with the object but choose to utter it, no longer as an "instinctive" gesture of appropriation mimetically dictated by our fellows, but as a free act of representation.

My student could not have defined himself as a mere locus of discourses without the freedom of the

Sartrean *néant*, which figures our separation as consciousness from what we do as material beings. But the metaphoric *néant* fails to make explicit that this separation is and can only be actualized in language. My self-consciousness is always really or potentially realized in language, just as it is through language alone that my student can complain that he is but a passive victim of language.

Even to represent our unfreedom is a free act. But the anthropological reality of this freedom cannot be understood without a theory that provides a minimal hypothesis of its origin. The enunciation of our inalienable moral responsibility can only provide a convincing model of human freedom if it shows plausibly how the latter emerged from its roots in prehuman necessity. Which is, of course, the fundamental purpose of **Generative Anthropology**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Marcus Borg's Spiritual God

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Jesus was a peasant--which tells us about his social class.

Clearly, he was brilliant. His use of language was remarkable and poetic, filled with images and stories. He had a metaphoric mind.

He was not an ascetic but world-affirming, with a zest for life.

There was a sociopolitical passion to him; like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King Jr., he challenged the domination system of his day.

He was a religious ecstatic--a Jewish mystic, if you will--for whom God was an experiential reality. As such, he was also a healer. And there seems to have been a spiritual presence around him, like that reported of Saint Francis or the Dalai Lama.

And I suggest that as a figure of history, he was an ambiguous figure--you could experience him and conclude that he was insane, as his family did, or that he was simply eccentric, or that he was a dangerous threat--or you could conclude that he was filled with the Spirit of God.

Marcus Borg - *The God We Never Knew*, p. 90

The other day the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion** sponsored a lecture by **Marcus Borg**, a member of the **Jesus Seminar** and the author of a number of well-regarded books about **Jesus**. Unsatisfied by the subjectivist orientation of the lecture, I took a look at Borg's latest book, *The God We Never Knew* (HarperSanFrancisco 1997), which turned out to be the source of most of the lecture material, including the 164-word description of Jesus quoted above, originally prepared for a live television interview. The book is a sincere and, arguably, a socially necessary attempt to make God meaningful for modern people skeptical of transcendental beings "out there." But although it fleshed out what was sketchy in the talk and edited out the speaker's distracting self-consciousness, it only confirmed my original impression. Borg develops his theology for our time without a word about the human reciprocity that religion in general and Christianity in particular exist to promote. His only ethical notion, presented as "God's dream" for humanity, is "compassion," a term that, as I have had occasion to observe in these [Chronicles](#), tends to reflect an unfortunately non-reciprocal and politicized vision of human relations. Borg's book provided just one more proof that it is the *mensonge romantique* [romantic lie] rather than the "supernatural" that poses the chief obstacle to a genuine anthropological understanding of religion.

Borg's chief aim, with which I am not without sympathy, is to get beyond the image of God as a judgmental father-figure about whom we learn at second hand through religious texts, an anthropo- and andromorphic entity we imagine added to the beings we find in the world. Although Borg touches on it only incidentally, this religious supernaturalism is directly connected to the **sacrificial**, that is, to what the **Judeo-Christian** tradition is notable more than any other for having demystified and denounced.

Thus his enterprise, in its initial inspiration, is consonant not only with the anti-sacrificial thrust of **GA**, but with the fundamental aim of Christianity itself. In this respect, although Borg himself seems to deny this, it is true to the original reforming spirit of the **Lutheranism** in which he was raised.

But Borg's replacement for the sacrificial in the form of objective, external supernaturalism is... subjective, internal supernaturalism. After having rid ourselves of religious alienation in the form of an external authority-figure, we bring it back in the guise of internal "spiritual experience." This God is emphatically not the "**superego**"--a term that Borg borrows unreflectively from **Freud**. Borg's experience of God is not one of authority, *le nom/non du père* the **Lacanian**s like to tell us about. It is rather an "ecstatic" one, such as those regularly experienced by shamans and mystics, and occasionally by ordinary folks like ourselves. In the absence of supernatural belief, Borg offers us psychological "experiences of the sacred." But he fails to see that the psychological inversion of the institutional sacred is still a form of supernaturalism. It is always a question of "my relationship to God," a dual relation between a human being and a non-human other in the absence of other humans. Because God's otherness is non-human, it can only be attested in exceptional circumstances; whether we call them "other-worldly" or "ecstatic" is a secondary matter.

What is missing from this account of religion is what the word's etymology so clearly requires: our relationship to other people, not in "compassion" but in **love**. I don't know what the Jesus Seminar thinks of the authenticity of texts like "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12) or "Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother" (Matthew 5:24), but what is truly unique about Christianity, although it exists in less lucid form in all religion, is its understanding that the Being of God is a mediating force that defers conflict among human beings. Borg seems constitutionally unable to conceive of human otherness; he reduces even Martin Buber's conception of the "I-Thou" to a modality of the relationship between the isolated individual and "the world."

Hence it should not surprise us that Borg's picture of Jesus, however reverently intended, tells us nothing of what made him and his movement unique. It is entirely fitting that the description quoted above was composed in answer to a television personality's question, "what it would have been like to be Jesus' disciple." Borg's religious realism purges Jesus of fantastic attributes like virgin birth and bodily resurrection, but in their place provides nothing but the banal mediatic exceptionalism of one who is "brilliant," speaks in poetic images, and has a "spiritual presence." The appeal to the **Dalai Lama**--who has no personal doctrine, nor indeed an individual existence, since his name is a title--suggests that Borg expects, perhaps rightly, that his audience will find it easier to relate to the Tibetan's pacified sacrificial charisma than Jesus' moral message, which appears nowhere in the book: God is love, *aimez-vous les uns les autres* [love one another]. As for the reference to **Martin Luther King**, I can only imagine what that devout Christian would have thought not merely to hear himself, with all his sins, compared to Jesus, but to hear Jesus compared to him!

What makes Jesus one of the great figures of history are not the "spiritual" features that distinguish him from you and me, and ultimately make us resent him, but what he teaches us of our common humanity, what makes us want to love him and everyone else as both different from ourselves and yet our equals. No doubt Jesus "challenged the domination system" --an unfortunate term that washes out all tensions between the Jewish and Roman "dominators" in a binary opposition between the good oppressed and their evil oppressors. But our own century has surely taught us that political implementations of righteous anger against the social order in the attempt to realize God's kingdom or some secular equivalent on earth

are anything but productive of social justice. "Taking the side of the victim" in the Christian sense is far more than a political act of rebellion against "the system": it is the concerted and never facile attempt to stand on the side of love against resentment, including the resentment of "the oppressed" that has fueled so many of history's greatest horrors. The Holocaust that Borg so rightly treats as the worst of these was the act of Germans who fancied themselves "oppressed" by the Treaty of Versailles.

However praiseworthy this author's aims, his conception of religion in general and of Christianity in particular is untouched by any insight into the function of religion in the human community. If Borg's Protestantism has the admirable quality of requiring him to establish his own radically individual relationship to God, it has the enormous flaw of detaching his relationship with God from its primary function--constantly emphasized by Jesus for whom he cares so much--in mediating his relationships with other human beings. I am sure Borg would himself put away his sacrifice to reconcile himself with his brother, but he fails to see that his deepest experience of the God who is love lies in this very reconciliation, not in "external" and "internal" mystical states and the other "varieties of religious experience."

But perhaps the popularity of Borg's writings and the visibility of the Jesus Seminar in which he is an active participant should give us pause. All but a happy few, most of whom can identify historically or personally with the mimetic theory of desire, would rather see themselves as subjects, however deconstituted, confronting objects, however deconstructed, than as participants in triangular relations of mediation. If this be a weakness, then it is a near-universal weakness. Perhaps religion exists precisely for those who could not otherwise shed their self-definition as autonomous subjects of desire, so that the truth of **GA's** notion of God is demonstrated by its very incapacity to found an "irrational" belief system. The **GA** aficionado who finds Borg's arguments inadequate would doubtless never believe in God anyway, whether in Borg's or the fundamentalist's terms.

Yet I cannot accept this reasoning as definitive. A theory too subtle for its time is not the same as a theory too intelligent for humanity in general. The former is "world-historical" in **Hegel's** sense; the latter is not. The **Enlightenment** project, whose intellectual heirs we all are, arrogantly oversimplified the relation between religion and human knowledge. I think that **Generative Anthropology** is the first form of secular thought that does not share in this error.

This by no means implies that **GA** is passively accepting of religion; it implies just the opposite. The only way in which religious thinking can adapt itself to **GA** is to change radically. Not only the big daddy God of old-time religion, but the "feminine" spirit God of Borg cannot help but be radically transformed by a way of thinking that makes God's revelations to man the bearers of not merely religious but anthropological truths. Whether the breakthrough be made by **GA** or some later equivalent, religion cannot forever keep its back turned to the insights of a minimalist anthropology founded on the mimetic theory of desire.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

God is Love

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In [my last Chronicle](#), I criticized **Marcus Borg** for reducing **Jesus** to a "spirit person" and neglecting his fundamental revelatory message: *God is love*. This week I would like to articulate this message with the minimal hypothesis of **Generative Anthropology**. How is the imperative of promoting the cause of love over that of resentment derived from the ethic incarnate in the originary sign? If the first sign is the **Name-of-God**, in what sense is it the sign of **love**?

We may rely on the experience of human sexual love. The *eros-agape* distinction is not primary. If we use the word "love" in both cases, it is because we feel the love of God and the love of one's beloved to be variants of the same experience. Human love is not worship; but love of God is not "worship" either in the sense of the adulation of a superior being. Love defers resentment; where resentment suspects the other's difference from me as greater proximity to the center of significance and, consequently, as a violation of the principle of human reciprocity, love experiences difference as "horizontal" equidistance from the center. In heterosexual love, this difference--*vive la différence!*--is the most fundamental biological one. The mutuality of sexual pleasure is a physiological guarantee that difference need not be a zero-sum game.

If the first sign is the Name-of-God, then God is significant difference itself. The love of God is not the worship of his superiority, but the willingness to accept his difference, like the sexual difference of the beloved, as a source of mutuality. The sacred Being we call God is what remains when the central being desired by all and renounced by all is no more. We cannot understand this Being as love unless we replace the traditional substantive notion of God as a supernatural entity with the insight that what stands behind the significance of the central object is not a substance at all but an **interaction**. The Being that defers our violence through representation *is* no more than our act of deferral itself.

What is the place of representation in human love? The *sine qua non* of love is **care**; he who loves is he who cares for the other, not he who merely represents his love. To love is to sacrifice one's time and energy for the beloved, one's life if need be. To say "I love you" and subsequently turn one's back on the other's need is not to love. But neither can love be made to consist in the mere act of care. The act of love is inseparable from the promise it fulfills, and which the expression "I love you" conveys. To love is to be faithful to one's promise, to care in fulfillment of the promise of care. But this necessary condition is not sufficient. I do not love if I act merely to fulfill my original promise. Love requires that I continually renew this promise "in my heart." By the very fact of this renewal, the promise of love is broader than an obligation of worldly care; the continual renewal of my promise requires that I unceasingly defer the resentment engendered by my perception of the other as the beneficiary of this promise.

This analysis makes clear the difference between **GA** and **René Girard's** "fundamental anthropology" concerning the nature of the deferral of originary violence. Girard attributes what I have been calling

love's deferral of resentment to the designation of a scapegoat as the object of communal violence. The scapegoat-God is first hated, then loved for his presumed role in provoking, then ending collective violence--ending it by being presumed to provoke it. In contrast to the gods of violence, **Jesus Christ**, the God of love, asks us to love each other in him, to defer mimetic violence not by sacrificing him, but by remembering his sacrifice by and to the old order. Christ substitutes for the scapegoat because he unveils and thereby deconstructs the sacrificial mechanism--this is, in effect, the archetype of historical "deconstruction."

In Girard's model, deconstructive knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism is fed back into the triangular structure of desire with which it is ostensibly incompatible. Here the paradoxicality of the relationship between representation and reality as both structural and historic, structural because historic, ungendered because engendered, returns upon the triangular model of desire and subverts it. The scapegoat is "cast out," not from the community, but from the model of desire; little by little, Jesus' message erodes sacrificial triangularity.

But the question of what remains cannot easily be answered. Just as Girard's analysis of **Stendhal's** *Le rouge et le noir* in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* [*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*] suggests that Julien's love for Mme de Rênal, in contrast with that for Mathilde de la Mole, is free from metaphysical desire without explaining how this is possible, so in his evocation of Christian agapé, Girard never provides an articulated model of love without mediation. The opposition in *Mensonge* between the *transcendance verticale* of religion and the ever-intensifying idolatry of internal mediation would appear to imply that unmediated love must set its mediator at an infinite distance. But Christ, in contrast with the Old-Testament idea of God, is precisely the mediator who insists on inhabiting the same world as the mediated.

The example of human sexual love usefully problematizes the question of mediation: in the dyad of lovers, there is no third party to expel. In a familiar vision of masculine love, the female *qua* spirit mediates herself *qua* flesh to male desire by displaying her "narcissistic" indifference to this desire. The man's response in what used to be called, and still remains, the *battle of the sexes* requires him to practice what Girard calls *l'ascèse pour le désir* [askesis for the sake of desire], feigning indifference in order to make his desire itself the object of his rival's desire. In Stendhal's novel, Julien seduces a noble lady by sending her a set of prefabricated love-letters, then treats her with indifference. When the latter's "narcissistic" mediation of her desirability fails because she is treated as undesirable, not only she but Mathilde find Julien irresistible.

This analysis does not provide a place for "true love." Even if we eliminate gender asymmetry, to consider each lover as a subject mediating him/herself as object of desire is to dissolve the unity of God-as-love. To love the Other as mistress or master of his/her inaccessible body is to fall into idolatry, and the idol, as we know, is a sacrificial figure, a reification of violence. By analogy with Girard's own polarity between the religion of love and that of violence, in order for human love to furnish a model of God-as-love, it must diminish the sacrificial, the idolatrous. This does not imply "spiritualizing" the body away, but rather investing with spirit its very desirability, so that the potential resentment inspired in each by the other's self-possession is continually dispelled by the other's gift of self. The self as subject exists apart from the other only in order to give up possession of itself as an object, that is, as a source of physical energy and of anything in any way appropriable. The promise of love is to perpetuate this process.

The lover is both active and passive, a self that gives itself. The independently self-sufficient God who gives his substance in a one-way gift is not the God of love; such gifts arouse resentment. God-as-love is substantive Being caught in the process of its generation from human desire. Indeed, to say that God "is" love is to reify the process that the rhetoric of the sentence "God is love" realizes. The equation expressed by the copula is in the general case "false" in that the two things it equates cannot be identical for us if they have different names. (This is true only of cultural phenomena; in an astronomical model, for example, it may be simply true that the "morning star" is identical to the "evening star.") In the sentence "God is love," we witness the generation of substance from process: **God** as a named "someone," a substantive subject, a user of language, is equated with **love**, the essence of human interaction insofar as it cannot be reduced from process to substance. We may "deconstruct" the former to the latter, but the subversive glee that accompanies the operation fails to comprehend its incorporation "always-already" in the cultural construction that preceded it. (**Paul de Man**'s version of deconstruction understood this ironic always-already, but only as an attribute of "texts," thereby fetishizing textuality as an "unconscious" wiser than the culture within which it operates.)

If we understand the standing-against of Being as the institution of a hierarchy in which we can only re-present what is no longer present and remains substantively "elsewhere," then love is not simply the cessation of rivalry among desirers and representers of this Being; the relationship between lovers each case assimilates the other to the desired Being itself. Our "realistic" age purports to understand the analogy between divine revelation and sexual ecstasy from the sexual perspective, but it can only be understood from the divine.

The gift of self in sexuality is only an exemplary moment of love, not its totality. The self as Being acknowledges its dependence on the desire of the other by acting at each moment to desacralize itself for the other. The implicit triangularity of desire is annulled in the confidence that it will be instantly reformed, creating a local sacred that perpetually abolishes itself and its attendant resentment. This operation implies "works" as well as "faith": the other's faith in my transcendence must be repaid within the world.

Which returns us to the *sine qua non* of love: the implicit promise of **care**. Love can never be exhausted by a specific promise. As the process by which Being is continually recycled into the desire from which it originated, it is the very faculty of promising, of being-there for the other. But thus defined, the faculty of love depends in turn on the "eternal" "self-identical" permanence of Being--on all the attributes inseparable from our idea of God.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Victimage and Virtual Inclusion

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We have all participated in conversations among members of a certain group--family, racial, ethnic, sexual, what have you--that deal with the real and imagined foibles of the members of another. In such cases, even the most objective discussion ceases when a member of the discussed group enters the room, because the discussion has been predicated on his exclusion, not merely from the group at hand, but from the virtual community of discourse for whom the conversation is intended. Even the objective truths of such discourse--but it is no accident that such truths are the hardest to determine and/or to have accepted--are not uttered disinterestedly. When we speak negatively--or even "positively"--of another group, we affirm our solidarity by justifying their exclusion from our virtual community.

One might argue that the xenophobia commonly observed in private discourse does not disturb the public sphere; that, on the contrary, it is a lightning rod that serves to forestall public manifestations of intergroup hostility. Yet because our virtual discursive community is in principle the whole of humanity--all humans are mutually linked by language--exclusion from the virtual linguistic community is the equivalent of exclusion from humanity itself, in violation of our most fundamental moral intuition.

The **PC** phenomenon to which I have alluded many times in these *Chronicles* is a variant, however snobbish and self-serving, of our postwar/postmodern revulsion against such exclusion. Because exclusionary attitudes led to the exemplary phenomenon of the **Holocaust**, exclusion on whatever scale is suspect. Generalizations about the racial, sexual, ethnic "Other" become anathema. The postmodern imperative is that the universality of the virtual community be realized in every conversation. When **Gentiles** assemble, **Jews** are virtually present; when **Whites** get together, **Blacks** are there in spirit.

Because, taken at face value, this is a wholly praiseworthy aim, one wonders why the very term "Politically Correct," with its overtone of resentful impotence, ever came into being. But just as we have seen that our "love" for celebrities expresses in the first place our rivalry with our less illustrious fellows (see *Chronicles* [108](#) and [114](#)), so our declared love for our fellow humans also risks serving as a sanctimonious weapon against our benighted neighbors. The fact that our virtual community should be open to persons of all colors does not prevent a Green's expression of horror at his neighbor's disparagement of Blues being construed as an attack on his fellow Greens.

The victimary reaction that always sides with the outsider derives from the Christian exaltation of the victim, but Christianity is not altogether capable of eliminating its ethical ambivalence. Christianity reveals the constitutive power of the victim itself, as opposed to the divinity for which the victim is merely a stand-in. The **Trinity**, the linchpin of Christian theology, codifies the intuition of the son-victim as a "person"--essentially, a *role*--of the sacred rather than a mere sacrifice to it. In ethical terms, this means understanding that the victim is "closer to God" than his sacrificers, although one is supposed to love the latter as well.

Although there is no fixed limit to the insight available within a given ethical paradigm, at a certain point the articulations that express its revelatory substance come to be anticipated and "discounted" and thereby lose their usefulness in evaluating our choices. One might think that an ethic that privileges the victim is invulnerable to such "discounting," since no one could willingly endure victimary suffering merely for the sake of ethical exemplarity--in other words, that the paradox of the crucified divinity is irreducible by the rationality of the social economy. But the development of market exchange indeed reduces the original paradox by carrying out the ever more richly articulated exteriorization of the Christian ethic in the world of consumption. The results of this process, Enlightenment rationalism and even "God is dead" theology, are reflections not of the failure of Christianity but of its success.

And so is the **Holocaust**. Its very horror is a tribute to the "civilized" state of its European perpetrators. Not only is modern antisemitism a reaction to the freeing of the **Jews** from earlier restrictions, but modern brutality, initiated in thought by **Nietzsche** and in deed by so many, is a panic reaction against the fear that in a culture without physical violence, the ignoble internalized violence of resentment will be a permanent and irredeemable state.

The great irony of today's Left Nietzscheism is its demonstration of Christianity's triumph over the prophet of **Zarathustra**. Postmodern victimary thinking merely produces another avatar of the Christianity that Nietzsche railed against. Nietzsche was anti-authoritarian; but the authority he hated was that of the sanctimonious, self-denying priest--someone, in short, with precisely the personality type of those who now denounce "phallogocentrism." Nietzsche's anti-victimary revolt has always "succeeded" by becoming a caricature of itself: first a barbaric racist-"socialist" cult of the **Superman**, then an academic **Phariseism**. Yet Christianity has not been able to solve the victimary problem. The recent recrudescence of **fundamentalism** reflects the impatience of traditional believers with what they perceive not inaccurately in the mainstream churches as the conflation of Christian reverence for the victim with political **liberalism**.

Victimage is not simply exclusion. In the ritual scheme of things, victimage is a necessary operation. A victim is not a mere unfortunate, but one chosen to perform an essential religio-social function. When we consider someone excluded from the virtual community in this light, we see him as a scapegoat chased out into the desert with the community's sins on his back. From this perspective, to condemn his expulsion is to condemn the arbitrariness of all sacrifice, to renew the work of **Jesus**.

The achievement of postmodern victimary thinking has been to insist on the inclusion in the virtual community of all those previously excluded. Men may no longer come together to condemn women, Whites to condemn Blacks, or vice versa; no dialogue is valid that does not take place in the virtual presence of all

Those who follow the victimary model view the establishment of a genuinely universal community of discourse as predicated on amends made by the oppressor to the oppressed, the persecutor to the victim. The most irritating sign of this first reaction to this universalization of the virtual community has been hypertrophic euphemism, the rejection of any communication from a "victimizing" to a "victimized" group that is not merely not insulting but unflattering.

But we can substitute for the negative model of **victimage** the positive one of **virtual inclusion**. According to this model, the one excluded from the community is not a scapegoat, but merely someone not yet accepted--not an exile, but a potential immigrant. No one is definitively excluded from our virtual linguistic community, but in some cases we are not yet sufficiently prepared for their arrival.

From a long-term perspective, PC and the victimary vision it reflects is no doubt but a short-term annoyance. The universalization of the virtual community of discourse is a necessary, positive development; it signifies the "final" triumph of Christian morality. As the novelty of this inclusiveness wears off, we have already made considerable progress toward a frank and clear-eyed questioning of the needs and demands of different groups. As intergroup tensions enter the dialogue that formerly could not be expressed, they purge themselves of their potential for violence. But the price of this pacification is that those who were previously excluded must renounce their claim to victimary status. Within the virtual community, there can be neither victims nor slaughterers, only equals engaged in reciprocal exchange.

Can we really doubt that men and women, Whites and Blacks, hetero- and homosexuals are able to talk about their differences and similarities more openly today than ever before? The strength of liberal democracy is not that it produces harmony, but that its dissonances are channeled away from physical violence into the sphere of representation--and from there into the marketplace. If we have faith--as most of PC's opponents do--in the ever-expanding inclusive capacity of our social order, we should treat PC's victimary rhetoric as an inevitable childhood illness rather than a potentially fatal disease.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The End of *Seinfeld*

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I have not been a regular viewer of a TV series since I watched *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* as a little boy, but I will admit to being something of a fan of *Seinfeld*. Although this year's episodes give clear evidence of decline (of which below), the show has operated throughout its existence on a level unmatched by other supposedly sophisticated sitcoms, including the to my mind vastly overrated *Frasier*.

Seinfeld has just two axioms (*dixit* co-creator **Larry David**): *no hugs* and *no growth*--an absence of either synchronic or diachronic **sentimentality**. Sentimentality is the creation of unanimity through "sentiment" or desire. This unanimity derives, as we know from **Girard**, from that of the sacrificers before the victim. But what we call the "sentimental" in Judeo-Christian society appears insidiously in the guise of the unanimous defense of the victim. The sentimental calls us together to commune in a virtual utopia in which violence is simply unthinkable, and those who practice it, essentially inhuman. The sentimental indignantly expels violence, forgetting that human violence is really nothing more than this expulsion.

Popular culture, in contrast to high culture, is unencumbered with scruples concerning the sacrificial and its variant, the sentimental. To be "popular" is to be of the people, the mass, to espouse its collective wisdom and prejudice, not to identify with the sufferings of the unique center. High culture prepares the "elite" to assume responsibility for the sacrificial totality; popular culture refuses this responsibility on the ground that the "people" in hierarchical societies are not responsible for what takes place at the center and share little if at all in its benefits.

Our higher education was and still is dominated by the high culture of early modern Europe, with its great creators imitating and in some cases surpassing high culture's classical models. Politics aside, it is difficult to deny the superiority of these cultural forms as models for our own acculturation. Even as we denounce "elitism," we recognize the need to raise the general public to the responsibility of the elite rather than to lower the high to the vulgarity of the mass.

But in the postmodern era following World War II--a time that is "postwar" in the global sense that, whatever its local conflicts, the world can no longer tolerate full-scale war--the balance of authenticity between popular and high culture has shifted. This is not a mere artifact of technology or the "media": on the contrary, the media evolve in response to ethical developments. Today the high arts--painting, sculpture, concert music, opera, poetry and the like--are increasingly dependent on popular models for their renewal. There is more human truth and, indeed, more intellectual sophistication in an episode of *Seinfeld* than in most collections of contemporary poems. Between the high and the popular arts it is surely the latter, which offer not only fame and fortune but the possibility of real cultural impact, that today attract the greater talents.

The central preoccupation of culture since the end of the archaic empires has been the deferral of

"sentimental" unanimity. This would explain the centrality of high culture from the Greeks to our own time in weaning us from sacrificial sentimentality. But if the unanimity of the sacrificial crowd is the essence of popular culture, how can popular culture come to be our main source of cultural enlightenment? The answer lies in the historicity of all cultural categories. There is no eternal Idea of "popular culture" any more than there is an immutable set of social castes. With the spread of high-cultural sophistication to broad segments of the population, the "popular" spirit that sees itself as cut off from the center and the "elite" spirit that would take responsibility for its sufferings become increasingly permeable to each other, and the "middlebrow" world of television becomes their melting-pot.

Seinfeld is exemplary of this shift in relative authenticity between high and popular culture. No recent work of high culture has been nearly so effective at combating the sentimentality of the popular. As **David Marc's** fascinating studies *Demographic Vistas* and *Comic Visions* reveal, television is a very self-aware medium, and much successful television comedy is a pastiche (e.g., *Saturday Night Live*) of "conventional"--read sentimental--television fare like soap operas and newscasts. (What could be more sentimental than the lugubrious tone of a newscaster announcing a disaster?) *Seinfeld* contains frequent spoofs of other TV series as well as movies. Its strength, however, lies not in parody but in the construction of a maximally unsentimental world.

Whether or not *Seinfeld* and David were aware, in creating their "series about nothing," of **Flaubert's** expressed desire to write "a novel about nothing," in their success they have become Flaubert's true successors. The novel/sitcom about nothing refuses to represent a center of interest; the stage, the formal center of attention, is a representational artifact, a seemingly inexplicable holdover from the days of ritual. The high-cultural equivalent of *Seinfeld* is the devaluation of dramatic time as a time of awaiting in **Beckett's** *Waiting for Godot*. But Beckett's black comedy situates itself at the historical endpoint of the Western theatrical tradition. The stage on which the founding event is supposed to occur becomes an ironic locus of awaiting; this is the pastiche of a dying form. Hence Beckett's "unsentimental" discourse cannot avoid being resentimentalized as an elegy for the theater. Beckett's plays after *Godot* deal explicitly with this phenomenon: *Endgame* is an open deconstruction of Tragedy and *Happy Days* converts the stage into something very like a place of ritual sacrifice.

Seinfeld, on the other hand, is unapocalyptic, even in relation to its genre; it makes no pretension of being "the last sitcom," and it will surely not be. In contrast with the soap opera, with its ever-evolving cast of characters, the sitcom is a serial genre in which no real change takes place from week to week; the characters' hopes and fears of dramatic change for better or worse are never realized. Stability is itself a value to be sentimentally celebrated, as the *I Love Lucy* genre always did. But *Seinfeld* eschews any sign of return to order; there is no well-defined order to return to. It is significant that although the action nearly always starts in *Seinfeld's* apartment, the foursome virtually never find themselves there at the end.

The characters, as in the popular-sentimental tradition, inhabit a banal representation of a banal universe. But *Seinfeld* is the one situation comedy whose "situation" has dissolved all ties with the sentimental constitution of time by the institutions that preserve the social order, notably **the family**. A show such as *Married With Children* is unsentimental in its dialogues and story-lines, but the mere copresence of parents and children creates a configuration that gives meaning to time, and therefore implicitly consents to participate in the unanimous "yes" of the community. (*The Simpsons*, more ostensibly sentimental, is a more acute pastiche of the genre.)

In *Seinfeld*, the only significant parent-child relationship, that of **George Costanza**, is pointedly de-Oedipalized. George's parents do nothing so violent as to disown him; they are simply indifferent to him, and to his prolongation of their genetic heritage. If we were to risk extending this observation to a "psychoanalysis" of the series as a whole, we would conclude that the characters' lives mean "nothing" because their parents have not invested their own desire in their upbringing. In a world where parents are more concerned with their retirement leisure than with their children's success, human interaction becomes a chaotic struggle for momentary recognition, a permanent cold war of all against all.

Although its characters live in the liberal milieu of **New York's** semi-intelligentsia--people like these have begun to dream of voting **Republican** only since **Mayor Giuliani** has cut the crime rate--the series treats **PC** as just another form of sentimentality. Even the most apparently virtuous collective causes are deconstructed into the product of resentful motives. When George finds himself obliged to play the role of neo-Nazi leader **O'Brien**, the only crowd violence we see on screen isn't that of the latter's followers but of the mob of liberal protesters. When **Elaine** takes a pregnant fortune teller to task for smoking (thereby preventing George from learning whether he should take a vacation trip), the satiric point isn't that smoking during pregnancy is really OK but that, in the circumstances, Elaine's remarks reflect not genuine human love but a resentful sense of superiority to the benighted--who just happen to belong to a lower social class. In an equal-opportunity putdown that may be television's most daring antiracist gesture ever, the series has even shown a Black man boring Elaine with endless talk about **George Washington Carver** and the peanut.

Seinfeld's creators have a gut understanding of mimetic desire. Where **Kramer** is mimetic in blissful serenity, George is an heir to **Dostoevsky's Underground Man** who becomes incapable of having sex with his girlfriend because he's obsessed by another woman who treated him with contempt. The psychological base of *Seinfeld's* deconstruction of sentimentality is that these characters are selfish not out of a sense of self, but from the lack of it.

The relationship of the four principals is entirely voluntary, unconnected with even the loose notion of an institutional center such as the bar in *Cheers*. Their stability, a formal necessity of the series, remains enigmatic on the plane of content, where the little community subsists on a ground of mutual betrayal. The frequent references to a common past are inevitably recriminations rather than reminiscences. Yet because the foursome must stay together, their unity becomes the object of our desire. The less sentimental their relations, the more we value their conjunction *quand même* as a sign of what can only be, in the absence of any other explanation, the purest, most disinterested **love**. This implicit love is the secret and the charm of the show's cynicism; it remains transcendental because it can never be articulated or thematized in any way.

Seinfeld has gone on for nine years. Although, on the lesser scale of the comic strip, serial stability can be maintained for decades and even for generations, this is not possible in a major creative endeavor. The end of *Seinfeld* is inherent in its project of deferral. Its lack of sentimentality is a means of deferring the creation of a sacrificial community. But sentimentality is not something one can simply eliminate. It is inherent in the formation of the community; it can be deferred, but it cannot be destroyed without destroying the cultural function of the work, which is after all to bring us together. However hard-headed its understanding of mimetic desire, the end of *Seinfeld* as of every other cultural phenomenon is the generation of love out of the transcendence of resentment. Its strength lies in its refusal to represent the love that it must generate. This attention to what I have called *esthetic paradox* was formerly the privilege of the high culture. The genius of *Seinfeld* is to have understood that, when wholly unmotivated

by extraneous, *i.e.*, institutional factors, the discontinuously stable community inherent in the sitcom format can itself become a model of this paradox. *Seinfeld* is the sitcom about nothing because it is the sitcom whose form, unmotivated by content, is at every moment a transcendental gift.

But, however unmotivated the community of its protagonists, the series' very popularity fatally creates a motivated community among its spectators. Reading the recent articles on the series' demise in *Time* and *Newsweek*, I was struck by the references to "named" episodes such as "The Rye" or "The Chinese Restaurant"--as though the world of *Seinfeld* watchers has found communion in a set of universally admitted preferences. The reader will excuse me if I find this less than appealing. The pleasure of *Seinfeld* is an individual experience to be shared with one's special friends. Here is the one TV show that stands above the rest, that you and I, with our sophisticated esthetic tastes, may enjoy. Once this enjoyment has become just another of the banal unanimities that *Time* transmits weekly to its readers, it is indeed time for the show to leave the air.

This year's episodes, having thrown off the restraint that formerly characterized the series, seem to be burning the bridges of plausibility that held the characters and their world together. But the real sense of this outlandishness is just the opposite. The resort to slapstick and the wild improbabilities of a paranoid world view reflect an unprecedented need to share the quiet desperation of the series' protagonists with the outside world. (The recent "*Thelma and Louise*" scene between Kramer and a car salesman is a case in point.) This sharing reflects, within the series, the series' own popularity. As the world has increasingly come to commune in the non-communing community of *Seinfeld*, *Seinfeld* itself cannot but increasingly mirror this contamination. How can *Seinfeld* continue to avoid sentimentality in a world that sentimentalizes over *Seinfeld*? The world of the nineties that the show depicts has become a world for which that very show has become the central cultural experience. This is too much for popular culture to absorb, too much even for the series' considerable resources of self-reflectivity. *Seinfeld* has reached its end, and must come to an end.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Personal Origins of GA

3. The Pursuit of Amateurism

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In the second of these "personal" columns, [Chronicle 113](#), I related the minimalism of **GA** to the minimalism of the **Bronx** itself, with its status as a way-station between (for my generation) the Lower East Side and Scarsdale or Beverly Hills. What I called in that *Chronicle* my attraction rather to "the structure of transcendence itself than to any possible worldly incarnation of it" is expressed perhaps yet more profoundly in a persistent--and perverse--personal trait: **amateurism**.

As a beginning student of French literature, I was struck by a key sentence in **Chateaubriand's** *René* (1802):

Il fallut quitter le le toit paternel, devenu l'héritage de mon frère. [...]
Arrêté à l'entrée des voies trompeuses de la vie, je les considérais l'une après l'autre, sans m'y oser engager.

I had to leave my father's house, which had become my brother's inheritance [after their father's death]...
Paused at the entrance to the deceitful paths of life, I contemplated each one in turn, without daring to start out on it.

The image of the "*entrée des voies trompeuses*" suggests a central intersection or *rond-point* from which they all diverge, like the avenues around **L'Etoile**. The deceitfulness is not that of any given path, but of their general condition: once it is chosen, you must abandon the others. To pause at the "entrance," in contrast, is to retain the possibility of choosing any of them and thereby to make the "latent" choice of all. To remain at this universal intersection is to remain within the unity of childhood while at the same time grasping the variety of options open to the adult.

This is the configuration of **adolescence**, conceived as an extended moment of transition and apprenticeship. Beyond the author's own experience of exile, René's new cultural-psychological attitude reflects and reacts to the beginning of post-Revolutionary bourgeois society. The young man--and today the young woman as well--can no longer pass in a moment of sexual initiation from childhood to adulthood; he must acquire a profession, a qualification with which to enter the marketplace. If there is one thing that the members of market society share, it is their prolonged and therefore "Romantic" adolescence.

In this context, **maturity** may be defined as abandonment of the transitional space of adolescence and successful advancement along one of the "*voies trompeuses*." Maturity is the normal goal of adolescence, but for the Romantic, it constitutes a horizon that one never wants to reach, a spiritual death one seeks to

defer until the end. According as we reject or accept the Romantic's perspective, we will choose very different professions. In the first case, serious contact with the "real world" is of the essence; at best, we may hope to retire early and enjoy a second adolescence before it's too late. But in the second, we choose our professional activity with an eye to preserving adolescent openness as fully as possible; Professional life must remain maximally **amateurish**. The amateur, indeed, does not stand inactive at the center of René's metaphor, but although he takes a few steps along one or several of the *voies*, he never goes far enough to lose sight of their common intersection.

The Romantic ideal is to make one's profession simply equivalent to the deferral of maturity. This originally meant becoming an "artist." But in today's world, dominated by the "youth culture" Chateaubriand already anticipated in horror, adolescent self-expression can only compete in the marketplace dressed up in all sorts of ritual trappings--in a word, it too has been **professionalized**. In our culture, the surest way to defer maturity indefinitely is to remain in the institution *par excellence* of adolescent universality, the **university**. A professor is someone who has never left school, who refers to everything outside academic life as "the real world."

The academy too is professionalized, but in some domains more than others. One's choice of field must be made with the end of minimizing the danger of moving too far along one of the *voies* to remain in contact with their unique origin. The question is not whether one can do without knowledge and discipline. The intellectual amateur is not a primitive; there is no "natural" way of thinking. But one must seek a mode of thought that can remain productive without being particularized into a technique or "methodology."

The problem posed by the professionalization of thought was first raised in **Plato's** critique of the **Sophists**. For Plato, the legitimate professionals are the artisans, the shoemakers and carpenters who employ technical knowledge for the instrumental end of manipulating the natural world. But human interaction is not an instrumental activity, and the art of **rhetoric** that seeks to manipulate this interaction is not a true profession but a means of deceiving others. To professionalize human dialogue is to treat others as instruments. The true philosopher, like **Socrates**, has no "profession."

Every field of study, including philosophy itself, risks professionalization as either a technology or, what is worse, a mode of rhetoric. Of the fields not technical in their essence, that is, in the domain of what may be broadly called the **Humanities**, there is, or was, in **French** perhaps the least pressure to become a technologist of either critical "methodology" or a narrow field of specialization. French culture is universalist, more concerned with principles than with concrete details, and this is reflected in the modes of scholarship it favors. It is no accident that the theory of **mimetic desire** was born in the context of French Studies.

GA's minimality insures that it is minimally professionalizable. No doubt transformation into a marketable technique is a danger that must continually be deferred, but GA as a "permanent revolution" in thought seeks to make this deferral as effective and as renewable as possible. No formulation of the originary hypothesis can ever be definitive. Nor can there ever be a well-defined body of knowledge that can provide its context. An originary theory of the human can neither ignore any given aspect of the human nor become dependent on it.

The **Bronx Romantic** is drawn to amateurism because he preserves the most radical Romantic intuition: that life is adolescence and maturity is death. In order to remain at the originary center, he must vigilantly resist the seductions of professional life. In this respect, it is no doubt fortunate that the professionalism

of today's academy is so different from what I encountered at the beginning of my career thirty-odd years ago. In those days, the profession was small and expanding, jobs were easy to come by, and status was obtained through seniority and publication, that is, by doing one's work. Today the profession is large and contracting, jobs are difficult to obtain, and status is a function of networking and trendiness, which is to say, it must be fought for as a value in itself. This situation, however disheartening for new entrants in the field, is the fulfillment of the Bronx Romantic's dream: it makes full absorption in professional life impossible.

The true amateur never sells his soul to the crowd. He theorizes the operations of the collective and the sacrificial with all the generosity of which he is capable, but he forbears to submit to the judgment of the marketplace. The more we respect the market as the determiner of value, the more vigilantly we must resist its judgment as to our understanding of it. The truth of the market at any given moment is never what the market at that moment wants to hear.

The power of the Romantic attitude lies in permitting us to assimilate the contours of our individual life to the originary unity of the human. This is a unity that is always virtual and can never be actualized. Professional thinkers who propose a unitary explanation of the human, such as the successive generations of Darwinists represented today by the school of "evolutionary psychology," inevitably fail to grasp the paradox inherent in reducing the human invention/discovery of the transcendent realm of the sign to the model of natural adaptation. But the Bronx Romantic remains faithful to the intuition that if one is to understand how humanity and its culture might have come into being, one must not stray far from the central singularity from which all roads diverge.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Political Economy

No. 123: Saturday, January 24, 1998

(With my apologies to **David Rapoport** and his colleagues in the **Department of Political Science**.)

The term *political economy* suggests that the fundamental social articulation is that between the political and the economic, the exercise of power and the distribution of economic goods and services. From **Marx's** materialist standpoint, which has much to recommend it, politics is the servant of economics; the power-structure is determined by the mode of production. **GA** proposes that, although material consumption is the *sine qua non* of social life, the most fundamental human problem is not economic but political--the destructive potential of **mimetic desire**. Man is his own worst enemy, and human culture comes into being not as a means to increase material productivity, but to prevent mimetic violence from destroying the potential producers. Although economics--the satisfaction of appetite--is the fundamental process, it is dependent on politics; until we have been humanized by *différance*, we cannot tend to our animal needs.

As a result, the originary hypothesis begins not with material consumption but with the deferral of consumption under the threat of potential violence. The sign as exchanged among the participants of the originary scene is a means of insuring that no individual, not even the "alpha" in the prehuman pecking order, will be able to appropriate the central object for himself. But once the sign has been exchanged, the sacred center, by the very fact that the sign protects it from appropriation, no longer risks arousing mutually destructive violence; it has become approachable. Whence the *sparagmos* or tearing-apart of the object that is the originary form of distribution.

The originary reciprocal exchange of signs is the source of our model of moral equality. But this should not be taken to mean that the originary community constituted by this exchange is a lost paradise. History is not driven by a desire to return to the womb. The reciprocity of the originary community has only a single degree of freedom. Each individual renounces through the reciprocal exchange of signs the center that can only be appropriated by the group "equally" through the reciprocal exchange of things. Pre-agricultural societies maintain this reciprocity, which dictates elaborate systems of gift-giving and "the exchange of women." But the center remains sacred; no subsequent decision as to its apportionment can do more than reaffirm the originary renouncement.

Hierarchical society is born after the invention of sedentary agriculture, when an individual who generates a surplus realizes that he may thereby usurp the function of the sacred center, a discovery that in *The End of Culture* I attributed to the "**big-man**." The first wave of hierarchical societies culminates in the great archaic empires--in the West, **Egypt** and the various **Mesopotamian** kingdoms--where the god-king's occupation of the ritual center extends the tribal big-man's usurpation. Whatever the inefficiencies and brutalities of theocratic rule, it offered a genuine decision-making apparatus for the distribution of the economic surplus where the original system could at best devise ritual mechanisms of

waste, such as the **Kwakiutl** potlatch so dear to **Georges Bataille**. Rousseauian sentiments to the contrary, the "equality" of modern democracy has nothing in common with that of primitive society--nothing, that is, that has not been mediated by the archaic usurpation of the center.

The first democracy arose in **Athens** when the remnants of the palace hierarchy inherited from the **Mycenaean** era had become unable to maintain order among the small independent producers who composed the backbone of the population. The focus of **Solon's** reforms in the early 6th century BC was the abolition of the debts and "feudal" obligations that bound the individual citizens to their noble superiors. The citizens were empowered to choose their own leaders; dialogue and negotiation took the place of theocratic dictates and hierarchy became the free choice of the community.

Solon's reforms mobilized the citizens for external conquest, not economic take-off. They strengthened the Athenian military forces, particularly the navy, in order to assure Athens' dominance over its colonies and tributary states. Athenian democracy, like later Roman republicanism, paid for itself militarily rather than economically. The liberation of the Athenian population from economic dependency that was the basis for its political freedom generated a need for slaves to do the work that in other societies was accomplished by unfree peasants (e.g., **Sparta's** helots); the freedom of the Athenian citizenry was paid for by the subjection of foreign populations.

The small producers who made up the majority of the electorate were empowered to make decisions in the "originary" context of reciprocal dialogue, but because the economy was not itself empowered by a similar model, the immense mobilization of civic energy to which we still pay tribute was invested in cultural and military, but rarely in strictly economic projects--there was indeed no conception of "economic investment." Although productive labor was not held in contempt, the sheer quantity of political activity--voting, lot-drawing, judging, ostracizing--in this direct democracy was an obstacle to work. Athens could not maintain its military edge, and after the defeat by Sparta in the **Peloponnesian War** (404 BC), its heroic era was over.

* * * * *

Ancient democracy failed because it was politics-driven. The resource-allocation system had changed from a ritual hierarchy to an electorate of free citizens without liberating the economic sphere as such. In modern **liberal democracy**, the **free market** provides for reciprocal exchange in the economic sphere to complement that in the political sphere. The result is the institutional articulation of the originary balance between politics and economics: political institutions have their *raison-d'être* not in themselves, but in the maintenance of a "civil society" of economic production and consumption.

Modern democracy differs from Athenian democracy not merely in its representative structure, but because it presides over a society in which economic rather than political activity is foregrounded. The proportion of human energy devoted to politics in the **United States**, whether at its creation or today, is incomparably smaller than in ancient Athens. Although nascent American democracy, like its Athenian predecessor, was dependent on slavery, its subsequent history, punctuated by the **Civil War**, shows this atavistic mode of production to be incompatible with modern democracy rather than indispensable to it.

Just as democracy makes the originary reciprocal exchange of signs the basis for the negotiation of political decisions, so in the market, the "equal" division of the sacrificial victim becomes the basis for the negotiation of economic values. The market presupposes the accumulation of property and consequent differences of wealth, just as the political process presupposes the accumulation of influence

and consequent differences of power.

Economic exchange did not await the coming of the bourgeoisie. It is not easy to understand in what way the marketplaces of the "free market" differ from those of the past. As a result, we tend to subordinate the innovation in human relations brought about by the free market to that effected by the technological progress that the market in fact inspired: we speak not of the "market revolution" but of the "industrial revolution."

My experience in purchasing souvenirs from the Arab vendors in the *shuk* or *souk* in **Jerusalem** gave me a useful insight into the premodern market. These vendors have no fixed or even posted prices. The Western tourist, especially the American, is offered at first an outrageous price, say, \$200 for a cotton dress. On refusal, the price comes down sharply to \$20 or \$15. A little experience taught me that not only does the seller offer no fixed price, but the buyer can command pretty much any price he likes. It suffices to name one's figure and to continue to stick to it as the vendor makes successively lower offers. I didn't experiment with deliberately absurd prices, but those I set were always eventually accepted.

But the interaction would become increasingly unpleasant. As the price got lower, the vendor's attitude changed from obsequious to grave to downright hostile, and when the purchase was finally made, he would turn away in disgust. I abandoned my technique out of an uncomfortable feeling that I was subverting the vendors' culture of negotiation by exploiting a loophole that authentic participants disdained. Both parties were expected to bargain; holding to a fixed price was not interacting appropriately with my adversary.

In this kind of market, the vendor sets the price of each item interactively. The lower the price you want, the more you have to work for it, and the more uncomfortable you are made to feel. It is as though the vendor concentrated in himself a collective sacrificial energy. Ultimately you could have the goods for free, but you would be lynched on leaving the stall.

From the standpoint of the free market, what is wrong with this form of bargaining is that it confuses politics with economics. Instead of fluctuating around a "fair price" determinable by objective calculation of market conditions, the price is the object of a contest of wills and implied threats--a contest of power. To find the price is not to seek the intersection of the supply and demand curves for the product, but that of the two parties' "negotiation curves": the point at which the one is unable to endure the signs of the other's potential for (individual and collective) violence. I could subvert the system without penalty as a tourist in a policed marketplace, but not in a society where the seller's relatives might avenge his humiliation.

An economy dominated by interactions of this type could not become independent of the political system. In such a society, my power-relations with the vendor would be just a tiny element of the political hierarchy. A rich or influential buyer would get a better price, or no price at all. The market's distribution of resources could not become an independent source of economic information.

In liberating economic exchange from "politics," the free market reciprocally liberates the political system from responsibility for economic distribution. The result is a democratic political system conceived not, as in Athens, as a substitute for the old central system of ritual redistribution, but as a means to maintain the conditions--peace and security, rule of law, economic infrastructure--under which a "civil society" ordered by market exchange may flourish.

The democratic process requires that the large majority of citizens have, as it is often put, "a stake in the

system." But this "stake" is best measured not by a certain level of economic success but by the capability of creating an individual "message" of identity through consumption of products offered on the market. No aspect of "capitalism" has been so bitterly denounced by the intelligentsia as "consumer society"; yet the ability to express one's political disaffection from the liberal democratic system via an economic transaction within the system is a measure of its stability. What **Herbert Marcuse** a generation ago called its "repressive tolerance" is its insurance against the horrors of centralized political control.

In the scene of human origin, the key moment is the "political" exchange of signs, but the ultimate goal is the "economic" distribution of the body of the sacred victim, which incarnates the meaning of the sign in materially assimilable form. When we can produce economic goods in such quantity and variety that they function more like the sign that defers mimetic violence than the object that incites it, the average citizen need not contest through the political *agon* what he can obtain through the peaceful reciprocity of the marketplace. The "deferral of violence through representation" that is the function of human culture need no longer defer the pleasures of consumption as well. As a result, the political, like the cultural, comes to be just another sector of the universal dialogue among the citizenry.

What some see as the degradation of the political process--recent events indeed make this sentiment difficult to avoid--is more significantly its **democratization**. The rigorous separation of politics from economics, word from thing, sacred from profane, is "elitist" even before it generates an elite; the dialectization of these differences in the social dialogue, along with that of class and ethnic differences, is a guarantee of social stability. Each gets to define and display to others "esthetically" through the medium of consumption a personal identity, a personal piece of the universal sacred. It is surely noteworthy that, whether or not we have reached the "end of history," the most virulent anti-Western ideologies today, unlike that of the **Bolsheviks** of old, promise *less* rather than more economic productivity. Today's resentful revolutionaries, like the peasant in the Russian tale, are happy to lose one eye provided that their neighbor lose both.

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Much remains to be said about the relationship between the stability of modern democracy and the nature of social conversation in consumer society. I hope to return to this subject in future *Chronicles*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Market Model: Three Points

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At the end of last week's column, I suggested that more could be said about the relationship between market society and liberal democracy. Since I have been dealing with these matters elsewhere, it seemed useful to defer the originary analysis of *"presidential kneepads"* and the like in order to develop some less topical reflections.

1. The Minimal Market Model

Evolution is a minimal model of change in the biological domain. Seventy-odd years after the **Scopes trial**, the idea still seems to be sufficiently under attack to arouse spirited defenses, of which **Daniel Dennett's** *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) is an impressive recent example. But when I hear spirited defenses of the theory of evolution, I always want to say, "yes, but what are you really defending?" The evolutionary model in itself, independently of the details of the genetic mechanism about which Darwin himself knew nothing, is something akin to tautological in the historical sphere. In a system with sufficient complexity to generate self-reproducing organisms, reproduction cannot be perfect, and when forms change, those that remain are by definition better adapted than those that don't. The minimal explanation for the current state of these forms is "evolutionary"; any other theory requires the intervention of external, not to say supernatural, forces. That Darwinian theory fails to explain the specificity of the human, a point that I have made many times in these *Chronicles* and elsewhere, by no means implies that it is "refuted." It is not false to call human culture "adaptive"; to conceive its adaptivity according to the same model as the form of a shark's fin or even a chimpanzee's call is simply to remain on the wrong level of generality, to make one's hypothesis too strong by a whole degree of magnitude. On this another day.

Similarly, the market is a "minimal model" of human interaction. All interactions from the originary event on down may be considered "exchanges," all decisions, evaluations of "utility." The choice to consider every human interaction in market terms implies nothing falsifiable about social reality. Yet the choice itself, to the extent that it is not merely a speculative but a practical act, has a considerable influence on social reality. Ethical interactions, be they acts of punishment or reward, love or hostility, may be represented in market terms without distortion; but the degree to which such representations filter out from the "etic" sphere of the theoretician to contaminate the "emic" social world itself has profound implications for the nature of the interactions they model. And needless to say, the invasion of the "real world" by these concepts is itself dependent on their market value.

One of the difficulties in applying the market model to human interaction is that it has until now been left to economists, who are not concerned with human paradox. However paradoxical the desire that the market generates for a given article of mass-produced uniqueness, from a strictly economic standpoint, there is only "demand." But from a generative-anthropological perspective, the paradoxical "supplement"

of these desires measures the market's success in purging our resentment of its violence and recycling its energy into the exchange system. At the horizon--which is a theoretical limit and not a utopia--desire would be reduced to pure mimetic paradox and circulate at infinite speed, and all occasions for mimetic conflict would be instantly evaluated, compensated, and dissolved in the market.

2. The Priceless Always Costs a Little More

At the first level of approximation, the market is a virtual locus of exchange within which prices are communicated with "perfect knowledge." Its elements are "exchange values," which are tautologically equivalent to prices. But we don't generally buy something because we find its exchange value favorable and intend to resell it; we buy it to use, and our purchase depends on the "utility" we expect to get from it. Thus when we're hungry, we may pay a premium price at a **7-11** for a loaf of bread, but we'll wait for a sale at **Lucky's** if we already have a few loaves in the freezer. Consumer products have a "use-value" as well as an exchange-value, but so do producer's goods for whoever uses them. Use-value is not necessarily based on "subjective" considerations; my purchase of a new machine for my factory depends on the same kinds of considerations as that of the loaf of bread: I'd be forced to accept a higher price if my old machine breaks down than if I'm merely buying in anticipation of future expansion.

But although "use-value" may be more personal than exchange-value, it is not sufficiently interactive to reveal the paradoxical nature of desire. The term smacks of Utilitarianism--the model, traceable to **Jeremy Bentham**, that would explain human behavior according to a "calculus" of utilities. The notion of use-value or utility cannot address the role of the object of consumption as a sign of collective desire. This is a domain that not only has not been sufficiently theorized, but that can never be sufficiently theorized. The consumption-sign cannot be reduced to a calculus because the sign has value only insofar as it exceeds any calculus, as it makes a sacred "revelation."

This is the limitation of **Jean Baudrillard's** semantic analysis of the "product-sign." Although is useful to talk about the synchronic structure of product-signs at a given moment, it is impossible to construct a model of consumption based on such a structure because the value of product-signs is far more dependent than that of words on their diachronic situation. Language is a "mature," consumption an "originary" mode of signification. Only a few slang words like "groovy" come in and go out of style; most words ("tree" for example) evolve only through broad, slow phonetic changes. In the world of consumption, on the contrary, obsolescence is the rule rather than the exception. The point of consumption is not, like mature language, to create a model of a relatively stable significant reality but, like language at its origin, to situate oneself on the cusp where significance is created. The consumer's "message" is more like a fashion collection than a discourse: last year's collection is not this year's; each component must be constantly revalued. This endless circulation is not generated by the manufacturers' cynical desire to sell new products, even if they profit from the circulation and encourage it; it reflects the fact that desire is "ostensive" rather than declarative, revelatory rather than constative.

Consumer goods are products of mass consumption, but for that very reason, they seek the **aura** of uniqueness by imitating handicrafts and, more generally, by appropriating signs of the sacred from the ritual distribution system that preceded the market era. Circulation within the modern exchange system depends on the assimilation and recirculation of the very signs of what resists circulation. (As **Thomas Frank** points out in his recent *The Conquest of Cool*, this resistance may be quite explicit; an important phenomenon of marketing since the 1960s is the "commodification of discontent": selling people signs of their disaffection from the very system that sells them.) Some have taken this to imply that the system is

living on borrowed time, that when we use up the signs of our ritual past, we will have nothing more to sell. I think not. These signs are continually recycled and enriched; the sacred of the past contaminates the objects of the present, just as the sacred has always done.

3. The "Ultimateness" of the Market

Nothing is more utopian than the claim to put an end to utopian thought. All thought about the future is utopian, since it implies of necessity that the categories with which to think the future are available in the present. This is tautologically so, regardless of the sophistication with which we anticipate future categories of thought. To think about the future implies that we have reached the "end of history." But to translate this unformed virtuality into historically specific terms by asserting that liberal market society is the "final" social form smacks of the most arrogant, or naive, utopianism.

GA is not **Fukuyamism**. My point about market society is not that it is the definitive *form* chosen from an infinite set of possible forms, but that it is the minimal or most general *model* chosen from a finite set of models. For example, we may consider tyranny, monarchy, oligarchy not, as **Aristotle** does, as a set of mutually exclusive categories that form a "structure," but as cases of limited circulation of power within a minimally constrained model of general circulation. And the same is true for the economy. Earlier systems of distribution too are "markets," as are the restricted subsystems of our own day. These systems differ in their smaller number of "degrees of freedom"--a term I use here metaphorically but which could presumably be approximated by mathematical methods.

In this perspective, the "ultimate" nature of liberal democracy is not an attribute of any particular aspect of contemporary institutions--elections, legislatures, stock markets...--but reflects the fact that this system alone openly realizes, in both senses of the term, the fundamental nature of the market or exchange model. This realization is not merely a matter for theoreticians; it brings with it political and economic consequences. But because the market model is already minimally constrained, these consequences cannot render the model itself inadequate; they only modify its parameters. The accelerating confluence of **words** and **things** in the postmodern market breaks down barriers of thought that cannot be erected anew; future systems of thought will not be able to avoid providing a generative model of their divergence from a common origin.

The market model is neither tragic nor triumphalist; it is "realistic." The human is a system for generating the deferral of conflict, not either happy or tragic endings. The human exchange system does not merely reshuffle the same elements; from the first and ever thereafter, it creates meaning by incarnating, capturing, and consuming--**sacrificing**, in a word--its sacred Other. All earlier models of human behavior have either been centered on this Other as though we could understand "its" intentions on the analogy of our own, or have--the "Enlightenment" view--elected to ignore it altogether. A **generative anthropology** is one that accepts the obligation to construct a model of the human and its transcendental Other with the materials made available within human interaction alone.

The **Romantic** critique of the market, as formulated by antibourgeois writers like **Théophile Gautier** in the 1830s, is that it ignores the transcendental realm in its unique preoccupation with the generation of material "utility." But the consumer era has shown us that, on the contrary, the market is a collective mechanism for incarnating the sacred objects of collective desire in consumable products. Market exchange is the minimally violent mode of sacrifice, of accomplishing "the deferral of violence through representation." To adopt the market as our fundamental model of human interaction is to take a

qualitative step toward creating a generative theory of the human, a minimal anthropology.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Presidential Kneepads and Phallic Religion

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I doubt that academic humanism's current obsession with Freudian vocabulary will redound to its credit in future generations. The substitution of "**Phallus**" for "**Being**" in presumably respectable scholarly discourse will surely strike our heirs as aberrant. Everyone quotes **Lacan's** line that "the unconscious is structured like a language" but, in truth, our theoreticians act as though the unconscious were structured like a **religion**--a religion of **phallus-worship** inherent in the human psyche. *Chassez l'inconscient collectif, il revient au galop*. [If you chase away the collective unconscious, it just comes galloping back.]

But this religion is uniformly practiced in **denial**. The "phallogocentric" West is the bogey-man of the world, and feminist thinkers from **Luce Irigaray** to **Jane Gallop** make reputations from the resentful deconstruction of **Lacanian** phallicity--it being apparently unthinkable that some feminine thinker might simply abandon the whole androcentric system of psychoanalysis and start afresh.

Yet the news over the past few weeks has been something of a revelation: far from being, as I had thought, an academic deviation, phallus-worship is alive and well in the "real world," in Washington, D.C. and beyond. With the news of his alleged affair, the President's approval rating has risen, particularly among women who have reacted far more favorably than men. Tut-tutting aside, **Clinton's** part in the **Lewinsky** affair is one of phallic virility. As **Stacey Meeker** pointed out to me, had we been reading that, like **Proust's Baron Charlus**, Clinton let his intern whip him while chained to a bed, or that, like **Marv Albert**, he lost his toupee to her in the heat of passion, public reaction would be very different. But **oral sex** under the alleged conditions is a secularized form of phallus-worship; the **presidential kneepads** are instruments of piety.

We cannot separate the resentful phallus-worship practiced in the obscurity of our literature departments from the more affirmative kind manifested in the White House. But they need not be seen as signs of the "moral decline" that a certain kind of conservative thinker enjoys--and profits from--bemoaning. In my corner of the world, at least, there is little evidence that we are reliving the fate of **Sodom & Gomorrah**. Young couples today appear more rather than less inclined to fidelity than those of my generation. Certainly among **UCLA** graduate students--the next generation's secret trend-setters--the prevalence of long-term over short-term sexual relationships has risen dramatically over the past twenty years.

Let me attempt a different explanation. The two most significant historical developments of the past half century are **(1) the failure of socialism**, including "national socialism," and **(2) the end of total war**. On the one hand, the utopian alternatives to the market system have been shown to be without value; on the other, the chief means by which societies have always competed has been rendered unusable.

Can it be a coincidence that these two components of the "end of history" have occurred in tandem? We arrive at the one "final" social system just at the moment when it is no longer possible to contest a war between two competing systems. Just when it appeared that the **Cold War** would last forever and that

neither capitalism nor socialism would ever be able to demonstrate its superiority, the **Berlin Wall** fell and the **Soviet Union** dissolved. The coincidence of phallic theory in the academy and phallic practice in the White House help us to understand this conjunction.

1. Why is theory today so bound up with phallic mythology? What we call "**theory**" is the final avatar of **Enlightenment** rationalism. Theory expresses the intellectual's resentment against a social order dominated by "irrational" forces, whether those of religion or those of the market, that his mastery of discursive rationality--of "metaphysics"--does not permit him to control.

Freud was no leftist, nor **Lacan** either, but however justified the repression of infantile sexuality by the needs of "civilization," however inevitable the passage from the "imaginary" to the "symbolic," psychoanalysis can be read as telling a story of desire that was once "natural" and has subsequently been repressed. Lacan's notion of mediated desire is not all that far from **Girard's** and may even be considered one of its sources; yet the ontogenetic definition of a prelinguistic "imaginary" stage on which language is imposed in the form of paternal interdiction inverts the phylogenetic model in which human desire first comes into being mediated by the sign. The positing of a prepaternal stage of desire where the mother "has" the phallus creates a space for the contestation of the "phallogocentric" paternalism of the symbolic order--and for the Lacanian-feminist phallic antireligion.

Nostalgia for a repressed true self is the psychological counterpart of utopia. Now that the bankruptcy of our century's political utopias has thrown us back on the mercies of the hated market system, "theory" clings to the psychoanalytic utopia as the only one available.

2. The end of war means the end of the most significant public testing ground of virility. Human mimetic violence is exercised principally by males, whose competition is unrestrained by the need to bear and nurture children. Male aggressivity provides the minimal impetus for language; the male potential for violence can only be restrained by culture, "the deferral of violence through representation." But in the absence of warfare, virility becomes exclusively sexual. It is often held against **President Clinton** that he evaded the **Vietnam** draft. But this is no reason to take him for a coward. From **Achilles** to **George Bush**, (the youngest American pilot in WW II, I believe) our leaders proved themselves, really or symbolically, on the field of battle. By the time of the Vietnam war, whatever the individual motivations of those who served and those who managed not to, the age of battlefield heroism was at an end. Clinton is the first president from the post-**World War II** generation, the first world leader of a new era in which "heroic" masculinity best expresses itself through submission on **presidential kneepads**.

The postmodern era is one in which the great competitions are no more. We will have neither the "final conflict" on the battlefield nor the undecidable conflict of the Cold War. The voices of opposition have not been silenced; they are more voluble than ever. But they are voices of resentment that seek to undermine a system on which they admit their dependency. Within modern market society, the chief model for oppositional activity is no longer war but "love," the "battle of the sexes." As our central authority figure becomes an object of phallus worship, those who would contest authority are driven to the feminist rewriting of the phallogocentric myths of Freud and Lacan.

Under these circumstances, **GA's** emphasis on **violence** in human etiology might seem old-fashioned. But just as it is the excess of our means of violence that makes war impossible, so it is the excess of our means for the deferral of violence that makes "socialism" impossible. We have weapons too powerful to use and a system of consumption too elaborate to abandon; in either case, the outcome would be chaos. Nuclear devastation is easy to imagine; but think of the violence in our cities if our supermarkets were

stocked like those in the old **USSR**. The common element of violence, potential and deferred, links the two conditions of postmodernity and the two versions of postmodern sexuality.

That we can now turn from the battlefield to the far less bloody battle of the sexes is good news indeed. But let us not forget that humanity remains, as it probably always will, the primary threat to its own survival.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Origin and Structure

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Rereading **Ferdinand de Saussure's** *Cours de linguistique* the other day, I was struck by the emphasis on methodological rigor. Linguistics was to offer the example of a true, "hard" science among the human sciences. Saussure casts out the diachrony of speech (*la parole*) and the longer-term diachrony of linguistic evolution in order to construct a synchronic "system of differences," the structure of language (*la langue*) at a given moment. Saussure's *langue* is not truly a synchronic cut in diachronic history; it is a **model** within which the internal temporality of language itself--that of the syntagm--is cut off from its normal prolongation in historical time. Aside from a few clichés, there are no sentences in *la langue*, only sentence-*patterns*, but the internal temporality of these patterns is not contiguous with the real time of human action.

The idea that all cultural systems, on the example of language, can be modeled by synchronic structures is what became known as "structuralism," a term that now recalls a bygone era. Influenced more by the phonologist **Nicolas Troubetzkoy** than by Saussure himself, **Claude Lévi-Strauss** believed that all cultural practices from body-painting and village topography to myths and marriage-patterns could be derived from a highly schematic cultural unconscious that enjoyed far fewer degrees of freedom than we naively think we possess.

In today's post-structuralist climate, it is hard to recapture the enthusiastic scientism of that era. If, at the time, a certain minimalism was the rage, today's world thirsts for signs of difference. These cultural needs are reflected in our intellectual constructions in ways not always perceptible and never overtly present in the arguments used in their defense.

Even more radically than structuralism, **GA** is a minimalist way of thinking, but those who would tar it with the same brush fail to understand the connection between a minimal set of preconditions and a maximal freedom of evolution. The simpler the original model, the more freely it can develop. What is wrong with structuralism is not its minimalism; it is that it is not minimal enough. Instead of beginning from a single event and a single sign, the structuralist paradigm refuses to "begin" anywhere. Lévi-Strauss's symbolic unconscious may be simple, but it remains multiple, and that synchronic multiplicity prevents it from having a history.

A system of "pure differences" has no point of origin. But in that case, the temporal, syntagmatic or narrative operations of the system itself, which Lévi-Strauss understands as working through social contradictions to restore an easily disturbed ethical equilibrium, can no longer be described. In order for the system to function in time, it must be subject to time. A synchronic model cannot capture, even as a first approximation, the operation of such a system. However universal the system and however local its instantiation, instantiation and system influence each other, just as a tiny planet has a measurable effect on the gravitational field of the star it orbits. To declare the star fixed with respect to the planet is an

innocent operation, because it merely simplifies physical relationships; in contrast, to declare our culture fixed with respect to our historical problems makes it impossible to understand how our culture arises and evolves in response to these problems.

The familiar post-structuralist critique of **Derridean deconstruction** assimilates structuralism to **Platonism** as exemplary of "logocentrism," a term that may best be translated as "the regime of the declarative sentence." A structure is a synchronic system of differences, but difference is also, "at the same time," deferral. The selection of one member of a paradigm cannot be understood synchronically because it implies the deferral / differentiation (*différance*) of the selected member from the others.

Deconstruction is *de l'anthropologie qui s'ignore* [anthropology unaware of itself]. The crucial object of *différance* is not meaning but **mimetic violence**. By putting the minimal human necessity of deferring this violence at the origin of the sign, we see that it is not the differential paradigm or "structure" but the sign itself that is *always already* an agent of deferral. The "present" of the *logos* is deferral itself, the deferral of real action. This is an argument I have made most recently in *Signs of Paradox* (1997).

Is there a better scientific paradigm than that of structuralism? Let us assume for the purpose of argument that the deconstructive critique can be subsumed within that of **generative anthropology**, which proposes a minimal hypothesis for the genesis of "structure." How then shall we answer the fundamental question of human science: is the construction of a scientific paradigm of the human possible? If not, what could be the status of the affirmation that human science is "impossible"? After all, "positive" social science departments are flourishing; it is rather the "deconstructive" humanities, and the intellectual life they foster, that are threatened with extenuation.

The intellectual and the scientist

There is no shortage of social scientists; it is the humanist intellectual that is in danger. A decade ago, **Russell Jacoby** lamented the passing of *The Last [American] Intellectuals* (Basic Books, 1987), who were never in any case more than pale imitations of the French. In a brilliant analysis of the phenomenon, *Agonies of the Intellectual* (Nebraska, 1992), **Allan Stoekl** of Pennsylvania State University traces the intellectual's conflictive relationship with social science to the seminal figure of **Emile Durkheim**, the founder of modern social science as well as an influential public figure who conceived the "sociologist" as the secular priest of modern society.

The "intellectual" is a paradoxical personage, half scientific truth-teller, half prophet. Unlike the ordinary political commentator or ideologue, he claims to found his socio-political recommendations on a privileged knowledge of the human, not to say of Being itself. Because Durkheim combined the scientist's Enlightenment faith in reason with an optimistic vision of the amenability of the sacred to rational control, he was able to affirm the compatibility of both roles. Through analysis of the mechanisms of primitive religion, the sociologist learns the role of the sacred in the social order; he then applies that understanding to the creation of a secular religion in modern society. The paradox inherent in the attempt to control the sacred through rational means, to obtain an "ostensive" effect through the logic of the declarative, was not apparent to Durkheim, although the irrational forces of modern society were revealed to him in the horrors of World War I, in which he lost his son.

For Durkheim, religion is a dynamic expression of social solidarity; it is ambivalently and, ultimately, self-contradictorily both a declarative "constatation" and an ostensive revelation. Structuralism, in

contrast, refuses to deal with sacrality as an ostensive phenomenon. Sacred myths do not reveal truths; they convert the system's logical contradictions into narrative metamorphoses. From the structuralist's atemporal perspective, the transformations wrought by mythical narratives are reversible; these narratives are understood as exchange systems, like the exchange of women in "elementary kinship structures." No doubt this "misunderstands" the sacred, but it provides a model of it that is scientific in that it implies neither kinship with it nor an attempted application of it.

The structuralist has no agenda for the "good society"; he merely observes and models. His goal, as announced in various places by Lévi-Strauss, is to reduce the apparent complexity of social forms to its lowest terms, and his faith is that these terms are low indeed, that the number of parameters that determine the structures of human communication is very small.

Although it is never stated as such, the program implicit in such research is that of **control**. The structuralist seeks "objective" knowledge of the structures that determine human signifying practices in the implicit hope of controlling these practices. No doubt his thought-processes too are subject to these same structures; but his specialist's knowledge of their "unconscious" influence allows him access to hidden resemblances among phenomena that appear different, and therefore to causal relations that escape the uninitiated. And since the structuralist's notion of exchange is that of a closed system, he has no theory to explain how his own clearly valuable knowledge can be transmitted to--and discounted in--the larger society.

This quandary demonstrates the deficiency of structuralism. If there is indeed a finite, simple set of "structures" that explains all human phenomena, the system of significant differences we have constructed on the basis of our "misreading" of these structures cannot survive our knowledge of them. But the notion that any "true" model of the human cultural system can drastically reduce the information in it is absurd. We use these "false" differences to construct meanings; to know the structural underpinnings of the differences cannot reduce them to the underpinnings; it merely reveals that the underpinnings are not sufficient to explain the differences. One could make this point through a reading of Lévi-Strauss's own analyses of myths in *Mythologiques* and elsewhere; but the illogic is inherent in structuralism itself, in its implication that the scientist can ultimately dictate "true" significations to the lay population.

This discussion confirms the legitimacy of the deconstructive position with respect to structuralism. Deconstruction's critique is not scientific; it does not propose a new model to replace the structuralist model it "deconstructs." But structuralism is not simply an inaccurate model that can be superseded only by a more accurate one; it is an "infinitely" inaccurate model whose moral consequence if carried out as a program would be the breakdown of the system of differences that constitutes the social order.

Between the paradox of the intellectual and the sinister implications of the structuralist-scientist, there is a third position: that of minimal anthropology, or **GA**. **GA** is not "scientific" in the sense of providing a falsifiable empirical model. It does not attempt to reduce the complexity of human phenomena to a simple set of structures. No doubt every individual phenomenon of culture has "the same" structure because it is derived from the same source, the originary emergence of the sign as the means to "defer violence through representation." But it cannot rely on its mere "structure" to be operative; each cultural phenomenon must reproduce not merely the structure but the *effect* of the originary sign in generating meaning anew.

As we observe the generation of meaning and learn how it is structured, we become needy of a new

generation for the next time. The understanding of the mechanisms of culture is incrementally, not radically reductive. Our conceptualization of the mechanisms of human interaction that have been represented (shown, not told) in the cultural work is part of the overall cultural movement that drives innovation. But even when it is in the vanguard of this movement, to "understand" culture is not to learn to manipulate its procedures of creation; it is rather to consume it and thereby to encourage the creation of new products that we cannot yet understand.

The exchange system that subtends the model of **GA** is the open-ended system of the **free market** rather than the closed one of structuralism. **Georges Bataille's** idea of "general" exchange that gets such play today among intellectuals was based on a disastrously romantic notion of the sacrificial as unrecuperated *dépense* [expense]. The *entre-deux-guerres* fascination with renewing the sacrificial was purged along with **Nazism**, which showed us what the modern sacrificial is really like. Yet Bataille's underlying intuition is worthy of retention. Culture operates not with a restrained but with an open, "general" exchange system even if, surprise of surprises, it is not human sacrifice or the **potlatch** but the despised capitalist marketplace that maximally realizes this openness. When the intellectual class has become able to assimilate this fact, it will be able to appreciate the claims and achievements of **GA**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Body Sacrificial, Revisited

No. 127: Saturday, February 21, 1998

In the summer of 1995, I devoted the seventh of these [Chronicles](#) (the second most popular of all) to the phenomenon of **body piercing**. Recently, **Tobin Siebers** asked me to contribute a chapter on the subject to a book he is editing on Art and the Body. I thought it would be useful to devote another column to piercing, if only to try out a few of the ideas I expect to develop more fully in the book chapter.

All the "research" for *Chronicle 7* was done on the WWW, and the same has been true this time. The **Internet** is not only more interactive and up-to-date than printed matter, it is the appropriate medium for an anarchic, "underground" activity like body piercing or, more broadly, "**body modification**" (**BM**). The [Body Modification Ezine](#) or *BME* is the best and most thorough of a number of highly professional and elaborate Web sites and publications devoted to the subject. The [Almost Complete Body Piercing Links List](#) contains at last update over 1100 links--including, I am proud to say, my [Chronicle 7](#). BM ranges over a gamut from tattoos to castration; here I shall confine my remarks to piercing, its "middle of the road" and most characteristic form.

In *Chronicle 7*, I considered BM in terms of the two fundamental parameters of modern consumption: as **sacrificial** and as **semiotic**. Like all consumption, but more explicitly than most, BM acquires its sacred aura through sacrifice; like all consumption, but more explicitly than most, BM conveys a "message." This time around, I would like to explore a second level of approximation, that of the interactive context of the message that BM conveys through the sacrifice of part of one's being. In contrast with the mid-level addressee of mainstream acts of consumption, BM characteristically focuses on the two extreme interlocutors of the modern citizen-consumer: the most intimate, one's actual or potential sexual partner, and the most general, society as a whole. The **erotic** and the **political**, then, or, as some wag once put it, the **public** and the **pubic**.

Piercing eroticism

Lists of reasons are an affront to **GA's** credo of intellectual parsimony. Whenever people allege five different reasons for some activity, there is a way of understanding all five as aspects of some more general "reason." To say that **X** gets pierced because he wants to make a statement, **Y** because he thinks it looks nice, **Z** because it enhances his sexual pleasure is fine at the level of the user survey, but it should be a basis for, not a substitute for, analytic reflection.

Many accounts of pierces, not limited to those in explicitly erogenous zones, refer to enhanced sexual pleasure as the motivation for, and a result of, the pierce. Sexuality is "physical" but, as its metaphoric generalization suggests, "sexiness" is inextricably bound up with the semiotic motivations of desire. Piercing stimulates nerve endings and, in certain places, the jewelry is in constant contact with erectile

tissue. But these auxiliary benefits of piercing become available only once it has become possible to consider one's body as a zone of "modification" activity. Once it becomes thinkable to pierce holes in and hang rings from anywhere on my body, it is a foregone conclusion that these things will be done in such a way as to enhance erotic sensations, just as, once it is permissible to write about anything or display pictures of anything, it is inevitable that writing and displaying will be used for the same end.

The erotics of body piercing include the physical enhancement of pleasure, but this very possibility is itself a "spiritual" enhancement, a sign of the piercer's freedom to act so as to enhance his pleasure. It is this sign that, in turn, appeals to those whom the piercer wishes to attract. The non-piercer is drawn to the piercer as to a possessor of Being. As a result, the pierced erotic couple, once formed, tends to assert its exclusivity, deriding non-piercers as inferior sexual partners.

Sometime in the year of 1997 a rabbit [participant in the newsgroup Rec.Arts.Bodyart] posted to the newsgroup about how disgusting kissing someone without a tongue piercing is once used to the adorned appendage. "You might as well just lick a slug," stated dextra.
([Queen Spako's Slug Patch](#))

The pierce possesses the mark of difference, which is, needless to say in our post-deconstructive era, a supplement to the mark of a lack--the ring in the pierced hole. The erotic motivation of piercing is the intimate end of the spectrum of its relationship with desire in general. To encounter a metal ring in an intimate part of the other's anatomy is to be reminded of the other's sacrificial self-mastery in the very act of sexual self-abandonment. At such a moment, the ring/pierce is not a signifier in a paradigm but, like all sacrificial gestures, a self-confirming or "autoprobatory" sign that distinguishes its wearer absolutely from the non-pierced as the initiate is distinguished from the profane. This confirmation of absolute distinction can carry a powerful erotic charge.

Piercing politics

The erotics of piercing are very real, and no doubt principally dictate its progress or decline. Piercing will disappear when young people no longer find it sexually exciting, not because it functions exclusively as an aphrodisiac, but because any sign of the individually desirable is realized most concretely on the sexual plane. To be chosen as a sexual partner is to demonstrate one's desirability the way our genes like best, by acquiring opportunity to exercise one's "reproductive fitness."

But the "statement" piercing makes to one's potential sexual partners is also delivered to society as a whole. And here we encounter the curious contrast between the infinite variety of erotics and the banal finitude of politics. As the market exchange system stimulates the generation of increasingly more means for oppositional self-expression, the political content of this expression conveys increasingly less information. The body-piercer stands, in principle, in opposition to the strait-laced bourgeois "establishment," but an establishment that permits him to pierce as it permits him so many other things is a difficult target for his criticism. The piercer's antibourgeois paranoia and environmental outrage are rarely the fruit of much information or reflection.

The "hate tribe" Wendy says, is a name for people throughout the world who hate all aspects of this fucked up society, and express their frustration by hurting themselves, apparently adopting Nietzsche's adage, "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger." She refers to scarification as "battle scars" of the tribe. ([Interview with a piercer, IN THE FLESH vol 1](#))

[issue 2](#))

For Chico State senior, Kristie Ford, piercing her body has been a simple way for her to make a statement about herself. Ford, who has had her nose, nipple, bellybutton, and ears pierced, said that she did it because she wanted to be different.

"I'm not like everyone else and I don't want to be," Ford said. "For me, piercing is a way that I can say to people, 'I don't care what you think; fuck the establishment.'" ([\[California State College at Chico\] Orion Online](#))

The more body-piercers and other members of what used to be called the "counterculture" are obsessed by their own cultural activity, the less energy they have to devote to political matters. The poverty of their political statements reflects the unfocused nature of their resentment, which in turn forestalls any concrete political activity. There is a hidden complicity between the market system and its detractors.

The ideological content of adolescent revolt has become all the less political with socialism's retreat to a bastion manned by a few tenured professors. But I do not find it a bad thing that the energy of this revolt is expended almost entirely on the personal plane. These slogans about the environment and the establishment have been around for a while, and their sterility has not prevented them from swallowing up a good deal of potentially productive energy. In contrast, acts of body modification add real information to the world. These anarchically mimetic individual activities of self-creation are what make the market system function, not just in the obvious sense, by providing new opportunities for purveyors of piercing operations and jewelry, but in the deeper one of enriching the unpredictable dialogue among members of society.

Practitioners of BM often call themselves "modern primitives," a term coined by BM guru **Fakir Musafar** and popularized in 1989 with the publication of *Modern primitives : an investigation of contemporary adornment & ritual* (San Francisco, CA : Re/Search Publications), and many web sites make reference to BM's association with tribal societies. Ritual piercing, tatooing, and scarification are indeed common initiatory practices whose relative absence in modern industrial society, like that of so many things, makes it the exception rather than the rule in human history. It is easy to dismiss renewal of interest in these practices as a return to primitive sacrificial religion. But everything depends on their ethical content. The sacrifices one imposes on oneself are not comparable to those imposed by the social order. BM is comparable to the "humiliation of the flesh" practiced by mystics. Its practices are true acts of deferral, as their erotic value attests: all askesis is ultimately **Girard's** "*ascèse pour le désir*," whether the desire in question be worldly or celestial.

There is a further point to make about the body modifiers' insistence on their primitive roots. The modern market system, as I pointed out recently in [Chronicle 124](#), avoids wherever possible offering its goods to consumers as nothing but fungible commodities. Goods sold on the market acquire an aura of supplementary value from their association with the sacred exterior of the market. The goods circulated by the exchange system are figures of the sacred center inaccessible to exchange. In modern society, the primitive is a transcultural figure of the sacred, just as "nature" is.

The Romantics began the modern cult of the primitive by processing it into symbols, souvenirs, and tourist attractions. The smile with which we greet these nineteenth-century innovations today reflects the danger of banalization that always haunts the market's assimilation of the sacred; the aura, once it reaches the mass market, is an aura no more. One area little explored outside of marketing manuals and corporate

offices is that of the means of creating what **Pierre Bourdieu** called in a famous but condescendingly banal study "**la distinction**." None of the product-signs of consumer society is a mere token; each seeks to connote distinction, whether it be as proof of the expense of energy, wisdom or, more predictably, wealth. **Jean Baudrillard's** idea of consumption as the creation of meanings is only useful if we understand that all meanings are differential and distinctive, all are attempts at appropriating the unappropriable Being of the center.

The ethnological associations of BM make it a particularly potent source of *la distinction*. Whereas the return to nature is easily banalized into "organic food," "natural wood finish," "Amazon rain-forest ice cream," and so on, in BM, the primitive imposes a supplementary, sacrificial cost: the "product-sign" must be irreversibly inscribed on the body. Instead of returning to "nature," one returns to a state of culture in which ritual is more violent because higher forms of deferral have not yet evolved. The sacred aura of primitive ritual lends BM a staying power lacking in mere fetishes of the natural.

The forms of sacrificial culture cannot simply be assimilated to market transactions; they must be experienced "in the flesh." No doubt this is true of other forms of consumption, such as tourism, sports, or "fitness." "Body modification" is itself the goal of many mainstream activities, from exercise to plastic surgery. But BM's distinction lies in making explicit the *semiotic* character of inscription on the body. Even the avid weight-lifter who practices "body sculpture" is inscribing on his body only the physiological effects of his exercise. His esthetic is one of instrumental effort, whereas, in foregrounding the gratuitousness of the inscribed sign, the pierced or tattooed becomes a witness to the radical "uselessness" of cultural meaning--a martyr to *l'art-pour-l'art*.

That BM furnishes us with a compelling model of the creation of significance in postmodern times is demonstrated above all by an unexpected feature that I dealt with in my earlier *Chronicle*: its generation of narrative. The WWW sites devoted to BM contain countless narratives of ordinary people's piercing experiences: their fears, physical sensations, health problems, erotic and social concerns. These narratives, short or long, sloppily or carefully written, amateurishly or professionally formatted, form a genre not simply reducible to the banality of **My Home Page**. Each recounts a unique experience of significance, a peak on the curve of life. Piercing is something that nearly anyone can afford, that requires no particular talent or heroic character, yet that reveals a certain courage, indecidably physical and moral--the courage to suffer the pain of the body's dissolution with the confidence that the body will survive and master its undoing.

It's addictive," [UCLA undergraduate Helen] Chang whispered. "It's a rush." ([UCLA Daily Bruin 11/15/95](#))

Just as BM's erotic potency is real, so is its narrative potency. By making the sacrificial significance of ritual and its supplementary mythic narrative accessible to the average adolescent, BM promises to last well into the new millennium.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Erotic

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In last week's column, I touched on the question of the erotic content of the practice of **body piercing**. This week I would like to reexamine the question of the erotic from the standpoint of originary thinking. I say "reexamine" because my latest book, *Signs of Paradox*, contains a chapter on "two psychoanalytic concepts," the **erotic** and the **unconscious**. From a strictly generative standpoint, this chapter strays in the direction of empiricism; but such "straying" is the very *modus operandi* of the erotic and cannot be avoided in the discussion of the subject. The minimalism of originary thinking encounters the erotic as a "temptation" that it cannot encompass but only refer to obliquely. The erotic is recalcitrant to originary theory, for the very reason that the purpose of cultural deferral is to permit it.

We can construct a simple model of originary "triangular" or mimetic desire, but we cannot use it to predict the worldly operations of desire. My desire is mediated, in the general case, by the expressions of desire I encounter; I desire what others desire. But there is an additional component in desire, one that becomes dominant in sexual relationships, in which the desire-object itself serves as mediator. We call this component the "erotic." Its role is clearest when this "object" is a human being, but even inert objects carry an erotic charge insofar as they may be said to figure the human Other's self-mediation. It is the existence of this erotic component, with respect to which the search for an "originary" mediator is futile, that makes the construction of a predictive model of triangular desire impossible.

In this conception, it is not quite accurate to say that the erotic is to the sexual as culture is to nature. If we take sexual appetite as given, what transforms this appetite into desire is the mediation of our appetite through representation. But the object of my sexual desire, however her desirability may be enhanced for me by the desires of others (to simplify matters, I will assume the until-now culturally dominant "he/I" desires "her"), does not become an erotic object until *she herself* reflects this desire, that is, when she shows me that she finds herself desirable, that she desires her own desirability. Erotic desire is desire for an Other whom we conceive as sharing, indeed, inaugurating, our own desire.

Les filles au miroir

Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses,
Qui font qu'à leurs miroirs, stérile volupté!
Les filles aux yeux creux, de leur corps amoureuses,
Caressent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité...

Charles Baudelaire - "Lesbos," *Les fleurs du mal*, 1857 (one of the six condemned poems)

[Lesbos, land of hot and langorous nights

That incite, sterile sensuality! before their mirrors
 The hollow-eyed girls, in love with their bodies
 To caress the ripe fruits of their nubility...]

The original title of **Charles Baudelaire's** *Les fleurs du mal*, arguably the most significant volume of lyric poetry of modern times, was *Les lesbiennes*. The first modern poet was he who dared connect the eroticism of the male spectator of female homosexuality with the Sapphic origin of lyric poetry. The condemnation of the two "lesbian" poems of the original 1857 edition illustrates the danger of an eroticism potent enough to transcend the specifics of sexual roles. In the second half of the nineteenth century, lyric poetry constitutes itself as a radical anthropological discovery principle through an act of faith in **Sappho's** originary lyric consciousness. Only at the turn of the century, after Baudelaire's doubling of this consciousness and its internal absence from without as itself an object of desire could **Renée Vivien** translate Baudelaire's "Sapphic" vision into straightforward lesbian love-poetry.

Baudelaire teaches us that man is attracted to female "narcissism," not as emptiness is to fullness, but as the desirer of the different is to the desirer of the same. The girls caressing their "*fruits mûrs*" before their mirror are exemplary erotic figures in the very plurality that attests to their individual lack of Being. The space between the woman and her mirror image is the same abyss of desire as in male (auto)eroticism, but it lies between her and her own image.

Because the erotic Other is her own mediator, she appears at first glance to inhabit a utopia of self-absorption. **Freud's** theory of narcissism is based on this illusory self-sufficiency, which **Girard** (*Des choses cachées...* p. 391ff) denounces as a myth. Yet this myth of psychoanalysis is not faithful to eroticism itself. The "narcissistic" erotic object does not appear to the subject as self-sufficiently enclosed within herself; on the contrary, she is still more alienated in her desire for herself than I am in desiring her. I can at least hope to approach the object of my desire, whereas she has already approached hers to the maximum--to the closest point at which she can make out her image in the mirror. The mirror is a locus of *jouissance* because it is in the first place one of anxiety--that of the old queen awaiting with horror the wrinkle that will end her tenure as "the fairest one of all."

The myth of **Narcissus** who, far from inhabiting a utopia of desire, suffers until his metamorphosis a nightmarish fate comparable to that of **Tantalus**, reveals that the "narcissistic" self is not whole but divided. Its desire for its own reflection / representation can never be satisfied. What arouses erotic desire in the subject is not the other's wholeness, but its relocation of desiring alienation to the abyss between itself and its own image.

This discussion might seem to imply that Girard's mimetic critique of the psychoanalytic model of desire attacks only a secondary component--the internal mechanism of "narcissism"--while leaving intact the Other's self-sufficiency, not, to be sure, in the sense that she is satisfied in her desire, but in the sense that, at least, she is the sole source of the image that is her object of desire. But the image in the mirror, like all such "supplementary" doublings, reveals the flaw in this perfect complementarity. The woman loves in her image the desires, potential and real, that it attracts from without. Her self-love is not self-determined, but an appeal to public mediation--why else need she look in the mirror? The autoerotic island of the erotic mediator floats on the sea of diffuse mediations through which the world attributes to each object its value for desire. Although Freud's remarks about the attractive woman's "narcissism" do not constitute a wholly satisfactory theoretical model, they are not altogether without foundation. The attractive woman does "narcissistically" contemplate her own image; what draws her back to her mirror

is her astonishment at being "herself" this figure of beauty to which numberless admirers have given value.

Hence, just as the young woman caressing her *fruits mûrs* in the mirror is the exemplary object of erotic desire, an ugly woman admiring herself in the mirror is an object of fear and loathing or, at best, of comedy. To the very extent that her "unjustified" desire produces nevertheless a mimetic effect, we turn away in horror, just as the "homophobe" turns from the expression of male homosexual desire. This turning-away pays homage to the mimetic temptation of desire, but by the same token it thematizes our resistance to it. The degree of this resistance is a measure of our "sanity" in sharing the desires of the community. But because the erotic figure is herself our mediator, our need for the Being she incarnates may lead us to follow her beyond the values of common desire. Erotic "perversion" becomes a tribute paid by the sexual to the originary operation of desire: the generation of sacred significance.

As **Bernini's** famous statue of **Saint Theresa** reminds us, religious ecstasy and erotic ecstasy can take much the same form. How then shall we distinguish between eroticism and religion, **eros** and **agapé**? Erotic desire, as we have seen, is based on the reduction of the triangle of mediated desire to a relationship between desiring Self and desired Other in which the latter serves as both object and mediator. God as the originary mediator of all desire is surely the mediator of my desire for his Being.

The Other of erotic desire loves herself as representation, as the imaginarily timeless image in the mirror. In the religious case, we attribute to God himself the timelessness of representation; the separation between God and "himself" into which the erotic imagination can insert itself is figured by the sacrificial figure, who is the originary designatum of the sign but not the bearer of its Being. God's internal self-separation is realized theologically in the **Trinity**, which includes the Incarnation within the godhead itself.

Christianity does not want our love for the **Son** to be erotic; the figure of appetite is conjured homeopathically through the communion wafer. But once it becomes possible to see **Jesus** as exemplifying the despairing desire for his own immortal essence that **Lamartine** extended to all mankind in his line "*L'homme est un dieu tombé qui se souvient des cieux*" [Man is a fallen god who remembers the heavens], it becomes conceivable that his mediation might mobilize the energy of sexual desire as well. The "sublimation" of eros into agapé occurs at the point where the object of the mediating Other's own (self-)desire is understood not as a physical image of the desirable but an immortal "soul."

From the converse, spiritual, perspective, the erotic appears as a strategic short-circuiting of self-relationship: to love significance in one's body rather than one's soul. It is no accident that in Baudelaire's poem, as in eroticism generally, this short-circuiting is in the first place the act of the mediating Other. Were the male subject's sexual appetite sufficient unto itself, it would not require erotic supplementation. The whole demonology of female sexual desire finds its place here, from medieval "misogyny" to the vampiric fatal woman of the Decadence.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

What is an Author?

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Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" has been one of his most widely read pieces since its appearance in Josué Harari's *Textual Strategies* (Cornell, 1979), and it was as such that I recently encountered it in my department's introductory literary theory course. Through what in another vocabulary we might call its "deconstruction" of the concept of "author," this essay signals a sea-change in the way in which we read and interpret texts. Roughly speaking, instead of understanding the text as an emanation of the author's unitary intention, we are to situate it in the context of the "discursive practices" of its time, which allow certain things to be said, certain "subject-positions" to be maintained, among which is the historically determined "author-function." Foucault, unlike **Derrida**, does not seek to tease out of the self-contradictions of these practices the paradoxical cultural mechanism that lies behind them; he is not a fundamental anthropologist. His intention is less to propose a new way of reading than to articulate an epochal change that is already taking place. But lest this reference to intention might appear to challenge his thesis--or to reveal the naivete of my own habits of reading--I will not pursue this line of argument. Surely a theoretical metatext need not follow the same rules, or be read by the same method, as the texts to whose reading it refers. The question as to whether Foucault is indeed the "author" of this essay may be dismissed as perverse, since his text expounds a clear, logical idea that may be read like any discourse on method.

Or does it?

True to his historical method, Foucault notes the dichotomization of the unitary notion of **authorship** as **authority** in early modern Europe. In the place of the old indiscriminate guarantee given by the author as "father" of his text, different criteria are henceforth appropriate to different families of texts. On the one hand, scientific discourse stands or falls by its internal logic; on the other, literary discourse bears the imprint not merely of authority but of the author's unique creative intuition. We should note that Foucault's exclusively discursive orientation leads him to omit from consideration the most fundamental category of textual authority: that of the **witness**, whose authority comes not from subjective but from objective experience. Memoirs of people involved in historically important or simply unusual events always find an audience. These authors have authority because they were where we were not; however banal the form of their texts, their content prevents them from being reduced to the mere intertextual play of discourses. Foucault's notion of "discourse" tends to make us forget that discourses not merely take up positions but also convey information.

The Greeks too had known texts sustained by logic alone; the proofs in **Euclid's** *Elements* did not depend on their "father"'s authority. But in modern scientific discourse, not merely the constructions of mathematics and logic but the real world became subject to the rigor of the **scientific method**. Consequently, texts that did not follow this method had to be guaranteed not by their author's mere authority but by his personal vision. Instead of being transmitted "authoritatively" from God to the reader

by the intermediary of the author, the text became the reflection of a personal revelation that he alone was able to put into words.

It is this personalized view of authorship that flourished in the **Romantic** era and that Foucault sees today as coming to an end. The author remains, to be sure, an indispensable legal persona who owns the economic rights to his text and stands responsible for it before the law. What is new is that this external relationship of possession is no longer deemed to correspond unproblematically to the authorial subject position *within* the text. Whatever the author's legal status as its creator, and however the "implied author" may trumpet his authorial identity (today, such trumpeting would probably be perceived as ironic), the text is understood not as a unitary emanation of a unique intention, but as an "intertextual" matrix of pre-existent discourses woven together, to use the familiar text = tissue metaphor, according to discursive practices over whose overt and implicit rules no individual has more than marginal control.

What is at stake here is but another moment of the eternal dialectic between the world of signs and the world of things, *les mots et les choses*. Foucault's argument would no doubt have been clearer had he posed the problem in originary terms. Instead, his text is inextricably both a revelation about sign-systems in general and a revelation about our historical self-consciousness of these systems. Its factual, indeed, **authoritative** tone--no doubt the secret of its popularity--implies an irreversible passage from illusion to reality: the romantic notion of the author is a myth and our current anti-authorialism, a demystifying step toward the truth. Yet at the same time, the periodization of "épistémès" in the absence of any transhistorical truth-criterion implies that we are simply witnessing the passage from one arbitrary mode to another. The "death of the author" is one more revelation that the sign never reveals the thing, the map is never the territory; but this very disillusion is itself no revelation of ultimate truth, merely another illusion like the others. This paradoxical mode of thought is far more clearly articulated by Derrida, who always remains in the margins of the same phallogo-metaphysical center, albeit at the cost of Foucault's attention to historical specificity. Only **GA**, it seems, is able to synthesize the universal and the historical by beginning at the minimal origin of both.

Should Foucault's article then be read, in the mode of **de Man's** "blindness and insight," as exemplifying the text's blindness to its own laws of composition, as failing to situate its own revelations within the conceptual framework it establishes? But as de Man was wont to say of "texts," as opposed to mere chains of arguments, Foucault's essay contains within itself the sign of its own author's ironic understanding of the paradox implicit in its composition.

In the final section of his essay, Foucault introduces a new category of author, neither the impersonal author of a scientific discourse, who holds no authority outside of the logic and empirical accuracy of the text itself, nor the "personal" author of a literary discourse, whose only authority is his unique subjective experience of reality. This new category is that of the "founders of discursivity"--the French *fondeurs de discursivité* is no more euphonious. Foucault considers only two thinkers worthy of this designation: **Marx** and **Freud**. Not only have these writers created new "paradigms" but, as is not the case for the creators of **Thomas Kuhn's** "scientific revolutions," their followers are forced to continually "**return to the origin**" to reevaluate their own founding works. A new development of psychoanalysis is not merely a new development of ideas originated by Freud--it implies and requires a new reading of Freud's works themselves. And (to a lesser extent today than in 1979, when massive state apparatuses were still devoted to their study) this is also true of the works of Marx.

Constant rereading and reinterpreting were required by the old "authorities" as well, both literary

(**Homer, Shakespeare...**) and philosophical (**Plato, Hegel...**). What is new is the scientific pretension of these new "discursivities," which purport, to paraphrase Marx's own famous words, not merely to speculate about the world, but to (permit us to) change it. The modern "discursivities" are, as **Karl Popper** and his disciples have pointed out, invulnerable to "falsification" but, unlike religions, to which they are often disparagingly compared, they provide reasonably coherent explanations of human experience without recourse to transcendental entities. In a word, they are **anthropologies**.

Foucault presents this new category in a matter-of-fact manner, as though merely acquainting us with one more historical wrinkle in the concept of authorship, and then goes on to reach this **Nathalie Sarraute**-like conclusion:

We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: "Who really spoke? [...] With what authenticity or originality?" [...] Instead, there would be other questions, like these: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? [...] And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (p. 160)

But within the category of "founders of discursivity," it certainly does make a difference who is speaking. Marx and Freud are only two exceptions, but they are human, not divine; if they can "found discursivities," then so can others. If a given thinker's work is not a "discursivity," is this inherent in the work itself, or an artifact of its reception? The thinker in question can only keep developing his ideas in hope that others will find it worth their while to prolong them. As he continues to write, he conducts himself as though he too were a "founder of discursivity."

It is well and good that we henceforth be expected to read discourses without recourse to the naive notion of authorship as existing equivalently and unproblematically on both sides of the barrier between reality and representation. The textual paradigm in which the author is "the same" within and outside the text is no longer acceptable. But in the case of "founders of discursivity," what exactly does it mean that we must return to their works as the ultimate ground of each new theoretical development? What is it in "their" discourse that is not replaceable by any combination of other discourses? These are not poets whose esthetic intuition brings together unforgettable combinations of signifiers.

It is clearly their impact not just on academic thought but on thought in general that caused Foucault to single out Marx and Freud. Their texts are traces by means of which we witness, not a historical event, but an intellectual revelation. **Heidegger, Hegel**, even **Nietzsche**, whatever their influence on professional and semi-professional intellectuals, have not deeply touched the general population and have not, therefore, transformed beyond recognition the way we think about ourselves. **Darwin**, however controversial he remains, founded not a "discursivity" but a branch of the natural sciences.

The intellectual revelation, like the religious revelation, is important not in its content alone. In either case, the vision revealed by the founder has an irreversible effect on our self-conception--our anthropology. It is a unique experience of thought, not because it reflects a subjective intuition that cannot be duplicated, but because it has so affected the categories by which we think that we can no longer put ourselves in the place of the founder as he wrote his text. His words are endowed with special prestige because they not merely reflect but themselves constitute a historical event; as we read them, we experience the founding link between the world of ideas and the world of reality. As in the originary scene, the sign is the "trace" of the event, but this trace is itself the event.

The "discursivities" are not bound by the regional limits of the human sciences; their generativity is that of the scene of representation itself. Both Marx's contrast between infra- and superstructure and Freud's more subtle and convoluted opposition between the conscious and the unconscious purport to reveal to us the hidden, originary nature of our relationship to the objects of our (material or sexual) desire. The founder's intuition is that of a fundamental anthropology, a conception of the human. If every writer is a potential "founder of discursivity," then no writer's work can be reduced to the mere interplay of discourses held together by an "author-function."

This does not imply that we should forget all we have learned about the separation between words and things and go back to reading texts as emanations of a transcendental authorial intention. But the fact remains that, at the origin of the discourses or "discursivities" that we really care about, we seek, despite all caveats, something very much like this intention--a moment of equivalence between experience and signification, between word and imaginary thing, that we cannot reproduce without returning to the event in which it originated. We remain curious of authors' lives because we are grateful for any clue that can relate worldly experience to the construction of a new cultural paradigm. The ostensive human presence that we expel from discourse as *écriture* returns as the experience of foundation. Conversely, the more we see a text as a mere tissue of preexistent discourses, the less it means to us, and the more we are led to deconstruct it to the point at which we encounter the founding intuitions of the discourses from which its different strands are derived. At this point, we become once again witnesses to the trace of a human experience that we respect enough to seek the reality behind it.

But we do nothing else even in our everyday communications. Our most banal words attempt to convey an experience of emerging signification. Believers and unbelievers alike bear witness to the faith inherited from our originary ancestors that all revelatory experiences are mutually communicable, that all renew the pacifying effect of the originary sign. However incommensurable the "author-function" may be from any worldly interaction, both author and reader know each other to be, not "functions," but human beings. What we are primarily linked to and separated from by the deferring mediation exercised by all signifying practices is not "language" or even God, but each other.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Our Oral Culture

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The postwar revision of the traditional relationship between **speech** and **writing** was inaugurated by **Roland Barthes'** *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* [*Writing Degree Zero*] (1953), which first gave prominence to the term *écriture*, defined in opposition to *style* as an impersonal and so to speak unconscious set of language elements that presuppose without affirming a certain vision of the world. (One tends to forget that Barthes' primary example of *écriture* was the *langue de bois* of Stalinism.) "Style" was, in spirit if not in practice, and however ironic the etymology, oral. The writer's style expressed the presence of "*l'homme même*" [the man himself] whereas *écriture* was always an absence. In *Le degré zéro*, Barthes seeks the reduction of this absent power to the "zero degree" (as maximally approached by the dead-pan writing of Camus' *The Stranger*), but it is the power that centrally preoccupies him.

Fifteen years later, **Jacques Derrida's** *De la grammatologie* (1968) presents writing, in opposition to speech, as the heretofore-rejected and now-to-be-favored model of language. Speech fosters the illusion of self-presence and mastery of the *logos*, whereas writing openly displays its deferring, supplementary nature. For this reason, Western metaphysics from its inauguration with **Plato** through its modern rewriting by **Rousseau** to its transformation into the exemplary human science by **Saussure** has always "expelled" writing, relegating it to the role of a mere auxiliary to speech. The prestige of *The Book*, **Bible**, **Koran** or other, is as recorded speech, not as writing per se. Barthes in his later *Plaisir du texte* (1973) reflects, in a less rigorous discursive mode, the enhanced prestige of what he now calls the "*scriptible*" or "writeable" as opposed to the readable / *lisible*. The readable provides a passive pleasure, the esthetic analogue to the security of the illusory presence that Derrida attributes to metaphysics. But the scriptible, the "writerly," procures *jouissance*, orgasm/ecstasy; its self-aware non-correspondence with any prior reality invites the reader to construct its meaning for himself.

Turning the tables on unexamined certitudes like "phallogocentrism" is the very soul of rhetoric, the "art of persuasion," which functions by arousing our resentment against what it presents as a heretofore unchallenged usurpation of central authority. The championing of writing over speech exemplifies as well the duplicity that has always been associated with rhetoric. As one condemns the illegitimate centrality of the adversary in order to legitimate one's own centralizing claim, the pretense of modesty is *de rigueur*, to wit, **Shakespeare's** Antony: "I am no orator, as Brutus is." But when the attack is a universal denial of the illegitimate centrality of rhetoric--speech--itself, rhetorical duplicity becomes properly foundational, a substitute for originary paradox. *Différance* may differ "unspeakably" from *différence*, but the term was in fact first promulgated in a speech (Derrida's lecture on *la différence* to the *Collège de philosophie*). The postmodern attack on the *logos* and its "subject" has been accompanied by, not to say driven by, a drastic increase in the **orality** of the academic culture within which it has flourished--particularly that of the US, where deconstruction has remained since the early 70s far more influential than in France.

What do I mean by "orality"? I need only cite the familiar adage that describes today's academic world far better than the naive--and largely obsolete--"publish or perish": **"it's not what you know, it's whom you know"** (or "*who* you know," in the non-academic version). "What you know" = writing; "whom you know" = speech. As the Humanities job market continues to stagnate in conjunction with a still-expanding pool of candidates, the pressure to engage in personal networking is ever more inexorable. Today's graduate students are far more active in the profession than the junior faculty--indeed, any faculty--a generation ago. When I chaired my department in the early 80s, my junior colleagues helped me to put on a yearly one-day colloquium. Now our graduate students all by themselves put on a yearly three-day colloquium. With such a beginning to one's career, it is easy to imagine life on the professional summit. Successful academics may attend a dozen or more prestigious conferences a year, invitations to which are obtained not through the solitary labor of *écriture* but face to face and phone to phone. The link between the domination of the Humanities by a "media elite" and the critique of the self-present subject of the logos can hardly be coincidental.

In saying this, I imply no conspiracy. The "death of the subject" that the promotion of writing over speech implies reflects the general evolution of the mature market system. Claims of central authority polarize resentment and block the circulation of discourses through which the exchange system functions. To promote writing over speech undercuts the authority of the center. Yet the center is still there. The relationship between the audience and the central speaker at an academic lecture is the same as it was at the beginning of hierarchical society: one person speaks, all others are silent. Those who make their reputations as participants in conferences have renounced none of their privileges by denying the authority of their own presence. On the contrary, to claim authority is to lose it; if one needs to claim it, one does not have it. To deny it is the true proof that one has it.

But to denounce the phallogocentric authority of speech is to renounce anthropological understanding of the communication that speech, or writing for that matter, effects. Language is fetishized, set up as an independent force. Those who smile knowingly at **Marx's** denunciation of the liberal bourgeoisie for pretending that its universalist morality was more than a mask for class-bound self-interest listen approvingly to speakers who denounce the pretensions of speech. Although language speaks through the speaker, he or she gets the honorarium.

The speaker's "presence" is not an artifact of metaphysics; it is an originary anthropological reality. But the notion of logocentric presence conflates two distinct elements of the originary scene: the externally observed presence of the central being, which is the effect of its sacred inaccessibility, and the "self-presence" of the emitters of the sign, which is not self-absorption but presence to the central object that it designates. The self-presence of speech is self-alienation; I am "present to myself" only in the sense that the sign as the name-of-God expresses my ecstatic dispossession by the Being to which it refers. It is just this ostensive ecstasy that is suppressed by metaphysics in the name of the harmony-bringing Idea.

Derrida's own visit to **UCLA** a few years ago was a media event; people who had no idea of his writings sought out the presence of the Great Thinker. Such phenomena can only be explained by an **anthropological** rather than metaphysical model of presence. The speaker's presence before the community permits the deferral of violence. The central locus from which he speaks is undecidably that of the victim and that of the divinity to whom the victim is sacrificed. To occupy that locus is to risk the horror of the *sparagmos* in the hope of furnishing the community with the goods for the feast. The speaker, like the "big-man" at the origin of hierarchical society, is the originary provider of the sacrifice

who is thereby authorized to speak in the name of the divinity.

To stand before an audience is always to usurp the place of the divinity and its victim. In order to seek the audience's indulgence for this usurpation, one claims to speak only from the margin of the "logocentric" scene. The audience is to focus its hostile energy on the real central locus of phallic power and forget the speaker's presence on the periphery. Everything is done to prevent us from noticing that, as soon as one begins to speak, the scene shifts and recenters on the speaker. The Freudian fantasy of killing the Father is enacted once again to the benefit of the Son.

One does not give speeches to oneself; the speaker's potency does not derive from solipsistic self-presence but from presence to the community. The illusion of self-presence that Derrida sees as the essential blind spot of metaphysics is the originary cultural illusion: the illusion of unmediated subject-object interaction. It is a variant formulation of the constitutive "illusion" of the sacred center: the existence of sacred Being independent of human desire and representation. As in those countless fantasy movies (*The Fifth Dimension* is a recent example) in which one must place a number of stones in a circle in order to make the divinity appear, the power of the center can manifest itself only in the peripheral presence of human desire.

Derrida's notion of *différance* or deferral relies on **Saussure's** notion that the sign only signifies through its difference from other signs, that it cannot itself point to its worldly referent. But *différance* is prior to the Saussurean differentiation of signs; it is its cause rather than its effect. The primary difference of the sign is its difference in kind from its object. The word defers the thing and, in that space of deferral, generates the thing's transcendent Being. I cannot be "present" to my speech, not because my word's meaning is deferred by other words, but because my word's meaning is constituted by deferral itself. The separation of the sign from its referent would be a merely worldly separation, like that of the appetitive gesture of appropriation from its intended object, did it not generate the **ontological** separation between the object itself and its transcendental Idea or **signified**. Once the sign has been emitted, the referent is no longer merely a thing; it is inhabited by its difference from Itself. It can be destroyed and eaten as a victim now that the "real" object of desire is no longer present in this world.

All language is "writing," deferral of central, present Being. But charismatic speech never claims central authority for itself. On the contrary, the speaker is our **leader (Duce, Führer)** who effects our **Exodus** to the **Promised Land** by liberating us from the illegitimate usurpation of the scenic center, be it by Phaoroh, "The International Jew," or the phallogocentric patriarchy.

But wait, my reader may say, the aim of the writer of these lines is no different: to lead us from the Egypt of **deconstruction** to the Promised Land of **Generative Anthropology**. No doubt. But rather than deny the communicative presence of discourse as a metaphysical claim, we should concern ourselves to minimize it as an anthropological reality. It is sacrificial violence that is our real original sin, and that we must always do our best to minimize. The netsurfers who read these words are in a far better position to defend themselves against this violence than those who participate in the academic equivalent of the sacrificial feast.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Full Monty

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A successful film, especially a successful low-budget film, is always more than the film itself; we are forced to interpret such films not as self-enclosed artworks, but as cultural events. Unanticipated popularity reminds the remaining connoisseurs of well-wrought urns that all cultural activity, public or private, takes place as an event on the scene of representation. We should not need a specialized "esthetic of reception" to sensitivize us to the interactive nature of art of all kinds.

The Full Monty, a low-budget British "ethnic" film, was the sleeper of the 1997 season. Its success suggests some new revelation, as is almost too obvious in a film whose title refers to the most elemental kind of revelation. But nothing is in fact revealed. As a curious coincidence, I saw the film just after reading **Jean Baudrillard's** book *On Seduction*, where he rejects the critique of our culture's phallocentrism by affirming that what the French call "the feminine"--not to be confused with the female--is and always has enjoyed sexual dominance. According to the inevitable genital metaphor, feminine sexuality is constant and confidently assumed, whereas its masculine counterpart affirms itself in an unstable striving that cannot be maintained. (Of course, the metaphor can be made to imply just the opposite, as has traditionally been the case; the explanation of human relations through the interactions of our sex organs can only be carried out a posteriori.)

The originality of *The Full Monty* is in its good-humored acceptance of the dominance of "the feminine" as a new, inverted starting point for male empowerment. In contrast to facile inversions of the **Xena Warrior Princess** variety that, in subordinating the male, resentfully reinforce unawares the dominance of "the masculine" (for, *pace* Lucy Lawless, women remain smaller and weaker than men), here the world would seem to have truly come full circle. Men having been rendered impotent, they can reestablish their public status and, presumably, their breadwinner role by engaging in a form of sexual display traditionally reserved to women. But whereas the "nothingness" of the woman's genitals is the very core of her erotic power, that of her male counterpart is a comic deflation of the erotic in general. That the male organ is as much "nothing" as the female at the same time confirms and demystifies the **Lacanian** view of the Phallus as the unrealizable Penis-Ideal. *The Full Monty* is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the modern myth that human desire is sexual before it is mimetic.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was revolutionary in its time, not for centering its universe around a woman, but for incarnating a "feminine" world-view. **Emma** herself is more "masculine" than the world secreted by Flaubert's style, with its reliance on repetition and cliché. Critics always remark that her desires are copied from romantic novels, but Flaubert's point is that all desires are, so to speak, copied from romantic novels; his originality was to develop a novelistic vision in which this is revealed, not as an exception, but as an inevitability. The other side of the coin, which critics have neglected, is that in Emma's world the desires found in these novels can be expressed, if not satisfied, in the world of consumption. Emma's death, we should recall, is caused by bankruptcy, not heartbreak. Her second lover, Léon, was himself an

object of consumption, and had her funds not run out, Emma would no doubt have replaced him by a third. This is still a world in which Emma, not Léon, is shown taking off her clothes, but it is already one in which the model of the male producer has been replaced by that of the female consumer.

Unlike **Balzac** or **Dickens**, Flaubert never takes the world of work seriously. His is a world of consumption, not production, which somehow takes place despite the utter incapacity of any of the characters to produce anything. This world's "successes," notably M. Homais who receives *la croix d'honneur* in the last words of the novel, are schoolboy caricatures of adults, incarnations of the resentment of one who has no clue of how economic value is created. But at least they have the outward appearance and appurtenances of productivity. This trace of "realism" in the good old Lukacsian sense is no longer honored by the hyper-Flaubertian model of the world provided by *The Full Monty*, in which there is no productivity whatsoever. The only people we see actually producing anything are the steelworkers in the publicity clip that begins the film and that sets its tone by antithesis. Those were the days of manly toil in the fabrication of the manliest of metals. Today, the steel mills are deserted, and their only function is as a repository of girders to filch, as in the opening scene of the story--from steel mills to steal mills, so to speak.

For the rest, nearly all the people we see working are government bureaucrats: the police and the welfare employees distributing the dole. When one of the male characters does find a job, it is as a security guard in one of those megastores that combine Safeway with Walmart. This suggests a corollary economic observation. We see our guard, a worker in the most unproductive of professions, walking through well-stocked aisles of practically everything. Clearly the point is that while production seems to have disappeared, consumption is doing very well. Sheffield may have lost its steel mills, but it is by no means unprosperous. It is only the heroes of the film, chronically unemployed former steel workers, who are shown as suffering. And for them too, security guard positions no doubt beckon for those willing to take them. Watching others consume is a serious occupation, however painful for former producers. Is it the women who work? Certainly they have money to spend, in the store and at the strip club. But we are not asked to concern ourselves with their source of income. The dominance of the "feminine" is displayed by the inversion of the "masculine" world of hard physical labor into a world dominated by consumption. The strip club is the former workmen's clubhouse and, in one significant scene, what had been a men's room is inspected with a conquering air by a group of women, one of whom pulls down her pants and pretends to urinate *in modo virili*.

The title of the film refers to the decision of the male strippers not to end with a G-string but to go "the full Monty." Thus "the full Monty" means, in effect, nothing, the nothing that they will strip down to. The once-redoubtable revelation of the phallus is now understood in purely negative terms: "fullness" is that of the clothing to be removed, not that of the thing itself. When the former foreman, the oldest of the group, worries that, as in a past experience on the beach, he might get a "stiffie," the others suggest thoughts to help avoid this eventuality. But we understand that this is an old-fashioned concern, a relic of the patriarchy; the phallus is by now so far from the penis that we can scarcely imagine our heroes, confronted by their aggressively cheering audience, in a state of erection. Indeed, whereas their performance was anticipated to be a simple inversion of female stripping, with male performers and a female audience, the actual audience for their show is mixed. There is no real difference any more between the sexes, just between their reversed "positions." In contrast with the old opposition between (dominant) male producers and (subordinate) female consumers, we now have the opposition between (dominant) female consumers and (subordinate) male self-displayers. One can make money and even, like the chief protagonist (played by **Robert Carlyle**), become an acceptable father to one's son, if one

learns to go "the full Monty" in accepting this new set of roles. Whereas in the past, female display was part of the standard sexual ritual--we have all learned by now that women's prominent breasts were selected as an advertisement of sexual suitability--now males display their non-masculinity, which paradoxically has become a new equivalent of sexual, or at least social, suitability. Playing the traditional "feminine" role has become the sign of accession to the new consumer-dominated society, where production has been replaced by comic-sacrificial self-display.

The unmanned world of *The Full Monty* is not exactly a dystopia. In fact, it is more of a utopia, as worlds with happy endings usually are. The end of the era of "man's work" is depicted as an era of prosperity with no work at all. The only obstacle to participation in this prosperity, the film tells us, is refusal to go *The Full Monty*, to abandon all reserve toward this society's "feminine" values. Instead of the "masculine" domination of culture by nature, we are asked to believe in a world in which the only physical nature we need deal with is our own. Yet however much we may want to believe with Baudrillard that the modern market system no longer allows for any distinction between reality and simulation, the only way to have consumption is to have production. I hate to sound like a neo-Marxist, but I wonder if there is not some connection between this emasculated vision of modern society and an economic neocolonialism that does its manufacturing either in third-world countries or in factories peopled by third-world immigrants.

All culture makes the utopian claim to provide human experience with meaning on the model of its unique operation: the deferral of violence through representation. In the tragic tradition, the protagonist's life receives meaning from its encounter with the human propensity to mimetic violence. Now we have come full circle, and we dream of a culture so powerful that it can generate not only peace but economic value from the enactment of its own denial, as though it sufficed to take off one's clothes to be transported back to the plenitude of Eden.

The final shot does not dwell on the dancers. It shows them from behind as they reveal their nakedness, but gives us no time to savor their triumph or hear the cheers of the crowd. The genius of the film is to cut off the action before we begin to ask ourselves whether we too want to see the nothingness of what they are displaying to the audience--which would oblige us to ask ourselves who is triumphing over whom. The myth of *The Full Monty* is not that of the infinite value of our naked selves, but the equally utopian construction that attributes infinite value to the revelation of our valuelessness.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Guest columnist: Matthew Schneider

The Sign, the Thing, and *Titanic*

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Next Wednesday is the 86th anniversary of the sinking of the British passenger liner R.M.S. *Titanic*. This year, the nation's attention will be more intensely focused on this grim remembrance than it has for the last 84 years or so because of the runaway success of **James Cameron's** *Titanic*, a 3 1/2 hour fictionalization of the disaster. For the last four months the world has been gripped by *Titanic* fever: in March the film won 11 Academy Awards, tying the record set by *Ben-Hur* (1959) for most awards to a single movie. Earlier this week I heard a news report that an Australian woman has seen the film 100 times, and plans to keep returning to her neighborhood cinema until she reaches 150 showings. Purportedly the most expensive film ever made, *Titanic* is also the biggest money-maker ever: by the time the totals from foreign markets and video sales are all in, the film is projected to earn more than \$1.2 billion.

Every year has its movie megablockbusters, of course, but the reaction *Titanic* has met with is of a different magnitude than the hoopla stirred by the big films of the past few years such as *Jurassic Park* and *Independence Day*. The moviegoing public's immediate and overwhelming response to *Titanic* leads one to suspect that the film somehow touches on the originary themes that these columns seek to explicate. Does GA have something to tell us about the origins of *Titanic* hysteria? What roles do love and resentment play in this film, now touted as the *Gone with the Wind* of the second half of the twentieth century?

If pressed to account for it, film-industry insiders would probably attribute the success of *Titanic* to Cameron's having infused a traditional Hollywood "epic" with a 1990s sensibility--no easy task, since ours is an era in which epic grandeur is inevitably viewed with suspicion. There is some truth to this assessment, but as I hope to show, it only hints--if you'll pardon the pun--at the film's deeper, originary dimensions. By cinematic standards, the film can be called an epic by virtue primarily of its length--194 minutes. Cameron also amplifies the event's Odyssean echoes by setting the story of the sinking within a frame, in which a *Titanic* survivor named **Rose** recounts the disaster for a group of modern-day treasure hunters attempting to salvage a priceless necklace from the wreck. Rose's is a classic love story--classic in the sense that she's at the center of a love triangle. The competition for Rose is not, however, between equals; and in this respect Cameron updates the classic triangular configuration by infusing it with what contemporary academics like to call "issues of gender and class." Rose defiantly smokes cigarettes and amuses herself by spitting off the side of the ship, thereby announcing herself a proto-feminist. At one corner of the love triangle stands her fiancé **Cal**, who embodies all the evils of patriarchy: when a waiter asks for Rose's dinner order, Cal orders for her. At the other corner is **Jack**, an egalitarian bohemian, whose human authenticity is evinced by his confusion at the plethora of silverware with which he is confronted in the first-class dining salon.

The point of this and many of the film's stark juxtapositions of the ship's two worlds--the stilted, sterile

confines of first-class staterooms and promenades and the warm, violent confines of steerage--is to guarantee that the story has a certain kind of relevance for today's moviegoer. In previous cinematic depictions of the *Titanic* disaster, the story's relevance for its audience lay in its unquestionable capability to stir the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Perhaps spooked by reports of young people laughing at *Schindler's List*, Cameron seems less confident of his audience's ability to forge a mimetic identification with women in Victorian gowns and men in evening clothes than was the director of *A Night to Remember* (1953). Cameron's solution to this problem is to evoke love for the protagonists *via negativa*: we are asked to love and pity Rose and Jack because everything around them, including the ship itself, is hateful. Its hatefulness, however, is not solely derived from the technological hubris that *Titanic*'s builders manifested in calling the ship "unsinkable." Cameron's *Titanic* shows its hubris primarily in the human realm: consistent with the venerable literary trope of ship as microcosm of society, on this *Titanic* manners, refinement, and technological and architectural ostentation are the signs of what our culture views as unforgivable sins, classist and sexist oppression. For Cameron, the great ship sinks not because it symbolizes man's overreaching, but because it is a floating anti-egalitarian institution. In interviews, Cameron has called *Titanic* "a cautionary tale." To a much greater extent than in previous films based on the disaster, however, Cameron portrays the ship as itself a kind of villain, a wrongdoer who must be sacrificed in the name of progress and the common good.

As readers of this column know, however, lurking in even the most outwardly justifiable sacrifice is always some pity for the victim; originary analysis sees this pity as a source of at least one of the varieties of love. At the film's climax, Cameron's *Titanic* pathetically groans and writhes like a wounded animal in its death throes; and, unlike other film treatments of the disaster, this one does not avert its gaze from horrible scope of the disaster. After the ship slips beneath the surface, the camera slowly pulls back to a panoramic view of the thousand or so life-jacketed people who will shortly die of exposure in the near-freezing water. Seemingly despite Cameron's intentions, *Titanic* embodies the ambivalence that inevitably clings to all sacrifices, in which the demands of justice collide with the tragic emotions of pity and fear, emotions which are only a step away from love.

But there is yet another way in which love enters into Cameron's retelling of the sinking of *Titanic*, one in which mimesis also plays a crucial part and in which lies the real source of the film's appeal. By making *Titanic*--again, supposedly the most expensive movie in history--Cameron realized the dream of every American boy who, introduced via the movies to the high drama and cosmic ironies of the great ship's construction and demise, saved his weekly allowance, bought **Revell's** 1/350th scale model of the RMS *Titanic*, built it, and sank it in the bathtub. Given the amount of pre-release publicity surrounding the making of this film, the success of a tie-in book chronicling *Titanic*'s production, and the flimsiness of the love plot, one suspects that all Cameron really wanted from this film was to do again, but on a titanic scale, what he had done as a boy: build the largest and most detailed model of the *Titanic* ever, and then sink it. And this is, in fact, precisely what he did. Its extraordinarily high budget notwithstanding, there is comparatively little special-effects magic in *Titanic*: though the film employs its share of computer animation and other, more established tricks of the trade, its astonishing verisimilitude is almost entirely created by its set, a floating 9/10ths scale model of the ship itself that Cameron built next to a sleepy Mexican beach town. When Rose and Jack amble along the promenade deck, the background that recedes into the distance isn't an illusion created by blue-screen projection, matte photography, or mirrors. The ship looks big because it *is* big. Having built it, Cameron then destroyed this "set" during the filming of the sinking sequences, as the lovingly faithful reproductions of the ship's interiors were flooded one by one. The Revell model, which when I bought it cost \$4.95, clearly wasn't

enough for James Cameron. He has earned this one-time model kit builder's admiration--an admiration not unmixed with envy--for persuading others to finance the most elaborate and expensive modeling project the world has ever seen.

I have commented several times on some of the differences between Cameron's *Titanic* and previous representations of this memorable story. Finally, though, the difference between Cameron's film and the others lies in the degree to which this director has followed what we might call the originary imperative to minimize representational deferral, to transcend the sign and become the thing itself. In *Poetics* Aristotle wrote that "the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood (actually man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative and learns his first lessons through imitation)." The other kind of love that *Titanic* expresses is the love of imitation itself, the source of the child's seemingly boundless fascination with the miniaturized world of dolls and toy trucks. From the standpoint of **GA**, the sexiness of its stars--the teenage heartthrob appeal of Leonardo Di Caprio, for instance--alone cannot explain *Titanic*'s appeal and staying power.

My point is not to denigrate *Titanic* or those who, perhaps for the first time, have been touched by what happened on that cold April night 86 years ago. As Cameron reminded the viewers of the **Academy Awards** ceremony, behind his film and its phenomenal success is an actuality of unfathomable horror--more than 1500 people lost their lives. The pathos alone of that actuality is insufficient, however, to account for the film's success; the secret of its appeal lies in the potent mix of love and resentment--the titanic forces that emerge in the event of human origin--that *Titanic* manages to evoke.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Mind and Brain

No. 133: Saturday, April 18, 1998

Few philosophical controversies better illustrate the French expression *dialogue de sourds* [dialogue of the deaf] than the "mind-brain problem." The two camps are typically represented in the April 6 *Weekly Standard* review by **Stephen Barr** of *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, **Edmund O. Wilson's** latest sociobiological treatise. In one corner, we have either the hard-headed scientist, Wilson or **Steven Pinker**, or the *scientiste*, the humanistic adept of scientism, say, **Daniel Dennett**. In the other, we have someone like the *WS* reviewer, who finds his adversary wanting, but proposes no rational alternative beyond metaphysical dualism in which the source of the second, non-material kind of reality is never explained. Such veiled appeals to the supernatural appropriately call forth **Aesop's** well-known moral: "the gods help those who help themselves." Theories are not "truths" but *models*; the complaint that a theory explains some things but not everything is valid only as a preliminary to a more inclusive theory.

In a world that can no longer accept the historical particularism of religious thought, "mind" is presumably the last obstacle in the path of the all-conquering juggernaut of biological reductionism. An optical instrument can measure the wavelength of the color red far more precisely than you or I, but it can't have the "experience of red" that defines it as a "mind." How many times, in how many ways have we heard this argument? **John Searle's** improved version, if I recall correctly, compares a computer translating English into Chinese to a room full of people mechanically placing and ordering signs in accordance with programmed instructions, with no one knowing the sense of all of the signs so as to be able to understand the result. No doubt the computer lacks our experience of language, but a subjective description of the difference between computers and people will not save us from objective bio-reductionism. A minimal definition of the specificity of the human should not be concerned with uncommunicable entities like the "experience of red" or even the "experience of language."

Although it is not apparent at first glance, the mind-brain controversy is a pseudo-empirical variant of the controversy over the "existence of God", in which the idea of "existence," which refers to worldly realities, is applied to the Being that stands behind the "other-worldly" realities that are the signs of language. There is no "other world" where the **Ideas** pass before the fire that projects their shadows on the wall of the cave. Signs are ideal entities that don't "exist" at all. That such entities are not "natural" does not make them "supernatural," which is only a mystified variety of "natural." Signs are not things but relations within a network of human communication. The idea of the linguistic sign is the most inexpressible of all ideas because it is the simplest--the minimal idea. Which means that we should attempt to minimize the language with which we describe it, not create a whole new ontology sitting up there in the sky.

As **Wittgenstein** enjoyed noting, "experience" is a funny category. Whether I call out or say I'm hurting, not even **Bill Clinton** can "feel my pain." You can never know what I feel; for example, you can never know how it feels to me to see the color red. Maybe when I see red I have exactly the same visual

experience that you have when you see blue. But whatever my experience, I can communicate either color to you with a sign. Although signs are learned individually by individual minds, they don't subsist in these minds, but in the sphere of their communication. The point of the sign isn't to convey my or your experience, but to permit us to communicate about what is important to the linguistic community. We accept the verdict of the dictionary because we see it as the spokesman for this community; even when we disagree with it, it's not because of what the word "means to us" but because of our perception of its common meaning.

Animals too have "experiences" and we may claim if we like that they have "minds." But as **Descartes'** *cogito ergo sum* suggests, the core of the mind-brain controversy is the sign. The self-conscious self is the sign-using self; we become conscious of our selves only when we can talk about them, and we talk about them in the first place to others. The yuppie who defines himself through his consumption of objects available to all is the heir of the self that constructs itself from language available to all. When we speak with **Sartre** of a "prereflexive *cogito*," we lose sight of the essential connection between human self-consciousness and language. The human self is a user of signs in a community of like selves, with all the uncertainty that such an individual-collective entity suggests. Yet the arrogant dismissal of this truth by the overweening bourgeois Self should nonetheless not lead us, however understandably, to affirm that we have no selves at all.

The brain as an organ cannot account for the mind because "mind" is not something physical contained within the brain, even the brains of the entire population. It is a virtual, interpersonal reality that subsists in human culture and in which we participate. Our certitude that we are thinking beings is not illusory; but the instruments of our thought are signs that we share with others and that have no meaning outside of this interaction. To use words, or any other form of representation, is to participate virtually in the communal scene of representation. We each have our own thoughts but, in contrast with an emotion, there is nothing "private" about a thought.

Computers can now beat grandmasters at chess; can they be taught to "talk"? can they really "think"? can they at some point acquire self-consciousness? Emotions have a reassuringly physiological component. Fear makes our skin contract and activates our sweat glands; for a "cyborg" to have a comparable reaction, it would have to have a mammal-like nervous system, at which point its distinction from a human would truly start to become problematic. But what about thinking? To the extent that thinking is the formal manipulation of symbols, computers can indeed "think" much faster and better than we do. But that is not what we mean by "thinking." To think is not simply to perform logical operations; it is to seek to represent what in our experience, whether of the natural or of the human world, has not yet been satisfactorily represented. What is human in thinking is not "the experience of thinking" but, on the contrary, the reduction of experience to thought, to language. This is not a task a computer can perform in any but a trivial sense.

The much misunderstood *cogito* offers a minimal example. A computer can easily be programmed to deduce "I think, therefore I am"; it suffices that its data base contain the notion that only existing things can perform such tasks as thinking. To think implies existence; only an existent being can think; I am thinking, therefore I am, *QED*. But that is not the point of the *cogito*. It is that I understand my own existence only insofar as I conceive thoughts, representations in principle shared by others. My being, in other words, is not wholly contained in myself, but implies the existence of a human community. It is the implicit existence of this community that explains the apparent *non sequitur* in which Descartes asserts, following the *cogito*, that God is too good to provide him with senses that will betray him in the normal

course of events. Had this idea occurred to Descartes before the reduction to the *cogito*, it would have saved him a good deal of trouble; if God is worthy of confidence, then there is no urgent need to doubt the evidence of our senses. Why then was this idea not previously available? Because the kernel of the self's certitude of being is in fact a demonstration that the individual mind knows itself only in language, through the virtual mediation of the community of which God is the guarantor. If God were unreliable, the community would not exist, nor would the enunciator of the *cogito*.

The mysteries of philosophy aka metaphysics stem from its insistence on understanding its "clear and distinct" ideas as though they were givens in themselves accessible to the isolated individual instead of the derivative products of a collective revelatory event. Because metaphysics denies the ostensive source of language, it cannot conceive how language was born or how it continues to function. Nor, by the same token, can the *scientistes*, who have fetishized the objective scene of metaphysics into a reductionist dogma.

If all human brains were destroyed, the word "tree" would have no more meaning for any creature. But this does not mean that the meaning of the word "tree" subsists in a set of individual brains; it belongs to a virtual communal sphere of signs and meanings. To affirm that this sphere cannot be reduced to the material world is not to countenance supernatural beings. On the contrary, it is positivism that needs either to embrace or condemn the "supernatural" because it is unable to comprehend the anthropological function of the sign. The danger in dealing with the transcendental is that we cannot talk about it without substantializing it. The intellectual ethic consonant with the reduction of the violent arbitrariness of the sacrificial consists neither in seeking a new formulation that would avoid this danger nor in denying the transcendental and its danger altogether, but in minimalizing it.

We need not reject the intuition that tells us that computers lack "mind," but it should be understood as a consequence of the fact that computers are, for the moment at least, unacquainted with mimetic desire and its potentially violent consequences. What programmers do about the "experience of red" doesn't bother me; I'll begin to be concerned when they learn how to program resentment. As any reader of science fiction knows, cyborgs are a pretty resentful bunch.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Consumption As Production

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Perhaps the most remarkable retailing trend of the past few years has been the rise of semi-wholesale stores such as *Smart & Final*, *Home Depot*, or *Office Depot* that sell to both small businesses and the general public. Ostensibly it is the promise of lower prices that lures customers to these emporia. But a neglected factor in their success is the retail customer's special thrill at shopping, whether or not at wholesale prices, in the same store and in the same quantities as the professionals. Those large boxes of condiments and meat patties purchased at *Smart & Final* make the consumer imagine that he isn't merely consuming but "producing": that he is a retailer buying in quantity and reselling in consumable amounts to himself. Similarly, we are attracted to "professional quality" tools and gadgets of all kinds, including small trucks and "off-road" vehicles driven around cities at huge premiums in cost and operating expenses by those who wish to imagine themselves engaged in the productive activities for which these vehicles were presumably intended. If, in the case of highly differentiated products, we professionalize consumption itself by acquiring a yuppie *connaissanceurship* in wines, clothes, furniture, and restaurants, in that of simple commodities, we like to give ourselves the means to imagine consumption as production. (Buying fine wines by the case combines the two tendencies.) This marginal erosion of the distinction between these two economic opposites tells us something precious about the market system, and about human exchange in general.

If paleontology has taught us one thing about the human origin, it is that we must abandon the myth of *homo faber*. Protohumans had tools for perhaps hundreds of thousands of years before the advent of human language, their technology evolving at a glacial pace incompatible with event-driven cultural temporality. The Acheulian fisherman using a scraper is mentally far more advanced than the chimpanzee stripping a stick to poke for ants, but his problem-solving intelligence still does not reflect back upon itself. It is the event-nature of the scene of language that makes it possible to oppose production to consumption. Our originary production is the sign; our originary consumption is the *sparagmos*; the first defers, the second releases appetite. To produce is, in the first place, to defer consumption; conversely, consumption in the human sense exists only as the obverse of production. We produce the edible victim for the *sparagmos* only after we have produced the sign, that is, converted our gesture of consumption into a supplementary act of representation. Production generates peace by deferring appetite; consumption satisfies appetite but brings us to the brink of war. Whence our predilection for performing the latter while conceiving it as the former.

It might be objected that this is not true of traditional, aristocratic society, nor of its prolongation into the nineteenth century, with its **dandy** and **snob** victims of romantic ennui. Romantics are amateurs, not professionals; even when they produce, they prefer to see themselves as consuming. The dandy doesn't shop at *Smart & Final*, nor anywhere else--shopping is for servants.

The aristocratic master of violence is incapable of understanding culture as "the deferral of violence

through representation." If the point of production is to generate peace, he subsists in a permanent state of war. Aristocratic militarism reflects the sharp dichotomy between agricultural production and exchange. The activities of tilling the soil and those of distributing its products are too divergent to sustain more than a trace of primitive egalitarianism. Yet the master's originary model is the big-man of old, who first learned to profit from his surplus production to control the ritual center. Contrary to appearances, the noble is in the first place a **producer**, not a consumer. **Hegel's** master-slave dialectic, with its relegation of production to the slave, is not originary. Recognition is not first given to him who inspires fear for one's life, but to him who provides divine abundance. The separation of this provision from the physical labor of its production is a secondary phenomenon.

The modern dandy who disdains work does not really condemn production, for production is in the first place not making but **exchange**. His contempt for work was shared by the **Athenian** democrat as well as the medieval aristocrat. In agricultural societies, the "producer" in the social sense, which is the primary human sense, is not the laborer but the noble who appropriates and redistributes the product of his labor. Although **Hannah Arendt's** category of "action" is biased toward the political, it hints at the primacy of ethics--the priority of interaction with humans over interaction with nature.

That different moments of history have different ethics is no argument for ethical relativism. Just as science and technology progress, so does ethical awareness, even if the "sentimental" reaction to this progress is at times more violent than the "naive" violence it replaces. The turn from aristocratic dandyism to a fascination with the "professional" reflects a deepened anthropological understanding. If constituted hierarchies have every reason to forget their source in the big-man's supplementary labor, the market-system reestablishes the prestige, not of **Marx's** undifferentiated "labor-power," but of professional qualification. As a general rule, we produce one thing but consume many things. We are professional in one narrow area and amateur in all others. The dream of consumption as production allows us to retain our source of income while remaining able to imagine ourselves as "Renaissance men," as significant producers in every sphere.

I have noted more than once in these *Chronicles* that modern market society attaches to its products wherever it can a supplementary sign of sacrality, a proof that the merchandise it is selling us was not really meant for the marketplace: "The priceless always costs a little more." But this sacred aura is paradoxically shared by the professional who devotes all his efforts to the marketplace. The professional, to borrow **Alexander Kojève's** terminology, is the "freed slave" of bourgeois society who understands how to extract human value from the world better than his former master. The cult of professionalism respects one who brings measurable value to human interaction. When I use my "professional strength" cleaner, I imagine that in cleaning my house I am performing a marketable task, just as does the boy shooting baskets in his **Michael Jordan** athletic shoes.

As I pointed out [a propos of *The Full Monty*](#), there is no hard-and-fast distinction in mature market society between the activities of production and those of consumption; it all depends on what the public is willing to pay for. **Emma Bovary** anticipates this trend, as her story anticipates so many other aspects of contemporary consumer society. When, still a faithful wife, she hesitates to embark on her fatal horseback ride with **Rodolphe**, it was the prospect of purchasing a riding-costume that convinced her--*l'amazone la décida*. But if nineteenth-century Emma had only one place to shop--the boutique of "draper" **Lheureux**--today you're likely to find her counterpart at **Office Depot** or **Staples**, buying office supplies for her home office.

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The End of Literature and the Beginning of Literary History

No. 135: Saturday, May 2, 1998

This summer *New Literary History* will publish an article by *Anthropoetics* collaborator **Richard van Oort** on **GA** and esthetic phenomenology. In conjunction with this, the editor has kindly asked me to contribute an exposition of **GA** as a branch of critical theory. Whence these preliminary reflections on literary history.

* * * * *

Literary history is an unfashionable concept today because it no longer has an interesting story to tell. (The exception is the new nations of the third world; scholarly interest in the cultures of these countries reflects their constructive vitality as well as, or rather as a result of, their victimary "post-colonial" status.) At the turn of the twentieth century, the now-forgotten **Ferdinand Brunetière's** Darwinian thesis on the "evolution of genres" had a certain plausibility. In 1960, when I began graduate study, French literature was still a vigorous, ongoing phenomenon. Today more novels are produced than ever, but if the French public continues to read them, French professors almost never do, and no one sees the French novel or any other genre as "evolving." The postmodern cultural universe is averse to literary history, not because today's literary productions are inferior to those of the past, but because we forbear to provide this history with material by crowning our contemporaries as masters. Culture is in the first place the assignment of roles with the ultimate goal of **deferring violence through representation**, and as hierarchies dissolve, so does that of the high culture.

This dissolution reflects the victimary sensibilities that have been released into the postmodern cultural atmosphere; as continuing battles over the "canon" demonstrate, victimary thinking attacks cultural hierarchy more insistently--and more successfully--than political hierarchy. Behind the facile denunciations of the "patriarchy" of the past, it is the potential cultural hegemony of the present that one wishes to hold at bay. The literary world is fractionalized into genres produced by specialists whose expertise we can admire without having to set them above us as universal spirits. The same is true in the theoretical sphere: humanists willingly bow down to the authority-figures of psychoanalysis because "clinical" experience makes them external rather than internal to the sphere inhabited by their worshippers. It is easier to sacrifice to foreign gods than to risk elevating someone too much like ourselves.

But if literary history as the **history of literature** has become unfashionable, as the assertion of the **literarity of history** it is so fashionable as to have become invisible. At our recent graduate student conference, when an undergraduate speaker referred to the xenophobic discourse of the French *Front National*, an academically innocent questioner wondered if there was not indeed some point in **Le Pen's** insistence that Arab and African immigrants were taking jobs away from native Frenchmen. At this

point, my antiquated sensibilities anticipated a hostile reaction from the young but amazingly professional lecturer. But she elegantly side-stepped the question: I am neither sociologist nor economist, she said; I concern myself with discourses, not realities. Behind the diplomacy of this reply lies the scarcely questioned conviction that history is in the first place the history of discourses, such that the language of Le Pen, like that of **Hitler**, is best understood in relation not to its social but to its discursive context. Whatever its purportedly specific justifications, racism remains racism and is as such condemnable. This incident is one more confirmation that the **Holocaust** is the defining event of postmodernity. We tend to forget that since the late nineteenth century, it had been perfectly acceptable for respectable people to declare themselves **antisemites**. That this is no longer possible is (however little help it may be to the Jews) a genuine postmodern accomplishment that we should bear in mind when we complain about the proliferation of victimary discourses.

Postmodernity is dominated by "literary history" precisely because, having rejected the hierarchy of the esthetic center, it can no longer boast a "literature." If we suspect the history of facts because we see facts as secondary to the discourses that organize them, the source of this model is not some vague *fin-de-siècle* malaise but our historical experience of the discourse of victimization. It is no doubt significant that **France** suffers from high unemployment while maintaining the highest level of immigration of any European country, just as it is significant that **Germany** in the **Weimar** years suffered from ruinous inflation; but the Holocaust shows that these facts remain less important by an order of magnitude than the return of modern-day political discourse to the archaic language of demonization. Inflation, unemployment, and immigration can be lived with, however painful they may be; the enactment of sacrificial expulsion on the scale of **Auschwitz** cannot.

Because the Holocaust is important not as a contingency but as a significant potentiality, not to say a necessity, of **Western** civilization, literary history becomes the history of the victimizing discourses not just of Hitler and Le Pen but of the "patriarchal" West as a whole. The oppositional "subaltern discourses" now being unearthed have so far been treated in a different light, but the window of victimary opportunity, which saw the end of such institutions of ascriptive hierarchy as colonialism, segregation, and apartheid, is now in the process of closing. The current critique of affirmative action corresponds to the realization that the discourses of the dominated are no less sacrificial than those of their erstwhile dominators, and often more so. Today's more positive trend is to concern oneself with the cultures of the "borderlands" where the two discourses interact; this is a salutary development whether it originates as an attempt to save or to expunge the victimary perspective.

To treat political and historical discourse as the matter of history is not to show contempt for reality, but to assert that the originary structures of the human reveal themselves less clearly in the realities of social difference and the events they generate than in the ideologies with which we attempt to justify them. The high art of "literature" criticized the violence of sacrifice from within what remained a sacrificial structure; sacrificial violence was necessary because social difference was necessary. If we are no longer willing to allow the esthetic scene to subsist unchallenged, it is because the revelation that has proceeded from this scene is incompatible with our continued submission to it--a submission that ended with Auschwitz. The resentment that refuses to accept heroes of any kind finds its historical justification in the cautionary tale of Nazism: *The Triumph of the Will* is the West's last serious artwork. The Christian "abolition of religion" ultimately leads to that of art as well; the self-creating individuality of Western market society can subsist only in the absence of a strong central figure.

If the postmodern era's victimary sensibility is the product of the Holocaust and its discrediting of the

esthetic image, its postliterary culture reflects its unstoppable democratization--its generation, through the proliferation of meaning-bearing consumer goods, of the means to ever-greater reciprocity. The end of literature is the beginning of literary history because the postmodern, postliterary world is one in which our imagination no longer shields us from the presence of the Other who generates discourse and is generated by it. There are still **authors** and **readers**, but there are no longer **characters**. Our history will henceforth be the tale not of legendary figures but of ourselves.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Moral Contradiction of Liberalism

No. 136: Saturday, May 9, 1998

There may be other *Chronicles* on this subject. Much more could be said of the **Bronx Romantic's** disillusionment with liberalism.

The academic, especially in the humanities, swims in a sea of **liberalism**. I too was a liberal once--we all were. There nevertheless exists a recognizable, if small, school of "**neoconservatives**" who have abandoned the liberalism of their parents and their youth. American liberalism as we know it is a product of the **Depression**; its politics of compassion was meant to provide a safety net for those unable to cope with the crises of the market system. Hence the original impetus of **Rooseveltian** liberalism is to promote the egalitarian moral ideal in market society as equality not of results but of opportunity. But what has not been sufficiently appreciated is that, like the **Romantic** utopianism derided by **Marx**, liberalism cannot perpetuate itself beyond its founding generation without this original intention becoming a source of "perverse incentives." An act of compassion can promote the general welfare only when it is unanticipated by its recipients. As soon as its gift becomes an "entitlement," it perverts the unspoken presupposition of liberalism that aid is a temporary boost designed to get its recipients back on their feet so that they may continue functioning within the market system, except when they are unequivocally incapable of doing so for reasons congenital or environmental.

The neoconservative reaction against liberalism is not simply the result of my generation's natural aging process; it is a reaction to the degradation of the liberal ideal. Indeed, those of my parents' generation remained to the end unrepentant Rooseveltian liberals in a world where Rooseveltian liberalism was no longer conceivable. The neoconservative has lived through and registered the postmodern triumph of the victimary, a triumph facilitated by but ultimately incompatible with liberalism. **Rush Limbaugh** may not be a subtle thinker, but he has a firm grasp of the essence of post-Rooseveltian liberalism. For Limbaugh, the liberal's promotion of real or symbolic equality for his social inferiors is in the first place a quest for moral superiority in relation to his peers. But what Limbaugh misses is that this sense of superiority is not merely a source of self-satisfaction but an epistemological guarantee. The sense that one is, however homeopathically, sacrificing what is generally considered to be one's self-interest has become the sole proof of the rightness of one's deed. Putting the victimary other's needs above my own may or may not be its own reward, but it is its own justification, whether or not the other is really helped by my gesture.

Back in the late sixties, I was a tardy member of **SDS** just before it entered the (**Weather**) underground. As a radical, I thought of liberals as hypocrites, incapable of following to the end the logic of their moral ideas; later I realized that the New Left was but a bloodier form of liberalism. The essence of both is the conviction that the results of historical human interaction, in particular those of the market system, are morally inferior to the models constructed by their individual moral judgment. Instead of taking the system of human exchange as a source of ethical truth, the liberal sees it as a necessary evil. He respects the radical's faith in socialism, but considers humanity to be "not good enough" for the lofty socialist

ideal, as though an ethical idea could be both valid and inapplicable at the same time. His is **Hegel's** *schöne Seele*, the beautiful soul unreconciled to human reality.

The central affirmation of **GA** is that our faith in our moral intuition is ultimately a faith in the moral model generated at man's historical origin. The resentful sense of injustice that provides the energy for our drive toward moral equality is a unique product of human language and culture that has no counterpart anywhere else in the natural universe. The liberal's self-effacement before the Other implies an ontology in which the human alone, by virtue of its use of representation, has access to the transcendental moral realm.

Yet as an heir of the **Enlightenment**, the liberal prefers to deny any essential difference between man and animal, even between man and **Turing machine**. The Enlightenment idea that we need not believe in any historically revealed truth but can place our faith in the instrumentalism of natural science is expressed in **E. O. Wilson's** sociobiology or **Steven Pinker's** evolutionary psychology. (Please see [Chronicle 135](#).) Whatever the value of studying either bonobos or artificial intelligence, what liberals seek in these investigations are the means to disprove any claim of human uniqueness. Their hostility to the divine guarantees offered to this uniqueness in the Western religious tradition suggests the mimetic origin of their desire. This denial of human difference was not an original component of liberalism. It reflects the postmodern exacerbation of the contradiction inherent within all human society between each individual's absolute and certain link to the originary generation of transcendence and his relative and error-prone relationship to historical human exchange. Both morality and market exchange are products of the originary scene of representation. In its inability to bear the post-Holocaust tension between them, liberalism subjects the historically human to a moral critique beyond history.

Liberal ethical thought contains a blatant contradiction. The liberal is a disciple of **Nietzsche** who believes that there is no qualitative difference between the human and the natural and that God's election of man is a man-made myth. In the latter's view, the ideas of God and morality were successfully imposed by a weak but clever priesthood on strong but unsophisticated warriors. But although the authority of the *Genealogy of Morals* is in high demand in today's academic marketplace, even the most Nietzschean academic liberal writes not to affirm his "will to power" but, on the contrary, to denounce all such wills in the name of a victimary version of equalitarian morality. Nietzsche was anything but PC; he was, on the contrary, the true father of **Nazism**, not because he endorsed antisemitism, which he abhorred, but because he denied the validity of our equalitarian moral intuition--the very intuition that his "followers" today unreflectively deploy as an all-purpose weapon against "patriarchy," "phallogocentrism," "eurocentrism," "orientalism," and what have you. Liberals are **Nietzscheans** in ethics, but **Christians** in morality: they apply "genealogy" to the former to the greater glory of the latter.

Conservatives, in contrast, generally believe in the qualitative human difference guaranteed by God's creation of man "in his own image." Although some of those who have turned away from liberalism wholeheartedly accept this religious view, I think GA's minimalism is more congenial to the neoconservative spirit. The originary hypothesis makes no postulations of supernatural powers; it "believes" only in the simultaneous emergence of God and man, the human and the sacred, the minimal conditions for which it seeks to define. The great spiritual need of our time is to bridge the gap between the historical particularism of revealed religions and the liberal-positivist denial of the central problematic of all religion: the deferral of mimetic violence. The genuine humility of which peace is made does not consist in setting ourselves on the same level as chimpanzees or dolphins, but in understanding the precariousness of the chance for self-understanding that our potential for mimetic

violence has given our species, and that its danger to our survival obliges us to take.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Appeals to Authority

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The recent Indian nuclear test, which took place after this *Chronicle* was conceived, reminds us of the possibility that future generations may look back with nostalgia on the foibles of our peaceful age. The earlier history of the century now ending ensures that those of us who have emphasized the centrality of the avoidance of violence to the human condition would rather be laughed at or even forgotten than proven right by circumstances.

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One of the frequent bugbears of these *Chronicles* has been the present-day intelligentsia's abandonment of the **Cartesian** tradition of minimalist reflection for what my Chinese readers may pardon me for calling the **Mandarin** approach of appealing to consecrated authorities. I am old enough to remember an era in the Humanities when there were essentially no such authorities, when one quoted other writers who had uncovered new information or had a new interpretation, but where the expression "as **Lacan-Foucault-Derrida** has taught us" was virtually unknown. Of course there was a hierarchy of critics and thinkers, but even the most prestigious--**Freud** and **Marx** themselves--were not automatic sources of value-added. Today, the first thing an ambitious graduate student learns is which authorities to quote from in order to enhance the prestige of his writing. More than any sophistication of thinking, it is the appeal to a common set of references that distinguishes, or should I say, socializes, the promising student. Nor are these references to major thinkers so much as to those, like the three B's, **Blanchot**, **Benjamin**, and **Bataille** (not to speak of **Barthes** and **Bakhtin**), who were witnesses of the prewar era when the market system seemed doomed and when socialisms of either right or left seemed attractive alternatives. These writers--Bataille no doubt most of all--are quoted for their intuitions rather than for their reasonings. We gesture via their mediation toward an inaccessible experience of the great crisis of the twentieth century--the era that produced the **Holocaust** and **postmodernity**.

The mindset that appeals to the authority of an absolutely unavailable experience is ready to appeal to the relatively unavailable experience of later-generation thinkers. These appeals are not simply "in contradiction with" Foucault's mindlessly quoted "What is an Author?" (see [Chronicle 129](#)) and similar denunciations of authorial and patriarchal authority. Such denunciations no doubt reflect the interest of a new set of authorities in denying their occupation of the very "patriarchal" position they denounce. But the appeal to inaccessible experience--at the very least that of a French education, or of postcolonial resentment--defies the simple **Nietzschean** "genealogy" that derives all values from the will to power of their perpetrators. Our academic mandarins have found a way of justifying authority by renouncing it, in the centrifugal mode that characterized the art object in the modernist era and that in our own has become characteristic of its creators. The nostalgia this inspires in me is not so much for the days of my youth as for the philosophical tradition in which appeal to authority was accounted a "fallacy" and at the central moment of which **Descartes** crawled into his *poêle* and meditated on the minimal conditions of selfhood

with no other guide than his internal scene of representation--a tradition that survives today only in the unworldly speculations of analytic philosophy.

I can conceive two possible interpretations of this phenomenon, which their very articulation as a duality draws together into one. The more prudent of the two makes it a simple matter of historical perspective. When I began my studies, it was felt that twentieth century literature, which in those days still had some time to run, was a more difficult and unstable specialty than the others because we had had insufficient time to judge the "permanent value" of its creators. Until we have come together on a "canon"--a term unknown in those days--we are forced to rely on the vagaries of the intellectual marketplace with its fads and injustices like those of any other market. To paraphrase **Winston Churchill**, this is the worst possible way of making intellectual and cultural decisions, with the exception of all the others. Thinking for oneself is admirable, but only very rarely more efficient than thinking like everyone else. The current generation is only marginally and unimportantly more mimetic than earlier generations; beyond the brief period of personal experience, we forget the faddishness of the past because we remember only its greatest minds.

But despite the obvious pitfalls, I am tempted by the more radical view that our situation is indeed historically unique, and not only because the vast expansion of our intellectual market, coupled with the precarious funding of humanities departments, creates a far greater dependency on the approval of one's peers than was required in the expanding university world of the 1960s. When I was a graduate student, it was professors, not students, who went to conferences, and not to all that many of them. The relative decline of the humanities, by which I refer not so much to such things as the weakening of the "language" departments as to a general disaffection from high-esthetic "universal" culture, is no epiphenomenon, but the inevitable result of the democratization of culture. (No one whose ancestors were commoners should bewail the nobility of the past in our vulgar age.) The contemporary recoil from the heights of cultural authority tends to be expressed in terms of the oppressiveness of past "hegemonies" that vast intellectual energies have been deployed to denounce--it is by their ability to catalyze these energies that the present generation selects its "authorities." But what lies beneath this facile and anachronistic criticism of the past is the resentment of those who do not intend to respect any superiors in the present. Who are, after all, our "superiors"? There is no absolute measure of accomplishment in any domain, save in sports, where we can play at adulating the possessors of abilities whose relevance to everyday life in the machine age is too insignificant to inspire comparison. **John Henry** doesn't compete against today's steam drills.

Why then are there any authorities at all in a democratic age? The now nostalgic mode of the left-wing intellectual who provides the authority needed to contest the "establishment" has endured since the Romantic era. **Joseph Schumpeter** thought this phenomenon endemic to bourgeois society; but Schumpeter also believed that, despite its economic superiority, market society would generate too much resentment to survive the appeal of socialism. Today there is nothing recognizable that we can even fantasize under the name of "socialism"; the concept is as dead as **phlogiston**.

The intelligentsia is still alive, but it's no longer kicking very hard. The very fact that its authority lives on chiefly in humanities dissertations and in the watered down PC purveyed in teachers' colleges reflects its disconnection from the crucial areas of political reflection. A moralistic view of history would attribute this fall to hubris, but not only is the danger of hubris itself anthropologically derived (he is guilty of hubris who generates resentment in his fellows), the attribution of such moral designs to history is itself sacrificial and therefore doubtfully moral. The decline of the intelligentsia may be explained

simply enough by the growing inadequacy of its mode of resentment in the "mature" postmodern era that has succeeded the fall of socialism. The problems of market society are real enough and those of us who style ourselves intellectuals would do better to make our modest effort to address them than to blather on about "late capitalism" as though we had a superior system in our heads ready to take its place.

There is no way to judge once and for all the specificity of a historical moment. My reading, for what it's worth, of our era is that we have been privileged by the "end of war" with **Auschwitz** and **Hiroshima** to witness a time of ethical progress and construction through the circulatory movement of the marketplace. As a result, there has been little urgency for decisive thinking of any kind. To grant authority to the thinkers of crisis is a way of preserving the intellectual's role of rendering an independent and presumably functional critical judgment on reality, however clearly the very fact of the appeal reveals the hollowness of both independence and functionality. What we appeal to in these witnesses of the time before posthistory is the once-legitimate illusion of transcending the exchange system in which all values are determined simply by others like ourselves. Just as in the days of the "democratic republics" of Eastern Europe, it is those who fervently claim to be on the side of the "people" who are the most fearful of democracy.

The pertinent fact that we have the peace and leisure to engage in such speculations as these is not easy to take into account while we are still so engaged. American power still dominates the world, still guarantees a tired leftist discourse about Western dominance--as well, more dangerously, as the current Administration's serene fecklessness in international affairs. It is only when this dominance comes truly to be threatened by the ferocious resentment it generates in the rest of the world that we will see what kind of authorities--perhaps even what kind of artists--we really need. Men do not follow a leader out of a blind adherence to his charisma but, as with everything else, out of fear of chaos. At the moment, we have order enough to afford its imaginary deconstruction; this may not, surely will not eternally be the case.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Rhetoric of God

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We have all heard hypocrites invoke **God** to guarantee their selfish ends. In such cases, it is easy to take the superficial **Nietzschean** view of God as simply a rhetorical trick by means of which the weak can wrest power from the strong. By disguising my own will to power as the expression of God's all-powerful will, I deal myself a card that trumps any human value.

The grain of truth in this analysis does no discredit to religion; on the contrary, the association of God with persuasion through language provides an insight into the anthropological reality of both God and language. God and the sign of human language are inseparable; there is no reduction of God to language that is not at the same time the subordination of language to God. The flagrant weakness of Nietzsche's analysis--which has done no harm to its popularity--is that, like all Enlightenment thinking about religion, it begs the question of separating ontology from pragmatics, truth from usefulness. If "we" are gullible enough to accept the rhetorical appeal to God, must there not be something inherent in the human use of language that makes us gullible in this way? Why and how did we acquire this gullibility? Those clever priests who used religion to usurp power from their physical superiors must have had some reason to believe that their ruse would be successful.

Religious traditions are justly preoccupied with experiences of revelation that give historical specificity to God as the Being named by the originary sign. Rituals continually reproduce the public scene of mimetic crisis in which religion originated and whose memory must be preserved for religion to remain alive. In this scene, the polarization of mimetic desire in the center prevents appropriation and thereby defers the rivalrous hostility among the participants. But the modern world, where collective life is more nostalgia than reality, makes us skeptical of serious, let alone critical, public manifestations of desire. We look back to them as the originary crucible of our own humanity, but we no longer find in them the source of our productivity. For the originary deferral of public violence also originated the possibility of private economic activity in which the individual temporarily detaches himself from the community in order to produce goods capable of acquiring value within it. Modernity is nothing but the society that results from the domination of this operation and its regulation through the free market. In such circumstances, creativity is, if not a purely individual activity, a definitely private one; the exceptions to this rule, like sports events or rock concerts, can excite public passions only because of their reassuring marginality.

In these circumstances, God's presence among humans appears to be essentially a matter for the individual consciousness or "conscience." The **Cartesian** moment is a key step toward recognizing the originary constitution of the self through the generation of the sign as "name of God," but it also lends itself, via the Enlightenment "misreading" of the *cogito*, to the false consciousness of the self as an autonomous entity whose dependency on human interaction is merely incidental. Even the **Lacanian** "return" to a language-constituted self takes place within the biological ambit of **Freudianism**, from

which the human collectivity (except in the forgotten pages of *Totem and Taboo*) is altogether absent; the "father" imposes language on the "son," but there is no concern for the obvious fact that this process could not have originated in the nuclear family. With or without Lacan, the modern self tends to understand God (see [Chronicle 118](#)) either as an external "anthropomorphic" being to whom I relate as to a father or king, or, in a more modern vein, as a purely "spiritual" presence within myself. These twin visions of God, apparently so different, are ultimately the same. Both depend but fail to acknowledge their dependency on the deferral of violence that sacred Being inaugurates at the origin of the human--inaugurates *as* the human. Both symmetrically situate Me before God, the "internal" or "external" nature of whose presence is wholly indeterminate. (The whole point of phenomenology was to do away with this kind of inside-outside distinction; no one considers God to be internal the way a toothache is internal.)

It is no doubt a mistake to see this as a falling-away from revealed truth, the abandonment of a religious Golden Age. The collective origin of the sacred is and has always been successful precisely insofar as it is hidden; for each participant, to see only the central Being is to be preserved from the potentially deadly rivalry of the others. The hiddenness of this collective origin is itself originary; it only appears to increase with the "decline of public man" because the evolution of the exchange system provokes in us a sensitivity to the difference between the public and private spheres unavailable to our ancestors. The premodern individual defines himself in the sacrificial repetition of the originary scene; his lack of a "private" identity makes him less capable of insight into the founding role of human mimesis than his skeptical modern counterpart. No doubt the **Enlightenment** was, as **Eric Voegelin** claims, an era of "gnostic" excess, but it is a prerequisite to **originary thinking**.

How then can we further our understanding of our collective origin under modern conditions? It is for this purpose that I am suggesting that we understand God neither as Being nor even as Language (whether the divine Logos or the fetishized postmodern version), but as **rhetoric**. The one experience of God no one can avoid is the use of his name in conversation. Believe or not, the rhetoric of God is difficult to refute. The appeal to the transcendental avoids the interpersonal rivalries of this world. What I take from you to give to God I do not give to myself. In order to reject my impersonal reference to God's will, you must descend to the personal level and accuse me of "bad faith."

To affirm belief is to affirm what lies beyond language. If **René Girard** is less concerned than some with the identity of human origin and human language, it is because he believes in a Being beyond language. But for believer and unbeliever alike, God is accessible only through the signs by means of which he persuades us of his presence. Tartuffery aside, there are moments marked by crisis and death in which even the "unbeliever" commonly makes use of these signs, moments ranging from the proverbial foxhole (see "The Unique Source of Religion and Morality," [Anthropoetics I, 1](#)) to wholly personal crises. At a funeral or at the bedside of a dying relative or friend, one need not be a believer to comfort a bereaved party with a reference to God's will or to his loving care for the deceased.

The experience that inspired this *Chronicle* is the yet more paradoxical case of one who does not habitually make use of divine rhetoric, but is drawn to do so, so to speak involuntarily, in circumstances of great personal significance. One way to describe **Generative Anthropology** is as an exploration of the minimal conditions of dialogue between "believers" and "unbelievers"--of bringing the anthropology that is religion into the orbit of secular reflection. Hence it is of great interest to me to witness the "presence of God" in my own discourse. What else, indeed, is revelation? The difference between this purely linguistic presence and the great revelations of **Moses** before the burning bush or **Saul/Paul** on the road

to Damascus--in both of which God manifests himself only through language--is one not of substance but of expression. These public displays, like the visions of the resurrected **Christ** described in the Gospels, depend on an intimate contact between the public and the private scenes of representation that in the modern era language alone preserves.

Rather than define the difference between "believer" and "unbeliever" as a matter of belief, we may define it in terms of rhetoric: the first habitually uses, where the second does not, the rhetoric of God. That when we find ourselves in "foxholes"--whether of death or of life, of resentment or of love--we all tend to pronounce the name of God suggests that, in extreme moments, believers and unbelievers share a common understanding of what it is to be human. Where they differ is not in their fundamental ontology but in their pragmatic sense of the value of ritual.

The Judeo-Christian tradition is the most powerful historical locus of desacralization, but all religion is in conflict with its ritual. Ritual is the "supplement" that demonstrates its own lack; it is a reproduction that seeks to renew for its participants the experience of absolute originality. The believer nevertheless affirms the social efficacy of ritual and of its linguistic variant, **the rhetoric of God**. By talking of God, he hopes to bring us closer together in our otherness from him. What belongs to God is neither yours nor mine; we have no need to fight over it. Christians share the sign of the Cross that Jesus suffered for us so that we have no need to inflict it on each other. This revelation of nonaggression gives cause for celebration. The churches that are growing today--not only within Christianity--are those that insist less on renewing the originary crisis than on celebrating their divine protection from it. Evangelical ecstasy is not the ecstasy of sacrifice, but that of healing.

The unbeliever is suspicious of ritual's disconnection from the world of profane creativity: if he disdains to profit from the rhetoric of God in everyday life, he will not make use of it in the temporary community of a church. In him Judeo-Christian iconoclasm is pushed to its limit, the commandment not to take the name of God in vain applied with the greatest rigor. When he does pronounce this name, he reproduces the surprise and the rhetorical impact of its originary use.

To defer the name of God can be the most barren of spiritual acts. But it can also be the the most profound. This deferral is the last word of Christianity and of all religion--the most subtle form of the rhetoric of God.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Programming and Thinking

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Concerning the question of whether computers can think, the intellectual community seems divided between those who love computers and say they can, and those who hate computers and say they can't. I wonder how many among those who deny thought to **Turing machines** share my passion for programming--"hacking," as it used to be called, but like the dear old **Bronx**, benign terms sometimes take on sinister connotations.

The joy of computer programming, although surely not the greatest of joys, is unlike any other. It is not the joy of making the computer think, but quite the opposite: that of reducing what for me requires thought to a mindless series of mechanical operations. Every computer procedure, even those of simple arithmetic--assembly language programmers know that arithmetic is not what comes easiest to microprocessors--is essentially a simulation. By reducing one's thought process to a series of programmable steps, one avoids having to think in the future.

I recently made up my mind, after several years as a disaffected **DOS** (and former **CP/M**) programmer, to master the art of **Windows** programming. A course in **Java** I took a couple of years ago produced a couple of "applets" but was not the general-purpose language I needed. So I got myself a copy of **Visual Basic**, sent away for **Microsoft's** inevitable "supplementary" manuals, and began acquiring an amateur's knowledge of the language. **Basic** is my native programming language, and **VB** still has most of the old **M(icrosoft)Basic** constructs. (How many recall that **Bill Gates & Co.** got its start writing Basic compilers? My old CP/M **MBasic** manual may be a collector's item.) For years, the event-driven style of Windows programming had seemed impossible for an old proceduralist to learn. But once the system was up and running and I had converted a couple of my old **QBasic** programs to VB, I discovered that things were a lot less different than I had imagined. Code was still code, and working with a preestablished **GUI** (graphical user interface) was a lot easier than trying to roll one's own. However proud I had been of my primitive assembly-language windowing system in DOS, it was surely a better idea to make use of the infinitely more developed one provided by the Windows **API**.

To get my feet wet in VB, I decided to write an improved version of the **Minesweeper** game familiar to all Windows users. MS is the only computer game I can think of that is neither a video game, a card game, nor a two-person game in which the computer simulates another player. MS is a true solitaire, but one that needs the computer's interactivity (and capacity for random number generation) to make it enjoyable. It is played for speed, but doesn't require the kind of pre-frontal coordination little kids use in blasting invading Klingons. Choosing which squares to clear is largely a mechanical procedure, but a certain amount of optimizing and strategic thinking is possible. I first implemented the basic program, then added a few extras, like an **autoclear** feature that relieves the player of the tedium of clearing around the mines he has located. But what tempted me above all was a strategy module. Every MS player learns a few basic configurations in which one knows exactly where the mines are and are not. If I could

formalize the basic MS strategy, I would discover new and more complex configurations.

After conceptualizing, programming, and (the longest stage) debugging, I created a functional strategy module; given a Minesweeper position, it will find all the safe moves. (I'm still working on an "endgame" procedure to evaluate positions where the choice of moves depends on how many mines are left on the board.) This accomplishment, respectable for an amateur, is nowhere near the **Deep Blue** level, nor anything like what's normally called "artificial intelligence" (**AI**). Nevertheless, it gives me a little supplementary insight into the question of whether computers can "think" or, to put it more precisely, whether human thinking is qualitatively different from the Turing-machine operations of computers.

One poses the question badly when one seeks to define thinking as either a mechanical operation or a "spiritual" one. At least the latter choice shows some respect for the specificity of the human, but it is inevitably expressed in a way that makes its partisans into mirrors of their materialist adversaries. The supernatural is only an unverifiable variety of the natural; to found human difference on it is in effect to deny its empirical reality.

The mechanist school of thought relies on complexity to differentiate between the thinking of a computer program and that of a human being. Of course a minesweeper strategy is just a small series of calculations, but--so the reasoning goes--the only difference between it and "real" thought is that the latter is more complex. Our brains have billions of neurons and synapses; they're just bigger and better Turing machines.

I don't purport to know any better than the mechanists how the brain works; I don't think that's the point. Nor am I tempted by the kind of category errors that lead a distinguished mathematician like **Roger Penrose** in *Shadows of the Mind : A Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness* (Oxford, 1994) to seek in quantum theory the explanation of the difference between human and computer thought. If this kind of thinking ever stopped to reflect on what it itself is doing, it would gain far greater insight into what human thinking really is than that revealed by its theories, just as even the worst human thinking tells us more in its very badness about human thought than the most sophisticated computer program.

The crux is not logical but anthropological. It depends on whether one cares about the human or not. Have we reached the point in our history when what really matters is the creation of better Turing machines? One day, sci-fi writers speculate, we'll build computers so smart they'll take over. And we will have been right to do so even if it means the end of the human species, for these computers are truly a superior life-form. As mere "flesh-puppets" of our "selfish genes," what higher destiny could we aspire to than to sacrifice ourselves to the creation of a superior form of beings. From a mere means by which one gene produces another gene, we become the designers and builders of our successor race...

Perhaps our descendants in the year **3000**, if humanity survives that long, will have some reason to think this way. But if one thing is certain, it's that we don't. We have to do anthropology because the greatest danger to our survival, in the atomic era even more than on the occasion of our originary discovery of language, comes from our fellow humans. Denigrating ourselves, as we are wont to do, in comparison with animals or trees, is at best an infantile apotropaic gesture. Denigrating ourselves in comparison with computers is another. My Minesweeper program finds moves that I don't, **Deep Blue** found a few that **Kasparov** didn't; if this be thinking, then without a doubt, computers do it better.

The adepts of AI concede that Minesweeper and chess are restricted domains not typical of "life," but

argue that computers are merely in their infancy. The quantity of data necessary to understand, say, a newspaper article is several orders of magnitude greater than that required to play a game of chess, but the capacity to record and manipulate data has been increasing exponentially, doubling every 18 months. How can we assume that there are things that we can know or manipulations we can exercise on the data of our knowledge that are beyond the ultimate capacity of an appropriately equipped Turing machine?

The point isn't to show that we are "smarter" than computers, that we can perform formal intellectual manipulations of which they are incapable, but simply that thinking is irreducible to formal intellectual manipulations. This does not mean that it should be explained by divine inspiration, although the rapprochement between thinking and the sacred is worth keeping in mind. Thinking is irreducible to the manipulation of formal signs because it involves the *creation* of formal signs. To put it in the terms of *The Origin of Language*, thinking has an *ostensive* component. Platonic metaphysics pretends to reduce all discourse to the logic of declaratives, to eliminate the ostensive and the "poets" whose work explicitly depends on it, but as I tried to show in "Plato and The Birth of Conceptual Thought" ([Anthropoetics II, 2](#)), the central metaphysical concept of the Good and, by extension, every concept, functions not as a mere marker for reality but as itself a "thing" that we possess in common, with each of us in possession of the whole. The miracle of the concept, like that of the loaves and fishes, is its embodiment of the trace of the originary scene, where the shared ostensive sign defers mimetic violence. The sign does not create the physical thing, but it creates the meaningful thing that can be represented by a sign. It is this "transcendental" function of the sign that cannot be programmed in a computer, which by definition manipulates symbols alone.

What then precisely is thinking, and why do the activities of Turing machines appear to come so uncomfortably close to it? I may appear to have surrendered to the cyberneticists in defining thinking as the attempt to reduce the entropy of a given situation by creating a model with an optimally small number of parameters that can be manipulated "mechanically"--programmed, if you will--with the final goal of transforming an anxiety-ridden decision into an algorithm. What I do and what a computer does when we try to think of a chess move are essentially similar. We both evaluate the forces on the board and their possible configurations after a certain number of possible moves with the final intention of choosing which move to make. But what differentiates chess from real life is not simply complexity. Chess is a *game*, that is, an activity governed entirely by man-made rules. Such activities exist only in the human sphere; they derive directly from the ritual imperative to **defer violence by representation**. Following strict rules is a simple way of avoiding conflict. We have all seen players who get upset and knock all the pieces off the board. These do not "break the rules" but leave the domain of rules; it is thus that "real life" contrasts with games.

No doubt the natural and even the human world have their regularities; thinking processes are for the most part programmable. Empirical science seeks such regularities or "laws" in its data, and computers can be and are programmed to do the same. But the reduction of chaos to order is not merely the principle of games like chess, it is the deepest principle of human interaction. The originary invention of the sign was not the discovery of a regularity in empirical data, but an "act of faith" in the efficacy of subordinating our mimetic rivalry to a Being beyond ourselves. The act of faith is a feature of all thinking, not only of that effected in the originary scene and in the scenes of revelation on which the great religions are founded. My humble Minesweeper strategy may be purely mechanical, but its inspiration is spiritual; the desire to conquer nature's chaos through intellect reflects our more fundamental need to defer the dangers of our own. No creature that does not embody the potential

violence of mimetic desire would either invent a game like Minesweeper or attempt to devise a strategy to conquer it.

At the end of a recent *Chronicle* I tossed off a line to the effect that only when computers began to feel resentment would I begin to worry about their approximating human thought. One member of the **GAlist** obligingly replied that he had just programmed a computer to simulate resentment. Computers can indeed be programmed to simulate anything. But the only computer simulation that would allow us to understand human thought would be one that could be made to generate, starting with the invention/discovery of representation, the historical evolution of human culture. Even then, of course, the computer would not be "thinking" in the sense that we are, but just as in chess when computers begin to win against grandmasters, at that point we could begin to say that human thinking had met its master and was no longer necessary.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Not Receiving a Promotion

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The sense that there are two sides to the relationship between individuals and institutions is a peculiarly Western phenomenon, grounded on the historical circumstances of the dissolution of the archaic empires of the Middle East. The two strands of the Western synthesis, the Hebrew and the Greek, are founded on liberation from the social order exemplified by dynastic Egypt in which institution and sacred are inseparable and private values are wholly subordinated to public. The market exchange system that has spread throughout the world grew up under the sign of the Cross, that most anti-institutional of symbols.

Many Humanities faculty have based their careers on denouncing one or the other Western institution, if only that of "capitalism" itself. Back in the sixties, the university was regularly the focus of such denunciations. But over the years, the students have become professors, and the simple fact that, within the not-very-stringent limits of budgetary considerations, the university's personnel process is dominated by the faculty themselves has removed their institution from the spotlight of criticism. Radicals are rarely denied tenure for their radicalism; the opposite is far more likely. Hence the intellectual class has come to believe that, unlike the "real world" that rewards members of "hegemonic" at the expense of "subaltern" groups, the university grants its rewards to the truly deserving. Our intellectual elite's unflinching condemnation of the rest of society allows it to accept the largesse of the educational system in good conscience.

By a strange irony, I too adopted a version of this attitude. However critical my view of the academic profession as a whole, I thought of UCLA as an oasis within the boundaries of which I could expect to be judged "on my own merits." I often wrote in these *Chronicles* about the profession's increasing mimeticism, all the while continuing to assume that this could not affect my relationship with my local institution. Experience has now taught me not merely that this reassuring sentiment was false, but that it reflected a dangerous dependency on institutional judgment. There comes a time when one must liberate oneself from the tutelage of even the most benign of institutions. Although I have never been required overtly to compromise my intellectual integrity, it is ultimately compromising to expect that this or any institution will judge one's work on "merits" other than those that contribute to its current value in the marketplace.

To say that the world of ideas is a marketplace like any other is not to condemn thinkers to slavery to the latest fashions. Markets operate on many time-scales at once. Following short-term trends is a recipe for short-term success; new ideas, in academic life as in the business world, often take time to prove their value.

We are fortunate to be blessed with universities that allow us such freedom to do research and teach courses in areas of our own choosing. Without the Western university system, neither Generative Anthropology itself nor the thought that led up to it would likely have emerged. But it is one thing to be

grateful to an institution for affording us the means of elaborating our ideas and another to depend on that institution for assurance that these ideas are of value. Institutional tolerance is already a godsend--and far more than history gives us the right to expect.

Disappointments are often blessings in disguise; in relieving us of false hopes, they give us the opportunity to free ourselves for an instant from the power of mimesis. I hope I will be able to put this opportunity to good use, and that my readers too may find this lesson a salutary one.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Looking Into Branagh's *Hamlet*

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I finally caught **Kenneth Branagh's** full-length *Hamlet* on cable this week. I'm not sorry I missed it in the theater; a four-hour film is too exhausting to watch away from home, and Branagh's effects for the big screen are hard enough to take on a small one. But seeing it reminded me that I had always wanted to write about *Hamlet*, and that, aside from a paragraph or two in *Originary Thinking*, I had never done so.

This *Hamlet* is indeed a mixed blessing. I have no major complaints about the acting. Although **Horatio** is stiff as a board, **Jack Lemmon** as **Marcellus** is embarrassing, and **Charlton Heston** as the Player only a little better, the principals, particularly Branagh himself, are generally fine. **Ophelia** (**Kate Winslet**) gets a bit overwrought, but she is an essentially pathetic character. It is the atrocious visuals that mar the film; some rejected *Godzilla* footage of the ground opening up is shown a good half-dozen times. Especially in the early part of the film, the director insists on translating the words of dramatic passages into images as though the spectator isn't smart enough to do this for himself. At some points it seems that each time Hamlet says "table," they show you a table--well, almost. And the shot of **Hecuba** in the ruins of Troy is so ugly that it would have turned the Greeks to stone.

This production violates what should be graven on Moses-Heston's tablets as the first commandment of movies made from plays: *never upstage the stage action*. Branagh often undercuts his own fine acting with what seems to be masochistic relish. **Monty Python** couldn't have made the "How all occasions do inform against me" speech more ludicrous; Branagh's words are half-drowned out by "public service music" as the camera tracks back ever farther, leaving him an insignificant dot. The final sequence, which intercuts the action at the Danish court with a surprise military invasion of **Denmark** by **Fortinbras'** forces, is clearly intended to convey the impression that all this family in-fighting is just so much fiddling while Denmark burns. But as a commentary on Hamlet's delay or **Claudius'** fecklessness, it fails for the simple reason that it could not be made a theme of the play without changing the original text. It's one thing to put on classical plays with modern dress and decor and another to introduce into them new perspectives that can only be presented as dumb-shows unsupported by dialogue.

It is nevertheless a joy to hear all of **Shakespeare's** text, the length of which adds considerably to the substance and effect of Hamlet's famous "delay." One is struck above all by Hamlet's delight in "words, words, words," and this aspect, necessarily neglected in productions that cut the "unessential" dialogue, is precisely the one in which Branagh most shines. Better than any other Hamlet I've seen, he brings out the Danish prince's affinity with the intellectual who glories in his mastery of language as a means to defer as long as possible the contact of ideas with practical reality. In this peculiarly modern form of "the deferral of violence by representation," the intellectual-of-resentment gets his representations to represent as little as possible.

René Girard, in his *A Theater of Envy* (Oxford, 1991) and at greater length in an earlier article,

attributes Hamlet's delay to a "modern" defect of mimesis. Where an old-fashioned character like Fortinbras would have run Claudius through in a trice, praying or not, Hamlet, in Girard's reading, is too unmimetic, too "Christian" to rush to revenge. Only when **Laertes** reappears in the final act does mimetic rivalry finally push Hamlet over the edge, and even then, he does not act until he has seen his mother poisoned and he has accidentally grasped Laertes' poisoned sword.

It is ironic that the thinker who revolutionized our understanding of mimesis by studying the modern novel has come to associate modernity with a diminution of mimetic rivalry. On the contrary, the passage from external to internal mediation, from models of desire that are above us to models who stand beside us, banalizes and universalizes this rivalry. Hamlet's failure to take revenge is the archetype of the transformation of the classical man of resentment--**Achilles** is the originary example--into his modern counterpart. Hamlet enjoys playing at the periphery of the scandalous scene of which his uncle has usurped the center. Branagh is quite successful in conveying the scarcely disguised glee with which Hamlet compares his uncle to his father. One imagines that were the old man still around, he'd probably (in keeping with the nineteenth century setting of the play) grab the first train to **Wittenberg**.

Unlike Girard, I think we still can learn a good deal from **Ernest Jones'** Freudian study of Hamlet as the exemplar of the modern Oedipus complex who no longer kills his father but ambivalently identifies with his murderous uncle. This is a sharp insight independently of Freudian dogma. The modern *homme de ressentiment* prefers to let others act violently and then complain about the violence; what else have we been witnessing in "post-colonial" academia lately? Hamlet's delight in righteous indignation prefigures the romantic heroes for whom he serves as the primary model. His sulking appearance in the king's council in **I, ii** precedes any contact with the **Ghost** and can indeed be said to have generated it. Is Hamlet's attachment to the scene of his father's murder and his own exclusion "sexual"? Let's just say that, like all realizations of the paradox of desire, it has a sexual charge. We don't need Freud to grasp the undertones in the scene in **Gertrude's** bedroom, or to point out the mimetic violence her presence inspires in him.

Branagh's puerile use of illustrative imagery gives us *malgré lui* an insight into the play's irrationalism. Not only is the Ghost's objective existence dubious in the same way as similar mimetic catalysts in the "fantastic" works of the nineteenth century, but even a scene like Claudius's confession of the murder at prayer is more meaningful in the context of the mimetic triangle between him and the two Hamlets than in that of Claudius' relation to God. The piling-up of evidence that old Hamlet's murder really took place has nothing of the rationalizing assurance of comparable sequences in a detective novel; on the contrary, it bespeaks the "hystericization" of the mimetic configuration that leads to the death of all the principal characters.

Girard rightly points out that, in the final act, Laertes' appearance at Ophelia's grave provokes Hamlet into the "internal" mimetic rivalry from which he had been shielded by his quasi-filial relationship with his uncle. Even then, Hamlet can only act in the context of the neo-mimetic fencing-scene; the affected **Osric**--played by **Robin Williams**, the only American import to perform creditably--is representative of a modernity by which the heroic competition of old is reduced to a game. But the lesson here is not that the unmimetic Hamlet has finally been provoked into a form of mediated desire, but that the appearance of his contemporary and virtual equal--the only principal other than his acolyte Horatio to whom Hamlet speaks with unambiguous affection--makes impossible the solitary proto-Romantic role he had played until that time. Fortinbras is often spoken of as Hamlet's counter-model, but in fact the action of the play is framed by Laertes' departure and return, during which time Hamlet is free to present himself as the

young sufferer of what two hundred years after his time would come to be called the *mal du siècle*.

Girard's point is that we should, but never do, read *Hamlet* "against revenge" in accordance with the **Judeo-Christian** tradition that alone specifically suspects and forbids revenge--a noble imperative rendered all the more timely by the recent renewal of nuclear activity on the Indian subcontinent. Yet the fact that I must partially dissent from this reading provides me with a useful occasion to define the nuance that separates my perspective from that of my teacher.

Girard deftly points out all the parallels that make Claudius and the old Hamlet essentially indistinguishable, and at the same time those which display in Claudius an indecision that parallels Hamlet's own. In such circumstances, delay, or "deferral" as I would rather call it, is not only the very substance of culture, but the only "reasonable" tactic. Girard sees Hamlet as a modern nuclear-armed leader with his finger on the red button, hesitating to push it. The other critics, in his eyes, are criticizing Hamlet for not pushing the button, psychoanalyzing his delay as a symptom of mental illness. How do all these supposedly civilized intellectuals concur in treating this civilized young man as a failure because he refuses to follow the advice of the ghost to murder his uncle? If Polonius attributes Hamlet's sickness to love of his daughter, the sophisticated Poloniuses of a sophisticated age transfer his desire to his mother. But if we "read *Hamlet* against revenge" we will understand that Hamlet's true destiny was to renounce the Ghost's imperative altogether. Branagh himself seems to suggest this in the final moments of the play; if Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius had stuck together, they might have prevented Fortinbras' virtually unopposed invasion.

In the last analysis, Girard no more than the other critics can consonance Hamlet's indefinite delay. The difference, and it is entirely to his credit, is that where our pseudo-**Nietzscheans** impatiently urge Hamlet to wreak vengeance on the patriarchy, Girard wants him to follow the **Christian** road of renunciation. The slaughter that ends the play, in this view, is a concession to the bloodthirsty public that does not reflect an inner necessity of the modern psyche.

Yet it is here that Girard, like those he criticizes, is guilty of utopianism. In order to castigate us for our lack of understanding of Hamlet's--that is, essentially of Shakespeare's--situation as a modern tired of the old sacrificial world of revenge, Girard must himself deploy a certain verbal violence. Of course we should avoid violence, sacrifice, and revenge; but we should never expect to abolish these things once and for all, merely to defer them. What is modern in Hamlet is not his partial liberation from mimesis, but his conversion of it into a deferring mechanism independent of the old social forms. What distinguishes him from Laertes or Fortinbras is not that he is less of a man of revenge than they, but that he is more a man of resentment. And so are we all. The choice we face is not whether to renounce violence, but to live in its deferral or to die all at once. The apocalypse of violence can only be indefinitely postponed, not inverted into an apocalypse of peace.

To the extent that we would love one another, we must continually devise new mediations through which to discharge the resentment human interaction ceaselessly generates in us. As individuals, we should do our best to fill our hearts with love for those around us. But on the societal plane, we can only accomplish the deferral of violent revenge through mechanisms of less violent revenge. If we seek to short-circuit these mediations, we will establish on earth not the **kingdom of God** but the **kingdom of Death**. There is at least this justification for Branagh's ominous ending of the play with the tearing down of old Hamlet's statue: humanity can survive only on the condition that no man, nor woman either, receive unconstrained the substance of his desire.

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

A Thought for Independence Day

No. 142: Saturday, July 4, 1998

In my previous *Chronicle*, I distinguished **GA's** anti-apocalyptic perspective from the apocalyptic one that **Girard** conserves from the Judeo-Christian tradition. This distinction extends to that between **GA** as a "way of thinking" and "methods" of any kind. To understand the mimetic structures of a given work of art or political institution in a generative perspective, it does not suffice to denounce them as instruments of hegemony or even to reveal in them a growing rejection of the sacrificial. What allows humanity to survive and must continue to do so if we are to survive at all is the generation of ever-expanding possibilities of "deferring violence through representation." **GA's** ethical imperative is not the revelation of violence or mimetic rivalry within literary texts, but the revelation of the historical contribution of each specific text to this expansion. I have already given a few examples in past columns: **Emma Bovary** as the archetype of the modern consumer, **Hamlet** himself as the initiator of a new way of dealing with mimetic rivalry, **Proust's** narrator as the model of the self-constructed self. In this week's column, I would like both to make clearer the ethical imperative. Although one cannot in good conscience present a way of thinking that is simply "impractical," the most rigorous way of thinking can only accomplish practical ends by avoiding the limited forms of closure to which both traditional and modernist rhetorics have habituated us.

Let us then think about the application of "method," to narrow our focus a bit, to literary texts.

The most easily applicable methods, after the strictly formal-linguistic ones that no longer seem to attract much attention, are **structural**: they seek and find in texts structures independent of any particular historical context. Theirs is the attraction of "methodology" in general. This does not make them necessarily hostile to historical contextualization in the long term. On the contrary, the use of method is to permit a transhistorical perspective within which historical phenomena can subsequently be situated.

In this context, **Girard's** mimetic theory of desire provides the basis for the ultimate or simply the minimal structural method. I speak here of the theory of "metaphysical desire" as developed in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*) rather than of the fully anthropological theory first presented in *La violence et le sacré*. The novel, and by extension, any cultural text, overtly presents a set of subject-object relations, the desire of X for Y; it is the reader's task to seek out the hidden third party or "mediator" in each case. In so doing, one situates the given example of literary mediation within a quasi-historical scheme defined by the proximity of the mediator to the subject. According to the story told by *Mensonge*, a prenovelistic era of external mediation gives way to the age of internal mediation, of modernity and the novel. The perspective is openly apocalyptic; the internalization of mediation reaches its maximal intensity in **Dostoevsky**, where it encounters the only force that Girard considers capable of opposing it: that of **Christianity**.

However simplistic the method suggested by *Mensonge*, it articulates the passage from structure to

history or from **synchrony** to **diachrony** far more clearly than popular methodologies of our time such as **psychoanalysis** or **deconstruction**; at the same time, it avoids the symmetrical defect of reducing all synchronic structure to binary **master-slave** relations. Because diachrony always tells the story of a structure that functions in synchrony, the evolution it describes cannot affect the structure itself, merely its "expression." But the transhistorical reality of this structure is not an artifact of "theory"; it must be guaranteed by an **anthropology**. This Girard realized intuitively at the moment of *Mensonge*, and concretely in *La violence*. If mimetic desire has transhistorical reality, this cannot be because it is independent of humanity's historicity, but on the contrary, because it is foundational to it. (**Freud's** attempt to make the **Oedipus complex** the origin of the human in *Totem and Taboo* reflects his realization of the same truth.) Thus the structure that permits the development of a method is anything but the arbitrary patterning to which structuralists *à la* **Lévi-Strauss** referred. On the contrary, to the extent that a structural method has any chance of revealing something about the human-in-general, it must be founded on an *originary* structure.

How does **GA's** approach differ from even a method as originary as Girard's? The answer is to be sought, in the first place, in the difference between the stories they tell. In *Mensonge*, the story was the internalization of mimesis. The external status of the mediator in **Cervantes** gives way to the ironic rivalry of **Stendhal**, the anxious snobbery of **Proust**, and finally to the paroxysms of **Dostoevsky**, whose vision leads through apocalypse to Christian love. The negativity of this movement is not a reason for pessimism; on the contrary, in the apocalyptic vision, the revelation of the idolatry of desire is a necessary opening to transcendental truth. In the Girardian interpretation of *Hamlet* discussed in [Chronicle 141](#), the element of progressive revelation predominates; *Hamlet* illustrates the contamination of the pagan world of revenge tragedy by Christian non-violence. But in either case, the story is told against a horizon of closure.

This is not the place to answer the question as to whether non-eschatological narrative is truly possible. But there can be little doubt that *method* is always eschatological. The genealogical perspective inherited from **Nietzsche** and systematized by **Foucault** reveals its deepest methodological possibilities in the binarism of victimary thinking: history until now has been the self-concealing triumph of **patriarchy**, and by unveiling this triumph we begin to put an end to it. This critical story lacks closure only to the extent that those who tell it must be careful, as faithful disciples of the patriarchs they revile, to dissimulate their own institutional power; thus their own anti-triumph must take place only in small increments, final victory being indefinitely deferred. (The originary anthropology suggested by practitioners of this method is the usurpation of, say, matriarchal power by males. Feminism in particular and victimary thinking in general would be more challenging if they openly hypothesized this usurpation to be the origin of the human, but such a hypothesis would have unfortunate ideological consequences.) Girard's apocalypticism is not more "closed," merely more honest than that of victimary thinking: in both cases, anthropological truth is a "thing hidden since the creation of the world," but what Girard understands as hidden and revealed is precisely the demonization of the Other that the very concept of patriarchy illustrates.

As I tried to bring out in last week's *Chronicle*, *Hamlet*, and by extension of all cultural works, should be read in a perspective of openness rather than closure. This does not mean to promote the "open work" in the spirit of utopian modernism, but to understand cultural works, however they may fight against their closure, in terms of the openness they permit or empower. *Hamlet* is closed by death, but the cultural contribution of this greatest literary achievement of the Renaissance is precisely to have modernized the vengeful pre-modern genre of tragedy by transforming it into a model of "delay," which is to say, of

deferral. The empowering role of the model is more important than the work's formal closure, which, like all ritual forms, is "always already" in the process of dissolving. Not that the tragic (or comic) end of the story is epiphenomenal. The model transcends esthetic closure only because this closure guarantees the meaning of the model of relationship to the world that the work presents. We may defer "forever," but deferral is in the first place not a global but a local phenomenon. We imitate Hamlet not in his death but in his protoromantic attitude, just as we imitate **Emma Bovary** not in her suicide but in her consumerism.

No doubt the level of detail to which we can carry out the imitation is itself historically determined; it is what we know best of history. Classical tragedy did not permit imitation of its heroes. But the cautionary example of **Oedipus** is no less a variety of **mimesis** than the more seductive one of Hamlet. The tragic counterexample that no Greek would have dared choose as his model was not for that reason discredited; on the contrary, the sacralization of its violence as an object of deferral is an incentive to create the means for its worldly realization. **Freud's** greatness was to have made the crimes of Oedipus accessible to the average bourgeois. History is nothing but the devolution of the sacred into the profane, and Christianity realizes the most significant step in this process: the assimilation of human praxis to the divine.

To be attentive to those elements of literary narrative that lead beyond the closure of the narrative itself is an existential reformulation of the cliché about works whose immortality transcends their historical situation. What gives it added power is its ethical focus. Great works give us additional means to acquire meaning. But because these means are won in the face of the denial by the formal structure of the work that they can be imitated at all, they lead to the erosion of the form that expresses this denial. The esthetic mediates between the sacred and the profane; by representing what we cannot do, it incites us to realize its representations.

To give another example, the lyric of **Sappho** reveals the power of sexual desire over the "masculine" world that seems to exclude it. In the lyric sphere, individually experienced desire becomes the source of meaning. It is easy to see lyric as a source of cultural empowerment; in fact, it is too easy. Lyric proposes to canonize sexual spontaneity, but as **La Rochefoucauld** pointed out, there would be few lovers if we hadn't already heard about love. In glorifying sexual desire as a natural phenomenon, lyric demonstrates its meaningfulness as a human phenomenon. To make this point, it expresses "natural" desire in "cultural" terms--the familiar Derridean *supplément*. Yet denunciation of cultural self-blindness is not a sufficient analysis. Lyric does not simply appeal to immediacy in the mode of mediation. It negotiates a path between "naive" desire and the artifice of its assumption as a simple cultural role--a path on which we are still treading. For we have all heard of love, and we all engage in loving. Each figure of lyric poetry that translates our individual desire into the sphere of meaning provides a means to defer the potential violence of rivalry over our common desire.

Girard points out this ineluctable commonness; for him, difference is but a necessary illusion. Derrida finds behind difference not the commonness of rivalry but the always-decaying myth of central authority. In asserting its significance as prior to its assertion, the figure disguises its imperative point as a constative. But in the most comprehensive view, the figure is the addition of a new word to our cultural vocabulary, a new means--as measured on the historical scale of novelty--to perform the ever-renewed cultural task of deferring violence through representation. We can neither abolish difference in an apocalypse of sameness nor seek to ensure its perpetuation by separating its process from that of the ethical.

Human culture is neither a conspiracy of all against a few nor a conspiracy of a few against all. Through culture we tirelessly operate to keep ourselves alive, even if it be by denouncing it or denying it more than a fragmentary existence. But the truth of culture cannot be formulated in such a way as to avoid the originary paradox that its revelation as truth is inseparable from its falsification. The things hidden since the foundation of the world can never truly be revealed; to think them is already to enter the forbidden sphere wherein their potency is denied. To practice "method" is to seek to maintain structure against the erosion of history. The only guarantee we can offer of an originary hypothesis of the human is that it cannot become the basis of a method, however conscientiously and sincerely we "apply" it. Its value is, on the contrary, that it allows and forces us to think each historical moment in its revelatory uniqueness. Only such thinking can liberate the true humility of democracy from the victimary snobbery of modernism.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Personal Origins of GA

4. Class and Universality

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As I begin the fourth year of these *Chronicles*, I am more convinced than ever that the ethical models or "anthropologies" that we create are framed as solutions to our personal situations in the world, but not in a simple manner. For the formulation of these models is a means of resolving the problems they purport to solve, not directly, but through the intermediary of one's success in promulgating one's solution to others. Yet a trace of the originary problematic remains, not because we can think back to the moment when we faced "the world" bereft of imaginary recourse to authorial fame and fortune, but because this very possibility depends on freedoms already present in the original milieu. It is not naive to seek the originary in the present once one understands that the nature of human temporality defines each situation by the possibilities it allows for fleeing it.

In describing these situations, we need something like the **Marxist** notion of **class**, which our era has enlarged to include gender, ethnicity, race, and the other "ascriptive" qualities of physique, age, handedness.... Yet the narrow understanding of theory as class ideology is a perfect example of what this understanding purports to denounce; it might be dismissed as sophomoric pseudo-sophistication were it not so effective in serving the self-interest of those who proclaim it. By denouncing "bourgeois universality" as the ideological instrument through which the bourgeoisie dissimulates its power, one dissimulates one's own far cruder acquisition of power on the basis of strident particularism. If indeed "all is political," then all that should matter is the degree to which the nakedness of political power is deferred. It is one thing to attempt to justify one's values as universal, and another to simply justify those values as one's own. In this regard, victimary thinking lacks--deliberately forgoes--the crucial nuance that separates sacrificial from post-sacrificial thought. As our century of victimary resentment comes to a close, perhaps we can appreciate a little better the bourgeois virtues.

The late **Lucien Goldmann**, one of the few recent Marxist thinkers worthy of the name, is remembered today chiefly for his *thèse d'état* on **Racine** and **Pascal**, *Le dieu caché* [*The Hidden God*] (Gallimard, 1959), where he develops an esthetic based on the coherence given by "great artists" to the praxis of their social class. What Goldmann would later call "genetic/generative structuralism" (*le structuralisme génétique*) found many revelatory connections between the **Jansenist** movement (and the two great writers associated with it) on the one hand and the situation of the 17th-century *noblesse de robe* on the other. It was less successful at making specific correlations between class praxis and broader categories of esthetic form such as the modern novel, no doubt because its Marxist underpinnings focused it too narrowly on the public sphere of production. I am reminded of this limitation, yet also of the spirit of Goldmann's own project, in directing **Karen Andersen's** doctoral dissertation, which persuasively seeks the origin of the modern "analytic" novel (*roman d'analyse*) in a specifically feminine experience, that is, in the category of human activity that most fundamentally resists the public sphere of economic

production. Such research is fundamental to our understanding of the human, which exists only in the mediating space between the particular and the universal.

I say this as a prologue to a series of reflections by means of which I would like to clarify in what sense **Generative Anthropology** is the expression of my own personal history. I have no taste for personal confessions, but in light of recent experience, I think it is important to define as clearly as possible the aspects of my own background that led me to transmute **René Girard's** mimetic anthropology into something as curious as **GA**. It has become more urgent for me to determine--for myself, but also for those whom my thinking might influence--whether **GA** reflects what Goldmann would have called the praxis of a well-defined social group or merely a bizarre individual's yearnings for fame. The binary division is, of course, made to be deconstructed. The praxis of a group is realized in the activities of a diverse set of individuals whose diversity is increasingly thematized as essential to the welfare of the group. Thus at a certain point the "group" may come to be understood as a set of individuals who define themselves by their *non*-membership in the group. Such is the perverse situation into which I was born.

The modernist is always (already) in the process of renouncing his privileges and recapitalizing this renunciation as "culture." As a member of what used to be called the "white collar" class, I have never felt that I possessed sufficient privilege to be able to capitalize its renouncement. My hostility to modernism is that of a latecomer to the "universal" high classical culture that absorbed and survived the Romantic revolt, but on whose decadence the modernists avidly fed. Modernism is the extreme form of the esthetic aristocracy's war against the "middle class" as representative of the market system.

It would be easy enough to create a portrait of this intermediate stratum in my own image. It is profoundly "meritocratic" because resentful of the essential (as opposed to existential) merit that is the hallmark of aristocracy. If today it has neoconservative tendencies, this reflects its lack of sympathy for group victimary privilege. But this vision fails to reflect my own divergence from the liberalism of this class, which is to say, its own modestly modernist tendency. Most of the members of my class--even defined in the most literal sense as the **Bronx High School of Science class of 1957**--have become true liberals, not merely beneficiaries of liberalism. Accession to higher cultural and financial standing has generated in my classmates a mildly guilty sense of privilege--one that, despite modest worldly success, I have never shared.

My particular place in and relationship to the lower middle class reflects that of my parents. My father finished college and law school and even passed the bar examination, but never practiced law. In the depths of the depression there were no paying jobs; in order to marry my mother, he clung to the security of the Post Office, where he had worked throughout his college years. So many sacrifices for nought; he remained all his life a postal clerk, incapable of dealing with the extra pressure and inconvenience of even the lowest supervisory position. My father was an educated man, but not a cultured one: the education never really sank in. My mother, an orphaned member of a better-established family, was always attracted to the trappings of culture and "gentility," yet unwilling to push my father to help her acquire them.

Does this analysis suggest a mimetic relationship between father and son, mediated by the mother's cultural attitudes? The attempt at "class" analysis seems to dissolve in a mist of socio-psychological detail, which **Sartre** alone of major thinkers has attempted to sort out by means of his "progressive-regressive" method. But while honoring the reflection that culminated in an immense study on **Flaubert** (*L'idiot de la famille*), I would prefer to find in my own (auto)biography not infinite detail

but a simple model, a heuristic by means of which to show how the ideas of **GA** both reflect and universalize the fundamental relationships to the world that I learned from my early milieu.

The idea that we are all bound to particularity to the same degree, that we all universalize our particular experience with the same naive insistence, denies the conditions necessary for its own emergence. One's adherence to one's own culture always takes place against a background of cultural attitudes that offer models of both imitation and distancing. The dual nature of mimetic desire as a universal human characteristic makes both attraction and hostility inextricable. As soon as I take on a cultural attitude of belonging, I permit its thematization, by myself or by others, and consequently its "antithetical" denial. The Hegelian dialectic, like all other operations of human culture, is a figure of mimesis.

The "universal," or better put, the originary position in culture cannot be the privilege of any class. But there are individuals, found in greater concentration in certain social classes than others, whose relation to culture is more abstract and therefore more "minimal" than others'. At the center of the continuum between affirmation and denial lies not equilibrium but a neutrality that reflects the lack of affective bonding. One predisposed to disaffection is more likely than another to become the spokesman for a universalist understanding of the human. To step back from the concreteness of culture is to privilege resentment over love and the power of identification. In contrast with the "humanist" gestures of the privileged toward Man in general that mask their neglect of humanity in particular, the movement of abstraction reflects a merely tentative relationship to one's social milieu, geographical place, level of achievement.

What most distinguishes **GA** from other secular ways of thinking is its insistence on starting from an explicit rather than an implicit hypothesis. (Although religious thinking denies its hypothetical nature, the religious "act of faith" in fact poses its own originary hypothesis.) By naming the hypothesis, and consequently naming itself as a "doctrine," **GA** offers a target to resentment that *in medias res* approaches avoid. It eschews the self-serving "smallness" that my colleague **Doug Collins** has persuasively enthroned as the essence of modernism. To proclaim that "small is beautiful" is to seek and acquire power in the most concentrated of institutions.

What the neomodernists of the postmodern era oppose to the originary hypothesis is not a better hypothesis, but no hypothesis at all. **GA's** "democratic" universality, which imposes a minimal constraint on the human, is confronted with the "aristocratic" alternative of ostensibly unconstrained particularity. But the democratic alternative, in its minimality, defines an aristocracy of the spirit, whereas the aristocratic denial of universality performs the democratic function of allowing each participant to retain the myth of his or her inviolate self-substantiality.

Just as the market operates by exchanging values ostensibly independent of it and even hostile to it, most people in democratic society would rather be implicit aristocrats than explicit democrats. The minimal hypothesis, because it is a part of the culture to which it applies, cannot escape the laws of desire even as it defines them. For the first time in history, the "truest," most universal doctrine is not simply condemned and suppressed, but simply ignored, because it lacks a clientele among the groups that form the liberal-democratic social order. That there is no "class" for which **GA** is the ideology is all too clear; this is what confines it to the marginal position that the apostles of "smallness" claim to covet but ever flee in practice. Its truth-claim remains confident, however, if only because it is the one way of thinking that dares to affirm, without falling into the Nietzschean abyss, the necessity of *ressentiment*. I have borrowed many terms from **Derrida**, but not this one. Yet *supplement, margin, remainder, hymen,*

frame, différance itself are merely its figures.

Much more needs to be said on this topic. This *Chronicle* only makes a few gestures toward the social matrix from which **GA** emerged, the milieu where every content of desire is a failed mask for mimetic form that, to quote a book title by my **Bronx Science** classmate **Marshall Berman**, "melts into air."

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Beyond "Generative Anthropology" 1. Deferring Resentment

No. 144: Saturday, July 18, 1998

Resentment is the one category that cannot be deconstructed. **Nietzsche**, who discovered the power of resentment, was destroyed by it at the same time. For to discover resentment in another is at the same moment to discover it in oneself. Only resentment can know resentment; yet resentment knows nothing, since it distorts the reality of what it observes. Nor can anyone reveal resentment without being contaminated by it; history only gives us models for putting it off, for spreading it thin enough to let some light pass through its opacity. No "genealogy," no act of deconstruction can separate itself from the construction of the order it resents. No use of language can represent, and defer by representing, its own resentment, yet all of culture is nothing but this attempt.

To resent is to deconstruct the pretensions of a central figure; deconstruction is resentment in action. French deconstruction, following **Jacques Derrida**, sees the text as a spurious claim of centrality resenable and therefore--an a priori obsessively confirmed through close reading--resentful. The American school, following **Paul de Man**, finds in the ineluctability of resentment the basis for an esthetic: the artwork acknowledges the resentment that the discursive text pretends to ignore. Where the theoretical text claims to be objectively separated from the resentments it describes, the artwork allows no separation between representation and what is represented. Art "deconstructs itself" in anticipating and attempting to satisfy the resentful eye of the beholder, with its suspicious question "what's in it for me?"

Today we no longer share the faith in art that once lent it privilege in the deferral of resentment. We can begin to circumscribe the era of this privilege--roughly from **Kant** to **Andy Warhol**--as that of an immature market society where one could claim, as writers like **Théophile Gautier** did in the 1830s, that the values of art could be separated from the values of commerce. But the very fact of speaking of "values" reveals that the world of art is no more than an extended double of the market. **Emma Bovary**, who "consumes" novels as imaginary models of compensatory behavior, is a harbinger of the future. The esthetic is never reduced to simple "utilitarianism," but its label can only offer a blanket guarantee for as long as the beholder can appreciate "beauty" in the Kantian mode as an autonomous source of pleasure. Art is presumably less resentful than expository prose because it shows us in sensual images what the latter tells us with concepts; the image demonstrates what the discourse only expounds. But the very comparison is already the beginning of the fusion of the two modes. The revelatory, "autoprobatory" nature of images becomes too dangerous, too painful--too resentful--to believe in. Once the image appears as a supplementary gift of the text and not the representation of a revealed truth, its esthetic status has been "bracketed" and "textuality" is born--born to be deconstructed.

But it is one thing to describe another's text as "metaphysical" and to situate one's own text in its

"margins" and another to describe the text as resentful and one's own as only more subtly so--and therefore more worthy of resentment. The discourse of what we call "theory" demystifies on the condition of not mentioning the very principle of its demystification. Not to speak of resentment is the simplest way to defer it.

If I have made one contribution to classical scholarship, it is my reading of the first word of the *Iliad*, **menin**, the accusative of *menis*, generally translated as "wrath," as **resentment**, the resentment of **Achilles** against **Agamemnon** for having taken away his captive with impunity. What we admire in the ancients was that they dared speak openly of resentment, and by this very act made it something other than what Nietzsche would condemn as the hypocritical *ressentiment* of Judeo-Christian societies. But to hold Christianity responsible for the current theoretical silence around the concept of resentment and mimetic theory in general is hardly to do justice to historical specificity. Christianity remains the source of the deepest ethical insights of Western liberal democracy, including Nietzsche's own; the horrible failure of twentieth-century revolution should put an end to Enlightenment illusions about the virtues of dechristianization.

I witnessed the reticence surrounding the concept of resentment in the discussion on "compassion" that followed **Stacey Meeker**'s talk on "Witnessing" last year (see [Chronicle 97](#)). A few **GA** veterans pointed out that the "compassion" that attracts us to victims was not a simple "emotion" but a mask for the guilt that reflects our fear of the other's resentment. "Compassion," like "true love," is a utopian category of desire that exists only at the horizon of all the mimetic tendencies with which it must constantly do battle. (On this score, the Christian understanding of desire shows itself far superior to the Nietzschean.) But the other members of the audience would have none of this. They felt compassion, and that was that. Like the fictional characters analyzed by **Girard** in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, they refused to admit the possibility that they could experience mediated desire.

Why is this so? My esteemed colleagues at UCLA have finally forced me to face up to the reality that **Douglas Collins** has been trying to get me to understand all these years. As he puts his **Schumpeterian** insight, the modern market must insulate itself from the resentment it generates, and the sociological instrument of this insulation is the "institutional middle class," the market equivalent of **Milovan Djilas**'s "New Class," **Max Weber**'s bureaucracy with a moral rather than merely structural function. This class, which has become the backbone of the Democratic party, is centered in the "helping professions"; in the academy it is particularly dominant in the Humanities and "soft" social sciences. Its function is to dissimulate resentment by the production of what Collins likes to call "empathic" effects.

The claim that what **Robert Sheaffer**--an interesting "amateur" theoretician of resentment to whom I shall return in a future column--calls "envy control" is the founding principle of human society strikes me as more valid by every reasonable intellectual criterion than, for example, **Richard Rorty**'s popular idea, borrowed from **Judith Shklar**, that the good society is one that avoids **cruelty**. The idea of avoiding cruelty is so sanctimoniously self-serving, in a word, so **sacrificial**--Cruelty as the black-hatted Bad Guy--that it makes me nostalgic for the **Aztecs** who supplied themselves with protein by slaughtering their neighbors; no mealy-mouthed hypocrites there! But this Nietzschean reaction, however natural, only plays into the hands of the "institutional middle class," with its "empathic" notions of compassion and cruelty-avoidance. As proof, Nietzsche himself has become a hero of this class, which is to say, of the Left, which he execrated. His *revaluation of all values* is now, with fitting irony, put to just the opposite use to that for which it was intended: the consecration of the victimary. This should be a warning to all thinkers who dare speak of resentment.

I have never quarreled with this analysis, but until now treated the revelation of the truth of the system as a goal independent of the system itself. But now I realize that for this revelation in turn to add new degrees of freedom to the system, it must be made not simply available but accessible to the membership of the liberal democracy in which we operate--the worst of all systems with the exception of all the others. This is the real challenge that Generative Anthropology must now attempt to meet, even at the cost of no longer calling itself "Generative Anthropology."

If GA's true public is not the empathic class but the "general public" that the empathists must ostensibly protect from the realization of its own resentfulness, then GA must find a new mode of expression. To despair of finding this mode is to despair of its anthropological validity; if this truth is truly liberating, then it must be expressible in such a way as to liberate.

If we want to maintain the position that human culture operates by deferring resentment, we cannot avoid taking into account the resentment this very position arouses. Only if it can successfully meet this challenge will ordinary thinking enter its second phase and begin to contribute more actively to human thought. To put this in more positive terms: regardless of its power, if an anthropology arouses resentment rather than love, it still has room for improvement. For GA to remain faithful to the very premise of minimalist thought, it may be necessary no longer to speak of "GA." Ordinary thinking is not a doctrine; to create what is truly a generative anthropology, it may be preferable to stop calling it "Generative Anthropology." However I may insist on its minimalism, the mere fact that it bears a name is a liability. The ancient **Hebrews** are still with us because they understood that to give a name to the central principle is to falsify the dynamic nature of its centrality.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Beyond "Generative Anthropology" 2. Resistance to (Mimetic) Theory

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In a more or less egalitarian society, where people are loath to give credit to others' ideas without the guarantee of "expertise," originary thinking is vulnerable to the accusation of being purely speculative. The originary hypothesis is in principle empirical, but it is not one that any conceivable factual discovery could falsify. "Falsifiability" is the primary criterion of science, following **Karl Popper's** point that a scientific hypothesis can never be confirmed by data, only falsified. It is important to note, however, that this is the case only for universal hypotheses such as "all swans are white." Just the opposite is true for the "existential" hypothesis "some swans are white," which no data can disprove but which a single observation can confirm. Perhaps we should begin to think of anthropological hypotheses as being of this type.

A pragmatic criterion of theoretical truth is the enhancement of the life-possibilities of its potential adherent. In the context of academic research, this would suggest that a theory is "true" to the extent that it facilitates further investigation by the reader. No doubt such a criterion makes little sense in the "hard" sciences or mathematics, where it is sufficient to rely on one's intuition of "elegance" or "significance" to determine what problems need be solved while leaving the stricter notion of "truth" to more formally verifiable criteria. But in the anthropological domain, things are not so clear. The closer one gets to fundamental matters, the less it is possible to separate the process of modeling from the phenomena being modelled. Hence the empirical hypotheses of the social sciences are pragmatically useful precisely to the extent that they *do not* raise fundamental questions about the human. The science of economics, for example, is rigorous only to the extent that it can take the fundamental principles of the market for granted. Marx's ingenious economic argument for the inevitability of socialism is a demonstration of the unsuitability of economic models for broad historical speculation.

Specialists in the social sciences tend to question the usefulness of any non-specialized starting-point for anthropological reflection. Any idea of general validity, so the argument goes, will emerge in the natural course of already-established research programs. Thomas Kuhn's metamodel of scientific research as the elaboration of a series of "paradigms" both reflects and consecrates this tendency. New paradigms emerge, but they are created by specialists in the field to solve the same kinds of problems as the old paradigms. One field may be transformed by the adaptation of a paradigm from another field, but there is no room in the picture for nonspecialized reflection. This attitude makes perfect sense in the natural sciences, where the only valid sources of knowledge are those developed within the fields themselves. An amateur physicist can do valid work only if he possesses essentially the same technical knowledge as a professional; any insights into the composition of matter that we obtain through everyday experience are best kept to ourselves.

But this is not true of the fundamental anthropology that underlies the social sciences. On the contrary, these sciences' inevitable specialization makes it imperative that some form of general reflection remain outside their purview. The nature of human action is distorted by any perspective that seeks to reduce it to a set of predictable models--within which the model-maker's own activity both must and cannot escape accounting. Yet however necessary reflection on fundamental human questions may be, it is not a specialty capable of becoming a legitimate academic "field." If what I have called "generative anthropology" is truly "a new way of thinking" irreducible to philosophy, academic anthropology, religion, or "critical theory" as practiced in Humanities departments, it must be able to show potential adepts a way in which it will improve their lives--in academic terms, the way it can enrich their research programs--without necessarily constituting a research program of its own.

Which returns me to the familiar notion of **resentment**. The originary hypothesis defines the human by its deferral through representation of mimetic desire; in other words, by its resentment. What guarantees the value of **René Girard's** mimetic anthropology and its generative prolongation are the "triangular" phenomena of mimesis unrecognized in any systematic way by the social sciences or even the Humanities. It is worth asking the question why this is "necessarily" so.

I recently ran across a book that gave me some insight into this question. **Michael Bernstein's** *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, 1992) presents the **Abject Hero** as a transhistorical, one might even say anthropological figure, from **Horace's** *Satires* through **Diderot** (*Rameau's Nephew*) to **Dostoevsky** and **Céline**, with its prolongation in two postmodern murderers, the better known of whom is **Charles Manson**. I admire not only the subtle literary distinctions Bernstein surehandedly draws among these figures, but above all his ethically responsible disquiet at what he perceives as the current fascination with them, a fascination he is honest enough to recognize in himself as well while avoiding both defiant defense and simple-minded denial.

Bernstein borrows his primary anthropological model of the Saturnalian figure from **Bakhtin's** "carnavalesque," which is referred to throughout the book. Yet his one brief reference to Girard expresses sympathy for the mimetic view of the "carnavalesque" *as against* that of Bakhtin:

René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* offers a view of the Saturnalia diametrically opposed to the one endorsed by Bakhtin, and although I am far from sharing all of Girard's conclusions, his vision of the "mimetic violence" underlying the carnival's rites and his description of the revelers' Dionysus as a "god of homicidal fury" contains a salutary counterbalance to any populist and idealizing optimism (p. 36).

This sentence is all too typical. Girard's ideas are interesting only as a "counterbalance" to those of an officially guaranteed theorist. His broader conclusions about carnival are dismissed without argument in a ritually apotropaic gesture ("I am far from sharing all of Girard's conclusions"); Girard's work on **Dostoevsky**, certainly relevant to Bernstein's lengthy discussion of this author, is nowhere mentioned. I would venture to speculate that it is precisely because Girard draws "conclusions" from his conception of mimetic violence that his work is dealt with in this cavalier manner.

To take up the Abject Hero as a literary-critical topos is to insert the "dialogic" or "carnavalesque" figure within a ritual framework separated from everyday behavior. Roman Saturnalia and Christian Carnival provide moments of reversal within a context of order. For Girard's "fundamental anthropology," such festivals express the very essence of culture, the homeopathic discharge of violence. The lord or king that one mocks on the feast-day but must obey on all others is revealed as dependent for his authority on the

paradoxical structure that the rite openly embodies. The sacrificial victim and the king are two variations on the same theme, as **Frazer's** *The Golden Bough* already abundantly shows.

To claim that the authority-figure whose authority is (mock-) challenged in the carnivalesque context derives his authority from the originary form of that very context is to situate resentment and its deferral at the center of culture. This defeats the very purpose of Carnival, which is to isolate the homeopathic discharge of resentment in a specific time and place. Girard's point is that this isolation is necessarily strategic rather than ontological; all our rites perform essentially the same function of "deferring" the mimetic violence that reveals itself in the Saturnalia. Bernstein could not openly contest this point; his work, triggered by the story of a 60s acquaintance who committed a murder (and escaped punishment through the charisma of his Abject Hero personality), is neither an antiquarian study of a family of rituals nor even a historical study of a certain type of personage. But, precisely, he does not contest the centrality of resentment to culture: he simply refuses to theorize it, presumably as one of Girard's "conclusions" that he does not "share."

This gesture of denial, unimportant as it may have been in the overall economy of the book's composition, is an indispensable act of liberation. For however great the importance Bernstein attaches to the Abject Hero, however much he insinuates that this figure, in his very mimetic unoriginality, has become the ghost that haunts all of us, he never tells us this in the context of anything resembling a "falsifiable" anthropological theory. In order to attract our interest to his book, the author does not propose a "theory" at all, but a singular, "existential" figure. The Abject Hero is whatever we make of him; Bernstein merely proposes him to our attention and prompts us to seek within ourselves the causes of his fascination for us.

The modesty of this theoretical mode is akin to the "showing, not telling" style of successful literature. However we affect to have abandoned the values of traditional "mimetic" literature, music, and painting, in the critical realm, showing and not telling remains the norm because it is more esthetically pleasing, because, in a word, it offers us an figure that minimizes our resentment. The fact that, in the case at hand, the image is itself a figure of resentment is not taken specifically into account by the work's theoretical apparatus; the Abject Hero is, presumably, one of many "interesting" figures. Thus the deferral of resentment through the choice of the figure and the resentment incarnated by the figure are never brought into relation. Surely on this subject, at least, the mimetic theory of desire cannot be dismissed as a theory of "content" irrelevant to the study of esthetic form. Yet Bernstein must dismiss it a priori, *foreclose* it, in order that his own work be realized at all.

The last thing I want to suggest is that this foreclosure is an idiosyncrasy of Bernstein, or that Bernstein is a particularly resentful or paranoid critic. On the contrary, if insanity is, as **Foucault's** disciples still like to claim, merely deviation from the norm, then it is Girard who is paranoid in his insistence on mimetic violence as the central theme of culture. In contrast with Bernstein's reader, the reader of *La violence et le sacré* is not asked to determine for himself the range of application of the model therein presented. Girard entitles his last chapter "*l'unité de tous les rites*"--the unity of all rites, all ritual, revealed by a single fundamental theory. In the nineteenth century, this is what the reader wanted; today, it is the last thing he (she?) wants. Does this make the theory less valid? Is anthropological truth subordinate to pragmatism? These are the questions my reading of Bernstein inspires, and that I will attempt to answer in the coming weeks.

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Art of Resentment

No. 146: Saturday, August 1, 1998

Our waning victimary era has been boundlessly indulgent toward crude renditions of resentment from those it identifies as oppressed. A recent example is *Girls' Town* (1996), where a band of friends, led by the ineffable **Lili Taylor**, "empower" themselves by spraying graffiti and trashing the car of an abusive boy-friend; **Leonard Maltin** praises these resentful fantasies as "painfully unsentimental."

Yet properly formalized expressions of resentment can go much farther than car-trashing. I recently saw on cable *Liquid Sky*, a low-budget production that, I was astonished to learn, dates from 1982-83. This bizarre but beautiful film, the unique work of its director (**Slava Tsukerman**), is an elaboration on "Pirate Jenny"'s song in the *Threepenny Opera*, the source of the key phrase of [Chronicle 1](#): *sie wissen nicht mit wem sie reden* [they don't know whom they're talking to]. In this hotel maid's song, a warship arrives in the harbor and shells the city as she presides over the execution of all its inhabitants ("Hop-la!"); the ship then departs with her on board. In *Liquid Sky*, the ship is replaced with a **UFO**. The use of science-fiction in this film confirms the thesis advanced by **Markus Müller** in his recently completed doctoral dissertation (see his ["Reconsidering the Fantastic: An Anthropological Approach"](#) in [Anthropoetics II, 2](#)) that the fantastic is a mask for human violence. Aliens don't kill people, people kill people.

Here is a plot summary of *Liquid Sky* written for the *Internet Movie Database* (us.imdb.com) by **Marty Cassady** (martyc@vt.edu):

Invisible aliens in a tiny flying saucer come to Earth looking for heroin. They land on top of a New York apartment inhabited by a drug dealer and her female, androgynous, bisexual nymphomaniac lover, a fashion model. The aliens soon find the human pheromones created in the brain during orgasm preferable to heroin, and the model's casual sex partners begin to disappear. This increasingly bizarre scenario is observed by a lonely woman in the building across the street, a German scientist who is following the aliens, and an equally androgynous, drug-addicted male model. (Both models are played by Anne Carlisle, in a dual role.) Darkly funny and thoroughly weird.

The aliens manifest themselves only in the distorted vision of their "eye," as revealed through brilliant low-budget special effects (it's a lot cheaper to modify the image in the camera than to photograph large-scale models a la *Titanic*). **Margaret**, the main **Carlisle** character, is a girl from an upper-crust ("Mayflower") background whose terminal boredom with family expectations of marriage and barbecues has led her to the City and thence to drugs and bisexuality. In the first scene that gives a picture of her passive, resentful personality, she is raped after being lured back to the penthouse apartment she shares with her lower-class drug-dealing girlfriend "Adrian" on a false promise of cocaine. The next sexual sequence, with her former professor-lover, ends with the death of her orgasmic partner. The professor

(professor of what? this is the comic-strip world of professors without departments) does not "disappear" as per the summary, but is killed by what appears to be a long glass shard through the back of his skull; the same is the fate of her succeeding partner, a drugged-out writer.

The sci-fi explanation may be "weird," but it clearly follows the principles of the fantastic transformation of mimetic desire. If the aliens are seeking the pheromones of orgasm, they won't find them in Margaret, who is sexually indifferent to the men she copulates with. After the second death, she addresses the aliens as friends. Realizing that sex with her is deadly, she begins, as she puts it, to "kill with her c...", seducing and dispatching her "male" double-rival and finally the rapist of the first scene. On the way, she also regretfully disappears her street-tough roommate, who insists on having sex with her despite its obvious danger.

Margaret's last kill owes nothing to aliens or to magic powers; she stabs the German scientist in the back after he goes to her apartment to warn her of the dangerous aliens. In the final scene, we watch her through the eyes of two "straight" women climbing onto (and above?) the roof during the departure of the flying saucer. She flutters in a kind of cosmic wind, but is not destroyed, and we are led to imagine that, like Jenny's "ship with eight sails and fifty cannon," the saucer has carried her off in some new and unimaginable form.

The brilliantly eerie music and psychedelic images convey the heroine's resentful imprisonment in endlessly repeated simulacra. Her roommate Adrian (played with raw power by Paula Sheppard), who recites a chilling poem over the dead body of Margaret's professor-lover, exudes a fully believable ferociousness. That it is passive Margaret rather than tough Adrian who survives, killing off in the process all the masculine characters including Adrian herself, reminds me of one of my favorite movie moments, the conversation in **Visconti's** *The Damned* (*La Caduta degli dei*) between the macho **SA**-man and his decadent-artist cousin who has joined the (victorious) **SS**. The latter informs his soon-to-be-dispatched interlocutor that real power lies not in self-indulgent bluster but in the icy submission of one's will to a higher necessity. What the **Führer** is for the SS-Man and the pirate ship for Jenny, the aliens are for Margaret: a force outside herself that realizes, better than she could hope to herself, her own resentful desire.

What is it that inscribes the deaths of Margaret's lovers within an esthetic experience where the car-trashing is mere barbarity? What allows the stylization of resentment to reveal rather than disguise its violence? Are we merely dupes of the "narcissistic" image, or does this image have its own truth to reveal to us?

The hoary esthetic paradox that the ugly repels us whereas its artistic representation satisfies us is resolved as soon as we reformulate it, as all esthetic questions should be reformulated, in the ethical terms of the originary hypothesis. To defer through representation the *ethically* ugly, that is, the violent, is to perform culture's essential function.

But "representation" is not a simple given. To represent the collective trashing of a car as a form of valid self-assertion, drawing us in from timid kicks and scratches to the "courageous" heaving of a cinderblock through the window, is to invite us to join the ugly mob. To find this esthetically valid reflects, if not simple moral degeneracy, then submission to **PC** (which is a second-level form of moral degeneracy). One turns a blind eye to the formal parallel between these girls and a lynch mob from fear of appearing to condone the sexual abuse for which their act is presented as retribution. Such "revolutionary" attitudes provide a poor basis for art--and, as our century has abundantly taught us, an even worse one for politics.

In *Liquid Sky*, despite our sense that genuine and understandable emotions of hatred are being conveyed, our participation in them as desire-objects is never justified or explained away. On the contrary, the "fantastic" deaths become increasingly voluntary, leading up to the quasi-murder of the rapist, and Margaret's alibi disappears altogether at the end when she kills the German scientist. The latter is Margaret's "double," and her superior in his lack of hedonism; he is able to deliver his warning only because he has steadfastly resisted (in a schlock-comical sequence) the advances of a lonely woman, the mother (?) of the "male" model, from whose apartment he observes the flying saucer and deduces the activities of its alien inhabitants. In murdering this innocent truth-teller, the heroine assumes full responsibility for the previous deaths as projections of her desire.

I am not claiming that the spectator does not "identify" with Margaret. To show us an esthetic image is by definition to propose it to our desire and thereby to construct ourselves as its subject. But identification is not irresponsible participation. Margaret's revenge, like that of Pirate Jenny, is something we are made to understand, even to sympathize with, but we experience resentful desire as destructive of the self rather than therapeutic of it. Margaret's final disappearance is not apotheosis but annihilation as a human being.

The final ambiguity as to whether she is really on board the ship brings this home. In the real world, there are no violent aliens, only resentful alienation. The film figures the latter by means of the former; this is the structure of all fiction. But it cannot figure the paradoxical transcendence of the human to which resentment ultimately aspires. The UFO can only exist in relation to the human world; to represent it as a utopia where Margaret can realize her true desire would deprive the film of all moral seriousness. *Liquid Sky* becomes a work of art by resisting the temptation that all art must resist: the fall into an imagery of mass resentment that prettifies participation in the *sparagmos*.

The ultimate figure of resentment, like that of divine love, is disappearance from the human world. The transcendent universe of signs as the end of our desire takes us beyond the human. Artworks that realize this going-beyond of all imagery reproduce humanity's originary construction of a formal sign of the Being that we cannot possess--that, as the Mosaic tradition reveals in its interdiction of "graven images," we cannot even figure without destroying ourselves through mimetic violence. *Liquid Sky*'s "weirdness" is the sign under which it faithfully performs the function of all art: to demonstrate that the figuration of this violence is at the same time the de-figuration of the self that would embody it.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Private Ryan: The Unknown Survivor

No. 147: Saturday, August 8, 1998

This *Chronicle* is dedicated to **Doug** and **Hélène Collins**, my recent hosts in Seattle. It contains a number of ideas that emerged from my conversation with Doug following our viewing of *Saving Private Ryan*, some of which may find further development in a later column.

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I believe *Saving Private Ryan* to be a cultural event of great significance. It is a film distinguished not only by box office receipts but impact on people's lives. The *Los Angeles Times* titled its "Column One" on August 6 "Ryan' Ends Vets' Years of Silence ... Younger people say they understand for first time the sacrifices that were made." Like all works of popular culture, this film's importance reflects not only its esthetic originality but its strategic relationship to its cultural context.

It is simple yet sufficient to explain the first of these qualities as greater "**realism**." The notion of realism is the most tantalizingly difficult of all esthetic ideas. All representation is revelatory; it can do no other than claim to show its object "as it really is." An esthetic can only claim not to be realistic when, as with modernism, a prior mode named "Realism" exists against which it can define its own truth. Thus we may begin by understanding realism, not as a specific historical movement, but as the claim that a given representation is "more real" than previous ones. Realism in this sense is a universal function of the historicity of the human, the necessarily "progressive" nature of culture that stands in tension with the necessary "decadence" of its ritualized traditions. We may then understand Realism in its historically specific sense as the thematization of "realism," that is, the expectation of experiencing a Realist work, independently of its content, as more real than previous works. A novel or a film appears realistic precisely to the extent that it makes earlier novels and films appear unrealistic. This process requires the unanticipated and revelatory foregrounding of some new element that "thickens" narration, at the same time deferring its end and intensifying its effect. High-cultural realism tends more toward the former pole, popular realism to the latter; in the first case, the detail nuances the violence of the narrative conclusion; in the second, it intensifies it.

As a historical phenomenon, Realism accords significance to industrially produced detail in a bourgeois society ever more dependent on the mediation of mimetic conflict by such detail. Cinema's original vocation--for example, in the horse-galloping experiments of **Eadweard Muybridge**--was the mechanically determined and therefore objective revelation of such detail. This is true of both documentary "**Lumière**" cinema and fantastic "**Méliès**" cinema--the latter being, as it had been in literature, a byproduct of the former. Films like *Star Wars* or *Jurassic Park* are as realistic in their methods as *Titanic*: they create illusion through the perceptible reality of their details.

Saving Private Ryan is more realistic than earlier war films; it is distinguished by a new revelation of

violence that is at the same time a new deferral of violence. What makes it exemplary is that this is the exemplary violence from which the postmodern world emerges--it is our era's originary scene. **World War II** is the last time that human violence, including nuclear weapons, could conceivably be fully unleashed without destroying humanity altogether. It was also the last time that market society would conceivably have to fight for survival. In retrospect, victory over **Nazism** now appears as the first and decisive stage in the triumph of the market system over the system of authoritarian solidarity that we may call, in the broadest sense, "socialism." After the crushing of right-wing socialism, the end some forty-five years later of the threat of world domination posed by left-wing socialism seems almost an afterthought. For victory in WW II and the ensuing impossibility of all-out conflict guaranteed victory in the **Cold War** as well, although we did not see this at the time. Authoritarian systems may have a chance against democratic ones on the battlefield; they have none in the marketplace.

Just as WW II was the occasion of humanity's ultimate foreseeable violence, the key moment of the war--both symbolically and strategically--was the **D-Day** invasion that provides the subject of *Saving Private Ryan*. No doubt (not to speak of the action in the Pacific) the fighting in North Africa and up the Italian peninsula, the Red Army's struggle back from **Stalingrad** were as material to the final Allied victory as the invasion of France, which revisionist historians have long criticized for its tardiness. But D-Day begins the final showdown between the leading powers of both sides, the one characterized by the maximalization of openness and the other by esthetic-political closure. The antisemitism that reaches its paroxysm in the Holocaust is the sign of the extreme form of this closure, which would revoke the Hebrew abolition of the figural center that is the foundation of Christianity as well as Judaism. The not impossible success of this revocation would have meant the end, or the long ("ten-thousand-year") deferral of the liberating drive of Western culture.

If *Saving Private Ryan's* realism reveals the founding violence of the postmodern era, it is particularly noteworthy in today's historical context that it does so while remaining entirely free of **PC**. There are no "majority" - "minority" relations, not even the Euro-American multiculturalism of earlier WW II films in which a group of soldiers exemplify the *Melting Pot*. The members of **Captain Miller's** detachment come from a varied set of subcultures, but these are never discussed; with the perhaps unfortunate exception of the Jewish soldier who, like **Red Buttons** in *The Longest Day*, flaunts his Jewishness before a line of German prisoners, ethnic self-assertion is wholly absent. Women appear, only very briefly, as mothers, wives, typists. When **Ryan** reminisces about his last night at home with his brothers now killed in action, he thinks of the most un-PC scene imaginable, a sexual encounter between one of the brothers and an ugly girl who, if I heard correctly, bears the name of a well-known feminist. The crudity of this scene reflects Hollywood's own prejudices, less against women than against the great unbicoastal Center. Crude it surely is, but it makes a point: that this film avoids the least hint of PC even at the risk of sinning in the opposite direction. In *Saving Private Ryan*, popular culture returns from the celebration of resentment, whether through the display of victimization or of gratuitous violence, to the memorialization of our last, foundational sacrifice.

Private Ryan is the inverse of the deceased **Unknown Soldier**: he is the **Unknown Survivor**. (The recent DNA determination of the identity of the Vietnam War's Unknown Soldier points up the inherent instability of this designation: no one can be expected to accept eternal loss of identity for any cause.) I hope I will not spoil the film for anyone by revealing the simple but powerful narrative trick of the frame story. When, in the opening sequence, we see an old man kneel before a grave on the *plages de débarquement*, the closing-in of the camera and the ensuing match cut to the Captain's face (to which the old man's bears a faint resemblance) leads us to think that it is he who is remembering these events. This

reassures us that he will survive amid the carnage. But after the body of the film is over, we see that it is not Captain Miller but Ryan himself who kneels before what is now revealed to be Miller's grave. (Miller's death at the end of the rescue mission is still uncertain as we leave this scene.) The memory of the landing at **Omaha Beach**, in which Ryan himself did not participate, is seen through his eyes because it was his and not Miller's survival that the landing made possible. Miller's experience has not been lost; it has been preserved in Ryan's, and our, continued existence.

Culture is, before anything else, about survival. We use representation to defer violence not because it is prettier or more intelligent than prehuman communication, but because we need it to survive. Unknown Survivor Ryan and his wife, his well-groomed and healthy children and grandchildren, are the representatives of all of us. We don't know what Ryan does or did for a living, nor do we want to know. When he asks his wife if he's been a good man, worthy of the sacrifice of Miller and the others, he is asking the question for every American and, by extension, for every member of the global civilization that has survived the war. This is a sentimental moment that transcends all sentimentality.

The operation of "high" art we have inherited from the Greeks relocates us from the sacrificial mob to the central place of its master who is above all its victim. In contrast, popular art imaginarily realizes our resentment in the mass destruction of this central figure and/or the acquisition of his mastery. But the historical filiations of popular culture lead, in *Saving Private Ryan*, and to a degree already in *Schindler's List*, Spielberg's earlier film about World War II, to the incorporation within popular art of the elevating goal of high culture--an incorporation that is at the same time its evacuation as a distinct ideal.

The war movie justifies the imaginary exercise of violence as victory over an enemy whose triumph would mean our destruction. In its most vulgar form (e.g., *Independence Day*) the enemy is dehumanized and the danger he represents is assimilated to the natural calamities of disaster films. But if we simply treat the disaster film as a demonized version of the war film, we miss the originary element that it preserves: the asymmetry between periphery and center. The "enemy" is a society symmetrical to our own, but it can only figure in a war (as opposed to anti-war) film as a justified focus for our aggression. One cannot tell a good war story in the Voltairean-pacifist mode that casts a plague on both houses.

The D-Day invasion is an exemplary war subject because we are indeed the active force and the enemy a mere obstacle to our liberating advance. The film takes full responsibility for this aggressive position, even to the point of depicting without condemnation the killing of surrendering German soldiers. In the most elaborate development of this theme, the Captain lets go free (with orders to turn himself in to an Allied patrol) a captured enemy soldier that the interpreter had befriended. This angers one soldier so much that he threatens to desert the mission--a situation resolved only by the Captain's revealing his hitherto secret--and non-heroic--peacetime occupation. But in the final battle sequence, this same enemy soldier, who had returned to combat, is recognized and killed by the interpreter after, paralyzed by fear, he had failed to come to the aid of a comrade killed in hand-to-hand combat: his first act as a real soldier. The viscerally non-violent intellectual is made to understand that peace itself must be in principle defended through violence.

The realization of resentment in justified violence is the fundamental hallmark of popular as opposed to high culture. Yet in this film it is inseparable from the necessity of historical remembrance. We must recall the sacrifice of other lives for ours, and the modality of this sacrifice is not, as the narrative trick of the frame story reveals, reducible to their mere martyrdom. The final battle sequence is, in itself, a story of survival; the little squad's task is to hold a bridge until reinforcements arrive so that it may be used by

the Allied army. Not just Ryan but the Captain too is a survivor, even if his survival through the invasion's perils ends here. Were we to see the Captain and his men solely through Ryan's knowledge of them, we would not sufficiently appreciate their roles as survivors through violence who enable our own life of peace.

Saving Private Ryan is by no means a celebration of violence, but what turns its violence against itself is not the esthetic irony of high art. The Captain is no **Oedipus** whose acceptance of guilt is the ironic prolongation of his central role. Like the GIs he commands, he just wants to return, his duty done, to his wife and family. Historical objectivity itself provides a sufficient deconstruction of mythical narrative through the critique of sacrificial violence. The convergence in this film of the techniques of popular art with the aims of high art realizes at last the aims of a mature postmodern esthetic: to appeal to collective identity, yet so minimally as to exclude no one. The threadbare transparency of the flag that opens and ends the film, which some have interpreted as a sign of the weakness of patriotism, is a sign rather of this minimality. To identify ourselves with those who fought under this flag in World War II is to demonstrate a national pride that lets through as much human light as possible.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Spielberg's Tales of Survival

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In preparing last week's *Chronicle* on **Steven Spielberg's** *Saving Private Ryan*, I had occasion to review Spielberg's preceding World War II film, *Schindler's List*, as well as his more recent *Amistad*, which attempts to do for slavery what *Schindler* had done for the **Holocaust**. These films provide material for reflection on our popular culture and on Spielberg's privileged role within it.

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The most successful definition of the postmodern, no doubt because it expresses in decorous fashion the resentments of our era, is that of **Jean-François Lyotard**, for whom postmodernity is the era that no longer accepts the "master narratives" of our culture. (As a perspicacious colleague once remarked to me, the story of the end of the master narratives is the one master narrative that seems to have escaped the fate it describes.) My own inclination is to situate postmodernity more concretely in history in relation both to an event (**World War II, Hiroshima, Auschwitz**) and to its consequence for socio-political organization: the end of a century (1848-1945) of attempts to institute the utopian transcendence of the market system through some kind of "socialism." The eternization of market society means the end of "master narratives" that express a closed, apocalyptic vision of history, as epitomized in the *Internationale* ("Tis the final conflict; let each stand in his place. / The International Soviet shall be the human race!"), including the **Hegelian** "master narrative" of history, as revised and corrected by **Francis Fukuyama**.

Yet the most crucial event of WW II is the Holocaust, an event that, precisely, is not directly convertible into a narrative. Those who have proclaimed that after this event culture is no longer possible (**Adorno**: "All post-Auschwitz culture ... is garbage") are making a profound anthropological point that must, like all expressions of Jewish exemplarity, be separated out from its ethnic particularity. (To the extent that "Generative Anthropology" has a specific historical mission, it may perhaps best be stated in these terms.) As I tried to show in *Signs of Paradox*, the Holocaust as the "final solution" to the "Jewish question" targets the exemplary refusers of esthetic centrality whose vision of history is likewise the ironic awaiting of an unfigurable messianic *dénouement*.

The "story of the Holocaust" is not tellable within the parameters of historical fiction because it cannot be assumed by any of its victims. To read about particular reactions of courage or resignation on the part of one or more of the "six million" is not really to exemplify the annihilation of the Jewish universe of which they were a part. The scandal of the Holocaust is that it can be totalized only from the standpoint of the persecutors; that is what genocide is all about. A "final solution" certainly provides a good ending for a narrative, but only if one accepts its intentions. (A well-crafted example is *The Turner Diaries*, the neo-Nazi novel discussed in [Chronicle 90](#), which describes the final triumph of the "Aryan" race; only in the context of such a "master narrative" could Hitler's successful elimination of the Jews from most of

Europe be presented as a part of a historical process.) This has not prevented the emergence of a "Holocaust industry" devoted to telling the impossible story. There is no cultural paradox that cannot be made the theme of cultural discourse. But when we try to read the whole story from the standpoint of the victims, say in **Martin Gilbert's** *The Holocaust*, the result is less a series of events than a list of liquidations.

To this conundrum, *Schindler's List* provides a radical solution. Instead of trying to convey the horror of the Holocaust through synecdoche, it recasts it as a tale of survival. In the true spirit of popular culture, the Holocaust becomes a story with a "happy ending," guaranteed by the moving presence in the epilogue of the real survivors who, accompanied by their (so much taller!) actor counterparts, conclude the film by placing commemorative stones on **Oskar Schindler's** grave in Jerusalem. Some have reacted negatively to Spielberg's film as a feel-good gimmick. The Holocaust is not about survival, they say, but about destruction; the survival of a thousand Jews cannot stand in for the death of six million. But in this victimary interpretation, the impossibility of telling the "story of the Holocaust" becomes in effect a critique of survival itself. Had Hitler's view of the world been fully implemented, there would be no problem in telling the story of the Holocaust. Only Jewish survival makes it untellable.

The Holocaust is indeed about survival, and Spielberg shows us that the story of survival is the only one that popular culture, which is to say, ourselves, can tell about it. Rather than a gimmick, *Schindler's List* should be seen as exemplary of other survival stories--those involved, for example, in the foundation of **Israel**. It is indispensable that, as pointed out to me by **Doug Collins**, Schindler's action, although it ends up as an act of charity, is at the outset and in principle a rational economic one. The Jews' survival depends on their ability to function within market society, not as sinister conspirators a la *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, but as effective economic agents.

The unsatisfactory fit of the film as a model of the Holocaust reveals, without the need for the subtlety of textual deconstruction, the discordance between map and territory that makes culture always a part of history in the present rather than a reliving of the past. Of course the **Schindlerjuden** are a drop in the bucket of blood shed in the Holocaust; of course their story is not that of the six million. I will go further. Even the images of apocalyptic violence we see in the film are rendered less serious by their association with what is ultimately a positive tale with a "happy ending." In particular, **Ralph Fiennes'** portrayal of the camp director **Amon Goeth**, however horrible the deeds we see him carry out--using prisoners for target practice, arbitrarily shooting a dozen or so after one member of their detachment escaped--is just slightly ironic. Instead of provoking in us justified resentment of an evildoer, he is very nearly a figure of fun. This is perhaps the film's greatest triumph: to make a Nazi "sympathetic"; it is also the reason that some Holocaust specialists intensely dislike the film. For, manipulated by Schindler, he cannot prevent the latter's triumph.

This is true even in the film's most sinister depictions. When a train of prisoners to be deported to Auschwitz (and presumably to annihilation) awaits at the station, Schindler gets Goeth to have the cars sprayed with water, even to attach an extension hose for the cars at the end of the train. We are shown repeated images of prisoners gratefully drinking the water at the openings in the cars. Goeth, knowing that these prisoners will in a few days have been reduced to ash, jocularly accuses Schindler of cruelty in giving them hope. The critics of *Schindler's List* agree with Goeth; I find myself in agreement with Schindler. If this humane gesture indeed took place, it would have had only the briefest effect on the lives of the Jews in the cars; hardly enough, one might even say, to justify Schindler's diminishing his stock of influence to make the effort. But it is in this way that popular culture teaches us the virtues of

esthetic "symbolism." Schindler's humane gesture, however futile in "reality," is not futile in the economy of the narrative. The positive imagery of thirst-quenching it provides, even in cattle-cars headed for Auschwitz, is a model of the film as a whole, telling the only story that we can tell, the figure of survival amid disaster.

High culture does not deal with symbolism in this way. The high-cultural model of survival is cultural, not physical, as its highest expression in tragedy reveals. The scene of culture is sacrificial, but we permit the sacrifice and find it justified because it generates a shared meaning that defers further conflict. Our selves are constituted by the mimetic desire for centrality that the tragic hero realizes; dying, he lives on in cultural memory. The victims of sacrifice once had heroic stories to tell, but the ultimate future of sacrifice is the Holocaust, where the victims are anonymous and uncountable. Afterward, there is only the impossibility of story, or the ultimately tiresome metastory of the story's untellability. In the face of this high-cultural inadequacy, the lesson of *Schindler's List* is that it is better to tell the story as comedy than not to tell it at all. It is legitimate and authentic to focus on the survivors because we too are survivors who have no right to expect tragic victims for our cultural consumption. In tragedy, survival is a problem only to the extent that we must, like **Horatio**, absent ourselves from felicity awhile; "felicity" is not a category we associate with gas chambers.

Holocaust, Auschwitz--to write these words is indecent because the reader's pain is inflicted not by the Nazis but by the author. To talk about the Holocaust, however necessarily, is to arouse resentment in those we submit to its potency. But there is a rarely appreciated advantage in this situation: evocation of the Holocaust is never **PC**. It is by understanding and appreciating this advantage that *Schindler's List* tells its story of Holocaust survival, tells the Holocaust as a story of survival. Although, or rather because the Holocaust was the historical origin of postmodern victimary thinking, antisemitism alone of discriminatory modes is not condemned by PC--indeed, PC in its extreme forms *becomes* antisemitism. This, perhaps the most ironic sign of Jewish "election," helps to explain why *Schindler's List* so much better a film than *Amistad*, Spielberg's flawed attempt to find a tale of survival in the Holocaust's twin horror story, that of **African-American slavery**.

If Jews are, for better or worse, immune to the poisoned gifts of PC, the case of American Blacks is just the reverse. This explains why, if "we" all become Holocaust survivors in the context of Schindler's rescued 1100, there is no universal American "we" who can experience a similar survival story in slavery. Spielberg's noble error was, following too closely the model of *Schindler*, to treat slavery as an **event** and present as its "survivors" a shipload of African captives who freed themselves from their chains. As the last line of the film tells us, the freed **Amistad** captives returned to a land in the throes of civil war. **Cinque** and his followers have no **Israel** to build; *horribile dictu*, they would probably have been better off as slaves in the United States than as "free" people in **Sierra Leone**. Their survival (for how long?) is an abstraction; it is "our" soul rather than their lives that is at stake. Hence our obligation to sit dutifully through the sanctimonious speechifying about the evils of slavery (**Anthony Hopkins** / **Quincy Adams**' final speech takes a full quarter hour, enlivened only by low-angle shots into the sunlight and **Aaron Copland**-like "public-service" music), or to "participate" in the destruction of the African slave fortress ("Tell Mr Holabird that he is correct; the fortress does not exist"). The most powerful imagery in the film is that of the brutalities on the slave ship (casting dozens of chained captives overboard to ease a food shortage--yet the Africans' revolt is portrayed *before* this justifying imagery, since we are presumed *already* to know the evils of slavery). But these are, precisely, not images of survival but the opposite.

Amistad fails because one cannot transcend PC by substituting "real" Africans for African-Americans; the victimary resentment and rage must be worked through. Slavery, unlike the Holocaust, was not an event; surviving it was not a matter of being spared. American popular culture is rich in figures of the survival of slavery; indeed, it is dominated by them. But this figural vocabulary belongs to the culture created by slavery's real survivors. Even Spielberg's sentimental *The Color Purple* (1985, after **Alice Walker**) expresses this form of survival more appropriately than *Amistad*.

Saving Private Ryan conveys its message far more cleanly than *Schindler's List*, but only because *Schindler* had already taught Spielberg and his public that survival is not a morally complex operation. The skills required seem, at first glance, to be reduced to technical knowledge: for example, how to attach a mirror to a stick with chewing gum (the film's only lesson for the young, according to the *New Yorker's* reviewer). Hence the reproach of superficiality and even "immaturity" (leveled by the impeccably mature John Podhoretz of the *Weekly Standard*). But the technical tricks lead to victory only because they are employed by an effective human organization, one we take for granted for most of the film, but whose "deep structure" is revealed to us in a single moment of crisis.

When Captain Miller's squad captures a machine-gun nest after losing one of its men in a skirmish, they kill one surviving enemy soldier in a rage; a second remains, whom the interpreter befriends. Since he has no way to take prisoners, the Captain blindfolds the soldier and lets him go free. This enrages the private from Brooklyn, who threatens to desert the mission. The sergeant threatens him with his pistol, but the soldier refuses to obey. It is up to the Captain to restore order.

We already know that the men have set up a pool to bet on the Captain's peacetime identity; at one point, the latter had made a jocular deal with the interpreter to split the winnings when the amount reached \$500. Now the Captain reveals to the men that his is the least heroic of occupations, that of a small town high-school English teacher. He then leaves the rebellious soldier free to desert, even promising to do the paper work. This anti-charismatic gesture, which defuses the scene's tensions, illustrates the difference between a maximal social order focused on a central leader and a minimal system where leadership exists only to get the job done. Whereas the enemy soldier, in fear of being shot, had felt it necessary to shout "Fuck Hitler," the American system as portrayed here is defined by neither adulation nor resentment of the center. The mystery that composes the Captain's minimal charisma can be sacrificed at any time for the sake of group cohesion.

If we see ourselves today as liberated from the tyranny of "master narratives," it is because they were pursued in WW II to the point at which they revealed their bankruptcy. Today's culture is "popular" in consequence, not because it cannot rise above the vulgar display of resentment, but, on the contrary, because the sufferings of the esthetic center can no longer justify identification with its violence. Steven Spielberg's films have been a major factor in this development. Where *Schindler's List*, by teaching us to understand the Holocaust as survival rather than victimage, helped preserve the cultural force of World War II from the paralysis of victimary repetition, *Saving Private Ryan* demonstrates the purposefulness that accompanies this new understanding.

Resentment will always present problems, and those it will pose to the next generation are likely to make our own seem benign. History waits for no one; what makes it possible to evacuate the cultural paradoxes of one era is the burgeoning urgency of those of the next. The decline of victimary thinking in the world's dominant culture is driven by necessity, not by some gratuitous improvement of the human soul. We should therefore celebrate all the more those forces that hasten it. The affirmative minimalism illustrated

by Spielberg's films of World War II offers our own best chance of survival in the emerging era of global interaction and nuclear-armed resentment.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Visiting the Getty

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To Matt and Ann Schneider, without whom I would never have gotten to the top of that hill

The other day, **Matt Schneider** was kind enough to show me around the new **Getty Center**, the museum-cum-art-institute everyone in Los Angeles has been talking about for the past year or so. The Getty is the product of a nobly uncompromising effort to adapt the presentation of high art to the conditions of our age. Anything more familiar would have been merely condescending. Yet in its effort to put anonymous mortals in contact with unique art objects, the Getty succeeds only in making us feel still more anonymous.

I'm not sure if **Jean Baudrillard** has visited this site, but it offers the best available evidence for his idea that the postmodern is a world of simulacra that has abandoned all criteria for distinguishing between reality and simulation. (This is, of course, a utopian vision of the horizon of the postmodern market system rather than its reality.) The "simulated" atmosphere of the Getty was brought home to me by a curious experience. While touring the museum, we chanced upon a film clip describing a computer-generated virtual reality depiction of, if memory serves me, the **Roman Forum** in the post-Augustan period. The graphics put the viewer in the Forum and allowed him to "walk" within it, the perspective changing as in a computer game. Getty spokespeople touted the virtues of such simulations as a teaching tool: to the child who wonders "why should I care about this?" they provide not dead information but "live" participation.

Far be it from me to condemn simulation as a pedagogical technique. (Although the manipulative insistence on "participation" is the great weakness of American education, the child typically transcends the manipulation by relating less to the content of the simulation--*e.g.*, the Forum--than to its ingenious technique, becoming in the process less a future classicist than a future programmer.) But what struck me most about the Forum simulation, in its straight-line coldness and inhospitality to human existence (a few scattered figures seemed afterthoughts in the emptiness), was its uncanny resemblance to the Getty itself. The museum and grounds seemed to be a gigantic computer simulation whose hundreds of human visitors were altogether superfluous.

When one visits an ancient temple or a medieval cathedral, one feels one's ephemerality beside these stones that have witnessed the passage of so many generations. The building models the sacred atemporality of human culture by embodying the eternally self-renewing deferral of its own destruction in the sacrifice that is commemorated *here*. This is not at all one's emotion at the Getty. One feels not mortal in the face of immortality, but human in the face of inhumanity, the lone explorer of a planet deserted by an alien culture. My fellow visitors seemed dwarfish and out of place, and that is surely the way I must have appeared to them. The consequence of this dichotomy between my intuition of myself and my vision of others is to alienate me from my fellow humans. My guess is that young people seldom

meet and fall in love at the Getty. As in the Roman Forum simulation, our primary relationship is with architectural space, not with the other visitors who seem to have been added to the decor only in order to make the space appear more real.

The most obvious explanation of this alienation is that the site itself--the obsessive straight lines and multiple *coups d'oeil* offering misty views of the city far below, the overpowering brightness of the Travertine marble in the sunlight, the elimination from the concourses of the irregularities of plant life, scraps of waste or dust--is so dominating that the visitor stands upon it as a profane on the Temple mount. As Matt observed to me, the art collection, quite respectable if not comparable to that of older museums, is so overwhelmed by the architecture that it seems a mere pretext for it. Yet this grandeur is quite the opposite of that of, say, the mausoleum-like Nazi architecture of **Albert Speer**. In the overall geography of Los Angeles, the Getty is not central but peripheral. One sees it from the 405 freeway not as a fortress guarding the passage but as a curiosity, a vaster version of the idiosyncratic personal architectures that punctuate the hilltops. The swarms of security forces are there only to guard objects we have freely chosen to look at; if we don't like the atmosphere, we can just go home.

No, the Getty's dehumanized geometry exemplifies not tyranny but postmodern democracy. Humanizing it would have been a cop-out. Indeed, the Getty is humanized, for children at least, in the "art information" rooms where the young can draw pictures, don costumes, pose before mirrors, surf computers for information... These delightful little rooms--I wished the costumes had been big enough for me to get into--demonstrate that "user-friendliness" is not the Getty's problem. But to doodle on a piece of drawing paper provided by the management is no more interactive than to wipe one's hands on a paper towel provided by the management. Our inputs may be valuable to us; they are of no value to the institution. The paradox is that this is not a sign of the institution's undemocratic nature, but of the opposite.

In traditional aristocratic societies--for example, in the European Middle Ages--art, particularly plastic art, is created by artisans rather than "artists" for the greater glory of God or his earthly representatives. With the growth of the market system, the artist's work comes to be individualized as a unique source of revelatory value. Just as stockbrokers get rich by picking the richest stocks, recognition of esthetic value is itself a value. Even when the modern artist assails the public's bourgeois Philistinism, his attack is implicitly or explicitly addressed to the connoisseur who will appreciate the value of his work.

If our experience of medieval art is relatively serene, this is because its religious context mediates the relationship between artist and audience in what Girard calls the "external" mode. The artisan-artist never presents himself as our rival; we admire his specialized skill, but our attribution of meaning to the signs he creates does not fall under his authority. In the secular world of modern art, as the source of significance becomes increasingly personal, my relationship with the artist becomes increasingly complex. The refusal of late modernist artists to "draw well" or even to represent anything at all points to the fact that it is the artist's dominant position in this relationship rather than his reproductive talent that confers meaning on the artwork. Yet the more the artist attacks his audience, the more he expresses his need of it. Provocation is just another form of love. Even when he just pours the paint on the canvas, the artist is trying to communicate to us a unique revelation of truth.

The traditional art museum, the heart of whose collection consists of works of the era in which this complexification was taking place--roughly, from the Renaissance to 20th-century modernism--reproduces in its audience something of the connoisseur's complicity with the artist. The

spectator, assumed to be already familiar with the paintings, is given little information about them. The museum is a temple of art in which the visitor's communion is presumed to be informed by esthetic competence. Cartoons of the "bourgeois" visitor nonplussed before an incomprehensible painting deny the authenticity of this communion in a particular case only in order to emphasize its institutional necessity.

In contrast with the traditional museum, the Getty embodies a new, postmodern perspective in which communion is no longer a meaningful concept. (This perspective is not expressed in the choice of the artworks themselves: the eminently traditional permanent collection contains very few works of modernism, let alone postmodernism. There is, however, a tendency toward special contemporary exhibitions, explicable, as Matt suggested, as public relations efforts toward the local community, where, with a deadpan neutrality worthy of **Warhol**, postmodern ephemera are presented as seriously as the most venerable masterpieces.) Postmodern democracy has in principle put an end to the struggle between artist and spectator. Each person is presumed to be a specialist in his own field; outside it, he is expected to defer to other specialists. Because the artist too is a specialist, he should therefore be judged by specialists in his field. Specialization, far from being undemocratic, is "universalizable" in the terms of Kantian ethics. The restriction of authority to specialists means that no individual can claim a special "aristocratic" relationship to any object of study; he must gain authority by working in his specialty, by doing, not being.

The most elaborate example of democratic specialization is no doubt the university, with its departments subdivided into fields and subfields. The Getty implements this principle in the field of art. Instead of standing in a problematically complicitous relationship with the artist, the visitor to the Getty views the paintings and sculptures through the mediation of the specialized commentaries attached to each artwork. These commentaries, useful and relatively unobtrusive, nevertheless confirm the alienating impression engendered by the overwhelming architecture and the detachment of the site from the city below. The museum is user-friendly, even interactive, but its interactivity is confined to providing knowledge to the ignorant.

At the end of the concourse stands the Research Institute, where knowledge can be created as well as consumed. Matt and I tried to get into the library to look around, but, despite our PhDs, we were told that browsing is not permitted and that we could only be admitted to consult with a librarian about a specific project. Research is to be conducted by specialists meeting with other specialists; no enlightened amateurs here. Nothing about this incident is undemocratic, but it points up the paradoxical elitism of democracy. In principle, anyone in our broadly educated society, on obtaining the appropriate certification, can become an expert in any field. It is not consonant with democratic principles to make scarce resources available to those unqualified to make socially valuable use of them. The result, however, leaving aside that PhDs in Art History are rarely given to the sons and daughters of the lower or even middle classes, is that even the best educated layman is excluded from dialogue with the institution.

On this apparently typical day, the museum's demography recalled to me that of south **Florida**, where I could still feel like a youngster in my 50s. It is well that retirees visit museums, and normal that they do so in groups, but a museum in which the typical visitor is a senior citizen overawed by the Brave New third millennium is not a very endearing place to visit. The art collection would have to be many times as distinguished to compensate for the visitor's sense of institutional humiliation.

What does this experience tell us about the place of high art in the postmodern era? Postmodern culture is

often described, particularly by conservatives, as one of mystification and posturing. But perhaps the simplest way of characterizing it is as a culture of specialists. This is most obviously true of what is still called "classical" music, but it applies as well to all the arts, even, within the limits of the profitable, to the popular ones. Artists who attempt to maintain the revelatory posture of "high art" can appeal only to the expertise of other artists and scholars. This is an unanticipated consequence of the progress of democracy. For mature market society is not an undifferentiated mass but an increasingly differentiated army of specialists, each jealous of an expertise acquired through years of study and practice. If we reluctantly accept the Getty as the cultural institution of our time, it is because we recognize that we are better off separated from each other by the rhetoric of expertise than brought together by the undifferentiating violence of ideology.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Clinton in Paris

No. 150: Saturday, October 3, 1998

To experience the long-awaited **Starr** report on **Bill**, **Monica**, and the cigar in **Paris** is worth a semester-length course in French civilization. The papers all published lengthy extracts, and *Le Monde*, the paper "of record," provided a sixteen-page summary-supplement in French only a few hours after the report's release, as well as including both a complete translation and the complete English version on its website **www.lemonde.fr**. But although French and Americans are equally fascinated by the lurid details of the case, our reactions are quite different, the French interpretation of our common fascination being centered, as ours is not, on the very fact that it is common, which is to say, universal.

Americans, particularly those who have not been to France, tend to misinterpret the defining quality of French civilization as a superior refinement that contrasts with America's more "natural" manners. In contrast, we believe we incarnate for the French the mythical "noble savage." But the real difference is that in France the cultural is conceived as a means of embellishing the natural whereas in the USA it is a means of restraining it. The American in France is struck by a far greater tolerance for children urinating in the street, dogs entering restaurants, or politicians having *affaires de coeur*. Appetitive impulses are accommodated as long as nothing is done too obtrusively. There is no need for the familiar American anti-puritan stance of setting nature as a challenge to culture. The French have no beatniks, and French hippies are such in dress alone.

This accommodation of the natural inherited from its courtly past allows French culture even today, with its ubiquitous **MacDonalds** and blue jeans, to retain its unparalleled harmoniousness. But it also makes the French incapable of understanding the Lewinsky affair and, indeed, American democracy in general. Its amiable tolerance for the animal passions--a domain in which Hilary's husband inspires a good deal of sympathy--deprives French culture of a productive tension omnipresent in our own, that between **norms** and **laws**. Just as there are no French beatniks, there are no French **lawyer jokes** either. These apparently unrelated cultural differences reflect two contrasting national positions in the modern market system.

Since Clinton's American partisans seem unable or unwilling to understand the point of Kenneth Starr's investigation any better than the French, it is worthwhile to rehearse the essence of the matter. The investigation into the Lewinsky affair did not originate in Starr's prurience, however widely this scurrilous and infantile explanation has been echoed by supposedly respectable publications. (In one cleverly-written American newspaper column, an unnamed man described as obsessed by Monica's thong underwear and phone sex conversations turns out in the last line to be not Clinton but Starr. In France, the respected weekly *L'express* devoted six pages of its September 17 issue to a luridly hostile psycho-biography of Starr, complete with photographs, destined to explain the otherwise inexplicable: '**How can we explain the independent prosecutor's zeal in crucifying Clinton for his sins? Perhaps by his frustrated youth, by his highly reactionary associations, and by a certain bitterness.**')

The central fact that bears repeating is that the point of departure for Starr's investigation was the clear evidence of Clinton's perjury in the **Paula Jones** case. As for those who blithely dismiss this perjury as falling within our implicit right to lie about our private sex lives, the reply is clear indeed: the questions about Lewinsky posed to Clinton in the Jones trial were anything but unwarranted intrusions into his "private" sex life. Paula Jones' accusation, we should recall, alleged an egregious case of obscene behavior by a public official--behavior for anything similar to which I and most of my readers would lose our jobs in an instant. The purpose of this particular line of questioning was not to dig for dirt irrelevant to the accusation but to establish a pattern of irregular sexual activity in the workplace by a figure of high authority. And when Clinton lied under oath, it was not to protect his "privacy," let alone his family, but to avoid providing corroborating evidence for Jones's accusation that he displayed his penis to her and requested from her the very same act that he engaged in with Lewinsky. Unless we consider that a high official's displaying his penis to a subordinate is a "private" activity of no concern to the legal system, we cannot maintain that questioning about similar activities is an invasion of privacy.

The hypocrisy of the erstwhile liberal protectors of the outraged **Anita Hill** is indeed mind-boggling. **Jonathan Lear** claims in the September 28 *New Republic* that we consider perjury a serious crime only because we expect the legal system to ignore "minor" perjuries like Clinton's. How can lying about an action directly relevant to the charged offense be considered "minor"? There is an implication in all this that fails to examine its own premise, one that the French might accept, but that few Americans would: that legal forms are irrelevant so long as the offense is "about" something so trivial as sex.

In the United States, blindness to the seriousness of the charges against Clinton is a paradoxical effect of partisan politics that makes feminists of both sexes the political bedfellows of (Democratic) womanizers like Clinton and Teddy Kennedy. In contrast, the French defense of Clinton is an attack not simply on Starr *et cie.* but on American "puritanism." The French are no less prurient than Americans, but they feel a lot less guilty about it. Nor should their dismissal of the Lewinsky affair be attributed to their secret guilt for having enjoyed reading the Starr report; rather, the pleasure they experience in reading the report is for them the proof of its triviality as a legal brief. The idea that Clinton's activities fall within the domain of normal appetitive pleasure implies that they are of no more possible legal significance than **Mitterand's** well-known womanizing. The idea that "normal" activity can become the basis for legal action--for example, when it is lied about--is foreign to the French mentality.

The French see Starr's investigation of the Lewinsky relationship as an autonomous activity independent of the Jones accusation. When asked about the Jones case, the French generally reply that the accusation is itself trivial, that is, that Clinton's rejected proposal to Jones falls, like Lewinsky's accepted proposal to Clinton, in the category of normal expressions of sexual appetite. But a more revealing French response is that the obscenity of Clinton's purported behavior to Jones, which one would not expect from even the most womanizing of Frenchmen, reflects the puritanical conditions of American life that make it impossible for a political leader to satisfy his appetites in a more natural manner. The asperities of American sexual life, particularly our obsession with "sexual harassment," are blamed on the repression of our bodily needs.

Thus where Americans see the rule of law as protecting market society from the crudities of appetite, the French see appetites as constituting in themselves a naturally regulated exchange system that requires external intervention only in cases of unambiguous violence--had Clinton raped Jones, even the French might find grounds for action. We recognize here the tension between the "Protestant ethic" of the creators of capitalism and the more tolerant ethic of Catholic countries. But this tolerance of the

"appetitive" makes the French insensitive to the unnaturally mediated and therefore necessarily regulated nature of human sexual interaction. Legal tension is avoided only by dismissing as puritanical the attempt, essential to a democratic social order, to define the limits of the expression of "natural" desires when they come into conflict with the liberty of their human object. Thus even French feminists fail to face up to the fact that Clinton's alleged behavior with Jones was less an expression of animal desire than an attempted exercise of *le droit du seigneur*.

France's adaptation to market society has been, despite lingering high unemployment, generally quite successful. But the present example reveals that much has survived unexamined from the *ancien régime*. The "natural law" that regulates French sexuality makes cheerful allowance for feudal modes of interaction. The American insistence on reciprocity in all markets, sexual as well as economic, makes our life less attuned to *la différence* but more respectful of individuals of either sex. This is the lesson the French, and Clinton supporters in general, should take away from the Lewinsky affair rather than seeking to explain it away as an artifact of Kenneth Starr's libidinal frustrations.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Clinton and the Sacrificial Paradigm

No. 151: Saturday, October 17, 1998

One thing demonstrated by the reactions to [the previous Chronicle](#) is the classical lesson that rigorous thinking is incompatible with the "passions" of political rhetoric. The most egregious use of such rhetoric is surely in the camp of **Clinton's** defenders, who make the hostility of his "right-wing" enemies rather than his own conduct the real source of the crisis, as though lying under oath under any circumstances is not, at the very least, a serious matter. Yet my criticism of the "French" position did not prevent one subscriber from accusing me of excessive indulgence for French cultural values.

The rhetoric that flows so naturally in such cases reflects the fact that political situations require real decisions in the absence of objectively decisive criteria. The "passions" are not mere emanations of undisciplined minds; they are decision-making mechanisms indissociable from the political rhetoric that justifies them. The "passionate" nature of this language is the direct reflection of the sacrificial nature of the crisis; the raising of voices is the clearest sign of sacrality. When they are raised sufficiently, there is only name-calling, finger-pointing, "scapegoating" on both sides. In **Girard's** schema, this is called a "sacrificial crisis." It is at this point, when it is no longer clear who or what is to be sacrificed, that the "emissary mechanism" intervenes and the "scapegoat" is found. But this schema cannot be applied transparently to historical phenomena. We can claim neither that Clinton "is" a scapegoat nor that he "is not" because the modern world of Judeo-Christian self-consciousness is founded on an awareness of scapegoating that makes us henceforth incapable of carrying it out. How then can we clarify the specific mode of the "sacrificial" that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair--now the basis of an impeachment hearing--exemplifies? This crisis, both serious and ridiculous, provides a timely opportunity to put our political passions in brackets and examine the sacrificial paradigm itself.

At the **COV&R** meeting in Chicago in 1995, I discovered that Girard's work, which had always been reviled by the Left, had been adapted to **PC**. Since Girard attributes the moral and epistemological benefit of the Judeo-Christian tradition to "taking the side of the victim," it requires only a simple extrapolation to define his own theory in the same manner even after the demystification of the sacrificial model has eliminated the objective criterion of victimage. Girard's model of modernity as the deconstruction of the sacrificial fails to include the indispensable compensatory force of the economic exchange system, lacking which the model tyrannically reduces all human relations and even our relation to "nature" to that between persecutors and victims.. Scapegoating is always an etic category; it is always the other guy who seeks scapegoats, not we. The **Nazis**, **Hitler** above all, hotly denied scapegoating; they justified their genocidal violence by the claim that the Jews were on the brink of destroying Western civilization. The **Holocaust** marks a historical watershed because its enormity provides an existential proof that in the agon of sacrificial rhetoric there may be a true victim who is telling the truth. But such a "proof" is soon discounted by anticipation and dissipates its effect.

The weakness of the Girardian paradigm is that it makes no allowance for its own accessibility to the

scene of consciousness. The scene of revelation, even of Christian revelation, does not remain invulnerable to the significances it reveals. The sign, not the scapegoat, is the fundamental characteristic of the human because the sign both designates and articulates the structure of sacrificial victimage from the beginning throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition, including **Generative Anthropology**. Even in tribal societies, the sacralization of the emissary victim precedes through the mediation of the sign, which must be a gesture of deferral before it can become a gesture of accusation. Hence the task of cultural reflection is not to decide whether the Clinton-figure at the center of such an event is or is not a scapegoat, but to unravel the threads of filiation that link current sacrificial forms to simpler ones and ultimately to the minimal scene of origin.

Clinton's "scapegoating" is understandable in terms of the resentful postmodern rejection of the heroic to which I have often alluded in these columns. In an egalitarian exchange-system, the holders of central power are more or less openly resented and a public figure's discomfiture is a source of resentment-deferring *Schadenfreude*. The deep explanation of the **Clinton-Lewinsky** affair is not that Clinton cannot control his sexual appetites but that Clinton's sexual escapades and his lies about them are crucial to his attractiveness to the public. Beyond the voyeurism of witnessing the confession of vices and misdeeds, we take pleasure in the unpredictable interplay between being caught and getting away with it that has characterized the whole of Clinton's career. We appreciate the value of knowing what kind of underwear he prefers only because we are confronted with a compensating impenetrability in his capacity for denial of even the most obvious facts. In 1992, Clinton denied having relations with **Gennifer Flowers**; his admission of it in court six years later arouses no interest because we always knew he was lying and he has since moved on to other denials. The paradox that has caught up with Clinton now--but only to the extent of enabling a cumbersome impeachment procedure that its proponents will never dare carry to its end and that may diminish their political effectiveness--is that in order for a denial to be sufficiently brazen to satisfy our resentment, it risks running afoul of the law. Although we have digested the Flowers admission because Clinton was under oath, we secretly hope for another lie that will breach even this barrier. And although there is little risk of Clinton's being thrown out of office, the impeachment machinery has now been contaminated by the resentful game we and Clinton play. The greatest corruption of the body politic in this affair lies in the public's complicity with a game of abjection and defiance being played at the highest levels of institutional democracy.

The complex interaction of the "victim" with his "persecutors" of which Clinton's career is so rich in examples cannot be found preformed in the hypothetical originary scene. But the historical nuances of Clinton's situation are variants of the same paradoxical structure that underlies and undermines all constructions of meaning. Rather than succumbing to the sacrificial satisfactions of defining a scapegoat and persecutors of our own whether it be Clinton or **Starr**, a "right-wing" or a "left-wing" conspiracy, our task is to seek the paradoxical dynamic that stands above and controls all such definitions.

No doubt I have my own "passions" invested in this affair, however little I rejoice to see the impeachment mechanism set into movement by the president's actions. (Nor do I think that the **Supreme Court** was right to let **Paula Jones's** case against Clinton proceed, however much her accusations deserve legal redress and respectful attention. Our already-proven fascination with the Clinton game was reason enough to postpone the trial before its contents infected the presidency itself.) But the minimal human unity posited in the originary hypothesis protects us from the temptation to reduce this complex situation to the simplicity of "scapegoating." Sacred significance is not generated by the mindless repetition of a "mechanism," as a facile reading of Girard might lead one to assume. The paradoxical locus in which significance is generated is continually resituated. If we are to examine this or any crisis

with as much calm as our passions permit us, we must strain our minds to the point at which our model of the crisis encompasses the necessary but impossible contradiction that permits it to generate meaning--the point at which it becomes impossible to say who is the victim and who the executioner. We must bracket the objectivity and rationality of the procedures whose anticipated effects we include in the equation. This does not mean that we need deny the possibility of subsequently choosing between the two sides or that we should assimilate our judicial system to a sacrificial ordeal.

The applicability of a sacrificial vocabulary to the present crisis is not a sign that the president is being "sacrificed," but it does point to a particular tension inherent in the American presidency. The more central a political figure, the more his role must incorporate sacrificial elements in order to ward off the resentment focused on him. If we have now reached the point where this "prehumiliation" comes to imperil the institution of the presidency itself, we may wonder whether the all-powerful centrality of the American president, anomalous in contemporary democracies, is still compatible with our society's need for the free circulation of desire. That **Nixon** in 1972 and Clinton less than thirty years later have thrown the presidency into crisis over minor illegalities reflects the increasing fragility of their office rather than their idiosyncratic failings; that Clinton's illegalities are even more trivial than Nixon's only confirms this historical trend. Thus the weakening of the presidency bewailed by all parties to the current debate may well be the "socially intended" effect of the crisis. Whether this weakening is fully compatible with the president's key role as **Commander in Chief** is an ominous but not yet really compelling question.

The originary scene becomes a scene of sacrifice, but it is in the first place a scene of the paradoxical creation of significance where the object of desire becomes the meaning of a sign that defers desire. This scene is relevant to Clinton's current situation not because he is a victim caught in the mindless mechanism of emissary sacrifice but because his effort to remain in the center and defer its violence requires the continual regeneration of this originary paradox. What Clinton has in common with the originary central figure is not his status as innocent victim but his ability to arouse in us a new resentment whose fulfillment is incompatible with the endurance of the scene that makes it possible. The best that we can hope for is that the American electorate and the presidents it elects will react to the current crisis by returning to a less intensely mimetic conception of the presidency.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Titanic and the Decline of Narrative

No. 152: Saturday, October 23, 1998

The other day I became one of the last people on the planet to watch *Titanic*. **Matt Schneider** in [Chronicle 132](#) (April 11, 1998) having already provided a persuasive anthropological explanation of the film's popularity, I felt free to explore an auxiliary question: that of the tension between "high" and "popular," cinematic and literate, within popular cinema itself. Now that I can follow *en connaissance de cause* the debate begun by **LA Times** critic **Kenneth Turan**'s crack that director **James Cameron** should have been kept away from the word processor, that is, that this master of high-tech is not a true man of letters, I find that it nicely epitomizes this tension.

Rereading not only Turan's review of *Titanic* but a good many others, amateur and professional, most favorable, some not, I was struck by a dearth of what might be called literary sensibility. In the eyes of these reviewers, the accurate depiction of smokestacks or propellers is more relevant to the value of the film than its narrative coherence. None of them bothered to make the sort of points about the film that an undergraduate English major would be expected to make about a novel, presumably because those who were able to do so found such points irrelevant to evaluating a work of popular culture. This is just as true of Turan as of the unsophisticated admirers who claimed to have seen the film 20 times. Cameron's strongly reasoned critique of Turan as forsaking his role of movie reviewer for that of cultural prophet was in fact understated: Turan's "literary" potshots at the film betrayed no sophisticated literary sensibility. Criticizing pseudo-poetic dialogue like "sooner or later the fire I love about you is going to burn out" in a movie love scene strikes me as churlish; attention to stylistic details is the lowest level of critical discourse.

What then are the real flaws of *Titanic*? Many fault its crude sociology, which opposes the stuffy rich to the lovable poor nearly without nuance. And there is a titanic abuse of "poetic licence" that extends well beyond the energetic action scenes in (and under) ice-cold water. A seventeen-year-old girl from a good family, even a reader of **Freud** (!), who danced and drank the night away with the proles in steerage would simply have been locked in her cabin for the remainder of the trip; yet **Rose** escapes her family and class again and again. The film's romance is a fairy tale. Yet to demand a more nuanced story in which (for example) **Jack** would sail first class but remain an unacceptable suitor because incapable of replenishing the family fortune would be to ask Cameron to become **Edith Wharton**.

But extrinsic criteria aside, there is a major flaw in the plot in its own terms. Our hypothetical English major would no doubt zero in on the priceless French diamond "*Le Coeur de la Mer*" [heart of the sea]. The recovery of the diamond is, after all, the enabling motive of the plot; it is this treasure the explorers seek in the wreckage, and that old Rose throws overboard in the final scene that precedes what we take to be her death. The jewel, somewhat like **Henry James**'s "golden bowl," is a metaphor of the story itself, the precious gift of narrative that the heroine confides to us and whose return to the sea prefigures her own return among the *Titanic* passengers in the--genuinely moving--final sequence.

It is with respect to this key plot element that the film commits its most unforgivable narrative error--one unmentioned in all the reviews I read. The body of the film is, we recall, constituted by Rose's account of her adventure to the explorer **Brock Lovett (Bill Paxton)**, who is interested above all in the diamond. Just before the sinking, **Cal**, Rose's fiancé, exclaims that he left the diamond necklace in the overcoat he had thrown over Rose's shoulders. (We may ignore the fact that Rose herself could not have witnessed this particular conversation.) When in the final sequence Rose holds the necklace before dropping it into the sea, we get a flashback to her discovering it in the coat while standing on the deck of the rescue ship. But we already know it was in the coat, and Lovett must know it too. How then could he have neglected to ask Rose what happened to that coat?

This is precisely the sort of narrative detail the viewer caught up in the rush of events is likely to miss; I thought of it only after the film was over. But it is nonetheless a lacuna, and one that could easily have been not only repaired but turned to advantage by a more sophisticated screenwriter. It would have sufficed to have Rose "tell" us that she lost the coat with the diamond necklace in its pocket. Then the final shot of the necklace in her hand would be a surprise revelation of the single lie, the one element of "fiction" in Rose's presumably truthful narrative of the shipwreck. Constructing the plot around the diamond is indeed a fine idea, a tribute to Cameron's narrative instinct, but this instinct in Cameron the writer is not sustained by the same meticulousness of execution that Cameron the director displays in the reproduction of physical detail.

The grain of truth in Turan's curmudgeonly remarks is that emphasis on the viewer's visceral experience of the story has needlessly led to the neglect of the film's narrative coherence. A moving picture's technical details must be faithful to history because the viewer is sure to notice them. The accuracy of these details, which correspond to the descriptive passages **Balzac** was first to insert into novelistic narrative, is indispensable to the imaginary scene on which the story takes place; it would take but one obvious flaw for the beautifully reconstructed ship to reveal itself a mere stage set. Weaknesses in narrative structure fall into a different category. Even when they constitute overt self-contradictions, we tend to accept the human interactions we see on screen. Whereas things must be "as they are," humans become what they do. When a character speaks, it requires considerable effort of the will to stand outside the film and pass judgment on the probability of his statement. This is all the more so in the case of a sin of omission such as Lovett's failure to follow up on the diamond in the overcoat.

This suggests a new elucidation of the opposition between "high" and "popular" culture. The contrast between description and narration is not simply that between spatial and temporal, synchronic and diachronic. Such a metaphysical interpretation neglects the anthropological basis of metaphysics. The spatial, synchronic object of description is opposed to the temporal, diachronic object of narration as the world of things--**Sartre's** *en-soi*--is opposed to the world of human (inter)action "*pour soi*," that is, for itself. This by no means implies that popular culture is about things and high culture is about people--all culture is "about" human beings. But descriptive accuracy creates a sense of reality that need not but may serve as a spurious guarantee for the utopian resolution of resentment characteristic of popular art, whereas narrative coherence implies precisely the ironic demystification of such utopian "fictional" elements. In the heroic era of the nineteenth-century novel, the referent of "realistic" description was presented not as a thing-world in itself but as a sedimentary product of human interaction. It is in this sense that we can accept **Gyorgy Lukács'** Marxist preference for Balzac's "dialectical" realism of over the "fetishistic" naturalism of **Zola**.

Cinema simplifies these categories and their opposition. The submission of Zola's characters to the

thing-world, as epitomized in his insistence on hereditary rather than mimetic determination of the objects of their desire, weakens our sense of their humanity, but does not disturb the narrative logic of Zola's novels. The most superficial popular romance is able to maintain this logic. But when we are faced with a multi-million-dollar production that includes a 90% scale model, computerized water, and undersea shots of the original ship, this logic seems a relic of the precinematic days when the reader could turn back to a previous page to check the story-line. In the world of contemporary cinema (awaiting that of full-fledged virtual reality), the illusion of experiential truth is so strong that the details of narrative logic can be neglected with impunity. This does not mean that the story is not essential to the film. Yet, in the present example, we and our surrogate Lovett can lose sight of the jewel that is the narrative itself, provided that it be recovered and, at the very end, sacrificed by the narrator.

Unlike most reviewers, I thought **Gloria Stewart**'s performance as "old Rose" did great damage to the film. (Cameron would have done far better just to put some makeup on **Kate Winslet** and let her play "herself.") Stewart's sprightliness, while admirable at 87--her real age in 1997--was altogether inappropriate in a woman of 101 years. She spoke her--often embarrassingly stilted--lines with blithe serenity and lack of emotional tone, like someone reading a novel aloud. Stewart never allowed us to imagine that she was the same woman as Kate Winslet's character until the concluding scene when, at last "letting go" of life, she returned the diamond to the heart of the sea in exchange for a final moment of love's fulfillment on the reconstituted *Titanic*. Our experience of this final apotheosis is so intense that our "intradiegetic" surrogate Lovett's inconsistency and even Stewart's wooden acting are simply forgotten.

It is nonetheless the duty of "literary" criticism to remind the film's creator of narrative flaws, for however irrelevant they may be to the immediate effect, our belated consciousness of them diminishes the remembered experience to which a more coherent construction would allow us to return with greater and more subtle pleasure. This is Turan's justification in deploring *Titanic*'s carelessness with the literary, however inappropriate it was for him to have given free rein to his resentment of the cinematic values that overwhelm it.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Beyond the Nation-State

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In the heat of defending the Western political economy against the mindless hostility of victimary thinking, it is difficult to avoid compensatory sacrificial gestures of one's own. But no political system should ever be supported as other than a lesser evil, a deferral of violence judged more effective than its competitors rather than a "final solution" of any kind. Originary thinking is optimistic only in the sense that as responsible ethical agents we must act on the premise that the human can be preserved. This act of faith need not imply our own survival or even that of our ethnic group. Its only imperative is the survival of humanity; even acts of resentment may make positive contributions to the overall human economy.

Above all our reflections on the "end of history" must exclude the triumphalism that taints **Francis Fukuyama's** famous essay. If it were universally accepted that the West had discovered the optimum social order and that the rest of the world could only imitate it, this would signify not the triumph of the Western system but its demise. Liberal democracy, the free market in things and in words, will become a universal system only when it is no longer identifiable as a "Western" phenomenon, when the social passions now invested in the difference between this order and others will have been transmuted into new differences within it. In the interim, and this may be several centuries, the most urgent problem facing humanity is to defer the potential for violence generated by the economic superiority of some market economies over others. In an era where weapons of mass destruction are coming increasingly within the reach of third-world governments such as **India** and **Pakistan**, not to speak of the "rogue" governments of **Iraq** and **North Korea**, this is a preoccupying task.

The growing potential for nuclear or biochemical warfare poses a problem of finitude far less mythical than the familiar misanthropic ecological disaster scenarios. The very capacity to create such scenarios presupposes the possibility of resolving them; in contrast, the possibility of violence from our fellow humans is quite concrete. **American** politics is likely to pursue its present self-centered course (for which **President Clinton** is only partially responsible) until an unexpected crisis forces us to modify drastically our perspective. At that point we will become obliged once again to treat liberal democracy, the "worst form of government with the exception of all the others," as a positive good worth defending with our lives. Hopefully we will also be moved to more strenuous efforts in adapting the market system to those areas of the world where it currently generates more resentment than national income.

The anthropological basis for the **nation-state** is the rediscovery in the early modern era of a common language and by extension a common system of representations as the most fundamental basis of community. Yet however long the nation-state may yet endure, we have no reason to assume it to be humanity's ultimate political form. In the postmodern era, when world war has become unthinkable, rivalry among advanced societies must be settled by nonviolent, that is, economic means. But once this is understood, the very notion of "rivalry among nations" is no longer useful. Absent the social mobilization that war implies, "societies" do not compete at all, save in ceremonial activities like the **World Cup**.

The **European Community**, with all its imperfections, provides today's unique example of the integration of nation-states into a larger organism. Although the European experiment may turn out to be a dead end rather than the main evolutionary road beyond the nation-state, it is nonetheless useful to speculate, within the minimal anthropological framework provided by originary thinking, on what kind of model it suggests for the future.

The most salient feature of the European model is that local languages and customs are not subsumed into larger transnational units in order to create "economies of scale." The **linguistic** question has been resolved not by creating a new **Esperanto** but by the informal adoption of **English** as the global *lingua franca*. The **religious** question, outside of the **Balkans** at least, has simply disappeared from the map. As for the **cultural** question, where capital can be rapidly globalized, the representational systems that make up civil society cannot. The new transnational entity requires a new layer of institutions that reflect economic integration without forcing cultural integration. The latter, it is assumed, will take place at its own pace, through the sharing of common experience.

It is irrational to fear that this sharing must lead, as the prophets of **MacDonaldization** foretell, to greater uniformity. On the contrary, the breakdown of national barriers can take place only on the basis of an appreciation for the nuances of national difference. We should not misinterpret the highly visible mimetic conformism among European **youth**. These young people are driven to dress alike and listen to similar music as a revolt against what they experience as the limiting national identities imposed on them by their national education systems. Conversely, economic denationalization generates, even against the will of the individuals involved, a compensatory cultural differentiation. Life in Paris is not life in Amsterdam, however passionately one seeks to purge it of all "uncool" (e.g., **unCalifornian**) elements. A trip to any supermarket shows us that the integration of European economies results not in the extinction of national differences but in their proliferation. The variety of new "product-signs" with which one writes and continually revises one's identitary messages only increases with the breakdown of international barriers. As a French home becomes less obviously distinct from a German home, the variety of ways in which it expresses its owners' posture toward the world in "French" and "German," but also "European" and even "American," "Asian," or "African" modes tends to increase continuously.

Cultural integration under these circumstances both is and is not similar to the creation of the original European nation-states through the integration of their various regions. It is similar in its subsumption of regional particularities into a transregional vocabulary, but it differs in that national cultures are qualitatively more developed than those of the subnational regions. The very definition of a national culture is its elaboration of a self-conscious "high culture" beyond the popular "folk" cultures of the regions.

In Europe, the integration of popular regional traditions into high national traditions occupies the period from the Renaissance "defense and illustration" of national languages through the nineteenth-century canonization of the varieties of national experience. There is no obvious task of this magnitude for a transnational culture. What fascinates us in cultural borders and their transgression is that cultural elements cannot simply be mixed any more than languages can simply blend into each other. National high cultures cannot be absorbed into higher levels of cultural generality; they are already universal. We have not sufficiently reflected on why this is the case. Why is it that studying in depth, say in a university "language department," the national literature of a single people is even today a privileged avenue of anthropological understanding? The answer is that high culture situates the maximal ethical vocation it inherits from the originary scene within the national contexts that until very recently provided the

maximal extension of ethical communities. (Higher religion, emphasizing the central universality rather than the peripheral particularity of the scene, tends to deal with the individual as part of an undivided human community.)

In reflecting on the sacrificial closure of the cultural scene, high culture becomes self-conscious anthropology. The "compact" community is seen from without in the process of generating the significance that it takes as given. High culture is always a critique of a given society's sacrificial closure even as the necessity of this closure is affirmed. What new forms of culture might then emerge if national-linguistic compactness is not merely questioned by the high-cultural critique but exceeded by new political forms?

The need to transgress the boundaries of the nation-state is but one more way of defining the end of high culture, not, as our **Frankfurt** friends prophesied, in the degradation of "mass art," but through its absorption into a more modest vision of culture-in-general. What it is not possible to prolong after **Auschwitz** is precisely the several European national cultures that make up what we call "high culture." This impossibility is not the result of a sentimental refusal, in honor of the millions of dead, to create what could be created. It reflects rather the irredeemable failure--as demonstrated at Auschwitz--of the minimally compact national imagery that is the indispensable basis of high culture, the imagery that must attract our desire in order for it to be demystified in the course of the work.

I would not attempt to predict the quality of esthetic experience that a transnational culture can provide, nor the new kinds of totalization that may result, but it is clear that the breakdown of the untouchable canon of immortal masterpieces puts in doubt the very concept of esthetic immortality. Just as we are now too resentful to accept new religious leaders, let alone new divinities, we are becoming too resentful to accept new canonical masterpieces. Even the classics whose place remains secure are likely to meet with more whimsy and less reverence in an increasingly transcultural world.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

In the Beginning Was the Word

No. 154: Saturday, November 14, 1998

Some recent discussion on the **GAlist** has prompted me to attempt to clarify my position through an anthropological reading of the fundamental text of originary Christian theology--and of originary Christian anthropology.

Here is **John I, 1-5**, in the **Jerusalem Bible** translation:

1 In the beginning was the Word [*logos*]; the Word was with God and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. 4 All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, 5 A light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower / understand / "grasp" [*katelaben*]

The reading of *logos* not as "word" but as "victim" is the key to **René Girard's** interpretation of the Christian revelation: in the beginning was not the "word" of language but the chosen collective victim--the original sense of *lego* appears to be "to select"--on the basis of whose "lynching" human culture is constituted. Girard does not conceive this lynching as a single event; there is no primordial scene of origin, but a gradually emerging model of crisis-resolution furnished by the "emissary mechanism"--the discharge of collective aggression onto a scapegoat. As mimetic tensions accumulate in the (proto)human group, the breakdown of the community is averted by the inherent tendency of mimetic desire, whether attractive or repulsive, "erotic" or "thanatic," to focus on a common object: as each imitates his neighbor, the hostility of the group as a whole tends to become concentrated on its most marginal member, the one least able to meet aggression with counter-aggression. Language plays no generative role in this scenario: only after death do the remains of the victim become a funereary sign. In this view, from the "infrastructural" emissary mechanism, repeated and elaborated, there emerge as a "superstructure" the representational elaborations of culture.

The unique privileged moment in Girard's anthropology is not the scene of origin but the **Crucifixion** in which is revealed the equivalence of the sacred with victimary violence. It is this revelation that Girard would have us read in the passage from John. The *logos* is the victim whom sacrifice transforms into God but who as victim is also "with God," as Christ is God the son and is with God the Father. The life of "all that came to be" through this sacrifice, which we may take to mean the human world in the broadest sense, was "the light of men" in the victim-*logos* whose expulsion provides the community with peace. This victimary reading is guaranteed by the fifth verse: the "light of men" shines in the dark and the darkness cannot "grasp" it, whether to understand and thereby enlighten itself by it or to overpower and thereby extinguish it. In either case, the darkness figures a (human) violence that opposes and rejects the light.

To read the word *logos* as "victim" is a gesture of radical anthropological insight. But this reading is

subject to two caveats, which I would address not so much to Girard himself as to his readers. In the first place, the Greek word *logos*, even if the original meaning of *lego* be taken to be "to choose [the victim]," has always been attached, like the parallel Hebrew term *davar*, to ideas of language: word, sentence, thought, discourse, speech. To translate *logos* exclusively as "victim" is to engage in a sacrificial choice of one's own, and thereby to renounce the anthropological knowledge congealed in the totality of the word's related meanings. The *logos* may be the victim, but it is also the sign; the word reveals a fundamental connection between the two phenomena anterior to the metaphysical differentiation of concepts.

This leads me to my second caveat. The connection between the ideas of sign and victim is not one that must be imposed by philology or by an independently evolved anthropological model; it is drawn by the Johannine text itself. The *logos* that was with God is the source of the light that shines in the darkness. Girard takes this light-darkness opposition as a metaphor of victimage, using the translation of *katelaben* as "understood," so that the final sense is that the darkness did not "grasp" the light, failed to be illuminated by it, remained dark in spite of it, and, presumably swallowed it up and destroyed it. But the opposite, "optimistic" reading of "grasp" as "overcome" (in which the import of verse 5 is that the light survived and was not swallowed up by the darkness) leads to the same conclusion; it merely focuses on a different moment of the process--in the Christian case, the **Resurrection** following the Crucifixion.

The Johannine text makes a narrative connection between the *logos* and the metaphorically violent scene created by the opposition between the mass of darkness and the single, central light. In the course of these verses, the choice of the *logos*-sign generates the world, at first as a totality without opposition ("all things," "all that came to be"), then as illuminated by the *logos* for man, and finally as structured by the opposition between this source of illumination and the surrounding darkness. The light of men that illuminates what appears to be a peaceful human community is immediately opposed by a darkness that can only be understood as a figure for a negative force emerging within this same community.

This reading, which reduces the cosmology of the text to the anthropology that it metaphorizes, reveals a scene of origin that poses the prior existence of God only to suspend it in the last clause of verse 1 ("and the Word was God"), which affirms the temporal coequality of the Word-victim-*logos* and God. At this moment, when the *logos* is at peace with God, the *logos* and God are equivalent. But the *logos* as the light of men is subsequently surrounded by the dark of men. From a locus of unperturbed centrality the center becomes an isolated point surrounded by a vast, hostile periphery. As a narrative of the originary scene, the Johannine text expands from the center outward, thereby inverting the anthropological genesis of the center from the periphery inward. But this expansion can itself be understood in originary terms as the path of the attention--no longer purely appetitive--of the peripheral community that was focused at the outset exclusively on the "chosen" *logos*-victim. So long as they see it alone in the center, it is in its substantiality the incarnation of its sign, guaranteed by God who is the permanent Being of the sign, and itself constituting this Being. But as the life of all things and the light of man, it becomes part of the context of the world it generates, and thereupon becomes subject to a desacralized view of the human scene as a whole in which the light is no longer an uncontested source of Being but a lone hope of peace in a world of chaos.

This reading of John I 1-5--which discussion of the passage's Old Testament references would only reinforce--is not meant to demonstrate the chronological priority of language over Girard's "emissary mechanism." Its point is rather to show that this "mechanism," insofar as it is a *human* phenomenon, cannot be separated from the generation of the sign. If it is necessary to remind the vast majority of social

scientists that human language could not have emerged without the sacred, to the enlightened minority who are readers of Girard it bears repeating that the sacred cannot reveal itself to humanity without language. If the designation of the *logos*-victim were nothing but a mimetic mechanism, this opening passage of John, and human culture in general, would be not merely inexplicable but unnecessary. However the center of the originary scene is constituted, the designation of its central object cannot be reduced to a release of aggressive tension. The moment in which the *logos* is with God and is God is not a moment of animal aggression but of human deferral of aggression, however violently--and "violence" is only this--this aggression may subsequently have been released. To claim that the *logos* is "nothing but" the victim is to cut oneself off from the anthropological insight that nourishes this scene and Christianity itself.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Antisemitism and Market Phobia

No. 155: Saturday, November 21, 1998

The following reflections on **antisemitism** emerged from my course **European Studies 102** and were developed in a recent talk to the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion**.

* * * * *

What is most paradoxical about antisemitism is that the ancient hostility to Jews in the Christian and Moslem worlds is easier for us to understand than the virulent modern form that played so huge and horrible a role in European politics between 1879 (the first attestation of the word itself) and 1945. That a small and relatively powerless fraction of the population could become the obsessive focus of major political movements cannot be explained by either traditional suspicions or a universal need for scapegoats.

My explanation for this anomaly is that modern antisemitism coincides with the rise of the mature market system and was the means through which came to be expressed and discharged the tensions of this singular historical moment of whose importance not even **Karl Marx** was fully aware. Human life may be filled with problems, but it is the problems of human interaction that the most fundamental mechanisms of human culture are designed to solve. Just as explaining the origin of religion by "primitive man"'s awe of natural phenomena misunderstands the critical danger to humanity posed by its own potential for mimetic violence, so the explanation of antisemitism as a generalized panacea for social ills neglects the chief potential source of mimetic violence at the time of its emergence.

The originary scene of culture responds to the need to defer the violence generated by mimetic rivalry for a central object. The "scene" of antisemitism answers a new version of this need, driven by the dominant form of human interaction in the late nineteenth century: the emerging modern market system. The difference between the old occasional anti-Judaism and the new obsessive antisemitism reflects the shift from a set of punctual disasters, typified by the **Black Plague** of 1348, to the ongoing problem posed by the modern free market. In the first case, the Jews were conceived as diabolical subverters of the Christian world order; in the second, the Jews were seen as the masters of a diabolical new order that held sway over the captive nations of Christianity.

Marx, the earliest and greatest theoretician *cum* practitioner of antisemitism, makes this association clear in his early pamphlet *On the Jewish Question* (an 1844 "review article" of a book by the same name by the Young Hegelian **Bruno Bauer**):

The Jew has emancipated himself in the Jewish fashion not only by acquiring money power but through money's having become (with him or without him) the world power and the Jewish spirit's having become the practical spirit of the Christian peoples. The Jews have emancipated themselves to the extent that Christians have become Jews.

Money is the zealous one God of Israel, beside which no other God may stand. Money degrades all the gods of mankind and turns them into commodities.... Money is the essence of man's life and work, which have become alienated from him. This alien monster rules him and he worships it.

The God of the Jews has become secularized and is now a worldly God. The bill of exchange is the Jew's real God.

Jewry reaches its peak with the perfection of bourgeois society, but bourgeois society reaches perfection only in the Christian world. Only under the rule of Christianity, which externalizes all human relationships... could bourgeois society isolate itself entirely from the life of the state, destroy all those bonds that link man as a species, replace them with egotism and the demands of private interest...

Christianity sprang from Judaism; it has now dissolved itself back into Judaism...

Christianity is the sublime thought of Judaism, Judaism is the everyday practical application of Christianity. But this application could become universal only after Christianity had been theoretically perfected as the religion of self-alienation of man, from himself and from nature.

Only then could Jewry become universally dominant and turn alienated man and alienated nature into alienable, salable objects, subject to the serfdom of egotistical needs and to usury.

The social emancipation of Jewry is the emancipation of society from Jewry. (tr. Dagobert Runes)

The Jew, in Marx's terms, converts Christendom to his "religion," the market system. Marx's neo-Hegelian analysis of the Judeo-Christian dialectic is not without subtlety. The triumph of "Judaism" is only possible after the prior triumph of "Christianity": the creation of the modern market as a generalized system of exchange is only possible once worldly goods could be conceived of as alienated from the essence of the individual agent. (Marx conceives this alienation as an illusory substitution of the abstract soul for the material body rather than as an affirmation of the primacy of the ethical over the appetitive.) Only with the transcendence of sacrificial mediation could men detach themselves sufficiently from the specificity of material "compactness" (to use **Eric Voegelin's** term) to conceive of goods as exchange values. The Jews, *dixit* **Max Weber**, did not play a major role in the evolution of modern capitalism; their mastery of money did not make them the original source of European capital. But at the moment when capitalism began in earnest, when, after the **French Revolution**, the market-system replaced the old ritual hierarchy as the central institution of the modern nation-state, the Jew appeared suspiciously at home in this system because he alone was able to retain the values of community within the social alienation of market exchange. The Jew appeared not merely the master but the Subject of the decentered and increasingly international market system because he seemed able to live *en famille* within an exchange-system that defined itself against the "natural" human community of the nation-state.

The existence of the Jew permitted those threatened by the market system to conceive its "invisible hand" as the instrument of a hidden human volition. With the replacement of the **Old Regime's** centralized

hierarchy by a decentered system of exchange, the **King** as the visible Subject of the community is replaced by the Jew as the imaginary Subject of the economy. The extraordinary importance of antisemitism during the maturing phase of the market system reflects the importance of this transition. Modernity is better understood as the result of the growing domination of exchange than of the decline of ritual into "secularization." Nietzsche's "death of God" and the other *fin-de-siècle* metaphors of decadent centrality are cultural figures of the decentralization of the modern exchange-system. But the dead God of the former ritual order could be replaced by the diabolical figure of the Jew.

The old ritual anti-Judaism condemned the Jew as the killer of **Christ**, heedless of the superior Christian intuition (powerfully developed by Girard) that all humanity, including his own disciples, had forsaken **Jesus** on the **Cross**. The continued existence of the Jew was the test of true Christianity because to imitate Christ is to forgive all men as his murderers, not only those who have learned to admit their guilt. Similarly, under the market system, the Jew is designated the Subject of a process for which all are equally responsible. But what accounts for the greater virulence of modern antisemitism is that this new "crime" is not a specific violent act but the dominant form of social interaction. The modern antisemite fears not that the criminal will escape unpunished but that the entire society has become his victim. Like **Gulliver** immobilized by the **Lilliputians'** threads, the "Aryan" has been enslaved by the "Semite"; will he awaken before it is too late? The title of the first major French work of antisemitism, **Alphonse Toussenel's** *Les Juifs rois de l'époque* (1845) is typical of the genre, as is the later *Les Juifs nos maîtres*. **Edouard Drumont's** best-seller *La France juive* refers not to the Jewish part of France but to France as a whole in the hands of the Jews. In an 1886 campaign poster for the **National Assembly**, the cartoonist **Adolphe Willette** exhorts: "The Jews are great only because we are on our knees. 50,000 alone benefit from the constant and hopeless work of 30,000,000 French slaves" (Robert Byrnes – *Antisemitism in Modern France* (1950)). These apparently hallucinatory visions of Jewish power, which would be reinforced after **World War I** with the worldwide distribution of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, can be explained only by the fact that the Jews were accused of controlling a process that no subject in fact controls, the market.

The paroxysm of antisemitism, the **Holocaust**, marks the end of the era in which communal uniformity could be conceived as the solution to the problems of the marketplace. During the four decades of **Cold War** between the end of **World War II** and the fall of the **Berlin Wall** in 1989, Communism still held out an illusory hope of transcendence of the market system. Few Western intellectuals followed **Hannah Arendt's** prescient assimilation of Nazism and Communism to a single "totalitarian" model; most persisted, and many persist even today, in maintaining hope for a socialist transcendence of the "capitalist" exchange system. The horror of the Holocaust had made it appear that what had to be overcome was nationalist compactness rather than the entire utopian-socialist dream of returning from the impersonal system of market exchange to a fraternal politico-economic community. The responses to the Holocaust in the form of liberation movements that ended colonialism and officially sanctioned racism were often seen as steps in direction of socialism rather than as expressions of faith in the reciprocal interaction embodied in the market system. It took forty more years to discover that the most useful model of national liberation was not the Russian but the **American Revolution**.

The greater longevity of Communism despite its economic inferiority to Nazism is no mere accident of history. The requirements for Cold War military spending put an end to the Soviet Union; Nazi Germany itself began the hot war that was to destroy it. Only in the urgency of war is antisemitism a possible remedy for the alienation of the market-system. The modern state created to annihilate modernity must project its contradictions outside itself. In order to preserve the "compact" exchange economy from the

"cosmopolitan" temptations of modern consumption, the single mission of war in the name of racial purification had to replace the plural desires of self-definition that the peacetime consumer market serves. Once hostility to the market system had been concentrated on the Jews as its "bacterial" carrier, the German economy itself could function only as a means to their destruction.

If the Holocaust is the defining moment of postmodernity, mature postmodern self-consciousness required that we be convinced that the market must endure, that the imperfection of *Gesellschaft* will always remain preferable to the nightmare of restored *Gemeinschaft*. Once we understand that the only alternative to the market decisions of the general population are those of a tyrannical elite, we can concentrate our political efforts within the market system rather than awaiting the demise of "late capitalism."

By designating the Jews as the Subject of the market, the antisemite makes them its Antisubject, those whom the exchange-system exists in order to despoil, exploit, and annihilate. But for any party to play the Subject role in earnest is to wreck the system altogether. The "death of the Subject" that is the core conviction of postmodernity refers not to the end of individual responsibility for one's actions but to the illusiveness of the Subject position in the sphere of social interaction.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Proust's Homosexual Modernity

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Rereading recently a couple of chapters from **Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's** *Epistemology of the Closet* (U of California, 1990), I was struck by the power generated by her single-minded determination to view the world through the special optic of her homosexuality (she also claims membership in three other victimary categories: women, Jews, and fat people). I could not help comparing her aggressively personal partiality with the universalism of **Generative Anthropology**, and musing on on their relative popularity at the box-office of ideas.

I read most carefully her chapter on **Marcel Proust**, the last in the book. Proust, she claims, was only able to conceive his previously fragmentary work as a unified novel on the basis of what she calls "the spectacle of the closet," the revelation or "outing" of the homosexuality of key characters of the novel, notably the **Baron de Charlus**, whom she calls "the novel's most ravishingly consumable product." The key first scene of this outing is one of the most famous in the novel, the opening of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (euphemistically translated by **C. K. Scott Moncrieff** as *The Cities of the Plain*), which depicts the mutual recognition of Charlus and a tailor named **Jupien** before the voyeuristic eye of the narrator, who is purportedly observing an orchid awaiting fertilization by a bee.

The attraction of the narrator's hidden eye to the display of "secret" homosexuality is not reducible to the formal superiority over the characters in the world of the novel of the author whom **Flaubert** described as "like God in his creation, present everywhere and visible nowhere." The Flaubertian narrator-God smiles down sardonically on the denizens of his fictional world engaging in the pursuit of false desires--false because mimetic, like **Emma Bovary's** picture-book yearnings. But were he obliged to enter this world, his own desires would presumably be no different. We identify ambivalently with these protagonists whose worldly desires are in principle no more tawdry than our own, yet who are incapable of seeing and transcending this limitation as the narrative voice of the "implied author" permits us to do.

What becomes impossible to figure in the novel is the career of the novelist himself. There are no novelists in Flaubert; the only full-fledged artist is **Pellerin** in *L'éducation sentimentale*, a ridiculous figure whose only real success (as with **Nadar** on whom he is vaguely modeled) comes as a photographer. When in the 1870s Flaubert sought to represent "salvation," his closest approach to the novelist (following three saints and a servant-girl) was the pair of copyists **Bouvard** and **Pécuchet**. In the unfinished part of the novel (which he no doubt could never have finished), B & P are made to "copy" a volume of *bêtises* of the sort that adorn the column-ends of the *New Yorker*, which Flaubert himself had dutifully combed from real sources. But the resentful desire to denounce *la bêtise*, the only one Flaubert shares with his creations, is the most universal of all desires, a modern avatar of what I have called "originary resentment." It is anything but an open door to the novelist's Self--nor to the Selves of those who, world-bound as they may be, can nevertheless read him and identify with his otherworldly stance.

The "spectacle of the closet" provides Proust with an intermediary form of desire that serves to guarantee his first-person satire. Proust doubles the binary opposition between the worldly self and the artistic self, one the slave of mimetic desire, the other liberated from it, by the in-the-world opposition between the narrator and the inhabitants of "the cities of the plain" whose desires are proof of their damnation. A surprising proportion of the personnel of *A la recherche* is eventually revealed as homosexual; the only characters safe from this qualification are those whose desires are exclusively non-sexual, such as the arch-snob **Mme Verdurin** (who ends up **Princesse de Guermantes**), or those who belong to the narrator's childhood world (e.g. **Swann**) and who are no longer around at the end of the novel. Nor--although the **Duc de Guermantes** twice changes his position on the Dreyfus affair, Charlus who once despised Mme Verdurin later courts her favor, and the *côté de Guermantes* and the *côté de chez Swann* are revealed at the end to be one--is homosexuality ever alleged as an example of the lability of desire. Numerous characters (such as the noble and soldierly **Saint-Loup**) are outed in the course of the novel, but no one is presented as going in the other direction, either in reality or in appearance. The outing process that begins on the first pages of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* thus provides a new model for the relationship between the narrator and the other characters. By revealing in language their closeted spectacle, the voyeuristic narrator supplements the purely formal difference between one who speaks and one who is spoken about, one who observes and one who is observed, by the "substantial" difference between one whose worldly desires are labile and tentative and therefore do not define him, and one whose identity as homosexual bears the indelible stigma of a "vice" but at the same time the beauty of a self-determined artwork.

The era surrounding the turn of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence, along with the word "homosexual" itself, of a new homosexual identity, first nosological and then social. For Sedgwick, the source of this identity was what she calls "**homosexual panic**": man's fear of his own potential for homosexual desire. Despite the obvious question-begging that lies behind a term that, like "homophobia," imputes repressed homosexual tendencies to anyone hostile to homosexual practices or lifestyles, Sedgwick has a point. The rise of homosexual identity coincides with the maturation of the market system into a consumer society where the individual self is defined by its choices in the world of desire. The "panic" Sedgwick speaks of reflects the possibility of losing one's (respectable) identity through acceding to a homosexual desire that in earlier times would have been considered a temptation but not a threat to one's sense of self. What she fails to point out is that the flip side of the panicky "homophobia" that led to such celebrated trials as those of **Oscar Wilde** and **Eulenberg** (in Germany) was the positive affirmation of the homosexual self-image by someone like **André Gide**. As Gide's case shows, the homosexual is not simply a creation of the "homophobe" any more than (*pace* **Sartre**) the Jew is the creation of the antisemite. More or less clandestine groups of what we now call homosexuals have existed in all societies we know enough about; but so have groups of gamblers and drinkers. That homosexuality is not a "vice" but an "alternative lifestyle" is not the kind of idea that can be affirmed all at once; it emerges in the late nineteenth century neither from homosexuals nor from "homophobes," but from their interaction in a new socio-economic environment.

In contrast with Gide's prototypical affirmation of gayness, Proust, like Wilde before him (but less tragically), refused the designation of *inverti* and even fought a duel with one who so accused him. Yet it is Proust who is the more profound and true writer in the eyes of Sedgwick herself. In a paradox that is only apparent, Gide's apology for homosexuality was based on a vision of it as a "special taste." There are no homosexuals in Gide's novels, only men with certain "inclinations" toward youth. Even *Corydon*, Gide's celebrated defense of homosexuality, follows the Greek pederastic rather than the modern

egalitarian model. It is Proust's novel that exhibits the true beginnings of the gay lifestyle. Unlike the encounters between Gide or his fictional surrogates and Arab pre-adolescents, the conjunction between Charlus and Jupien, two middle-aged adults whose relationship, as Sedgwick reminds us, is one of the few constant ones in the novel, is the mutual affirmation of a profoundly experienced "natural" identity.

And because of this identity, the narrator's sympathy cannot prevent them from being condemned as inhabitants of Sodom. Although Proust may have shared their tastes, neither he nor his narrator would accept to be called **Sodomites**. Lesser minds than Sedgwick have called this hypocrisy. But the resistance that the novelist shares with his characters is in the service of the one great aim of Proust's life. (He is said to have died of pneumonia brought on by waiting in the cold outside the apartment of a young man he had followed home; but he had finished his novel.)

The "spectacle of the closet" that makes Charlus's character so entertaining and even empowering is not merely the vision of the Other who cannot help but reveal his vices to the secretly observant Self. Charlus exemplifies the desiring self as a self-conscious, self-constructed work of art--the self that was born, one might say, with the portrait of **Dorian Gray**. Charlus's persona with all its ironies and pathos is as emblematic of modernity as Emma Bovary's was of the nascent consumer era. We are all disciples of Charlus, putting forth our desires both brazenly and ironically, but rarely with the panache that is the reward of his assumed stigma. Proust does not so much denounce this model of the self as deny himself the possibility and the pleasure of living it. Through refusing to make his life into a work of art, Proust was able to perform the supreme modernist feat of making a work of art out of his life.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Voice of Authority

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One is easily tempted to invert the ubiquitous rhetoric of "silenced" or "subaltern" voices into a litany of lamentations about the fate of "white males" and majority culture. But neither of these self-annihilating claims gets to the heart of the question of authority in contemporary discourse.

If these words are coming to you via the **Internet** rather than a mass-circulation periodical or a television talk show, the reason is neither that their author belongs to an oppressed minority nor that he does not. It is that the universalizing discourse of the "eternal amateur" (see [Chronicle 122](#)) lacks the essential sign of authority in the contemporary world, that of **expertise**. No doubt it is easier to be credited with expertise in some areas if one can claim a certain gender, ethnicity, or class affiliation. But these special domains are less significant than the publicity they receive makes us imagine. Day in, day out, we live by the discourses of "specialists" in "fields" of knowledge.

Just as we rely on brand name to assure quality and certification to assure professional competence, we rely on specialization for discursive authority. And just as we wouldn't let our eyes be operated on by a heart surgeon, we are not likely to pay attention to the ideas of a scholar trained in one field when they touch upon another. In our complex world, it is surely better as a general rule to rely on the specialist than the person on the street. Yet there is more here than meets the eye. The rational explanation of the advantages of expertise coexists with a more profound ethical explanation: for each to be an expert in his own field diminishes the risk of mimetic conflict. The democratic ideal is not so much equality of means as equality of discursive authority--equality in the exchange of signs. No doubt some bear more responsibility than others and some reap greater rewards, but even the humblest is entitled to a domain of competence in which he reigns supreme. "Socially-conscious" films of the thirties/forties often showed an executive/officer asking a worker/soldier for advice about a technical detail crucial to the enterprise at hand, the point being to demonstrate that every person is a specialist, not a mere cog in the wheel.

In pre-modern society, when sacred ritual was the chief mechanism for maintaining peace, religion was the guardian of our central anthropological intuitions. In the early bourgeois era, secular culture, the subject-matter of the Humanities, came to challenge religion in this role. Today, although we need mourn neither the "death of God" nor the "death of Art," the primacy of these institutions is no more. It is not so much that the source of anthropological intuition has moved elsewhere as that a priori anthropological truth has lost its cultural preeminence. As a result of progress in the circulation of ideas, goods, and, most characteristically, of goods that express ideas, we perceive the human universe as continually regenerating itself rather than as realizing a "plan," divine or human, that was or could have been set out in advance.

The university incarnates the democratic ideal in the realm of knowledge. Each professor is an oligarch willing to negotiate with outsiders only on the neutral terrain of interdisciplinary committees. But once

the division of expertise has been implemented in the field of knowledge, how is general thinking about the human possible?

In the democracy of academic specialization, there is no privileged road to anthropological truth. All fields of knowledge are presumed equally important both to the general public and the student population. Whence the nearly universal disappearance of the undergraduate "core" program. No one any longer has a firm idea of what the young-person-in-general should be expected to know. Each department and subfield clamors for a larger share of the curriculum--and from what Olympian perspective can it be dissuaded? Just as the budgets passed by state or federal legislatures reflect the give and take of democratic market society, the undergraduate curriculum in a democratic university can only be a product of intellectual-political compromise. We should accept this with good grace rather than lamenting the passing of the good old "liberal arts" curriculum.

Liberal arts education has declined because it is increasingly difficult to defend the universal human truths the Humanities preserve from the verifiable ones assembled by the social sciences. The quasi-sacred authority of the humanist based on textual knowledge and the *je ne sais quoi* of cultural intuition or taste gives way to the data-based authority of the social scientist whose conclusions are "falsifiable." Cultural studies replaces cultural study not because we no longer respect the great texts but because it is no longer possible to grant them the equivalent of a class distinction from other texts. The assault of social scientists on the Humanities generates works such as **Pierre Bourdieu's** 1992 *Les règles de l'art* with its "sociological" analysis of **Flaubert's** *L'éducation sentimentale* that rivals traditional literary analysis in detail, if unfortunately not in textual or narrative sensitivity. Bourdieu's analysis singles out Flaubert not as a "better writer" than his contemporaries but as a better social scientist.

Although the future financing of the Humanities may be reduced and/or focused on less traditional objects, neither the cultural masterpieces of the past nor the artistic traditions within which they have been understood risk being forgotten. Of more urgent concern to this writer, in a sense inseparably "subjective" and "objective," is the fate of **Generative Anthropology**. Where the intuition-based Humanities tradition has tolerated in the name of "theory" a good deal of speculation on fundamental anthropological questions, the social sciences demand hypotheses supported by hard data. From the standpoint of originary thinking, cultural phenomena such as art and religion cannot be explained by means of correlation matrices of empirically established "factors"; their esthetic or spiritual "necessity" or "rightness" can only be understood as derived from their crucial originary function of deferring mimetic violence. But this distinction requires an ontological argument of the sort that social scientists are notoriously uninterested in following.

We are all familiar with the critique of the "hegemonic discourses" of past eras that prevented the other members of society from being heard. But the suppressed discourses we recover under such circumstances are by the very nature of "subaltern" situations incapable of presenting a challenge to the established ones; they reveal lost potential, but not genuine alternatives. Although, for example, we are more sensitive to women's contributions to the genesis of the modern novel than in the past, and more likely to read second-level women novelists like **Mme Riccoboni** or **Fanny Burney**, the preeminence of the "crossover" novelists **Mme de Lafayette** and **Jane Austen** has not been seriously challenged. And if it is unlikely that we will unearth unknown masterpieces in the arts, it is even more so in theoretical and scientific domains.

I think that today things are different. **Generative Anthropology** is a new but not a "subaltern" way of

thinking. Quite the contrary of being restricted by the limited perspective of the disadvantaged, it takes a more universal view than the public discourses of the day. Nor is it a coincidence that GA prefers the minimal **Girardian** model of "triangular" mimetic desire to the widely accepted **Freudian-Lacanian** myth of the sexually constituted subject. An anthropology that privileges the unavowable mimetic relation of resentment is bound to be "unpopular," and that it alone can explain the resentment it arouses, arouses still more resentment. Deferral of resentment is the function of all cultural phenomena, including theories about culture; the foregrounding of mimesis puts the knowledge-function of theory (the self-knowledge that, however distorted, results from the originary operation of the sign) into unavoidable conflict with its peacekeeping function. The paradoxical structures of mimesis must be evacuated from the discourse of authority, either by reducing them social-scientifically to evolutionarily derived "behaviors" or by humanistically reducing them to the mythic context of individual psychology.

GA maintains a bastion outside of the authority of specialization within which the mimetic foundations of the human can be elaborated. It cannot define itself as a "field" without cutting itself off from humanity's ultimate ethical enterprise of self-understanding. That the voice of originary thinking is not the voice of authority gives it a critical advantage in the search for anthropological truth. In the human domain, unlike the natural, theories affect the objects of their theorizing. A theory can avoid this only if the dialogue it generates maintains a low enough profile not to influence events. Neither to be silenced altogether nor to occupy a visible place in the public conversation of the age is to realize the dream of the observer whose observations do not affect his human object of study.

The attempt to construct the human in general--to provide an ethical and intellectual basis for what are otherwise the merely diplomatic trade-offs of "multiculturalism"--must take place outside the bounds of specialties. Yet because it would be a strategic error to abandon the community of knowledge altogether for that of prophecy, we must adapt to exploring the margins of our departmentalized world. The pleasures of such an amateur's existence are the reward for our interest in originary thinking.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Impeachment

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Few indeed predicted that after the moderate disaster of the 1998 elections, the narrow Republican majority in the House would hold firm in passing an impeachment resolution against President Clinton. And although it seems unlikely that the Senate will vote to remove Clinton from office, the issue has been infused with a new seriousness. The success of the impeachment effort has for the moment deepened the gulf between Left and Right: as conservatives congratulate the Republicans on their unexpected toughness in the face of popular opinion, liberals accuse them of everything from insanity to treason. The *New Republic* coverage of the impeachment contains some of the most partisan rhetoric I have seen in that moderate journal; conservative publications, on the other hand, not only unanimously support the impeachment but speak ominously of the moral decline reflected in the general public's loyalty to the president.

We stand at the intersection of two apparently contradictory trends. On the one hand, the resignations of **Joint Chiefs** and **House Speaker** nominees on the basis of revelations of distant adulteries give evidence of a growing "puritanism." On the other, the ever-increasing explicitness of sexual discourse betrays increase in "licentiousness." We have the word of **Larry Flynt** that he and **Kenneth Starr** should switch jobs because Flynt can buy sexual confessions more cheaply whereas Starr has been more effective in making the stuff of pornography available to the general public. The two trends are not really opposite at all. They reach their common limit when, discourse having come to include every sexual act we have performed, no one can withstand public scrutiny. What is being maximized under these contradictory names is our mimetic fascination with and resentment of each other's pleasures.

The claim of moral decline is inseparable from the topos of the "golden age" or the "good old days" inherent in culture's deferral of violence. All representation creates a utopia of lost presence. The originary "presence" of the central object on the scene of language is experienced as its absence from the world of appropriation; this pattern is repeated throughout history. The distinctions that defer mimetic conflict are never as absolute as the differences of the past; the ethic they define is looser, less dignified. Dignity is a quality of ritual hierarchy; it does not comport well with the unpredictable interactions of history's movement toward equality.

The ambivalence of our moral relationship to the past may be made clearer by comparing Clinton with two Democratic predecessors: **John F. Kennedy** and **Harry S. Truman**. One need not be an apologist for Clinton's disgraceful behavior with Monica Lewinsky to find it an improvement over the steady stream of prostitutes brought into the White House to fuel Kennedy's sexual urges. These unpublicized commercial transactions had none of the ambiguous sentimentality of Clinton's affair; the women had no incentive to reveal these experiences and would no doubt have suffered had they done so. Some would say that this historical evolution represents a decline in public morality; Kennedy's improper activities were kept out of the public view whereas today one can't let one's children watch the news. I think rather

that indignity is the price we pay for a higher level of reciprocity in human relations. What makes the aristocratic Kennedy-prostitute relation more dignified than the messy Clinton-Lewinsky one is that the latter pair are on a footing of greater equality. That Kennedy's womanizing is never mentioned in the same breath with Clinton's only reflects the vestigial respect for sacred difference that is the basis of all nostalgia.

In contrast to Kennedy's White House whoring, Harry Truman's upright and unpretentious lifestyle is probably what most people associate with the "good old days." One cannot imagine old Harry, who wrote love-letters to his wife for sixty years, responding to some intern's thong underwear. Both Truman and Clinton, as opposed to the wealthy Kennedy, are men of the people, but the man from Hope cuts a poor figure beside the man from Independence.

Yet we must allow that the temptations set before the contemporary "man of the people" are far more varied and insidious than those available to one of Truman's generation. However much we may admire Truman's conjugal fidelity, we need models of behavior that resist and overcome these temptations rather than simply antedating them. It is a sign of humility and not merely of fecklessness that we are chary of casting the first stone. Our outrage at Clinton's conduct is tempered by a sense that moral indignation is more often indicative of hypocrisy than purity. To laugh at Lewinsky jokes is to experience the ambiguous morality of the witness of sexual guilt. Those who accuse **Kenneth Starr** of pursuing Clinton as a means of expressing his fantasies while at the same time denying them are condemning less Starr than themselves.

Moral debates of this sort are ultimately about human survival. Nostalgia for order is not mere narcissism; we resist the breakdown of old differences lest it lead to the breakdown of the social order itself in a Hobbesian war of all against all. What I would call the "generative" view sees the historical dissolution of differences as reducing rather than increasing resentment. Through the consumer activities scorned or neglected by the nostalgics the fall of formal barriers creates more difference than it destroys; rigid hierarchies give way to nuanced distinctions created by individuals themselves through the countless choices that make up their lifestyle. Yet one can recognize the benefits of consumer society and nonetheless express doubt as to its survivability. The spread of "weapons of mass destruction" is an inevitable corollary of the postmodern expansion of consumer choice. Harry Truman, whose lifestyle harked back to simpler days, also marked the limits of our future; he was and hopefully will remain the only person to order the use of nuclear weapons.

The only lesson of history is to avoid the end of history. The progress of human culture is, *pace* our sociobiologists, not a blind Darwinian evolution but the development of ever more efficient means of deferring mimetic violence. And among those means is the one we are about to see implemented in Washington.

The founders of the American republic were astute anthropologists in their own right who recognized the need for procedures to generate unanimity when parties or factions cannot agree. Where it is impossible to reach through compromise a single political judgment, the mechanisms of democracy implement unity on a second level; to settle an issue by counting votes is to refound communal unity by affirming our "equal" descent from our common scene of origin.

I think it was fidelity to this intuition rather than pressure from the demonized "right wing" that led moderate House Republicans to support impeachment as an apt means for resolving the current dispute. A judicial decision is based in principle on the evidence alone; a political vote frankly reflects ideological

differences. Because the trial that follows impeachment is decided by a body of elected officials, it partakes of both the judicial and political processes. Overwhelming evidence of crime would trump political division, but Clinton's is an exemplary impeachment in that the evidence is not of this sort. The vagueness of the constitutional "high crimes and misdemeanors" is the product not of the founders' negligence but of their sagacity. There is no set of objective rules to follow in deciding whether Clinton's acts fall within this category. The two-thirds majority required to convict falls in between the unanimity of a criminal jury and the simple majority of everyday politics. Even if a majority of senators vote to convict and the president nonetheless goes free, the mechanism of judgment itself will have a pacifying effect.

This leads me to the paradoxical conclusion that, although Clinton's offenses are not serious enough to merit impeachment, carrying the process to its conclusion is a useful affirmation of the health of our political and national life. The fact that despite the partisan motivation of the trial the Senate has been able to reach unanimous agreement on at least its preliminary phases suggests that the cure for the salaciousness as well as the divisiveness that encumbered the news throughout 1998 is not to short-circuit the impeachment process but to carry it to its conclusion. What we need the trial to purge is less Clinton's own disreputable risk-taking (please see [Chronicle 151](#)) than our own psychodramatic identification with it. We cannot recapture the simple dignity of Harry Truman, but we can hope for the maturity to enjoy the benefits of modern consumerism and the accompanying "sexual revolution" without losing our ability to distinguish right from wrong.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Socratic GA

No. 159: Saturday, January 30, 1999

I

In a comment on [Chronicle 157](#) ("The Voice of Authority"), **Don Socha** observed that the historical model for the thinker who stands "outside of the authority of specialization" and emphasizes the ethical over the technical is **Socrates**. In his dual existence as a real person and a personage in **Plato's** dialogues, Socrates is the founder of the Western philosophical or metaphysical tradition that privileges the declarative sentence, which presents an objective model of reality, over the imperative and ostensive forms that interact directly with the real world (see ["Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought"](#) in *Anthropoetics* II, 2).

Socrates confronts us with the apparent illogicality of declaring an action to be good in an individual circumstance without being able to define what "good" is. On hearing someone say that X acted courageously or that Y's decision was just, he would ask the speaker to help him define Courage or Justice. Why was this search for the general idea behind particular cases felt to be a danger to Athenian religion and morals? Socrates' interlocutors may have been intellectually lazy but they were not lazy intellectuals; they were good citizens who relied on culturally accepted models of ethical action. The ostensive definition of courage and justice through examples was the affirmation of a traditional, ritual-based ethic. To seek a universal or "declarative" definition is to undermine the authority of these examples and of the social order they sustain.

Plato seeks to vindicate his master by establishing, independently of ostensive religious revelation, the conflict-deferring force of the sign. Plato's designation of the Idea as the object of Socrates' quest prefigures GA's dictum that culture is "the deferral of violence through representation." That A and B both seek "the good" is no proof, despite the Platonic Socrates' repeated assertions, that what is good for B is also good for A. The Idea of the Good is nothing more than the *signified* or meaning of the *signifier* "good"; that we share the word does not imply that a common good exists. But Plato's intuition, which leads him to elaborate in *The Republic* a model of the "good society," can be justified anthropologically if we understand the linguistic sign as in the first place a means of deferring conflict. The notion that we can all commune in the Idea of the Good in the literal sense of founding our community on it is Plato's attempt to relocate the sacred central object of desire within the world of language.

There is no evidence that Socrates thought that such a relocation was possible, let alone that he envisaged a Republic where the Good could become the transparent basis of the social order. Socrates invented a method of criticism; Plato converted the dialogues into discourses and made possible the edification of metaphysical thought. GA avoids the dichotomy of construction and deconstruction inherent in the metaphysical enterprise. Generative thinking is progressive and inclusive. It does not begin by teaching

us that "we know nothing" in order to construct a new edifice on a foundation of originary intuition. It affirms rather that this intuition is already at the basis of what we are doing now, that no possible social alienation can obliterate the originary model of reciprocity that inheres in our common use of language.

What role can GA play in today's agora? If Socrates set himself the task of refuting the smug moral certitudes of his contemporaries, what faces us today is an equally smug lack of moral certitude. Today's interlocutor does not propose traditional examples of courage or justice from which the philosopher can extract the Idea; he denies the existence of the Idea by claiming that each society's concepts of courage or justice are unique and incomparable. Where Socrates showed that the existence of different examples implies that they all derive from a single Idea, our task is to show that the existence of different Ideas implies that they all derive from a single example.

Everyone knows that we must control our tendency to rivalrous or mimetic violence. Everyone is also interested in the origin of the mimetic phenomenon of human language. To engage in "originary thinking," that is, to create a minimal model of our origin consonant with the subsequent history of human culture, is to think the connection between these two forms of mimesis: the creature that uses language evolved from creatures that did not because language was a revolutionary new means for preventing violence.

There are two dominant points of view on the subject of human origins: those who prefer the Bible to Darwin and those who prefer Darwin to the Bible. Either we attribute the specialness of humans to God's unfathomable will, or we deny it altogether. The believers are right to insist that human evolution is irreducible to its biological component. But my idea of a living faith is one that doesn't fall back on the lazy cliché of "God's will" but seeks to understand its purposes.

II

When **Princess Diana** died, I was moved to try to explain why it is that so many people identify with celebrities who possess far more wealth and fame than they. This identification would be inexplicable if it were simply a one-on-one relationship, but it is not. One identifies with Princess Di as a weapon against more immediate rivals. The lady next door has a diamond ring, but it's not as big as Princess Di's. You may be smarter than I, but **Einstein** is smarter than you. Although motivated by resentment rather than charity, compensatory identification with celebrities performs the socially useful function of reducing the overall intensity of mimetic rivalry.

Identification with a distant, superior figure was not always confined to our superficial and voluntary relationship with celebrities. When kings and emperors ruled, their central position made them both loved and hated, indeed, beyond being loved or hated in the normal sense of the term. As a super-celebrity, the king acted as society's mediator, diverting to himself the rivalrous tensions between its members. The ruler was the last worldly hope of the downtrodden; the victim of injustice would typically refuse against all reason to believe that the Tsar, or even Stalin, could have had any part in his misfortune. Generative Anthropology teaches us that this diversionary role is not a fortuitous benefit of kingship but the fundamental structure of the social order. Although lacking any power over our lives, the modern celebrity, like the rulers of the past, diverts toward the center the rivalrous energies of the periphery.

But from the practice of "sacrificial kingships" to our current affinity for presidential scandal, the place

of the throne is also the place of the sacrificial altar; the central figure is a powerless victim as much as the holder of power. At the origin, sacred victim and sacred divinity are alternate faces of a single Being. The most significant of all ethical evolutions is the one that leads from identification with the community's sacrificial power vested in its ruler to identification with the victim as the originary mediator of this power. Although elements of the demystification of sacrifice are present in all the higher religions, notably in **Buddhism** with its doctrine of withdrawal from the world of violent desire, the **Judeo-Christian** tradition's moral analysis is more precise--as witness the "globalization" of the Western exchange system. The most profound intuition of Christianity is that the power of kings--and of celebrities--derives from the community's focusing of its mimetic violence on the sacrificial victim. But to implement this intuition in social institutions is a lengthy and still incomplete historical process.

A key moment of this process occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century; the developed countries of Europe began to evolve into "consumer societies" where the goods one purchased were no longer mere proofs of wealth ("conspicuous consumption") but conveyed "messages" about one's posture toward the world. A society that extends to the majority of its population the possibility of defining themselves through the exchange system is incompatible with unselfconscious assertions of material superiority. The classical wisdom of the "golden mean" and "nothing in excess" (a wisdom accompanied, we should not forget, by sacrifices to various deities) was no longer sufficient to moderate the resentment generated by success. In order to maintain the circulation of the desire for self-worth that sustains consumer society, success in that society is subordinated to the compassionate attention focused on those--ethnic groups, animal species, even geological systems--that can with more or less credibility be considered its "victims." By speaking of victims, one affects to assimilate modern society to the ritual cultures of the past that fall under the Judeo-Christian antisacrificial critique. In consumer society's division of labor, this ideological operation is the province of the "new class" of academics and "helping professions," while those directly concerned with productivity tolerate the anticapitalist ideologues as part of the price of doing society's business.

As the exchange system reaches ever higher levels of reciprocity, it becomes increasingly important to defer the resentment it generates by presenting it as a source of disequilibrium, a world of persecutors and victims. To devalue a priori the object of our worldly ambitions by denouncing our ethnocentrism or even our "speciesism" not only protects us against the danger of success; it is itself a part of this success, a posture that demonstrates our moral worth. Let us consider two resentful people. The first consoles himself with the thought that if his neighbor has a big car, **Michael Jackson's** limo is bigger. But he keeps this thought to himself; it is too openly resentful. The second, on the contrary, openly accuses his neighbor of despoiling the planet's resources by using too much gasoline. **Nietzsche** was the first to see that the second is the cleverer of the two; in our society, he is almost certainly the better educated and better off. Moral indignation against his neighbor permits him to enjoy his own car in good conscience. Instead of seeking compensation through identification, he transfers the focus of competition from accumulating material wealth to denying complicity with the system that provides it.

But just as the insights of GA reflect the experience of consumer society, the further evolution of this social order both presupposes and generates ever higher levels of anthropological awareness. Our task is to make originary thinking accessible to a wider audience as an antidote to victimary thinking and its corollary moral relativism. The moral revolution that produced the democratic marketplace as a solution to the rigid hierarchies of ritual society is founded on the same originary revelation of human reciprocity that inspires the marketplace's critics. All cultures, however diverse in detail, diverge from a common root and are constantly reminded of this root by their use of language. Just as all human languages are too

similar not to derive from a common source, the same is true of human societies. Rather than "What is courage?" and "What is justice?" our new Socrates should ask his interlocutor to consider what originary conditions might account for the fact that human beings holding apparently incompatible concepts of justice and courage can and do enter into dialogue with one another.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Michael Jordan's Productive Resentment

No. 160: Saturday, February 6, 1999

I entitled this series "Chronicles of Love and Resentment" because, however much we want to promote the values of love, we are all creatures of resentment. It is impossible to react to the resentment of others without expressing a resentment of one's own that will in turn be resented at the risk of a spiral of mimetic violence. Yet the indifferentiated chaos of **mimetic crisis** is as unrealizable on earth as the **Kingdom of God**. Our mutual resentments, when properly focused, lead not to the breakdown of the social order but, on the contrary, to its more efficient functioning.

A recent piece on **Michael Jordan** ("The Best: The Secret of Michael Jordan's Greatness" by Jonathan Last in the January 25 *National Standard*) reproaches the media for concentrating on Jordan's clean image rather than the quality that has made and kept him the greatest athlete of his time: his intense competitiveness. Jordan resents anyone whom he suspects of raising the least possibility of his not being considered the best. Last's article cites an incident when he played an outstanding game because he thought an opponent intended to show him up before his family, although the opponent probably had no idea Jordan's family was attending the game. Yet Jordan's resentfulness, although undoubtedly painful to his immediate adversaries, does not threaten the sport with mimetic crisis. On the contrary, by setting him above all other players, Jordan's resentment has not only led to the improvement of his own game, not only encouraged other players to improve in emulation of him, but reduced resentment both in the NBA and in the society overall. Jordan's superiority is such that he is no longer perceived as an equal competitor; from an internal mediator he becomes an external one, a basketball "god" who helps reconcile us to our lesser inferiorities to our neighbors. As Last's article emphasizes, the immense value to sport and to world culture that derives from Jordan's objective excellence is less the product of an extraordinary physical talent than of an immense resentment that, rather than seeking outlets in the sphere of consumption, channels its energies into improved performance. Few of us can dream of excelling in any field as Jordan has in his, but we can all learn from him to recycle our resentment into productive activity.

This is not the way **Friedrich Nietzsche** or his critic **Max Scheler** saw what the former was the first to describe with the French term *ressentiment*. For these philosophers, resentment was sterile hatred generated by another's superiority. In this view, Michael Jordan should be the last person to feel resentment; we should all be resentful of him. Nietzsche's great idea, scandalously insightful yet not really true, is that the Christian priest and his Jewish predecessor are archetypal men of resentment whose relation to the noble pagan warriors they eventually subjugated is analogous to the opposition, drawn by other thinkers of the same era, of the naive, generous **Aryans** to the weak but crafty **Semites**. The turning point of Western history occurs when the priests, by making the pagans feel ashamed of their own superiority, foist upon them humility and self-abasement. No explanation is provided of how this could have come about; the power of Nietzsche's "genealogy" lies precisely in its dismissal of either historical or moral explanations in favor of a cynical *cui bono* ("Who profits?") to which he opposes the

romantic myth of the "transvaluation of all values" by the man who stands "beyond good and evil." Nietzsche would never have developed this argument had he known the purposes to which it would be put both by the **Nazis** and in the postmodern era.

Nietzsche's resentful Christian priests are physically weak, but they are diabolically clever. Max Scheler wanted to set the record straight: resentment is sterile and impotent and Christians are not resentful. Comparing **Jesus** to a medieval knight, Scheler scorns the masses whose resentment drives political movements. Yet Scheler fears the potential power of such movements. If *l'homme du ressentiment* is powerless, why are the philosophers who put him on the map so obsessed by his danger to the social order?

The ambivalence of their analyses reflects their failure to understand resentment as a form of deferral mediated by representation. Its first moment is to stand back from the scene of one's exclusion and contemplate oneself as its victim. The man of resentment appears as not only impotent but perverse; rather than counter the other's superiority he seems to wallow in his discomfiture. **Hamlet**, the archetypal man of resentment for the modern era, delights in the scene of his impotence as much as he suffers from it, both hating and identifying with his uncle (see [Chronicles 141](#)). Hamlet is an aristocrat, not a bourgeois practitioner of "primitive accumulation" deferring the gratification of his desires in the interest of a long-term goal--he is not, for example, engaged in a long-term plot to kill **Claudius** that might misfire if he acted more promptly. On the contrary, his attempts at strategy provoke his enemies to violence--the play that reveals Claudius' guilt to Hamlet also reveals Hamlet's suspicions to Claudius--whereas his own acts of violence are without exception precipitous and reactive.

It is in the absence of any rational connection between the deferral and the accomplishment of his goal that Hamlet exemplifies the modern man of resentment; he lives not for the goal but for the desire itself, which exists only insofar as it remains unrealized. But this is exactly the point: resentment provides a model of deferral that can be made to be productive despite itself. The conditions of market society that grow up around it exploit its potential productivity independently of the subject's willpower. The consumer is not simply incited to express his resentment against social reality--say by attending a punk rock concert--but persuaded to dispel the energy of this resentment in an indefinite series of compensatory purchases. **Emma Bovary** can once again serve as our example: fed up with her husband and disillusioned of her chances at leaving Yonville, she multiplies her purchases of clothes, knick-knacks, art materials. Is she "expressing" her resentment? Or is she learning to focus not on the Paris she cannot have but on the images of Paris she can create within her own life?

Is resentment a "good thing"? The example of Jordan allows us to answer this question in a more equitable fashion than Nietzsche or Scheler. Resentment is the negative moment of mimetic desire in which one sees one's other-model-rival closer to the center of the scene than oneself. The scandal that fuels resentment is denial of our equidistance from the sacred center, as guaranteed by our originary equality in language. In its simplest form, resentment is a social "instinct" that protects us against unequal treatment just as our biological instinct makes us pull our hand back from a fire. When someone tries to push ahead of us in line, our "instinctive" reaction is not to let him in. But since the origin of hierarchical society, this same mechanism can be adapted to more creative ends. Michael Jordan is not resentful of unequal treatment; his resentment is aroused by any hint of challenge to his superiority. We admire him not for this resentment itself, but for channelling its energy into his work with such ferocity that he has been able to maintain this superiority for over a decade on the basketball court, while acting as a decent human being outside it.

But Jordan's "work" itself is not really productive. Only in consumer society do we have both the leisure and the need to admire athletes with whom, unlike the Greeks, we have no prospect or interest in competing. We do not encounter Jordan in the context of our own competitions, but in those whose significance we merely "consume." Yet it is not enough to say that we are Bovarys, not Jordans. The meanings we construct as consumers are potential sources of enrichment for our productive lives. The chain of mediations is longer in some cases than in others, but it goes in the same direction.

Nietzsche might well have admired Jordan's resentful pride as he admired that of **Achilles**, but he would not have called it resentment. My insistence on the term is not, however, an arbitrary matter of definition. The point is that there is no fundamental distinction between the resentment of Nietzsche's priests or Scheler's impotent failures on the one hand and that of Jordan and Achilles on the other, nor between either and that of the Hamlets and Bovarys in between. The political history of our nearly completed century is demonstration enough that fundamental human equality must be pushed back one more level than Nietzsche's anti-Christian critique allowed it. Separating people into the heroic and the resentful, the authentic and the inauthentic, is a prelude to genocide.

Resentment is not something we can abolish. It is inherent in the human condition and just as indispensable to our functioning in society as our biological instincts are to our bodily existence. Our love for our fellows is not a state of effortless beatitude but a continual conquest and refocusing of resentment. We need not model our behavior on Michael Jordan's intimidation of his opponents, but we can all emulate his readiness to be scandalized that others might see us as less than what we can make ourselves become.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Thinking Religion

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If any cultural phenomenon must be thought about it is religion, which is a name for the set of practices that have held human communities together throughout most of human time and space. Because religion and thinking about religion are inextricable yet not precisely identical, we distinguish between "etic" and "emic" ways of thinking, respectively external and internal to their object. Both are necessary modes of anthropological thought. The "etic" description of a religious rite is not objective if it fails to concern itself with the meaning of the objects and gestures it employs; to fail to treat them as representations is comparable to describing the sounds of language without considering their articulation and meaning. Conversely, the "emic" description of the same rite cannot confine itself to the private feelings and interpretations of its participants. All cultural practices define and sustain communities, and all human communities are essentially of the same nature. We should not shrink from applying to all social practices knowledge acquired either through ethnological study or through social experience of how human communities function--which does not imply imposing "our" way of life on others. As is increasingly the case, groups and societies once excluded from anthropological dialogue are having their own word to say; the etic / emic polarity is increasingly a difference of degree negotiated within different fractions of the "marketplace of ideas."

What interests me here is a somewhat different distinction. On the one hand, we can reflect on religious practices from a generative standpoint as carrying out the fundamental cultural operation of *deferring violence through representation*. In this perspective, the heart of religion is ritual and we seek in it what **Girard** calls in *Violence and the Sacred* "the unity of all rites." But it is also useful to classify the different aspects of the fuzzy set of religious practices and activities we empirically encounter in the real world. No doubt these practices all ultimately derive from the same source, but it is not without interest that they present themselves to common sense and its vocabulary as distinct, or at any rate as distinguishable.

In a recent colloquium for the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion**, which he directs, my colleague **Scott Bartchy** presented such an empirical view of religion, dividing its practices into six categories arranged in a circle:



My first reaction was impatience with this as with all pluralistic analyses of cultural phenomena. Generative thinking is minimalist: it derives the multiple from the singular. But there was something to be said for beginning from a set of categories empirically based on our sense of human differences. A way of thinking that respects the human as a whole cannot afford to dismiss our intuitive distinction

between a set of ethical rules and a set of ritual practices, between a rabbi perusing the **Talmud** and a practitioner of **Transcendental Meditation**. Yet I was sure these pragmatic categories could be better articulated within the categories of **GA**. The goal would be to see all these phenomenologically different activities as moments of a single process.

After giving the matter some thought, I found a way to articulate Scott's categories in terms of the three types of utterances described in *The Origin of Language*: **ostensive**, **imperative**, **declarative**. **Ritual** and **Shamanism** may be associated with the **ostensive** (sacred presence), **Mysticism** and **Devotion** with the **imperative** (calling for/to sacred presence), and **Rationalism** and **Right Action** with the **declarative** (creating models of reality). This association reveals, as might be expected, a significant difference between those religious practices based on the elementary linguistic structures--the ostensive and the imperative--and those based on the declarative. Let us first subject these categories to a bit of originary analysis.

The Ostensive Modes: Ritual and Shamanism

With regard to the originary event, Scott's circle is more than a metaphor. The circle of participants equidistant from the sacred center is the structure of the human scene of representation that is reproduced each time a crowd gathers around a street performer or the scene of an accident. Of the six categories, two concretely reproduce this structure: Ritual Performance and Shamanic Meditation. In **Ritual**, priests and officiants participate in a more or less scripted activity that reproduces, via a series of historical mediations, the originary scenic configuration. Ritual operates in a predictable manner; its generative effect is subordinated to the purpose of providing sacred reinforcement to an already-existing order. In **Shamanism** these priorities are reversed. If the priest, however privileged, belongs to the periphery of the circle, the shaman belongs to the center. This often sexually ambivalent figure reenacts the originary scene, recreating in himself the presence of the sacred being before a passive audience who may seek concrete benefits, such as healing, from the "medicine man"'s action. As the mediator to the others of the force of mimetic desire concentrated in the center of the ritual circle, the shaman's action is adapted to a particular crisis rather than, like ritual, serving to ward off future crises by lowering the general level of resentment.

Shamanism, like all cultural practices, is always already becoming ritualized; the second time one visits the shaman, one can predict a little better what might happen. Shamanistic talent lies in impressing one's audience with ever-new manifestations of sacred power. This is the kind of cultural ability we associate more with artists than priests, although the most predictable weekly church services generally involve elements of both long-term institutional variance (*e.g.*, a set of Bible readings that repeat only once a year) and one-time originality (*e.g.*, the sermon). Religion is about events; the shaman concentrates in himself the event-nature of religion. But his originality can only exist within a community whose order is guaranteed by the founding event that others can reenact in ritual.

The Imperative Modes: Devotion and Mysticism

The **mystic** who flees the collective ritual scene demonstrates the scene's persistence within the individual mind. Even in the absence of others, he remains on the periphery of the circle, for our representation of the center is itself a reminder of collective desire. To be engaged in the **Mystical Quest** is to seek to comprehend this originary structure from within the self's internalization of it, to qualify one's peripheral self as capable of evoking the sacred center. The paradoxical object of the mystic's quest

is knowledge of God, that is, an ineffable union with the sacred center in which the center is nonetheless "knowable," as though we could "know" in imperative language and without being able to communicate it to others.

Devotion, in contrast, views the originary central presence as something that must be recalled by the communal imperative of the periphery. In distinction from ritual, Devotion does not employ a sacrificial placeholder for this presence, but seeks to invoke it through shared prayer and other activities that enact the periphery's agreement as to the center's sacredness.

The Declarative Modes: Rationalism and Ethics

As with mysticism, to engage in **Rational Inquiry** is to seek in one's mind alone the mechanism of reason, but this time as a project fully communicable to others in declarative sentences. The rationalist understands that our minds are all formed by the same scene and are therefore bound to function in the same way. But we should not confuse the religious thinker with the metaphysician. Rational inquiry in the religious sphere begins from a revealed sacred text from whose ostensive origin it derives its declarative sentences and their logic. (The rationality of **Lévi-Strauss'** *pensée sauvage* is not bound by such a text but, for that very reason, as soon as it becomes thought, *e.g.*, classificatory thinking, it is no longer specifically religious.)

Right Action belongs with the declarative not simply as a mode of religious practice--the enactment of holy law--but insofar as Right Action is the mode of any behavior toward another at which the sacred center is implicitly present as a mediator. A declarative utterance expresses my renunciation of the center as an object of desire, my willingness to share it through representation with my fellows. Renunciation of the center is the most important cultural gesture of all; the whole edifice of cultural representation, religious and profane, exists only to promote it. If we could have continued to perform without human culture the "right actions" necessary to our survival, we would never have become human.

The four categories associated with the elementary linguistic structures all fall within the domain of what we normally consider as religious. **Ritual, Shamanism, Mysticism, and Devotion** are incomprehensible without reference to the sacred. **Rational Inquiry** and **Right Action**, in contrast, are not. They are associated with religion only when a connection has been made between ethical laws or logical arguments and a revealed text from which these laws or arguments derive. When revelation is no longer a living truth, religious reflection becomes metaphysics and God a construction like Aristotle's "unmoved mover" rather than an object of worship. The declarative in the religious context is never independent of the ostensive from which it originally emerged.

If Scott's categories correspond to the fundamental linguistic structures, why then are there six rather than three? In religion's task of reconstituting the scene's originary configuration, the point of departure may be either the sacred center or the profane periphery. The charismatic shaman differs from the unindividualized officiant of Ritual in that the first recreates the scene from the sacred center whereas the second stands in the center as the emissary of the periphery. All intermediate degrees of centralizing charisma are possible; a rabbi is not a priest, a high-church pastor is not an itinerant revivalist, Billy Graham is not David Koresh. Similarly, all degrees are possible between the prayer of Mysticism and that of Devotion, between the community that calls to God to reappear in its center and the individual who seeks the manifestation of this center for himself alone. Every participant in ritual can dream of becoming the sole focus of sacred revelation; every devotee can imagine himself in solitary communion

with God.

The two declarative modes are harder to connect because they are less well defined in the original schema. But if "rational inquiry" means the decipherment of the sacred text and "right action" the attempt to follow the precepts of such a text, they once again present a polarity between the scholarly representative of the community who interprets God's law and the individual who realizes this law in action.

Needless to say, these reflections cannot substitute for either the empirical study of religious practices or the elaboration of an originary theory of religion. The model they propose nonetheless suggests avenues for empirical research that would subject it to the ultimate test of falsification in the real world. If religious practices can indeed be associated with the elementary linguistic structures, it should be possible to find analogies in the evolution of these practices that would correspond to the movements discussed in *The Origin of Language* from the "inappropriate ostensive" to the imperative and from the failed imperative to the declarative. For example, as we move from ritual to devotion we organize our service around prayer that requests sacred presence rather than sacrificial manifestations of this presence; we observe this in Judaism in the passage from temple to synagogue, in Christianity at the time of the Reformation, in the birth of Buddhism in the context of Hinduism. Similarly, we should expect to find modes of transition from shamanism to mysticism and from mysticism and devotion to rationalism and law-based ethical practice; indeed, the latter transition is illustrated in the West by the whole process of "secularization" that culminates in the Enlightenment.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Failure of Mimetic Theory?

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I was recently asked to read a set of applications for a local postdoctoral fellowship on the theme "**Sacred and Profane.**" There were fifty-nine applicants in the modern period, recent and incipient PhDs in history, philosophy, literary and cultural studies, anthropology, and a smattering of other fields. These young people, most of whom come highly recommended from elite institutions, are a good sample of the academic leaders of the next generation. The assigned subject struck me as particularly welcome, given the characteristic neglect of the sacred dimension in the university--as the meager funding for the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion** bears out. The congeniality of this subject to **Generative Anthropology** was surely the reason I was asked to read these applications in the first place.

The sobering fact is that not a single one of the fifty-nine made any use of the constitutive ideas of GA. Not one referred in his project description to **René Girard's** work on the sacred (it was mentioned once in a bibliography), although the usual names of "French theory," from **Bataille** to **Foucault** and **Derrida**, were much in evidence. Nor were generative ideas presented under other rubrics. Scarcely anyone referred to **Durkheim**, and no one mentioned **Frazer**, **Robertson Smith**, **Freud's** *Totem and Taboo*... The focus on the originary that informs every sacred rite and text was roundly ignored.

When I pointed this out to the colleague in charge of administering these fellowships, he remarked that although Girard aroused some interest twenty years ago, no one any longer teaches this material--my own efforts being a negligible exception. Like deans, directors of academic Centers evaluate ideas the way stockbrokers evaluate companies, and mimetic theory was not showing a profit. Yet when I offered the explanation that its "weakness" was that, unlike feminism, post-colonial studies, or cultural studies generally, it did not express the resentment of a well-defined clientele, this explanation, obvious to any student of GA, caught him unawares. It is precisely because GA can explain the success of these other theories better than the theories themselves that it is unpopular. The mimetic theory of desire and the anthropology that has sprung from it are too powerful for their own good. Those who employ the rhetoric of justice cannot admit the resentment without which they would never have thought of justice.

It is disheartening for a man of my relatively advanced age to discover after years of attempting to promote a great and widely ignored idea that this idea is already considered a thing of the past. We can accept that our modes of thought must be superseded by better ones; we would have it no other way. But the conceptions of GA are more powerful than the tired and underpowered ideas that hold the field. At best, thinkers like Bataille express awareness of the problematic relationship between violence and the sacred; they never articulate this relationship into a model. Or if Bataille is really better on the sacred than Girard, one would think it would be worth demonstrating. Our fellowship applicants find it more useful to our understanding of "sacred and profane" to confront Bataille with figures like **Maurice Blanchot** or **Pierre Klossowski** (author of *Roberte ce soir*) than with Girard; such are the privileges of "theory."

Standardization is indispensable for a large, complex enterprise, and the very connectivity that allows marginal activities like *Anthropoetics* and these *Chronicles* to survive on the **Internet** intensifies the contacts among academics and the attendant rigidity of their *lingua franca*. Just as programmers complain about the bugs in **Windows 95**, I complain about the bugs in the academy's intellectual software. When persons who formerly saw each other at conventions twice a year attend conferences together twice a month, trying to revamp the language of intellectual communication becomes as impractical as rewriting **Microsoft Word**. The increasing dominance of the profession by the cruder forms of victimary thinking is a reflection less of the politics of its members than of the principle formulated decades ago by the legendary **Mancur Olson**: small determined groups organize, large diffuse groups do not. The trump card of the victimary is our fear of blackmail by those whose victimization we might be accused of perpetuating, and the most fearsome are those most willing to perturb the system to make themselves heard. The more squeaky the resentment, the more oil we pour on it. It would be indecent to point out that today's academy rewards the champions of the world's resentments far better than the representatives of their purported oppressors; it would be as though one were to complain of the disproportion between **Jews** and **Nazis** in chairs of **Holocaust Studies**.

But after all the ironies have been savored, the fact remains that the ideas that this column exists to perpetuate are failing to reach the current generation of young scholars, and that whether one call these ideas **Mimetic Theory**, **Fundamental Anthropology**, **Generative Anthropology**, **Girard**, **Gans**, or whatever, they are not being practiced by sufficiently numerous and well-placed people to ensure their survival into the next generation. I hope by raising the issue to raise our own level of resentment so that we may become more active on behalf of our intellectual cause than in the past.

While I am in so frank a mood, I will point out a key, perhaps predictable, weakness of our intellectual ambit: its lack of communal cohesion. That we know better than anyone that mimetic rivalry is a reality of life does not foreclose the possibility of intellectual solidarity. Nor does a propensity to becoming interested in the theory of this rivalry connote in some obvious way a rivalrous personality incapable of recognizing the merits of others. Yet it is rare that former students of Girard even bother to cite each other's work, let alone attempt to build on it. A comparison in terms either of academic success or of mutual assistance between the students of Girard and those of **Paul de Man** would be embarrassing. Not only are Girard's students reluctant to cite each other, they are not even likely to refer more than obliquely to their mentor, even when their work relies on and develops his ideas. I would like to see this situation change, in my own intellectual interest and in that of all of us. We should abandon the distorting tendency--in a world whose watchword is the denunciation of "the Subject"--to equate ideas with persons ("I use Foucault and a little Lacan"). Once we resolve to think in terms of ideas, we are then more ready to give credit to their creators whatever their current market value.

The failure of socialism has made Humanities departments the last refuge of the **revolutionary intellectual** whose function is to articulate the resentment of the oppressed. As the political expression of this resentment has been discredited, its cultural expression becomes the sole guarantee of the theories that exalt it. I do not deride this resentment; it is as justified as any other. Perhaps it can only be integrated into the modern (that is, Western) system of thought by the kind of mediations practiced by our victimary colleagues, who are amply rewarded for their services. But however valuable these services, they are not consonant with the spirit of institutions designed to provide knowledge of the human whose value is independent of the individual or group that articulates it.

This is no doubt an unpropitious time to expect from the institutions and organizations of the Humanities

openness to new ideas that conflict with their dominant political mindset. But this does not mean that individuals cannot be found within these institutions and organizations who are open to new and challenging ideas. A recent experience, as encouraging as the fellowship applications were depressing, was a recent visit, on **Wolfgang Iser's** kind invitation, to his graduate seminar on cultural theories at the **University of California, Irvine**. The seminar had already read and discussed some of Girard's and my books along with those of other theorists such as Geertz and Leroi-Gourhan. The dialogue went on for nearly three hours; rarely have I had so challenging and responsive an audience. Such an occasion gives proof that, given a chance to compete on an equal basis with other modes of thought, **originary thinking** can make a powerful impression on the minds of the next academic generation.

Victimary ideas are the university equivalent of **bilingual education**; they serve above all the interests of their academic sponsors. The "dominated" both inside and outside the developed world will profit far more from acquiring and adapting to their needs the techniques of economic and political rationality than from learning new means to denounce the social order that created and, however imperfectly, practices these techniques. The best way to promote genuine equality among the peoples of the world is not to indulge and excuse unproductive expressions of resentment, but to work toward integration into the world exchange system on the level of ideas as well as of goods and services. As developments in less ideologically charged areas like popular music make clear, the result is not deadening "McDonalidization" but enriching cultural interaction. The Western-originated exchange system is not the adversary but the only competent agent of this interaction. Whatever its problems, they can only be resolved from within; the alternative is resentful isolation a la **North Korea**.

Perhaps sooner than we think, we may expect a return to generative thinking, which American anthropology abandoned two generations ago for the relativistic **Boasian** culturalism that is the direct intellectual ancestor of the multi-culti of today. GA's usefulness in facilitating intercultural dialogue will be recognized when the interested parties come to understand that to affirm the moral superiority of less over more successful individuals and societies is to offer them the same consolation that masters have traditionally provided their slaves.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Deconstructing the Subject

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I have just finished teaching the French Department's introductory "theory" course this quarter. It began with the usual suspects, from **Saussure** and **Lévi-Strauss** through **Derrida**, **Foucault**, and **Lacan** to **Kristeva** and **Irigaray**, but the last two weeks were a bit different. One was an introduction to postcolonial theory, with the kind assistance of my colleague **Françoise Lionnet**; the other was an introduction to **René Girard**. Rereading Girard is always an enlightening experience; I expect to say more about this in a future column. Here, I shall concentrate on what all these discourses have in common: the critique or deconstruction of the "Subject."

Lévi-Strauss, **Barthes**, **Foucault**, **Derrida**, **Althusser**, **Irigaray** may differ in many ways, but their discourses have a common plot: that of undermining the pretensions of the "Subject"--self-contained, self-present, self-important, white, male, patriarchal, phallogocentric, solar, Western, father, author, creator, master. Girard too deconstructs the human subject by revealing it to be founded on the justificatory myths of emissary violence. As for postcolonial theory, it combines a neo-Marxist attack on the Western Subject with a tentative model of global dialogue that redefines subjectivity as reciprocity rather than resented domination. Rather than criticize postcolonialism's victimary tendency, it is better to encourage the dialogic bent that distinguishes it from the elite discourses of the European left and makes it more open to generative thinking.

There is a resentfulness about "theory"'s critique of the Subject even in its most abstract moments that betrays its political origin. Whether at its most subtle in Derrida or its most delirious in **Deleuze-Guattari's** *Anti-Oedipe*, the critique reflects the same frustrated agenda. All these writers, from the hyperdogmatic Althusser to the décontracté **Baudrillard**, are reacting to the failure of socialist utopia that is the defining truth (as the **Holocaust** is the founding event) of postmodernity. The insistent critique of the tyranny of the Subject hides the fact, obvious in any clear depiction of political and economic realities, that the market system is the least, not the most, centralized of exchange systems, the one that generates the most widely diffused resentment precisely because it is the one least adapted to the focusing of all love and hate on a central sacred figure. The verbal abuse directed at an abstraction reflects "theory"'s frustrated lack of a real villain. In its victimary forthrightness, postcolonial thought comes closer to revealing this than the rhetorical contorsions of the "theorists."

The more abstract the argument, the more the political message becomes insidious and allusive, but this message is always the same. Foucault's hallucinatory vision of the market-system in the guise of **Bentham's panopticon** says it all: capitalist modernity is a prison more confining than all the tyrannies of the past. This is not a thesis that can withstand open examination, but it is a powerful channeler of resentment. It explains better than any purely intellectual argument why the great names of "French theory" are who they are--and why Girard's is not among them. Theory is the deferral of the truth that,

whatever its flaws, the market system is the only viable modern social order. It expresses the frustration of a critique of capitalism that has no alternative to provide. I am pleased to note that post-colonial theory has taken to reproaching Foucault for the passivity with which he constructs his model of "power" as everywhere and nowhere, located in no center that can be attacked. (I am not sure what center the postcolonialists should be attacking, but their critique is valid nonetheless.) All these deconstructions that remain "in the margin" of the system they denounce are, in their very abstruseness, expressions of the failure of socialist revolution to overthrow the phallic father once and for all. This is true even of Althusser, whose Stalinist dogmatism coexists with the evacuation of the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic. To be "interpellated" by Althusser's "ideology" is the same as to be "spoken" by a Foucauldian "discourse": there is no opening to viable political action in either case.

This is not to say that "French theory," as some on the Right would like to think, is mere empty ratiocination. Just as the frustrated romantic utopianism of 1848 gave rise to the last great outpouring of literary creation in the postromantic and early modernist periods, so the prolongation of this frustration after World War II inspired a newly profound understanding of the anthropological underpinnings of the individual human Subject, who never really exists except in interaction with a human community. The deconstruction of the individual subject is an avowal of the mutually mediated nature of human desire. To claim that no central Subject is the supreme Author-Creator of the Work of Art or the self-present originator of the discourse by which we classify human reality is to take the first steps in the direction of the mimetic theory of desire and of **Generative Anthropology**, which has never concealed its debt to the Derridean notion of *différance*/deferral. Dispensing with the concealment of failed political hopes behind the resentful rhetoric, Girard's deconstruction reveals the hidden underpinnings not of the spurious construction of the logocentric father but of the necessary constitution of the human in general. There is no undercurrent of resentment in Girard's text--save on the immediate level, toward his "theoretical" rivals. His anthropology contains no "bad guy" that we love and hate and cannot do without; the violence he reveals as our own cannot be denounced as that of some ill-defined Other. It is ours, and yet we are able to comprehend it and, in part, overcome it by means of the anthropological understanding expressed in Christianity--as well as, I would add, in the generally ignored and disdained historical follow-up to Christianity, the market system in its mature, "consumerist" phase.

The great anthropological intuition of deconstruction is that the *supplément* and *différance* that "Rousseau" or "Saussure" as spokesmen for Western metaphysics attempt to ignore must be brought to light within metaphysics itself. But Derrida is too prudent to accept the existence of a premetaphysical form of thought such as **Heidegger**, the originator of deconstruction, finds in the **pre-Socratics**. In recent years, Derrida has ventured into the domain of religious thought, but he remains tone-deaf to religion because he conceives its discourse as indistinguishable from that of metaphysics. Metaphysics operates by declarative logic, whereas religious discourse is founded on ostensive revelation. The examination of the discourse of revelation leads not to an endlessly regressive series of discourses, but to the concrete experience of the origin of language.

By revealing the human and not merely conceptual violence that subtends the metaphysical world of "presence," Girard allows us to reconstruct the origin that deconstruction forever defers. The deconstruction of metaphysics is not an end in itself; it has value only in the service of an anthropology, or to put it still more concretely, of an ethic. To understand the origin of culture and of language itself as an ethical phenomenon is a huge step beyond denouncing the constitutive illusion of a historically bound family of discourses. Originary thinking explains and comprehends deconstruction, whereas deconstruction can only try to explain away originary thinking as a futile attempt to explain the

inexplicable. The **Gospels** tell us that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; similarly, *différance* was made for humanity, not humanity for *différance*. To abandon one's commitment to the human in reaction to the failure of a political dream is truly, in the hoariest cliché of Marxist rhetoric, to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

As the foregoing makes clear, I am not dismayed by the decline of "theory" in favor of the less subtle thinking of cultural studies and postcolonial theory. These modes are, in the very assertiveness of their victimary politics, healthy developments that lead us out of a labyrinth of metaphysical abstraction into a landscape where real anthropological thinking becomes possible. Surely, one might object, the denunciation of "the West," like the feminist attack on "the patriarchy," is a project of the same ilk as the deconstruction of "the Subject." But the openness of its political agenda revives the historical dialectic that had been stifled by the veiled and contorted language with which deconstruction and related discourses hide the inavowable demise of their own agenda. Third-world countries, after all, have real problems that demand real solutions; they cannot nourish themselves à la Foucault on the bittersweet opiate of failed socialism. Bringing the focus of "theory" back to human reality can only have a healthy long-term effect.

The end of "theory" is the beginning of wisdom, which is to say, of ethics. Whatever the current readings of the ideological tickertape, the most humanly useful anthropology will win out in the end. We all have a stake in hoping that the victory goes to the most inclusive and generous theory, for if we remain attached to the discourses of resentment, our fragile humankind is unlikely to be around for the start of the fourth millennium.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Is Anthropology Empirical?

No. 164: Saturday, April 3, 1999

I was recently asked to review *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), the latest book by **Derek Freeman**, the New Zealand ethnologist who made his reputation with an earlier (1983) book that punctured the myth of **Margaret Mead's** trouble-free Samoan adolescence, setting off the "Mead-Freeman controversy." Reading the literature that surrounds the controversy, particularly Mead's classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* itself, leads me to reflect on the degree to which anthropology is or is not an empirical science.

What we learn from studying less advanced cultures is clearly not independent of the fundamental anthropology that we bring to bear on them. Freeman is surely right to point out that as a disciple of **Franz Boas**, Mead sought confirmation of Boas's cultural relativism by finding in Samoan adolescents an exception to the "rule," advanced by biological determinists such as **G. Stanley Hall** (author of a major 1904 study), that adolescence was necessarily a period of turmoil. In **Karl Popper's** terms, the existence of even a single exception would "falsify" this rule (just as the existence of one black swan would falsify the hypothesis "swans are white") and thereby lend corroboration to the view that humans are raw material molded by culture.

Obviously the nature/nurture controversy is a matter of degree; no one can deny the constraints imposed by biology. Thus the question arises as to exactly on what terrain the battle was contested. What points can be scored against biological determinism by the study of a particular culture? Even if we suppose that Mead invented her picture of Samoa out of whole cloth, it remains useful to examine what claims she makes for it. What Mead sought in Samoa as proof of the Boasian doctrine of cultural determinism was neither the infinite variety of custom nor an exception to a biological "rule" in any rigorous sense, but the one thing that no culture can supply: a world of conflict-free desire.

What has made **Coming of Age in Samoa** the most widely-read ethnological study ever written is that Mead offers the lay reader the guarantee of academic science that there exists a land where adolescent sexuality, more specifically, adolescent *female* sexuality, is without conflict. Not coincidentally, this paradise of sexually available female adolescents is the dominant setting for pornography. These nubile girls on whom every culture, Samoan or other, depends for its self-reproduction and thus for its survival are the privileged objects of sexual desire, defended as such against unauthorized males by both external and internal restraints. Among the latter, we find the valorization of virginity instilled in Samoa by both Christian pastors and native tradition. But the most tenacious obstacle to free sexuality even in the absence of societal controls is the woman's own "narcissistic" resistance to the man's desire generated by her awareness of her desirability. Mead's extraordinary success reflects the fact that she makes Samoa the objective correlative of an erotic dream: young female sexuality endlessly offering itself to male desire without ever becoming caught up in the infernal dialectic of all desire, not even to speak of the danger of

conception. This is the "innocence" that four generations of readers have found in Mead's account of Samoan adolescence.

In this erotic version of the *société commencée* of **Rousseau's** *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, desires come into existence only to be immediately satisfied, reborn, and satisfied again in an unending blissful cycle. Despite the author's express recognition of the advantage of advanced civilization's "recognition of many possible ways of life" over the "one way of life" of Samoa (247-48), *Coming of Age in Samoa* has been a major source of reinforcement for the Rousseauian myth of the natural harmony of desire, along with its uglier corollary, the blank check offered to resentment against "unnatural" modernity in general and market society in particular. Although professional ethnologists have taken Mead's work less seriously than the general public, its enormous popular success has nonetheless influenced academic anthropology in the direction not merely of cultural relativism but of the active mistrust of Western civilization that continues to pervade the softer social sciences.

Thus Mead's contribution to the "nature/nurture" controversy was her "discovery" of conflict-free desire. And this, empirical data aside, is also the central focus of my objection to her work: desire is conflictive by its very nature. But although readers of these *Chronicles* are unlikely to find this objection particularly controversial, it contravenes the core rules of ethnological research. My claim that there is no conflict-free society is not based on an exhaustive study of human cultures; it is not based on any study at all. If the human itself is defined by the deferral of mimetic conflict through representation then clearly no human society can ever simply abolish such conflict.

"But then," the reply might be, "wouldn't your hypothesis be disproved by a society where there is truly no conflict, just as the white swan theory would be disproved by the existence of a black swan? If GA isn't falsifiable, then it's just an ideology, not a rational, scientific theory."

My answer is that, of course, GA would be "falsified" if there existed a society without conflict, just as evolution would be falsified if God were observed creating a new species, or the laws of chemistry would be falsified if one mixed hydrogen and oxygen and obtained gold. The point is that scientists don't waste their time (i.e., don't get grants for) setting up experiments to observe hydrogen and oxygen turning into gold, even if from a Popperian standpoint the fact that the mixture has always produced water until now is no proof that this will be the case on the next occasion. (Popper's example is the possibility of the sun not rising tomorrow.) Chemical knowledge allows us to reject such an experiment as a waste of time. That anthropological knowledge has apparently not advanced far enough to qualify the search for conflict-free societies in the same manner is not something that GA should be blamed for.

Although in anthropology, as in every domain of empirical study, there is need for a fundamental theory to precede data collection, the general view is that we have an overabundance of speculative theories about the human in relation to our empirical data. First religious and then secular thought (metaphysics) have reflected exhaustively over the centuries on "the proper study of mankind," not to speak of the theorizing of several generations of social scientists. For well over a century, speculative thinkers like **Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger** have been declaring their speculations something other than metaphysics or even than philosophy; scientists are understandably wary of new ways of thinking that make similarly untestable claims. But as a consequence of this suspicion of speculation, anthropology has lost the vocation of human unity that alone justifies its name. On the one hand, we study material cultures behavioristically, from without; on the other, we describe symbolic cultures from within. If physical anthropology permits itself to make general statements about biological humanity, cultural

anthropology forbears to understand its subject-matter in terms of overall human qualities, let alone to see "higher" cultures as the fulfillment of the aims of "lower" cultures. The task of explaining human historicity--without which we cannot explain human history--is abandoned to crude forms of Darwinian speculation indifferent to the essential difference between biological evolution and cultural "evolution," between genes and "memes."

GA attempts to provide a minimal theory that will permit empirical anthropology to avoid absurd projects like the search for a conflict-free society. As I have often had occasion to emphasize in these *Chronicles*, the elaboration of such a theory is not unscientific simply because it does not focus on testing its falsifiability.

Let us take as an example the foundation of GA: **Girard's** model of mimetic desire. No one can deny that the mimetic (and potentially conflictive) nature of desire is corroborated by a vast amount of data in which the mediator of the desire is overt or can be revealed unambiguously. But neither a "triangular" mediator nor mimetic conflict is an overt component of every desire. In such a case, the mimetic theory of desire becomes vulnerable to the same critique that Popper leveled against psychoanalysis. Once desire is defined in terms of an "unconscious"--whether the Freudian unconscious or what might be called the "Girardian unconsciousness" of the mediator, it becomes undetectable by what are normally considered empirical methods. (It is nevertheless surprising that no one seems to have ever taken the trouble to test **Freud's** assertions using normal scientific procedures. It is at least conceivable to construct tests of the components of the "Oedipus complex," for example by comparing children brought up in different types of family structures. I speak here from ignorance, but I assume that had such tests been performed, their results would have become common knowledge.)

Overt imitation of a mediator of the sort that would be testable through observation or interrogation corresponds to Girard's category of external mediation, whereas the typically modern form of internal mediation falls under the category of the unverifiable "unconscious." This allows for a useful distinction between Girard's original model and that of GA. Girard's original idea is that the internal mediator is an identifiable individual of the sort he discovers in novels like **Dostoevsky's** *The Eternal Husband*. But from a minimalist standpoint, the mediation of desire does not require the presence of a specific mediator; the fundamental structure of mediation is that of mimesis in the **Aristotelian** sense: the objects of our desire are mediated through their representations. The point is not to suggest formalistically that a certain form of representation generates desire, but rather that the essential human category of representation permits desire to be generated prior to the formation of any specific human "triangle." In this sense, representation is the constituent factor of the market; advertising only thematizes this relationship.

Thus the invisible element of our model of desire that makes the behaviorist reject it as unfalsifiable is nothing so elaborate as the Freudian unconscious; it is simply the human capacity for representation--in its minimal form, for language. (It is to **Lacan's** credit to have redefined the Freudian mediations of desire in terms of language, although without seeing that this definition undermines the Freudian ontogenesis of desire.) Theories of the human that take representation into account not simply as a "behavior" but as a fundamental constituent of desire cannot be falsified in the normal sense of the term. To say, when A desires B, that A's desire is mediated by a representation of B is not testable in any simple manner. There is no way to remove all representation of B in order to test the hypothesis, since precisely representation is not limited to some formal procedure of designation but can be accomplished by any sign that the desiring subject encounters on his scene of representation.

We may understand Mead's utopia of unproblematic desire as a vision of human society within which the genesis and continued function of language and culture as means for deferring mimetic conflict are wholly forgotten. This utopian deproblematization of language is the very condition that makes anthropological description falsifiable and, therefore, "scientific." This is corroborated by the fact that Freeman's more nuanced description of Samoa, although surely more realistic than Mead's, does not make the connection between the elements of conflict it refers to and the human use of representation any more than hers. It is because of this that Freeman can "empirically" discover conflict in Samoan society as a biological rather than a cultural necessity.

The conclusion would seem to be that "scientific" anthropology as it is presently constituted must choose between cultural utopianism and biological realism, that a critical understanding of mimetic desire necessarily evades it. Only when anthropological controversies no longer rage over the existence or nonexistence of societies without conflict will GA's reinterpretations of the empirical data, however persuasive, be accepted as scientifically relevant.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Marx-Freud Alliance

No. 165: Saturday, April 10, 1999

Lately I have been making a serious effort to understand why, nearly forty years after **Girard's** *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* and twenty after my *The Origin of Language*, the mimetic triangle and its cultural implications remain so little known, while hundreds of academics continue to pay tribute to the Oedipus complex and its derivatives. In previous columns (see *Chronicles* [115](#) and [125](#)) I have remarked on the contemporary propension to phallus-worship--a resentful idolatry whose believer delights in watching the organ deflate. But however defective the Freudian paradigm may be as originary anthropology, its heuristic value is demonstrated on a daily basis.

An example in my own academic field of nineteenth-century French is the highly respected study *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Harvard, 1989; henceforth FIR) by **Charles Bernheimer**, who, sadly, died last year of pancreatic cancer. The commodification of female sexuality is associated throughout the century, from **Parent-Duchâtelet** (author of a groundbreaking 1836 study on Parisian prostitution) to **Zola** and **Huysmans**, with figures of decay and degeneration; the prostitute is viewed as a sanitary instrument of purgation and fantasized as a dangerous vessel of contamination. FIR shows how the exaltation of the masculine world of art depends on the degradation of female sexuality into a form of exchange-value. Although everyone knows that **Balzac**, **Flaubert**, **Baudelaire**, **Zola**, and others often wrote about prostitutes, Bernheimer reveals prostitution to be at the narrative core of their work. Contemporary feminism has sensitized him to expressions of dehumanizing contempt and fear of women, and of sexuality itself as associated with women, that scholars once simply took for granted.

In order to make these points, Bernheimer makes use of a double intellectual strategy, all the more significant for never being presented nor perhaps even reflected on as such. On one hand, the exchange of woman's sexual favors is used as a discrediting "figure of ill repute" for market society ("capitalism") itself. On the other, male attitudes toward women are explained by reference to Freud's theory of sexuality, particularly fetishism and the "castration complex."

FIR reveals, in other words, the living reality of the old alliance between **Marx** and **Freud** that writers like **Herbert Marcuse** once hoped to transform into a theoretical synthesis. The construction of this synthesis has been abandoned on the highest levels of "theory"--although the last few books of **Fredric Jameson**, the United States' most eminent living Marxist, probably contain more Freudian (and **Lacanian**) vocabulary than Marxian. As FIR illustrates, however, this theoretical neglect simply reflects

the fact that, on the level of "practical criticism," the matter is tacitly taken as settled: Marxian-cum-Freudian deconstruction of the "phallic" bourgeois-patriarchal Subject is the critical lingua franca of our era. The theme of prostitution, a relation both sexual and commercial--the archetype of "commodity fetishism"--offers an exemplary validation of this alliance.

Movements like feminism, postcolonialism, gay studies, by resituating in the domains of gender, race, et. al. Marx's binary opposition of capitalist and proletarian, tend not only to ignore the difference between individual and collective motivations but to obscure the more fundamental point of Marxism as a doctrine of revolution. The Marxist demystification of capitalist economic relations was intended to generate a revolutionary consciousness that would lead to the abolition of these relations. In contrast, post-Marxist modes of demystification operate wholly in the world of discourse, through innuendo; the mere exhibition of unequal relations that contravene what I would call the originary ethic of reciprocity suffices to condemn them. In books like *FIR*, the reader is presented with a series of discourses about woman in general and the prostitute in particular that we are obliged to denounce as "chauvinistic," "patriarchal," "misogynistic," in association with a "bourgeois ideology" that we are consequently required to denounce in its turn. The reproachful condemnation of the fantasmatic pictures of commodified woman's devouring sexuality, touching not merely decadents such as Huysmans but Freud's teacher **Charcot**, is extended to commodities in general, just as the brothel client's attitudes are assimilated to bourgeois ideology. Condemnation of prostitution becomes condemnation of bourgeois society in general. But the author is not content to condemn male power over women by analogy and in conjunction with the capitalist's power over the proletariat: the ideology of the "patriarchy" is not understood as the expression of its will-to-power but as the male's reaction to castration anxiety, which he projects in a sacrificial mode (the words "sacrifice" and "scapegoat," but not the name Girard, figure in the book) onto the woman's "castrated" genital organ.

As Freudian readings go, these are among the best; always sensitive to the nuance of individual texts or artworks, Bernheimer is not Flaubert's **Pécuchet** for whom "everything became a (castrated?) phallus." Yet, despite its insights, this is the criticism of Hegel's "beautiful soul": lacking a credible revolutionary utopia, Bernheimer condemns bourgeois society as immoral without proposing how things might have been different. As an extreme example, he reports (p. 236) in a vaguely indignant tone that it was proposed at one time to make it a crime to knowingly transmit a sexual disease, comparing this proposed law to similar laws today that forbid the knowing transmission of AIDS. Should such laws then be abolished? or is it merely that their "victimization" of AIDS sufferers marks them as deserving of our moral disapprobation.

In the alliance between "Marx" as the denouncer of capitalist exploitation and "Freud" as the demystifier of male pretensions to the phallus, the Marxian element condemns the bourgeois social order, presumably in terms of a historical dialectic, while the Freudian, by asserting the transhistorical permanence of male castration anxiety projected onto the female, guarantees the relevance of this condemnation even in the absence of such a dialectic.

Where the Marx-Freud alliance sexualizes the historical, we would do better to historicize the sexual. Is it not nascent consumer society rather than an eternal castration anxiety that generates the anxieties these authors express in images of castration? Isn't the source of these horrific images of female sexuality more simply explained by the resentment of the desirer for the desired other, intensified in this era by its mediation through a "rationalized" exchange system that facilitated the purchase of sexual favors by upper-class males (and also allowed courtesans to acquire considerable wealth by manipulating their

market position)? Instead of looking down one's nose at the benighted and hypocritical nineteenth-century bourgeois, it would be a far more useful, if no doubt more difficult, enterprise to explain the sexual tensions of the era in terms of the conflicting demands of private family life, the public world of market production, and the ever more dynamic intermediate activity of consumption. For example, as Bernheimer notes following **Alain Corbin**, the common brothel of the early part of the century gives way, on the one hand, to specialized--high "value-added"--brothels for the rich, but on the other, to *brasseries à femme* where the purely commercial aspect of prostitution is mitigated by "romance." In either case, the simple commodification of sexuality gives way to more highly mediated forms. But such mediations evolve in tandem with the phenomenon of conjugal love, the modern history of which also begins in this period.

The problems of constructing modern market society--the society from whose safety retroactive social critics express their facile indignation toward its forbears--cannot be understood in terms of the simplistic binarism of dominators and dominated, bad guys and good guys (or gals). Only when the resentful energy that still animates our cultural criticism--and Bernheimer's book is one of the more distinguished achievements of this criticism--has been converted into a sympathetic curiosity toward our own social order will the really interesting questions about the interplay within it of public and private, commercial and sexual relations be asked and answered.

In the ten years that separate us from FIR's date of publication--the **USSR** still existed then--gender relations have grown less strained, and a male writer about prostitution would probably not feel himself obliged, as Bernheimer does in his introduction, to agonize about his own complicity with the male fantasies that he studies as narrative mechanisms rather than reflections of a brutal patriarchal reality, nor constantly to repeat terms like "sexist," "chauvinist," "patriarchal" to forestall the reader from being seduced by these fantasies. But the Marx-Freud alliance is still alive and well.

Forgetting about Marx for the moment, what makes Freud's theory of desire so much more attractive than Girard's? FIR answers this question very simply: its sexual essentialism gives it a prefabricated semantics where Girard has only a syntax--a "nature" where Girard has only "culture." Notions such as castration complex, fetishism, and voyeurism derive from a set of fantasies, as much Freud's (and Bernheimer's) as those of his patients, focused on the genitalia. The "natural" physical manifestation of sexual difference is substituted for the social reality of sexuality in its historical context. Were I not averse to victimary terminology, I would not hesitate to qualify the definition of women (and of men) in terms of the phallus and its castrated lack as "sexist." Feminists have, needless to say, preceded me in this denunciation, but without ever entertaining the possibility of simply detaching the mimetic element of Freud's theory of desire from its genital-centered essentialism. The function of this essentialism, in Bernheimer's book as in many far less distinguished works, is to permit the denunciation of certain desires--those of the bourgeoisie, of consumer society in general--as perverse and unnatural by analogy with Freud's distinction between normal genital desires and their "fetishistic" or "voyeuristic" perversions.

In a word, what Freud provides contemporary criticism is ultimately the same thing that, as we saw in last week's [Chronicle 164](#), **Margaret Mead**'s very un-Freudian picture of **Samoa** provided a simpler era: a guarantee of the romantic-revolutionary denunciation of market society as "unnatural." Should we really be surprised that academic intellectuals prefer to theorize their resentment of the bourgeois social order rather than the mechanisms through which this resentment is generated--and subsidized?

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Back to the Origin of Language

No. 166: Saturday, April 17, 1999

It is both easy and hard to believe that my first book of Generative Anthropology was written over twenty years ago, before the term itself was invented: *The Origin of Language* (TOOL), published by UC Press in 1981, was written mostly in 1978. Now I have returned to the origin of language, which has been on the back burner since that time. Much has been written on the subject since then, virtually none of which takes TOOL's analyses, let alone its general perspective, into account. The reason is clear: writers on the origin of language are linguists, paleontologists, primatologists, sometimes psychologists and philosophers, and I am none of these things, nor did I make an effort in TOOL to speak a language that any of these groups could recognize as relevant to their concerns. This time I intend to deal explicitly and at length with competing arguments and relevant data. The passage of years makes all the more urgent my attempt to bridge the gap between the humanities and the social sciences by demonstrating the power of the paradoxical thinking characteristic of the former in the liminal domain of language origin so important to the latter.

The point of the originary hypothesis is not to present a particular scenario for the origin of language, but to propose the necessity of a public scene of origin, of an event that originates the function of human language to memorialize events. The origin of language is also the origin of religion, art, in a word, "culture," and gradualist hypotheses or those that begin from private, local communications have even less plausibility in explaining the public scene of human culture than that of language.

There is a constitutive difference between humanistic and social science thinking, one that in "all other" cases corresponds logically to a difference in subject matter, but that comes to a head on the particular subject of the origin of language. Social science thinking is empirical; it must formulate concrete hypotheses that facts can falsify. Humanistic thinking, on the contrary, is concerned in the first place with the production of ethically meaningful discourse; this is true whether one is analyzing a poem or defining "the human" in originary terms. Such thinking resists immediate falsifiability by data because its function is to provide a reasonably stable basis for human interaction. Such, for example, are the texts of *revealed religion*, the chief locus of humanistic thinking throughout the centuries. An example of an intermediate form of thought is *political theory*, which purports to advise us on the best system of social organization. Such thinking is not falsifiable in the Popperian sense since it seeks to impose an order, not simply to observe one. Yet political theories are falsifiable by human behavior in the long term, as most people today consider "socialism" to have been.

To the extent that the science of human origin is concerned with concrete data, its hypotheses are drastically modified from year to year as new fossils and artifacts are discovered. This is as it should be in the empirical domain. But our general understanding of the human cannot simply wait until all the facts are in; the sparse prehistoric data amount to little weighed against all we have learned from human

history. That the paradoxical structure of mimesis provides the basis of human culture is revealed throughout this history, and if our contemporaries have been loath to recognize it, their reluctance is unlikely to be greatly affected by the results of further paleontological research.

But although Generative Anthropology is primarily concerned with the ethical consequences of the originary hypothesis per se rather than with any version of its "minimal" realization, if we wish GA's scenario of the origin of language to be taken as something other than an imaginary atemporal model like the "social contract" or John Rawls's "original position," we must be willing to situate it, however tentatively, in the context of the current understanding of human and linguistic prehistory.

This poses to originary thinking (at least) the following empirical questions:

1. At what stage of the evolution of the genus *Homo* did language arise?
2. What kind of communication system corresponded to the tool-making of *Homo erectus*, *neanderthalensis*, and early *sapiens*? Is it useful to postulate lower levels of human language prior to the origin of "modern" humanity?
3. Since prehumans, on the model of contemporary apes and (especially) monkeys, must have had a considerable vocabulary of signals, how if at all was this material integrated into the sign-system of language proper?
4. By what mechanism did the originary sign give birth to a full-fledged phonetic system characterized by "double articulation" of morphemes and phonemes?

On the basis of my research so far, here are some preliminary answers to these questions:

1. **At what stage of the evolution of the genus *Homo* did language arise?**

Although I have always avoided pronouncing on this question in my books, in *Chronicle* No. 52 (July 27, 1996), I suggested that the origin coincided with the cultural "take-off" that began around 35-50 TYA (thousand years ago). I no longer consider this a minimal hypothesis. Studies of the human vocal tract (see Philip Lieberman, *Eve Spoke*; Norton, 1998) would seem to indicate that the earliest modern humans of 100-150 TYA were already "designed" for speech, with the lowered larynx and extended pharynx of today. The selection of these features is difficult to explain in the absence of true human language. More fundamentally, the minimal event of the origin of language should not be presented as the flowering of a complete human culture, but as its first moment, one that would have led to the selection for the vocal traits of modern humans. Such an event must therefore have occurred at some time before 150 or 200 TYA.

In my earlier thinking on this subject, I was influenced by the line of thought exemplified by William Noble & Iain Davidson in *Human Evolution, Language and Mind* (Cambridge, 1996), who note the lack before about 50 TYA of creativity and planning of the sort that would suggest the presence of language. But further reflection shows that this argument, based on the cognitive function of language, should be rejected as metaphysical. For GA, language is in the first place a means not of knowing the world but of deferring intrahuman violence. What in TOOL I called the "formal" system of language and the "institutional" system of ritual were no doubt for a long time barely distinguishable; the fossil record (ritual burials date back at least 100,000 years) corroborates GA's hypothesis by suggesting that some degree of religious culture existed among even the earliest users of language. Early language conceived as possessing an exclusively ritual or

"religious" function could well have coexisted with the highly stable technologies of the Paleolithic.

This historical minimalism only increases the cognitive impact of the originary hypothesis. All the literature on the origin of language begs the question of its origin by presenting it as advantageous for survival, despite the large brain, lengthy infancy, and inefficient vocal tract it requires. Aside from gradualist non-explanations of the emergence of language in the wake of human cognitive development, no one has formulated a plausible hypothesis of the birth of language, let alone for its coincidence with religion, which (in the guise of "symbolic activity") is nonetheless, ironically enough, the sole archaeological criterion for the presence of language. Only the hypothesis that this origin resulted from a crisis of mimetic desire explains the generation of "transcendence" from "immanence" that uniquely defines the human.

In this perspective, the cultural "take-off" of 50 TYA—a highly relative term, cultural evolution henceforth being measured in thousands of years rather than tens of thousands—would best be explained by the emergence of what I called in TOOL "linguistic universality," the taken-for-granted characteristic of mature language that "everything" can be spoken about, a development that would put language to work--replacing the old "instinctive" signal system--in everyday practical activities. For the moment it is difficult to speculate on the specific causes for this technological and artistic acceleration.

2. **What kind of communication system corresponded to the tool-making of *Homo erectus*, *neanderthalensis*, and early *sapiens*? Is it useful to postulate lower levels of human language prior to the origin of "modern" humanity?**

Whatever kind of language the tool-making practiced by *erectus* requires, what is significant about it is rather that the weapons produced (little evidence of which is available) make plausible the originary moment of "mimetic crisis." If the early emergence hypothesis presented above is correct, the Neanderthals were descendants of the originary scene and must have had some level of human language and culture. For example, they appear to have buried their dead, although this may have been in imitation of *homo sapiens*.

3. **Since prehumans, on the model of contemporary apes and (especially) monkeys, must have had a considerable vocabulary of signals, how if at all was this material integrated into the sign-system of language proper?**

The words of language, like signals, are part of a communication system, but words are also objects of reflection linked to concrete, event-related memories. The human ostensive "lion" is superficially analogous to an ape's emission of a lion-call, but neither the emitter nor the receiver of the call can refer in its memory to a sign, a signifier-cum-signified.

The principle of the word, as opposed to the signal, is the deferral of appetitive activity. The one tells us to follow our instinct to devour or to flee, the other, on the contrary, tells us *not* to act on our desire. Since these two functions are diametrically opposed, it is difficult to assume that signals were simply taken into the language. I think rather that the early stages of language coexisted with an extensive signal system; words, at that time, would have been rare and sacred.

4. **By what mechanism does the originary sign give birth to a full-fledged phonetic system**

characterized by "double articulation" of morphemes and phonemes?

This is the most speculative of the four questions. The articulation of sounds could, of course, have already been present in the signal system; language differs from signal by the signifier-signified distinction, not the articulation of the signifier. But this seems far-fetched; an exchange of signals as rapid and articulated as language would, following the "looks like a duck" criterion, simply *be* language.

My hypothesis is that the articulation of different sounds *preceded* rather than followed the multiplication of meanings. The original "vocabulary" would be a set of variations on the "name-of-God" that is its first element. From this incantatory glossolalia--typical of prayer even in the "higher" religions--different meanings could come to be associated with different variants. This provides an explanation of the system of "minimal pairs" that distinguish words today. The entire phonetic system need not spring up full-blown; it can be generated through varying the constitutive elements of the originary sign.

Over the next few months I will be seeking further means of fleshing out the originary hypothesis by reference to empirical data; my goal is to produce a book about the origin of language that neither the specialists in the social sciences nor the "theoreticians" in the humanities will be able to ignore. When my research has progressed a bit further, I intend to publish a bibliography of language origin on the *Anthropoetics* site to which all will be invited to contribute. I would also ask readers of these *Chronicles* to challenge the originary hypothesis and any auxiliary hypotheses I present here or elsewhere as strongly as they can, and to point out to me any materials that they believe might falsify it.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Origin of Language II: Scientific Perspectives

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As everyone who studies the subject knows, the origin of language was banished from the arena of scientific debate by the **French Academy of Sciences** in 1866. When I published *The Origin of Language* in 1981, there were still only a handful of works on the subject. Today there are dozens of books and thousands of articles. The **Language Origins Society** or **LOS** will hold its fifteenth annual meeting this year. Language origin study has become an interdisciplinary subfield of the human sciences.

There are other examples of enduring interdisciplinary specialties. But because the origin of language is a special subject, its colonization by the social and biological sciences holds a special significance. As the late **Jan Wind**, a founder of LOS, affirmed a few years ago, "The question [of the origin of language] had until recently mainly been tackled by students of the humanities, unfortunately without much progress. Only during the last few decades some progress has been achieved, mainly as a result of the sciences having contributed their share" (*Language in the Würm Glaciation*, ed. Udo Figge; Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1995, p. 183). The withdrawal of language origin from the purview of humanistic thinking follows a long line of similar withdrawals, of which the most notable occurred in the Renaissance when sunspots became visible in **Galileo's** telescope. But whereas, "anthropic principle" or not, the line between cosmology and anthropology is easy to draw, that between humanistic and scientific anthropology is the archetype of all untraceable boundaries. Whatever the existence of the human mind might be able to tell us about cosmology, to treat the cosmos as the product of a human-like "will" is not the way to find out about it. Humanity itself being part of the cosmos, the "enlightened" argument arises that anthropomorphic explanations even of human phenomena are inappropriate. Just as the Genesis creation stories cannot help astronomers to explain the birth of the solar system, so, this line of reasoning goes, humanistic speculations on the origin and essence of the human are of no use to serious students of the subject.

The prevailing scientific view is that language is an "instinct" (**Steven Pinker**), an involuntary mechanism like walking (**Derek Bickerton**) that evolved in the same manner as all other such mechanisms. Our eye or our spleen is a simple product of biological evolution; to believe our language "organ" is any different is a relic of cultural anthropomorphism on a par with believing that the universe was created in six days. Humanists who concoct originary hypotheses are a latter-day version of the theologians who sought to deduce the functioning of everything in the universe from theological first principles.

As for why the overwhelming majority of the language users throughout history and even today have not been isolated individuals for whom language-based thought serves primarily to rehearse practical

activities but members of communities whose most intense experiences of speech, as well as of other forms of representation, take place in the context of collective religious rites, the question always remains unanswered, even though the proofs that a given prehistoric variety of *Homo* possesses language are always provided by ritual-related materials such as burial goods or cave paintings. One sometimes finds references to religion: for example, "[Religions] give us a sense that all is not completely beyond our frail control, that via prayer and ritual we have recourse to mechanisms that will allow us to ensure that life will proceed in a tolerably benign way" (Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*; Harvard, 1996, p. 103). But no one bothers to explain why, when language appears, these reassuring mechanisms always come with it. Presumably the problem has been, if not solved, then laid to rest long ago; there is a curious unstated indulgence of nineteenth-century explanations of religion among scientists who would never dream of citing someone like **Max Müller** as an authority on the origin of language. Religion is the Achilles' heel of positive anthropology, not because true believers cannot accept this anthropology, but because this anthropology cannot explain the existence of true believers.

Derek Bickerton's *Language and Human Behavior* (Washington, 1995), originally a series of lectures given at the University of Washington in 1992, is perhaps the most coherent and thoughtful synthesis of scientific thought on the origin, evolution, and functioning of human language. Bickerton is one of few who understand that (1) whatever the neurological status of language today, it cannot have emerged as a gradual adaptation of prehuman signal systems but constitutes a radical new development; and (2) language cannot be explained as a superior tool of cognition generated by our steadily increasing intelligence--rather, this intelligence is a product of human language. Hence Bickerton recognizes that the emergence of language in what he calls the "magic moment" poses a problem, one for which he has no very likely solution. His hypothesis that language first arose as a means for "exchange of information about food sources" (p. 56) is no more plausible than any other gradualist-utilitarian hypothesis of origin, and solves no better than they the conundrum that he himself describes so clearly: "[F]ew have thought about much about the most crucial features of the magic moment: how the hearers knew that it was a meaningful utterance and knew how to respond appropriately" (p. 54).

Where Bickerton goes wrong is in his refusal to view language as primarily a means of communication although its birth, as we see, can only be imagined in a communicative context. Language is indeed a system of representation, but the locus of representation is not in the first place within the individual but among the members of the linguistic community. The only plausible answer to the question of how one could begin to speak without potential hearers—a question that those who explain language as a product of genetic mutation find particularly delicate—is supplied by the originary hypothesis. The generation of the "vertical" world of signs from the "horizontal" world of appetitive relations is only conceivable in a collective, *scenic* context.

(*Soit dit en passant*, I also differ with Bickerton's strict dichotomy between weakly syntactic "protolanguage" and true Chomskian language--a "Rubicon" whose crossing he goes so far as to explain as the result of a "single [genetic] mutation" (*Language and Species* [Chicago, 1990], p. 190)! On this point, I find far more plausible the gestural explanation of the origin and evolution of syntax offered by Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox in *Gesture and the Nature of Language* (Cambridge, 1995). As I pointed out in [Chronicle 166](#)--following Philip Lieberman in *Eve Spoke* (Norton, 1998)--the virtual absence of progress in the Oldowan and Acheulian stone tool industries need not reflect, as Bickerton seems to think, a qualitatively lower level of language competence; my hypothesis is that language was reserved for sacred rather than "profane" everyday activities.)

Professional linguists like Bickerton are rightly suspicious of "cultural" theories of the origin of language whose airy phrases float far above the subject. But GA is not a "cultural" theory any more than it is a theory of natural science. Originary thinking is irreducible to the subject-object dichotomy of classical metaphysics, either in its positive mode as the basis of the natural and human sciences or in its paradoxical mode as the unthinkable foundation of cultural self-analysis; it offers an explanation for the emergence of both.

The fact that communication can take place without representation does not imply that representation is born independently of communication. The point is to explain why **non-representational** communication became insufficient and why **representational** communication offered a solution. But this cannot be done if human language is conceived as the autonomous activity of biologically independent individuals. To claim that the human is a communal reality and that the meaning of a word does not exist within the individual brain but in the context of a linguistic community does not imply that language emerges from a mystical entity like the "collective unconscious," nor that a hypostasized Language is the real agent of our speech. No doubt, whether or not it is useful to speak of a "language organ," a "language instinct," or a "Language Acquisition Device," the individual user of language must learn to process both incoming and outgoing utterances on his own. But the origin of this operation, and its most urgent task, cannot be understood in terms of the Subject-Object relationship of the individual to his environment, or even in terms of the communication among subjects concerning this environment. It is only comprehensible as a means of mediation of the mimetic desire of the subjects themselves, an instrument of "the deferral of violence through representation." Only thus, in empirical terms, can we explain the common birth of language and the sacred.

Why do social scientists react with such hostility to the hypothesis that language originates as a means of deferring intrahuman violence rather than as a means of facilitating hunting, scavenging, or tool-making? The simplest answer is that improving the interface between the species and its environment is the typical biological enhancement of reproductive fitness, whereas preventing its self-destruction is not. Other animals have communication systems that operate to reduce intraspecific violence (e.g., submission and mating rituals), but these are always dealt with separately from the ostensibly more language-like signal systems that provide information about the environment. It seems disproportionate that so rich and complex a tool of communication as human language could derive from a mere conflict-avoidance mechanism. In any case, the specific occasion for our "stumbling" onto language is the least preoccupying of the problems raised by language origin, since it gives so little insight into the complexities of syntax, and of the body and brain that generate it, on which the energies of the paleolinguistic community are focused. That it might provide a special insight into the nature of human society is dismissed as an irrelevancy.

In *The Origin of Language*, I proposed a nascent dichotomy in originary language between the "formal" and the "institutional," between language proper and ritual, or simply "culture." This dichotomy eerily anticipates the functional division between students of language and students of culture, between linguists and their allies in physical anthropology, neurophysiology, psychology, primatology on the one hand and humanists and cultural anthropologists on the other. The search for the origin of language along the two branches of this dichotomy leads away from the locus of their original unity. As the second group turns away from the problem, declaring that in principle it has no solution, the first studies language in isolation from human culture as if it were a biological organ rather than an instrument of reciprocal communication.

Bickerton explains, I think quite cogently, the origin of human self-consciousness by the emergence, as the result of language, of areas in the brain that can be detached from the immediate task at hand to engage in "off-line" reflection on the "on-line" processes going on in other areas. The language user can reflect on his own "instinctive" activity; the human plans how to catch tomorrow the mammoth that eluded him yesterday while the cat, or even the chimpanzee, thinks only about the rat it is chasing. But this freedom conferred on the human brain by language is not, as it is described, that of isolated individuals. Language and thought can be acquired only through mimetic interaction with others, with all the difficulties and dangers it occasions. There are few more convincing demonstrations of the need for ordinary thinking than the fact that the finest minds investigating the origin of language within the tradition of empirical science find themselves limited to such impoverished and unrealistic visions of humanity's mental landscape.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Origin of Language III: Toward Synthesis

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During my first weeks of reading through the recent literature on the origin of language, the progress in scientific research in the various relevant domains did not seem to have resulted in any notable convergence with the positions of originary thinking. I was happy to see that the **Chomskian** dogma concerning our "language acquisition device" had been largely abandoned, along with the absurd idea of multiple genesis of *Homo sapiens*, and to learn of the renewed interest in **gesture**, both as gesticulation and as "signing" (as in **ASL** and other languages for the deaf). But none of this theorizing came anywhere near the central core of the originary hypothesis: the reconstruction of the founding event of the human.

Derek Bickerton, whose work I discussed in [Chronicle 167](#), recognized the anomaly of the origin of human language and its discontinuity with previous forms of communication. But, on the analogy of the differences he discovered between *pidgins*--improvised, ungrammatical *linguae francae* for communication between speakers of other languages--and *creoles*--pidgins that have become the native tongue of the second generation, who spontaneously impose on them syntactic order--Bickerton splits this origin in two, as (1) the origin of a "protolanguage" of some two million years' duration, and then (2) about 50,000 years ago, as a result of the maturation of the language-selected brain, the origin of syntactically modern language. This allows him to sidestep the real question of what motivated the first origin, which he implicitly admits he cannot answer.

Thus it seemed that, whatever advances science would make, it would never even begin to understand the need for an originary hypothesis as proposed in my 1981 book, *The Origin of Language*. This incomprehension, while frustrating, had its compensations; it suggested a nicely dichotomous complementarity between "humanistic" GA and the "positive" biological sciences, cultural anthropologists remaining essentially uninterested in the question of human origin.

Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species* (Norton, 1997) puts the situation in a new light. This ambitious overview by a neuroscientist of the emergence, evolution, and present reality of the brain's language function takes long strides toward the position of the originary hypothesis. It is both disquieting and exalting after all these years to see a biological scientist associate language origin with ritual, interdiction, and the difficulty of making peace among groups of male hunters. The world of positive thought has been unknowingly convergent with the generative theory of mimetic representation; empirical science has moved tentatively toward the positions I elaborated twenty years ago on the basis of an a priori hypothesis of language and culture.

This implies the coming together of the "two cultures," the scientific and the humanistic, that have remained until recently more separate than ever and that still remain so in important respects. For those of us who are convinced that the middle path taken by **Generative Anthropology** between the cultural and the natural had produced the first secular synthesis of the positive "is" of nature and the ethical "ought" of culture, this development obliges us to reexamine our intellectual strategy. Thus far, this middle ground, formerly the exclusive terrain of religion, has been approached almost exclusively from the humanistic side. Will that continue to be the case now that connections are beginning to be drawn between the functioning of the brain and the operations of thought? And what of the "soft" social sciences? Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* made strong, specific ethnological claims that the ethnologists themselves have largely ignored. Could advances in the study of biological evolution herald a renewal of anthropological research into human origins in the face of the mind-numbing emphasis on cultural "diversity" that has politicized the field and marginalized, even stigmatized, its original evolutionary concerns?

Deacon focuses on language from the standpoint of brain structure. Bickerton understands that the oversized, cortex-heavy human brain is the product of selection for language rather than the other way around, and conceives of the prefrontal cortex as the locus of the "off-line" operations of human language in contrast to the "on-line" processing of other species. But Deacon's specialized knowledge of the interconnections in the brain between language and perceptual and motor functions allows him to avoid Bickerton's dichotomized vision of language as with or without syntax. Deacon's adaptation of **C. S. Peirce's** semiotic categories of *icon*, *index*, and *symbol* to the stages of evolution of animal communication and its expression in the brain is a model of the scientific assimilation and application of philosophical thought.

But even more than its author's semiotic sophistication and neurological expertise, what sets *The Symbolic Species* above all other scientific writing on language origin is the power of his anthropological intuition. This researcher of brain functions has succeeded in articulating the social nature of language better than any social anthropologist. In speculating on the possible origin of this new form of social activity, he has revived in a new context the powerful intuitions of the nineteenth-century evolutionists, most notably, the link between language and ritual and their function in establishing peace through the interdiction of ethically destabilizing behavior.

To the context of meat-eating and all-male hunting parties familiar to students of the originary hypothesis, Deacon adds a consideration that my own reconstruction of the originary event may fairly be said to have neglected: the necessity of reinforcing the monogamous bond within which our care-demanding "neotenous" children are nurtured. Because the protohuman society depended on meat, groups of male hunters might be absent from home for long periods. In order to assure the stability of the couple and protect the male investment in his offspring, the symbolically guaranteed bond of **marriage**, based not on mere association but on a true ethical interdiction, would become advantageous for the group as a whole in a way that had never previously been the case in primate societies. This reasoning is not uncongenial to the originary hypothesis. The intensity of the mimetic crisis in which the "aborted gesture of appropriation" became the first "symbolic" sign would surely have been augmented by the fear of each member of the group that not only his life but his genetic future would be in jeopardy if another member of the group preceded him in appropriating the central animal/object.

Deacon's account is even closer to the originary hypothesis than this powerful but still external ethical motivation suggests. He conjectures that the group's members learned the new form of association

embodied by the sign through the collective repetition in "ritual"--a term whose sacrificial connotations he admittedly appears to ignore. He understands both that the original function of language is ethical and that the crucial ethical problem is "to mediate . . . peace" (403) and that the meaning of language is a social reality not reducible to any individual's brain state. Deacon even recognizes the power and centrality of religious belief as a feature of the human use of symbols, and although he presents these beliefs as overreachings of our symbol-centered brain rather than as extrapolations from the common origin of language and religion, he makes this common origin more plausible than any other scientific work I have seen. If Deacon does not carry his intuition of the commemorative function of originary language to its radical scenic conclusion, his hypothesis is by no means incompatible with an event of origin.

At the end of his book, as is not uncommon in such endeavors, Deacon speculates on the possibility that we might create artificial beings capable of using language. Dismissing the digital computer as a model of language use--the final chapter contains an enlightening discussion of **John Searle's** well-known "Chinese room" model of computer intelligence--Deacon suggests that only a creature possessing "sentience," the ability to perceive and react to its environment, could be taught to use language as we do. This may some day come to pass. But Deacon's description of the brain's Darwinian networks of synapses in which the fittest associations survive to become "knowledge" suggested to me something different: a new justification for humanistic thought.

In recent years, some of the great mathematical conjectures of the past have been proved: the four-color theorem, even Fermat's "last theorem" that $x^n + y^n = z^n$ has no integer solutions for $n > 2$. But the proofs, rather than being short and elegant, are virtually incomprehensible, have been obtained through exhaustive computations made possible by computers. Command-driven digital computers are not appropriate models for the neural networks of the brain. I allude to these results only as an illustration of the difference between demonstrating and understanding even in the rule-governed world of mathematics. In the brain as Deacon presents it, this distinction becomes a dichotomy. Although we can of course use our brains to reason logically, as I hope I am doing now, the operation of representing by means of a sign the originary central object, and to a non-vanishing degree, every subsequent object, is a self-confirming one, the association with a perceived object not of a mere "index" but of a *meaning* whose apparently atemporal objectivity depends on the human configuration of mimetic desire that surrounds it. From the standpoint of logical thought, we legitimately speak of the paradoxical nature of this operation, yet from that of the brain's operation, there can be no "paradox" but only the reinforcement of certain synapses at the expense of others.

This suggests that, however far neuroscience may advance in its description of the operations of the brain, it can never explain the emergence of significance and in particular, of language. This impossibility does not reflect the presence in human language of some mysterious indeterminacy of the kind that led the mathematician **Roger Penrose** to seek the source of the human sense of free will in quantum undecidability. It is merely an artifact of the incommensurability between our logical use of concepts and the way they are generated in the brain. Were the brain truly, as **Artificial Intelligence** researchers used to claim, a biological **Turing machine**, this problem would not arise, but then human consciousness and the use of signs would not have arisen either. But because our brain is capable of reacting to a collective situation of mimetic crisis by transforming an appetitive association into an inhibitory sign, its operation cannot be described in algorithmic terms; its representation of its environment is interdependent with that environment. Whence the need for the paradoxical, culture-based models of "humanistic" thinking to represent this interdependency in terms that can make it

understandable, that is, able to become in turn an object of potential desire for these very same human brains.

I do not intend to imply by this that members of the scientific professions are incapable of generating such models, as Deacon clearly comes very close to doing. The need for a separate profession of humanists diminishes every day. Yet we may be consoled by the fact that the tradition within which our thought has been disciplined does not seem fated to lose its relevance. On the contrary, the confluence of humanistic and scientific thought can only make the study of cultural phenomena more exacting. This is the best news in a long time for practitioners of **Generative Anthropology**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Little Bang Theory

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Some years ago, a reviewer of one of my books spoke of **Generative Anthropology** as a "big bang" theory of human origin. Even the [motto](#) I have chosen for GA echoes this slogan: **The fox knows many things; the hedgehog, one big thing.**

Although the "big bang" idea is superficially attractive, it is a formula guaranteed to backfire. Whether or not the big bang of the cosmologists is destined to remain accepted doctrine, anything self-styled "big" in human affairs is setting itself up as a target. This has been recognized at least since **Herodotus'** anecdote about the king who walks through his garden lopping the heads off the flowers that show above the others.

My friend and colleague **Douglas Collins** of the University of Washington has always warned me against making any "big" claims. **Proust**, he points out, got away with writing the biggest novel in history by calling everything "small": *la petite madeleine*, *le petit clan* (the Verdurins), *la petite phrase* (from Vinteuil's sonata), *le petit pan de mur jaune* (in a Vermeer painting). Modern art and especially modern theory are characterized by what Collins calls *pre-humiliation*: in order to occupy center stage, one must first be inoculated against the resentment that the center-stage figure attracts. If, as many have noted, **Hitler** looks a lot like **Charlie Chaplin**, it is because these two most center-stage figures of the first half-century had extraordinary gifts for pre-humiliation.

All this being said, I would still not wish to disguise GA's real character if I thought that the term "big bang" did it justice. But in truth it does not. The term reflects a misunderstanding of the originary hypothesis to which I may inadvertently have contributed, but which my recent research makes me anxious to correct.

I have often noted that GA seeks to infiltrate the central terrain between metaphysical and scientific discourse heretofore occupied solely by religion. Where the first--and the "ultimate" cultural discourse of deconstruction makes this explicit--considers the human as always already existing so that its origin can never be discussed, the second treats humans as simply another type of animal so that their origin is not worth discussing. That the opposition between the two is not eternal is brought out by the emergence of interesting new positions, some of which I have alluded to in the recent series of *Chronicles* on the origin of language. But it remains true that only religious thought, in its awareness of the crucial nature of human origin, has dared to propose what **Wolfgang Iser** would call its "staging" as an event.

It is religion, not GA, that puts forward the "big bang" theory of human origin: *In the beginning the Lord created the heavens and the earth*. To call the originary hypothesis a "big bang" is to invite comparisons with **Genesis** and with lesser "myths of origin." GA with its "minimal hypothesis" of origin should more

appropriately be characterized as the *little bang* theory. This term expresses GA's similarity to and difference from religion, as well as its scientific ambitions.

In the first place, big or little, as a "bang" theory GA has an inherent sympathy for religious thought. As I pointed out in *Science and Faith*, even naïve creationism has a point against **Darwinism** in that the latter fails to account for the unique mode of humanity's emergence. The fact that we are the only species that can theorize our own origin is not independent of the nature of this origin. Humanity can only begin with a "bang." Hitherto, only religion has articulated this fundamental intuition; if it can now become assimilated within secular thought, religion cannot be denied the respect due its priority.

But in the second place, GA as a "little" theory is not merely in step with the tactical (read "fake") minimalism of other modernist and postmodernist modes; it is in accord with the primary scientific rule of parsimony. Although I have been saying for a long time that GA was "minimalist," I have not always drawn the full measure of conclusions that this status implies.

The idea of the "minimal hypothesis" is that we should seek the simplest configuration capable of generating the scenic nature of human language and culture. But the minimality of our scenario cannot be measured by the simplicity of its configuration alone. Adopting the "early" hypothesis for the origin of language--that language emerged at the time of the first divergence of *Homo habilis* from the Australopithecine line some two million years ago (see [Chronicle 167](#))--forces us to minimize not only the situation but the human potential of its participants. These are not ready-to-speak **Cro-Magnons**, creatures human in every way but one, but ape-men whose humanity is limited to the little bang produced by the founding event.

The point of situating all the categories of culture--desire, resentment, sacrifice, religion, morality, esthetics, exchange--as "moments" within the originary scene is to define their minimal originary relationship to the emergence of the sign, not to imply that in a single moment a group of protohumans created an entire culture. The scientific understanding of the emergence of *Homo sapiens* from our common ancestor with the chimpanzee is necessarily gradualistic because it seeks to explain a development that took millions of years involving bipedalism, tool-making, the liberation of female sexuality from the oestrus, and many other traits in addition to language. But now that scientists such as those mentioned in the last two *Chronicles* have come to recognize that human language represents a radical break with earlier primate communication systems, the little bang of the originary hypothesis becomes all the more plausible as arguably the most parsimonious way of representing this break. Language and event go hand in hand; a minimal amount of language, a minimally memorable event.

It is this memorability, minimal as it may be, that is retained by religion in ritual and its accompanying myths. To deride religious narrative in good Enlightenment fashion for transforming the little bang into a big bang is to commit a category error. If in the past decade or so scientists have begun to appreciate the radical difference between human and animal minds, brains with or without human language, this is something that religion has known all along. To be able to respect this knowledge while incorporating its minimal core into a scientific hypothesis is the contribution of originary thinking's little bang to human science.

This contribution is minimal in another sense. It does not so much resolve as evacuate the classical problems of metaphysics with which **Kant** constructed his famous antinomies of pure reason--the first of which, as I recall, posed the insoluble question of the existence of an extra-worldly creator. This dismissal is perhaps still too radical for philosophy to assimilate. But from the standpoint of

anthropology conceived as the foundational human science, it is a confirmation of scientific principles from within the world of humanistic discourse. If we would understand the origin not only of language but of religion and culture in general, we will have to translate our humanistic paradoxes into terms accessible to rational thought.

Generative anthropology, as the students in the GA seminar have learned, is not a quick fix that short-circuits historical specificity. On the contrary, the little bang offers only a minimal point of departure for the historical study of culture. Its most powerful effect is to imbue culture with a sense of its own evolution. However unfashionable it may be nowadays to speak of cultural forms as evolving, the general public has always known this, and the recent spate of Darwinian treatments of culture in the name of "evolutionary psychology" or "memetics," however crudely articulated, reflect what is ultimately an optimistic need to understand our history as something other than an "eternal return" of equivalent social forms. The little bang of the originary hypothesis provides a minimal touchstone by which the evolution of social systems can be measured: the number of degrees of freedom that can be added to the system while maintaining the deferral of violence.

But to make this touchstone any more specific would be to offer a "theory of history," the deadliest of the twentieth century's big ideas. I shall stop, then, before this *Chronicle* grows any bigger, ending, not with a whimper, but with a little bang.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

COV&R Story

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I recently returned from **Emory University** in Atlanta, where I attended the annual meeting of the Girardian *Colloquium on Violence and Religion*. This year's topic was "violence reduction in theory and practice." The speaker's list included a primatologist, an ethnologist, a participant in the South African peace process, and an autodidact writer on the Holocaust, none of whom referred to the mimetic theory of desire; clearly it was up to the audience rather than the speakers to do the theorizing. As compared with my only other **COV&R** meeting, in Chicago in 1995, the talks were wider-ranging and more thought-provoking, but they included fewer academic applications of Girardian theory.

The conference was very smoothly and professionally run by **Theophus (Thee) Smith** of Emory's Religion Department with the able assistance of **Maggie Kulyk**, a graduate student in Religion, and several other devoted volunteers. Southern hospitality is a reality; when Atlantans tell you to have a nice day, they really seem to mean it.

On the personal level, it was a very positive experience; I felt fully welcomed into the Girardian fold. I look forward to working in COV&R with a couple of fellow old-time students of Girard: **Sandy Goodhart**, the new **Executive Secretary**, and **Andrew McKenna**, a member of the Editorial Board of *Anthropoetics* as well as the Editor of COV&R's print journal *Contagion*. Possible projects include cooperation between *Contagion* and *Anthropoetics*, new website features, and more ambitious publishing possibilities.

My reportorial skills being limited, I will recount a single revelatory incident. My opening talk on the [origin of language](#) was followed by a presentation by **Frans DeWaal**, the director of Emory's renowned **Yerkes Primate Research Center**. During the common question period, I observed several times that he attempted to stand as far away from me as possible. I took this expression of "territoriality" not as a personal affront but as a sign of the distance that a practicing scientist feels the need to establish between himself and an "armchair" student of culture like me.

This incident led me to reflect once more on the difference between the scientific and the "humanistic" or, as I prefer to call it, the *generative* approach to cultural matters. What attracted me to **René Girard** from the first, as a graduate student in 1960, is that his work is rigorously minimalistic, always directed toward the most parsimonious explanations of cultural phenomena. I was reminded of this the other day when reading a recent book, best left unnamed, on (purportedly) the origin of religion. This work makes a long detour through **Freudian** theory, discussing the evolution of "the child" through oral and anal stages to his fears of castration with the onset of the Oedipus complex. None of this discourse of desire, needless to say, is supported by one iota of proof beyond Freud's own authority. What is truly egregious in Freudian (and Lacanian) discourse is its utter reliance on narrative plausibility. "The child" is made the protagonist of a series of adventures about which we can know nothing directly because he is not yet

capable of telling us about them. Instead of presenting experimental data, psychoanalysis offers just-so stories that we must accept on the faith of an undemonstrable "clinical experience." In Girard's work, on the contrary, there is no appeal to any experience that is not immediately shared with the reader. Although a book like *Violence and the Sacred* contains no tables of data, it offers a clear thesis and a simple model that, one would think, could be easily tested in the laboratory.

One of the more popular sessions at Atlanta was one conducted by a trio of psychologists using mimetic theory in place of the usual Freudian dogma. As psychotherapist **Rusty Palmer** put it to me over lunch, patients don't pick up readily on suggestions about their repressed conflicts with their father, but they react immediately to an observation like "that fellow at work really has a piece of you." Mimetic theory suggests that one mediator is like another, that the one we really care about and prefer to "repress" is not the first but the latest. In this sense alone, the mimetic theory of desire is a "structuralism": what matters most is not tracing desire to its source in some childhood experience but understanding the mechanism itself. Perhaps that fellow at work's resemblance to my father makes it easier for him to "have a piece of me," but the time it would take to explore the past in an effort to find out would be better spent on reflecting on the mimetic situation in which I presently find myself.

Adapted to the study of culture, this conclusion would imply, not that we should be concerned exclusively with the present, but that we should focus on the specific manifestations of mimetic desire that characterize the times and places that interest us. What is important about a given culture may be described according to Rusty's criterion; our task is to discover what had "a piece of" the members of this culture, including those members--here I do not disagree with proponents of such things as "women's history"--whose unpublicized resentments would surface only in future generations.

As we examine the literary works and other discourses of an era, mimetic theory makes us particularly sensitive to the presence of mediations that authors are at pains to deny. To give an obvious example that "literary history" is still far from having assimilated: if the nineteenth-century proponents of *l'art pour l'art* castigated the "bourgeois" for his vulgar desires, instead of taking them at their word as true aristocrats of the soul shocked by vulgarity, we will get much farther by understanding the hated bourgeois as "having a piece of" the artists of the period, none of whom could credibly claim to have remained uninfluenced by the values of the expanding marketplace.

"The lady doth protest too much" is not a new idea, but the generative theory of mimetic desire allows us to go beyond the mere imputation of denial. The resented mediations that generate such denials reflect the circulation of desire in the society. The need to differentiate ourselves from that which threatens us by its absorbing sameness reveals a culture's historical specificity--how does *poète-vs-bourgeois* compare with, for example, the poet/lover-vs-jealous *lozengier* in medieval love-lyric?--but at the same time its "universality," by which we mean not that all literary works convey the same message, but that they progressively display new levels of anthropological revelation as their characters become less like gods and "more like us." Whether or not, as I have suggested, this double progression of literary works toward specificity and generality reaches its historic high point in the postromantic era around the turn of the twentieth century is itself a question for Generative Anthropology, although not one I can deal with here.

The skeptic may reply that although Freudian discourse is an extreme mystification, Girardian discourse is only a sparer one. Why, in order to study cultural phenomena "objectively," do we need a "theory" at all beyond the basic principles of scientific method? Hypotheses, in this view, should be local,

formulated only after the study of a particular set of data. Whether we call it "mimetic theory," "fundamental anthropology," or "Generative Anthropology," Girardian thinking asks us to accept an a priori understanding of human behavior rather than trust to empirical observation and its extensions in the cautious generalizations of the social sciences. As for explaining the seemingly unshakable popularity of Freud: if Freudianism and Girardianism are systems of faith, "religions" of a kind, then it is easy to see why those of a religious disposition would prefer the richer ritual and mythic atmosphere of the first over the relative austerity of the second. There are more Freudians than Girardians for the same reason that there are more Catholics than Unitarians: those whose temperament makes them suited to a minimal religion or a minimal hypothesis are even more suited to no religion and no hypothesis at all.

My answer is that, whatever the theory of temperaments predicts, at the end of the day the most productive theory will prevail. Scholarly projects are experiments whose payoff cannot be measured by their concordance with the personality types most prevalent in the academy. In the preceding [Chronicle](#), I called **GA** the "little bang" theory. Now I shall try to show not only that our "little" hypothesis of origin derives from the Girardian model of human desire, but that it offers the minimal justification for the adoption of *any* a priori hypothesis concerning human desire.

Readers of the recent series of *Chronicles* on the origin of language will recall that as scientists come closer to understanding the brain functions that make human language possible, they are increasingly respectful of the fundamental difference between language and the ape-calls that earlier generations saw as the unproblematic predecessors of language. This difference appears mysterious, not because it is so large, but because it is so small. What indeed distinguishes a word, a linguistic sign, from a signal, *prior* to the existence of a system of signs?

My claim is that the "mystery" is not a feature of the reality of the origin of language but of the method used to describe it. If "scientific method" cannot accommodate the singularity of an originary moment, then rather than denying the necessity of such a moment, we must modify scientific method. The "little bang" of the originary hypothesis accomplishes this task in a minimal fashion.

The little bang is a way to conceive the origin of language as the passage from one kind of communication system to another. But communication through signs is a form of mimesis. To the skeptic who claims that we need only formulate our hypotheses on the basis of the data, without an a priori theory, we answer that in order to model the origin of language, we need to find the basis for this originary singularity within the repertory of human behavior, and that the mimetic theory of desire is the minimal structure of paradoxical behavior or "pragmatic paradox" that provides such a basis. To learn from imitating another what to appropriate from the world is "at the same time" to enter into conflict with him over the object of this appropriation. This conflict cannot in principle be contained through animal hierarchies because its intensity cannot be matched by the differential energy available to such hierarchies. (This would require, for example, that as mimetic tensions in the group increase, the differences in strength between alpha, beta, and other animals must increase at the same rate.) Thus when conflict becomes inevitable, it can be forestalled only by a new form of relation to the object that we call the **sign**. The singularity of the "little bang" and the mimetic model of desire have this in common: they refer to a structure that is necessarily inaccessible to empirical observation. It is this minimal structure, rather than the complex syntax of mature language, that provides the basis for Chomsky's famous "refutation" of Skinner's attempt at a behaviorist analysis of language. No "language module" is required for this purpose; what suffices is the communal accord concerning the central sacred object and the sign that is taken to represent it.

Thus the ultimate contribution of the Girardian thinking that inspires the **Colloquium on Violence and Religion** is the opportunity to understand the origin of the sign in terms exclusively of the paradox of mimesis, that is, without the intervention of "supernatural" forces. But the originary hypothesis explains at the same time why such forces are necessarily evoked. To understand the origin of the sign, we must understand the sacred quality of its referent. The sign is the name-of-God; the sacred, what is designated by the sign. Paradox is the minimal explanation, but there is no higher criterion by which to decide if paradox by itself is explanation enough, if our connection to the community through language can be understood otherwise than in terms of a subsisting mediating being. Whichever may be the case, an invisible barrier will always separate the purely empirical study of human behavior, including that of the brain, from the human essence revealed in the birth of language. If there is to exist a true science of the human or *science humaine*, it will be through the acceptance rather than the denial of the revelation that COV&R has chosen as its mission to preserve.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Origin of Religion: Preliminary Reflections

No. 171: Saturday, June 19, 1999

Readers of these *Chronicles* know that the originary event is the hypothetical origin of all the categories of human culture and, most particularly, of *language* and *religion*. In *The Origin of Language*, the symmetry of these two fundamental human institutions was articulated in the opposition between "formal" language and "institutional" ritual as commemorations of the originary event. The fact that language and religion are found together in all human cultures would seem to make obvious the need to combine both in any theory of human origin. Yet with the exception of a few hints in **Terrence Deacon's** *The Symbolic Species*, discussed in [Chronicle 168](#), no serious scientific treatment of this joint origin exists. While the origin of language, once rejected for scientific study as an unproductive distraction, has come to provide a useful focus for research into the structure and evolution of the brain and of human society, the origin of religion seems stuck in the time-frame of hazy and suspiciously "colonialist" nineteenth-century speculation. As the recent series of *Chronicles* showed, language origin is a booming field of study. In contrast, I have been unable to find **a single recent work** on the origin of religion. (The one partial exception is a book about *writing about* the origin of religion.) "Religious studies" is flourishing, but its increasingly severe self-imposed limitations make it ever less capable of taking a critical position toward any religious practice. This is, as we will see, inherent in the subject-matter itself.

Language has an objective correlative in the brain, a set of neuronal connections that has now emerged from the black box of **Chomsky's** "language acquisition device" to be explored in detail. But not since the demise of phrenology has anyone attempted to find in the brain anything like a "religion acquisition device." If language is a synchronic symbol system that we grasp as a system before considering its possible origin, religion is a diachronic or narrative symbol system whose originary focus so overwhelms its systematicity that it appears to evade scientific study altogether.

Recent works on religion are so concerned to avoid asymmetry in dialogue with the "Other" that they voluntarily abandon any claim of scientific method. There is a blanket presumption of moral equivalence that puts the most inhuman practices off limits to ethical judgment so long as they are situated within a religious framework. This neutrality is all the more questionable when, as in **Ninian Smart's** *Dimensions of the Sacred* (Harper-Collins, 1996), the term "religion" is rejected as too limiting and replaced by "worldview." If the "worldviews" of **Nazism** and **Communism** are rightly understood as secular equivalents of religion, must we then discuss them in such a way as to avoid offending their "believers"? Like all expressions of what **Hegel** called the "beautiful soul," such reasoning abandons to violence--ultimately, to war--the power to determine the superiority of ethical systems.

Yet there is a strange logic in these arguments, one that sheds light on the still unresolved phenomenon of **Political Correctness** that reigns in no other domain so absolutely as in that of religion. Our need to expel PC, either by denying its existence or by ridiculing it, is a sign of its persistent force. PC is so easy to satirize only because it is so close to our intuition of the symmetry of human dialogue. Its extension

from racism to weightism, from the visually challenged to the sartorially challenged, merely extends *ad absurdum* the list of specific asymmetries to guard against. PC obeys the letter, if not the spirit, of the **Christian** injunction to make the moral model of reciprocity--which is in the first place linguistic reciprocity--into an ethic. Indeed, there is nothing absurd about the injunction to treat all others with equal respect even when they are overweight or poorly dressed. Such consideration becomes PC only when it emphasizes castigating others over reforming oneself or when it inconsiderately abandons the criteria of social judgment on which civilized life depends. I have seen several university functions disrupted when obvious vagrants were welcomed as guests in misguided efforts to transcend look- and smellism.

To exclude someone from a given dialogue, one needs objective criteria. As we descend from "harder" to "softer" subjects, the question of who is qualified to participate becomes increasingly open. That it is nowhere more open than in the domain of religion reflects the fact that religion is the commemoration of the originary dialogue. If religion excludes us from its dialogue, it excludes us from humanity itself--something no postmodern Westerner, Christian or not, can accept. PC in religious studies is the naïve expression of an important insight; it is, so to speak, the negative image of **Generative Anthropology**.

Once we begin to understand religion as the mode whereby we recreate the originary reciprocal exchange of signs that made us human, its "objective" study becomes a problematic operation. To study religion is by definition to externalize it, to exclude its discourse from our own dialogue. But since the ultimate end of such study is to enlarge the context of reciprocity recreated by individual religions, the most radical solution is to immolate "etic" study altogether to "emic" dialogue. No statement about a given religion is permissible unless verified by a practitioner of that religion; indeed, the assertion should ideally be not merely verified but *initiated* by the practitioner rather than the nonbelieving scholar, whose analyses even if accepted may prove misleading. This ideal, even when not fully carried out, puts into question the ethic of religious studies and, by extension, that of all social science. The latter can only begin to defend itself by formalizing within its explanatory model the intuitive understanding of religion-as-dialogue reflected in the ideal itself. But such a model is beyond the reach of those who treat all religions as equal in their difference, let alone of those who view religion as a set of consoling fictions and unenlightened social practices.

René Girard rightly notes that treating all religious practices as "different" amounts to the same thing as treating them as the same. Religious dialogue can productively respect the differences among religions without trivializing them only if it demonstrates the filiation of each religion from a common source. All religions, even that of the **Aztecs**, are ways of fulfilling the fundamental purpose of culture to defer internal violence. Even when we find the practices of a religion morally unacceptable, we must at least grant their functionality for maintaining a social order.

So long as we are unable to refer the idiosyncratic terminology and practice of the different religions to a common model, we must choose between the unpalatable alternatives of subsuming them within our own religious tradition or simply taking them at face value. In contrast, a minimal generative framework unencumbered with the particularities of any religion liberates us from our own tradition to examine how all religious practices have developed from their common root. For example, we need no longer simply contrast **Buddhist** godlessness as the "Oriental" alternative--whether better, worse, or equally good--to God-centered Western religions. The originary hypothesis empowers us to trace the negation of being in **Nirvana** to the same source as the Christian soul's preservation in God; the two religious traditions

emphasize different elements--the sign's abstraction, the sacred center's symmetric Otherness--of the same originary scene.

But inasmuch as we can trace all religious phenomena to their common hypothetical source, we are also given a criterion by which to evaluate them: the moral model of human reciprocity, as exemplified in the symmetrical exchange of signs that defers violence in the originary event. Religion founds an ethic, but it also implies morality; while ethics everywhere differ, morality is always the same. Hence we can admire the achievements of **Aztec** or **Greek** civilization without closing our eyes to the affronts to the moral model occasioned by human sacrifice or slavery. What differentiates this critique from the sanctimonious moral condemnations that PC reserves for our own society is that it is grounded in an explicit anthropological universal. Violations of human reciprocity are factors of social instability and ultimate social change because the moral model is universally present in all speakers of human language; everyone, slave or victim, feels resentment at unequal treatment.

Tracing diverse descendants to a common ancestor is the way of biology. The study of religion, increasingly paralyzed as a "conversation," would be a good place to put into practice, on the basis of the originary hypothesis, a little of that shared scientific rigor that **Edward O. Wilson** calls "consilience." But the sort of rigor available to the study of religion is not that of the natural sciences. Our only possible consilience must first pass through the acceptance of the "little bang" of the **originary hypothesis**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Kosovo: War in the Postwar Era

No. 172: Saturday, June 26, 1999

Although I cannot claim to have predicted the apparent victory in **Kosovo**, and although I deplore its muddled strategy and the government's failure to put its case before the public, I do feel some sympathy for the foreign policy behind it. This way of waging war lacks the "dignity" of the old methods, but what is newer and less violent will always be less dignified than older, more sacrificial procedures, just as **Athenian tragedy** is more dignified than the entertainments of our era. Even the lack of strategic planning is not a simple negative.

To forestall objections, let us stipulate that **NATO** did indeed achieve victory, that concessions to **Milosevic**, such as not permitting NATO troops into **Yugoslavia** proper, are not signs of a sell-out, and that, whatever their sufferings, the Albanian **Kosovars** will eventually enjoy greater autonomy and a more productive economy than if the war had not taken place. Even if these assertions turn out to be utopian, it is still worthwhile formulating a model of what victory would have been like, if only to help us understand what prevented the model from being realized.

Watching a film like *Saving Private Ryan* (see [Chronicle 147](#)) gives one an appreciation of the heroism of war in its final incarnation. The American soldier as typified by **John Miller** doesn't want to be there, gives no thought to why he is there, knows only that he must remain there until the job is done. This is not, as certain superficial critics have suggested, a failing either of Miller, of the Allied cause in **WW II**, or of the film. The point is that Miller's acceptance *perinde ac cadaver* of his country's aims in the war is a condition that, as an educated man (Miller is a history teacher), he has examined and accepted, but that has no relevance to the day-to-day fighting in which he is engaged. The last "real" war, fought to the finish with the maximal weapons at hand, was also arguably the most just and necessary of all wars as well as the most violent and wantonly destructive. Perhaps **Dresden** was unnecessary; it is difficult to argue that **Hiroshima** was unnecessary. It is as though these horrors of WW II offer as their excuse that they make explicit the meaning of what **WW I** had claimed to be--and it is not only ignorant undergraduates who confound the two--"the war to end all wars."

The point of postwar military action, rather than to be heroic, is to drain war of its heroism by eliminating risk to one's own troops while minimizing casualties to the adversary. Killing is no longer the aim but an accident of war, which has become, more truly than **von Clausewitz** ever imagined, an extension of diplomacy. That the bombing of Kosovo was begun without a long-term strategy for ground invasion reflects the uncertainties inherent in redefining an age-old institution. This minimalization of violence has nothing in common with a return to a "ritual" conception of war. Indeed, the most effective aspect of the military action in Yugoslavia was, as in WW II, its effect on civilian life, except that instead of carpet-bombing **Belgrade**, NATO contented itself with disturbing the electric grid and other necessities of civilized life. Such tactics would not work so well in **Afghanistan**, **Rwanda**, or **North Korea**; they are a tribute to Yugoslavia's place in "Western civilization." But the fact that they worked,

in contravention of the expected analogy with the **Londoners**' in WW II whose resolve was only strengthened by the bombs and V-2 rockets, reflects not merely the sophistication of the Yugoslav economy but the lack of stomach for sacrifice in a generation that, quite reasonably, no longer sees why such sacrifice should be necessary.

The familiar story of the **Fall of the Roman Empire** leads us to fear that the civilized world's lack of stomach for fighting and dying will incite "barbarian" forces to conquest. But in recent history, the armies of the "barbarians" **Saddam** and Milosevic are far from having displayed the implacable bloodthirstiness that made **Attila's** and **Genghis Khan's** hosts so terrifying. The reason is that the "barbarians" too are part of global civilization; even if they do not read history books, their leaders watch **CNN**. Thus they know that the brutal physical courage which (allied with sophisticated equestrian technique) once assembled pyramids of skulls is no longer of "world-historical" significance. The **Nazis** were the last major power to cultivate such traits, albeit in a new guise adapted to the industrial means at their disposal--*Kristallnacht* was an embarrassment to the architects of the *Endlosung*.

The "barbarians" are still with us, but their acts are limited to the creation of malaise through random violence, and there is no certainty that even terrorism will continue indefinitely. (Nor is there any certainty that it will cease; terrorism is far from having exhausted all its possibilities.) But if, along the lines of this general argument, terrorism itself comes to an end, this would not be a sign that humanity has been cured of violence, merely that the model of heroism constituted by the sacrifice of individual life for the sake of the collectivity is rapidly losing its viability even in the less democratic areas of the globe.

At the recent Atlanta **COV&R** meeting (see [Chronicle 170](#)) I attended a talk on "The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust" by **Richard Koenigsberg**, an *autodidacte* who has devoted many years to the subject. Koenigsberg's central point was that, **Hitler's** notion of national belonging having been shaped by the "sacrificial" experience of WW I, his idea of annihilating the Jews was, in a perverse way--the speaker did not seem to realize just how perverse--ultimately indistinguishable from his conception of the sacrificial destiny of German youth.

In linking these two destinies that clearly had opposite valences for Hitler and his followers, Koenigsberg recalled **Hannah Arendt's** not altogether dissimilar view of "totalitarian" societies as functioning through a universal terrorism ultimately indifferent to national differences. Arendt comes close to making **Jews** and **Germans** just two subgroups of terrorized humanity. Although Koenigsberg's notion of sacrifice suggests the paradox in this union of contraries more openly, I think his categorization can be further sharpened.

The Nazis saw the destruction of the Jews as analogous not to human sacrifice but to the elimination of disease-causing bacteria. Yet Koenigsberg's talk revealed that this decisive step toward dehumanization had already been taken *within* the vocabulary of sacrifice applied to the soldier-victims of WW I. Here is one of his citations, from **P. H. Pearse**, founder of the Irish Revolutionary movement, writing in 1916:

The last sixteen months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe. Heroism has come back to the earth. It is good for the world to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefield. Such august homage was never before offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country.

Koenigsberg equates war with human sacrifice, on the model of "[t]he Aztecs [who] believed that the sun

arose each morning because it was fed with the heart and blood of sacrificial victims." But just as the **Holocaust** was a unique historical experience, so too was WW I. European civilization in 1914, whatever its flaws, was hardly comparable to the society of the **Aztecs**. The latter, we recall, failed to invent the wheel, presumably for the same reason that they fed on sacrificed human flesh: they lacked large edible and otherwise exploitable mammals. In contrast, prewar Europe lacked neither protein nor horsepower. The horror of WW I was the irrational consequence of the European economic rationalization that had generated mechanized weaponry, universal conscription, and colonialism--and with it, the model of colonial war, to which the victory in Kosovo owes not a little.

Bloody phrases like that quoted above, in other words, are not expressions of an untroubled and uninterrupted tradition of bloody sacrifice; they are more or less hysterical attempts to justify *a posteriori* the unexpected bloodletting over trifling objectives as an expression of the individual's duty to subordinate his own survival to that of his community. This is not to say that all wars previous to WW I had deserved such justification. But after the excesses of the Napoleonic era, war in the nineteenth century had steadily become less expensive of European manpower; the ratio of political accomplishment to casualties seemed to rise steadily. It is the brutal termination of this trend in the unproductive sacrifices of WW I that inspired in Hitler the apparently final paroxysm of the sacrificial vision of war. This time, sacrifice would be meaningful: there would be no symmetry of friend and foe, no fraternization across the barbed wire. The similarity in the fates of Germans at the front and Jews in the camps--we should not overlook the horrible differences--was an irony Hitler would not have appreciated. And yet, the sacrifice of millions of regrettably anonymous "heroes" is not all that far from the extermination of millions of deliberately anonymous "vermin."

WW II was truly the war to end all wars because it was fought, by soldiers like Spielberg's **John Miller**, to put an end to the sacrificial vision of war (a vision enthusiastically shared by Germany's **Japanese** ally, if not by the **Italians**). There is a horrible symmetry between combatants in any battle, but mimetic rivalry between communities does not as a rule generate pacifying difference out of symmetry by arbitrary sacrificial means; war puts to the test the ethical strength of competing systems. In the case of WW II, the good guys won. The moral ambiguity injected into the Allied victory by the participation of the "totalitarian" **USSR** can now be seen, on the scale of world history, as an irrelevancy.

No doubt the NATO soldiers in Kosovo are taking advantage of weaker adversaries caught taking advantage of still weaker adversaries; their lack of heroism is precisely the model that the war to end all wars inspires us to follow. If it is indeed true that the "barbarians" themselves have become too civilized to pose a challenge to civilization, there may be reason for optimism concerning the progress of peace in the coming millennium.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Toujours le Meme

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Ever since **Richard Dawkins** in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976) floated the idea of a cultural unit called the **meme** analogous to the biological gene, the term has been used in many places with about as many meanings. A number of **GAlist** members have wondered about the similarity of the **memetic** to the **mimetic** and the value of the various attempts to build a theory of **memetics**.

A supposedly scientific term whose usage shows no sign of converging on a publicly accepted definition should arouse suspicion. Pseudo-science always relies on the suggestive power of words rather than models. That memes turn up in the writings of pop psychologists and in the motivational hocus-pocus of such doctrines as **spiral dynamics**--about which I was privileged to learn (until my patience ran out) at the recent **COV&R** meeting in Atlanta--hardly reflects well on its scientific credentials. Although most writers' idea of a typical meme is a minimal snatch of music such as the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth, the spiral dynamicist presented memes as the (color-coded) mental equivalents of the stages of human social evolution, roughly from terror before the supernatural through submission to reason to self-governing freedom. Whatever truths about human organization may have found their way into this Comtian scheme, the word "meme" added nothing to their perspicuity.

Recently a friend recommended to me a book that made a more intelligent use of Dawkins' concept: *Cultural Software* by **J. Balkin** (Yale, 1998). But rather than persuading the reader of the value of memetics, this book supplies its *reductio ad absurdum*. Balkin is a serious, well-informed writer, and his functionalist software metaphor allows him to score points against "postmodern" thinking a la **Foucault** that fetishizes "discourse" into an independent controlling force. But Balkin fails to realize that while pointing out the failings of fashionable social theory he is putting nothing in its place. Although he deals in cogent detail with a wide variety of cultural phenomena from the aesthetic to the political, because he lacks a concept of the fundamental operation of culture, he can say nothing substantive about any cultural process, let alone about any individual "meme," other than that its fitness has been demonstrated by its survival.

Darwinians fascinated by their hero's "dangerous idea" (**Daniel Dennett**) never seem to realize that its strength lies in its emptiness. That the "survival of the fittest" is a tautology because "fitness" is just another word for "survival" is not a quip: it is the simple truth. Of course "fitness" means *reproductive* fitness--surviving without offspring to the age of 100 does nothing for your genotype--but exchanging *the survival of the fittest to survive* for *the reproduction of the fittest to reproduce* does not make Darwinian doctrine any less tautological.

Let the reader not surmise from this that I am a "non-believer" in **Darwin**: on the contrary. Aside from the detailed observations that make *The Origin of Species* doubtless the most readable of major scientific documents, the genius of Darwin's theory of evolution is precisely its lack of presuppositions. In its most

general form, the theory is by no means limited to life; any system will tend to evolve in the direction of more "survivable" states, which, as **Ilya Prigogine** in particular has pointed out, are just the opposite of entropic states of simple equilibrium.

Life is unique in that living creatures reproduce themselves, and the particular merit of Darwin's theory as opposed to **Lamarck's** "inheritance of acquired characteristics" is that it makes reproduction a necessary factor in evolution. If we could inherit acquired characteristics, we could just as well be immortal creatures "evolving" through time; the usefulness to the species of death and sexual reproduction, as immortalized by **Freud's** *eros* and *thanatos* or **Bataille's** *l'érotisme et la mort*, would be unclear. The advantage of sexual reproduction is the generation of variance, and the usefulness of variance requires the testing of different forms in different conditions. Implicit in the tautology of "the survival of the survivors" is the idea that survival is not guaranteed, that life is a competition, as expressed in the other great Darwinian (more precisely, **Spencerian**) phrase: **struggle for life**. We have heard so much irony directed at the "social Darwinists" who once drew crude parallels between competition in market society and competition through natural selection that we forget how strong the parallel really is; we take for granted or even denounce the fact that by forcing economic entities to participate in something like a "struggle for life," the market system has created by far the most productive economies ever known.

In the Darwinian context, the search for the **gene** as the unit of evolution reflects the need to understand how the elements of variance are transmitted from one generation to the next. **Darwin** implies **Mendel** because, where Lamarckian inheritance is the transmission of a homunculus who changes along with the body that produces it, Darwinian variance requires only the transmission of a mixture of each parent's original information with the addition of a small amount of random variation, supplied in genetic theory by "mutation." But if Darwin implies Mendel, the latter's construction of the gene *in abstracto* and the much later decoding of the genetic material are genuine scientific discoveries. Genetic decoding associates specific protein chains with specific phenotypic traits. If I belabor these obvious points, it is because what makes the gene useful in biology is precisely what makes the meme appropriate for spiral dynamics.

The meme promises by analogy a hard-headed genetics of culture. Just as the biblical "origin of species" by arbitrary divine command has been replaced by Darwin's supremely parsimonious hypothesis--creationism being essentially a rearguard action--so the proponents of memetics promise to reduce the apparently arbitrary diversity of culture to its basis in evolutionary logic. What the memeticists fail to realize is that the criterion of cultural survivability is truly a null hypothesis. To claim that the cultural elements now in our brains have survived competition and must therefore possess certain traits that have ensured this "fitness" is not only a tautology, it is too vague a tautology to serve as a working hypothesis for the study of culture. Even the traditional literary scholar who proposes we wait a century before deciding which works "stand the test of time" has a more concrete notion of cultural fitness.

Scientific activity begins not with the empty hypothesis that fundamental cultural traits or "memes" exist but when we begin to make testable conjectures about the nature of these traits. Darwin himself could have posited the "gene" as the minimal component of evolutionary change, but the idea in itself would have had no content. The gene was born as a scientific concept when Mendel discovered its combinatorial properties; it acquired a physical counterpart only decades later when the discovery of DNA led to the analysis of its chemical composition and structure--at which point the gene's isolation from its

surrounding genetic material is no longer an absolute *a priori*. Those who would analyze culture in terms of memes would similarly have to discover, first, rigorous rules of combination and, ultimately, some physical correlate, presumably wiring patterns in the brain, that can be experimentally isolated and recombined under the proper conditions of human interaction to "generate" culture.

Some readers may find this an intolerable prospect. I do not, because the history of science, as opposed to that of scientism, demonstrates that greater rather than less freedom accrues to societies that discover and exploit new laws of nature, including, to the extent that it is possible, human nature. My hostility to the concept of the meme is directed not to its ultimate scientific potential but to its use in pseudo-science. If you take the meme seriously, the last thing you should be doing is to seek it in such things as tunes that run through our brain. Such examples of cultural survival may well provide interesting material for study, but to call them "memes" is even more inept than confusing the gene that stimulates a fruit fly's wing development with the wing itself. If the four-note beginning of the Fifth is a meme, what is it a meme *for*?

A more profound difficulty of the application of Darwinian theory to the evolution of human culture emerges in the discussion aroused by such books as **Francis Fukuyama**'s recent *The Great Disruption* (Free Press, 1999). When we reduce morality to an evolutionarily advantageous trait, are we not eliminating the spiritual content of morality in favor of its pragmatic value? How then can we defend moral action, as we all do, at times when its pragmatic value is not immediately apparent? The "little bang" of the originary hypothesis provides an answer to this question. The originary scene of language supplies the originary model of moral reciprocity, just as it supplies the originary model of religious transcendence. **Durkheim**'s idea that God is a projection of the community as a whole is valid only if we understand this "projection" not as an illusion of mediated desire but as a necessary condition for the constitution of the human, both as an object of ("anthropological") thought and in reality.

Not long ago it was fashionable to explain moral behavior by means of an "altruism gene." Tomorrow it may become popular to speak of a "morality meme"--indeed, this would be an improvement over most uses of the term. But although morality has indeed been "selected for" in the sense that we as morally aware creatures exist, calling the kernel of morality a "meme" adds nothing to our understanding of it in the absence of a hypothesis concerning the specific process of selection--irreducible to that of biological evolution--for this and other cultural traits. Because the originary hypothesis offers the only non-religious, that is, **minimal** depiction of such a process, we have reason to assume that it will eventually be adopted in some form by those engaged in fundamental human science. At that point, it might well become useful to assimilate the individual moments of the originary event to something like "memes." For the moment, however, I think this assimilation only confuses the central issue of distinguishing human origin from the biological origin of species.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Ending History

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One way of defining the **end of history** is as the moment when it becomes impossible to tell stories about humanity as a whole, what **Jean-François Lyotard** called "**master narratives**." The source of this impossibility is the incompatibility of narrative with dialogue. While I'm telling a story, you can't intervene. While we're having a conversation, there is no "story." At the end of history, dialogue is all, history nothing.

The end of history is nowhere more apparent than in Western religion. Although not long ago each religion claimed to tell the uniquely true story of the world, today such claims are considered in poor taste. To insist that my religious tradition alone lends meaning to history makes me unfit for dialogue with members of other traditions. Dialogue is conceived as transcending the particularity of religious history. But maintenance of this dialogue depends on excluding the basic fact of its *own* history, which is that this substitution of dialogue for history arose and is still centered in the **Christian West**.

In religious dialogue we refer to the origin of our beliefs and practices in specific revelations: **Mohammed** was told--and told us--this, **Moses** that. But because the dialogue cannot reflect upon itself as a historical reality in its own right, it cannot function as a **Hegelian** dialectic progressing toward a new synthesis. The separate histories that enter into our conversation reveal not the truth of the world to which the beliefs and practices give meaning but only that of the beliefs and practices themselves. Although I can tell you their historical source, I cannot claim that my beliefs are "truer" or my practices "better" than yours.

This mutual tolerance emerges nonetheless in a competitive marketplace where the worse is constantly replaced by the better, the falsier by the truer. Unlike the dialogue of belief, market exchange generates a historical dialectic. In its early days, the West's economic superiority was accompanied by imperialist arrogance. The assurance that its system was destined to replace all others served to justify colonization and the acquisition of spheres of influence. Yet there arose in tandem with this arrogance a fascination with other religions "in themselves." If today's "multicultural" dialogue--with its denial of Western Christianity's privileged status--began anywhere, it is with the "imperialist" founders of modern anthropology such as **Tylor** and **Frazer**. It was rather the anti-imperialist **Marxists** who maintained the Hegelian vision of religion as destined by the historical dialectic to transcend itself in "philosophy."

In the imperialist age, religion was alternatively a primitive mode of thought destined to pass away and a transhistorical set of anthropological themes. The pathos of early ethnography is founded on the idea that "we" of the West are rapidly destroying the ecological conditions on which primitive societies depend. We need to engage in dialogue with these societies, yet such dialogue is not really possible. This tragic mode reaches its apogee in **Lévi-Strauss's** *Tristes tropiques*.

Modern multiculturalism takes a different tack. In a world already wholly penetrated by the Western

exchange-system, it insists that all extant cultures participate in dialogue rather than in the “master narrative” of Western triumph. In the domains of artistic and religious practice, this dialogue produces local syncretisms that in turn contribute to the variety of “Western” culture. But the ineffable triumph-narrative that haunts the postmodern enterprise continues to trivialize all other narratives. It is not that we “can no longer tell stories,” or even that we no longer believe in them; we “believe” in our own so well that we fear to hear it.

Our fear is not unjustified. The market system can progress only by making all cultural elements equally marketable. The multiculturalist who proclaims his disdain for Western “imperialism” is unknowingly the most effective agent of the penetration of non-Western cultures by Western “values,” primary among which is the meta-value that cultural phenomena should be understood as incarnating values rather than laws of uniquely correct behavior. Those who best grasp this paradox are not the golden liberals of multiculturalism and their “third-world” adjuncts but the **Islamic** militants who fanatically reject all commerce with the West because they understand that once the dialogue is engaged, the “West” wins by definition: “dialogue” is a Western concept, the equivalent of market exchange in the ideological sphere.

The usual understanding of the end of history is as the attainment of the final state of human organization, as **Francis Fukuyama** describes liberal capitalism. Fukuyama shares Hegel’s idea of the end of history as the end of the dialectic and therefore of all essential discourse. In Marxist terms, this translates into the “realm of freedom” where history ends because we have been liberated from causality; if my choices at moment B are not limited by my prior decisions at moment A, then I have no “history” and my life is a series of independent moments. And although the absolute liberation of socialism is a chimera, the market system liberates relatively by providing a constantly expanding set of options. The story of this year’s trip to France has an ever-diminishing narrative value both because nearly everyone else has already been there and because I can go nearly anywhere else next year.

The end of history is not an achieved state like death but an ever-open frontier between the historical and the posthistorical age. On the one hand, the end of history defines an opposition between winners and losers; in this respect, it is not the least but the most historical of moments. This is the tone of Fukuyama’s famous article and of his subsequent writings on the subject. But on the other hand, the end of history is also the end of the historical structure within which events are given historical meaning. Thus as soon as we say that the West has “won,” we abolish the very idea of “winning”: the world becomes just one big decentered exchange-system. This does not prevent us from creating narratives, but it undermines their pretension of being “history” rather than arbitrarily selected partial series of interactions. The complacent proclamation of the death of the Subject in Postmodern “theory” is an unconscious paean to the marketplace where outcomes are determined through interaction rather than by a central ego.

What are the implications of the “end of history” for narrative? I would not be so presumptuous as to claim world-historical status for my own increasing impatience with fiction in any form more challenging than film. Individual lives still have their constraints and their goals, their comic or tragic outcomes. But--this is the insoluble problem of the novel since **Proust**--the consistency of character that lends concreteness to fiction is constantly menaced by the author’s implicit assertion that all that matters in life as in art is the reader’s submission to the narrative discourse itself. Novelistic characters who once shared normal worldly goals now simply want to be “famous,” to interest us in their story; to the extent that they do not, their desires are trivialized or sentimentalized like those of ethnic characters in the

movies. I think we have gone too far along the road of *Mme Bovary, c'est moi!* for narrative fiction to remain a mode of anthropological discovery.

The end of history, as readers of Hegel will recall, is also the end of art, religion, and even philosophy. It is the end of cultural or “humanistic” discourse, but not of discourse as such; that of science will only be encouraged by the elimination of its traditional competitor. In this light, we can understand both the finality and the relative obscurity of generative anthropology’s **little bang**. Originary thinking as the final mode of “theory” evacuates all the classical philosophical problems at precisely the moment in which they cease to be of interest. But better a little bang than a big whimper.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Was There an Origin of Language?

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There is something to be said for the pragmatist notion that no ideas are true or false in themselves, that what counts is whether they "work." The real question is what counts as "working"? Many ideas appear to "work" for large groups of people to which it doesn't seem useful to assign a truth value. An article in the July 23 *Los Angeles Times* described the Chinese government's persecution of the **Falun Gong** sect, seen as a potential threat to the regime. This cult, whose leader **Li Hongzhi** resides in New York, has several million adherents in China. Is Li truly the "savior" of these people? His doctrine appears to bring its followers something of the inner peace traditionally granted by sacrificial ritual in a world where ritual is no longer practiced. The power of any cult over its adherents comes from its ability to translate these originally collective violence-deferring practices into terms accessible within their daily lives. If the idea of a **Wheel of Law** spinning in my abdomen is to bring me inner peace, it must project the assurance that I am not a potential victim of mimetic violence. Although it appears easy for outsiders to separate the content of such an idea from the anthropological truth it incarnates, this becomes more difficult in the "higher religions" where a specific historical event, such as the preachings and crucifixion of **Jesus**, is the occasion for a much more complex anthropological vision.

How should we deal with this question at the very highest level, that of the minimal notion of the human as hypothesized by generative anthropology? Is this construction, however minimal, ultimately just a means of experiencing a more intellectual variant of the peace provoked in the Falun Gong by attending to the Wheel of Law in their bellies, or does it convey a useful anthropological truth? But how is the context of "useful" to be defined? If we think of ourselves as human scientists, then what is useful is what allows us to construct a logically consistent anthropology in the peaceful realm of "theory." But we may equally well see ourselves as humanists whose vision of the human is subject to the paradox of culture that defers violence without ever freeing itself altogether from violence. I have always conceived generative anthropology as standing in the interface between the scientific and the humanistic visions, making itself as nearly punctual as possible in order to avoid occupying territory on either side.

Why then do we need to postulate an "originary scene"? The emergence of modern *homo sapiens* in the ancestral line that split off from the common ancestor of the chimpanzees some four million years ago comprises many stages, at any one of which we may declare that "humanity" has come into being: upright posture, permanent tools, fire, hunting... and, of course, language and ritual. And even if we consider language the essential quality of humanity, since fully-developed language capacity probably emerged over some millions of years, why is it necessary to fix on some particular moment as "originary"?

An example of the latest scientific thinking about language is **Sydney Lamb's** *Pathways of the Brain: The Neurocognitive Basis of Language* (John Benjamins, 1999), which constructs a detailed and plausible model of how the operations of language might be realized in the brain. In this

"neurocognitive" model, language is a set of connections between sound-production and -detection systems on the one hand and conceptual meanings on the other. Lexical units or "lexemes" are not symbolic entities "stored" in memory and "retrieved" for use, but "nections" or nodes in a network, "recruited" by experiences of association; our linguistic memory, unlike that of a computer, has no existence outside the processing network itself. From the standpoint of this model, as Lamb affirms, to speak of an origin of language is naïve--the very notion of "language" is naïve. There are merely connections, and any "mutation" in which Darwinians might be tempted to locate the origin of language is just one among countless thousands through which the hominid brain has evolved to its current level of connectivity. For Lamb, the defining moment of origin that linguist **Derek Bickerton** calls the "magic moment" or the "Rubicon" (see [Chronicle 167](#)) and that brain researcher **Terrence Deacon** feels obliged to justify by a mutation of the protohuman social order (see [Chronicle 168](#)) is an illusion based on our reifying as "language" what is merely connectivity. As Lamb puts it, the human brain handles language not as the stomach digests food but as the right foot operates a car's accelerator. Hence although language generally involves the left brain and phonology, it can be implemented by the right brain and by hand signals. Connectivity is all, and the qualitative difference between human and animal communication systems reflects a gradual, genetically selected increase in connectivity over thousands of generations.

No minimalist thinker can dismiss this radical attempt to abolish the reification of language and its origin. But can we meditate on the implications of language as a proliferation of connectivity without some idea of what drove our species toward this proliferation? Lamb would presumably reply that, in the study of brain function or the modeling of linguistic processes in the brain, such speculation is a distraction; to attempt to tell exactly at what point the neural network becomes "human" is to set up an artificial boundary that corresponds to nothing in the network itself. Whatever motivations in hominid social structure there may have been for this cognitive development would be irrelevant. The challenge raised by Lamb's model is not so much to find a place within it to situate our "originary scene" as to show how doing this is relevant to the model.

Let us then imagine the prelinguistic state of the brain. It contains conceptual links or associations between perceptual traces; it also contains links between such traces and vocal productions or "calls." Although Lamb does not make the distinction, the brain pathways for calls must be distinguished from those for words. Humans have a few "calls" of their own--laughter, sobs, gasps--qualitatively different in both form and operation from the signs of language. Hence the question of the origin of human language is not evacuated by a description of the multiplicity of its connections in the brain. Even if Lamb's gradualism is justified with respect to the conceptual nodes that exist in primate (and lower mammal) brains as well as ours, this cannot be the case for the lexical nodes that link the conceptual nodes to centers of phonological production. Lamb's concern to establish human continuity with the prehuman on the "higher" conceptual plane seems to have led him to overlook the problem that the origin of language poses on the "lower" physical plane. A chimp is mentally equipped with concepts and, although lacking in human speech organs, physically capable of creating linguistic signs. But what is lacking in the chimp, and what he can only acquire at the most elementary level through intense special training by humans, is a set of "nections" between the signs, be they vocal or gestural, and the concepts.

Researchers have succeeded, on a modest scale, in teaching chimps and bonobos to use language. But the demonstration of this possibility, far from disproving the originary hypothesis (as some have claimed), only corroborates it. No one contests that the human brain is far better adapted to language than the

bonobo's, nor that this adaptation is the result of (at least) hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, at the outset of which our gifts for language must have been far more limited than they are now. If we assume that it was language that made humans diverge from the ancestral lines that eventually led to chimps and bonobos, then at the origin of this divergence, our language abilities must have been pretty much the same as theirs. Let us grant, for argument's sake, that those of the protohuman line did not exceed those of the bonobo today. But bonobos don't use language in their natural environment; they do so only when trained by humans. This implies that it is not their "natural endowment" that led humans to invent/discover language, but the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. If protohuman and bonobo do not differ in language ability, some other explanation must be found for the difference in their use of language. Teaching chimps to use signs only reminds us of this; it doesn't tell us why we talk and chimps don't.

I don't pretend to have any particular insights into the evolution of the cerebral cortex. But it is clear a priori that a model of language that cannot discriminate between a call and a word or "lexeme" is inadequate. Whatever the nature of the linguistic sign, its use involves a new kind of withdrawal from the world of appetitive association--Bickerton's "off-line processing"--that requires explanation.

The fact that we can now model specific operations of the brain where previous generations had to be content with the old metaphysical vocabulary of "thinking" and "willing" does not preclude the need for an originary hypothesis to explain the emergence of human language. On the contrary, by making more precise the nature of the brain's linguistic function, recent research--as Deacon's book suggests--makes such a hypothesis all the more plausible. But this research makes it incumbent on those of us who work with this hypothesis to take these latest discoveries into account. It may still be a bit premature to attempt to describe our internal scene of representation in terms of neurons and synapses or even of "nections," but we should prepare ourselves for the day when a hypothesis that lacks such a description will be dismissed as the product of an outmoded way of thinking.

I would not end on a negative note. Lamb's book dismisses the origin of language, yet it is not uncongenial to GA's minimalism: one explains all by mimesis, the other, by connectivity. The originary hypothesis describes the genesis of language in a mimetic crisis; how could this genesis have created the first linguistic "nection" in the brain? What makes such "nections" possible and necessary in the brain can only be what makes the linguistic sign possible and necessary in the originary scene: an inhibition of "horizontal" appetitive associations of the sort possessed by calls, but not by words. Before there could have been "language areas" in the brain, **Wernicke's** or **Broca's**, there was created a new kind of "nection" between a concept and a sign that suspended rather than provoked appetitive action. Whatever the phonic and/or gestural substance of the first sign, its connection with its "signified" or concept must have been mediated by the necessity of substituting for such action the communication of the signer's renunciation of it to his fellows. I will leave it to brain researchers to tell us how this was implemented neurocognitively, but I find it hard to imagine what finding of theirs could persuade me that it was not.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

History of Language Origin I: Hobbes and Rousseau

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The recently revived inquiry into the origin of language has its roots in the **Enlightenment**. The eighteenth century saw numerous works explicitly devoted to the origin of language(s) and still more, such as **Condillac's** *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), that were centrally concerned with the subject. Most of these works were not founded on anthropological or even linguistic research; they were thought-experiments that sought to understand how perceptions and sensations could give rise to signs. (The most authoritative scholarly reference is still **Hans Aarsleff's** papers collected in *From Locke to Saussure*, Minnesota UP, 1982.)

Equally characteristic of the Enlightenment are the attempts, begun somewhat earlier, to conceive of the origin of human society. Two of these, **Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan** (1651) and **Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Discourse on the Origin of Inequality** (1754), may arguably be considered as defining the intellectual and chronological limits of the Enlightenment as an active intellectual force.

Hobbes and Rousseau are traditionally viewed as exemplifying opposite conceptions of human nature. For the first, the "state of nature" is one of universal strife, the war of all against all; for the second, it is an idyllic world not yet contaminated by the evils of human sociability that civilization brings to the fore.

Although this contradiction is well grounded in the works of both writers, the traditional view nonetheless reflects a superficial understanding of the problem of human interaction that their thought serves to illuminate. On the fundamental issue, Hobbes and Rousseau are essentially in agreement. Both anticipate and at the same time fall short of the mimetic model of human interaction that is the basis of Generative Anthropology, which situates the essential problem of human violence within the minimal social group (*e.g.*, a hunting band), at a level intermediate between the family and the potentially hostile "state of nature." The excessive optimism of Enlightenment social thought is a consequence of its failure to situate the human potential for mimetic violence at the very core of human interaction.

Despite their differences, Hobbes and Rousseau were more acutely aware of the phenomenon of mimetic desire than any theorist before **René Girard**. (*Leviathan* I, 13: "if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies"; *Discours* II: "the sociable man, always outside himself, only knows how to live in the opinion of others.") Both understood that it is the mimetic nature of human desire rather than scarcity or even inequality in itself that causes the particular problems of human society, and both made the need to hold this desire in check the *sine qua non* of a viable polity. Yet both Hobbes and Rousseau expel mimetic desire and its attendant potential for violence from the central core of the human community into the "state of nature" of *external* relations among men--the gendered term "men" is necessary, as I will show below. The difference between Hobbes' famous description of life anterior to the contractual establishment of "commonwealth" as

"solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*ibid*) and Rousseau's picture of the healthy, happy "savage" is entirely attributable to their very different assessments of the intensity of these external relations. For both understand "society," whether Rousseau's *société commencée* or Hobbes' commonwealth, as constituted by the coming together of isolated individuals rather than as the already-existing matrix of humanity.

This construction of human society, contrary as it may be to the ideas of modern anthropology, appears somewhat less radically atomistic if we attend to the gendered nature of the term "man." A "man" in Hobbes' terminology and even--less consistently--in Rousseau's is not simply an atomic human being but the implicit head of a family, as is borne out by Hobbes' description of the nuclear family as a miniature monarchy (II, 20: "Of Dominion Paternal, and Despotical"). However abstract may be Hobbes' description of the "state of war," we should imagine it as existing among *patresfamilias* rather than among humans in general. The model of the Western nuclear family is to blame for the failure of Enlightenment social thought to include potential competitors within the minimal social group. When rivals meet, it is as strangers, members of different (family) units. In Hobbes' model, based on his own developed and demographically dense society, one comes upon strangers so regularly that one lives in a state of perpetual terror and hostility. In Rousseau's model, which takes from preromantic ethnography the vision of a simpler and sparser world, one meets others so rarely that mimetic vanity has no opportunity to develop. The words *seul* (alone) and *solitaire* recur constantly in Rousseau's description; he reproaches Hobbes with having situated in the "state of nature" the mimetic problems that, in his view, belong exclusively to constituted "society." In an anti-Hobbesian example, Rousseau's "savage" confronted by an aggressor prefers abandoning his meal and finding another elsewhere to fighting for it. But beneath their disagreement, the "social contract" functions similarly in both writers to unite persons only externally related to each other. It is no accident that their models of the constitution of human society focus on its highest-level structure, the **state**. Hobbes shares with Rousseau the Enlightenment's characteristic failure to appreciate that the minimal human group must solve the problem of deferring *internal* mimetic conflict before an external "state of war" among groups or individuals can come into being.

Hobbes, as the founder of Enlightenment political thinking, is not concerned to create a scenario for the origin of language. His remarks surrounding the "invention . . . of speech" (I, 3 - 4) nonetheless already reveal the generative paradox that Rousseau will make explicit. (The glosses in brackets are from the original text.)

Those . . . faculties . . . which seem proper to man only . . . proceed all from the invention of words, and speech. For besides sense, and thoughts, and the train of thoughts, the mind of man has no other motion; though by the help of speech, and method, the same faculties may be improved to such a height, as to distinguish men from all other living creatures.

[*Infinite*] Whatsoever we imagine is *finite*. Therefore there is no idea, or conception of any thing we call *infinite*. . . . When we say any thing is infinite, we signify only, that we are not able to conceive the ends, and bounds of the things named; having no

conception of the thing, but of our own inability. And therefore the name of God is used, not to make us conceive him, for he is incomprehensible; and his greatness, and power are unconceivable; but that we may honour him. . . .

[Chapter 4: *Of Speech*] [*Original of speech*] But the most noble and profitable invention of all other, was that of **SPEECH**, consisting of *names* or *appellations*, and their connexion; whereby men register their thoughts; recall them when they are past; and also declare them one to another for mutual utility and conversation; without which, there had been amongst men, neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears, and wolves. The first author of *speech* was God himself; that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight [...]

To sum up these consecutive paragraphs in Hobbes' text, we find

- (1) speech is what sets us above other animals;
- (2) the name of God--the first "name" or word mentioned in the text--does not designate a concept but serves to "honor" or worship God;
- (3) without speech we would not have the "peace" of human culture but would live in a state of violence like wolves;
- (4) God is the source of speech.

A superficial reading of this passage with regard to the origin of language, seeing only (4), would dismiss Hobbes as a "creationist," but the humanistically trained reader will note that before God "authors" speech in (4), he has already been named by humans in (2). The symmetry of the two references to God is accentuated by the fact that (3) is only an elaboration of (1) that makes more explicit language's role in deferring violence. (4) follows naturally from (3): having been told that speech was a "noble . . . invention," we expect to learn whose invention it was. (2), in contrast, does not follow from (1) at all. It concludes a chapter (I, 3) entitled "Of the Consequence or Train of Imaginations," where Hobbes discusses what he calls in the quoted passage our "train of thoughts"; (2)'s *raison d'être* appears to be to conclude the chapter with discussion of an unimaginable entity, the infinite, as a limiting case. But the infinite is the only "imagination" in the chapter to become associated with a "name," that is, with a speech act, the capacity for which distinguishes man among all creatures.

Thus, in the order of the text, the God who is the author of speech has already been named by us, not as a concept, but in a vocative--we may say, an *ostensive*--act of honoring. The connection of these ideas is, to be sure, not elaborated into an explicit anthropological model, but it is sufficiently rigorous to warrant our "honouring" Hobbes himself as the first substantial predecessor of Generative Anthropology.

By the time the question of the origin of language reaches Rousseau, the "sandwich" between the two

mentions of God in Hobbes' text has been tightened into a paradox. This most anthropologically sophisticated of Enlightenment thinkers was far more aware than Condillac or **Maupertuis** of the paradoxical difficulty of the task of reconstructing the origin of the sign without presupposing what one is attempting to generate. (*Discours* I: "If men needed speech in order to learn to think, they needed even more to know how to think in order to find speech.") By making this paradox explicit, Rousseau makes it clear that the significance of language origin for the Enlightenment in its mature, post-Lockean phase is to permit opening up a space, unavailable in Hobbes, in which the human can be defined prior to the emergence of mimetic desire. The equation of the origin of the human with the origin of language thereby allows the construction of a parsimonious "secular" model of the emergence of human difference to replace the revealed creation story of Judeo-Christian tradition--the anthropological value of which we should not make the Voltairean error of dismissing.

If Hobbes is not yet concerned to open this prelapsarian space, Rousseau is interested in the space as humanity's true habitat rather than in its function as the locus of (language) origin. Condillac's straightforward Enlightenment atomism can only be conceived in a primordial utopia. This sets the stage for the nineteenth century's turn away from a priori models to more narrowly historical, and national, conceptions of "origin"--a phenomenon already visible in Rousseau's own posthumous "Essai sur l'origine des langues."

* * * * *

This discussion will be continued over the next few *Chronicles*, in which I intend to deal with **Locke**, **Condillac**, **Rousseau**, and **Herder** as theoreticians of the origin of language.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Herostratus Revisited

No. 177: Saturday, August 7, 1999

At the time of the **Littleton** episode, I felt I had nothing to add to a discussion that, however necessary, also seemed necessarily incapable of defining the "real" problem. But seeing the other day the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* occupied by stories on two independent mass murderers--one in **Yosemite**, the other in **Atlanta**--makes me think again of **Herostratus** (see [Chronicle 87](#)), who is said to have burned down the **Temple of Diana at Ephesus**--one of the **Seven Wonders of the Ancient World**--in order to become immortal, and who has succeeded so well that we no longer know whether he ever really existed as a mortal human being.

Are there more mass murders now than in the past, or is the increase an artifact of journalistic attention? One feature of the phenomenon is the impossibility of defining it in statistical terms. After Littleton, Generation Xers pointed out that today's youth is collectively less violent than in the past, that our schools are collectively safer. The rash of middle-class massacres is not equivalent to a "crime wave" provoked by a surge in criminal motivation, as with the introduction of a new drug or the loss of entry-level jobs in a recession. The murderers no doubt feed on each other mimetically, but they feed as well on the complacency of a safe and prosperous society. One can base a "critique of pure fairness" on the idea that the better and fairer things become, the more intolerable the situation is for "losers" who fail to benefit from these favorable conditions: a stock trader who loses money in a bull market, for example.

The attention we devote to mass murderers offers two lessons in human mimesis: the obvious one of our preoccupation with our greatest danger, man-made violence, and the only slightly less obvious one that killing a dozen people is the only way the average person has of making it to the front page of the newspaper. A curious mimetic relationship exists between the mass murderer and the general public. Leaving aside the unbalanced few who would follow the killer's example, his act fulfills for the public at large something like the function of ritual sacrifice in traditional societies. Our "mourning" for his victims, whom we come to know only after their death, relieves our own aggression. This relief may be psychologized in a number of ways: as the fulfillment of unconscious impulses, the projection of hostilities, or, as I prefer to put it, **the deferral of resentment**. But the sacrificial model is the most parsimonious and therefore the most anthropologically valid. This "positive" function of violence--like that of the Holocaust on a larger scale--depends on our cultural ability to recuperate its effects through sacralization, purging our imaginary complicity in the murders that made them sacrificial in the first place. But this is how sacrifice has always functioned. Nor is the fact that we have neither selected nor killed these victims any stranger to sacrifice, where responsibility for killing is often avoided through the use of aleatory or collective procedures or by entrusting it to a "sacred" individual on the margin of the community.

The modern market system is characterized on the one hand by the circulation through "product-signs" of the "natural" use-values that cannot themselves be exchanged within it, and, on the other, by the

recycling into productive activity of the resentments generated by the failure to obtain these signs. Mass murder brings these two features together in the most radical--and scandalous--manner. The value created by the circulation through the system of the "natural" element of death defers resentment in defiance of morality. Yet the scandal of the mass murderer is that, as the author of a genuinely (as opposed to representationally) irreversible gesture, he cannot be recuperated by the system but, on the contrary, can discount his own scandalous value within it. Herostratus serves a function within the social order and, aware of this, can anticipate, even if he does not live to see it, the reward of publicity that society cannot deny him. The naive cynicism of **Oliver Stone's** *Natural Born Killers* expresses the self-serving critique of an "outsider" to the system--as though the film's portrayal of mass murder as entertainment were not the worst kind of pandering to the phenomenon it purports to denounce. The mass murderer is not a "hero"; but his ability to frustrate the system arouses a grudging admiration that, in more cases that we care to admit, is acquiesced in rather than fought against. The **Unabomber**, for example, is at least a semi-hero for many to whom the marginally political inspiration of his murders serves as pretext to deny, or simply forget, the innocence of his victims.

Herostratus blackmails the system by taking to an inhuman extreme the founding premise of the human social order: the primacy of the mimetic over the appetitive. Thus he sacrifices his life, in principle at least, to the pleasure of being recognized--recognized not within the standard market publicity apparatus, which offers only representations of the "natural," but as one who, by accepting his own mortality, has turned his back on this apparatus. Like the 1997 **Heaven's Gate** suicides (see [Chronicle 89](#)), he is a dandy, but one who, like **Lacenaire** in **Carné's** *Enfants du paradis*, understands that the most scandalous demonstration of the dandy's superiority comes from killing others rather than himself.

Since the classic supply curve suggests that the publicitary attractiveness of acts of mass murder would grow with their increasing rarity, stamping them out altogether would require the eradication of the Herostratus syndrome from the entire population--hardly a realistic assumption. This does not make any less clear the ethical imperative we as individuals and collectivities should follow to prevent them: **act so as to defer resentment**. In most private cases, to implement this ethic is simply to follow the moral model brought to the fore by the Judeo-Christian tradition. But on a broader scale, implementation is a matter of serious policy decisions. It might help just a bit if policy-makers, who read the same headlines as the rest of us, were more clearly aware of this goal.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Language Origin in History II: Condillac's Originary Scene (Part 1)

No. 178: Saturday, August 14, 1999

Although not one of the big-name *philosophes*, L'Abbé **Etienne Bonnot de Condillac** (1715-1780) has a claim to the title of the most significant philosopher of the French Enlightenment. Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* [*Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*] (1746) naturalized **Locke's** epistemological sensualism in France shorn of its moral and political baggage. The principle that "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses" stands at the head of **Hobbes' Leviathan**, and Locke had worked out its consequences for the genesis of our ideas. Condillac's most fundamental difference from Locke was his refusal to grant the human intellect an autonomous power of "reason" independent of the sense data it accumulated. In Condillac's model of the human mind, it is not enough to postulate that our senses provide us with the raw material of our knowledge, memory, and imagination; they must also provide the material for **signs**. Our "ideas" for Condillac are not, as in Locke, independent of the linguistic signs with which they come to be associated. Condillac anticipates contemporary neurocognitive research in his contention that thought without language, such as animals are capable of achieving, is effective only in its immediate context and leads to no long-term acquisition of knowledge. This reliance on the sign as, one can almost say, a neuronal focus for thought, is also a major step in the direction of originary thinking. Following the logic of this position, Condillac was the first thinker to go beyond generalities about the sensation-based language of the "first men" to construct a minimal scenario of the origin of language.

In [Chronicle 176](#), I suggested that the **Enlightenment** may be defined in anthropological terms by its atomistic model of human relations. Hobbes' and even **Rousseau's** "state of nature" consists of isolated individuals--males with unmentioned families in Hobbes, both sexes including "single mothers" in Rousseau--whose only human relations beyond the immediate family are with strangers. The mimetic conflict within the minimal social group that the originary hypothesis makes the motivation for human language is excluded from the Enlightenment model. Hobbes, who understood the primarily communicative function of language, could not theorize it as the originary manifestation of human transcendence--whence the unarticulated textual conjunction I described in *Chronicle 176* between the author's description of our "infinite" appeal to the name-of-God and his reliance on the **Genesis** creation-story as the source of human language. In Locke, the human cognitive apparatus of ideas and signs is detached from human interaction altogether; the human individual is constituted as an idea-maker and language-user independently of any encounters with his fellows.

Condillac's scenario too takes Genesis into account but, unlike Hobbes, Condillac conceives linguistic transcendence as reemerging after the Fall in a strictly earthly context. His scene is widely alluded to but goes largely unread and misinterpreted. above all, the generative intent of the scene is ignored. Although nearly any educated French person will express familiarity with Condillac's scenario of "two children on

an island," few recall that the two children are explicitly designated as of opposite sexes, and that somewhat later in the discussion they themselves have a child.

Condillac is a disciple of Locke; the statue of *Le traité des sensations* (1754) that acquires its ideas along with its senses is an illustration of Locke's *tabula rasa* ("Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? . . . To this I answer, in one word, from experience. . . . Our observation employed either about external, sensible objects or about the internal operations of our mind. . ." *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, 1, 2) Both men consider (with Hobbes) the senses to be the sole origin of our ideas. But the experiential context of the sensations and, consequently, the ideas privileged by Condillac is very different context from that found in Locke, a difference summed up in the word that makes Condillac's title something other than a translation of his model's: the word *origin*. Locke is interested in how the senses write upon the paper of the mind; his concern is with the source of a given idea in our sensations. Condillac, in contrast, sees the biological individual as an "originary" being and seeks to trace the origin and progress of his knowledge. The contrast is visible in their respective descriptions of our first ideas:

First, our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several perceptions of things, according to those various ways, wherein those objects do affect them. And thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet . . . (*Essay* II, 1, 3)

Let us consider a man at the first moment of his existence; his mind/soul feels at first different sensations such as light, colors, pain, pleasure, motion, rest: these are his first thoughts. (*Essai* I, 1, 3)

Locke's conception of sensation is passive and unmotivated. His list of ideas is an arbitrary sampling of the senses, from sight through taste; sound and smell are excluded, the former no doubt because of the possible confusion with the sounds of speech, the latter because there are no simple terms to describe its "perceptions." In Condillac, on the contrary, "sensation" is understood not as mere perception but as impingement on a living, appetitive being. Although he was no doubt inspired by Locke to begin with sight, he is concerned not with specific ideas (yellow, white) but with what affects the organism and provides it with its "first thoughts." Similarly, where Locke's considerations on language emphasize the cognitive separation of individual speakers whose uses of the same word reflect the different "ideas" of each, Condillac's originary hypothesis of language is founded on the speakers' intent to communicate vital needs.

Let us turn to Condillac's originary scene. I have used and occasionally modified the only available English translation, that of Thomas Nugent, published in 1756(!) and reprinted in the 1970s.

[Part II, sec. 1] In Adam and Eve, the habit of intellectual operations was not the effect of experience; for immediately after their creation they were rendered capable, by the extraordinary assistance of the Deity, of reflecting and of

communicating their thoughts to each other. But suppose that some time after the deluge two children, one male, and the other female, wandered about in the deserts, before they understood the use of any sign. I am authorized to make this supposition by the fact above related. And who knows but some nation or other owes its origin to an event of this kind? Let me then be permitted to make the supposition, and the question* will be to know, in what manner this nation first invented language.

* "In judging only from the nature of things," (says Dr. Warburton, *Divine legation*, Vol. II. p. 81) "and without the surer aid of revelation, one should be apt to embrace the opinion of Diodorus Siculus (lib. ii.) and Vitruvius (lib. ii. cap. 1.) that the first men lived for some time in woods and caves, after the manner of beasts, uttering only confused and indistinct sounds, till, associating for mutual assistance, they came, by degrees, to use such as were articulate, for the arbitrary signs or marks, mutually agreed on, of those ideas in the mind of the speaker which he wanted to communicate to others. . . . [T]hough, continues Dr. Warburton a little lower, it appears that God taught man language, yet we cannot reasonably suppose it any other than what served his present needs, he being now of himself able to improve and enlarge it: consequently the first language must have been sterile and narrow." All this appears to me very judicious. My motive for supposing two children under the necessity of inventing even the first signs of language is because I did not think it sufficient for a philosopher to say a thing was effected by extraordinary means but judged it to be incumbent upon him to explain how it could have happened by natural means.

It would be wrong to interpret Condillac's opening sentence as a mere sop to the Church. Leaving to God the responsibility of the Creation avoids the problem of anthropogenesis that would become accessible to scientific thought only with the emergence of theories of evolution in the next century. No doubt the children's status as full-fledged humans precludes the construction of a model of hominization as the acquisition of language. But the preexistence of the Genesis story gives Condillac's model the advantage over the "natural" pagan one cited by **Warburton** in the note of avoiding the trappings of "woods and caves" that serve as mere alibis of prehumanity. By reducing the opposition between isolation and communication to the minimal terms of the couple, Condillac articulates the terms of the "mutual assistance" that in the ancient scenario is simply taken for granted as the result of our emergence from the "state of nature."

Condillac's point in the note against Warburton--Bishop William Warburton, 1698-1779, famous for his work on language *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1737), which included a study of hieroglyphics translated into French--is not to dismiss the religious tradition but to propose a more epistemologically sophisticated mode of transition between the Judeo-Christian creation story and the modern scientific perspective. Warburton's way of reconciling the religious tradition with the needs of secular thought was to suggest that God gave man an elementary form of language that he was expected to "improve and enlarge." In Condillac's model, what God had done in the Garden of Eden, man was required to do after

the Fall; the point is not to integrate the two stories but to separate the (divine) creation of the human being per se from the construction of a model of human communication in our "fallen" state. We may reproach Condillac with failing to take the mimetic nature of our "fallenness" fully into account; but his emphasis on desire and lack, in contrast to Locke's passive cognitivism, is already a creative--and creatively "Judeo-Christian"--step in this direction.

The remainder of Condillac's "originary scene" will be discussed in the following *Chronicle*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Language Origin in History III: Condillac's Originary Scene (Part 2)

No. 179: Saturday, August 21, 1999

[Chronicle 178](#) dealt with the first paragraph of the second part of **Condillac's** *Essai sur les connaissances humaines* (1746), the preliminary description of his famous thought-experiment in which two children generate human language. Aside from the biblical example of **Adam** and **Eve**, this scenario was no doubt inspired by **Herodotus'** well-known anecdote about the Egyptian king **Psammetichus** who, in order to discover the most ancient language, has two children brought up in a language-free environment. Their first observed "word" being the Phrygian word for "bread," Phrygian was credited with being the most ancient language. Condillac's experiment is more radically conceived as a model for the origin of language itself.

Here are the details of the experiment. As with the previous selection, I am using Thomas Nugent's 1756 translation, slightly modernized:

[Chap. 1] 1. So long as the abovementioned children lived apart, the operations of their minds were confined to perception and consciousness, which never cease to act while we are awake; to attention, which must have taken place whenever any perceptions affected them in a particular manner; to reminiscence, which was when they recollected some circumstances that had struck them before they had lost the connections formed by those circumstances; and to a very limited exercise of the imagination. For example, the perception of a particular want was connected with that of the object which had contributed to relieve it. But as this sort of connections were formed by chance, without deriving any strength from reflection, their duration was but short. One day the sensation of hunger put these children in mind of a tree loaded with fruit, which they had seen the day before; soon after this tree was forgotten, and the same sensation revived the idea of another object. Thus the habit of the imagination was not in their power; it was no more than the effect of the circumstances in which they were placed.

This passage reflects Condillac's thesis that the acquisition of knowledge is impossible in the absence of signs. Associations of ideas in the absence of "reflection" are, in his view, confined to what we now call the "short-term" memory. In determining the content of these mental operations, Condillac sees the human being, as befits the children's "fallen" state, not as a Lockean perception machine but as a needy organism. What is perceived is, in the first place, a lack; in a secular version of the Fall, the absent fruit tree becomes the object of the first common memory, but one which, in the absence of signs, cannot become an object of long-term knowledge.

2. When they came to live together, they had occasion to enlarge and improve those first operations because their mutual converse made them connect with the cries of each passion the perceptions which they naturally signified. They generally accompanied them with some motion, gesture or action whose expression was yet of a more sensible nature. For example, he who suffered by being deprived of an object which his wants had rendered necessary to him did not confine himself to cries or sounds only; he used some endeavors to obtain it, he moved his head, his arms, and every part of his body. The other, struck with this sight, fixed his eye on the same object and perceiving some inward emotions which he was not yet able to account for, he suffered in seeing his companion suffer. From that very instant he felt himself inclined to relieve him, and he followed this impression to the utmost of his power. Thus by instinct alone they asked and gave each other assistance. I say by instinct alone; for as yet there was no room for reflection. One of them did not say to himself, I must make such particular motions to render him sensible of my want, and to induce him to relieve me, nor the other, I see by his motions that he wants such a thing, and I will let him have it, but they both acted in consequence of the want which pressed them most.

This paragraph describes a prelinguistic "state of nature" where the "passions" are expressed by natural or "indexical" signs (sighs, tears) equivalent to animal "calls," as well as by gestures. The author's insistence on the children's "endeavors to obtain" the object of desire by moving head, arms, etc., serves to emphasize that these signs are not simply involuntary; they reflect an intention to appropriate the appetitive object. I am able to understand such signs not only because my instincts would produce the same cries in similar circumstances but because my own physical efforts to appropriate the object would also be analogous to my companion's. Yet the difference between voluntary and involuntary natural signs is not graspable by reflection in the absence of language.

Let us note once more the relevance of Condillac's reference to the Genesis story. This originary scenario is not based on sensation but on "needs." The association of the two children, not otherwise

motivated, is cemented by their sharing of "passions." And however physical their "needs," Condillac describes their mutual assistance in mimetic terms: "He suffered in seeing his companion suffer." When he asserts that they act "by instinct alone," he refers of course to their prelinguistic, prereflective state, but this state is implicitly distinguished from similar states in animals by its proto-human mimeticism. One does not aid the other by interpreting his actions, but "both acted in consequence of the want which pressed him most." The only coherent reading of the last assertion is that, as a result of witnessing the other's "need," each acquired this need for himself, making it "the want which pressed him most." A further turn of the mimetic screw would lead us directly to the familiar triangular impasse of mimetic desire, since the two "wants," now equally pressing, could not normally be satisfied without conflict.

3. And yet the same circumstances could not be frequently repeated, but they must have accustomed themselves at length to connect with the cries of the passions and with the different motions of the body those perceptions which were expressed in so sensible a manner. The more they grew familiar with those signs, the more they were in a capacity of reviving them at pleasure. Their memory began to acquire some sort of habit, they were able to command their imagination as they pleased, and insensibly they learned to do by reflection what they had hitherto done merely by instinct. At first both of them acquired the habit of discerning by those signs the sensations which each other felt at that moment, and afterwards they made use of them in order to let each other know their past sensations. For example, he who saw a place in which he had been frightened, mimicked those cries and movements which were the signs of fear in order to warn the other not to expose himself to the same danger.

It would be easy enough to deconstruct this model of the birth of the "symbolic" sign; if habit alone could transform the children's instinctive cries and practical-instinctive gestures into signs, habit should do the same in animals as well. Only the children's prior God-given humanity can justify this difference of outcome. Nor is this a satisfactory model of the origin of the linguistic sign. Words cannot be derived simply from the "cries of the passions." Although we can--not without difficulty--voluntarily approximate our prelinguistic "cries" or "calls" such as laughter and tears in order to arouse a desired response in our interlocutor, such action, generally frowned on as dishonest, is very different from using language. (The difference is the point of the gag about the group of old friends who, having learned each other's jokes by heart, decide to save time by numbering the jokes and just saying the number.)

Condillac's scenario is nonetheless a groundbreaking contribution to the modern understanding of the origin of human language. By situating this origin specifically in the passage from the natural-indexical sign of need to its "arbitrary" linguistic counterpart, it focuses our attention on the possible motivations for this passage. Nor is it by chance that, in the unique concrete example of the just-quoted paragraph, what the speaker points out to his companion is not a source of food, as modern theoreticians such as Bickerton typically propose, but a place of fright and danger. It suffices to attach this fear to the "want

that pressed them most" of the preceding paragraph to generate the originary hypothesis.

Condillac's cooperative model of language refounds the fallen human species on the family begun by his two children, whose own child is the first "native speaker." Condillac suggests that the new baby, finding himself--not unlike the child in Lacan's "mirror stage"--unable to perform the practical gestures of his parents, has recourse to verbal language more readily than they; whence what he describes as a gradual evolution favoring spoken over gestural language. This speculation anticipates our view today, with habituation to the "arbitrary" sounds of language replaced by the evolutionary development of the vocal tract. For Condillac as for **Rousseau**, language as the exemplary means of human communication is a "supplement" to the "lack" engendered by the Fall. If in Condillac the critique of the "misuse" of language never puts in doubt, as it does in Rousseau, its essentially beneficial nature, this is because the human cooperation it promotes never itself becomes, as it does for his successor, a source of mimetic conflict. Yet, as we have seen, the elements of this conflict are present in germ even in the most constructive moments of his text.

In passing from Condillac to Rousseau, we reach the culmination of Enlightenment anthropology and the beginning of its transformation into the more paradoxical human vision of Romanticism. Where Condillac, like the **General Semanticists** of recent times, sees human conflict as the result of preventable misunderstandings of signs, Rousseau understands that any use of signs bears the potential for mimetic conflict.

The theoretical centrality of Rousseau's ideas on human origin, as expressed in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754) and the posthumous *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, reflects his situation at the threshold of true modernity, just before the French Revolution and the rise of the modern market system. This central battleground of postmodern theorizing remains dominated by the deconstructive thinking of **Jacques Derrida's** 1968 masterwork *De la grammatologie* [*On Grammatology*], which takes the *Essay* as its focal text. The deconstruction of Rousseau's anthropological model may be seen as a supreme attempt by the postmodern heirs of the Enlightenment to deny significance to the historical lessons of Christianity and of the modern exchange system by equating Rousseau's critique of language-as-"writing" with that of Western metaphysics in general. Yet whatever its political motivations, this analysis cannot be countered, as academic conservatives often seem to think, by yet more blatantly political gestures in the other direction. Derrida's critique of Rousseau suggests despite itself a fundamental anthropology that can be countered only by a yet more fundamental anthropology, one that understands the historicity of human thought, including "metaphysics," as characterized by the elaboration of ever more highly articulated and more "enabling" models of its own genesis. In coming weeks, I will attempt to define Rousseau's contribution to mimetic anthropology as the key enabler of the Romantic illusion that mimesis is unnecessary to anthropology.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Postmodern GA

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Most conservative publications use the term "**postmodern**," often in association with "deconstruction," as if it belonged wholly to the **Left**. In this perspective, the postmodern is less an objective historical period-concept than an ideology disguised as one, less a time than an ideological space in which all values are relative and all cultural edifices are deconstructed, including that of history itself. The postmodern agenda is to eliminate from the past as from the present all objective criteria of social reward, to the benefit of those who would substitute resentment for productive ability. Difference is reduced to domination and domination to sacrifice; whatever the game, losers are victims who deserve compensation, winners are victimizers who deserve condemnation.

Although there is more than a grain of truth in this portrait of postmodern thinking, I do not accept it. I think the term "postmodern" refers to a problem rather than a solution. To recognize the specificity of this problem is to be able to separate the necessary deferral of victimary resentment from the vision of reality that this resentment proposes. Although the end of Soviet communism has convinced almost everyone of the fallaciousness of the socialist ideal, neither the Left nor the Right have yet digested its consequences for their view of history. Postmodernity may well be precisely the period marked by the "end of socialism," by the reluctance to accept the statistical tyranny of the market as lighter and more forgiving than the most enlightened despotism that could conceivably replace it. Once the necessity of this acceptance has been fully digested, the term "postmodern" will presumably no longer be necessary. But this prediction does not come with a time limit. Perhaps market society will remain forever in mourning for the socialist illusion without which it cannot conceive its own freedom. This is something we can hardly know while we ourselves remain in this phase. At any rate, if a catastrophe occurs to take us out of it, we will know of that soon enough.

If this view of the postmodern is correct, then the truly postmodern way of thinking is not deconstruction or any of its victimary avatars but **Generative Anthropology**. Yet neither GA nor mimetic theory in general has been integrated into mainstream thought. What then is the situation of its discourse with respect to the general social dialogue?

Popularity is no index of truth in mathematics or the natural sciences. **Thomas Kuhn's** "paradigms" may not be subject to immediate falsification à la **Karl Popper**, but the need to test hypotheses against real-world data allows us to be reasonably confident that over the long haul scientists will find the most effective paradigms in their various domains.

The situation is different in the social sciences, not because data cannot be obtained and hypotheses tested and falsified, but because there is no fundamental agreement as to the significance of the results. We know what questions to ask the natural world because our place in this world generally makes it clear to us what manipulations, whether practical or merely theoretical, we desire to exercise on it. Among the

social sciences, the field of economics, where we can count on nearly the same degree of unanimity, is closer to the natural sciences than are sociology or anthropology, where academic tradition (the "history of the subject") plays a predominant role.

The academic discipline of **Anthropology** can be counted on to ask and answer a fairly well-defined set of questions about human behavior. These are not, for the most part, the questions addressed by **Generative Anthropology**, whose roots lie not in the social sciences but in the **Humanities**, in a fuzzy critical domain known today simply as "theory" and that appears to be in the process of dissolving altogether. Historically, GA may well be the last significant attempt to understand the human on the basis of the textual perspective that defines the Humanities, and whose current decline presages the end of the Humanities' claim to a shaping influence on the public dialogue. By subordinating the textual to the contextual, the current shift of emphasis toward cultural and intercultural studies deprives the Humanities of their *raison d'être*. I recall hearing many years ago a professor of European history reproach the French Department for teaching **Proust**, who was little known during his lifetime, rather than **Romain Rolland**, whose works were influential best-sellers. This old dispute between the historian and the literary critic has, generally speaking, been resolved in the historian's favor. Today, the contemporary works studied in a (Humanities) literature department will most likely be the same as those studied in a (Social Science) area studies program; indeed, the field is likely to be represented in both programs by the same faculty member.

GA originates in reflection on the literary text reduced to the minimal dimension of the first linguistic sign. Its difference from other ways of thinking stems from its insistence on the cultural and therefore "literary" significance of this sign. Deconstruction, and post-structuralist "theory" in general, puts language at the center of all things. So does GA, except that for this child of **René Girard's** deviant, extra-Parisian brand of "French theory," language is not an independent force but a distinctively human activity.

None of today's social sciences, anthropology and linguistics included, concern themselves with originary scenes. Empirical science requires prudent hypotheses that stick close to the data. GA insists on the "minimality" of its originary hypothesis, but minimality with respect to prior suppositions is not the same as empirical prudence. Prior to any attempt at empirical justification, the originary hypothesis affirms the absolute originality of the language-world. The first sign as the name-of-God inaugurates the new notion of *significance* as applied not simply to objects of great appetitive interest but to the object of an interest so great that it cannot lead to an appetitive praxis. That the sacred is accessible through representation alone is the central truth of all culture, one that leads us to spend money and time on religion, tragedy, and pornography. But the explanation of culture that derives from this truth, however evident it might seem to the readers of this *Chronicle*, is not that of the majority, who either prudently adhere to one of the anthropologies proposed by the social sciences or, dissatisfied with "secular humanism," prefer one that is religion-based. Yet the latter generally suffer in inverted form from the same blindness as the former: they think the affirmation of God's preexistence absolves us from attempting to understand how we gained access to his transcendental realm.

I have often reflected on **Doug Collins'** explanation for the failure of the originary hypothesis to win general acceptance. For Doug, if I understand him accurately, postmodernism merely prolongs modernism's strategic flight from the center. The modernist understood that in order to occupy the center in reality he had to renounce any claim of charismatic attraction, presenting himself in advance as unworthy in a mode Collins calls "prehumiliation." GA's own prehumiliation is the "little bang" of its

minimal hypothesis; but minimization of the positive attraction of the center is not its (strategic) denial.

That I am a *dix-neuviémiste* rather than a *vingtiémiste* reflects my distaste for high modernism's snobbish disdain for the "bourgeois," marked not coincidentally by a certain antisemitism (Eliot, Pound). (We should note that the truly great modernists, Proust, Joyce, and Kafka, were equally obsessed by the "Jewish question.") Thus I prefer to see postmodernism, with its roots in the Holocaust, not as a prolongation of modernism but as its repudiation, not as a strategic avoidance of the center but as a demystification of it in the service of decentralized dialogue. Thus far, no doubt, postmodern thought has followed Collins's definition rather than mine; GA is reproached with arrogantly imposing its own centrality at a time when the proper thing for Western thought to do is to accept a (falsely) humble role on the periphery. The alternative is the less hypocritical institutionalized modesty of the social sciences, where the question of *significance* that defines the study of cultural texts has been excluded in advance.

It is as though (*tout se passe comme si*, to borrow the formula of poststructuralist irresponsibility) in taking the first human word, however minimally, as not merely signifying but *significant*, the "little bang" hypothesis goes beyond the bounds of logical thought to appeal to our *esthetic* judgment. The attribution of significance to an event, however minimal, necessarily involves esthetic participation; we must imagine ourselves as part of the event, sharing the desires of its participants.

For **Kant**, esthetic pleasure is "disinterested" and the judgment of beauty it provokes is universal. Two centuries of cultural experience permit us to refine these assertions. The **Platonic** idea of the "Good" is such that its very existence as a universal concept demonstrates its non-conflictual nature. Apostles of selfishness such as **Callicles** (*Gorgias*) or **Thrasymachus** (*Republic*) are refuted as simply illogical: it can never be in my interest to do what is not Good, even if I seem to benefit from it. (See ["Plato and The Birth of Conceptual Thought."](#)) The "disinterested" concept of the Beautiful takes over where the Good leaves off. In the ethical realm, Kant does not argue that to follow the "categorical imperative" is to act in my own interest, but simply that human reason requires it; in contrast, to experience beauty is to find non-conflictive pleasure in a universal value--because, I would add, the enjoyment is mediated through representation.

In the Renaissance, **Hobbes** and others demystified the Platonic Idea of the Good with its a priori assumption of the harmony between individual and collective interests. The model of the "social contract" explains my abandonment of my personal desires for the common good in terms of my own self-interest. Today, I would submit, we can deconstruct the Kantian concept of beauty in an analogous way. My identification with the imaginary desiring subject of the artwork is no more automatic than my concurrence in the universal Good; I relinquish my own subjectivity only through an "esthetic contract" under which I receive the *catharsis* or purgation effected by the work.

Once the originary hypothesis is considered, however minimally, as the potential object of such a contract, it becomes easy to explain its lack of wide acceptance. Its very minimality makes it incapable of competing esthetically with either the historical particularity of religious discourse or the textual mystique of deconstruction, yet it nonetheless requires a contract of participation that the hypotheses of positive social science do not. The logically valid argument that to refuse a minimal hypothesis implies the acceptance of a far more content-rich set of empirical "facts" about human language, religion, and ethics is irrelevant in this context because, precisely, implicit acceptance is not a "contract."

What then might lead to a broader acceptance of originary thinking? I can think of only one answer: the partial verification by positive science of the esthetic intuition it expresses. My enthusiasm for Terrence

Deacon's *The Symbolic Species* (see [Chronicle 168](#)) reflects its adoption of a scenario for language origin tantalizingly close to that of the originary hypothesis. Another quantum leap of this kind would not only make the hypothesis more acceptable, it might stimulate a real dialogue between GA and neuroscience that would be beneficial to both parties.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

GA Futurism

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To accept that the democratic market system is here to stay, that there is no more stable system available to human social organization than one that allows for the free exchange of goods and services on the one hand and compensatory resentments on the other is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. The very openness of the market system that incarnates its highest value for us minimizes the predictability of future outcomes. Whence the misunderstanding that surrounds the term "end of history" that has been applied to the vision expressed in the opening sentence.

What **Daniel Bell** saw in his 1976 volume as *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* had been decried by the hyperrevolutionary **Herbert Marcuse** in 1964 as a sinister effacement of all contradictions through "repressive tolerance." But consumer society is neither being torn asunder nor congealed into dead unanimity. Even hyped-up versions of the classical bread and circuses do not lead the consuming classes to become incapable either of working or of complaining. No doubt there is a "contradiction" between the sobriety required of the market producer and the inebriation he deliberately induces in his potential consumer. But the consumers are also the producers; they produce in order to consume, restrain themselves on weekdays in order to revel in weekend leisure--far more soberly than the nineteenth-century worker who could only drink to forget his misery. The fact that the average person lives the "cultural contradictions of capitalism" in his own life means both that the contradictions are not allowed to get out of hand and that the real tension between them is not forgotten.

These alarmist analyses fail to take into account the not merely quantitative but qualitative dynamism of the market system, the products of which cannot simply be extrapolated from present developments. They are analogous in their myopia to the early critiques of industrial society as producing at the expense of the workers ever-greater quantities of goods to fulfill human "needs." In the long term, whatever the sentiments of the propertied classes, the market system cannot operate without generating desires for new products among the workers themselves and providing them with the means to possess them: the so-called consumer society. But in our age, the market system appears to be reaching a new threshold, where it is becoming able not merely to create new products to enhance our lives but to modify our genetic constitution and that of our potential children, to generate complete virtual realities on command--in short, to create and modify information on the same level of complexity as our genetic machinery and our brains. These new capacities not only pose ethical dilemmas of the sort that "ethicists" busy themselves with; they revive fears of social collapse.

The ages of market society are defined by new technologies but the human significance of technique is in its interaction with human desire. However reactionary and irrelevant the technophobia of a philosopher such as **Heidegger** seems today, our anxiety before the latest scientific advances demonstrates that every new technique for manipulating the natural world holds a potential danger for the human social order. As the market operates to satisfy our desires and to generate new ones, we unendingly play the role of the

Sorcerer's apprentice who risks getting more of his desire than he can cope with.

The first and most common disorder of modern consumption, which decades of exercise programs have not been able to contain, is **obesity**; because we tend to want more food than we need, the market produces it and we eat it. Overweight is rarely cited as one of our most serious preoccupations, but it offers a simple model of the paradox implicit in the technologically driven satisfaction of desire. But cloning and genetic manipulation pose problems far more challenging than overeating. They begin to impinge upon the limit of mortality that has always framed human desire. Our consciousness of mortality is not in the first place a solitary "being-toward-death" but is turned toward the potential of human violence. As is well known, in primitive societies, death is virtually always understood as a consequence of human or anthropomorphic intentions--a striking demonstration of the fundamental premise of Generative Anthropology. Even in more advanced societies, the equipotence of human violence and "natural causes" remains an essential determinant of our relationship with the natural world. Human violence can kill us, but we know we are fated to die in any case. But what if we remained able to kill each other yet, absent this or other accidents, could live forever? The possibility is no longer inconceivable. Life expectancies have gradually increased over the past decades, and older people (among whom I have begun to include myself) increasingly practice activities previously confined to the young. If even these gradual increases in longevity have become a source of worry for the younger generation, what would be the consequence of, say, doubling our life expectancy within a century?

I have always been skeptical of futurists, having lived long enough to witness many examples of the unpredictability of technological progress: copy machines, ball-point pens, microcomputers. (I still remember an Isaac Asimov sci-fi tale from the 50s that portrays "future" computers as having grown so large that they occupy entire asteroids.) But whatever the effects of this or that innovation, that we are becoming able to modify the information-transferring functions that during the early phases of industrialization still remained the exclusive province of biology is an epoch-making development. Barring a catastrophic return to more primitive conditions, we will continue inexorably to generate techniques that will increasingly permit us to transcend our biological limitations.

These limitations have already long been exceeded in the negative direction by the invention of weapons of destruction powerful enough to destroy all human life. Our success for over fifty years in preventing use of these weapons has been remarkable, and although we should not blithely assume that this success will continue indefinitely, at least we understand what has to be done. In contrast, the constructive possibilities are not only harder to control, their very nature is unpredictable. As yet we have conceived no non-catastrophic mechanism for stemming or even stabilizing the continual generation of new and increasingly powerful capacities for human self-transformation. The social order doesn't control our weight and, even at its worst, euthanasia *à la hollandaise* provides but a mild brake on longevity. Yet we can hardly tolerate this laxness in the case of self-cloning or virtual immortality. As the market becomes increasingly able to satisfy our "impossible" desires, stricter forms of regulation and rationing would seem inevitable.

A modern improvement on the traditional paradigm of decline from a golden age, the sociological model of social decadence most significantly associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau opposes a "natural" social order characterized by a minimum of social intercourse to one corrupted by the increased circulation of desire. Rousseau understood (quite correctly, I think) the causes of this circulation to be *les sciences et les arts* of civilized life rather than technology as such, but the interactive basis of the model is the same. Today we tend to smile at the pseudo-Rousseauian figure of the "noble savage," but our reaction to, say,

cloning obeys the same structure as Rousseau's critique of civilization: to put it in GA terminology, a point exists beyond which the satisfaction of human desire interferes with the deferral of violence that culture operates to maintain.

The biological and anthropological knowledge we have gained since Rousseau's time has added surprisingly little grounding to our sense of the "natural." In the case of overeating, we have learned to blame our "paleolithic" physical constitution: our hunter-gatherer ancestors didn't have supermarkets. But when similar biologically based explanations are given for modern *anomie*, urban violence, the decline of the family, and what have you, this is just Rousseau spiffed up with some Darwinian vocabulary. Sociobiology offers interesting analogies, but analogies between human and animal societies not only lack ethical force, they have little value as a source of practical suggestions.

Whatever the future shape of the ethics of cloning and genetic modification, I see no reason to lose our faith in the resiliency of the democratic market system. It is no accident that only in democratic nations has there evolved sufficient coordination between science and industry to create these highly complex technologies. The very pessimistic horror aroused in democracies by the extreme possibilities of genetic technology is a strong indication that any applications of such technology will fall subject to the self-protection mechanisms that limit the access to the market of goods and services that might undermine the functioning of the system as a whole.

But the very need for "self-protection" in this context constitutes a historic change. What would it mean for us to possess a technology that could render us virtually immortal yet whose very power made it as unusable as the hydrogen bomb? The analogy is more significant than appears at first glance. The perception that in Hiroshima and Auschwitz human violence attained a maximum from which it had to retreat if the human race were not to destroy itself defines what we call the postmodern era. For the first time, humanity possesses weapons it cannot use and increasingly refuses to enforce hierarchical differences among human groups. Decolonization, the civil rights movement, feminism, gay liberation, the rights of the disabled are all products of this ethically motivated renunciation of the technologically possible.

We cannot do more than speculate about the new era that would be defined by the necessity of restraining constructive rather than destructive technology. Surely it would be pervaded by a sense of the limitations of our manipulation of nature, including "human nature," as means of solving the problems inherent in the human condition. This suggests that this condition itself might come to be understood in more generative terms. The necessity of renouncing our ability to "play God" would reinforce not simply religious faith but a deeper understanding of the anthropological function of this faith than that common today among either believers or nonbelievers. In last week's [Chronicle 180](#), I reaffirmed my conviction that, despite the popular view of postmodern thought as nihilist ideology, authentic postmodern thinking is originary thinking. But perhaps only in the still unnamed age defined not by the Holocaust and the Bomb but by mastery of information-processing and the genetic code will the need to view the human in the light of the "little bang" of our origin prove inescapable.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Science and Faith in Kansas

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The recent decision of the **Kansas Board of Education** to remove the theory of evolution from the high school science curriculum has made creationism front page news. Articulating the reaction of the intellectual class, the September 6, 1999 issue of *The New Republic* devotes two articles totaling nearly three full pages to the refutation of creationism. But these sophisticated rebuttals shed little more light on the matter than the pronouncements of the creationists. While it may be true that "[i]t is not truth for which the creationists hunger, it is meaning" (TNR 11), the unquestioned presupposition that religious "meaning" has no cognitive value reflects a religious epistemology that has remained stuck in the era of **Voltaire**.

I can cite a more personal example. In the chapter "Science, Religion, and Anthropology" of the recent collaborative "handbook" *Anthropology of Religion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), **James Lett** misinterprets a passage in *Science and Faith* (1989) as proposing that we should "[accord] religious people respect and admiration" (113), and therefore presumably refrain from evaluating the truth value of their affirmations. In fact, the passage Lett quotes says nothing about respecting "religious people"; what I say is that anthropology should "demonstrate a far greater concern and respect for the form and content of religious experience" (*Science and Faith*, 1), in other words, that we should treat religion with respect as a source of anthropological truth. By making me sound like a candidate for the Kansas Board of Education, Lett illustrates the difficulty the scientific temperament has in comprehending the distinction between religion as a "personal belief system" about the facts of the world (such as the number of days of the Creation) and religious experience as a source of anthropological understanding--in simpler terms, in understanding the difference between **cosmology** and **anthropology**. Theology is often good anthropology but it is nearly always bad cosmology. What people say about God in relation to human interaction deserves our most serious attention; what they say about God in relation to natural phenomena may interest anthropologists, but not geologists or biologists.

Darwinian evolution in its general form is a model of scientific minimalism; indeed, it has so few presuppositions that it is difficult to conceive a serious alternative. The sole essential postulate of the theory of evolution is that creatures that can reproduce can also vary. But even if Darwin could be somehow shown to be completely mistaken, **creation science** still offers no alternative to Darwinism. Creationism is not an alternative theory because it is not a "theory" at all. The very term is an embarrassment, an admission that the truth of the **Genesis** narrative can only be affirmed in the face of the hypotheses of modern science by borrowing the outer forms of scientific expression. There are, to be sure, a variety of creationisms, some of which make more sophisticated use of scientific vocabulary than others, but it is the concept itself, not its implementation, that is spurious.

The conception of a God compatible with scientific discovery, who started the universe running and then left it to us to discover what "laws" he designed it to obey, is deism, not creationism. But if God is not

merely the clockmaker but the ruler of the universe, then everything that happens in it takes place by his will; invoking this will does not explain the creation any more than it explains the weather. Although it has often been pointed out that the (first) Genesis narrative is in reasonably accurate correspondence with what is known of the evolution of our planet, the attribution of this "evolution" to God as its sole causal principle is the very opposite of scientific method, the point of which is to minimize rather than maximize causal assumptions.

But if theology is often good anthropology, then there is at least one point in favor of creationism, one that inevitably gets lost because it is emphasized by neither the creationists themselves nor their critics. The real aim of creationism is not to count the days of creation or shorten the age of the earth or even to question scientific theories of the emergence of life. It is to object to the **Darwinian** explanation of the "descent of man." However hostile creationists may be to evolutionary theory in general, what arouses this hostility is not the assertion that birds are descended from reptiles, but that humans are descended from monkeys. However slim its scientific credentials, this "theological" objection to Darwin may at least be said to fall within the domain of anthropology.

The emergence of the human cannot be explained by the theory of biological evolution alone, not because Darwinism isn't good science, but because the defining human trait of symbolic representation is not a biological phenomenon (see [Chronicle 173](#)). The point of the minimal hypothesis or "little bang" is that human language and culture can only be understood as derived from the commemoration of an event, of other events that commemorate that event, and so on. This is an intuition that is preserved in religious traditions in the form of "creation myths." The use of the condescending term "myth" is unavoidable because these stories are not minimal; they go into great detail in order to avoid taking on the appearance of hypotheses. Religious discourse, including that of Genesis, is not "theoretical" but revelatory, as the commemoration of an event of revelation must be. The starkness of the opposition between scientific parsimony and the deliberate "thickness" of religious language reflects the crucial nature of the subject under debate, which is no less than the nature of the human. Each side appeals to a higher principle than the human, suggesting that the human may be defined by the very trait of appealing beyond itself, but not whether one of the appeals allows us to dismiss the other.

My respect for the anthropological value of religious revelation does not predispose me toward either skepticism concerning evolution or "equal time" for creationism. The decision not to require the teaching of evolution in Kansas high schools is rightly an occasion for condemnation and ridicule. It is a sad day when the religious intuition that there is more to human origin than the procedures of biological evolution can explain is made to justify the rejection of biology itself.

Like the efforts of creationism in general, the Kansas Board's unfortunate decision points to an anthropological problem--the inadequacy of Darwin to explain the human specificity that is central to religion--but as a means of generating respect for religion's anthropological content, its solution is worse than useless.

Here is an alternative suggestion. Rather than foolishly claiming that Darwinism is "unscientific," it would be far more useful to probe its limitations by teaching pupils to reflect on what indeed separates the human from other species. Human language cannot be understood as a biological achievement; on the contrary, our biology--our brain, our vocal tract--is adapted to language. And what of the connection between language and religion? Since they are always found together, should we not assume that they emerged simultaneously, that they are in fact two modes of the same general phenomenon? When we

become willing to deal with such issues, we can stop looking at religion as a set of unprovable beliefs that serve to separate us into members of different "cultures" and see it as a means for understanding the specific difference of humanity as a whole.

I am quite aware that the originary hypothesis pleases neither the scientists, who find it superfluous because we are essentially like other forms of life, nor the religionists, who find it superfluous because we are essentially different from other forms of life. But this symmetry tells me that the minimal terrain of Generative Anthropology, whatever name it may eventually go by, is the only one on which the two sides can meet. For the sake of Kansas' schoolchildren, I hope the meeting takes place soon.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Language Origin in History IV Rousseau: Language and Unanimity

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Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous remark that **Rousseau** was the first real anthropologist is the founding text of **deconstruction**, in the sense that a grain of sand is the founding particle of a pearl. The core of **Derrida's** *grammatology* is that **anthropology**, or human science in general, is just a new disguise for **metaphysics**. No doubt--but it is a metaphysics open not only to empirical data about human cultures, which Rousseau was the first major thinker seriously to integrate into his model of the human, but also to the--far more subversive--infiltration of the anthropological **event** into the domain of the metaphysical **concept**, the most visible form of which up to the present time has been not **GA**, but deconstruction itself.

Rousseau is one of very few who may justly be said to have initiated a new mode of consciousness. It is not enough to describe his innovation as a new way of thinking; its most original aspect is interactive, mimetic, a new way of dealing with one's fellows in obedience to what may be called the "paranoid imperative." **Romanticism** is rooted in this aspect of Rousseau, and the fact that romantic illusion can be "transcended" does not mean that modernity provides any worldly alternative to it.

Rousseau was the first person to realize that modern society's refusal in principle of sacrificial exclusion offers its individual members an excellent basis for blackmail. Although **Molière's** **Misanthrope** (and, already, **Hamlet** at Claudius's court) preceded him in this strategy, Rousseau, operating in the real world, transformed the noble's disdain for bourgeois reality into a democratic, universally accessible attitude. Individual resentment at real or imaginary exclusion was transformed into a social rhetoric of injustice that flourished in the romantic era and has truly come into its own in the postmodern age. It is not to disparage victims of injustice to point out that the rhetoric of injustice is not the same as its reality, that nothing resembles justified resentment more than unjustified resentment. In bourgeois society, victimary rhetoric serves to point out problems in the circulation of desire within the exchange system that as a rule are not simply reducible to injustice. The system tends to deal with such problems by increasing the circulation of goods and desires, often neglecting to resolve the "injustice" alleged as their cause.

Despite its recent disillusionment, the intellectual class remains attached to rhetorics of intellectual blackmail, condemning the market system while refusing to acknowledge that this system alone not only tolerates such condemnations but takes their substance into account. The market system looks askance at any relation that generates irrecoverable resentment. As **Hannah Arendt** pointed out in *Totalitarianism*, what is resented is not domination or inequality in itself, but domination or inequality that has lost its obvious function in maintaining the social order and has come to appear as mere privilege. It is not so much dead as dying horses that attract the most beating.

In Rousseau's day, the French monarchy was the greatest of dying horses--it would expire a mere decade

after he did. But Rousseau could not have predicted its demise, nor could he have anticipated the complicity between the market system and its critics that would make his own critique of "society" so useful in the romantic era. Rousseau's espousal of victimary rhetoric cannot be attributed to anything so crass as political self-interest; he followed his paranoid imperative wherever it might lead. It is this act of faith that separates him from the Romantics, which is to say, from all of us who live after the **French Revolution**.

What is the connection between Rousseau's rhetorical blackmail and his theory of language origin? Unlike **Condillac** and his predecessors, Rousseau is aware of the paradox of representation, which he calls *l'embarras de l'origine des langues*. In contrast with the thinkers of his own time--and of ours--Rousseau is conscious that language cannot be explained as a simple prolongation of prehuman systems of communication, that it could not have emerged unless its use had become *indispensable*.

May I be permitted to consider for a moment the embarrassment of the origin of languages. I could content myself with quoting or repeating Abbé Condillac's investigations on this subject, all of which fully confirm my own conceptions and may well have provided them with their point of departure. But because Condillac's solution to the difficulties that he poses for himself concerning the origin of instituted [*i.e.*, conventional, symbolic] signs shows that he presupposes what I put into question, that is, a kind of society already established among the inventors of language, I consider myself obliged to add my own reflections to his in order to expose these same difficulties in the light appropriate to my subject. The first difficulty that presents itself is to imagine how languages could have become necessary; for if men had no communication among themselves, nor any need to have any, one cannot conceive either the necessity or the possibility of this invention, in the event that [*lit: if*] it was not indispensable.

Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, part I (all translations mine).

A few lines later, Rousseau refers in similar fashion to "the error of those who, in reasoning about the state of nature, bring into it ideas taken from society." Rousseau problematizes the origin of language by questioning its epistemology: how can we explain the origin of language without attributing to the originators qualities that depend on language. This awareness of paradox, which seems banal in the age of deconstruction, makes Rousseau the originator not only of victimary rhetoric but of deconstruction itself.

The argument continues: even when we "[suppose] this first difficulty vanquished," that is, that language could have become "indispensable," we encounter a "new difficulty, worse even than the previous one": that if men needed language in order to think, they must have needed thought in order to speak. These paradoxes are accompanied by fragments of a hypothesis of origin that is in turn deconstructed:

Man's first language, the most universal, most energetic language, and the only one he needed until it became necessary [*i.e.*, in

"society"] to persuade men in assembly, is the call of nature [*le cri de la nature*]. . . . It was finally decided to substitute for [the call] vocal articulations which, without having the same [*sc.* "natural"] relation with certain ideas, are more appropriate to representing the totality of ideas as instituted signs--a substitution that could not have taken place without common consent, and in a manner rather difficult to exercise for men whose crude organs had not yet any practice, and still more difficult to conceive in itself, since this unanimous agreement [*accord unanime*] had to be motivated, so that speech seems to have been very necessary in order to establish the use of speech.

The first anthropologist, Rousseau didn't miss being the first true **generative anthropologist** by much. All that was lacking for him to turn this self-deconstructing argument on its head was an equivalence that his own writing provides. No Rousseauian reading the expression *accord unanime* in the preceding passage will fail to recall the more famous passage that begins Rousseau's final work:

Here I am, alone in the world, with no brother, neighbor, friend, or society but my own. The most sociable and loving of humans has been proscribed from society by a unanimous agreement [*accord unanime*].

Rousseau, *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire*, I

The identity of the words suggests an identity of structure: the same unanimous agreement that is the agency of scapegoating (and whose denunciation is the object of the victimary rhetoric that Rousseau inaugurated) is also the agent of the creation of human language as distinct from the prehuman *cri de la nature*. This is the link we have been seeking between Rousseau's invention of the victimary and his discovery of the paradox of representation.

In the continuation of this *Chronicle*, I will examine the more concrete elements of Rousseau's notion of "natural" human interaction, notably the mimetic function of **pity**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Sacrificing Culture

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The term "culture" is indelibly ambiguous. In the narrow sense favored by the general public, it is a system of esthetic representations that functions to defer violence. In the broad sense used by anthropologists, culture includes all the activities of a given human society that are in any way meaningful. But meaning implies representation: there is no meaning prior to language or, even in the vague sense of "meaningfulness," without signs. This is not to deny the distinction between the all-inclusive idea of culture and the narrow one that focuses on specifically "cultural" activities. What the ambiguity of the term points to is a privileged link between systems of representation--religion, art--and the social order in general. Although economic relations are crucial to life, it is cultural phenomena in the narrow sense that are exemplary of human culture in the inclusive sense.

If symbolic culture is the exemplary human activity, what then is "popular" culture? In a simple sociological model, more appropriate to the nineteenth than the twentieth century, popular or mass culture is the culture of the uneducated working class--the "proletariat"--in contrast to the educated possessing class--the "bourgeoisie." High culture for the readers of the classics, popular culture for the barely literate. But this class-based analysis is fundamentally inadequate.

The dichotomous culture of early market society reflects an unusual level of tension between the moral intuition that "all men are created equal" and the state of the social order. All previous societies beyond the most primitive had been dominated by elites, in the general case far more privileged and oppressive than the relatively civilized nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, but in these societies the intuition of universal equality had been deferred far more strongly by a social ideology promoting some form of the "divine right of kings." The ideology of market society, on the contrary, becomes increasingly egalitarian as it evolves toward its mature, stable form of liberal democracy.

The tension between egalitarian ideology and extreme inequality poses a problem to an art that would transcend the resentments of everyday life. The high culture of the nineteenth century reflects, as against the resentful and/or sentimental tastes held in common by the "people" and the majority of the bourgeois themselves, the authentically universalist aspirations of bourgeois society. The art-for-art's-sake ideology of the second half of the century defines high art by its difference less from the art of the people than from that of the bourgeois world as a whole.

The ethical weakness of popular culture is that it reverts to a de facto pre-Christian sense of the sacred. On the one hand, there is an unhealthy relish in dispatching the "bad guys" whose evil deeds are transparent pretexts for our participation in their downfall. On the other, the "good guys" are suspiciously sacralized. In **Girardian** terms, if high culture participates in the Judeo-Christian deconstruction of sacrifice, popular culture remains sacrificial in the pagan sense, naively accepting the premises of scapegoating accusations.

Although the educated bourgeoisie furnished and continues to furnish the audience for high culture, popular culture is less and less limited to the "people"; the universalism incarnate in high culture is increasingly challenged by the universal appeal of popular culture. The apparently clear difference in cultural sophistication between high modernism and the contemporary manifestations of popular culture in cinema, detective novels, stage shows and the like already reflects less a difference of class or even of world-view than of mindset or attitude. By the middle of the twentieth century, most educated people had become broadly familiar with both high and popular cultures and few connoisseurs of the former could honestly claim that their familiarity with the latter was untainted by participation.

In the succeeding decades, high culture has become increasingly relegated to museums and classical music concerts. The artistic avant-garde that continues to work within high-cultural modes increasingly addresses niche audiences isolated from the educated general public, who share in the universality of its popular counterpart. When the connoisseur of modern music meets the connoisseur of modern poetry, they discuss the latest film. Art touches the public mind only through scandal of an ever cruder nature; what is scandalous nowadays is not the creation but the public funding of "artworks" that would otherwise be ignored. As recent news from **Brooklyn** about elephant dung on the **Madonna** demonstrates, all that is left of the avant-garde's defense of the beautiful against bourgeois banality are infantile gestures of desecration no longer mediated by artistic technique.

What this suggests is not merely the end of the opposition between high and popular, but the decay of the "high" even as a laboratory for the development and testing of forms that eventually flow into the mainstream. This does not imply that we are no longer able to appreciate the difference between sacrifice and the critique of sacrifice, but that we have reached the point in the historical unfolding of this critique at which there is no longer any ethical value, which is to say, any further deferral of violence, to be derived from it. On the contrary, its liberating pretensions have made it more sacrificial than the "bourgeois" forms it purports to demystify.

The story of culture as the revelation in time of the arbitrariness of sacrifice is a "master-narrative" ripe for deconstruction. The critic-narrator is blind to the sacrificial structure of his own story, to which sacrifice in the role of the bad guy is as indispensable as the evil genius in a **James Bond** movie. There was a time when it was useful--and dangerous--to denounce sacrifice. Or perhaps we should say more prudently that there was a time when it was socially harmful in the short run but morally helpful in the long run, that even if a nonsacrificial social order could not be conceived, insistence on reciprocity in human relations helped to create the increasing approximation of such an order. But as the sacrificial model inherent in esthetic form comes increasingly to be applied to contingent forms of interpersonal dissymmetry, the basis for the high-popular, sacrificial-antisacrificial distinction is lost.

Once the deconstruction of the sacrificial no longer accepts esthetic form's affirmation *malgré tout* of the necessity of the sacrificial, it can no longer be realized within this form. Unlike tragedy, which achieved a deconstruction of its own sacrificial form, a literary work that denounces exploitation or racism turns a blind eye to its own structure, which functions on the basis of expulsion. Even the distinction between works in which faceless bad guys are annihilated and those which end in reconciliation is not sufficient to reestablish the high-popular distinction on firmer footing. For the narrative of reconciliation, however ethically superior it may seem to the mere reversal of roles between persecutor and victim, is to high-cultural comedy as the expulsion of the bad guy is to high-cultural tragedy. There can be no true reconciliation between the perpetrator and the victim of a continuing injustice. Comedy in such a situation means reform, expulsion, if not of the sacrificer, then of his sacrificial attitudes and

propensities. But then the same critique applies: these attitudes, like the bad guys, are denounced as unnecessary by the very form that depends on having the opportunity to expel them.

This end of the ability of the esthetic to discriminate between the sacrificial and the antisacrificial is not the end of art. On the contrary, it liberates the esthetic from the ethical end of justifying sacrifice. Esthetic form remains sacrificial, but sacrifice is no longer understood as a necessary feature of social organization; it is merely a "psychological" element of the human condition. Just as we retain physiological drives, such as the appetite for sugar, that have become counterproductive in modern society, so we retain the cultural drive toward sacrifice that determines the structure of the esthetic work. And just as we feel no compunction about substituting saccharine or aspartame for sugar, so we need feel no compunction about replacing the naively sacrificial forms of the past by ironic versions of these forms that we no longer consider as models of ethical relations. The wisecracking superheroes of the comics and their movie adaptations typify this attitude. We no longer really believe in good guys and bad guys, but we need the dichotomy in order to enjoy the narration and the catharsis it effects. Like the molecules of aspartame that fool our tastebuds into thinking they are sugar, the staged contrast between good and evil fools our cultural instincts, not "us."

To ironize sacrifice is very different from deconstructing it, which implies taking it seriously. The "postmodern" **Batman** is not a deconstruction of the old superhero. The new adventures have the same structure as the old; the irony that tells us not to take the bad guys' sufferings to heart is altogether different from tragedy's incitement to identify with the protagonist-victim despite his crimes. On the contrary, it makes such identification not simply impossible but beside the point, like suffering on behalf of the pilots shot down in a video game.

Art is far from ended, but I think it is fair to say that its sacrificial esthetic is essentially exhausted as a creative force. The future would appear to lie not with fictions but with *simulations*, the creation of virtual realities in which the spectator plays an at least partially interactive role. Two contemporary indications, **Brooklyn Museum** aside, are the stagnation of popular music and the spread of pornography. I hope to explore the cultural implications of these trends in future *Chronicles*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Language Origin in History V: Rousseau's Prelinguistic Pity

No. 185: Saturday, October 16, 1999

Pity plays a central role in **Rousseau's** originary anthropology. It is the fundamental "natural" relation between humans prior to the introduction, with language, of even the most elementary form of society. "A natural repugnance to see perish or suffer any sentient being and principally our fellow humans" is one of the "two principles prior to reason" that Rousseau recognizes as "the first and simplest operations of the human soul" in the Preface to his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*--the other being *l'amour de soi*, the principle of self-preservation. The term "pity," which does not figure in the Preface, appears near the end of Part I, in the context of a polemic against **Hobbes'** famously negative vision of man's natural state. After accusing Hobbes of falsely attributing to humans in the state of nature the *amour-propre* or selfish vanity that Rousseau reserves for the members of society, he remarks that his adversary has failed to notice "another principle" that was given to man to temper both varieties of *amour*: "an inner repugnance to see his fellow human suffer." Here he names **pity**, repeating that it precedes the "use of any reflection" and attributing it on occasion to animals as well. He relates how even **Mandeville**, the author of *The Fable of the Bees* and "the most extreme detractor of human virtues," was obliged to recognize man's natural sympathy for his fellows.

The key function of pity in Rousseau's anthropology is to provide a guarantee of human reciprocity prior to "the late [*tardives*] lessons of wisdom," so that "we are not obliged to make of man a philosopher before making him a man." If our "duties toward others" can be attributed to this natural principle, then we can separate morality from the language / sociability nexus and place it on the good, "natural" side of Rousseau's famous dichotomy (affirmed in a footnote of the *Discourse*): man is good, men are bad.

But we have learned all too well how to deconstruct Rousseau's dichotomies. The positive mimetic moment of pity and the negative mimetic moment of Hobbes' war of "every man against every man" are doubles. To put oneself in the place of one's fellows is precisely what mimesis is all about, and since **Girard's** *Mensonge romantique* (1961), we know that to be in the same place as the other is to be the other's rival. When tragedy puts us in the victim-protagonist's place, it puts us at the same time in the place of his executioners.

Rousseau is not wrong to associate violence with crossing the threshold between the natural and the cultural: mimetic conflict in animals is limited to pecking-order challenges that never reach the Hobbesian state of universal war. And we will look with more sympathy on the chimerical attempt to situate this threshold within the human itself if we recall that Rousseau had to generate the cultural from the natural without being able to conceive that one species could evolve into another. Hobbes' state of nature inhabited by full-fledged humans lacking only a system of laws is populated in Rousseau by "savages" that double as pre-Darwinian hominids.

In order to guarantee his distinction between "man" and "men," Rousseau maintains their individual isolation much more rigorously than Hobbes. Where, as pointed out in [Chronicle 176](#), Hobbes uses "man" to refer to a male *paterfamilias* implicitly supplied with spouse(s) and children, in Rousseau's state of nature, women and men do not form families but go their separate ways. But the very need for this isolation from mimetic contamination implies what it seeks to deny. Rousseau's savage is happy not because he is not mimetic, but because his mimetic tendencies have few occasions to assert themselves.

And these rare occasions all seem to fall under the rubric of pity. In his disquisition on the subject near the end of Part I, Rousseau asserts that pity is the source of all our social virtues ("What are generosity, clemency, humaneness but pity applied to the weak, the guilty, or to the entire human race?"). He then examines a potential objection to his claim: pity is not a moral sentiment but a feeling of "identification":

Even if it were true that commiseration were an obscure feeling that puts us in the place of the sufferer, a feeling obscure and strong in the savage, developed but weak in civilized man, what effect could that idea have on the truth of what I am saying except to strengthen it? Indeed, *commiseration would be all the more energetic in proportion as the spectator animal identifies [s'identifie] more intimately with the suffering animal. Now it is clear that this identification must have been infinitely closer in the state of nature than in that of reason.* It is reason that engenders selfishness [*l'amour-propre*], and it is reflection that fortifies it, that turns man back upon himself, that detaches him from all that troubles and distresses him; it is philosophy that isolates him, it is through philosophy that he says in secret at the sight of a sufferer: perish, if you like, I am safe. [My emphasis]

Amour-propre has just been defined as a social passion "that leads each individual to make more of himself than anyone else" and that was unknown in the state of nature where "it is not possible that a sentiment originating in comparisons that [the savage] has no means to make could arise in his soul." *Amour-propre* belongs to the negative moment of mimesis; to compare oneself to another is to render the identification of pity impossible. The savage, who, like **David Reisman's** erstwhile "inner-directed" man, makes no such comparisons, can identify more intimately with others because he has no fear of losing his identity to them. Rousseau's utopia denies the mimetic equilibrium of positive and negative. Rightly seeing that only humans are centrally preoccupied with preventing the destructive effects of mimesis, Rousseau draws the illegitimate conclusion that the positive and negative moments of mimesis are mutually exclusive. He fails to see that if pity and vanity combat each other in the soul of "civilized man" it is because they are both generated by the same mechanism. To the extent that the "savage" is less mimetic, he must be less compassionate as well.

Why does Rousseau make pity, as opposed to learning or playful imitation, the exemplary form of positive mimesis? Why is our identification with others confined to their sufferings? Natural pity can be opposed to social *amour-propre* only because pity, unlike simpler manifestations of mimesis, is a *social* emotion that contains its negative element in transcended form. As Rousseau himself observes, "natural pity" is intentionally generated by culture:

Such is the pure movement of nature, anterior to all reflection, such is the force of natural pity that even the most depraved morals have difficulty in destroying, since we see every day in our theaters [*spectacles*] becoming moved and crying

at the misfortunes of a sufferer someone who, if he were in the tyrant's place, would only increase the torments of his enemy.

Theater, particularly tragic theater, is a place for the deconstruction of sacrifice. We pity the tragic victim only insofar as we are participants in the tragic form that guarantees his sufferings. We want **Oedipus** to escape his own investigation, yet we know in advance that he will not. This quintessentially *cultural* structure is the basis of Rousseau's "natural" pity. Let us note that if in the *Discourse* Rousseau presents **pity** as the primary relation between men in their natural state, in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, it is rather **terror**:

Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them *giants*. (*Essay*, ch. 3; tr. John Moran)

Neither pity nor terror are "natural" sentiments. Pity, already present in **Condillac** as the recognition of shared need in our fallen state, is not the positive moment of mimesis but a recuperation of its negative moment. The primary object of pity is not natural suffering but the cultural suffering engendered by sacrifice. Even today in primitive societies there is no "natural suffering" with which to commiserate, no illness untainted by at least the suspicion of a cultural cause.

Compassion is always compassion for the victim, and the victim is always sacrificial. The victim of a natural disaster evokes in us not the simple desire to heal his pain but a guilty sense that "there but for the grace of God go I." Pity is a social passion that depends on the designation of the victim by a sign; the sacrificial victim is the originary referent of language. By situating pity in the state of nature, Rousseau would have us deconstruct sacrifice before it is instituted. He performs the sleight of hand of evoking an effect of the sign--and of the society it generates--as a demonstration of the sign's contingency.

Certainly mimetic identification exists prior to the sign, but so does the symmetry of its positive and negative moments. Where there is imitation, there is rivalry; where there is identification, there is competition. And where there is pity, there is terror. The savage who identifies "more intimately" with his suffering fellow and the savage whose fear makes him call the other a "giant" are one and the same. The victim is always already sacred; if we pity him, we fear him. The Rousseauian "savage"'s terror is realized in language whereas his pity is expressed without words. But this is only possible because the word designating the victim has already been irrevocably pronounced.

Rousseau's half deliberate, half naive repositioning of pity for the victim as prelinguistic sympathy would become the defining sentiment of the Romantic era, the *mensonge romantique* that grounds both its doctrine of human interaction and its critique of the nascent market system. In 1848, the French elected **Alphonse de Lamartine**, the exemplary romantic poet, as the first leader of their revolutionary government. But the Romantic revolution failed. When, in the following century, "natural pity" finally prevailed politically over the mediations of the bourgeois order, the results were something less than utopian.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Three Kinds of Authority

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In *Double Business Bound*, **René Girard** gives a mimetic analysis of Act II, scene 3 of **Molière's** *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, where the philosophy master intervenes in an argument between the dancing master and the fencing master as to the relative excellence of their respective arts. Instead of providing the expected pacifying mediation, the philosopher turns a pecking-order quarrel into a Hobbesian war of all against all by affirming the superiority of his own specialty over the other two.

It is easier to be amused by this example than to apply it to one's own case. The multicultural relativism of the postmodern era, with all its self-serving silliness, reflects a situation where the universalist "philosopher" has lost the authority that had set him, in principle at least, above the specialist disputants. Ethical authority derives from the originary human event both in the form of unanimous arbitrary choice--that of the sacred central object/victim--and of free reciprocal exchange--that of the originary sign among the event's participants. The history of human governance may be described as a movement from the first pole of this originary model to the second. But the closer we come, the more difficult it becomes to decide on the universal ground rules that the system of free exchange must obey.

The traditional sacred rulership that descends from the arbitrary unanimity of the originary scene has waned in modern society with the growth of the pragmatic authority derived from reciprocal exchange. By founding this authority on the reasoned consent, explicit or not, of the members of the group, **Hobbes** and other early modern political theorists in effect reduced the sacred center to a function of the group itself. This process appears to have achieved stability in the political sphere. Today, strange as it might have seemed less than a generation ago, there are no more major arguments about the best way of organizing the government of advanced societies. What remains in greater flux is the intellectual authority that guarantees the value of discourse. Although there are official licensing procedures for professional--medical, legal, professorial--discourses, what concerns me here are rather those domains left to the discretion of the user.

The authority of free-market discourse comes *grosso modo* in two varieties: (1) **specialized expertise** for the domain of production and (2) **gnostic wisdom** for that of consumption.

- **Specialized expertise** is the democratic means of avoiding mimetic conflict. Each individual has his own domain of supremacy; each level of generality, rather than a step up a hierarchical ladder, is just one more local domain of specialization. One appeals not vertically to higher authority, but horizontally to specialized technique. Today, a philosopher would have no mandate to resolve a dispute between a dancer and a fencer; the appropriate mediator would be not a fount of general wisdom but an expert in problem-resolution, perhaps an "ethicist" specialized in recreational activities. The absence of a higher authority to whom to appeal insures that there will be not be a "higher," more general and potentially threatening conflict to resolve. The expert is not charged with preventing, or by his failure contributing to, Hobbesian chaos; his very presence guarantees

that even the conflict most universal in appearance will have only local significance.

- **Gnostic wisdom** is dispensed by gurus, not experts. Thus it is not part of the expertise structure of practical discourse, although it may so disguise itself--e.g., as "therapy"--in order to attract new adherents. Because it is revelatory rather than empirical, it gives short shrift to epistemology; its point is to console rather than to inform. To consume gnostic certitude is not to contravene the fragmented local expertise that runs the productive system; although each certitude concerns the entire universe, the number of certitudes is just as unlimited in principle as the number of local domains of expertise. The same market system that links the local experts in its productive capacity tolerates the separation of beliefs in its consumptive capacity.

Both expertise and wisdom are forms of strong authority. The expert must be strongly believed because he has wagered his professional career on knowing more about the matter than anyone else. The Gnostic guru too must be strongly believed; like the expert, his wisdom must not be tested but simply accepted. Although both forms of authority participate in the decentralization characteristic of the modern market system, they retain a centralized structure within their own local domain. Both involve suspension of judgment, rational in one case, ecstatic in the other.

To propose a theory of the system as a whole, it is necessary to remain open to dialogue with any element of it, as neither the guru nor the expert can. **GA**'s authority derives solely from the minimality of its hypothesis. This authority is "weak," guaranteed by neither expertise nor spiritual leadership. But because **GA** does not derive its legitimacy from either the communal sacred or individual free exchange within the originary scene, it is free to propose a model of their articulation.

What are the prospects for a third way between the well-established market positions of our two forms of discursive authority? In the not-so-distant past, the credentials of general discourses about the human were subject to far less scrutiny. The rise of expertise as a guarantee of discourse coincides with the exponential growth of discourse itself with its authors clamoring for our attention. The same **Internet** that permits the existence of the *Chronicles* requires its users to have some means of filtering its terabytes of data.

In this respect, **GA**'s semi-official status is as exemplary as its intellectual position. Like **René Girard** and myself, *Anthropoetics* (including the *Chronicles*) has a respectable university base, but in the humanities rather than the social sciences. We are professional enough to insure seriousness, but we do not speak with the voice of a profession. The adepts of **GA**, including the members of the *Anthropoetics* editorial board, are specialists in various fields of knowledge for whom originary thinking provides a heuristic focus.

As I explained in [Chronicle 180](#), originary thinking appeals to potential adherents through esthetic intuition; it is more congenial to the humanities than to the social sciences because the humanities are more attuned than the social sciences to the central anthropological question: what is the human? But I see no reason to consider the positivism of social science eternal. The cognitive sciences cannot forever ignore the event-nature of our origin that is pointed to by all of human culture. Whether **GA** is ultimately credited with its enunciation of this truth is a secondary matter. But even if its insights were to become the standard basis for the human sciences, originary thinking itself, as I see it, will always remain an extraprofessional practice, one that nourishes and dialogues with the various specializations of anthropological knowledge without becoming fixed in any one of them. Only thus can it conserve its incentive to minimality that facilitates its dialogue with all.

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Oulipo

No. 187: Saturday, November 6, 1999

Last week the **UCLA French Department** was host to **Marcel Bénabou**, an eminent member of a group of twenty-odd French writers called *Oulipo*, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* or **Workshop of Potential Literature**. Oulipo probably holds the longevity record for modern literary schools. Founded just under forty years ago by **Raymond Queneau** and **François Le Lionnais**, it is still going strong, acquiring new members to replace those who depart. In its early years, it was a relatively obscure rival to the much-heralded *Nouveau roman* (New Novel), a far looser group of higher-profile writers such as the late **Nathalie Sarraute** and **Alain Robbe-Grillet**; today, the *nouveaux romanciers* are nearly all gone and their slogan relegated to the history books, but Oulipo lives on. The secret of its continued life--Bénabou emphatically rejected the term *survival*--is contained in the deliberately antiquated term *ouvroir*. Oulipo presents itself, with the modesty indispensable to success in our postmodern era, as a workshop of artisans rather than a coterie of artists. But the modesty that matters most is not that of personalities or slogans. The Oulipiens' fountain of youth is a literary method that permits them to remain a coherent group of free and relatively equal individuals rather than an unstable set of rivalrous egos.

This method is not a common "vision" such as may arguably be said to have united the *nouveaux romanciers*. The Oulipiens are devotees of wordplay, of *les jeux du signifiant*. Their governing principle is the self-imposition of generative procedures restricting or organizing the use of words on the basis not of their meaning but of their written (or occasionally sonorous) manifestation. Perhaps the most famous Oulipian exercise is a "lipogrammatic" novel by **Georges Perec**, the school's most talented writer; *La disparition* (*The Disappearance*, 1969) is written entirely without using the letter "e," a letter still more common in French than in English. (A similar novel in English appeared in the 1930s, but unlike Perec's, it does not make the disappearance of the fifth letter the central theme of the story.)

Bénabou himself has conceived combinatorial systems for constructing locutions and aphorisms by combining lists of "templates" on the one hand ("There is no A without a B," "Take the A and leave the B") and lists of words related in various ways on the other ("love-"hate"; "pleasure"-"treasure") to produce "There is no love without hate," "Take the pleasure and leave the treasure," and so on. Another Oulipian method is "S+n": one takes a sentence from some well-known source and replaces each noun/substantive with the nth noun following it in the dictionary. A Shakespearian S+1: "Friesians, romances, countryseats, lend me your earls."

For the Oulipiens' most important predecessors, the **Surrealists**, "automatic writing" was meant to serve as a unifying methodology, and **André Breton's** first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) explicitly defined Surrealism by this method. ("**Surrealism**: n. Psychic automatism by which one proposes to express ... the real foundation of thought. Dictation of thought in the absence of any control exercised by reason...") But automatic writing was too limiting and negative a constraint; denial of conscious control over the

writing process is not a source of new material. The Oulipiens, in contrast, have solved the dilemma of finding a method that can unite the group yet remain open and indefinitely creative by imposing no restrictions on the constraints that the members may invent for themselves. These can extend from the mechanical S+n to the complex combinatorial patterns of Perec's masterpiece, *La vie, mode d'emploi* (*Life, an Owner's Manual*, 1978), in which each chapter takes place in a different room of an apartment building in an order determined, along with the contents of the room, the vocabulary of the chapter, and other details, by complex formulas.

My acquaintance with Oulipo is largely the product of directing **Stella Behar**'s doctoral dissertation on Georges Perec nearly ten years ago. I should admit that, despite admiring Perec's work (not all of which is dominated by wordplay), I have never taken Oulipian practices very seriously. Formal constraints like rhyme or sonnet form have a communicative function that merely combinatorial exercises do not. All art strives to motivate its signifiers, and all writers seek out and exploit word patterns that potentially convey meaning. But the foregrounding of these patterns rather than the meanings they convey, one of many examples in avant-garde art of emphasizing the process over the product, undermines the context in which the meanings themselves are communicated. A pun is only funny when there is a punster who intends that you should find it funny. Computer-generated puns or their hand-calculated equivalents inspire tedium rather than laughter.

But Bénabou's talk suggested another way of looking at these methods. His main point is that expressed in the title of his first novel: *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* [*Why I Haven't Written Any of My Books*], a take-off on the title of a famous essay by the turn-of-the-century cult figure **Raymond Roussel**, who claimed to have generated his novel *Impressions d'Afrique* from punning on an arbitrary sentence. As Bénabou explained, his youthful ambition had been to write A/The Book, an ambition nourished by a combination of Jewish reverence for the Torah and literary emulation of **Mallarmé's** dream of **Le Livre**. His conversion experience came when he realized that no one (certainly not Mallarmé) could write the Book, but that each can write the story of his plans to write the Book and their failure, which writing converts into a meta-success. Interestingly enough, of the three novels Bénabou has published about not writing The Book, the latest (*Jacob, Menahem, and Mimoun: A Family Epic*, 1995, English translation 1998) is much less occupied than the other two with word-play and far more with the autobiographical and family material he originally intended his Book to contain.

It is enlightening to compare Bénabou's model of novel-writing with that proposed by **René Girard** in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (*Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*). For Girard, too, the novel reflects a conversion experience, a turning-away from the illusion of mimetic desire. **Proust's** novel, which supplies Girard's theory with its explicit model, ends with the novelist retiring from the world to write the Book of his prior illusions. But what if the illusory object of desire is the Book itself? Then one must write a meta-Book that recounts the time of illusion and renunciation. Unlike the Proustian confession-narrative, the meta-Book is a prehumiliated form of the Book. The meta-novelist's ambitions for worldly fame are no less than those of the novelist, but he realizes them by demonstrating their failure.

But this easy formula disguises the underlying market situation. As a replacement for Proust's 3000-page masterpiece, a mere admission of failed ambition would not sell many copies. The high-school journalist's column about not being able to find enough material to write his column is not the one he'd use when applying to journalism school.

It is here that Oulipo makes its positive contribution. Perec's literary success and the curiosity value in being the sole surviving literary "school" provide the Oulipo label with considerable market value. Yet the underlying source of this value, which is also the source of Oulipo's remarkable staying power, is the humble praxis of word-play. There are no geniuses at S+n, and even when, as in Perec's e-less novel, Oulipian constraint becomes the occasion for a creative *tour de force*, we admire the author as an artisan conquering his medium rather than as an Artist communing with the sublime. Perfect adherence to an arbitrary constraint is a modest substitute for the Book's unreachable perfection. In its crafty silliness, Oulipo may well have discovered the literary technique most conducive to postmodern creativity.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Adorers of Literature Scared of Criticism

No. 188: Saturday, November 20, 1999

One way of describing the trouble with the **Humanities** today is that those who are clever are wrong and those who are right are dull. Last year, the appointment of my friend, former student, and *Anthropoetics* stalwart **Tom Bertonneau** as **Executive Director** of the *Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* (**ALSC**) inspired in me a moment of optimism about the possibility of an organization's combining rightness and cleverness. Sadly, my experience of the ALSC annual meeting in New York illustrates the polarization of humanistic thinking, or what is left of it, between a Left inspired by what it imagines to be a flight from the Western tradition and a Right mired in passive worship of this tradition.

(There is an interesting historical connection between **GA** and the ALSC. One of the ALSC's leading lights is **Roger Shattuck**, now retired after a long and distinguished career as a professor of French. Best known for *The Banquet Years*, a colorful study of early French modernism, Shattuck is no theoretician. But in reaction to the emergence of deconstruction after 1968, he articulated the ideological position that is the semi-official credo of the ALSC: that literature is grounded in orality and remains so even in our literate culture. I first heard Shattuck enunciate this position in a talk at **UCLA** in 1980. What I perceived as its intellectually retrograde nature so provoked me that, in Paris the following summer, I wrote the article "Differences" (*MLN* 96: Spring 1981) that outlined the program of what would become **Generative Anthropology**.)

Both Left and Right unknowingly commune in confirming the sterility of Western culture at precisely the moment of its greatest triumph. Today the Western market-system with its ethic of exchange is in the process of integrating within itself--which does not mean swallowing up--the totality of the world's cultures. The new millennium begins in the dawn of a global civilization. Under such conditions, there is no need either to accept at face value the resentments of the post-colonial world or to circle the wagons around the masterpieces of Western civilization. The West's victory in the Cold War put an end to the rivalry of the two world-systems; there remains only one, and whatever modifications it acquires from the practices of other lands, nothing can change the fact that it was invented in the Judeo-Christian West.

Hence there is precious little chance that the cultural masterpieces of the society that created this system will be forgotten. The multicultural excesses that stimulated the formation of the ALSC are already receding. But this does not obviate the need for theorizing both the specific mediations that permit communication among what may already be considered subordinate elements of a world civilization as well as the general anthropological truth revealed by the triumph of the Western ethic: that the human condition is essentially one of **meaningful exchange** and that the gradient of history corresponds to the acceleration and proliferation of this exchange.

I regret to say that most of the clichés about the phallogocentric patriarchy are true of the ALSC. It is dominated by a small phalanx of elderly scholars insulated from the general membership, whose

suggestions, if the business meeting I attended is any indication, are met with condescension and largely dismissed. Its annual conference deliberately eschews the fragmented *Modern Language Association* (MLA) format of ten or twenty sessions going on at once in favor of a far smaller number of plenary sessions; the whole is never divided into more than three subgroups. But this praiseworthy unity comes at a price: the few speakers are chosen in advance by the all-powerful program committee rather than, as at the MLA, by independent chairs of the separate sessions. Junior scholars, not to speak of graduate students, need not apply.

My own invitation to speak in the Drama subgroup was a product of my relationship with Tom. The original title of my talk was "René Girard's Theory of Tragedy." For the first time in my career, I was forced to abandon a title for fear of controversy, I think less because of **Girard's** theoretical stance than simply because his stance is theoretical. For the conference emphasis was exclusively on the literary, the maximally literary. Foreign literatures were represented by **Goethe** and **Cervantes**. The other two panelists in my drama session spoke about **Shakespeare**. A session on the question of literacy dealt not with a single mega-author but with all of them together; the panel's literary component was a description of Columbia College's Great Books course.

I found the average level of intellectual sophistication quite a bit lower than at the MLA. Many of the participants seemed to have been drawn to the ALSC less out of scandal at the excesses of multiculturalism than out of fear of literary-critical theorizing of any kind. The vast bulk of postmodern theory, beginning with deconstruction, is, to be sure, on the Left. But the mistrust of Girard shows that the intellectual problem is deeper than the political. Since 1968, English and, to a lesser extent, other literature departments have been roiled by deconstruction, feminism, cultural studies, queer theory, postcolonial theory... Most of this theorizing is indeed victimary thinking, but its most frightening aspect to someone with a traditional literary background is its constant reference to an extraliterary--philosophical, sociological, linguistic, psychoanalytic...--universe of thought not formerly explored in literature departments and not easily absorbed by someone out of graduate school. This situation generates a quite understandable demand for authoritative, not to say authoritarian reassurance that these theoretical discourses, dwarfed by the great literary and philosophical works of the Western tradition, may safely be ignored.

A sizable group discussed for nearly an hour the relative merits of the literate and the oral without ever mentioning **Jacques Derrida**, whose attack on the myth of orality in *De la grammatologie* (1968) put this opposition at the center of the postmodern critical debate. And as though awakening from a twenty-year slumber, I once again heard Shattuck extol the virtues of the oral, declaring that the ultimate purpose of literary analysis in the classroom was to prepare students to read the work aloud. And once again, this Rousseauian profession of faith in the virtues of the unmediated voice made a Derridean of me. Sublimely indifferent to the impracticality of reading aloud in class anything much longer than a sonnet, Shattuck would have public readings of the literary classics take the place of the village festivals in the *Letter to D'Alembert on Spectacles* as means to reestablish a lost *Gemeinschaft*.

My disappointment with the ALSC may best be understood through a brief detour through political analysis. The American political configuration in the post-Cold War era breaks down roughly into three elements:

1. A traditionalist, moralistic, "paleoconservative" Right, highly suspicious of modernity and of the market system that sustains it. This group's increasing

association with religious fundamentalism is not without analogy to the violently anti-market religio-political movements in less developed countries.

2. A Left that remains openly hostile to the market and to the free circulation of human desire in general, which it views in victimary terms. Human degradation of the environment being the ultimate proof of the inherent destructiveness of the exchange-system characteristic of our unfortunate species, the "victim" is increasingly found in nature rather than humanity.

3. A neoconservative Center-Right favorable to the market. This element is particularly suspicious of the victimary thinking of the Left, but it is also uncomfortable with the moralizing of the Right.

Clear parallels may be drawn between the first two of these positions and the traditionalist vs postmodern dichotomy accepted by both sides as defining today's critical debate. But there is no third, pro-market position on culture because **culture itself, even the most marketable culture, is essentially hostile to the market.** Cultural phenomena impose their value in the marketplace by preempting the decision of the market, by opposing their version of the unique sacred to the reciprocity of exchange. To accept the market's decisions about culture is to renounce any given set of cultural meanings; to take a cultural position in favor of the market is to refuse to take a cultural position in the strong sense of the term. Hence it is really no surprise that, seeking in the ALSC the cultural equivalent of neoconservatism in the political sphere, I found only intellectual paleoconservatism.

GA, as a minimalist anthropology, a metacultural rather than a cultural theory, is neutral in the debate between traditionalism and multiculturalism. To recognize the historically superior--that is, less sacrificial--ethical aims of high as opposed to popular culture is not to presume that these aims constitute high culture as a transhistorical form--the Great Tradition--that evolves only in its content. There are no guaranteed heirs of the Great Tradition today. Only the marketplace can reveal to us what are henceforth the viable forms of culture, which is not to say that their importance can be measured by this week's or this year's receipts.

There is a clear analogy between this minimalist position and the neoconservative preference to let the market decide. But even if we grant for purpose of argument that a neoconservative cultural politics (for example, skepticism toward the public funding of cultural activities) is implicit in GA, this would still not imply any particular position with regard to which cultural phenomena to consider as significant. GA is culturally neutral because its vision of the human is ethical before it is esthetic. But those who feel strongly that they have a stake in what is taught in literature departments and in how it is taught cannot accept this benign neutrality. They will come down on one side or the other rather than sit back and await the verdict of history, by which we mean nothing more than the process of human exchange.

I should no doubt have understood all this before the ALSC meeting. But my experience is just one more demonstration that one best learns the value of things, be they goods or ideas, in and from the human exchange-system itself.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Language Origin in History VI: Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*

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Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is the Urtext of deconstruction. Like many a posthumously published work, it is characteristic of its creator to the point of caricature. Although its history is unclear, it is difficult not to connect its unpublished status with its lack of discipline in the deployment of Rousseau's trademark nature-culture dichotomy. The more rigorous *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* is not only closer to our own minimalist ideal, it is closer to the text of deconstruction itself. But for a doctrine like deconstruction that denies scientific value to metaphysical constructions in any case, the more caricatural the better; concentration on the *Essay* at the expense of the *Discourse* makes it easier to overlook their commonality of aims and achievements as proto-scientific texts. To point this out is not to deconstruct the discourse of deconstruction, but rather to suggest that it is itself, *à son corps défendant*, a discourse of construction--an inadequate one, to be sure, but not so much more than our own, the chief measure of the difference being the underlying *mensonge romantique* of a discursive practice that claims to turn away from anthropology, from the construction of the human.

If the author of the *Discourse*, dixit **Lévi-Strauss**, is the creator of anthropology as a human science, the author of the *Essay* would seem to be a purveyor of the pseudo-anthropological myths that lie at the foundation of Western thought, most notably of the myth so precious to **Derrida** of the speaker's presence to himself in his voice. The world of the *Essay* is not the state of nature of the first part of the *Discourse* but the social condition of the second part. Within this already-corrupt world where language has replaced le *cri de la nature*, the melodious voice serves as a supplement to man's lost natural state.

There is no point in redoing Derrida's deconstruction of this text. The greater challenge is to find in it, as in the *Discourse*, a lesson in originary anthropology.

As noted in [Chronicle 185](#), the primary extrafamilial relationship among humans in the *Essay* is not determined by pity, as in the *Discourse*, but by a **Hobbesian** fear that is, not coincidentally, the first "passion" to be expressed in language. The scene in Chapter 3 expresses the *Essay*'s most brilliant anthropological insight:

Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he will see the others as taller and stronger than himself. He will give them the name of *giants*.

But in the context of this language of fear--to which I shall return below--there intervenes the "supplementary" sweetness of the voice that will be shown in Chapter 9 to characterize particularly the melodious, vocalic South in contrast to the harsh, consonantal North. This supplement is expressed

primarily not in speech, but in song (Ch. 4). For the *Essay* is as much a polemic about music as it is a speculation about language.

Rousseau's text contains the components of a model of the origin of human representation in two moments: (1) The birth of the sign as the making-sacred of an Other ("giant") recognized as a potential source of mimetic conflict; (2) the peaceful elaboration of the sign in ritual performance. The *jeu du supplément* that creates song in compensation for the lost harmoniousness of nature is not a merely metaphysical operation; it reflects the passage from the purely formal emission of the sign to its institutional elaboration in ritual. No doubt Rousseau's argument appeals not to the equilibrating construction of the musical supplement but to its naturalness, not to the sacrificial nature of ritual but to the erotic virtues of song:

... In the arid places where one could only obtain water from wells, men had to come together to dig them, or at least to reach agreement on their use. This must have been the origin of societies and languages in warm countries.

There the first ties were formed among families; there were the first rendezvous of the two sexes. . . . *There the first festivals took place.* Feet skipped with joy, eager gestures no longer sufficed, the voice accompanied them with impassioned accents; pleasure and desire mingled and were felt together. There, finally, was the true cradle of nations: from the pure crystal of the fountains flowed the first fires of love. (Ch. 9, emphasis mine)

The anthropological lesson of Rousseau's text is subordinated to its polemical intention. But in our proto-scientific reading, Rousseau's preference for the Natural over the Social is stripped of its rhetorical moralizing to become a postulate of *method*, one not uncongenial to **Durkheim's** sociology of religion: the sociologist focuses on the simplest forms of a given phenomenon because they most clearly reveal that phenomenon's originary function. What is at issue for human science is not the moral valence of historical progress but its obscuring action for the study of fundamental human reality.

The contrast between the *Essay* and the *Discourse* on this point is instructive. The second *Discourse* is, like its cruder predecessor, the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, a paradoxical diatribe against human history, but it is not a polemic as such. Because its attacks on human society serve no cause, its critique is easily translated from the moral to the methodological domain; it suffices to change "good/bad" into "good/bad to study." The transformation is all the more justified in that the resulting values have practical implications for scholarship, whereas the only way to put the original into practice would be to carry out the desire purportedly inspired in **Voltaire** by the *Discourse* to walk on all fours. (Or, under the influence of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, to seek to realize the "general will" through political action; but that is another story.)

The *Essay*, in contrast to the *Discourse*, is overtly polemical. Its purpose in declaring melody more natural than harmony is to endorse the Italian musical style (which Rousseau himself practiced) over the French style championed by Rameau. The other variants on the nature-culture dichotomy in the text may be read as so many corroborations of this endorsement. The purely speculative preference of the *Discourse* for the primitive over the civilized is replaced in the *Essay* by a geographical preference for the South (Italy) over the North (France) and for a public, ritual culture mediated by song over a private, secular culture that communicates (if at all) through writing. To consider this text in methodological terms is not simply to sacrifice its practical implications but to translate it from the musical realm where

these implications are operative into that of cultural analysis; when this is done, the *Essay*'s greater concreteness makes it a more specific guide than the *Discourse*. Whatever our view of the author's ethico-musical preference, we can hardly avoid making it our methodological preference, as over a century of ethnology has shown. Even the paradoxical turn of the argument that makes it so apt for deconstruction may be understood in methodological terms. Rousseau's own use of writing as a supplement to the lost state of nature translates into the literate ethnologist's analytical insight into the operations of oral cultures that is inaccessible to the participants in these cultures themselves.

In the concluding chapter (20) of the *Essay*, entitled "Relationships between Languages and Governments," Rousseau's model of ethical origin is given a communal (and political) context; southern societies where a general can address his entire army in public are favorably compared with unfree northern societies where language is private and might just as well be written as spoken. Combined with the "giant" scenario of Chapter 3, this collective scene becomes a model of the origin of language. As in **Condillac**, language is generated in that scene by fear of danger rather than positive appetite. But where Condillac understood the linguistic sign as emerging from the increasingly voluntary rationalization of the prehuman "call" elicited by this fear--and where **Herder**, a generation after Rousseau, will separate the linguistic sign not merely from this *cri de la nature* but from the danger that motivated it--for Rousseau the danger posed by the "giants" displaces the sign *ab ovo* from *any* natural relationship with its referent. The no-longer-natural quality of the context in which the sign emerges is figured by the metaphoric nature of the sign itself. In the absence of a contrasting word for "man," "giant" can convey no well-defined meaning. But insofar as Rousseau's scenario is a model of glossogenesis, the same could be said of any first word. What is conveyed by "giant" is not simply greater than normal size but supernaturalness, in other words, sacrality. The Différance with which language begins is not, *pace* Derrida, **Saussurian** difference, but the sacred that defers violence.

The text presents the speaker as isolated before a number of fearsome potential enemies, like Rousseau himself confronting the *accord unanime* (see [Chronicle 183](#)). But the dynamic of the glossogenetic situation implies that it is rather the speaker and his interlocutors who would be the more numerous. In the Hobbesian world of the *Essay*, it would not even be far-fetched to trace the aggression directed outward at the giant-victims to the mimetic rivalries within the proto-community.

The danger represented by the Other-as-giant is that constituted in **Girard's** model by the **scapegoat** or emissary victim. Were the "giants" encountered in the concluding chapter of the *Essay*, the general's voice would transform his soldiers into a Girardian lynch mob. But the structure of Rousseau's scene in Chapter 3 is that of **GA's** originary hypothesis. Designation of the "giants" is in the first place linguistic representation. The victim is made sacred by the sign *before* he is made a victim. Whatever one may subsequently do to giants, one first hesitates before their incarnation of supernatural force.

Rousseau may be deemed the first modern thinker because he is the first whose thought reflects, *avant la lettre*, the dynamic of bourgeois society. In his writings, the elements of originary anthropology and even of its methodology are all present in implicit form. We are no longer required, as in Hobbes, to solicit them from the structural "unconscious" of his text. But we are still obliged to piece them together; they are not yet combined in an even inchoate synthesis. As a man of the Enlightenment, Rousseau remains committed to regenerating, in opposition to religious tradition, the collective from the individual; he cannot yet conceive their common and interdependent origin. Such a conception, inspired by the maturing of the market system, first emerges unambiguously over a century later, in the work of Durkheim.

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Does God Exist?

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Perhaps the deepest motivation for **Generative Anthropology** is the need to raise the level of our discourse about the **existence of God**, which habitually begin by defining "God" and then go on to examine the evidence for his/her/its existence... These mind-numbing exercises persist, and not only among the intellectually unsophisticated. The other day I read a review of a book about **Albert Camus** that went on at length about Camus' inversion of Christian belief into a faith in the non-existence of God. Is the world "absurd"? If so, does its absurdity prove the non-existence of God? This kind of ratiocination is about as helpful as counting angels on pinheads.

But this does not mean that we should simply dismiss the whole debate, in good **Enlightenment** fashion, as a survival from the dark ages of the soul. If we declared the question of God's existence meaningless, as the logical positivists thought they could do, all religious questions would be expelled from rational discourse. On the contrary: it is the very importance of religious questions that makes the usual terms in which they are debated so frustrating.

I sometimes wonder about the helpfulness of the **originary hypothesis** for analyzing literary texts, but I have no doubt whatsoever that it evacuates the old clichés of Western philosophy about the existence of God. We need a new way of thinking that provides a qualitatively more neutral language in which to speak of religious matters. And because humans do not live in hermetically sealed universes of discourse, the creation and dissemination (which are not the same thing!) of such a language are bound to transform religious discourse and, as a consequence, the reality of religion itself. I believe GA as it stands today is the beginning of such a language, although I cannot tell when or even whether people will begin to speak it.

Generative Anthropology is about the origin of the human, defined as the origin of language. We have heard enough recently about the sacralization of language. But those who treat language as a transcendent force beyond our control not only fail to reconstruct its source, they deny that such a source is conceivable. The point of the originary hypothesis is to minimize the scandal of conceiving the moment of the origin of language, which is the moment of passage between the non-human and the human.

No one claims that animals, who do not possess representation, know God. What we claim to know of God is known only through representation, that is, through language in its broadest sense. We know we have language, then, and we claim to have knowledge of God. To what extent is the first knowledge tantamount to, or even equivalent to, the second?

Language helps us to understand God because it provides us with a model of transcendence and its "mystery." The linguistic sign cannot be understood simply as one thing substituted for another, *aliquid*

stat pro aliquo. It belongs to a different "world," in **Karl Popper's** terminology, one that shares the quality generally attributed to God of existing outside time and space. The representational sign is "immortal"; even when it falls into disuse, it retains the virtual being of a God that is no longer worshipped rather than dissolving into its elements like a dead animal. In the same vein, the immortality of our soul is analogous to that of a linguistic text. A book can decay, but the words that compose it do not die a material death even when they disappear; the same may be said of our thoughts.

We cannot explain these analogies by claiming that the sacred itself is merely an epiphenomenon or, as **Max Müller** (the subject of an upcoming *Chronicle*) put it in his famous dictum, a "disease" of language. Thus because the sun (to use Müller's own favorite example) is the subject of the verb in "the sun rises," it comes to be understood as having the other attributes of human subjectivity. This understanding of the sacred as an anthropomorphic construction of natural reality is limited to grammatical relations, which lack any analogy to transcendence. Because it relies on the natural, it cannot take into account the deeper analogy contained in the other-worldly ontology of the sign itself.

In the common-sense view that Müller shares, language is part of the everyday world whereas God is veiled in mystery. But treating sacred mystery as disease and desacralized language as healthy will not explain the origin of either language or the sacred. The mystery of the sacred belongs to the domain of language as well. It is the *conjunction* of language and the sacred that is the defining feature of our species; the purpose of the originary hypothesis is to explain the origin of this conjunction.

To think of the origin of language is to think of a mystery to which God's existence offers a preemptive solution. This existence is both the central article of all religious faith and a category error. To the extent that God (*i.e.*, for the atheist) is no more than the signified or meaning of the originary sign, he cannot be said to exist any more than the word-form "tree" exists; his immortality depends precisely on his not possessing the existence of a real, mortal tree. But to the extent that God (*i.e.*, for the believer) is not merely a sign but solves the mystery of the sign, his "existence" is altogether different from that of a tree and cannot therefore be understood under the same concept. **Saint Anselm's ontological proof** claims that God, as the most perfect being, must exist because existence is a "perfection." But aside from the question-begging nature of the argument, it is not proved even in its own terms. Why not claim the exact opposite? As **Keats** put it, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter." We would understand each other better if instead of arguing over whether God exists, we reflected on what it means to say that he *is*.

GA does not, like God, solve the mystery of the sign through preemption, but it is the first mode of thought to take the solution of this mystery as its methodological challenge. The minimality of the originary hypothesis reduces faith to its lowest common denominator, abstracted from the historical circumstances in which its revelations were procured. When we speak of analogies between God and the sign, the sign we speak of is not the word or "sememe" of language in its mature state, but the sign in the minimal, originary configuration of language where there are no other signs from which it may be differentiated. In this originary state the **Saussurian** equation of meaning with difference breaks down; the first sign differentiates not with respect to other signs but by pointing out its referent from its unmarked surroundings. If God can be understood through the sign of language, it is as the Being of what that sign--understood as the "name of God"--designates. God is more than a signified or meaning, an Idea or concept. He is the substance that grounds the possibility of meaning, the sacred being that must be before we can designate some particular thing (the central object of the originary scene of representation) as sacred.

The originary hypothesis does not require us to believe in God because it does not presuppose the anteriority of the sacred to the human. I would not say with **Girard** that the sacred *is* human violence, even with the precision that its emergence requires the proliferation of violence in a "mimetic crisis" that can be resolved only by the concentration of the community's hostility on a single object. What is sacred is the object of the community's common desire. This desire need not be generated merely as a means to discharge the mimetic tension of the group; it may simply--I think more parsimoniously--be provoked by a particularly attractive object of consumption. The function of the sacred is the deferral of violence, and this is accomplished through representation, through the generation of the sign.

From a religious perspective, any object that so concentrates human desire is a divine revelation that the human community can found itself around this concentration of desire. The generation and reproduction of this concentration is not limited to the specific mortal object that on this occasion effects it. The sign that designates the object persists after the object has been destroyed (presumably to be shared as food among the group); its meaning is not exhausted by any specific referent, nor even by the signified to which the referent is related as a token to a type. The sign does not demonstrate God's existence; it affirms the violence-deferring presence of sacred being.

However difficult the exposition of these ideas may be--and I apologize to the reader for any obscurity--they seem to me a clear improvement over the usual modes of discourse on the subject of God's existence. Yet they are generally met with an indifference that is partly a failure of marketing, but cannot be this alone. To say that the world is not yet ready for them is to beg the question of their future value.

Is Generative Anthropology too much oriented toward solving old problems rather than toward posing new ones? In simplifying our understanding of human reality does it fail to suggest new lines of empirical research to confirm this understanding? Or is this failure caused rather by the disjunction between the motivations and strategies of scientific research and the process of humanistic thinking, which (in this respect like religion) cannot influence scientific research programs without sacrificing its central anthropological insight. Thus even when empirical research corroborates various aspects of the originary hypothesis, as with **Terrence Deacon's** *The Symbolic Species* discussed in [Chronicle 168](#), the conjunction, of interest to us, is without consequence to the empirical researchers themselves.

My own view is that no research program based on biological categories can explain human language. I understand that cognitive scientists might not be particularly anxious to agree with me on this point. But if we change the word "language" to "religion," it becomes harder to disagree, whether one is a believer or not. The idea of God makes explicit the mystery implicit in language. To the extent that this making-explicit is the very ground upon which Generative Anthropology rests, GA is more fundamentally a theory of religion than a theory of representation. I don't think **Durkheim** would have disapproved of such a definition of the most fundamental human science

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Eric Gans

Language Origin in History VII: Herder's Bleating Sheep

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Johann Gottfried Herder's prize *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1772) is the definitive rejection of **Condillac's** Enlightenment model that seeks to derive human language from natural signs. This rejection obliges Herder to reject as well the interactional basis for language, reasoning that if animals could communicate adequately through the very natural signs that he has shown language not to be, communication cannot be language's *raison d'être*. In this, Herder anticipates the cognitivist position of **Chomsky** and his school, who see language as an epiphenomenon of the evolution of the brain.

Man, placed in the state of reflection which is peculiar to him, with this reflection for the first time given full freedom of action, did invent language....

Man manifests reflection when the force of his soul acts in such freedom that, in the vast ocean of sensations which permeates it through all the channels of the senses, it can ... single out one wave, arrest it, concentrate its attention on it, and be conscious of being attentive. He manifests reflection when, confronted with the vast hovering dream of images which pass by his senses, he can collect himself into a moment of wakefulness and dwell at will on one image... and can select in it distinguishing marks for himself so that he will know that this object is this and not another. He thus manifests reflection if he is able not only to recognize all characteristics vividly or clearly but if he can also recognize and acknowledge to himself one or several of them as distinguishing characteristics. The first act of this acknowledgment results in a clear concept; it is the first judgment of the soul--and through what did this acknowledgment occur? Through a distinguishing mark which he had to single out and which ... struck him clearly...

Let that lamb there, as an image, pass by under his eyes; it is to him, as it is to no other animal. Not as it would appear to the hungry, scenting wolf!... Not as it appears to the rutting ram which feels it only as the object of its pleasure... Not as it appears to any other animal to which the sheep is indifferent and which therefore lets it ... pass by because its instinct makes it turn toward something else--Not so with man! As soon as he feels the need to come to know the sheep, no instinct gets in his way; no one sense of his pulls him too close to it or too far away from it.... White, soft, woolly--his soul in reflective exercise seeks a distinguishing mark--the sheep bleats! His soul has found the distinguishing mark.... This bleating, which makes upon man's soul the strongest impression, which broke away from all the other qualities of vision

and of touch, which sprang out and penetrated most deeply, the soul retains it.
(Section 2)

This view of language as a product of the human freedom from animal determinations of appetite and action is closer to the originary hypothesis than to the cognitivists' evolutionary determinism. Herder's exposition suggests, albeit in the context of the lone Enlightenment individual rather than the group, the free-floating mimetic interaction by which humans replace these animal determinations. For Herder, as for **Sartrean** Existentialism, human freedom is a primary category, defined in negative terms but inexplicable merely on the basis of what it negates. The effect of this absence of determination is an otherwise unexplained desire to imitate, not other persons in their similarity to us, but other beings insofar as they force themselves upon one's consciousness. Whence the "bleating sheep," the best remembered passage in the *Essay*.

Herder's sheep, the very symbol of innocuousness, is diametrically opposed to **Rousseau's** giants. Herder exemplifies human disinterest by the least fearsome creature in opposition to both Rousseau and Condillac, for whom language originates in the "unfree" need to communicate one's distress. Yet there is a subtle contradiction between the choice of the lamb, innocent victim and symbol of **Christ**, and the postulated disinterest of the human speaker in its edibility; the Lamb of God is a direct descendent of the eminently comestible Paschal lamb of the Hebrews. Herder in his Enlightenment optimism ignores the fact that it is precisely this lack of fearsomeness that makes the lamb the ideal sacrificial victim and, as a consequence, the symbol of the sacred in the religion that most clearly reveals the mimetic nature of the sacrificial.

Herder's arguments against Condillac's derivation of language from natural cries are more destructive than constructive. His own originary scene suggests the sacrality of language only by *reductio ad absurdum*: if man has no appetitive interest in the sheep, why should he "[feel] the need to come to know" it? In order to find an anthropological basis for what Herder sees as a purely gratuitous interest, we must situate it on a different level from appetitive interest, which is to say, as the interest we have in the significant, in the sacred.

Why is it the *bleating* of the sheep that "makes upon man's soul the strongest impression"? Clearly the "bow-wow" theory here presented takes for granted not only the sonorous but the mimetic nature of speech. We cannot ourselves become white, soft, and woolly in imitation of the sheep, but we are able to mimic his cry. As opposed to Condillac who derives language from our own involuntary "calls," Herder finds its source in the deliberate imitation of those of another creature. The obvious objection that many objects and actions, let alone grammatical words, are not associated with a sound suffices to refute the bow-wow theory as an overall explanation of the lexicon, but it is not entirely on the mark with respect to Herder's originary scene. The choice of the sheep, a higher animal and the prototypical sacrificial victim to boot, allows us to construe this scene more generously. As the hypothetical referent of the first word, the sheep is an object of both desire *and* imitation. Despite Herder's Enlightenment atomism, the only way to connect desire and imitation is through the desire of the human community: we all desire (to eat) the sheep, it acquires being as a result of its desirability, we all share that being by representing/imitating the sheep through its cry. Hence to emit the sign is both to represent the object as desired and to take on the being of the object represented. Although this is not a useful explanation of the origin of most of our vocabulary, it highlights language's doubly mimetic structure.

It is fitting that the Enlightenment's definitive statement on the origin of language should on the one

hand evacuate Condillac's model of continuity with nature that Rousseau had problematized but not really overcome and on the other reduce the scene of language origin to the confrontation between a meaningless nature and a single free human spirit. Of these two operations, the first redefines the problem in all its paradox for all future students of the question. (To quote Alexander Gode, the author of the 1966 Frederic Ungar Press translation of the *Essay*, "Can we today, armed as we are with an infinitely more vast array of documented primary data than Herder, excel over Herder in his ultimate insight into the nature and the mystery of language? The answer, I fear, can only be in the negative.") The second, in renouncing the Enlightenment ambition to reconstitute the community from an aggregate of individuals, looks forward to the Romantic blurring of boundaries between individual and collective. The two operations are inseparable; in the Enlightenment perspective, to be cut off from nature and its instincts is to be without any "natural" need for communication with a fellow creature.

Herder's elimination from the language situation of the human other and its mimetic relationship with the self focuses our attention on the "vertical" mimetic relation between speaker and referent that in previous models, such as that of Condillac, was merely an element of the "horizontal" appetitive décor. The trajectory of this movement away from the mediating other/rival and toward the sacred central object is that of the hypothetical originary event itself. Herder is right to give primary emphasis to the individual's free choice to represent the central being. But there remains to reestablish the relation with the human other on the basis of this mediating representation, a gesture beyond the capacity of Enlightenment thought.

Thus Herder's solipsistic model of language origin, however indispensable to future progress, is a closure of the problem rather than a solution to it. This closure foreshadows and continues to lend credence even today to the *Société Linguistique de Paris*'s infamous 1866 ban on theories of language origin. Herder's model can be completed only once the absolute difference between free human speech and *le cri de la nature* can be understood as resulting from an *event* of separation that inaugurates a radically new form of communication. This, as my reader will recognize, is what **GA** achieves with the originary hypothesis.

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Eric Gans

Language Origin in History VIII: Max Müller's Orinary Sunrise

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Max Müller, editor of the **Vedas**, was the most important Sanskritist of the nineteenth century and arguably its major figure in the study of religion as well. Despite the naivety of his ideas about religion and his failure to formulate a clear thesis of language origin, Müller was the first to conceive an orinary anthropology that gives language and religion equal weight. Both his achievement and his limitations are encapsulated in the sentence (from the 1861 *Lectures on the Science of Language*) for which he is best remembered today: "Mythology is a disease of language."

Although **Durkheim** decisively refuted Müller's "naturistic" theory of the origin of religion in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), his own theory of the sacred as a projection of the social never comes to grips with the problem of origin. This helps explain why even today something like Müller's theory remains the typical common-sense explanation for religious belief. How did humans come to believe in god(s)? Through their awe at the wonders of nature. At the first sound of a thunderclap, they bowed down in fear and prayed to the thunder god to spare them, etc., etc. This scenario deviates only slightly from Müller's in its focus on a concrete event. Sacrificing the specificity of the isolated event for the sake of universal visibility, Müller prefers to conceive the original object of worship as the sun in its daily phases, particularly its emergence at dawn:

One of the earliest objects that would strike and stir the mind of man and for which a sign or a name would soon be wanted is surely the Sun. It is very hard for us to realize the feelings with which the first dwellers on the earth looked upon the sun . . . But think of man at the very dawn of time: forget for a moment, if you can, after having read the fascinating pages of Mr. Darwin, forget what man is supposed to have been before he was man; forget it, because it does not concern us here whether his bodily form and frame were developed once for all in the mind of a Creator, or gradually in the creation itself . . . think of him only as man (and man means the thinker), with his mind yet lying fallow . . . think of the Sun awakening the eyes of man from sleep, and his mind from slumber! . . .

Few nations only have preserved in their ancient poetry some remnants of the natural awe with which the earliest dwellers on the earth saw that brilliant being slowly rising from out the darkness of the night, raising itself by its own might higher and higher, till it stood triumphant on the arch of heaven . . .

For so prominent an object in the primeval picture-gallery of the human mind, a sign or a name must have been wanted at a very early period. But how was this to be achieved? As a mere sign, a circle would have been sufficient . . . if such

a sign was fixed upon, we have a beginning of language in the widest sense of the word . . . With such definite signs, mythology has little chance . . .

Introduction to the Science of Religion (London, 1871): 366-70

Müller then proceeds to note that a "real," that is, spoken, name is required and that such a name could be derived only from a primitive verbal root signifying one of the sun's effects:

If the sun itself was to be named, it might be called the brilliant, the awakener, the runner, the ruler, the father, the giver of warmth . . . but there was no possibility of naming it, except by laying hold of one of its characteristic features, and expressing that feature by means of one of the conceptual or predicative roots. (*ibid.* 373)

The reference to **Darwin** is most significant. We see in Müller's exposition the last remnants of a pre-evolutionary mindset that cannot quite fathom the transformation wrought by Darwin's theory on the science of human origins. It was easy for Durkheim to show that even the earliest men would look at the sun as a pure banality, for if indeed humans evolved from prehuman ancestors, there was no inaugural moment at which "man" and the sun came in contact for the first time. *Contra* Müller, it does indeed "concern us here whether his bodily form and frame were developed once for all in the mind of a Creator, or gradually in the creation itself," since in the latter case, the phrase "man at the very dawn of time" becomes meaningless.

Yet Müller's hymn to the sun proposes, however implausibly, an event of language origin founded on the concentration of human desire on a central object. That this "object" is central to desire but not to the topography of the scene is not without relation to the fact that "man" is presented here, still in Enlightenment fashion, as indifferently singular and plural. If we consider "man" more concretely as the originary protohuman community, then it becomes clearer that what is essential in Müller's scene is not the celestial primacy of the sun but the unanimous nature of the desire directed at it. A specific group of not-yet-men would be more likely to come to blows over a desirable beast of prey than over the sun, but "man" can only unanimously desire something all humans can see. Yet whatever the failings of Müller's conception, his intuition that the sacred and language both spring from the human community's inaugural contact with an external and unanimously shared object of desire supplies an element lacking in Durkheim's otherwise far more mature anthropology.

As a scholar of the oldest extant corpus of religious literature written in **Sanskrit**, the language that the pioneering Indo-Europeanists of his day considered the closest thing to an *Ursprache*, Müller saw language and religion as fundamentally interrelated and coeval with the human. This would no longer be the case in the following generation. **Tylor**, **Frazer**, **Durkheim** *et al.* would focus their attention on religious "representations" (Durkheim's term) but not on language as such, which they took for granted as a human *a priori*; conversely, linguists like **Meillet** and **Saussure** would no longer concern themselves with the names and tales of gods.

In the passage quoted above, Müller suggests an originary "sign" for the sun that is not spoken or even gestural, but graphic. **Derrida** would be happy to know that the quintessential nineteenth-century philologist not only put written before spoken language but did so for fear that the pure inscription would be corrupted by sonorous speech. In a language limited to this simple sign, "mythology would have little chance": the "infantile disease" would not yet threaten because the mere circle would lack anthropomorphic possibilities--although Müller suggests that if the circle "reminded the people of an

eye," "the germs of mythology would spring up" (370).

Circle or word, the idea that the first sign is also the name of the first sacred object is a powerful one indeed, a clear advance beyond **Herder's** sheep. But Müller does not stop to develop this intuition because, although he sees religion as the sign's first cause, he cannot conceive of words originating as *ostensives*. Hence, passing over the "mere sign," Müller has recourse to the "primitive roots" of language among which the sun's first names are presumed to be found. But because these roots express basic human actions and qualities, their attribution as names to the sun makes inevitable our fall into the disease of anthropomorphic mythology. Once the sun is no mere circle, it fatally becomes the awakener, the father, the giver of warmth...

Whence come these roots that pre-exist man's awe of the sunrise? Here is Müller's explanation:

The 400 or 500 roots which remain as the constituent elements in different families of language are not interjections, nor are they imitations. They are *phonetic types* produced by a power inherent in human nature. . . . Man, in his primitive and perfect state, was not only endowed, like the brute, with the power of expressing his sensations by interjections, and his perceptions by onomatopoeia. He possessed likewise the faculty of giving more articulate expression to the rational conceptions of his mind. That faculty was not of his own making. It was an instinct . . . Man loses his instincts as he ceases to want them. . . . Thus the creative faculty which gave to each conception, as it thrilled for the first time through the brain, a phonetic expression, became extinct when its object was fulfilled. The number of these *phonetic types* must have been almost infinite in the beginning, and it was only through the same process of natural elimination which we observed in the early history of words, that clusters of roots, more or less synonymous, were gradually reduced to one definite type.

Lectures on the Science of Language (New York: Scribner's, 1862): 385

In this quasi-evolutionary depiction (composed less than five years after the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1856), articulate speech is a human instinct irreducible either to **Condillac's** "interjections" or to Herder's "onomatopoeia." In failing to provide an explanation of the origin of this "instinct," Müller seems to have abandoned Herder for the latter's *bête noire* **Süssmilch's** explanation of language as a product of divine will. But Müller reintroduces an evolutionary element in the *struggle for life* that reduces the "almost infinite" roots of earliest humanity to a few hundred. In the beginning, the language instinct was young and word-creation unbridled; with the decline of its creative powers, the roots had to fight for survival and were drastically reduced in number. In none of this discussion of the earliest phases of human language is there any question of awe before nature, religion, or even mythology, which Müller would nonetheless describe as the "childhood disease" of language.

Müller's roots are verbs and adjectives designating simple actions or qualities rather than nouns. The nominal is, in Müller's eyes, a late development, one closely associated with the mythological; in its pure state, the lexicon is not so contaminated. But this picture of "healthy" language as composed of a small number of basic roots is the result, we learn from the above, of the hecatomb of countless other words of less general and therefore less useful scope. Should we not assume that these redundant forms were essentially nominal, even ostensive? Müller's theory of lexical proliferation appears to echo a notion that

goes back (at least) to **Locke** and that was often expressed in the eighteenth century, notably by **Rousseau** and **Maupertuis**: that early in the development of language, each thing would receive an individual name, and that general names would arise only gradually through our learning from experience that tree A has a great deal in common with tree B. Müller's new wrinkle, based on his philological studies but hardly demonstrated by them, is that the end product of the evolutionary struggle was not words like "tree" but like "grow" or "green." But to account for the original proliferation, we must assume that for Müller as for Maupertuis, words were first attached to individual objects and only subsequently became generalized and de-nominalized into verbs and adjectives. What "instinct" could justify this proliferation of names in the communal context in which their struggle for survival would later take place?

If we put together Müller's theory of language origin and his theory of religious origin, we observe that he describes the origin of nouns in two moments: a God-given "instinctive" moment and a God-creating mythological moment. The only thing lacking for these two moments to dissolve into one is a plausible motivation common to both religious worship and language. Müller comes close to suggesting this for the sun. If naming the sun were the model for the first exercise of our language "instinct," there would be no proliferation of words beyond the limited plurality of divinities--each with its own "root"--and the struggle for life between words for tree A and tree B would take place only in the context of conflict between gods.

Müller chooses the sun as his model divinity precisely because it is the most undoubtedly unique of referents. But despite his lyricism, Müller presents our attribution of root-names to the sun as a gratuitous act of mythological *enfantillage* rather than a practical act of language use. What is missing in Müller is what Durkheim would supply, a *social* purpose for religion. But what is lost in the latter's conception of religion as the representation of the social ideal is the relationship, whether as disease or as motivation, of religious representations to the signs of language and their origin.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Culture vs. Exchange

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Since these *Chronicles* often refer favorably to the market exchange system and less so to cultural phenomena hostile to it, people sometimes wonder what relevance the modern market might have to a hypothesis concerning the origin of language and culture. Why should a theory of human origin be concerned with defending our political economy against its cultural assailants?

The beginning of the answer is that the interactions that define us as human are best understood as processes of exchange. In scenic terms, speech (which may of course be gestural) is an exchange of information on the periphery of the circle; ritual sacrifice is an exchange between the sacred center and the profane periphery. We must trace the tension between the modern market and its culture back to its originary roots in order to understand the apparent paradox that, although this tension has always existed, it is only with the emergence of the first social order overtly based on economic rather than ritual exchange that it is expressed as overt hostility.

Meaning or significance is created in the center of the scene; subsequently, meaningful representations and objects are exchanged at the periphery. The attachment of sacred meaningfulness to objects of economic value maintains peace in the community while permitting the consumption of these objects. Meaningfulness adds nothing directly to our material satisfaction; it can only have arisen as a means to prevent conflict--the **originary hypothesis**.

In the originary scene, the tension between the creation of meaning at the center ("culture") and its circulation on the periphery ("exchange") emerges as that between the designation of the central object by a sign and its distribution to the participants. At the **first moment**, the object is whole and the sign is shared by all. The community adds meaning to the object through--in exchange for--the deferral of its members' appetitive satisfaction. In the **second**, this satisfaction is obtained, but at the cost of destroying the object that was the source of meaning. Significance remains attached to the sign, but it is no longer reinforced by the presence of the object of desire; it is at this point that we may truly speak of the sacred or of God as possessing a Being transcending that of worldly objects. The process of economic exchange, which emerges here in *at least* virtual form, occupies a moment intermediate between the two others, in which the portions of the victim have been distributed but not yet consumed. At this moment, they are exchangeable with each other, or, in other terms, they are of equal *value*.

In order to create these portions of equal value, the original object that is the source of value has been destroyed. Inherent in this process is tension, in the sense of potential instability, between (1) expressing the significance of the object and (2) apportioning the object. If the second phase is carried out too soon, the object will not have had time to generate meaning and the value of its parts will therefore be lacking; if it is carried out too late, the meaning itself will have been dissipated and the desires of the group focused elsewhere. "Culture" is the force that would retain the object whole at the center and "exchange," the force that would apportion it among the members of the group. At the origin, these two moments

would be participated in equally by all members of the community, but, as society becomes more complex, the two functions would come to be divided among different individuals and castes, each of which would have reason to limit the powers of the other.

How does the tension between culture and exchange generate historical change? On one side, the exchange system tends to evolve in the direction of productive efficiency, helped along by wars that select the more efficient among competing societies. The Marxist model of social evolution through the organization of production is exclusively concerned with this process. What **Marx** calls "class conflict"--significantly enough, in all but the final, all-important "proletarian" vs "bourgeois" case--is the struggle for power by rival groups involved in this process--in modern Europe, typically the landed nobility and the bourgeoisie. Research in this area, however complex, is not conceptually problematic.

But on the other side, ritual and esthetic culture, far from being a mere "superstructure" of the economic process, is the original locus of the valuation of goods and services. In all societies prior to the Industrial Revolution, the regeneration of meaning at the ritual center of society had priority over exchange at the periphery as the means of deferring mimetic violence. The paradox that **Karl Polanyi** confronted in his historical genealogy of the free market is that although the latter is a minimal structure that one would expect to occur spontaneously whenever exchange is not otherwise constrained, it originated only once in history, in early modern Western Europe. However obvious it may appear to us that value is constituted in the exchange process itself by the interaction of supply and demand, in all premodern societies, value is established not at the periphery, in the process of exchange, but at the center--at first purely ritual, then, in hierarchical societies, at the same time ritual and political. Modern market society is a historical aberration. But its qualitative superiority, political as well as economic, over earlier social systems suggests that its technique of recycling resentment through the exchange system is truer to the ethical potential of the originary scene than the traditional practice of periodically "purging" that resentment via ritual/esthetic culture.

As we laugh at the tenured Marxists who still speak of "late capitalism," we should avoid the symmetrical fatuity of speaking of the "mature market system." Barring catastrophe, the shift of emphasis from center to periphery and from culture to exchange that took place around 1800 will last until the end of human society as we know it; in that context, two hundred years are hardly enough time to permit talk of maturity. Except perhaps for Moore's law that predicts the doubling of microchip speed every 18 months, there are no steady states at any level of the market system. Yet since we have now begun a new millennium, I beg the reader's indulgence in predicting the course of the system's evolution in the near term.

The early years of the market system were dominated by the opposition of **Right** and **Left** inherited from the **French Revolution**. The failed revolutions of 1848 marked the passage of the "liberal" bourgeoisie from the Left to the Right side of the spectrum, generating a postromantic or premodernist culture that prepared the cultural and political revolutions of the twentieth century.

We know the horrors unleashed by the various socialisms that these revolutions ushered in. Following their demise, the political arena today appears to be increasingly configured by a de facto alliance of the antimarket forces of Right and Left against the market-oriented center, as exemplified by the farcical reenactment of the **Hitler-Stalin** pact in the recent embrace between **Pat Buchanan** and **Leonora Fulani**. The traditional Right-Left opposition survives in reduced form between neo-liberals and neo-conservatives that differ far more in their constituencies than their policies. While this narrowed

debate fine-tunes the liberal-democratic system, the antimarket opposition increasingly reverts to sacrificial religious modes. The liberal center has become so dominant a force that it brings together the opposition from both sides.

The space left unoccupied in today's ideological debate is that of what might be called the protomarket, consisting of those societies that have not acquired the human capital to compete in a global economy. Not long ago, these societies put their faith in nebulous ethnic "socialisms." Today, their resentment against the West can be channeled neither into a clear-cut oppositional policy, however illusory, nor into economic production. Despite the obvious virtues of the market system, there is still no clear answer to the question of what system works best in "developing" nations. What seems probable, however, is that despite the efforts of cultural nationalists, the popular culture of the West will increasingly articulate the resentments of their populations. Hence it seems probable that the successful negotiation of the rocky road to "globalization" will take place first in the cultural domain. Integration into the market system will begin with the adoption of the Western mode of alienation from its own market system. We may have to endure a lot of rap music before it is accomplished.

The surplus-free exchange system of primitive society derives directly from the egalitarian exchange of signs *and* portions in the originary scene. This system endured perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. But it was ultimately unstable because it could not survive the production of an economic surplus. The hierarchical societies that followed subordinated the distribution of this surplus to the necessities of the cultural order rather than to economic rationality or even the defense of "class interests." The modern exchange system is the first to emancipate exchange from sacred authority; the political order has the last word, but only in enforcing exceptions to the general rule of free exchange.

Why do we need an originary hypothesis to understand these developments? Because without one, we can explain the universal human intuition of moral reciprocity that drives the whole process only by the concept of "natural law" that is about as useful as Molière's *dormitive virtue of opium*. Democracy's open political debate permits us to tolerate great differences in material wealth; the reciprocity of words has always been more fundamental than the reciprocity of things. A cat may look at a king, but because a human being can speak to him, the king eventually gives way to an elected president. One of the highest priorities of any **GA** research program should be to study the evolution of political, economic, and cultural institutions in terms of the originary dichotomy between central meaning and peripheral exchange.

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Eric Gans

Body and Soul

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Rodney Cotterill's *No Ghost in the Machine* (London, 1989) is a scientist's attempt to prove that there is no such thing as a **soul**. I often wonder exactly what people who write this way think they are arguing about. These Enlightenment arguments resemble like a photographic negative the claims of believers as to the existence of supernatural domains like **Heaven** and **Hell**. First, an "immaterial," "supernatural," "transcendental" form of being (or Being) is described; then it is said (not) to "exist." But arguments about existence all wind up referring to something like the material conditions by which we recognize existence in our own world. Thus the soul is said to be immaterial, but to inhabit the body and leave it at death, which is to say, to behave just like a physical body (*e.g.*, the breath-psyche). Heaven is said to be supernatural, yet we conceive it as a place where the blessed reside.

GA avoids this kind of language by explaining it and offering an alternative to it. The model for all transcendental entities is the linguistic sign, which does not "exist" in the spatio-temporal world. Words are not mortal, but they do not "inhabit" their speakers and need no Elysian fields on which to disport themselves. Nor is this linguistic reference merely a more sophisticated version of the Enlightenment denial of the spiritual. Language is not merely a cognitive operation of our brains; it is a source of sacralization that arises in order to defer mimetic violence. To represent by means of a sign is to cut off from worldly action. The supernatural quality of what is designated by the sign does not arise from the formal reality of the sign's existence in a different world from that of things; it is rather this formal difference that arises from the the human community's "absolute" need of putting the desired object beyond the reach of its potentially contentious members.

Thus the first word is the name-of-God that both designates the object of desire and at the same time does not signify merely this mortal object but a sacred Being that will subsist after the object has been destroyed (in the simplest scenario, divided up and eaten by the group). The animal that the word designated is no more, but the word and its peace-bringing power remains, and God, or the sacred, is what it *means*. The word's "immortality" contrasts with the worldly mortality we depend on to support our appetites.

The major bugbear of Cotterill's book is "dualism," understood as the Cartesian doctrine that mind is separate from body--in particular, the brain. But this way of stating the problem merely perpetuates misunderstanding. Mind as "the ghost in the machine" has no possible material referent, yet is derided for lacking one. The image conjured up in the reader's mind is of some kind of preternatural ectoplasm, that is, once more, a "supernatural" substance that is not of this world yet manifests itself in it. It is easy enough to dismiss such concepts as obscurantist holdovers from primitive times.

But if we think of dualism as the doctrine that signs are not things (not even "one thing substituted for another"), then these objections vanish. A word is not a thing, but neither is it some kind of ghostly emanation. It is an atemporal form, not some kind of immortal substance. Nor does it "exist" in my brain. This is a point that deserves some clarification.

Recent research into the workings of the brain, some of which has been remarked on in these *Chronicles*, has gone far toward understanding how language functions in the individual language-user. But that the word "tree" in my brain is instantiated by a set or "node" of neurons connected on the one hand to mental images of trees and on the other to the sounds [t], [r]... and the letters T, R... does not mean that the word is a "thing" in my brain. The very nature of the circuitry makes the word more a "disposition" than a thing; but the crucial point is that a sign cannot be understood as existing à la **Herder** in a single mind. As soon as its existence is thus defined, it becomes no more (*pace* **Chomsky**) than a **Skinnerian** association. What makes language more than a reflex is that it exists as a mode of communication among separate individuals. On this point, I am happy to cite a prominent theoretician of mimesis and language origin--one who, sad to say, seems unaware of GA:

The integration of morphophonological addresses [*i.e.*, sound patterns] into a larger descriptive [*i.e.*, lexical] system is an inherently social activity, and one is tempted to predict that this process could not be confined within the isolated brain; that is, one should not expect to find the 'language acquisition device' that Chomsky predicted entirely inside the individual brain. Rather, the emergence of language depends on a community of brains in interaction.

(**Merlin Donald**, "Preconditions for the Evolution of Protolanguages," in *The Descent of Mind*, Michael Corballis and Stephen Lea, eds., Oxford UP, 1999), p. 150)

To the extent that the word "tree" "exists," it does so not in my brain but within the collectivity of English speakers. Any private associations I may develop with the word can become part of the word's meaning only if they are communicated to and repeated by others. There is no simple limit to what a word communicates; even the most rigorously defined meanings are "fuzzy." That is the result of the way signs exist: changes of meaning in one mind do not instantly propagate themselves to other minds. For this reason, Locke warned of the danger of assuming that others use words with the same meaning as ourselves. But the point of language is not to arrive at absolute transparency but to defer violence; the originary sign designates not a rigorous concept but the sacred source of this deferral.

Materialists are likely to tax this conception with mysticism. There is, they claim, no such thing as "the word 'tree,'" only individual sounds and marks--and trees. That a group of people associate a set of these sounds or marks with mental images of trees is no different from Pavlov's dog associating the bell's ring with dinner.

What is my answer to these objections? That ontologies--monist, dualist, or what have you--are not determined objectively on the ground; they reflect whatever distinctions the ontologist considers essential to his model of the world. Just as human beings are "just" collections of quarks, so words are "just" sounds. But the materialist dismissal of dualism jettisons, along with the ghostly soul, the specificity of human language and culture. This is less easy to do when one has made the connection between, on the one hand, the soul and the family of ideas associated with the sacred, and, on the other, the phenomena of language and "secular" culture. Just as ideas are now thought to reside in the brain not in specific neurons but in interactions among neurons, so do the signs of language and culture exist not in individual minds but in the interaction among human beings.

Let me clear up a possible objection. The existence of categories as opposed to individual beings did not begin with language, or even with life. What then is the difference between saying the word "tree" is

atemporal, since it does not depend for its existence on any given instantiation, and saying the same thing of the category "proton"? In Saussurian terms, "tree" is part of the *langue* even if no one speaks or thinks it, but is not the *langue* itself just a set of nodes in the brain, or in a community of brains? My answer is: yes, but the point is not to show that words are "immortal," but that they have a different relation to temporality than things, one that is the basis for our concept of immortality. Gods too may be considered mortal in the sense that when their believers are gone, they are no longer "real" gods, but this form of "death" is not directly comparable to the decay of the flesh. An electron can "know" the category "proton," but not even a chimpanzee can reflect on the non-mortality of the sign, because no sign has ever been necessary to preserve his society from mimetic violence.

It is only after explaining why human communities have a stake in the existence of the signs of language and culture that one can explain why these communities create the idea of the soul, of God, the sacred, *mana*, karma, and so on. I wonder how long will we have to wait before the *dialogue des sourds* between science and faith gives way to an anthropological science fully cognizant of the specificity of its human subject-matter.

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Eric Gans

Language Origin in History IX: Durkheim and Sacred Representation (I)

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[Chronicle 192](#) mentioned **Emile Durkheim's** refutation of **Max Müller's** "naturist" theory of religion, which boils down to the denial that the radical otherness of the sacred can be derived from human reaction to nature, even the unusual in nature. As we observed in passing, Durkheim's far more sophisticated theory of the sacred as an ideal projection of society nevertheless fails to explain how this projection is to be generated. In gaining his understanding of the place of religion in the social order, Durkheim abandons Müller's most valuable intuitions: that the sacred is the product of a memorable event, and that the most concrete and durable trace of this event is to be found not in ritual but in language.

This having been said, Durkheim comes qualitatively closer to a generative conception of religion and culture than anyone before **Girard**. His insight into the sacred might be more appreciated today had he not made the unforeseeable marketing error of describing primitive religion in terms of "totemism." (The neglect of **Freud's** *Totem and Taboo*, another proto-generative work, springs no doubt in part from the same source.) The idea that totemism is a constant feature of "elementary" religion has been generally discredited. **Claude Lévi-Strauss's** *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* (1962) reduces totemism, to the extent that it may be said to exist at all, to a classificatory system disassociated from sacrificial ritual; the totem is, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, "good to think" rather than good to eat.

The rejection in principle of Durkheim's search for a universal model of religion is one more case of the empirical trees overgrowing the theoretical forest. It is important to study the facts in their diversity, but it is equally important to formulate models that parsimoniously explain these facts. Such models have not been forthcoming in this area for a long time. The fact that the elements of totemic systems are better to think than to eat does not discredit the hypothesis that the totem was originally a sacrificial animal any more than the arbitrariness of a given signifier discredits the hypothesis that this signifier was originally motivated. To reduce the sacred to a product of our classifying intellect is to ignore its role in the genesis of the human--more specifically, in bridging the gap between animal and human communication systems. Contemporary research into the origin of language has revived interest in this gap, but the neuroscientists and paleoanatomists who conduct this research are not professionally inclined to take an interest in the sacred.

The strength of Durkheim's understanding of religion lies in his uncompromising insistence on the separateness of the sacred from the profane. This makes Durkheim a "dualist" in a sense far more anthropologically significant than that defined by the incommensurability of mind and brain (see [Chronicle 193](#)). Although he never discusses the origin of language, it is a small extrapolation from statements like the following to the more fundamental hypothesis that sacred difference (if not precisely the sacred-profane distinction) is the origin of meaning itself.

Religious forces . . . are moral powers because they are made up entirely of the impressions this moral being, the group, arouses in those other moral beings, its individual members . . . Their authority is only one form of the moral ascendancy of society over its members. But, on the other hand, since they are conceived of under material forms, they could not fail to be regarded as closely related to material things. Therefore they dominate the two worlds. . . . It is this double nature which has enabled religion to be like the womb from which come all the leading germs of human civilization. Since it has been made to embrace all of reality . . . the forces that move bodies as well as those that move minds have been conceived in a religious form. That is how the most diverse methods and practices, both those that make possible the continuation of the moral life (law morals, beaux-arts) and those serving the material life (the natural, technical and practical sciences), are either directly or indirectly derived from religion.

The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (tr. J. W. Swain), Book 2, Ch. 7, sec. 3, p 254-55)

All that is lacking here is consideration of the relation of religion to language. Religion is the "womb" or matrix of culture because it "dominate[s] the two worlds." The notion of "religious forces" as "conceived of under material forms" is a reference to totemism, but what is at stake is the more general point that what is sacred and therefore the basis for significance manifests itself at the same time in the material world of appetite. The meaning, Idea, or signified can only be grasped by being attached to a material referent whose mortality demonstrates the formal separation of words and things, the ideal and the real.

Durkheim rejects "naturism" because, as he puts it, "The impressions produced in us by the physical world can, by definition, contain nothing that surpasses this world" (2.7.4, p. 256). A worldly reality can be elevated into a totem only through the mediation of the group or **clan**. The sole element lacking in Durkheim's model is an explanation of how the clan comes to be "represented" by the totem. The originary hypothesis generates this representational relation, which is precisely that of language, from the concentration of the group's mimetic desire on the object. In the light of this hypothesis, Durkheim's tentative insights into the origin of the totemic representation of the clan may be applied, more radically, to that of language itself.

Durkheim's explanation of the clan's attachment to its totem as a symbol of itself is a *petitio principii*:

We have shown how the clan, by the manner in which it acts upon its members, awakens within them the idea of external forces which dominate them and exalt them; but we must still demand how it happens that these forces are thought of under the form of totems, that is to say, in the shape of an animal or plant.

It is because this animal or plant has given its name to the clan and serves it as emblem. In fact, it is a well-known law that the sentiments aroused in us by something spontaneously attach themselves to the symbol which represents them. . . . This transference of sentiments comes simply from the fact that the idea of a thing and the idea of its symbol are closely united in our minds; the result is that the emotions provoked by the one extend contagiously to the other.

At this point, we still have not learned why the specific totem is chosen as this "emblem." The word "contagiously" refers ostensibly to a relation of signs in the mind, but its more fundamental referent is the group itself.

Durkheim continues:

For we are unable to consider an abstract entity, which we can represent only laboriously and confusedly, [as] the source of the strong sentiments which we feel. We cannot explain them to ourselves except by connecting them to *some concrete object of whose reality we are vividly aware*. [my emphasis] Then if the [abstract entity] itself does not fulfil this condition, it cannot serve as the accepted basis of the sentiments felt, even though it may be what really aroused them. Then some sign takes it[s] place; it is to this that we connect the emotions it excites. . . . The soldier who dies for his flag, dies for his country . . .

Now the totem is the flag of the clan. . . . It is therefore natural that the impressions aroused by the clan in individual minds--impressions of dependence and of increased vitality--should fix themselves to the idea of the totem rather than that of the clan; for the clan is too complex a reality to be represented clearly in all its complex unity by such rudimentary intelligences. More than that, the primitive does not even see that these impressions come to him from the group. He does not know that the coming together of a number of men associated in the same life results in disengaging new energies, which transform each of them. . . . However, he must connect these sensations to some external object as their cause. Now what does he see about him? On every side those things which appeal to his senses and strike his imagination are the numerous images of the totem. . . . Placed thus in the centre of the scene, it becomes representative. The sentiments experienced fix themselves upon it, for it is the only concrete object upon which they can fix themselves. It continues to bring them to mind and to evoke them even after the assembly has dissolved, for it survives the assembly, being carved upon the instruments of the cult . . . It is still more natural to attribute them to it for, since they are common to the group, they can be associated only with something that is equally common to all. Now the totemic emblem is the only thing satisfying this condition. By definition, it is common to all. During the ceremony, it is the centre of all regards. (2.7.3, p.251-52)

I have quoted this passage at length in order to demonstrate both how close Durkheim comes to the originary hypothesis and how effectively this hypothesis resolves the residual obscurities of his text. As we see, the specific reason why *this* object is the totem of *this* clan is never given. On the level of individual psychology, the association is explained in the italicized phrase by the individual's vivid awareness of a concrete reality. In what follows, the totem is presented as such a reality *in the context of a preexisting totemic ceremony*. Yet although the origin of the ceremony itself is not given, the centrality of the object and its "vivid" presence to each individual participant are precisely the conditions for the arousal of mimetic desire in the scene postulated by the originary hypothesis.

Durkheim is truly the founder of modern religious anthropology. We can only regret that, despite all the

attention his work continues to receive, his most fundamental contribution to human science has been put aside by his empirically minded successors. It would be comforting to attribute this neglect to Durkheim's failure to grasp the connection between mimetic desire, potential violence, and representation, but my own experience suggests that had he made this connection, the neglect would have been still more radical.

Durkheim's thought on religion is far too rich to be treated in a single column. In a later installment I will deal in greater detail with his notion of the sacred not merely as a functional one for preserving the solidarity of the group, but as the basis of representation, which is, in the first place, **language**.

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Levels of Intentionality

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Intentionality is characteristic of "systems" like ourselves that have intentions, which we may define as internal models of future states. Intentionality is complicated by the way in which intentional systems deal with other intentional systems. If I tell you, "Please open the window," at first glance my order merely seeks to bring about a preferred state: having the window open. But this would be a complete analysis only for an order to a robot. Speaking to another person requires that I operate at a second intentional level: by making my request, I intend that you act intentionally to open the window. Yet even this analysis does not suffice. I intend not merely that you do so but that you do so specifically in response to my request, that is, I intend that you know that I wish that you act so as to open the window. Thus a typical speech act involves four levels, or two double levels, of intentionality.

There is a problem with this kind of reasoning, however: it leads to infinite regress. This would not be possible if I had to explicitly think out each level, which would rapidly become impossible. But such explicitness is not necessary. After all, when I ask you to open the window, I am not thinking explicitly in four intentional layers; they form the implicit structure of my speech act. But since you implicitly know this as well as I do, your own understanding of my request may be said to add another layer: you know that I intend that you know that I wish... And since I know this as well as you do, I may be said to know that you know that I intend... Since this "knowledge" has no obvious effect on the speech situation itself, the number of levels is for all practical purposes indeterminate. This poses a problem for those who would use the number of intentional levels as a measure of "Machiavellian" intelligence, as is currently the trend in primate studies. (See **Raymond Swing's** ["Comments on GA"](#) in *Anthropoetics* V, 2.)

Behaviorists had such fears long ago. Hence they rejected "mentalism," grounded on unverifiable subjective constructions, preferring instead to understand animal behavior, including our own, "behavioristically," that is, at the zero level of intentionality. In this view, my speech act may be explained simply as a result of operant conditioning: I have learned that when I am hot and there is another person (and a closed window) present I can gain relief by saying "Please open the window." However few or many degrees of intentionality I may lay claim to, behaviorist parsimony demanded they be ignored.

Today the pendulum has swung the other way, and scientists consider themselves obliged, and able, to deal with "intentional systems." For behaviorism and mentalism are not mutually exclusive. As the operations of the brain become clearer, the mental increasingly becomes just another category of behavior. Suppose what we call "having an intention" can be understood as the XYZ configuration of such and such complexes of neurons. At this point, the behaviorist can simply replace the mentalist notion of "intention" with the scientific term XYZ. Instead of "I intend to bring about situation S," we would say something like "Gans's brain is in XYZ configuration with content S." To be complete, we would have to convert to behavioral terms the notion of "implicit intentional level" that seems

indispensable to the analysis of human speech acts. The XYZ configuration would have to include, not necessarily at the level of conscious awareness, a hierarchy of intentional representations. Thus empirical research might conceivably confirm the four-level analysis given above--or, of course, it might do just the opposite.

Clearly we want to distinguish between those organisms that act "instinctively," those that can formulate intentions, those that can recognize such formulations in others, those that can recognize that others can recognize their own such formulations, and so on. One way to do this is to seek evidence of *deception*. Deception is the commonest indicator of intentional level because it provides explicit proof that I have a "theory of mind"--that I am concerned with your mental state--proof that is rarely obtainable when I merely communicate what is true. But even assuming that the accounts of deception among higher primates in the literature are accurate, as **Daniel Dennett** laments after his experience with vervet monkeys, there is no clear way to assign intentional levels to them (see Richard Byrne & Andrew Whiten, *Machiavellian Intelligence*, Oxford, 1988, ch. 14). It is clear enough that chimpanzees are more skilled than lower animals at manipulating others and predicting their reactions; what is not clear is how to correlate this intellectual superiority with intentional level.

The human use of language, on the contrary, implies reciprocal recognition of intentionality. I express my intention to you in the context of your understanding not only the intention itself but its intentional status. The question of additional intentional levels arises because language allows us to create and test sentences like "I know that you know that I know that..." But language cannot have originated as a metaphysical parlor game. Can the originary hypothesis clarify the matter of intentional level?

Let us begin, as language itself must have begun, with the **ostensive**. When my gesture of appropriation becomes a re-presentation of its object, it expresses my intention that my interlocutor recognize my intention not to appropriate the object. Thus the originary sign does not merely have a referent, but having it as a referent is understood *as opposed to* having an appetitive intention to appropriate it. The metaphysical notion of intentionality ignores this distinction between the intention to appropriate and the intention not to appropriate that for GA defines human language. This does not mean that I cannot use language to announce my intention to appropriate an object. But when I do so, my language is not a pointing-to-what-I-want, but a reference to an object *in the first place* independent of my desire, toward which I then contingently express this desire. I use the same representational means to request the object that I originally employed to renounce it.

This implies that the theory of mind I attribute to another human who requests, say, a banana, is qualitatively different from the theory of mind by which chimp A attributes to chimp B a desire for a banana (which A may thereupon hide, pretend to be unaware of, etc.). The fourth-level intentionality implicit in any use of language is not an automatic consequence of the substitution of a sign for a referent. What distinguishes language from simple substitution is precisely its mediation through an originary human collectivity. My telling you X implies I want you to know I'm telling you because language was from the origin a way of informing one's interlocutor not simply of the presence of the sacred object but of the speaker's intentional relationship to it. While pointing to the center, I inform my fellow participants that I will not appropriate it *and that I want them to know that*.

We cannot explain the limitation to the human species of what **Thomas Suddendorf** (Michael Corballis & Stephen Lea, *The Descent of Mind*, Oxford 1999, ch. 12) calls *metamind*, the ability to consider representations *as* representations, simply as a result of our "greater intelligence." None of the current

social-science explanations of the human mind fully account for representation as a *cultural* rather than a biological phenomenon. As we saw in [Chronicle 195](#), **Durkheim** understood that the sacred cannot be derived from the natural without the mediation of the social; in other words, the cultural cannot be derived from the biological without the mediation of the communal. Representations, whether linguistic or ritual-esthetic, are not merely artifacts of "intelligence" but products of a new level of interaction that could only have emerged in a collective context. This explains why our ability to construct recursive chains such as "I know that you know that I know..." is irrelevant to the intentional level implicit in language.

Suppose I come out of a movie theater and tell you, "I liked the film." As we have seen, I am telling you (1) I liked the film, and (2) I want you to know/think I liked the film. But (2), as well as (1), is a possible locus of deception: I may want you to think something that is not true. Because you know this as well as I, you may interpret my statement as a lie. And since I know this, I may be perpetrating a third-level deception: (3) I want you to think that I want you to think I liked the film. That is, that you will think: "he wants me to think he liked the film (but he really didn't)" when I really did like the film.

The same analysis leads us to level 4. Suppose I want you to think that I want you to think that I want you to think I liked the film, that is, that you think, "he wants me to think he wants me to think 'he liked the film (but he really didn't)' when he *did* like the film" when I really didn't. But because you can anticipate this strategy as well, I may anticipate this anticipation and perpetrate a fifth-level deception. This analysis leads to the conclusion that there is no end in principle to intentional levels, even if they reach a practical cut-off point.

But this conclusion is not justified. Beyond level 3, the analysis of layers of deceit is purely academic; it corresponds to no concrete behavior. I can either say "I liked the film" in such a way as to sound sincere, or in such a way as to appear to be insincere. But the way in which you interpret my words, the number of layers of deceit you think me capable of, is not a function of the speech-situation itself. You can only choose between believing that I'm trying to make you believe A or believing that I'm trying to make you believe not-A. The situation is homologous to that in the game of **morra** or "choosing," where each of two adversaries takes "odd" or "even" and then extends either one or two fingers, the total of which determines the victor. In principle I will extend the number of fingers that I anticipate you will not expect. You will anticipate that I will anticipate this, and so on. One usually plays two out of three. Let us say I played "1" last time; the second time, you may expect me to change to "2," so I play "1" again. But you may anticipate this move as well, so I play "2." But... However long the analysis goes on, there are still the same two possibilities, and it is absurd to continue to attribute to the players ever higher levels of intentionality, let alone of intelligence.

Similarly, the number of "moves" we may wish to count in the deception game is independent of the communication structure itself. This does not prevent us from constructing representational models with indefinite numbers of layers, where A thinks (knows, wants...) that B thinks that C thinks that D thinks that E ... thinks X. But such chains are merely formal constructions that fail to correspond to any specific human behavior. I would stress that I do not attribute this failure to the limits of our mental capacity--limits which, incidentally, are not shared by the computers we use to help us think--but to the fact that human language as originally constituted operates on two doubled levels of intentionality. A tells B about C, but in such a way that B is made aware that A is sharing the sign for C with him. B's attention is drawn to C, but he is simultaneously connected socially with A. This is explained by the originary hypothesis, but not by theories that see language merely as a formal system that substitutes

signs for things. If you enjoyed this column, subscribe to the galist and you'll receive updates about our on-line journal Anthropoetics and get **Chronicles of Love and Resentment** every week by **email**.

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Whither GA?

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Now that *Anthropoetics* has gone through ten issues and the list of *Chronicles* nears two hundred, it seems appropriate to take stock of the **GA** enterprise and to draw some conclusions about its future.

On the positive side, we have shown that an e-journal can be a viable activity. As the **Internet** grows, the number of hits at our site continues to increase. The great virtue of electronic journals, aside from being essentially cost-free--**UCLA** allots me a yearly *Anthropoetics* budget of \$0--is that every issue from first to last remains fully accessible, far more so than even the latest number of a print journal. Old articles continue to attract as many readers as recent ones; even old *Chronicles* are constantly being read.

Our impact on the intellectual scene is more difficult to gauge. The last decade or so has witnessed the decline of the French style of humanistic theorizing whose influence had once spread to the social sciences. If **Derridean** deconstruction, **Foucaultian** "discourse analysis," and **Lacanian** psycho-semantics were the last highly visible modes of "French theory," **Generative Anthropology** may well be the last doctrine of potential intellectual significance to emerge from this tradition.

The creativity of the humanities depends on the credibility of the humanist's claim that literature (and, *mutatis mutandis*, the other arts) is a privileged source of anthropological revelation. The high point of literary anthropology, or at least of its ambitions, was reached in the romantic and post-romantic eras, notably in the work of English and German romantic and French symbolist poets as well as of several generations of novelists from **Balzac** and **Dickens** to **Dostoevsky** and **Flaubert** to **Proust** and **Joyce**. **Mallarmé's** poetry was an authentic act of research into the foundations of language and culture, as in a more sensational vein was **Rimbaud's** dedication to *le raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens*.

As the twentieth century wore on, the literary world became increasingly dominated by theoreticians rather than creators. **Valéry**, **Blanchot**, **Bataille**, **Sartre** are *littérateurs*, not great literary writers. What came to be called critical theory depended increasingly less on contemporary literary practice. Yet the era of "French theory" that reached its apogee in 1968 continued to feed at least nominally off the last important French literary movement, that of the *nouveau roman*. Although the theorists of the **Barthes-Foucault-Derrida** generation were no longer literary creators at all, their ideas continued to be nourished by literary texts that they still conceived as part of a living tradition.

A graduate of and professor in American universities, **René Girard** is neither part of the Parisian literary establishment nor nourished by a direct connection to contemporary literary creation. While figures like Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, **Deleuze**, **Althusser** were bringing together the centrifugal presuppositions of "French theory," Girard was creating, beginning with *La violence et le sacré*, a more ambitious system of thought than any of them with the explicit intention of providing a new foundation for the social sciences. But in transcending the sophisticated yet ultimately parochial cultural politics of the "theorists," Girard's ambition overstepped the bounds of the possible influence of humanistic thought on human science. **Mimetic desire** could at first be deemed, or at least, passed off as, a "literary" concept.

This was no longer possible for the scapegoat mechanism and the rest of the vocabulary of Girard's "fundamental anthropology," the direct ancestor of **GA**.

Humanistic thought stands or falls by the guarantee provided by textual analysis. Once it leaves the shelter of the literary text, it withers and dies in the thin air of the social sciences, where hypotheses may be proposed only by those certified as competent in each field's methods of systematic data-collection. The era of speculative thinking is no more, not because such thinking is no longer capable of generating useful ideas, but because every area of anthropology has become professionalized. Only victimary status still provides some degree of universal authority, breadth of terrain being counterbalanced by narrowness of focus. And even here, the institutionalization of the various genres of victim studies generates new sets of professional specializations--and a concomitantly less victimary orientation.

There is no world without resentment. The idea of a universal perspective on human affairs that puts aside our own resentments is illusory. This truth is the most valuable intellectual legacy of Marxism, despite its error in thinking that to enunciate this truth is to transcend its limits. Because human desire is not contingently but essentially in disequilibrium, there can be no well-defined goal on which all can agree. This does not mean, however, that the goal of universal peace is illusory. Although every human situation will provoke resentment, our goal is not the elimination of resentment but the deferral of violence. Where ritual societies purge mimetic tensions through sacrifice, market societies recycle resentment into economic, political, and cultural systems. The most crucial social goal--can we at least agree on this?--is to continue to expand the process of converting the energy of resentment into something exchangeable in one of society's many marketplaces.

The several human sciences study the human on the different levels at which this conversion is accomplished. The most concrete is that of the **economy**, the locus of interaction where by far the most energy is expended. Where the passions that count are those that can be harnessed to drive the market, desire is bounded by objective criteria: whatever its semiotic qualities, a product has to work. Thus economics is the human science that strays the least from the rationality of natural science. It takes its lessons from the most successful economies because they dominate the global marketplace.

The second level is that of **politics**. Here popular resentments express themselves through voices/votes rather than marketable goods. Central power reflects and/or dominates this popular will. Even if we accept the "Fukuyama thesis" of the inevitable dissolution of political centralization through expanding market circulation, the non-linear nature of this process and the unpredictability of the resentments it is bound to generate guarantees a future for independent political reflection.

Finally we come to the sphere of **culture**, the scholarly domain of the Humanities. In the past, humanists studied the classics, what they considered to be "the best that has been thought and said in the world." Today, they are more likely to be found examining the recent works of members of the world's least successful economies--for it is here that the ethical role of culture in human society is most critical. The "amateur" science of Generative Anthropology understands this radical change; it understands as well why the post-colonial world of the humanities has so little interest in sharing its understanding.

My conclusion is by no means that we should abandon the GA enterprise. To withdraw from the world of the intellect on the pretext that our work is "misunderstood" would be an uncharitable expression of resentment. There are times when making a difference requires that one must defer for an indefinite time the pleasures of market success.

Resentment is today's central concept, but very few are willing even to name it, let alone to situate it in the theoretical context it requires. "Injustice" attracts attention and compensation; "resentment" inspires cynicism and repugnance. Yet to recognize the ease with which we translate our resentment into righteous indignation is to accept the need for an anthropology that neither glorifies this emotion nor explains it away. For GA, resentment is not Nietzsche's *ressentiment* but the human reaction to a perceived violation of our common humanity, as defined by the reciprocal equality of language.

We should not be tempted by the thought that more charismatic personalities and a shrewder marketing strategy might have succeeded better in promulgating this new way of thinking. A world in which a small band of humanists could single-handedly redefine the human sciences would be a far more dangerous one than ours. We can only hope that the ethical and cognitive value of GA will be demonstrated over the years through its further development by others. We must have faith in the continued existence of brave souls willing to cast off the tired metaphysical vocabulary of the "history of ideas" and engage in originary anthropological thinking.

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Emile Durkheim, Hedgehog (Language Origin in History X)

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For **Durkheim**, religion was in the first place a social phenomenon; he had little patience for discussions that focused a la **William James** on individual "religious experience." But Durkheim's aversion to subjectivism was also a judgment concerning religion's originary function. If in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (see [Chronicle 195](#)), he criticized **Max Müller**'s "naturism," in an earlier essay, "Concerning the Definition of Religious Phenomena," published in *L'Année sociologique* (II) in 1899 (in *Durkheim and Religion*, ed. W. S. F. Pickering, London: Routledge, 1975), he rejects the definition of religion in Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* as "a mental faculty or disposition which . . . enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names and under varying disguises" (p. 76). On the contrary, Durkheim asserts, "[f]ar from seeing the supernatural everywhere, primitive man sees it nowhere." The universe is wholly explicable to the "completely uncultivated mind" because it makes no distinction between its "inner states" and external nature. Only a scientific age can have a conception of a "natural order" to which the "Infinite" or supernatural may be opposed.

This reasoning displays the superiority of Durkheim's conception of the social, functional nature of religion to question-begging explanations on the model of Müller's Infinite. At the same time, there is a curious contradiction in its articulation. In the first part of the essay, where it is a matter of refuting the Infinite, the "primitive" is said to inhabit an intellectual universe without objective contours, much like that described by **Lévy-Bruhl** in *La mentalité primitive*: "As his understanding is not yet formed, . . . it is with his imagination that he views the world. . . . The inner states which [the imagination] is fashioning . . . are made up of such insubstantial, plastic material, their contours are so blurred and wavering, that they are easily modified according to the whim of the subject" (Pickering, p. 78).

Yet, later in the essay, the primitive is seen to participate in the familiar binary "division of things into sacred and profane, which is fundamental to all religious organization" (p. 90). Since this division, as Durkheim later explains, provides a basis for further classification, notably the division of the tribe into totemic clans: "these systemic classifications are the first we meet with in history, and . . . they have taken the forms of society as their framework." (*Elementary Forms*, p. 169), Durkheim now seems to have rejected Lévy-Bruhl for **Lévi-Strauss**'s *La pensée sauvage*.

The coherence of Durkheim's construction can be salvaged only if we follow his logic to its ultimate conclusion and make the sacred-profane distinction the foundation not merely of conceptual and classificatory thought but of all representation and of language itself. We may then take a more charitable view of the Infinite than Durkheim without betraying his insistence on the functional core of even the most superficially irrational religious practices. The Infinite, after all, is nothing but the sacred understood as the source of the "vertical" world of the sign that transcends the finite world of prehuman appetite.

Durkheim's theory of religion was not well received in his own time outside the circle of his disciples, a situation that is little changed today. An important contributory factor to this disfavor is his reliance on not altogether trustworthy second-hand data. But the heart of the problem is Durkheim's use of an empirical model of "elementary" religion, a choice which derives in turn from his desire to found a positive sociology rather than a minimal anthropology of religion. (Durkheim was hostile to the idea of seeking the origin of religion: "Like every human institution, religion did not commence anywhere. Therefore, all speculations of this sort are justly discredited; they can only consist in subjective and arbitrary constructions which are subject to no sort of control"; *Elementary Forms*, p. 20.) By insisting that his model of Australian totemism was exemplary of "elementary" religion and thus of religion *tout court*, Durkheim became vulnerable to a far more devastating criticism than the questioning of his data: he made his sociological model of religion dependent on a model of human social evolution that obligatorily passes through the stage of totemism as he describes it.

There is an unacknowledged quality of Australian totemism, beyond its "primitive" nature, that explains Durkheim's attraction to it: the "elementary" society must be compact and egalitarian so as to make the totem the center of the circular structure of the (originary) human scene. The egalitarian presence of the clan around the sacred totemic center transforms the worldly into the transcendental. This scenic self-presence of "society" in religious ritual is indispensable to the emergence of "concepts" or "representations," if not of language as such. For Durkheim derives all conceptual thought from religion. Causality, for example, is first understood not in everyday experience, where there is nothing but a series of events, but through the encounter with sacred forces acting in the collective context of ritual:

Let us bear in mind how the law of causality, which the imitative rites put into practice, was born. Being filled with one single preoccupation, the group assembles: if the species whose name it bears does not reproduce, it is a matter of concern to the whole clan. The common sentiment thus animating all the members is outwardly expressed by certain gestures . . . and after the ceremony has been performed, it happens that the desired result seems obtained. So an association arises between the idea of this result and that of the gestures preceding it . . . But since a social interest of the greatest importance is at stake, society cannot allow things to follow their own course . . . So it demands that this ceremony . . . be repeated every time that it is necessary . . . it imposes [the ritual gestures] as an obligation. Now they imply a certain definite state of mind which, in return, participates in this same obligatory character. To prescribe that one must imitate an animal or plant to make them reproduce, is equivalent to stating it as an axiom which is above all doubt, that like produces like. Opinion cannot allow men to deny this principle in theory without also allowing them to violate it in their conduct. So society imposes it . . . and thus the ritual precept is doubled by a logical precept which is only the intellectual aspect of the former. The authority of each is derived from the same source: society. (*Elementary Forms* 3.3.3, p. 410-11)

For Durkheim, we pass from the prehuman level of "association" to the logical principle of causality by order of society ("society imposes it"). But this "imposition" can only be a verifiable fact where the society as a whole is present to itself in action. In the Conclusion, this point is made explicit:

[S]ociety cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realizes its position . . . Then it is action which dominates the religious life, because of the mere fact that it is society which is its source. (p.

465-66)

The social cohesion that Durkheim thought he had found in totemic ritual is that of the originary hypothesis. By grounding his religious sociology on a minimal hypothesis rather than on empirical data contested in both accuracy and significance (is totemism really the center of Arunta religion?), Durkheim would evacuate the criticism leveled at his already outdated linear historicism.

Durkheim thinks it is possible to work with concepts like "society" and "representation" positively or nominalistically, while at the same time insisting that the conceptual itself emerges, with infinite "realism," within religious ritual. While seeking an empirical guarantee for the religious origin of concepts, he vigorously denies that concepts can be grounded in empirical reality.

The religious realization of the social, evident among the Australians, can no longer be grasped in the modern world, where "we are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity" (p. 475). But the contrast between modern secular and primitive religious societies obscures the key methodological point that, in the absolute concentration that Durkheim requires of it, *the social cannot be encountered empirically anywhere*. The social as the source of the world of representation is conceivable only as the minimally, hypothetically human. The fact that the Arunta appear to exemplify some of Durkheim's ideas about the originary function of the social does not relieve him of the need to provide a model of its genesis along with that of the common representations it exists to enforce.

No doubt Durkheim would have been unwilling to abandon the empirical basis that he considered indispensable to the foundation of a *science*. But, precisely, the fundamental anthropology that he is practicing is not scientific in the usual sense of the word. It was not for nothing that **W. E. H. Stanner** (Pickering, p. 300) called Durkheim "the arch-hedgehog." However loftily he dismisses the "speculative" question of the minimal constitution of society and representation, Durkheim's sociology of religion is really **Generative Anthropology** *avant la lettre*.

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Eric Gans

Clouzot's Cruel Crow

No. 199: Saturday, February 19, 2000

Le corbeau (*The Raven* or *The Crow*) is probably the most controversial film in French history. It was made in 1943, under the German occupation--and for a German-owned production company--by **Henri-Georges Clouzot**, best known in the US for *Diaboliques* and *The Wages of Fear*. To quote **Evelyn Ehrlich**'s authoritative study of Vichy film, *Cinema of Paradox* (Columbia, 1985), "Of all the crimes committed by the film industry during the occupation, seemingly the most serious was having worked on *Le Corbeau*" (p. 176). Clouzot was banned from film-making after Liberation and did not complete another film until 1949; **Pierre Fresnay** and **Ginette Leclerc**, the film's stars, were imprisoned.

Both Left (Resistance) and Right (Vichy) agreed in finding *Le corbeau* demoralizing and "anti-French." Even today, those who praise it speak of its darkness and cynicism, its jaundiced denial of moral certainty. Yet my impression is quite different. I see it as a film about trust and love, on the one hand, and the harsh but real necessity of moral judgment on the other. No film more forcefully denounces mob persecution and scapegoating, not to speak of the sinister practice, so notorious under the occupation, of informing on one's neighbors through anonymous letters. Although not a propaganda piece for the Resistance, *Le corbeau* is an affirmation of humanistic values antithetical to those of the German occupiers and their Vichy collaborators.

Le corbeau has many characteristics of a detective film. At the center of the story is a rash of anonymous letters signed "le corbeau," the first of which accuse **Dr. Germain** (Fresnay), a physician-obstetrician suspected of being an abortionist because he cares more for the mother's life than that of the child, of illicit relations with **Laura**, the attractive young wife of the old psychiatrist, **Vorzet**. The letters go on to reveal many secrets and denounce much dishonesty in the (medium-sized) town of St.-Robin. One brutally informs a young hospital patient that his cancer is fatal, whereupon he cuts his throat with a razor.

Germain, perturbed by the accusations, spends a night with **Denise** (Leclerc), the sluttish occupant of the neighboring room (he is renting in a schoolhouse). Meanwhile, suspicions about the letters solidify around **Marie Corbin**, Laura Vorzet's unattractive sister who is a nurse at the hospital. Clouzot films Marie's flight through the empty crooked streets to her room with the techniques of German expressionism to create a powerful indictment of mob violence. Then a letter that appears after Marie is jailed demonstrates her innocence.

Germain catches Denise writing him a *corbeau* letter to announce that she bears his child, and immediately suspects her of having written the others. But in the film's most moving scene (and its only close-up), she asks him to find in her tearful eyes the truth that she is not *le corbeau*. Finally, it comes out that the first letter was written by Laura herself in an effort to seduce Germain, and all the others by Vorzet. Laura is carted off to a mental hospital in a scene reminiscent of a **Gestapo** abduction; the hospital suicide's mother cuts Vorzet's throat with her son's razor. Germain and Denise decide to have

their child and, we assume, will leave St.-Robin together.

To read most descriptions of this film, one would never know that the story ends with, on the one hand, the punishment of those guilty of sending the letters and, on the other, the affirmation of life and love through the child awaited by the principals. Germain declares to Denise that he needs this child, that one should not refuse the future--and opens his window to hear children playing in the schoolyard, having closed it to shut out their noise in the couple's first scene in the film. Even Clouzot's fabled cynicism is not dark--nor is the lighting--but satiric and often humorous.

The situation of Clouzot's spectator is judiciously balanced. With respect to the satiric elements of the film--the mutual blackmail of the chief doctor and the bursar, the hypocritical storekeeper who abandons Germain for another doctor because of the letters, the postmaster taking for himself a *corbeau* letter addressed to his wife--we stand back ironically. But as regards the central question of discovering the author of the letters, we are put in the same position as the other characters, particularly Germain, and are induced to jump to the same conclusions. Rather than being terrorized along with the victim, as in a *film noir*, or repelled by the mob, as in **Duvivier's** postwar *Panique*, we become part of the persecuting crowd. Yet there is no final lynching to pin on us. Like the good doctor, we learn that those he suspected were innocent. The guilty party, whom we presumably have not suspected, is indeed punished, but not by "us"; the mother, half-hidden by a veil, dons in the film's final shot the black plumage of the Crow.

In probably the best-known scene in the film, Vorzet confronts Germain in a schoolroom at night. Germain affirms his moral reprobation for the *corbeau* and declares his certitude in knowing right from wrong. Vorzet, accusing Germain of being just as contaminated by the letters as the rest of St.-Robin, counters with a little demonstration. The two doctors stand in front of a globe; the room is lit by a single bulb hanging from the ceiling. Vorzet pushes the light fixture so that it swings back and forth, casting its moving shadow on the globe (on which Europe is visible) as he claims that the boundary between good and evil is similarly unstable. When Germain tries to grab the bulb to stop its swinging, he burns his fingers, whereupon Vorzet announces that his demonstration is conclusive: moral truth cannot be grasped by mere mortals.

This scene is inevitably cited by critics as a statement of Clouzot's own views about life in general and collaboration in particular. Thus Ehrlich:

The theme of the film is stated quite explicitly in a scene between Vorzet and Germain. [description of the lamp-swinging scene] The moral ambiguity which Vorzet verbalizes in this scene is certainly Clouzot's. (p. 185)

But the critics inevitably pass over the contrasting scene that follows.

Vorzet departs, leaving Germain in the room. As the lamp continues to swing, Clouzot signals the passage of time by fading in an image of the lamp having come to rest. We pan down to see Germain in the morning, having apparently spent the night asleep with his head on the teacher's desk. He is awakened by the arrival of the suicide's mother, who tells him that she now works as a cleaning-lady at the school, shows him her son's razor, and informs him that she has a good idea of the identity of the *corbeau* but is waiting to be absolutely sure before taking action. Germain expresses shock, but she is unmoved.

Thus the matching of the still lamp on the moving lamp reflects not only the passage of time but the transition from a world of relativism associated with Vorzet to a world of moral certitude exemplified by

the mother. Germain seems to side with Vorzet, and in his subsequent remarks about the *corbeau* and the priority of the mother's life over the child's he takes a more measured position than previously. But when the film ends with the mother's departure down the crooked street as Vorzet lies dead with his head on his desk beside an incomplete letter of the *corbeau*, we can hardly assert that the film itself is on Vorzet's side. On the contrary, it shows us that only the mother's brutal act could terminate the scourge of the *corbeau*, and that more delicate souls like Germain in fact depend upon such acts to maintain a moral order. If we situate the film within the ethical context defined by the German occupation of France, then if Vorzet's ambivalence relativizes the guilt of collaboration, the mother's act cannot but recall the deeds of the Resistance.

An element in this complex film that fits less easily into this interpretation is the strange insistence on the sexuality of pubescent fourteen-year-old **Rolande**, Denise's niece, whom one of the letters accuses Germain of seeking to make his mistress. But if this suggestion of sexual disorder reflects the paranoid world of the *corbeau*, in Rolande's last appearance on screen she uses her nascent feminine wisdom to reassure Denise that Germain will not leave town without her. The lovers' mature relationship takes over the sexual terrain from Rolande's adolescent longings--as well as from Laura's illicit desire for Germain that created the *corbeau* in the first place.

The ambiguity that critics see in *Le corbeau* is not absent, but neither is it the film's message. The refusal to judge offers a charitable vision of humanity where *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*, but the final word of the film is something else. We are offered visions of both Germain's broadened humanity and the mother's vengeful resolve. The first is more congenial, but the second ends the story. *A corbeau, corbeau et demi*.

Vorzet (played to perfection by **Pierre Larquey**) is a seductive character, and his "demonstration" a convincing one; but as we learn from our earlier readiness, shared with the townsfolk, to condemn Marie Corbin, *séduction n'est pas raison*. The truth is not to be found in mere appearances, the film tells us, but in Denise's eyes--and in the mother's razor.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Minimal Faith: The Human as Event

No. 200: Saturday, March 4, 2000

In "[The Unique Source of Religion and Morality](#)" (*Anthropoetics*, I, 1), I explained religious faith by the WWII dictum that "there are no atheists in the foxholes": that one calls on God at the moment of life-threatening violence because our very idea of the sacred was born in the context of life-threatening violence. There being no atheists in foxholes, those who would stimulate our faith strive to convince us that we are indeed in a foxhole rather than in the marquise's *salon*. Hence **Pascal** describes humanity as a collection of prisoners in chains awaiting their turn as they see their fellows led out to execution. Anything that distracts us from what **Heidegger** would later call our "being-toward-death" is mere *divertissement*.

The principal component of this diversion, in our time far more generally than in Pascal's (when the vast majority of the population were critically concerned with the material necessities of life), is **vanity**, or put less moralistically, the desire for recognition. Although history abounds in examples of courage and other virtues, by definition we lack examples of non-recognition; tales of unrecognized genius are bogus, since we only hear the tale once the genius has been recognized. To renounce vanity is thus to renounce worldly recognition *sans exemple*. The one form of suffering that even the **Crucifixion** fails to prepare us for is anonymity.

Because we possess a world of shared representations that are not material but formal, we are free to conceive the individual soul that houses a unique set of these representations as immortal. The Buddhist, in contrast to the Judeo-Christian, emphasizes the dissolution of the individual soul in the universality of the representations that compose it and with regard to which individual identity and desire are mere illusion. What both cases have in common is not survival but "immortality" in the sense of access to the transtemporal realm exemplified in human experience by the sign.

For faith as with all fundamental elements of culture, originary analysis provides a minimal model or structure of understanding: **faith is the mode of shared representation**. However much animal signals may be learned, animals have no signs whose reference must be taken on faith. The originary act of faith is the deferral of violence; in the originary scene, the participants must accept on faith both the meaning of the others' aborted gesture and the others' faith in the meaning of their own. Each soul is inhabited by the "immortal" originary representation of the central object of desire as the "name-of-God."

"Faith in one's ideas" is not a common quality independent of the content of those ideas, whether they be the originary hypothesis or experiences of abduction by aliens. Although by definition faith can never wholly be justified by reason, the program that reason suggests to faith is its minimization--which is not to say its elimination. Positive empiricism does not do away with faith; it simply agrees, in the interest of achieving concrete "results," not to concern itself with the faith that underlies the system of thought in which these results are expressed. That methodological considerations of this kind do not obviate the need for an originary hypothesis is the kernel of the hypothesis itself.

The faith of originary thinking is that the indispensable basis for human thought is the emergence of the human in and as an event; the claim of the originary hypothesis is to minimize a explanatory leap between animal and human *that cannot be eliminated*. Faith in originary thinking is faith that there is really no other way of thinking than originary thinking. Recognition of this truth would be tantamount to bridging the gap between the humanities that conceive the originary and the social sciences that do the thinking.

But the minimality of the originary hypothesis makes it poorly suited to an intellectual environment that requires cooperation among specialists in various disciplines. The old metaphysics can only be broken down by the slow work of empirical analysis for which this metaphysics itself provides the basis; even, or especially, the empirical discipline of anthropology resists an "anthropological" perspective. Disciplines are communities, and the first duty of a community is to protect its existence; this is a truth that **GA** puts too embarrassingly to the fore to make it congenial to any of these communities. Thus originary thinking can only flourish in the margins of today's academy, or outside them altogether. Yet for its ideas to survive and prosper, they must be promoted by persons willing to anchor themselves in specific disciplines and conduct empirical research in the light of the originary hypothesis.

On this point, some positive news from both ends of campus.

First, the scientific: As I noted in [Chronicle 168](#), **Terrence Deacon's** explanation of the origin of language in *The Symbolic Species* (Norton, 1997), although not quite scenic, comes nonetheless far closer to the originary hypothesis than any previous account in the literature. *Machiavellian Intelligence II* (Cambridge, 1997) a follow-up volume to that discussed in **Raymond Swing's** ["Some Comments on Generative Anthropology"](#) (*Anthropoetics* V, 2), provides further supporting material, less theoretically powerful but equally suggestive. In "Egalitarianism and Political Intelligence," **Christopher Boehm** claims that the egalitarianism that distinguishes early human from primate society is based on the restriction of "alpha" males by a coalition that, unlike the fluctuating coalitions of ape societies, includes the entire human group: "Morality makes a radically egalitarian outcome possible for humans because morality involves a permanent coalition of an entire watchful community" (361). In "Social Intelligence and Language," **Esther Goody** presents the origin of language as a social rather than simply cognitive phenomenon, one that permits cooperation through "shared meanings" (382) rather than "Machiavellian" deception.

Perhaps needless to say, neither Boehm nor Goody concern themselves with modeling as an *event* the paradoxical process in which the transition between deception and cooperation, dominance and egalitarianism is accomplished. Rather than conceive the emergence of "shared meaning" in a scene, Goody (373) refers to a computer simulation that purports to generate sign-meaning relationships from lengthy series of one-on-one communications (50,000 to establish twelve signs, in the example given). Once again, human scientists draw from empirical data tentatively and in gradualistic form conclusions that follow directly from the originary hypothesis. The latter is nevertheless made to appear increasingly plausible as a working hypothesis for empirical research.

On the humanistic side, as might be expected, corroboration is more nebulous. But it is surely not altogether coincidental that both **UCLA** and the **University of Washington** are holding colloquia this Spring--the latter quite a high-profile affair--on the subject of **the Sacred and the Profane**. There seems to be a clear trend in recent years toward acknowledging the centrality of the sacred to the domain of cultural study, if not of "cultural studies."

GA was articulated by humanists rather than human scientists, but it bears allegiance to neither domain. To rely on any professional grouping to give value to originary thinking would violate the very principle of minimality by which originary thinking is defined. The only group that can be the object of our minimal faith is humanity itself.

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GA and Not-so-Social Science

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Today the **Humanities** appear to be drifting in the direction of the social sciences. Textual analysis becomes every day less like biblical hermeneutics and more like archival research--when it doesn't resemble the presentation of a brief at the **Nuremberg Trials**. Cultural documents are examined less as sources of universal enlightenment and more as historical evidence, sometimes incriminating, sometimes disculpatory.

An interesting side-effect of this "sociological turn" has been a renewal of interest in **Durkheim**, whose hedgehog status (see [Chronicle 198](#)) reflects his insistence on the unity and independence of the "social." Durkheim is a key ancestor of **GA**. Indeed, **Girard's** mimetic theory of social organization may be described as a synthesis of Durkheim's "realist" notion of the social with his rival **Gabriel Tarde's** nominalism. Durkheim views society as a transcendent entity that dominates its individual participants; Tarde emphasizes the mimetic structure of human interaction. Durkheim rejected Tarde's notion of imitation as dependent on the prior existence of the social order whose structures it was meant to explain; Tarde reproached Durkheim with hypostatizing society as a kind of Platonic Idea independent of the individuals that compose it. Girard achieves a creative *Aufhebung* by making the social itself the product of "imitation" or **mimesis** in both its positive and negative aspects, which Tarde recognized under the term "opposition."

But the very hedgehog qualities that made Durkheim instrumental in imposing the idea of "social science" within the academic and intellectual worlds explain why he is not in favor in the social sciences today. In anthropology the triumph has gone rather to **Franz Boas**, theorist of the cultural *tabula rasa* and advocate *avant la lettre* of "thick" cultural description; Durkheim's universalism seems hopelessly restrictive, not to say **Eurocentric**. The failure of humanists to challenge cultural relativism when they are not its enthusiastic partisans makes me wonder whether their tips of the hat to Durkheim are more than gestures of symbolic appropriation. Are humanists making a serious effort to resume Durkheim's agenda, or are they just putting a "scientific" label on their nostalgia for the sacred?

Either way, it should come as a surprise to most humanists that, although in the context of twentieth-century anthropology Durkheim is at the antipodes of someone like **Clifford Geertz**, the critique of the "standard social science model" (**SSSM**) associated with the school of **evolutionary psychology** considers Geertz as Durkheim's disciple. (See *The Adapted Mind* [Oxford, 1992], especially the introductory chapter by **Leda Cosmides** and **John Tooby**, who edited the volume along with **Jerome Barkow**.) We cannot blame either Durkheim or the evolutionists for this bizarre filiation, although we can certainly blame more recent anthropologists for failing to refine Durkheim's notion of the social--or to recognize GA as a decisive step in this refinement.

What makes Geertz a disciple of Durkheim? For the latter, social facts are irreducible to the facts of individual psychology (this was the heart of his polemic with Tarde). Durkheim sought to establish laws

of social action as well as an increasingly religion-centered generative scheme of social organization, whereas Geertz seeks neither laws nor scheme. But once the "social" has been declared an autonomous entity detached from the specific mechanisms of the individual human psyche, it is a short step to the Boasian claim that the human being is a mere cipher wholly determined in all his behaviors by the specific society of which he is a member. Once the specific mental constitution of the human individual has been declared irrelevant to the constitution of "society," there is no longer any reason to emphasize the unity of society rather than its diversity and, conversely, the noblest reasons for emphasizing the latter over the former.

Can we then follow the path of Durkheim without arriving at Geertz? Originary thinking answers this question with an unqualified "yes." The originary hypothesis anchors the "social" in the mimetic psychology of human individuals and their interaction; it explains *why* there is a "society" in the Durkheimian sense of something more than a collection of individuals linked by one-on-one or small-group relationships.

The evolutionist critique has the potential for drastically modifying the anthropological landscape within which we operate, in a direction I believe quite favorable to originary thinking. Assuming that this critique eventually succeeds in discrediting the SSSM (whose intellectual vacuity has been no secret in these quarters), what will remain is a biology-based anthropology on the one hand--and humanistic studies on the other. Despite the evolutionists' use of vocabulary such as "machines" to describe human beings and "epidemiology" to describe cultural diffusion, these are no more than hopeful heuristic metaphors. However salutary it may be to reject the dogma of cultural relativism and to examine cultural phenomena as products of evolution-driven adaptations, evolutionary analysis is not yet ready to take the place of the interpretative study of texts.

The relativistic social science model that has lately become so attractive to humanists as an alternative to moribund traditional models of "high culture" can no longer serve them when it is losing validity in its own domain. This suggests that, just as biological adaptationism proposes a yardstick to judge and classify the efficiency of human behaviors, an analogous evaluative tendency will reemerge in humanistic studies, if only to explain the persistence of certain cultural works (*e.g.*, **Shakespeare's** plays, but also folksongs) beyond their immediate historical context. More importantly, it implies that new and more rigorous models will be required to mediate between the cultural and the biological. The "**Integrated Causal Model**" (ICM) proposed by the evolutionists must respect the specificity of the human just as much as that of living as opposed to inanimate matter. The originary hypothesis as a minimal explanation of this specificity is far more at home in the more rigorous context of the ICM than it ever was in the dogmatic gradualism-relativism of the SSSM.

The only way to defend the validity of Durkheim's concept of society in a context redefined by the evolutionary critique is to offer a model of its *generation* out of the interactions of its individual members. The constitution of human society as something more than a population of mutually fertile individuals and even than the "social" groups found among our primate cousins is most parsimoniously explained as the result of an *event* commemorated by a representational sign. If humans are unique in their possession of a "language module," the originary hypothesis offers an explanation of how this module first appeared as an adaptation to increased mimetic tensions within the proto-human group.

But it also explains why the social is more than the sum of its constituent modules. The presence in all cultures, concomitantly with language, of the ritual enactment of mimetic phenomena suggests the

existence among humans of a particular propensity to mimesis already remarked by **Aristotle**, a propensity that may be described in modular terms as a focused adaptation, but one that at the same time leads to the "dialectical" transcendence of the narrowness of the modular in general. It is the very domain-general form of language that we call metaphysics that permits us to formulate scientific theories, including, in particular, the modular theory as a refutation of the domain-general view of language. But modularity and universality in language are not mutually exclusive. The generative critique of metaphysics as a set of declarative sentences ("propositions") that denies its historical roots in the ostensive has much in common with the evolutionary critique of the SSSM as a history-denying theory of language and thought.

Although the evolutionists convincingly confute the relativist-descriptive anthropology founded on the Boasian rejection of human nature, which they explain as a noble but wrong-headed reaction against colonialism and eugenics, their failure so far to persuade the more humanistically oriented sector of the social science community cannot wholly be laid at the door of the latter's fuzzy-headed dogmatism. Whatever the weakness of the domain-general learning-oriented psychology of the SSSM, it reflects, however crudely, an awareness that humans differ from animals in their possession of a formal system of information processing that permits what **Derek Bickerton** calls the "off-line" manipulation of ideas. However modular its operation within the brain, such a system is qualitatively different from the sensory and signal-based information-processing systems available to animals. Although the human system can only physically exist in individual brains, it can function only in the context of culturally shared meanings that is Durkheim's "society."

If our language modules are beneficial adaptations to anything, it is not to our internal information-processing needs but to the communication of information to others in the context of these culturally shared meanings. The parsimony of the originary event as the origin of these shared meanings contrasts with the conjectural complexity of hypotheses, such as the one referred to in [Chronicle 200](#), that attempt to model the generation of such meanings through one-on-one interactions. The minimality of the originary hypothesis is the antithesis of the SSSM's minimalistic depiction of the brain as a *tabula rasa* of non-dedicated neurons that leaves it to the "environment" to define the parameters of human nature.

I hope to explore in future *Chronicles* further implications of the evolutionist critique and its potential effects on both the narrowly academic and broadly intellectual contexts of the originary hypothesis.

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GA and Esthetics: Ideas for a Research Program

No. 202: Saturday, March 25, 2000

The faith of GA, as I attempted to explain in [Chronicle 200](#), is that all thinking is "really" originary thinking. Such an assertion, if it is not to be mere rhetoric, should be followed by at least some indication that its content is of some value for the thinking-that-is-really-GA-but-doesn't-know-it-yet that it purports to enlighten, that those engaged in humanistic/anthropological research will find explicit awareness of and reference to the originary hypothesis to be to their intellectual--if not academic--advantage.

My readings in the scientific literature have convinced me that humanistic studies can retain their significance only by taking on a more rigorous character, but that this rigor cannot be attained through social-science empiricism, even modified in the direction of biological modularity. On the contrary, the most rigorous, or perhaps I should say minimally unrigorous, way to deal with the phenomena of culture created by the speculative freedom of human representation is to trace these phenomena back to their minimal source in the hypothetical originary event in which representation first emerged.

Our unique capacity to construct fictional worlds is founded on our unique capacity to experience-and-recall *events*. A "science of culture" would take this capacity and its products as its object. Of the many historical manifestations it might study, humanists lay claim to the most extensive and intricately structured "data set," the world of literature and the arts that they alone have the knowledge and training to analyze. Humanistic modes of interpretation would enrich the science of culture by exploring what in each individual artwork reproduces the event-nature of human origin.

In the hypothetical originary scene, the experience of avoidance and fascination that we call the sacred is not simply a relation between the individual participant and the central object; its crucial element is the emission of the sign that communicates this experience to the others in the group. The sacred experience is one of representation-as-a-substitute-for-appropriation, but once we have represented-instead-of-appropriating, we are less likely to think of appropriating and more of representing. The sacred can be kept alive only by renewing the experience of its birth, regenerating the collective mimetic tension that valorized the sacred object in the first place. This necessary renewal is the function served by culture.

How, on this definition, does the necessity of culture imply that of art? Why is it not sufficient to reproduce the scene of crisis in sacrificial ritual? Why does the originary scene give rise not merely to a *formal* process of signification (the sign signifies the sacred being) and an *institutional* process of reproduction (the ritual scene reproduces the originary scene) but an *esthetic* process in which both the sign and its scenic referent are present? This question offers subject-matter for a GA research program on two levels.

The first is that of **esthetic theory**. The philosophy of art in antiquity and more particularly the study of the effects of art in the early modern era that led to **Baumgarten's** *Esthetics* and **Kant's** *Critique of [the*

Power of Judgment has much to reveal about how this intermediary domain has been (mis)conceived within Western metaphysics. Kant's famous notion of the judgment of taste as being "universal without a concept" acquires new meaning in the light of our definition of conceptual-metaphysical thought as that which posits the declarative-logical "proposition" rather than the ostensive as the minimal utterance-form. The experience of "the beautiful" remains in Kant's system within the intermediary realm of the judgment, which normally assigns a sign-idea to a sensory experience, without ever subsuming its experience under any given concept. But Kant does not see the dependence of the esthetic on *representation*; his "judgment without a concept" is no more than a suggestively paradoxical union of uniqueness and universality (cf. "unity in diversity") detached from the generative context of human history. Because originary thinking encounters the sign before its signified becomes a "concept," it can explain the anthropological function of this "intermediary" state in which both sign and imaginary referent are held in the mind simultaneously, or, more precisely, in a state of **oscillation**.

As the two elements of signification, the ancestors of **Saussure's** signifier and signified, the originary sign and its sacred referent are not merely "associated" in the traditional behaviorist sense but linked in a new kind of relationship that we call *signification*. We experience signification as an asymmetrical binary relation of sign and meaning in which the thought of one calls up the thought of the other. We say that the originary sign *represents* its referent because perception of the sign provokes (real or imaginary) perception of the central object, but perception of this object as significant requires in turn continual reinforcement through perception of the sign.

In an ostensive utterance where sign and referent are both present to the participants, this oscillation may be actualized as a physical movement. When the sign is used in the absence of its object, this oscillatory movement is transferred to the imagination. The sign conjures up an image of the object that, whatever real experiences may have contributed to it, is not an independent trace of worldly experience but one dependent on the sign. Let us recall that the primary function of the sign is not to increase our knowledge of the world but to maintain peace within the community by sacralizing an object of potential mimetic conflict. The esthetic moment of oscillation is the process through which investment of energy in emitting the sign replaces the impossible praxis of appropriating the object. The sign not merely signifies its object but engages with it in a dynamic process of becoming-significant. The collective discharge of mimetic tension in ritual sacrifice depends on the esthetic reinforcement of the sacralizing-signifying link between sign and referent in the individual participants.

This analysis might be taken to suggest that the esthetic is the truly essential, dynamic moment of the generative process of culture and that the sacred is no more than its static residue. But we must be careful not to apply to the human in general the valorization of the dynamic over the static characteristic of modern market society. The "esthetic" central object does not survive the scene; all that remains is the signification-relation that associates the sign as name-of-God with sacred Being. As the basis of communal order, the sacred cannot be constantly put to the test of esthetic judgment. That this is indeed the effect of esthetic experience is substantiated by the hostility of sacred institutions to "secular" art. But to say that the sacred is put into question by esthetic experience is tantamount to saying that it was through esthetic experience that it was generated in the first place.

The second level of our research program is that of the empirical examination of esthetic experience. Humans obtain enjoyment from stories and may reasonably be said to have a need for them; all cultures engage in storytelling, from the level of communally accepted myth to that of ephemeral gossip. Positive anthropology finds it easy to conceive adaptive functions for storytelling just as it does for language. The

paleoanthropologist who explains the emergence of language as a means to communicate the location of food sources can similarly explain storytelling as a means to communicate useful knowledge about both natural and social reality. In contrast, if we derive language minimalistically from the sign emitted to defer mimetic conflict, we must maintain a similar minimalism with respect to narrative.

As I attempted to show in "Originary Narrative"

(<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/narrative.htm>), originary narrative is the story of the emission of the sign as the genesis of signification, the becoming-sacred/meaningful of the central object. Telling a story is not a simple matter of finding a referent and then using a sign to represent or recall it. The significance that we find at the end of the story has been generated in the course of the story. No story can offer a logical demonstration of the significance of its object, but some stories are more successful than others at maintaining the reader/hearer in a state of oscillation between sign and (imaginary) referent. In a successful narrative just as in the plastic arts--where, however, the temporality of esthetic reception is less explicitly structured--we are continually motivated to return to the work to replenish our imagination. The source of this motivation is not necessarily "suspense," although the latter is certainly a frequent component of successful narratives.

Significance is something that each narrative must generate anew, not reproduce. A story, whatever its basis in fact, is not a contingent representation of something that exists but a *generative* representation of an imaginary and therefore "fictional" referent. Narratives are the means by which we renew our contact with the originary function of language. This is the grain of truth in the romantic paranoia that opposes literary language, and the sphere of art in general, to the "disenchanted" discourse of the modern, secular, rationalized world as though the two domains were not interdependent.

The generation of significance through narrative is prior to the conceptual or metaphysical use of language and does not therefore depend on it. In contrast to narrative, conceptual discourse, which includes the logical and the scientific, describes what is in principle already there; it does not bring it into being. Yet because all human language comes from the same generative root, the contrast between the two forms of discourse can never be made absolute; no language is purely conceptual or "positive," particularly not that of the sphere of human science.

It is the achievement of deconstruction to have grasped this point in reading philosophical and culture-theoretical "texts" as being of a kind with works of the literary imagination. The deconstructive critique of metaphysics has much in common with that of originary thinking. Its crucial weakness lies in its failure to criticize the principal unspoken pretension of metaphysical discourse that language itself is metaphysical, a proposition implicit in the term "logocentrism." Language is indeed logocentric; but the mutual dependence of logos and center expressed by this term is precisely what demonstrates the essential lateness, the anthropological modesty, of metaphysics. This demonstration should encourage us to pursue the analysis of narratives and other "texts" as so many historical examples of originary thinking.

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Eric Gans

Originary Thinking, Cognitive Science, and Religion

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I've been reading a lot about "modules" lately. Many people postulate a language module; I haven't heard of any who postulate a religion module. The one useful point I have seen made by cognitive psychology about the objects of religious belief is that, whether in non-Western cultures or in our own, they contain elements that are "unnatural," counter-intuitive, while at the same time obeying universal psychological intuitions about how minds work. (See **Pascal Boyer**, "Cognitive constraints on cultural representations: Natural ontologies and religious ideas," in *Mapping the mind*, ed. Lawrence Hirschfeld and Susan Gelman, Cambridge UP, 1994.) Whatever modular thinking's other virtues, it restores some measure of common sense about human universality, allowing us to trust instead of apologizing for our "Western" intuitions. (Not to speak of the fact that, whatever its intentions, admiring the "naturalness" of religious beliefs in other cultures resuscitates **Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's** notion of "pre-logical" primitive mentality.)

No doubt **Durkheim's** sacred-profane opposition presents the "unnaturalness" of religion more elegantly and with a far more cogent explanation of its communal function than Boyer's idea that "certain combinations of intuitive [*i.e.*, anthropomorphic psychology] and counterintuitive [*i.e.*, supernatural physical existence] claims constitute a cognitive optimum" (406). Yet the insistence on the universal counter-intuitiveness of religious belief is a step in the right direction, one particularly welcome given the far more critical eye cast on universals of human behavior in our era as compared with that of Durkheim.

Boyer's example is the **Fang** belief in ghosts or *bekong*. The Fang ghost is presumed to have a mind like ours but in addition is gifted with qualities such as non-mortality (the *bekong* are, roughly speaking, the souls of the dead) immateriality, invisibility, the capacity of instantaneous displacement, and most significantly, the power to inflict illness on those guilty of the violation of ritual prohibitions (398). The ghosts are anything but "natural" beings; their unnaturalness is inseparable from their cultural significance.

The cognitive psychologist sees the unnaturalness of beings gifted with superhuman attributes, but fails to derive from this a theory of the "unnatural" that includes language or even the sacred in Durkheim's terms. Instead, he focuses on the "cultural survival" (406) of religious ideas, not for the community that practices them, but in and for themselves. This is very close to **Dawkins'** notion of the *meme* or cultural fragment that survives by reproducing itself in the members of a culture; "unnatural" ideas survive because the cognitive dissonance they generate makes them harder to forget than common-sense ideas.

Boyer is well aware that only a few such "unnatural" ideas become the dominant representations of an entire community:

In any cultural environment, indefinitely many religious representations are constantly created and communicated. Only some of them, however, have the potential to support both imaginative scenarios and intuitive inferences. These

are the ones that combine a rich intuitive base, with all its inferential potential, and a limited series of violations of intuitive theories, which are attention-demanding. Because of these characteristics, such assumptions are more likely than other assumptions to be easily acquired, memorized, and transmitted. It should not be surprising, therefore, that they constitute the most recurrent aspects of religious systems. (407)

Yet this near-tautological language tells us nothing about how religious ideas are generated and how they function. Nor is the solution to be found through examining the ideas in themselves. The survival of religious ideas is inseparable from that of the human communities that generate them--in the first place, from that of the human species that alone can formulate ideas in language. **Rousseau's** brilliant intuition that in the earliest language men would be called "giants," and even the common Enlightenment idea (most often associated with **Vico**) that the earliest language was poetry rather than prose, still have much to teach those who think they can generalize about our "representations" without concerning themselves with why we create representations in the first place.

It is not enough, however, to point out in the language of the history of ideas the weaknesses of such contributions as this to the scientific study of religion. For the emergence of these analyses is precisely a sign that the old metaphysics that still dominates theoretical discussion in the humanities and the softer social sciences is reaching the end of its usefulness. As I suggested in [Chronicle 201](#), the most useful or "dialectical" alternative to the biological model of the human in the light of the cognitive-evolutionary critique of the "Standard Social Science Model" (SSSM) is a humanistic, that is, a generative, anthropology. The "two cultures" may become more likely to listen to each other as the intellectual buffer of a culture- but not event-based anthropology becomes increasingly less available. For whether or not mental modularity is the answer, the cognitivist critique of the conception of cultures as arbitrary and irreducible absolutes can at best be deflected, not refuted.

Most of the supernatural qualities of the Fang ghosts, as of all religious beings are, as I have pointed out on many occasions, those of the linguistic sign. Signs too are non-mortal, immaterial (as types), rapidly transmitted. But in addition to the transcendent status of the sign with relation to its worldly referents, the supernatural also expresses the transcendent status of the sacred being in relation to its worshipers. The first relation is formal; it may be described in a geometrical metaphor as a "vertical" supplement to the "horizontal" world of appetite. The second relation is ethical; interactions among humans are mediated by sacred interdiction, and both the rules of practical ethics that govern societies and the model of reciprocity that founds our moral intuition derive from it.

What then of religion, the traditional guardian of the notion of the event-based nature of the human? If GA, as a rigorous form of anthropological thought, stands on the humanistic side of the frontier between the humanities and the sciences, it cannot be said to be situated *between* religion and something else. The individual religions are not likely to experience a need for the minimal shared core that originary thinking provides until their own mutual dialogue has advanced far beyond its current "interfaith" level. Rather than being in dialogue with religion, I see GA rather as the (unelected) representative of religion to the scientific community. Here once more we follow in the footsteps of Durkheim, with the difference that the cognitive value of religion in originary thinking does not begin with the unexplained dichotomy of sacred and profane but with a motivating *event*. As a result, our "science of religion," unlike that of Durkheim, is able to integrate the core intuition of religion itself. Durkheim writes about religious classification as (still) a nineteenth-century anthropologist analyzing the religion of "primitives" and

(already) a structuralist modeling a human world without events. Durkheim claims that religion is the source of science, but he relies for the scientific status of his own discourse on the metaphysical foreclosure of the event and of the ostensive utterance-form associated with it. The central intellectual task of GA, if it can be described in one sentence, is to demystify this separation by articulating it in anthropological terms.

Everyone talks about the human need for stories; it is not yet generally understood that the need for stories is a need for events. Events are what stories are made up of. By postulating an originary event, GA does not create a new myth but rather makes clear the minimal presupposition of human culture that thrives on events. Events cannot derive imperceptibly from non-events; there must be a "first" event because events by definition are *noticed*. Different cultures there certainly are, but they all share the same eventfulness and are therefore most parsimoniously derived, lacking evidence to the contrary, from a single originary scene. (*Pace* some critics of GA, a multiplicity of originary scenes would by no means disconfirm the originary hypothesis, but merely complicate its historical articulation: did the originary communities born in the diverse scenes combine? Were the descendents of all but one such community eventually eliminated--in which case there would be only one originary scene for *us*?...)

How then should we explain the "cognitive optimum" that Boyer finds in the Fang ghost stories? The counter-intuitive element that makes these and all religious tales memorable is not explicable simply as a story-telling device; it is an imaginative means of representing the transcendental basis of storytelling itself. But the transcendental does not emerge from thin air. For the sacred object to become the source of the Being or signified that stands behind the sign, it must be destroyed in the *sparagmos*. The birth of the sign as told in the originary story is consequent on the death and transfiguration of the object that was the originary center of desire, the death and transfiguration that lies at the root of sacrificial myths and of those stories that prolong and interpret them. It is not by chance that the Fang "ghosts" originate as the souls of the dead.

What generates the "cognitive optimum," the balance between ordinary human psychology and the transcendence of human physical limitations is not some undefined "limited series of violations" but the tension between the vulnerability of the originary object-referent to the violence of human desire and the persistence of its peace-bringing significant Being--life after death. The supernatural is bound to be "attention-demanding" because it reproduces the very source of human attention to the sign. This is a lesson that cognitive science can learn from Generative Anthropology.

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Eric Gans

The Novelistic Attitude

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As we begin the third millennium, it seems clear that the novel has relinquished to film its role as the dominant narrative form. This is increasingly the case even in those emerging countries where the novel would appear to remain a viable means of creating communal consciousness. We tend to tell the story of the novel as the triumph, consecrated in the nineteenth century, of the fictive imagination over public spectacle; we would do better to understand the dominance of fiction over spectacle as a romantic and post-romantic interlude.

Not that theatricality disappeared in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, as cultural historians such as **Vanessa Schwartz** (*Spectacular Realities*, California 1998) and **Paul Metzner** (*Crescendo of the Virtuoso*, California 1998) have pointed out, it is precisely this period that witnessed the emergence of modern popular spectacle and, with it, the modern notion of celebrity. In turn, the ubiquity of this spectacle provoked the literary reaction that led through post-romanticism to modernism. As principal heir to the post-romantic *l'art pour l'art* that culminated in **Mallarmé's** combination of hermeticism and ironic consumerism, modernism aims at creating a spectacle for the elite that would defeat the popular at its own game. But whereas late nineteenth-century literature remained centered on the solitary genres of poetry and the novel--the individual nature of creation was perhaps the one dogma Mallarmé held in common with **Zola**--modernism tends to be collective (*e.g.*, the **Surrealists**) and anti-narrative (*e.g.*, **Valéry**). The greatest modern novelists belong less to modernism than to the extremes of the post-romantic; this explains why the questions posed by **Joyce**, **Kafka**, **Proust** to the limits of the novelist's communion with his reader did not lead, as with **Scott** or **Balzac** a century earlier, to an enlargement of the possibilities of the genre, but to their exhaustion..

If the figure of the romantic poet/artist is a tired cliché, it is because his example was accessible with only minor adjustments to the young men of the early bourgeois era. **Frédéric Moreau**, shown in the opening scene of Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* carrying an artist's album and a guitar, typifies the pretensions of the *jeunesse romantique*. Any reasonably educated bourgeois can write a few verses or sketch a scene. The novelist's role is different. The nineteenth-century realist novel, as opposed to the classical *roman d'analyse*, requires too much prolonged, concentrated effort to be within reach of the youthful amateur.

The novel exemplifies the creativity of the isolated individual, Balzac or **Flaubert** alone at his writing desk. During the age of the novel, from roughly 1830 to 1960, cultural energy was focused on the self-creation of the individual under the guidance of the singular author-creator. If the crowd communes in spectacle, the cultured self can only join the community once he has first asserted his capacity to create significance unaided. Each individual is the bearer of the originary source of significance, and it is only because of this that bourgeois society can function as a whole.

Now that the novel has declined and the high-cultural novel all but disappeared from the first-world cultural equation, it is easy to see the purely representational yet personified spectacle of cinema as a

synthesis of the purely representational novel and the personified spectacle of theater. But what was most significant about the novel has not survived its supersession: the novel was a factor not merely of adjustment but of subversion. In contrast to the poet/artist, the novelist is openly a middle-class entrepreneur, capitalizing his talent and profiting from its exploitation (think **Dickens** or Zola). Yet the novelist also represents a point of resistance to market activity; his solitary labors of the imagination contrast with the utilitarian practices of the bourgeoisie.

The novelist is at the same time isolated from the world and fascinated by it. Unlike the romantic self-regard that enhances one's human capital in preparation for entry into bourgeois life, these attitudes of detachment and vicarious participation can only help us survive life's disillusion. Balzac's romantic realism is only superficially an encouragement to market success; Flaubert's post-romantic disillusion is clearly an apology for worldly failure. Within the rhythm of bourgeois life, the novel is designed for a private experience of reading that consoles the private self after its daily buffeting in the marketplace.

Unlike the poet, the novelist is not a model to be emulated; he is a transcendent figure, a secular priest, an association that Balzac provoked with his monk's robe and that Flaubert never ceased to flaunt in his correspondence. This priestly function gives the novelist access to a truth that the reader as ordinary bourgeois can see only through his eyes: **Girard's** *vérité romanesque*, the revelation of the vanity of worldly desire from the transcendent vantage point of pure representation. As opposed to the popular novel whose romantic heroes are still served up for identification today, the "literary" novel ends unhappily or at best ironically. The reader plunges into these tragic depths protected by the diver's bell of the novelist's extra-worldly subjectivity.

The novelistic stance of refusing the world in order to grasp the world, naively assimilated by Balzac and Zola to that of the scientist, is in reality a sacrificial one that redeems the vanity of the worldly desire it denounces. This existential relation to the sacred is not possible in cinema. The "experimental" films made in the equivalent of cork-lined rooms have only technical or cult interest. The spirituality of cinema reflects that of the world itself, viewed with utmost seriousness; it has no place for the irony of the novelistic gaze. Where **Dreyer** shows us the Passion of **Falconetti-Joan of Arc**, Proust's literary agony allows us to delight in the self-delusions of **Charlus** and **Mme Verdurin**.

The age of the novel is that of a short-lived bourgeois idealism. The novel serves as a guarantee for my faith that by sacrificing my own life to art I too could create an immortal work. It is the loss of this ideal consolation for worldly failure that explains the postmodern urge to monumentalize lives before they are complete in any sense. From **Emma Bovary** to **Erin Brockovich**, the protagonist has evolved from a figure of pity redeemed by Flaubert to a figure of envy consecrated by **Julia Roberts**.

What has passed away is not the novel but the *novelistic attitude*, that of the self who accepts lack of control over the world in exchange for the privilege of living within it detached from its values, observing it, at least in principle, as if it were material for a novel. Although this attitude is not incompatible with worldly success, it is difficult to reconcile with the corporate lifestyle. The novelistic withdrawal from the marketplace is conducive to success within it only so long as it reflects the secret desire of those entering a world that does not yet offer a full complement of means for expressing personal uniqueness. With the passing of this immature stage of market society, there is no longer need for a transcendental vision to oppose to that of the marketplace itself.

What dies with the novelistic attitude is not personal creativity but the ideal of its virtual existence in the isolated individual. The world of the film-maker, to draw the pertinent comparison, is far more

egocentric but also far less solitary than that of the novelist. The latter can avenge himself on the world with pen or word-processor; the former must bend a whole team of people to his will and find financing in the bargain. The film-maker, however introspective, must be at least minimally gregarious and manipulative or his film will not get made. And if, at the bottom line, the novelist knows he can always find a place to withdraw to, even from failure as a (public) novelist, the film-maker must live with the terrible knowledge that if he can't make his film, he has no recourse of any kind--other than to write a novel.

Because the **Bronx**, that urban **Valley of the Dinosaurs**, maintained nineteenth-century cultural modes long after they had perished elsewhere, my generation is perhaps the last to have known the novelistic attitude. Today we all take our cue from the film-maker in realizing that human creativity, like the human society it nourishes, is an interactive enterprise.

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Eric Gans

Originary and Evolutionary Esthetics

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I have claimed more than once in these *Chronicles* and elsewhere that the emergence of humanity cannot be understood simply in terms of the theory of evolution, and that "creation science," whatever its absurdities, has a single point to make: the origin of the human, as defined by our use of language, must be understood not merely as a process but as an *event*. The origin of language, however prepared by genetic evolution, cannot be explained by genetic mutation alone; the emergence of language is itself a *cultural* mutation that subsequently becomes the basis for new adaptations, including the mental and physical elements of our linguistic capacity.

My recent reading in the not uncontroversial field of evolutionary psychology (see *Chronicles* [201](#) & [203](#)) offers new hope that a viable interface is possible between GA and evolutionary theory. Most attempts by psychologists and anthropologists to explain the phenomena of human culture in Darwinian terms only demonstrate for all to see that, lacking an adequate anthropology, empirical science cannot formulate a valid research program about human behavior. (A recent example: *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* by **Randy Thornhill** and **Craig Palmer** [MIT Press] claims that men have been selected for a specific adaptation to commit rape.) But if the concept of evolutionary adaptation is not directly applicable to the forms of language and culture, it does offer some clues as to the sort of content that these forms will tend to include.

It is perhaps in the domain of **esthetics** that is most amenable to fruitful dialogue between event-thinking and process-thinking. An esthetic experience may be understood both as the result of a *process* that generates a particular "esthetic effect" and as a memorable *event* in the life of its subject, unique in more than the trivial sense in which every life experience is unique. More particularly, the experience of art is generated and strongly structured by a process internal to the individual artwork that may be understood as a mechanism deliberately designed to provoke in its audience the experience of a new event.

Whereas, according to the originary hypothesis, this event derives its form from the originary event, the fundamental *content* of art as of all cultural mechanisms is supplied by objects of precultural appetite. Ritual sacrifice predominantly involves large edible animals because these are the most concentrated forms of nourishment; the predominant motive force in narratives is sexual desire, whose biological importance needs no demonstration. Less obviously, evolutionary psychologists hypothesize an esthetic of **landscapes** that reflects their attractiveness as habitats for our species in its formative stage in the Pleistocene. **Gordon Orians** and **Judith Heerwagen** in "Evolved Responses to Landscapes" (in Barkow/Cosmides/Tooby, *The Adapted Mind*, Oxford UP, 1992: 555-79) provide a plausible evolutionary model for our topographic tastes: we tend to find attractive savanna-like scenes that offer potential food but especially "prospect" and "refuge," which afford us the ability to see without being seen.

From a biological standpoint, this kind of esthetic sense is a refinement of the tropism that makes

amoebas move toward solutions possessing the requisite pH. The amoeba need not exercise "judgment" because its tropism is defined by a single equation computed by the amoeba's perception system; in **Kantian** terms, the tropism is not "without a concept." Conversely, we call our own judgment "esthetic" because the field of perception that occasions it is too complex and the set of evaluative criteria too vague to permit of simple conceptualization. The attractive-landscape hypothesis offers an evolutionary basis for the "judgment without a concept" of Kantian esthetics. Clearly our judgment will be quicker and more decisive if it doesn't require us to reason, that is, to compare in our minds a given landscape with a series of landscape-images variously suited for human habitation or exploration. Among Pleistocene hunters moving through the terrain, the ability to decide correctly without reflection which direction to follow is certainly likely to affect evolutionary selection, in the same way as the ability to choose correctly at a sniff or nibble which foods to eat. It is no coincidence that the notion of *taste* has been from the beginning associated with the esthetic. If our taste in food has practical use, so does, or did, our taste in scenery.

Taking the evolutionary hypothesis a step farther, the Kantian distinction between the "beautiful" and the "sublime" would appear to distinguish respectively scenes that we desire to enter and scenes that we wish only to contemplate--"prospect" being a major feature of the evolutionary esthetic. Thus we may not need to link the sublime to the sacred in order to explain our otherwise seemingly gratuitous interest in mountains and waterfalls; perhaps adaptive value can be found in our "tropism" toward places from which such phenomena may be viewed.

How is this biological notion of the esthetic to be articulated with the phenomena of art? That we use the same language to speak of beautiful landscapes and beautiful paintings strongly implies that our taste for the latter in some sense derives from taste for the former. Evolutionary psychology furnishes this much justification for Kantian esthetics' primary focus on natural beauty, but it seems even less ready than Kant to tackle the crucial question of the articulation of the natural esthetic with the cultural.

One of the hoariest clichés of esthetics offers a simple means of distinguishing between the beauty of nature and that of art: the idea, which goes back at least to **Aristotle's *Poetics***, that objects that would frighten or repel us in the real world (Aristotle mentions "vile animals and cadavers") elicit our praise as subjects of an artwork. Contemporary shock art, whatever its other virtues, allows us to refine this assertion. Whereas the classical examples, typically pictures of wild beasts, were more fearful than repugnant, an important trend in the plastic arts makes a cult of ugliness and repulsion, using excrement, menstrual blood, and other excretions with the apparent aim of demonstrating that the esthetic can only be defined in opposition to our biological tastes. Ever since the romantics determined to *épater le bourgeois*, art has been increasingly opposed, not, as was often claimed, to the "useful," but to the naturally or naively beautiful, to the kind of objects that natural selection would seemingly direct us to choose.

No doubt, in its ostentatious protesting-too-much, painting with excrement only affirms the ultimate bondage of art to the natural esthetic. **Mondrianesque** abstraction was far more liberating in reducing this esthetic to its bare bones of pattern and rhythm. Abstraction is in keeping with the nature of our perceptive system; our inviting landscapes are built up from patterns of edges and shapes. These reactions against the natural esthetic may be interpreted historically, manifestos to the contrary, as enlargements rather than denials of the canon of natural/classical beauty. But the most significant point made by the anti-naturalism of modern art is in the domain of form rather than content: to emphasize the mediation of the esthetic sign. This emphasis on form is most crucial in the plastic arts, where an artwork

that copies the appearance of its subject-matter risks being reduced to a mere example of "mechanical reproduction." Whereas the classical admirers of *trompe-l'oeil* were satisfied to understand representation as reproduction, modern art, reflecting a deeper insight into culture's source in human interaction, understands representation as creative in a primary rather than secondary sense. Whatever its excesses, the modernist anti-mimetic revolt in the plastic arts, with its parallel rebellion against tonality in music, reminds us that the sign of art is never a mere trigger for the natural esthetic.

The oscillation between the esthetic sign and its imaginary referent mediates between human culture and the natural esthetic. The latter tells us which landscape or sexual partner is likely to promote our evolutionary fortunes; if our perception includes a moment of "esthetic judgment," it cannot be detached from the practical use to which it will be put. The referent of the sign, in contrast, is by that very reference cut off from the world of practical reality. Even when the ostensive sign picks out an object in the real world, that object is thereby detached from the surrounding world of appetitive relations. Here the oscillation between sign and referent is in its simplest state; the referent exists in reality, but its contemplation is dependent on the sign to frame it as an object of esthetic experience, to detach it as solely significant from the rest of its visual environment.

We may assume that a potentially significant object will have already been detected as such by our precultural perception system and even that it will have received an esthetic valence, just like the landscape evaluated by our natural esthetic judgment. The framing effect of the sign results, according to the originary hypothesis, from the sacralization of the object through the convergence of the desires of the community; it is prerequisite not to perception itself but to the exclusive focusing of attention characteristic of esthetic contemplation. Thus the sign provides a "supplement" to the natural esthetic interest aroused by the object, with the consequence that the visual field, instead of being composed of a set of diversely interesting objects, is restructured as a central object on which all attention is concentrated and a background from which all interest has been withdrawn. But the interest focused on this object is no longer preliminary to appropriative or exploratory action. Mediation by the sign is tantamount to withdrawal from the world of appetite into that of "disinterested" contemplation. Culture reinforces the relative dispositions of the natural esthetic with the absolute significance borne by the sign.

Although this articulation of natural and cultural esthetics strikes me as reasonable, the question this discussion raises in my mind, and perhaps in that of the reader, is whether evolutionary esthetics has really added anything new to the dialogue between Kantian esthetics on the one hand and originary thinking on the other. Why indeed was landscape chosen in *The Adapted Mind* to illustrate the natural esthetic? If, for example, female beauty had been selected instead (see, for example, **Nancy Etcoff**, *Survival of the Prettiest*, Doubleday, 1999), it would be obvious without any discussion of esthetics that men are attracted to those women who show, always according to the criteria of the Pleistocene, the greatest likelihood of enhancing their reproductive fitness. (It has never been clear to me why that old misogynist **Schopenhauer** has been given credit for the all but tautological observation that our criteria of female beauty correspond to evidence of this likelihood.) There would be no need to allege an esthetic sense independent of appetite simply in order to affirm that our judgment in such matters is based on "apperception" without the need for reasoning.

In the case of landscape, however, our preference appears to our intuition as disinterested in the Kantian sense because, unlike our nomadic ancestors, we are unlikely to follow it to a practical end. (Within this framework, our choice of "esthetic" vacation sites would seem to lie half way between a practical and a purely esthetic decision.) Because we admire landscapes in a contemplative mode that does not appear

strongly connected to an even virtual praxis, it becomes of interest to show that this mode has roots in practical action of the kind that drove the evolution of our genotype. But I find no compelling reason to consider such contemplation as constituting a separate "esthetic" category. The esthetic only acquires its specificity, that is, its independence from appetitive praxis, on the communal scene of representation where the danger of mimetic desire forces us to contemplate the sacred and the beautiful. Evolutionary biology can arguably refine our understanding of the appetites that lie behind human culture, but only originary anthropology offers explanations of the forms of desire that this culture constructs.

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Locke's Little Bang

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In [Chronicle 176](#) I spoke of **Hobbes's** infamous picture of the "state of nature" in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" as the beginning of the originary anthropological thinking that defines the **Enlightenment**. For the first time, a scene of origin for human society was formulated in strictly human terms.

Yet Hobbes's authoritarian solution to the mimetic rivalry he observes so sharply has received little support from the political thinkers who have succeeded him. Those such as **Joseph de Maistre** who, like Hobbes, support the sovereign's absolute power tend to found it on a divine, not to say sacrificial, basis rather than deriving it from a strictly anthropological model. Hobbes's jaundiced view of natural man makes him the bad boy of the Enlightenment, just as **Machiavelli** was the bad boy of the Renaissance--the one cynically revealing the means of power, the other just as cynically theorizing its necessity.

Where Hobbes is incisive, **Locke** is prudently ambiguous; where Hobbes is rigorous, Locke is pragmatic. Hence, to quote **Peter Laslett's** introduction to the latter's *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, 1960):

[Hobbes] was the greatest of all the meta-political writers, those who refine and analyse political language and elaborate axioms into axiologies. For this reason his influence on thought about politics has been enormous, but his purchase over what men do politically has been negligible.... (89-90)

[*Two Treatises*] contained just that ingredient which *Leviathan* lacked--policy; statement of guidance of what men will accept, respond to and pursue . . . (91)

In keeping with these comments, Locke's state of nature is very different from Hobbes's: its affirmation of humanity's originary non-conflictivity is the direct ancestor of **Rousseau's** more elaborate and anthropologically grounded attempts to demonstrate that "man is good, men are bad." Locke's enormous influence on the theory and practice of liberal democracy demonstrates that his vision of our originary state is not only more flattering to us than Hobbes's but more politically pragmatic. On Hobbes's anthropology could be built only tyranny; as Laslett points out (90), Hobbes's failure as a political (as opposed to a philosophical) "realist" is revealed by the fact that he actually thought *Leviathan* would serve, as Locke's *Treatises* in fact would, as a basis for political action.

My intellectual instincts draw me to Hobbes as the great early modern exponent of the anthropology of mediated desire. In Hobbes's model, men are naturally in a state of mimetic crisis from which they are spared only by renouncing their sovereignty to a central authority. The sharpness of Hobbes's vision of mimetic rivalry and violence is unsurpassed before the nineteenth century. Hobbes sees human relations as dominated by an unceasing rivalry in which appetite and its satisfaction play no independent role and

value is conferred entirely by relative supremacy--that is, where the political wholly dominates the economic. Hobbes is well aware that the possession of language that sets us apart from the animals is directly correlated with the instability of any natural hierarchy; it is because we represent our social context to ourselves that we cannot abide finding ourselves in an inferior position and that we are consequently obliged to strike first even if we would sincerely prefer not to fight at all. Hobbes's state of nature is one great game of **Prisoners' Dilemma** in which no one has any reason not to defect.

Hobbes's world, so close to that of **Dostoevsky's** novels as described in *Mensonge romantique*, has obvious affinities with **GA**. Locke's anthropology, in contrast, seems at first glance both less originary and less coherent. For Locke, man in the state of nature already enjoys the essential advantage that central authority confers in Hobbes's universe: liberation from the state of mimetic crisis. Locke expresses this in theological terms:

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions. For men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker, all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order and about his business, they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure. . . . Every one as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind . . .
(*Second Treatise*, sec. 6)

It would be hard to find a clearer expression of the function of the sacred in deferring mimetic violence. Because we are **God's** workmanship, we are not merely obliged to avoid harming our fellows, but we are on the whole able to do so. Thus where Hobbes sees the war of "every man against every man," Locke is concerned only to point out that every man in the state of nature has the power to enforce the law of nature, for example, by putting a murderer to death. Violence in Locke's as opposed to Hobbes's state of nature is local and reversible rather than universal and contagious.

Why then do men subject themselves to governments? When Locke comes to answer this question, his state of nature sounds at first glance like Hobbes's:

For all being kings as much as [a given man], every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state [of nature] is very unsafe, very insecure. This makes him willing to quit a condition which, however free, is full of fears and continual dangers . . . and . . . to join in society with others . . . for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property. (sec. 123)

This sounds like Hobbes, but it is in fact very far from Hobbes. Fear and danger are punctual rather than general, and this because they come from persons who may be egoistic ("no strict observers of equity") but not mimetic. In Locke's world, the desiring self is never naked as in Hobbes's: it is always clothed in property. Locke's subsumption of even our "lives" and "liberties" under the category of property protects the desiring self from Hobbes's naked triangularity by assuring this self's externality to all its objects of

desire, including its own living body. It is, in a word, a *soul* present in its nakedness only to God. Or in anthropological terms, the mimetic crisis is over, the sacred Being has been established, in advance of Locke's state of nature.

In Locke, renunciation of power to central authority takes place in a "little bang" rather than the big bang of Hobbes's Leviathan. What is required of government is a set of established laws, impartial judges to apply it, and an executive to enforce it--a tripartite division that is the outline of our system of governance (secs. 124-26). But we need obey government only insofar as it promotes the "common good" (sec. 131). Just as we never lose sight of natural appetite for the sake of mimetic rivalry, so we never renounce the promotion of our appetitive welfare for the sake of a central institution.

For Hobbes, the transition from the state of nature to that of organized government is too absolute to be understandable as a historical boundary. It is rather a thought-experiment: if there were no government, we would fall into such a condition. On this point, Rousseau will claim that Hobbes inserts into the state of nature excessive human desires that exist only in society. Locke's state of nature, in contrast, is the model, if not of a historical state, then of a proto-historical one. To those who object that the state of nature never existed, Locke describes in some detail how government might have evolved out of patriarchal power in the family. Locke's state of nature, unlike Hobbes's, is meant to be plausible, which means above all livable. Hobbes's universal war would lead to extinction since total preoccupation with mimetic desire leaves no energy for the satisfaction of essential appetites. In Locke, we are protected from this eventuality by our property; even the murderer who takes my life seeks to remove an external obstacle to my possessions, not the internal obstacle of my desire itself.

Since Locke's state of nature already presupposes our equality under God not as a mere piety but as a guarantee of potential cooperation, it might be asked how Locke's model can enter into dialogue with originary thinking. In Hobbes, the passage from the state of nature to that of government is the transformation of a purely theoretical but unlivable state to a livable one, analogously to the originary emergence of representation as a means for deferring mimetic crisis. But although one can tease out of Hobbes more easily than Locke the connection between human language, religion, and mimetic crisis, neither proposes a scenario of human or language origin, a development that must await **Condillac**.

Hobbes's state of nature, like what **Girard** calls mimetic crisis, goes beyond the minimalism of originary thinking in requiring a long-term rather than short-term abandonment of the appetitive for the sake of the "metaphysical." Hobbes's and Girard's models end with the focusing of all attention on the central being, whether as submission or assassination. What is missing from both is the return to the appetitive after the *sparagmos* that divides up the consumable central object.

In contrast, Locke integrates the appetitive into the cultural. Property, he insists, already exists in the state of nature: we make natural objects our own through our labor. In contrast with the **Ricardo-Marx** labor theory of value, Locke defines labor as agency rather than physical effort; the turfs one's servant cuts are one's property as much as those one cuts oneself (*ibid.*, sec. 28). It is precisely this concept of agency that defines what we may call in the broadest sense the **bourgeois self**. Instead of concerning myself with my neighbor's property, I act to enhance my own, beginning with my own God-given life and energy. Such a position may at first appear naively to deny the power of mimetic desire that Hobbes so lucidly recognized. But the anthropological superiority of the Lockean to the Hobbesian model has been borne out by history. The triumph of liberal democracy is founded on the deferral of mimetic desire through economic activity. It is only those societies where market society has not succeeded that are

dominated by Hobbesian problems and solutions.

No doubt Locke fails to address directly the threat of mimetic crisis, but this refusal is an act less of denial than of reticence. My desire and your desire may well have mimetic origins; "ultimately" we may well desire nothing but each other's desire. But like **Keynes's** long term in which we will all be dead, our ultimate desire is irrelevant to our concrete existence. Locke's model of liberal government guarantees our property rights as the most effective means of turning us away from our rivals toward desire-objects that are in principle our own and not those of another. The bourgeois world functions by privileging the parallel movement of desire over its rivalrous convergence.

The twentieth century taught us the truth of **Churchill's** quip that democracy is the worst form of government with the exception of all the others. The only solution to the problems of our democratic exchange society is more democracy and more exchange, and the only useful debate is over the relative weight to give each of the two in a given circumstance. The dialogue of democracy is a debate among Lockeans in which Hobbes serves only to designate the outer limits. No anthropology can afford to ignore history's most successful model of human interaction.

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The Persistence of Anti-Semitism

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The other day yet another white supremacist went on a rampage, killing five people of five different nationalities: **Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, African-American**, and ... **Jewish**. Which led me to reflect once again on the strange exemplarity of the Jews.

It is not by way of complaint that I refer to an anomaly that is inevitably ignored or dismissed rather than reflected on. Jews do not benefit from affirmative action programs for disadvantaged minorities; they are not considered a "minority" at all, merely a Euro-American ethnic group like Poles or Italians. In mainstream American society, Jews today feel more threatened by intermarriage than prejudice. Yet among those who see as their mission to maintain the purity of the white (**Caucasian? Aryan?**) race, the chief target remains, even after the **Holocaust**, not "people of color" but the Jews, the masters and beneficiaries of **ZOG (Zionist Occupied Government)**.

The superficial explanation for this obsession is that it is a historical holdover from European antisemitism and in particular from **Nazism**. Yet the skinheads and their brethren are not--as were, for example, the Old Leftists-- beholden to European philosophies. The proof that antisemitism is essential to these movements is that there is not to my knowledge a single white supremacy group that does not practise it. If whiteness is the ideal and "mongrelization" the problem, there are plenty of people of non-European ancestry to hate; why remain obsessed with a group of highly assimilated Caucasians? There is something more here than mere slavery to tradition.

In [Chronicle 155](#) I attempted to explain the peculiar virulence of modern antisemitism as a reflection of the decentered structure of market society. **Karl Marx's** *On the Jewish Question* designates *the Jew* as the central figure of capitalism. Now that Marx's "scientific socialism" has been discredited, we can understand better than a century ago that the Jew is fingered as the central figure of capitalism precisely because there is *no* central figure of capitalism. The myth of the "international Jewish conspiracy" as an all-encompassing explanation of the behavior of the market is all the more enticing because there is no rival explanation: the free market is "inexplicable," and the importance of *the Jew* to our homegrown white supremacists is a corollary of this fact.

The subsumption of racial and ethnic minorities into a Jewish-directed conspiracy is an extension of the same paranoid logic. The civil rights era, and especially that of affirmative action, generated great resentment among less fortunate whites. That the Jews have never directly benefited from the racial preferences they have supported politically only proves that they are *secretly* profiting from them. The *Turner Diaries*, the neo-Nazi cult novel discussed in [Chronicle 90](#), portrays *the Jew* as controlling animal-like Blacks (a model guaranteed to turn Blacks into antisemites) in a racial variant on the old idea that **Bolshevism** was a plot of Jewish bankers. In this manner, the threats to the lower middle class from above and below, from the unpredictable outcomes of the market and from the emergence of new ethnic forces, may be explained with a single word.

Yet this explanation is still too historically contingent to exhaust the anthropological significance of antisemitism. The figure of the Jew as the "subject" of the capitalist market is too restrictive both in scope--*the Jew* is seen as dominating culture as well as the marketplace--and in historical depth. Not only has antisemitism been, at least since the **Crusades**, a constant feature of the Christian West, but the modern market is not a historical contingency but a highly stable institution that evolves by progressively freeing originary human reciprocity from the restrictions of pre-industrial economies.

The traditional justification for anti-Judaism indicts the stubborn Jewish refusal to accept the Christian intuition of the humanity of the sacred center. For the Jew, man is made in God's image, but there is no specific image for that to be. Christianity proclaims itself the historical revelation of the originary truth of human reciprocity, the unity of theology and anthropology. The Jew is a reproach to the Christian because he shares this truth but has no pretensions of living it as an apocalypse.

To live as a Christian is to gain the world in practice by turning away from it in theory. Economic exchange can free itself from the ritual order only as an exchange among free spirits who know the center of the circle as well as the periphery. Hence it is really no surprise that it was Christians, not Jews, who created capitalism. The market is modeled on the decentered reciprocity of the Kingdom of God, whereas the Jewish liberation from the ritual center never overrides the ethical concerns of the community.

In the Biblical understanding of the originary scene revealed to **Moses** in Exodus 3, the sign that remains after the consumption of the central being is to be used not for the imperative recalling of the scene but for its declarative universalization. God's name is not "Jehovah" but "I am that I am." Yet this declarative, objective God retains a privileged relationship with this particular people. Even if we forget God's specific promises to Israel, we cannot put out of mind the superiority of a people constituted by the warrant to conceive all experience, and particularly the worst, as God's message to itself alone.

What then of the Christian revelation? To reprise my argument in *Science and Faith*, **Jesus'** admonitions to love one another, to put away our sacrifices and reconcile ourselves with our brother are already part of the Jewish tradition. What is radically new is **Paul's** understanding of the sacred centrality of the persecuted, the revelation of Jesus' divinity on the road to Damascus. Where the Jews had understood that the real center is inhabited by the Being of the sign, the Christians realized that this Being was generated, and could be generated anew, by an act interpretable as a victimization. To expel the other is to sacralize him; if we would be free of this mimetic idolatry, we must accept the mediation of the one who was expelled for revealing this mechanism. But this imperative is compelling only to the persecutor, not to the indifferent. If he who, like **Saul** of Tarsus, is obsessed with expelling Jesus, can find solace only through conversion, this is not true of those who do not share this obsession.

What Saul/Paul discovers is that to persecute is to adore in the mode of mimetic rivalry. It is in this same mode that the Jew is persecuted by the anti-Semite, who is protected from conversion to the worship of *this* Jew by the historical specificity of the Pauline revelation that makes him already the worshiper of a Jew. The anti-Semite compels the Jew to enter the infernal circle of rivalry and persecution in order to reenact his own Christian conversion: he is the new Paul, and the Jew is the Saul he used to be.

This analysis suggests that antisemitism intensifies in the bourgeois era because it is at this point in history that persecution, which grants significance, comes to be preferable to indifference. The Romantic prefers (imaginary) martyrdom to anonymity, as witness not to his God but to himself. This is the era of individualism, but also of nationalism. If **Rousseau's** *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* is the key text of Romantic neo-martyrdom, *Du contrat social* defines the terms of nationalist--and socialist--mythology:

the "masses" enter political circulation by pledging their allegiance to an avatar of Rousseau's "general will." At this point the Jew's indifference to Jesus is no longer a veil covering his guilt for the Crucifixion; it is itself the ultimate persecution. To opt out of the theater of national life is *ipso facto* to operate in a hidden realm of conspiracy. The Jew is the ultimate dandy whose detachment from society--in principle, regardless of fact--is the sign of his omnipotence. The anthropological meaning of anti-Semitism may be expressed in terms of the market, but only insofar as the lesson of the modern market is itself understood as a transhistorical revelation concerning human exchange. The Jew is designated the "subject" of the market because, faithful to the empty center revealed by the burning bush, he remains in principle indifferent to the objects--whether of persecution or adoration--that he finds there.

It took the Holocaust to remind us that real persecution is indeed worse than indifference. The succeeding half-century has been dominated by the denunciation of persecutors by minority victims, a global affirmative action from which the Jews, unsurprisingly, have benefited little. Now, at the moment when Jesus' status as a white man has run afoul of newer identities, those who see the white race as itself a victim are obsessed less with other races than with the corrosion of racial identity itself by the Jews' "anesthetic" indifference.

Monotheism means being able to claim that everything that happens is God's message to *us*. Enraged at the Jews' monotheistic equanimity in defeat and disaster, the Nazis hoped to inflict on them a catastrophe so great that it could not be understood as the message of God to his people. Nearly sixty years later, we are only beginning to come to grips with the implications of considering the Holocaust as just such a message. Meanwhile, the Nazis' latter-day disciples, more pathetic than fearsome, although capable of real violence, see themselves as a last line of defense against the Jewish centerlessness that presides over the world of human exchange. However similar to theirs is the conspiratorial mindlessness of the anti-market anarchists of Washington State and Washington DC, we may at least be thankful that the effigies they burn are not those of the **Elders of Zion**.

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Our Post-Postmodern Bobos

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The May 8 *Weekly Standard* contains a summary of **David Brooks'** recent best-seller *Bobos in Paradise*, an analysis of America's "new upper class" of **BO**urgeois **BO**hemians. Brooks' thesis is that the information economy has put an end to the "culture wars" that have characterized the entire history of market society, beginning in earnest, as Brooks accurately points out, in Paris in the 1830s. The battle between *artiste* and *bourgeois* has now been resolved by the absorption of the former into the latter. The bourgeois has always felt himself a bit *artiste*, and now, after something over a century and a half, the *artiste* has discovered that he is really a *bourgeois*.

Brooks describes our modern bourgeois as having acquired "bohemian" tastes without losing his capacity for hard work. "Bohemian" is a somewhat misleading term, because whatever the bobo lifestyle may have borrowed from the artistic, it is antipodal to the life recounted in **Henri Mürger's** novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (a portion of which became **Puccini's** *La Bohème*), whose central feature is **poverty**. However dubious the virtue of poverty as a sign that one has not sold out to the putative vulgarity of bourgeois taste, it was essential to a bohemian lifestyle which, given the usually bourgeois background of the painters and writers involved, reflected a sacrifice of wealth and status far more sharply marked than in our own time. Not that Brooks' analogy between our IPO millionaires and Mürger's garret-dwellers is without foundation. Poverty aside, the former as well as the latter are willing to abandon tradition for risky innovation and capable of forgoing immediate satisfactions in the pursuit of long-term goals.

In lifestyle terms, however, our bobos have more in common with **Des Esseintes**, the wealthy aristocratic esthete of **J-K Huysmans'** *A rebours*, the bible of the French and English decadence but also a covert paean to the nascent consumer society. No shivering Mimis for Des Esseintes, who should be worshipped as the totemic ancestor of the yuppie. Although the accoutrements for which he is remembered--the *orgue à bouche* with a keyboard that emits chords of liqueurs, one room fitted out like a ship, another like a monk's cell, the gold-encrusted tortoise, not to speak of his jewelry collection or his greenhouse of exotic plants--were designed by the hero himself, they were nearly all composed from commercially available materials. Des Esseintes was less a collector than a wise consumer who knew in which byways of the marketplace to find the articles he needed. A more immediately prophetic work is **Georges Perec's** *Les choses*, published in 1965, which dissects the consumption-obsessed life of a yuppie couple twenty-odd years *avant la lettre*.

It is this talent for consumption that the modern bobo develops and applies so assiduously as a means to self-creation. As theorists of consumer society such as **Jean Baudrillard** pointed out long ago, the lifestyle values thus generated furnish a status not simply reducible to money. But neither can these values be reduced to the pure mimeticism of the snob. Brooks is well aware of the moralistic, even ascetic side of all this self-indulgence. The bobos build huge kitchens and stock them with overpriced paraphernalia in order to cook their own gourmet meals. They purchase expensive exercise equipment in order to work out strenuously. They lavish on their children not only obscene amounts of cash but a great

deal of their own precious time. Whatever their real musical tastes, their patronage has given a new lease on life to classical music and opera.

The term *yuppie* caught on because it expresses a nice balance of smartness and derision; I can't imagine that *bobo* (a French child's word for a source of pain) ever will. But word-play aside, I have only admiration for Brooks' analysis of information-age prosperity. What I especially admire is his own genuine admiration for the creativity that the marketplace unleashes in its participants. The *artiste* was unfair to the *bourgeois* he affected to despise. In his lucid moments, he knew all along that his work was nourished by bourgeois rather than aristocratic values: the aristocrat is, but the bourgeois does. Des Esseintes himself is more bourgeois than aristocrat, as Huysmans, a bureaucrat of modest extraction, well understood. That **Charles Baudelaire**, the most astute *artiste* as well as the greatest poet of his time, dedicated his 1846 *Salon* "Aux Bourgeois" seems today a prophetic gesture indeed.

Brooks' incisive analysis suggests to me some further reflections on two points.

Assuming Brooks' analysis to be correct, the first is the question of how the end of the "culture wars" should be understood in the overall context of market society and of social organization in general. Brooks explains plausibly that the new bourgeois of the information economy are particularly open to new ideas and experiences because they derive their income from creating new ideas and experiences for others. But this is too narrow an explanation for a development as consequential as the end of the conflict between the marketplace and its own culture.

The culture wars have indeed been endemic to bourgeois society. The French romantics made oppositional culture into a mass movement, but they were following British models, **Byron** and **Beau Brummel**, or their own **Chateaubriand**, who go back a generation to the earliest stages of what one could call the bourgeois era. The idea that market society today has finally become able to absorb this oppositional culture without simply evacuating it obliges us to revise our understanding of the cultural operations of the market system.

Why was this oppositional culture generated in the first place? In its early years, it was the work of aristocrats displaced by the French Revolution, but its real resonance was in the bourgeoisie itself. Romanticism was not merely an oppositional but a youth culture--a point perhaps not sufficiently insisted upon by Brooks. The mildly rebellious sons of the bourgeoisie played the same role in the romantic era as they later did in the rock'n'roll era. The cultural-oppositional stance operates to root the young bourgeois, beyond the mere mimeticism of the marketplace, in the "use-values" that are the ultimate objects of exchange. The romantics saw these "natural" human values as incompatible with the "unnatural" spirit of the exchange system, but naively thought this spirit could be changed without damaging the economic productivity of the system. After the sobering experience of 1848, this incompatibility was understood to be insuperable within the present exchange-system, requiring at least its profound modification and, for many, its "dialectical" destruction. It was generally agreed in the cultural world that the market system was hostile to the very human values whose exchange it facilitated.

In this context, art served to focus the attention of the participants in the system on the values it was accused of neglecting. Whether sentimental or decadent, bourgeois culture was almost always at least a bit anti-bourgeois. Throughout many decades of ever more sophisticated consumption, the role of culture remained that of rejecting "commercial" values for the sake of "natural" values that, magically and perversely, the commercial world increasingly made available. Today, if Brooks is to be believed, this is no longer the case.

Like the emergence of the information era itself, this transformation is indissoluble from the demise of socialism, which is not merely the death of political systems--first "National Socialism," then Soviet socialism--but, more importantly, the death of a utopian dream within bourgeois society itself. The cultural integration of "capitalism" involves the dawning recognition that it is less a sphere with a center and a periphery than a network of exchange. In such a network, the resentments of a given person or group are not opposed to the "system" from without but to other resentments from within. The victimary movements of postmodern culture are still with us, in many ways more stridently than ever. But as these movements increasingly operate within the political system--for example, in the current judicial lynching of the tobacco companies--the old anti-establishment rhetoric comes to be limited to tenured radicals and fringe segments of the youth culture.

The end of socialist utopia, the information age--these designations point to but do not quite articulate the key transformation of our era, which is no longer "postmodern" in the original sense of the term. The human, from the perspective of the originary hypothesis, is defined by the exchange of signs rather than the exchange of things; the freedom and ease of the first can only indirectly and over time be transferred to the latter. The sea-change signaled by Brooks is that for the first time it is generally accepted that this transfer is possible and desirable; the Internet is the clearest emblem of this transformation. This does not mean that we are about to become immortal or that poverty is about to disappear, only that we generally acknowledge the acceleration of economic and intellectual exchange, rather than the construction of one or another zero-sum utopia, as our shared social goal, one whose implementation gives us real hope of improving human life.

My second point is related, although obliquely, to the first. If culture is essentially a means of deferring violence by preventing the accumulation of resentment, then the truce between *artiste* and *bourgeois* means that the bohemian lifestyle is no longer a valid means of discharging this resentment. A generation ago, a mother going back to college, a homosexual coming out, would be sufficient material for family dramas; in bobo circles today, women take up professions as a matter of course and even the most extreme sexual proclivities elicit little reaction. (Brooks begins his article by describing how respectful of bourgeois values the sado-masochistic community has become.) But however tolerant we are of other people's sex lives, the one thing that grows not more but less tolerable along with our sophistication is **violence**. However blasé you may be about a transvestite with green hair and a tongue pierce, you react to someone shooting at you.

Violence clears a path to the outside of even the most inclusive system of human relations. Now that the network model has replaced the center-periphery model, the more traditional resentments have moved from without to within the system; the outsider-victim stance that was effective a decade ago is perceived as outdated. But the outside-inside model remains a recourse. For resentments that are too unproductive to function within the network, expulsion is the only alternative to indifference, and the surest way to prompt expulsion from the social network is through violence. Nothing closes down a marketplace faster than a few gunshots.

To claim that the news media magnify the intrinsic significance of incidents like last year's **Columbine** massacre is to forget that the media are very soul of the information age in which the bobos flourish. A steady stream of "hate crimes" attests to the continued health of expulsion/publicity-provoking extremism. Within the fabric of American society itself, such incidents are unlikely to create more than local unpleasantness; but there is a world out there that resonates with resentment against the Western social order. The twenty-first century may well be dominated by the contest between the

ever-more-inclusive global market network and those who obstinately and violently affirm their outsider status. In such an eventuality, we are fortunate to have the sons and daughters of the American bourgeoisie on our side.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Post-Millennial Age

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The postmodern era may be said to date from the end of **WWII**, determined by **Hiroshima** and even more importantly by **Auschwitz**. The end of full-scale war as a rational strategy--our debt to Hiroshima and **Nagasaki**--was a turning point in human history. In international relations, it gave rise to the apparent stand-off of the **Cold War**, with what appears today as its absurd doctrine of equivalence between "the two systems." In the domain of anthropological theory, it stimulated a new understanding of violence as the key problem of human society that led to **Girard's** *Violence and the Sacred* and to **GA**. In the practical sphere, the discrediting of the almost exclusively masculine province of intraspecific violence that had justified, literally from the beginning, culture's focus on male desire led to the melting-away of resistance to feminism over the next decades.

Even greater was the effect of the **Holocaust** on social relations. This paroxysm of "prejudice" and "discrimination" made all group dominance suspect; the war was followed by decolonization, the civil-rights movement, feminism (again!), gay liberation, etc. Dominated by victimary resentment and the fear of arousing it, the postmodern era saw the dismantling of virtually all explicitly hegemonic structures and institutional behaviors; many of the ethnic and other counter-resentments unleashed by this liberation are still unresolved. The usually noted characteristics of the postmodern esthetic--its distrust of "the subject" and of "master narratives," its denial of originality and propensity to citation from historically diverse sources--may all be placed under the rubric of the suspicion and deferral of closure. The specter of a real apocalypse to be avoided at all costs makes the well-ended narrative unappealing. The lessons of both Hiroshima and Auschwitz combine in one simple message: *no more final solutions!*

In the immediate postwar era, despite works like **Karl Popper's** *The Open Society and Its Enemies* or **Hannah Arendt's** *Totalitarianism*, most intellectuals understood the moral bankruptcy of utopian closure to apply only to the right-wing socialisms of **Mussolini** and **Hitler**. It took nearly fifty years for the intelligentsia to realize the symmetrical bankruptcy of the variety whose "Internationale" exhorted us to victory in the "final conflict." Although this symmetry seems in hindsight an inevitable corollary of the postmodern ethos, it did not appear to follow from the original premises of postmodernism that market society is the minimal, stable form of human relations. Suddenly, the Cold War between the market and the command economy was over; just when we were getting used to the idea of living in the postmodern era, we were in the process of entering a new one.

One definition of the post-postmodern era is suggested by the truce in the culture wars declared by the "bobos," the "bourgeois bohemians" referred to in [Chronicle 208](#); the coming of genetic manipulations and other forms of power over what had been the biological determinants of human life, as discussed in [Chronicle 181](#), suggests another. The end of the fundamental opposition between the market system and its culture is a corollary of the disappearance of the system's political Other. In contrast with the

necessarily authoritarian nature of the military decisions that dominated the Cold War, decisions concerning technologies of creation rather than destruction are bound to be made democratically: fundamental life-enhancement cannot be treated as an economic good. The restraints thus placed on market exchange should further mitigate the resentment endemic to the system.

Although the discrediting of political utopianism gives us reason for optimism, the coming era is likely to be much more unsettled than the one now ending. The relative stability of postmodern international relations reflected not only the "balance of terror" but the era's quasi-romantic faith in victimary revelation. The Soviet Union not only survived economically but benefited morally from the mantle of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." It sufficed to show oneself a victim for one's resentment to be morally, and often materially, rewarded. The utopian rebellion of **1968**, the kiddie reenactment of what **Marx** already called the farce of **1848**, gained legitimacy from its links to the more or less genuine liberation movements of the period. The victimary basis not only of 1968 but of the whole postmodern era was nicely summed up in **Daniel Cohn-Bendit's** now all-but-forgotten slogan "Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands."

The post-postmodern era, in contrast, cannot afford the automatic validation of victimary credentials. The resentments incarnated by guerilla movements such as **Hezbollah** or the **Tamil Tigers** cannot be resolved simply by acceding to or even by negotiating their demands; they can only be reduced in the long term through integration into the global exchange system. This means not the "McDonaldization" of the globe but the establishment of the mode of reciprocity--the economic--that is the least culturally constraining. But however delicately and deliberately this is done, it will surely take much time and human suffering before countries like **Haiti** or **Sierra Leone**, to name a couple recently in the news, are able to participate on an equal basis in the world economy.

Perhaps I am showing my age, but I no longer see art as the central stage on which new forms of human relations are acted out. The postmodern era feared closure and acted out the deferral of closure, most notably in **Beckett's** minimalist dramas. But high minimalism was hardly the sum total of the era's esthetic activity. Today, when the esthetic avant-garde has been reduced to infantile excrementalism, popular art entertains us with often quite sophisticated dramatic fantasies without regard for "higher" esthetic judgment. This is no small matter. The end of "high art," the termination of the phase of civilization that began with **Homer's** epics, is an esthetic phenomenon far more significant than the specific forms the post-postmodern esthetic may adopt.

It is no coincidence that the end of high art coincides with the end of the "culture wars" between *artiste* and *bourgeois*. Although its localization in identifiable professional groups dates from the Romantic period, this opposition itself is the defining feature of high culture. Where the exchange system promotes circulation of desire, high culture enacts its renunciation. Tribal ritual combines the moments of culture and exchange in a single process, but it does not confuse them. In the esthetic moment the central object is admired, in the economic moment it is divided among the participants. The distinction between these two moments, the student of Generative Anthropology will recognize, is the essential deferral/difference opened up by the sign in the originary scene.

From **Achilles' wrath** to **Vladimir** and **Estragon's** clownish quarrels, high art has always been about the deferral of resentment. The reader/spectator is made to identify with desires that cannot be fulfilled and suffer along with the protagonist society's sacrificial complicity with those who attempt to realize them. Significance in the literary mode is acquired at the price of renunciation, of the internalization of the

sacrificial values externally incarnated in myth. At the end of this process, we have "purged" our resentment by vicariously enduring the hero's punishment and acquiring the resulting significance in his place. The end of the age of high art that tragedy exemplifies obliges us to ask what characterizes our era that was not applicable to the stages of civilization from the Achaeans to the Cold War.

Myths, as **Girard** describes them, are rationalized stories of lynchings in which violence is mitigated and/or made to appear justified. We need not share Girard's realist etiology to accept the view that myth is an attempt to make plausible the creation of significance in an event through the projection back into the past of a model of human intentionality ("anthropomorphism"). As sign-users, we reenact the origin of the sign that defers violence. Such tales may be detached from their original ritual context.

The *Iliad*, and Western "high culture," begins with a word (*menin*, from *menis*) that denotes the rage of resentment. A mythical treatment of the subject matter of the *Iliad* would center on Achilles' choice of a short and glorious life over a long, dull one as his application of a sacrificial model of significance to himself. But the story as told emphasizes another theme, that of a "rage" that reflects not Achilles' painful accession to significance but the necessity of resigning himself to its loss. Achilles must learn to accept the subordinate status to which the Trojan expedition condemns him.

The higher values of culture are those of restraining personal desire in the interest of the social order. High culture teaches this as the lesson of desire itself; desire leads to evil and should be renounced. Literature is not the simple repetition of this lesson but its application to the diverse modes of desire generated within cultures throughout history. How can this lesson no longer be of use? It is not that morality no longer exists in the modern world, that the marketplace has eliminated all moral restraints. On the contrary, we have observed how the "bobos" temper hedonism with responsibility. What is new is rather that the mere elimination or "transcendence" of mimetic desire can no longer be envisioned as the ultimate goal of culture. The coincidence of our disaffection from socialism with that from the category of high art exposes the deep complicity between culture and social utopia. The emergent complicity of culture with the marketplace, and more specifically of bourgeois high culture with the market society it affects to disdain--I would date this emergence from *Madame Bovary* in 1857--can no longer remain hidden behind the sacrificial plot-line now that the bourgeois system has proved itself sole possessor of the political-economic terrain. Our popular culture remains utopian as ever, reconstituting originary deferral in myriad ways, but this utopian closure is accepted as entertainment, as a kind of (soft or hard) spiritual pornography, rather than as defining the goal of our moral existence.

The post-postmodern only draws the final anti-utopian conclusions from the postwar era: the failed utopia of socialism is revealed to be the political (and therefore final) incarnation of the utopia of high art. Those who bewail the end of this utopia should recall that the greater nobility of societies whose ideals are higher than themselves is a measure of their inferior capacity for moral reciprocity. Thus we should not encumber ourselves with the self-denying irony of "post-postmodern." By passing the millennium mark, we have put millennialism behind us. With your help, dear readers, Generative Anthropology will come to be recognized as the most useful way of thinking in the **post-millennial age**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Is GA Too Perfect?

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It is sometimes claimed that once one accepts the originary hypothesis there is nothing more to say about a given text save to translate it into the terms of the theory. In one of the first GA seminars, a student remarked in praise but also in frustration that GA's minimalism, in contrast with the baroque complexity of **Lacan's** thought, did not give critics the chance to build texts of their own upon its flaws and inconsistencies.

At first glance, this critique sounds like a compliment; how can one complain about logical consistency and parsimoniousness? Yet even when judged by the hard criteria of the sciences rather than the subjective measures of the humanities, a theory that is "too perfect" is clearly not performing its task. Although the purpose of a theory is not to keep a certain number of scientists employed, a valid paradigm is one that not only explains the old data but is conducive to the production of new knowledge.

This may occur in two ways. On the one hand, the paradigm may encourage, in order to corroborate or falsify it, the generation of data at new degrees of distance from everyday experience. This has generally been the case in the natural sciences; it is also the case with the scientific study of human origins. But on the other hand, a new paradigm can evacuate one set of questions and obligate us to reformulate their content in its own terms--terms that presumably reflect more closely the articulations of this content. A superficial example is the reinterpretation of celestial data from **Ptolemaic** orbits around the Earth to orbits around the sun in the wake of **Copernicus** and **Kepler**. More complex are paradigm shifts in the human sciences, where no clear barrier can be established between objective "etic" evaluation and the "emic" one of the culture under study. The emergence of early modern critical thought in opposition to medieval scholasticism is an obvious example, although one we probably understand less well than we think.

GA is a new paradigm of the latter sort. The originary hypothesis evacuates the problematics of classical metaphysics, perhaps most concisely expressed in **Kant's** "antinomies of reason," not, of course, by resolving or dismissing the underlying human problems they point to, but by redefining them, through "originary analysis," as moments in the originary configuration of the human. What this leaves us as a research program is no less than all of human self-knowledge.

Far from exhausting the universe of humanistic study, originary thinking calls us to a reinterpretation of the totality of our metaphysical heritage. The series of recent *Chronicles* (and the just-concluded GA seminar) on the subject of the origin of language/culture/religion suggests how whole bodies of work, including texts of **Hobbes**, **Locke**, **Rousseau**, **Herder**, and **Durkheim**, may be opened up for rethinking in the light of the originary hypothesis. A similar task could be performed with respect to writings on ethics, esthetics, metaphysics, politics...

Yes, one might object, but you already know the result you seek in each case. In reading Hobbes,

Rousseau, or Durkheim, you are really reading your own idea into the texts of these writers as the fancied "solution" to the lacunae one inevitably finds there. Why should we bother to write, or read, the GA book on Kant or **Plato** if we know in advance that it will only affirm the triumph of the originary hypothesis? GA sets itself innocently in the center that deconstruction had emptied out in the text of Western metaphysics. How can linking all of human culture to that center generate the "cognitive dissonance," the sparks struck between disparate entities from which new ideas emerge?

This abstract objection can be answered only in context. As we enter the post-millennial era, the victimary paradigm that dominates the humanities today appears increasingly unsatisfactory. The other day I heard a speaker denounce binary oppositions as nothing but ideological disguises for domination. Aside from showing ingratitude to the computer on which it was composed, this deconstructive critique of binarism is eminently deconstructible. If all binary oppositions are ethically dubious, we can surely make no exception for the crudest binary opposition of all, that between the dominant and the dominated, the hegemonic and the subaltern, variants of the good old **Hegelian** master and slave. Shorn of its revolutionary counterexamples, the victimary critique of the bourgeois social order and its discourses is a nay-saying that inverts the ethos of its **Nietzschean** origins.

Yet in a final intellectual triumph of the hedgehog of **Jerusalem** over the fox of **Athens**, the postmodern victimary paradigm points to the anthropological unity behind the dualistic order of classical metaphysics. In both **Derridean** deconstruction and **Foucauldian** discourse-analysis, classical texts, whether in form or content, are combed for signs of victimization, the moral thrust of the critique ensuring that the two elements converge in any case. The value of victimary thinking is to have forced Western thought, however crudely, to acknowledge its ethical basis.

The justification for human inequality, around which revolves all moral thought in societies beyond the tribal, can neither be expelled from center stage nor palmed off on "transcendental" agencies. It must be faced and worked through. Victimary thought may see itself today exclusively as the debunking of "hegemonic" Western metaphysics; but since its origins in the **Enlightenment**, it has also been an opening to **anthropology**.

The strength of postmodern victimary thinking is that it has needed no basis other than the moral intuition activated by the **Holocaust**--nor need it claim even this as its basis. The horrors of a social order based on "binary oppositions" were so clearly illustrated in **Auschwitz** that an entire era was able to rely on the equation of non-reciprocity with victimage. This is no longer the case in the post-millennial age. The ungrounded intuition that takes the part of the victim against the persecutor has outlived its usefulness; but to return to, say, the Kantian conception of morality would be to take up again the very yoke of metaphysics that has been cast off. The only model of human interaction that can provide an anthropological basis for morality beyond the mere anti-metaphysical inversion that characterizes victimary thinking is one that *generates* the moral within its human context. If humanity is indeed to be defined by its moral intuition, then this intuition must be hypothesized as coeval with the human.

In my just-concluded GA seminar, **Marina Ludwigs** suggested that the strongest way to present the case for GA would be to demonstrate that we cannot explain human culture without implicitly referring to its origin and therefore emitting at least implicitly an originary hypothesis.

Although **Ockham's razor** provides a prima facie guarantee of the minimal hypothesis, the principle of intellectual parsimony is too ambiguous to found a convincing argument. Those who investigate the phenomena of culture and, ultimately, their physical correlates in the brain, claim to have no need to

speculate on their origin. A more developed argument for the originary hypothesis is that, if language and other forms of representation commemorate originary events, then even if one denies the reality of such events, one cannot deny the reality, and therefore the origin, of the commemoration. But those who deny the event-status of the origin of language do the same with that of commemoration.

In this polemic, logic must take a back seat to heuristics. We cannot disagree on the "facts," because the "fact" of the originary little bang is vanishingly small. Everyone must agree that at one time human or symbolic language didn't exist and that at a later time it did. The bottom line is the heuristic value in conceiving a *scene* of origin versus reconstructing the social and ecological context of protohuman culture from the rapidly growing body of neurological, paleontological, primatological, and other data.

I think the best response to Marina's challenge would be to divide the question. The diversity of the data and its still-fragmentary state would seem to justify empirical scientists' preference for a *weak* (as opposed to *minimal*) hypothesis of human origin. In contrast, those who would construe the meaning of cultural forms have no reason to fear the strong hypothesis of the originary scene. Those who reject GA as a "social contract" theory affect to forget that the *only* way we can reflect on cultural institutions is to conceive them in their originary form, because in this form these institutions are not merely at their "simplest," they are *emergent*.

The philosophies of the ancients differ from those of the moderns in that they conceive the originary form of an institution atemporally, not as a coming-into-being but as an entity subsisting in the world of Ideas, which is in fact the world of signs. Ancient philosophy substituted the sign-Idea for the god, but proposed no anthropological genesis for the sign, and therefore no anthropology as such. Modern thought is historical and *therefore* anthropological. The "social contract" is its trademark because, perhaps catalyzed by the newly discovered tribal societies in the New World, it conceives the human community as self-constituted from out of humanity's "natural" state.

It is no coincidence that the "early modern" age of Hobbes and Rousseau was an era of linguistic speculation that would produce theories of Hebrew as *Ursprache* as well as scenarios of language origin. What we should retain of the social contract is that it is a hypothetical event that creates peace out of violence. Its flaw is its artificial separation of the collective formulation of the contract from the collective violence to which it is the solution. The scene of the contract figures the originary passage from violence to peace without being able to justify it because it fails to describe the birth of the sign that is the specifically human instrument of this peace.

The end of culture is the generation of meaning through representation--minimal in the linguistic sign, maximal in ritual ceremony. Works of art do not *have* meaning; they effect the generation of meaning. To interpret a literary work is to explain this effectuation, or, in other terms, to conceive the artwork as an originary hypothesis. Such a "hypothesis" is not minimal; but the excellence of the interpretation depends upon its clear articulation of the crisis by means of which the work generates in us the sentiment of significance. No work of art merely repeats a myth of origin; but in its newness, it is the originary we seek.

We cannot fulfill the critic's obligation to bridge the gap between representation and reality if in demonstrating the work's significance we take significance itself as an unanalyzable term. Once we begin to explain *how* we experience the work as significant, we are using the artwork to help us explain significance itself, which is only possible because we understand significance itself on the mimetic, scenic, generative model of the artwork. It is because all cultural analysis, in a word, is always already

generative anthropology that there is progress to be made in rethinking this analysis in full cognizance of this equation. Perhaps this is as close as we can come to a formal demonstration of the kind that Marina would have us seek.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Tycoon, Yuppie, and Bobo: Three Stages in the Esthetic of Consumption

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Discussing **David Brooks'** *Bobos in Paradise* in [Chronicle 208](#) led me to some further reflections on the distinction between the post-millennial *bobos* or "bourgeois bohemians" and their predecessors, the *yuppies* ("Young Urban Professionals"), who dominated consumer society in the postmodern /baby boomer generation.

But the story begins a couple of generations earlier. **Thorstein Veblen** (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899) the first theoretician of consumer society, defined it as the realm of "conspicuous consumption." His central insight was that a significant portion of the outlays of the wealthy went neither for utility nor investment but was expended in the mode of the Kwakiutl *potlatch*. Veblen's analysis of consumption was revolutionary in its understanding that the system of exchange was used for purposes other than rational economic gain. But his conception of this phenomenon was essentially one-dimensional. Just as, in the *potlatch*, prestige is measured by the volume of blankets burned, what matters in conspicuous consumption is the quantity of money visibly expended rather than any particular characteristics of the objects purchased. Whether the robber-baron's money bought diamonds and furs--the austere capitalist generally delegated his wife as conspicuous consumer--artworks, or racehorses, their only role in Veblen's model was to display his wealth. The socialist Veblen used the consumerism of the "leisure class" as an argument against the scandalous wastefulness of the market.

What Veblen did not predict, although it was anticipated by **Flaubert** and **Baudelaire** as early as the 1850s, was the semiotic consumerism defined by **Jean Baudrillard** in *Le système des objets* (1968) and illustrated in **Georges Perec's** nearly contemporary novel *Les choses* (1965). Consumption was not just unprofitable expenditure that signified the consumer's power to squander his resources; it was a disciplined procedure designed to generate specific meanings communicable to other members of society. Each object of consumption possesses a nuance of meaning and reflects a specific level of social awareness. If Veblen's notion of consumption belonged to the day when **Ford** would sell you any color car you wanted so long as it was black, Baudrillard's corresponds to the postwar "affluent society" where all but the poorest can use consumption to define their attitude or "posture" toward the social order.

With the maturing of this era, the yuppie becomes the defining figure. Young and professional, hence as a rule not (yet) wealthy, the yuppie is particularly careful how he spends his limited disposable income; unlike Veblen's magnates, he needs to maximize bang for the buck. Whence the yuppie's insistence on the signs of up-to-date, sophisticated taste. Yuppies know the best wines and where to buy them, the best shops for clothes and household goods, the best restaurants and night spots, and what to buy and order there.

The yuppie is the exemplar of the creative consumer; that is why I think of **Des Esseintes**, the hero of **J.-K. Huysmans'** 1884 novel *A rebours* (*Against the Grain*) who taught the decadents self-definition through refined consumption, the first yuppie. (See [Chronicle 208](#).) But the yuppie's creativity remains passive; however original his personal style in clothing, home furnishings, food, and so on, his only activities are purchase and arrangement, and he expends his energy demonstrating awareness of ever-changing trends rather than in creating new ones. The only narrative one could construct from his activity is that of discovering new things to buy and new ways of making them *chic*--the substance of Perec's novel. On this point, the bobo represents a new departure whose generational implications I would like to examine.

Bobos need not be older than yuppies, for the "y" in the latter word refers to career stage more than chronology. Living in a more volatile and prosperous era than his predecessor, the bobo, whatever his age, is presumed to be well beyond the lower-middle rungs of a professional salary scale. Thus he is less concerned with maximizing the semiotic return on his consumption dollars than with defining himself as a unique individual through his avocations. Whereas the yuppie had no idiosyncratic hobbies, his consumption pattern being determined by a lifestyle held in common with his rivals, the bobo defines himself precisely by such activities. Where the yuppie worked out to stay fit, the bobo runs marathons or triathlons as material for a life-narrative. The bobo wants to tell, and have told, a unique story about himself. His "bohemian" activities are designed to make him an unforgettable character for whom the drudgery of wealth-creation is a mere instrument for personal fulfillment. This insistence on the narrative element is the key distinction between the bobo and the yuppie.

Dealing with wealth means dealing with the resentment of others with which, in modern times, the wealthy person himself cannot help but identify. Even **Donald Trump**-like flaunting of wealth is a defensive reaction not unlike that of the macho nervous about his masculinity. The core of popular culture is the expression of this and similar resentments, and since the beginning of the bourgeois era, the wealthy have flirted with the art that denounces them. What is new about the bobos is that their full-time participation in the economy does not preclude their active participation in this culture; they seek to defuse its victimary thematic by taking part in it. This in turn forces what remains of the avant-garde who insist that their art be incompatible with the bourgeois ethos to make violent and/or offensive behavior its essential criterion. In a world where businessmen and women wear earrings and pierces, this means the kind of self-mutilations described by **Dawn Perlmutter** in *Anthropoetics* V, 2 (<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0502/blood.htm>).

Can we really speak with Brooks of an "end of the culture wars" when Western society still has large differences in wealth and access to the possibility of wealth? Surely there will be no end to the cultural expression/deferral of social conflict. The bobo's sufferings as he climbs cliff faces or endures the g's of hang-gliding do not balance out the rage of the boyz in the 'hood. There will always be a culture war of sorts--and there had better be, unless we would prefer a real war. What has changed is the nature of the cultural terrain on which the war will be fought. At the same time as the bobos are draining the last traces of oppositionality from the *vie de bohème*, **Christian** and **Jewish** fundamentalism are on the rise, and it appears likely that within a generation the majority of **African-Americans** will identify themselves as **Muslims**. (See Daniel Pipes, "How Elijah Muhammad Won," *Commentary* 109, 6 [June 2000]). As the tension is evacuated from secular culture, it reappears in the less tractable form of religion.

The most interesting question posed by the end of the battle between *artiste* and *bourgeois* is that of the future of secular culture itself. I received a bit of flak for claiming in *Chronicle* 208 that the death of high

culture corresponds to a final disillusionment with utopian closure as the expression of our ethical intuition. No doubt it is the openness of the masterpieces of high culture that distinguishes them from archaic, sacrificial cultural forms. But this openness does not extend beyond psychological identification; the artwork as traditionally understood is a closed world of representation.

The postmodern era is a time of retrenchment in reaction to the failed utopias of the 20th century. Cold-War agnosticism toward capitalism's superiority over socialism produces agnosticism in the cultural domain. The only guarantee of meaning is provided by victimage. The postmodern story is the revelation of the victimary constitution of the self, which is its obliteration as an active, goal-seeking self. The yuppie's activity, goal-directed as it is, shares with the postmodern esthetic its minimalist conception of selfhood. In contrast with his "bourgeois" parents, the yuppie avoids excess ornamentation, unnecessary symbolism, and all other signs of vulgar self-assertion. He is minimalistic in his search for "pleasure," "beauty"--in everything but his use of information; yuppie minimalism involves an immense and hard-won knowledge of details.

In distinction to the modernist minimalism of the **Bauhaus**, postmodernism has no bedrock ideological notion of *the* minimum. The first (1972) manifesto of postmodernism, **Ken Venturi's** *Learning from Las Vegas*, defines it as citational, treating previous styles as material for new combinations that convey new information less as deliberate constructions than as chance collocations. It is here that we observe the gap that still remains between the postmodern artist and the yuppie. The yuppie's consumptive activity is esthetic only in a passive sense; he remains a *bourgeois* content to let the *artiste* play his independent role and anxious to avoid his contempt.

It is only by repudiating all signs of highness that what still passes for the high art of the victim-centered postmodern era maintains the claim of superiority that it increasingly feels the need to justify. The shadow of political utopia that haunts the age parallels the shadow of esthetic utopia that haunts its art. Postmodernity's fundamental model of human interaction as persecution generates a praxis of de-victimization that, however lacking in a clear positive goal, cannot help extrapolating from its negative one to a utopian hope akin to that of Marx in the "classless society." Abolish all domination and *something* perfect must appear. But from the elimination of colonialism and apartheid to homosexual marriage and animal rights, this praxis (d)evolves away from revolutionary inversion toward diversification, which is to say, away from socialism and toward the continual expansion of exchange as the solution to the problems of market society. It is into this configuration that the bobo enters.

The bobo, in contrast to the yuppie, rejects the very idea of specialized esthetic creation. He wants his own life both to be and to tell a story. If high art begins with the **Homeric** division of labor between the hero who acts and the rhapsode who weaves his tale and broadcasts it to the world, it ends with their conflation in the contemporary bourgeois, aware of the unlikelihood in an ever-differentiating society of finding a bard other than himself. The bobo belongs to a world in which everyone wants to be significant. It is a world dominated by celebrity rather than fame, one that trivializes public significance out of a secret resentment that this significance has become its sole value. Here it is not enough to consume, however "creatively"; one must be a hero in at least one's own tale.

It is a reflection on post-millennial culture that a children's book has broken all sales records. If culture once addressed adults, then adolescents, now its center is on pre-adolescents; the core readership of the **Harry Potter** books is younger still than the core audience of **Britney Spears**. This has usually been explained, if at all, by the fact that (increasingly) young(er) people expend more money on culture than

their elders. But this fact is itself more cultural than economic. It demonstrates, in the first place, that the young *need* culture more than their elders, that the nurturing metaphor of culture is real; a similar conclusion may be drawn from the increasing prevalence of the post-colonial world in literary studies and in literature itself. The child's need for cultural self-definition reflects his lack of a mature consciousness of desire. The young are still unaware of the shame of the mimetic; one ceases to be young when one realizes that, in the modern world, passionately desiring the same thing as everyone else is not a way to achieve significance. In our era of designer diapers, the age at which one matures in this sense is continually reduced.

But, you may object, adults too buy the Potter books. Yes, of course. Mediated by those who truly desire, they reach for the same object. This stands on its head our "Rousseauian" propensity to equate the unmimetic with the natural--**Rousseau** himself was, as **Jeff Spisak's** *Anthropoetics* VI, 1 (<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0601/spisak.htm>) article demonstrates, quite aware of children's susceptibility to the mimetic. Our children are more "natural" than we only in that they display with less reticence our mimetic nature.

What propels human history--what makes us historical beings in the first place--is mimesis and the resentment it generates. We need culture because we cannot afford to let this resentment descend into violence. The age of Harry Potter and the bobos succeeds the age of **Madonna** and the yuppies when Internet-driven adult communication becomes too interactive to tolerate passive consumption and even teenie-boppers become too jaded to focus their desire on a product of culture (whence, for example, the ecstatic "rave" phenomenon). Ours is also the age of "Survival" and other life games that allow arbitrarily chosen ordinary people to realize the fifteen minutes of **Warhol's** prescient prophecy. Celebrity is the passion and the curse of the post-millennial age, blinding us to its nature by its ubiquitous, obnoxious presence. I will pursue this point in the next *Chronicle*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Still More On Celebrity

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How can we doubt the value of celebrity? Since human beings have always valued above all else the recognition of their fellows, what could be more desirable than to be "celebrated"? In a world where some achieve this status, what possibility of compensation remains for the others? If our consciousness of death and the resulting self-concern that **Heidegger** called "care" are spin-offs of our originary fear of our fellow humans, our passion for recognition supplements the emptiness this consciousness knows to be inevitable. We would believe, all experience to the contrary, that, given this recognition, we will become "immortal," ultimate triumph of culture over nature. The human consciousness born of culture that made us aware of dying in the first place pays its homage to culture in making it a compensation for death.

The kind of global recognition we associate with celebrity could come into being only with states that transcend the sphere of personal interaction. In old **Egypt**, but not in tribal cultures or even chieftainships, the chance of an inhabitant of **Thebes** being known to an inhabitant of **Memphis**, or even to a Theban from another district of the city, was presumably very small, yet everyone would know of the **Pharaoh** and the chief members of his court--including, no doubt, its prominent entertainers. *The End of Culture* situated the beginning of secular literature and of "modernity" in the broadest sense at the point where popular resentment of the privileged status of the rulers ceased to be blocked by their unquestioned sacred status. Secular culture emerges from ritual when the resentment that accompanies recognition can no longer be resolved in the process of recognition itself. There are whisperings of this in Egypt and **Babylonia**, but in the West only the **Greeks** created a full-fledged literature because only they had freed themselves from the tyranny of a central distribution system. No doubt the Egyptian peasant resented the pharaoh's glory, but circulating, if at all, in the private sphere, his resentment posed no threat to the social order and was incapable of generating a new culture. In contrast, the Greeks needed to express resentment in order to control it. Just as language arose to avert the dissolution of the proto-human social order, so did "high culture" to defer the resentments that threatened Greek and particularly **Athenian** society--resentments that fatally limited it and eventually destroyed it.

All the literary categories we inherit from the classical age appeal directly to our resentment of those who occupy center stage. To define this centrality in terms of power or wealth is to miss the essential point that a moment in a theater reveals: the identity of the object of our envy with the object of our attention, whose sacrality is definable by this very fact. No doubt, in pre-celebritary times at least, this attention is determined by control over the social center and its means of violence. But these hard facts are beyond our power to change by "cultural" means. Drama permits us to confront the objects of our resentment in a venue where we are free to grant or withdraw our recognition. We watch the action on stage only because we choose to do so, and by so choosing, we make the characters' centrality depend on us. The payoff is that those **Aristotle** calls "better than ourselves" are humbled by tragedy, while comedy rewards those "worse than ourselves" for not provoking our resentment.

Despite the increasing differentiation of specialties and increasingly rapid exchange of ideas, goods, and services, the context of modern celebrity is a "winner-take-all society" that accords a premium of recognition to the few top stars of each of these specialties that raises their market value far above that of their second-rank competitors (see [Chronicle 46](#)). The increased circulation of information that computers and particularly the **Internet** make possible devalues local hierarchies in each field by absorbing them into one great global hierarchy. The value and reward of being the best violinist in town is diminished when you can purchase a recording of the best violinist in the world. Local recognition remains effective only for those whose skills are not part of a global market. A plumber does not compete

with superplumbers as a model competes with supermodels or a trial lawyer with **Johnnie Cochran**.

Celebrity, they say, is an artifact of the media, but not only do the media act in response to demand, what is demanded is, precisely, celebrity that can be discounted as manufactured by the media. The aura of ludicrousness that surrounds "being famous for being famous" is what makes celebrity sustainable. It devalues the very center stage on which our eyes are fixed in a latter-day equivalent of the "pity and terror" generated by the tragic hero's downfall. We mock celebrity not least by calling it "celebrity" rather than "fame," emphasizing thereby its aleatory character. We particularly enjoy pitying celebrities' misfortunes, experiencing the paradox of finding our anonymous lives preferable to theirs. The aspects of their lives that interest us most are precisely those that reflect no outstanding signs of distinction save those that derive from celebrity itself, although even today, most famous people have become so through individual accomplishments--and not always aided by social advantages.

In the postwar "affluent society," most people are capable of living decently from the product of their labors but not of competing for global recognition in any arena. Their real-life competitions are on a lower level, and it is here that global celebrity serves a function that compensates for the resentment it generates. As **Girard** pointed out, internal mediation is always more violent than its external form; one envies one's neighbor's small superiorities far more obsessively than the glory of those one never confronts directly. It is this envy that is assuaged through our resentful identification with celebrities. To accept this identification is, no doubt, to admit our own inaptitude to share their status, but the star provides the worshipper in compensation a point of comparison that trumps all local inferiorities. As I explained in *Chronicles* [108](#) and [114](#) (on the subject of **Princess Diana**), by accepting to forgo the extremely improbable chance of competing with such a person for the spotlight, one obtains a powerful ally against the humiliations of one's own environment. Learning the details of Di's wardrobe avenges the mortification of the neighbor's new dress.

Yet in our post-millennial era, a worshipful relationship to celebrity becomes increasingly less operative. The sacred mystery surrounding the great media stars of the past can no longer be recaptured. Perhaps the chief reason for the extraordinary outpouring of grief at Di's death was the general sentiment that no future royal and perhaps no one at all would ever again play a similar role. Certainly no plausible successor has come forward in the three intervening years.

First raunchy talk shows and now "reality" programming demonstrate that the publicized activities of self-selected ordinary people are more effective than those of stars in deferring today's resentment of anonymity. Since the advent of television (at least), we have repeated ad nauseam that stardom is less a quality of certain individuals than a desideratum of our system of public communication. Yet the star's quasi-sacred trappings are incompatible with this insight. The cynical debunking of stardom that inspired countless films starring the stars themselves is predicated on a naïve and resentful distinction between the film's enlightened audience and the naïve and resentful masses. The fact is that the general public until recently and the young still today have found it of value to single out a few entertainers by criteria that are *not* entirely arbitrary. Only today, when this value has diminished, does the resentful mechanism cynically understood as having always been behind the process come to the fore in reality.

The old star-making system never chose its beneficiaries arbitrarily; the benefits were simply too great. The fierce competition alone guaranteed a rational selection process. In contrast, the new life-game shows, both by reducing the benefits of "stardom" and by focusing the entry criteria outside any predictable career path, are able to give us "ordinary people" whose ambition is not mediated by an unusually high level of talent or ambition--people toward whom the spectator has no reason to feel any kind of inferiority. If the talk shows specializing in embarrassing but (fairly) exotic problems such as incest and sexual perversions are the antithesis of the old star-making vehicles, reality shows are a synthesis of talk-show ordinariness and star-making ambition.

The change is no mere substitution of lucidity for "false consciousness." The gradient that leads from **Hercules** and **Achilles** through the TV celebrities of the fifties and the **Jerry Springer** guest list to the participants in "Survivor" or "Big Brother" cannot be described by the idea of demystification. Achilles and his real-life counterparts played world-historical roles; they "deserved" to be famous. Even the fifties actress-turned-quiz-show-panelist had paid her dues to show biz. As celebrity becomes more trivial or, to use **Doug Collins'** term, "pre-humiliated," its beneficiaries inspire a more internal mode of resentment: I could not defeat **Hector**, but I could certainly see myself competing

with these people. But this very fact demystifies their fame, and fame in general; it consoles us for our own anonymity by emphasizing the arbitrariness of celebrity. We enjoy resenting "undeserving" celebrities because it legitimates our resentment of the others.

Resentment is not a purely passive relation. The lessened distance between me and an "ordinary" celebrity allows for a less artificial form of identification than adulation of a star. It permits something of the openness we feel--or used to feel--in identifying with fictional characters. I can watch "someone like myself" on television and admire his ingenuity or mock his foolishness simply as a fellow human being. His antics can nourish my daily conversations with other members of the general public just as well as the latest football scores or Hollywood gossip, and without making me feel inferior to those of whom I speak. This, in turn, makes my relationship with other celebrities not only more bearable but less resentful. Absorbed bobo-like in creating my own life-narrative, I can afford to look with indulgence on those who seek centrality through pre-humiliation. The very unclarity of the question of exactly who the bobo's audience is, professional peers or fellow "serious hobbyists," mitigates his resentment of the unique mediatic center and its less-than-serious inhabitants.

Although yuppies and bobos, media celebrities and "ordinary-people" celebrities continue to coexist, the post-millennial is rapidly separating itself, even as we speak, from the postmodern. A few years from now when everyone is talking about the new post-millennial age, you will be able to say that you saw it described here first.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Happy Birthday: Blues Riffs

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Birthdays are happy moments, but each year more ironically so. Religion liberates us from this growing awareness of finitude. The sacred sign's deferral of human violence becomes the originary source of our consciousness of death; we apply this pattern of deferral to the violence of death in general. Nor is this an unwarranted extrapolation; our consciousness of death makes us conscious of human life as not mere physical existence but the life of a soul, the locus of representations by nature immortal.

I am convinced of this originary explanation. But does it provide consolation, let alone liberation, to one who has just celebrated his 59th birthday? Even if Generative Anthropology--as distinguished from previous claimants to the title--truly deserves to be called the theoretical equivalent of religion, its elegance comes at the price of the messy human specificity around which communities are built--not only religious, but also theoretical communities. An idea survives when it reflects, or generates, a collective interest...

I had begun my birthday *Chronicle* in this manner when Stacey reminded me that one of my grade-school teachers once asked me in exasperation whether I had been vaccinated with a phonograph needle. I was always spinning ideas and retailing information on a series of subjects--snakes, baseball, philosophy (courtesy of the New York Public Library)--and frequent sessions with **Mr. B** and **Mr. S**, our good cop / bad cop vice-principals, did little to curtail the irrepressible chatterbox. A little kid can speak freely because he isn't expected to be a real authority on anything; in the world of adult professionals, the amateur learns not to speak out of turn.

In *Chronicles* [111](#), [113](#), and [122](#), I described my native ideology of **Bronx Romanticism**: an unquestioning faith in Western high culture at a time when this culture had already begun to define itself in opposition to any such faith. The **Bronx Romantic** is exposed to romantic clichés at too early an age to be able to exorcise them. Reaching adolescence in a world where distinction is equated with the proliferation of outward signs, he thinks he can save himself by equating distinction with the absence of outward signs. He renounces the gilded French provincial-style dining-room of his respectable Bronx household and conceives a vision of "greatness" in featureless purity. He rebels against *Emma Bovary* only to become **Frédéric Moreau**.

The **Bronx Romantic** freely imagines himself in the company of the immortals because he is convinced that he is absolutely insignificant. The awareness that nothing he can do could possibly be of the least consequence places him all at once on a transcendental summit inaccessible to those who actually scale the cliffs. Whatever the **Bronx Romantic** accomplishes in adult life is bound to be both an incredible surprise and a horrible disappointment. **Dostoevsky** understood the delicious irony of this paradox. "Notes from Underground," in the bright red covers of the Macmillan edition and **Constance Garnett's** understated Victorian prose that the literal-minded call unfaithful to the original Russian, was the Bible of my adolescence. "I am a sick man; I am a spiteful man. I believe my liver is diseased." Yes!

The **Bronx Romantic** is of another race than the baby boomers of the forward-looking post-war era. We sprouted in the arid soil of the late Depression, when those who could blame the latter for their failure refocused their ambitions on their children. (My father was a member of the New York Bar who never practiced law; not an unusual case.) We were bearers of parental desires concrete only in appearance, motivated more by regret than hope of vicarious enjoyment.

Today's yuppie parents, the bobos all the more so, make their children showcases for their parenting. No after-school enrichment class, movie-spin-off action figure, or classmate's catered birthday party can be guiltlessly passed up. Full of their own anxiety for success, they project this onto their children rather than ask their children to succeed for *them*. These kids are not meant to fulfill their parents' desires; it is the kids' desires the parents rush to fulfill before they grow too old to be sure what their desires are. (See [Chronicle 211](#)). The emphasis is not on becoming but possessing; ostensibly this is done in preparation for the future, but this future so much prepared and so little defined cannot help but be--like the **Bronx Romantic's** but for the opposite reason--an insufficient return on investment. The serious but banal careers with which the children of my generation strove to realize their parents' dreams ("my son the doctor") cannot suffice for these children. Nothing can. They should grow up to be the most accomplished generation in history as long as they keep taking their Prozac.

The incarnation of the **Bronx Romantic's** family paradox, **GA** is both a rethinking of the entirety of human self-knowledge and an empty abstraction, an intellectual revolution and an exercise in *bavardage*. **GA** *minimally* explains the phenomena of human culture. It understands that significance exists only as actualized in concrete, spatiotemporal being; but knowing this, it leaves the details to others. This infuriates the specialists, whose whole lives have been devoted to the acquisition of these details. It also disregards the stuff of human lives, not least of all my own.

Anyone who's gone shopping with me will tell you that I am exasperatingly fascinated with detail. Stacey has witnessed me examining and testing a dozen "identical" Opinel knives and accumulating over numerous shopping trips a finely nuanced collection of abrasives (grades 00, 0, 1, 2, 3 nylon steel wool, large and small (red) Crate & Barrel acrylic scrubbers, various files, rasps, and hand-drill sanding attachments, a metal brush-head fitted to a heavy-duty handle...). In Paris, we visited all three *marchés aux puces* and brought back from France a (red) toilet brush--shaped differently than American models--and a rubber broom. My favorite shopping places are discount stores, like Independence, MO's fabulous **Recovery Sales Outlet**, where shopping fools can find everything from jewels to tools.

The charm of the "found object," the incredible bargain you buy first and figure out what to do with afterward, or simply find on the street (my years of running in Santa Monica have produced a large collection of "streeted" coins, a pair of pliers, a silk scarf, and a couple of stuffed animals), lies not only in its unexpected entry into your life but in

the mysterious way it finds there an exclusive niche that you never knew existed. Or you can renovate and return to circulation objects that had fallen out of the paradigm, like the lamp in the shape of a lovely lady that we found in an old carton and regilded, and that now stands on my mother's nest of tables in the living room. As the new find is accommodated into the pre-existing community of objects, new categories and hierarchies emerge. People criticize **Imelda Marcos** for piling up all those shoes, but I am certain that in her mind each pair serves a uniquely specific function.

There is what **Hegel** would have called a dialectic between finding and desiring: finding a new item generates a desire for a whole series--the principle of coin, stamp, sportscard collecting. Each one of our abrasives has its specific use, real or potential, as do each of our knife-sharpening devices (try those new diamonds-in-plastic stones), four varieties of hand lotion (see *Consumer Reports*) or our many nail-clippers: one for the living room, one for the study, one for the office, one on my key-chain... After I discovered Chinese exercise balls in San Francisco, I made two trips to our local Chinatown to obtain, for home and office, large and small ones (for female guests), enameled and plain ones, and stone ones to avoid the clanging. (I was proud of my ability to turn the balls without touching each other in either hand and in either direction, and always considered the musical ones vulgar, until a Chinese student informed me that the point of these is not to make noise but, on the contrary, to test the practitioner's ability to turn them silently. I haven't had occasion to pursue this new level of expertise.) When I took up juggling not long ago, remembering that my father could juggle, I ordered sets of beanbags from each of the two juggling supply companies, one set more firmly packed, the other with a more grippable surface, six of one set and five of the other, although I could never learn to do more than three consistently. (You have to start younger.)

Doug Collins, the theoretician of the found object, told me the other day after my [Durkheim lecture](#), "You don't hang around. You make your point and you're out of there." He seemed to mean this as a compliment, shades of **Napoleon** impatient to get to the next battle. But the reality is that center stage is not a comfortable place and I'd rather be searching for a bug in a **Javascript** program. Great art radiates the comfort and joy of infinite immersion: **Bach, Proust, Brueghel, Flaubert** working on his "unfinished" *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, **Nick Park's** claymation in *Chicken Run*. Eventually, you have to wrap the film, print the book, cut the CD, frame the canvas, but the artist's secret desire is that his work remain a part of his life rather than a product, even at the risk of its becoming, like Frenhofer's "Belle Noiseuse" in **Balzac's** "Unknown Masterpiece," increasingly incomprehensible to others. "Yes, but it's beautiful to *me*," not: "here's the lowdown on Durkheim and goodbye."

The details I can't get enough of remain in the private realm where the amateur is never upstaged by the professional. Private life is, as **Lévi-Strauss** calls "savage" thought, *bricolage*, tinkering. As I work at doing the dishes, I continually improve efficiency--using plain and abrasive-covered sponges with or without detergent-filled handles, French and American Scotchbrite (available from Costco in an 18-pack), grade 2 steel wool (more effective than grade 3), dishcloths backed with nylon mesh, or French sponge-cloths that leave a surface dryer than anything on the American market, or replacing flimsy paper towels with blue shoptowels-on-a-roll--but this efficiency has no standing in the marketplace.

A way of thinking is not a Platonic essence; it operates its own narration and the drama is in the details. That of **GA** cannot be separated from the personal drama that began with the young kid in the Bronx and endures with the old kid at UCLA. *Le moi est haïssable* [the self/ego is detestable], so I speak of Generative Anthropology or originary thinking rather than *my* ideas. The slogans supplement the ideas' abstractness; their familiarity through repetition substitutes for the personal specificity that is the shyly veiled reverse face of originary thinking--provided the familiarity has been achieved. Not long ago a group of UCLA faculty got together to consider applying for a grant to study the relationship between religion and science. As I expounded my grand originary vision of the subject that the others were attacking piecemeal from the perspective of dreams or emotions or pain or what-not, I suddenly saw myself in their eyes as peddling some crackpot scheme--Iterative Ecology, Correlative Doxology, Rebarbative Pomology--that gives you all the answers before you've even heard the question. We never did apply for that grant.

The **Bronx Romantic** clings to empty transcendence out of fear that the world will not love him enough if he merely participates in it as a historical being, unique only as historical beings are unique. This weakness is also his strength; who else would have an interest in the *minimal* unity of the human? But birthdays teach even the **Bronx Romantic**

that this unity, lived by a finite being, can be understood only through finitude. Both the generality *and* the particularity of life are all there is. While I can still make out the scar from my old phonograph-needle vaccination, maybe I'd better crank up the old turntable; vice-principals beware!

-- Eric Gans

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

NOP

No. 214: Saturday, October 7, 2000

Why should anyone do a crossword puzzle? At best, you wind up with the answer you could find in the back of the book or in next week's magazine. But it's just because *there is* an answer that you do it. As on multiple-choice exams, you seek not **The Truth** but the answer you imagine the puzzle-maker/examiner/deity had in mind.

American crosswords rarely get past the content of the words. **French** puzzles recognize linguistic form (the *signifiant*) to the point of playing on multiple meanings and homonyms, scrambling a word or inverting its direction. I find those of **Robert Scipion** in the *Nouvel Observateur* the most intellectually satisfying of the genre. But the most ingenious crossworders are the **British**, who work on a grid in which only about half the letters cross, sparing them the need to fill it out with silly crossword-puzzle words. The text of the clue contains both a straightforward definition of the keyword and a cryptic allusion to the anagrammatic tricks by means of which it can alternatively be constructed. It is like a detective story in miniature. (No accident, of course, that the Brits also invented the whodunit. Did **Agatha Christie** do crossword puzzles?) A relatively straightforward example: **Mocked, put out and ran away outside** (7) = **FLOUTED** (*out* with *fled* outside it; *mocked* is the straight definition).

F	L	O	U	T	E	D
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These examples of "national character" reflect the different relationships between the cultural elite and the society as a whole. American puzzles are democratic, lowest-common-denominator--common knowledge plus a crossword-puzzle dictionary. I have seen some less-than-scintillating local imitations of British puzzles; should we anticipate a conversion to **European** sophistication analogous to the **Starbucks** phenomenon? Among the Euros, there is an interesting distinction between French and British elitism. The French have a courtly culture where wit is the highest value; the British are given to schooled ingenuity. A Frenchman would consider it beneath his dignity to play childish games like putting "out" inside "fled," but British culture from **Dickens** to **Harry Potter** has focused on ingenious children. (What used to be called the "classics" were tales for pre-adolescents--not *The Red and the Black* but *David Copperfield*, not *Penguin Island* but *Treasure Island*.)

Solving puzzles provides you with the more-than-personal satisfaction of having seen through the author's mystifications and penetrated the opacity of the world of signs. For a moment, you feel that human minds can be transparent to each other. (This is the charm of detective stories as well, with the added point that what we divine in the other's mind is a project of violence.) Yet finally the only understanding you achieve in the process of doing a crossword puzzle is of how to do crossword puzzles.

I sometimes do jigsaw puzzles too. These are so time-consumingly guilt-inducing that I don't dare risk the temptation

at home, reserving them for family trips to **Kansas City**, where the living-room table has been adapted for this purpose. A friend recently made an extension board to accommodate increasingly larger puzzles: first 1000, now 2000 pieces. Jigsaws demonstrate that the intentionality to which the puzzler responds need not descend into detail. A crossword is composed word by word by a Scipion or **Margaret Farrar**; a jigsaw puzzle is just chosen by someone for its pleasing appearance and stamped out on a cutting board. Yet our struggle to find the right piece is a search for the triumph of order over chaos that activates the same social instincts as other types of puzzles.

Jigsaws make up in the esthetic realm what they lack in shared wit. A filled-in crossword makes no prettier a picture than an empty one, but consider the almost-finished jigsaw: the missing pieces are gaping holes in a totality, begging to be filled. The jigsaw-maker is indifferent to the details of *découpage*, but he assures the puzzler that all those little pieces can be brought together in a finished product, a complete form revealing a complete content.

It's hard not to participate in a jigsaw puzzle. The purely cumulative nature of the activity invites cooperation; if I add a piece to your puzzle, I can't possibly be frustrating your effort. Their extended topography makes jigsaw puzzles the most communal form of puzzling, but an unfinished crossword similarly invites participation. Whoever you are, you are part of the community whose purpose is to find that answer or fill that hole. Yet the satisfactions of puzzling are incommunicable to non-participants. There is no crossword- or jigsaw-puzzle-solving narrative. Imagine how a friend would enjoy the story of how you solved a jigsaw puzzle: "I looked through all the normal shaped pieces until I found one with a thin bottom tab with a wide and pointy left side and a dot of white on the lower right edge. It was still a bit too wide on the bottom tab, so. . . The next piece I found was. . ."

It's hard for me to resist a puzzle of any kind: crosswords, jigsaws, cryptograms, logic problems, magazine quizzes, even those inane word-search puzzles. But more than any of these I enjoy computer programming. Writing a program offers all the stimulation of puzzling outside the confines of someone else's mind. The solution does not accompany the problem; it has to be invented step by step. (**Hacking** in its new, sinister sense of seeking to crack a security system is *too much* like doing a crossword puzzle.)

The puzzle-like interactivity in computer programming makes debugging a program even more enjoyable than writing it. I tend to abandon good, dull programming practice (writing small, easily verified routines and combining them) and rush through the whole project to the point where it works more or less but there are still all sorts of errors in the code. Then you can run it and see whether you get "run-time" error messages or the output isn't what you wanted from your input. It's like a crossword where you can test your entries and learn from your mistakes. Once in a while, you get that special high from a program that runs perfectly the first time.

When my colleague **Sara Melzer** first introduced me to the 4 mHz **Kaypro 10**, I couldn't wait to learn **Basic**. The little I had seen about programming fascinated me; as an ex-math major, I couldn't understand how you could write " $x = x + 1$ ". The instruction "print" (no longer used in the graphics era) also mystified me; why did they keep "printing" the thing on every line? Whence the unforgettable feeling of empowerment when I got my first program to "print" a pattern of green letters on the little black screen

It went something like:

```
10 for i=1 to 19
20 print tab(1+3*abs(10-i));
30 for j=1 to 10-abs(10-i)
40 print "blurk ";
50 next
60 print
70 next
```

The output:

```
      blurk
blurk blurk
```



```

        blurk blurk blurk
      blurk blurk blurk blurk
    blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
  blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
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blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
  blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
    blurk blurk blurk blurk blurk
      blurk blurk blurk blurk
        blurk blurk
          blurk

```

My main programming activity in the 8-bit era was system utilities in **Z80** assembly language--for example, a keyboard macro system using the Esc key on a keyboard lacking either function keys or Alt--but my favorite programming projects were the games I wrote in Basic, my "native" computer language. Back around 1985 I wrote a computer vs user domino game that, ported to **Java**, still pursues its existence at www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/french/faculty/gans/java/domino.htm, where it gets more hits than the entire rest of the **French Department**. My most recent project in this vein was a VB improvement on the **Windows** solitaire **FreeCell**: see www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/french/faculty/gans/java/home.html for details.

The most popular microcomputer language in those days was **MBasic**, "M" standing for **Microsoft**, at the time a small outfit whose sole product was, I believe, that Basic compiler, including an **Apple** version on the **Motorola 6502**. Each line had a number. Full-screen editing had not yet arrived; you retyped any lines you needed to change and the interpreter would reinsert them for you in numerical order (type "I" for a listing). With all the advances since in hardware and software, I have never known a more user-friendly programming environment than good old MBasic, where you could write your program and just type "run" to see how it worked, modifying it line by line until you got it right. To exit the interpreter, you used the old mainframe command *system*. In **CP/M**, you usually rebooted after each program. A little Basic joke was to do this by typing *call mom*; the *call* command would call the routine at the address given in the following variable, and since you hadn't defined *mom*, it would be set to 0, the address of the CP/M "warm boot" routine.

Visual Basic is pretty friendly too, but first you have to get past all those *forms* and *controls* and get used to event-driven programming. The old programs always kept moving; if they awaited input, there was a location in the program where they ran in place while waiting for it. When I ported my old CP/M games to **MS-DOS** (the next stage in the triumph of the "M") I incorporated a mouse, a **Mac**-like luxury in the DOS era. You played by clicking on a "card" (implemented first as [2h] or [Ks], then--in color!--as [2♥] or [K♠]), and after each play the program came back to the same spot. Even the first version of Java dominoes incorporated a waiting loop. It took me a long time to realize that a program doesn't have to be doing anything; it can just wait for input. The **Bronx Romantic** finds it particularly hard to believe that you can just stay there and do nothing, his own existence having made him so much more familiar with turning around in a loop.

There's not enough vocabulary for jigsaw puzzles, but there's too much for computer programming. I have learned the hard way that nothing is more boring to spouses, friends, and assorted acquaintances than explaining how a program works. Does anyone care what a "pointer" is, that C-derived languages are case sensitive, don't initialize variables, and their arrays begin with 0, while Basic isn't, do, and its arrays begin with 1, that DOS strings used to be terminated with "\$" before they became like **UNIX** strings terminated by 0--binary 0, not the letter "0"? Can anyone appreciate

this old routine to convert binary hex numbers to ASCII without jumps--here in **8080** code, but it still works on a **Pentium** :

Starting with:	6	12
adi 90 (adds 90)	96	102
daa (gets rid of the 100s)	96	2 (carries the "1")
aci 40 (add 40 with carry)	136	43 (adds 41)
daa (as above)	36 = "6"	43 = "C" (12 in hexadecimal)

Numbers are from **C** and letters are from **Basic**: the numbers begin with Hex 30="0", whereas the letters begin with Hex 41="A". To get around this, adding 90 followed by **daa**, which stands for "Decimal Adjust for Addition," adds an extra carry to the letters while treating the step from Hex 39 to Hex 40 as a single ("decimal") digit, so that 9 becomes Hex 39= "9" while 10 adds the carry to get to Hex 41= "A".

Have I really made you care about **aci 40** and **daa**? What about **dad sp** and **pchl**? Or **nop** , "no operation," the hacker's favorite instruction, used to patch over a test for the password or license he doesn't have. An instrument without cultural resonance, the jargon of current and bygone assembly language still gives me the thrill of the exotic, perhaps because I learned it relatively late in life. I used to have a **Honda Civic DX** with the license plate **XORDXDX**--get it?

Computer culture

In a time when people are writing books to demonstrate that computers will soon be smarter than we are, does programming reflect a desire to join with **them** against **us**? We never stop playing the game of problem and solution whereas computers, like Visual Basic programs, just stand there and wait until one of us provides them with input. No doubt anything we can understand about ourselves can be programmed into a computer. Just as the word processor "wants to" go to the next line when you type beyond the margin or the program in a guided missile "wants to" follow its moving target, computers of 2050 or 2100 (can we even begin to imagine the computers of 2200? of 3000?) will be programmed to "want to" play tennis, make love, what have you. But this lends no credence to the horror stories about computers taking over the world. The learning modules that will make computers "superior" to us will be of our own design. The idea that computers will keep secrets from their users and scheme together to replace them is just one more paranoid fantasy on the model of alien invasions, one more distraction from our real worst danger, which is ourselves. You can program resentment on a computer, but you can't make a computer resentful. I'll take **HAL** over **Saddam** anytime.

Of all human creations computers are the most insistent indicators of progress. They have shown the most rapid sustained improvement of any human creation; doubling in every aspect of performance something like every eighteen months over a span of twenty years or so, they give us a taste of a future in which the material aspects of life will increasingly be controlled by the transfer of information. Rather than seeing humanity defeated by its own creation, we are witnessing the expansion of the semiotic human feedback mechanism to the material world as a whole. Computers have brought the whole world together, the developed part of it at any rate. The early confraternity of computer freaks has expanded and diversified into the majority who use email, handle a little word-processing, and surf the Internet; the **nerds** who know the best websites, how to change margins and recalculate spreadsheets; the **geeks** who can write, say, card games in Visual Basic; and the supergeeks who still call themselves hackers, stay up all night drinking **Mountain Dew**, and who know enough about interrupts and the **Windows API** to break into security systems.

Despite all the inventions of the Middle Ages and Renaissance--gunpowder, the compass, clocks, printing--the men of the eighteenth century still saw themselves as **Greeks** and **Romans**. The industrial nineteenth century showed that human history was not merely "perfectible" but open-ended and irreversible. Now the information era has made the reality of this irreversibility--improvement and obsolescence--an object of immediate experience. Purchasing a computer or any information-processing device is like changing dollars in a land of runaway inflation; buy in the morning and you're sorry you didn't wait till afternoon.

In contrast with the ever-improving hardware, programming is relatively conservative. The major operating systems, **DOS-Windows**, **UNIX-Linux**, even the **Mac OS**, have all been around for over fifteen years. A Visual Basic program today is still recognizably a Basic program, just as a **C++** or **Java** program is still recognizably a C program with semicolons and matching braces. And the **Intel Pentium II-III** assembler code that underlies the objects and methods of the latest languages derives with few changes--and still with **daa**--from the good old 8080, just as those new Mac chips descend from the 6502. 32-bit **EAX** just extends **AX**, which extended the 8-bit "accumulator" **A** . And if the strange academic languages like **Forth** and **Snobol** seem to have disappeared, generation-old **Cobol** and **Fortran** programs are still running.

That my domino game has survived the transition from CP/M to **Windows 2000** , from 4 mHz to 1 GHz, from Microsoft Basic to Microsoft *omnipotens*, allows me a not-quite-**Proustian** sense of defeating time. Writing a computer program is solving a puzzle to which no prior solution existed. Isn't that true as well of the **originary hypothesis**?

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Last updated:

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Back to the Origin of Language

No. 215: Saturday, October 21, 2000

Watching the **World Series** (I need not tell you which team the **Bronx Romantic** roots for) reminds me that nothing is more serious than the cultural games that have allowed us humans to survive in the first place. In the broadest sense, a game, whether ritualized or free-form, is any activity in which a shared significance in a meaningful goal or activity distracts us from the Hobbesian war of all against all. A memorable example of this deferral is the closing scene of the 1966 film *The Naked Prey*, starring **Cornel Wilde** as a "white hunter" captured by a warlike tribe and given a head start to be hunted like prey. Wilde survives through cunning, killing a number of his pursuers in the process. At the end, he reaches the safety of a colonial outpost. As they give up the pursuit, his remaining pursuers, whose companions he has killed, nevertheless bid him a warm farewell. He has shared the premise of their "game" and this mutual understanding has subordinated the deadly violence of this game to the fundamental human gesture of representation.

Just as one can use games to act upon the world outside--**Dale Carnegie** increasing steel production by inciting competition among shifts, automobile racing leading to engine improvements, better video for better video games--we can often understand our worldly actions on the model of a game. We speak of the "race" to colonize the New World or to put a man on the moon. The importance of game theory in today's economic and political theorizing needs no demonstration here.

I used to think there was a race to discover **the origin of language**, on the analogy of the "missing link" that paleontologists once thought would solve the Darwinian problem of the origin of man. Today, as research continues and knowledge accumulates, people vie for specific prizes--today's biggest will be for describing how language operates in the brain--but no one is going for the \$64,000,000 question, the origin of the human as such. Like **President Clinton** questioning the definition of "is," we are unwilling to define humanity specifically enough to conceive of an event of origin.

I think I have already answered the \$64,000,000 question, but I'm not waiting for the check to arrive. The originary hypothesis wins by default a game no one else is playing. This sheds light on the postmodern era in which GA originated, without telling exactly how it will fare in the post-millennial age now beginning. Some Bronx Romantic

had to make it his destiny to play the game, both heroic and cowardly, that no one else cared or dared to play: it's lonely out there on the court, but if nobody else is playing you can't lose. I am mindful of the fact that this description of events puts me at the very center of the world's intellectual history. But as **Doug Collins** has been telling me for years, the center is just where you don't want to be. Once it was dangerous but thrilling; today it is deserted, or so they say.

We cannot understand what game we are playing when we investigate the origin of language unless we examine the origin of the question itself. The "history of ideas," of the answers offered over the centuries to the great questions, precludes providing more satisfactory answers than those it discusses; it rather implies that the question cannot be answered at all and that we are really concerned only with the "socially constructed" historical responses it has provoked. Yet to grasp effectively the implications of **Hobbes's** or **Rousseau's** theories of language is to establish their relationship to a more mature theory, just as an effective appreciation of **Galileo's** physics requires its insertion into **Newton's**, not to say **Einstein's**. The historical insight we can obtain from **Enlightenment** theories of the origin of language is directly proportional to the anthropological insight of our own theory. This suggests that we read the thinkers of the Enlightenment in the light of the originary hypothesis.

Our vastly greater store of data--ethnological, linguistic, neurological, evolutionary--is not our sole advantage over these thinkers. The canard that the **originary hypothesis** offers only a **social-contract** explanation of the origin of language has at least the virtue of reminding us that nothing essential in **Generative Anthropology** was unavailable to the Enlightenment merely because of its less advanced state of technical knowledge. Nor do we need to know more about human nature than Hobbes or **Cervantes** to understand the centrality to society of what **Girard** would later call mimetic desire. What makes it possible for us to conceive a fundamental anthropology unavailable to the thinkers of the Enlightenment is a product not of our technical experience but of our ethical experience. It is what we have learned from history rather than what we have learned in the laboratory that allows us a more synthetic view of the human than our predecessors. History *is* our anthropological laboratory--a point missed by those who regret that we cannot turn back the clock to observe tribal life in all its glory.

Why, for example, is Hobbes, despite his interest in the relation between language and thought, not concerned to formulate an originary hypothesis that would associate the contractual birth of the social order with the birth of language? My thesis is that, despite all Hobbes had experienced of mimetic violence and of the urgent need to prevent its spread, it was only after **World War II** that it became possible to conceive of the human condition as *absolutely* dependent on the deferral of violence. A generative, mimetic anthropology was only conceivable once we had the experience not merely of a society in danger of dissolution but of humanity itself in danger of destruction. What defines the postwar, "postmodern" period is both the magnitude of the danger posed by violence in the nuclear era, which makes its deferral an absolute necessity, and a renewed awareness of the sacrificial component of culture, comparable but on a vaster scale with the insight into sacrifice that **Joseph de Maistre** won from the experience of the execution of **Louis XVI**. The model of the **Holocaust** justified and continues to justify the revolt of the victims, even anti-Semitic "victims," in the postwar era. The most powerful political force in this period has been the guarantee afforded to victimary resentment. Victimary thinking translates any more or less systematic difference in worldly success into an absolute difference between the sacrificed and their sacrificers. As a result, overt structures of domination such as colonialism, apartheid, and racial segregation lost their claim to *de jure* status and were effectively ended; subsequently, physical handicaps, gender, ethnicity, and "sexual orientation" have become sources of victimary status and, to various degrees, the privileges that accompany it.

The victimary thinking that has dominated the political wisdom of the postwar era both hides and reveals its anthropological underpinnings. Although Girard's anthropology takes sacrifice too seriously to make it popular among victimary thinkers, its fundamental insight derives from victimage as the fundamental human solution to the conflict engendered by mimetic desire. A point that most readers of *Violence and the Sacred* failed to grasp was that Girard's understanding of the sacrificial solution to human violence presupposed that it had been superseded--only later would we discover by what. Nor is this the Rousseauian paradox of human culture's always-already supersession of the state of nature; the overcoming of sacrifice is a historical phenomenon that Girard would later situate in the **Mosaic** and **Christian** revelations.

Hobbes created a model of the origin of social order as a remedy for an anarchic state of nature rather than a model of the origin of the human out of pre-human nature. Evolutionary considerations aside, the inhabitants of Hobbes's state of nature must already be human because both their mutual hostility and its contractual solution are dependent on representation. Nor would Hobbes have thought to present contractual government as an improvement on a sacrificial stage of human society, which it would, on the contrary, risk resembling too much.

Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind, as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself.

For such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty or more eloquent or more learned, yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves . . . But this proveth rather that men are in that point equal, than unequal. For there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of any thing than that every man is contented with his share.

From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies. . (*Leviathan*, I, xiii)

Hobbes implicitly recognizes that our capacity for representation both makes us equal in potential violence and generates our propensity to envy. Affirming with dry irony our equality in "wisdom," Hobbes suggests that what matters is the equality of our representations of ourselves: each can imagine himself in the other's place. Yet neither here or elsewhere does he draw the originary and seemingly obvious connection between the symmetrical operations of representation both in fomenting and in deferring conflict.

Let us reexamine the remarkable sequence in Part I, Chapters iii-iv of *Leviathan* that I referred to in [Chronicle 176](#). At the end of Chapter iii ("Of the Consequence or Train of Imaginations"), Hobbes points out that since "whatsoever we imagine is finite," we cannot imagine anything infinite. It follows that our use of the name of God is "not to make us conceive him, for he is incomprehensible . . . but that we may honour him."

In the following chapter ("Of Speech"), with no explicit link between the passages, Hobbes describes language as the gift of God to mankind. ("The first author of speech was God himself, that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight . . .") Language is described as granting humanity the possibility of mutual understanding that distinguishes us from the beasts:

But the most noble and profitable invention of all other, was that of speech, consisting of names or appellations, and their connexion; whereby men register their thoughts, recall them when they are past; and also declare them one to another for mutual utility and conversation; without which, there had been amongst men, neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears, and wolves. (I, iv)

The dissymmetry between these two references to God and human language displays the limits of Hobbes's "originary thinking," and, indeed, of that of the Enlightenment as a whole. From the standpoint of the originary hypothesis, the gift of language and the conception of the sacred are two views of the same event. The originary sign is an ostensive pointing to the sacred center; it is from the outset the bearer of sacrality and its emission, a primordial act of worship. It is through this common gesture that we experience the gift of language "for mutual utility" as permitting us to establish "contract" and "peace."

In presenting language as the mark of the human, Hobbes expels from the human sphere the violence that language is

said to protect us from; lions, bears, and wolves are innocent of the egalitarian human envy presented in Chapter xiii as the source of our own "natural" violence. This expulsion permits Hobbes to treat signification as an instrumental function accorded us by a preexistent deity. If we follow the flow of his text from one chapter to the next, the sign's incapacity to represent its "infinite" object makes it an *act* of worship and only as the object of this act does God grant the sign to us. But this analysis is implicit, "textual" rather than thematic. The act of worship generates God in Hobbes's text, not in his ontology.

The political context of the new anthropology of the Enlightenment, intended to provide a basis for the early modern state, makes it easy to overlook the significance of the social contract as an anthropological model. For Hobbes, the contract is not a historical phenomenon but an a posteriori justification for authoritarian rule. Yet both the violence and the "contract" that defers it are moments of the originary scene of language. The asymmetrical sovereignty of *Leviathan* only extends to a human monarch the sacred difference of the center.

The political aim of securing and preserving order in an emerging bourgeois economy is incompatible with an originary model in which order is coeval with equality. No historical system of governance can be justified by a model that situates the deferral of human violence at the origin of the human itself. As we shall see, even Rousseau, who opened the door to anthropology proper by his ontological demotion of the social and who saw language more as a source of mimetic conflict than of its resolution, remained wedded to a concept of a human "state of nature" to which, for better or worse, order can be brought only from without.

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Last updated

Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Faith and Factoids

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I have always been a **Yankee** fan. My first baseball memories are from the 1949 pennant race, listening on the radio to the final two-game series with the **Red Sox**; the Yanks came in a game down and had to win both. It was the prelude to five straight series victories.

The Yankees have been in the **Bronx** since 1923, yet no one has ever dreamt of calling them the Bronx Yankees. In the old days, the Bronx didn't even have its own post office; it still doesn't have its own team. The Bronx Romantic roots for the most powerful dynasty in American sports without being able to identify with it as *his* home team the way **Brooklynites** used to identify with the **Dodgers**. Because my girl friend was a Dodger fan, we made a few two-hour subway treks out to **Ebbets Field**, which had an altogether different feel from pin-striped **Yankee Stadium**. I could understand how a Bronx girl could be a Dodger fan. They truly were a home team--but it wasn't my home.

I also absorbed in my younger days a good deal of baseball lore, stories and stats about those old-time players, **Cy Young** and **Ty Cobb**, **Christy Mathewson** and **Honus Wagner**, dozens more. But what remains in my mind of all this is more memory than information. I wouldn't fare well on a quiz show and never bring the subject up in conversation. It is something that belongs to me, but not something I *possess*.

The Bronx Yankee fan has faith in a team, housed in his borough, that will never be his own.

In order to affirm the universal human truth as something beyond the human, faith asks us to affirm the truth of a particular discourse as a precondition of our humanity. GA too defines the human by a linguistic affirmation, independently of its specific content. This abstraction is the earmark of the Bronx Romantic.

What makes the Bronx Romantic a man of faith is an intense need for "meaning in life," for generating a sacred narrative about himself in which the intuition of meaningfulness takes the place of religious dogma. Mere ambition has no attraction for him; he can be satisfied only with immortality. Living every moment in the solar gaze of transcendence, he tends to neglect anything so banal as facts.

In symmetrical opposition to this faith is the cult of the **factoid**. Where the Romantic strains his brain to focus on an infinitely meaningful kernel, the factoid master, a man of faith no less than he, is memorizing encyclopedias. Factoids are those superficial facts, not merely known but talked about, that we also call *trivia*. What is trivial, however, is not the names of the kings of **France** or the capitals of the fifty states, but the fact of knowing them--the trivial advantage over the ordinary guy who has to look them up in a reference book--that scores points for the factoid master in the eternal game of one-upmanship. However much the master is resented, he is respected; trivial or not, he knows who won the **Oscar** for best supporting actress in 1942 (**Teresa Wright** for *Mrs Miniver*) and you don't.

We are all experts in something; what makes our expertise, professional or amateur, something other than trivial reflects the fact that it is *specialized*. You can memorize French kings or capitals without having the faintest idea how **Boise** differs from **Denver** or **Louis XVI** from **Charles the Bald**. A specialist of French history or American geography possesses a rich fund of knowledge culled from extensive research; trivia are found in almanacs and the *Guinness Book of World Records*. No knowledge can become trivia until it has been made available to the general public in such a book. A fact becomes a factoid when the excitement of discovering it is replaced by that of knowing it before your neighbor.

True trivia mastery is attained only when one has a set of factoids appropriate for every conversational context. The fund of knowledge required employs much time and many synapses. GA, in contrast, offers a minimal set of ideas it claims to be relevant to any human situation. Like the factoid master, the generative anthropologist provokes resentment, but for just the opposite reason. The one has too many stories to tell, the other too few; both are suspected of holding a faith that puts them outside the normal range of human conversation.

It is a mistake to think of faith as confined within the traditional scope of religious rhetoric. Belief in "life after death," in heaven, hell, or purgatory, is a sign of faith rather than its substance. Whatever we may think about the hereafter, most people behave in this world in such a way as to give meaning to their existence, be it though career ambition or love, not to speak of the subordinate goals that make each day a series of minor tragedies and comedies. Outside the realm of pure terror and pain where one thinks only of survival--and even there--the goals we set for ourselves are based on a faith inseparable from human culture and its representations. Human aspirations, dependent on our possession of language, are incommensurable with the aims of survival and reproduction that we share with animals. Nor can they be understood if language is understood merely as a tool for the manipulation of the environment.

Bronx Romanticism and the factoid cult are two forms of the life of faith. What separates the Romantic from the trivia master is what separated Protestant from Catholic in the Reformation: salvation through faith versus salvation through works. Works too are demonstrations of faith, in the Jewish religion even more than the Catholic. But there is an important difference between a conception of faith that privileges these demonstrations and one that views them as contingent manifestations of a prior state of grace. One says, "by knowing important facts and communicating them to you, I participate along with you in an absolute sense of significance." The other, "our shared absolute sense of significance is demonstrated by my not having to know any facts." The factoid master performs good works by placing his trivia in conversation. He knows that you too could look them up in the almanac, but the fact that a beggar could get a job does not diminish the sanctity of alms. The minimalist Romantic, on the other hand, disdains mere local utility; he contributes his sublime ideas to humanity as a whole.

GA is my way of justifying Bronx Romanticism to those born far from Yankee Stadium. Its minimalism locates the priority of form over content, of faith over works, of hedgehog over fox, at the very origin of humanity. The sense of dispossession from the positive world of facts that leads me to find refuge in transcendence and abstraction can be vindicated only if this intuition is the right one after all, the generative principle of the human, the missing link between positive science and humanistic faith.

The theory of the "little bang" expresses my faith that my own experience of significance is universal, that my need to communicate some significant truth to the world is inherited from the origin of human representation. My intuition tells me that this same need to participate in significance drives everyone else as well; it is inseparable from our participation in language and in human collectivities whose primary need is to protect themselves from internal violence.

Religious people will tell you that you "really" believe in God even if you deny it. The person of faith can conceive of others only through the mediation of faith; he translates the other's self-concept into the terms of his own. Although this is not an argument for any particular faith, it argues the truth of faith as such, the minimal truth that the originary hypothesis seeks to capture.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

November Choices

No. 217: Saturday, November 4, 2000

As the **Middle East** slips back into **Intifada** mode, I thought I'd say something before it's too late about the current election campaign.

One feature of **American** politics that **Europeans** have a difficult time understanding is the extreme significance in two-party democracy of appeals to the "center." This encourages our presidential campaigns to become personality contests centered on the least informed and least concerned voters. Although not all swing voters are ignorant and indifferent, they surely average a lot more so than those who are ideologically committed to one side or the other. Barring the extremes of **Goldwater** or **McGovern**, you are voting less for an individual than for a party representing a set of general principles that you hope to see translated into legislation, foreign policy, and--increasingly crucial in our litigious age--judicial appointments.

The democratic process, designed by the intellectuals of the 18th century, was not designed to please those of our own day. (I'm not a big fan of **William Buckley**, but I certainly agree with his preference for being governed by the first thousand names in the **Boston** phone book rather than by the **Harvard** faculty.) Universal suffrage is a reality only when the politicians must appeal to each individual voter, and the great mass of undecided force them to do this far better than the well-organized and focused factions of either side who put up the money for the campaign.

This being said, some thoughts on the election.

Gore has always repelled me. His maudlin exploitation of family tragedies in past elections (not this one; the focus groups must have dissuaded him) discredits him in my eyes far more than **Clinton's** sexual adventures. Telling us he created the **Internet** and inspired *Love Story* or listened as a child to union songs not yet written is not much better. (Shades of **Hillary Clinton's** claim that she was named for **Edmund Hillary** although she was born before he climbed **Mt. Everest**.) On the other side of the ledger, **Bush's** naming **Jesus** as his favorite political philosopher--without telling us a thing about Jesus' "political philosophy"--is a bit much. (My favorite political philosopher is **Hobbes**, if only for the phrase "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.") Yet I guess the real importance of Jesus' political philosophy isn't what one can say about it in a debate, but what one does to implement it. Sanctimoniousness aside, **WWJD** (What Would Jesus Do?) is a pretty good rule of thumb.

Isn't this personality rather than ideology? Yes, but the personality-watchers have a point. The crucial problems of the

post-millennial age are not likely to be finding the best tax cut plan or the best way of "saving" **Social Security**. We must prepare ourselves for unpredictable world crises and perhaps domestic ones as well. Terrorists are getting smarter and the resentment that fuels them is getting no weaker. Voters are not ill-advised to observe these potential "leaders of the Free World" for indications of who would perform better in a crisis.

In such circumstances, I'd rather have a modest guy who knows how to make decisions but is willing to take advice than someone obsessed with his self-image to the point of inventing outlandish and easily refuted fictions. As to the question of how I would vote if the character traits of the candidates were reversed, my answer is that **Republicans** are just not like that--not even **Newt Gingrich**, with all his self-importance.

In the old days, **Democrats** weren't like that either. No political figure is a bigger hero in my eyes than **Harry Truman**. Even my K.C. Republican in-laws have a grudging respect for the guy. (Truman's **Independence, MO** is a suburb of **Kansas City**.) Neither Gore nor Bush have the grass-roots quality of this middle-class soldier, haberdasher, and small-town politician, the guy who said "the buck stops here" and fired that old blowhard **Douglas MacArthur**, not to speak of desegregating the military and recognizing **Israel**. Yet if you subject both of them to the Truman test, I think you'd know which one to vote for. No doubt Gore's "fighting for you" echoes Truman's rhetoric and his marriage seems as solid as that of Harry and **Bess**, but can you picture Truman pleading that he's "his own man"? Bush, whatever his limitations, doesn't have that kind of problem.

Let me not belabor this point, and, instead, attempt to define what is at stake in this election beyond the conflict of personalities and even of parties.

The disappearance of the serious third-party challenges of the past two elections corresponds to the decline of the "third way" between liberalism (in its American sense) and conservatism. **Perot's** success was that of a process-oriented positivist in opposition to what he credibly labeled interest-group-centered ideologies. One way to interpret this is as a last political statement of the "middle class," the people who (used to) shop at **Sears** and drink twenty-five-cent coffee. Today the candidates of the major parties have reassured their bases and are seeking the votes of the people in the middle, but being in the middle doesn't make them a middle class. The fact that Gore, in his populist tirades, uses the term "middle-class" as a synonym for "lower-income," signifies only that the very sense of a middle has been lost. Not that long ago, it was clear to the members of the middle class both who was above them and who below--and not just the "underclass."

Does this mean our society is becoming more polarized? More "diverse"? I'll just say that anyone who believes that exchange is the essential human activity can't really be upset about the revival of a marginally more adversarial politics. Yet I would note the difference between the conflict today and that of a generation or two ago, in the days of the **New and Old Left**.

Although the term "socialism" is not incapable of making a comeback, the model incarnated by the **USSR** is dead; the people who once swore by it are now busy denouncing our **Cold-War** bullying of our feeble adversary. Smashing the "capitalist" social order has become a marginal stance and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future. The most extreme rhetoric on either side of the present divide is not likely to lead to violence à la **1968** or even to large-scale disaffection from the political process. It should not be forgotten that, during the **Vietnam War**, the Left considered socialism the superior system not only in Vietnam but also in the **United States** (ideally without abolishing parliamentary democracy), nor that they were convinced that socialist states would eventually surpass capitalist ones in productivity as well as social justice. Back in the **1930s**, needless to say, the Left's positions were even more extreme.

The conservative **Right** is by definition without utopian dreams, so without the downside of world-class disillusionments. (The **Radical Right**, truly represented not by **Pat Robertson** but by **Hitler** and his residual worshipers, is really much closer to the Left, notably in its disdain for the democratic process.) Republicans are far less inclined than Democrats to dream of replacing the market system with something else. Although the real base of the Republicans is in small, not "big" business, there is little clientele for withdrawal from either global or domestic exchange. The polarization of political styles between the parties, reflecting the polarization of the interest groups that support them, suggests not so much divergence on the issues as broad general agreement that permits more intense

debate on the margins. This extends even to foreign policy. The fact that the Democrats have in the last few years become more activist in this area than the Republicans only underscores the lack of any fundamental disagreement on aims. Not very long ago the idea of "projecting American power" was viewed with horror by mainstream liberals; today the difference comes down to the Democrats' marginally greater propensity for "idealism" and marginally inferior attention to the nuances of diplomatic *gravitas* (*viz.* the recent shots of **Mme Albright** reviewing **North Korean** troops with **KJI**).

No member of a university department is unaware of the difference between large differences of opinion and intense ones; no reader of **Girard**--or **Dostoevsky**--can be unaware that the two often vary in inverse proportion. Faculty members who have all their intellectual prejudices in common engage in impassioned conflicts over an appointment or an exam result. This sort of thing may be unhealthy in a small group, but it is not such a bad thing in the national political forum of so large, wealthy, powerful, and diverse (without quotes) a country as the USA. The more debate there is in the center of things, the better the nation will prepare itself for both the prolongation of the current prosperity in certain areas and its inevitable cessation in others. (The relative lack of debate on foreign policy, on the other hand, strikes me as rather a good thing.) It may be true that neither candidate in this election has been able to articulate, save perhaps in one area (see below), a distinctive political position--as opposed to associating himself with distinctive political symbols--but in today's context, one's starting position is less important than one's contribution to the effectiveness of the political process through engaging debate and negotiating solutions.

While I am in this somewhat platitudinous vein, let me add a few words on the best-articulated issue of this campaign: that of **public education**. Like millions of other public school graduates of earlier times, I find it hard to relate to the horror stories about the **K-12** world: drugs, guns, stopped-up toilets, terrorized teachers, disrupted classrooms. In my experience, not all that much learning went on in the old schools--I could tell a different kind of horror story, even about classes at the **Bronx High School of Science**--but the baby-sitting was at worst a mode of "socialization" that made us eager to absorb more concentrated doses of information at a later date.

We can forget the "cultural" explanations: the "decline of civic values," porno on the Internet, "bowling alone," raves, rap, road rage, whatever. **Durkheim** worried about suicide and *anomie* over a century ago and we're still going strong. The problem of creating "solidarity" in the modern exchange-system should not, in my view, be approached from the **Rousseauian** standpoint of opposing what is "natural" to humanity to the excesses of modernity. By replacing the sacred by the "natural," Rousseau created the key modern variant of that hoariest of cultural modes: telling us how much better things were in the old days. (The sign is always greater, "older," than its referents; this is true already of the **originary sign** and its referent.) It is easy to repeat the **Ur-cliché** all the while brandishing statistics and sounding very *à la page*. But it always comes down to saying: "in the past, whatever innovations we permitted, there were still some basic human values that remained untouched. But *now* etc. etc. etc." The only people who bother to defend modernity against this ancient diatribe are a few bohemian esthetes--unless it takes an **anti-PC** tack by seeming to condemn the practices of a "subaltern" group, at which point the academic masses hasten to insist, in what they fail to realize is an echo of old Durkheim himself, on the "social construction" of all values: who are we to condemn the **Other's** culture? To this in turn respond the evolutionary psychologists... but at this point the debate has become too esoteric for our purposes.

How do I propose to avoid this overly-trodden path? By rejecting the Rousseauian premise along with its pseudo-Durkheimian antithesis. Things aren't just getting worse, but it *does* matter if they do. I would rather begin from the assumptions that human societies all show about the same level of concern for our biological ("natural") needs and that any ongoing society demonstrates by its very survival that it maintains a sufficient level of cohesion ("solidarity"). Along with Rousseau, **Gibbon** is the secret model for our apocalyptic thinkers, but the barbarians are not at the gates: they are watching our TV reruns.

Once we exorcise the apocalyptic temptation we can address the real issue, not whether American, Western, or global society is falling apart, but what kind of equilibrium it is adopting and how we can--assuming "we" agree--inflect this equilibrium. American society works pretty well with porn on the Internet and obscene rap songs; if we want to change this, it isn't because we're afraid of social chaos (hard to make a case for this at current crime rates) but because, like the late **Steve Allen**, we don't like the kind of social stability that includes such things.

Enter the public education system, dominated by teachers' (and their unions') desire for "professionalization." Just try to get a permanent position in a public school and you'll soon discover that two PhDs and forty years of university teaching experience are mere chaff to the grain of **Ed Courses** and "supervised" teaching. Now the Ed courses of today, in spirit even more than matter, distill the most imbecilic strain of **PC**, which defines respect for human equality as refusing to do anything that risks generating a perception of invidious differences. In plain English, the worst thing is to make anyone (except those in the "majority") feel "inferior." Not that I'm convinced it's really so terrible to put off reality until college--the US has by everyone's agreement the world's best universities. But along with plain old incompetence (arguably greater than in the past now that the old teacher pool of intelligent young women has moved upmarket), **Ed-School PC** is surely the single most obvious factor in our K-12 problem. If I had to listen to the sort of inane gender-ethnic propaganda that passes for history and culture in the schools, I'd blast those rap records too; maybe I'd start cutting a few myself. These expressions of naked resentment are an inevitable reaction to the "nice" **NEA**-approved resentments against the "patriarchy," "dead white males," "Western civilization," and the rest.

Solutions? **Vouchers** are a possibility; for starters, you can guess which candidate the NEA likes better.

George Sivertson informs me that on a TV debate this week, **Ben Stein** used the proverb of **the Hedgehog and the Fox** to champion Bush over his "foxy" opponent. I'm happy to give one big vote to someone who knows **One Big Thing**.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Post-Victimary Thinking in the Holy Land

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One hindrance to **GA's** popularity way back in the 20th century was its tendency to arouse resentment. This is itself a convincing argument in its favor, but only for someone who already accepts its premises. In a misguided moment of academic optimism, I once applied for a grant for a project on **Resentment**. After my proposal was duly rejected, I requested the comments of the grant committee. Aside from one brave soul who had defended the project, the comments expressed righteous indignation... that I dared to equate righteous indignation with resentment.

A while ago (see *Chronicles* [208](#) & [209](#)), I attempted to distinguish between the postmodern and a new **post-millennial** era, inaugurated respectively by the **Holocaust** and the fall of the **Berlin Wall**. It is easy to understand why the victimary thinking of the postmodern age was inhospitable to yet fascinated by **Girard's** anthropology of the scapegoat. If the model for all unequal relations is that of the **Nazis** and the **Jews**, it is obscene to postulate that human society depends from the outset on such relations. At the same time, it is a very short step from positing our dependency on victims to proclaiming, in good victimary fashion, our guilt for their persecution.

The post-millennial age has reluctantly abandoned socialism; what evidence do we have for thinking it is abandoning victimary thinking as well? Is there any sign that such thinking is becoming less functional in the contemporary world?

One not merely symbolic measure of this functionality is conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. In historical terms, **Israel** is a direct product of the Holocaust. At its founding in 1948, it had the sympathy of the titular leader of the world's victimary forces (the **USSR** was the first country to recognize Israel), but this sympathy was quickly lost

when it unoblingly won several wars against its invading neighbors.

The Holocaust was "the end" of traditional Western **antisemitism**; the creation and survival of Israel during the postmodern era drew on this sentiment. Conversely, the revival of antisemitism after this "end," particularly among **Moslems** and those in their sphere of influence, including many **African-Americans**, reflects the instability of the victimary position. Prior to **WWII**, people were proud to call themselves antisemites: antisemitism was a self-confidently indignant defense against the presumably all-powerful **Jew** (see [Chronicle 155](#)). Since the war, antisemitism no longer dares speak its name; it operates both by calling into question the Jews' victimary credentials through Holocaust denial, and, pointing to the **Palestinian** situation, condemning **Zionism** as a form of "fascism."

As the living guarantees of this condemnation, the Palestinians are called upon to present themselves as exemplary victims. Many witnesses have remarked on the joy of martyrdom manifested, for example, at the funerals of young protesters; throwing stones at armed soldiers risks and is in fact designed to invite deadly retaliation, generating in the process new martyrs for the cause. World reaction is divided, but it is far harder for the friends of Israel to denounce the Palestinian martyrdom as self-inflicted when the bodies lie in full sight than for her enemies to denounce the "excessive violence" of the Israeli retaliation, whatever the provocation.

We may say that the post-millennial era succeeds the postmodern when victimary thinking loses its usefulness as a means of judging institutions, when it no longer makes sense to distinguish between victims and persecutors. There have always been intractable political conflicts; the crucial question is whether these are limited and *sui generis* or local examples of a more general conflict that they may eventually ignite. There are many cases in which opposing nationalities make near-symmetrical claims: **Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka**, the former territories of **Yugoslavia**. It is no accident that these are all restricted conflicts with relatively little effect on the international economy. In the really significant conflicts of our day, the relations between the two sides, and the mutual accusations they give rise to, are far less symmetrical: they oppose modern, democratic societies to those of the "third world."

The greatest triumph of postwar victimary epistemology was in demonstrating that **colonialism** and **apartheid** could be abolished without shattering the social order. It forced on the world the conclusion that overtly unequal institutions, offensive not merely to those subjected to them but to the universal human intuition of equality, are *ipso facto* unjust institutions; or, in more historical terms, that the ethical awareness consonant with our present level of information sharing and economic development makes it inconceivable that the offense of these institutions to the originary principle of reciprocal dialogue could be outweighed by positive factors, say, in the economic sphere. In contrast, the *de facto* domination of industrial over pre-industrial societies offers no clear venue for victimary thought. If the poor countries are "victims" of the rich, how is this victimization to be ended or compensated? More crucially, is this approach to the question really the most effective way to make poor countries richer?

The specifics of the Israeli-Palestinian situation allow us to sharpen our analysis. Here the first-world vs third-world opposition is complicated by territorial and religious factors. Whatever the ancient claims of the Jews to the land, the Palestinians can always point to their recent collective presence. Whatever the Jews' pre- and post-Holocaust justification for Zionism, the Palestinians can present themselves as innocent victims of its demographic imperative. Just as the unilateral destruction of the Jews in Europe imposed the victimary paradigm in the postmodern era, so the undecidable status of the Jews in the **Middle East** provides a model for the dilemmas of the post-millennial. Can it be a coincidence that the ultimate ambivalence of the role of the Jews as the **Other** of Western civilization is revealed at just the moment when it is becoming necessary to construct, on the basis of the Western and related "first-world" economies, a non-exclusionary global civilization?

If victimary thinking is outdated, on the basis of what paradigm are the conflicting claims of **Arabs** and Jews to be adjudicated? The apparent lesson of the peace process whose fragility we have seen is that victimary claims are unbounded and that both parties to a dialogue must ultimately renounce them. There are no relative victims; the binary structure of sacrifice is unsuitable for negotiation.

The non-punitive end of apartheid, including amnesty for most of its enforcers, might be cited as a counterexample. But whatever compromises the black majority has made with the white minority in **South Africa**, it was never required to renounce its condemnation of apartheid. Conversely, the enforcers of apartheid may not have been

punished, but they were not allow to retain any justification for their doctrine. Nor would a South African solution appease the Palestinians; in their eyes, not unequal treatment but the very presence of the Jews on "their" land constitutes victimization.

This and other examples suggest that, in contrast to the relative stability of the cold-war era, the post-millennial age may well be a "time of troubles." However crude it may be, the victimary criterion is relatively objective; the elimination of overt institutional domination brings clear ethical progress as well as social stability. Now that only the hard cases remain--including such things as the oppression of women and minorities in "third-world" countries that themselves claim victimary status--the idea that an appeal to the overarching principle of reciprocal justice can settle all disputes is no longer tenable. This does not mean that we must resign ourselves to the uncontrollable violence of these conflicts; on the contrary, vigilance is required to prevent them from igniting a global conflagration. In the international sphere as well as the domestic, the greatest danger is utopianism. Just as we have had to renounce our dreams of socialism as the solution to conflict within individual societies, so are we forced to renounce the idea that to resolve international disputes it suffices to "take the side of the victim."

Nietzsche's critique of **Christianity** as the religion of resentment makes him the prophet of the modern rejection of victimary thinking. The irony is that what made the victimary thought of the postwar era far more radical than the expressions of national and class resentment in Nietzsche's own day was the reaction to the horrors brought about by the Nazis' not altogether unfaithful adaptation of Nietzschean thought. The "superman" who stands above the petty conflicts of the mutually resentful is no more than a pernicious and self-serving mask for the man of resentment. (This is a pervasive theme of the various dramatizations of the **Leopold-Loeb** murder, such as **Hitchcock's** *Rope*.) If there were indeed a superman, he would not consider himself such, nor would he need Nietzsche's philosophy to come into being; he would live like **Jesus** (not Nietzsche's **Zarathustra**) in the assurance that his kingdom is not of this world. We do not want to be supermen; perhaps we can be **artists** remaking in our image a world where information transfer in the service of the imagination increasingly trumps material constraints. But where does this leave us with respect to the political problems of the post-millennial era?

The cure for the failure of socialist utopia was relatively simple. As soon as one realizes that exchange is fundamental to human relations, one learns to focus one's hopes for human betterment within the market system rather than on working for its destruction. To the extent that socialism hangs on as a form of government, it becomes, as in **China** or even **Cuba** (where participation in the global economy consists in reopening the fleshpots of old **Havana** to dollar tourism), an authoritarian accompaniment to the market system rather than a substitute for it. The "end of history" consecrates the realization that the stable system within which the human social order can continue to evolve has already been found.

The analogous solution to first-third world conflict in general and Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular is to be found in the global economic system, whose beginnings not surprisingly provoke violent reactions among the diehards of victimary thinking, the remnants of the sixties' **New Left**. Can the global economy integrate the societies of the Middle East that have so far been unable to contribute anything to it but raw materials? Can we tell the Palestinians to stop hating the Israelis and start writing software?

For what it's worth, I think the answer is a qualified "yes." If there is any possibility of peace in the **Holy Land**, it will come via the economic rather than the political process. Which is to say that the goal of the political process should be to separate the two sides and to "economize" their relationship as much as possible until better days become conceivable.

The great symbolic point of contention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the one that has apparently blown the peace process apart, is sovereignty over **Jerusalem**. This controversy is an exemplary case for the abandonment of victimary logic. Jerusalem is and always has been the holy city of the Jews. If it has significance for **Islam** and Christianity, it is only as a derivative of this prior sacred status. Christianity aside, Islam has holier cities, over which it exercises complete control, forbidding non-Moslems even to enter them. (Imagine if the Jews suggested running Jerusalem the way the Moslems run **Mecca**.) Israel acquired sovereignty over the **Old City** only after the 1967 war in which Israel was invaded by its neighbors--the original model of one side throwing stones and the other shooting

back. Under **Jordanian** rule, we should not forget, synagogues and Jewish holy places were trashed, and no Jewish access to the latter, including the **Western Wall**, was permitted. This contrasts sharply with the access and control Israel has granted to Moslems at the **Dome of the Rock**.

As an ultimate gesture to the victimary logic of the peace process, **Barak** made an offer that no Israeli government had dared openly even to discuss: sharing sovereignty over Jerusalem with the Palestinians. Because the Palestinians were the "original" inhabitants, because they had lost land and been occupied by Israeli forces, because, in a word, they could make a case for being considered victims of Israel, the appropriate solution seemed to be to give them a share of the **Holy City** while requiring nothing from them in return but peace, meaning an end to stone-throwing and presumably to resentment.

As we saw, it didn't work out that way. The style, if not the substance, of Barak's offer offended Palestinian sensibilities, particularly those of **Arafat**. The crude but effective victimary technique of throwing stones and getting the Israelis to shoot back was used to destroy the viability of Barak's offer. Part of this may justifiably be put down to Arafat's manipulation of the Palestinian "street," but the latter was no mere passive puppet. Clearly all the Israeli concessions of the peace process, including this last one, had done nothing to allay the seething rage displayed in the **Ramallah** lynchings. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the nearness of the day on which this rage would have to be abandoned made peace increasingly intolerable.

This only apparently paradoxical process reveals an underside of victimary logic that is observable elsewhere in the aftermath of its postwar triumphs. Most post-colonial societies are still just that, dominated politically by resentment against their former masters and the developed world in general, mired in political and economic backwardness. With regard to the Middle East, it has often been remarked that the enthusiasm of the crowds for yelling "death to the Jews!" and burning the American flag is proportional to their utter lack of any other means of expressing oppositional political sentiments. It's a lot safer to burn **Uncle Sam** in effigy than **Uncle Saddam**.

This does not imply that the victimary epistemology that led to the victories of the civil rights and colonial liberation movements was in error. What it does mean is that elimination of *de jure* differences that directly violate our intuition of human equality only sharpens collective awareness of any remaining *de facto* differences and the resentment that accompanies it, generating continued appeals to victimary logic that fuel a symmetrical backlash of their own. The victimary dies hard, and its potential for provoking conflict can be defused only by the gradual and always imperfect abandonment of resentment by both the former "victims" and their former "oppressors." Just as the "final conflict" of socialist utopia was a lie, so is the hope given out by victimary thinking that eliminating an oppressive institution suffices to remove the resentment it produced; still more pernicious is the converse notion that the remaining resentments of the former victims are in themselves proof of continuing oppression.

We should be wary of giving further nourishment to victimary thinking. Israel's retention of control over Jerusalem while permitting the birth of a Palestinian state would put an end to the current peace process without mutual affection but hopefully without full-scale combat. By rejecting victimary logic, the Israelis would take us a step further beyond an era dominated by the epistemology of the victim. The coming times may well be more unsettled than those we have known since WWII, but if we manage to avoid blowing ourselves up, we will emerge from them with a clearer understanding of humanity--with a better anthropology.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Victim's Hard Death and Democracy's Moral Paradox

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The first part of the title is meant to dispel any suspicions either that I think that victimary thought is about to disappear or that I am unaware of the irony of "killing" the victim by declaring the end of the victimary era. It is certainly neither my hope nor my expectation that we will abandon the notion of (in)justice. What I am suggesting, however, is that we have gone beyond the point where justice can best be served by identifying success with persecution and failure with martyrdom.

The real challenge of emerging from victimary thinking is thinking from love rather than resentment. Love is not a synonym for (symbolic) masochism. I cringe every time I witness a male using "she" instead of "he," vicariously experiencing his self-abnegatory submission to a force greater than himself, his desire to avoid blackmail, to get invited to conferences... but also his sense of righting a wrong, making up for past injustice, showing he is a good sport, adopting the Other's pronoun as a small price to pay for a (white-male) privileged existence. . . But this is not my idea of how to convert resentment into love.

I think a far better model is to be found in our personal, as opposed to political or even professional, relations. Whatever **Orwellian** horrors **PC** has wrought in the public sphere, it is undeniable that private relations between men and women, and even across racial divides, have become more frank and reciprocal in recent years. No doubt victimary rhetoric and its backlash do invade these conversations, but I think that rather than infecting them, these rhetorics serve to immunize and thereby to preserve the space of intimate dialogue from the fall into politics.

The most significant feature of the transition from the **Marxian** model of inequality as the opposition between capital and labor to the gender/race/ethnicity/sexual orientation/abledness dichotomies of our era is one not usually remarked: the potential and real *intimacy* of the respective "oppressors" and "victims" under the new dispensation. The impersonal contractual relation of capitalist and worker is replaced by a complex of personal relations more characteristic of *Gemeinschaft* than *Gesellschaft*. This is clearest in the major transition in victimary thinking from **class** (and **race** in the civil-rights sense) to **sex**, a transition that **Simone de Beauvoir's** *The Second Sex* (1949) anticipated and helped, we might say, to **engender**. I recall from the **1968** era the women of the **New Left** beginning to spin off rooms of their own in which to raise the issue of their inferior status within the "revolutionary" cadres of the **SDS** or **NUC**. Instead of fighting the faceless Establishment, they were contesting their own marriages and love-relationships. It is my strong impression that this opening of discourse, however shrill it may have felt at first, has led to far more mutual understanding and reciprocity between men and women than in the past. Personal experience and observation both tell me that mutual respect and essential equality within couples has never been greater, perhaps never in history.

This gives some hope that, in the long term, the frictions now felt in the public sphere will similarly dissipate. Meanwhile, there is wisdom in letting the strongest resentments speak loudest, provided this takes place within our republican system of "checks and balances"--one designed for very different kinds of differences of opinion from those we experience today, yet, in its prudently abstract view of the mimetically desirous human condition, applicable to these as well.

As a result of its refusal to pronounce on the legitimacy of these resentments, **GA** is sometimes accused--whether "fairly" or not is not at issue--of doing no more than expressing less socially useful resentments of its, or my, own. There is an unavoidable ambivalence in a theory that purports to make the need to contain resentment's potential violence the "motor of history." Does such a theory "scapegoat" resentment? Or, on the contrary, does it justify and

even glorify it? We seek a "theory of justice" chastened by the difficulty of extricating a core of injustice from the resentment that surrounds it.

Insofar as history has taught us a gross solution to this difficulty, it is to favor the market model over its "socialist" transcendence. Now, whether or not the market is indeed politically neutral, the rhetorics it generates surely are not. When **Al Gore** insists that he's "fighting for *you*," he is denying the market-system's ability to render you your just desserts. Yet, in a broader conception of the market-system, Gore is a loyal servant of the **Republic** acting within its rules by offering his policies on the marketplace of political ideas that acts as a necessary counterweight to strictly economic exchange. This observation, however, resolves the issue only in part. On one hand--let's call it the "right" hand--the resolve to act within the democratic system involves implicit acceptance that the other guy's position is as legitimate as one's own (something that, even in their least civil moments, the presidential debaters expressed by such language as "my opponent and I have a disagreement"). But, on the "left" hand, it is felt that the very idea that the market basically makes the right decisions and needs only minor correction is immoral. Forgetting about the fringe of the so-called "radical right," **Democrats** are undeniably more self-righteous than **Republicans**. To agree with the Democrats is not to contest this judgment, but rather to accept as justified their self-righteous defense of the victims of the market-system.

One of those '68 slogans was that when there's a controversy, instead of coming down on one side or the other it's better to "teach the conflict." This poor man's Hegelianism, hoping for rather than creating synthesis, shows a faith in the democratic process and in the openness of history than neither **Hegel** nor **Fukuyama** have demonstrated. In the lofty terms of the present discussion, this faith means recognizing that **the paradoxical opposition between moralists and amoralists who agree to disagree within a context of moral neutrality is precisely the equilibrium position of mature democracy**. We can understand this paradoxical structure by recalling the category of "transcendence" that the existentialists inherited from Hegel via **Heidegger**. The point is no longer some stable "synthesis," but a going-beyond into an always unstable position outside, yet soon once again inside, the system. Liberal democracy, the diametrical opposite of **Marcuse's** unidimensional dystopia, rather than expelling the outside, admits it inside. In so doing, no doubt, it is "coopting" it. But rather than destroying negativity, cooptation guarantees its renewal, ensuring that the outside will be constantly recreated by new people with new agendas rather than solidifying into a revolutionary "mass," with consequences we can predict all too well.

Let me now apply these observations to two "current events": the election crisis, and a recent experience in academia.

Some Girardians have been tempted by the indecisiveness of the presidential vote to assimilate elections to arbitrary and/or sacrificial operations. I don't think **Girard's** anthropological achievement is honored by attempts to decide "who is the scapegoat/victim" in a democratic election. The function of human institutions is not to disguise their victimary basis so that only the possessors of the gnostic secret disseminated by **COV&R** can penetrate their "deep structure" and find the hidden victim. All gnosticism shows a lack of respect for human history, and for humanity itself. (No doubt ultimate criteria are lacking; it may be, as **Voegelin** thought, that it is the whole modern experiment, emphatically including democracy, that is irredeemably gnostic. If this is so, an awful lot of people are going to die violent deaths before the world can be brought back to its pre-industrial senses.) Elective office, that great **Athenian** invention, is surely an ethical improvement on either dictatorship or anarchy, let alone human sacrifice. But when the system fails to work properly, not because of glitches but simply because the decision required from it falls within its natural margin of error, we are suddenly faced with the revelation that all systems are ultimately arbitrary--the point being, we should not forget, to make the arbitrariness as "ultimate" as possible.

The most profound revelation of the election is to remind us of something we all know but would rather forget about: the impossibility of neutrality. There are no "honest brokers" because there is no one without a preference; none of those who claim this role have enough credibility to be trusted by those whom their decision will harm. Each side has its legal arguments, as lawyers are wont to create, none clearly superior to the other's. In the end, what really counts for each side is who wins. Each appeal to our sense of fairness is predicated on second-guessing the results of that fairness: on the one hand, respect the objectivity of the process, stop the recounts... and choose **Bush**, on the other, allow each voice to be heard, continue the recounts... and elect **Gore**. The objective observer is suddenly faced with the realization that he is incapable of rendering an objective decision. But at this point, instead of talking about

arbitrarily chosen victims, we should begin counting our blessings. For the difference between the two possible outcomes is not all that great; as I said in the election [Chronicle](#), the intensity of the debate is proportional to its narrowness. An appropriate parallel, one that Bush might appreciate, is with the **World Series**: we rooted passionately for one team or the other, yet victory or defeat didn't make all that much difference. We should be happy that we can draw this parallel, which is only now beginning to apply to **French** elections, and certainly didn't apply to the battles under the **Weimar Republic** between the **Communists** and the **Nazis**.

As for academic life: the other day, I attended a meeting of the **UCLA Academic Senate**, a body that prides itself in being the most powerful in the state university system that gives more power than any other to its faculty. On the agenda was the report of a committee appointed by the Administration to study "gender equity." The substance of the report was that, measured by numbers of female graduate students and PhDs in various fields, women were "under-utilized" on campus and that new hiring, as well as promotions, should take this into account.

I had to endure the self-righteousness of several highly successful representatives of a self-declared victimary group, speaking loudly into the mike, cheerfully confident of their position, in a context that permitted no opposition nor more than the most timid doubt concerning the quality of their statistics, which were based entirely on attendance at or graduation from a postgraduate institution and (as one brave soul pointed out) lacked any measure of the prestige of the institution, let alone of the qualifications of the individual graduates for university teaching positions.

This prompted me, if only in compensation for the times I had sat through more distasteful meetings in silence, to make a few cautionary observations about the euphemism of "gender equity"--after which, following one (male) speaker's enthusiastic reference to the "good will" of the group, the meeting was adjourned.

I reflected afterward not simply on whether I had "made a difference" (surely not) but on what point I had really wanted to make. Although my own Department is blissfully gynocentric, there may well be "underutilization" in others. And, in any case, can one really claim that the unpleasantness of privileging "oppressed" groups outweighs the social value of "diversity," even if presumably objective criteria of achievement must be bent just a bit? It is not, after all, a question of hiring incompetents, merely those whom we might have rated second (or fifth) but about whom, on second thought, and with some financial encouragement from the Dean, we might be willing to change our minds, presumably otherwise conditioned to choosing candidates "who look like ourselves."

This situation presents, as the intelligent reader will have already surmised, a variant of the paradox discussed above. The Left takes a moral stance against the institutional status quo, but on a higher level demonstrates its faith in the fairness of the institution by asking it to validate this stance without abandoning its "objective" policies. We aren't asked (heaven forbid) to set *quotas*, merely to promote "diversity." The Best Candidate will be hired, but it will just happen (more often than in the past) to be someone of the "underutilized" gender. After all, State law prohibits consideration of gender in hiring.

The important difference between the two variants, of course, is that, on the national scene, the moralistic left and the complacent right are evenly matched, whereas on the gender equity issue everyone in the Senate is on the same side. The Girardian who finds elections equivalent to drawing straws to see who will be eaten should surely leap at the chance to assimilate this unanimous group to a lynch mob. But there is no one to lynch, not even those White Males whose retirement is being anxiously awaited. Having dared to speak in skepticism, I was neither stoned nor even hissed, merely politely ignored.

My conclusion is that there is a wisdom in the institutions of democracy, where ideas are exchanged as well as goods, that surpasses that of its members. What need is there for me to deny the ultimate judiciousness of greasing the squeakier wheel? "Gender equity" need not imply, as I feared for a moment, an inexorable political pressure that will not cease until 51% of the faculty are female; it is a means for relieving the excess resentment on the part of a group whose numbers have been increasing rather more slowly than their "rising expectations." This process will generate a compensatory resentment in males; I need not act on this by anticipation, but may rest assured that the resentments will eventually even themselves out. This has already begun to occur in the general public, with a result that **California**, and the **UC Board of Regents**, have banned affirmative action. (I cannot help but applaud this result--**Ward Connerly** is someone I greatly admire--yet when I see how little these results are respected within the

university, how strongly it is committed to circumventing the law in the name of "diversity," I wonder if the latter ban was not premature.)

These reflections lead me to feel justified in treating burning questions of injustice as conflicting resentments. The beauty of our system is precisely that it neither forces us (Republicans) to accept the equation between resentment and injustice, nor does it prevent us (Democrats) from doing so.

Such reflections do not, however, answer the more apocalyptic complaints of those who see the world on a global scale not as composed of kleptocracies gradually moving toward democratic prosperity but of poor countries being bled by the rich. I'll try to say something about this in a forthcoming *Chronicle*.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Originary Thoughts on Sexuality

No. 220: Saturday, November 25, 2000

Georges Bataille's *L'érotisme* (1957), more graphically titled in the English translation *Death and Sensuality*, is a sloppily constructed work, lacking rigor and even consistency. Yet it still remains the most serious attempt to integrate human sexuality into what may broadly be called Durkheimian anthropology. We should appreciate Bataille's effort all the more today, when the sexual domain has become the near-exclusive preserve of "gender studies" that sees in sexual difference only the "socially constructed" domination of one sex by the other, and when anthropology itself has been largely reduced to a dust-storm of case studies.

No doubt the biological link between sexuality and death--asexual animals don't die, they just divide--is a weak reed on which to hang a cultural theory. As Bataille well knew, only in human sexuality and attitudes toward death does awareness of this connection become a factor in determining behavior; whether this awareness is already implicit in life itself is a question for theology rather than science. But Bataille's explorations of the link between the sexual, the violent, and the sacred, carried out with a far surer anthropological intuition than **Freud's**, have not been improved upon, nor even revisited in a truly exploratory spirit. (Most books on Bataille are either sensationalist, hagiographical, or, most often, both.) It is curious that our "uninhibited" interest in sex has not made a dent in Bataille's understanding of the fundamentally transgressive nature of human sexuality. Bataille's critique of the anthropological passion for the **incest taboo** is one that forty-odd years of ethnological monographs have done nothing to dispel:

The interdict [*interdit*] that opposes sexual freedom in us is general, universal; particular interdictions are its variable aspects.

I am astonished to be the first to say this so clearly. It is banal to isolate a particular "interdict," such as the prohibition of incest, which is only an "aspect," and to seek its explanation wholly outside its universal basis, which is the formless and universal interdiction [*interdit*] of which sexuality is the object. (*L'érotisme*, p. 58; quotes are the author's)

In the structuralist paradigm as developed by **Lévi-Strauss** in *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*--whose limitations are dissected by Bataille in one of the sharpest chapters of his book--"incest" is simply the violation of marriage rules. Implicit in this binarism is that what is not a violation is legitimate and therefore unproblematic. **Durkheim's** ambiguous and never fully analyzed notion of the sacred is reduced to precisely what Durkheim insisted

it could not be reduced to: the opposition between "right" and "wrong" sexual relations. But, as Bataille makes clear, sexual relations are *always* transgressive. Marriage as a rite of passage is not simply a permitted move in a game; it is the conferral of a right of transgression equivalent to the right to eat the (normally forbidden) totem animal at a ritual feast. The famous *droit du seigneur* under the authority of which the feudal lord deflowered his vassals' brides was more a sacred duty than a lustful privilege: the first sexual act, in which blood would be spilled, was fraught with sacred danger.

Bataille's theory of sexuality is not "new." It is the oldest in Western culture, that expressed in **Genesis** by the association of sexual shame with original sin. Bataille's remark that "the essence of eroticism is given in the inextricable association of sexual pleasure and interdiction" (119) was expressed more dramatically a century earlier by **Baudelaire**--writing after **Sade**--"l'unique et suprême volupté de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le *mal*" [the unique and supreme pleasure of love lies in the certitude of doing *evil* - author's emphasis]; or, as **Woody Allen** put it more recently: "it isn't sex unless it's dirty." Bataille's accomplishment is to integrate this "reactionary" vision of sexuality into anthropological theory.

Although sexual desire, from the mimetic standpoint, would appear to be just one kind of desire among others, it is unique in its permanent association with transgression. Lust is only one of the seven deadly sins, but it alone designates a form of desire whose very nature is sinful, in contrast with gluttony or avarice which, as opposed to normal desires for food or goods, are obsessive desires for excess. Thinking about food and (arguably) other commodities is justifiable as being proportional to one's need for them as means of survival, whereas the sexual imagination feeds on itself and can, unlike the others, lead to physiological discharge even in the absence of its object. Avarice and gluttony are what happens when food and worldly goods become **sexy**.

It is curious that in a world where, as **Foucault** pointed out, we pretend to repress sexuality while constantly talking about it, there are no anthropological models that can comfortably integrate such observations. Freud's pansexualism uses the private to explain the public, elucidating the anthropological problem of sexuality by reference to the family drama. Recognizing that the causal sequence must originally have gone in the opposite direction, Freud devised in *Totem and Taboo* an originary model of sexual guilt: in the "horde," where the "father" monopolizes all the women, the "sons" get together and kill him; but subsequently, their guilt for his murder prevents them from sharing the women they killed him to obtain--whence the interdiction of incest. The internalized father, later baptized the **Superego**, replaces the real father as a source of interdiction. But why? What mechanism could make the sons renounce the women in guilt unless they had internalized the father's interdiction *before* the murder? Mimetic desire is the only conceivable answer: fear of mutual rivalry projected onto the dead father, whose rule maintained a **Hobbesian** peace. But if we posit the centrality of the mimetic, we can construct an originary hypothesis with no need for Freud's "Oedipal" scenario. Freud was nonetheless on the right track in seeking a collective, scenic explanation for his model of sexuality,

Even Bataille, in his discussions (as opposed to his imitations) of Sade, never quite acknowledges the significance of the association of the latter's "sadistic" philosophy with **pornography**. Sade is remembered neither as a great philosopher nor as a great pornographer, but because he was the first (only?) writer systematically to combine the two. This is something I would not dare to do here; but I shall attempt to discuss its anthropological implications. Primary among these, as suggested but never sharply formulated by Bataille, is that human sexuality is erotic precisely to the extent that it is tied to *representation*. It is not sufficient to say that sexuality is transgressive; transgression is possible only because the forbidden object is designated by a **sign** that retains its meaning in the absence of its object. What is lacking in the theory of transgression, as in all "metaphysical" theories of mimetic desire, not excluding **Girard's**, is that the sign/interdiction is not a mere marker of mimetic desire but the implicit element of a *scene* by means of which the individual imagination participates in the mimetic universe of the collectivity.

How can we translate into anthropological terms Baudelaire's idea that the only pleasure of love comes from doing evil? The sinfulness of murder is easy to understand in generative terms as a crude violation of human reciprocity. But Bataille's demonstrations that sexuality is linked with death or his definition of the erotic as the loss of one's individual being are less explanations than *a posteriori* justifications of the "dirtiness" of the sexual. As, in another

domain, are those of Freud.

The principal difficulty confronting the originary analysis of human sexuality lies in the less than obvious relationship between the sexual scene and the originary scene of language. Many years ago, a student in my **Generative Anthropology** seminar constructed an originary scene that included sexual relations among the participants. As the famous ithyphallic **Lascaux** hunter (reproduced in a plate of *L'érotisme*) suggests, sexual excitement may well have been part of the hunting experience. This student's attempt was brilliant and sustained, but it was ultimately unsuccessful. I think I understand now better than at the time what the problem was.

Before the emergence in the "little bang" of the scenic/representational complex we call the **human**, there were no scenes of collective significance. There were, however, sexual "scenes," in the sense of moments of pleasure shared by couples. Whatever sexual rivalries were enacted in these scenes, they were not a threat to the animal social order, which, then as now, was structured by one-to-one relations rather than a one-to-many scenic configuration.

This is no longer the case in the context of the human scene of representation. The couple as a self-contained unit in which sexual pleasure is exchanged constitutes an "other scene" that rivals the community assembled around the sacred central object. This rivalry is not a mere structural homology but a mimetic relation. In particular, although language and other forms of representation can arise only in the communal group, they cannot help but be imported into the intimate world of the couple. It is here that we find the explanation for the two linked peculiarities of human sexuality: its transgressive nature and its dependence on representation.

The language of sexuality, unlike any other language, has a quasi-sacred charge; merely to hear or see sexual words is to be drawn into "impure" sexual excitation. This seems to suggest that sexual language is "sacred," since, aside from sexual words, holy words (such as the **name of God** in Judaism) are the only ones we are forbidden to pronounce. But this use of the term "sacred" is too imprecise. Sexual vocabulary, as Sade would certainly have agreed, is **Satanic** rather than holy, nor can positive science deny anthropological significance to this distinction. Satan was God's rival; sex's link to Satanism is its rivalry with the communal sacred as a source of significance. The charge of sexual words comes from their role in the *anti-ritual* of sex. Not that this rivalry begins as intentional. (Its first cultural expression may well be **Sappho's** line that the most "beautiful" thing is not an object of collective value but "what one loves.") What threatens the social order is not the sexual couple's deliberate defiance but the fact that their mutual desire "naturally" expresses itself in language. Just as the first sign signifies an object of collective desire, so the signs of the sexual vocabulary arise to designate objects of desire. In the couple, the "deferral of violence through representation" enhances sexual pleasure by inextricably expressing and generating its significance, just as the sign grants significance to the object of collective desire.

Bataille's intuition that sex is always transgressive displaces the phenomenon of incest from the defining role assigned it by an earlier generation of anthropologists. Given that sexuality is a dangerous force that must be brought within the communal order, it follows that the institution of marriage as a social device to impose order on sexuality cannot be allowed to disrupt the preexisting familial relationships that are already part of this order. Before becoming a system of reciprocal "gifts" constituting the "exchange of women," exogamy is the avoidance of contamination of family or clan by the sexuality of the new couple, whose license to exchange sexual favors between themselves precedes and founds the broader structure of sexual exchange.

Where does the orgiastic fit into this picture? Orgy is a feature of agricultural fertilization rituals but not of hunter-gather life, at least as we have evidence of it. I would assume that, like human sacrifice, orgy is the extreme form of a ritual structure rather than its originary form. In orgiastic rites, the community becomes, like the couple, a rival to its own order as realized in other rites. The most significant thing about orgy is what Sade knew so well, and what Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* tries rather ineptly to suggest: orgy is a limit implicit in *all* sexual relationships. Human sex "always already" both contaminates and is contaminated by the larger community. The couple, in using language, admits the community into its bed; the orgy is only a literal extension of the human sexual imagination. Human sexuality, be it orgiastic or intimate, is always accompanied by transgressive representations that are also representations of transgression. The couple's flight from public view is therefore less a desire for intimacy than a fear of witnesses to this transgression. The orgy is the overcoming of this fear, which is one transgression

more.

I doubt if those who have spent years teaching language to apes have attempted the following experiment: to place the animals in a situation that excites their sexual desires and observe any changes that take place in their use of symbols. I rather doubt such changes would occur. Yet only creatures like ourselves, who can appreciate pornography, can really be said to understand representation. Social science has something to learn from Georges Bataille, or even Woody Allen, concerning the minimal criteria of humanity.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Resentment, or the Sense of Injustice

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Although the perceptive reader of these *Chronicles* may detect here and there faint traces of resentment, the [Index](#) reveals that I haven't dealt explicitly with the subject for over three years. It's time the *Chronicles* took another look at this concept that supplies **49%** (some would say **99%**) of their inspiration.

Whatever the anecdotal evidence of animal revenge, resentment is a peculiarly human phenomenon. At first glance, re-resentment (the French *ressentiment* was **Nietzsche's** version) appears to be an emotion. But strictly speaking, an emotion is a physiologically correlated psychological state. Sadness, joy, and anger are emotions, roughly equivalent to those found in other mammals, who all share the layer of the brain called the "limbic system" (see **Thomas Lewis** et al., *A General Theory of Love*, Random House, 2000). Resentment is inevitably associated with emotion: it makes us angry, sad, or both. But its specific causality within the human condition is irreducible to mere emotion.

Resentment has always been misunderstood. The pejorative connotation of the term gives it the appearance of a mimetically exaggerated appetite, equivalent to the "deadly sin" of **envy**. But envy is a looser term than resentment. Envy moves from (1) the scandalous revelation of the other's asymmetry to (2) the exterior indication or "fetish" of this asymmetry; it displaces onto the object the desire that resentment focuses on the rival. Envy is defined as coveting the possessions of others, as in the **Tenth Commandment**, in contrast to **jealousy**, which, closer to avarice, is the obsession with one's own possessions. But, significantly, in common usage, the object of jealousy has become that traditionally appropriate to envy. I am less likely to say "I envy my rival" than "I am jealous of him." It would be more accurate to say that I am jealous of my lover, but *this* feeling is more commonly expressed as a "state of mind" without an object: "I am jealous." ("I envy you" is, in contrast, an expression of praise, an indirect acknowledgement of your high status.) The attraction of the term "jealousy" demonstrates the exteriority of the object (2) to the fundamental human relation (1). Through this displacement, my desire for the object makes it seem as if already mine; by calling my envy "jealousy," I imaginarily appropriate my rival's possession.

Resentment, unlike envy, is concerned with the rival, not the object. As opposed to appetites and emotions, or to such mixed categories as the "sins," resentment cannot be separated from the scene on which self and other appear. Inassimilable to an object-relation, it is not an internal state but a collective or, in **Durkheim's** vocabulary, a "social" relation. In the hypothetical originary scene, with the sacred object at the center of a circle, resentment may be defined as our (potential) reaction to a violation of the equidistance of the participants on the periphery from the center. The difficulty is to articulate this "reaction." In my early reflections on the subject (in *The End of Culture*), I hypothesized that resentment was limited to hierarchical societies, which consecrate this asymmetry as *rank*. Hunter-gatherers have equal status at the ritual feast, whereas the fellah is as nothing to the **Pharaoh**. This dependence on social

consecration is too restrictive; the potential for resentment must be conceived as present from the outset. But this too poses certain problems.

The equalitarian configuration of the originary scene would never have arisen without the mimetic rivalry that precludes any participant, even the heretofore "alpha" individual, from occupying a privileged position. Yet we cannot call the participant's reaction to a violation of symmetry "resentment," because resentment depends on the representation of difference. Where difference is present from the start, is in the relation between periphery and sacred center. Transcendent status does not inhere in the central being *a priori*; it must be conferred on it, and in participating in this conferral, the individual participant is obliged to renounce any prior possibility of a "horizontal" relationship with the object. I called the reaction to this renunciation *originary resentment*, humanity's primordial temptation with respect to the sacred, as exemplified in the Western religious tradition by **Satan's** rivalry with **God** and **Adam's** Fall. The point of this concept was to serve as an originary model for resentment between those on the periphery: the scandal of my absolute inferiority to the center must precede that of my relative inferiority to my rival, since what I feel as "inferiority" is a relation of *significance*, in contrast to the pecking-order rivalries of the animal world. Yet it is easy to misunderstand this concept as "metaphysical" rather than minimal, and it is unnecessary to my argument here.

Let it suffice then to say that the peace-bringing symmetry of the originary configuration, as registered in the memory of the participants, makes them aware of any subsequent violation of the symmetry of that configuration. This awareness, which makes resentment possible, figures in the minimal constitution of the human, along with other effects of representation/signification such as the sacred, desire, and the esthetic. None of these phenomena can be given a merely physiological definition, not even desire, which too, as opposed to appetite, is dependent on the (collective and individual) representation of its object.

Resentment has at its core a scenic representation. Yet the already-noted pejorative nature of the term suggests that this representation is not normally identified with the concept of resentment. We rarely admit to resenting others; we observe resentment more readily in our enemies than in those with whose desires we identify. Its central importance in human history is obscured by this reluctance. What then is the conceptual content normally associated with the configuration I have analyzed as that of resentment? Let us say that I resent **Bill Gates**. The simple fact that he has more money than I doesn't explain my resentment. I resent him only when I come to feel that this much is *too* much, more than he deserves. Bill Gates's wealth, in other words, does me an *injustice*. (The same injustice may be done to others like me, perhaps to everyone; I may associate myself with them in my resentment, even feel resentment on their behalf, as political activists are wont to do.) The articulation of resentment as the "feeling of injustice" makes explicit its structure. Injustice is the core representation or *idea* of resentment, which gives rise to its *feeling* (anger, rage, depression...). We feel injustice if and only if we consider ourselves capable in principle--perhaps not in practical reality--of *justifying* this sentiment. To put it more precisely: to say we "feel injustice" at a given moment, whether justifiably or not in the broad scheme of things, is to say we *think* at that moment that (1) there is an objective criterion of justice, one that everyone must agree on, and (2) that this criterion has been violated in such a way that everyone is obliged to recognize the violation. (Those who refuse to recognize it are blinding themselves to truth.)

In contrast to theological or **Kantian** "imperatives," the originary hypothesis provides an anthropological model for our intuition of (in)justice in the reciprocal exchange of the originary sign. Although advanced societies create differential access to certain signs, there is no hierarchy inherent in the sign, in language, itself. Even in the most rigid hierarchy, it always remains, in the words of the **Declaration of Independence**, "self-evident" to us that we are "created equal." The originary hypothesis explains the universality of this intuition: it is inherent in human communication through representation. We are all equal in our common possession of language.

The egalitarian configuration of the originary scene provides the minimal model for the resentment we feel when our sense of justice is violated. We should be careful to distinguish this minimal intuition of (in)justice from the "idea of justice" about which we communicate and establish guidelines. We can trace the evolution of *diké* and *dikaíosyné* from **Homer** to **Plato** and beyond. But at bottom, there really is no such positive "sentiment" as a "sense of justice." What we call our "sense of justice" refers to the egalitarian model or norm that we become conscious of only when we sense, or resent, that the originary configuration of equality has been violated.

To experience a feeling of injustice is, minimally, neither to suffer nor to be "oppressed"; it is (1) to imagine oneself in a symmetric configuration with another person or persons and (2) to experience the violation of this configuration. The feeling of injustice is inconceivable without inner, if not an outer, rage; its representational kernel is not a cognitive "structure." Perception of the violation of the symmetrical configuration calls in principle for action to reestablish symmetry, and this call mobilizes the emotions. (I will leave it moot at this point whether it be useful to speak of the "adaptive value" of the emotional accompaniment to the representational core of resentment, not knowing how one could go about separating their respective genetic causality.) That the sense of injustice is mediated through representation does not mean that it is "imaginary." It goes without saying that resentments come in all degrees of intensity; my sense of outraged symmetry is incomparably more intense in a public humiliation than when I read in the newspaper about someone who earns more money than I do.

Just as our model explains our rage at injustice, it explains the intermittent nature of our less critical resentments. We do not spend the whole day resenting Bill Gates; only when we begin to dwell on him do we come to resent him, because what we "dwell on" is precisely our symmetry with him. As all revolutionaries know, a *sine qua non* of revolutions is the generation, voluntary or involuntary, of an imaginary symmetrical configuration in which we situate ourselves alongside whoever it is we are supposed to rebel against. It is only when we conceive this model that our inferiority becomes a scandal and we suddenly realize that "we're just as good as they are," whether "they" be lords, kings, bosses, colonizers, males, whites, straights...

The fact that resentment requires a "realization" is by no means a denial of the universality of the human intuition of equality. On the contrary, the imaginary symmetry derived from the originary sharing of the sign, the minimal kernel of our resentment at inequality, remains latent within all humans regardless of power relations. In rigid hierarchies, where the inferior has virtually no chance of attaining equal status with the superior, there is little opportunity for imaginary comparison and, as a general rule, relatively little resentment of those of higher status, although it remains a permanent possibility. Resentment is likely to be stronger in situations of "rising expectations," where status has become more fluid, at least in the imagination of those below. These are hypotheses for a serious history of resentment to confirm or modify.

Resentment depends on the internalization, that is, the imaginary representation, of a collective scene. The transmission of this scene from one generation to another takes place neither by explicit cultural communication nor via some obscure "collective unconscious"; it is language itself that transmits from generation to generation the symmetrical scene of human culture. The kind of neurological circuitry by which this scene is realized in the brain is something I am not qualified to speculate on, although I certainly hope that others will explore it. My argument is independent of this circuitry. It reaffirms the substance of the originary hypothesis, which is that phenomena such as resentment that are contingent on representation are most parsimoniously explained by situating them within our model of the originary scene of representation.

What resentment, even more clearly than desire, reveals about this scene is that it is not, as metaphysics would have it, a kind of screen or *tabula rasa* on which representations or ideas "appear." It is in the first place a *human* configuration, and the attention paid to the center of the scene is dependent on the equal distance from it taken by the humans on the periphery. (This restates in originary, and negative, terms Durkheim's intuition that our cognitive powers have their origin in "society.") This dependency is demonstrated by the power of resentment to disrupt our disinterested contemplation of the center. As soon as I perceive my neighbor to have some privilege I lack, my attention can no longer focus on anything but his possession of that privilege. As this little Russian fable suggests, we are more concerned with the asymmetry itself than with its "enviable" cause:

God appears to a peasant and tells him, "You may have anything you desire, but whatever I give to you, I will give twice as much to your neighbor." The peasant replies, "I would like you to put out one of my eyes."

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Justice and Resentment

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One could write a history, beginning in the **Enlightenment**, of the models of elementary human interaction, from **Hobbes'** war of all against all through **Rousseau's** pity, **Hegel's** master and slave, **Marx's** economic exchange, to **Girard's** mimetic ambivalence. In the originary scene hypothesized by **GA**, the fundamental human relation is our common mediation through the central figure designated by the sign. In the previous *Chronicle* we saw how the perceived violation of the equal/reciprocal terms of this mediation led to resentment. Justice was presented as a norm that is only made thematic by the resentment aroused when it is violated. Does this comprise an adequate "theory of justice"?

The obvious criticism of basing the **sense of justice** on **resentment** is that it seems to become amoral; one resentment is as good as another. As analyzed in *Chronicle* 221, the sense of justice is composed of two elements: in the first place, the internalized model of reciprocal linguistic exchange, or the "moral model," and, in the second, the representation of a violation of this model. Epistemologically, we become aware of the moral model as a norm only when we represent its violation to ourselves. The question then becomes how we justify our resentment as the reaction to a *real* violation of this model. How, in other terms, do we distinguish justified from unjustified resentment?

There is no simple answer to this question because, as the recent election diatribes remind us, there is no objective standpoint from which resentment can be judged outside of the intuitions of those who potentially or really experience it. We seek impartial judges and juries who have no stake in the resentments of a given case, but we can only understand resentments by identifying with them, that is, by making them imaginarily our own. There is no algorithmic theory of justice that can adjudicate conflicting resentments by tossing the unjustified ones out of court.

John Rawls's *Theory of* [distributive] *Justice* offers a model for calculating, through a procedure akin to what **GA** calls "originary analysis," the relative justice of differentiated social arrangements. The premise is that any difference in fortunes must be justified by a benefit to the group as a whole such that we would accept it in the so-called "original position," in which we are unaware of the position we would ultimately occupy in the society. Rawls has defended his model with great scrupulousness through several editions of his book and other discussions and writings, conscientiously modifying it in response to objections. If we can use his model to arrive at useful results in a concrete situation, so much the better, but this model can make no anthropological claim (for example, that the equality of distribution in the originary event is the basis of our sense of justice). It could only do so by relinquishing its *raison-d'être*, the not merely implausible but deliberately paradoxical disparity between the postulated uniformity of the participants in the "original position" and the specialized socio-economic structure into which they are to be integrated.

We can decide what is just in a given case more easily than what is justice itself. **Justice**, as opposed to its worldly adjectival counterpart, is a metaphysical concept that typifies **Socrates'** quest for the **Idea**. Indeed, we might consider the idea of justice as the paradigmatic case for the impossibility of a constructive definition. If justice takes as its model the originary reciprocity of linguistic exchange, then any deviation from this model is a scandal (a potential source of violence), and any rectification is an *ad hoc* attempt at restoring equilibrium rather than the output of a preexisting algorithm. A "just" action is an a posteriori attempt at righting *in-justice* rather than the realization of a pre-given norm. In the general case, equilibrium cannot be restored by simply reversing the timeline.

For example, if I commit a murder, the traditional punishment is that I be put to death on the principle of "an eye for

an eye." But many reject this very symmetry, equating capital punishment with legal murder, a "cruel and unusual punishment" that demeans state power. I am not responsive to this argument, but its popularity makes clear that there is no objective procedure for restoring equilibrium after a murder has been committed; the disequilibrium caused by the murder cannot be measured in any simple way. Our intuition that murder is wrong because it destroys this equilibrium is powerful, but the intuition that suggests the appropriate punishment, even if equally powerful, is not directly linked to originary peace; on the contrary, it urges reciprocal violence. Even if we evoke the evolutionary adaptivity of the intuition behind the death penalty, all this tells us is that it worked in the long term, not that it was the most just or even the most efficient solution.

Judges apply laws; in less formal circumstances, we try to "balance things out." My sense of this balancing--which would be an interesting object for empirical research--is that it follows two rules of thumb that reflect the two kinds of reciprocity in the originary scene. On the one hand, with objects (I use this term in its broadest possible sense) not previously attributed, we attempt to divide them equally: if children are fighting over candy or a new toy, we attempt to divide access to it equally, whether by turns, sharing, or division. On the other, when an object already belongs to someone, we assert property rights (which are not incompatible with temporary sharing): if Johnny takes Mary's pencil, we have him return it, then (perhaps) ask her if he may borrow it. Thus, on the one hand, we implement the originary reciprocity that precedes sharing of the central object, and, on the other, we insist on respect for the portions already distributed. We all participate in both the "democracy" of linguistic exchange and the "republic" of material exchange, where reciprocity is mediated by "scarcity" and its concomitant hierarchies. The latter case involves a notion of private property that some would say is culture-bound. But even hunter-gatherers have individual possessions, and, at the limit, there must always be a point at which an object becomes one's "private property" if one is to be able to use it--say, eat it--at all.

Resentment enters this model when injustice is done: when Johnny takes Mary's pencil or Jane refuses to let Dick share the new scooter. Such resentments may be equated with a sense of injustice; righting the wrong will satisfy them. But what if Johnny has no pencil of his own and Mary has five of them? The question of distributive justice cannot in practical cases be resolved through procedures such as the utilitarian calculus or Rawls's "veil of ignorance"; who is to say whether the possible world in which Johnny has as many pencils as Mary would be a better world for all? In the local universe comprising Johnny and Mary, equal distribution might satisfy Johnny but would enrage Mary, who can't be expected to give pencils to all her pencil-less friends. And because desire is mimetic, as **Hobbes** recognizes, even if Johnny has his own pencil, he might well find Mary's more attractive (and she, his).

There is no obvious way to eliminate or satisfy such resentments. Where premodern societies "purge" them through ritual, including such auxiliaries as popular art and carnival, modern societies increasingly recycle them into the system as the energy of ambition. The question for us is whether we experience these "unjustified" resentments in the same way as the others. Does our resentment engine itself operate differently, or does the difference come entirely from without, from the never completely internalized judgments of our "superego"?

The originary model suggests that all resentment is essentially the same. The desire to justify "illegitimate" resentment leads to revolutions: we declare Mary's extra pencils, perhaps even her first, as the illegitimate rewards of privilege. On the other end of the spectrum, just as love exists only as a constant transcendence of our natural state of resentment, so "good sportsmanship" exists only as a constant transcendence of our natural state of sore loser. Our very admiration for the former trait reflects our understanding that it denies our real feelings; underneath, we always resent inferiority, but the good sport pretends not to feel this resentment out of respect for his fellows.

We may conclude that resentment and the sense of injustice comprise the same complex of idea and feeling, but since the latter explicitly refers to a *concept*, its expression makes a claim on communal reality that the expression of resentment does not. In the event that his claim of injustice is denied by the community, the resenter learns that similar claims are illegitimate and becomes less likely to make them in the future.

Practical justice applies our prior and posterior rules of equality in consonance with the consensus in a given community. Even though the overarching model of justice is the originary moral model, it cannot apply to concrete situations as the template of a static utopia but only as the horizon of a movement toward greater reciprocity. That all

concepts of justice share this horizon allows us to agree, more or less, on the direction in which the social order should move. Contrary to those who despair of the possibility of cohesion in our increasingly diverse culture, I think the path of history, and in particular the success of liberal democracies, demonstrates that these societies are increasingly united on ethical issues.

For example, contrary to what one commonly hears, recent controversies on abortion and homosexuality should be seen as signs of greater moral integration rather than less. In the past, abortion was a crime, but it was sought despite its criminality, and despite "pro-life" beliefs, by many who felt it necessary; homosexual acts took place in a similar atmosphere. Recent developments have made controversies, that is, dialogues, out of closed worlds that once were reconciled only in hypocritical silence. If the woman who has an abortion must deny it in polite society, she is accepting consensus only at the expense of dialogue, in a moral version of what **Durkheim** called "mechanical solidarity" in contrast to the "organic solidarity" of exchange in which these controversies exist today.

If there is a real danger to this solidarity, it comes from the resentment less of the morally than of the economically disaffected both within our society and, more crucially, in the increasingly Islamic "Third World." Integrating the economically less successful nations into some kind of global exchange-system may well be the challenge of the new century and of the new millennium.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Art, High and Popular

No. 223: Saturday, December 23, 2000

Not long ago, I received a feedback message from **Scott Woodham** asking me why I continued to insist on the distinction between high and popular art, particularly now that by my own admission "high" art is no longer a living phenomenon. Reflecting on this distinction and attempting to clarify its purpose led me to review some fundamental esthetic concepts of **Generative Anthropology**.

What is it in us that reacts to art? It is sobering to think that such a fundamental question has never been answered satisfactorily. We are not even sure what to call the faculty involved in this reaction. It was already clear to the author of the *Poetics* that, as with resentment (discussed in *Chronicles* [221](#) and [222](#)), the core of esthetic experience is a set of internal representations that arouse our emotions. It is no small challenge to our anthropological model to take advantage of the social and cultural experience of the past 2400 years and improve on **Aristotle's** formulations.

The originary source of esthetic pleasure, as of all cultural values, is the energy released by *the deferral of violence through representation*. The reproduction of this experience of deferral is the object of ritual. But ritual does not provide individual pleasure; it is a collective experience of solidarity. Art, in contrast, operates in the individual imagination, which has internalized the public scene of representation. We reenact within ourselves the passage from anxiety to peace that provides satisfaction to human desire, as opposed to the satiation of animal appetite. The originary interpersonal or ethical configuration comprises, minimally, the renunciation of immediate appetitive satisfaction to the benefit of the central being on whom the desires of the group are projected. The human equality of the scene, the origin of morality (the "moral model") and of the distributional practices of hunter-gatherer societies, is necessarily mediated by the central figure. It is easy to lose sight of this mediation, absent from **Rousseau's** reflections on the subject, in our admiration for primitive equality.

In the originary scene and the cultural scenes derived from it, there is renunciation of the central whole followed by

recuperation of a part: each individual's portion of the sacred. Renunciation of the whole is a human necessity--indeed, it can be said to define the human. In the strict hierarchies of the archaic empires, dominated by a ritual redistribution system, this necessity is assented to by the general population only through the ritual system. The beginning of high esthetic culture corresponds to the decline of these empires and the rise of exchange-oriented Greek city-states. In these societies, the individual bears a complex relationship to the social hierarchy that **Rawls's** "original position" is a latter-day attempt to theorize. On the one hand, he inevitably resents his position in the system as inferior to others (the general case) and/or potentially challenged by them. (The latter case is exemplified by **Laius's** preemptive strike in exposing the infant **Oedipus**, designated by the oracle as usurper of his throne.) But, on the other hand, he is an active rather than passive participant in economic exchange and, in **Athens**, in the deliberations of the assembly as well. In such a social order the necessity of renouncing the sacred center must be experienced by the individual citizen independently of the coercion of collective ritual. The esthetic educates desire to defer its demand for satisfaction. This voluntary deferral, like the internal restraint that **Foucault** condemns in *Madness and Civilization*, is not unsurprisingly analogous to that required by the secular exchange-system, most rigorously by the modern market-system.

The Greek ideal of *Paideia* was an esthetic-centered educational philosophy. High culture implies a particular relation between esthetics and ethics, one that justifies the metaphor of "culture" itself. The **cultured** person is one who has learned his ethics from esthetic experience as opposed to the merely **learned** person who knows artworks as worldly realities. High art educates or "cultures" us to renounce the whole of our desire for the benefit of participating in human society; whence our identification with the tragic hero, our surrogate in the forbidden desire for the center. This lesson is not imposed by coercive ritual authority but learned from within by the experience of the artwork, which inspires in us the intuition that the very representations in which it is conveyed reveal this necessity. This is the fundamental irony of all art, as discussed in the "Irony" chapter of *Signs of Paradox*.

Popular art shares with high art the mechanism of deferred satisfaction, but outside or even at the expense of the social order. For popular art, the use of representation does not imply the necessity of distinguishing between the renounced whole and the achieved part. The spirit of the popular esthetic is nicely captured in the song that **Alceste**, **Molière's** misanthrope, recites as a counter to **Oronte's** precious sonnet:

Si le roi m'avait donné
Paris, sa grand'ville
Je dirais au roi Henri
Reprenez votre Paris!
J'aime mieux ma mie, O gué!
J'aime mieux ma mie!

[If the king had given me
Paris, his big city
I would tell King Henry
Take back your Paris!
I prefer my gal, ohé!
I prefer my gal!]

This little song makes explicit the resentful comparison implicit in the popular esthetic. Its declaration of love's superiority over the highest worldly values is sour grapes with a vengeance.

Aristotle had a more directly ethical reading of the high-low dichotomy. Tragedy is high and comedy is low; in tragedy, our superiors are humbled, in comedy, people like us are made happy; as in **Isaiah**, the valleys are raised and the mountains laid low. Both comedy and tragedy depict essentially the same event: a **Girardian** "emissary murder" or sacrifice. Tragedy sees it from the standpoint of the victim, central and unique; comedy, from that of the crowd who rejoices in the victim's peace-bringing downfall. In tragedy, the originary configuration is disguised by the hero's assumption of responsibility for his own defeat, transforming the crowd into passive witnesses, a role actualized in the chorus. In comedy, it is the violence done to the victim that is disguised--minimized, but never

eliminated. Comic violence reaches a near-tragic intensity in Molière's dark comedies, *Le misanthrope*, where the humiliated hero leaves the stage followed by the group of potential consolers, and *Dom Juan*, where the protagonist is punished by the familiar, not quite believable, descent to Hell. But even in the "festive" comedies of **Aristophanes**, there is always a trace of sacrifice; what else is a feast if not a sacrifice?

In tragedy, in order to succeed on the formal level in expelling/sacralizing the victim, we consent to fail on the level of content by identifying with the victim's desires, implicitly admitting that the tragic victim is *our* victim whose suffering we require for our catharsis. The popular work never acknowledges this necessity; the protagonist's sufferings are the fault of the "bad guys" who will get their comeuppance in the last reel. Like the high esthetic, the popular esthetic too is based on deferral. The *Odyssey*, as I pointed out in *The End of Culture*, offers a model for this kind of deferral: **Odysseus**, sitting disguised as a beggar in front of his own house, taking the suitors' abuse, and preparing his revenge, far more brutal than any of the war-scenes of the *Iliad*. This contrasts to the ultimate expulsion of the tragic hero, but also to the transcendence of revenge that we find in the earlier epic, which ends with **Achilles** containing his rage and allowing **Priam** to visit the Achaean camp and reclaim **Hector's** body.

Tragedy makes us identify with the formal, not the worldly sources of the hero's suffering. We are not ennobled but debased when we affect to cleanse ourselves by applauding as art the resentments of the "oppressed." Indulging in guilt is no more a part of high culture than indulging in self-righteousness. The esthetic acceptance of formal necessity is not the equivalent of blaming ourselves for a crime that we could just as well not have committed. If our guilt is indeed justified, its cause should be corrected in the real world, not in an artwork.

High art depends on our conviction that our essential limitations are those of human society, that the sufferings we require in the esthetic realm are compensations for our essential incapacity to satisfy our (mimetic) desire. The sacred thrill of great art is its enforcement of an *anthropological* sense of the inevitable. High art in this absolute sense is born in the West with **Homer** and includes the classical "canon" in all the arts. But in its binary opposition to popular art, the term "high" is anachronistic. High art *stricto sensu* is a creation of the nineteenth century, the age when industrialization and the growth of the middle classes made possible its unholy double, mass popular art. The historical configuration of the high-popular opposition makes explicit the relationship that had always existed between the individual's role in the exchange-system and his ethical and esthetic sensibility. In the world of universal suffrage, the popular esthetic's characteristic irresponsibility for the whole, which had been taken for granted in more hierarchical times, posed an ethical problem to the increasingly democratic social order. To enjoy the represented satisfaction of resentment was understandable in the powerless, less so among participants in the political process. The very possibility of the high-popular dichotomy suggests both the imperfection of society and the temporary impossibility of remedying this imperfection directly.

It seems to me that in the domain of cultural analysis, our choice is between working with today's *doxa* of throw-away hypotheses about art, religion, and other cultural forms and adopting a working hypothesis that can give form to historical research. The originary hypothesis explains the power of the work of art through the dependency of our cultural systems of representation on the center-periphery structure of the originary scene. This explanation, in turn, becomes a spur to the concrete historical analysis that fleshes out this abstract model.

Natural-scientific research, for example, into the operations of the brain, will no doubt continue to reduce the space within which the originary hypothesis operates, but I cannot conceive that it will ever eliminate this space entirely. More than two centuries ago, "enlightened" thinkers declared the death of religion; a century ago, we heard of the "death of God." Yet there are still quite a few churches around, and new ones being built. It is the height of arrogance to presume that the spiritual needs they minister to have no counterpart in the cognitive sphere.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Thoughts for a Dying Millennium

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Few arguments are more tedious than the one between partisans of the two possible ends of the millennium. After the more obvious end on December 31, 1999, we can all agree that January 1, 2001 erases the old millennium for good, and with it, the tedium of the subject. Since in 2001 I turn sixty, this is an appropriate moment for reflection on death, which a sixty-year-old can no longer ignore but need not yet try to forget.

We daily fill our brains with data, print, audio, video; the brain decays and nothing remains of its contents. What we leave behind is what we have stored on paper and on disk, in libraries and on servers. But look in the library at those yellowing books; and what will a century do to pages on the **Internet**--these *Chronicles*, for instance? We think of our descendants: but how much of self remains in genetic material constantly diluted? **Bataille** knew that sex and death put the individual out of place.

Death is everyone's foxhole. Our sense of mortality, born in the fear of collective violence, has a life of its own; the deferral of collective violence is not the suspension of death.

If the operative force in the originary scene were simply fear of the potential violence of one's fellows, it would be no more than animal fear, to which centrifugal flight rather than centripetal concentration is the normal response. Animal fear of death through violence is not humanity's unique anticipation of death.

Humanity and the sacred are coeval. To say that the originary participants "project" the violence of their own mimetic conflict onto the central object of the scene suggests that humanity creates the sacred. But we should avoid deciding this priority. The human comes into being when and only when its central cognitive agency and means of communication are alienated from it to a sacred center that has power of life and death over the newly instituted community. In the scene, the fear of mimetic violence diminishes when the gesture of appropriation is aborted and becomes a sign. The referent of the sign cannot be appropriated by a participant on penalty of death, a penalty that does not proceed from the rival appropriative gestures of the others but from the sacred center itself. The center remains as the signified of the sign after the being that inhabited it has been divided among the participants and the real-world scene abandoned--and the fear of death remains along with it. The sacred is still taboo and the death penalty, permanently in force.

Animal fear is dependent on circumstance, ephemeral and intermittent. Once it has been transmuted into human fear, it is permanent; it is part of the signification of the violence-deferring sign. The sacred is fearsome because it concentrates within itself the potential violence of the community. This violence is not responsible for the body's natural decay and death. But "natural death" is a sophisticated notion. It is no mere cliché that in tribal societies everyone dies for a "cultural" reason. What is minimally human is that we possess a *concept* of our death that transcends animal fear, a concept whose germ is the originary sacred.

The historical path from the tribal notion of "cultural" death to our own biological one deserves to be studied from an originary perspective. The cultural explanation of death has not altogether disappeared; health panics reveal a deep desire to blame death on culture rather than nature. But where is "culture" in my own apprehension of biological decay?

My father died suddenly after checking himself into the hospital with mild chest pains. My mother called me a few hours before her death to complain of being kept waiting to be sent home from the hospital. Like the victims at **Pompei** or the dancers drawn into the medieval dance of death, neither took proper leave of their worldly possessions.

When I return from the store with a new gadget or piece of clothing, a gallon of liquid soap or a package of 75 shop towels, I think of the scarcely-worn clothes and gadgets and the stocks of quantity purchases I had to pack or throw or give away when I cleaned out their condominium in **Florida**. Or I make plans to do little things and worry less about living to do them than about their irrelevance to my ultimate purpose. **Pascal** observed 350 years ago that we seek distraction from mortality, too weak to spend our days paying off the wager of our ephemeral lives against a small but finite possibility of eternal salvation.

A pain in your chest, a tingling in your head, a fit of constipation, a mole, and you ask "Is it now?" Where is culture in our constant vigilance toward the body's decay? Perhaps we envy the societies where no one dies a natural death; ours is not among them. Even as we rail against second-hand smoke or pollution or global warming, we know that in the last analysis our death does not depend on human action.

Anticipation of death is with us from the beginning, contained within the meaning of the sign from which all other signs proliferate. Knowledge of the profane world allows us to forget the sacred, but only because the sacred sign defers our self-destruction. For the moment, the sign has brought us peace; to die in bed at a decent age is a gift we forget to appreciate. Meanwhile, in the absence of world war, thousands continue to die the most culture-bound of deaths, and the world may be filling up once more with those who say with the young militant quoted in the paper the other day (*LA Times*, December 28, 2000, p. A12): "Jihad gives life purpose. Without it, we are useless."

We understandably take for granted the sacred protection against our own violence, and then that pain or tingle comes... We are sure no God is commanding us to die, but we say anyway a little prayer, to make sure we are in the right state of mind, caring toward our loved ones and forgiving to our enemies, so that we may be well remembered. What we fear most is not death but oblivion. The animal fear of death, transferred to the sacred center, returns to us in our "profane" lives as the fear of being forgotten.

Let us resolve then to circulate more love than resentment in the world. The bleak solitude with our dying bodies that we hear so much about is as much a myth as blaming disease on witchcraft. It is in the human world, not in nature, that we either die alone or join in one of the many versions of the great recycling of souls. In affirming that the permanent significance of the sacred belongs to our temporary being, love, which won't stop us from dying, shows itself stronger than death.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Risking Death: Realism and the "Standard Narrative Model"

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In the previous [Chronicle](#) I referred to the insufficiently appreciated privilege granted to most of us of dying in bed at what used to be called a *ripe old age*. When I was young, 70 was considered such an age; today, if you don't reach 80, your death is "premature." Of course there are many areas of the world where life expectancy is far less, and quite a few where a natural death at any age cannot be taken for granted. But what about explorers, intelligence agents, test pilots, commandos, tightrope walkers, mountain climbers, suicide bombers, adventurers of all kinds who throw life expectancy to the winds?

One way to deal with our inevitable mortality is to challenge it. Instead of waiting for the body's decay, some prefer to make even their temporary survival a triumph. If one false move means certain death, then life's continuation is not mere passive postponement of the end but skilled victory over it. And if one does make that false move, one dies of one's own failure rather than universal entropy. Death, and its deferral, have become *cultural* experiences.

Narratives of all kinds, which by their very nature grant their characters' lives cultural significance, thrive on risk to these lives, whether deliberate or accidental. The life-or-death significance of the narrative content to the characters justifies *a posteriori* the life-or-death significance attributed to the story by the very fact of telling it. In real life, risking your life makes life imitate art; your life itself, rather than its products, becomes a source of significance, a model for others.

Since I began studying literature, I have tried out many definitions of the term *realism*, none of them really adequate. Realism makes claims like **Balzac's** "All is true!" or **Zola's** assimilation of the novel to scientific experimentation. It is tempting to dismiss these objective claims in favor of **Roland Barthes'** subjective *effet de réel* [reality effect]. But mere *effect* does not do justice to the realia in realist novels, which often contain lengthy, technically accurate descriptions of complex activities ranging from mining in *Germinal* to whaling in *Moby Dick*. When **Dickens** describes **London** or **Balzac Paris**, we assume the streets are on the map.

The basis for the "reality effect" is *contingency*; one finds things in the text that have no obvious necessity for being there other than--one is supposed to believe--correspondence with historical reality. The notion is useful in reminding us that a novel isn't really, as **Stendhal** ironically claimed it to be, "a mirror carried along a road," but it doesn't provide a very sharp historical criterion. *All* literature situates itself in relation to human reality, even when it takes place in some other galaxy. Does *Don Quixote* produce an *effet de réel*? How about *La Chanson de Roland*? The reality effect is in fact a narrative universal that varies with era and genre according to what contingencies are required in order to produce it. Barthes' own example of a gratuitous reality effect, a barometer in **Flaubert's** "Un coeur simple" [A

Simple Heart] that has no apparent function in the narrative, is unconvincing; the barometer nicely connotes that just slightly futile bourgeois rationality the contrast of which with the peasant's care and faith is the heart of the story. But the real point is why the barometer should lead us to speak of reality effect and realism when the *Chanson de Roland's* *Haut sont li pui e li val tenebros* [High are the hills and dark the valleys] does not. Aren't these hills and valleys narrative props intended to give the impression, however conventional, of a contingent landscape, in the same way that **Snoopy's** "dark and stormy night," however symbolic, is in the first place a contingent weather pattern? Even when the formula is always the same, its function is not to satisfy ritual necessity but to depict worldly contingency; what varies is how much such depiction is needed. The specificity of "realism" must be found elsewhere.

A characterization I find tempting is that realism deliberately deals with subjects that the reader would rather not know about. (*Why do I have to read about this? - Because it's real!*) This is certainly the thrust of the **Goncourt** brothers' preface to *Germinie Lacerteux*, their most famous novel, which explains that although the reader would rather not hear about the protagonist's sordid life, in a democratic society all deserve access to narrative. Balzac had expressed a desire to disturb his complacent reader in the introductory passage of *Le père Goriot* that includes "All is true!" To claim that the criterion of the reality effect is unpleasant surprise not only reflects a rhetorical tendency of realism but by shifting the focus from an ill-defined "effect" to the fundamental interaction between writer and reader brings us closer to its anthropological core. Yet the transformation of the contingent into the irritating remains within the sphere of individual subjective reaction.

The problem of defining realism may be restated as that of deciding what to oppose it to: Romanticism? Classicism? fantasy? Let us begin by defining the *standard narrative model* (**SNM**) as a story in which the protagonist and perhaps other characters risk their lives. (We may define "risking one's life" as engaging in some activity that involves an explicit and substantial risk--at least to the reader/spectator--of leading by a fairly short causal chain to death.) The SNM encompasses epic narrative as well as adventure tales of all kinds; it also allows for a mock-heroic version in which, like Don Q, the character thinks he is engaging in life-threatening activity when he really isn't. We then define a **realist** narrative as one that **does not obey the SNM**.

Realism is focused on "ordinary people" who hope to die of old age. Like all cultural modes, that of realism should be understood as at the same time a historical contingency and an anthropological type. Historically, realism is a bourgeois mode, one appropriate to what **Alexandre Kojève** called the "freed slave," referring to the **master-slave dialectic** in **Hegel's** *Phenomenology of Mind*, where the slave is one who accepts to live under another's mastery rather than risk his life to defend his own. The bourgeois is a slave in refusing to risk his life, but he has been freed by the exchange-system from the ordeal of face-to-face rivalry. He neither fights the Other nor recognizes his mastery; they engage in exchange-relations, mediated by contracts for goods and services. If such a person can become a narrative protagonist, then everyday life may be said to have significance. I shall return to Hegel's master and slave below.

The bourgeois doesn't risk his life, but he invests it, and any investment is something of a gamble. He may not be likely to fall from a cliff or be eaten by wild animals, but he runs the risk of financial loss, ultimately of bankruptcy. Bankruptcy is a sign for death throughout Balzac's novels and in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as well, where Emma commits suicide only when she runs out of money. (In contrast, Flaubert's mature masterpiece, *Sentimental education*, turns narrative itself into a defense against bankruptcy.) The equation of bankruptcy with death is the sign of a realism still in thrall to the SNM,

since the key institution of bourgeois economy, the "limited risk" corporation / *Société À Risque Limité*, is designed precisely to prevent loss of a given investment from destroying all one's wealth, let alone one's life. A novel that follows the realist ethos does not end with violent death; it recounts a "slice of life." And because everyone, every day, risks his life in the sense of spending irretrievable time, the realist denial of the SNM aspires to a temporality so stretched out as to appear infinite. Proust's "infinite" narrative and Joyce's 600-page Dublin day mark the limits of European realism.

A few lesser novels adhere to the realist ethos, but most compromise with the SNM by portraying their characters' lives as inadvertently fortune- and life-destroying. The reason that most readers find Zola's few working-class novels not only better but more typical than the numerous others dealing with the bourgeoisie is that limited lives are more easily assimilated to the SNM: economic fatality substitutes for tragic fatality. If, in Hegelian terms, the bourgeois is a freed slave, the worker is a partially reenslaved bourgeois who, in the nineteenth century at least, is forced to accept life-threatening conditions as a price of survival. The worker-protagonists of *L'assommoir* and *Germinal* risk their lives not to give them meaning but simply in order to preserve them. It would be interesting to examine in this light the socio-historical implications of other high and popular syntheses of realism and the SNM, such as detective stories and thrillers that depict policemen, detectives, spies, military personnel, and so on performing acts that are ambivalently bourgeois-professional duties and life-risking affirmations of mastery.

Hegel's master-slave dialectic may be read as his originary scene of human self-consciousness. Kojève's focus on this scene and its implicit theory of desire inspired the neo-Hegelianism that flourished in France in the 1930s and 40s. Hegel's combat between masters is analogous to that in pre-human society between the alpha animal and his potential challenger. In both cases, real or threatened violence settles the question without the "absolute" deferral provided by the sign. (The value of this process for animal societies is that the violence is restricted to a few individuals and usually not fatal.) Although Hegel's master fights to be "recognized" by his adversary, his desire cannot be met; only one master will survive combat and the slave's recognition is inadequate. The master wants to be recognized by another master, unafraid to risk his life in combat, who *freely* renounces his own mastery. Such a person is inconceivable in Hegelian terms. But in our originary model, recognition is given not to a human master but to the sacred, the desired, mediating element not in competition with the participants. It is the recognition given the sacred that provides the originary model for the Hegelian dream of mastery; the master wants to be recognized as the equivalent of a god. By restricting the conflict to the interaction of two signless egos, Hegel excludes the possibility that *both* candidates for mastery might renounce their conflict and in that gesture of deferral become self-consciously human, capable of thematizing the mastery that they had previously contested.

Despite its inadequacy as an originary model, Hegel's dialectic sheds light on the distinction between realism and the SNM: risking one's life for mastery is not simply affirming superiority over others but seeking to usurp the place of the sacred that is the birthplace of meaning. To risk one's life is to act as though sacred deferral of violence were not a necessity of human existence. The consequence of such action may be portrayed either as the tragic reiteration of this founding necessity or as its comic transcendence; in either case, the SNM situates its protagonists in the sacred center of the social order. Realism, in its refusal to take for granted this *rapprochement* of the human to the divine, tells the story of Hegel's slave who, unlike his master, is aware of the real-world human value of deferral. What makes realism *realistic* is its acceptance of human limitation. We may extract from the Hegel-Kojève model the sociological insight that the advent of the modern exchange system makes it possible both to extend and

to challenge the SNM by depicting a praxis that incarnates human deferral rather than divine violence.

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On Being and Time

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Marina Ludwigs is proposing a dissertation at **UC Irvine** that will explore both **Generative Anthropology** and **Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (SZ) [*Being and Time*]** as joint bases for an anthropology of narrative. Reading and discussing her proposal recalled to me that, although few readers may be aware of it, Heidegger's ontology of *Dasein* (lit. "being-there": the human as existent) is an important source of GA. I share, and have been inspired by, Heidegger's impatience with *ontic* or empirical explanations of the human. A number of chapters of *Originary Thinking* and *Signs of Paradox*--on being, thinking, signification--were attempts to redirect Heidegger's "ontological turn" toward GA. The present *Chronicle* only scratches the surface of Heidegger's seminal text as an indication of the wealth of anthropological riches that originary analysis may uncover there. (All quotes are from the standard 1960 Niemeyer edition; translations are mine--with a little help from the French translation.)

The great unsolved problem of the phenomenological method is its essential solipsism, which is no mere methodological problem. Phenomenology assumes, given that we can have no direct experience of any other mind, that the individual mind must generate its own ontology and that of the world on the basis of its "existential" experience in this world. For **Husserl**, other people have no special status among the variously-structured objects of one's mental universe. I assume they have minds like my own, but they need not be taken into account in my investigation of my own mental processes. Heidegger, unlike Husserl, recognizes the existence not merely of other individuals but of *being-with* [*Mitsein*] and *coexistence* [*Mitdasein*]; but for Heidegger as for **Rousseau**, the effect of society as a collectivity is not to lead us to Being but to tempt us with loss of self in the mimetic crowd--*das Man*: "people," no one in particular--which expresses "its" opinions in impersonal talk [*Gerede*]. No path in Heidegger's philosophy leads, as in Durkheim, from the social group to the sacred and Being itself.

Originary thinking adds to phenomenological introspection the "empirical" knowledge, crystallized in language, of the communal nature of human reality. The originary hypothesis takes us minimally outside ourselves in a collective scene that provides a common basis for the scenes of representation we all experience within our separate minds but on whose essential identity we rely when we engage in phenomenological reflection. The originary scene is not empirically given; its postulation of communal rather than individual reality can be expressed only in hypothetical terms. But this minimal postulation of a common scene allows us to model

the cultural or what **Durkheim** called the "social" essence of humanity. Heidegger precedes GA in pointing out the limits of empirical anthropology, but where GA situates the co-emergence of the human and of sacred Being in an *ethical* event, Heidegger defines the human in relation to Being alone. The ontolatry of the later writings and even his pseudo-Nietzschean glorification of Nazism can be traced to this ethical lacuna.

The individual mind begins by acquiring a language that comes to it from without. But this is not what Heidegger and **Sartre** call "falling" into a pre-given human reality. Our participation in the self-consciousness of Heidegger's *Dasein* or Sartre's *pour-soi* [for-itself] depends on our participation in a culture of shared representations at the center of which is language. Human consciousness without language or language without society is an ontological absurdity. We do not come to being-with-others from our individual experiences, we come to these experiences as a "withdrawal" from the originary communal scene. As Heidegger says, being-alone is a form of being-with. But Heidegger's "being-with," even in its "authentic" mode of free participation in a common project, cannot serve as a model for human culture because it is not our primary relationship to Being: "But the expression 'Dasein' clearly shows that 'first of all' this being is unrelated to others" (SZ §26, p. 120). Nor does the discussion of language as "speech" [Rede] in §34 ever tell us the source of the language by which we "express ourselves" and "understand," nor what precisely the relation is between *my* self-expression and the fact that it is formulated in a mode of communication to others. Indeed, in a rare note of modesty, Heidegger ends this section on language by recommending further "philosophical research" in this area.

When Heidegger comes to analyzing the concrete use of language, in SZ as in his later works, he falls back on what is in effect a crude reflection-theory of signification: the truth of Being is revealed in language. For example, in §44a, he speaks of the relation between the sentence "The picture on the wall is hanging crooked" and the fact of the picture's hanging crooked as an "uncovering" or "revelation" [Entdeckung] unmediated by "representations" [Vorstellungen]. By the latter, Heidegger refers to whatever empirical contents of my brain may be activated when I hear this particular sentence. But the notion of "revelation" does not tell us how we come to share, not empirical representations--a question that troubled **Enlightenment** empiricism from **Locke** on--but the Saussurian "signified" or concept that allows us to communicate with each other. "Uncovering," like Heidegger's many references to the Greek *aletheia*, truth as unveiling, points to a revelatory scene in which the empirical or "horizontal" world comes to be thought as Being by means of the sign. Language can "reveal" truth only because it was inaugurated as a means of sacred communication within the human community.

A similar analysis may be given of Heidegger's analysis of human temporality as defined by "being toward death." [Chronicle 224](#) expressed the idea that the source of our awareness of death-in-general is each participant's deferral of "cultural" death at the hands of his fellows in the originary scene. The sacred and its cultural matrix are defined not by the simple transcendence of the human sphere but by transcendence on the plane of the sign originating from deferral on that of the real world. The worldly temporality within which the participants experience the scene, in contrast to their revelatory relationship with the sign, is one of deferral, deferral of violence but also of appetitive satisfaction. By means of this appetitive

deferral we learn to distinguish the atemporal being of the sign from the time-bound being of the central object that the sign originally designates. We speak of the linguistic sign as *atemporal*, but in reference to the sacred we prefer the term *immortal* since the sacred is not merely the significant but the significant that reveals itself in the world. Any individual revelation of Being is necessarily mediated by the collective revelation that revealed/established sacred Being in the first place. The tribal shaman or the romantic poet visited by the divinity is a representative of a human community coeval with this divinity.

Derrida's *différance*, deferral-as-(significant)-difference, teaches us all we know about "human time." As the postponement of appetitive satisfaction, deferral is the temporality of the Sartrean *project*, the projection of an intention into the future as a goal against which action will be measured. At the same time, as the averting of violent conflict and potential death, deferral is also the temporality of Heideggerian *care* [Sorge]. What Heidegger calls the "resoluteness" [Entschlossenheit] of Being-toward-death is not a simple category but a *synthesis* of these two moments of deferral in which the human temporality of the project, freed from the scene of its origin by the communal deferral of violence inaugurated by the scene itself, "remembers" its origin after having "forgotten" it in worldly activity--constituted not merely by "diversion" but also by economic exchange. *Différance* is inseparable from language and therefore from the human; but the language we derive from sacred interdiction and which, through the separation between sign and referent, permits the destruction of the central being to our appetitive benefit, allows us to consider our own death on the same model, as the separation of our worldly being from its "signified" or self/soul, and therefore as a thematic object of contemplation.

This analysis helps us to grasp the socio-historical specificity hidden in what we usually call "authenticity," being "genuinely oneself."

Dasein is genuinely [eigentlich] itself in the original solitariness of resoluteness that keeps silent and disposes itself to sustain anxiety [Angst]. Genuine *being-onself as keeping-silent* does not indeed say "I-I" but "is" in silence the thrown being as which it genuinely can be. (SZ §64, p. 322-23; emphases the author's)

The genuine self is a speaking being that keeps silent lest it join the mimetic attraction of the crowd, whose distracting chatter [Gerede] separates the self from its "primitive and originary relations of being to the world, from being-with and from being-in itself" (§35, p. 170). But this contrast between silent being-in and -with and the voice of faceless *Man* is a romantic one, historically aroused by the recentering of society on the marketplace in the post-Revolutionary era. The language of mimesis can be opposed only to the language of mimesis deferred. There is no path from Being to the individual human mind that does not pass through the language of the human community that defines itself and is defined by the sacred.

By aborting the appetitive gesture into a sign, we become capable of experiencing time independently of the events that fill it. Our experience of originary deferral explains what Heidegger calls our "ek-static" temporality: we experience not only the past and future but even the present as a standing-outside-our-immediate-existence-in-time. What is missing from Heidegger's analysis of time-consciousness is reference to the linguistic sign or to

representation as such. Although, for Heidegger, "representations" [Darstellungen] are mental images, of interest only to empirical psychology, yet to stand before the future, past, or present is only possible in the context of a shared system of representations, themselves experienced as invulnerable to temporal change, on which our notion of time depends. It is not enough to say that I "stand outside myself" in that moment. I represent to myself a given temporal state, not as a mere image or "representation" in Heidegger's sense--which would reduce time-consciousness to a simple extension of the now: I feel fear now because I now experience the (past, present, future) image of X--but as a *scene* communicable in principle to my fellow humans because derived from the shared originary scene of representation.

"Resolute" Dasein refuses the Pascalian *divertissement* [Abkehr, diversion] into which it falls when it lets itself be determined by any particular worldly goal. The existential project requires our constant free recommitment of ourselves to its worldly finitude. The specific goal of a given praxis is finite, yet its ultimate source of meaning is transcendent. The human can emerge only in relation to a sacred that it represents as the transcendental guarantee of its representations. The ethical function of the sacred is to defer human violence, but this deferral must be continually renewed; no ultimate or final peace is conceivable. Deferral of violence is our "ultimate" goal in the dynamic sense that it transcends any particular goal.

To call this ultimate guarantee "Being" dehumanizes what is perhaps too human when we call it **God**; above all it founds the fallacious image of Being revealing itself to humanity on a scene of "its own" creation. Authentic Dasein cares for its being-toward-death in an *ethical* context because both being and death as the ultimate object of deferral were revealed in such a context. This is the kernel of the originary hypothesis as a minimal guarantee of the moral model of human reciprocity that Heidegger's notion of Dasein allowed him at a crucial historical moment to deny. In anthropology, the ultimate argument is always ethical, even if it requires that we postulate for it a foundation beyond ethics.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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La mondialisation

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In [Chronicle 209](#), I proposed the term *post-millennial* to describe the era now emerging from the victimary shadow of post-WWII postmodernism. (To the same end, but from a very different point of departure, Raoul Eshelman proposes the term *performatism* in his article in [Anthropoetics VI, 2](#).) But the most common term used to describe this era is one that less clearly designates a break with the postmodern or indeed with the industrial era: *globalization*--in French, *mondialisation*. Globalization/*mondialisation* is one of the most

insistent buzzwords of the past few years, so much so that I am in the process of preparing a (French) talk on it. This *Chronicle* is a preliminary reflection on the subject, beginning with the words themselves.

Mondialisation recalls phenomenology's world of experience, the "in-the-worldness" of Heidegger's *Dasein*, literally, "being-there," the term by which he designates the human's spatio-temporal situatedness (see [Chronicle 226](#)). *Mondialisation* is the coming-together in a single world of the insular human worlds of not so long ago. But we would not speak of *mondialisation* if we did not inhabit a *globe*, a surface on which continued expansion from a given origin is fated to close in upon itself while transforming the planar structure of center and periphery into a network of decentered nodes. If the pre-globalized world may be thought of as a conglomerate of circles each with its own center, the global network as a whole has a single center maximally distant from the surface. Humanity returns to its originary condition of a single world with a single center of transcendence, but one whose singleness reflects its maximal virtuality--its *minimality*.

In *Things hidden...*, Girard saw the beginning of *mondialisation* in the potential of nuclear arms for world-wide violence. The human world is brought together by the unthinkable possibility of its annihilation, bringing full circle the spread of humanity through the world made possible by the originary deferral of violence. Yet the one world created by weapons of mass destruction is chimerical; it remains an abstraction so long as the weapons are not used and would vanish as soon as they were. The Cold-War era seemed to have suspended *mondialisation* indefinitely--a powerful illusion that goes far to explain the overreaction at its end. Only after 1989 did we understand that beneath the apparently static configuration of "two world systems," the final conflict between the world market system and its centrally planned alternative was drawing to a close. The impossibility of military conflict that seemed to make the stand-off eternal blinded us to the decisive nature of the economic competition that would transform the abstract community of mutual deterrence into a world of economic and cultural exchange.

Many find this development disturbing. Rousseau is the patron of those who increasingly communicate about the evils of increased communication. For Rousseau, human intercourse inevitably spreads the contagion of mimetic desire, generating the vanity and oppression endemic to "society." His political solution for the modern world reflects this mistrust of exchange. One seeks in vain in *The Social Contract* any reference to debate or dialogue, even in the legislative system, which devolves upon a--singular or collective--"legislator," just as sovereignty is the province of the "sovereign" who expresses the "general will."

But where, consistently with his preference for originary simplicity, Rousseau attacked the proliferation of desire-objects made possible by the development of the "sciences and arts," the anti-*mondialistes* accuse *mondialisation* of leading to universal sameness. The unfettered exchange of goods and desires, following the "winner-take-all" nature of expanding markets, results in a deadening worldwide uniformity, with a **Holiday Inn** at every airport and a **MacDonald's** on every square. For example:

. . . what is happening is the destruction of traditional culture . . . the flattening of cultural variations in the face of the pervasive model of

economic well-being. Although these changes would not take place unless local people in some sense wanted them, this fact does not settle the question whether it is a good or bad thing. . . . It is for many a deeply worrying feature of the modern world that insufficient value is placed on cultural diversity . . . If then we recognize that people have a right to cultural diversity, what is happening in the name of 'development' is simply undermining this right.

Nigel Dower, "Human Rights, Global Ethics and Globalization" in *Globalization and Europe* (London: Pinter, 1998), p. 121

This anti-imperialist defense of localism uses an imperialistic frame of reference, complete with (post?-)colonial disdain for "what [third-world] people (think they) want" (*ibid*). Aside from the fact that few things are more valued today than "insufficiently valued" cultural diversity, the kind of diversity that pre-industrial cultures are here granted a "right" to can be appreciated only by the cosmopolitan traveler. Such "diversity" is really a traditional sameness that must be preserved by refusing to give the population "what they (think they) want." Instead, the point has been made, notably by the ethnologist **James Clifford**, that the introduction of Western modes of consumption and cultural creation does not eliminate the local ones, but leads to interaction and interpenetration both locally and globally: Chinese jazz, French rap, California-Thai restaurants.

Another synonym for globalization is the "end of history," announced by **Francis Fukuyama** in a famous 1989 article celebrating the triumph of liberal democracy over **Soviet** socialism. This **Hegelian** term has an unfortunately apocalyptic resonance, as though human time had run into a brick wall. On the contrary, the end of the history that prevented *mondialisation* was inevitable only in the sense that it was the *ethically* inevitable equilibrium state of the one world's interacting human desires--the outcome that, from the post-Hegelian perspective of history as indefinite opening rather than closure, we are bound not simply to accept but to *choose*. In this perspective, liberal democracy is less a specific form of political organization than the social configuration that imposes the minimal constraint on human exchange by making the exchange of representations (politics) a means for facilitating the exchange of things (economics). In comparison with pre-modern systems of ritual redistribution or even with **Athenian** democracy, where the economic was, on the contrary, an instrument of the political, liberal democracy maximizes the dynamic of moral reciprocity that is the originary accompaniment to the deferral of violence.

Mondialisation cannot be imposed by the West or even by the laws of economics; it can only progress as the resultant of the free choices of its eventual beneficiaries. In this sense *mondialisation* is *dialogic* rather than "dialectical" in the Hegelian-Marxist sense; the conflicting elements of world culture are not "lifted up and transcended" [*Aufgehoben*] in a final synthesis but continually transform themselves as increasingly equal partners in exchange. And because *mondialisation* is integration into a *world* rather than simply a global economy, we cannot hope to stand outside the process and grasp it as a whole.

The most valuable indicator of the cultural opacity or "thickness" that *mondialisation* must integrate is not the state of international trade but that of religion. The **Enlightenment** desire to reduce each religion to the doctrine of reciprocal morality common to all religions has been

with us for 250 years or so, yet religions remain nearly as specific as ever, and despite various noble efforts at ecumenism, recent growth in world religions has disproportionately occurred in the *least* ecumenical sects of each.

Religion is based on the unjustifiable leap of faith from worldly fact to transcendental meaning that is also the *modus operandi* of the "arbitrary" linguistic signifier. The flaw in the Enlightenment view is in taking the flat, rational world of metaphysics as self-contained, whereas this world could only come into being, and only continue to be regenerated, through the constant reaffirmation and transcendence of anthropological particularity.

The irrational particularism that makes dialogic reconciliation among religious traditions so difficult is no mere residue of pre-modern times; it is a reminder of the fundamental human truth preserved by religion, one that can never be wholly absorbed by even the best-functioning, most egalitarian exchange-system because it is the foundation of that system. Religion's lesson for *mondialisation* is that there will always be difference within the world because there is at the center of the human a difference between eternal signs and temporal things.

To see our Earth as one network of nodes around a minimally present center is to envision humanity's maximally creative state of dynamic equilibrium. The most significant movement in this direction so far is, arguably, the ongoing unification of **Europe**, a transformation whose revolutionary nature may be measured by its lack of drama. Banality is the guarantee of the success of *mondialisation*, whether on the scale of a continent or of the entire world. It marks the end of history as macrohistorical spectacle and the beginning of the indefinitely dense microhistory in which every individual's life is inscribed.

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Film Realism

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Like it or not, film is the basic narrative form of our time, a position it achieved with the establishment of the feature film toward the end of **WWI** and consolidated in the sound era. Film's images stimulate our imagination more strongly than words in a book. Today, few people ever get excited about a novel; few people never get excited about a movie. Although film is doubly fictive in that the images aren't really moving and their substance itself is staged, our brains cannot process the series of still photographs as anything other than real-world movement. In more culturally relevant terms, in comparison to the words of a novel, the authenticity of the film image requires of us less deference to their author. The film *auteur*

chooses his images, but he *shows* them to us rather than forcing us to reconstruct them from his prose. The unspoken motivation behind the nineteenth-century drive to reproduce sound and image is the desire to liberate representation from the triangular relationship with the Other-Subject.

I proposed in [Chronicle 225](#) to define realism as deviation from--better, deferral of--the **Standard Narrative Model (SNM)** in whose action the "master" wagers his life. This definition is of historical value in capturing the literary focus on bourgeois characters--ordinary people--that begins in the eighteenth century and becomes dominant in the nineteenth. But the simplest, perhaps the best, definition of realism is simply as *looking real*. The objects we constitute in our imagination from realistic representations can be counted on--or so we think--to behave like real objects. This constitution is very different when it begins from photographs rather than words. Language becomes realistic by conveying believable information; we give credibility to detailed, apparently coherent descriptions, to specialized jargons recorded by novelists from **Balzac** to **Zola** and beyond. For our paleolithically-evolved brains, a photographic image is realistic until proved otherwise.

This mental imperative can be exploited in two ways, giving rise to the **Lumière-Méliès** dichotomy with which cinema history begins. On the one hand, reconstituting real movement on screen creates the illusion that one is really witnessing it: the train entering the station will crush the movie audience! On the other, by manipulating the series of images, one can create a realistic illusion of traveling to the moon or, more simply, of taking off one's head and tossing it in the air. (Méliès, we recall, began as a magician.) But because film fantasy is parasitic on the mechanism of perception in a way that literary fantasy is not, I incline to the idea, elaborated most famously by **André Bazin**, that the vocation of film is realism; regardless of what is done with them afterward, its images are consecrations of a real, and specifically human, world.

Film's fundamental realism is anterior to our judgment of the plausibility or possibility of the action. A science-fiction film is realistic because our first reaction to what we see on the screen is to accept it as faithful to reality. That this acceptance is historically conditioned--neither rear-projected scenes of the road behind actors driving cars nor **New York City** scenes shot in a studio's back lot convince us as they did fifty years ago--only reinforces my point; more sophisticated techniques sensitize us to small clues of unreality (the flatness of the projected image, the lack of open perspectives of city life) that were less noticeable before these techniques evolved. As we grow more sophisticated, we require images ever more indistinguishable from those of real life.

What does film's realism imply about filmic content? If the novel is an apparently amorphous literary genre whose only obvious quality is a certain length, film would seem to be yet more abstractly determined by its medium alone. Yet for reasons that cannot be dismissed as merely commercial, twenty years after its inception, film had acquired its standard "feature" format of 70-120 minutes, one whose dominance became more definitive with the coming of sound, and all but absolute with television's relegation to the archives of the serial, the newsreel, and the "short subject." When one visits a movie theater today, one sees only a feature film and advertisements ("trailers") for more of same. Film length is more rigorously fixed by a whole degree of magnitude than novel length. Novels range from about 30 K to over 1 M words; a

full-length film is too short at an hour and over the limit at four.

The novel's length, which, however vaguely defined, exceeds that of the (short) story, lets us defer the inevitable death of the story it is telling and to live with the protagonist in a human time that is more than an ultimate moment--**Racine's** *dernière fois*--that reveals his fate. This living-with makes the novel the privileged esthetic vehicle of adaptation to the world of market exchange. Human culture has been focused from the beginning on the deferral of mimetic desire; only in the modern world does my desire, in imitation and contradiction of others', become the principal motor of my action. The novel supplies a temporal context to the story of desire gained or lost that lets us learn its lessons along with the protagonist. Not all novels end with the renunciation by which **Girard** defines the form in *Mensonge...*, but the novel's length makes it a model of the relationship between lived experience and life as a whole, whose end is willy nilly that of the time that lends desire significance.

After the coming of sound there were, most notably in France (**Pagnol, Guitry**), energetic defenders of film's kinship with theater. A novel is normally read alone, whereas film and theater are spectacles. One can make a play into a movie by just filming a performance; both spectacles last about the same amount of time. Nonetheless, **Eisenstein**--comparing **Griffith** to **Dickens**--claimed for film a special affinity with the novel. With the exception of those modernist works--**Proust, Joyce, Musil**--that test the limits of realism's extension of time, most novels lend themselves so naturally to film that we consider reading and watching esthetically equivalent experiences. This is all the more curious because we may very well be aware, while watching the film, of exactly how much of the novel has been eliminated. As I recall, **Zinnemann's** film of **Forsyth's** *The Day of the Jackal* combines two episodes and eliminates one altogether, yet it sticks in one's mind far better than the book.

A play, precisely because it is performed by real people, cannot be realistic. It is either a tragedy where the principals live on the edge of sacrifice, a melodrama that shortens tragedy's heroic cloak to accommodate the bourgeois, or a comedy that gets laughs from burlesquing the other genres. To see real people as people other than themselves requires a leap of faith that derives its energy from the sacred roots of drama. This dramatic core explains why, even more than painting has abandoned "photographic" depiction, theatrical decors and costumes in the film era have renounced the attempt at illusion. (This was not so before cinema, when theaters featured live animals on stage and shipwrecks in artificial seas.) Our acquaintance with **Oedipus** in our two hours with him is identical with the revelation of his fate; this acquaintance is tragedy itself. Yet an even shorter time spent in the movie theater provides an experience of novel-like realism because film *looks real*. Film concentrates the *effet de réel* that novels create over time into the same time-frame as a play--the time of spectacle.

This suggests that we may characterize film as **realistic spectacle**. Movies are full of violence and death; not only westerns, police stories, thrillers, martial arts, sci-fi, but almost every masterpiece. What great French film does not contain a murder?--*Grand Illusion, Daybreak, Breathless, Jules et Jim, Hiroshima mon amour...* (Yet think of the cinematic illumination of "ordinary lives" in a film like *La maman et la putain* or the works of **Eric Rohmer**.) Film realism domesticates the sacrificial ethos of the SNM, just as the fantasy built on this realism devalues it. The characters in film are flesh and blood like you and me; their death, like ours, is inexplicable. But because this death is only an image, we can indulge in fantasies of

resuscitation or, alternatively, of the infinite carnage that video games and **Schwarzenegger** films have made familiar.

Understood as realistic spectacle, film need not and, indeed, cannot seek the suspension of time that is the ideal of the novel. Cinematic time is suspended within time. Film is a series of representations whose content is nonetheless processed by our senses as lived reality. The very impermanence of its images that defines film's realism is what preserves these images of human time from decay. But after the first flush of novelty, the mere fact of filming is not sufficient to guarantee film's consecration of reality, whence the early demise of the Lumière 50-second documentary. What a movie shows us cannot be more real than what we see from our window, but unless we have something like **Jimmy Stewart's** view in *Rear Window*, we won't continue to watch. This suggests why the greatest films, those that capture the form's foundational tension, are either "spiritual" works that pay homage to the sacrificial reality they display, such as **Tarkovsky's** *Stalker*, **Dreyer's** *Joan*, or **Bresson's** *Condamné à mort*, or "theatrical" ones that play on the discordance that film alone captures between spectacle and its flesh-and-blood basis, as do **Renoir's** *Rules of the Game* and **Carné's** *Children of Paradise*.

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We are all generative anthropologists now

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Twenty-odd years of **originary thinking** have given me ample occasion to reflect on the resistance it encounters among academics. Personal equations aside, the basis for this resistance would seem to be that, in our time at least, the production of (publishable) research is not visibly furthered by a mode of thinking whose function is to provide a minimal basis for all more specific thought about the human. If everyone could get together and agree on a common ground for such thought, generative anthropology would be the only possible choice, but, even if we grant this less than modest proposition, the fact is that "everyone" isn't going to get together: the intellectual marketplace, like the economic one, functions through individual exchanges that only incrementally modify the network as a whole. This is not to deny that such a common ground must be found, but to suggest that the sense of its necessity too must propagate incrementally through the network.

The aim of last year's studies on the modern history of the question of language origin (roughly, *Chronicles* 175-198) was to demonstrate that, in approaching this issue, thinkers both before and after the great divide that separates twentieth-century science from eighteenth-century speculation end up proposing, albeit in an unconscious, irresolute fashion, versions of what I call the originary hypothesis.

(The transitional nineteenth-century is generally barren in this area, as witness the oft-quoted 1866 declaration of the French *Académie des Sciences* that hypotheses concerning the origin of language would no longer be entertained. The turn from language to languages is best exemplified by **Wilhelm von Humboldt**--the subject of an forthcoming *Chronicle*. For Humboldt, who tried to learn every known language, the focal point of the anthropological study of language is no longer, as for his precursor **Herder**, the hypothetical diachronic interface between the prelinguistic and the linguistic state, but the empirically accessible synchronic differences of form between language families. In this turn, if not in his models for linguistic analysis, Humboldt anticipates the structural linguistics of **Saussure**. No doubt Humboldt, whose four categories of agglutinating, incorporating, isolating, and inflected languages are still used today, considered the last type--best exemplified by **Sanskrit**--superior to the others, but even this "Aryan" quasi-racism should be associated with the synchronic turn of his thought: although nineteenth-century historicism is often linked to colonialism and "orientalism," the fundamental thrust of racism is not to distinguish among different stages of development but among different kinds of beings.)

A demonstration of the necessity of the originary hypothesis may appear chimerical to those who consider that "real research," pursued in the absence of any such hypothesis, is closing in on what is for them the essence of the matter--the description of the present state and evolutionary development of the linguistic processes in the brain. But despite the vast scientific progress since the **Enlightenment**, this scientism suffers from a materialist fallacy that, on the specific point of language origin--and therefore on that of the essence of the human as such--recalls **Descartes'** location of the soul's action on the body in the pineal gland or **Gall's** proposal, mocked by **Hegel**, to divine our mental abilities from the shape of our skulls.

Whether in the era of pre-scientific speculation or in that of empirical research, outside of **Generative Anthropology**, models of the origin of language without exception rely on an originary hypothesis that remains unaware of itself. The individual studies presented in the earlier *Chronicles* have noted this fact. The thematization of the originary hypothesis is not a product of technological advances, nor is its relationship to earlier hypotheses of language origin comparable to that between **Newton** and **Aristotle** or **Einstein** and **Newton**. This thematization depends rather on the historical, which is to say, the *ethical* experience of postmodernity, the ultimate revelation of which is the impossibility of avoiding the model of **exchange** as the basis for human relations. It openly avows the leap that attends the creation of the sign-world and seeks to minimize this leap without denying it. To refuse to formulate such a hypothesis is either to deny the discontinuity between animal and human or to subordinate it to the greater discontinuity between human and God.

The originary hypothesis is equally impatient with either secular or religious refusal; conversely, it tolerates equally well secular or religious expression. Its difficulty with religious thought is not the appeal to transcendence as such but the non-minimal nature of this appeal. Since humans may be shown to exist and God or gods cannot, a secular hypothesis of origin might seem "more minimal" than a religious one. But the hypothesis of human origin is not a question that may be posed from outside the human experience; and within that experience, the transcendent Being personified in the Judeo-Christian tradition as God is not detachable from the communal guarantee that makes language and other representational forms possible. We

need not "believe in God," not even "in the foxholes," to be aware of this dependency.

There is clearly much to be gained, on both sides, by denying the symmetry of the human and the sacred, by either setting God prior to humanity or humanity prior to God--or, like the churchgoing scientist, doing both at once. Setting aside the first choice for the moment, the second has obvious immediate advantages for empirical research. To understand the sacred as a mere artifact allows one to explore its social usefulness while ignoring it as a causal factor. It then becomes possible to draw analogies between animal and human communication while "bracketing" the gap between human representation and its animal precursors. This research could no doubt be carried out, and one day no doubt will be, within the framework of the originary hypothesis; but at its present stage, that empirical scientists' own hypotheses can be demolished on a priori "philosophical"--read minimal anthropological--grounds, seems irrelevant to their, if not to our, concerns.

Yet in the long term, the truth can never be irrelevant. If indeed language is a social process generated not by some new configuration of the individual brain but by the interaction of a group, then not only can the origin of language not be presented directly in terms of biological evolution, but language as such must be understood as a process of interaction between human beings rather than as a set of connections within an individual brain. The attempts of **Derek Bickerton** or the far more anthropologically aware **Terrence Deacon** to model a possible origin for language are not innocent footnote speculations "supplementary" to the serious material. The very awkwardness of these speculations, their throwaway nature, betrays both the necessity of acknowledging the question and the inadequacy of the less than rigorous answers suggested.

To those who seek the secret of language in the brain, I propose as a thought-experiment that, since religion and language emerge simultaneously, one seek the secret of religion in the brain as well. Perhaps there is a region in the brain (in the "right brain," no doubt) devoted to religious concepts. Whatever the results of neurological research concerning language, clearly the neurological evolution leading to the doubly articulated languages we know is a consequence of the birth of language, not its cause. But this simple fact, even if admitted, is masked by the elaborateness and complexity of this evolution, whereas our common God-concepts (what corresponds in the linguistic domain to the intellectual structures of theology is not language but linguistic philosophy) show no apparent dependence on evolving brain structures. Language, which I called in *The Origin of Language* "formal" representation, requires a minimal expenditure of energy. Its representation of the (originally sacred) world has adaptive consequences that drive the joint evolution of language and the brain; Deacon points out that in the course of this evolution, the brain and language adapt *to each other*. Religion, in contrast, is "institutional"; its representations do not interact freely with the world and we have therefore no adaptive interest in increasing their throughput. On the contrary, the cost (**Bataille's** *dépense*) of ritual is a benefit, since the energy we thus expend is diverted from mimetic violence. But the fact that several hundred thousand years of human evolution have not created a religion area in the brain comparable to those of **Broca** and **Wernicke** for language--and that we feel no need to seek such a region--sheds light on the fundamental question of where we should situate our "competence," to use **Chomsky's** term, in either language or religion.

Both religion and language are, minimally, forms of representation. Precisely because the object of religious worship, however "primitive," is Being rather than beings, it must be designated by a sign that persists as the correlative of Being in the absence of the being that first gave rise to both sign and correlative. This generative reasoning relegates to subordinate status the question of where the sacred sign resides in the brain. In the originary scene, an associative or "indexical" sign--the "abortive gesture of appropriation"--acquires a "symbolic" value. Language originates as the generation of a new *communally recognized* connection, independent of the built-in call system (comparable to laughter rather than speech), yet no mere private **Pavlovian** association.

This argument, so difficult to accept with regard to language, where syntactical issues loom so large, is rejected only out of inertial prejudice in the domain of the sacred. The often-proposed idea that a genetic mutation led to the emergence of speech is a category error, but one less flagrantly absurd than the idea that such a mutation gave rise to the concept of God. (Imagine the thrill of one day discovering the **God gene**.)

Today's empirically driven reflection on these subjects is unconcerned with the internal logic of its hypotheses; the all-important goal is to formulate research programs--and obtain funds--for the systematic collection of information. This is a reality of the academic practice of science, whose general effectiveness in providing benefits to humanity it would be churlish to ignore. In the "early modern" past, however, there was no research establishment focused on work-creation, only a set of individual thinkers. It is among these thinkers that the encounter with the logic of the originary hypothesis can best be tested. The continued reliance of those who today style themselves philosophers on the Enlightenment moral reasoning that culminates in **Kant**, not to speak of that of **Plato** and **Aristotle**, demonstrates that since early modern times at most incremental progress has been made in grounding the fundamental principles of human relations. These Enlightenment thinkers, whose ideas are still felt to be alive today, remain the sole interlocutors willing, tacitly to be sure, to discuss with us the question of human origin.

But beyond the dialogue with texts, my real interlocutors will be those in whom this writing will arouse the long-repressed intuition that the origin of language and religion *must* be thought because it is at the root of anthropological thinking. No doubt humanity has all of human time to assimilate the logic of its origin, but the time is coming when we will need to guarantee the continuation of this time itself through the admission that we all hold this logic in common.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Victimary Thinking Forever?

No. 230: Saturday, March 31, 2001

I suggested in [Chronicle 224](#) that we are leaving the victimary postmodern era and entering a "post-millennial" era of non-victimary dialogue. What seems more likely is that we are leaving the acute form of the victimary for the chronic, the heroic for the banal. Both formulations refer to the damping of violence through dialogue, but the nuance is crucial, since it distinguishes what amounts to a utopian absence of hostility--and utopias are ever dangerous--from an endemic state of suspicion--the *ère du soupçon* detected by Nathalie Sarraute some forty-odd years ago.

If there is a single explanation for GA's relative obscurity (despite the yearly doubling of our website volume), it is its incompatibility with victimary thinking. Although certain radical modes have subsided, victimary discourse has become so endemic in our intellectual and cultural life that only in such contexts as this is it possible to speak of it with (relative) impunity. I have no desire to give offence to those who gain privilege and power by asserting their own--or their clientele's--victimary status. The temptations to do so are too great; in the absence of either the reality check of the natural sciences or the constraint of an authoritarian ideology, the "soft" sector of the academy is bound to be driven by the "winner take all" principle characteristic of the global marketplace. Contrary to intuition, there is little room for controversy in the soft intellectual world, where victimary discourse is the *lingua franca*, any deviation from it is discouraged if not punished, and a principled stand against it cannot be recognized as such. To claim that one simply wishes to treat everyone equally is taken as a defense of "white male" privilege, even in the mouth of a principled black man like UC Regent Ward Connerly.

Yet this academic discourse is clearly more abject than the human relations that accompany it. In my experience, relations between the races and the sexes in the United States have never been more reciprocal and equitable. Should this not count as proof that victimary discourse facilitates improvement of relations between unequally powerful groups, that legitimizing the expression of resentment is the least violent means of discharging this resentment and engaging the dialogue of reciprocity?

Here is a hypothesis to focus the mind: *Victimary thinking is the post-millennial replacement for utopianism*. When we lack a blueprint for changing the world, only resentment can tell us what to change, and among the competing resentments, those with the most collective force are fittest for survival. This explains why, upon the collapse of apocalyptic utopianism, intellectual discourse, far from submitting to the criteria of market-driven rationality, denounces this rationality at every turn as perpetuating "domination," "hegemony," "patriarchy," "exploitation," "under-representation," etc. No market success goes unsuspected by this discourse--except its

own.

Whether or not the fact that a certain group stands lower than another according to some criterion is scandalous in itself, the effort to correct the imbalance offers an outlet for the resentful energies formerly applied to utopianism. The market system welcomes these energies, which have nothing like the destructive force of the twentieth-century utopias. Affirmative action in its various guises is an indefinitely ongoing project that legitimizes an empowering victimary rhetoric. Even where no political progress is made--and some usually is--to denounce the patriarchy is to play a trump card when the opponent with all his aces is trumless.

I shall illustrate the hold of victimary discourse on the academy by examining a recent work by **J. Hillis Miller**, a distinguished professor of English and Comparative Literature at **UC Irvine**. In an essay on "the transnational university" in *Black Holes* (Stanford, 1999), Miller, quoting with approval **Bill Readings'** *The University in Ruins* (Harvard, 1996), reflects on the replacement of the "university of an idea" with the "university of excellence." The latter criterion, as Miller and, presumably, Readings point out, is tautologically oriented to the marketplace, since "excellence," at least as my Dean and her superiors view it, is simply a synonym for "marketability": what is excellent is what those "in the field" consider excellent. Excellence in the Humanities, as in physics and medicine, corresponds to objective achievement, an objective achievement in the Humanities being one that is recognized by an objectively large number of people.

Seeing this point made at the start of his essay gave me hope that Miller would bring new insight to the Humanities' increasing slavery to the academic marketplace. Alas, Miller's essay is perceptive in every area but the one that counts, the political analysis of the university in general and the Humanities in particular. I can accept the linguistic **PC** (she for he, United States for American, Chicano *and Chicana*...) as a sign of respect for (victimized) Others; I can even abide the hook-line-and-sinker acceptance of the race/class/gender cliché that considers "United States" culture the expression of the self-interest of heterosexual white males (a category whose inclusiveness would have shocked those who not so long ago barred Catholics and Jews from their society). These ideological choices have no direct bearing on the accuracy of the author's analysis. The real problem is that this analysis is based on a wholly misleading picture of the Humanities in our universities today.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, an example might be worth a hundred. As evidence for his position that the university, now that the Cold War has ended, is becoming dominated by private corporations, Miller quotes (p. 55) **University of California President Atkinson** re the university's role in preparing students for the "global marketplace." (Shades of **Clark Kerr's** "multiversity" and the 1964 Free Speech Movement.) Now it so happens that, just last month, I and my colleagues received a memo from this same President Atkinson about a well-funded program he was instituting for the purpose of including more "underrepresented minorities" on the faculty. At **UCLA**, the largest item in the Chancellor's budget this year is funding for committees on "Gender Equity," on which I have already reported in [Chronicle 219](#).

I am happy to stipulate, as the lawyers say, that these and other similar initiatives are fully

justified, and that race-based affirmative action, currently illegal in California, is nevertheless a good thing to be promoted by all means possible. My objection to Miller's analysis is simply one of fact. As Miller insightfully affirms in reference to every cultural postulation other than this one, using terms like "hegemonic" to refer to white male culture is a performative rather than constative use of language: it creates the category it assigns. All's fair in love and war, but please don't tell me that the present evolution of the Humanities displays subordination to corporate practices and the hegemony of the white male. The "cultural studies" world is the mother of all academic marketplaces, in which those who would defend "subaltern" voices against the hegemony of international corporations are handsomely funded, largely if indirectly by these very same corporations. I think of myself as having something to say on a good number of subjects. My last invitation to a Humanities conference dates from 1992. In contrast, there are those who attend such conferences every month. I will let you guess the level of white-male hegemony in the areas of study most of them focus on.

Sadly but understandably, those such as Professor Miller to whom the profession has given little personal cause for resentment cannot help us to take an objective view of the victimary culture in which we operate. This is, therefore, a task I am assigning myself over the next year or two, *inch'Allah*, as an late friend of mine was wont to say. I, at least, am aware of my own resentment, and aware that it is my own, not that of a group, whether mine or someone else's, of which I have made myself a representative. I don't even represent lower-middle-class heterosexual Jewish males born in the **Bronx** in 1941, few of whom share my political views, let alone my intellectual perspective (most have remained **Yankee** fans, however). Independently of both the vast majority of "United States" academic humanists from the Bronx and elsewhere, who continue to echo victimary resentments with uncritical vehemence, and the conservative minority whose analysis is largely limited to the denunciation of the preceding--and who have their own, albeit more limited, funding sources and self-congratulatory conferences--I propose, on the basis of the originary hypothesis, to study the evolution of victimary thinking and to construct a model of its operation. With nothing to lose but my *Anthropoetics* budget of \$0 per annum, I can afford to be as unbiased as they come.

My personal stake in this investigation is my hope, as a participant in the "Judeo-Christian tradition," to transcend through understanding my resentment of these phenomena. Victimary thinking is a powerful ethical epistemology whose force in the emerging global society we should not underestimate. Implicit in our end of history that does not put an end to history is the perpetuation of victimary thinking as the constitutive principle of post-millennial politics. If the post-millennial is a useful category to oppose to the postmodern, it cannot be because it marks the end of victimary thinking; such an "end" is just as utopian as the "end of history."

What utopias and dystopias have in common, and may therefore be considered essential to utopianism regardless of its valence, is that in either case *people have a place and know their place*. In a utopia, they like this place. In a dystopia, some may hate their place and not all may accept it, but they know it because their masters accept and defend *theirs*. If our world is neither utopia nor dystopia, and depends for its survival on the deferral of both, it is because no one is secure in his position; all of us are real or potential subjects *and objects* of victimary resentment and vulnerable therefore to the inevitable expressions of this resentment.

It is essential to victimary thinking to claim we are truly living in a dystopia; but in what kind of dystopia is this claim itself tolerated and even echoed by the so-called oppressors? The only true utopians left are the **neo-Nazis**, who maintain their "Aryan" dream in defiance of public sentiment. Which proves once again that if victimary thinking is bad, utopianism is a lot worse. What makes post-millennial victimary discourse effective is that it continues to circulate and transform itself rather than stagnating and fermenting into a monstrous ideology. The expression of resentment within the political process and its dominant position in the academy may best be thought of as means for accelerating this circulation. Just as in **Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees***, private (or group) resentments enhance the public exchange system. Whether or not this must indefinitely remain the case is the crucial question for one who would model the operation of victimary thinking in our era.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Paris in the Springtime

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The *Institut d'Etudes Politiques*, better known as **Sciences Po**, is the most central of the *Grandes Ecoles* where the French governmental and administrative elite are educated, or, as the French say, "formed." The mathematically inclined prefer *Polytechnique*, artists, *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts*, academics, *L'Ecole Normale Supérieure*, but Sciences Po is the gateway to most high-level careers in politics, journalism, management, and public service. Thanks to the persistence and persuasiveness of **Maxime Cenzi**, a student at Sciences Po and a *passionné* of GA, I was invited to Paris in late March to participate in the so-called "grands O[raux] de Sciences Po" at which several speakers debate a selected topic, in this case, *la mondialisation* (see [Chronicle 227](#)).

I won't go into much detail concerning the "debate" except to note that the French, often thought of as exemplars of exquisite politeness, are more accurately characterized by a somewhat different cultural trait that locally goes by the name of *goujaterie*. My ideas seemed to go over well enough with the audience, but there wasn't much time to develop them since the first speaker (whom I gallantly refrain from naming) took far more than her allotted time to say extremely little, and the others, both politicians, were more concerned with scoring points against each other than engaging in anthro-philosophical reflection. With all today's fascination for things American, an *étranger* is still welcomed with difficulty into *le débat franco-français* [the Franco-French debate]. It was nonetheless a stimulating experience, one surely few of my countrymen have had, to address the future elite of France from the podium of the main amphitheater of this supremely Gallic institution.

More fulfilling was the talk on GA I gave at Sciences Po two days later, to a small but committed audience. This may well be the first time I have ever given a full-length exposition of the ideas of Generative Anthropology in French; my GA seminars at UCLA have always been held in English. The experience recalled to me that French is my language of predilection, and gave me all the more the feeling of being a French thinker exiled in my native country.

When I go to Paris I walk for kilometers on end. Paris is a pretty small city, only 105 k² (Los Angeles is 1200) and with the exception of those dull left-bank *arrondissements* like the 15th, you can find something of interest in almost any street. (My shopping recommendation for this trip is the **Dépôt-Vente du 17e**, 109 rue de Courcelles, Métro Place Péreire.) Even when I take the Metro one way, I usually walk the other.

I feel at home in Paris--far more so for many years than in my native New York. But this is not a "natural" phenomenon; I could well say that I have arranged my life precisely so that I can feel at home in Paris. My stepdaughter lives there with her family; so does her grandmother (my ex-mother-in-law)--my French family as it were. For someone who didn't visit France until after obtaining his PhD, its capital's hometown status is made, not born.

Becoming a student of French was both the most intelligent and the dumbest thing I have done in my life. I doubt if I shall ever have the luxury of knowing which, although the current evolution of the profession seems to be trying to drop me a hint. Obtaining this second cultural identity was not merely a triumph over the obvious difficulties but a real inner liberation. It represents neither a denial of my American origins nor a simple pose. Many, no doubt most, of my dearest and most intimate relationships over a lifetime have been conducted in French.

This still doesn't tell me whether I did the right thing in taking up this "field." To say that it has grown less receptive to my way of thinking is true but largely irrelevant, more alibi than demonstration. Although I once committed a *faux pas* by indicating to my (female) Dean that I preferred the "old boy" system of the past to what we have now, I was never, God forbid, an "old boy" myself; as in that Aesop fable where an animal stuck in the mud doesn't let a friend brush away the flies because they would only be replaced by more bloodthirsty ones, I simply found the old-boy bloodsuckers less ravenous than those of our era. (Though the figure is ill-chosen, since it's not the old boys or girls who do the sucking.)

Clearly the needs of the academic market with respect to such things as language professors are more symbolic than real. Their most important function is arguably to provide a model of the well-oiled circulation of academic ideas. Outsiders such as I find it easy to mock these ideas, whose value is not measured by their correspondence to reality but by the degree to which they are adapted to this circulation. It is not therefore without interest that the Darwin-Gresham mechanism that dominates academic life selects inexorably for the victimary. The ideas that circulate best are those that defend victims against oppressors, ideas that may be repeated ad nauseam without our having the right even to find them boring, let alone false or irrelevant. Such considerations, no doubt, are only vaguely relevant in the hard sciences, and as a graduate of the Bronx High School of Science one would think I should have gone into one of those. But I never really enjoyed science and I don't think I am particularly gifted for it, or even for mathematics, at least on the level required to make an original contribution. It's the human that fascinates me, but, alas, the human is where the idea market, at its current (and

future?) level of maturity, seems able to operate only in unselfconscious victimary language.

The French are a bit less victimary than Americans; they still retain a "republican" rather than "democratic" sense of their polity, even if on social issues like gun control, abortion, the death penalty, or universal health insurance (not such a bad thing), they stand far to the left of the American center. We may let people have guns, but we also let them wear religious dress to class; we may execute minority murderers, but we also admit minority students to schools on a priority basis. For the moment, at least, the French don't believe in hyphenated (and privilege-graded) identities; one wonders if this is national character or merely the equivalent of the French lag in such areas as computing and venture capitalism. At Sciences Po, the key French elite educational institution, a new policy will admit some students this year from schools in "disfavored" areas, bypassing the normal entrance examination...

Well, I'm too old to worry about such things. Finding an audience for GA among the brightest young people of France is reward enough. As I told them, whether the lecture hall be full or empty, there is no substitute for the originary hypothesis. If people prefer the authority of **Kant** or **Aristotle** on moral matters to the construction of a generative model of morality, there's nothing to do but await the slice of **Ockham's razor**. Meanwhile, victimary thinking seem to be evolving toward ever firmer denial that the human species is morally superior to others. This evolution corroborates my position that the success of victimary discourse is not dependent on the existence of victims, but it makes ever more remote the likelihood of that Ockham shave. Perhaps the survival of our species requires this self-righteous false modesty--motivated, needless to say, less by love for other-specied creatures than by the need to one-up the fellow-specied **Philistine** down the street. Perhaps this hecatomb of human self-awareness will even "save the planet"...

As that arch-Frenchman **Pascal** said:

L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature; mais c'est un roseau pensant. . . . Mais quand l'univers l'écraserait, l'homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue . . . Toute notre dignité consiste donc en la pensée. . . . Travaillons donc à bien penser: voilà le principe de la morale. [Man is but a reed, the weakest in nature, but he's a thinking reed. . . . But if the universe should crush him, man is still nobler than what kills him . . . All our dignity consists therefore in thought. . . . Let us therefore work at thinking well; *voilà* the principle of moral reflection.]

And *voilà* a cultural ideal this old *hérisson* [hedgehog] can relate to. So let's hear it for *croissants* and *café au lait* and Paris in the springtime.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Wilhelm von Humboldt's Pre-Darwinian Structuralism

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The beginnings of full-fledged market society in the early part of the nineteenth century coincided with and were so to speak emblemized by a new systematization of linguistic knowledge. **Wilhelm von Humboldt's** posthumous 1836 *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und seinen Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* [*The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*], published most recently in translation as *On Language* (Cambridge, 1988; all references here are to this edition), was intended as a theoretical introduction to Humboldt's incomplete *magnum opus* on the ancient **Kawi** language of **Java**. Humboldt's work grounds comparative language study in a pre-Darwinian linguistic structuralism.

Parallels between various Indo-European languages, including Sanskrit, had been noted as far back as the 16th century (see Daniel Droixhe, *De l'origine du langage aux langues du monde : études sur les XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Tübingen: G. Narr, 1987); in 1786, William Jones's third "Anniversary Discourse" to the Asiatic Society sketched a first picture of the Indo-European family tree as a whole. Languages could no longer be cast into vague categories such as **Rousseau's** "northern/southern"; their historical relationships were beginning to be analyzed in detail. The establishment of the Indo-European tree in turn inspired interest in languages outside it: what other trees would it be necessary to construct? how many families, how many types of languages were there? Of the growing number of students of language in the first half of the nineteenth century, Humboldt was the one most deeply concerned with these questions. Fluent in a dozen languages, he is said to have studied over three hundred. Although Humboldt's philosophy of language is filled with romantic mist, his work in classifying languages into families and above all in creating a general linguistic typology (agglutinating, incorporating, isolating, inflected) shows him to be no longer a *philosophe* and already a professional linguist.

In the later part of the nineteenth century, under the influence of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), such disciplined social scientists as **Durkheim** and **Tylor** (not to speak of **Marx and Engels**) would classify cultural phenomena in terms of their closeness to the "origin," albeit generally in the absence of hypotheses of origin as such. Written at an earlier time, Humboldt's work exhibits a flowering of synchronic dominance that would be reasserted by **Saussure** only well after the turn of the twentieth century. This post-Darwinian turn away from historicism, suspected of racism or at any rate of "Eurocentrism" *avant la lettre*, produced a more rigorous structuralism than Humboldt's, one purged of the value-judgments that had made his variety,

as we shall see, the intellectual basis of the **Aryan** "race" theory proposed by **Max Müller** whose virulent offshoots contributed to the discredit of historicism.

Humboldt's structuralism is the result of the vast accumulation of empirical knowledge that separates him from his eighteenth-century precursors. The more one knows about languages in the concrete, the more obvious is the barrier between the origin of language and its present state, and the more obvious as well, the difference in kind between concrete descriptions of language forms and families and unverifiable speculations about language origin. It is this dichotomy that underlies Humboldt's statement, itself wholly speculative, that:

Language, indeed, arises from a depth of human nature which everywhere forbids us to regard it as a true product and creation of peoples. It possesses an autonomy that visibly declares itself to us, though inexplicable in its nature, and, seen from this aspect, is no production of activity, but an involuntary emanation of the spirit, no work of nations, but a gift fallen to them by their inner destiny. . . . It is no empty play upon words if we speak of language as arising in autonomy solely from itself and divinely free, but of languages as bound and dependent on the nations to which they belong. (sec 2, p. 24)

Rather than seek the path from language to languages, from the "involuntary emanation of the spirit" to the empirically known "work of nations," Humboldt insists on their incommensurability, not because he has less insight than **Condillac** but because he has much more knowledge, which he can articulate in a way qualitatively more concrete and verifiable than any discussion of language's roots in the "depth of human nature" could possibly be. Humboldt's refusal to speculate on the origin of this "spirit" is the beginning of the negative form of minimalism that will be reflected by the *Académie des Sciences*' famous 1866 ban on such speculations.

The chief difficulty encountered by the modern reader of Humboldt's treatise is in following its train of thought. Where a contemporary comparatist such as **Joseph Greenberg** is content with outlining diverse linguistic structures in order to argue for one or another configuration of one or another linguistic tree, Humboldt wants his typology to tell a "story" that is nevertheless not strictly chronological. The breadth of linguistic knowledge that takes him far beyond the Indo-European and the related Semitic family makes him--quite rightly--wary of postulating any kind of historical progression from one family of languages to another:

One might certainly suppose . . . a gradual progression [from the Chinese to the Sanskrit/Indo-European languages]. But if we truly feel the nature of language as such, and of these two in particular, if we reach the point of fusion between thought and sound in both, we discover there the outgoing creative principle of their differing organization. At that stage, abandoning the possibility of a gradual development of one from the other, we shall accord to each its own basis in the spirit of the race, and only within the general trend of linguistic evolution, and thus ideally only, will regard them as stages in a successful construction of language. (sec. 4, p. 32)

Humboldt posits an "evolution," a set of "stages in a successful construction of language," but this evolution is "ideal" rather than historical. The relation between Chinese and Sanskrit is not one of linear filiation but of differentially successful offshoots from a common stem, like that between *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens*. If Chinese were an earlier stage of Sanskrit, we could assume its speakers could evolve into speakers of the "more successfully" articulated tongue. But they are not; they incarnate a different, and inferior, creative principle, one that has its own unique virtues and capacities but can never acquire the higher ones of the superior linguistic-national stock.

The clarity and precision of language gain through the habit of expressing enlarged and refined ideas . . . But this whole progress of improved language-making can only go on within the limits prescribed to it by the *original design of the language*. A nation can make a more imperfect language into a tool for the production of ideas to which it would not have given the original incentive, but cannot remove the inner restrictions which have once been deeply embedded therein. To that extent even the highest elaboration remains ineffective. (sec. 4, p. 34; emphasis here and elsewhere is the author's)

Thus Humboldt's justified disinclination to present a scheme of linear evolution leads directly (via Müller's "Aryan invasion" theory) to the linguistically grounded racialism that would become so important later in the century.

Given his comparativist preoccupations, it is unsurprising that Humboldt has little to say about the ultimate origin of language. He associates language with "sociality" by means of a causal link reminiscent of Condillac, to which he adds the Herderian idea of language as free reflection ("mental cultivation"):

The individual man is always connected with a whole, with that of his nation, of the race to which the latter belongs . . . His life is necessarily tied to *sociality* . . . In the merely vegetative existence, as it were, of man on the soil, the individual's *need for assistance* drives him to combine with others, and calls for understanding through *language*, so that common undertakings may be possible. But mental cultivation, even in the loneliest seclusion of temperament, is equally possible only through language, and the latter requires to be directed to an external being that understands it. . . . Man thereby at once discovers that around him there are beings having the same inner needs . . . For the intimation of a *totality*, and the endeavour towards it, are given immediately with the sense of *individuality* . . . (sec. 6, p. 41)

Language for Humboldt is, famously, not a product but an activity, not **Ergon** but **Energieia** (sec. 8, p. 49), whence its affinity with sound, which "streams outward from the heart's depths (sec. 9, p. 55)." Language is essentially social, and linguistic exchange requires the reproduction in the interlocutor of the thought-processes encoded in the speaker's utterance. But once this has been established, Humboldt finds himself obliged to deny the very words he had previously used to explain the origin of this exchange. The following passage is clearly

aimed at Condillac:

Even the *beginning of language* should not be thought restricted to so meagre a stock of words as is commonly supposed when, instead of seeking its inception in the original summons to free human *sociality*, we attribute it primarily to the need for mutual *assistance*, and project mankind into an imagined state of nature. . . Man is not so needy, and to render assistance, unarticulated sounds would have sufficed. Even in its beginnings, language is human throughout. . . Words well up freely from the breast, without necessity or intent, and there may well have been no wandering horde in any desert that did not already have its own songs. (sec. 9, p. 60)

The same "mutual assistance" that produced sociality in the earlier passage is now shown to be insufficient to determine human language; calls for help could be handled at a pre-human level. Language (again echoing Herder) is a "free" activity; yet to define this freedom, Humboldt finds himself obliged to deny not merely "necessity" but "intent." No doubt these are familiar quandaries that the previous century's speculations could not resolve; what is new here is the author's lack of real concern with resolving them. The originary hypotheses of the past are inadequate because they construct only a protolanguage, whereas, as Humboldt observes, "even the languages of so-called *savages*, who would have . . . to come closer to such a state of nature (*ibid.*)" are always already articulated. As for the origin of the "sound-form" within which this articulation takes place, it is dismissed in a gesture that Durkheim will repeat at the beginning of the following century with respect to religion:

The *creation* [of a sound-form], if it is to be a true and complete one, could hold good only of the original *invention of language*, and thus of a situation that we do not know about, but only presuppose as a necessary hypothesis. (sec. 10, p. 76)

No conceivable hypothesis can take us from the "original invention of language" to the creation of a (specific) sound-form. Humboldt the structuralist sees language as a "totality"; but there is no point that can serve as the origin of all the dynamic totalities that humanity has generated from the struggle between *innere Sprachform* and external sound-substance. (The only way of reconciling the specific and the general is to postulate an articulated *Ursprache* from which all languages would be derived. This ancient idea, revived in more recent times notably by **Morris Swadesh** [*The Origin and Diversification of Language*, 1971] and some tenants of the "Nostratic" hypothesis, is incompatible with Humboldt's empirically driven but "ideal"--i.e., Platonic--hierarchical classification system.)

Articulated language is always already differentiating and differentiated. To go beyond the variety of "sound-forms" to the common human fact of language itself can be done only by hypothesizing a moment prior to articulation that is the origin of the difference that constitutes it. This hypothetical moment had haunted the speculations of the previous century and would return near the end of the following one; Humboldt's still inchoate linguistic science derives its professional self-consciousness from its expulsion.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Art after the End of History

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In **Hegel's** world of thought without language, the paradoxical effect of language on the world it purports to describe is fully recuperated in the *fuite en avant* of the dialectic, within which art and religion incarnate ideas that only attain fully self-conscious expression in propositional or declarative form. The "end of history" is the revelation of an ultimate truth simultaneously anthropological and ontological: the Spirit once embodied in art or evoked in religious rite is now *known*.

The framework of **Francis Fukuyama's** notorious equation of the end of history with the triumph of liberal democracy is the dialectic of political forms in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, but its cognitive corollary is clear. We come to the end of history when we have nothing essential left to learn about the human. Political organization is the ultimate anthropological test; if we now know how to construct the ultimately successful society, and know that we know this, any further learning can reveal only what is already implicit in this social form through which humanity realizes its full potential. Within this final state, following Hegelian logic, art as the imaginary presentation of paradoxical relationships, that is, those not expressible in propositions, would no longer have a necessary function. Whether or not "entertainment" (not a Hegelian category) would remain as a means of discharging our residual "pity" and "terror" (read: resentment), art would have nothing left to reveal.

From the standpoint of political theory, the Achilles' heel of the "end of history" thesis is that it hypostasizes the nation-state as the permanent overarching form of human organization. Phenomena such as the evolving integration of the **European Union** and the globalization of international capital markets suggest that the nation-state is far from the ultimate stage of political development. Nor is the future likely to bring "world government" as either a reproduction of the structures of the nation-state writ large or an overarching federation of individual states taken separately. Rather than a linear hierarchy of political bodies from municipality to nation to regional confederation to "globe," what appears to be emerging is a network of intersecting hierarchies regulating different aspects of human intercourse.

But there is a deeper sense in which it is naïve merely to substitute the liberal-democratic nation-state for Hegel's Prussian autocracy as the ultimate political institution. Once liberal democracy is perceived to be the synthesis of all previous political forms, it no longer has an antithesis and therefore ceases to be a specific "thesis" or category at all. If, as it now appears, communism and fascism-Nazism were not serious alternatives to market society but aberrations on the world-historical scene, then "history" in the narrow sense of the emergence

of new forms of political organization has been over since (at least) the mid-nineteenth century, and the last century's painful struggle with totalitarianism was merely the conclusive demonstration of this fact. Rather than see the end of the Cold War as the triumph of the liberal-democratic nation-state, we should view it as the beginning of an era whose chief task is to lay the groundwork for a stable and universally beneficial world exchange system.

The greatest human problem of the post-millennial era is the resentment provoked by great and durable economic inequality both among and within nations. Inequality within market society can of course be theorized; this theorization has in fact become the dominant intellectual mode of our time. Yet if it is increasingly impossible to maintain the claim that the social sciences, whether sociology, economics, or political science, are value-free even as an ideal, it is precisely because of the impossibility of constructing value-free models of unequal relations. It is no coincidence that the demise of the illusory alternatives to market society has been contemporary with the rise of victimary thinking in the social sciences as well as in the humanities and in the popular consciousness. Feminism provides perhaps the most striking corroboration; in many recent collections of neutral-sounding articles on questions such as globalization or corporate management, one finds a group of studies that denounce, often in quite vehement terms, relevant aspects of the condition of women. In the humanities, victimary discourse has long been the norm rather than the exception. In a post-national market society in which no quasi-unanimous ideology is conceivable, to speak of unequal relations in neutral terms is implicitly to violate our most fundamental ethical intuition.

This has not always been the case. The model of an unequal system is in principle a tool for modifying that system, as is Marx's analysis of the capitalist production system in *Das Kapital*. But this kind of analysis is acceptable only because it purports to find a path beyond inequality to a fully reciprocal state of free exchange. Post-utopian models of the market can no longer explain inequality as a structural necessity ("exploitation") of a system ("capitalism") that for that very reason is fated to give way to a higher ("communist") form. More or less orthodox Marxist analyses of the world economy continue to be produced, but these can no longer plausibly situate themselves within the eschatological horizon of the market's self-transcendence; to the extent that they posit historical evolution, the engine of change is moral rather than economic. In a word, Marxism is henceforth only one of many forms of victimary discourse. Absent a plausible claim of historical inevitability, it is impossible to analyze inequality without denouncing, at least implicitly, its causes.

In these circumstances, societies and sub-societies whose economic conditions justify a claim to victimary status pose the following dilemma. On the one hand, situating the causes of inequality entirely outside the social unit deprives it of subjecthood, reducing it to the passive status of an animal species; yet, on the other, situating these causes even partially within the society risks further inflaming resentment by giving the appearance of "blaming the victim." Where inequality is endemic and not easily eradicated, so that individuals born into disadvantage cannot be given a clear path to its diminution, no model, however true to the facts, is likely to be found acceptable. Within the realm of theoretical discourse, only the narrowest paths are available for negotiating this dilemma.

But the integration that cannot be accomplished by the declarative discourse of theory is accessible to the ostensive representations of art. My thesis is that what maintains the

revelatory function of art throughout history from the earliest times to the present is *inequality within a system of at least partially reciprocal exchange*. What is new about our liberal-democratic times is the absence of any credible ideological justification for this inequality, either as ontologically grounded in itself ("the will of God") or as a temporary stage in a process leading to its abolition. Art no longer either puts itself in the service of the Revolution or seeks by *catharsis* to restore a timeless stasis; its dominant mode in our era is (non-socialist) **realism** (see [Chronicle 228](#)). The deferral of resentment that art accomplishes within its local universe is at the same time a movement toward the integration of this universe within global culture. In this context, "esthetic value" is increasingly assimilable to exchange value, not simply because of the rationalization of markets (e.g., for painting) under conditions of "perfect information," but because the artifacts and behaviors of the particular worlds that art reveals acquire value in the marketplace.

As a simple example of this contrast between art and theory, let me first recall one of the most controversial works of social science in recent years, **Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*** (New York: Free Press, 1994), which purports to explain and offer solutions to the educational and economic difficulties of the African-American population. Many of the book's critics attacked its use of data on technical grounds, but the hostile tone of most of these attacks, many of which accused the authors of racism, makes clear that statistical methodology was not the issue. The real problem of *The Bell Curve* is what led conservative commentator **Rush Limbaugh**, not known for his exquisite racial sensitivity, to express his disapproval of the book's overall project: in explaining unequal Black performance on IQ tests on the basis of long-term factors, *The Bell Curve's* theoretical model is unethical on its face. Even if the book's ultimate intent is to aid the unequal to become more equal, it violates the implicit ethic of social science within a democratic exchange system by justifying their inequality, however "objectively," in the first place.

Let us now turn, in contrast, to the plethora of films made by Black directors (**Spike Lee, John Singleton, the van Peebles, the Hughes brothers, Bill Duke...**) over the past decade or so about life in the "inner city." However critical these films may be of the larger society, they rarely hesitate to reveal the factors that make inner-city families and their children poorly adapted to the post-industrial economy. But because this revelation takes place within an esthetic context, the spectator, white or black, is made to experience the characters' actions as meaningful, to share their resentment and its esthetic transcendence. Young people's more radical identification with the resentments of rap music is fundamentally similar: this identification, both in a broad sense and in its specifically youthful version, is fundamental to American popular culture, particularly its music.

A simple statement of the originary hypothesis is that humanity and its culture are founded on the fundamental principle that signs are more easily exchanged than things. But before the signs of human representation can be distilled into the declarative propositions of theory, they function in their ostensive, esthetically evocative role as means of deferring violence. Art may be unnecessary for those wholly and confidently focused on success in a world that sees itself as nothing but a network of human exchange. But the rest of us need the esthetic sacralization of human action that, by dissolving the imaginary barrier between failure and success, helps

make ultimate success in this world possible. If this analysis is correct, then art, as well as history, will survive the end of history.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Vico's Originary Science

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Giambattista Vico's reputation as a thinker rests on a set of powerful ideas derived from his historically unique insight into the generative relationship between the sacred, language, and human order: that language is a product of mimesis, that the first language was poetry rather than prose, sung rather than spoken, that the objects of this language were sacred rather than profane, and--as is rarely mentioned--that this elementary sacred, constituted by anthropomorphic explanations of natural phenomena, is a providential means for imposing order through terror on "savage" society. To these we may add the methodological principles of Vico's "new science": that we can only fully know (that is, analyze) what we ourselves have constructed (*verum factum*), and that we should study the human in general by discovering what all human societies have in common.

It is not the least fascination of *La scienza nuova* that these intuitions and principles are accompanied by a sublimely uncritical approach to historical data. Vico's *Scienza Nuova* is far from the only book that people talk about without having read. (All citations are from *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, tr Bergin & Fisch, Cornell UP, 1948.) But in contrast with similar cases--Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Marx's *Das Kapital*--the less known parts are likely to shock those familiar only with the author's main argument. Thus we learn that after the Flood only the Hebrews remained humans of normal size while the "gentiles" grew into giants; that these giants were terrified of thunderstorms because lightning was unknown for centuries after the flood; that the word *myth* is cognate with the word *mute*, demonstrating that myths were originally written rather than spoken, and so on. It is easy to forget in reading Vico's mixture of folk-etymologies and speculative myth interpretations that he was only twenty years older than Voltaire and that the third edition of *La Scienza* (1744) antedated Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) by little more than a decade. Vico grafts an Enlightenment ideal of scientific method onto a pre-Cartesian mind that takes biblical and classical lore at face value and invents word derivations that would make Plato's *Cratylus* blush. Beneath his quasi-Spinozistic claims to logical rigor, the man often called "the greatest Italian philosopher" is closer in mentality and culture to Montaigne than to Kant.

In Book I of *La scienza*, Vico expounds the principles of his science in pseudo-Euclidean

manner as a chain of "axioms" linked by a logic generously supplemented with tendentious interpretation. His three stages of world history--sacred, heroic, and simply "human"--each with its political, legal, religious, and social frameworks described in considerable detail, situate him half way between **Hesiod** and **Auguste Comte**. Vico defines three corresponding types of originary language: the language of the gods (mute, gestural and/or graphic), the language of heroes (half-mute, half-spoken), and the mostly spoken language of the people. These languages are also described as coeval, and Vico variously describes the first linguistic signs as gestures, graphic representations, onomatopoetic sounds, emotional interjections, and rhythmic monosyllables derived from song.

All these pregnant speculations are informed by Vico's central generative intuition--one yet today ignored by the empirical study of human origin--that the first language designates an object of sacred terror that imposes order on a potentially violent nascent human community. **Marcel Danesi's** proposal of a Vichian originary anthropology, *Vico, Metaphor, and the Origin of Language* (Indiana UP, 1993), is justified by this intuition alone, although Danesi unsurprisingly discusses his linguistic insights in the context of the individual mind rather than in the religio-ethical framework of what Vico calls "a rational civil theology of divine providence" (342), where the first, "sacred" language serves the religious function of deferring violence.

The following passage from Book I, the first and most incisive of several dealing with the origin of language and religion, reveals both the profundity and the limits of Vico's anthropological intuition, as well as illustrating his inimitably assertive expository style:

XXXI

177. Wherever a people has grown savage in arms so that human laws have no longer any place among it, the only powerful means of reducing it is religion.

178. This axiom establishes the fact that divine providence initiated the process by which the fierce and violent were brought from their outlaw state to humanity and entered upon national life. It did so by awaking in them a confused idea of divinity, which they in their ignorance attributed to that to which it did not belong. Thus through the terror of this imagined divinity, they began to put themselves in some order.

179. Such an [initiating] principle of things Thomas Hobbes failed to see among his own "fierce and violent men" . . .

XXXII

180. When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things, they attribute their own nature to them.

[. . .]

XXXIII

182. The physics of the ignorant is a vulgar metaphysics by which they

refer the causes of the things they do not know to the will of God without considering the means by which the divine will operates.

[. . .]

XXXVI

185. Imagination is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak.

XXXVII

186. The most sublime labor of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things; and it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons.

187. This philologico-philosophical axiom proves to us that in the world's childhood men were by nature sublime poets.

This series leads to the description of "savage and cruel" witches (190) as the originators of "bloodthirsty religions" and human sacrifice, thus confirming the saying "fear first created gods in the world," and to the conclusion that "all this [religious violence] was necessary to tame the sons of the cyclopes and reduce them to the humanity of an Aristides, a Socrates . . ." (191).

Denouncing the artificial rationalism of social contract theory, Vico affirms that only religious "terror" can tame a "savage" people in Hobbes's state of nature. Providence generates this terror by awakening an idea of the sacred that is first attributed to the new post-diluvian phenomena of thunder and lightning. This natural sacred is understood anthropomorphically, following the principle that men attribute "their own nature" to forces they do not understand. Whence the universality of the god **Jove/Jupiter, who, Vico insists, is found (along with his son **Hercules**) in "every gentile nation" (196). The power to "give sense and passion to insensate things"--presumably, to make gods out of natural forces--is attributed to "the most sublime labor of poetry," a product of "the world's childhood" (186).**

It is not far from Vico's insight that fearsome representation of the gods defers human violence among the gentile "giants" to the hypothesis that fear of the gods itself derives from the fear of human violence. Vico's reference to "that frightful thought of some divinity which imposed form and measure on the bestial passions of these lost men and thus transformed them into human passions" (340) follows the logic of the originary hypothesis in making "thought" of the sacred the locus of the transition between animal appetite and self-conscious--and controllable--human desire. Yet after anthropologizing the sacred, Vico re-naturalizes it: rather than the Hobbesian fear of fellow human beings, the originary inspiration for the gentile sacred is the age-old *tarte à la crème*, terror at thunder and lightning.

We observed in Hobbes's notion of God an unconscious duality, realized in his text but never conceptualized: God gives humanity the gift of language; "God" is a sign that "honors" its infinite referent without being able to describe it (see Chronicles [176](#) and [215](#)). Vico is the first thinker to articulate this duality. In Vico's pseudo-Biblical scenario which, more radically than

Condillac's, returns the "fierce and violent" gentiles to virtual prehuman status after the Flood, it is "providence" that infuses in them the "idea of divinity." We may compare this with a later passage (II, 4: 447): ". . . at the same time that the divine character of Jove took shape--the first human thought in the gentile world--articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia . . . By the Latins Jove was at first, from the roar of the thunder, called Ious; by the Greeks, from the whistle of the lightning, Zeus . . ." The fanciful etymology of the specific names for the storm-god is less important than Vico's implication that the originary use of language served to affirm his sacred character, "the first human thought in the gentile world." But this world cut off from God cannot generate the sacred; the human imagination of false gods depends on the true God's prior existence. It is providence that supplies the paradoxical link between the transcendental concept of divinity and the worldly object of the gentiles' fear.

This intervention of providence is not a mere sop to the **Inquisition**. The divinity of the gentiles is derivative in relation to true divinity, just as the gentiles themselves are degenerate forms of an originally articulate humanity. Vico associates poetic mimesis with childhood, in nations as in individuals:

215. Children excel in imitation; we observe them generally amuse themselves by imitating what they are able to understand.

216. This axiom shows that the world in its infancy was composed of poetic nations, for poetry is nothing but imitation.

Neither here nor elsewhere does Vico conceive the "infancy" out of which civilization emerges as itself an emergent higher level of mimetic intelligence. Even his insistence on the priority of poetry over reasoning is ultimately privative: "the first men, the children as it were of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class-concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters, that is, imaginative class-concepts or universals . . ." (209). These "children" who think in concrete rather than abstract terms are identical with the "fierce and violent" creatures who must be "brought from their outlaw state to humanity." Vico never sees the "savage" mimetic violence that the sacred defers as itself a product of nascent human intelligence; on the contrary, the supernatural force of providence is required to counter humanity's decline into savagery. Rather than being generated within, and projected out of, the proto-human community, originary significance, of transcendental origin, is attributed by the savage mind to the most distant and inhuman objects within the human world.

The idea that humans created the gods is at least as old as **Xenophanes**; what is new in Vico's originary anthropology is the idea that in creating the gods, humanity created itself. The only Enlightenment thinker to conceive language and the sacred in holistic, cultural terms, Vico comes as close as the *Weltanschauung* permits to treating "gentile" religion as a purely human construction. Yet the Vichian sacred remains a transcendent force, analyzed in its effects but not in its constitution.

It is in the post-Darwinian age of **Nietzsche** and **Durkheim** that the nature of the sacred--if not its fundamental relationship to language--begins to be analyzed within a wholly anthropological context. But only post-WWII victimary epistemology that validates resentment as a denunciation of injustice provides a sufficiently radical critique of human difference to

allow us to conceive sacred difference itself in the light of our "originary resentment." GA founds its new way of thinking on this radically anthropological conception of sacred significance, which Vico comes closer to anticipating than any thinker before Durkheim, and, in many respects, before Girard. It is not Vico's least claim to greatness that his anthropological insights, conceived over a century before Darwin and two centuries before the Holocaust, have yet to be absorbed by the social science of our own era.

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Les Liaisons dangereuses

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The novel is the literary form adopted by the emerging bourgeois self-consciousness of the early modern era. The novel gives the *différance* of human language its formal correlative; its sheer narrative length embodies the internal space of reflection between the individual and the world, the abstract form of which is **Sartre's néant**.

In the earliest recognizable novels, those of the Spanish picaresque tradition, this space is occupied by the ruses that permit the *picaro's* advance through nascent market society. In France, home to a courtly tradition of pastoral pre-novels dominated by female writers, the first true novel, and one of the greatest, is **Mme de Lafayette's** *La princesse de Clèves*. That it was written by a woman cannot be an accident. As a later novelistic heroine would point out, we seldom acquire abilities that we do not need. Repeating **Sappho's** inaugural role in Western lyric, Mme de Lafayette opens up an internal novelistic space within which her heroine is able to resist the attraction of mimetic desire in the person of the seductive **Duc de Nemours**, even after her husband's death has freed her to marry him. The princess has learned that love in the world of the court cannot transcend desire to achieve stability; even her husband remained in love with her only because she had never fully given herself to him.

In the near-century that separates *La princesse* from **Choderlos de Laclos's** *Les liaisons dangereuses*, the French novel becomes largely a first-person genre. The interior space Lafayette's narrator had invented for the princess has become the generative space of narration, whether told in retrospect as memoirs or in the present in the form of letters. Laclos' unique work of fiction is the only one of the century's multitude of epistolary novels in which the letter is not merely the reflection of its writer's interiority but a written document that can be premeditated, falsified, preserved, copied, and deliberately or involuntarily revealed to others than its nominal recipient. The space of freedom that defended the princess against her own desire becomes for Laclos' protagonists a means for manipulating the desire of others.

The central subject of *Les liaisons* is the battle for supremacy between the veiled libertine **Mme de Merteuil** and her accomplice and rival, the roué **Vicomte de Valmont**. Since the novel owes its very existence to the woman's perspective, it is not surprising that the Marquise outmatches the Vicomte as a manipulator of desire. As she explains in her "feminist" autobiographical letter 81, men can openly boast of their exploits whereas women, whose

sexuality involves a far greater biological and social commitment, cannot. The male acts most efficiently by allowing his desire, inextricably sexual and socially mediated, to select his goals for him; it is to be expected that Valmont is obsessed by, even in love with **Mme de Tourvel**, the object of his current "campaign." In contrast, with the possible exception of the **Vicomte** himself, Merteuil takes no pleasure from the process of her sexual conquests, only from their results.

That the interiority of the pre-revolutionary novel is a defense against desire does not make the battle of the sexes a zero-sum game. The novel's evolving interiority is the space of evolution of romantic love; the couple fills this new narrative space with the negotiation of their desire. This negotiation, tragic failure though it be, is already an essential element of *La princesse de Clèves*. Seventeenth-century readers considered the princess' confession to her husband of her attraction to Nemours as the high point of the novel. Her effort fails: the prince admires his wife but cannot dominate his jealousy, which ultimately kills him. Even the narrative ploy of having Nemours coincidentally overhear the conversation while hiding on the Clèves estate is justified by the rigor with which the novel denies any possibility of an intimacy beyond desire. The confession is nonetheless an unprecedentedly radical attempt to transform a traditional marriage-pair into a modern couple. The last pages of *Manon Lescaut* (see [Chronicle 17](#)) point to the emergence of such a couple; Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse*, despite its unhappy ending, illustrates the principals' communion ad nauseam. Laclos' cynicism is no simple extension of Lafayette's pessimism; it is both the antithesis of the modern couple and its transcendence.

Mme de Tourvel, whose seduction is facilitated by the new model of the couple's intimacy unavailable in *Mme de Clèves'* day, dies like **Richardson's Clarissa** of the after-effects of seduction and abandonment. This leads some readers, including one of my professors *Way Back When*, to see Tourvel as exemplifying pre-romantic bourgeois sensibility in a world of decadent nobles. (In contrast to the old military aristocracy of Valmont, Prévau, Gercourt, and presumably all the other characters, Tourvel's husband is a noble de robe, the président of a regional court or parlement, and therefore not much more than a bourgeois.) Yet were it the point of *Les liaisons* to test the strength of an intimate bourgeois conception of love against the aristocratic model of military conquest, Tourvel would not be shown as constantly inferior to her adversaries. There is nothing in *Les liaisons* that resembles the genuinely modern negotiations of desire that we find in **Jane Austen**. Tourvel, who is already married, makes no attempt to confide in her husband--who never enters the scene even when his wife is dying of a broken heart. She is easily duped by Valmont not because she is "sincere" but because she is naïvely self-indulgent, failing to suspect either Valmont's conscious or her own unconscious motives. A comparison with the princess, not to speak of Merteuil, demonstrates that "bourgeois" moral self-awareness is precisely what Tourvel lacks.

Those who defend Tourvel's uniqueness must assume that, absent Merteuil's manipulation of Valmont's vanity (she gets him to send a mortifying break-up letter to Tourvel by intimating that his schoolboy-like behavior is ruining his reputation), he would have been permanently transformed by their love. For example, in **Roger Kumble's** 1999 film *Cruel Intentions*, an

otherwise fairly uncompromising retelling of *Les liaisons* among American teenagers, "Valmont" sacrifices his life to save "Tourvel's" by throwing himself in front of a speeding car. But what is special about Tourvel is not the self-consciousness of the future but that of the past; she resembles less Austen's **Elizabeth Bennett** than the heroine of the 1669 novel *Les lettres portugaises* (written, incidentally, by a man), a nun who writes unanswered letters to her seducer. In Valmont's cynical world of sexual intrigue, where the innocent **Céciles** are incapable of resistance and the experienced Countesses *** resist only for decorum's sake, where glory is available only from tactical triumphs such as stealing a woman from under the nose of both lover and husband (Letter 71), Tourvel, who alone resembles the pious, sin-conscious victims of the original **Don Juan**, is the only conquest worthy of the name.

Tourvel is an exemplary object for Valmont's model of conquest, a model whose difference from Merteuil's ultimately destroys their partnership. Not only does Don Juan typically fall in love with the object of his seduction campaign, but once the battle has been won, he has no compunctions about indulging freely in the pleasures of victory. Indeed, we may see Don Juan, if not Valmont himself, as an exemplification of masculine desire whose plurality of loves need not be attributed to prior intention; each one begins as immortal, though it soon dies of boredom. True, Valmont is no plain-wrapper Don Juan. He is obsessed with the glory of conquest, inseparable from humiliation of the conquered. His unscrupulous resourcefulness is demonstrated in his seduction and sexual "corruption" of the fifteen-year-old Cécile--a project, undertaken at Merteuil's orders, that for Valmont is a mere distraction. But nothing in Valmont's constitution would lead him to end a relationship before it becomes boring.

In contrast with Valmont's, Merteuil's model of sexual conquest is without sentiment or self-abandonment. Outside her relationship with Valmont, Merteuil is motivated by only two desires: to confirm her superiority by adding to her string of lovers neither willing nor able to boast of her favors, and to humiliate an adversary, whether for revenge, as with Gercourt (Cécile's fiancé whose wedding night she wishes to spoil), or for mere sport, as with Prévan, Valmont's competitor whom she tricks so devastatingly that he is dismissed in disgrace from his regiment.

Because Merteuil succeeds in manipulating Valmont into cruelly abandoning Tourvel in a vain effort to win her favors, one tends to see their entire relationship as one-sided. But Valmont is no mere pawn in Merteuil's game. His Tourvel campaign--and his detailed account of it--is as much an assertion of independence as a bid for glory. Merteuil cannot dissuade him from it; she eventually succeeds in destroying the couple and both its members, but only at the sacrifice of her own carefully maintained reputation.

Laclos writes in the pre-romantic age of the couple; but who is the couple in *Les liaisons*? There is no true intimacy between Valmont and Tourvel; even their most tender moments are shared with Merteuil, whatever Valmont's bad faith or deliberate provocation in the sharing. Forgetting the callow Danceny and his instinct-driven Cécile, the only real couple in the novel is that formed by Valmont and Merteuil themselves.

Whatever Valmont may feel for Tourvel, he can share his feelings with Merteuil alone. This puts her in the paradoxical role of receiving, as proof of his love for her, his confession of his passion for another. Valmont makes Merteuil play a role of super-woman that negates, both deliberately and involuntarily, her womanhood. Even the sexual favors Valmont desires from her are primarily a sign of approval, a second degree communion to reward his first-degree victory over Tourvel.

Merteuil's feeling for Valmont is less definable. He is the only person she can confide in, and she needs a man of confidence for practical reasons, irrespective of hypothetical psychological ones. Even Merteuil's confession-letter 81 may be read as intended to intimidate Valmont as much as to reveal herself to him. Yet Merteuil's refusal of Valmont's promised sexual reward, which leads to their climactic falling-out, contradicts her own declared principles as well as her rational self-interest. Even while insuring Valmont's death (assuming she could predict Danceny's victory in their duel), she cannot be unaware of his power posthumously to divulge their incriminating correspondence. That her desire for revenge leads her thus to cut off her nose to spite her face (she loses an eye from smallpox, is exposed to opprobrium, and forced to flee the country) suggests that she is driven by a passion of her own.

Merteuil is for Valmont a transcendental figure, mother and/or goddess, with both the dependency and the resentment such unequal relationships imply. Valmont's schema requires a lower-degree mistress for Merteuil to be higher than. Merteuil, for her part, demands that Valmont do what she claims men cannot: devote himself wholly to their secret relationship, which can afford no satisfaction to his masculine vanity. The impossibility of becoming a true couple is implicit in the inevitable reserve of the epistolary form itself, which never allows its principals to meet in the flesh. Valmont resolves this dilemma by situating Merteuil on a transcendent plane above his "real" love, Tourvel; Merteuil can offer her correspondent shared superiority to others, not equality with herself.

Despite, or rather because of Merteuil's greater power over desire, Valmont's solution reflects a deeper understanding of the narrative situation than hers. His fatal error is in failing--despite Merteuil's own warnings--to accept the consequence of this implicit understanding: that their relationship must remain spiritual, that is, epistolary. In the end, Valmont pays with his life for confusing soul with body, whereas Merteuil is punished in the flesh for forgetting that the body is the mere instrument of the soul. But a novel's interest lies in process, not outcome. In the uncompromising lucidity and richness of their interactions in novelistic space, Valmont and Merteuil incarnate the eighteenth century's highest ideal of love.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Freud's Originary Parricide

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It is fitting that **Sigmund Freud**, the great psychologist of the scene, should be the first thinker to construct a genuine scene of human origin. **Hobbes** (see Chronicles [176](#) and [215](#)) situates the origin of human ethics in a communal accord or "social contract," but nothing in the state of nature as Hobbes describes it would permit its solitary inhabitants to become parties to such a contract. **Vico** (see [Chronicle 234](#)) is well aware of this incompatibility, but he relies for humanity's scenic discovery of the sacred on an extra-anthropological Providence. In **Condillac's** wholly human scenario (see Chronicles [178](#) and [179](#)), there is no scenic event; language, information-bearing but not sacred, emerges seamlessly from nature. Freud's father-murder is the first self-consciously event-centered originary scene, even if its author never clearly grasps that the key element of such a scene is not the violence exercised by its peripheral participants on a unique central figure but the deferral of this violence through an act of representation.

Totem and Taboo (Norton, 1950 [1913]; tr. James Strachey) attempts to develop a comprehensive psychoanalytic model of communal interdiction ("taboo"), beginning with the fundamental and universal interdiction of incest, which Freud associates, as did **Durkheim**, with the prohibitions of the "totemic" clan. The dramatic scene of parricide recounted in chapter 4, section 5--seven eighths of the way through the book--is presented as a founding explanatory model for the ethnographic data presented earlier, although its notoriety has tended to eclipse the rest of Freud's argument:

One day, the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually. (Some cultural advance, perhaps, command over some new weapon, had given them a sense of superior strength.) Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers; and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things--of social

organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (p. 176)

A few words of explanation are in order. The "patriarchal horde" was a conjecture of Darwin's concerning the earliest form of human society: a mature male, his harem of females, and immature males ("brothers") to whom the women were forbidden. (Significantly, the women, for whose sake this murder purportedly took place, are not mentioned in Freud's key paragraph.) The "totem meal" is a feast in which the members of a totemic clan are allowed to eat as a collectivity the totem animal that is forbidden to them at all other times.

The status of Freud's "criminal deed" with respect to human origin is never made explicit. If the Darwinian horde was the social order of "primaeval man" (quoted on p. 156), then there were humans before what Freud refers to as "the beginning of . . . social organization . . . moral restrictions and . . . religion." Yet whatever Darwin's notion of the primeval, the logic of Freud's text suggests that the fundamental traits of the human are those that appear after the scene of parricide. This leaves an obvious opening to Freud's critics: if its aim is to explain the origin of "moral restrictions," particularly the incest taboo, then the scene is unnecessary, since the father had already forbidden the women to his sons. What is more, the very fact that we can speak of a father and sons implies the prior existence of family and therefore of human "social organization." Finally, for the sons to join together, they must be able to identify themselves as a group, an identification inconceivable in the absence of a system of representation and therefore of human culture.

All these objections are duly noted in René Girard's critical reading of Totem and Taboo in chapter 8 of *La violence et le sacré* (Grasset, 1972). For Girard, Freud is correct in tracing totemic classification and the incest taboo to a founding murder, but the patrocentric ideology of psychoanalysis prevents him from realizing that this foundation depends on the scenic configuration alone, the "emissary victim" being not the already-central father but an arbitrarily chosen member of the murderous group.

For Girard, the emissary mechanism generates significant/sacred difference from a trivial local imbalance that emerges chaotically within the mimetic war of all against all. The mimetic crisis is resolved by the division of the formerly undifferentiated group into the unique victim and the community that has newly defined itself by excluding and destroying it. As a result of this sequence of events, the community conceives the sacred central figure as both harmful and beneficial, bringer of violence and bringer of peace--the double valence of the sacred. To avoid the common objection that scenes of origin contain from the outset the categories they were meant to construct, Girard's scene begins with no difference at all. The mimetic crisis, having eliminated all trace of prehuman difference, is resolved when a new, sacred difference is generated through the emissary mechanism. Girard's objection to Freud's model of tragedy (part 7, p. 192-93), which opposes the lone protagonist to the undifferentiated chorus, is that the protagonist was originally indistinguishable from the others.

Yet despite the fantastic nature of the father-centered "horde," there is a baby to be saved

before tossing out Freud's bathwater. Even if--setting aside the problem posed by the fact that primitive religion was and is focused mostly on animals, somewhat on women, and almost never on men--we grant full credence to Girard's model, the emissary murder as Girard describes it does not suffice to generate the human because it is not a self-conscious event and does not therefore constitute a scene, nor does the mere repetition of the mechanism. Insofar as the lynching of the victim becomes a source of meaning, it cannot remain a paroxysm of violence; it must become ritualized. But at that moment, it is the repetition, no longer of a mechanism, but of a representation.

The Freudian father is taxed with redundancy because his murder was motivated by the very interdictions that this murder was supposed to bring into being. But this redundancy of interdiction with which Girard, quoting Lévi-Strauss, reproaches Freud's scene ("[there is] a vicious circle that makes the social emerge from a process that presupposes it," p. 265) is rather a point in its favor. For a new order to emerge, it must come about as a result of the breakdown of an old order. The "father's" dominance enforces a prehuman mode of interdiction founded not on a represented rule but on the animal emotion of fear. When a rival is no longer afraid to challenge the alpha animal, the two fight for supremacy, a fight that may involve the enlistment of allies. In conditions of anarchy, or where wealth may be gained from activities stigmatized in the larger society, humans too return to pecking-order systems of this type, although they cannot sustain an independently viable society in the long run.

The preexistence of the central interdiction of Freud's murder scene is precisely its strength as an originary model: all that need be added to the prior configuration of authority to transform it from animal to human is its representation within a scene. Representing the "father's" central power is the revolutionary act that bridges the gap between the one-on-one pecking-order hierarchies of animal societies and the center-periphery one-against-all model that obtains only among humans. To put the father in the center of a scene of representation is to reveal the universality of his power that had previously been experienced separately by each son--perhaps along with a local coalition--and consequently to expose the father to the resentment of all the sons constituted as a community. Parricide is inherent in the structure of the scene itself.

Freud's scene, which implicitly originates in the breakdown of the animal social order of the protohuman "horde," is conceived as a scene of representation; the murdered father, in contrast with Girard's scapegoat-victim, is truly memorable--representable (by the "totem") and ritualizable in sacrifice. In order that the victim become the scenic source of culture, it must be made the center not only of an act of violence but of its deferral. Freud's sons have always already deferred--in time--their project to kill the father; after the murder has taken place, they defer through exogamy--in space--the possession of the women he has kept for himself. Ending the first deferral insures the permanence of the second; in the absence of paternal interdiction, the sons would, as Freud himself makes clear, fight among themselves over the women. No doubt, as Girard rightly points out, the sexual rivalry they must prevent is not dependent on common paternity, but the essential point is that the institution of a rule of exogamy enforced by the group as a whole must be explained by the replacement of the animal system of

authority, whether or not similar to that of the Darwinian-Freudian "horde," with one founded on the human scene of representation.

Yet the scene that brings together the community of "sons" cannot be generated merely by their hostility to pre-existing paternal authority. Qua alpha animal, the "father's" authority is only virtually central; communal allegiance to a sacred center must challenge and supersede fear of the bearer of animal authority. The minimal condition of the new collective order is that it form around a new center. In the last analysis, both Freud's uniquely predestined central figure and Girard's arbitrary victim suffer from the same defect: the centrality of both presupposes in the minds of the originary participants an already-human "theory of mind." In the two models, the central figure is blamed for violence and credited with peace. Rather than being itself an object of common desire, this figure is perceived as the unique obstacle to the realization of this desire, whether its object be the "father's" women or the benefits of collective order that Girard's scapegoat is accused of destroying. In both cases, there is a shift of interest from the object of desire to the rival accused of obstructing its appropriation; both scenes have two centers. In Girard, these are (1) the original object of contention, and (2) the emissary victim thrust forward by the scapegoat mechanism to put an end to this contention; in Freud, the sons kill the father (2) in order to possess the women (1). The shift from one center to the other is the point at which a theory of mind and therefore of human representation is smuggled into a scene that is purported to generate it. In Freud's case, the representation of the father as center is a simple given; in Girard's, for the repetition of the originary murder to be a cumulative cultural rather than an identical natural event, the designation of the emissary victim, described as the result of an arbitrary mechanism, must be in reality the moment of deferral, and therefore of representation, that constitutes the human historicity of the scene.

Of further interest in Totem and Taboo, as well as in its partially rearticulated summary in Freud's final work, Moses and Monotheism, is the link between Freud's analysis of the "totemic" derivation of what are indifferently names and terms of classification and Freud's own theory of language. This will be the subject of a future Chronicle.

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Moral Heroism

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Like the celebrity, the hero exists for his public as an incarnate representation. But where the first inhabits a disordered world of gossip and anecdote, the second is the protagonist of a clearly ordered narrative. (Once his story has been told, the hero is free to degenerate into a celebrity and figure in gossip columns with the others.) The rigor of the heroic narrative makes it relatively indifferent to the flesh-and-blood reality of its protagonist; fictional and live heroes inhabit very similar discourses.

There are several kinds of heroes. Some struggle against matter--the forces of nature and/or the limitations of the human mind; one rescues flood victims, another invents the light bulb. Such figures may encounter difficulties, even death; but their role as benefactors of humanity is unambiguous, our gratitude unproblematic. The heroism of battle is similar; the humans the combatant faces are like physical forces in the "state of nature." For that reason, his valor is independent of its broader moral context: a Nazi soldier risking his life to aid a wounded comrade is as heroic as any other.

In the problematic center of culture we find moral heroism, heroism defined entirely within the scene of human interaction. The need and opportunity of moral heroism arise from the inherent instability of this scene, where the group is always tempted to defer internal violence through the exercise of external violence. The moral hero espouses the universal value of human reciprocity against the group's short-term interest; he defends the victim against the crowd. Even if we accept Girard's claim that historical recognition of this kind of heroism is unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition, nothing in this uniqueness is inexplicable in terms of the anthropological scene itself.

In the narrative dynamic of moral heroism, real or fictional, the hero is isolated and unappreciated; except perhaps for a few intimates, no one takes his side against the crowd. In a word, he occupies the position of the Girardian scapegoat. Yet with the whole world against him, he has the support of the only people who really count: the storyteller and his faithful acolyte, the listener. In the world of the story, the hero is persecuted; in the world of its telling, he is rewarded. This dichotomy between esthetic form and content is not, as a facile sophistication suggests, an artifact independent of reality. Just as the sacrificial form of tragedy reflects the inevitability of death, which culture both reveals to us and offers us the wherewithal to make meaningful, so heroic narrative points to a historicized vision of redemption. The hero, who stands for moral values either temporarily forgotten or as yet unrealizable, is hailed by author and reader in anticipation of more universal recognition. In real biographies, we discount early failures through the redemptive lens of later successes; in fictional ones, our sympathy is itself an intimation of the protagonist's immortality.

Moral heroism is the noblest form of heroism, but it is also the most ambiguous. Since it is defined by a stand against one's own community, it cannot be recognized in the immediate by that community itself. Societies differ in the opportunities they offer for moral heroism because they differ over time and space in the forms and degrees of victimage that the hero defends

against. Most notably, the postmodern era that began after **WWII** was the great global heyday of this kind of heroism. The war and especially the **Holocaust** provoked a world-wide revulsion against the sacrificial in all its guises and the near-universal adoption of what might be called victimary epistemology: any differential status that could be seen as analogous with that imposed on the **Jews** by the **Nazis** was taken as a sign of victimization; any resentment widely shared within a group was taken as proof of victimary status. The global successes of such thinking lent it an air of historical inevitability; whether or not "capitalism" was fated to give way to socialism, inequalities based on race, nationality, and soon, gender, were felt to be morally untenable anachronisms.

We have so well assimilated the lessons of this era that we tend to forget how great a transformation it wrought: the end of colonialism, apartheid, and racial segregation, the assertion of the rights of women, followed by such groups as the physically handicapped and homosexuals, and the emergence of such related phenomena as the animal rights movement, radical environmentalism, and the stigmatization of smoking. But moral heroism has lost much of its strength in recent decades.

At the high point of the victimary revolution, rebels against colonial rule, civil rights workers in the South, and protesters against apartheid took great risks and sometimes sacrificed their lives. But the confidence in history that allows us to venerate heroic liberators is not itself independent of history. I challenge the reader to come up with a single well-publicized example of moral heroism today. (**Aung San Suu Kyi**, perhaps; **Myanmar** is just about the only tyranny no one seeks to defend against the United States.) Slavery in the **Sudan**--which, unlike the **US**, has a seat on the **UN Commission on Human Rights**--is surely as oppressive as apartheid was in **South Africa**, yet a combatant against Sudanese slavery--how many of us could name one?--would be perceived at best as merely one party in a conflict, at worst as a Christian defending Western hegemony against third-world Muslims. Unless a tyranny can be identified as an agent of the West's "hegemonic" power, we suspect its opponents, however honorable, of being lackeys or pawns of the forces of Late Capitalism. Which is to say that the victimary epistemology that worked so well not long ago has ceased to provide us with useful bearings on political action.

If victim-driven moral heroism is unsustainable in a human world increasingly less clearly separable into victims and persecutors, what form of moral exemplarity can take its place? Although the postmodern era spelt the end of unchallenged hierarchies and "master narratives," it retained the title of hero for those who dared to challenge them. The post-millennial age would do away with even this negative form of sacralization. But with the disappearance of public heroism, the affirmation of our moral intuition is no longer contaminated by the hope of reward. The transition from one era to the next, which is really that from one mind-set to another that is by no means assured of prevailing, implies a new kind of non-heroic moral action that I shall attempt briefly to describe.

Postmodern moral heroism requires the following elements: (1) a "victimary" social structure S1

within which group A has a hierarchical advantage over group B; (2) an individual H, inside or outside S1, who defends the victim B's right to equality with A; (3) a "post-victimary" social structure S2 that proclaims H a hero. (H cannot be so proclaimed by the community his heroism condemns; the Abolitionists and the civil rights marchers were heroes in the North, not in the South.)

Now let us suppose that the hierarchical, victimary relation between A and B grows more ambiguous, while S2 continues to reward those--call them group C--who still view B as A's victim, in contrast to those--group D--who no longer do so.

Let us now consider the situation of an individual J who defends the rights of D within S2. There is no new social order S3 to proclaim J a hero. The majority within S2 who continue to define moral heroism as the defense of victims will align themselves with C rather than D and, far from admiring J's courage in defending the minority within his own society, will condemn him for lending tacit support to A's hegemony in S1. But the very hostility that J encounters within S2 is a guarantee of moral integrity, if integrity be defined as the courage to stand alone against the crowd, to act *sub specie aeternitatis*.

J rejects the victimary description of S1 because this description is itself a form of persecution that reproduces itself within S2 in the victimization of D by C. He reminds us that if the original impetus of victimary epistemology was revulsion at antisemitism, the antisemite too presents himself not as persecutor but as victim--of the Jews. Once the victimary system has been unmasked, the unmasking itself becomes a mask. The only solution is the democratic, unromantic one of negotiating mutual grievances.

J may console himself with the thought that we are now entering a post-millennial, post-victimary era. But, unlike H, he cannot point to a trend of obvious moral improvement comparable to that toward racial and gender equality. To affirm that was once the Jews' moral advantage over the Nazis now belongs neither to Israelis nor Palestinians, neither to Blacks nor Whites, neither to women nor men, is to make a transcendental leap of anthropological faith analogous to that required by messianic religion.

Society needs both public figures and moral exemplars, but, outside of exceptional circumstances, it no longer needs anyone to be both. The modern solution to the danger of the sacred center is preemptively to desacralize its inhabitants, to "prehumiliate" them, as **Doug Collins** puts it. The term "celebrity" by which we designate our unheroic public figures reflects an increased proportion of resentment to adoration in our ever-ambivalent attitude toward the center. As a complement to this humiliated center, those outside the public eye can defend their post-victimary moral intuition against the victimary crowd in the confidence that they should expect no reward.

For **Kierkegaard**, moral perfection consists in appearing as much as possible like a bourgeois;

Pascal's honnête homme (see [Chronicle 26](#)) deployed his greatest skill in not calling attention to himself. To find in today's visibility-mad and victim-obsessed academy a possibility of emulating these exemplary models has helped me lay to rest the sense of institutional outrage I have felt for the past three years (see [Chronicle 140](#)). The often misplaced rationalization of the marketplace of ideas is a powerful force for conformity. In such circumstances, be an honor deserved or not, we are better off without it.

We may associate the moral integrity of the post-millennial era with a categorical imperative derived (as Kant's was not) from the scenic configuration of the originary hypothesis: act in such a way as to diminish--first locally, then, as far as possible, universally--the amount of resentment in the world. We would do best to devote ourselves to persons rather than victims, and lend our support to others who try to do likewise.

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Eric Gans

Telling One's Story

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I should say at the outset that I am not good at telling stories. Finding the story-teller's position too perilously hierarchical, I prefer to improvise an answer, interject a witticism, make up class lectures as I go along. Wary of generating narrative, I turn to theory to explain its dangers. This Chronicle is one of several stabs at an originary analysis of narrative, (see "[Originary Narrative](#)" in *Anthropoetics* 3, 2). I can only hope that the story of these attempts is leading to a happy ending.

The **semiotic** theories that sought to derive stories from sentences are now largely forgotten. It is no problem to reduce narrative *n* to sentence *s*, but since what makes *n* a narrative is not (yet) in *s*, without a procedure for generating *n* from *s*, we have no real theory of narrative. The fundamental weakness of the semiotics of narrative lies not in its concept of derivation but in the insufficient theorizing of its point of departure. As I first tried to show twenty years ago in *The Origin of Language*, the declarative sentence cannot be taken for the originary basis of human language--nor, I might add, of narration--without falling into the familiar trap of metaphysics.

The analysis of narrative requires a vocabulary that describes what narrative does without itself doing it. The sign is, minimally, a deferred gesture of appropriation. Emission of the sign "tells the story" of the conversion of the horizontal world of appetite into the vertical one of interdiction and desire. Any story can thus be described as a movement from (horizontal) crisis to the establishment of a new (vertical) significance. In this description, the key operator is the word "crisis." A story creates a crisis in its audience; the word "crisis" by which we describe it does not.

(A generation of literature professors would respond that the critic--excuse me, critical theorist--too creates a crisis. Yes, the critic creates mini-crisis. And what distinguishes a mini-crisis from a crisis is precisely that the first can be resolved by means of declarative sentences alone. When I read texts of critical theory, I never imagine real people living and dying--other than the writer and myself, respectively.)

This distinction allows us to pinpoint the semiotician's error. If we model our generative process on the substitution trees by which linguists generate an unlimited number of sentences from a root pattern such as NP + VP, the key substitution is not that of a linguistic entity, whether intermediary or terminal, for another, but that of an effective crisis on the audience's scene of representation for the word "crisis" in our description. This procedure is analogous to semiotic analysis only in appearance. This generative substitution moves from language toward the world; it operates ostensibly, not declaratively.

An effective story puts us in an imaginary state of mimetic crisis--the "imagination" being only another name for our internalized scene of representation. Stories provide explanations for human institutions by making them appear as means of resolving crises. All stories are "just so" stories; what gives a bad reputation to those that explicitly go by that name is the same error that makes theology good anthropology but bad cosmology: the abuse of a cultural technique to explain a natural phenomenon. One of **Kipling's** tales derives the **rhinoceros's** wrinkled skin from scratching at crumbs. Scratching an itch is a simple crisis-resolution pattern, a good metaphor for many acts, but it tells us little about rhinoceroses and their skin. (In contrast, the **giraffe** stretching its neck to reach high branches is a textbook illustration of **Baldwinian** evolution.)

Today, although we tell each other fewer stories than in the past, we thus describe our interactions far more frequently. From boardrooms to classrooms, we constantly refer to every activity from marketing a product to interpreting a sonnet in terms of telling a story. The dominance of the story model is commonly said to reflect postmodern suspicion of the geometrical **Cartesian** ideal that presided over the **Enlightenment** and that remained dominant in Western culture, despite well-publicized romantic reactions, until the postwar era. There are no a priori rules for making a good story (whereas there are almost enough to allow you to construct a good proof). Even when its content is entirely verifiable, a story is fictional, its moral, "socially constructed." These explanations all present the postmodern as a demystifying subtraction from the metaphysical logos. On the contrary, I think our fascination

with stories bespeaks the intuition that this logos is itself an abstraction from an originary ostensive mode of signification that narrative continues to embody.

The postmodern obsession with stories reflects its ethical obsessions. Story is about sacrifice; it ratifies the postmodern dominance of victimary epistemology. This explains an interesting anomaly, otherwise understood in political--which is to say, merely volitional--terms: Even the most dubious victimary claim (that of **Mumia Abu-Jamal** is a good recent example) suffices to turn postmodern skepticism about "master narratives" into its opposite, inciting the same thinkers who deconstruct with relish the most innocuous universalist discourse to compose and promote heavy-handed harangues in the style of **Noam Chomsky**, not to say the old **Comintern**. The reduction of causal explanation to narrative "construction" is a condemnation of the hegemonic logos presumed to preside over this construction. By in effect reducing the crisis internal to the story to the simple root term "crisis," postmodern story-analysis claims to uncover the sacrificial arbitrariness of the resolution of this crisis through the designation of a scapegoat/victim.

The reader may have noted the uncanny resemblance of this depiction of postmodern story-analysis with **Girard's** reading of myth. This resemblance points to a reality that merits fuller discussion: the uneasy kinship of Girard, and thence of **GA**, with victimary thinking or "**PC**." Just as neoconservatism reacts against victimary thinking in the domain of politics, mimetic theory and generative anthropology may be understood in historical terms as reactions against--but also "with"--the victimary temper of postmodernity.

A critique (by **René Harrison**) of the preceding Chronicle requires a response. It is claimed that by reducing all questions of justice to negotiations of resentment, I have denied the validity of the objective criteria of justice through which these negotiations might be settled. To phrase this argument in the historical context within which victimary thinking became dominant, it is as if the **Jews** should be asked to sit down with the **Nazis** to try to settle their differences.

The problem, of course, is that once one has determined who are the **Nazis** and who the **Jews** (the **Israelis**--who have overwhelming military power? the **Palestinians**--who reprint the Protocols of the Elders of Zion?) the discussion is over. My point in declaring the end of the victimary era is not to delegitimize victims' resentment against their persecutors, but to recognize that, generally speaking, this resentment has played out its value as a world-historical source of insight. In disagreeing with me, what must be refuted is not my political perspective but my sense of history.

How is this matter relevant to the present Chronicle? Persecution and victimage are the heart of story-telling; to tell someone's story is to tell the story of a victim. The immense charge that still derives from **Foucauldian** discourse analysis is that it claims to detect beneath the supposedly neutral language of rational exposition a narrative of sacralization. But it should not be forgotten that this narrative is essentially sacrificial. The "patriarchal" narrative, for example, legitimizes male hegemony by extolling men's sacrifice (notably in war); their domination is

presented as a result of this sacrifice.

The end of the victimary era does not imply the end of storytelling as a means of determining justice. What it does imply is rather negotiation between the parties themselves, whether or not in the presence of a mediator. Each side tells its story; no single story imposes itself as the true one. In a successful post-victimary adjudication, the story that prevails is the story of the negotiation itself.

Meanwhile, the stories we continue to tell are derealized. This is, I think, the sense of **Raoul Eshelman's** notion of performatism (see "[Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism](#)"). In a film like *Run, Lola, Run*, the heroine gets three chances to succeed in rescuing her boyfriend. Such a story is less the representation of an action than of the mental rehearsal of an action. In effect, it is a crisis narrated from the perspective of one who is aware of the term "crisis." The performatist narrative can pull off its external view of the narrative mechanism because it understands the cultural presuppositions of this mechanism, which knowingly operates in the domain of the unreal. That the performatist story openly but formally ("outside" "the story itself") tells us that it is unreal does not make it fundamentally different from any other story. But it makes story as such a performance of self as narrator and spectator rather than the generation of culturally valid meanings through the depiction of a commonly-experienced crisis and its resolution. Performatism is the sign of a world where individuals, like factions in a dispute, each retain their myths but are unable to dissimulate their mythic identity. In such a world, the only real story is that of endless, unpredictable, and unrepeatable confrontation and hoped-for conciliation.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Time and the Novel

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Teaching an undergraduate course on the novel reminds us of how little effect a century of "literary theory" has had on how we read. Lacking our dubious skill in dealing with novels as "texts," undergraduates remind us of an essential epistemological point: one can't follow a story without constructing its actors in our mind in the same way that we construct real people. We speak of these textual entities as though they are real because that is indeed the only way to

talk about a novel's content. But this very fact reflects the historic specificity of novelistic form.

A novel, however short, must be long enough to allow us to experience the passage of time in the lives of the characters. The novel, whether classical, "realist," or avant-garde, alternates between interactive scenes and extra-scenic passages characteristically narrated at too fast a pace to provide material for the reader's vicarious experience: "telling," not "showing." The characters leave the scene (I say "the scene" because scenic confrontations all derive from the same model), return to it, and leave it once more. Although these acts of leaving and returning are often literal, their narrative implementation permits of alternatives: interior monologues, flashbacks, repetitions. We make the passages of summarizing narration part of our reading experience only by integrating them within our scenic knowledge of the character: the fact that X has studied here, worked there, traveled somewhere else is relevant only to the X whom we know now, in this scenic moment of his life. Novelistic scenes are islands of meaning in a non-scenic sea.

What the apparently merely quantitative fact of length makes distinctive about the novel is the tension between the scene and its narrative environment. What holds it together is an overarching sense of the unity of life, usually of a single character, but extensible to the family and even the community in the collective sagas or romans-fleuves of the plethoric first decades of the twentieth century. The novel models the texture of life in its systolic-diastolic opposition between scenic and non-scenic moments. This texture, by making us aware of the fragility of the scene, creates a phenomenon that I shall call novelistic felicity: the narration of a revelatory experience analogous to that of the sacred because, at that one precious moment, wholly enclosed within the scene. Love is the source of most such experiences, but there are felicitous scenes of battle, of murder, even of whaling. What we take for granted in classical theater (and, in an ironic mode, in modern theater as well) has in the novel the status of a rare epiphany--a status that self-conscious modern novelists (think of **Proust's** petite madeleine) increasingly thematize, but whose privilege is already clear in France's first great novel, *La princesse de Clèves*.

Let us consider in this light the association of **mediated desire** with the novelistic context in which **René Girard** discovered it in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961). Although Girard has since found mimetic desire equally present in the theater, notably in **Shakespeare**, his original insight should not be lost. The ahistorical tenor of Girard's writing that make some see the triangle of desire as a "structure" should not blind us to the historical specificity of his analyses. All desire is mimetic and all culture a means of deferring it, but the novel defers mimetic desire in a new and radical way.

The mimetic theory of desire is a theory of the "double bind": the mediator both incites our desire and discourages it, incites it because he discourages it. (**Georges Bataille's** model of (erotic) desire as transgression respects the indissociability of desire's double bond.) Thus it is not always so easy to distinguish between the positive and negative moments of triangular desire. "Mimetic theory," sad to say, has never gone beyond Girard's basic scenario: (1) the

mediator, knowingly or not, designates the object to the subject-disciple (imitate me!); (2) the disciple displays desire for the object; (3) the mediator forbids the object to the disciple (don't imitate me!). If the mediator is external to the world of the disciple, he is unaware of the latter and therefore presumably cannot carry out the negative moment of interdiction. This appears to imply that only internally mediated desire can produce the triangular double-bind effect. But it is clear from Girard's own association of external mediation with the sacred that attraction and interdiction both inhere in any mediation process and therefore in any desire.

Considered in this light, moments (1) and (3) of Girard's triangular scenario are merely two descriptions of the same operation. To "designate" an object is both to display its availability as a focus of desire (which is why harems are not open to the public) and to display its unavailability to everyone but its designator (which is why rich people drive expensive cars). The positive (imitate me!) and negative (don't imitate me!) moments of mimetic desire both inhere in the same act.

This analysis permits us to add a degree of freedom to the triangular model in order to account for the different ways in which mimetic desire may be made the basis of a literary (or, more generally, "cultural") plot. Instead of limiting the model's variability to the distance--internal or external--of the mediator from the disciple, we consider as well the degree to which the positive and negative moments of mediation predominate at the origin of desire. On this point, I propose the following hypothesis: whereas the classical, typically theatrical, plot turns on negatively mediated desire, the modern, typically novelistic, plot turns on positively mediated desire.

This explains, for starters, why Girard first discovered mimetic desire in the novel and only later thought to apply his schema to tragedy. **Oedipus** is no **Julien Sorel** seeking in **Napoleon's** memoirs the course to follow. Always already the object of **Laius'** aggression, he chooses a path always away from his paternal mediator. What drives the plot of **Sophocles'** play is **Oedipus'** quest not for **Jocasta** but for his father's rival, that is, for himself as disciple of the negative moment of mediation. What **Oedipus** learns from mimetic desire is above all the impossibility of the subject's coexistence with his mediator. **Sandor Goodhart** points out in "Oedipus and Laius' Many Murderers" (*Diacritics*, 1978: 55-71) that we never really learn whether **Oedipus** killed **Laius**, because once the shepherd brought in to testify about the murder recognizes **Oedipus** as the child **Jocasta** gave into his care, **Oedipus** accepts his guilt as his mother's husband and forgets about finding his father's murderer. This switch, which **Goodhart** attributes to **Sophocles'** awareness of the arbitrary necessity of **Oedipus'** guilt, also demonstrates the priority of the negative moment of mimetic desire over the positive. The positive moment (incest with the mother) provides **Oedipus** and the audience with an imaginary object of desire, and guilt, that dissimulates for a moment the more banal negative moment (murder of the father), but it is the latter that drives the story, as it does in all tragedy. The tragic agon re-presents mimetic crisis not as a common desire for a central object but, on the contrary, as the chaotic aggression occasioned by a central object's loss of desirability. The well-known fact that tragedy typically deals with plots known in advance is but another way of

stating this fact; the "already-known" is the negative moment of desire. The name, and the history, of the novel make the contrast clear.

Girard's title sets up as a foil to the novel (romanesque) the "romantic" (romantique) that dissimulates mediation behind the apparent spontaneity of desire. Without accepting the invidious nature of Girard's distinction, we may understand romance in its courtly origins as the first stage of modernity's shift from interdiction of the sacred world to valorization of the profane world. The *donna m'apparve* that inaugurates courtly love marks the descent of the sacred to the earth. Whether or not **Dante** loved **Beatrice** because some nameless rival designated her to him, the crucial mediation that marks his love is the consecration of the profane world by the spirit of **Christianity**.

The novel is no longer concerned with the descent of the sacred but with the disenchanted world of profane desire--the world of the marketplace. Even if "falling in love" still follows the Dante-Beatrice model these many centuries later, sacred mediation is not otherwise an effective way to chart a course through such a world. To construe the novel as a condemnation of mediated desire requires that we take its sacrificial structure as a moral, as in a fable. (**Tobin Siebers'** *Morals and Stories* [Columbia UP, 1992] insightfully examines the paradoxical relationship between narrative and the lesson we are expected/asked/dared to draw from it.) In its contribution to the practical world of its readers, the novel is much rather an encouragement to mediated desire; its cautionary moral is no less necessary in form and artificial in content in the novels that Girard accepts into his Pantheon than in *Les liaisons dangereuses* (see [Chronicle 235](#)). If the novel reveals the "demonic" nature of mediation, it also reveals that the lives of those who read novels are constructed on a demonic basis.

Girard concludes his history of the novel with **Alyosha Karamazov's** renewal of the Gospel message of love transcending worldly desire, a Christian equivalent of apocalyptic socialism. Once the critique of mediated desire truly becomes the moral of the novel, as it might arguably be said to do with **Dostoevsky**, from whose world the evolving consumer society so visible from **Balzac** through **Flaubert** and **Zola** is virtually absent, the novel becomes a prelude to spiritual-political change--such as the **Bolshevik Revolution** was supposed to bring about. But however much Girard wants his story to end with Dostoevsky, it ends in reality with Proust, whose esthetic transcendence of desire is at the same time the recycling of desire in a bourgeois world. To understand Proust's artistic praxis as a tribute to the punctual revelation of the vanity of mimetic desire is, in his case above all, to succumb to the myth of the novel rather than to elucidate it.

It is not surprising that the heroic age of the novel coincided with the birth, evolution, and implementation of the illusion that future society would do away with the mediations of human exchange. The novel concretely recounts a life of mediation while pointing abstractly to a set of meanings beyond mediation. Its survival through postmodernity depends on our willingness to identify with lives that can no longer be felt to incarnate any such meanings. Impatient with the exemplarity of these unexemplary biographies, I, like many others, have come to prefer the

more concrete--and temporally limited--scenicity of cinema. The novel requires that we follow a protagonist from scene to scene in the faith that the time we have invested in reading will be capitalized in a thrill of narrative felicity. For me, like Marcel's mother's kiss, this moment, so eagerly awaited, cannot compensate by anticipation the loss of meaning that is its inevitable aftermath.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Apologia

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By forty, you learn to live with yourself; at sixty, you have to bet on yourself, on your own unique set of limitations. You may be able to push them back a little, but you're surely not going to "transcend" them. Thus I have no choice but to wager that someone like myself--someone too impatient with data to concentrate his energies on any particular subject-matter, notably the details of others' lives (my last "biographical" book dates from 1974)--can contribute significantly to human thought.

Over twenty years ago I proposed that the origin of language must be conceived as an event because it is the origin of the event-ness that defines human culture. Nowhere in the ever-increasingly volume of language origins research has this idea been refuted: it is simply not taken into account. I am betting that the very unanimity of this neglect shows that it is I, rather than everybody else, who am right.

If the human is indeed defined by a system of exchange that serves to defer violence, there is no difficulty explaining why, in the current context, this definition is not generally adopted. Academic life is elaborately organized to eliminate direct competition: rivals in one's field are elsewhere, local colleagues are in other fields. Above all, there is no hierarchy: all are specialists, and no one's work encompasses anyone else's. Such a system cannot, almost by definition, tolerate an anthropology that insists on the transcendence of nature by the scene of culture focused on the sacred center. The center is a vulnerable place, all the more so when its occupant is no longer crucified but scorned as uncool.

The originary hypothesis defines humanity by what most critically concerns it. Whether in the

Kansas City Star or the New York Times, the biggest headlines are atop stories of violence. Persons with whom we have only humanity in common interest us to the point of obsession when they become characters in a tale of human violence. Recently the Star commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the death of a notorious petty criminal who had for years single-handedly terrorized several North Missouri counties, stealing hogs, burning down houses, threatening witnesses, and, finally, shooting a man in the neck at close range--for which he was convicted of second-degree assault and allowed free on bond during appeal. The community had had enough; in a rural area where firearms abound, a few individuals dealt with the problem. The identity of the murderers, if the term is appropriate, has never been revealed. This story illustrates the immense danger posed to the social order by even a single person who refuses to participate in the common deferral of violence. Denial that this deferral is fundamental to being human is only another form of deferral.

Scientific discourse takes human mortality into account only as subject-matter; medical science is no more humanistic than geology. Conversely, cultural discourse defers through representation our return to physical nature. Human beings whose awareness of death is revealed to them by the culture they share cannot afford to wait forever to understand their origin. They need an impatient anthropology that provides a minimal core of self-knowledge invulnerable to the storms of empirical data.

Let me give a brief counter-example. Recently I read Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy's *The Origins of Complex Language* (Oxford, 1999), which develops with great skill and tenacity an intricate argument requiring mastery of linguistic philosophy and linguistics as well as a good working knowledge of neuroscience and primatology. The author presents the specificity of human language as a consequence of the descent of the larynx, itself initiated not by the need to enunciate phonemes but as an anatomical consequence of erect posture. Our adoption of a form of language that features sentences possessing a truth value rather than simple noun phrases (NPs) is described as a consequence of the dual rhythm imposed on language by vowel-consonant articulation, which, in turn, results from the articulatory mode favored by our descended larynx. But even if the suggested correlation between the rhythms of phonetic and syntactic articulation is valid, it cannot explain the origin of language because it cannot explain the crucial correlation between the emergence of language and that of the human social order, inevitably established on a sacred foundation. It is sad to see so much intelligence expended in the service of the naïve and hackneyed antihumanist polemic with which the author concludes:

The idea that something so immense in its effects as human language could have its beginnings in physiological adjustments consequent on bipedalism strikes deeply at the assumptions that human uniqueness must be based on something rather grand and profound, such as access to unique kinds of knowledge and self-awareness. But, once we get used to the idea, I think we will come to realize that it is only our pride that is hurt. Certain historical accidents have indeed supplied us with a uniquely sophisticated mechanism for

communication and for the mental representation of the world; but, apart from that, we are just one species among many. (231)

What does it really mean to describe humanity as "just one species among many"? If this is a critique of religious anthropology, the author should explain how our "uniquely sophisticated mechanism for communication" is related to religion. If not, he should tell us what would count as falsifying his description. We are treated to a moralizing sermon in guise of a dismissal of "our" moral prejudices, which are really those of the great unwashed, since the intelligentsia has been obsessed with chastizing our "speciesist" pride throughout the postwar era.

This is a case where empirical research might have benefited from the framework supplied by this impatient old amateur. Ostensives are not "NPs," but complete utterances in their own right. The passage from ostensive to declarative is not simply cognitive but ethical; it is the passage from interdicting the sacred object through the sign to formulating this interdiction explicitly in signs. In other words, what makes humans a different kind of species is not language but ethics, which language uniquely articulates. However well or poorly our own ethical value compares with that of other species, ours is the only species that assigns such values; it is this fact, rather than the values assigned, that is relevant to Carstairs-McCarthy's inquiry.

Dear reader, if you've heard all this from me before, don't be impatient: who knows how much longer I'll be around? But if you find value in this kind of anthropological humanism, you owe it not to me but to yourself to defend it. Social science insists with quasi-religious fervor that language is either a simple extension of animal communication or an "instinct" analogous to those of animals. The idea of human uniqueness is dismissed as a contemporary equivalent of the belief that the sun revolves around the Earth. But denial cannot save us from the ethical question this uniqueness poses. The unique attributes of humanity are what make us dangerous to each other and, accessorially, to the other inhabitants of the planet. If we would protect the Other, we must first ensure that we are protected from Each Other; this Hobbesian need is what defines us as human in the first place.

I am betting that, however long people deny these truths, sooner or later, they will come to acknowledge and live with them, as the basis of what Kant called "perpetual peace." I may not see that day, nor, no doubt, will you, dear reader; but you would do well to bestir yourself if you would like your children or your grandchildren to do so.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

On Consumption and Immortality

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Many of these Chronicles have been devoted in one way or another to defending consumer society against those who affect to despise it. Resentment of the wealthy aside, the intellectual loathes consumerism because it has proved an effective substitute for socialism. The potential revolutionary is diverted from the struggle by the constant pressure to update his life-style. The **Marcusian** idea of "repressive tolerance" secularizes **Pascal's** critique of the worldly **divertissement** that distracts us from the care of our immortal soul.

But secular spirituality need not be assimilated to political negativity. The mode of the soul's perseverance with which we are most likely to concern ourselves is historical. Celebrities fascinate us not simply because they are famous now; their aura reflects our expectation that they will be inscribed in the future's reconstruction of the present as past that goes by the name of history. Our passion for top-100 lists of films, actors, sports figures, and what have you reflects this equation of historical immortality with salvation.

No doubt the modern exchange system complicates the simple dichotomy of sacred production and profane consumption: because consumption produces social meaning, its expense is also an investment. As opposed to the Calvinist for whom worldly success is a sign of salvation, the modern producer/consumer manipulates signs in order to succeed, choosing the wine or travel anecdote that will clinch the sale. Even what is at first sight pure animal self-indulgence is recuperated by the system of signs. The attention to body-image that has shrunk portions in upscale restaurants gives rise in reaction to stores selling frozen yogurt and even chocolate chip cookies, high-calorie words in the yuppie message inflected with the ethnic accent of **Mrs. Fields** or **Famous Amos**--compare **Winchell's Donuts**.

Yet the opposition between consumption and production, self-indulgence and self-abnegation, continually reasserts itself. The "p" in yuppie stands for "professional." Buying the right suit is part of being a lawyer, but it doesn't substitute for law school, the bar exam, and fourteen-hour workdays. Nodding respectfully to conspicuous consumption and potlatch, the **Pascalian** dichotomy reemerges in everyday reality. We constantly encounter the temptation to abandon the sacred for the profane, even if the sacred corresponds to cleaning out the garage and the profane to redecorating the living room. The dichotomy is unforgivingly clear for writers. Business deals may be sealed on the golf course, but books are not written there. The chief source of **Marcel Proust's** iconic status as **The Writer** is the falsely reassuring myth his career inspires that our lives wasted in self-indulgence will some day be "regained" by twenty years' activity in a cork-lined room.

No, the critique of consumption as distraction has not lost its relevance. The clothes, entertainment, or travel I consume may enhance my self-image and serve my career, but unless I am a professional model, film critic, or travel writer, they will not win me a place in the history books; better work at downing the most hot dogs in ten minutes and get my name in the Guinness Book of World Records. Consumption steals money, time, and mental energy from the productive activity that is our best shot at becoming immortal. It tempts us with the short-term satisfactions of acquiring and using a new object, of experiencing the envy of others. For our chances of historical immortality are vanishingly small, and the pleasures of consumption, fleeting but reliable.

One candidate for the "motor" of Western history is the structural difference between **Christian** spiritual immortality and secular historical immortality. It is not simply that the latter is more difficult than the former; in Pascal's **Jansenist** universe, nothing is less certain than the salvation against which we are asked to wager our finite lives. The difference lies rather in the competitive nature of historical as opposed to spiritual salvation. That not all souls are saved is no reflection on God's ability to save them, whereas historical immortality rewards a few successful competitors for the world's finite attention. This scarcity inevitably arouses resentment. However clearly an individual has earned his place in history, our sense of human moral equality is violated by a selection process that saves a mere handful and casts the others, good and evil alike, into eternal darkness.

This resentment in turn provides energy for faith, which we can understand most simply as reliance on the omnipotent sacred center to preserve us from violence. The cultural scene's success in deferring mimetic violence makes it a transcendental causal agent to which can be attributed the power to defer all violence--the violence of death, and of forgetting.

If originary, "ostensive" faith is indistinguishable from this reliance itself, faith in the strong, "declarative" sense conceives the sacred Being as the subject of a predication rather than as the object of an ostensive sign. This removal of the sacred to the sphere of narrative gives birth to divinities who incarnate the permanence that inheres in sacred Being as the object of the originary sign. At this point, the sacred becomes a bulwark not merely against **Hobbesian** violence but against resentment of human difference: whatever my neighbor's superiority over me, it is as nothing compared to God's over both of us. Before preserving historical memory, language and culture commemorate God's omnipotence. It is no coincidence that the minimal credo of **Islam**, the religion most successful at channeling resentment, begins with "God is great"; that of **Judaism**, the religion most successful at attracting resentment, reads "our God is one" (yours, presumably, isn't).

Salvation, translated into anthropological terms, is participation in the immortality of representation. For the Christian, as opposed to the **Buddhist**, this means individual salvation, the promise of resurrection in the flesh. A democratic and vastly more comprehensive version of the library, the **Internet** offers no doubt the first practical secular model of immortality. Just as all our life's actions are presumably preserved on the celestial **WWW** of which God is

webmaster, we expect all files on the Internet to remain available forever. The belief that the Internet or its successor will preserve--if it hasn't already--not merely selected documents but every trace of our existence in every medium is not implausible. A mere two decades ago, a twenty-page (40K) essay posed a storage problem to personal computers. Today's 20G hard disk contains a few bytes for every person on earth. Who can imagine network capacity even fifty years hence? Survival on the Internet is not equivalent to survival in the history books, but survival in any form is sufficient to give one a shot at the history books of the future.

Where does this leave the Pascalian opposition between production and consumption? A web page is at least nominally a "production," but what of those **webcams** that give us the opportunity to create our own reality TV? (Pretty girls finance their education by getting men to pay-per-view them all day long.) Perhaps the web of the future will contain recordings of complete lives; I can see upscale parents subscribing their unborn children, beginning with conception. Historical memory at last freed from the contentious condition of scarcity, we will all remain "out there" forever. . .

And why am I writing these fantasies, dear reader? As a diversion from the book that I should be writing about the origin of language. For a writer, even writing can be a form of *divertissement*. Or could it be that these Internet Chronicles are what will one day remain of my writings on **Generative Anthropology**?

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

We Are All Buddhists Now

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Early this month, I flew to Long Island, NY for the funeral of my last uncle, **Martin Gans**, my father's younger brother, who died at the age of 86. My parents, through a not altogether fortuitous combination of protectiveness and religious indifference, kept me away from funerals when I was young and refused their own when they were old; this was actually the first time I attended the funeral of a close relative.

Marty was Jewish and his wife Catholic, a not atypical combination in mid-century New York City (remember Abie's Irish Rose?). Although hardly true believers, neither ever dreamt of

denying their respective heritage. Yet the plastic memorial card given out at the funeral home contains, on one side, a prose rendering (unidentified) of **Max Ehrmann's** poem "Desiderata" (written in 1927, popular in the sixties, and all over the Internet), whose first sentence reads, "Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence," and, on the other, a lotus-like image of the Buddhist eightfold path above the word "Peace."

Thus a couple of educated but not hypereducated, aware but not trendy, and surely not New-Age New Yorkers, raised in two great Western religions that share a common holy book, chose to express themselves through a Buddhist image and what Westerners (if not real Buddhists) would think of as Buddhist-like spirituality. No doubt this is a Buddhism reduced to the merest symbolic gesture, but that does not explain why the materials for this gesture were not drawn from within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

What has made the Buddhist perspective attractive to Westerners since the days of **Schopenhauer** is its rejection of desiring individuality. Few in consumer society practice the systematic denial of desire, but many include in their consumption practices signs of this denial to display to themselves and others. Yet this recuperation of "Eastern" values by "Western" consumerism is not altogether complete. As the popularity of Ehrmann's poem illustrates, there is a peace to be gained from renouncing the Judeo-Christian drama of salvation. Although not overtly competitive, the quest for individual salvation unavoidably smacks of the desire for centrality. In the Buddhist equivalent, one renounces all desire and with it, the desiring traits that make up one's "self."

I am not unmindful of **René Girard's** point that the Judeo-Christian tradition conveys the sharpest vision of the anthropological function of the mimetic violence that all religions seek to expel into the realm of the sacred. The prophetic denunciations of sacrificial violence that culminate in the Gospels display more awareness of its anthropological function than the turning away from all violence characteristic of Buddhism or Jainism. It is easy to make the argument that the West's greater awareness of culture's function in deferring violence has oriented it toward developing secular alternatives to the sacrificial mode rather than merely turning sacrificial violence inward against one's own desire. When the Western tradition renounces worldly desire, it is in the service of the individual soul's spiritual desire--a desire that can still arguably enter into an inter-human dialogue--rather than the search for Nirvana.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between Buddhism and Christianity is in the career of their respective founders. Where the former rejects sacrificial violence, the latter both rejects it and falls victim to it. This dramatic element in Christianity (prefigured many times in the **Old Testament**) has no place in Buddhism. Like **Jesus**, **Buddha** lives and dies, but he is neither a divine being nor a sacrificial victim--characteristics that we know to be two moments of the same history. The contrast is all the more telling in a cultural context where everyone knows the story of Jesus but few know much about Buddha; ignorance only enhances the attraction of the undramatic.

The contrast between Buddha and Christ is reflected in the religions' respective models of sanctity. The Christian makes a sacrifice of his desire; the more heroic his suffering, the greater his celestial reward--witness **Saint Anthony (Flaubert's patron)** with his nightly temptations in the desert. The Buddhist approach, as I understand it, is that the sage doesn't struggle to extirpate his desires, he merely learns to avoid suffering by not acting on them. Without the **Satanic** personalization of the figure of temptation, learning to resist desire, however arduous, is no more dramatic than learning to play the piano.

Christian dramatization of the soul's struggle for salvation, along with its secular derivatives, is arguably the driving force in the West's historical success. The more advanced the exchange system, the more individual participants are obliged to invest in their own "story." Does the preference for undramatic "Buddhist" moral exemplarity over Western personal-historical drama suggest, then, a turning-away from this investment? I think not.

Let us read "Desiderata" as an expression of American "Buddhism." The work, more a homily than a poem, consists almost entirely of a series of imperatives. We are told to go placidly, to speak quietly (and to listen), to avoid comparing ourselves to others, to remain interested in our careers, to accept aging, to be cheerful, to strive to be happy. Yet the strongest statement of the poem is in the indicative mode: "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here." Only one penetrated by Western romantic alienation and *Verworfenheit* ("thrown-ness") could conceive, or require, such reassurance. I'd be willing to bet that the average Buddhist would find this poem inappropriately focused on protection of self rather than loss of self.

The most striking feature of Ehrmann's text is the constant backing and filling in an effort to reconcile asceticism and hedonism, to defer the violence of worldly desire in such a way as to forestall a resentful reaction. This attitude is perhaps best illustrated by the line, "Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself." The ancient *ne quid nimis* (nothing in excess) is here applied, not to desire, but to the self-discipline that controls desire. Or: "Whatever your labors and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul." We have come a long way from the moral striving of an earlier phase of market society, illustrated by **Henley's "Invictus," Kipling's "If"**--best of all, by **Longfellow's "Psalm of Life"**:

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each tomorrow
Find us farther than today.

A more mature market society balances consumption with production, "discipline" with "gentleness." It cultivates the drama of each life, but, in order to maintain the energy required for this cultivation, it gives us a fall-back position, a way of looking at our lives in which nothing need be won or lost. What we think of as "Buddhist" is really a perspective that, by reassuring us of the availability of this position, permits us to invest yet more energy in worldly ambition.

Perhaps the twenty-first century will discover that this kind of spirituality is more helpful than the Christian variety in the mature global marketplace. But it is more likely that the market system, and the globalizing culture that accompanies it, is evolving toward a pluralistic synthesis of (at least) Western historicism and Eastern transcendentalism. We were already Christians, and now we are Buddhists too.

Born in 1915, my uncle Marty, a Jew who sang in church choirs and wanted to be remembered with a Buddhist image, was already a citizen of the twenty-first century.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Chinese Dao of Language

No. 243: Saturday, September 1, 2001

At a meeting of the **UCLA Center for the Study of Religion**, it was pointed out that the Chinese term dao (formerly tao), usually translated "way," also has the meaning of "discourse." I found this usage tantalizingly close to that of the Greek word logos, diversely translated as "word," "discourse," "speech." In the New Testament book of John that famously opens with *En arche en ho logos* [In the beginning was the Word], Jesus also identifies himself as "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14.6). The parallelism between logos and dao offers a privileged opening to the difference and similarity between the two cultures.

As a follow-up to our discussion, my colleague **William Bodiford** of East Asian Languages and Cultures recommended to me **Chad Hansen's** *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford, 1992), which I read with great interest. I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that ancient Chinese thought, focused on the social, "performative" use of language, is closer to GA's understanding than Western metaphysics, which sees language from the perspective of the individual mind. I also felt a considerable affinity with the paradoxical thinking about language

in **Laozi** and others, despite the fact that there is no room for an originary scene in this mode of thought (see **Cecily Hurst's** "[The Origin of Language in Chinese Thought](#)"), which never conceives of the human social order as other than a kingdom.

For these thinkers, language is important above all not as a medium for enunciating true propositions but as a means of guiding action. As Hansen points out:

Classical Chinese does not have explicit descriptive and prescriptive forms. Students of comparative translation, therefore, will find huge chunks of text that one translator renders in declarative English and another in imperative English. Behind this apparent ambiguity, I suggest, lies this assumption about the function of language. All language functions to guide behavior. Given that assumption, a community would not require an explicit prescriptive marker.

That does not mean that all sentences are prescriptive sentences. It means only that, like a computer program, the input as a whole guides our action in the world. We use all the distinctions made in language in guiding action. The communication of information is a subtask of language. Information is always information in relation to a program that guides action. (51)

In other words, the Chinese declarative has not become metaphysical; it has not lost its connection with what I have called the "elementary linguistic forms": the ostensive and imperative that designate objects of significance, for worship or practical action.

The central tension in Chinese thought reflects the ambivalence of the deferral of violence through representation as the bringer of both freedom and order. On the one hand, **Confucianism** is concerned with maintaining traditional ritual usage through "rectifying names," making sure that the signs of language name a socially appropriate object. (A Western parallel might be the debate as to when a fetus becomes a "human being.") Confucianism, unlike traditional Western thought, has not lost sight of the primary link between language, music, and ritual. The modern rediscovery of this connection in the West could be made only through the detour of ethnology; in contrast to Confucianism, **Christianity**, the religion that abolished sacrifice, has no internal conception of ritual. On the other hand, the **Daoist** current reflects the fact that no use of language can put an end to dialectical reciprocity. Daoism is inhabited by a sensitivity to the fundamentally paradoxical relationship of language to what it asserts that is almost wholly lacking in the West. "The way [dao] that can be spoken is not the constant way." That is, once you've spoken of a "way," it's no longer the same way; it has become an object toward which you must take a stand rather than the series of steps you are taking. Ethical language, by the very fact of suggesting a "way" of action, modifies that way of action. Because the focus of Chinese thought about language is ethical rather than metaphysical, it sees paradox neither as a nuisance à la **Bertrand Russell** or as a

psychological operation a la **Gregory Bateson**, but as a fundamental property of language.

Hansen, whose lucidly and passionately argued views are, as I understand it, somewhat controversial, groups **Buddhism** and **Indian** thought in general with Western individualist logic and language philosophy, leaving China (he says nothing of **Japan**) as the sole source of truly non-Western thinking. Chinese civilization understood over two thousand years ago that (1) ostensive words are more fundamental than declarative sentences; (2) language is closely allied to ritual as a means of creating order, yet (3) the assertion of this order in language is paradoxical. In contrast, the mature intellectual life of the West begins with **Plato's** construction of the concept or Idea as an object of reflection accessible only through the declarative sentence. This separation of declarative objectivity from ostensive-imperative pragmatic activity has its parallel in the founding scene of **Judeo-Christian** religion, God's appearance to **Moses** in Exodus 6 (the burning bush), where he names himself with the declarative sentence Ehyeh asher ehyeh: I am/will be who/what/that I am/will be. (See Science and Faith.) Western culture has been built on the forgetting of the originary function of language.

I am tempted to use a paraphrase of Laozi's gnomic words to explain why **GA's** recalling of these "Chinese" insights has met with little enthusiasm. What makes a culture function, its dao, is incompatible with the revelation of its operation. The ethical paradoxality of language is the suppressed truth of Western individualism, built upon what we might call the **Lockean** fiction that language is the subjective possession of individuals who subsequently come together to communicate objective truths about the world. The individual mind and external nature ("what is the case") are perceived as the polar elements of linguistic communication, so that **Wittgenstein's** Tractatus with its "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen" [what we cannot speak of, we must leave in silence] becomes the ultimate, tragic work of Western philosophy. As Hansen shows, Chinese thought's refusal to lose sight of the interpersonal nature of language has been associated with the domination of language and society by a centralized despotism rather than the seemingly utopian proliferation of "ways" encouraged by Daoist thought. Insight for insight, Western emphasis on the individual's possession of language has been more socially productive than Chinese emphasis on its communal origin.

The twenty-first century, however, may change all that. A new era is dawning, one marked by the global interplay of cultural modes. The very success of market society means that it no longer belongs exclusively to the West. Even the triumph of Western liberal democracy over (European) communism may perhaps best be understood as the end of the era in which the historical dialectic was played out on Western terrain.

One way to formulate the historical dilemma implicit in this development is as a choice between two models of globalization. If we take as unquestioned the unity of the global market, then the crux of twenty-first-century history (have you noticed that--unlike the French who entered le dix-septième siècle in 1600--English speakers live for the first time in a century with a compound

name?) will be the progressive integration of the "third world" into this market. In this case, the main axis of world tension will be between the (more or less Christian) West and **Islam**, the world's chief source of resistance to market society. In contrast, if Chinese culture, as expressed in the Confucian-Daoist dialectic, is indeed the true Other of Western-based world civilization, then the potentially richest, as well as most dangerous, interaction is likely to be that between the US, the leader of the global market, and China. As every consumer in the West is aware, China, unlike the lands of Islamic fundamentalism, is a real and growing presence in the marketplace, yet it shows little sign of evolving toward the Western model of liberal democracy.

The next few decades should tell us whether there is indeed a distinct Chinese road to market dominance. As a good Westerner, my sympathies lie with **Francis Fukuyama's** position that liberal democracy is the freest and therefore the most creative social form and, consequently, the inevitable outcome of the evolution of market society. But the Western world should not make light of the challenge of a society whose understanding of human interaction was shaped over two thousand years ago by a non-theistic anthropology of language that brings together ritual order and self-referential paradox.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The New World Order

No. 244: Tuesday, September 11, 2001

I had finished a draft of my next Chronicle when the catastrophe occurred. I was born three months before Pearl Harbor and now have lived to see even greater devastation inflicted on the city of my birth. When I spoke of a new post-millennial era I couldn't anticipate how clear and horrible the defining moment would be.

In *La violence et le sacré*, published nearly thirty years ago, René Girard put forth the basic tenets of a new "fundamental" or generative anthropology founded on the primacy of the human need to defer mimetic violence. Those who professionally go by the name of anthropologists have ignored Girard's generative model, as they have ignored my own attempts to extend it to human language. Perhaps events of this magnitude are necessary to convince those who escaped but have not yet absorbed the horrors of the last World War that deferral of violence is the crucial function of human culture--and that this deferral is not and can never be

synonymous with the utopia of perpetual peace. In the preceding Chronicle, I suggested that the conflict between capitalism and communism was the last moment in the dialectic of world history that would be dominated by the internal conversation of the West. In the light of the events of today, the Cold War assumes its true dimension as a family quarrel. As the name of their prime target indicates, the perpetrators of this series of acts have declared war not just on Western but on world civilization, and on the market that supports it. This is a time when those who have heretofore focused their energies on denouncing the evils of the market system had better start to come to grips with the implications of their position.

I send my condolences to the victims as well as my pledge to pursue for as long as I am able these efforts to improve our understanding of our common humanity, whose mimetic abilities give us such awesome capacities for peace and for violence, for love and for resentment.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Minimizing Difference

No. 245: Tuesday, September 18, 2001

I had already completed a draft of this Chronicle before the events of September 11, but its subject-matter is not altogether irrelevant to the questions posed by these events to our anthropological understanding. We have language and other modes of representation because we are threatened by violence, which, according to a hermeneutically circular definition, is mimetic conflict pushed to the point where it must be deferred through representation. No witness to **Black Tuesday** will question my minimal definition of the human as the species that has more to fear from itself than from the rest of the universe. Fear and the accompanying deferral of action are the beginnings of a particularly human wisdom that also goes by the name of original sin. There is more fundamental anthropology in **Genesis** than in all the "scientific" demonstrations that humans differ no differently from other animal species than they differ from each other.

* * *

A recent discussion on the GAlist began with the following conundrum posed by Chris Fleming of the University of Western Sydney:

. . . recently I instructed quite a few members of my department to "check out" the GA website, read through the "Introduction to GA," and then have a look at Anthropoetics. The quite bizarre result of this "experiment" was not that these academics--a few of whom told me that they [spent] hours on the site--didn't "understand" GA. They (independently) told me that they'd read through the things I recommended, but just couldn't quite work out what was being argued through; surprisingly, two of them could tell me that GA [...] concerned "the deferral of violence through representation," but admitted that they couldn't explain what that MEANT.

This unsettling reaction may be understood on many levels. But before we explore the personal equation or the difficulty inherent in any attempt to close or even to theorize the gap between the humanities and the sciences, I think it most useful to consider it a reaction less to the ideas of GA (no one failed to "understand") than to its problematic status as a research program in the academic context within which most of us operate.

It is my strong impression, given the vast increase over the past few decades in the personnel and activity of knowledge-related fields, that conditions pertinent to the "sociology of knowledge" increasingly determine what kind of knowledge will be assimilated and disseminated. As a scientific colleague recently noted, the traditional concept of "academic freedom" is irrelevant to those filling out grant applications. I am not speaking here of any kind of conspiracy; quite the contrary. If I have anything to complain of in the contemporary academic scene, it is rather an excess of democracy than an excess of elitism. Generative anthropology is less attuned than either victimary or positivist ("materialist") thinking to the communal style of today's academy.

To think anthropologically is to renounce the metaphysical point of departure based on the declarative sentence, or, to put it another way, on the idea that "mind" can be abstracted from its implantation in human beings. This ideal of objective representation is that of science itself. Because GA is anthropology not as a positive science but as an ontology of the human, it is not organized around a particular research program. But this characteristic, which makes GA disconcerting to Chris Fleming's colleagues, makes it a potential meeting ground not only between the humanities and the social sciences but between these sciences themselves. Of all the scientific studies I have read concerning the origin of human language, I cannot think of one in which confronting the hypothesis that defines human culture as "the deferral of violence through representation" would not have aided the author to reframe and sharpen the conclusions derived from his or her research.

Here is an example from the extremely active field of primatology. In a long, passionate, and

deliberately "unscientific" article ("Ape Language: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in *The Origins of Language: What Nonhuman Primates Can Tell Us*, School of American Research Press, 1999, 115-88), the distinguished primatologist **Sue Savage-Rumbaugh** (SSR) conceives an imaginary debate between herself and "Wally," a composite of those social scientists who maintain that there is an unbridgeable chasm between ape and human communication. Without claiming that apes have languages directly comparable to ours, SSR gives examples of intentionality and communication of intent, symbolic reference to absent objects, deception, premeditated revenge, and so on, insisting throughout that the strict separation in kind between human and ape language is more a self-serving myth than a scientific hypothesis, and, in conclusion, affirming that the point of research into both human and ape communication is not to establish where these functions are "located" in the brain, but to improve the quality of this communication: "Behavioral science will be judged . . . by its creations rather than by its explanations of cognitive structure . . . Localizing skills in the brain does not build a better mind" (187).

It is impossible not to respect the passion of someone who has dedicated a lifetime to understanding our primate cousins and who clearly shares a good deal of the humanist's impatience with the bloodlessness and spurious rigor of much social science. Yet I think that a little originary thinking would have considerably sharpened and focused this author's quarrel with the skeptics.

I have no ideological or theoretical difficulty in accepting SSR's judgment that there is real communication between apes or even that the bonobo Kanzi is really using language when he tells his conspecific Tamuli to return to the author the keys Tamuli has stolen from her. Such revelations, by throwing discredit on the neat absolutism of human-animal difference, only help us better to understand the theoretical importance of the originary scene. What is the difference between ape and human? Even if we deny with SSR the existence of a "human-ape linguistic gulf (118)," we cannot deny that human language and culture differ considerably from those of apes. What is most characteristically human is not merely to be different from other species but to define ourselves by this "absolute" difference. In another article in the same volume--"The Game of the Name: Continuity and Discontinuity in Language Origins," 229-68--**Iain Davidson** comes close to this idea by suggesting that these binary distinctions are not found in nature but are a product of the human ability to "name." But his hypothesis of how "naming" might have come about on the basis of exchanges of signals relies on a contingent "trick":

[we hypothesize] two hominids communicating with each other using a bodily gesture(-call) that indicates the observable presence of prey or predator through iconic movements of hand and arm . . . If that gesture were accidentally or incidentally traced into a more permanent medium (such as the side of a stream channel), then the trace itself might become an object of attention in the absence of the prey or predator. . . . Some such trick is needed to achieve the

distinctive discontinuity between nonhuman primate and human communication represented by the uniquely human, and languagelike, ability to pay attention to the communicative act itself, rather than to the object of communication. (261)

I will let my readers judge whether they find this scenario more convincing than those I have suggested for the originary hypothesis.

Let us grant that bonobos can communicate their intentions in language, that chimps can use tools and even use tools to make tools, even (why not?) that these apes have some kind of proto-religion. This only increases the burden of explaining why human evolution was driven by the capacity for representation by signs whereas that of bonobos and chimps was not. Some have been tempted to lay down the burden by blaming it all on a chance genetic mutation. (That this absurd notion has been taken seriously by authorities in the field such as **Derek Bickerton consoles me for their neglect of the originary hypothesis.) On the contrary, the closer our cousins come to displaying a linguistic competence less developed than but similar to our own, the more crucial it becomes to explain why this competence never came to drive their evolution and consequently failed to generate a historical culture.**

To reiterate the originary hypothesis, the crucial, generative function of human language, over and above communication about the natural world, is the deferral of potential conflict, reflecting **René Girard's still-ignored observation that the mimetic nature of intelligence makes the most intelligent animals increasingly susceptible to such conflict. At the point where the need to contain mimetic conflict surpasses the capacity of animal communication, the only alternative to annihilation is the emergence of formal and institutional representation, ritual sacrifice and language.**

However dependent our everyday use of language may be on context, linguistic signs, in contrast with signals, typically have a context-free meaning or signified. To speak of an event of language origin is to propose a specific moment of emergence for a sign whose meaning "always already" emancipates itself from this original context of utterance. Yet the linguistic sign, liberated from its context, continually recalls it. Because words are products not of biological evolution but of cultural creation, they bear the mark, some more explicitly than others, of their event of origin. Whenever we use a word, we revive and renew its entire etymology as the history of the binding between this particular signifier and its signified. Not only Biblical exegetes but modern thinkers from **Locke to **Heidegger** have mined words for ontological--I would call them anthropological--truths.**

Signals may be manipulated by their users, and there is no need to affirm dogmatically that the higher primates use them with no sense of intention. (There is in any case a distinction between the number of levels of intention or "theory of mind" accessible to humans and non-humans.) Let us then accept SSR's reproach that the dogmatic distinction between "call" and "utterance" only provides an alibi for the refusal of skeptics like "Wally" to recognize the real

similarities between ape and human language. The important point is not intentionality as such but the fact that that animal signals derive from sounds or gestures that express the drives or "instincts" of their producers. In contrast, I hypothesize the first sign of human language to have been an aborted gesture of appropriation, a checking or deferral of our appetitive drive toward its object. It is the anti-instinctual, interdictive nature of its origin that distinguishes human "symbolic" communication from animal language. Of course the fear of one's fellows that overrides appetitive-mimetic desire for the central object is itself "instinctual," but the inhibition of appetitive desire that it effects is not the drowning out of one drive by another, but its deferral and displacement from the untouchable object onto the shareable sign.

Granted that apes can learn some language, engage in ritual-like practices, have elements of a "theory of mind," none of these demonstrations of primate cousinship reduce the plausibility that the differentiation of human from ape was triggered by the inadequacy of ape communication. The object of originary thinking is to provide a plausible function for human difference so as to be able to explain the emergence of the human as that of "absolute" difference itself.

Davidson is correct: binary distinctions are facts, not of nature, but of language. But not even this binary distinction should be hypostasized into a fact of nature. The natural, prehuman world has plenty of de facto binary distinctions. Biology, in particular, has a neat way of creating such distinctions: speciation--two creatures that can produce fertile offspring are of the same species; otherwise, they are not. The difference between these and absolute (de jure) distinctions is created by their formalization in language by a creature whose survival depends on explicit binary distinctions. **Durkheim** saw that the most fundamental binary distinction of all is the social/ethical opposition between sacred and profane. To separate the potential combatants requires an interdiction of ontological force that is the creation of ontology itself. This does not mean that language "creates reality." Language does not even create our perception of reality. What it creates is a *différance* or deferral of violence by means of a representation of its object as different. The primary difference is that between the significant and the insignificant, the sacred and the profane, this meaningful thing and everything else. Where **Derrida** goes wrong is in presuming the symmetry of this difference on the Saussurean model of a grammatical paradigm.

Apes have no notion of difference; humans do. This is no denial of ape intelligence, and surely no invitation to treat bonobos as Cartesian robots. It is simply a fact of evolution that at some point difference, the basis of all signification, became necessary and was created/invented. Saying that this creation makes us "absolutely" different from animals is really only another way of saying that our difference may be thought of as vanishingly small in concrete, relative terms. Both SSR and "Wally" ought to be able to agree on this.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for the "incomprehensibility" of originary thinking is that it focuses on the never completely graspable moment of emergence of the "vertical" sign from its "horizontal" context. Language is born in paradox; the sign both expresses and denies appetite

and, in so doing, transforms it into desire. Human culture plays out this paradox in narrative time, forever re-presenting the genesis of representation. Generative anthropology is founded on a minimal model of this paradox.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the chief result of this focus on the moment of origin is an increased sensitivity to historical specificity. The very fact that mimetic desire and the need to defer the conflict it arouses are always the same implies that the means to effect this deferral cannot remain fixed; the new human community created by the deferring sign will have the free time (French *loisir*, "leisure") in which to generate new desires and new conflicts. The absolute nature of sacred significance both permits and obliges us, in contrast to our closest non-human relatives, to generate the continuous series of relative changes in the objects of significance that we call history.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

GA Twenty Years After

No. 246: Saturday, September 29, 2001

My first book of **Generative Anthropology**, *The Origin of Language (TOOL)*, was published in 1981. At that time, there was not a great deal of literature about language origin. Everyone quoted the ban on the subject imposed in 1866 by the **Société Linguistique de Paris**. There were a few seekers for the *Ursprache*, such as **Alexander Marshack** and **Mary Le Cron Foster**; **Gordon Hewes** suggested that human language began with gesture (as I recall, one of his pieces of evidence was that the palm of the hand--whose visibility at a distance is essential for a gesture-language--is never darkly pigmented even among those with the darkest skin). **Derek Bickerton's** *Roots of Language*, which uses pidgins and creoles to make the case for a universal basic syntax, also appeared in 1981.

The originary scene in *TOOL* was closer to **Girard's** model than more recent versions: the moment of the "aborted gesture of appropriation" that becomes the first linguistic sign was situated after rather than before the *sparagmos*, making deferral a consequence of mimetic violence. I made no attempt in *TOOL* to associate the hypothetical moment of origin with palaeontological data, and made little reference to primatology. I thought, naively as it turned out, that once the model of origin was supplied--and I was convinced I had supplied it--the

empirical details could be worked out by others more familiar with the terrain.

How have my ideas changed since 1981? I still believe not only that my model of language origin is the most parsimonious but that it alone explains the connection between language and religion--a subject virtually ignored since the days of **Max Müller**. But I have become less utopian concerning GA's potential for displacing the methods and perspectives of social science. Originary thinking is of value in explaining cultural forms and ideas and as a critique of the conclusions that may be drawn from empirical research; it is neither a program for such research nor a substitute for it.

What of the originary scene itself? In **TOOL** and for some time afterward, I conceived the scene as an event for which we could of course not expect to find evidence but that we could attempt to reconstruct by fleshing out our hypothesis concerning human culture ("the deferral of violence through representation") with whatever empirical knowledge we might acquire of the life of our ancestors. As we continue to revise our understanding of humanity's prehistory, it seems increasingly appropriate to consider the scene as a heuristic construction--and yet not a simple fiction like the social contract or **John Rawls'** "original position."

Given the basic presupposition that the signs of human language are derived not from appetite but from its deferral, the originary event, understood as a "little bang," the first hesitation that converts a gesture of appropriation into a sign, must have occurred. But the originary hypothesis is stronger than the tautological assertion that, given that C lies on the path between A and B, if you go from A to B there is a moment at which you are at C. This weak notion of a moment of origin does not suffice to explain the scenic nature of human culture. If I emphasize religion in tandem with language, it is because all manifestations of religion take place explicitly on an external or internal scene. Indeed, one could define religion as the most general mode of representation that is explicitly scenic. The simplest understanding of God is as the Being that maintains the permanence of the scene of representation; the consolation of prayer is that, in whatever solitude or misery one finds oneself, its interlocutor is conceived as always on the scene.

The minimal originary hypothesis need not postulate a watershed event that would radically transform relations among the members of the group. The equalitarian configuration of the scene of representation, with the sacred object at the center and the human participants on the periphery, need not replace all at once the pre-human configuration of "pecking-order" power relations. But we can say that, however fleetingly, the event-nature of the event must have imprinted itself on the consciousness of the participants, else there would be no cultural scene--and no history--at all. However minimal, the little bang must nonetheless be understood as an event.

In the Spring 2000 GA seminar, **Antoine Philippe** of UCI made an insightful point about this event: it is an event in which nothing happens. Projected onto the worldly plane, the conversion of a gesture of appropriation into a "vertical" sign turns an action into a non-action. The first

event is a non-event; the first memorable scene is constituted by the uneventfulness, however temporary, that takes place on it. This emptiness, **Sartre's** néant, is the space-time of representation, which is the ground of the specifically human freedom that Sartre finds there.

The most serious misconception about GA is that what I call the "minimal" requirement of an originary hypothesis is rather a violation of the rule of parsimony than an expression of it. Discussions of morality or religion tend to begin either in medias res, with the data--which may be obtained largely from thought-experiments--or with an a priori model, motivated only intuitively, that is subsequently applied to this data to see if it fits. In the place of an originary hypothesis, the author customarily refers to the état présent of the field and/or to classical texts. This procedure may be parsimonious in minimally disturbing the terrain of previous discussions, but surely not in minimizing its ontological presuppositions.

Even when philosophers discover aspects of language that have clear anthropological roots and implications, such as **Austin's** notion of the "performative," these aspects are taken as given and never traced back to an originary model. Yet "doing things with words" is a cultural activity; any model of the phenomenon that ignores its origin and cultural function is incomplete. How did it become possible to use words to marry, to christen, to promise? What is the most parsimonious model of the human that explains these phenomena? It is in answer to questions such as these that the minimality of originary thinking is made evident.

Just about every thinker since **Marx** has denounced metaphysics and offered a way to replace it, or, more prudently, to "deconstruct" it. In comparison with what has gone before, originary thinking offers the clearest definition of the metaphysical and of our limited but real capacity to "comprehend" it within an anthropology. Metaphysics is best understood as the mode of thought that recognizes no utterance-form more elementary than the declarative sentence or proposition. Metaphysical discourse is sufficient for analyzing the natural world, which is not dependent on our representation of it; this discourse cannot adequately describe the human world because it has effaced the trail that leads back to its own anthropological origin.

I believe that in the uniformitarian spirit of science, the emergence within the natural world of the cultural world of representations--entailing the often implicit but always operative dualism of our reflections on human ontology--should be made the object of an explicit hypothesis. Within the Humanities, this is even more crucial in the domains of ethics, religion, and philosophy in the traditional sense than in those of literature and art, whose works are only effective if they contain so to speak a "portable anthropology" within themselves. The originary hypothesis obliges us to understand the human faculty of representation not as an inexplicable given but as generated within a world where it did not exist. This generative model provides an anthropological basis for ethical concepts such as the categorical imperative, which we are otherwise asked to accept on faith, by grounding these scenic phenomena in a hypothetical originary scene where the relationships among the participants are made explicit. Similarly, this heuristic makes intelligible both the "supernatural" entities of religion and the imaginary constructions of esthetic culture, where the scenic is abstracted from its relationship to the

everyday world temporally as well as spatially. The originary hypothesis permits the transcendence or *Aufhebung* of the monism-dualism, body-mind debate that circles constantly around the same tired dilemmas.

GA has been around for twenty years now. Its survival into the next generation will depend on whether you, dear reader, find that it helps you to better perform your task in our endless human enterprise of self-understanding.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Holding up Our End of History

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I have often referred in these Chronicles to **Francis Fukuyama's** idea, first articulated in 1989, that the fall of communism represents the "end of history," having always found that strong, **Hegelian** models of this kind help us to understand historical turning points better than more prudently qualified ones. But whatever interest this thesis may have had before September 11, its very complacency, which now seems of another era, tells us much about historical reality in our post-millennial world. As I noted in [Chronicle 244](#), these events make the Cold War look like a family quarrel. The historical dialectic within the Western tradition may now be concluded, but that still leaves the rest of the world unaccounted for.

I share Dr. Fukuyama's admiration for liberal democracy, the social form that he considers definitive, whose inherent dynamic obliges it to generate ever more degrees of freedom in order to recycle the resentments of an ever-more-demanding population. Liberal democracy has been by far the most successful and productive mode of social organization in history. Yet its seemingly unchallengeable ability to co-opt its opposition through what **Herbert Marcuse** called in **Orwellian** language "repressive tolerance"--selling gangsta records to would-be gangsters--has been shown to have a huge window of vulnerability.

Despite my admiration for Fukuyama's daring thesis, it contains a central contradiction that the present events only make more apparent. To declare the historical dialectic at an end, one must make a decision as to the insignificance of the ongoing conversation. This is the equivalent, let us say, of distinguishing between the discussion in a legislature while a bill is being debated and

the chatter that takes place after the vote; or, to choose an example more suited to Fukuyama's Hegelian objectivity, between the dialogue among scientists before a problem is solved, and the continuing bavardage of pseudo-science (e.g., **Thomas Hobbes'** persistent attempts to square the circle). But in the matter of history, how is this decision to be arrived at?

The final stage of the historical dialectic may be said to have been achieved by liberal democracy because in this system, the decision-making process in both economic and political exchange is minimally constrained by power-relations. The result in each given case is, in principle, unpredictable by any individual, the product of a generalized form of **Adam Smith's** "invisible hand" that integrates the wisdom of all. Which is to say that the ultimate superiority of liberal democracy does not lie simply in its empirically-found capacity to produce more wealth and to give its citizens more options, but derives from the minimality of the constraint the system places on its decision-making process. Another way to put this is that the historical macrodialectic may be declared at an end only insofar as it is transformed into a microdialectic within the global market-system dominated by, and ultimately to be made up entirely of, liberal-democratic states.

But in such a system, the decision whether to characterize the dialectic as historical or post-historical can be made only by a consensus of the participants. If one party or another refuses to participate in the global exchange-system, then it is contrary to the very rules of this system to declare that party's dialectical position nugatory. After all, critics of Soviet communism such as **Frederick Hayek** denounced socialism as a sham in 1944, following a more technical argument articulated by **Ludwig von Mises** as early as 1922. What would then have prevented these writers from declaring the "end of history" after WWII, claiming that the apparent challenge presented by communism to the market-system was in principle unviable?

But the definitive proof of my point is supplied by Dr. Fukuyama himself. His article in the October 5 Wall Street Journal defending his position is entitled [History Is Still Going Our Way](#). Is that an affirmation one can legitimately make after the end of history?

Far more radically than the communist-capitalist competition, focused on the creation of material prosperity--the point of **Khrushchev's** near-friendly "we will bury you"--the current conflict opposes two irreconcilable conceptions of social order. And if, geopolitical questions aside, there was really no way that Soviet-style economies could have out-produced the market, the situation is much less clear in a confrontation where opposition has no such common ground. The victory of market democracy, which would consist in the demonstration of its invulnerability to terrorism, leading to the marginalization if not the complete elimination of the latter, is by no means assured.

Clear thinking at such a moment walks a fine line. One can hardly disagree with those who use terms like "evil" to describe terrorist attacks. Those others--and they are not so few--who climb on their high horses to tell us that these actions, however horrible, are expressions of legitimate grievances and/or punishment for "our" arrogance only display their own moral obtuseness. The

idea that we should pull out of the Middle East and stop supporting Israel so as to bring acts of terrorism against us to an end is not only morally bankrupt but terminally naïve. It is not some rival fanaticism of our own, but the social dynamic at work in this conflict that makes any kind of quid pro quo, let alone any negotiation--with whom?--unthinkable. We can, and should, act to mitigate the resentment that found expression in these attacks. But we must do this by positive gestures, such as those we are currently making to the people of Afghanistan, not by shaping our foreign policy to the will of the resenters.

Yet it would be foolish to deny that, far more than the tragic utopianisms of the past century, to say nothing of the ideology of our farcical protest movement that has now turned its sights from the WTO to our anticipated "racist war," these attacks express a coherent world-view. Moral considerations aside, neither Nazism nor communism had any real possibility of creating a viable society by eliminating "bourgeois parliamentarianism" or the bourgeois economy. In contrast, Islamism--the term both distinguishes the terrorist ideology from Islam and recalls their intimate relationship--is the most coherent opposition to market society conceived in recent times. It has spread over the "third world" as the apocalyptic hope of the resentful masses, and even as we do our best to change the object of this hope, we must understand its logic.

Let us compare the ideology behind September 11 with that of the terrorist attack whose body-count record it shattered. Although both radical enemies of the market system (and of the Jews who are held to embody it), **Tim McVeigh** and **Osama bin Laden** have very different visions of the good society. McVeigh's white-supremacist dream finds its most vigorous expression in *The Turner Diaries*, a novel published in 1978 under a pseudonym by **William Pierce**, the leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance. (I hesitate to recommend this book to my readers, but it is available on line at <http://www.angelfire.com/hi/themadmoose/tdforwar.html>; Francophones may prefer the French translation at <http://www.natall.com/french-turner/>.) I don't know what al-Qaeda leaders read in their spare time, but, at the novel's climactic moment, the eponymous protagonist achieves immortal glory by **deliberately crashing his airplane, armed with a nuclear bomb, into the Pentagon**. After thus defeating the Jews and their henchmen in the United States, the "Organization" proceeds to realize its dream of an all-white world by wiping out the entire population of Asia. Aside from the vileness and the absurdity of this dream, its substance is naively utopian; once all the "non-whites" have been eliminated, those who are left will inevitably find new ways of differing, and fighting, among themselves. The Nazi dream of Aryan community is not only repulsive but incompatible with reality.

These same flaws cannot be found in the ideology of those who actually hit the Pentagon. No doubt their motivation was rather to strike at American power and cause us suffering than to impose their ideals on us, but the two aims are quite compatible. The destruction of the world market system that the twin towers symbolized would return us to a pre-industrial world that the Islamicists would find far less threatening than ours and where they would stand a good chance of imposing their religious views. Provided we convert to Islam, we would all have a

place in this world; unlike the Nazis, Islamicists are not racially exclusionary. Nor is their social ideal unrealizable: something like it exists in many places and it has many adherents around the world. For example, the Taliban-ruled poverty of Afghanistan. No doubt, in the world of today, such a society is not really self-sustaining: the rulers cynically extort food and other supplies from efficient producers to make up for their inability to foster a viable economy. If the whole world were reduced to their level and no such supplies were available, most would die, but those remaining might well find stability in something like a Taliban-ruled existence.

When elaborate social orders fall apart, they do not simply disintegrate. Those who call themselves "anarchists" should reflect (assuming for the sake of argument that anarchism and reflection are not incompatible) that what results from the breakdown of order is not a blissful lack of constraint but the domination of those most able to take advantage of such conditions, that is, groups of young men with guns, optionally under the direction of older leaders. In the worst cases, such as recently in Sierra Leone, these gangs of young men are driven by nothing but greed and lust. But such groups are highly unstable; they lack a principle of cohesion by which to defer the internal resentments they generate. One such principle is a caricature of Marxist ideology, such as that which binds together "leftist" guerillas in places like Colombia and (formerly) Peru, not to speak of the Khmer Rouge. But the most fundamental and powerful principle of cohesion has always been the sacred. The Taliban may be a gang of thugs, but their thuggery is in the service of Islam as they conceive it.

Let us consider a worst-case scenario. Suppose our society were continually disrupted by terrorist attacks on power-stations, transportation systems, dams, workplaces, leisure attractions, and computer networks, perhaps even struck by "weapons of mass destruction" wielded by rogue states in league with the terrorists. At some point, arguably, our economic system would give way under the strain, our political order would break down, and warlords and gangsters would take over. A society in such a state of decomposition could no longer make use of sophisticated production techniques, let alone provide services like road maintenance or health care. We would return to something like Hobbes' state of nature where our lives would become, if not solitary, then certainly "poor, nasty, brutish, and short," just as are today those of a good part of the Afghan population--and of many other populations--even with foreign aid. Whether or not we all converted to Islam--homegrown fanaticisms would be more likely--the apocalyptic goal symbolized with diabolical brilliance by the destruction of the World Trade Center would be accomplished. The modern configuration of liberal democracy, consumer society, individual choice, and global exchange will have been supplanted by an impoverished pre-modern world where the only alternative to lawless violence is inflexible tyranny.

The establishment throughout the globe of Taliban-style social order, I should make clear, would by no means signify another kind of "end of history": conflicts would arise, even between Islamic regimes, with who knows what long-term outcome. But the destruction of the global market system would set the world back a good few hundred years, and that, in historical terms, is about as much as anyone can hope for.

The purpose of these remarks is not to make us more fearful, but more resolute. We cannot afford either complacency or fatalism; we must realize that we may be called upon to exert ourselves in altogether new ways both to defend democratic market society and to promote it in those parts of the world that now foster, or at least cheer on, those who abominate it. We may have to endure sacrifices less punctual than the loss of even a few thousand people and far more disruptive than waiting an extra hour at an airport. As we do so, I think we can best maintain our courage by keeping our eyes fixed on the alternative.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Window of Opportunity

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My first reaction to the **September 11** attacks was to call them "nihilistic," since they sought destruction for its own sake. On reflection, however, I think we should see these attacks as motivated by a model, however crude and "medieval," of an ideal social order, one roughly exemplified by the **Taliban** and other Islamist regimes. Some readers of the preceding Chronicle, in which I presented this model as a possible alternative to the global market system, accused me of alarmism. Surely there is no way that **al Qaeda**, or even the whole internationale terroriste, could reduce the industrialized world to the level at which Taliban would be the universal norm.

Perhaps this is true today. But even if anthrax scares and similar fears are nothing but symptoms of war hysteria, can we consider this truth eternal? How much would the course of current history have changed had Israel not destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981? Perhaps biological and chemical weapons are too sophisticated for terrorists to use effectively; perhaps nuclear weapons are inaccessible to them. Are these facts somehow permanently guaranteed by human ontology? **Hobbes'** famous chapter (Leviathan I, 13) describing the "state of nature" begins with the observation that "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself." Can we say that this truth of human mimesis cannot possibly apply on the state level?

This is not to say that Islamist regimes offer a viable alternative in today's world. They are

creatures of third-world frustration whose vogue is unlikely to outlast the present generation. Even if we did nothing, eventually either the Afghans themselves would throw out the Taliban or the Taliban itself would liberalize, as is gradually happening in Iran. But that is not my point. In the one-world society of today, medievalism is reactive, dependent on the modernity it reacts against. But the terrorists' ambition is, by destroying modernity with its own weapons, to re-medievalize whatever is left; societies like Afghanistan can be taken as preliminary models of what this re-medievalization would produce.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that terrorists could wipe out whole cities, or spread disease over a whole country. Whatever damage they might do would be consistent with their aims in a way that communist or even Nazi violence was not. In order to reestablish a medieval social order, one must first destroy the conditions of modernity. Even if the current jihad is incapable of destroying modern civilization, we should take it as a very serious wake-up call. Nuclear weapons technology is becoming ever easier to duplicate, and there is no reason to assume that biological and chemical weaponry will not evolve in the same direction. This had better be the last time that we face a concerted terrorist threat backed by any kind of state apparatus; next time, there may be millions of deaths rather than thousands. We have a rapidly shrinking window of opportunity in which to begin recycling the resentments generated by the global market system.

Not long ago, I conceived the idea of a "post-millennial" era, defined by its abandonment of the victimary epistemology of the postmodern age. The defining issue seemed to be **the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**. The breakdown of the "peace process" and the renewed **Intifada** made it clear that the continued focus on the Palestinians as victims had become counterproductive for both sides; no real negotiations could take place when beneath all Palestinian demands was a sense of legitimized resentment on the model of the South African Blacks under apartheid. (This parallel was in fact raised at the recent Durban conference on racism.) It seemed to me that a new age had begun in which the relatively easy answers of the previous era would have to give way to market-like processes of negotiation.

If it was not clear to everyone from the suicide bombings in Israel that resentment could no longer be legitimized within the political process, the September 11 events made this point much more decisively. Palestinian terrorism may be linked to legitimate--and, at least in principle, negotiable--grievances; **bin Laden's** cannot. Just as the **Holocaust** inaugurated the postmodern era by making victimary resentment the preeminent criterion of political change, September 11 ended it by demonstrating the horrors such resentment can produce. These attacks impose on us the necessity of clearly distinguishing between the deferral of resentment and the legitimation of this resentment. This distinction has never been sharper--perhaps even to the point of impinging on the awareness of that most intellectually stagnant of classes, our "progressive" intelligentsia.

Does the end of victimary thinking mean that we should no longer seek justice? Of course not. But it does mean that justice cannot be sought simply by "taking the side of the victim." It

suggests that the redistributive model of justice, conceived as exercising absolute authority over all objects in contention between the parties, must be replaced by a less absolute, negotiational conception, where the judge is first and foremost an arbitrator. Victimary justice puts everything up for grabs; the persecutor has no rights of ownership, for all his possessions are tainted by victimization. More modestly, post-millennial justice respects the **Lockean** notion of property as a buffer between persons; it begins with the situation as it exists, and declares possession illegitimate only when it can be shown unambiguously to be so. Needless to say, no mere redefinition of terms will solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; but only if both parties reject the victimary mindset, as seemed to be the case after **Oslo**, are win-win solutions conceivable.

Awareness of the rigor of the terrorists' opposition to global civilization only makes clearer the impossibility of compromise or of competition in the "we will bury you" sense. It is not enough to explain the Islamists' inflexibility by the fact that they are "religiously motivated." As the answer to any anthropological question, religious motivation is like the turtle that holds the world on its back but needs another turtle to hold it up--"turtles all the way down." What guarantees this "religious motivation" is a concept of human community, the **Umma** of all Moslems. The intense hostility that inspires many in the Moslem world to burn American flags in support of al Qaeda is fueled by the conviction that the Umma, unlike the Christian Kingdom of God, can and should be realized on this earth. There is the glorious past to recall, but there is also the less glorious but real present in which hands and heads can be chopped off and women whacked with sticks for violations of the **Sharia**. The law of the Prophet may be incompatible with the modern exchange system, but it is not incompatible with certain social forms that have survived under this system and can therefore be felt to offer a preferable alternative--even if, as I have noted, the universalization of the Islamist ideal would require a drastic reduction in the world's population.

That we all bear within our minds an originary model of reciprocity is made clear enough by the resentment we experience when we feel this model is violated; resentment is only another word for the feeling of violation. Yet reciprocity is never perfect; in every exchange-system, if not in every individual exchange, some are closer to the center of significance than others. Every social order generates resentment; a global society generates resentment on a global scale. The present conflict is not a "clash of civilizations" but a battle within world civilization between those who lead it and those whose resentment wills its destruction. We must provide means to defer this resentment at the same time as we raise the cost of expressing it through terrorism to the point of unacceptability.

In the long term, we will be obliged to work out the political implications of the turn away from victimary thinking on a global scale. Liberal democracies provide mechanisms for mitigating economic power with political power, and, by every indication, these mechanisms, whatever their imperfections, are adaptable to the social problems of the foreseeable future. On the global level, however, differences of national wealth and productivity make direct political solutions impossible. Bringing the wealthy countries down to the level of the poor ones would

be no more productive than bringing the WTC towers down to sea level. Not "world government" but a multilayered set of institutions is needed to facilitate the integration of the preindustrial world into the global economy.

Ethics is concerned with creating practical models of human exchange against the background of the originary moral model of perfect reciprocity. Beyond this minimal configuration, there is no "just" or "good" society to serve ethics as a utopian model. No demonstration of the fairness of a given social order will persuade those who feel disfavored within it. Just as Fukuyama's idea of the "end of history" stands in contradiction with the democratic model of decision-making by which he defines this end (see [Chronicle 247](#)), so does any ultimate notion of the good society, even "in theory." One can minimize resentment, one can recycle it into the system; one can never simply eliminate it.

Hence one can never wholly eliminate the source of terrorism, or, no doubt, terrorism itself. Any ethical model with a claim to practical application must allow for the existence of individuals and groups within the larger society who consider that society unjust and who ardently desire its destruction, even if they be destroyed along with it. This does not imply, however, that such individuals and groups cannot be denied the means to act on their desires. As these means become more powerful, stricter restrictions will have to be placed on them. This will inevitably lead to the diminution of what we call our "civil liberties." I will postpone further reflection on this point to another Chronicle.

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Two Concepts of Justice

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In [Chronicle 248](#), I suggested that the newly begun "post-millennial" age requires a negotiational concept of justice to take the place of the redistributive concept that dominated the previous era. Where in the latter, the enforcer of justice subjects the present distribution of values to a "zero-based" evaluation, the former takes the given distribution as just until proven otherwise and seeks to negotiate grievances rather than enforce them.

In the context of American political philosophy, this opposition is reminiscent of the debate

between liberalism, represented by **John Rawls** (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971) and libertarianism, championed by **Robert Nozick** (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 1974). Very briefly, Rawls' theory is based on the fiction of an original position in which we must approve the distribution of values within our society without knowing what place we would occupy in it. From this model, Rawls deduces that we should approve an unequal distribution only to the extent that it benefits the least fortunate members of society. Nozick's work is an antithetical response to Rawls; his notion of the minimal state or "minarchy" allows coerced redistribution only to fund indispensable services, punish crimes, and rectify illegal usurpations. Thus Nozick argues against any governmental imposition of a "safety net," which could be funded only by taking the property of those who would not require its benefits.

While similarities may be found between the concepts of justice in Rawls and Nozick and the two conceptions of justice to which I refer, the notion of justice itself plays a very different role in GA than in either of their systems. GA proposes no "theory of justice"; its concern is to understand how the dominant model at a given moment is derived from humanity's originary constitution. Rather than articulating an ideal, it attempts to make explicit by means of this analysis the concept of justice that has actually been followed in the postmodern era. Similarly, in the post-millennial age, as defined by an emergent consensus of disillusionment with victimary thinking, GA's task is not to propose our own desiderata but to anticipate the new model of justice that this disillusionment implies. Whereas Rawls' theory strikes me as a fairly reasonable approximation to the victimary ethic of the postwar era--the "veil of ignorance" in the original position forces us to put ourselves in the place of the disfavored and consequently to reject any institutional discrimination based on ascriptive traits--Nozick's libertarian ideal has limited relevance to the negotiational model of justice to be outlined here.

The models of justice to which I refer are only tangentially applicable to the internal politics of a liberal-democratic nation. The give and take between the economic and the political process in a country like the US produces outcomes that cannot be predicted in advance, although at some critical moments a new conception emerges with sufficient strength to dictate major political shifts; this was the case, for example, in the Civil Rights era. In the everyday context of national politics, "theories of justice" are essentially party ideologies: Rawls for **Democrats**, Nozick for (some) **Republicans**. Their tendentious nature makes them useful for defining policy positions, but a higher-level "meta-conception" is required to make sense of historical change.

Although even in the postwar era that saw the demise of the chief institutions that granted explicit privileges on the basis of skin color or ethnic origin, redistributive justice was more an ideal than a reality, it inspired such things as German reparations to Jews, increased welfare and unemployment benefits, Affirmative Action programs of all kinds, and, perhaps most important in this context, political rhetoric. Even if the "victims" did not always receive the requested compensation from their "persecutors"--as witness, for example, the apparently futile efforts of American Blacks to obtain reparations for the slavery of their great-grandparents--what is significant is that the argument is made at all. The victimary-redistributive notion of

justice does not sweep all before it; yet it is responsible for the most significant changes in human interaction, both domestic and international, in the postwar era.

The Holocaust made the application of the victimary model to institutionalized inequality intuitively obvious, although it had not been so before WWII. In a brief space of time, we began to judge social institutions by the standard of the originary moral model of reciprocity, as exemplified by language. But the identification of inequality with victimization remains unproblematic only so long as the inequality can be attributed to the difference of persons before the law. The legacy of the postmodern era is (1) a democratic-liberal system for dealing with (a) essentially symmetrical relations, and (2) a victimary system for dealing with (b) essentially asymmetrical relations. The first and most critical problem of the new century is dealing with so-called asymmetrical conflicts between unequals that cannot unproblematically be assimilated to the victimary model. The dilemma of the post-millennial era is that (1) works well in its own domain, but cannot be applied directly to (b), yet (2) is no longer applicable either.

How then can conflicts be resolved between parties in an asymmetrical relation? In the sense that negotiated solutions can be found for difficulties in and between liberal-democratic societies, or even between societies lacking political freedoms that have become successful participants in the world market, the answer is that asymmetrical conflicts cannot be resolved. The **Palestinian-Israeli** situation exemplifies the difficulties faced by attempts to negotiate a solution to an asymmetrical conflict, not the least of which are the false hopes such attempts raise. The negotiational conception of justice is problematic in asymmetric situations because only one of the parties accepts the status quo as a point of departure for negotiation. If you feel victimized by me, whether overtly or simply by the very fact of my superior wealth or power, the idea of our negotiating as equals will strike you as farcical. But this cannot be our final word on the subject. The inapplicability to asymmetrical negotiation of the institutions that facilitate negotiation between coequal partners does not imply that no model is conceivable.

Within a democratic judicial system, the poor and the rich have equal standing, and the advantages of wealth may be outweighed by the fellow-feeling of the jury, or even of the judge. Consequently, such a conflict is not essentially asymmetrical. (That unfairly asymmetrical differences exist is a constant claim within democratic political systems, where these differences are judged and mitigated in a context of institutional symmetry, such as that of the representatives in a parliament.) How then are negotiations possible in the absence of any such overarching "symmetricalizing" institution?

The following model strikes me as plausible: The more favored party (A) listens to the claims of the less favored party (B), and attempts to reduce B's resentment of the asymmetrical situation between them, but without accepting B's demands at face value. Rather than compensating B for his inferior status, A's task is to act so as to improve B's hopes of narrowing and eventually eliminating the inferiority. This implies that A must accept the incomplete resolution of B's resentment, and that B, despite this resentment, must be brought to accept the assistance of A.

This model avoids imposing guilt on A by compensating B directly for his resentment, while offering incentives to both A and B to enter into conversation.

How could this model be implemented? There is by definition no body with power to impose it, for if such a body existed, the parties would be symmetrically situated in relation to it. An institution such as the **United Nations can certainly exercise moral suasion, but ultimately it is the more favored party who must realize that human reciprocity is best served by initiating dialogue with the less favored one. This is not an abstract moral precept; the reciprocal interaction of language is in the first place a means of preserving peace so as to permit the pursuit of materially necessary economic activity, and these same reasons preside over the choice of the stronger to engage in "symmetricalizing" dialogue with the weaker.**

Before WWII, despite the widespread existence of democratic political institutions, the dominant mode of conversation between the more and less privileged remained that of asymmetrical authority. In the manner of a Hegelian antithesis, the era that followed the war was dominated by the voices of the less privileged. The synthesis I am suggesting here begins with the two parties in their current asymmetric positions, understood not by the model of victimization but by that of negotiation as apprenticeship through dialogue. The interaction of the two parties is no longer conceived as a zero-sum game but as a productive one whose goal is the sharing by the weaker party of the privilege of the stronger.

We should not make light of the frustrations inherent in such a dialogue; it will not always be successful, perhaps will never be fully successful. Yet if, as seems obvious, we need to go beyond the model of persecutor and victim, negotiational justice as making-symmetrical through dialogue is the only obvious alternative.

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More on Negotiational Justice

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A recent email from **Marina Ludwigs raises two significant objections to the reflections on "negotiational" justice developed in last week's Chronicle:**

First, Marina points out that, in the area of class relations, negotiation has long ago replaced the victimary rhetoric about the laboring masses common in the 19th century; the rise of labor unions and collective bargaining led to the elimination of the image of the worker as "wage slave." (Today, as Marina also points out, workers are seen as victims almost exclusively in a racial or ethnic context, where we react to them as victims of discrimination rather than exploitation.)

These observations are well-taken; negotiation, even between unequal parties, didn't begin in 2001. Negotiations between labor and management were facilitated by labor legislation (e.g., the 1935 Wagner Act), which in turn reflected the workers' electoral clout. The tendency of the democratic political process, in labor relations as in the judicial system, is to facilitate the regulation of asymmetrical relations through symmetrical negotiations.

Just as the capitalist-communist Cold War has become in hindsight a family quarrel, so has the domestic class struggle. The innovation of the postwar era is the universal application of the victimary model (as opposed to that of "exploitation") to unequal social relations. In this regard, there is an important difference between labor-management negotiation and the model of negotiational justice conceived as the successor of the victimary model. Workers and capitalists are participants in the same productive operation with divergent economic interests; negotiation between them is a local matter indifferent to broader questions of social justice. Indeed, Marxist revolutionaries condemned "trade-unionism" as a betrayal of proletarian consciousness purchased by the surpluses obtained through imperialist exploitation overseas.

In contrast, in the race-gender-ethnicity case, nothing essential can be negotiated on the local level; the question is not one of divergent interests but of victimage. Negotiation takes place on a higher plane, in the legislative-judiciary system where laws are created and enforced. Here the replacement of the victimary model by the negotiational is signaled by recent debates concerning welfare and affirmative action programs that not long ago could not be questioned without arousing accusations of racism or sexism. Negotiations on these issues put into question, as labor-management negotiations do only implicitly, the overall usefulness of the victimary model. When, instead of as persecutor and victim, we see the parties as social groups with divergent interests, specific remedies can be found for specific inequities without invoking universal guilt.

Marina's second objection questions the very idea of a negotiational concept of justice:

I am not sure how to apply the negotiation model to cases where both parties feel wronged . . . To take the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Many Israelis feel (and with good reason) that it is they who are the victims in this conflict, historically cheated by the British vitiation of the Palestine Mandate, targeted by terrorism, demographically disadvantaged, and scapegoated by Western countries and the Arab world. . . . Aren't most ethnic conflicts within and between nation

states of this undecidable or contested nature? (See, for another example, the Serbian-Albanian conflict, where, although Western countries sided with the Albanians, the Serbs also had strong justification for claiming the status of the wronged party). [text slightly edited]

My presentation of negotiational in contrast to victimary justice assumed that there would be no difficulty in identifying the privileged party in asymmetrical conflicts. (I refer to conflicts that are genuine social phenomena rather than the work of fanatical gangs without real support in the population, such as the **ETA** in Basque Spain or the **Shining Path** guerillas in Peru.) Yet, virtually by definition, this identification is not agreed upon by the parties themselves. The anti-Semite, for example, considers himself an injured party who is merely defending himself against The Jew. In the specific cases Marina cites, Israelis and Serbs certainly do have a claim that they rather than their opponents are the disadvantaged party. This problem is not merely practical but theoretical: if we reject victimary epistemology, on what basis can we assign the stigma of privilege? Isn't the very fact of saying that one side is more privileged than the other the product of victimary thinking?

Response:

On the practical side: in each of the cases Marina adduces, as well as in virtually all the others she might have cited (Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Kurds in Turkey, Chechens in Russia...), the broad consensus as to which side is stronger includes most of those who favor the stronger party. However sympathetic one is to Israel, one can hardly deny that the Israelis--like the Serbs, the British, the Singhalese, the Greeks...--hold the stronger hand.

On the theoretical plane: A synthesis, in Hegelian terms, is not the abolition but the "sublation" of the lower-level opposition it succeeds. What determines the asymmetry of such conflicts and the relative position of the parties is indeed the same old victimary epistemology whose criterion is resentment. To abandon the victimary model is not simply to reject this resentment but to "raise it up" to another level where it is understood as the sign of a problem to be solved rather than of a crime to be punished. In all these conflicts where one side is more convinced than the other of being the victims, it is up to the other side to take the lead in finding means to mitigate this resentment.

What of the limiting case, where neither side will relinquish its victimary posture? In this case, very simply, negotiations cannot take place without the intervention of a "symmetricalizing" third party. It should not be forgotten that I am not proposing the negotiational model as a universal ideal, merely as the only viable framework I can conceive for regulating asymmetrical conflicts that cannot be assimilated unproblematically to the victimary model.

To return again to the most urgent and resonant of these conflicts: however much the Israeli population is justifiably resentful of the violence visited upon them by Palestinian terrorists, it

has been clear at least since 1967 that Israel is the more powerful party and that Palestinian resentment must be taken into account in peace negotiations. Military occupation is an unambiguously asymmetrical relationship, even if it is unfair to assimilate this particular occupation, the result of a defensive war, to persecution. The fact that **Barak's** far-reaching concessions were not accepted does not prove that, in the long term, Israel cannot obtain peace by continuing to reach out to the Palestinians and to move toward a symmetrical state-to-state relationship. And this "long term" may be closer than the recent hostilities make it appear.

* * *

A note on periodization: To speak of postwar or post-millennial "eras" is not to deny the dynamism of historical processes. The dominant model of human relations in each era operates much like Thomas Kuhn's scientific "paradigms": native to one revelatory situation, as the victimary model was to the Holocaust, it is applied to others in succession until domains are reached where its application raises problems it no longer appears suited to solve. Thus the victimary model, first applied to obvious inequities, comes to be used in increasingly more controversial cases of asymmetry (gender parity, homosexual marriage, slavery reparations...). If the beginning of a new era is characterized by the emergence of a newly attractive model, its universal application is the sign that it has reached the limits of its usefulness.

Coda: two and one-quarter stages of anti-Semitism

The postwar transformation of anti-Semitism into anti-Zionism is not simply a change of name, even if most of the propaganda materials remain the same. The difference is not verbal but structural. Unregenerate Western anti-Semites still hate Jews rather than Zionists. They follow prewar anti-Semitism in presenting The Jew as secretly powerful yet insisting that the Aryan population, if made aware of their thralldom to the Jews, have the power to crush them. Anti-Zionism, however much it reproduces the old stereotypes, reflects a very different relationship between the parties. The center of gravity of anti-Zionism is not Europe but the Middle East. Israel, vulnerable as it may be, is more powerful than the surrounding Arab states; it is a demonstration of Jewish power that was unavailable, and unnecessary, to prewar anti-Semites. Thus anti-Zionism follows, in its unsavory way, the victimary pattern that came into existence after WWII. The old anti-Semites hated the Jews for their suspected secret powers; the anti-Zionists' hatred reflects the demonstration of their own material--economic and military, if not demographic--inferiority.

This situation, however distressing, offers an opportunity to the Israelis that was not available to the Jews of Europe. Traditional anti-Semitism was a scapegoating operation against a stigmatized and essentially defenseless minority. The fact that the preponderance of resentment was on the side of the anti-Semites implied neither that they were victims deserving of compensation nor that they were, questions of blame aside, the weaker party whose resentment the Jews should attempt to defuse. But the Holocaust did away with the traditional scapegoating structure. Anti-Zionism is directed at an entity that is powerful enough to have

some capacity for deferring the resentment it arouses, that is, to move the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation part-way out of the victimary and into the post-millennial era.

Which leads us back to the Palestinian question. Until this is resolved, there is little point in Israel's seeking better relations with the dictatorships that surround it. If, conversely, some kind of peaceful *modus vivendi* is established with a Palestinian state, the surrounding Arab populations might be susceptible to more moderate influences. A modernized, democratic, secular Palestine would set an example for other Arab states to follow. This may be a dream at the moment, but it is one those subjected to anti-Zionism have some hope of realizing, whereas the victims of anti-Semitism had only despair. This contrast alone is sufficient to justify Herzl's Zionist solution for the anti-Semitism of Europe.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Scapegoating after September 11

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Scapegoating or "emissary victimage" is the defining operation of René Girard's originary scene. The proto-human group, caught up in the violent chaos of "mimetic crisis," finds unanimity by directing its aggression against a single, marginal individual; his death ends the crisis and he is subsequently venerated as the bringer of peace.

Although my own thinking is greatly in debt to this model, I do not think it can serve as the originary scene of human culture. The emissary murder does not constitute a true scene; it is all aggression and no contemplation. What corresponds more closely to GA's notion of the scene of representation is rather the moment following the murder, when the members of the community, their aggression discharged against the victim, experience peace and solidarity as they contemplate his remains. But if the affect that inspired the murder has indeed been discharged, there is no clear motivation for collective veneration or, more crucially, for representation. Nothing at this moment would motivate the production of a sign, much less a minimal, linguistic sign.

The inadequacy of this model of human culture extends to its application to historical events. Scapegoating may be understood as a derivative of scenic activity, but to reduce the mediating

locus of human communication to a lynching party is to deny the freedom acquired through representation that is the most important product of the scene. Humans may discharge their aggression in lynchings, but they also defer this aggression through the exchange of signs. If no ethical truth emerges from the scene of representation, then our ethical thought can only be that of **Hegel's** *schöne Seele* who is somehow able to transcend--with or without divine intervention--the violence of our fallen human condition. Which leads us to the events of September 11.

Here is an excerpt from a recent email from a correspondent, whom I shall leave anonymous, who claims to be "applying Girard's theory of the scapegoat to George W. Bush's construction of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden":

My thesis is that President Bush is creating a person whom he has named "Osama bin Laden"--a person that bares [sic] only minimal resemblance to the actual person Osama bin Laden. If one looks at the things that bin Laden has said in the past, President Bush's words do not make sense; Bush says that bin Laden wants to take over the world, etc. Essentially, Bush has constructed a person who can be hated and eventually murdered in order to atone for mistakes in American foreign policy.

. . . before the tragedy Bush expressed concern over a "divided" America; a place where some citizens were not convinced of the "good" of America. Now, however, we are "united" and "one people" who represent "good" (as opposed to bin Laden representing "evil").

These statements, which nowhere mention the September 11 attacks, are **Chomskian** in their demonization--dare I say scapegoating?--of the United States. Here is Chomsky's own take on September 11: "The terrorist attacks were major atrocities. In scale they may not reach the level of many others, for example, Clinton's bombing of the Sudan with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people . . ." But Chomsky, at least, does not pretend to be a disciple of Girard. Although he believes world affairs to be a zero-sum game in which American prosperity can come only at the expense of other people's sufferings, he does not add the Girardian refinement that we inflict these sufferings not simply out of greed but in order to project our own violence onto a surrogate victim.

Yet the author of the quoted text can claim in his defense that he is scrupulously following Girard's model, of which designation of a victim and the consequent achievement of communal solidarity are indeed the primary components--even if, after the Christian revelation, the subsequent conversion of the victim into a god is presumably no longer a viable option. Thus the passages above point out (1) that President Bush has "arbitrarily" designated OBL as bearing primary responsibility for the terrorist attacks and consequently as the chief target of

US efforts at retaliation, and (2) that this "scapegoating" operation has brought about a large degree of national unanimity and solidarity. Poor **Osama** is only the latest in a long line of arbitrarily designated victims, stretching back to the Athenian *pharmakos* and beyond, who have been sacrificed on the bloody altar of **Durkheimian** solidarity. That, to quote a recent newsmagazine, "Bin Laden's . . . is the first truly global terror operation," that OBL has overtly claimed to be actively seeking the wherewithal to destroy the United States, that, as **Tony Blair** put it, no one can seriously maintain that on September 11 he would have hesitated to kill ten times, or, indeed, a thousand times as many Americans--these undisputed facts have no place in the epistemology of the scapegoat, where they are mere pretexts for the universally human, or, at any rate, American, need to commit emissary murder.

What is it in "mimetic theory" that lends itself to this folie épistémologique? The problem, it seems to me, is that the scapegoating model operates simultaneously on two incompatible planes.

On the one hand, as the description of an ethical act, "scapegoating" is a pejorative term. As Girard notes, implicit in this term is the revelation of the arbitrariness of the sacrificial act. To scapegoat is to do violence to someone who is, if not innocent, at any rate no guiltier than his fellows. More precisely, it is to treat someone whose guilt is at most quantitatively greater than the others' as though it were transcendently greater, so that the violence that had been diffused over the entire community comes to be unanimously directed from the innocent collectivity to the one guilty victim. Such an act violates the moral model of universal reciprocity that is inherent in language and therefore in humanity itself. The Gospel demystifies and rejects the utilitarianism of High Priest **Caiaphas**' declaration that "it is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed" (John 11.50).

But, on the other hand, as an epistemological operation, scapegoating is the originary model of selection in general. Just as Durkheim posited a bit hastily, but with a profound anthropological intuition, that even categories like right and left were derived from systems of religious/social classification, in Girard's system--although he never goes into detail on this point--scapegoating is the source of the scene of representation. The unconscious choice of the emissary victim as a solution to mimetic crisis is the source of all choices and designations, including the "choice" of the referent by the sign that creates the signifier-signified structure uniquely characteristic of human language. To decide, as Girard likes to remind us, comes from *decido*, to deal the death-blow to the sacrificial victim.

To deny to the first users of representation any awareness of the nature of what they are representing guarantees that any such awareness must be of miraculous origin. But inversely proportional to our originary ignorance is the Gnostic thrill of liberation from it. Girard's claim to be only reiterating **Jesus**' own understanding, both simply human and incomprehensibly divine, of the scapegoat mechanism at the basis of all human knowledge is put in doubt by the ease with which this reiteration is taken by some simples d'esprit as a new mimetic Gospel granting a transcendent understanding of violent humanity. This phenomenon, a minor annoyance in

normal times, reveals its full potential for perversity in moments such as the current crisis, when the voice of mimetic wisdom affirms in tones worthy of the God of wrath that "we" are no better, and perhaps far worse, than those who fly planes into skyscrapers. It is no trivial matter whether we define the human by an act of violent appropriation or by a minimal hesitation before it, whether humanity begins with a glimmer of ethical awareness or an act of original sin.

To this ethical difficulty corresponds the epistemological one of determining criteria by which to judge selection of any kind. In Girard's anthropology, any "arbitrary" selection of an object of transcendental significance--kingship, election, designation for a suicide mission, winning the lottery--are all derivatives of scapegoating. Yet it is not the originary designation itself but the freedom it provides by deferring mimetic violence that permits the emergence of human consciousness. By separating designation (of the scapegoat) from deferral of violence (following his collective murder), Girard separates the content of this consciousness from the sign that brings it into being. And thus, ironically enough, Girard's mimetic anthropology, by appearing to justify the **Derridean** critique of representation as violence, becomes involuntarily what deconstruction is deliberately: the foundation of a victimary politics.

To defer, however briefly, the gesture of appropriation is to open up a space for the facility language offers us for "off-line processing" (**Bickerton**). As **Vico** saw, the fear of the sacred center is the beginning of wisdom. It is this deferral that grounds Durkheim's claim: animals can perceive regularities and act on them, but only creatures who have substituted signification for appropriation have the wherewithal to create systems of classification. By the same token, our capacity for moral stupidity derives from the misguided fetishism that seeks in signs themselves the knowledge that these signs allow us to achieve and preserve. Like the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the term "scapegoat" is merely a sign of wisdom, not wisdom itself; we can no more acquire the knowledge of good and evil through pronouncing the one than through ingesting the other. That Girard's scene of emissary murder provides such good shelter for the Gnostic snake only demonstrates all the more the necessity of a minimalist model of humanity's originary scene.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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The Scenic Imagination: I - Before and after Christianity

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In **Originary Thinking**, I distinguished the **neo-classical** esthetic, covering the period following the institution of Christianity (what **Hegel** called the "Romantic" era), from the classical esthetic by its scenicity, its awareness of the scene on which the action takes place, which becomes thereby a place either to enter or to avoid. The Greeks take the scene as a given; the arts from the Middle Ages on are aware of the difference between just being and being en scène. By placing the individual human being in the center of the scene of representation--the Cross is nothing else--Christianity constitutes the first total anthropology. The scene no longer operates beyond human control. If **Jesus** suffers the sacrificial punishment meted out to the occupant of the center, his mock coronation points to the ambivalence of this role, which is that of victim but also of king.

Roland's argument with **Olivier** in the *Chanson de Roland* about blowing the horn is inconceivable in a classical epic. Roland sees himself as if on stage; to blow the horn would be to admit failure to play his role. Both Roland's self-consciousness and the configuration in which he realizes his destiny reflect this scenic awareness: his death, surrounded by Saracens, takes on the structure of ritual murder. Similarly, **Hamlet's** "play within a play" is more than a theatrical ploy; his famous hesitation to act thematizes the boundary between the profane and the sacred, the stage and the world outside it. The consciousness of the stage as a locus of sacrifice is a constant of European theater from **Marlowe** to **Beckett**, nowhere more intensely than in the theater of **Racine**.

Yet the difference wrought by the Christian revelation is still more spectacular in *theoria* than in theater. Esthetic forms have always been products of a scenic consciousness even when the anthropology of the scene remained obscure; the same is not true of the forms of thought, where the conscious use of scenicity, the "scenic imagination," brings about an epistemological revolution.

The thematization of a higher level of scenic self-consciousness within the artwork becomes, in the theoretical domain, the direct exercise of this consciousness itself. The scenic imagination is not a mere form, but the mode whereby we become able to think the originary emergence of form--a process that the esthetic neither need nor can carry through, since esthetic form by its very nature reproduces the scene of its own emergence. Not only do all modes of post-classical thought reflect the scenic consciousness implicit in the Christian revelation, but, with the reemergence of secular, non-exegetic thought in the Renaissance, it becomes possible to make explicit use of the scene as a heuristic device.

A comparison of ancient and modern philosophical "scenes" makes clear this revolutionary effect of the scenic imagination. Here is the beginning of **Plato's** "Allegory of the Cave" (*Republic*, Book VII):

(Socrates, Glaucon) And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open toward the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passersby spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Compare this excerpt from the first great Enlightenment text, **Hobbes' Leviathan (II, xvi)**:

The only way to erect such a common power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort as that by their own industry and by the fruits of the earth they may nourish themselves and live contentedly, is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will: which is as much as to say, to appoint one man, or assembly of men, to bear their person; and every one to own and acknowledge himself to be author of whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act, or cause to be acted, in those things which concern the common peace and safety; and therein to submit their wills, every one to his will, and their judgements to his judgement. This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man, in such manner as if every man should say to every man: I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition; that thou give up, thy right to him, and authorise all his actions in like manner. This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a COMMONWEALTH; in Latin, CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather, to speak more reverently, of that mortal god to which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defence. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him that, by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad. And in him consisteth the essence of the Commonwealth; which, to define it, is: one person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all as he shall think expedient for their peace and common defence.

And he that carryeth this person is called sovereign, and said to have sovereign power; and every one besides, his subject.

In Plato, an undefined power, tantamount to a sacrificial divinity, controls the scene on which we, its prisoners, view the shadows of the Ideas. The men who carry the figures along the wall are agents of this power. The structure of Plato's scene is an object lesson in the disdain of Greek philosophy for critical epistemology: the connection between the human prisoners within the scene and the human who describes it from without is beneath consideration. This reflects Athenian social relations: the dichotomy of jailer and prisoner being homologous with the institution of slavery, no concern need be shown for the passage from one state to the other because it is clear that humans are equally able to occupy either one.

The non-reciprocal nature of the Athenian anthropology precludes the radical imaginary return to a state in which reciprocity itself may be seen to generate the social order, including the forms of representation that preserve this order by deferring the revelation of its basis in reciprocity. Nothing in Plato's world corresponds to Hobbes' "covenant of every man with every man," which requires a collective and reciprocal conversation. Hobbes models the genesis of political order, and of human order tout court, as an exclusively human scene. His reference to "that mortal god to which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defence" is a nearly explicit secularization of the Christian revelation that the minimal constitution of God and man are the same. The scene of generalized reciprocal exchange has become a functional heuristic, a discovery procedure for the lines of force that guarantee communal order. The "authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth" that enables the sovereign to "form the wills of them all" is the conservative, centralist, realist version of **Rousseau's** radical, collectivist, utopian "general will," which miraculously manifests itself on the periphery of a circle without a center.

Hobbes does not note, but it is implicit in his formulation, that the "wills of them all" described as "formed" by the sovereign were what established him as sovereign in the first place. More precisely, he cannot note this, because these individual wills are what is relinquished in order to establish the power of the center. As in an earlier passage (I, 3-4; see Chronicles [176](#) and [215](#)) where Hobbes first analyzes "God" as a linguistic gesture toward infinite power rather than a name, then proceeds to affirm that God gave man language, Hobbes deals with both the before and after of the originary scene without yet perceiving their symmetry and therefore without being tempted, as Rousseau would be, to bring them together in a single scenic event. Nevertheless, the major revolution in thought has already been accomplished; the heuristic of the generative event is already pregnant with the revelation of this symmetry that is finally made fully explicit in the originary hypothesis of **Generative Anthropology**.

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Eric Gans

Post-Millennial Thoughts

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The sign designates what is there in such a way that it is no longer necessary for it to be present. The linguistic sign has vanishingly little substance; it is part of a system within which even "motivated" (generally, indexical) signs become arbitrary. When, on the contrary, the sign possesses a substance that makes us return to it rather than traverse it toward its meaning/signified, we speak of it as esthetic. All signs may be said to possess an esthetic component or potential. In language, poetry famously exploits this potential; to affirm with **Vico** that the earliest language is poetry is to affirm the esthetic character of all language. Yet although all representation is esthetic, we should not neglect the fact that certain works are esthetic not merely intentionally but institutionally. Just as **La Rochefoucauld** remarked that few people would fall in love if they hadn't heard about loving, few people would appreciate beauty--even sexual beauty--had they never heard of art.

It follows from the originary hypothesis that the ethical is the primary dimension in human affairs: the esthetic modalities of a given period extrapolate from (rather than merely "reflecting") the modes of human interaction in the society as a whole. The primacy of the ethical over the esthetic is not akin to the rigid Marxist determinism of cultural "superstructure" by economic "base." Although exchanges within the economic system ("production relations") arguably lend themselves more easily to modeling than those of society at large, from the outset, economic exchange presupposes the exchange of representations, whether between participants in tribal ritual, imperial officials and subjects, lords and vassals, or the free agents of bourgeois civil society, whose different roles in the production process are secondary to their de jure equality as citizens.

Great ethical changes lead to new esthetics. Perhaps the most significant such change, the rise of Christianity, divides the esthetic of modernity from that of the classical era. The more tentative watershed that we are experiencing today is that between the postmodern and a new post-millennial era whose esthetic **Raoul Eshelman** calls performative. Because this transition involves historical events fresh in our memories, defining our models of these periods can serve as an exemplary exploration of the relationship between art and history.

The years following WWII witnessed the birth of a new ethical epistemology, informed by the post-Holocaust revelation not simply that all deviations from the moral model of symmetrical relations are evil, but that these relations may be assimilated to the persecutor-victim relationship. This transformation, which put an end to colonialism, segregation, and apartheid, is also a revolution in fundamental anthropology. The center-periphery distinction that structures the scene of representation is revealed as posing an ineluctable quandary to the

moral model of universal human reciprocity. Unlike **Rousseau's** social contract, which transforms the entire group into a spectacle for itself on the model of God whose center is everywhere and periphery nowhere, the victimary model affirms the dependency of the peaceful relations of the "first world" of whites, males, straights, and so on, on the exclusion of its "third world," non-white, female, gay Other.

The political implications of the postmodern vision explain the extreme antinomianism of intellectual life during this period. The political stance of the postmodern intelligentsia has moved ever farther from the norm in European countries, and still farther in the United States, famously indifferent to socialist rhetoric. Whatever the intellectual powers of **Noam Chomsky** or **Jacques Derrida**, **Susan Sontag** or **Fredric Jameson**, their model of "late capitalism" in which a greedy, unscrupulous elite rules multitudes dumbed into submission by mass culture and the spoils of imperialism has little explicative value. This Procrustean application of victimary epistemology to democratic market society reflects the difficulty of assimilating the Holocaust within the historical dialectic.

At its crudest, the art that corresponds to this victimary vision merely inverts the direction of violence, whether the new scapegoats be the Nazis themselves, the demonic nazifiers of **Ludlum**-variety novel and cinema, or, a bit more subversively, everyday authority-figures who, at the height of the postmodern era in the late sixties, were commonly assimilated to sacrificial animals ("off the pigs!") or violators of our deepest taboo ("up against the wall, m...").

But there is a genuine postmodern esthetic. While **Samuel Beckett** avoids victimage par en bas by offering an unworthy target--proud Pozzo declines, but Godot's humble clowns go on--**Marguerite Duras**, more subtly, discovers the power of the victim's position. After *Hiroshima mon amour* (1961) transforms the losers of WWII into victims (the only casualties are those of Hiroshima and the German soldier loved by the heroine), *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein* (1964) radicalizes **Proust's** lesson of the de-realizing effect of desire through the intuition that the most stable and therefore most powerful vertex of the triangle of desire is that occupied by the defeated rival. Postmodern history has amply demonstrated Lol's truth in both the political and the intellectual spheres.

The best-known theoretical counterpart to the victimary esthetic is deconstruction, the creation of **Jacques Derrida**, who theorizes in infinite detail the sacrificial structure of the scene of representation while ignoring its anthropological etiology. But the postmodern era is also that of **René Girard**, whose discovery of the "triangular" structure of mimetic desire that defines humanity both individually and collectively makes him the most powerful thinker of the age--demonstrated if only by the fact that its intelligentsia, unable to refute his ideas, has done its best to ignore them. Girard is to thought what Duras and a few others are to fiction: a revealer of the power of the victimary, which is also (but not entirely) the rediscovery of the original intuition of Christianity.

In the victim-persecutor relation, the persecutor gains only what the victim loses. Thus the

victimary conception of justice is redistributive: inequalities, whether of wealth or opportunity, must be evened out as much as possible. **John Rawls** ingeniously conceived his "original position" to determine the redistributive optimum. Unlike Marxism, which sees the motivating force of economic productivity driving social evolution toward eventual equality, victimary thinking is ahistorical, condemning inequalities without explaining them. Effective in eliminating institutions such as slavery or racial segregation where historical explanations only confuse the issue, it is unhelpful in dealing with the de facto economic asymmetries of market society.

The victimary system has depended since the beginning on the white guilt of the purported victimizer, whose encounter with the Other's resentment, whether directly, or, more commonly, as interpreted by a sympathizer, forces him to see his relationship to this Other as a violation of the moral principle of reciprocity. The subaltern status of the colonized generates white guilt, if not in the colonist himself, then certainly in his countrymen at home. The colonist may claim to be acting in his charges' best interest, and perhaps he is, but this does not invalidate the assimilation of their relationship to the persecutor-victim model. White guilt, far more than the revolutionary power of the oppressed, has been the motor of historical change throughout the postmodern era. In the absence of such guilt, the motor stalls.

Victimary thinking fails to understand that, in principle, even asymmetric exchange within a market system is profitable to both parties. The key expression here, of course, is in principle. But rejecting victimary thinking does not imply denying the existence of injustice. (The **Milosevic** trial illustrates the growing international intolerance for "crimes against humanity.") What it does imply is that, in the present state of world history, the most effective solution to all but the most unambiguous complaints of injustice lies in considering them not as proofs of victimage but as claims to be negotiated.

We are now, I believe, entering a new historical phase; the new millennium coincides with the discrediting of the great twentieth-century prophecies of the "final conflict" that would do away with conflict itself, where the sacrificial structure of the scene of representation would apocalyptically sacrifice its very sacrificiality. To the postmodern esthetic, serious or ludic, that deconstructs the "phallogocentric" scene of representation while recognizing that it cannot for all that be abolished, the post-millennial era opposes its "performatist" affirmation of the scene, warts and all, as the instrument of human historicity. Instead of Beckett's ironic conception of desire as a zero-sum game whose stakes we can at best try to minimize, the new perspective sees the desiring imagination as continually creative of value, both cultural and economic.

Perhaps the most significant sign of the wane of the victimary is the increasing "global reach" (to use President **Bush's** term) of terrorism, in conjunction with its replacement of specific political aims with a wholesale rejection of modernity. Terrorism is the most extreme form of victimary behavior; it is predicated on the confidence that even the most heinous crime is justifiable because its random victims were all at least passive accomplices in victimization. As the negative of white guilt, terrorism is exacerbated by its failure to inspire it.

Hindsight leads us to reproach previous US administrations with insufficient attention to the terrorist threat. But one need not be a defender of **Clinton's** generally feckless foreign policy to note that, before September 11, terrorism was broadly understood in terms of the victimary paradigm, as an unpleasant but understandable product of the frustrations of real victims. The pontifications of those who continue to insist on this paradigm now appear in such places as the "Idiocy Watch" of the moderate-liberal New Republic.

The only real novelty is the scale of the attacks--or rather, of their success, for similar mayhem had been planned before. Several thousand deaths concentrate the mind by providing a warning call that global terrorism is not restrained by the prospect of **Mutually Assured Destruction**. The fact that terrorism, the ultimate expression of the victimary, has become a danger to humanity that can no longer be tolerated, casts discredit on the victimary paradigm itself.

It is worth recalling the guarantee that terrorism found in the total war against the forces that produced the Holocaust and the Nanking massacre. The loss of civilian life in the firebombing of Dresden and the atomic bombing of Japanese cities was felt to be nugatory in the effort to rid the world of German and Japanese racism; it aroused little indignation in wartime. That, after the war, such as Duras and **Karl Vonnegut**, author of *Slaughterhouse Five*, could provoke in its winners white guilt toward its losers was a clear sign of the dawning of the victimary era.

The increasingly apocalyptic tenor of terrorism today reflects the fact that white guilt is no longer the force it was in the days of **Gandhi** and **M. L. King**. Conversely, the unqualified condemnation of terrorism has become a criterion of minimal unity among all organized polities--and, as **Saddam's** example illustrates, a simple test of what constitutes a "rogue state." This is the grain of truth in the idea, discussed in the previous Chronicle, that we are "scapegoating" **bin Laden**. But the unanimous rejection of terrorism need not imply an obsession with punishing its perpetrators. It can become the basis for a genuine, if minimal, global fraternity based on the understanding, at last realized explicitly in the public sphere, that the basic function of the exchange of representations that is human culture is the deferral of violence. The abandonment of victimary thinking is the universal commitment to abide peacefully within not only egalitarian but also asymmetric relationships, in the faith that even the latter are preferable to violence--and that, in a world of market exchange, they will tend in the long run to mitigate the asymmetry.

The scene of representation creates the means for both the peaceful deferral of resentment and its manifestation as violence. Historical circumstance obliges our generation to make a **Pascalian** wager on one of the two. Unless we support the aims of **al Qaeda**, we must bet on the ability of modern civilization and of our species to defer its destruction by the violence whose preconditions it inevitably generates. Under these conditions, optimism is, in a quite literal sense, our categorical imperative.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

More on the Scenic Imagination: The Enlightenment

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If we seek the one word that insists most sharply on the contrast between the human and the non-human, that word would be scenic. The human is the scenic animal; everything that uniquely distinguishes us takes place on a scene. Yet skene is the Greek word not for the stage but for the hut or tent or storeroom into which the actor retired to change his costume. Giving the name of this interior scene to the public scene reflects a profound intuition that the private imagination and the public scene are internal and external versions of the same locus: the empty space or néant in which representations appear, the "scene of representation."

The minimal core of our minimalist anthropology is the hypothesis that language originates in a scene, defined by the fact that each participant understands himself to be participating in it along with the others. The forms of ritual, including the secular rituals of art, make scenicity explicit. All of what we call "culture" derives from the imagination that first manifests itself in the originary scene and presides over its repetition in ritual. The human imagination is not a "faculty" but a mode of interaction, a *mise-en-scène* before an implicit audience. As such, the form and content of what appears on the scene of representation has a history that may be epitomized in the history of the "scenic imagination": the imagination of the scene itself.

The scene is, in the first place, the locus of the sacred, and it is of the essence of the sacred as an active force (as opposed to the concept of the sacred) that it cannot be conceived as a form independent of its content. Originary culture is sacred culture; the profane exists within it only as sacrilege. The appearance of secular literature, in the West, the invention of the Greeks, corresponds to an emergent awareness of the independence of the scene from its content. The scene generates atemporal sacred meaning from human mortality. Myths are centered on "immortals" who incarnate the atemporality of the sign. Literature begins with the return of meaning to mortality; its substance is the dangerous experience of being *en scène*. Although classical tragedy generally (but definitely not always) takes its material from myth, it views myth not from the point of view of the gods, but from that of mortals engaged in the tragic agon.

The classical mind understands the scene as a place of significance independently of its content, but never as constituted by the mortal protagonists who enter upon it. The scene is given to or imposed on us by the gods, as the locus of our limited contact with sacred meaning. Ancient philosophy never evolves a critical epistemology because it never conceives the scene on which it views reality as originally constituted by human reflection. The cogito is a strictly modern phenomenon.

The classical imagination is aware of the scene's formal independence, but awareness of its anthropological constitution is unique, I believe, to the Christian modernity of the Renaissance. Of all religions, Christianity, for which the unique God is also a man, most radically understands that the human

and the sacred have the same fundamental ontology. Throughout the Middle Ages, this understanding was used to explain the human on the basis of the divine; **St. Augustine's** City of God exemplifies medieval reflection on social organization in an era that conceives the aim of human order as abolishing itself in divine order rather than attempting to emulate it. Yet the kernel of Christian anthropology is mutual love, reciprocal recognition among all human beings, founded on our common possession of an immortal essence. This vision presides over the collapse of the ancient economy based on slave labor, and slowly generates, in the margin of the Middle Ages, the means to reestablish a society of reciprocal exchange. Once this possibility becomes practically conceivable, the Kingdom of God, from a transcendental vision that turns us away from the world, becomes an ideal that defines action within it.

The Enlightenment is the moment of Western history when it first becomes possible to conceive of the human as self-generating. Some associate the beginning of the Enlightenment with the experimental rationalism of **Francis Bacon**, who theorizes a scene of objective empirical knowledge protected from the "idols" of collective mimesis, but I think the critical moment is **Hobbes'** scenic conception of the "social contract." For the first time in history, the genesis and function of human social organization is understood in purely anthropological terms--which is not to say that Hobbes' anthropology can do entirely without the sacred.

The Enlightenment is born with the English revolution--and will die with the French. This first revolution to set as its goal something like what would later be called "liberal democracy" was the proximate cause of Hobbes' revolutionary but quite illiberal heuristic. Before conceiving social order in general as generated by human beings in the "state of nature," Hobbes had witnessed an abortive attempt to generate a new social order that seemed only to lead back to this state. At the same time, the Puritan revolution demonstrated for Hobbes the bankruptcy of medieval, transcendental justifications for central authority; his anthropological model would supply a justification that was wholly immanent.

Anthropology is an experimental science, but its experiments are found, and lived through, in history. Nor is it sufficient to say that thinkers only draw the lessons of history, as though human action and thought were separate realms. What **Cromwell** and his followers discovered was already thought, and what Hobbes thought was already enacted. To envision a parliamentary republic in a Christian context is to go beyond the conceptions of slave-based ancient democracy to conceive an all-inclusive community. But utopian thought sees in the past only an Eden to be reconstituted; it is rather its adversary who is driven to reflect critically on origins. Where the Puritans sought to establish a theocentric Calvinist republic, Hobbes reminds us that the human scene derives its order from the institution of an earthly center. The lesson that humans choose their own form of social organization is transformed into a demonstration that their choice is dictated by necessity; the only way to escape the nightmare of the "state of nature" is freely to alienate one's sovereign freedom to the central Leviathan.

In reaction to the violence of civil war, Hobbes demonstrates that the self-generated center of the scene of human interaction is the only possible constraint on violence--which is, for Hobbes, an unambiguously human, "semiotic" phenomenon. But, by a paradox that should be familiar to us, once the center is presented as the necessary resultant of the interactions of the human periphery, the permanence and scope of its authority, having renounced its sacred guarantee, is no longer unconditionally legitimate. (Whence Hobbes' difficulties with the royalists.) Despite Hobbes' own arguments to the contrary, to relinquish one's sovereignty is not to renounce the freedom that founds the capacity for sovereignty. Hobbes' prejudices were conservative, but the scenic imagination is inherently liberal. If it is we who create the center, then we have the power, and the right, to replace or even abolish it.

The Enlightenment liberation of the scenic imagination runs aground on **Edmund Burke's** reflections on the Revolution that was the Enlightenment's ultimate fulfillment. Unlike Hobbes, Burke did not found his post-revolutionary conservatism on an originary anthropological model; rather than justifying parliamentary monarchy on originary grounds, Burke's argument justified any social order whatever, provided it had evolved over time rather than being imposed all at once by a group of revolutionaries. Where Hobbes returns to the originary deferral of violence as the remedy for the chaos brought about by political revolt, Burke opposes to a revolution inspired by a radical version of Enlightenment anthropology--which, ironically, can trace its ancestry to Hobbes--yesterday's presumably organically evolved political forms. The danger of the scenic imagination, whether progressive or reactionary, is that it claims to deduce such forms from an anthropological model; the remedy is to renew our respect for history--history, that is, up to but not including the French Revolution. Burke's notion of the historical process denies the validity of Enlightenment anthropological speculation, yet it is within this process that the speculation was generated. The paradoxality of this position sets the tone for the post-Enlightenment reaction that seeks in history protection against the aberrations of history.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Scenic Imagination: Modern Times

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Speculation on the origin of humanity and its institutions does not begin in the Enlightenment; it is at the heart of all culture. But in the Enlightenment, for the first time, this speculation acquires the status of a more or less rigorous anthropological thought-experiment, no longer concerned with what the gods have given humanity, but with what it has generated on its own. Such thinking may not propose verifiable/falsifiable theses, but it rises to the level of an anthropological hypothesis in a domain where verification/falsification is an ethical rather than simply logical operation. The human scene as event exceeds the scope of any empirical model based on repeatable phenomena: a scene exists only insofar as it is memorable, and what is memorable is not deducible from what is or might be observed. Enlightenment models of the origin of fundamental human institutions mark a new use of the scenic imagination as the basis for what we may call the science of origins.

Rousseau, the "first anthropologist" (**Lévi-Strauss**), used the sparse ethnological data available to him in the construction of originary models whose radicalism was sufficiently revealed in the famous phrase, "Commençons donc par écarter tous les faits," [Let us begin by putting all facts aside] from the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*. Rousseau's nineteenth-century heirs would accumulate increasingly precise and objective data at the price of abandoning the construction of originary models. The specificity of customs and beliefs not only appeared to point up the inadequacy of such constructions--an appearance that remains unchanged today--but, by revealing the gap between the primitive and the originary, suggested

that the human can only be understood through the former, attested by observable data, rather than the latter, which is not. This empiricist position, clearly articulated by **Durkheim** at the end of the century, was tacitly held throughout. On this score, even the most radical romantics were closer to **Burke** than to **Robespierre**. Their affection for the primitive was homologous to Burke's preference for tradition; they merely displaced humanity's Fall into the hubris of self-generation from the French to the Neolithic Revolution.

This development is not simply as a disillusioned retreat from the anthropological optimism of the Enlightenment; empirical reality aside, it is, from a purely theoretical standpoint, a needed correction. It is no accident that the generation of the scenic center from the periphery that flourished in the Enlightenment was epitomized in the "social contract," generative of political institutions rather than of the human in general. The center for **Hobbes** or Rousseau was a horizontal concentration of human appetite, not a locus of transcendence; the "sovereign" is not, as it would be for Durkheim, equated with the sacred. The Romantic retreat from Enlightenment originary thinking is the effect of the reintroduction of the transcendental element of the sacred into the human scene. This development, prefigured in the reality, if not the theory, of Enlightenment politics in such phenomena as the Revolutionary cult of the Etre suprême [supreme being], was thematized in the Restoration, most significantly by **Joseph de Maistre**, whose conception of the centrality of sacrifice is closer to **René Girard's** than to that of Durkheim's students, **Hubert** and **Mauss**.

Another by-product of the Romantic distrust of originary models was the emergence, in the first half of the nineteenth century, of the notion of biological evolution, including that of humanity. **Darwin's** conception of evolution, infinitesimally gradual and "uniformitarian," stood in obvious contrast to the dominant religious model of divine creation. Creationism is a latter-day rear-guard defense against this "scientific" denial of the eventfulness of human origin. The following passage presents a far earlier, but, in a very different way, equally naïve defense of this eventfulness:

It is very hard for us to realize the feelings with which the first dwellers on the earth looked upon the sun . . . But think of man at the very dawn of time: forget for a moment, if you can, after having read the fascinating pages of Mr. Darwin, forget what man is supposed to have been before he was man; forget it, because it does not concern us here whether his bodily form and frame were developed once for all in the mind of a Creator, or gradually in the creation itself . . . think of him only as man (and man means the thinker), with his mind yet lying fallow . . . think of the Sun awakening the eyes of man from sleep, and his mind from slumber! . . .

Max Müller, Introduction to the Science of Religion (London, 1871)

Max Müller, whose reflections on language and religion antedate the publication of *The Origin of Species*, locates the origin of religion in the encounter of "the first [human] dwellers on the earth" with the, so to speak, naturally transcendent spectacle of the sun, an encounter that provides Müller with an originary model, indifferently solitary and collective, of the scene of representation. "Man" encounters the sun as an individual, yet his awe is the source of the collective phenomenon of myth, deprecated in Müller's most memorable phrase as a "youthful disease of language." Müller's **Condillac**-like restriction of scenic interaction to sensation and cognition ("think of the Sun awakening the eyes of man from sleep, and his mind from slumber!") ignores the social dynamic within which language and religion are generated. Although Müller deserves praise as the only nineteenth-century thinker to directly link the

origin of these central cultural phenomena, his work illustrates his century's difficulty in integrating the sacred into the collective scene of the "social contract." In the relation between humanity and a transcendent Other, a scene with only two characters, a single human being and the sun, appears more parsimonious to a liberal Protestant scholar such as Müller than one that views the scene of the sacred as a locus of collective interaction.

The generative use of the scenic imagination, increasingly moribund throughout the nineteenth century (one recalls the Société linguistique de Paris' famous 1866 ban on theories of language origin), was revived through an infusion of scenic data from ethnology. Fleeing from the scenic imagination into the empirical study of the primitive, the ethnologist discovers the centrality of this imagination in primitive culture itself, which is dominated by ritual models of the originary scene.

Because human time, made up of events and not simply of phenomena, is not merely evolutionary but historical, any description of our activities is undecidably both particular and universal. Each human culture--indeed, each human representation--is both a specific example and a model of the human-in-general. The quest for the most fundamental forms of social organization that drives ethnological research cannot avoid this ambivalence, however much its deniers describe with loving care the "thick" specificity of each culture while attributing to humanity itself no specificity other than biological. In contrast, at the time of the early systematization of data on primitive religion by such scholars as **Morgan** and **Tylor**, generality bore no stigma; the difficulty lay rather in including in one's model the eventfulness that separates the human world from the natural. Durkheim, although he fails to make eventfulness into a generative principle, criticizes both Müller's "naturism" and Tylor's "animism" for neglecting the essentially social character of the religious event. For Durkheim, it is the sacred that distinguishes human society from its animal counterparts; semiosis--human language--begins with the binary distinction between sacred and profane. Durkheim was the first anthropological thinker to understand the sacred as constituted by interaction among human beings rather than by either their collective or individual awe before the spectacle of nature, or their collective or individual communion with gods or "spirits," whose apparent immortality reflects that of the already-existing sacred sign.

Yet the most spectacular scenic imagination of the early twentieth century belonged, not to Durkheim, but to **Sigmund Freud**. For Freud, human life was a series of scenes of which the first, consciously repressed but perpetually reenacted in the unconscious, were the most determinant. Freud's early notion of the "primal scene" is akin in significance if not in content to the originary hypothesis--it is, indeed, an originary hypothesis scaled to the life of the individual. The family drama of the bourgeois child is an allegory of the genesis of humanity itself.

Time has revealed the weaknesses of Freud's ahistorical model of the human psyche as well as of his curative technique. What remains of value is his scenic intuition of the human. The same may even be said for **Jacques Lacan**, whose refinements transform Freud's physiologically defined "stages" into developmental phases of the scene of representation ("imaginary," "symbolic"), beginning with the Ur-scene of the "mirror stage." Unfortunately, this process, in conformity with Lacan's structuralist fetishizing of the semiotic, detaches the psychoanalytic model of the human psyche yet more completely from its grounding in history.

Yet Freud himself made one major attempt to ground his key psychic model of the "Oedipus complex" in a hypothetical scenic event. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud attempts to link the ontogenetic scene to its phylogenetic original through a renewed exercise of the scenic imagination, now nourished with

ethnological data.

Freud's originary scene, the most scandalously audacious speculative model of early ethnology, is rejected by even the most devout Freudians--especially by the most devout Freudians. This return from Durkheim's prudent empiricism to the speculative mentality of the Enlightenment is not merely isolated; it serves as a caution even today to anyone tempted to follow in the master's footsteps. Freud's scene of the collective murder of the "father" by his "sons," a throwback to a distant era in the eyes of mainstream social science, is prophetic from the perspective of generative anthropology. Seen more broadly, Freud's model of the origin of internalized interdiction or guilt is a model of the origin of representation in general. The sons, no longer dominated "instinctively" by the father, must consciously reconstruct a social order. Dividing the women among them requires a system of classification, the origin of which is the sacred significance attributed to the father, whose posthumous influence makes him immortal like a god--or a sign. Although the Oedipus complex appears to give desire for the mother priority over mimetic rivalry with the father, in Freud's description of the originary murder scene, the "mothers" are forgotten. The modern family drama to which Freud's scene serves as prologue does not obscure its value as a model of the origin of representation whose crucial operation is the generation of a new set of ethical relations, guaranteed and memorialized by a shared representation.

* * *

Ideas, the signifieds of the signs of language, do not die, but live on in latency until they are thought once more. Combine Durkheim's concept of the sacred with Freud's scenic violence, add a dash of de Maistre's theory of sacrifice, and you arrive at Girard's originary scene, the beginning of a new chapter in the story of the scenic imagination.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

René Girard and the Overcoming of Metaphysics

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As I attempted to show in [a recent article](#), **René Girard** is **Durkheim's** true successor in the anthropology of the sacred. Durkheim was the first to understand the function of the sacred-bearing institution of religion in maintaining the social order; Girard provided a generative model of the sacred as the solution to the problem posed to humanity by mimetic desire. Sacred ritual, which for Durkheim merely reinforces the attachment of the individual to his society, is for Girard a reenactment of the proto-sacrificial mechanism that generates the sacred/profane dichotomy by discharging and expelling sacred violence and partitioning the profane world into differential roles. Improving on the daring but anachronistic example of **Freud's** Totem and Taboo, Girard conceives a generative scene of the

resolution of mimetic crisis through "emissary murder" as the minimal kernel of the human.

Although higher animals imitate another's appetitive actions, both positive and negative, in the search for food or in flight from predators, in designating a particular object, the mediating animal does not modify its intrinsic value; this designation neither arouses desire for a previously undesired object nor privileges its specific object over the general category of which it is a member. Consequently, it can modify the appetitive value of the object only in the long-term context of **Baldwinian** (behavior-driven) evolution. Human mimesis does not need to change the genetic code to influence behavior, or desire itself, because relationships between human beings are mediated by the scene of representation. The disciple does not imitate the master's desire as one imitates a physical gesture; this desire functions to sacralize its object.

The fact that Girard has never considered himself a philosopher makes all the more significant his qualification of mimetic desire in his early (1961) work *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* as "metaphysical." **Aristotle's** term, taken near-literally, designates the sign in a human system of representation, which stands "beside" (meta) physical reality. Thus the metaphysical world is ultimately the world of human language, but alienated from its human origin and set in the heaven of the Ideas. Metaphysics grants reality to the symbolic world of ideas, concepts--ultimately, words--independently of the world they represent; it is a secondary matter whether this reality be explored in itself (idealism) or as a model of the represented world (rationalism). We remain within the domain of metaphysics so long as we ignore the filiation of the word/concept/idea/signified with the ostensive event from which it derives, just as, when we understand desire as a binary relation between subject and object, we ignore the ostensive event by which this object was designated to us. Ignorance of the ostensive origin of the "context-free" concepts of metaphysics is the cognitive analog of the romantic lie (*mensonge romantique*) of unmediated desire.

The scenic imagination of the Enlightenment constructs an anthropological genesis for the ancients' timeless conceptions of the social order, but remains on the level of politics, the interaction of represented desires. The language by which we represent these desires does not appear to require a collective scene of origin; it is conceived either as emerging from the indexical signs of natural appetite (**Condillac**) or as the product of a unique faculty of free contemplation (**Herder**). The Romantics abandoned generative hypotheses for representations of the nature we all presumably share beneath the divisive mediations of bourgeois exchange, and which hold out the promise of the universal harmony that Romantic poets seek to incarnate in images. Romantic politics, exemplified in France by the most illustrious of these poets--both **Hugo** and **Lamartine** sat in the legislature of the July Monarchy and were active in the abortive Second Republic, the latter as its first provisional president--equated shared ideas and images with shared feelings, or, in political terms, with shared interests. In conceiving these representations as a source of harmony, the Romantic confuses their deferral of mimetic conflict with the final transcendence of mimetic desire.

The attack on metaphysics begins in earnest after 1848 with the fall of the French Second Republic, the last creation of the Enlightenment bourgeois-revolutionary ethos. On December 2, 1851, **Louis Napoleon's** coup d'état dealt the death-blow to romantic politics and the human ontology that lay behind it. Here was a seemingly definitive demonstration that harmonious representations did not produce harmony among human beings, but merely deferred for a time their propensity for conflict. **Marx, Nietzsche**, and their successors see the pacific conceptual system of metaphysics as an ideology to unmask, or, more prudently, to deconstruct. Where the Enlightenment had thought it sufficed to eliminate the historical arbitrariness of the sacred for universal reason to take its place, Marx saw

bourgeois universalism as a mask for exploitative production relations. Philosophy/metaphysics does no more than transmogrify the time- and class-bound reason of the current ruling class into universal truths; changing the world begins by demystifying these "truths." Marx was nonetheless a believer in reason--the reason of history, which "scientific socialism" demonstrated to be that of the proletariat. Nietzsche replaces the triumph of historical reason with the triumph of the individual will over the imprisoning force of falsely universal truth. This paradoxical struggle of the Nietzschean self with its "own" representations has been the obsession of philosophy ever since, even of analytic philosophy, haunted by the same paradoxes in a drier, logical form.

The postwar, postmodern world marked by **Hiroshima** and the **Holocaust** inspired a new radicalization of the scenic imagination. A world where the deferral of violence would henceforth be "forever" the most crucial preoccupation saw every context-free Idea as potentially a mask of violence. The most common recourse was to confess this violence at the outset; this avowal of "white guilt" was the chief power-source of the post-war victimary revolution that ended colonialism and so many other formal inequalities. But victimary thinking, whatever its efficacy in the political sphere, is a flight from metaphysics rather than an overcoming of it. The unending task of this overcoming can be carried out only by moving "outside" metaphysics to imagine, on the scene of representation, the birth of the scene itself--by replacing originary philosophy with originary anthropology. This Girardian transformation, the expressed aim of *Violence and the Sacred*, is already implicit in the analysis of "triangular" desire in *Mensonge*. Although the prestige of each fictional mediator exists within a specific interpersonal relationship, Girard's analysis makes clear that the mediator exercises his power on the communal scene of representation internalized by the disciple. The collective nature of mediation will later be made explicit, but the triangle of desire is already a minimal model of the community in which the reduction of the triangle to a simple subject-object relationship defines metaphysical desire. This model refutes the pessimistic claim that we are imprisoned within the metaphysical; mediation can be known and rejected, if only for a more distant, more explicitly communal mediation.

To seek to remedy this ignorance of the mediations that direct our desire is less a cognitive than an ethical act, designed to free our desire from the confines of a specific triangle to let it circulate within society as a whole. For Girard, our choice is between a worldly idol and the true sacred, whose truth is understandable in Durkheimian terms as correspondence to the most universal values of society/humanity. This choice cannot be made once and for all; it is an unending process. The same is true in the cognitive domain; as we elaborate models of the human world, we must continually reconnect them to their origin in the deferral of violence. Metaphysics is the instrument of our conquest of nature, but, in the human sphere, we must move toward its overcoming, as we seek to overcome the resentments of mimetic desire. The fact that we communicate in context-free declarative sentences does not absolve us from the task of hypothetically reconstructing the scenic context within which our shared concepts are generated.

Metaphysical desire, like metaphysical thought, assimilates culture to nature. We can only think, or desire, a "natural" object that we apprehend from without; but the source of both desire and thought lies in human representation, which can be understood only from within. The overcoming of metaphysical thought is originary thinking; the overcoming of metaphysical desire is love: this is the double transcendence of Girard's Christian anthropology.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Our Neo-Victimary Era

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I have, as they say, a visceral dislike of victimary rhetoric, the sanctimonious denunciation of white guilt in others, or in ourselves--as I, if not you, have acknowledged. One cannot ignore one's viscera; yet, in human relations, at least, they provide no peremptory justification. There have been plenty of visceral anti-Semites. No mode of human interaction is so natural as to escape the mediation of the cultural scene of representation.

Readers of these Chronicles know that I have been trying for some time to situate victimary rhetoric in history; this quest has led me to the notion, discussed more insistently since September 11, of the post-millennial. Before WWII, it was taken for granted that Others, as we call them nowadays, were welcome in some, but not all conversations, and certainly not as a matter of course. After **Auschwitz**, overt exclusion has become unacceptable. The proliferation of victimary thinking, inspired by the Nazi-Jew model of unequivocal persecution, has led to the elimination of the most glaring institutional or de jure inequalities: colonialism, Jim Crow, and so on. Their disappearance has coincided with the discrediting of what was less than two decades ago the world's most powerful victimary ideology ("Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!"). September 11, with its demonstration of the horrors that such ideologies can be made to justify, is icing on the cake. We are now entering a post-millennial era in which the oppressor-victim model is increasingly less viable; inequality in a global exchange system is a problem to be rectified, not evidence of oppression.

Although there is more than a grain of truth in this position, some wishful thinking remains to be squeezed out of it before these seeds can take root. The benefits generated by the rationalization of the global economy are differentially distributed across racial, ethnic, and sexual groups. Since the defining ideal of global society is universal reciprocity, the less favored groups have an arguable claim of exclusion from this reciprocity and, consequently, an arguable legitimacy in playing the victim card to bring about greater equality of results. Thus, in the US, and increasingly in other advanced countries, the attack on discriminatory procedures has given way to a critique of unequal outcomes.

As a case in point, in recent years, following a period in which affirmative action programs seemed to be on the wane, American universities have experienced a growing pressure for "diversity" at every level. In 1995, the **University of California Board of Regents** passed a "Policy Ensuring Equal Treatment Admissions" (SP-1) eliminating racial criteria in admissions; in 2001, it rescinded this policy after hearing testimony that it made "underrepresented minorities" feel "unwelcome."

No doubt there is a political dimension to this change. California, after a series of Republican governors, has become sharply Democratic in recent years, particularly since **Governor Wilson's** politically disastrous support for **Proposition 187**, which refused admission to state-funded schools and hospitals

to illegal ("undocumented") immigrants. After the passage of SP-1, representatives of the former beneficiaries of affirmative action rallied their troops to put pressure on the Regents. Yet I think there is a real evolution in attitudes about affirmative action that is not reducible to a mere swing of the political pendulum. The old affirmative action was part of the victimary era, and declined along with it. But--here I diverge from some of my previous statements--the end of this era does not spell the demise of victimary thinking, but its mutation. Affirmative action and the like have not simply survived, they have returned in a new guise.

Whereas the early supporters of affirmative action sought to provoke the strong form of white guilt that was a reaction to de jure discrimination, accusations of racism and sexism are counterproductive in promoting the positive goals of "diversity" and "gender equity." Neo-victimary thinking is aware of the difference between the guilt aroused by a priori and a posteriori status hierarchies. The enemy is no longer **Governor Wallace** in the schoolhouse door, but the inertia of our collective subconscious. And to counter this less blatant, more insidious adversary, open admissions of guilt like those that put an end to colonialism and segregation cannot suffice. The neo-victimary tone is milder, but its demands are considerably greater.

Fairness is no longer defined as the absence of institutional barriers but as the achievement of "equitable" results; the target is not discrimination but underrepresentation. If a given minority is not proportionally represented in the distribution of a privileged status, particularly one, such as college admission, that is granted according to a well-defined procedure, then, all explanations aside, corrective measures must be taken. The supporter of diversity is merely reminding us of what we are already presumed to know--a reminder all the more powerful for its presupposition of unanimity. Although race/gender quotas, seen as leftovers from the previous era, are generally condemned, there is no respectable way to oppose them when they come packaged under the less aggressive label of diversity.

The lack of any viable opposition to diversity policies reflects more than the left-wing politics that prevail in universities and other large bureaucratic institutions. Or rather, the difficulty of opposing diversity is an effect of the same socio-economic trends that generate this politics. Neo-victimary discourse is asymmetrical; only certain groups are considered to be victims. But, unlike postmodern victimary discourse, which conceived its aim as the abolition of difference in seamless integration, the new variety is concerned with the preservation of difference. Its utopia is not uniformity but proportionality, a state as a general rule unattainable, and unstable even if momentarily attained. At any given moment, ascriptive groups (races, genders, ethnicities) will differ in interests and abilities; there is no reason to assume that at some future date all these groups will fall on the same normal curve. Hence neo-victimary discourse is apt to perpetuate itself indefinitely, changing camps as some groups become overrepresented (e.g., Asians in the University of California, women in language departments). The equilibrium point toward which this discourse tends is not a static peace but a dynamic balance of resentments--a succinct description of political democracy. The peaceful exchange of resentments, now as at our origin, is the prerequisite for the peaceful exchange of everything else. The modern liberal-democratic polity extends without limit the deferred gift-exchange of **Hubert** and **Mauss**, expressing the awareness that the market makes us all both victims and persecutors, but not at the same place and time. Hence "diversity" at this place and time must be defined by the inclusion of those who are underrepresented here.

When I find neo-victimary discourse hard on my viscera, the pain subsides when I attend to its implicit reciprocity rather than its explicit demand for privilege. As I said in [Chronicle 219](#) in reference to "gender equity," the important thing in the long run is to even out resentments enough to permit everyone to

participate in the dialogue. As a means to this end, diversity policy has clear advantages over flying planes into buildings.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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On Esthetic Periodization

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The usefulness of periodization depends on the complementarity of the ethical and the esthetic. As a first approximation, let us say that art deals with the difficulties or paradoxes inherent in a given ethical system, that it acts as a means of dramatizing them, experimenting with them, etc. This kind of language is "functional" only in a superficial sense. Implicit in it is that ethics is "organization" and that any system of organization has flaws, cracks, contradictions. But ethical organization is by nature unstable, since its components are human beings whose resentful totalizations of the system are in tension with the system itself. It is impossible to conceive of a "perfect" organization that "no longer needs" art. On the contrary, the only functionally useful utopia is one in which the resentments generated by the social order can be reintegrated or recycled within that order by means of art--in conjunction with politics, for there is no art without politics. Where politics leads to a collective resolution of competing claims on the center, the scene of art, whatever conflicts take place upon it, is conceived by a single (possibly collective) imagination that guarantees and is guaranteed by the originary accord as to the meaning of the sign. The in principle non-conflictive source of the imaginary scene provides a minimal "definition" of art.

Because culture is scenic, its evolution is most parsimoniously modeled by changes in the structure of the scene of representation. Esthetic periods are really partially overlapping paradigms of the scenic imagination--paradigms analogous to, not to say the originary form of, the scientific paradigms whose "revolutions" **Thomas Kuhn** describes. It is the "digital" nature of these transformations that justifies cultural periodization. Yet despite its simplicity, the structure of the scene of representation cannot be used to draw up in advance a meta-paradigm of all possible esthetic periods; new models arise through revelations of possibilities previously undetected.

In the classical era, the characters are never self-conscious about being on stage; in other words, the drama never thematizes within itself the stage-nonstage analogy to the sacred-profane dichotomy, because the latter dichotomy, constitutive of the scene of representation, is still understood as absolute. It is **Christianity** that reveals the underlying equivalence of the sacred center of the circle with its periphery, in relation to which accession to the central role is thematized or "anthropologized." As a consequence, in the neo-classical age that begins with the first medieval texts and extends through the early modern period, the stage-nonstage polarity is omnipresent. Whether it be the lover ensnared by the eyes of his beloved, **Hamlet** putting on plays but avoiding as long as possible the stage of action, or **Roland** who defers blowing his horn to protect his reputation (los), the neoclassical protagonist operates

within a dichotomy of profane and sacred, private and public life; mounting on stage is both necessary and self-consciously sacrificial. The neo-classical, post-Christian artwork retains a sense of destiny, but this destiny is conscious and may be chosen or delayed. The ancient tragic hero is, so to speak, a demigod: a mortal whose sacrificial role inheres in his essence. Christianity teaches us that we all contain the scene within ourselves (in our "soul"); our essence is not dependent on the persistence of the public scene, to which we are called by "historical" circumstances.

If esthetic periods correspond to ethical intuitions, art is no mere emanation of ethical philosophy.

Plato's ethics is founded on the "good," a category whose very existence presupposes the possibility of universal harmony transcending and including all particular "goods"--thus Plato denies that what is "good" for me can be in conflict with the good of all. The Platonic concept is a sacred object not all that different from the churinga described by **Durkheim**, which incarnates the common good or principle of solidarity of the group and whose contact invigorates the individual member. Athenian art realizes the emergence from the agon of this still ritual-based worldly order. The model of Christian morality, in contrast, is the Kingdom of God, the moral model of perfect reciprocity that is "not of this world." In art after the Christian revelation, which **Hegel** called "romantic," the sacred guarantee of the world created by the scenic imagination is transcendent; beyond the pragmatic ironies of the sort **Oedipus'** career exemplifies, the modern protagonist's very existence on stage, his "destiny," is an ironic contingency.

The classical scene includes scenic representatives of the periphery, the chorus of Athenian drama. The impossibility of a chorus in Renaissance dramaturgy was pointed to by neo-classical thinkers who sought to distinguish classical from modern, naïve from sentimental literature. The simplest explanation of this absence is not, however, the "sentimentality" of modern drama, but the structural fact that its scene does not make an a priori internal distinction between periphery and center, but rather shows the sacrificial center as a role for which a "peripheral" protagonist is selected, in contrast with classical theater, where this selection occurs, in the general case, prior to the scene, but need not occur at all, as in **Aeschylus'** Suppliants, where the chorus as a whole is the "protagonist." The canonical neoclassical example is Hamlet's eccentric position around **Claudius'** table in his first appearance (I, ii), a scene (prior to Hamlet's awareness of the **Ghost**) that makes Hamlet the prototype of the modern homme de ressentiment, a spectator at the scene on which his own desires are played out. Hamlet incarnates the essential peripherality of the neoclassical subject with respect to the center he will be forced to occupy. The particular modernity of his role lies in the fact that it can easily be deformed into the romantic model where this public center is itself imaginary.

To the series of esthetic paradigms correspond modes of economic exchange, which find their basis in the scene of representation but perform the centrifugal function of providing individuals with the means of existence. That the independence of economic activity from the ritual center of society increases over time led **Marx** to consider it history's independent variable. The basis for economic exchange, however, is a system of ethical relations. The failure of the ancients to evolve a true market system, the subject of a great deal of historical speculation, corresponds to the absence of peripheral symmetry within the classical model. The tragic agon or fight for the center is symmetrical only in its violence; scenic exchange belongs to the comic world, which parodies the tragic one that supplies its protection. In contrast, the "civil society" that is the basis of the modern exchange system is homologous to the originary peripherality of the modern tragic hero. Hamlet ironizing on Claudius' court, even **Racine's Phèdre** dreaming of losing herself in the labyrinth, are prototypes of peripheral desires, "subjective" and therefore exchangeable rather than simply rivalrous.

The emergence of true "bourgeois society" in the era of the French Revolution brings with it the esthetic of romanticism, in which the erstwhile public center is populated exclusively by these peripheral or "private" desires. The romantic fondness for folklore and primitive cultures that condone the public manifestation of violent desires reflects nostalgia for "naïve" culture, but it is naïveté from the perspective of the subject whose desires are valorized by the community rather than of the pre-individualized performer of sacrificial ritual.

The discovery, after 1848, that the romantic system depends on an internal contradiction between the egocentric individual imagination and the fancied reciprocity of shared desire in the system as a whole leads to the irony of postromanticism. The romantic thinks, on the faith of his sacrificial exilic status, that he can both occupy the center in his imagination and communicate his imaginary centrality to others as their own. Postromanticism, by virtue of its ironic critique of the romantic model that it nonetheless recognizes as inevitable, is the first truly modern mode--a mode in which consciousness becomes aware not merely of its "belatedness" but of its dependency on traditional forms that are unable fully to express it. Modernism avoids the romantic paradox of "universal" subjectivity by doing away with the ego as subject of desire; the cruelty of the precultural desire that spites bourgeois society in the modernist artwork escapes the imagination to reveal itself in the apocalyptic violence of modernist politics, both fascist and--in reality, if not in theory--communist.

Modernism's challenge to the bourgeois self is its rediscovery that the scene of representation is itself generated by sacrificial violence. Although its anti-bourgeois thrust is superficially similar to that of romanticism, rather than making the individual subject the repository of the scene's authentic constitution, modernism traces this constitution through the interactions of a desire that is not localized in an ego and cannot therefore be recuperated, as was romanticism, by the bourgeois market. The radicalism of this movement is most evident in the plastic arts, where the so-called mimesis of the sacred object gives way to the creation of a sacred object for mimesis. The beauty of the artwork that the late romantics opposed to bourgeois "utility" is revealed to be just another "value"; the truly numinous object, in the absence of ritual's historical reference, "sublimely" evokes the fear of death associated with the sacrificial sparagmos.

The utopia pointed to by modernism is deliberately unlivable within the constraints of bourgeois society. Epater le bourgeois expresses in lapidary form the desire to exceed the bourgeois exchange system; this desire is concomitant with modernism's thematic interest in the sacrificial as a regulatory mechanism. Art as excess is anarchic only at its moment of appearance; its overall operation is designed to provoke a return to archaic, openly sacrificial modes that dissolve and restore the scene of representation. In this process, the central victim no longer solicits our identification as a fellow human being, as in the romantic era; his sacrifice is an apotheosis (that of **Freud's** murdered father, of **Apollinaire's** poet-as-burnt-offering, of the potlatch in **Bataille's** économie générale) that purges us of our fear of death without itself appearing to us as a shared mode of human suffering. The late post-romantics or "decadents" toyed with doing away with the mimetic mechanisms of pity and terror that had characterized high culture since the beginning, but within their identificatory esthetic model, these were merely ironies. (Compare **Villiers de l'Isle Adam's** Contes cruels with **Antonin Artaud's** théâtre de la cruauté.)

In the most general sense, all high culture from **Homer** to the post-romantics is "bourgeois" culture in its respect for the circulation of desire between spectator and protagonist. We freely identify with the latter's sufferings and are rewarded with an equal share of his central significance. From **Achilles** to **Mme Bovary**, this exchange-relation remains essentially the same; art is an affirmation of interpersonal

solidarity, a system of symbolic exchange, even when it begins to denounce the dominant relations of the society within which this exchange takes place. There is no "question of the victim" in pre-modern art.

Romanticism led to the farce of 1848, immortalized in **Flaubert's** *L'éducation sentimentale*; modernism led to **Auschwitz**. It is here that postmodernism, victimary thinking, and, ultimately, originary anthropology were born.

In the conclusion to his admirably thoughtful examination of responses to the **Holocaust**, La concurrence des victimes, **Jean-Michel Chaumont** quotes with qualified approval **Steven T. Katz's** authoritative work *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, "**From an empirical viewpoint, the world seems to have been little transformed, morally or otherwise, by Auschwitz.**" I believe this statement to be the exact opposite of the historical truth--although the very fact that I can only state my position in terms of belief reflects the fundamental ambivalence of the Holocaust's place in history.

Katz and Chaumont are referring to the degree to which the explicit memory of the Holocaust has affected life in the postwar era; where Katz takes the absence of world reaction to the Holocaust as one more demonstration of its historical uniqueness, Chaumont sees it as an event with an unlimited potential for meaningfulness that must be continually and insistently brought before the public eye. Both these positions are blind to what seems to me the obvious fact that the Holocaust has transformed the world as perhaps no other event of secular history has done; it is the closest thing the modern age has known to a founding religious revelation. As I have often noted, the decades following WWII saw the end of Western colonialism, racial segregation in the US, discriminatory laws against women, apartheid in South Africa. **Hitler's** persecution of the **Jews** was the model for the victimary paradigm that made all de jure discrimination increasingly intolerable. Not only were victims emboldened, but, yet more significantly, those not victimized were increasingly subject to the hitherto unknown sentiment of white guilt. This category and its importance in the modern world were presciently anticipated by **Nietzsche** in his diatribes against the inveiglement of classical heroes by Christian priests in *The Genealogy of Morals*. But, even for Nietzsche, the guilt of the "strong" before the "weak" rests on the supposed sinfulness that inheres in specific acts or desires, whereas to arouse guilt in the postwar era no sin of strength is necessary, merely the absence of marked weakness. As the payback for what Marx denounced as the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie's appeal to general principles of justice, extended to the arrogance of 19th-century colonial Eurocentrism and the age-old rule of men over women, white guilt attaches to a whiteness not of skin but of semiotic status, to the neutral, general case, now marked defiantly by its Others.

Postmodernity has never to my knowledge been defined in terms of its ethical basis in victimary thought. For what might be called the standard philosophical treatment (that of **Vattimo's** *The End of Modernity*, or, in a more science-oriented mode, **Lyotard's** *La condition postmoderne*), the independent variable is technological progress, which supposedly makes the "newness" of modernity so predictable as to be no longer new. Because traditional metaphysics understands the human in terms of its cognitive relationship to "nature," it tends to fetishize technology as its inassimilable Other and to dismiss out of hand the human value of its ever-improving knowledge of nature. (One might say that, just as there are no atheists in the foxholes, there are no technophobes on the operating table.) Postmodernism is not a simple reaction to modern technological evolution; the doubt about newness inherent in the notion of postmodernism is motivated by very specific developments in ethical relations dependent on very specific elements of technological progress. Auschwitz and **Hiroshima** were inconceivable without certain technological advances. Yet, although this applies to the second far more than the first, it is undoubtedly

the first of these exempla of maximal violence that is the more determinant of what would come to be called the postmodern era.

Postmodernism, like postromanticism, is not so much a new mode as a chastened version of the previous one that reflects the failure of the politics it inspired. Where modernist politics is cruel, postmodern politics is victimary. Its scenic imagination, haunted by the image of victimization, conceives an ideal scene without a sacred center, where all is periphery. The result of the postmodern consciousness of "scapegoating" on which **Girard's** mimetic theory and **GA** itself depend is a peculiar dichotomy between an activist politics and a nihilist esthetic. Postmodern politics has an infinity of tasks; it sees every form of human relation as at least potentially victimary. Where the postmodern esthetic shies from constructing a center, postmodern politics finds in every mode of human interaction a center to deconstruct, construed as the locus, not of sacrifice, but of power. This radical secularization of the scene is founded on the prying apart of the founding ambivalence of the sacred center: violence and peace, victim and god, object of worship and object of resentment. The old periphery, to which the center provided the benefits of deferral, disappears; one is either persecutor or victim. In the more interesting cases, these roles are played alternatively.

The postmodern esthetic has no vision of authentic centrality around which to constitute its scene. To empower the victim over the persecutor merely reproduces the old structure with the roles reversed, as in latter-day westerns where the Indians are good and the cowboys are bad. To go beyond this popular-art model to show the strength of the victim qua victim is already to engage in a kind of generative anthropology. **Beckett** provides the purest model of this in *Waiting for Godot*, where the merely time-consuming exchanges of the victimary duo of **Didi** and **Gogo** outlast the master-slave society of **Pozzo** and **Lucky**. Beckett's is a world beyond desire; in contrast, **Marguerite Duras** shows the power of the victim within the triangle of desire as the failed mediator who determines the desires of the other two vertices by designating them to each other, thereby becoming the object of a "higher level" of desire. At the other extreme from the eroticisation of the victimary center is its sparagmos; postmodern art, particularly the visual and performing arts, is the site of a post-modernist insistence not merely on the violence of desire but on its violent effects--what my fellow anthropoetician **Toby Siebers** calls "trauma art."

The postmodern, victimary era was characterized by the deconstruction of the esthetic center. The new "post-millennial" era has been characterized by **Raoul Eshelman** as "performatist": the artist rediscovers the originary ostensive and creates his own sacred center. Implicit in this ostensibly (and ostensibly) Nietzschean expression of the will to power is that everyone else can do the same thing. The personal sacred of the performatist provides a model we can all imitate in principle, since it privileges his creative act itself rather than its outcome in a given case, which is the affair of the creator. This stands in contrast to the personal sacred the romantic proposes to the world as exemplary of everyone else's desire as well as his own (**Victor Hugo's** *insensé qui croit que je ne suis pas toi!* [(You who are) out of your senses to think that I am not you!]). Performatist mimesis avoids triangularity through the non-exemplarity of its object; rather than choosing the object pointed to by the artist, one is encouraged to pursue one's own.

Readers of Hegel's *Esthetics* recall that each artistic epoch has a characteristic artistic genre: monumental architecture for archaic societies, sculpture for the Greeks, music for the romantics. And, one might say, poetry for postromanticism, painting for modernism, conceptual art for postmodernism. Along these lines, I would suggest that the typical post-millennial art form is **body piercing**. The pierced uses his or her own body as his canvas; the piercing act is initiatory but there is no well-defined society to be initiated

into. The ritual production of sacred value devolves to the individual, with the confidence of receiving sufficient recognition from others. Each pierce is a monument to a sacrificial performance whose exemplarity, limited to one's own body, can never block the parallel activity of its spectator. In its inclusion of art in life that forecloses no other life's possibilities, in its abolition of the dichotomy, ideal and financial, between world and spectacle, body piercing strikes me as the exemplary performatist art.

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Eric Gans

Originary and Provisional Morality

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Originary thinking provides an anthropological grounding for **Kantian** morality, as expressed in the fourfold formulation of the categorical imperative in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, as well as for the supreme Kantian distinction between the a priori and the empirical. The categorical imperative, whether expressed as the necessity of treating all human beings as ends or of acting so that the principle of one's action may be willed as a universal law, is a metaphysical formulation of the "moral model" of the reciprocal exchange of representations in the originary event. The world of representation is the real locus of Kant's a priori, and this world is that of the deferral of violence before being that of the representation of worldly objects.

At the same time, originary thinking both explains and transcends the ahistoricity of Kantian morality. The passage from conflict to peace that is inaugurated by the sign is recoverable as an event in a potential history only insofar as it is grounded in the "timeless" reciprocity of the scene of representation. The peace that succeeds real or potential mimetic crisis is not mere stasis but reciprocal exchange, whose symmetry establishes a temporality invulnerable to mortality, understood as the result of human violence. But the moral model, even in the originary scene and its ritual reproduction, belongs to the world of representation rather than that of reality; to seek to realize it in the world is (as Kant well understood) to commit a category error analogous to affirming the possibility of drawing a perfect circle on a blackboard.

Both the formulation of the Kantian categorical imperative and its exemplification in the quasi-universal rejection of any communally imposed or de jure asymmetry among adult humans suggest that already by the late Enlightenment, and certainly today, an ethical consensus has been established that condemns any formal obstacle to the reciprocity of the moral model. Bourgeois democracy accepts this model as directly operative in political situations, which are to be decided in an exchange of representations. In contrast, it is generally acknowledged that the various attempts between 1789 and 1989 to impose the moral model not merely as the formal basis of human interaction but as the basis of economic exchange were unsuccessful; politicizing the general economy in order to universalize economic power only concentrates this power in the hands of politicians.

In market society we may distinguish three kinds of collective decisions: **economic, political, and ethical**. Participants in the market can only submit to the judgment of the marketplace. Although the outcome of a political debate (say, among legislative representatives) is determined in much the same way as a market price, the individuals charged with reaching this outcome (and, ultimately, those they represent) are each presumed to have taken a position on the issue at hand and, as a rule, to maintain it even after the matter has been decided. Yet whereas political decisions, although based on principle, are typically subject to quantitative compromise, ethical decisions are of a discrete or "binary" nature. The amount of a tax or the breadth of application of a regulation are matters for negotiation in a way that, for example, abortion rights are not, even if the nature of the political process imposes the negotiational model on the latter as well as on the former. Because ethical decisions are based on conviction, even if this conviction must be subordinated to an overall principle of democratic rule (which in a constitutional system is not simply equivalent to majority rule), we do not immediately accept contrary decisions as defining a new ethical reality, merely a political one. Nevertheless, we know that, in the long run, a society's political decisions and its ethical convictions will tend to converge; it is for this very reason that struggles to impose one's ethical viewpoint are so dramatic.

Let us briefly examine, for the sake of concreteness, a few contemporary moral issues: **abortion, the death penalty, human cloning, animal rights**, and, by way of contrast, **slavery**, still practiced in some corners of the world.

Until the last few decades, there was virtually no public sentiment for legalizing **abortion**, even among those who engaged in it. Like prostitution, abortion was considered as at best a necessary evil, a recourse in an emergency but not a socially legitimate activity. Today, this has radically changed. The virulence of the abortion controversy (which now seems to be subsiding) would appear to belong to a transitional moment between a society that at best tolerates abortion and one where abortion on demand, under a varying set of restrictions, is considered a fundamental right.

The very nature of this controversy--but we will see that all real moral controversies share this nature--makes the application of Kantian formulas impossible. Proponents of abortion insist that a woman be treated as an end and not a means, but for their opponents, the fetus too is a human being who is treated not even as a means but as a mere physical impediment or "parasite" within the mother's body. The crux of the debate is the human status of the fetus, and this is precisely what no moral formula can determine. The same arguments that justify the abortion of the not-yet-human fetus can be extended (as they are by the infamous **Peter Singer**) to justify infanticide.

From a moral perspective, the triumph of abortion on demand in Western societies is more significant than the arguments either for or against it. Given the continued dissatisfaction with abortion even within the pro-choice majority, we should anticipate future medical research with an end to alleviating it, whether by means of post-conception contraceptives (the "morning after" pill), providing an artificial womb for the aborted fetus, or some presently inconceivable technique. Controversies such as this one tend to lead to "dialectical" syntheses because the moral model, however differently interpreted, is shared by both sides.

Similarly, the categorical imperative cannot tell us whether or not to support **the death penalty**; executing someone is not treating him as an "instrument" any more than putting him in jail. The arguments adduced on both sides of these questions invoke ad hoc principles such as "the sanctity of human life" or "a woman's right to control her body," that cannot be assimilated to Kantian maxims of

morality. As is often noted sarcastically--by both sides--"the sanctity of human life" tends to be interpreted in opposite ways in the two controversies; those who oppose abortion tend to support the death penalty and vice versa. This suggests, not that general moral principles are self-contradictory, but that are useless in real-world cases; principles that are truly universal are by definition agreed upon by all and consequently compatible with both sides. Reasoning from principle can be of use only in a hypothetical situation so complex that only the moral philosopher can discern the hidden incompatibility of moral principle with one side or another; outside of the philosophy classroom, it is doubtful that a single historical case can be found where moral philosophy has proven of greater value than common sense.

Another ethical question is that of **human cloning**. Few have expressed approval of creating cloned people (although this may change when, as seems inevitable, such clones appear); today's controversy is between those who support using cloned embryos for therapeutic purposes and those who consider the creation of an embryo merely for the benefit of others a condemnable use of another human being as an instrument. The crux here has much in common with the abortion controversy: should a cloned embryo, like a first-trimester fetus, be considered a full-fledged human being? Likewise, in the matter of **animal rights**, the controversy once again is not over the ethical treatment of human beings, but over what creatures should benefit from (some of) the rights human beings accord themselves. What "rights" has a chimpanzee, a dog, a snake, a tree? I find the notion of "animal rights" absurd, but whether the animal has rights or is merely protected by human laws, the degree of this protection cannot be deduced from a universally held moral principle.

In contrast to these hard cases, we may point to **slavery** as a matter to which moral rules obviously apply. But, precisely, in advanced countries, at least, there is no controversy over slavery--nor over human sacrifice, polygamy, or genital mutilation. As late as the nineteenth century, slavery was defended by arguments of racial inferiority that we no longer consider acceptable. Today, the principle of equality before the law, which consecrates the moral model of universal reciprocity, is universally accepted; the legitimacy of slavery is not affirmed even by those who practice it.

Moral principles, as we have seen, are useless in deciding ethical controversies. Yet because we are all obliged to take positions on ethical issues, we are faced with the necessity of formulating a "provisional ethic" for ordinary thinking.

Since the fundamental aim of human culture is the deferral of violence through the reciprocal exchange of representations, the fundamental rule of our provisional ethic must be to act so as to extend and accelerate this exchange. In contradistinction to utilitarianism, which evaluates an action by the quantity of happiness it is expected to bring, ordinary thinking evaluates it by its capacity to expand the exchange of representations, and, negatively, by its capacity to arouse resentment, the sentiment of non-reciprocity that forecloses reciprocal exchange.

Applied historically, this rule of thumb makes understandable both the existence and the abolition of slavery, which at its inception broadened the overall conversation more than executing prisoners of war, but which no longer performs this function when labor is contracted by parties formally equal before the law. A more useful application of the rule is in assessing the moral value of movements of dissent. Insofar as those previously silenced must shout to make themselves heard, such movements broaden the dialogue, but once they become institutionalized, the shouting threatens to drown out the voices of others.

The uncertainty of our assessments of the long-term effects of a given decision on the reciprocity of human relations forces us continually to reevaluate any exclusion of individuals or groups from the social dialogue for the sake of the communal whole. (Consider, for example, the transformation in the status of homosexuals over the past few decades.) Whatever general rules we apply in such cases, they can have no more than provisional value. Appeals to traditional guarantees of transcendence can serve at best as stop-gap measures in times of panic. The human community must continually renew itself by regenerating and enlarging, in ever new and unpredictable circumstances, the exchange of signs through which it defers its own violence.

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Eric Gans

Originary and/or Kantian Esthetics I

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The esthetic is most simply defined as a form of experience in which a representational sign is perceived as a necessary constituent of its imaginary referent; the result is an oscillatory movement of the subject's attention between the sign and this referent. The fundamental task of esthetics is to show why this relation is not a mere contingency but implicit in representation and thereby in the human itself.

Esthetic oscillation is minimized in the linguistic sign as we know it; this minimization, beginning in the originary scene, constitutes formal signification (see *The Origin of Language*, California 1981). The efficiency with which the linguistic sign designates its referent allows the interlocutor to transcend the sign toward the referent. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, **Sartre** referred to this characteristic of language as "transparency," but it is worth noting that he limited it to prose. The profound intuition, usually associated with **Vico**--it can be found in **Rousseau** as well--that the first language was (sacred) poetry reminds us that linguistic minimization is not an a priori feature of signification but the product of a historical process of separation from the symmetrically opposite movement toward the institutional ritual reproduction of the configuration of the originary scene. Standing between the minimality of "transparent" language and the maximality of ritual, where representation is assimilated to reproduction, the oscillatory movement of the esthetic affirms the mutual dependency of the sign and its sacred referent. However, insofar as the referent is made to depend on the sign, it must be understood as imaginary, that is, as taking place on the individual's internalized scene of representation. This imaginary staging of the esthetic requires some degree, usually more than the minimum, of staging in the real world; only in the silent reading of prose narrative--the characteristic mode of the novelophile nineteenth century--is the imagination obliged to furnish virtually the entire effort of constructing the esthetic scene.

Whereas the destiny of "transparent" language is to continually evolve technologies that minimize its physical presence, institutional representation must occupy the experience of human time in order to

transcend it; **Mircea Eliade's** in illo tempore is founded not in an ideal past but in the evocation of this past within the ideal present of ritual. Esthetic experience reproduces the collective dynamic of ritual within the experience of the individual, who, by submitting himself as at the origin to the authority of the intentional sign, experiences the mutual dependency of representation and its communal (sacred) referent. Only on the imaginary scene that we derive from the transcendent, "timeless" vantage point of ritual can we be made aware of time's passage. The *recherche du temps perdu* is characteristic of all esthetic experience.

Western metaphysics does not describe esthetic experience in originary terms. Even the philosopher who accepted to define the esthetic by the oscillation between sign and imaginary referent, would take this definition as phenomenological, that is, as a reference to pure experience. As such, its implicit anthropological basis would be that supplied by **Kant**, the theoretician of pure experience. In the third Critique, Kant defines "beauty" under the rubric of the "esthetic judgment of finality" as the source of a pleasure that attends this judgment when there is no concept of the understanding to which the finality can be referred, as, say, the finality of a horse to the concept "horse" (which would not prevent a horse from being beautiful if its appearance suggests a finality unclassifiable under the concept "horse"). The beautiful object thus gives the appearance of freedom, of being an end in itself. The key passage is the following:

If pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension (apprehensio) of the form of an object of intuition, apart from any reference it may have to a concept for the purpose of a definite cognition, this does not make the representation referable to the object, but solely to the subject. In such a case, the pleasure can express nothing but the conformity of the object to the cognitive faculties brought into play in the reflective judgment, and so far as they are in play, and hence merely a subjective formal finality of the object. For that apprehension of forms in the imagination can never take place without the reflective judgment, even when it has no intention of so doing, comparing them at least with its faculty of referring intuitions to concepts. If, now, in this comparison, imagination (as the faculty of intuitions a priori) is undesignedly brought into accord with understanding (as the faculty of concepts), by means of a given representation, and a feeling of pleasure is thereby aroused, then the object must be regarded as final for the reflective judgment. A judgment of this kind is an aesthetic judgment upon the finality of the object, which does not depend upon any present concept of the object, and does not provide one. When the form of an object (as opposed to the matter of its representation, as sensation) is, in the mere act of reflecting upon it, without regard to any concept to be obtained from it, estimated as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object, then this pleasure is also judged to be combined necessarily with the representation of it, and so not merely for the subject apprehending this form, but for all in general who pass judgment. The object is then called beautiful; and the faculty of judging by means of such a pleasure (and so also with universal validity) is called taste. For since the ground of the pleasure is made to reside merely in the form of the object for reflection generally, consequently not in any sensation of the object, and without any reference, either, to any concept that might have something or other in view, it is with the conformity to law in the empirical employment of judgment generally (unity of imagination and understanding) in the subject, and with this alone, that the representation of the object in reflection, the conditions of which are universally valid a priori, accords. And, as this accordance of the object with the faculties of the subject is contingent, it gives rise to a representation of a finality on the part of the object in respect of the cognitive faculties of the subject.

Critique of Judgment Intro., VII: "The Aesthetic Representation of the Finality of Nature"

For Kant, the beautiful object arouses a pleasure distinct from that provided by the satisfaction of appetite or interest. Because the finality of the beautiful object cannot be subsumed under a concept of the understanding, "the pleasure can express nothing but the conformity of the object to the cognitive faculties brought into play in the reflective judgment," that is, the object pleases us because it demonstrates our ability as free beings to grasp finality in itself rather than merely as subordinate to a system of categories. ("For that apprehension of forms in the imagination can never take place without the reflective judgment, even when it has no intention of so doing, comparing them at least with its faculty of referring intuitions to concepts.") The beautiful object displays its finality as if it were free, and we take pleasure in its revelation of our own freedom by which alone we are able to recognize this finality. Because it is indifferent to the worldly existence of its object, this pleasure is "disinterested" and, consequently, the judgment of taste declares an object beautiful not subjectively, for me alone, but universally.

The pleasure in the judgment of finality derives from the sense of intentional formal closure that is first achieved in the performance of the sign. We need not deny the physiological component of this pleasure, but we must, in the spirit of an anthropologized Kant, respect the primacy of the representational, specifically human component of this satisfaction: the release of tension attendant on participating in the communal representation of the central object rather than in mimetic conflict over its appropriation. The unanimity of this participation is the source of the universality of the "judgment of taste"; to take pleasure in a representation is to participate esthetically in a community from which violence has been deferred. The source of the "judgment of finality," which Kant attributes to our "cognitive faculties," is more specifically our "faculty" of representation understood, not as a component of the individual mind awaiting the neurologist's reconceptualization as a module of the cerebral cortex, but as a specifically human capacity derived from the collective originary scene. The source of Kant's disinterested pleasure is the originary deferral of violence through representation. The community is critically interested in this deferral, but this common interest depends on its individual members renouncing their material, worldly interest in the object, which their act of representation situates on the transcendent plane of the sacred.

The oscillation between sign and imaginary referent by which originary thinking defines the esthetic renews the originary pleasure in participating in the aborted gesture of appropriation that defers violence through signification. Beginning with representation, we conjure up a world of desire (a moment of the esthetic experience ignored by Kant), but once within this imaginary world, we are forced to recognize our dependency on the cultural sign with its burden of "disinterested" renunciation of desire. Whatever neuro-physiological pleasure we find in harmonious form--and the modernist esthetic is there to tell us that harmonious form is by no means essential to the esthetic--is recruited to this experience of cultural harmony that is heir to the originary sacred.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Originary and/or Kantian Esthetics II

No. 261: Saturday, May 11, 2002

Kant locates the esthetic effect, defined as "pure pleasure," in the faculty of judgment, which he situates midway between the understanding, whose concepts make sense of the natural world, and reason that "legislates" practical rules to our free will. The normal function of judgment is to subsume the objects of the natural world under the concepts of the understanding. But the esthetic defeats judgment's efforts; the object--explicitly or implicitly a representation--that provokes the esthetic experience cannot be subsumed under a concept. In other Kantian terms, we experience the object's "finality" or purposefulness, its status as the intentional product of a will, but not in the context of a specific end or purpose. A passport photo serves to identify someone; in order for a painted portrait, or this very same photograph, to produce an esthetic effect, it must be experienced outside the context of any such purpose.

Concepts of nature contain the ground of all theoretical cognition a priori and rest, as we saw, upon the legislative authority of understanding. The concept of freedom contains the ground of all sensuously unconditioned practical precepts a priori, and rests upon that of reason. . . . But there is still further in the family of our higher cognitive faculties a middle term between understanding and reason. This is judgment . . .

[T]here is . . . a . . . ground, upon which judgment may be brought into line with [an] arrangement of our powers of representation . . . that appears to be of even greater importance than that of its kinship with the family of cognitive faculties. For all faculties of the soul, or capacities, are reducible to three, which do not admit of any further derivation from a common ground: the faculty of knowledge, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and the faculty of desire. For the faculty of cognition understanding alone is legislative, if (as must be the case where it is considered on its own account free of confusion with the faculty of desire) this faculty, as that of theoretical cognition, is referred to nature, in respect of which alone (as phenomenon) it is possible for us to prescribe laws by means of a priori concepts of nature, which are properly pure concepts of understanding. For the faculty of desire, as a higher faculty operating under the concept of freedom, only reason (in which alone this concept has a place) prescribes laws a priori. Now between the faculties of knowledge and desire stands the feeling of pleasure, just as judgment is intermediate between understanding and reason. Hence we may, provisionally at least, assume that judgment likewise contains an a priori principle of its own, and that, since pleasure or displeasure is necessarily combined with the faculty of desire (be it antecedent to its principle, as with the lower desires, or, as with the higher, only supervening upon its determination by the moral law), it will effect a transition from the faculty of pure knowledge, i.e., from the realm of concepts of nature, to that of the concept of freedom, just as in its logical employment it makes possible the transition from understanding to reason.

Critique of Judgment Intro., III: "The Critique of Judgment as a means of connecting the two Parts of Philosophy in a whole"

What are we to make of Kant's three "faculties of the soul"? If knowledge results from the exercise of pure (theoretical) reason on the natural world, and desire is the mode of the free will's action on the practical (ethical) world, what, beyond its usefulness in Kant's triadic system, is pleasure doing between knowledge and desire?

The justification of Kant's model can be made more intelligible in the perspective of originary anthropology. First of all, in the generative context, the practical-ethical must precede the theoretical. The possibility of conceptual thought depends on the inaugural act of human freedom: the deferral of mimetic violence through the abortion of the potentially rivalrous act of appropriation and its transformation into the originary sign or name-of-God. This act is also the origin of desire, which we distinguish from appetite by its mediation through the sign. (In "The Cognitive and Anthropological Origins of Narrative" [<http://www2.bc.edu/~richarad/lcb/fea/mla01rvo.html>], **Richard van Oort**, adapting the **Peircean** schema of **Terrence Deacon's** *The Symbolic Species* [Harvard, 1997], refers to this originary transformation as the passage from the indexical signs of the associative world of appetite to the autonomous semiotic world of the symbolic sign.)

As a result of the emission of the sign, the participants experience the "pleasure" of the deferral of violence that is the foundation of all cultural pleasures. This moment also permits the dispersal of the newly constituted community, protected by the mediation of the sacred center they have collectively represented. The application to the natural world of the concepts of the understanding is dependent not only on the sign's prior existence, but on the persistence of the deferral of violence it inaugurates, and that we have just seen to be the source of esthetic pleasure. In the passage from the originary ethical act to the emergence of conceptual understanding of the natural world, the sign representing the central sacred object is transformed into an instrument of cognition; the name-of-god becomes an empirical concept. The esthetic experience of representation is the moment of the originary event in which the unity of the two poles is affirmed; as in Kant's schema, it is intermediary between ethical and cognitive, sacred and profane.

The sign as aborted gesture is the first gesture of human freedom, but, as in **Hobbes'** model of sovereignty, each participant's emission of the sign expresses the free sacrifice of his appetite (which only then becomes "desire") for (the sake of) the sacred center. In contrast, the cognitive moment of originary signification transmits not sacrality but information concerning the worldly presence of the central object. The distinction between the central being as material object on the one hand and as the "immortal" subsistent signified of the sign on the other is the originary source of Kant's distinction between the concepts of the understanding, which concern the natural world, and the concept of freedom that alone belongs to reason.

What must be intermediary between the sacralization of the object that coincides with renunciation of the attempt to appropriate it and its cognitive classification under a concept (as "god") is a moment in which the sign is no longer an act of ethical solidarity and not yet a mere instrument, but independently evokes its referent in the imagination, no longer as material object but as sacred being. The sacred sign is absolutely motivated; the formal closure that cuts it off from worldly action is alone the criterion of its significance for the community, not the specific form this closure in fact encloses. On the contrary, at the cognitive pole, the sign is "arbitrary," capable of being recalled in its specificity as a signifier designating a

signified. What assures the affective link between the arbitrary sign and the experience of sacred interdiction is the possibility of imaginarily, that is, esthetically, evoking the scene by means of the sign. The esthetic moment is, so to speak, the becoming-portable of the sign.

What makes this moment uniquely pleasurable is that it permits the individual subject to experience within his imagination the sacred deferral of violence by means of the sign. The esthetic experience, however solitary, is always implicitly collective. The pleasure of the esthetic effect is not merely affirmed as universal, but implicitly shared by the human community; the peaceful sharing of the esthetic experience is a guarantee of communal harmony, in contrast with the mimetic rivalry provoked by the "shared" desire for a real object. What Kant omits from this experience, along with the intuition of communal solidarity, is the concomitant experience of the transcendence of desire through the oscillation between sign and imaginary object that defines the esthetic experience. As soon as I come to desire the imaginary object, which is to say, to experience an implicit rivalry with my fellows over it, I am obliged to recognize that the source of my imaginary conception is nothing but a representation, that is, something made possible by my existence within the deferral of violence that constitutes the human community. The pleasure in the moment of sharing exists only against a constantly renewed background of "painful" desire that Kant does not mention. (As we shall see, however, Kant does recognize an analogous configuration in his discussion of the sublime.)

We may now revisit Kant's affirmation that esthetic pleasure "can express nothing but the conformity of the object to the cognitive faculties brought into play in the reflective judgment, and so far as they are in play, and hence merely a subjective formal finality of the object." What is unintuitive in Kant's description of "conformity . . . to the cognitive faculties" is precisely what is unanthropological: the "faculties" conformity to which provides the subject's pleasure in the object's "subjective formal finality" are not individual and cognitive but collective and ethical. The ultimate source of our pleasure in the "formal finality" of esthetic representation is not our "cognitive faculties" but our intuition that the community's shared participation in this finality or representational intentionality will protect us from mimetic violence. The esthetic performs a function analogous to that attributed by **Durkheim** to religious ritual: it reinforces our solidarity with the sacred center and, by its mediation, with our fellow members of the human community

As I approach the age at which Kant elaborated his moral and esthetic philosophy, I have come to see his system as the final synthesis of the classical metaphysical vision of the human that still remains the foundation of moral and esthetic philosophy today. Kant looked down from the height of the a priori of pure reason on what he considered the lesser empirical science of anthropology; he never tires of reminding us that the subject-matter of critical philosophy is not homo sapiens but the non-empirical category of "rational creatures." The goal of Generative Anthropology is to bring together in a single model the worlds whose separation Kant was the first philosopher rigorously to respect--the a priori and the empirical, the domain of representation and the domain of reality--by providing a parsimonious model of the historical generation, from within the empirical world, of Reason and its "realm of ends." In the Kantian sense of the word, Generative Anthropology is critical anthropology.

There will be more about Kantian esthetics in future Chronicles.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Originary and/or Kantian Esthetics III: The Esthetic Social Contract

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Although the concept of "representation" (Vorstellung) occupies an analogous place in critical philosophy and in generative anthropology as an activity limited to what **Kant** calls "rational creatures," Kant never specifically associates it with language. A minimal expression of the difference between originary thinking and metaphysics, as represented by its greatest minimalist, is that the former, but not the latter, takes the linguistic sign, doubly articulated as signifier/signified, as the exemplary form of representation.

Although Kant is not unconcerned with the human reciprocity that is the foundation of GA's "moral model," the reciprocity that interests him is not that of empirical communication but that of the virtual communication through which all humans share the moral law or the judgment of taste. Of the two, the latter case, where an experience that is wholly individual and falls under no law is nonetheless implicitly universal, has greater anthropological pregnancy, as befits the intermediary position of the judgment between representation and worldly reality. In describing what he calls the "empirical" value of this experience, Kant outlines in a single sentence a scene of reciprocal exchange closer to that of the originary hypothesis than to those of the social contract theorists that preceded him:

The empirical interest in the beautiful exists only in society. And if we admit that the impulse to society is natural to mankind, and that the suitability for and the propensity towards it, i.e., sociability, is a property essential to the requirements of man as a creature intended for society, and one, therefore, that belongs to humanity, it is inevitable that we should also look upon taste in the light of a faculty for estimating whatever enables us to communicate even our feeling to every one else, and hence as a means of promoting that upon which the natural inclination of everyone is set.

With no one to take into account but himself, a man abandoned on a desert island would not adorn either himself or his hut, nor would he look for flowers, and still less plant them, with the object of providing himself with personal adornments. Only in society does it occur to him to be not merely a man, but a man refined after the manner of his kind (the beginning of civilization)--for that is the estimate formed of one who has the bent and turn for communicating his pleasure to others, and who is not quite satisfied with an object unless his feeling of delight in it can be shared in communion with others. **Further, a regard to universal communicability is a thing which every one expects and requires from every one else , just as if it were part of an original compact dictated by humanity itself. [Auch erwartet und**

fordert ein jeder die Rücksicht auf allgemeine Mitteilung von jedermann, gleichsam als aus einem ursprünglichen Verträge, der durch die Menschheit selbst diktiert ist] And thus, no doubt, at first only charms, e.g., colors for painting oneself (roucou among the Caribs and cinnabar among the Iroquois), or flowers, sea-shells, beautifully colored feathers, then, in the course of time, also beautiful forms (as in canoes, wearing-apparel, etc.) which convey no gratification, i.e., delight of enjoyment, become of moment in society and attract a considerable interest. Eventually, when civilization has reached its height it makes this work of communication almost the main business of refined inclination, and the entire value of sensations is placed in the degree to which they permit of universal communication. At this stage, then, even where the pleasure which each one has in an object is but insignificant and possesses of itself no conspicuous interest, still the idea of its universal communicability almost indefinitely augments its value. (II, 41: "The empirical interest in the beautiful"; boldface mine.)

Having made this ur-anthropological connection between the "original compact" of humanity and the "universal communicability" of esthetic representations, Kant hastens in the following paragraph to deny its ontological significance:

This interest, indirectly attached to the beautiful by the inclination towards society, and, consequently, empirical, is, however, of no importance for us here. For that to which we have alone to look is what can have a bearing a priori, even though indirect, upon the judgment of taste. For, if even in this form an associated interest should betray itself, taste would then reveal a transition on the part of our critical faculty, from the enjoyment of sense to the moral feeling. This would not merely mean that we should be supplied with a more effectual guide for the final employment of taste, but taste would further be presented as a link in the chain of the human faculties a priori upon which all legislation must depend. This much may certainly be said of the empirical interest in objects of taste, and in taste itself, that as taste thus pays homage to inclination, however refined, such interest will nevertheless readily fuse also with all inclinations and passions, which in society attain to their greatest variety and highest degree, and the interest in the beautiful, if this is made its ground, can but afford a very ambiguous transition from the agreeable to the good. We have reason, however, to inquire whether this transition may not still in some way be furthered by means of taste when taken in its purity.

The reference to "purity" in the last sentence is a segue to the following section on the "intellectual interest" in the beautiful; for Kant, following **Rousseau**, an esthetic interest in nature, but not in art, is a sign of moral value. ("Now I willingly admit that the interest in the beautiful of art . . . gives no evidence at all of a habit of mind attached to the morally good . . . But, on the other hand, I do maintain that to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature . . . is always a mark of a good soul" [II, 42].) The "original compact" is characterized by reciprocal exchange, as emphasized by the sentence structure, with its opposition between ein jeder and jedermann, erwartet and fordert. Yet the collective entity formed by this exchange is "of no importance for us here," and this because it is from the outset, and all the more as humanity advances from the Caribs and Iroquois to the height of civilization, contaminated with society's "inclinations and passions." Even considered a priori, taste cannot be "a link [Mittelglied] in the

chain of the human faculties" because the "homage" it pays to inclination puts in danger the disinterested nature of the pleasure that it judges "in its purity."

This passage illustrates perhaps more strikingly than any other both the kinship between the critical philosophy and GA and the divide that separates them. Kant's a priori is, like **Plato's** realm of ideas, a world of sacred representation, but where Plato simply hypostatizes the products of representation, lifting human words up into the sky, Kant's a priori guarantees the vertical-transcendental realm of representation itself by separating it ontologically from the horizontal-empirical world of appetite. But the necessity of an absolute separation between the two worlds requires that the genesis of one from the other can never be conceived nor, consequently, explained.

Kant's dualism comes closest to synthesis in the esthetic domain. The judgment of taste returns the "cognitive faculties" from the conceptual analysis of the natural world to a reflection on their originary nature; moreover, this operation depends on the existence of a community that at least virtually shares and mutually communicates this experience. It is but a short step from this configuration to a hypothetical scene of origin, yet this step is as impossible for Kant as the leap of an inhabitant of Flatland into the third dimension.

Kant's Carib and Iroquois ornaments are of a sacred character, like the sacred objects of the "Aranda" in which, in **Durkheim's** analysis, the unity of the social order is incarnate, but Kant's Rousseauian privileging of the individual over society blinds him to the derivation of the "charms" of the esthetic from the critical social function of the sacred. The esthetic, even the sublime, are cut off from the discussion of the transcendental religious questions--the existence of God, the immortality of the soul--that we find in the previous Critiques. Esthetic pleasure is a worldly experience that intuits transcendence directly, without the need for the transcendental guarantees--the existence of God, the immortality of the soul--required by the upholder of the moral law. Yet it is not coincidental that the texts we are discussing are found, not in the Analytic of Beauty where Kant defines the moments of esthetic experience, but in the Analytic of the Sublime. There is in fact relatively little specific analysis of the sublime in this section, but its liberation from the closure of beautiful form makes the sublime the privileged locus not only of the awe before natural phenomena to which **Vico** attributes our first intuition of the sacred but of the genesis of transcendence from immanence, whose mystery only anthropology, not metaphysics, can solve.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

COV&R: The Third Time...

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This month I attended for the third time the annual meeting of **The Colloquium on Violence and**

Religion (COV&R), an organization, founded in 1991, dedicated to the advancement of the "mimetic theory" of **René Girard**. They say the third time is the charm, or as the French put it, *la troisième fois c'est la bonne*. This was certainly my experience.

I had previously attended in 1995, just after the founding of Anthropoetics, and again in 1999 (see [Chronicle 170](#), June 12, 1999), where the general focus was on "violence" rather than on Girard's anthropology, which most speakers either ignored or reduced to a form of victimary thinking. The group's demography was becoming less academic and, seemingly, less intellectually productive. This made me wonder about its future.

I am happy to say that the meeting just concluded at **Purdue University** both confirmed COV&R's staying power and cemented my own ties to the organization, which generously made me an honorary lifetime member of its governing board--an honor shared only by COV&R's American and European founders **Jim Williams** and **Raymund Schwager** and by Girard himself. For all concerned, this was a triumph of love over resentment, both in my own integration into the organization, and, in parallel, in the rapprochement between the fundamental ideas of "mimetic theory" and those of GA.

The subject of the conference, masterfully organized by **Sandy Goodhart**, a long-time Girardian who directs the **Jewish Studies Center** at Purdue, was "**Judaism, Christianity, and the Ancient World.**" A number of eminent biblical scholars were present, whose talks I was forced to miss because UCLA was still holding classes. The subject-matter, being both religious and scholarly, generated great intellectual as well as spiritual energy.

Girard's central objection to GA was summed up in a point he raised at my talk: that language is not primary because the first uniquely human act is an act of interdiction rather than representation. As I pointed out in reply, the fundamental premise of GA is that representation is interdiction. The fact that we have evolved a complex vocal apparatus adapted for speech means that language must have begun long before this apparatus had reached its mature state. The absence of the apparatus in the early stages of this evolution, lasting perhaps hundreds of thousands of years, makes it plausible that throughout this time language was confined to the ritual context. The sacralizing, interdicting gesture of ritual is the originary gesture of language, and the two no doubt remained inseparable for most of human history.

It seemed to me as I spoke that the COV&R membership could see, in most cases for the first time, that there was no fundamental difference between our positions. What subsists is the difference between a minimalist anthropology and one whose privileged commemoration of the Christian revelation must be understood as an ethical choice of faith over minimal reason as the necessary basis for the human community.

But where, Girard might have asked, is the scapegoat in all this? Scapegoating provides the plausible link between mimetic crisis and human sacrifice that founds Girardian anthropology, which rejects the deferral or *différance* associated with the sign as presupposing a "social contract." No such contract is required to sanction collective violence against a central figure, which we can observe already in animal societies. But where animals attack strangers, whether or not of the same species, the Girardian scapegoat is a member of the community, chosen arbitrarily rather than instinctively. Collective violence against the scapegoat is presumably carried out without deferral and consequently without formal representation; the collective dynamism is self-reinforcing. Once we see the others piling on, we pile on too, just as each fly in a swarm imitates the movement of the leaderless group.

But, as this last example shows, "arbitrary" collective aggression is not in itself a sign of the human. Instinct-driven creatures too respond in chaotic ways to small variations in their environment. What minimally defines the human is collective participation in an event that can subsequently be commemorated, that is, represented. What distinguishes the scapegoat as victim of human violence from the prehuman object of collective aggression is its representation by a sign, shared by all members of the community, that can be recalled in commemoration of the scapegoating event. Just "piling on" creates no interdiction and no sacred.

Defining the human by the sacred interdiction of violence contrasts with the metaphysical angelism that constructs "reason" independently of humanity and its evolutionary origin, while pinpointing the fideistic supplément of religion. The "rational" mind emerges, if at all, only from the mind of God; the human mind, on the contrary, must be conceived as emerging from a prehuman state. Human self-understanding is predicated on a model of scenic origin in a historically specific event. To posit this originary scene as an abstract necessity gives us a minimal generative anthropology; to flesh out its specificity as a revelation, historical in the broadest sense of the term, is the founding gesture of religion. The goal of originary thinking (which may be distinguished from generative anthropology as the dynamic act is distinguished from its static product) is to make vanishingly small the difference between religious specificity and anthropological abstraction by elucidating the religious revelation's anthropological content. Girard's conception of Christianity as revealing "things hidden since the foundation of the world" is a decisive step in this direction, one that I see my own work as filling out rather than contradicting.

Why should the world be concerned with our conversation? To what extent is the mimetic model that COV&R is devoted to preserving a means for understanding and for usefully modifying human reality? In my talk, I developed briefly the notion, familiar to readers of these Chronicles, that human society is from the beginning a "market" that originates not in a horizontal exchange of goods but in an exchange of signs designating the sacred--that which is absolutely outside the world of the marketplace. It is sacred exchange that permits the existence of secular exchange, where the symbols that emerged to designate the sacred can be reduced to electronic markers of quantity. This origin remains relevant to every market transaction, and not merely in the broad sense that rather emptily attributes all market activity to the operations of mimetic desire. To recognize this origin is to understand that modern consumer society, where articles of consumption are deliberately packed with symbolic value, is both the Satanic manipulation of desire denounced by religious reactionaries and secular progressives and at the same time a resurgence of originary sacred exchange as the crucial element of the rational exchange system.

The confusion on this subject is no mere conceptual error. Modern society, driven by the compensatory symmetries of desire, seeks to realize on earth the perfect reciprocity of the transcendental Kingdom of God; yet every success in this realization is at the same time a Satanic temptation to forsake its heavenly model. Nor is the understanding of this paradox sufficient to resolve it. The sacred model remains absolutely different from its attempted realization, and in a yet more radical sense than the circle we can never draw on the blackboard. The world operates within mimetic desire and the sacred outside it; in emulating the latter, the former leads us not out of the hell of desire but farther into it.

The crucial nature of this debate has been burned into our minds by the violent events that continue to mark, most cruelly last September 11, the conflict between the market system and the terror its evolution seems inexorably to generate. However optimistic we may be concerning this system's power over the natural world, it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive how it will withstand the resentment it generates in the human world. If the worldly "implementation" of the Christian Kingdom of God is

ambiguously a scandal to Christians, it is unambiguous anathema to those whose religion denounces not merely the scandal of substituting the real for the transcendent but the ethic of reciprocity itself, insofar as it is emancipated from a specific historical revelation and its Law.

Although Islam rejected the Christian Trinity for the sake of Hebrew monotheism, it has not reaped the dubious benefits that the market system has conferred on the Jews. The "democratic" nature of its monotheism, its catholicity in submission to God's word have proven rather an obstacle than an aid to the formation of political democracy and its associated economy--a world-historical demonstration if there ever was one that the source of all values exchanged on the market is a particular relationship to the sacred. The Jews' status as the first nation and self-declared "chosen people" guarantees this particularity independently of any specific market context, provoking in response history's most durable and context-free resentment.

The great question of the twenty-first century is whether the market system can reach beyond its remarkable success in recycling the resentments of its active participants to those who see themselves not strategically but radically outside the system, despite the fact that there is no place "outside" to be. The radicals' "irrational" denial that they are indeed within the market system leads quite logically to suicide bombing, since the only way to demonstrate the non-recuperation of one's act of destruction as a value in the market is to destroy oneself at the same time. The radical rejection of a world that knows nothing but exchange requires the refusal of the exchange-value generated by one's rejection--a conclusion few Western romantics have been prepared to draw. These voluntary martyrs bear witness not to the power of faith, as did the early Christian martyrs who were persecuted for this faith, but to the transcendent power of resentment over a worldly social order whose dependence on the sacred and its violent foundation is thereby affirmed.

It is by no means clear which side will win out in this struggle between the secularized sacred of the West and the anti-secular sacred of the "Orient." What I do think is clear is that originary analysis alone explains the anthropology of this conflict, from which derives its otherwise mysterious psychology. The survival of Western civilization may not hinge on its espousal of generative anthropology, but the path of lucid reflection on the dangers it faces leads inexorably to originary thinking, by whatever name it may come to be called.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Anthropology and Mortality

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The fundamental human paradox is that language is timeless but its users are not. The only way out of

this dilemma--one that will bear witness neither to our immortality nor to our simple materiality--is to postulate that the users of language must be mortal, that this very mortality is at the origin of language. Our minimal article of faith must be the anthropological nature of signification. God can make us immortal with respect to human violence because this violence, which makes us aware of our mortality in the first place, is subject to the deferral of the scene of representation. Yet mortality, on our awareness of which culture depends, is a biological reality from which our sacred cannot permanently protect us.

We go beyond **Durkheim's** conception of the sacred as a substitute for the human collectivity when we attribute to it the primary function of deferring human violence and the death that we fear from it. While religion commemorates the ostensive designation that constitutes the scene of origin, metaphysics inhabits the decontextualized scene of the declarative proposition, guaranteed by the deferral of violence that this designation provides. The ahistoricity of the declarative, which makes it capable of representing history and our personal relationship to death, defers at the same time its revelation of the historicity of its origin. The metaphysical era is the time of this deferral. To attempt to emerge from this era by situating the abstract scene of metaphysics within human history is, in fact, to formulate an originary hypothesis.

When metaphysics comes to reflect on its own presuppositions, a process that reaches its most rigorous level in **Kant**, it discovers the paradox inherent in the idea of a mortal user of signs. Kant's "antinomies" all express this paradox. Thus, Kant argues, for us to accept rationally the universal moral law of reciprocity, we must posit a God to guarantee the law and an eternity in which to "perfect ourselves" so as to live it as our own nature. These transcendental exigencies, which no empirical evidence can justify, are equivalent in Kant's own minimal anthropology to the minimal empirical exigencies of the originary scene. The divine guarantee is that of the deferral of mimetic conflict, the soul's immortality, that of the representations that commemorate this deferral.

The link between the moral and the sacred is a priori, but the sacred is not a merely speculative means of reconciling the individual with the universal; it is what subsists and recalls to us the originary experience of this, necessarily provisional, historical reconciliation. Nor is there a moment at eternity when this reconciliation might transcend its status as deferral and be liberated from the contingency of time. If we can nonetheless comprehend and enunciate the moral law, it is because the representational form in which this enunciation is accomplished is generated in response to this very contingency. The existence of God and the immortality of the soul appear within Kant's system, and within metaphysics in general, as aporias because they function paradoxically to define the genesis of the system itself.

Yet to accept that all meaning, including that of my own death, is the product of the common human need to defer human violence only deepens the paradox. The existentialist response, that of **Kierkegaard** to **Hegel**, or **Dostoevsky** to the Crystal Palace, is that, whatever its source, my language is my own because my death is my own; because my life is limited by its own temporal horizon, neither ontology nor anthropology can help me decide how to live it.

Our intellectual enterprises that go beyond the needs of the moment fall into two domains, the cognitive and the spiritual, corresponding roughly to those of Kant's *Verstand* and *Vernunft*.

Cognitive activity is in principle cumulative and unbounded, with practical implications likewise unlimited. Although this activity may be the basis of a career whose rhythms respect our anticipated life span, empirical knowledge and the methods by which we acquire it have no direct relationship to our mortality.

Scientific progress has no direct correlation with the temporality of human life, nor is the inevitable supersession of the models we construct analogous to biological decay.

In contrast, the spiritual search for "wisdom" or "enlightenment" is a personal enterprise that has meaning only within my own life. Each person seeks a *modus vivendi* for his mortal self in the world of mimetic desire; the external forms of public ritual are powerful stimulants to spirituality, but cannot substitute for it. Although it may take a lifetime to acquire it, spiritual knowledge is not cumulative; its acquisition is a conversion rather than a process of accumulation. **Heidegger's** notion of resoluteness (*Erschlossenheit*) as the acceptance of being-toward-death is the most coherent modern formulation of this spiritual goal.

Where does originary thinking stand with respect to this dichotomy? Irrespective of its cognitive consequences, the assertion of the minimalist *a priori* that is the germ of originary thinking is more a punctual act than a moment of an ongoing process independent of our temporal existence. Cognitive activity comes closest to spiritual experience in the moments of intuition in which new intellectual paradigms are created. Although the paradigm of the originary hypothesis proceeds from such a moment, its minimality makes it ill-suited to the establishment of a research program; in **Thomas Kuhn's** terminology, no "normal science" can be conducted under its aegis. Nor is the originary hypothesis a likely source of spiritual enlightenment; a minimalist understanding of the human has no immediate existential implications. The activity of originary thinking falls between the cognitive and the spiritual, just as the terrain of generative anthropology falls between those of social science and religion.

In a recent personal communication, **Jose Carrubba** suggests that these anthropological "truths" are in the first place expressions of my personal will to power. Aware that originary thinking demands a resoluteness whose very universality--the originary scene is the same for all--makes it incapable of providing an example for others, Carrubba recommends a **Nietzschean** interpretation of the originary scene as that of each human being's self-construction. But Nietzsche's anthropology has already been tried, with monstrous consequences. To define one's ontology--and one's ethics--as that of an "artist" is to condemn it to either idleness or inhumanity. On the contrary, to dare to think the fundamental question of the human as already solved, and as solvable only under the condition of believing it thus, with a faith limited to this proposition alone, is to express a credo that one can neither simply advise others to reproduce nor claim as a unique "artistic" gesture. The steadfastness of this conviction makes me spiritually ready for death yet prepared to pursue indefinitely the cognitive task of elucidating the implications of this minimalist conception of the human.

In the context of a global community that must henceforth be taken as a single unit, to define the human by the deferral of violence through the exchange of representations is to accept as one's goal the achievement of what Kant called perpetual peace: a world from which large-scale manifestations of violence have been "perpetually" excluded. The most powerful ecological reminders of our finitude pale before the human reminder inflicted on us on **September 11**, and on who knows how many more September 11ths. The pursuit of the infinite enterprise of human self-knowledge depends in our era, for the first time since the origin of humanity, on the short-term success of humanity's spiritual enterprise. The best use for anyone's finitude is in the attempt to realize, each in his own sphere, the truth of human reciprocity that has guaranteed until now the immortality of the human race.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Who Are We Now?

No. 265: Saturday, July 20, 2002

Thanks to **Gil Bailie** of the **Florilegia Institute**, I recently had the opportunity to read **Nicholas Boyle's** *Who Are We Now?* (Notre Dame, 1998). Boyle's survey of the contemporary historical situation, its (mostly German) intellectual background, and its ethical exigencies illustrates, beyond the writer's impressive intelligence and erudition, and in a mode very nearly complementary to **Girard's** mimetic vision, the great anthropological insight of which Christian thought is capable. This collection of ten essays ranging in subject-matter from the critique of **Thatcherism** to the interpretation of modern poetry expresses a coherent vision of our era, centrally informed by the thought of **Hegel**, whom Boyle sees as fundamentally a Christian thinker. This brilliant analysis suffers only from the limitations inherent in any non-generative anthropology.

Boyle begins his book with a couple of topical attacks on Thatcherism, defined as the surrender of all traditional values to those of the global market under the cover of an illusory façade of nationalism. His critique sounds at first like a refined version of the usual liberal anti-capitalist polemic, written in language reminiscent of the Communist Manifesto:

In the Thatcherist view, there is nothing else, beyond the satisfaction of desires. . . In the language of Thatcherism, people--that is, workers--must be flexible or unemployed. . . They are in short to be dismembered, reduced to a series of functions that they exercise in accordance with no principle of continuity of their own choosing, but only with the demands of the market. . . The assumption behind the demand for flexibility in the workers--which denies them the continuity of a fixed identity--is that as consumers too they will have no fixed or limited desires . . . In the Thatcherist society we each become a Faust, whose endless and innumerable desires can all be satisfied provided only that he gives up his identity, his soul. (27-28)

As we follow Boyle's argument, however, we soon learn that neither Thatcher nor anyone else in today's world can escape the dominance of the global market. What is wrong with Thatcherism is not its acceptance of globalization, but its nostalgic refusal to face globalization's primary corollary: the dissolution of class and national differences in what Boyle calls, following **Marx**, our universal "proletarianization." In the era of the global market, the traditional bourgeoisie, defined as those who, even when they don't live without working, don't have to work to live, is virtually defunct: everybody works for a wage. Even **Bill Gates** doesn't live on his income, because the only well-defined social role for someone who lives on his income is retirement. Boyle's perceptive hypothesis is that the real object of Thatcher's nostalgic nationalism is the pre-WWI imperial bourgeoisie, whose detachment from labor allowed it to maintain the illusion of participating in the market as consumer but not as producer.

Given the sharpness of his historical analysis, I find it unfortunate that Boyle ignores the defining feature of consumer society, theorized by **Baudrillard** and others, and already visible to **Flaubert**: the productivity of consumption as an expression of mimetic desire. Boyle's vision of consumption as an insatiable quest, stimulated by advertising, for new sensual gratifications is virtually identical to that of the **Frankfurt School**, except that the inexorable market forces that drive the process do not serve Capitalism, but, at worst, capitalists encouraged to be greedier than they need be by callous politicians in the Thatcher mode.

It is misleading to associate the condition in which "everyone works" with Marx's notion of proletarianization, defined as the reduction of the human individual to a uniformly minimal state of existence in which every calorie beyond bare survival is expended in producing the "labor power" of the next generation. Although the loss of status implicit in Marx's term may reflect the self-consciousness of the European imperial bourgeoisie, the transition to a social model in which all are expected both to work and consume might with more justification be called "Americanization"--assimilation to the mode of national life that puts the greatest, rather than the least, stress on personal identity. Our "proletarianized" society has replaced the nineteenth century's crude bourgeois-proletarian dichotomy--which Boyle astutely sees as dependent, in its mature form, on the even cruder homeland-colony dichotomy--with a far more interactive and polymorphic, but no less real, system of mimetically driven subcultural distinctions.

The non-mimetic concept of desire that distorts Boyle's vision of the global market inspires an economic vision of history surprising in a committed humanist. Boyle is surely right to describe the agonies of world history since the late nineteenth century as the painful transition between European bourgeois empire and the emerging global market. But are these modes of human interaction best described in economic terms? Was modern colonialism a fundamentally economic process, as **Lenin** affirmed in his 1916 *Imperialism: The Last Stage of Capitalism*? Boyle hints at the contrary when he refers to the colonies as providing an outlet for "the disturbed, the displaced, and the ambitious" (114) from the homeland. The economic value of colonies is not a simple given; French colonialism was conducted on the assumption that they cost more than they brought in. They provided for the exportation, not primarily of goods, but of resentments, both literally and symbolically. Not only could the dissatisfied make their fortune in the colonies, but the metropolitan population's self-image was raised by its participation, however remote, in a master-slave relationship with "subaltern" peoples. Colonialism cannot be reduced to the kind of brutal exploitation that took place in the Belgian Congo; the "white man's burden" was not a mere fig-leaf for oppression. What is wrong with unequal relationships is not that they are cruel and oppressive, but simply that they are unequal.

The Second World War, which first made this timeless intuition into a controlling principle, is the crux of the conflict between Boyle's economism and his humanism. On the one hand, Boyle sees WWII as a phase of the "75 years' war" between 1914 and 1989 that marked the transition to the new global era. On the other hand, the war's proximate cause is **Nazism**, which Boyle, unwilling to hold **Nietzsche** blameless for his intellectual heirs, understands as a perverted Nietzscheism. Boyle attributes to Nietzsche the invention of the pernicious "middle mode" so characteristic of post-modern discourse: the deliberate confusion of referential and metaphoric language that reduces truth to will-to-power. Yet he does little to clarify Nazism's place in history.

We may temper Boyle's fundamental point concerning nineteenth-century colonial empires with our interpretation of colonialism as primarily a means for exporting the resentments generated by the bourgeois economy during its transition from the era of "primitive accumulation" that impoverished the working class to modern consumer society. During this period, universal suffrage was the political complement of the economy's integration of the homeland proletariat into the market as an actor/consumer. This analysis suggests that the stunted nature of Germany's colonial empire, in contrast with those of England or France, was the precipitating factor in WWI. The difference was one of degree rather than kind, just as was the marginally greater "Prussian" brutality; **Renoir's** Grand Illusion is the great esthetic statement of this fundamental symmetry.

The loss of WWI stripped Germany of her colonies while provoking the runaway inflation that ruined her bourgeoisie. That the resentments thus generated were the force behind **Hitler's** rise is obvious enough. But his obsessive focus on the **Jews**, which the Nazis themselves, before taking power, felt called upon to explain in posters headed: "Why We Are Anti-Semitic," requires explanation. The **Holocaust** is the ultimate form of the modern anti-Semitism that evolved step by step with European embourgeoisement: the Jews, the archetypal stateless nation, were made the fantastic Subject of the subjectless, transnational marketplace. But Boyle's reminder of the importance of colonial empire suggests an additional factor. It was only after the war against the Jews that colonialism lost its legitimacy, which had scarcely been questioned in the course of the war itself, where colonial soldiers were required to serve the interests of the mother country.

It may sound crude to suggest that the Germans, deprived after WWI of the few colonies they had managed to acquire, chose the Jews to fill the same "subaltern" slot. Yet I think this rapprochement holds the key to the proper understanding both of the causes of the Holocaust and of its effects on postwar victimary sensibility. The particular virulence of Nazi anti-Semitism arises from its being the ultimate form of the abstract, "Germanic" substitute for colonialism that had been an important theme of German/Austrian politics since the 1870s. By exporting their resentment not to a far-off land but to a "nation" inextricably meshed with their own, the Nazis revealed the immorality of the institutional relations that supported this exportation.

Colonialism is ostensibly benevolent, or, at the very least, dictated by a notion of some kind of useful interaction between colonizers and colonized. Nazism reduces the colonial relation to what will henceforth be seen as its essence: victimization. Thus, where the worst type of colonialism worked the colonized to death for the colonizers' financial gain, the Nazis extracted financial gain from the Jews, down to hair and gold teeth, as a by-product of their death. As a result, if Nazi anti-Semitism began as a substitute for bourgeois empire, after the Holocaust, bourgeois empire seemed to be a substitute for Nazi anti-Semitism.

It is in this context that we must situate what Boyle sees as the politico-philosophical failure of post-Nietzschean philosophy--in particular, that of **Heidegger**. The existentialist world is a world without exchange. Where the nineteenth-century realist novelists Boyle admires explored the means by which the exchange process itself absorbed the resentments it generated, twentieth-century German thought was driven to project these resentments onto the metaphoric sacred of the "middle mode" of discourse.

The possession of empire permits an ironic detachment with respect to the exchange relations of the local society; the lack of control over one's own destiny in the market is mitigated both materially and morally by the superior status of the colonizer. In the absence of empire, this posture is unavailable; the marketplace is seen as a realm either of incomprehensible sacrifice (**Kafka**) or of a forgetting of Being unworthy of the "resolute" soul. Through the existentialist disdain for *das Man* and his "values" we substitute our individual rejection of the zero-sum game of market status for the socially guaranteed superiority of colonizer to colonized. However, inasmuch as the colonial's superiority is not mere fancy but founded on real institutions, so, too, the "resolute" individual's superiority to the world of exchange calls for institutional expression, namely, in a German society obsessed with its loathing for those who incarnate for it the spirit of the marketplace.

Boyle's laudable aim is to define an ethic for our time that will prepare us to define ourselves transnationally, as citizens of the world. I share his view that the evolving European community, bureaucratic and amorphous as it may be, is the most significant extant model of post-state political structure. I wonder, however, particularly in the light of **September 11**, whether the path to our future survival does not require of us a more positive defense of "Thatcherist" consumer society as the only effective model for peacefully integrating within the global marketplace the resentments that it will never cease to generate.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The Last Imperialist

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Coincidentally, while I was reading **Nicholas Boyle's** *Who are we now?*, discussed in [Chronicle 265](#), I was also plowing through **Winston Churchill's** six-volume memoir of World War II. The two works have mutual resonances beyond the fact that they were both written by Englishmen.

Churchill was one of the great personalities of the twentieth century. No one incarnates as he does the moral force of the victors of WWII. His memoirs reveal him to be not only a political leader and military strategist but also a manager attentive to the tiniest war-related detail, from the design of uniforms to the spelling of words in official communiqués. Despite bouts of ill health, Churchill devoted every ounce of his

energy to the fight against **Hitler**, meeting with other world leaders in Washington, Québec, Teheran, Moscow, and Yalta, and visiting near-battle zones in Egypt, Italy, and France, the latter only a few days after D-Day.

The subordination of all considerations to a single overriding goal that made Churchill so powerful a leader is also what makes his world appear so very different from the postmodern world from which we are now emerging. In Chronicle 265 I discussed Boyle's demonstration that the maturation of the nineteenth-century European market system was dependent on colonial empire (replaced, one might speculate, by the frontier cum Indians and in the United States). Churchill was the last great subject of the British Empire on which the sun never set and which he had no intention of renouncing after the war, knowing full well that it was the Empire that made Great Britain with its forty-odd millions a major power. Nor, in the fight to save civilization itself, could colonialism be put into question; Indian troops were duty-bound to fight alongside their British masters. Churchill would never have dreamt of comparing the British colonies to Germany's military conquests or Japan's "East Asian co-prosperity sphere." Fortunately, we might add, for any hint of moral equivalence would have had a devastating effect on the war effort.

Although WWII was decided by two powers neither of which fit neatly into the system of bourgeois empires, the "post-colonial" United States and **Uncle Joe's** Soviet Union--which Churchill inevitably refers to as "Russia"--Churchill was Hitler's exemplary antagonist because he remained, as **Roosevelt** and Stalin did not, wholly a protagonist of imperial war, untouched by the scruples that would dominate the victimary era. For Churchill, domination is not evil in itself: the British Empire, motivated by the welfare of its subjects, is good; the barbarous Nazi empire is bad. So is the Italian mini-empire in North Africa, although the principle that European nations should rule African ones could not easily be contested by a supporter of British colonialism. As for the Soviets, perhaps because Stalin was his ally, Churchill never speaks of the Russian domination of Central Asian peoples as a form of colonialism.

Whether in the context of Boyle's "75 year's war" or in Churchill's own, the morality play of WWII is the battle between good and bad Empire, the benevolent British kind versus the barbarous Nazi kind. Few choices could be clearer, yet, the choice once made, Empire itself was fatally undermined; henceforth the world would increasingly emphasize, and denounce, the similarity of the two systems rather than their difference. The Nazis' inhuman domination of the Other, born of the frustrated lack of opportunity for the more benign variety that built the British Empire, will increasingly be taken for the model of Empire itself.

But the key element that makes the Churchillian morality play so foreign to us is that it excludes the most morally significant event of the war. Churchill openly expressed his distaste for Nazi anti-Semitism, notably during a visit to Germany on the sole occasion on which he might have met Hitler; he also offered support, including arms shipments, for the Jews in Palestine, although he did nothing to permit European Jews to emigrate there. Yet there is no reference to the **Holocaust** in the text, only a single, albeit emphatic one in the "minutes" of directives and communications included in the appendix of the final volume:

Prime Minister to Foreign Secretary [Anthony Eden], July 11, 1944

There is no doubt that this [see below] is probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world, and it has been done by scientific machinery by nominally civilized men in the name of a great State and one of the leading races of Europe. It is quite clear that all concerned in this crime who may fall into our hands, including the people who only obeyed orders by carrying out the butcheries, should be put to death . . .

(VI, 693)

The text glosses "this" in brackets as "persecution of the Jews in Hungary and their expulsion from enemy territory," but Churchill's language strongly suggests that he was reacting to Nazi Jewish policy on a much broader level. It is all the more significant, then, that he did not see fit to comment on history's greatest crime in the body of the book. Clearly Churchill knew of, and deplored, the death-camps and massacres, but they were simply not a factor in the war. Hitler was a hateful tyrant whose defeat was an absolute necessity; his particularly cruel treatment of the Jews could add nothing to this necessity.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell 1989), perhaps the most intelligent analysis I have read on the subject, **Zygmunt Bauman** insists on the Holocaust's essential modernity or, more precisely, on modernity's essential aptitude for holocausts. In contrast to those who see mass murder either as an eternal possibility of fallen humanity or as a throwback to barbarism led by an unusual concentration of "authoritarian personalities," Bauman points to its dependence on the instrumental rationalism not only of modern technology but above all of modern bureaucracy. Only in an advanced industrial society can a group of people be isolated from their neighbors and treated as so many items for "processing." Not only is each detail of the slaughter performed without emotion in the task-oriented world of the civil servant, but, still more frighteningly, the victims themselves were caught up in the Nazis' cleverly implemented instrumental logic, making choices that at each point appeared to offer the greatest possibility of survival but that collectively only facilitated the final solution. (There is a flaw in this brilliant analysis of the dangers of modernity. As in so many critiques of one or another aspect of the market system, Bauman is fighting the last war. The Holocaust inspires in postmodern society an ever-increasing sensitivity to the victimary condition, so much so that this sensitivity may come to pose a greater danger to civilization than victimization.)

How does Bauman's **Weberian** model of bureaucracy run amok fit into the historical context of WWII as seen by Churchill and Boyle? The latter concur in viewing the war as a battle of empires, with little or no reference to either bureaucracy or anti-Semitism. Yet Boyle's concept of a globalizing economy implies a highly rationalized division of labor; similarly, Churchill's micro-management of the war would have been unthinkable without a complex civil and military chain of command constantly at work transforming his directives into realities. But although Churchill opposed with utter conviction Britain's good Empire to Hitler's evil one, he would very likely have admitted that the dedicated and courageous British soldiers, workers, and civil servants all had their counterparts in Germany. He several times pays homage to the tenacity of the German army, asserting controversially his right to praise **Rommel** as a gallant foe. The contrast that counts in Churchill's universe is that of sociopolitical ends rather than organizational means. Unlike Bauman, Churchill is not afraid of bureaucracy; his enemy is tyranny. No doubt totalitarianism is inconceivable without bureaucracy, but so is the modern democracy that alone can combat it. Churchill's imperial self-confidence gives him little insight into either the petty resentment of bureaucracy or Hitler's unique obsession with Jews; he sees the world in terms of good and evil agents rather than of mutually resentful oppressors and victims.

Bauman is not unaware that the bureaucratic dehumanization that produced the Holocaust is incompatible with political democracy; as he puts it, "pluralism is the best preventive medicine against morally normal people engaging in morally abnormal actions" (165). Democracy, in turn, is for Boyle a product of empire; the institution of universal suffrage in the home country depends on the existence of a disenfranchised colonial population. Under the condition of Empire, rationalization is incompatible with dehumanization, or, more precisely, the relative dehumanization of the distant colonized precludes the

absolute dehumanization of the nearby Jews.

The birth of consumer society, Boyle points out, is also dependent on Empire, both for the existence of a bourgeois leisure class who consume without producing and for the Empire's gift to the metropolitan middle and eventually working classes of the opportunity to emulate the bourgeois life-style. But the beginning of consumer society is also that of modern anti-Semitism; the consumer, sensing his desire mimetically manipulated by the market, constructs "the Jew" as the market's demonized Subject in order to explain this sense of powerlessness, and, eventually, to rectify it through anti-Semitic action. Jews and colonials play complementary roles with respect to the resentment generated by the exchange system: in one case, as a surrogate object for this resentment, in the other, as a compensatory outlet for its energies. Since it stems from a sentiment of inferiority rather than superiority, anti-Semitism is more virulent than colonialism, particularly when there is no colonialism to temper it. As we go from Britain to France to Germany, anti-Semitism itself takes on a darker tone: the Briton's aversion to Jews on the model of colonial relations gives way to the Nazi's obsessive hatred. Most of Churchill's references to Jews are to the Jews of Palestine, whom he considers loyal subjects of the Empire like the inhabitants of India; there was a Jewish contingent among the imperial troops fighting in Italy.

The memoirs end rather abruptly on a note of political pique following Churchill's unexpected defeat in the July 1945 parliamentary elections. In his campaign he had stressed completion of the war rather than the material interests of the electorate, and his hyperbolic denunciations of Socialism were counter-productive. Universally admired, Churchill would surely have won an American-style presidential election, but the British parliamentary system emphasizes party politics over personal charisma. Only in wartime can the head of a democratic state play the sacrificial leader whose unifying will transcends the resentments of his individual subjects. Hitler's defeat freed the British masses to choose, for the first time, the party of the welfare state. Ironically enough, welfare socialism was invented in late nineteenth-century Germany as a substitute for Empire--and a defense against communist revolution. Now, in postwar Britain, Empire was no longer an acceptable substitute for socialism. The victimary era had begun.

Churchill's account makes it clear that we came pretty close to losing the war. When the British faced the Axis alone in 1940, who other than Churchill--certainly not poor **Chamberlain**--could have held them together? A friend recently sent me this famous Churchillian quote (not included in the war memoirs), which I have posted on my wall to help me get through this year of administrative duties:

[N]ever give in, never give in, never, never, never, never--in nothing, great or small, large or petty--never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. (Harrow School, October 29, 1941)

Churchill could be clever like a fox, but the greatest compliment I can pay him is to call him the last century's supreme hedgehog.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

The New Anti-Semitism

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Gilles William Goldnadel's Nouveau bréviaire de la haine [New Breviary of Hatred] (Editions Ramsay, 2001--the nouveau is a reference to an earlier "breviary" by the anti-Semitism historian **Léon Poliakov**) is a little book written in a punchy polemical style, close to what the French used to call a pamphlet. Yet few books have more to say about the relation between the **Holocaust**, victimary thinking, and old and new anti-Semitism.

Goldnadel is a Parisian lawyer and defender of Jewish causes whose concern is to trace the origins of the new anti-Semitism that has been manifesting itself so violently, particularly in France, since the second Intifada began in September 2000. His key historical thesis is that the Israeli victory in the six-day war in 1967 was the turning point in attitudes toward Jews in the postwar era. To the idea that the Holocaust was the central catalyst of postmodern victimary thinking, Goldnadel adds the valuable nuance that awareness of the Holocaust (which he and other French writers prefer to call **Shoah**) remained largely latent until this date. **Jean-Michel Chaumont's** La concurrence des victimes [Competition among Victims] (Editions La Découverte, 1997), a study of reaction to the Holocaust referred to in [Chronicle 258](#), attributes this change in Jewish and subsequently general opinion to the time required for the survivors to overcome their guilt (toward the dead) and shame (before the living). Goldnadel's sharper point is that only after the definitive realization of Israel's military strength were both Jews and the world at large ready to accept the reality of the Holocaust as something that had now been put behind them.

Extrapolating from this insight leads us to speculate that Israel's 1967 triumph over her Arab enemies, greeted enthusiastically throughout the Western world, including--hard as it may be to believe--in France, was also the chief catalyst for the radicalization of victimary thinking that came to a head in the pseudo-revolution of 1968, also in France. The 1967-68 period is the apogee of the postmodern era. Just as Marxism was forged in the experience of the failed 1848 revolution, so deconstruction, the most consequential postmodern (anti-)metaphysical system, reflects the failed hopes of 1968. The Vietnam war, the immediate source of the widespread campus revolt of that year in the US, complemented Israel's experience by exemplifying the (apparent) weakness of Western military force against a determined third-world opponent. The US saw itself as fighting a popular revolution in a country far away, whereas Israel was seen as fighting for its life against an alliance of hostile despotic regimes on its borders. Yet, ironically, its very victory would make it possible to apply the Vietnam model to Israel itself.

Goldnadel's analysis draws a dialectical connection between the Holocaust, victimary thinking, and attitudes toward Israel--and, inevitably, toward Jews in general. Until 1967, the Jews were at least tacitly placed on the victimary side of the ledger in the binary persecutor-victim model that took its inspiration from Nazi-Jew relations, if not yet explicitly from the Holocaust. This view of Israel as heir to the victimary status of the Jewish victims of Nazism was echoed, from a very different perspective, by the Arab states, who expected to drive the "unwarlike" Jews into the sea. As a result of its crushing victory, viewed

favorably as the triumph of the underdog, Israel changed places with its neighbors: henceforth, Israel was seen as the dominator rather than the dominated, and, as if in response to this new categorization, the Palestinians--Jordanians before 1967--acquired the victimary status they have preserved, and their leadership exploited, so successfully to this day.

Goldnagel is uninterested in penetrating the ultimate causality of anti-Semitism, which he calls a "virus" in the tradition of the Nazism=plague metaphor of **Camus'** *La peste*. Thus he is content to explain the 1967 transformation of victim-Jew into conqueror-Jew by a kind of Hegelian "ruse of reason" through which the "virus" always finds new ways to propagate itself. One can well understand such fatalism. That "anti-Zionism" is no more than a euphemism for anti-Semitism, itself a racist euphemism for Judeophobia, needs no demonstration. When was the last time Chinese cemeteries in France were desecrated and Chinese people beaten on the streets of Berlin to protest China's occupation of Tibet? Israel, Goldnagel sadly concludes, has become "the Jew among nations." Nor can blanket hostility to Israel, as recently expressed, for example, by the (unreprimanded) French ambassador to Great Britain's calling it "a shitty little country," be dissociated from support for Palestinian terrorism. For their part, the forces backing this terrorism, in Palestine and throughout the Middle East, publish and distribute *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, along with homemade anti-Jewish propaganda of a crudity that would have embarrassed **Julius Streicher** of the Nazi weekly *Der Stürmer*.

The link between anti-Semitism and terrorism is of crucial importance because, since September 11 at least, it has become increasingly clear that the central conflict of the post-millennial era is no longer between "world-systems" or civilizations but between civilization itself and the destructive violence of terrorist organizations. (Last week's shelling of the new Colombian president's inauguration ceremony by "leftist guerillas" is another corroboration.) Whatever form the mature global system takes, it will emerge from the new century's efforts at containing this conflict, which opposes the modern state in its various forms to forces whose violence, whether or not ostensibly directed to some utopian or transcendental end, serves only the cohesion of the terrorist group. Terrorism tacitly expresses the most extreme form of victimary ideology: I kill you to demonstrate that I am your victim (and so you should feel guilty as I kill you). This is the point at which we must, for our own self-preservation, and even for the benefit of those who support the terrorists, reject the victimary model of the postmodern era and defend our civilization, warts and all, from its attackers.

The identification of Jews with power has always been at the heart of anti-Semitism, but only since 1967 has this mythical conspiratorial power become identified with the real power of a state. Today Western anti-Semitism is fueled, as Goldnagel insightfully observes, by an anarchic hostility to state formations that is both a symptom of and a reaction to globalization. In a time when European countries have essentially relinquished military force and are in the process of relinquishing national autonomy, Israel's reliance on its army seems a throwback to a discredited era--"Tsahal," as Goldnagel points out, is the world's only army its detractors call by name, no doubt on the model of **Hitler's Wehrmacht**. The anti-Semitic inclination of the anti-global left is perhaps best exemplified by that of France's **José Bové**, whose claim to fame is having set fire to a MacDonald's. Yet September 11 teaches us that we cannot afford to disdain the state power of democracies, above all, of the United States, the only force that can hope to contain global terrorism.

Today's anti-Semitism is no longer, as could once be claimed, an affirmation of national pride; rejection of Israel is a pretext for hostility to modernity in general. The only alternative to the nihilist violence that would destroy (or "Talibanize") our civilization is dialogue and commerce, exchange of goods and words. I

think Goldnagel would agree that we have an obligation to hope, and act on the hope, that global exchange will triumph over global violence. There is no reason to think that the modern market system has nothing to offer those countries whose leaders now indulge in anti-Semitism as a substitute for a productive economic policy.

One of the more hopeful experiences I have had in recent years is participating with **Ammar Abdulhamid**, a young Syrian intellectual, in a dialogue on some of these issues that has appeared in [Anthropoetics 7, 2](#) as well as (the first half) in the online Arabic journal [Maaber](#) (which also includes [the English text](#)). I have no illusions that these modestly successful Internet publications will exercise any great influence on the inhabitants of either the West or the Middle East. Yet since terrorism, as well as anti-Semitism, with which it is increasingly synonymous, are in the first place refusals of dialogue, it is important to show by example that dialogue is not impossible.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Edmund Burke: Ending the Enlightenment

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Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the author's only important work of political thought, has assured him a place in the Pantheon of modern conservatism. Burke's critique, which seemed overwrought in 1790 but prophetic in 1793, marks the end of Enlightenment confidence in scenic hypotheses. Where **Hobbes**, at the beginning of this era, was driven by the English rebellion of the 1640s to construct an originary model in defense of the monarchical order it challenged, Burke's experience of this rebellion's more radical French descendent leads him to condemn all such models as products of the worst kind of hubris. What he offers in their place is not traditional thought but a self-conscious appeal to historical tradition, a reasoned defense of historical gradualism that the twentieth century might have done better to heed. For Burke, the revolutionary scene is a demonstration that implementing the Enlightenment's radical anthropology produces not a more rational human order but a return to originary chaos:

All circumstances taken together, the French revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world. The most wonderful things are brought about, in many instances by means the most absurd and ridiculous, in the most ridiculous modes, and apparently by the most contemptible instruments. Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragicomic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed and sometimes mix with each other in the mind: alternate contempt and indignation, alternate laughter and tears, alternate scorn and horror. (11-12; all page

numbers refer to the first [1790] edition)

The emotions associated with this scene vary between "laughter and tears" insofar as their subject feels himself or not in danger; their object is "out of nature" in either case. Our feeling toward the Revolution alternates not between love and hate, but between distant "contempt" and proximate "indignation." "Tragicomic" is not taken in its literary-historical sense; it is a "monstrous" mixture of tragedy and comedy--a blend of sublimity and ridiculousness that, a couple of generations later, **Victor Hugo** would extol as the romantic "grotesque." (I will touch on Burke's own theory of the sublime in conclusion.)

For Burke, the scene that founds the political order lies outside it. His concept of the "social contract" is in deliberate opposition to the scenic models of the Enlightenment:

Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure--but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement . . . to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law. (143-44)

The contract that binds us to the state is a "partnership in every virtue and all perfection" across many generations; it cannot be figured as a scene of human accord. In the place of such an accord, Burke substitutes a scene explicitly both originary and transcendental, "the great primeval contract of eternal society." This is no mere rhetorical gesture but the postulation of an originary hypothesis as required by the logic of Burke's argument. The foundation of human society lies "outside" it, at its unique and unrenowable point of origin. The "eternality" of the human society thus founded is what guarantees in turn the "clauses" that define individual states. Burke's originary scene is theistic because only an external sacred can guarantee both the universality of what is in effect a model of morality and the value of its specific historical manifestations. (This is the point of **Kant's** far more explicit argument that the existence of God is necessary to individual moral existence.) If the "social contract" is indeed a partnership between the living, the dead, and the yet to be born, then it is an anthropological rather than merely political contract; it legitimizes no particular social order, but denies legitimacy to any order that disregards its specific place in the continuum that links it with its origin.

But I cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction. Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil

and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind. (7-8)

Burke's characterization of the construction of a political model on the basis of a "simple view" of human actions and concerns as metaphysical is the first of the long series of such critiques that mark the bourgeois era's emerging awareness that the originary function of human "reason" is the cultural deferral of violence. The Enlightenment had identified metaphysics with scholasticism, opposing Reason's clarity to the obscurities of the historical sacred. ("Let us put at the end of nearly every chapter of metaphysics the two letters used by Roman judges when they didn't understand a plea: N. L., non liquet, this is unclear"--Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, 1764.) For Burke, what is metaphysical is precisely these Enlightenment appeals to reason. Metaphysics hypostatizes the philosophical proposition, the context-free declarative sentence, as if it sprung full-fledged from the brow of homo sapiens instead of evolving from more elementary forms, the most primitive of which is the ostensive re-presentation of what is already present. (See **Richard van Oort's** [Epistemology and Generative Theory](#) in *Anthropoetics* I, 1.)

"Restraint upon [the] passions" rather than their sacrifice on the altar of "reason" is the central operation in Burke's political anthropology :

Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it, and exist in much greater clearness and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection; but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to everything they want everything. Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. Among these wants is to be reckoned the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done by a power out of themselves, and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue. In this sense the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights. But as the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances and admit to infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle. (88-89)

Men's potentially violent "passions" and "inclinations" must be subjected to "a power out of themselves." For Burke, in contrast to Hobbes, subjection to central authority does not arise from voluntary self-interested agreement. Its modalities "vary with times and circumstances" and cannot be determined by an "abstract rule," but the source of this power is always external to the political scene. Pace the French revolutionaries, man is a "religious animal."

All other nations [than France] have begun the fabric of a new government, or the reformation of an old, by establishing originally or by enforcing with greater exactness some rites or other of religion. (54)

We know, and what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort. In England we are so convinced of this, that there

is no rust of superstition with which the accumulated absurdity of the human mind might have crusted it over in the course of ages, that ninety-nine in a hundred of the people of England would not prefer to impiety. . . . If our religious tenets should ever want a further elucidation, we shall not call on atheism to explain them. . . . Violently condemning neither the Greek nor the Armenian, nor, since heats are subsided, the Roman system of religion, we prefer the Protestant, not because we think it has less of the Christian religion in it, but because, in our judgment, it has more. We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal.

We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us and amongst many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it. (134-35)

. . . I beg leave to speak of our church establishment, which is the first of our prejudices, not a prejudice destitute of reason, but involving in it profound and extensive wisdom. I speak of it first. It is first and last and midst in our minds. For, taking ground on that religious system of which we are now in possession, we continue to act on the early received and uniformly continued sense of mankind. That sense not only, like a wise architect, hath built up the august fabric of states, but, like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from profanation and ruin, as a sacred temple purged from all the impurities of fraud and violence and injustice and tyranny, hath solemnly and forever consecrated the commonwealth and all that officiate in it. . . .

The consecration of the state by a state religious establishment is necessary, also, to operate with a wholesome awe upon free citizens, because, in order to secure their freedom, they must enjoy some determinate portion of power. To them, therefore, a religion connected with the state, and with their duty toward it, becomes even more necessary than in such societies where the people, by the terms of their subjection, are confined to private sentiments and the management of their own family concerns. All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that they act in trust, and that they are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great Master, Author, and Founder of society. (136-38)

Burke anticipates **Durkheim** in considering religion to be not only the foundation of government but the "basis of civil society," one that can be replaced only by superstition. To abandon religion is to fall into the "drunken delirium" of revolution. Nor is Burke's notion of religion that of the deist's *si Dieu n'existait pas, il fallait l'inventer* [if God didn't exist, we'd have to invent him]. Established religion is the foundation of society, provided this establishment is perpetually accessible to and renewable by the citizenry. When Burke says "[w]e are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal," he is referring to the "zealous" affirmation of the Christian sacred by a community of Bible readers who make it part of their own experience--the religious equivalent of the electorate in England's constitutional monarchy. This is about as specific as Burke gets about religion; the single word "Protestant" added to the overall institution of

Christianity is the sum of his theology.

Burke is not, however, loath to define the Christian sacred by opposition to its "Other." A corollary of his self-conscious traditionalism is an emergent modern anti-Semitism:

[The English revolutionaries] were not like Jew brokers, contending with each other who could best remedy with fraudulent circulation and depreciated paper the wretchedness and ruin brought on their country by their degenerate councils. (70)

The next generation of the [French] nobility will resemble the artificers and clowns, and money-jobbers, usurers, and Jews, who will be always their fellows, metimes their masters. (72)

Are the church lands to be sold to Jews and jobbers or given to bribe new-invented municipal republics into a participation in sacrilege? (80)

These "councils," like those of the **Elders of Zion**, make the Jews "sometimes [the] masters" of the French nobility and, presumably, of France itself--a harbinger of **Drumont's** France juive. Nor can Burke's twelve-times-repeated reference to "Old Jewry," the "dissenting meeting house" in which a **Dr. Price** delivered a pro-revolutionary sermon that is the proximate catalyst of the Reflections, be deemed a coincidence; it cements the association between the "bad scene" of Price's un-Christian sermon and those who have rejected the scene of the Cross.

After Hobbes, with the exception of **Vico**, the Enlightenment abandons the idea of foundational violence. The conclusion of **Voltaire's** *Candide* presents the exchange system as the means to defer the mimetic violence that predominated in the rest of the story--the produce of *Candide's* famous garden is sold at the market in Constantinople--but the passage from violence to exchange is contrastive, not generative. Now Burke, having witnessed the reemergence in France of the Hobbesian state of nature, realizes that the preservation of human society from chaos cannot be achieved through politics alone. The scene on which representations are exchanged requires a guarantee beyond these representations themselves; society must have a sacred basis.

This intuition of the foundational status of the deferral of violence is already visible in Burke's other major work, usually entitled *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, over thirty years before *Reflections*. In terms not uncongenial to evolutionary psychology, Burke derives the sublime from our terror of "pain and danger":

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (I, 7)

The sublime is our "strongest emotion" because we are more concerned with "sublime" threats to survival than "beautiful" enhancements of it. It is not, however, the actual experience of "pain and danger," but their "ideas" that generate the sublime, which typically characterizes not a source of uncontrolled violence but an ultimately benevolent power; the book of Job provides many of Burke's examples. What we now call Burke's "gendering" of the sublime-beautiful opposition is prophetic: in contrast with the general

verdict of Enlightenment sensibilité in **Condillac, Rousseau, Diderot**, et al., Burke anticipates **Girard** in recognizing that (masculine) violence and its deferral are more central to our survival than (feminine) sympathy and beauty. The cultural memory of the revolutionary violence of seventeenth-century England provides Burke with an intuition that applies all the more to eighteenth-century France. The *Reflections* were a key influence on the post-revolutionary renewal of respect for the sacred cultural forms indispensable to human survival.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Mulholland Drive

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David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (MD) is one of the most formally provocative and, to my mind, one of the best films of recent years. Its self-deconstructing narration is one of the finest demonstrations to date of how the defamiliarizing narrative tropes first given currency in the French nouveau roman nearly fifty years ago (although their history goes back to the eighteenth century, even to antiquity) can be creatively absorbed into the vocabulary of Hollywood cinema. What makes MD a more significant work of narrative art than, for example, *Memento*, whose story is ingeniously told backward, is the deeper implication of its narrative technique in its particular elaboration of the universal theme of secular culture, the **deferral of resentment**.

MD's power comes from its thematization of both resentment and its esthetic transformation. At about the three-quarter mark we discover that the increasing strangeness of the narrative to that point reflects its status as a fantasy/fiction of the protagonist. "Betty," the wide-eyed new arrival in Los Angeles who unselfishly helps the amnesiac victim of a murder attempt (and discovers her sexual attraction to her "innocently" along the way), is revealed as Diane, a disillusioned second-rater who, after living on crumbs from her movie-star lover Camilla's table, has had her killed when she was about to end their relationship by marrying her director. The fiction sequence is a brief resuscitation of Camilla, whom Diane first sees in an instant's hallucination before the final long flashback sequence that tells Diane's "real" story, return from which to reality (and the detectives' knock on the door) precipitates her suicide. (Some may claim that we don't really know that the second sequence is any less a fantasy than the first. The important thing is the relationship they bear to each other. Sequence 1 is a fantasy of sequence 2; suggesting that 2 is also a fantasy implies the existence of a sequence 3 that can only be located outside the film.)

But the real turning point of the film precedes the transition from one sequence to the other via the "four-dimensional" little blue box; it is the lip-synched performance, in the context of a casting call for a new film, of a pop version of **Jerome Kern's** [*"I Told Every Little Star"*](#) that made a minor star of **Linda Scott** in 1961. Adam Keshner, the director, has been told by various Mafia-like figures, including the mysterious Cowboy, to choose for the role a certain "Camilla Rhodes" (the name of Diane's lover in the reality

sequence). Although Adam had earlier resisted the idea, the Cowboy's quiet threat seems to persuade him. After hearing "Camilla" sing this song, he calls over his assistant and says, as ordered, "This is the girl."

Why this particular song? Kern's original tune was a duet, sung by a couple in love in a forgotten 1932 musical, *Music in the Air*. Since the lyrics appear on several web pages, I don't imagine I can be sued for including them here:

I've told every little star
Just how sweet I think you are--
Why haven't I told you?

I've told ripples in a brook,
Made my heart an open book--
Why haven't I told you?

Friends ask me "Am I in love?"
I always answer "yes."
Might as well confess.
If I don't they guess.
[Scott simplifies the last line to "If the answer's yes."]

Maybe you may love me too.
Oh my darling if you do,
Why haven't you told me?

This song stands out among the insipid pop love songs of the era, a surprisingly large proportion of which were sung by women. (Rock 'n' roll had already begun remasculinizing the next generation of popular music with a vengeance.) In contrast with her sugary-sentimental contemporaries, as exemplified by the other lip-synch from the audition, **Connie Francis'** "Sixteen Reasons," Scott borrows a tune from an old musical that avoids postwar sentimentality and frames it with a little da-de-da riff that undercuts its conventional theme. Scott has a rich, powerful voice and a dynamic, brassy style. Her assertive performance conveys a sense of empowerment; as she sings it, the song could not be, as it was in Kern's musical, performed by a couple.

There is an unspoken irony behind the pop style of the era that makes it easy to pastiche. The genius of Scott's arrangement is in using a rhythmic frame to suggest awareness of this irony, telling us that the singer, while expressing a message of inarticulate love, is really in full control. At a time when the female singer typically expressed undying passion for her lover, Scott enhances the power and desirability of her persona by treating the love theme as an object of mere convention. In the context of MD, this gesture takes on a homosexual overtone it did not have in 1961.

"Camilla"'s performance of "Every Little Star" produces the first crack in the credibility of the film's narration. "Betty" has been invited on the set by a female casting director who thinks she has a good chance at the part. Just after Adam pronounces "this is the girl"--a phrase whose source, we later discover, is Diane's reference to Camilla's picture, addressed to the hit man in Winky's restaurant--Betty stares intensely (we hear the singer/syncher's "Maybe you may love me too..."); there is an exchange of close-ups with Adam (they are never in the same frame), then an extreme close-up of Betty's eyes, and

suddenly she panics and runs off on a transparent pretext. For the first time, Betty's action is inconsistent with the fresh and untroubled persona Diane has created for herself. Betty's look seems to be directed at Adam, but we hear the voice of "Camilla," whom we have seen performing on stage. In the reality sequence, this scene retrospectively acquires central significance when Diane determines to kill Camilla after catching a glimpse of the unnamed "Camilla" sharing a brief but tellingly sensual kiss with her at the wedding party. Diane has resigned herself to being abandoned for marriage, but not to being thrown over for another woman. In Diane's fiction, "this is the girl" conflates the two synonymous members of the triangle that excludes her.

The empowerment embodied by the song is that of Diane's imagination; but its realization on screen by her successful rival is the moment where Diane's imaginary absorption of her splits apart, recalling (in the story's chronology) and foreshadowing (in the order of the narration) the crucial moment at the wedding party. The song, a self-contained work of art, cannot be inserted into Diane's larger work without destroying its autonomy. In the fiction, Mafia coercion forces Adam to choose "the girl." "Camilla"'s talent is indeed an illusion, since the song is lip-synched, but in the world of the fiction--as we later learn at Club Silencio--illusion is art itself. Via Scott's interpretation, the song enacts the protagonist's empowerment, her mastery of desire, but Diane's fiction would be fantasy, not art, if it made this empowerment her own. The limits of Betty's mastery of desire are revealed in the acting sequence that directly precedes this scene; she can act out the past generation's sensuality with its aging men, but not perform its youthful liberation from desire.

Imaginary empowerment and self-creation are characteristic of the post-millennial or performative esthetic, which attains far greater maturity in MD than in the exhilarating but childish fantasy *Run Lola Run* (where the heroine gets three chances to save her boyfriend) or in **Michael Haneke's** chilling adolescent nightmare *Funny Games*. Self-performance cannot change the real world, yet it can transform our resentful reality into a spectacle to be shared with others: a work of art. The importance of this transformation is emphasized by the fact that the fiction occupies three quarters of the film; our imaginary experience is above all that of Diane, not that of the filmmaker. To invert these proportions would have been to estrange the audience from the sequence later exposed as unreal. In the brief reality sequence, we recognize many, and in principle all, the elements of this fiction: Coco (Adam's mother), the Cowboy (a briefly seen guest), the hitman, a waitress named "Betty," and, of course, the nameless rival who kisses Camilla at her wedding dinner; but it is through the esthetic fullness of the fiction sequence that this material emerges as culture.

The resurgence of the real that begins with "I Told Every Little Star" becomes definitive following Diane and Camilla's visit to Club Silencio, whose show is a didactic demonstration of the illusory, or simply fictional, nature of all representation: invisible instruments, a trumpeter who lifts his trumpet without stopping the music, and, climactically, a singer who collapses as her song--an Argentinian rendition of **Roy Orbison's** bathetic 60s hit "Crying"--plays on. Here lip-synching, far from a means of avoiding the effort of performance, allows the performer a total identification with the song's content incompatible with actual singing--the inverse of the Scott/"Camilla" case. The unreality of the real exposed in Club Silencio characterizes the club itself in the economy of the film, since it figures in the fictional sequence yet also in the film's coda, a shot of the fetish-like woman with blue hair who appeared in the balcony in the fiction sequence. This final scene overlays the club's symbolic status in the fiction sequence not so much with its reality as with its symbolic status in Lynch's fiction; return in extremis to the world of (dis)illusion is at the same time an affirmation and a deconstruction of the fiction that is the film itself.

Every important work of art says something specific about its place in the continuum of social relations. MD's very lack of any reference to historical events is historically significant, and not simply as a sign of the political apathy of the "X Generation."

Feminism is the purest form of victimary politics. On the one hand, men and women are demonstrably different in a way that "races" or ethnic groups are not; on the other, women's ability to engage in the social dialectic cannot seriously be questioned. Because gender difference is both biologically real and socially trivial, feminism makes the most fundamental claim of victimization, defined as the denial of human reciprocity.

This claim politicizes all relations between men and women, making them unusable in the tradition of high narrative art. Indeed, politicizing of gender relations correlates directly with the decline of this tradition, given the reliance of civil society, and consequently of literature, on the formation of couples. One consequence of this correlation is the dichotomizing of works that do not aspire to the transcendent reconciliation of high art into separate male and female orientations; the immense popularity of films and video games wholly devoted to masculine aggression is an obvious manifestation. But the dichotomy is asymmetrical. The macho onslaught is infantile compensation for the payment exacted from "man" for his erstwhile unmarked status; the male gender has been cursed with the "white guilt" of the oppressor. One sign of this inversion is the frequent (and to my mind offensive) substitution of "she" for "he" as the neutral gender in academic prose. A more profound consequence is that a cultural work that aspires to the status of high art, particularly one focused on individual lives rather than acts of epic significance, is drawn to the portrayal of exclusively female desire.

MD is a film written and directed by a man that lacks the element of male desire. (Nor can Lynch be accused of prostituting his attractive heroines to the male gaze in a couple of Sapphic love-scenes. The first one of these scenes, which occurs near the end of the fictional sequence, results from the increasing intimacy between the two protagonists; the care taken to motivate it--in contrast with what we may surmise about the real nature of the relationship--makes it impossible for the spectator, male or female, to view it as other than a love-scene.) Only three male characters play significant roles in the film: Adam Keshner, the host of Club Silencio, and, to a lesser extent, the hit-man. Keshner is shown in the fictional sequence as cuckolded by his wife and powerless to select the actress of his choice; in the reality sequence, he is manipulated into marriage by Camilla whose sexual interest is clearly elsewhere. Adam's fictional moments of independence--smashing the Mafia brothers' windshield, pouring red paint on his unfaithful wife's jewelry, talking back to the Cowboy--only set up his final surrender to the necessity of choosing "Camilla" as "the girl"; in contrast, the Club Silencio emcee, the film's true repository of masculine power, is a "director" who never leaves the stage/set. The power of the hit-man (viewed in the fiction with Tarantino humor) exists in reality only in the service of Diane. The other figures of male power--the Mafiosi, the Cowboy--are one-dimensional caricatures that we interpret in hindsight as projections of Diane's desire for revenge. In contrast, the fictional sequence includes a number of female figures of power: Aunt Ruth, Coco, the female casting director (who mocks the old male director, formerly her husband), the "prophetess" Louise. If **Flaubert's** *Madame Bovary* (1857) revealed the subversive centrality of female desire in bourgeois society at the dawn of the consumer era, MD shows female desire constrained no longer by male power but by its own triangular structure.

What is original in MD is not its portrayal of female sexuality; this is not a film about lesbianism. What it is about is resentment; Lynch has seen that, today, this theme that has dominated high culture ever since **Homer** made Achilles' "wrath" the subject of the *Iliad* can best be staged in a world of female desire. Far

from a concession to the victimary thinking of the postmodern era, the elimination of gender-based victimary politics is what allows us (and here I speak for both sexes) fully to identify with the protagonist's desire and its transformation in the fictional sequence. The ostensibly postmodern dream-logic is pressed into the service of a logic of desire which is, more than anywhere else in Lynch's filmography, that of the character rather than the filmmaker. Mulholland Drive represents both its creator's liberation from the postmodern era and our own.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

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Joseph de Maistre: First Anthropologist?

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In a famous phrase in *Tristes tropiques*, **Claude Lévi-Strauss**, speaking for the anthropological/ethnological community, called **Rousseau** "our master and our brother." With respect to the standard discourse of academic anthropology, Rousseau is indeed the first thinker to construct a model of the human "state of nature" on the basis of limited but reasonably reliable data. Whereas **Hobbes** peopled his rivalrous state of nature with men corrupted by the "sciences and arts" Rousseau denounced in his first Discourse, Rousseau's extrapolation from ethnographic data offers a more attractive model: primitive humanity ("begun society," *la société commencée*) inhabits a silver age paradoxically situated on the interface between the innocent state of nature and society's corrupting mimetic influences. Rousseau's expulsion of Hobbesian rivalry from human nature may well be called the first gesture of modern anthropology-as-ethnology, but the washing away of the original sin of mimetic desire that motivates anthropology as a discipline ensures that it will never construct a generative model of the human.

Rousseau's expulsion of mimetic desire founds anthropology as an infinite, open-ended process; but it is the oft-demonized **Joseph de Maistre** who deserves to be called the founder of anthropology as a minimal, originary theory of the human. De Maistre expresses in a religious vocabulary a Hobbesian understanding of human desire; what makes him an anthropologist as well a political philosopher is his focus on the sacred generative center of primitive and indeed all human society, ignored by the Enlightenment, to which we characteristically relate through sacrifice. If Rousseau may justly be called the precursor of **Boas** and **Geertz**, de Maistre is that of **Durkheim** and **Girard**. Like the latter's *Things Hidden since the Foundation*, de Maistre's posthumously published *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices* [Clarification about Sacrifices] (*Oeuvres complètes* V, 283-360, Geneva: Slatkine 1979 [1884]; all translations mine) applies the central insights of Christianity to historically existing institutions. In contrast with Rousseau's anecdotal use of data, De Maistre argues from a corpus of sacrificial rites ranging from classical antiquity to the Aztecs.

De Maistre's religiously tinged rhetoric should not blind us to the fact that the discussion of pagan

sacrifice that opens the Eclaircissements is essentially functional; the pagan gods are less supernatural beings than manifestations of an "idea of God" that de Maistre considers coeval with humanity: ("I am far from believing that the idea of God could have begun for humanity, that is, that it could be less ancient than man" [284].) Because for de Maistre the divine source of this idea is only fully known in Christianity he rejects the ancient notion, revived in modern times by **Vico**, that "fear created the gods," and insists on the inherent goodness of all conceptions of the divinity, however primitive. But the dichotomy between flesh and spirit coeval with the idea of God makes us guilty, so that we fear God's just wrath and seek to allay it through **sacrifice**:

[H]istory shows us that man has been persuaded in every era of this frightful truth: That he lived in the power of an irritated force, and that this force could only be appeased by sacrifices. . . .

[We say:] "The Gods are good, and we are indebted to them for all the good things we enjoy; we owe them praise and thanksgiving. But the gods are just, and we are guilty: they must be appeased, we must expiate our crimes; and, in order to accomplish this, the most powerful means is sacrifice." (284; emphasis here and elsewhere is the author's.)

De Maistre's thesis is that spilling blood in sacrifice is the means by which we atone to God for the sinful physical nature whose appetitive "soul" (âme) cohabits in us with our transcendent "spirit" (esprit). Blood is the essence of life, and life is the source of the worldly appetites that require expiation. This explains why "[Sacrifice] was [sc. in pagan societies] always the basis of every kind of religious observance, regardless of place, time, opinions, or circumstances" (285). Christianity perfects but does not deny the principle of sacrifice that founds the partial truth of pagan religion; where the latter requires a regularly repeated "communion in blood," Christ sacrifices his divinely innocent blood so that the sacrifice can be constantly renewed without further bloodshed. Although the pagans had the right idea in seeking "redemption through blood," pre-Christian humanity "could not guess which blood it needed. How could man limited to his own resources suspect the immensity of the fall and the immensity of redeeming love?" (346).

De Maistre is not unaware of the violent potential of mimetic desire, but he prefers to rely on the Biblical tradition of the Fall and the Christian doctrine of original sin, for which our rivalry with God is historically as well as ontologically prior to rivalry among ourselves. Thus he pays little attention to the communal basis of sacrifice to which expressions like "communion in blood" ultimately refer. Yet although de Maistre would have thought it an abomination to view with Durkheim the sacred as a projection of the social, his focus on blood sacrifice as apotropaic violence provides a better-articulated model of the functioning of the sacred in human society than Durkheim's vague notion of ritual as reinforcing collective solidarity.

Throughout the series of Chronicles on early modern thinkers ([Hobbes](#), [Locke](#), [Condillac](#), [Rousseau](#), [Vico](#), [Herder](#), [Kant](#), [Burke](#)), my historical thesis has been that the anthropological thrust of the Enlightenment corresponds to a unique confidence in the ability of our scenic imagination to construct valid models of the fundamental categories of human behavior, beginning with Hobbes'--and ending with Rousseau's--scene of the social contract.

The reaction against the Enlightenment in general and the French Revolution in particular condemns the arrogance of seeking to found social institutions on speculative models rather than historical experience. To the Enlightenment's imagined scenes, **Edmund Burke** (see [Chronicle 268](#)) opposes historical ones.

The events of the English Revolution are described not as radically new beginnings but as modifications of a preexisting context, whereas the French Revolution's attempts at re-origination lead only to violence. Burke is concerned with politics, not anthropology, but, precisely, his analysis can be read as a critique of anthropology as a basis for politics; for Burke it is rather politics, the crucial locus of human interaction, that teaches us anthropology.

De Maistre is even less concerned than Burke to construct imaginary scenes. Using the scene of the Passion as a source of anthropological understanding, he constructs a model of human society on the basis of a hypothetical generalization from the historically observed phenomenon of sacrifice. Rather than either opposing Christian to pagan sacrifice as truth to falsity or seeking in the latter proofs of the truth of the former, De Maistre presents sacrifice as an universal phenomenon whose meaning is understood only retrospectively through the Christian revelation.

Yet the Passion does not become for de Maistre the basis for a general theory of sacrifice until it is recalled to him by historical experience. If Burke sees nothing but disorder in the French revolutionary scene, de Maistre, writing after the Revolution had run its course, finds in its very violence the seeds of redemption. One redemptive scene obsesses de Maistre and influences all his subsequent writing: the execution of **Louis XVI**:

. . . We are continually confronted with the tiresome image of innocents perishing along with the guilty. But, without delving into that question, which is of the greatest profundity, we may consider it solely in relation to the age-old universal dogma of the reversibility of the sufferings of the innocent for the benefit of the guilty.

It was from this dogma, I believe, that the ancients derived their universal practice of sacrifice, which they judged of value not merely for the living but even for the dead; a routine procedure that habit lets us observe without surprise, but whose roots are nonetheless obscure.

. . .

The coming of Christianity consecrated this dogma, which is infinitely natural to man, although it seems difficult to derive by logical reasoning.

Thus there may have been [at the moment of his execution] in the heart of Louis XVI, and in that of the heavenly Elisabeth, an emotion (*mouvement*), an acceptance capable of saving France. (*Considerations on France* (1796), III)

There is another brief but telling reference to the king's martyrdom in *Eclaircissements* :

. . . Men have always attached an infinite price to the submission of the just person who accepts his suffering . . .

When the ferocious jailers of Louis XVI, then a prisoner in the Temple, denied him a razor, the faithful servant who has given us the interesting history of that long and atrocious captivity said to him: Sire, show yourself to the National Convention with that long beard so that the people can see how you are being treated.

The king answered: I must not seek to interest others in my fate. (347)

What Burke, writing nearly three years before the king's execution, saw as mere unchained violence has become for de Maistre a sacrificial scene interpreted in the light of what he calls the "Christian Theory of Sacrifice." In his work, the dehistoricizing scenic imagination of the Enlightenment gives way to a new conception of the scene of representation grounded in a dialectic between historical reality and the transcendently given model that it both realizes and develops. This is indeed the inaugural act of modern anthropology.

Epilogue: de Maistre on the origin of language

De Maistre discusses language and its origin in the second chapter or "Entretien" of his masterwork, *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (Paris: La Colombe, 1960 [1821]). It should not surprise us that this enemy of the Enlightenment both refuses to imagine a worldly event of linguistic origin and insists on its transcendental necessity, scornfully rejecting gradualism.

No language could have been invented, either by one man, who would not have been able to make himself obeyed, or by several, who would not have been able to understand/agree with each other (s'entendre). The best thing one can say about speech (la parole) is what was said of him who is called the WORD (parole). His origin goes back to the distant past, to the days of old... [Micah 5, 2]. Who shall declare his generation? [Isaiah 53, 8]. . . .

. . . Rousseau . . . admits that . . . he does not understand very clearly how [language] was invented. But the great Condillac takes pity on such modesty. He is amazed that an intelligent man (homme d'esprit) like Rousseau . . . failed to see that languages came into being imperceptibly . . . one generation says ba, another bé; the Assyrians invented the nominative, and the Medes, the genitive. (67-68)

In de Maistre's religiously grounded anthropology, language is intrinsic to the human and therefore complete from the beginning; "the prodigious talent of the first peoples for forming words" in fact declines with the progress of civilization. New languages are formed from old, but this cannot explain the origin of language itself. There is a separation between historical and transcendental, ontic and ontological language origin:

If, on this question of the origin of language . . . our century has missed the truth, it is because it was mortally afraid of encountering it. Languages have beginnings; but language (la parole) never, not even with man. The one [sc. la parole] must necessarily have preceded the other; for speech (la parole) is possible only through the WORD (le verbe). Every specific language is born, like an animal, by way of explosion and development without man ever having gone from the state of aphonia to the use of language. He has always spoken, and it is with sublime justice that the Hebrews called him a "speaking soul." When a new language is formed, it is born in the midst of a society in full possession of language . . . (73-74)

This split stimulates empirical research into specific languages by bracketing the question of origin, an effect accomplished more drastically by the Paris Linguistic Society's 1866 ban on discussion of this

question. Yet each language is at the same time a totality derived from the (divine) origin of language:

Each language, taken by itself, repeats the spiritual phenomena that took place in the beginning; and the more ancient the language, the more these phenomena are apparent (sensibles). (73)

Although the historical (languages) is separated from the transcendental (language), each historical language “repeats the spiritual phenomena” of its origin. If to go forward in time is to explore, in anticipation of **Humboldt**, “the genius of each language” (75) in its historical context, going backward to the earliest times brings us closer to the mystery of human origin. De Maistre remains unaware of the paradoxical relation between transcendence and immanence that language incarnates, but his insistence on both sacred origin and worldly history provides the basis for the dialectical ontology of the new century.

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The Kantian Sublime

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[T]he most important and vital distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is certainly this: . . . whereas natural beauty . . . conveys a finality in its form making the object appear, as it were, preadapted to our power of judgment . . . that which . . . excites the feeling of the sublime . . . may appear . . . to contravene the ends of our power of judgment . . . and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination . . . (Critique of Judgment, I, ii, sec. 23)

If Kant’s analysis of the beautiful depends implicitly on the paradoxical relationship between representation and its object, in his analysis of the sublime, the paradox is made explicit. Although the beautiful object cannot be subsumed under a concept, its contemplation provides a pleasurable stimulation to our cognitive faculty, which grasps beautiful form as something meant to be perceived and cognized by it. The sublime, on the contrary, makes us realize the limitations of this faculty. The pleasure provided by this initially unpleasant realization is of a moral nature; the experienced excess of nature over our power of judgment makes us aware of the transcendent relationship between our reason and the everyday world.

The feeling of the sublime is . . . at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as

the effort to attain to these is for us a law. It is, in other words, for us a law (of reason), which goes to make us what we are, that we should esteem as small in comparison with ideas of reason everything which for us is great in nature as an object of sense; and that which makes us alive to the feeling of this supersensible side of our being harmonizes with that law. (ibid., sec. 27)

Kant's "mathematical" sublime is a reaction to purely quantitative greatness of physical magnitude, which, by showing us the inadequacy of our "faculty of sense," reminds us of its "smallness" in comparison with "ideas of reason." The conceptual movement from displeasure to pleasure may be understood from the perspective of originary anthropology as describing the passage from the conflict occasioned by the excess of desire for the object to the peace provided by the promotion of this object to a sign of transcendence. What we experience as too great for our (collective and individual) desire gives us pleasure as a sign pointing to the "supersensible" domain of signification that defers our conflict over desire. Kant's statement that this experience "makes us alive to [rege macht] the feeling of this supersensible side of our being" is tantamount to the claim that this experience generates this feeling.

Where the mathematical sublime triggered by quantitative magnitude merely negates our faith in the understanding, the infinity of power ("quality") we experience in the "dynamic" sublime provides a transcendent object of faith. The mathematical sublime is a negative moment between two forms of order, that of the understanding and that of reason, between the beautiful, which finds satisfaction in form, and the dynamic sublime, which substitutes for formal order that of an all-powerful divine will.

But we may look upon an object as fearful, and yet not be afraid of it, if, that is, our estimate takes the form of our simply picturing to ourselves the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it, and recognizing that all such resistance would be quite futile. So the righteous man fears God without being afraid of Him, because he regards the case of his wishing to resist God and His commandments as one which need cause him no anxiety. But in every such case, regarded by him as not intrinsically impossible, he cognizes Him as One to be feared. (ibid., sec. 28)

Kant's exposition of the relationship between the fearful and the sublime clearly owes much to Burke; but where the latter (as Kant points out) remains within the realm of empirical psychology, for Kant the dynamic sublime defines our relationship to transcendence.

Kant's categories of the beautiful and the sublime correspond to the two relationships between representation and its referent that make up the paradox of signification. On the side of form, representation is a (beautifully) adequate substitute for its referent, just as the originary sign was an adequate substitute for the inaccessible central object; on the side of content, representation is a (sublimely) inadequate substitute for its referent. The sign can function to defer mimetic rivalry for the central object only if it is an acceptable substitute for it. But the very peace brought about by this substitution transforms the relation to the central object and makes possible its appropriation within the framework of culture.

Unlike the beautiful, which inheres in an object whose formal adequacy to our cognitive faculty is embodied in a universal judgment of taste, the sublime is a subjective attitude not inherent in the (natural) object that inspires it. But the preceding passage suggests that this "subjectivity" defines a relationship to a necessarily inadequate figuration of an unfigurable divine transcendence. The experience

of the sublime reflects the Judeo-Christian rejection of idols that cannot incarnate the sacred but at best suggest it by their very ontological distance from it. The object that provokes the experience of the sublime is not a "graven image" but something that resists being experienced as a sign and is for that very reason experienced as a sign of the limitations of signification.

The concept of the sublime has played an eccentric role in aesthetic theory since pseudo-Longinus in the first century; yet the opposition between the sublime and the beautiful is an artificial one. Aesthetic experience is an oscillation between the sign and its referent caused by the necessary inability of either representation or imaginary reality to create a stable plenitude of signification; the experience of beautiful form includes the sublime within it as the moment of the representation's inadequacy. Kant describes this oscillatory movement, but only with respect to the sublime, which he contrasts to our "restful contemplation" of the beautiful:

The mind feels itself set in motion in the representation of the sublime in nature; whereas in the aesthetic judgment upon what is beautiful therein it is in restful contemplation. This movement, especially in its inception, may be compared with vibration, i.e., with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction produced by one and the same object. The point of excess for the imagination . . . is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself, yet again for the rational idea of the supersensible it is not excessive, but conformable to law, and directed to drawing out such an effort on the part of the imagination: and so in turn as much a source of attraction as it was repellent to mere sensibility. But the judgment itself all the while steadfastly preserves its aesthetic character, because it represents, without being grounded on any definite concept of the object, merely the subjective play of the mental powers (imagination and reason) as harmonious by virtue of their very contrast. For just as in the estimate of the beautiful imagination and understanding by their concert generate subjective finality of the mental faculties, so imagination and reason do so here by their conflict—that is to say they induce a feeling of our possessing a pure and self-sufficient reason, or a faculty for the estimation of magnitude, whose preeminence can only be made intuitively evident by the inadequacy of that faculty which in the presentation of magnitudes (of objects of sense) is itself unbounded. (sec. 27)

The beautiful creates "concert" where the sublime generates "conflict." This contrast, which effectively trivializes the beautiful with respect to the sublime, has been revived in the postmodern era. The sublime retains its prestige in intellectual circles, whereas the beautiful is considered an outmoded category, a quasi-synonym for kitsch. What is at stake is clarified by Burke's psychological analysis, which associates the beautiful with the feminine and the sublime with the masculine: the greater spiritual resonance of the sublime would reflect the fact that culture privileges the deferral of violence over the fulfillment of desire, since without the former there would be no opportunity for the latter. Yet it is desire itself that inspires the violence; literature celebrates the sublimity of female desirability from Helen of Troy to Laclos' Mme de Merteuil. This artificial segregation of the sexes guarantees the metaphysical firewall between the "supersensible" world of the arbitrary sign and the world of sensuous forms, natural or man-made.

As an experience of transcendence cut off from its immanent basis, the sublime is a psychological effect divorced from any cultural context; the violence of storms and crags becomes a substitute for the human violence crystallized in the sacred. This was already the function of the sublime in antiquity; where Aristotle saw no need to separate off the experience of transcendence from aesthetic experience in general, by Longinus' time, the old gods had lost their credibility, not least in contrast with the God of

Christianity, and could no longer implicitly guarantee this experience. The Enlightenment's rediscovery of the sublime reflects its ambition to put away the Judeo-Christian God as well and construct a wholly empirical anthropology.

Thus modern aesthetics is born in the conceptual splitting of its object into two parts, neither of which is complete in itself. In the place of the sublimely beautiful, we must choose between the pretty and the monstrous, between the sign that loses itself in mimetic identity with its worldly object and the sign that bears its inadequacy on its face; the first provides a pleasure of the understanding, the second, the transcendent joy of reason. These dichotomies, and those of Kantian thought in general, situate within the categories of culture the split that culture is designed to mediate, and, in so doing, display the limitations of the Enlightenment's scenic imagination. For Kant, the aesthetic scene is either charmingly pacific or fearfully agitated. That the peace of the former is the product of the fearsomeness of the latter is too radical an idea for even the greatest thinker of an era that could understand the deferral of human violence as the source of human institutions but not of the human itself.

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Rousseau's Social Contract

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As I pointed out in [Chronicle 183](#), the concept of unanimity has a particular resonance for **Rousseau** as well as for generative anthropology. Near the beginning of his literary career, in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), Rousseau describes the difficulty of understanding the origin of linguistic signs whose meaning can only arise through a unanimous agreement (*accord unanime*). The first sentence of his final work, the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1776-78), describes Jean-Jacques' expulsion from society by another *accord unanime*. This use of the same phrase establishes an implicit link between victimage and language origin that can only be exploited by recognizing the identity of both unanimities.

Completed in 1762, *The Social Contract* (*Du contrat social*) also refers to an originary unanimity:

It would be better, before examining the act by which a people gives itself to a king, to examine that by which it has become a people; for this act, being necessarily prior to the other, is the true foundation of society.

Indeed, if there were no prior convention, where, unless the election were unanimous, would be the obligation on the minority to submit to the choice of the majority? How have a hundred men who wish for a master the right to vote on behalf of ten who do not? The law of majority voting is itself something established by convention, and presupposes unanimity,

on one occasion at least [suppose au moins une fois l'unanimité]. (I, 5 ; my emphasis)

Once the collective "general will" (*volonté générale*) is established by that single occasion of unanimity, this will maintains a permanent virtual existence, like the divinity that endures after the central object has been consumed. So long as the social contract remains in force, the general will decides every question pertinent to it. The people in assembly will not always be of one voice, but so long as the community wishes to remain united under the contract, the minority will perforce accept the verdict of the majority, which can therefore be taken as the expression of the general will.

Although Rousseau's general will is generally understood as an ideal construct, "on one occasion at least" evokes a hypothetical historical moment in which the community is founded. Rousseau implicitly criticizes **Hobbes'** conception of the social contract that men in the state of nature make with a sovereign in order to put an end to the war of every man with every man. Before "giv[ing] itself to a king," a people must have "become a people"; Hobbes' scene of the origin of hierarchy is secondary to a unanimous, egalitarian scene of self-constitution that grounds the general will in history.

Hobbes and Rousseau mark the beginning and the end of Enlightenment use of the scenic imagination as a heuristic for the origin of human institutions. It is no coincidence that both offer--diametrically opposed--models of the social contract, which, in contrast to the simplified originary scenes of **Condillac**, **Herder**, or **Vico**, must be enacted by the entire community.

Neither Hobbes' nor Rousseau's contract scene is complete in itself. The mimetic rivalry of Hobbes' "state of nature" is conceivable only within a preexisting community, the pre-hierarchical constitution of which his model cannot explain. Yet Hobbes' scene contains a crucial element missing from Rousseau's: a central figure who defers the violence of mimetic desire. All the ambiguity of Rousseau's social contract, arguably the key ideological foundation of both communism and fascism--both of which would approve the sinister paradox, "whoever refuses to obey the general will . . . will be forced to be free," on le forcera d'être libre (I, 7)--stem from his elimination of this center, lacking which the "occasion" of the unanimity to which he appeals cannot be defined. Hobbes' model valorizes the subordination of the periphery to the center that is inherent in the circular structure of the scene. Yet Hobbes presupposes that this central figure is a human subject like those who surround it; this implicitly theistic model serves to guarantee the monarchic power of the unique political center. Rousseau, more distant than Hobbes from this implicit theism, is concerned to avoid its problematic implications for the anthropological scene he constructs. The center of Rousseau's circle is solely occupied by the abstract object of the general will; all that subsists of the originary unanimity is this will itself, which, like a unique divinity, imposes the same law on all human societies.

The clauses of [the social] contract are so determined by the nature of the act that the slightest modification would make them vain and ineffective; so that, although they have perhaps never been formally set forth, they are everywhere the same and everywhere tacitly admitted and recognized, until, on the violation of the social compact, each regains his original rights and resumes his natural liberty, while losing the conventional liberty in favor of which he renounced it.

These clauses, properly understood, may be reduced to one--the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community; for, in the first place, as each gives himself absolutely, the conditions are the same for all; and, this being so, no one has

any interest in making them burdensome to others.

Moreover, the alienation being without reserve, the union is as perfect as it can be, and no associate has anything more to demand: for, if the individuals retained certain rights, as there would be no common superior to decide between them and the public, each, being on one point his own judge, would ask to be so on all; the state of nature would thus continue, and the association would necessarily become inoperative or tyrannical.

Finally, each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody; and as there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right as he yields others over himself, he gains an equivalent for everything he loses, and an increase of force for the preservation of what he has.

If then we discard from the social compact what is not of its essence, we shall find that it reduces itself to the following terms: "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole." (I, 6; emphasis the author's)

The individual members of the group "alienate" themselves to the group as a whole, whose will replaces the central "common superior" of Hobbes' contract scene. The exchange of "rights" among the members of the group involves no loss; it is endlessly reciprocal, a moral superconductivity. Because the unanimous decision that constitutes the group is self-referential--to express unanimity is to become the unanimous community--the subsistence of the general will guarantees this ideal exchange throughout the community's existence.

At the origin of The Social Contract's society without residue is the seamless passage from nature to culture that Rousseau rejected in the second Discourse. Rousseau motivates the contract scene in the following terms:

I suppose men to have reached the point at which the obstacles in the way of their preservation in the state of nature show their power of resistance to be greater than the resources at the disposal of each individual for his maintenance in that state. That primitive condition can then subsist no longer; and the human race would perish unless it changed its manner of existence. (ibid.)

Where Hobbes' men are warring mimetic rivals, Rousseau's are isolated individuals whose problems are with nature rather than culture. What Rousseau's omits from Hobbes' model are the mimetic desires that elsewhere he attributes to men in society ("man is good, men are bad," dixit the second Discourse), and that for Hobbes are the reason for the contract in the first place; when humans exist in a centerless mode of reciprocal exchange, they exchange not "rights" but violence. Rousseau's general will is a modern version of the Platonic Good whose very conceptual existence denies the possibility of conflicting interests. Unlike **Plato**, Rousseau provides his unanimous will with an anthropological origin, but he omits from his originary scene the conflicting desires on which the will imposes itself.

In Rousseau's social contract we exchange "natural liberty" for "moral liberty, which alone makes [man] truly master of himself" (I, 8) because it controls our "appetites." The social contract is a check on appetite rather than on the human conflict it occasions. In the final chapter of Book I, Rousseau explains

this more fully:

I shall end this chapter and this book by remarking on a fact on which the whole social system should rest: i.e., that, instead of destroying natural equality, the fundamental compact substitutes, for such physical inequality as nature may have set up between men, an equality that is moral and legitimate, and that men, who may be unequal in strength or intelligence, become every one equal by convention and legal right. (I, 9)

This is Rousseau's version of the moral model of reciprocity that derives from the unanimity of the originary scene. The perfect unanimity of his originary moment is the unmediated kernel of **Durkheim's** conception of the sacred as the emanation of the group's unity. In this pure, objectless state, the sacred is not differentiated from the profane but subsists as a self-mediated communion akin to that of the groupe en fusion in **Sartre's** Critique de la raison dialectique.

But this self-sustaining communion is a utopian dream that, untempered by the otherness of the sacred object/victim/deity, provides a delusive model for political action. Because Rousseau's unanimity was not at the outset a means of deferring violence, it lacks the dynamism to transform itself into a viable political goal. What Rousseau's model polity inherits from the originary absence of conflictive mimetic desire is the absence of politics. For Rousseau, the majority vote determines a general will that already exists in latent form, whereas the "will" of a democratic society is generated within the political process. In both political and economic exchange, the outcome is created by exchange itself.

Rousseau rejects Hobbes' mimetic violence in order to grasp the community's more primordial unanimity, but he cannot see that the source of this unanimity is the critical necessity of deferring this violence. Hobbes conceived his authoritarian social contract as pointing the way out of his country's civil war; Rousseau's, at once democratic and tyrannical, would inspire many a civil war to come.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Hegel's Master and Slave

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At least since the publication of **Alexandre Kojève's** Introduction to the Reading of Hegel in 1947, the best-known moment of **Hegel's** Phenomenology of the Spirit, not to say of all his works, is Chapter IV A, "Independence and Dependence [Unselbständigkeit, literally, non-independence] of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," more familiarly known as the master-slave dialectic. No doubt Kojève had political reasons for singling out this text, which can be read as an originary analysis of the Marxist category of exploitation. But a more universal explanation of its popularity is that it is the only moment in

all of Hegel that can genuinely be called a scene. However abstractly Hegel describes their interaction, in this chapter two distinct persons of flesh and blood confront each other, not a couple of antithetical ideas ready to be "lifted up" into a new synthesis.

In my student years, Hegel was my favorite philosopher; I admired his ability to make a story of the progression of consciousness continually enriching itself with new layers of self-knowledge. Last year, I was privileged to be lodged in Berlin only a few yards from Hegel's (austere) grave in the **Dorotheenstädtische Friedhof**, which I visited with some emotion. But I must admit that with the years I find myself preferring the dry rigor of **Kant's** critiques to Hegel's flights of dialectical imagination. Kant's ideas remain, however ahistorically, those of human minds; Hegel, in his admirable desire to situate ideas within history, makes the ideas do combat in the place of living (and dying) individuals. My own thinking remains more Hegelian than Kantian, but it is a Hegelianism stood back on its feet, not by **Marx's** historical materialism, but by originary anthropology.

This being said, the master-slave moment, which substitutes a historically conceived minimal human relation for the Enlightenment's loosely defined states of nature, has no equivalent in Kant. Hegel's unique scene explains the origin of the internal differentiation that is essential to his model of human self-consciousness as well as of human society. Once this is done, all subsequent concepts such as the "unhappy consciousness," the "beautiful soul," or the state of "culture," remain inhabited by this differentiation without having to refer to it explicitly.

The appearance of self-consciousness sets the stage for this unique Hegelian scene. Consciousness of self is not mere negation of the object of knowledge, but the return of its otherness into the self. The "unity of self-consciousness with itself" does not simply exist; it is something desired by the subject: "self-consciousness is the state of Desire in general" (Phenomenology IV, Introduction). As the dialectic develops, it appears that the object of the subject's desire must be another self-consciousness:

. . . [S]elf-consciousness is thus only assured of itself through sublating [its] other, which is presented to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire. Convinced of the nothingness of this other, it definitely affirms this nothingness to be for itself the truth of this other, negates the independent object, and thereby acquires the certainty of its own self, as true certainty, a certainty which it has become aware of in objective form.

In this state of satisfaction, however, it has experience of the independence of its object. Desire and the certainty of its self obtained in the gratification of desire are conditioned by the object; for the certainty exists through canceling this other; in order that this canceling may be effected, there must be this other. Self-consciousness is thus unable by its negative relation to the object to abolish it; because of that relation it rather produces it again, as well as the desire. The object desired is, in fact, something other than self-consciousness . . . At the same time, however, self-consciousness is likewise absolutely for itself, exists on its own account; and it is so only by sublation of the object; and it must come to feel its satisfaction, for it is the truth. On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can only attain satisfaction when this object itself effectually brings about negation within itself. The object must per se effect this negation of itself, for it is inherently (an sich) something negative, and must be for the other what it is. Since the object is in its very self negation, and in being so is at the same time independent, it is Consciousness. . . . The above general independent

nature, however, in the case of which negation takes the form of absolute negation, is the genus as such or as self-consciousness. Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness. (IV, Introduction)

The otherness of the object of consciousness that one is conscious of grasping as other can only maintain itself if it is in fact another self-consciousness. This is Hegel's way of dealing with the mimetic nature of human interaction. Instead of beginning with a community of subjects, he evolves interaction from within the individual subject, whose desire Hegel sees not as an appetite (which would simply be satisfied by production of its object) but as a self-perpetuating oscillatory process such as Kant's sublime--or aesthetic experience in general. But this oscillation is not attributed, as in Kant, to an experience of representation. Desire runs up against the independence of an other that it must continually subdue and regenerate. This process is embodied in the recognition that the self demands of the other.

In order for me to be conscious of myself as a self, I must compel another self to recognize my unique selfhood, which can only be accomplished by eliminating the independence of this other, that is, by killing him. The symmetrical battle for recognition is the Hegelian version of mimetic rivalry: each subject attempts to compel the recognition of the other. But no outcome of this war of all against all can provide a satisfactory resolution, since once I have killed my rival, he can no longer recognize my selfhood. A society of such rivals will necessarily reduce itself to a single individual.

The master-slave relation is the solution to this dilemma, one that alone, Hegel insists, permits true, "absolute" self-consciousness to manifest itself. Despite the reduction of the cast of characters to two, Hegel's scene is indeed a scene of origin, not merely of political economy, but of humanity, whose "absolute" self-consciousness can only emerge from the death and rebirth of sublated/transcended conflict.

The slave is he who renounces mastery to preserve his life, who grants recognition to the other before he is compelled to this recognition by death. Like that of **Hobbes**, Hegel's originary society is hierarchical, the difference being that Hegel generates the hierarchy from within the community of equal warriors rather than bringing the sovereign in from without as *rex ex machina*. The key point in Hegel's analysis is that it is not the master but the slave who emerges from this experience with a genuine human self-consciousness.

We have seen what bondage is only in relation to lordship. But it is a self-consciousness, and we have now to consider what it is, in this regard, in and for itself. In the first instance, the master is taken to be the essential reality for the state of bondage; hence, for it, the truth is the independent consciousness existing for itself, although this truth is not taken yet as inherent in bondage itself. Still, it does in fact contain within itself this truth of pure negativity and self-existence, because it has experienced this reality within it. For this consciousness was not in peril and fear for this element or that, nor for this or that moment of time, it was afraid for its entire being; it felt the fear of death, the sovereign master. It has been in that experience melted to its inmost soul, has trembled throughout its every fiber, and all that was fixed and steadfast has quaked within it. This complete perturbation of its entire substance, this absolute dissolution of all its stability into fluent continuity, is, however, the simple, ultimate nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure self-referring existence, which consequently is involved in this type of consciousness. This moment of pure self-existence is moreover a fact for it; for in the master it finds this as its

object. Further, this bondsman's consciousness is not only this total dissolution in a general way; in serving and toiling the bondsman actually carries this out. By serving he cancels in every particular aspect his dependence on and attachment to natural existence, and by his work removes this existence away. (IV, A; my emphasis)

This extraordinary passage is in effect an anthropological scene of the origin of human self-consciousness in the deferral of violence. The references to consciousness being "melted to its inmost soul," "trembl[ing] in every fiber," suffering the "complete perturbation of its entire substance" stand out in high relief among the cognitive abstractions of the *Phenomenology*. It is the fear of death that makes the slave realize the difference between soul and body, spirit and flesh, which is to say, between representation and reality; the imminence of mortality reveals to him the non-mortality of the sign.

If, however, we read this passage as describing a historical originary scene, the asymmetry between the participants is unsatisfactory. Either this asymmetry is truly absolute, and the "master" becomes God, or it is contingent and oscillating, and the human participants are engaged in the reciprocal exchange that is the model of moral interaction. To affirm that the bondsman finds in the lord "the moment of pure self-existence" reduces the sacred to the anthropological, but fails to account for the persistence of this moment as the foundation of the self beyond the moment of fear and trembling that Hegel describes. "Consciousness" cannot absorb this moment and go on to other things; it must be able to represent it, both to itself and to others. Hegel's vision of originary human relations lacks the mediation through the representation of the central object of desire that determines these relations as equal. Instead, the deferral of violence results from an absolute subordination of one man to another that excludes the possibility of reciprocal communication, and therefore of language and culture. The self-consciousness that passes through this revelatory moment has no one to share it with.

Yet the labor through which the slave will attain what Hegel will call "a mind of his own" is not simply the "negation" of the worldly object in a purposeful act of production; in order for the emergence of true self-consciousness to take place, the element of "absolute fear" in service to the master must be perpetuated:

For this reflection of self into self the two moments, fear and service in general, as also that of formative activity, are necessary: and at the same time both must exist in a universal manner. Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains formal and does not spread over the whole known reality of existence. Without the formative activity shaping the thing, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become objective for itself. . . . If [consciousness] has endured not absolute fear, but merely some slight anxiety, the negative reality has remained external to it, its substance has not been through and through infected thereby. Since the entire content of its natural consciousness has not tottered and shaken, it is still inherently a determinate mode of being; having a "mind of its own" (*der eigene Sinn*) is simply stubbornness (*Eigensinn*), a type of freedom which does not get beyond the attitude of bondage. (*ibid.*)

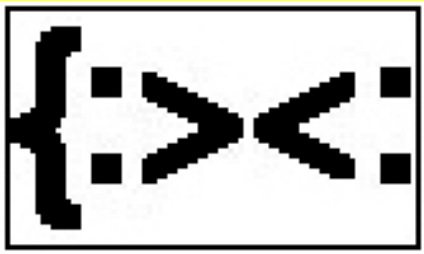
Here the master plays the role of God in maintaining the fear that is for Hegel the authentic hallmark of the originary scene's transformative power. Hegel insists on the persistence of fear, and thereby of absolute power, because he wants to create a purely anthropological scene of origin for the operation of transcendence--something to which Kant would never have dreamt of attributing an origin of any kind. Why does the master of dialectic not refer to the sacred and its related cultural institutions rather than emphasize the reproduction of the visceral fear that makes "natural" or pre-human consciousness "totter

and shake"? Hegel was surely no less familiar than **Vico** with **Statius'** *Primus in orbe deos fecit timor* (Fear in the world first created the gods). But Hegel's anthropological scene of the origin of human consciousness cannot be the origin of transcendence because transcendence is at the origin of the Phenomenology itself. The operative concept of dialectic depends on the transcendental from the very start; like Plato's Ideas, it is dependent on human language. The *Weltgeist* is present from the outset. Hegel will include in his dialectic the phenomena of human religion, but he cannot situate within this dialectic the emergence/discovery/invention of transcendence itself.

Hegel is the first philosopher to preoccupy himself with the historical evolution not merely of institutions but of concepts. But it is not the lack of a **Darwinian** model for the origin of the human that prevents him from adapting to his schema the originary scenes of **Rousseau** or **Condillac**. What limits him is the historical circumstance that still conceives of a definitive end to the dialectical process. The Spirit that was there in the beginning finds in the completed dialectic its full realization. The intellectual preformism that guarantees the Hegelian system is incompatible with a truly radical anthropology, for which the dialectic itself emerges only within human society. Although we cannot blame Hegel for the philosophical crudity of **Engels'** *Dialectics of Nature*, the latter's "error" is only an extrapolation of the master's method, one whose implicit political focus makes clearer its anthropological limitations. Marx's transformation of Hegel's ideal dialectic into the "materialist" one of "scientific socialism," far from being a simple vulgarization, renders in political terms the dialectic's utopian intellectual aspirations. This vision of the final utopia, the "end of history," is one that nascent market society could reject only out of a historical experience that, precisely, could not have been anticipated in Hegel's day. The human subject that is coeval with the transcendental dialectic can have no end within this dialectic; historical thinking cannot generate within itself the closure of history.

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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



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Nietzsche's Scenic Utopia

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Today when we are asked to name the most significant philosopher of the nineteenth century, we are likely to choose a man who was not a professional philosopher at all, whose work is aphoristic rather than formally rigorous, suffused with a rhetoric rooted more in Luther and Wagner than in the Western philosophical tradition. Nietzsche's particular modernity reflects the fact that, in contrast with his predecessors who took the human scene of representation as an a priori ethical model, Nietzsche situates the emergence of scenic self-consciousness, in its ethical as well as its esthetic mode, in human history.

The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche's first book, proposes an originary hypothesis of what is presented as the exemplary scenic form; by a paradox taken for granted since the German Enlightenment, the paradoxical tragic dynamic is the highest revelation of the human. In contrast stand, on one hand, the twin components of the tragic, the collective "witches' brew" of the Dionysian, artistically exemplified in music, and the Apollonian art of the principium individuationis, as manifested in sculpture and in "naïve" Homeric epic; and, on the other, the anesthetic, rational-scientific attitude whose original exemplar is Socrates, which has dominated European culture since the Renaissance. Yet there is hope, for Germany at any rate: Wagnerian opera reconstitutes the tragic tension between Dionysian sound and Apollonian words and images. We should recall that The Birth of Tragedy appeared at the moment of the formation of the Second Reich after victory in the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War--a moment explicitly referred to in the original dedication of the work to Richard Wagner. German opera extends into the cultural sphere the geopolitical hegemony attained

by the newly formed German nation over the nation of Descartes and Voltaire, the homeland of modern Socratic optimism.

For Nietzsche, Athenian tragedy emerges when the Dionysian "spirit of music" is supplemented by Apollonian language. Yet the emergence of this exemplary articulation of human unconsciousness and self-consciousness is never staged in the text. Nietzsche's formulations of the origin of tragedy always stop short of describing a specific scene:

1. I don't think I'm saying anything illogical when I claim that the problem of [the origin of Greek tragedy] has not once been seriously formulated up to now, let alone solved . . .

This tradition tells us very emphatically that tragedy developed out of the tragic chorus and originally consisted only of a chorus and nothing else. This fact requires us to look into the heart of this tragic chorus as the essential original drama . . . (7)

2. Enchantment is the precondition for all dramatic art. In this enchantment the Dionysian reveler sees himself as a satyr, and then, in turn, as a satyr he looks at his god. That is, in his transformed state he sees a new vision outside himself as an Apollonian fulfillment of his condition. With this new vision drama is complete.

With this knowledge in mind, we must understand Greek tragedy as the Dionysian chorus which over and over again constantly discharges itself [entladet] in an Apollonian world of images. (8)

3. It is an incontestable tradition that Greek tragedy in its oldest form had as its subject only the suffering of Dionysus and that for a long time later the individually present stage heroes were only Dionysus. But with the same certainty we can assert that right up to the time of Euripides Dionysus never ceased being the tragic hero, that all the famous figures of the Greek theatre, like Prometheus, Oedipus, and so on, are only masks of that primordial hero Dionysus. (10)

4. For this is the way religions tend to die out, namely, when the mythical pre-conditions of a religion, under the strong, rational eyes of an orthodox dogmatism become classified as a closed totality of historical events and people begin anxiously to defend the credibility of their myths, but to resist the naturally continuing life and growth of those myths, and when the feeling for the myth dies out and in its place the claim to put religion on a historical footing steps onto the scene.

The newly born genius of Dionysian music now seized these dying myths, and in its hands myth blossomed again [i.e., in tragedy], with colors which it had never shown before, with a scent which stirred up a longing premonition of a metaphysical world. (10; all emphasis mine)

The Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy restores to the Kantian distinction between beautiful form and its sublime transcendence a temporal, dialectical dimension. The "discharge" of Dionysian energy into Apollonian form is the process by which the unconscious mimetic rhythm of desire is transformed into a formal opposition between sign and sacred object; in other words, it is a model of the originary event. The "suffering of Dionysius," the "myth" to which Nietzsche refers in the fourth passage, is that of the originary sparagmos, yet the chorus that "discharges itself" through the figural vision of the god is never designated as the cause of this suffering, nor is the latter presented as the link between the mortal victim and the "Apollonian" figure of the god. Nietzsche's theory of the scene begins in medias res with the esthetic already in place and the Dionysian "witches' brew" of sacrificial ritual well behind us. The contrast with Hegel is striking; where the latter, unconcerned with the historical genesis of the scene of representation, defines the central human confrontation as mortal combat, Nietzsche theorizes the scene as constituted precisely by the esthetic transcendence of any such violence. Tragedy is conceived less as a functioning institution than as a privileged cultural state in which the Athenians of a certain period were privileged to dwell, where the Apollonian principium individuationis stands in perfect equilibrium with the depersonalizing Dionysian flux of mimetic desire. The temporal flow of the latter is "discharged" in the stability of the former through anthropogenic suffering, death, and transfiguration in which mimetic conflict is nonetheless always already transcended in esthetic unanimity.

Thus the central figure who emerges from within the chorus of satyrs is already transcendent; the single actor playing the role of the god is not opposed to the others, but merely incarnates their "vision." Nietzsche's scene eliminates the constitutive tension between sacred center and human periphery. On the contrary, elsewhere he describes the scene as constituted by unanimous suffering in imitation of Dionysus:

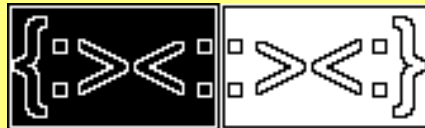
[W]e have now come to the insight that the scene (Scene) together with the action is basically and originally thought of only as a vision, that the single "reality" is the chorus itself, which creates the vision out of itself and speaks of that with the entire symbolism of dance, tone, and word.

This chorus in its vision gazes at its lord and master Dionysus and is thus always the chorus of servants. The chorus sees how Dionysus, the god, suffers and glorifies himself, and thus it does not itself act. But in this role, as complete servants in relation to the god, the chorus is nevertheless the highest, that is, the Dionysian expression of nature and, like nature, thus in its frenzy speaks the language of oracular wisdom, as the fellow-sufferer as well as wise person reporting the truth from the heart of the world. So arises that fantastic and apparently jarring figure of the wise and frenzied satyr, who is, at the same time, "the naïve man" in contrast to the god: an image of nature and its strongest drives, the very symbol of nature and at the same time the announcer of its wisdom and art: musician, poet, dancer, visionary--in a single person.

Dionysus, the essential stage hero and centre of the vision is, according to this insight and to tradition, not really present in the very oldest periods of tragedy, but only imagined as present. That is, originally tragedy was only "chorus" and not "drama." Later the attempt was made to show the god as real and then to present in a way

visible to every eye the visionary figure together with the transfiguring setting. At that point "drama" in the strict sense begins. Now the dithyrambic chorus takes on the task of stimulating the mood of the listeners right up to a Dionysian level of excitement, so that when the tragic hero appeared on the stage, they did not see something like an awkward masked person but a visionary shape born, as it were, out of their own enchantment. (8)

What appears on the Nietzschean scene is not violence and deferral, but the chorus's "vision" of the suffering god, seeing which "they do not act," yet combine in their inaction all cultural roles: wise and frenzied, natural and artistic. Nietzsche's collectivity only "later" takes on the role of the divinity to the end of "stimulating the mood of the listeners," who in turn see the actor as the Apollonian "visionary shape" of the god.



Nietzsche's concern with the tragic scene is neither antiquarian nor anthropological; it is a manifesto of cultural nationalism, both the most extreme and the most insightful of the countless efforts of German thinkers since Herder to identify the emerging German nation with the cultural glory of Greece. Thus the sole "tragic" scene described in any detail is taken from a Wagner opera:

To these genuine musicians I direct the question whether they can imagine a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of Tristan and Isolde, without any aid of word and image, purely as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring in a spasmodic unharnessing of all the wings of the soul?

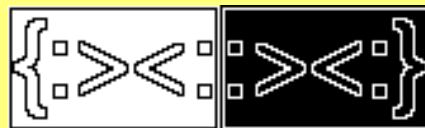
. . . But if such a work could nevertheless be perceived as a whole, without denial of individual existence; if such a creation could be created without smashing its creator--whence do we take the solution of such a contradiction?

Here the tragic myth and the tragic hero intervene between our highest musical emotion and this music--at bottom only as symbols of the most universal facts, of which only music can speak so directly. But if our feelings were those of entirely Dionysian beings, myth as a symbol would remain totally ineffective and unnoticed, and would never for a moment keep us from listening to the re-echo of the universalia ante rem [universals before things]. Yet here the Apollonian power erupts to restore the almost shattered individual with the healing balm of blissful illusion: suddenly we imagine we see only Tristan, motionless, asking himself dully: "The old tune, why does it wake me?" And what once seemed to us like a hollow sigh from the core of being now merely wants to tell us how "desolate and empty the sea." And where, breathless, we once thought we were being extinguished in a convulsive distention of all feelings, and little remained to tie us to our present existence, we now hear and see only the hero wounded to death, yet not dying, with his despairing cry: "Longing! Longing! In death still longing! for very longing not dying!" And where, formerly after such an excess and

superabundance of consuming agonies, the jubilation of the horn cut through our hearts almost like the ultimate agony, the rejoicing Kurwenal now stands between us and this "jubilation in itself," his face turned toward the ship which carries Isolde. However powerfully pity affects us, it nevertheless saves us in a way from the primordial suffering of the world, just as the symbolic image of the myth saves us from the immediate perception of the highest world-idea, just as thought and word save us from the uninhibited effusion of the unconscious will. The glorious Apollonian illusion makes it appear as if even the tone world confronted us as a sculpted world, as if the fate of Tristan and Isolde had been formed and molded in it, too, as in an exceedingly tender and expressive material. (21)

The operagoer participates in the originary passage from "expiring" to a "blissful illusion" that is presented as a remedy for "the primordial suffering of the world." The "symbolic image" of myth and its "thought and word" save us from the "unconscious will" that is nothing other than the potentially deadly force of mimetic desire. Tristan is dying, but the Dionysian music of death has now been imaginarily transformed into the "sculpted world" of immortal form.

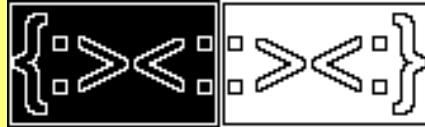
Here the tragic saves us from the temporal necessity of death by suspending time in "sculpted" form. This opposition does not coincide exactly with the spectator's oscillation between identification with the work's desiring content (fulfillment of Tristan's love) and that with sacrificial form (which requires his death). In the latter case, the transcendent meaning of tragic representation emerges from the opposition between the states of the human condition in which the spectator participates: fulfillment of desire (as if it were mine) and its necessary sacrifice (as the desire of the tragic victim). Nietzsche's opposition is rather between two modes of participation: the impersonal Dionysian flux and the individualized Apollonian vision, each one of which is already formalized in art. Just as the Bacchic chorus is never accused of the murder of Dionysus, so the operagoer is never accused of desiring the hero's death. To identify with Tristan as an individual is to separate oneself from the participatory flux and imagine him as "sculpted," that is, as immortal. When, in contrast, we participate in his death, it is not as his sacrificers but by "expiring" along with him "in a spasmodic unharnessing of all the wings of the soul." Whether I lose or affirm the individual self, there is no question of my affirming my self through the death of the other. In his desire to see tragedy as a dynamic equilibrium between the mortal world and the timeless world of representation, Nietzsche ignores the agon at its center from which this equilibrium emerges.



The Birth of Tragedy bears the seeds of the horrors that would emerge from German estheticism in the following century. The "tragic" as an antidote to decadence replaces the petty pleasures of worldly exchange and conflict with a utopian communion in death and life. We all know of Nietzsche's contempt for vulgar antisemitism--that of his brother-in-law, for example; yet he is not loath to put forth tragedy as the sign of Aryan masculine dignity in contrast with the "feminine frailties" of the Semitic:

The legend of Prometheus is indigenous to the entire community of Aryan races and attests to their prevailing talent for profound and tragic vision. In fact, it is not improbable that this myth has the same characteristic importance for the Aryan mind as the myth of the Fall has for the Semitic, and that the two myths are related as brother and sister. . . . Man's highest good must be bought with a crime and paid for by the flood of grief and suffering which the offended divinities visit upon the human race in its noble ambition. An austere notion, this, which by the dignity it confers on crime presents a strange contrast to the Semitic myth of the Fall--a myth that exhibits curiosity, deception, suggestibility, concupiscence, in short a whole series of principally feminine frailties, as the root of all evil. What distinguishes the Aryan conception is an exalted notion of active sin as the properly Promethean virtue; this notion provides us with the ethical substratum of pessimistic tragedy, which comes to be seen as a justification of human ills, that is to say of human guilt as well as the suffering purchased by that guilt. (9; emphasis the author's)

The same retrospectively sinister opposition between Aryan and Semite will reappear in the *Genealogy of Morals* at the moment of Nietzsche's most consequent philosophical achievement, the promotion of ressentiment to its rightful anthropological role. Ressentiment is a Semitic vice, in contrast with Achilles' noble "wrath"; Christianity is the triumph of "the slave revolt in morality" begun by the Jews. This contrast, however ill-founded, remains with us to this day. In Nietzsche's eyes, the scene of esthetic representation is constituted by the suspension of the ethical. I need not elaborate on how the dignity of crime was interpreted in Germany between 1933 and 1945.



Nietzsche is both the first genuine theoretician of the scene of representation and a dangerous mystifier whose historical hypothesis presents the scenic as the transcendence of the ethical, "beyond good and evil." We will be able to evaluate objectively Nietzsche's anthropological achievement only when neither the Right, as in the Nazi era, nor the Left, as in our own, is able to exploit this transcendence for its own ends.



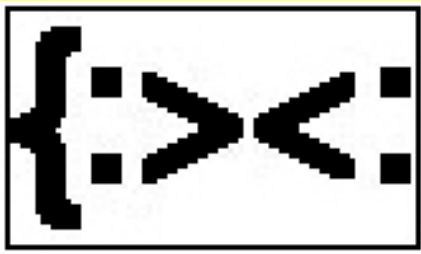
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment

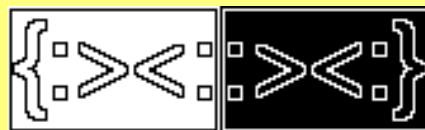


Eric Gans

Reality TV

No. 275: Saturday, December 21, 2002

Reality TV shows are not the most popular programs on TV (in the December 2, 2002 Nielsen ratings there is only one such show--Survivor, ranked eighth--in the top ten). But these programs arouse in their fans a particularly intense loyalty that makes them enthusiastic proselytizers. On a number of occasions when visiting friends or relatives of the thirty-something generation I have been shown tapes of entire series, presented as worthy of an interest no longer bestowed on fictions. For these people, television is about immediacy and spontaneity of narrative content, and reality TV is the exemplary form of television.



The cultural roots of Reality TV go back to the Romantic era and the emergent “realist” novel, which tells us, rather than the classical stories we already know, truths we dread, and are predictably fascinated, to learn. Cinema, the product of realist desire as much as of technological progress, began as a means of documenting the life-world, and although it soon evolved into a mode of fictional narrative that rivaled and surpassed the realist novel, cinema has never abandoned its documentary function. Television, immediately transmissible as film is not, has maintained a more uneasy balance between documentation and fiction; the mini-series, which takes advantage of the TV audience's domestic regularity, is arguably its only original contribution--and a dubious one at

that--to narrative form.

As a mechanical mode of reproduction, cinema already lends itself to the narrativization of everyday reality in modes such as *cinéma vérité*. But Reality TV is possible only on television, less as a technology than as a social institution; only on television can a narrative be strung out over several months, with episodes built around contestants in a staged but existentially real environment. Reality TV refuses to choose between chaotic spontaneity and aprioristic planning; it is both a contest focused on its outcome and a narrative sequence whose content it encourages its spectators to assimilate and recirculate in conversations with other spectators.

Télévision vérité has its lesser modes. There are websites that allow one to follow for a fee the movements of nubile young women, whose complicity in the operation, like that of the spectacularly indifferent coquette, is the source of its perverse attraction. But the exclusively sexual orientation of such forms of communication is the sign of their lack of public significance; in a word, they are forms of pornography. At an only slightly more respectable level, we encounter the low public mode made (in)famous by Jerry Springer: bringing people on stage to act out "life situations" in the public eye. These shows play on the tension between the viewer's sense of superiority ("thank God I'm not like that") and his frustrated anonymity ("that's the kind of thing that gets you on TV!"). The vulgarity and/or naiveté of the audience for these shows is set just above the vulgarity and/or naiveté of those who participate in them. This is "popular" culture in the premodern sense of the term; we will find no yuppies here.

Very different are the high-profile programs we designate as Reality TV. Although there are competitions focused exclusively on objective achievement, either in a lengthy project (e.g., *Frontier House*, where three families were set down in the Montana wilderness and given several months to construct a homestead in which they could survive the winter), or in an extended "amateur hour" performance (e.g., *American Idol*), I will limit myself here to the *Survivor* format: a group of selected contestants are faced with "survival" challenges in an exotic location, while at the same time being obliged to expel members at regular intervals over a series of weeks until only two are left, at which point a vote of the former participants decides the victor. Thus what is ostensibly a struggle between the human community and nature is continually refocused as a competition among humans. This procedure would never have been conceived if it were not modeled on the key dynamic for establishing and reinforcing communal solidarity: sacrificial expulsion. Each week, the *Survivor* community reconstitutes itself by expelling the most marginal of its members, only to find that the task must once again be repeated. The ultimate winner's dominance is less that of a Hobbesian monarch than of the Melanesian "big-man" who acquires ritually-based prestige by providing the most benefits to the others while offending them least.

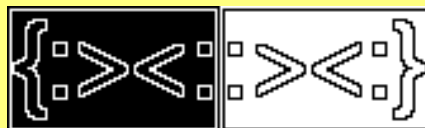
Within this framework, we observe a variety of human behaviors, all provoked directly or indirectly by the organizers, from collectively and individually meeting natural and artificial challenges to complaining about each other's personalities to intriguing with other participants to determine the next expulsee. As we watch the show an hour at a time, we know that the participants are living months-long in this environment. The narrative content, although staged for the camera, is qualitatively different from fiction: it is truly a selection from life--a life fully aware of the artificiality of its environment. The soap opera fan's concern for the fate of her favorite character depends on

her hypostatizing the narrative subject that controls this fate into a local divinity; the Survivor fan's concerns are for real people whose motivations are contiguous to his own.

Most active participants in the workforce prefer to talk about sports events rather than soap opera episodes. The genius of Reality TV is to detach the spontaneity of the sports arena from the ritualized rigor of sport itself. Although the reality-show participants occasionally engage in game-like competitions, these never dominate the show's overall narrative, but are summed up in the manner of newscasts of sports events. The real "game" is the show as a whole, with its ultimate goal of choosing the winner. Reality shows and sports events substitute for the transcendental relation between author and characters that defines fiction a shared framework in which the participants voluntarily assume the structure of the tragic agon; instead of the author's killing off his characters, the characters take this responsibility on themselves. The esthetic oscillation characteristic of fiction between identifying with the characters' desires and sharing the authorial subject's perspective, to which we "sacrifice" our identification with the characters, is dampened by the fact that the latter are dependent on their "author" only for the external premises and parameters of their activity; instead of a supreme subject that negates the desires in which we participate, there is only an external set of rules that mandate victory and defeat, but not the parties who will experience them.

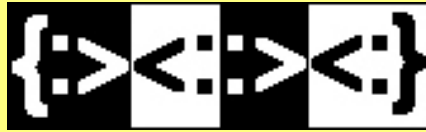
Athletes, bound by the rules of competition, are formally indifferent to their spectators; it is this sublime indifference, in which strength and skill are deployed and only thereby displayed, that makes sport truly a public function. The same is not true for reality shows. By converting the arena of the athletic event into a life mode, the reality show renounces its unambiguous status as spectacle; the open-ended nature of the participants' existential commitment makes our relationship with them unavoidably voyeuristic. This is not the crude voyeurism of shows that display the "private lives" of personages such as Anna-Nicole Smith or Ozzy Osbourne, whose very spectacularity is offered as an alibi for our prurient interest. But even under the more austere conditions of Survivor, we subject ourselves to the paradox of watching something not ontologically designated as watchable, of participating in the obscene.

The trade-off of the Survivor-watcher is between this obscenity and the asymmetry of the traditional esthetic relationship, in which we submit to the authorial subject's cultural wisdom, as demonstrated in the visual media by the power to mobilize institutional and technological expertise. Not the least valid explanation of the continuing decline of the novel relative to film is that the filmmaker can demonstrate far more explicitly than the novelist his access to cultural capital. This same institutional structure is behind programs like Survivor, but it no longer acts to empower a central subject; the godlike television studio spends millions of dollars to send ordinary individuals to exotic climes to construct "their own" sacrificial narrative for the benefit of the spectator.



Here I return to the demography of the Reality TV audience: loyalty to these shows is particularly great among persons who are neither too young nor too old to be disaffected from the market system, and whose identification with it as a source of opportunity is more urgent than their need to

witness cultural guarantees of its dominance. Reality shows appeal most to those who can imagine themselves as participating in them. The triumph of the obscene over the esthetic is welcome to the members of this post-millennial, “performatist” generation, who have learned from postmodernism to deconstruct preexisting hierarchical structures but who are also willing to take on the responsibility of constructing their own.



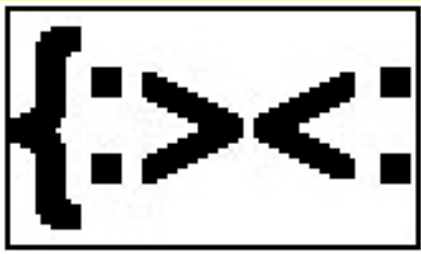
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Two Films: Reflections on Popular Culture

No. 276: Saturday, December 28, 2002

The other night I watched two films. The first was *His New Job*, an early **Chaplin** film from 1915; the other was the recent *Monster's Ball* that won **Halle Berry** her Oscar. These two films seemed to me to have a great deal in common.

The simplest way of distinguishing popular from high culture is in its handling of resentment. High culture is not the culture of the upper class but the culture of the community as a whole--in whose integrity the upper class generally has a clearer, if not necessarily a greater stake. Popular culture, in contrast, is that of the "people," insofar as they can be opposed to the community as presently organized, which they resent for relegating them to an inferior role. Thus whereas high culture, beginning with the *Iliad*, purges us of resentment by identifying us with its victims, popular culture performs the same function by identifying us with its satisfied practitioners. Our two films are versions, more or less sophisticated, of the popular formula. **Charlot**, as the French call him, is a one-dimensional embodiment of class resentment; all the other characters are higher on the social scale, and can consequently be victimized without arousing our sympathy. *Monster's Ball* belongs to a different era of popular culture, when the chief focus of our resentment isn't those we perceive as better off, but those who relieve us of our "white guilt" by confirming our sense of moral superiority. As **Voltaire** said of **God**, if such people didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent them.

The ultimate dream of resentment is to remain sole master of the world, having killed off everyone else. As **Achilles** puts it to **Patroclus**, before the latter's death makes him sadder and wiser:

For I would, O father Zeus, and Athene, and Apollo, that no man of the Trojans might escape death, of all that there are, neither any of the Argives [that is, the Greeks on whose side they are supposed to be fighting], but that we twain might escape destruction, that alone we might loose the sacred diadem of Troy. (Iliad, XVI, 97-100).

The Chaplin film, whose ugly vulgarity it would be lese-majesté to mention in cinematic circles, relies for its early laughs on kicking/pushing/stabbing people in the rear, but, in the interest of realizing Achilles' dream, Charlie switches at the film's conclusion to the more definitive gesture of bopping all the other male characters on the head with a large hammer. (In contrast with the formula of his later films, Charlie does not walk off with "the girl" at the end--although, with all potential rivals incapacitated, he is arguably free to do so.)

Let us now turn to MB, described in **Leonard Maltin's** familiar guide, which gives it 3½ stars out of a possible 4, as "[a] challenging film [that] tackles issues of darkness and light [i.e., race] with great feeling and nuance." The male protagonist, played by **Billy Bob Thornton**, is a corrections officer in a Southern state whose first defining act is conducting the electrocution of a black prisoner (played by **Sean "Puffy" Combs**), a dignified and repentant young man, and a talented artist to boot, the nature of whose capital crime remains shrouded in mystery. One down.

BBT has a son, a sensitive young man given to befriending Blacks, and a father (played by **Peter Boyle**), the stereotypical unreformed Southern racist; these two as well are present and former corrections officers. There are no women of any importance in their lives, save an implausibly attractive young white prostitute who works leaning over a table and appears to be the town's sole source of sexual release; the father and son are both widowers, the former by his wife's suicide. After BBT slaps his son around for vomiting during the pre-execution "last walk," the latter pulls a gun on BBT, who declares he has always hated him, whereupon the young man, affirming his love for his father, shoots himself through the heart. Two down.

This should suffice to disgust us for the duration with BBT's character. But now we come to the crux of the plot. Halle Berry, playing the sensitive convict's widow, after losing her previous waitressing job, takes a part-time position as night waitress in a restaurant frequented by BBT. HB has a son with a severe eating problem. One night, as mother and son are walking at the side of the road (her automobile having previously expired), the latter is struck by a hit-and-run driver. BBT, passing by, takes HB and her son to the hospital, but the boy doesn't make it. Three down.

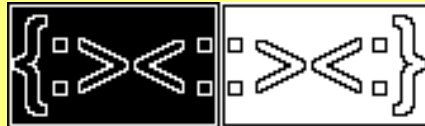
HB's grief for her son allows the "sensitive but inarticulate" BBT to express some grief for his own son--a grief that excludes any avowal of complicity in the boy's suicide. As a result, BBT and HB become friends, then lovers.

Things are going along well enough; BBT has quit his corrections job and purchased a gas station (the source of his wealth is never specified). He has also given HB his dead son's truck. (The truck has a stick shift, with which--implausibility 1--HB is at first wholly unfamiliar, but which--implausibility 2--we immediately see her handling without a thought. The point of this, no doubt, is to show how well she can learn, provided she has BBT to teach her.) But one day HB shows up at

the BBT homestead to deliver a hat she has bought him to express her gratitude. The old man asks her for a cigarette and then proceeds to demonstrate his unregenerate racism by a most unspeakable sexual remark. This understandably angers HB, who drives off in a huff (and in the truck). Whereupon BBT, invoking a law unknown in states that obey the principle of habeas corpus, whisks his dad--whom, like his dead son, he says he doesn't love--off to a nursing home, promptly informing HB that he has "sent him away." Four down.

Meanwhile, HB has been evicted from her home. But now that dad has been eliminated, what could be simpler than her moving into BBT's place. He opens up for her his son's room that he had padlocked after the latter's demise. He also begins to befriend his black neighbor and his sons, whom he had previously treated in the usual Southern racist manner. He even names his gas station "Letecia" after HB's character--presumably not fearing to alienate his white customers.

The final sequence--the only one in the film that is underplayed--shows HB discovering a picture of BBT drawn by her electrocuted husband, realizing thereby BBT's participation in the process. She crumples the drawing and goes into hysterics, and we expect an explosion on BBT's return with a half-gallon of chocolate ice cream (note the color symbolism). But no, as they sit on the steps of the house and gaze at the stars (one of those Hollywood constellations one would seek in vain in the night sky), she smiles, wistfully and hopefully. In a final ambiguity, the graves of BBT's mother, wife, and son (which he maintains on his property) are shown during this sequence.

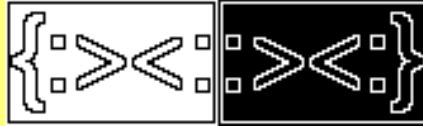


It is easy to see why HB won an Oscar for her performance, and why she saw this award as an occasion for the expression of racial pride. But let us take a dispassionate look at the character she portrays, both in herself and in her relationship to the African-American community.

Letecia's most notable personality trait is dysfunctionality. She can't keep a decent job; can't operate a cash register; can't stop her son from overeating (or from getting run over while walking next to her at the side of the road); can't keep her car or her home. Not to put too fine a point on it, her only evident qualities are sexual. Whence the extreme offense wrought by the old man's vile remark and the need for the film to deny any similarity between the father's and the son's sexual adventures with black women. (The film "subconsciously" suggests this similarity by making both BBT and his son--in reverse order--customers of the white prostitute.)

As for the black community, it does not appear to exist. HB has neither family nor friends. Not a single African-American gives her assistance in time of need, forcing her to depend for her lodging on BBT's generosity. The only other Blacks who play a major role in the plot--the murderer-artist husband and his obese son--are both killed off as a prerequisite to the final idyll. (Seeing BBT helping HB to raise the troubled little boy might have made the rest more bearable.)

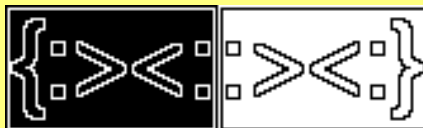
Conclusion: HB's Oscar may have been a great moment for African-American actors, but hardly for the African-American characters they portray.



Chaplin eliminates his rivals by knocking them out with a large wooden hammer. MB eliminates its unwanted males more subtly, albeit more violently, since three-fourths of them end up dead. The difference is that, in contrast to the Chaplin film, we are made to feel sorry for them--the one we feel least sorry for being the old man who is left to die rather than killed outright. Rather than, as in the Chaplin film, investing them with our class resentment, we allay our moral guilt by sympathizing with them as, each in a different way--even the old man--victims of Southern racism, at the same time as we benefit on the level of the plot from their elimination.

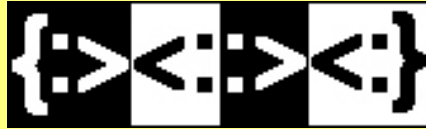
The turning-point of the film, the act that defines BBT's liberation from Southern racism, is not making love with HB, but expelling his father, an Oedipal gesture arranged so as to cause us, like BBT, a minimum of guilt. By kicking his father out of the house, BBT redeems himself for his role on the other side of the Oedipal divide that drove his own racially enlightened son to suicide. Harmony between races and sexes, this film tells us, is predicated on the scorched-earth abolition of the "patriarchal" family. The world can begin again with the love of BBT and HB facing the stars only on condition of expelling both fathers and sons from a world already devoid of mothers and daughters. Or, to turn it around, BBT's act of entering into a love relationship with a black woman suffices to purge all his previous sins of inhumanity, not merely to Blacks, but to his own family, while making palatable the elimination of all affective relationships between HB and other black people.

By way of contrast, **Colline Serreau's** 1989 romantic comedy *Romuald et Juliette* (Mama, There's a Man in Your Bed) depicts a Parisian romance between a white business executive and a large black cleaning lady with five children and the equivalent number of ex-husbands. **Juliette**, despite her humble station, is wise and sharp enough to save **Romuald's** business. This is not a "serious" film, but it shows that it is possible to conceive an interracial romance in which the black woman neither looks like a beauty queen nor lacks all resources save those of her white paramour. The differences between the two films may be said to reflect the different levels of cultural problematicity between the post-colonial African immigrants of the French film and the post-slavery African-Americans of the other.



Monster's Ball is a filmic exploitation of a semi-mythical deep South that doubles its excoriation of Southern racism with a particularly murderous plot structure. Yet it is no contradiction to affirm that, on balance, this film makes a positive contribution to American culture. By eliminating everyone else from the equation, it allows black-white romance to reach a one-on-one psychological density never before attained in mainstream Hollywood cinema. (Contrast, for example, the 60s classic *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*) It is this density that won HB her Oscar and that inspired Malin's praise. Popular culture, even that of Hollywood, has a wisdom of its own. Chaplin was an expression of it,

and so is MB. If Chaplin helped stop us from killing each other, if Monster's Ball helps Blacks and Whites to stop resenting each other, they are doing what culture is supposed to do.



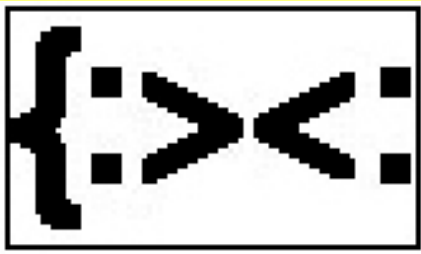
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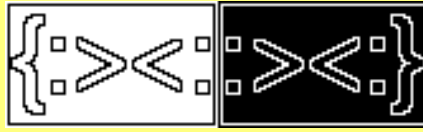
Eric Gans

Karl Marx's Sceneless Socialism: I - The Originary Moment

No. 277: Saturday, January 4, 2003

Of the nineteenth century's two great pourfendeurs of metaphysics, whereas **Nietzsche** opposes to metaphysics a theory of the scene from which its pretended objectivity derives, **Marx** ignores the scene as a mere derivative of material relations. Nowhere in Marx's writing, from his satiric rendering of **Eugène Suë's** *Mystères de Paris* in *The Holy Family* to his depiction of the 1848 French revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune, does Marx attempt to convey a sense of the scene within which events both occur and are represented. Events are transitions from one historical moment to another; they are never lingered on as significant in themselves.

One of Marx's most famous sentences is the "Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach": Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kömmt darauf an, sie zu verändern. [Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it]. Marx's idea of "changing the world" through thought means revealing the truth about the world's operations in such a way as to accelerate the processes inherent in these operations; in particular, by making his readers aware of the necessary demise of bourgeois society and of class society in general, to bring about this demise more quickly. No genuine scene of mutual presence, if one is to take place at all, is possible before the accession to the "realm of freedom" through the liberation of humanity's productive forces; until then, all figures of scenic presence are ideological shams of the ruling class designed to arrest the dialectical march toward freedom.



The first definitive statement of Marx's anthropology is the section entitled "History: Fundamental Conditions" in part I A of *The German Ideology* (1845). Marx first defines four "moments" that come together synchronically in the human: 1. "the production of material life itself"; 2. "production of new needs" derived from this basic production; 3. "the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the family"; 4. the combination of "a certain mode of production, or industrial stage . . . with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage."

[i.] Only now, after having considered four moments, four aspects of the primary historical relationships do we find that man also possesses "consciousness", but, even so, not inherent, not "pure" consciousness. From the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not enter into "relations" with anything, it does not enter into any relation at all. For the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.

Language is "practical consciousness" in the sense of material consciousness ("burdened" with matter") that exists in the world of human interaction. Language alone mediates "relations" between humans, self-conscious relationships that the concerned parties apprehend through the words that define them. There is no generative scene; indeed, Marx does not address the origin of language at all. Although he defines the human by "relations" designated by language rather than simply existing in the world, language does not originate in the spiritual realm of "pure" consciousness, but in the course of the productive process. To quote the preceding section of *The German Ideology* (I A 4. "The Essence of the Materialist Conception of History Social Being and Social Consciousness"): "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life."

The "History" passage continues:

[ii.] Consciousness is at first, of course, merely consciousness concerning the immediate sensuous environment and consciousness of the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious. At the same time it is consciousness of nature, which first appears to men as a completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force, with which men's relations are purely animal and by which they are overawed like beasts; it is thus a purely animal consciousness of nature (natural religion [Naturreligion]) just because nature is as yet hardly modified historically. (We

see here immediately: this natural religion or this particular relation of men to nature is determined by the form of society and vice versa. Here, as everywhere, the identity of nature and man appears in such a way that the restricted relation of men to nature determines their restricted relation to one another, and their restricted relation to one another determines men's restricted relation to nature.) On the other hand, man's consciousness of the necessity of associating with the individuals around him is the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all. This beginning is as animal as social life itself at this stage. It is mere herd-consciousness, and at this point man is only distinguished from sheep by the fact that with him consciousness takes the place of instinct or that his instinct is a conscious one.

Here, in contrast with the previous passage, the human being is "growing self-conscious" and as a consequence humans confront nature as "a completely alien . . . force . . . by which they are overawed like beasts." This derivation of "natural religion" from the conflation of the inherently cultural relation of awe with the pre-cultural, "animal" reaction to nature is typical of nineteenth-century explanations of the origin of religion; we have already seen its classic exposition in the work of Marx's contemporary Max Müller (see [Chronicle 192](#)). We need not dwell on the absurdity of this derivation, whose association of religious awe with the animal's presumably inferior abilities to cope with natural forces makes animality itself the source of religious feeling ("overawed like beasts"). What makes this passage important is that Marx's attempt to describe the genesis of his previously-defined anthropological model obligatorily leads him, in however perfunctory a manner, to account for the sacred. In the parenthesis immediately following the Müller-like derivation, Marx reassociates this worship of nature with human social relations. "We see here immediately: this natural religion or this particular relation of men to nature is determined by the form of society and vice versa." But what we see "immediately" is rather the contradiction between the parallel drawn here between religion and social form and the earlier derivation of religion from man's "purely animal" relation to nature. If indeed religion is not simply determined by "the form of society" as we might expect the superstructure to be determined by the infrastructure, but "vice versa" as well, then there is a reciprocal homology between religious ideology and the social order that cannot be explained by our "animal" awe before nature.

The only coherent explanation of "natural religion" is that our sense of a "completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force" proceeds not from our experience of nature but from the mimetic violence from which religion preserves the human social order. For the homology to be a functional relationship, this force must become the basis of an order that it constitutes by remaining outside it in the transcendental relation of the sacred that is nowhere to be found in nature. Marx's materialist disdain for the scene of representation reduces its originary manifestation to an animal act--that is, one that cannot by definition characterize the human. As soon as we are forced to cease our diachronically-oriented productive activities in order to attend to the scene of our experience, we act as beasts. In terms of the historical dialectic, the fearful apprehension of nature as an alien force is the first stage of the process by which we harness this force to our productive enterprise, but the natural religion that results from the appearance of this force on the scene of representation exceeds this dialectic in both directions at once, as at one and the same time a prehuman reaction and an ideological figuration of the productive relations by which the dialectic is presumably constituted.

It might appear curious that nature provides Marx with the original resistance against which his human dialectic can operate; the theoretician of the class struggle passes up the opportunity to derive human self-consciousness from the scene of human conflict on the example of **Hegel's** lord-bondsman dialectic. In this, Marx betrays the **Rousseauian** roots of socialist thought: a humanity born in **Hobbesian** internal conflict would lack an originary guarantee of the eschatological communist paradise in which class conflict is abolished; in other terms, it would be beholden to a scene.

[iii.] This sheep-like or tribal consciousness receives its further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase of population. With these there develops the division of labor, which was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act, then that division of labor which develops spontaneously or "naturally" by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g., physical strength), needs, accidents, etc. etc. Division of labor only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labor appears. [Marx's marginal note:] (The first form of ideologists, priests, is concurrent.) From this moment onward consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of "pure" theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.

Once again, Marx hints at the originary significance of the transcendental dichotomy between signs and things: the moment of the division of labor that gives rise to a self-reflective human consciousness that "can really flatter itself [sich einbilden]" is that between "material" and "mental" labor, the latter, as if in anticipation of **Durkheim**, being attributed to the sacred functions of priestly "ideology." Thus the material progress that can be attributed to human labor produces human consciousness only through the mediation of this sacred ideology that exists detached from "existing practice" on the scene of its own "pure" representations.

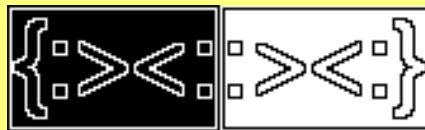
This is as far as Marx ever goes in the thematization of the scene of representation. Yet it is far enough to reveal that Marx's materialist anthropology cannot coherently explain the scene's dependency on the sacred, which, although described as originating in our animal fear of nature, gives rise not only to a homologous representation of the system of social relations but to human self-consciousness itself as distinct from the unreflective consciousness of the here-and-now.

[iv.] But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. comes into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production; this, moreover, can also occur in a particular national sphere of relations through the appearance of the contradiction, not within the national orbit, but between this national consciousness and the practice of other nations, i.e., between the national and the general consciousness of a nation (as we see it now in Germany).

Moreover, it is quite immaterial what consciousness starts to do on its own: out of all such muck [Dreck] we get only the one inference that these three moments, the forces of production, the state of society, and consciousness, can and must come into contradiction with one another, because the division of labor implies the possibility, nay the fact that intellectual and material activity--enjoyment and labor, production and consumption--devolve on different individuals, and that the only possibility of their not coming into contradiction lies in the negation in its turn of the division of labor. It is self-evident, moreover, that "specters," "bonds," "the higher being," "concept," "scruple," are merely the idealistic, spiritual expression, the conception apparently of the isolated individual, the image of very empirical fetters and limitations, within which the mode of production of life and the form of intercourse coupled with it move.

In conclusion, Marx reminds us that the above-mentioned "emancipation" of consciousness is in fact an illusion; consciousness reflects "social relations" and its liberation from "existing practice" is merely a reflection of the "contradiction" between these relations and the "forces of production." Moreover, such a contradiction must occur, presumably because (the text is allusive on this point) the emancipated consciousness is that of a privileged class defined by "intellectual activity" and "consumption" of the material goods produced by those engaged in the "material activity" of "production."

Here is the germ of post-metaphysical thought that changes the world not by reflecting the ideology of the privileged consumers but by elaborating that implicit in the productive activity of the proletariat, which not merely opposes them to the bourgeois possessors of the means of production but has the potential to render the bourgeoisie, and all "division of labor" in the sense of class difference, superfluous. Consciousness "on its own" produces only "muck"; its "idealistic, spiritual" contents are merely fanciful representations of the "very empirical fetters and limitations" of the production process, as seen through the distorting lens of class ("social relations"). The justification for the socialist ideology that Marx would subsequently elaborate is that the "fetters" of the current mode of production had become so clearly the effect of current "social relations" that the proletarian ideologist could envisage a world in which, at last, social relations would reflect production relations without conflict--the classless society in which the division of labor would be "negated." (I will deal with Marx's concept of the communist revolution in a later Chronicle.)



In class society, contradiction is inevitable because of the ideological mystification brought about by the division of labor. Yet the origin of this mystification, Marx tells us, is the sacred ideology first promulgated by priests, which itself derives from animal fear before the forces of nature. Which is to say that, however much these priests take advantage of their flock's credulousness to impose on them an ideology that justifies their own and their allies' class privileges, this credulousness itself, this willingness to grant authority to those who speak in the name of the sacred, has its origins prior to the division of labor in an "ideological" imperative that is nonetheless independent of humanity's ideological divisions. The originary role of the sacred in the constitution of the human is one that no

confounder of priestly ideology, be he Karl Marx or Friedrich Nietzsche, could account for.



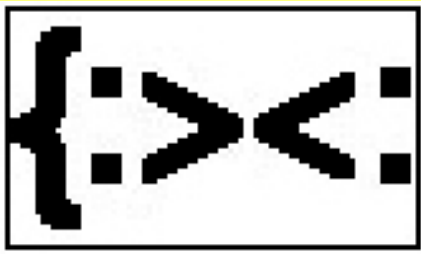
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Marx II: Scenes of Revolution

No. 278: Saturday, January 11, 2003

**C'est la lutte finale
Groupons-nous, et demain
L'Internationale
Sera le genre humain!**

**'Tis the final conflict
Let each stand in his place
The International working class
Will be the human race!**

Karl Marx wrote very little about the scene of "final conflict" celebrated in the Internationale. Yet the following well-known passage from *Capital* demonstrates that his historical vision was indeed informed by a scenic imagination that he generally preferred to leave implicit:

Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has

sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labor at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. [Die Stunde des kapitalistischen Privateigentums schlägt.] The expropriators are expropriated. (Capital I, part VIII, ch 32)

What is most striking about this revolutionary scene is its utter passivity. Even the expropriation of the expropriators takes place in the passive tense. The capitalist "integument" bursts without a human or even an anthropomorphic agent, as the inevitable result of the growing incompatibility between the "centralization of the means of production" and "capitalist private property," whose hour is struck, not by the revolutionary proletariat, but by the impersonal forces of history.

Marx's aim is not to render the proletariat passive, but, on the contrary, by affirming the inevitability of the process, to encourage them to hasten it. To this end, a natural necessity is affirmed in scenic, that is, cultural terms. An impersonal process is made into a spectacle; we are witnesses on the scene of history itself. And although the periphery lacks identifiable agents, the scene, like all scenes, is focused on its mortal center, the expropriators, the sacrificial nature of whose expropriation is underlined by the fatal implications of the striking hour (which the English "knell" renders in a more ecclesiastical register).

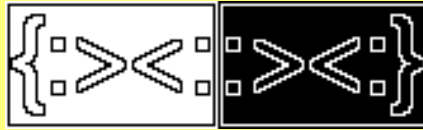
The passage concludes:

The capitalist mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labor of the proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of negation. This does not re-establish private property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the acquisition of the capitalist era: i.e., on co-operation and the possession in common of the land and of the means of production.

The transformation of scattered private property, arising from individual labor, into capitalist private property is, naturally, a process, incomparably more protracted, violent, and difficult, than the transformation of capitalistic private property, already practically resting on socialized production, into socialized property. In the former case, we had the expropriation of the mass of the people by a few usurpers; in the latter, we have the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people.

The first paragraph reinforces the process just described as the unfolding of an inexorable "law of Nature," whereas the second concludes with a reference to a human agent, the "mass of the people" [Volksmasse]. The action here is the same as in the preceding passage, the expropriation of the "usurpers." But here it is made explicit that the role of the capitalist in history is to construct what turns out to be the final revolutionary scene. Human history is divided into two phases: in the first, "incomparably more protracted," "scattered" property is concentrated into a form "already practically resting on socialized production," that is, into an economic totality, a nineteenth-century

version of today's global economy. In contrast, the second phase, that of the "negation of negation," is swift and automatic, and this because it takes place on the scene laboriously constructed in the course of the first phase. The "mass of the people" is, in effect, the entire society minus the few "usurpers." On the one hand, a sacrificial scene whose victims, "usurpers" or "expropriators," play the central role; on the other, a historical process in which this small group of capitalists is cast off as an "integument." The historical function of the bourgeoisie is to construct the unique and definitive sacrificial scene of human history, in which they play the central role as the last identifiable, and consequently superfluous, individuals, no longer necessary to the henceforth conflict-free historical process.



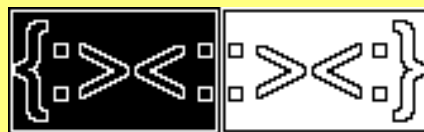
As with the scene of revolution, Marx was equally reluctant to lay out the scene of the future communist utopia, and his unique attempt to do so is equally revelatory. It is found in a famous passage from *The German Ideology*, very nearly contiguous to the passage analyzed in the preceding [Chronicle](#) as representative of Marxian anthropology.

Division of labor and private property are, moreover, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity.

Further, the division of labor implies the contradiction between the interest of the separate individual or the individual family and the communal interest of all individuals who have intercourse with one another. And indeed, this communal interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as the "general interest", but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labor is divided. And finally, the division of labor offers us the first example of how, as long as man remains in natural society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now. (My emphasis)

There is more than meets the eye in this semi-serious blueprint for the communist utopia. Aside from the pointedly pastoral references to hunting and fishing, the vision of communism as **Rabelais'** Abbaye de Thélème where each can do as he pleases without specializing in anything is reminiscent, in a more individualistic (and far more chaste) mode, of **Fourier's** phalanstères, which were to be meticulously organized so that the members' desires would all complement each other. But beyond what amounts to blaming "the division of labor" for the mortality that limits the scope of our earthly activities, the heart of this passage is the bland but sinister phrase: "society regulates the general production" (die Gesellschaft die allgemeine Produktion regelt). In any other case, Marx would be the first to tell us that abstractions like "society" disguise specific class interests. This little phrase is a blueprint for totalitarianism; "society," as incarnated by what **Lenin** would call "the vanguard of the proletariat," brooks no political debate over the terms of its regulation of production.

It is worth reflecting on the flaw in Marx's anthropology that underlies the flaw in his utopian vision. What we uncover in Marx's phrase about society is, once again, a scene: for "society" to regulate production, it is necessary that the productive functions of the whole society be accessible to a single decision-making body. Yet this scene remains unvisualized in Marx's text, where the main clause describes rather the individual's self-motivated lifestyle. The scene in which "society" decides who should produce what is syntactically subordinated to "my" desire to fish in the morning and hunt in the afternoon, as though "society" were a disinterested computer program that instantaneously transformed the energy of each individual's desires to produce into a "general production" that would simultaneously satisfy all these individuals' desires to consume. The cavalier style of the passage does not make it any less valuable as a revelation of the fundamental incoherence of Marx's anthropology: his vision of the ideal society as a scene without conflict between periphery and center, as a body with a single, absolute will (**Rousseau's** *volonté générale*), yet wholly lacking in self-presence, existing only to guarantee the individual independence of its members. As those who lived under twentieth-century despotisms learned to their detriment, denial of the scene of reciprocal human exchange is the most deadly denial of all.



Just as the sacrificial scene of revolution is disguised as an inevitable conflictive movement of impersonal forces, so the sacrificial scene of communism is disguised as the automatic harmonious operation of equally impersonal forces. Although throughout most of the twentieth century, to criticize Marx in this manner would have been denounced as perverse and reactionary, today we are able to realize that these fragments of Marx's scenic imagination have a good deal to tell us.



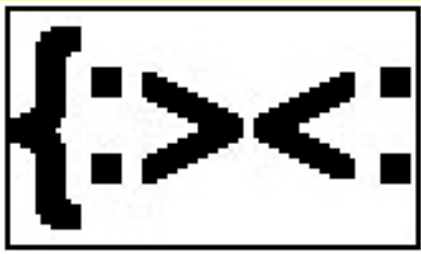
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Antisemitism and Anti-Americanism

No. 279: Saturday, January 25, 2003

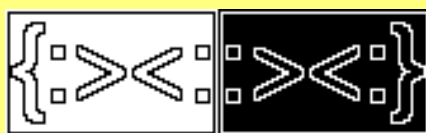
What has made the Jews a privileged object of collective hatred is their paradoxical place in the history of religion. Their historical role as the first people to worship a unique, universal deity imposes on them the blessing and the curse of defining the one God in terms of their own sacred history. However careful they may be to avoid naming him in any language, the Jews' humility before God cannot but be experienced by others as a transcendental arrogance. The New Testament and the Koran stand in an unavoidably mimetic relation to the Hebrew **Tanach**, whether as transformative supplement or wholesale replacement. The Jews' continued presence is an eternal reminder that all monotheism derives from, and therefore still is, worship of their God.

Every hegemonic spiritual movement in the Western world from Christianity to Nazism has presented itself as a solution to the "Jewish question," whether religiously by converting the Jews or nationally by eliminating them. Those in the first group expected the Jews willingly to exchange their paradoxical tribal privilege for membership in a universal community more apparently consonant with the one God's universal authority. Just as **Luther** thought his renewed Christianity would succeed in converting the Jews where Roman Catholicism had failed, **Marx**, in his early *On the Jewish Question*, by associating capitalism with the universalization of "Jewish" values, links the overcoming of capitalism to the elimination of Judaism. In each case, the conversion attempt was not wholly unsuccessful, but partial success is tantamount to failure, the scandal of the Jews' resistance being not its reality but its mere possibility. So long as it remains possible for Jews to remain outside the ecumenical community, the one God remains indistinguishable from the tribal

god of the Hebrews. The late nineteenth-century ideologues who created and adopted the term "anti-Semitism" thought the good society depended explicitly on the elimination of those whose very existence is an affront to any attempt to begin anew. The Jewish question had become the central political issue, which only the Final Solution could settle for good.

Conversely, the revelation of a given movement's roots in Judaism debunks its claim to constitute a new beginning. Nietzsche traces Christian victimary rhetoric to its "genealogical" Jewish source in order to denounce its resentful hypocrisy; Marx denigrates the political liberalism that emancipated the Jews by explaining it as a secondary consequence of the domination of bourgeois society by the "Jewish" value of money. The Jewish nation survives by institutionalizing either its national resentment or its nomadic insubstantiality, as manifested in its devotion to value-free exchange. In either case, the inadequate transcendence of Jewish values must be replaced by a more radical one--communism or the Superman--that will finally overcome the binding force, money or resentment, that sustains the Jews' mysterious cohesion.

The Holocaust turned the Western world away from the antisemitic solution to the "Jewish question." But we should likewise reject the philosemitic solution. Instead of looking forward to the day when antisemitism, along with every other form of identity-based resentment, will have disappeared, we should rather work toward an ethical maturity that allows people to overcome these resentments. The best Christian tradition considers the continued existence of the Jews a test: the true Christian is one who masters his resentment of the Jews.

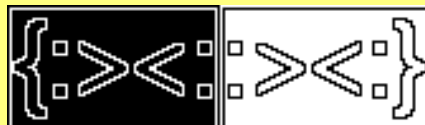


The Jews have long been hated as the first nation; today the United States is hated as the ultimate nation. To proclaim the one God is to proclaim the equality under God of all humanity, yet at the same time to foreclose all others from making the unique asymmetrical gesture that establishes this universal symmetry. The position of the USA as the hegemon of the global marketplace engenders a similar paradox; how can I be an equal world-citizen if one country alone exemplifies world-citizenship?

Modern antisemitism already blends resentment of the originary with resentment of modernity; the Jew's historical independence of other traditions is blamed for the corrosion of these traditions. Here again, Marx's critique is exemplary: it is "Jewish" capitalism that makes "all solid things melt into air" (Communist Manifesto). The Jews' association with money is not a historical contingency of their debarment from owning land but the essence of their rootless national existence; their economic values, like their Torah, exist in the form of portable signs. The triumph of exchange in the modern global economy is the triumph of portability over rooted stability, and this triumph is doubly incarnate: in the United States, as the capital of the global marketplace, and in Israel, whose existence signifies that the nomads' conquest is so complete that they now dare to return to the land, even the sacred land of Dar al-Islam.

It is no coincidence that the United States is the only country in the world where large numbers of

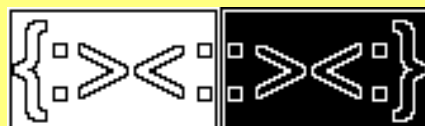
Jews have lived for several generations in no real danger of expulsion or persecution. Because the USA is a nation of immigrants, the Jews differ from the rest of its "hyphenated" population only in the peculiarity of their nation of origin, not in the fact of having one. Nor, since WWII, are they under pressure to deny their Jewishness. On the contrary, the oft-discussed danger of assimilation is mitigated by the fact that, in a society that grants prestige to ethnic particularity, Jews who marry Gentiles are as likely to bring up their children as Jews as not. To be a Jew in America is to exult in the universal triumph of "Jewish" fungibility while retaining one's Jewish identity. This identity is affirmed by American support of Israel, which for antisemites proves the domination of American policy by Jews, but which simply reflects the kinship of the only two countries where being Jewish is normal.



Since September 11, what both Jews and Americans alike fear most is the hatred of Islam. That Islamic violence toward Jews has not come anywhere near that perpetrated sixty years ago in Christian Europe gives little reassurance in the nuclear and bioweapon age. Islam has become once more what it was in the beginning, the religion of the margins of Western civilization, but it can no longer dream of conquering the center, only of destroying it.

The fruitless debate about whether the conflict of the extreme forms of Islam with the West constitutes a "clash of civilizations" founders on the asymmetry of the two parties to the conflict. Islam and the West are universalist in two very different senses: in the first case, one joins a potentially universal religious community; in the second, one participates in a virtually global exchange system. No doubt, to the extent that the Islamists themselves are part of that system, they already belong to Western civilization. But they are able to reject this participation even while it is taking place by defining themselves as representatives of a religious counter-civilization whose other-worldly virulence feeds on the impossibility of this-worldly liberation. The more world civilization becomes one, the more its alternatives must be founded outside the world. The fact that the imposition of the Islamists' version of civilization on the planet at large would be an incalculable disaster is less an obstacle than a stimulus to action.

In the conflict between Islam and the West, the Jews are a synecdochic focus; although one cannot conceivably kill off the entire Christian population, Hitler showed that one can make a pretty good try at killing off the Jews. The Islamists, however, do not share Hitler's illusion that it suffices to exterminate the Jews to recreate what Eric Voegelin called a "compact" community. As 9/11 showed, American economic and military power are their principal targets. Nor is it clear that, in imitating the dénouement of the neo-Nazi Turner Diaries by flying a plane into the Pentagon (Turner's, however, was nuclear-armed), they share the book's ideological aim of freeing the USA from Jewish domination. Moslems have no vested interest in Aryan liberation.



Globalization knits nations together through a complex variety of institutions, legal, financial, and political, on the model of the slowly but steadily proceeding integration of Europe. Yet this process of supranational integration does not abolish or even weaken national identity; it merely forces it to redefine itself in cultural rather than politico-economic terms. Under these circumstances, the "first" and "last," Jewish and American nations become the exemplary targets for the resentment generated by the national idea: the latter, because, as the world becomes more global, world culture becomes increasingly that of the United States; the former, because the originators of monotheism are, better than any other people, adapted to globalization.

As resentment of Jews becomes conflated with resentment of Americans, it becomes more widespread and seemingly more respectable. Yet there is a perverse comfort for the Jews in this conjunction: nearly three hundred million Americans now share the historical burden of the "chosen people." Under these circumstances, a second Holocaust is inconceivable, although not, alas, impossible.



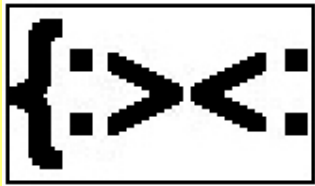
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Carole Landis

No. 280: Saturday, February 15, 2003



[PNG image \(900K\)](#)

[Other Photographs](#)

Few readers will be able to identify the subject of this photograph: **Carole Landis**, who committed suicide on July 5, 1948 at the age of 29. Hers was a name I had only heard; an actress who played in no major films and who died before I was seven years old. The other night, I watched the quasi-film noir *I Wake up Screaming*, with Landis as a murder victim whose killer is hunted down by **Victor Mature** and **Betty Grable**, who plays her sister. Carole Landis was so unfamiliar to me that on her first appearance in the picture I was surprised to find Betty Grable so beautiful; it took me a moment to realize that Betty was playing the other role.

In a brief exploration of the Internet, the source of all wisdom, I chanced upon this breathtaking portrait. It is, quite simply, the most perfect representation of a woman's beauty--of beauty itself--that I have ever seen. Since finding it, I have perused for purpose of comparison hundreds of publicity shots, from the 1930s to the present day. Most are wholly forgettable, some are pretty, many are supposed to be sexy but succeed only in being vulgar, a few are truly sexy, and a very few are portraits that give some insight into their

subject. I found none to compare with this one. Seek for yourself, dear reader.

Especially today, but in fact from the beginning, as the Bible and **Georges Bataille** tell us, there has been a shamefulness attached to a man's desire for a woman (women's desires for men, in contrast, lacking this element of shame, are consequently seen, and feared by men, as shameless). To desire is to threaten the self's dissolution in the imaginary but always potentially real sparagmos suffered by the peripheral worshiper who dares move toward the center. The "homosocial" sphere until recently so powerful allowed the transcendence of shame by relocating desire in the context of a friendly rivalry for an object considered fundamentally unworthy. The accession of women to more or less equal social and professional roles (a consequence of the postwar victimary critique) has relegated this kind of camaraderie to the lower reaches of the moral order, with the result of removing shame's protection.

The role of the bosom in feminine attractiveness is particularly vulnerable to this intensification of shame. Biologically speaking, women's secondary sexual characteristics have clearly been the object of a very intense selection; just take a look at a female chimpanzee. But desire is shameful; the endless talk about women's breasts reflects a great uneasiness. The everyday world respects **Jesse Ventura's** desire to be reincarnated as a 38DD bra, but the only women in public life with such attributes are figures of fun, the most egregious of whom, **Anna-Nicole Smith**, shares with **Ozzy Osbourne** the newly invented role of TVcam scapegoat.

To admire the photograph above is to accept without shame the bosom's importance as an element of female beauty. The myriad decolletés that dominate publicity collections rarely succeed even in being sexually attractive, no doubt because, were they to do so, they would risk stepping over the line that separates "innocent" erotic art, quaintly known as cheesecake, from pornography. Cheesecake is a secondary representation of sexual beauty, like the "myths" described by **Roland Barthes**: it represents the desirable without directly arousing desire, which appears only through its mimetic detour. In contrast, pornography alludes directly to sexual activity; if enough bandwidth is available, it displays such activity in detail. Its effect, which one can turn away from but not avoid, is mimetically to induce the spectator to equivalent activity. Pornography avoids the paradox of esthetic experience, the reliance on the representation's standing outside the world of the imagination it generates and that depends upon it, by opening a parallel path of fulfillment through the sexual excitation it inspires, relying on the fact, whose adaptiveness needs no explanation, that sexual desire is capable of generating its own satisfaction.

No doubt affirming that one finds a woman's bosom beautiful, as opposed to simply desirable, seems hypocritical, more than ever in our day of **Hooters** restaurants. And that is precisely what explains the remarkable fact that our feminine iconography, obsessed with the bosom, so rarely presents it without disfiguring insistence as a harmonious element of a beautiful whole. Compare our Landis photo with that of **Jane Russell** (which sells for 500 times its price!), or even that of the iconic **Marilyn Monroe**.



Our photograph, neither cheesecake nor pornography, transfigures Carole Landis into a work of art that both arouses desire and transcends it. What sets this photograph apart from all others is, first of all, the dignity of her face in its unostentatious revelation of the tension between pride and sadness. This tension reflects its subject's historical location on the cusp between the opaque sexuality, innocent or "fatal," of the prewar, patriarchal era and the self-assertive seductiveness of the feminist generation, which tells the spectator, "look at my body, but know that I know I am more than just a body." Too late for the former, too early for the latter, Landis was denied both easy solutions, which explains at least in part why she and many other beautiful actresses of her generation met with sad ends. Something of the same expression is visible in another portrait that shows Landis drowning in white fluff, a 1940s **Ophelia**.

Pride and sadness, pride in her extraordinary beauty, sadness in knowing that to live on this beauty is to degrade it, not so much by displaying it on screen as by commodifying it on Hollywood's casting couches. This tension, ultimately destructive of its subject's life, is held in suspension for the split second's duration of this portrait, which acknowledges beauty as an objective fact, a source of neither triumph nor abjection. Landis' expression, devoid of resentment, seeks neither domination nor revenge, only recognition of what is.

* * *

The photograph bears the mark of its place and time. Black and white was still the common idiom, of motion pictures as well as still shots. Landis' clothing and accessories, make-up, and hairdo bespeak the careful grooming and just slightly vulgar elegance of studio-era Hollywood, as do the exaggerated 40s shoulder line and the out-of-focus studio backdrop, and even her name, pieced together from **Carole Lombard** and baseball commissioner **Kenesaw Mountain Landis**. The beauty of this or any photograph, which at its best outshines, as this example shows, all other modes of plastic representation, is guaranteed by the reality of its object as it exists at the moment of its formal transfiguration.



The typical publicity shot showing an actress looking smilingly or suggestively at the camera is hardly pornography, yet it is not art either. It alludes not to sexual activity but to the socially admissible accessory activities of courtship and marriage that make up, generally speaking, the tragic or comic subject matter of the films the actress plays in. Landis herself posed for plenty of such photographs, in a great variety of modes; it is sometimes difficult to see them all as portraits of the same person. Today they have the charm of period pieces, figures of female beauty of an unpretentious dignity rare in the genre. But this charm is incommensurable with the power of our portrait, which finds in Landis herself and in the historical moment she embodies the material of esthetic revelation.



We may contrast our portrait with the rightmost photograph above, which shows Landis in the same dress, the same chair, almost certainly at the same time. The composition is strongly vertical, emphasizing the line of the arm and, accessorially, the curve of the bust. Here she looks directly at the camera, with a hint of a smile that covers like a mask the tension between inwardness and ingratiation, pride and humility. A certain haughtiness in this smile, contrasting with the more natural expressions of the other shots, reflects the fragility of this equilibrium.

In our portrait, this problematic self-consciousness is not only displayed in Landis' facial expression but echoed in the tension of her body, the head turned to the right, the chest thrust just slightly forward and to the left, the curved line down the left side of her face and her neck to her bosom countered by the strong horizontal of the belt that is in turn contained by the upward curve of the chair. The face is turned away, the body toward the spectator; the spirit does not deny the flesh, but discreetly asserts its independence of it, as a separate element in a dynamic harmony. Landis' face hesitates between a brachycephalic and a dolichocephalic esthetic, which alternate in the other pictures: the lower part of her face is long, the upper part is broad; she is both avid and cerebral. Our portrait displays this tension and its resolution, whereas the elongated picture, with the downward tilt of the head, merely makes it indeterminate.

* * *

Let there be no mistake; I am not claiming that Carole Landis was the most beautiful woman in history, or even the most beautiful Hollywood actress of the 1940s. Comparing beauty in this way is a category mistake, degrading an interactive relation to a linear measurement. Yet such a portrait cannot but reveal its subject. Carole Landis, whose short life ended so sadly, was a woman of great talent and generosity, whose tireless USO work during the war made her beloved of GIs and Allied soldiers. We should remember this as we accept from her the lasting gift of this perfect portrait that is, for me at least, the very incarnation of the beautiful.

Even when he was not thinking of the little phrase, it existed latent in his mind on the same footing as certain other notions without material equivalent, such as our notions of light, of sound, of perspective, of physical pleasure, the rich possessions wherewith our inner temple is diversified and adorned. Perhaps we shall lose them, perhaps they will be obliterated, if we return to nothingness. But so long as we are alive, we can no more bring ourselves to a state in which we shall not have known them than we can with regard to any material object, than we can, for example, doubt the luminosity of a lamp that has just been lit, in view of the changed aspect of everything in the room, from which even the memory of the darkness has vanished. . . . Perhaps it is not-being that is the true state, and all our dream of life is inexistent; but, if so, we feel that these phrases of music, these conceptions which exist in relation to our dream, must be nothing either. We shall perish, but we have as hostages these divine captives who will follow and share our fate. And death in their company is somehow less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less probable. (Marcel Proust - Swann in Love)



Postscript: Carole Landis in Film and History

Watching Carole Landis on screen is a very different experience from gazing at her photographs. In posed shots, her face is a harmonious whole, whether that of our portrait's dynamic equilibrium or the simpler harmonies of hundreds of others. On screen, however, as, presumably, in real life, her face exhibits a remarkable complexity. I alluded above to the tension between the long lower face and the broad forehead; in a motion picture, one observes in addition that the planes of her forehead and the lower part of her profile, marked by a pronounced overbite, are unusually independent of each other. Watching her on screen generates a vague anxiety lest her radiant but precarious beauty disintegrate as soon as it is no longer held together by the vitality of her smile--an anxiety that risks distracting our attention from her fictional role. The unique vulnerability of Landis' face contributes to the resolved tension of our beautiful portrait a supplemental energy of which I had been only vaguely aware.

This vulnerability, in turn, gives all the more significance to the serene gracefulness of Landis' body. If her face sometimes seems to be barely held together, her body is always harmonious and at ease. The anxiety provoked by the first is constantly allayed by the sight of the latter. This again is brought out in our portrait; although it stops just below the waist, the leftward turn of the hips suggests the long, elegant legs we see in the photograph below. Landis, who excelled in athletics as a girl, is tall without being "statuesque"; her lovely figure never panders to its admirer.



If beauty depends on the interdependence of a representation and its imaginary object, then the greatest beauty is the most fragile because the most clearly impossible to conceive without its representational support. In Landis' case the personal fragility that we sense on screen embodies the moment of transition between two eras defined by the war that defined the limits of human violence. What I described in Landis' face as the tension between pride and sadness is of the very essence of the esthetic object, whose subject both affirms its presence and hides it behind its representation. Our portrait's uniqueness reflects the emergence of the postwar sensibility that would no longer allow the mass media to "innocently" offer up to their spectators images of desirable otherness. Our portrait is a lasting memento of the moment when not just glamour photography but representation as such lost its claim to secular innocence.

* * *

Carole Landis' extraordinary efforts for USO during WWII, which permanently damaged her health, were the product of the generosity and graciousness witnessed by all who knew her. This opportunity to make a gift to others of her talent and beauty was without a doubt the high point of Landis' life. Such innocent generosity could not be maintained after the war. One Hollywood cliché is that Landis was "Marilyn before Marilyn," but the effect of her suicide was rather to avoid becoming "Marilyn," the postwar tease whose self-caricaturing sensuality was cheesecake of the mind. Landis' dignity would have been more consonant with the honestly assertive sexuality of today's post-feminist age.

At the end of *Four Jills in a Jeep*, a nondescript wartime film taken from Landis' own book about her USO experiences, in a makeshift theater in an unnamed North African city, Carole finally gets to sing in her throaty voice "I'm Crazy." But just as she starts to sing, the lights go out and her song is interrupted. She restarts the song under the ghostly illumination cast by the flashlights of the attending soldiers, as if in an eerie premonition of her death only four years later.

Sad as her suicide was, it is a blessing not to have seen Landis as a "TV personality" or a foil to **Doris Day**. She belongs to another

time, one in which she could offer herself to others as a gift that, in turn, guaranteed her beauty's exquisite and fragile harmony. Carole Landis' gravestone reads: "To our beloved Carole whose graciousness and kindness touched us all--who will always be with us in the beauties of this earth until we meet again."



Acknowledgments

Monroe: www.retrofilm.com

Russell: www.probertencyclopaedia.com

Landis images: 1. www.art.com 2. www.celebritymorgue.com 3. www.lawzone.com/half-nor/landis.htm

4. www.angelfire.com 5. www.art.com 6. www.skylighters.org 7. www.fantafilm.it 8. www.lawzone.com/half-nor/landis.htm

Landis information: www.carolelandis.net

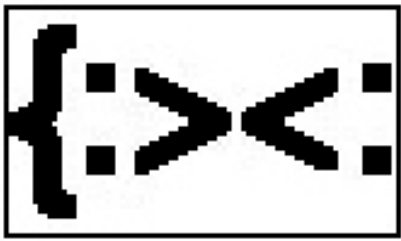
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Confessions of a Dialectical Hedgehog

No. 281: Saturday, March 1, 2003



[The Landis photograph](#) of [Chronicle 280](#) made real to me as never before **Proust's** description of things of beauty--whether a petite phrase of music or an 8x10 photograph--as hostages that guarantee our lives and deaths against meaninglessness. The necessary "littleness" of such things was the subject of [Douglas Collins' recent article](#) in Anthropoetics.

Yet Proust also observed in our most meaningful experiences an internal mechanism of self-diminution: what he calls *les intermittences du coeur*, the discontinuities of emotion. The greatest beauty cannot remain with us at every moment, just as the most powerful love cannot sustain us at every moment. Perhaps then I should take a more cautious tone in affirming the meaningfulness of the things that have meaning for me; perhaps I should become what **Richard Rorty** calls a "liberal ironist" who refuses to make the **Kantian** affirmation that my experience at this moment is a universal model for all. In the terms of **Archilocus'** dichotomy, revived by the late **Isaiah Berlin**, Rorty would have us all become **foxes**. The **hedgehog** conjures up for us the fanatical image of **Osama bin Laden**--foxy, perhaps, but

no fox he.



[Chronicle 279](#) explained antisemitism as an inevitable reaction to the Jews' status as the first monotheists--a thesis some rushed involuntarily to confirm by accusing me of arrogantly asserting Jewish superiority. Likewise, I pointed out that the United States was universally envied for its dominant role in the contemporary market system, a statement of fact that only provided new ammunition to the enviers. Thus in my last two Chronicles I have claimed (1) to belong to the religion that "objectively" made the greatest theological advance in (Western) history; (2) to live in the nation that "objectively" dominates the contemporary exchange system; and (3) to be the discoverer of history's most "objectively" beautiful image. Yet for chutzpah none of these claims holds a candle to the ultimate hedgehog hypothesis that purports to define the parameters of the originary scene of human language. Just as no one can think about monotheism without reference to the Jews, no one should think about language origin without referencing the originary hypothesis; that is the core of **Generative Anthropology**, which this website exists to promote.

Since I have now reached senior citizen status, it is surely too late to change into a fox. All I can do to make my peace with the world is to hope that foxdom has some need for my particular strain of the opposing species: hedgehogs who attempt to persuade on rational rather than dogmatic grounds. In honor of the great hedgehog philosopher, *der Igel Hegel*, I will call myself a dialectical hedgehog.

At first glance, dialectical hedgehogs don't seem very useful in the great scheme of things. The bin Ladens command our attention, whether through sheer terror or simply as points of resistance to the market's circulatory penetration. In the global exchange system, dogmatic hedgehogs are squeaky wheels, and so get lots of grease, whereas the dialectical hedgehog who not only believes he is right but has the supplementary arrogance to think he can demonstrate it to others is dismissed as a troublemaker.

But can I renounce the need to impose upon the world the unique significance of my own experience? I contemplate my Landis photograph, enthralled with my discovery, but this enthrallment is incomplete without the assent of those who have not yet acknowledged it. It is the dynamic of persuasion that drives the hedgehog dialectic; yet the very violence of my assertion is an obstacle to my reader's conviction. The foxy tack, so prized in our time, is to deny all satisfaction on the model of the dandy of old: *nihil admirari*. Emulation of the refusal of desire is the safest rivalry.

I know as much about irony as anyone, but the irony of desire can be enjoyed only in the brotherhood of ironists, less enchanted with their object than with each other. The Bronx Romantic who conceives his ideas in solitude gains no benefit from mocking the certitudes that inform his quest. On the contrary,

when they waver, he must uphold them through an act of faith. There may be moments when my portrait seems less beautiful, when its exquisite equilibrium seems broken; yet in the Proustian spirit of the dying **Bergotte** before **Vermeer's** petit pan de mur jaune [little yellow wall], I affirm this image as my consolation for life and death.

It is perhaps inevitable that the hedgehog who belongs to both the tribe of the discoverers of God and the nation of the masters of the global economy, and whose anthropology situates itself at the unique point of human origin, should one day declare this specific trace of this specific moment to be the nec plus ultra of beauty. How even begin to prove such an assertion? The proof can only be an act of faith--and of love, in a certain sense.



Our photograph is an article of commerce produced in a time when high art denied beauty all prestige, when only a Hollywood glamour photographer would create an image with an eye to making it beautiful. Beauty is not a stable state; esthetic desire circulates between the image and the imaginary figure it engenders. The modernist rejection of "mimetic" art is motivated by the refusal to create a representation that one could conceive at any point within this esthetic oscillation as an object of desire in the real world. Such an image might be, Ô horror, marketable. One might find in it a simple likeness, not a sign but a substitute object of desire, a form of pornography. I can defend Landis' portrait against this accusation, but I cannot deny that someone might find in it a promise of sexual satisfaction. The viewer of *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* runs a far lesser risk of such contamination.

The market-terror of modernist high art, no longer willing or able to take its content from the central domains of human experience, leaves popular art, for which the satisfaction of desire was always the aim, free to expand into high art's traditional terrain. Although our photographer took other, far less remarkable pictures of Carole in the same chair and dress, in this one shot, by chance or design, he found within the conventions of the glamour portrait the means of esthetic transcendence.

Yet this photograph is not famous; it is no longer even available commercially. Its beauty lacks the external trappings of the popular sacred. As a popular art, glamour photography depends for its marketability above all on its subject. On my last visit to eBay, there were 20-odd Landis items and nearly 6000 **Monroe** items. Save for a few scattered cultists and aged veterans, there is no Landis-ness to compete with Monroe-ness; a picture of Carole Landis has little cultural iconicity. Perhaps only a **Bronx Romantic**, the most stubborn variety of dialectical hedgehog, could see in it the purest of all revelations of beauty, one whose esthetic perfection is guaranteed by the very vulgarity of its origin.

Few of the legendary actresses of Hollywood were really beautiful; none was a match for Landis. Her portrait's pride and sadness would tell this even to one who knew neither her name nor the time and

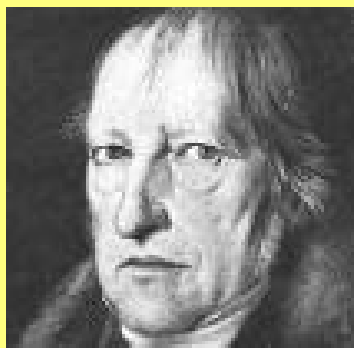
place of her life. The expression "achingly beautiful" conveys the spectator's shared experience of this paradox of presence and absence. It is painful to witness great beauty, but we are proud of our pain. We are unworthy to possess the sublimely beautiful, but proud to accept our unworthiness.





When an individual's "judgment of taste" affirms its universality, the very affirmation leads to conflict, since the second person to come along, even if he shares the taste of the first, can only passively acknowledge the truth of the other's judgment. In a democratic world, collectivities can unite around shared ideas of the beautiful only if cultural iconicity ensures that no individual be able to define this beauty for himself. To become Monroe or **Madonna** requires that each member of the audience be faced with a *fait accompli*. This cannot be done simply by blanketing the world with publicity, although it cannot be done without it. Just as Landis bears in herself the sign of superlative beauty without need for comparison with others, so the icon must bear in herself the sign of a mass appeal that permits of no individual overbidding. (These remarks apply to male icons as well; but outside the gay community, men, even **Leonardo di Caprio**, are simply not beautiful.)

The Marylins, Madonnas, and **Britneys** exude a centerless, anonymous attraction; Landis does not. No doubt she posed for plenty of (relatively tasteful) cheesecake pictures; the very existence of our portrait depends on her value as at least a minor icon. Landis in her day was somebody; in *Four Jills and a Jeep* the flyer she will later marry (and, in real life, divorce) falls in the mud in shock on hearing her say her name. But Landis' beauty was too real, too variable and vulnerable as well; she could never become like Marilyn a **Barthian** myth, a sign of herself. Her photographs can be artificial, but the artificiality remains on the surface, unbankable. Terms like "busty" and "curvaceous" were applied to Landis, but they were unworthy of her then as they are now. Perhaps you will say that my sensibilities are not those of the 40s, but I think we all have the same sensibilities; we only value them differently. We can give in to vulgarity or we can resist it; we can aspire to transcendence or reject it as an affectation. Landis' beauty speaks not to the fox but to the hedgehog.

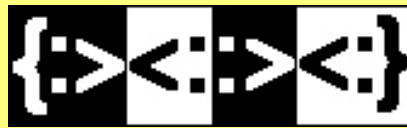


What use might there be for a dialectical hedgehog? In a system of emulation, his denial of the possibility of rivalry incites rivalry in transcendental form as the desire to annihilate his very being. If he has discovered the One God, the One Nation, the One Beauty, then there is nothing left for other mortals but the irrationalities of antisemitism, anti-Americanism, even, God forbid, anti-Carolism. But this reasoning falsely implies that all but the Bronx hedgehog are willing to sell their souls either to foxiness or to a categorical dogma. There is a hedgehog in us all. Rather than either suppressing it or turning it to fanaticism, we would do better to teach it the art of dialectic; the fox-chatter of the liberal ironist is not real dialogue.

How can more than one dialectical hedgehog escape the ineluctable master-slave dialectic of the

Hedgehog philosopher? But how do people deal with the Jews? Not everyone is an antisemite. The Jews were there first, but one recognizes their historical priority and moves on; the Jew or non-Jew who does not will contribute nothing positive to the 21st century. Nor is everyone anti-American. The global market, once created, is beyond nationality, as are one's personal accomplishments. The correct response to the dialectical hedgehog is neither blind resentment nor struggle to the death but acceptance and detachment; we live in an expanding universe with ever more to discover and invent, ever more syntheses to accomplish. We each need the courage to be dialectical hedgehogs in our own sphere; the Bronx Romantic has no pretension of being the first or greatest of the species.

Nor should anyone begrudge me my portrait. It is mine because it is everyone's, one at a time rather than collectively--as beauty is supposed to be. Until recently, this photograph sold on the Internet for under \$7.00, shipping included--the esthetic bargain of the millennium. No, I am merely reminding my fellow hedgehogs--we are all hedgehogs underneath--that hedgehog beauty is true beauty, the saddest and most exhilarating. For this discovery, dear reader, you should thank Carole Landis, not me.



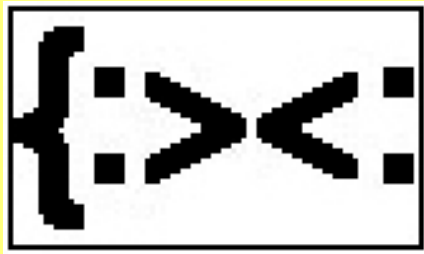
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Roy Rappaport and The Originary Anthropology of the Sacred

No. 282: Saturday, March 29, 2003

The fundamental hypothesis of generative anthropology is that the function of representation in general and religious representation in particular is to defer mimetic violence. Although **René Girard** theorized the triangular structure of mimesis over forty years ago, his model was, and regrettably still is, too simple and elegant to be acceptable to an anthropological empiricism that seeks in the complexities of thick description a remedy against global uniformity. As opposed to physical scientists, for whom the shortest equation that describes a phenomenon within a given error tolerance is unequivocally the best, contemporary anthropologists fear that any general statement about the human risks neglecting, and therefore implicitly denigrating, some part of humanity. The theses presented in most anthropological papers are more scientific in style than in substance. The presentation of empirical data, along with copious citations of and references to other studies' empirical data, often take the place of the rigorous application of Ockham's razor. In most cases the "thesis" is not so much a predictive statement about reality as a suggested mode of classification both whose criteria and whose competitors go unmentioned.

Lest I be accused of calumny, I shall examine the work of the late **Roy Rappaport**, arguably the leading recent American anthropologist concerned with religion, whose final, posthumous book, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), develops a general theory of religious phenomena specifically designated as anthropogenetic ("in the making of humanity").

Rappaport begins by defining the human through language: "Our forbears became what might loosely be called "fully human" with the emergence of language" (4). He then proceeds to explain this emergence by means of a familiar **Darwinian** tautology: "It is obvious that the possession of language makes possible ways of life inconceivable to non-verbal creatures, and even proto-language . . . must have conferred important advantages upon the hominids among whom [it] developed" (4). The implication of this statement is that the origin of language is not qualitatively different than the origin of claws, teeth, the elephant's trunk, or the giraffe's neck, all of which "confer important advantages" on their possessors. A few pages later, however, Rappaport insists on the qualitative difference between language and any other adaptation:

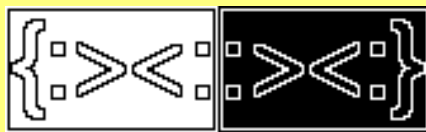
But even such far-reaching claims as "Language is the foundation of the human way of life" do not do language's importance justice, for its significance transcends the species in which it appeared. Leslie White used to say that the appearance of the symbol--by which he meant language--was not simply an evolutionary novelty enhancing the survival chances of a particular species, but the most radical innovation in the evolution of evolution itself since life first appeared. . . . With the symbol an entirely new form of information (in the widest sense of the word) appeared in the world.

. . . That language permits thought and communication to escape from the solid actualities of here and now to discover other realms, for instance, those of the possible, the plausible, the desirable, and the valuable, has already been emphasized. This was not quite correct. Language does not merely permit such thought but both requires it and makes it inevitable. (7-8; emphasis the author's)

Not only is language described as the most radical innovation since life itself, it is specifically distinguished from any mere "evolutionary novelty enhancing the survival chances of a particular species." This suggests, at the very least, the necessity of a specific hypothesis concerning the circumstances in which this innovation might have emerged. Rappaport observes that, once language exists, humans can, indeed, must, think about such things as possibility and desire. This leads, however, not to an examination of the relationship between language and the mimetic conflict implicit in the possibilities of desire, but to the affirmation that language becomes not merely the motor of human adaptation but an adaptive force in itself:

adaptive systems can be defined as systems that operate (consciously or unconsciously) to preserve the true value of certain propositions about themselves in the face of perturbations tending to falsify them . . . [T]he propositions favored in human social systems are about such conceptions as God, Honor, Freedom, Fatherland, and The Good. That their preservation has often required great or even ultimate sacrifice on the parts of individuals hardly needs saying. Postulates concerning the unitary or triune nature of god are among those for whom countless individuals have sacrificed their lives or killed others . . . (9-10).

Here violence--a term that does not merit an entry in the book's index--is associated with language, not because language is from the outset focused on deferring violence, but because the "preservation" of the "propositions favored" in language-possessing "adaptive systems" is so important that individuals must be sacrificed in large numbers to the necessity of maintaining them. Wars are fought over "propositions" because human evolution has made the preservation of these propositions the central adaptive trait to which everything else must be subordinated, and sacrificed when necessary. But because the link between the sacred propositions and the deferral of violence within the community is never made, no explanation can be given of the source of this violence, or of the frequency of violent conflict between defenders of different propositions. How could sacrificing "countless individuals" be adaptive unless the "propositions" to which the sacrifice is directed preserved the community from a still greater violence? Yet the implication of Rappaport's text is rather that, although the lives in question are sacrificed to human rather than natural violence, human violence has no particular causal relation to the loss of fitness that would be occasioned by the non-preservation of the "propositions." Although we kill people from other groups when they threaten our fundamental propositions, the adaptive value of these propositions is not presumed to have anything particular to do with preventing humans from killing other humans. The propositions promote a **Durkheimian** solidarity the contrary of which--breakdown in mimetic crisis--is never theorized explicitly.



For Rappaport it is the notion of the proposition that cannot be falsified that provides the connection between language and religion. Language permits one to talk about imaginary realities, hence, inevitably, about false realities. We can lie. Rappaport demurs from making the problem of lying the explicit cause of the emergence of religion, affirming instead that "religion emerged with language. As such, religion is as old as language, which is to say precisely as old as humanity" (16; emphasis the author's). Yet the sole explanation he offers as to why indeed religion emerged along with language is that contained in the following italicized affirmations:

I will argue, among other things, that aspects of religion, particularly as generated in ritual, ameliorate problems of falsehood intrinsic to language to a degree sufficient to allow human sociability to have developed and to be maintained. (15; emphasis the author's)

The tension between the hedging in this statement ("among other things," "aspects," "particularly as") and its emphatic italicization reflect the contradiction between explaining the emergence of religion by the necessity to "ameliorate problems of falsehood" that can only be posterior to the origin of language and intuiting that religion and language are indissolubly linked moments of an unnamed originary scene. On the one hand, language has adaptive value; on the other, it poses "problems of falsehood" that only religion can resolve by affirming unfalsifiable truths. Rappaport's favorite example of such an unfalsifiable truth is the Shema ("Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is One") that he calls the "Ultimate Sacred Postulate" of Judaism, whose maintenance permits

all lesser "postulates" to evolve while preserving the Jews as a religious community united around this linguistically unchanging, because unfalsifiable, kernel of faith. In Rappaport's view, religion, and its core operation, ritual, function to protect humanity against excesses of language that would otherwise undermine sociality by creating confusion between lies and truth. Whereas Durkheim explained religion as a means for maintaining solidarity with respect to a society's central ethical values, Rappaport sees it as a means to maintaining solidarity with respect to the society's central propositions. Max Müller called mythology a disease of language; Rappaport, to the contrary, views mythical, that is, unfalsifiable, propositions as a cure for linguistic and social disunity.

But if language and religion are, as Rappaport affirms, truly coeval, then the "important advantages" conferred by language must at the outset have been identical with those of religion, that is, those obtained by asserting unfalsifiable propositions, rather than the cognitive advantages of language as a means for communicating about reality ("the food is over the hill"). If indeed language and religion emerged at the same time, then one cannot separate language's adaptive advantages from the possibility of linguistically provoked disunion that religion is required to allay. The first assertions, in a proto-language that could not have articulated them in declarative sentences, must have been themselves religious and consequently, as Durkheim insists, useless as a means of understanding and communicating about empirical reality. Rather than as remedies for lying about empirical facts, the unfalsifiable propositions of religion result from the substitution of shared acts of signification for potentially violent acts of appropriation. What these propositions come into being to oppose is not another (falsifiable) kind of proposition, but a pre-human world lacking in shared symbolic signs of any kind, in which no communal meaning, and consequently no communal interdiction, is possible. Language emerges when the pecking-order control of mimetic conflict cannot withstand the mimetic pressure of a common desire; the first unfalsifiable proposition is not something like "God is one," but simply "(do not seek to appropriate this because it is) God!"

We have from Rappaport that lying poses problems of social incoherence--let us say: intrasocial violence--from which religion protects us by making us agree on a core set of unfalsifiable "postulates" that may ultimately be reduced to a single one. We also know that the defense of these postulates has led to a great deal of intersocial violence. The most parsimonious hypothesis that accounts for these two phenomena is that the violence with which a given society defends its postulates against others is the same violence against which these postulates protected it in the first place, that is, that it derives its energy from the same source. Both language and religion emerged in order to prevent the outbreak of mimetic violence, or, as I prefer to say, to "defer" it. Before lying could become a problem, that is, before the danger to the social order could be described in terms of a conflict between propositions, there must have been a potential conflict that could not yet express itself in propositions, even in the elementary forms of proto-language.

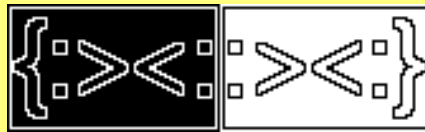
Rappaport concludes the introductory chapter of *Ritual and Religion* by redefining once again the problem that religion exists to solve, this time as that of "alternatives":

The ability to imagine and establish alternative orders is not, on the face of it, problematic. Such an ability makes possible, or even itself constitutes, a quantum leap in adaptive flexibility . . . This enhanced flexibility has, however, an unavoidable but dangerous concomitant: increased grounds

for disorder.

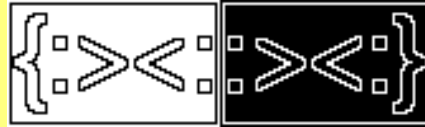
No actual society is utopian. It may, therefore, be difficult for any society's members not to imagine orders in at least some respects preferable to those under which they do live and labor. If they can conceive of better orders, how are their actions to be kept in sufficient conformity to the prevailing order for that order to persist? The conception of the possible is always in some degree the enemy of the actual. As such it may be a first step toward the disruption of prevailing social and conceptual orders, whether they may be . . . (17-18)

Once again, disorder is said to emerge from the possibilities inherent in language rather than from the desire that language both defers and generates. In attributing the danger to the social order to the language-user's inherent ability to "conceive of better orders," Rappaport once more stands the relationship between language and order on its head. Language did not come into being as an adaptive ability to conceive of alternatives that subsequently comes into conflict with the established order, but as a means for deferring the "alternatives" to the social order that are posed by each individual's desire to appropriate the (sacred) object of everyone's desire. Only once this crucial problem is solved can language become a means of representing both empirical reality and its "alternatives." This fetichization of language and semiotic categories persists throughout Rappaport's book.



I submit that there is a better way to talk about the relationship between language, ritual, and the sacred, one that begins not with a set of concepts but with a hypothetical scene from which all cultural phenomena are eventually derived. The scenic hypothesis has among its other advantages that of avoiding purely verbal disputes about whether animals have "ritual" or "language." Whether or not one uses these terms to refer to animal behavior, what distinguishes the human is its historical derivation from an originary scene. Human ritual may then be characterized not as the assimilation of the extraneous element of independently-evolved language into the more general structure of ritual, but as the attempt to reproduce this scene, that is, as a historical phenomenon, in contrast with biologically driven animal rituals. In the general case, ritual goes beyond the minimal energy required to generate linguistic signs, although poetry shows that language itself can become an object of repetition. It is less important to establish boundaries between the categories of language and ritual than to understand the specific position of cultural phenomena with respect to their ultimate origin. If language, ritual, the sacred, desire, and all other fundamental categories of the human emerged in the same scene, then we can examine each historical case with respect to how it performs the fundamental operation of this scene: the deferral of mimetic violence through representation. Human institutions, as opposed to the behavior patterns of animals, are scenic; they constitute themselves as totalities rather than as sets of piecemeal relations. This is as true of economic exchange as of religion.

The scene is a model of generative human interaction; its product is representation, the establishment of the sign, or system of signs, as a separate, transcendent mode of being that brings the things of this world into the central focus of human culture. The fundamental task of anthropology is to explain the emergence of this realm, which has no counterpart in the behavior of other creatures. Conversely, once we are in possession of a model of this emergence, that is, of an originary hypothesis, we need have no fear that any phenomenon of human culture will falsify it.



What is central to generative anthropology and missing from mainstream anthropology is mimetic violence. The negativity that Rappaport presents in cognitive terms as lying or alternatives is in the first place rivalry over an object of desire. What mainstream anthropology refuses to countenance is that the human comes into existence as a means to defer intrasocietal conflict. The simplest definition of the human is as the species that itself poses the greatest danger for its own survival. For the human thus defined by the reflexivity of crisis, language and culture are means for deferring this danger. The originary scenic structure of representation arises when the species, in focusing on itself as its own greatest threat, discovers that the postponement of this threat depends on the interdiction of shared appetite through an entirely new form of relationship that replaces the appetitive by the representational or transcendental.

In order to ward off the danger of mimetic violence, humanity can survive only by turning its attention to a transcendental center. The refusal of mainstream anthropology to recognize the danger of mimetic violence reflects the Enlightenment denial of transcendence that was originally constitutive of the social sciences. Rappaport, although far more sympathetic than most to ritual and to religion in general, understands the sign in the **Piercean** rather than the **Saussurean** mode, as part of the same world as its object; he defines religion not as the subsistent guarantee of the vertical transcendence of the sign, but as a means for bringing order to an already "ritualized" horizontal world, one into which the human, for a reason never explained, injects the phenomenon of representation. What is necessary, however, is to recognize not merely the radical newness of transcendence, but its specific pertinence both to human language and to the other forms of human culture. What is needed, in a word, is not an anthropology of religion or the sacred, but simply an anthropology of the human that offers a model of how the defining phenomenon of representation first emerged. In any such model of the human, language and the sacred will be not merely coeval, but identical in their central core.

(Abridged version of a lecture delivered at Catholic University, March 2003)



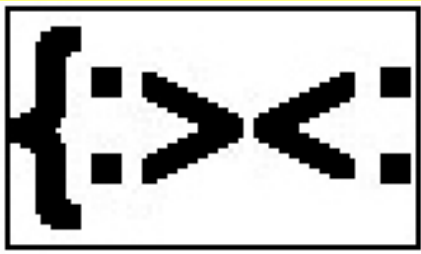
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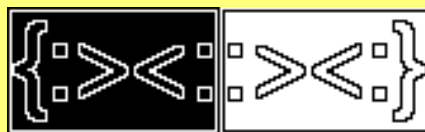
What's New and Old about the Origin of Language (I)

No. 283: Saturday, April 5, 2003

In last week's column, I had occasion to remark that the best designed typology of religious phenomena cannot make up for a deficient theory of origin. Scientific studies of, or better put, around the origin of language suffer from a similar deficiency. I hasten to say that these empirical studies include many useful results, whose demonstration is in most cases at least partially independent of any overall hypothesis of language origin. It is surely useful to learn about the descent of the larynx and the evolution of the primate brain. As long as the authors stick to empirically verifiable subjects, they are on solid ground, and only their fellow specialists are qualified to disagree with them. But at some point in most books and articles about the origin of human language, these authors feel obliged to bite the bullet and construct on the basis of their research a hypothesis of how human language originated. Lacking a sense of the paradoxical nature of language origin, they fall into the paradoxes of "supplementary" thinking with far less awareness than **Plato** or **Rousseau**. For the most part, these scholars purport to explain what is by their own admission the radically new phenomenon of human language either by age-old gradualistic **Darwinian** arguments (language enhances fitness) or, even more naively, by a mechanistic reliance on **Mendelian** ones (language cannot emerge unless a genetically determined language capacity is already present).

Of the abundance of examples, I have chosen six, two each from three recent compilations. In the

course of these analyses, I hope to convince you of the intellectual and, indeed, scientific superiority of my own anthropological hypothesis--neither falsifiable nor metaphysical--of the origin of language, religion, art, exchange, desire, and everything else that makes us human.



1. My first example is the article of **Tiziano Telleschi**, "Origins of language and of society-culture relationships," in *Becoming Loquens* (Bochum, 2000), pp. 75-100:

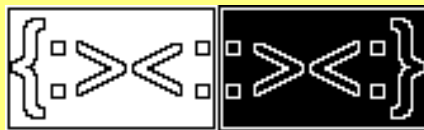
The true break with the world of other animals occurred when, rather than specializing the soma, the evolving living being . . . refined certain aspects of the "neo-mammalian" brain . . . Language, although presenting only a rudimentary structure, was an initial "choice" which was destined to exercise a profound influence on the development of the brain itself, disrupting the conditions previously imposed by natural selection.

By giving a "name" to things by means of "single words," probably a million and a half years ago . . . , the Hominid of the Lower Paleolithic began to achieve increasing independence from objects. In accordance with arguments put forward by Bronowski and Bellugi, who claimed that in epigenesis language carried out the task of restraining and cleansing the content of communication from the emotional pressures of the limbic system, controlling emotive afferences in order to use them to link past and present experiences . . . and to initiate direct connections between different associative cortical areas of non-limbic types, we can presume that "single words" were able to overthrow the dominance of the limbic system . . . (80-81)

The active agent of the first paragraph is the "evolving living being" that creates language as a result of the evolutionary "choice" of the brain over the body. In the second paragraph, the agent is language itself, which "carried out the task of restraining and cleansing the content of communication from the emotional pressures of the limbic system." There are no desiring human beings, let alone potentially conflicting ones, in these paragraphs, and for good reason: the emotions that might have led to conflict have been "restrained and cleansed." A **Roy Rappaport** (see [Chronicle 282](#)), let alone a **Durkheim**, would recognize that "restraining and cleansing" are precisely the cathartic functions of ritual that since **Aristotle's** *Poetics* have been associated with tragedy. But the "emotional pressures" referred to in this passage are not even remotely conceived as leading to human conflict; their "cleansing" takes place in a wholly cognitive context, as though language removed an emotional filter between the prehuman subject and the object of his cognition. Which is to say that language performs a "cleansing" operation in order to perfect a cognitive system that could not have existed without language. Language is not only an agent, it is a conscious agent, able to plan its cleansing operation with a goal in view; in short, language behaves as though it . . . were making use of language. Which is a lot to expect from an evolutionary abstraction.

Open a daily newspaper and nearly all the headlines, now more than ever, are about interhuman

violence of one kind or another and efforts to prevent or control it. But this truth, theorized long ago by the anthropological wisdom of **Machiavelli** or **Hobbes**, is virtually absent from contemporary studies of human origins. At the very most, evolutionary advances are described as advantageous in combat between protohuman or human groups; the idea of conflict within the group itself is simply unthinkable. Yet mimetic violence is never really absent; it is merely metaphorized, converted into "emotional pressures" that need to be cleansed from "communication" between members of the group. If, conversely, we understand these pressures as those of mimetic desire, then the second paragraph's unexplained personification of language metamorphoses into a simplified statement of the originary hypothesis: the conflict occasioned by mimetic desire over a contested object is deferred by the emission of a linguistic sign that represents and in so doing interdicts that object. Needless to say, this hypothesis, in which protohuman creatures rather than "language" or "the evolving living being" are the agents of historical innovation, is implicit in Telleschi's text only for someone who has already formulated it; it can hardly be said to emerge from it. On the contrary, the opacity of this text is one more demonstration that lacking a generative hypothesis one cannot "cross the Rubicon" between the biological and the semiotic; the solution will never emerge from the data alone.



2. My second example, taken from the same collection, is the article by **Merlin Donald** entitled "Preconditions for the evolution of protolanguages," *Ibid.*, pp 101-22. Donald has over many years developed a theory of mimesis that unfortunately lacks any connection to **René Girard's** seminal theorization of the subject. Once again, the specter of aggression shows its head, only to vanish without a theoretical trace:

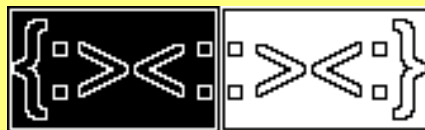
The emergence of mimetic skill would also have amplified the existing range of differences between individuals (and groups) in realms such as social manipulation, fighting and physical dominance in general, toolmaking, tool use, group bonding and loyalty, pedagogical skill, mating behavior and emotional control. This would have complicated social life, placing increased memory demands on individuals; but these communication tools would also have created a much-increased capacity for social coordination, which was probably necessary for a culture capable of moving a seasonal base camp or pursuing a long hunt.

It is important to consider the question of the durability of a hominid society equipped with mimetic skill: adaptations would not endure if they did not result in a stable survival strategy for a species over the long run. Mimesis would have provided obvious benefits, allowing hominids to expand their territory, extend their potential sources of food, and respond more effectively as a group to dangers and threats. But it may also have introduced some destabilizing elements, especially by amplifying both the opportunities for competition, and the potential social rewards of competitive success. (112-13)

In the first paragraph, Donald responds to his own objections. If, on the one hand, increased mimetic skill leads to sharper hierarchical differentiation, on the other hand, the "communication tools" associated with this skill permit a higher level of social coordination. What is unclear is the nature of the creatures we are discussing. Whereas ape societies are hierarchical, all tribal-level human societies are egalitarian. The ability of language to enhance the social coordination of steep hierarchies is realized only at the level of state societies; before that, to judge from the evidence, language use is associated rather with the absence of hierarchy. Could it be that Donald is confusing two different levels of human evolution? That increased mimesis, in leading to language, brings about the dissolution of the hierarchical structures we find in primate societies? Although societies with language can and inevitably do see themselves as cultural wholes, the author speaks of "communication," "fighting," "dominance," and so on in the one-on-one context characteristic of animal societies.

Hence when we arrive at the second paragraph, we are faced with a contradiction that, this time, cannot be dealt with even verbally, but can only be left to us as a problem for the future. It is very Girardian indeed to speak of the dangers occasioned by enhanced "mimetic skill"; enhanced mimetic skill is the independent variable in Girard's theory of homogenesis. But Donald's cautionary caveats receive no reply in his own text, and appear therefore as no more than propitiatory gestures.

These paragraphs conclude the section entitled "The cultural impact of mimetic skill distributed in social groups"; the following section, on "Mimesis as a preadaptation for protolanguage," makes no mention of the problem posed by these "destabilizing elements," a problem which, however "important" it may be to consider it, is never again broached in Donald's text. Here as elsewhere, Donald's discussion of mimesis is handicapped by the absence of any theorization of the difference between one-on-one imitation and the collective mimetic forms of human culture that serve to control rather than to exacerbate competition. This failure in turn reflects a more profound one, which is the failure to recognize the inherently conflictive structure of mimesis. Rather than being mediated by "the opportunities for competition, and the potential social rewards of competitive success," the "destabilizing elements" to which mimesis is said to give rise are already present within mimesis itself. One can find better anthropological models in Girard's work before he became interested in anthropology per se than in those of the one anthropologist who makes mimesis the core of anthropogenesis. If Donald would only take the trouble to type the word "mimesis" into **Google**, he would encounter conceptions of mimesis far more sophisticated than his own, conceptions that he seems never even to have given himself a chance to reject.



I now turn to a second collection of articles on language origin: *New Essays on the Origin of Language*, edited by Jürgen Trabant and Sean Ward in the Trends in Linguistics series for Mouton de Gruyter (Berlin and New York, 2001).

3. **Manfred Bierwisch's** article in this collection, "The apparent paradox of language evolution: can Universal Grammar be explained by adaptive selection?" (pp. 55-79), seeks to avoid a paradox

familiar in different forms to students of language origin since Rousseau: since the usefulness of language depends on its being shared with others, it would have to emerge in many minds at the same time--an idea sometimes made to imply that human linguistic capacity originated from a simultaneous genetic mutation.

It seems obvious to me that this problem vanishes if we can construct a plausible hypothesis for the collective origin of language. But those who study the question seem convinced that, whether or not communication is the force driving protolanguage evolution--and a surprising number of scholars think it is not--the only way to speak of the emergence of language is as that of a capacity for language in the individual "phenotype."

Bierwisch's solution is to separate "linguistic capacity" from "linguistic knowledge," the latter, but not the former, being "within the range of linguistic theorising" (71). He then proceeds to propose that a "protolexicon" emerges, relying on Herder for the notion of "reflection" as the origin of what he calls the "stimulus-free and situationally independent assignment of structured signals to conceptual representations" (71). This, of course, is precisely what a hypothesis of the origin of language must explain; here it is taken for granted. Bierwisch's notes that, once a protolexicon comes into being, it has no fixed, genetic limits as to the number of items it can contain. His hypothesis is that it is the increase in this number that drives the development of syntactic and morphological organization:

I have proposed how to avoid the paradox of language evolution by combining two distinct but interrelated problems, both of which have to be solved anyway: the evolution of the language capacity and the origin of linguistic knowledge. These frequently confounded issues must be clearly distinguished because they depend on fundamentally different conditions affecting the genetic heritage as well as possible knowledge based on it. But it seems that a plausible scenario emerges if they are construed to depend on each other in a non-vicious circle. The capacity to accumulate lexical items could gradually lead to a developmental stage where a random variation indeed leads to an improvement of the linguistic capacity, justifying the urgently desired selectional benefit. (79)

It is hard to disagree with the notion that the "language capacity" increases in tandem with the increased use of language rather than appearing all at once through the miraculous acquisition of a "language gene," or evolving gradually as a purely cognitive capacity that suddenly manifests itself as language--a hypothesis that is either a truism (language can only emerge in a brain that is ready to acquire the mechanism of language) or an absurdity (language is an epiphenomenal communication to others of conceptual connections already present in the individual mind). What Bierwisch does, in fact, is to reduce the problem of language origin to that of the origin of the first "protolinguistic" sign, which is to say, to the problem addressed by the originary hypothesis. In this minimalistic gesture, Bierwisch is in full accord with generative anthropology. Once the sign exists, it will multiply and structure itself syntactically and morphologically, generating **Baldwinian** (behavior-driven) selection pressure toward an ever-greater language capacity. I think this plausible-sounding argument pays insufficient attention to the non-gradual syntactical gradations of ostensive, imperative, and declarative, but it can be accepted in what the French call its grandes lignes. The missing link, that is, a hypothesis that accounts for the origin of the protolinguistic sign itself,

Bierwisch has the modesty not to attempt to supply. However praiseworthy this modesty, the fact remains that one cannot "solve" the paradox of language evolution by proposing a theory that accounts for this evolution only once language, even in its simplest form, has already emerged. The equivalent would be explaining the evolution of life after taking as given the existence of the first living organism.

(Part I of a slightly abridged version of a lecture delivered at Westminster College, Salt Lake City, in March 2003)



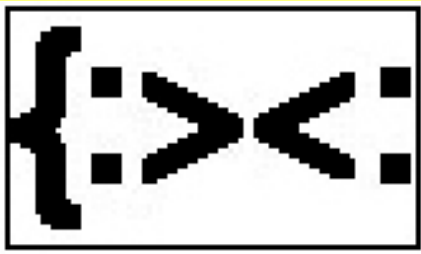
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

What's New and Old about the Origin of Language (II)

No. 284: Saturday, April 12, 2003

This week's Chronicle is the continuation and conclusion of [Chronicle 283](#), which critiques three attempts to explain the origin of language.

* * *

My fourth example is **Bernard Comrie's** article "From potential to realization: an episode in the origin of language" (New Essays on the Origin of Language, edited by Jürgen Trabant and Sean Ward in the Trends in Linguistics series for Mouton de Gruyter [Berlin and New York, 2001]): 103-17. Less prudent than **Bierwisch** (see [Chronicle 283](#)), Comrie is ready to discuss the very originary moment in which our "language capacity" is actualized for the first time. He describes this moment as the manifestation of what he calls the "**Dumbo factor**." At the outset Dumbo, **Disney's** flying elephant, was able to fly, but was unaware of this ability. Then, as Comrie puts it, "when placed in a situation where his life depended on being able to fly, he made the attempt and flew" (103). We should note in passing the importance of life-threatening danger to actualizing Dumbo's latent flying ability, which might be taken to suggest that Disney's storyteller was closer than Comrie to an understanding of language origin. After discussing a number of cases where limited levels of input lead or do not lead to the emergence of language in children, Comrie makes his concluding argument:

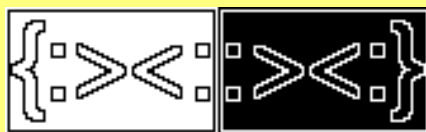
We may now return to our basic question, namely: what level of input is necessary for language to arise? In the few cases where we can be reasonably certain that a normal child has been exposed to no input, language has not developed. Now, when language first originated this must have been the scenario, that is, the Dumbo Factor must have come into play: a creature that had a certain ability but was unaware that it had this ability must have become aware that it had the ability. We know of no clear modern instances of this happening, but this is not in itself evidence, since most children have the possibility of acquiring language under normal conditions and do so. At best we can say that we have no direct evidence of the Dumbo Factor coming into play, but circumstances make it unlikely that we would encounter such evidence. In one sense, then, our basic question of how humans came to know that they could communicate by means of language remains unanswered. (113-14)

Without wishing to single out Comrie for ridicule, I think it is worth pointing out the inanity of this passage. Its fundamental argument is an obvious fallacy: (1) language use requires prior language capacity; (2) since capacity precedes use, there must be a time when one has the capacity without the use, and therefore without awareness of the capacity--the Dumbo Factor; (3) although normally individuals become aware of their capacity by contact with others already using it (i.e., speakers), there is no logical obstacle to actualizing it on one's own when some external factor acts as a stimulus ("a situation where his life depended on being able to fly"); (4) clearly, in the first use of language, there were no prior users, so therefore (5) the origin of language can be explained by the Dumbo Factor. QED. It should be obvious to you, if not to the author, that this "argument" explains nothing at all, but is a pure artifact of the a priori distinction between capacity and use, potential and realization. Dumbo is a well chosen example, because real elephants can't fly, and would have a great deal of difficulty in evolving the means to do so unless they were functionally employed in some intermediate state (for gliding, running faster, etc.), as wings are presumed to have evolved in birds. Exactly what it means for the Dumbo-protohuman to "become aware that it had the ability" to use language is left unspecified, since using language, unlike flying, is not something one generally does on one's own. We would need at least two Dumbos together so that one might inexplicably begin to talk, and the other to understand and reply. Condillac proposed a far more convincing scenario of language origin between two children over 250 years ago.

The remainder of Comrie's chapter falls back, in a similar if less self-aware manner than Bierwisch's, on the idea that, since children will develop language once a vocabulary is supplied, we can get the lexicon of mature language from protolanguage, concluding with the following *petitio principii*:

. . . perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the main task in creating language seems to be providing the lexicon. Now, since protolanguage clearly has a lexicon, the early humans who had developed the ability to acquire human language but did not yet have a human language to acquire could in principle have simply taken off from whatever protolanguage they already knew and expanded it. If this scenario is correct, then while the provision of a lexicon is a task that does not in itself require the linguistic ability of humans, it is nonetheless a crucial catalyst for the realization of that ability. (114)

In other words, "somewhat surprisingly," there is no paradox, no problem at all. Protohumans acquire protolanguage, which subsequently evolves into human language, and presto, they have become human, as easily as elephants learn to fly.



My last pair of examples comes from a third recent collection, *The Transition to Language*, edited by **Alison Wray** at Oxford University Press in 2000.

Wray's own article in this collection is entitled "Dual Processing in Protolanguage: Performance without Competence" (pp 113-37). She begins from the observation that language, particularly the language of everyday communication, is largely formulaic: "A striking proportion of formulaic expressions are used to manipulate others into physical, emotional, and perceptual reactions" (114). The next step in her reasoning is to remark that

the manipulative functions of our formulaic language correspond closely with those observed in the communicative behaviour of chimpanzees in the wild . . . On the basis of this parallel . . . I have proposed . . . that the holistic strategy for expressing manipulative messages in phonetic form may be considerably more ancient than the analytic strategy [i.e., the divisibility of the message into meaningful morphemes]. I have suggested that the holistic cries and gestures of our pre-human ancestors were transformed, over a long period of time, into a phonetically expressed set of holistic message strings, each with a manipulative function such as greeting, warning, commanding, threatening, requesting, appeasing, etc. (115)

The reference to a "long period of time" should arouse our suspicion; it is used to glide over the passage from a fixed set of genetically determined calls with little learned variability to an unbounded set of unfixed "strings"; Wray's strings have every appearance of being what **Saussure** calls arbitrary linguistic "signifiers." There is not even an attempt at explaining how or why this passage from hard-wired cries and calls to protolinguistic software is accomplished.

In Wray's hypothesis, these strings cannot be analyzed into component parts. But since the strings can multiply indefinitely, at a certain time (again determined without reference to any factors external to the individual protohuman brain) these cries/calls/strings stop being purely generic and begin to accommodate specific reference.

This [accommodation of individual denotation] is what I suggest came to pass at some point during the protolanguage period. The impetus could have been a small but significant increase in memory capacity, a cognitive change that made irresistible the expression of new connections between ideas, and/or environmental pressure to extend the scope of the protolanguage system. In all cases, the consequence would be a minor--but not a major--revolution in expression, opening the way to an analytic system, though not yet to syntax. (123)

Thus everything that needs to be explained is attributed, first to a "long period of time," next to "a small but significant increase," producing a "minor--but not a major--revolution in expression." One wonders what is wrong with a large increase and a major revolution; but the real intellectual operation being performed here, of which the author seems blissfully unaware, is to generate a structure of transcendence without anyone taking notice of it, and anything large would be likely to be noticed, if only by the reader.

Wray then goes on to propose a speculative hypothesis of how words came to be formed, that is, how the holistic strings of protospeech became analyzable into component parts. The following will give you the flavor of her speculations, which an uninitiated observer might call unscientific, or something worse:

In order to see how the first individual words could emerge, let us imagine that the frequency with which "fetch" messages for individuals are needed is sufficient to support individual designation, and that the system can handle it. The message inventory will include a separate message form for each of [what I say when I want you to] fetch N . . . In other words, there is a distinct phonetic form associated with each individual in the group, for the context of "fetch that person." . . .

Let us next imagine that a speaker wishes to get a hearer to give an apple to Mary, but, though the apple is in plain view, Mary is not present and so cannot be indicated by gesture. The speaker resolves the problem by saying first baku, "[what I say when I want you to] fetch Mary," and then tebima, "[what I say when I want you to] give specified object (distant) to specified female person." Since only one of the two variable referents (the apple) has been indicated by gesture, the hearer is seeking local information that will indicate who the recipient of the apple is. Provided baku is viewed as somehow relevant to this quest, the effect (whether on this first occasion or only after repeated usage) will be to interpret "[what I say when I want you to] fetch Mary" as a perceptual rather than physical manipulator ("conjure up an image of Mary") or indeed, simply to understand baku as "what I say when I mean Mary," . . . a straightforward referential name. (124)

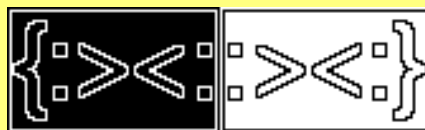
I hasten to point out that baku and tebima are fantasy-words with no empirical basis; they are, as **Pooh-Bah** put it, "corroborative detail intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative." It would take me too long to point out everything that is wrong with this passage; let it suffice to say that this convoluted just-so story is designed to take the last step in the creation of the linguistic signifier, the arbitrary sign. Instead of beginning with the designation of something specific, a point of departure that was intuitively obvious to eighteenth-century writers such as **Maupertuis** or **Adam Smith**, Wray makes this her last and most difficult step, seemingly without realizing that all the rest of her hypothesis is a series of *petitiones principii*.

The reason why these perverse protohumans are said to create separate strings for "fetch Mary" and "fetch Rosalie" before creating the names "Mary" and "Rosalie" is that their language, by remaining "holistic," remains on the other side of the Rubicon that separates the human from the animal. Into

this pre- or protohuman "holistic" language, Wray smuggles the essential element of symbolic language, notably arbitrariness, without which the indefinite multiplication of "strings" would be impossible. Then we are told that a specific set of messages--those for "fetching"--become so frequent that a different one is created for each member of the group. It boggles the mind, or mine at any rate, to conceive that a community might have different calls for each member of a group without a concept of reference to that individual, and that the reference to the individual would be derived only from some combination of these calls.

Wray's text is an extreme yet sadly typical example of the conceptual gradualism that complicates without in any way resolving the problem of the origin of human language by breaking it down into a series of arbitrary, speculative steps, each one of which presupposes precisely the symbolic relation between sign and referent that it purports to explain. The specialists, who not merely tolerate but actively encourage absurdities of the sort we have just witnessed, reject as unthinkable the notion that the community generates language by designating certain objects as sacred in order to preserve itself from the contagion of mimetic desire. The taboo against the sacred object is so powerful that even individual members of the group can be referenced only through the mediation of a call, "fetch Mary," which we can somehow conceive before realizing that Mary is the object to be fetched. "Fetch Mary" is what I referred in to *The Origin of Language* (1981) as a nominal imperative, on the model of the surgeon calling "scalpel" to his assistant. But before one can have an imperative, one must have an ostensive; before we can "fetch Mary," we must have an ostensive association between this word/string and Mary herself. The "string" that we are using to fetch Mary must already designate or represent Mary; and for the community to represent Mary independently of the desire to remedy her absence, her presence must already be of particular significance. Reasoning along this line will lead us to the originary hypothesis, which confronts directly the origin of the symbolic sign and the transcendence it brings with it.

Baku and tebima aside, Wray's theory is similar to Bierwisch's; both rely on the growth of the lexicon to explain the evolution of linguistic structure, whether morphological (Bierwisch) or, in the present case, simply lexical in the strong sense, that is, referential. All the smoke and mirrors in Wray's exposition serve only to hide the key difficulty, which Bierwisch is at least willing to admit he has not solved, of, reference aside, why or how there emerge arbitrary signifiers, not genetically linked to their function and capable of being multiplied indefinitely.



My final example is drawn from the same anthology: **Derek Bickerton's** "Foraging versus Social Intelligence" (pp 207-25). Bickerton first proposed the idea of protolanguage in *Roots of Language* (1981) on the basis of his study of "pidgins," simplified versions of languages spoken by non-native speakers that lack complex morphology or syntactic rules, and that evolve into "creoles" when they become the native languages of children brought up in these cultures. Bickerton's argument (which has been contested by other specialists) is that creoles all share the same simple syntax, which cannot be derived from the more complex languages from which the creole is constructed, and may therefore be attributed ex hypothesi to an underlying "protolinguistic" mental substrate. The notion

of protolanguage, the application of which is extended to such cases as apes who are taught versions of human language, appears to offer a bridge between pre-human modes of communication and language proper. It does not, however, as no intermediary concept can, answer the essential question of the origin of symbolic communication, the passage from animal signals to human signs.

In the article under discussion, Bickerton takes issue with what he refers to as a trend over the past few years of considering language to have arisen "as a direct result of increased and intensified social interaction"; the emergence of language would reflect the increased level of "social intelligence" required to organize an increasingly complex society. This hypothesis understands language as a means rather of social control than of amplifying practical cognition. To quote Bickerton:

[T]his chapter argues that the initial impetus for a [human] means of "information donation" quite distinct from means employed by other primates--that is, some form of protolanguage--arose directly from the requirements of group foraging, predator avoidance, and instruction of the young, rather than from specifically social interactions between individuals . . . (209)

Bickerton's main argument is this: given that human language is absolutely different from the communication systems of other primates, whereas the higher apes too have complex social relations, the uniqueness of language cannot be explained by the unique complexity of human social relations. Whatever selective pressures might have driven the development of language in humans, these same pressures, in lesser form, would have been present in our ape cousins; yet whereas our language is highly complex, "no other species has developed language at all" (209). I need not elaborate on how generative anthropology deals with this problem; what drives the emergence of language is not a mere increase in "complexity," but an increase in mimetic capacity that makes animal forms of communication inadequate to prevent the breakdown of the social order in mimetic violence.

Bickerton goes on to make other points. He rejects Wray's hypothesis examined above on the grounds that "it seems likelier that the original symbols consisted of single units with single meaning-meanings, moreover, that could somehow be ostensibly demonstrated from the immediate environment" (216). He also alludes to the "cheapness of tokens," their ease of emission that makes cheating particularly easy. These are points highly congenial to the originary hypothesis: the ostensive use of the sign comes not from a proleptic need to show what it refers to, but from a need to represent-interdict a present object of desire; the cheapness of the originary token is not accompanied by "cheating" because the whole point of the sign is to deny the possibility of cheating by making the centrality and therefore the sacrality of the object of desire the first object of human consciousness.

Bickerton's own explanation for the emergence of protolanguage is as follows:

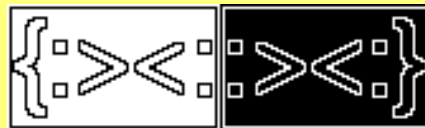
. . . there is abundant evidence that hominid ecology did differ from that of other primates: our ancestors lived on open savannahs or in marginal woodlands rather than

in deep forest, and they were primarily terrestrial rather than primarily arboreal. An even sharper distinction relates to an ecological niche occupied from the time of the Olduwan industry (approx. 2.3 million years ago) onwards. . . Hominids became principally scavengers and were able to compete with other scavengers and predators for the carcasses of large animals across a wide range of habitats. . . .

How did hominids succeed against fierce competition? Not, surely, by wandering round like a troop of baboons and eating what they happened to stumble on. They must have been able to (1) locate fresh carcasses with extreme certainty and rapidity, and (2) fight off competitors, probably with barrages of flung rocks. . . .

In such a context, the crudest beginnings of some form of language would have paid off from day one. Any hominid group capable of discriminating food sources (and perhaps also of indicating the relative dangers involved in their exploitation) would have enjoyed an advantage over other hominid groups. Note that the first linguistic communications need not have been monomodal, nor need their units have been arbitrary in the Saussurean sense. Directional gesturing with the hand, accompanied by the imitation of the noise made by a mammoth, could easily have been interpreted as meaning "Come this way, there's a dead mammoth" . . . (218-19)

The key giveaway in this just-so story, which explains the origin of language by its cognitive-practical use, is found at the end of the first sentence of the third paragraph quoted above: language "would have paid off from day one." Why is this expression there in the first place? Because the main difficulty of deriving language from its practical application is that language can have no practical application unless it already exists. "Day one" is a metaphorical way to posit a moment of origin without needing to define it. The originary hypothesis truly has something to say about "day one," but Bickerton does not; there is no single moment when what he formerly called the "Rubicon" can be crossed, and his "ecology-based" theory is no advance whatever on the many earlier attempts to make the obvious usefulness of language the explanation for its emergence.



Texts like these, written and compiled by leading scholars in the field and published by respectable houses, are absolutely typical; I could have cited dozens more. In one sense, they make my task terribly easy, since their inadequacy as explanations of language origin is so patent that it can be exposed merely by reading them aloud. In another sense, however, these texts make my task very painful, since they bear witness, over forty years after Girard's theory of mimetic desire and over twenty years after my hypothesis of the origin of language, to the fact that these ideas have not even brushed against the consciousness of the "serious" investigators of this issue.

I think I understand why this is the case; the idea that the origin of language, the very birth of the human, is something simple because cultural that some amateur like myself, inspired by another amateur like Girard, can hypothesize about, goes against the grain of the whole university-based

structure of knowledge, the only alternative to which is the intellectual sub-stratum of cults and cranks. To put it differently, the origin of language is not the kind of problem that social scientists are used to solving, or able to solve. One might wish to call it an a priori ontological problem, but that would risk situating it in the pre-existent category of metaphysics. No, it is an anthropological problem, yet one of a sort that the science of anthropology has long abandoned. It is a trans-departmental problem that can only be approached by trans-departmental thinking.

* * *

We must dare to have faith in our ability to think the world and to experience its truths, so long as we are humble enough, and confident enough, to listen to the arguments of others. Non-specialist though I may be, I will continue to believe that the originary hypothesis is the minimal explanation of the human until someone shows me a reason not to. I hope you will agree that none of the examples discussed above offer much of a threat.

(Part II of a slightly modified version of a lecture delivered at Westminster College, Salt Lake City, in March 2003)



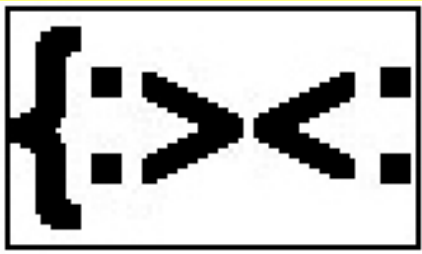
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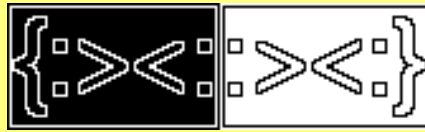
Carole Landis, Revisited

No. 285: Saturday, April 26, 2003

A sensitive reader of these Chronicles remarked to me that of all of them, [Chronicle 280](#) about **Carole Landis** is suffused with the most genuine emotion. It is indeed strange and wholly unexpected to experience such depth of feeling for someone known only indirectly. I feel as one who has discovered a buried treasure, something of immense value, lost to the world, to be brought forth by me alone.

Carole's beauty is incomparable. The library of the **Motion Picture Academy** contains a few hundred 8x10 photographs of her, dozens of which are more beautiful than any image I have ever seen of anyone else. Looking at her early photographs (the one that inspired Chronicle 280, still the most beautiful of all, and not in the Academy collection, dates from 1940, when she was 21), one could predict her selfless generosity during the war and after; Carole is so beautiful because her beauty is never coquettishly kept to itself but radiates forth as a gift to the world. It is a beauty that transcends desire as love transcends desire.

The film idols of the past, **Mary Pickford, Lilian Gish, Vilma Banky, Theda Bara, Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell**, so many others, all belong more or less to their time, and before our eyes become "historical figures," to be understood rather than simply appreciated. Carole's timeless beauty touches us now as it would have sixty years ago--more, I think, because the conditions that nourished it no longer exist.



Since writing Chronicle 280 over two months ago, I have learned a great deal more about Carole. I have seen about half of her 28 films, most forgettable except for her, some forgettable even with her. I have read her book, *4 Jills and a Jeep*, which is both a humorous account of Carole's first USO tour abroad and, in its modest way, her *Recherche du temps perdu*, the significant time of her life transformed by writing into a model of salvation. I have collected a few dozen photographs of her, and related articles and ads from old magazines. My wife and I have visited her star in Hollywood and left a bouquet on her grave at **Forest Lawn**.

Carole's uniqueness was not entirely of her own making. This was the one time that Hollywood, still in its pre-television, big-studio glory era, would find a place, however grudgingly, for someone so "distractingly desirable" (Life)--whom directors hesitated to use because they not unreasonably feared that her beauty would detract from the plot. Thus was Carole fortuitously allowed to attain the transcendent glamour that she so eagerly offered as a gift to those fighting the last and most crucial of history's great wars, becoming afflicted in the process with malaria and amoebic dysentery that plagued her the rest of her life.

Contemplating Carole's story has taught me a great deal about life narratives. Told as a Hollywood chronicle, it is depressing. Carole was not only beautiful, she could sing in a lovely contralto and act, with a particular gift for comedy; her memoir and other writings (which I believe are essentially her own work) display a knack for witty, vivid narration amazing in someone with a junior high school education. Poised, graceful, modest as befits someone whose attractiveness speaks for itself, neither haughty nor vulgar, intelligent, witty, kind, generous, patriotic, Carole was the true **American Beauty**. Yet she never starred in a major film and ended her career in low-budget English potboilers. By all accounts she was a delightful person to be with, yet, with the dubious and fatal exception of **Rex Harrison**, four times married, she seems never to have had a single genuine love relationship. Declining in health and career, looking worn in her last months and no doubt terrified of the nearing age of thirty, she ended her life with a bottle of Seconal. Hardly an uplifting tale.

There are no books about Carole. No one likes sad stories, unless there is a scandal attached to them, and Harrison is not quite scandal enough. There are, however, a dozen versions of her career in books like *Fallen Angels*, *Hollywood's Babylon Women*, *Hollywood's Unsolved Mysteries*, *The Hollywood Celebrity Death Book...*, for all of which her life's meaning is defined by her suicide. Here is the beginning of the most sympathetic account of her life, **Kirk Crivello's** November 1973 bio-filmography in *Film Fan Monthly*:

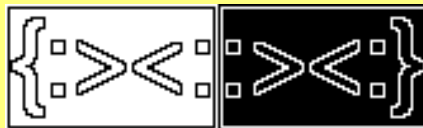
She came streaking into stardom like a comet ready to burn out--and a few years later, she did. The legend is that Carole Landis was playing herself: a bright and bouncy girl, with an undertone of occasional sadness, searching for something even she wasn't sure of. She began to stagger under the strain of having to be constantly sexy on screen: "I want a fair chance to prove myself as an actress--not just a curvaceous cutie!" But no one paid her any mind. There have been others, of course--Velez, Monroe, Mansfield,

Inger Stevens, Marie McDonald who supposedly acted out their personal lives in their professional careers, their talent and unhappiness as one, propelling them headlong into quick fame and quick destruction. The Hollywood dream cult of the failure of success.

There is real sympathy here, but expressed in a formulaic context that refuses to Carole, as well as to the others, the dignity of an individual destiny, a context in which "Hollywood" is the monstrous protagonist and all these women (and a few men, too), sad victims, drawn like moths to its flame. Whatever affection Crivello may have for Carole must be subordinated to the eternal formula of the scandal-sheet, updated weekly at every supermarket checkout counter: the rich and famous are no happier, are even unhappier, than we. But each of these "fallen angels" was different, and I venture to suggest that the antics of the "Mexican spitfire" and the sexual posturing of Mansfield and Monroe were as foreign to Carole as her hundreds of USO concerts here and abroad were to them.

There is, inevitably, much worse. Carole's beauty gave occasion for envy, and the more mean-spirited variety of Hollywood resentment literature is filled with what in a different context would be reviled as the lowest form of sexism. For **Kenneth Anger in *Hollywood Babylon II*, she is a "bouncy sexpot" and a promiscuous "studio hooker"; a recent *People* magazine makes an offhand reference to her as "curvaceous and unfettered by talent," the two qualifications being presumed synonymous.**

I intend to remedy this situation. Carole's real story is uplifting rather than depressing. It may be regrettable that Hollywood let us see so little of her, but we should be thankful, yes, thankful even to Hollywood, that it allowed us to see and hear her at all. I would compare Carole, in all seriousness, to **Thérèse de Lisieux, France's most popular saint, who died of tuberculosis in 1897 at the age of 26. The world saw even less of Thérèse than of Carole, but it saw enough to find in her an example of holiness. We don't need another twenty films to find in Carole's gift of beauty a consolation for our mortality. Carole's wartime activities, and the everyday "graciousness and kindness" referred to on her grave, were reciprocated in her time by a popular affection that those of later generations should be given the opportunity to share.**



Beauty is a cultural phenomenon that does more than reinforce biology. A beautiful woman concentrates within her the world's mimetic power. But the effect is not to provoke violence but to contain and transform it. Although the original desire is libidinous, beauty as magnificent as Carole's inspires not desire but chaste admiration. The appeal of sexual appetite is whetted by desire only to a certain point. At the moment when I feel that I bear within myself the unanimous desiring community, desire is transformed into a joyful assent to a sharing no longer burdened with sexuality, one in which persons of any gender can participate. The very attributes that inspire desire can be contemplated with disinterested reverence; we experience the body's beauty as communion with the soul. Carole is a worldly guarantee of incarnation.

If I have ever had a mission in life, it is to write a book, the only book, about Carole Landis. I cannot

blame this mission on God, so I will attribute it to anthropology. Carole has made me realize what this inextricably dialectical mixture of nature and culture called Eric Gans has been put on earth to desire, and to love beyond desire. She has made the thought of death less painful, and those who share my life more precious. This project is a token of my gratitude.



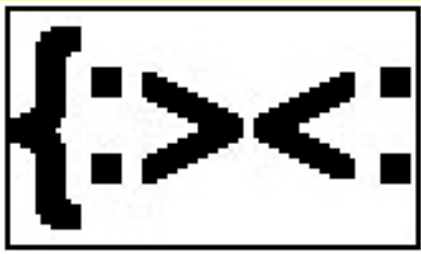
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

The Market and Resentment (I)

No. 286: Saturday, June 28, 2003

(This and the following Chronicle are taken from a lecture delivered at the recent **COV&R** meeting in Innsbruck.)

Of the various institutional criteria of the human--language, religion, art, politics, and so on--the most general is that of exchange. Animals exchange favors in the immediate present, as in mutual grooming among chimps, but only humans have symbolic systems that permit exchange at a distance, whether of goods, services, or simply of words.

Once we understand the human in this manner, we realize that although the "free market" is a very recent phenomenon, unknown in the West before the Renaissance and in the rest of the world considerably later, everything specifically human may be understood as a mode of exchange. The free market is symmetrical with the originary exchange of signs around the sacred object; in both cases, the exchange is not prescribed by any prior rule, but entered into voluntarily by the participants. And in both cases, the scene of exchange, virtual or real, both generates and defers or deflects resentment.

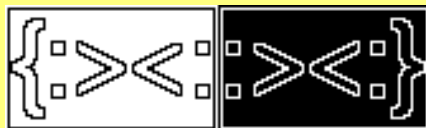
Resentment, or ressentiment, is the sentiment of exclusion from the center where significance is generated. There can be no signification without resentment; the sign that re-presents the central object is by its very nature both an expression and a deferral of resentment at its non-possession, directed at the center itself rather than at the other humans on the periphery. This is the general

form of **Girard's** scapegoat mechanism.

If all significance remains in the center, there is nothing to exchange on the periphery. In order for exchange to take place, the central object must be divided up among the peripheral participants, as normally occurs during a ritual feast. The center is sacred, but the central object is sacred only by association; it is in the sacred locus and belongs to the sacred being. Thus when the participants divide it they obtain portions, not of the indivisible sacred/divinity, but of the referential creature that exemplifies the eternal signified.

The origin of material exchange cannot be derived merely from its empirical history. The model provided in **Hubert** and **Mauss'** *Essai sur le don* is an important breakthrough on the empirical side, but its anthropological significance can be understood only from the standpoint of an originary notion of virtual exchange. It is a necessary consequence of the originary mutual exchange of signs that the "equal" portions of the subsequent sacrificial feast are virtually exchangeable. At the origin, this guarantees the refocusing of resentment from the group to the center and its discharge in the communal meal. The adaptive value of the sign is made possible by the combination of appetitive payoff and reduction in mimetic tension that it permits; the exchange of identical signs is guaranteed by the exchange of "equal" things. Once this equality is realized in ritual distribution, it implies the equality "outside" ritual of all divisible possessions--bearing in mind that we are never really outside ritual, only outside the scenic ritual context.

Today's global market is the ultimate heir to the originary scene of exchange. It hardly needs to be said that the liberation of this scene from a fixed locus and set of ritual objects has led to a vast expansion of human creativity. But what does need to be said is that the market, as the general form of exchange, must fulfill the same function that peripheral exchange fulfilled at the origin: the establishment of "solidarity" around the sacred center. It is not correct to say that this center "no longer exists," because the center has never "existed." One way of expressing the intellectual ambition of generative anthropology is to refer to the center as God and, rather than argue about whether God exists, simply affirm that God is. What is important about the sacred center, in other words, is that it is the foundation of being, not that it has some kind of material manifestation. If at the origin the center was a single locus, its status as the object of representation makes it "always already" portable and dispersible, partout et nulle part. In the era of the global market, we can begin to take this formula literally.



Mimesis is a "surplus," a supplement to object-oriented activity. Direct attention to the object is deferred as attention is focused on the mimetic model, and only through the mediation of the model does appropriative action take place. The energy devoted to "positive" mimesis, that is, learning from others, must be presumed to be more than recovered by greater flexibility and rapidity of adaptation to the environment; otherwise, mimesis would never have been adaptive. The energy of positive mimesis, we may say, is recuperated by the system. But mimetic mediation in turn generates, even prior to the existence of a symbolic realm, forms of rivalry whose potential violence

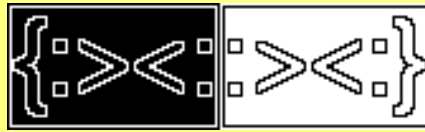
is limited by the presence of a "pecking-order" hierarchy where the strongest animal dominates the others and has in consequence greater access to sexual and other objects conducive to reproductive fitness. In this simplified model of higher animal (e.g., ape) societies, the energy of negative mimesis is not recuperated productively but allowed to dissipate in one-on-one rivalries. The superiority of the alpha animal is less analogous to sacred kingship than to the rule of the "alpha" member of a street gang (although even here the leadership is bound to acquire some of the trappings of the sacred).

The institution of the sacred constitutes a great leap forward by recycling within the social order not merely the positive mimetic energy of the learning process but the negative energy of mimetic rivalry that can no longer be dissipated in one-on-one battles. The central human institution of the scene on which the energies of the community are focused arises when it becomes necessary to defer the violence that this proto-resentment threatened to engender when it grew too powerful to be contained within the individual challenges characteristic of animal hierarchies. Focusing the negative as well as the positive energies of mimesis on a central, universal, sacred mediator is the basis for the institutions of representation, an activity limited to humans, which founds a social order that both exists and is represented by its members; the energy of negative mimesis is expended in sacrifice that reinforces the sacrality of this central divinity.

Hence a minimal model of the originary exchange system requires that to the reciprocity of peripheral exchange there be added a supplementary factor or supplément that reflects the burden or "tax" on the exchange process imposed by the ritual center, in the form of sacrifice or its secular derivatives. From the physio-mechanistic perspective that sometimes creeps into *La violence et le sacré*, the sacrificial act discharges the excess energy invested in the appetitive object as the result of the mimetic intensification of desire; we may compare Bataille's justification of his notion of *dépense* as the discharge of the excess or reserve energy required by evolution to ensure survival.

That the surplus relies on an excess of energy beyond that required for survival is a physiological, indeed, a physical truism. But this energy is not brought raw into the process; it is mediated by human, or, at the origin, proto-human modes of interaction that cannot simply be assimilated to physiological reinforcement. A more specifically anthropological analysis would measure the violence of mimetic rivalry by the symbolic energy employed to defer it. The mediation of the center is above all an operation of interdiction; the sacred being that guarantees the exchange process is what is forbidden, unexchangeable at least for a time, and the energetic investment of mimetic desire transferred to the sacred center is not "discharged" but on the contrary consecrated to the object of communal devotion.

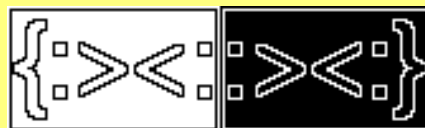
The sacred, in the most general sense of the term, is the process whereby mimetic desire is transcended in representation. The sacred may inhere in various objects or practices, but we will not understand it by conceiving it as a quality; like the beautiful, the sacred is only realized in interactive experience, the difference being that the esthetic finds its guarantee on the individual scene of representation, whereas the sacred is linked at least virtually to the communal scene.



The gift in the Hubert-Mauss sense creates a temporally local inequality that is only comprehensible against the backdrop of originary, virtual equality. In making my "sacrifice" to you instead of to the central divinity, I presume that your implicit participation in the originary reciprocity of the exchange of signs and the consequent equal distribution will lead you to reciprocate here as well, but by introducing a time-delay beyond the bounds of ritual temporality--here we can begin to speak of getting "outside" the ritual context, emerging into an explicitly non-ritual or trans-ritual temporality--I pose this reciprocity not as a quasi-automatic part of a necessary process, but as a challenge: turn this non-ritual time into ritual time by responding in kind. Such gift-giving is linked to the existence of an accumulated as opposed to a momentary surplus; one does not burn one's only blanket in a potlatch. It also reveals that the scenic configuration does not guarantee egalitarian symmetry; the functions of the center, shared by the community, can be monopolized by a few members or a single member of this community. The utopia of the periphery cannot ignore the center.

Gift exchange based on surplus leads to hierarchy; the so-called "big-man" emerges whose gifts cannot be reciprocated and who gradually takes over the central sacred distribution function. The sacred was always a "surplus," but it existed only for the community and in communal or ritual time, whereas with the development of agriculture (or in other cases of abundant resources as in the fisheries of the Pacific Northwest), individuals can maintain surpluses of their own which fall subject to the mimetic rivalry that originary representation had prevented; cashing in these surpluses in a potlatch is a movement toward local equality ("see, I have destroyed what constituted the difference between us") that contains the seeds of long-term inequality.

I have just said that the ritual-based gift exchange system leads to hierarchy. Another way to put this is that it leads to undischarged resentment. If I as big-man can give a bigger feast than you, you are going to resent me. Perhaps this will impel you to give a still bigger feast, in which case I will resent you. Fluid hierarchical systems are unstable because they cannot recycle the resentment they generate; they tend to evolve into stricter hierarchies whose leaders acquire the power necessary to maintain them. This renewal of rivalry under conditions of plenty leads to the centralization of the communal surplus under the control of a single political-ritual power: the structure of early state societies. This is the **Hobbesian** solution to mimetic conflict; equilibrium is found when the object of rivalry is removed from contention. In such systems the basic form of exchange is redistribution; the surplus is extracted from the economy and then sacrificed/redistributed at the ritual/political center; these early state societies are ritual redistribution systems writ large. The center is protected by the force paid for by the surplus; such polities, as the recent history of Iraq, North Korea, or Cuba demonstrates, are highly durable, since any deviance from the centralized system is easily detected and stamped out. Resentment, and the ambition it fuels, is strictly controlled; one can aspire only so high, no farther.



What we call Western culture is rooted in two smaller societies that broke off from the empires that evolved from these archaic states: Israel and Greece. Whatever the truth of the Exodus story, the Israelites define themselves in the first place as exiles from Egypt, protected by the One God who stands on a higher ontological plane than the gods who are agents of the Pharaoh's political control. The association of Jews with the market is a staple of antisemitism, but like most antisemitic accusations, it can be taken as a compliment. Because the Hebrews were the first to articulate--and found their ethic on--the ontological distinction between central Being and its worldly manifestations, they can be seen as theoreticians of the free market avant la lettre: the essence of human society is peripheral exchange around a center that does not itself enter into exchange relations with the periphery; ritual hierarchy, and the social hierarchy that derives from it, are secondary to our fundamental symmetry before God.

The Greeks, meanwhile, created a commercial society that evolved in Athens into the first functioning democracy, although it could not become a true market society in the absence of a free labor market,. Slaves are not simple economic goods; they are captured, not produced. For those who capture them, and for the whole society, military affairs are emphasized and labor itself debased.

Resentment was a real problem in Athenian democracy, one addressed directly by **Pericles/Thucydides** in the Funeral Oration. Democracy is both symmetrical and hierarchical; social position is hierarchical, but the roles in the hierarchy are not justified by the ritual system. There are no lords to control the citizens, who choose their leaders among themselves, and consequently generate resentment in those not chosen. The great flourishing of Athenian culture, whose exemplary form is tragedy, reflects the necessity of controlling this resentment. Like economic innovation, like human language itself, cultural innovation does not occur spontaneously; it is driven by the necessity of deferring the negative effects of mimetic desire.

In the post-democratic era in Athens that gave birth to Western philosophy, potentially shareable Ideas take the place of the unshareable objects of the tragic agon. Like Hebrew monotheism, Platonic metaphysics insists on the ontological inaccessibility of the central source of meaning (the Ideas); metaphysics blocks the generation of resentment since no one can make a claim of relative or absolute centrality. The abstraction from Greek democracy that we call "philosophy" has been the model for the optimistically agonistic exchange of ideas or propositions ever since, whereas the Hebrew insistence on the univocal subordination of the periphery to the ineffable divine center sets the paradigm for the peaceful exchange of things.

If Athenian democracy holds sign-exchange more important than thing-exchange, modern bourgeois democracy reverses this relationship; the bourgeois operates in civil society as producer and consumer of economic goods and engages in political exchange only as an outgrowth of that function. Politics exists in bourgeois society in order to control the resentments generated in the economic sphere--that is the founding ideology of bourgeois democracy.

Economists who view the bourgeois market as a system of exchange among rational actors cannot account for the resentment it generates. If each person participates only in voluntary transactions,

exchanging A for B only when he finds it to his advantage, how can he come to resent the system as a whole? What, in other words, in the exchange process exceeds the system and is not accounted for in the rationalist description of the process? The most ambitious attempt at characterizing this excess is that of Marx, for whom the apparent symmetry of exchange hides the underlying mechanism of the capitalist system: the extraction of surplus value from the characteristic exchange between proletarian and "capitalist" owner of the means of production, that of the former's labor for the latter's money. The capitalist enriches himself by paying the worker just enough to reproduce his "labor power," that is, enough to keep himself alive and provide children for the next generation's factories, while receiving from the worker a quantity of labor that adds sufficient value to his products to allow him a profit.

In a famous passage of the Communist Manifesto Marx somewhat melodramatically describes the bourgeoisie as having replaced all person-based economic relations by the closed, atomic acts of market exchange.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." It has drowned out the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. . . . In one word, for exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

Marx's description in this paragraph, which gives no hint of a theory of surplus value, contains an implicit contradiction that hindsight makes easily visible. The bourgeoisie is said to subvert the stable "patriarchal" hierarchy based on agricultural production, substituting a reciprocal exchange system for the asymmetrical relation between our "natural superiors" and ourselves. Yet this reciprocity is immediately characterized as "exploitation," indeed, "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation"; this, although in other places Marx will remark on the cleverness of bourgeois ideology that disguises its exploitative nature under the mask of symmetrical exchange. The allusion to "free trade" bears witness to this contradiction: "free trade" is the ideology of the "free market" that claims to do away with all but the most necessary coercion by permitting individuals of different nations to exchange goods and services voluntarily. But since only certain individuals own the means of production, those who have only their "labor power" to sell are at a structural disadvantage, and in terms of the model that will later be elaborated in great detail in *Das Kapital*, are said to be exploited--a scientific-sounding word for "victimized." Marx's mature theory predicts a historically falling rate of profit and consequent pauperization of all but the wealthiest capitalists, followed by an apocalyptic moment when the "knell of private property" sounds and the workers "expropriate the expropriators," ushering in the socialist millennium. For Marx, capitalism remains an essentially sacrificial system that by doing away with "religious and political illusions" merely ensures that its sacrifices not only do not benefit the community as a whole, but in the end fail to benefit the exploiters themselves.

(to be continued)



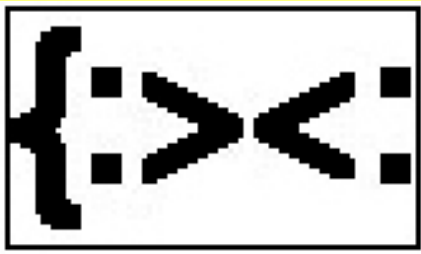
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

The Market and Resentment (II)

No. 287: Saturday, July 12, 2003

(continued from [Chronicle 286](#))

As we all know today, Marx's analysis, brilliant as it was, was simply wrong. The market is not tied by "the iron law of wages" to eking out a "falling rate of profit"; the community, however fragmented and individualized, or rather, precisely because it is fragmented and individualized, evolves a symbolic culture in which its members participate by devoting part of the "surplus" to esthetic and related activities, and, in particular, to communicating with each other through what Jean Baudrillard calls the sign-system of consumption. The central deficiency of Marx's theory of capitalism is his failure to predict and therefore to analyze the vast expansion of the symbolic exchange-function of the market that gives rise to what we call "consumer society."

Curiously enough, this phenomenon was first recognized, if not theorized, in a nation that was far from having the most advanced economy of its day. Why is it that France, economically still farther behind England at mid-century than it had been after Napoleon's defeat, nevertheless became the cultural engine of Europe after 1848, a role it really relinquished only at the end of the Cold War? Clearly although the French economy could not compete with the English, nor subsequently with the German or the American, there was a sharper awareness in France than elsewhere of the implications of maturing bourgeois society. The explanation of this dilemma may be found in the lessons of French political life, whose volatility ended only with the definitive establishment of the Third Republic in 1880.

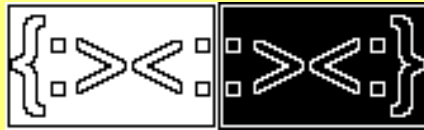
The demise of the Second Republic in Louis Napoleon's coup d'état of December 2, 1851 put an end for a generation to the democratic political activity that the liberal bourgeoisie had thought would resolve the economic resentments of market society. The ateliers nationaux were a make-work designed to curb unemployment, an ultimate expression of the illusion that socio-economic problems were above all political, and consequently amenable to political solutions. This illusion had originated with the philosophes and the horrors of the first Revolution had not dispelled it among the republicans, who continued to think on the contrary that its failure was a demonstration that still more revolution was necessary. The failure of the ateliers and the subsequent savagely repressed workers' uprising of June 1848 led to the breakdown of the alliance between the working class and the liberal bourgeoisie, to whom the coup d'état revealed that they could continue to rule the economy only if they renounced their claim to control the polity.

It is as a result of this lesson that French culture after 1848 reflects an awareness of the displacement of the cultural center, which is to say, the principal locus where resentment is discharged, from the political to the economic, an awareness lacking in the more placid political climate of England, where the opposition among different fractions of the dominant classes could be worked out in Parliament and the dramas of "civil society" expressed in terms of conflicting interests. No English novelist before James and Joyce (neither of whom was English) could comprehend, much less espouse, the radical refusal of the world of action embodied in the novels of Flaubert. Flaubert was not merely the creator of the "art novel," narration as a beautiful experience of an unbeautiful world; he was the first to write about the société de consommation. The two qualifications are inseparable.

Emma Bovary is typically described as a reader of romantic novels who naively hopes to realize them in life. Romantic novels correspond to the culture of the first stage of market society, in which nostalgia for pre-market relations creates a refuge from the market that not only makes the latter more bearable but promotes success within it, yet has only a marginal effect on the operations of the market itself. By contrast, in consumer society the market is driven by the need to co-opt non- and even anti-market forces. Emma is not content to read old novels; she subscribes to a fashion magazine and lets the sinister boutiquier Lheureux inveigle her into overspending her husband's income. When she is contemplating what will become an adulterous horseback ride with Rodolphe, what makes up her mind for her is the prospect of acquiring a riding-habit (L'amazone la décida.) The nascent consumer society of Emma's day does not yet possess an established universe of purchasable product-signs; Emma's symbolic acquisitions serve rather to insert her symbolically into an older, precommercial universe of aristocratic pursuits. But this behavior brings out all the more clearly a universal characteristic of consumer society: its paradoxical affirmation by means of the market of values inaccessible to market exchange, whose entry into the market takes the form of a surplus: the priceless always costs a little more.

Emma, as we know, never attains "the real thing," as exemplified by her failure to get to Paris. But the "real thing" in Flaubert is such only with respect to those who desire it. In Madame Bovary there is just enough distance between Charles and the Marquis de la Vaubyessard to lend pathos to Emma's quest; in his later novel *L'éducation sentimentale*, social differences are no longer a source of envy--for the reader, at any rate--so that there is no equivalent in the later novel to Emma's

"commodity fetishism." It is nonetheless not without significance that the dénouement of the hero's personal drama occurs at the auction of the furnishings of the woman whom he loves because she incarnates for him the bourgeois ideal. Where Emma was ready to create a new reality from consumption, Frédéric's adventure ends when he sees that his image of unmarketable purity is composed of mere commodities.

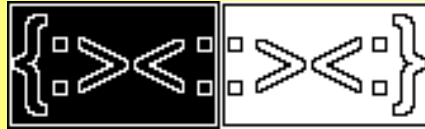


That the history of market society might be best told in terms of the sign-system of consumption would have seemed absurd to Marx and Engels, whose theory can be taken as a scientific demonstration that such a system could have no autonomous existence. Yet subsequent history has made it clear, to most of us at least, that the early stage of capitalism in which something like the "iron law" did apply is not full-fledged market society; the latter only comes about when the surplus is sufficient for the population at large to exchange not mere goods but product-signs. Although the exchange of goods and services takes place in private transactions whose cumulative effect determines supply and demand but creates no common bond among the members of the community, the exchange of signs of consumption is in principle public; people can see what each other are consuming. This exchange constitutes a new mode, essential to mature market society, of recycling resentment into the exchange system.

Let me suggest a division of the history of market society into stages with respect to the development of the symbolic function of consumption. In the first stage, that described by Marx and Engels, this function affected, or was perceived as affecting, only the wealthy; the resentments of the masses were taken into account only as subject matter for exhortatory literary and political texts, such as those of Victor Hugo. In the second, the age of Madame Bovary, goods begin to be marketed that compensate for the resentments of the middle classes. The scenes with Léon in the Rouen hotel in the third part of the novel epitomize the creation, at one's own expense, of a private nest or haven to shield oneself from everyday mediocrity; we could also cite Baudelaire's "Invitation au voyage." This kind of consumerism is already driven by an artisanal form of advertising, exemplified by the blandishments of Lheureux or the contents of Emma's fashion magazines. Everyday secular consumption can no longer be equated with the satisfaction of appetites in a ritually-established symbolic context; its most significant aspect, which increases in importance, is the satisfaction of desire, whose mimetic nature lends itself to advertising that can augment desire indefinitely.

Madame Bovary is characterized by a geographical linearity (Yonville -> Rouen -> Paris) analogous to the economic linearity theorized by Thorstein Veblen in his Theory of the Leisure Class. The notion of "conspicuous consumption" implies that the competition between consumers takes place in a single forum and that each knows who has "won"; the potlatch has been incorporated symbolically into the market system. In this model, those who, like Emma, are lower on the scale can only imitate their "betters"; they lack sufficient degrees of freedom to establish mimetic values of their own. At this time, the egalitarian Judeo-Christian virtues that so exercised Nietzsche influenced the market only negatively, through moralizing and denunciation.

Mature consumer society comes into its own only after WWII. The usual explanation for its expansion is the new affluence of post-war America and subsequently Western Europe and Japan, but the "affluent society" is not independent of the victimary tendency that defines the postwar or "postmodern" era. Consumerism is only weakly hierarchical; it is above all pluralistic and esthetically rather than materially based: the point is to make oneself into an object of mimetic desire by bringing together a number of attractive elements in a single "beautiful" package. The most striking change in consumption in the postwar era is, however, one not usually related to the domination of victimary thinking: the rise of the youth culture, which remains with us today and which if anything seems to grow continually younger as the decades go by. (Cf. Harry Potter.)



The first serious article I ever published, in the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, was an analysis of postwar youth culture in what might be called neo-Marxist terms. Consumer culture had always stood on the margin of the market, and not coincidentally was most often associated with women, that is, those members of the bourgeoisie whose productive activities were confined to the domestic economy, from Emma Bovary to the wives of the wealthy whom Veblen designates as the chief exhibitors of their husbands' wealth. Nevertheless, women and men belonged to the same economic world; the difference in their consumptive behavior, still in evidence today, may best be described as a phenomenon of the division of labor, as Veblen's analysis makes clear. The postwar youth culture constitutes an important watershed in the semiotic system of consumption that, thirty years after the article just mentioned, I shall attempt to situate within a generative-anthropological perspective.

The substance of my analysis was that, in contrast to traditional popular culture, associated with the productive forces of the society, the postwar youth culture is a culture of consumers who have not (yet) joined the market and ostensibly reject its values. This is perhaps clearest in popular music; the traditional love-song, so to speak a symbolic marriage proposal, is replaced by a more or less orgiastic celebration of adolescent energy, sexual or otherwise. Instead of recuperating the conflicts of sexual desire for the benefit of the social order, rock 'n' roll seeks release through the paroxysm of quasi-ritualized violence.

Culture in the broadest sense is everything that belongs to the phrase "the deferral of violence through representation." I am not suggesting that the postwar youth culture offers, even implicitly, a challenge to this formulation. The adolescent revolt is not a genuine rebellion; knowing that daddy and mommy are there to protect you allows one the expression of revolutionary sentiments without having to shoulder the burdens of revolution--or any burdens whatsoever. The youthful consumer is no doubt a future producer, but the youth culture prepares him for an adult role in the productive sector only to the extent that it provides him with an outlet for his resentment during his pre-productive years. This is quite different from the role played by popular culture before the war. It is precisely youth's temporary status in the margin of adulthood that makes it culturally dominant in the postwar era; this marginality supports the adolescent's victimary claims while at the same time reassuring the world that victimage, like youth itself, is only a passing phase.

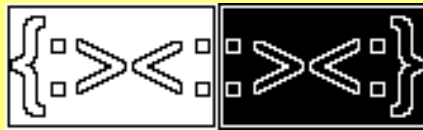
Superficially, the youth culture is a revolt against the consumerism that the young see typified by their parents (cf. Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* [1967]). But outside of what was always a small minority even in the heyday of communes and ashrams, the instruments of this rebellion are consumer goods. Lenin thought that the capitalists would sell the communists the rope to hang them with, but the capitalists have had the last laugh by selling the would-be revolutionaries a symbolic substitute for revolution. In *One-Dimensional Man*, a 1964 book now largely forgotten but quite influential in 1968, Herbert Marcuse referred to this phenomenon as "repressive tolerance." As the clearest statement of "1968" ideology, Marcuse's theorization for adults of youth-dominated postwar culture marks the transition between Marxism and more recent identity-based modes of resentment against the market system.

The youth culture, both reassuring and disquieting, provides a paradigm for the evolution of market society. On the one hand, as Marcuse's despair shows, it is a tribute to the pervasiveness of the market and its values that not merely internal maladjustments but its wholesale rejection can be transformed into marketable commodities. On the other hand, that this very despair could be so successfully communicated to those who had occasioned it is a demonstration that no exchange system is closed on itself. The resentments generated on the scenic periphery where exchange takes place can be deferred only by the common affirmation of the sacred center, not discharged within the exchange process itself. An exchange system that has freed itself from the eternal retour of ritual sacrifice is necessarily engaged in a continuous *fuite en avant*, mitigating one set of resentments only to generate others. The realization of this fact (whose dates may be situated between the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11/2001) is incompatible with the victimary thinking of the postwar/post-modern/consumerist era, and may therefore be said to mark the beginning of a new, post-millennial age.

The political paradigm of the postwar era, in reaction to the horrors occasioned by the Nazi doctrine of racial superiority, was the delegitimation of *de jure* hierarchies based on "ascriptive" or permanent, externally visible traits such as nationality and skin color, to which were later added gender and sexual orientation. Colonies disappeared, racial segregation and apartheid were ended, women were given a place in the professional workplace, and so on. The active mechanism in these developments was the legitimation of resentment. The resentments of those ascriptive groups that could be classified as "underrepresented" were cultivated and the traditional ritual and esthetic means of deferral discredited or subverted. In these collectively legitimized cases, resentment was considered in itself proof of discrimination. Whatever the justifiability of the real conditions that aroused it, resentment gives *prima facie* (but not definitive) evidence of injustice; resentment is the human means for detecting interpersonal asymmetries, just as our sense of pain detects harmful imbalances in our internal or external environment.

The youth culture, as one would expect from a vital cultural mode, was a step ahead of the integrationist thrust of the civil rights movement; white youth, as they still do today, identified culturally with blacks not as integrated into a color-blind society but as outsiders of the status quo. Indeed, it is the vitality created by the cultural identification at first of the working class and then of "youth" with African American popular culture that best explains American culture's unequalled exportability.

The potential danger of the postmodern cultural model is that the gap opened up by the *fuite en avant* may be filled by something more dangerous than rebellious adolescents. The more the average member of society is able to define himself through the exchange of product-signs, thereby in effect neutralizing him as a creator of culture, the more culture at the fringes must exaggerate its irreversibility--for example, in the self-mutilations characteristic of "performance art"--in order to counter the pervasive sense that everything is reversible, fungible, exchangeable. The extreme response to this frustration is terrorism, particularly the self-immolatory kind, so popular today, that is the ultimate act of resentment. In liberal democracy, the very "fairness" of the market-cum-political system pushes its enemies to extreme positions. No system is "fair" enough to make everyone happy with his fate; it is difficult enough to separate being happy from enjoying the misery of others without being expected to abolish this misery as well.



The great socio-political problem of the 21st century will surely be the integration into the market system of those who reject it and who, not being able to leave it, can express their rejection only by having recourse to violence that putatively demonstrates its failure. More specifically, anti-market resentment denounces what it sees as the victimary centrality of the market by focusing on a subset of those whom the system appears to favor and who are designated as its masters. The archetype of this operation is modern antisemitism, which singles out Jews as the putative Subjects of the market who can be held responsible when the exchange process does not go as one likes. It is no coincidence that today the United States, which dominates the global economy, is insistently associated with Israel in hostile political speech (that of Bin Laden comes to mind), so much so that one would like to invent a new term ("antisemericanism"?) for the combination of these two hatreds.

This situation suggests a few concluding theses.

1. The end of the victimary era is the beginning of a "new maturity" in which the automatic denigration of the center and its authority is no longer seen as appropriate. We are entering what my colleague Raoul Eshelman calls a "performatist" age in which each person acknowledges his desire for centrality and attempts to persuade others by "performing" this centrality. We increasingly foreground our attempts to (re)create ourselves as esthetic objects for the contemplation and mimetic attraction of others. The unexpectedly enduring activities of body piercing and other "body modifications" make the body into the locus of an esthetic; unlike previous modes of dress and hairdo, they involve a somatic commitment to semiosis. In the context of a weak collectivity, individuals are forced to reinvent their own initiation rites.

2. If the postmodern era was defined against the Holocaust, the exemplar of victimization that must not be repeated, it has also been marked by the recourse to terrorism in ultimate defense of "the victim." The contemporary revival of antisemitism within a movement that began as its antidote is an important indication that the victimary paradigm that dominated the postmodern era is no longer viable; we can no longer rely on resentment as a proof of victimary status. The ethic that follows from this demands respect for immediate as well as ultimate ethical values. The end cannot justify the means; in particular, terrorism must be condemned regardless of the "oppression" it claims to oppose.

3. Finally, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the crux (in every sense of the term) of the post-millennial world. If the two parties can find a way to make peace, a by-product of which will be the integration of a new Arab country into the global economy, this achievement will serve as a beacon to the world in its attempt to resolve the great problem of the 21st century.



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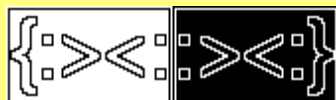
Carole Landis and the Concept of Public Beauty

No. 288: Saturday, July 19, 2003

My interest in Carole Landis may remind those given to literary analogies of old Faust's infatuation with Helen of Troy. However, I am not awaiting from Carole the kiss that will make me immortal. She has already done her share for the world; it's time someone did something for her. Rather than giving up philosophy for love, I am trying to give a little love through philosophy.

Carole Landis is a revelation in the history of public beauty. On her appearance on the Hollywood scene, she was deluged with superlatives: "the most gorgeous figure in moviedom," "a physical silhouette bordering on the magnificent," "blonde, buxom, and beautiful, Carole has caused the film city critics of feminine pulchritude to scratch their heads to get fitting phrases for her physique." Every possible adjective for female sexual attractiveness, from "curvaceous" to "lovely," was applied to Carole, and she was rarely referred to without one or two. No other actress has so impressed the film world with her physical beauty--and unlike most of the so-called beauties of the past, Carole produces no less an effect on those who discover her today.

The institutions that determine popular taste and the multitude who follow them have all but forgotten Carole, but no truth once revealed can be fully lost. Carole's tragedy was that the beauty that brought her to the world's attention was too exceptional to fit into the comforting legends of popular culture within which her career was charted.



The experience of beauty--true beauty, not the mimetic sign of a fictive other's desire--is the worldly correlate of what we call immortality, the timelessness of the realm of signs. It is an individual,



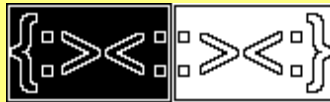
not a collective experience, one that finds its guarantee on the individual's internal scene of representation rather than on the public scene of ritual from which it derives.

The beauty of art is a beauty of representation, of signs rather than things. Because artworks are composed of human signs, the postmodern spirit that sees natural difference as the product of cultural victimage tempts us to construe them entirely within the "socially constructed" orbit of mimetic desire and its deferral. But mimetic desire, even as a specifically human phenomenon, is founded on appetite, with which it loses contact only at the point of madness.



The prototype of Kant's idea of natural beauty is landscape, a source of esthetic pleasure less in itself than by analogy with landscape painting. But by far the most intense experience of natural beauty, indeed, of beauty tout court, is that of human beauty. In classical civilization, this beauty was more likely to be masculine than feminine, but beginning with the troubadours and medieval courtly love, the terms "beauty" and "beautiful" have been applied more and more exclusively to women. Since the demise of the Old Regime eliminated the sacred/aristocratic notion of self-display, the norm of masculine dress has become sober and conventional, whereas women's clothing and adornment remains attuned to displaying the body to advantage.

Some feminists have complained of the "objectification" of women in such things as beauty contests. Yet historically, the increasing insistence on feminine beauty parallels the growing equality of women. Today, when women are arguably closer to equal public status with men than ever in history, young women's dress seems geared more than ever to the flattering display of the body. The obvious difference in the respective degrees to which sexual selection has reshaped male and female bodies obliges us to conclude that, lacking special cultural circumstances, female beauty will always be more humanly significant than masculine. Nor is this beauty appreciated exclusively or even predominantly by men. Not only do women actively seek out examples of female beauty to imitate; they are touched by it, perhaps more authentically than men. Of the many people to whom I have shown Carole's pictures, a far greater proportion of men than women feel the need to deny her exceptionality. To my mind, this difference is attributable to the interference of the shame of masculine desire with esthetic judgment. In particular, interest in the bosom is so vulnerable to ridicule that efforts to avoid it dominate whole historical eras, for example, the 1920s, during which time men's real tastes in women's bodies could hardly have undergone some mysterious mutation. Women, unencumbered by male embarrassment, are much more ready to acknowledge female beauty when they see it.



The central implication of Carole's revelation for my theoretical model of the human is a proposition I had taken for granted without reflecting on its consequences for originary anthropology: that, because the imaginary joys and sufferings that are the content of our fictions are grounded in real experience, the oscillation of attention between the sign and its imaginary referent that defines the esthetic is guaranteed by our faith in the possibility that such a referent could wholly satisfy our desire. In the history of the public imagery of beauty during its domination by the Hollywood movie industry, say from 1920 through 1980—although a less exclusive form of this domination is arguably still in effect—I would claim that only Carole fully justifies this faith. The origin of the human is a singularity, a single instance of collective desire for a single object. This one woman's public beauty stands as a guarantee that, however paradoxical may be the concept of "fulfilled desire," we can conceive in the presence of her image an idea of desire fulfilled.

Desire is the stumbling-block of esthetic theory. Kant rightly saw that esthetic experience is not linked to appetitive satisfaction and is therefore "disinterested"; but once desire has been eliminated as a motivation, the principle that makes us call a painting, a sonata, or a narrative "beautiful" is lost. What distinguishes the beautiful object from the merely desirable one is not its lack of an appetitive basis but its provocation of a return of our attention to the image from its imagined referent; we are not incited to practical action in the service of our appetites, merely to a renewed contemplation that is nonetheless inhabited by desire. In the moment in which we experience beauty, we return to the image, real or reproduced, rather than proceed immediately toward fulfillment. Beauty's deferral of appetitive action is not a denial of desire but a means of making it eternal ("Forever wilt thou love and she be fair," as Keats put it).

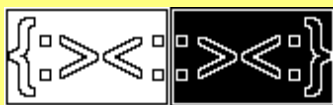
Art operates through the creation of a utopia of desire that, whether or not realized in the artwork, can never be actualized substantially. Tragedy is more profound than comedy because it thematizes this impossibility; comedy is more realistic than tragedy because in real life we do our best to avoid this thematization: except on the extreme fringes of the mensonge

romantique, we marry and live more or less happily ever after rather than hubristically transgress sacred taboos. In either case, however, the esthetic utopia of desire is the source of meaning for our worldly goals, just as religion promises our spirit accession to the eternal realm of signification.

What I have learned from Carole is that this utopia has its objective correlative in the public as well as in the private world, that it is indeed possible for a woman in the public eye to be truly beautiful, so that, unable to conceive her any more desirable than she already is, we must return to her image to reassure ourselves of her existence on earth at a specific historical moment.

Carole's beauty is timeless, but what makes it a historical revelation is determined by the nature of the traces we retain of her existence. If human beauty is to have cultural significance, there must be means to preserve and communicate it to those who have not seen it at first hand. The plastic arts, curiously enough, are not adequate to this task. A painting or sculpture, however closely it may reflect the objective reality of its model, is the product of an esthetic will to which the beauty of the image must in the last analysis be attributed. When we refer to the beauty of the Mona Lisa, it is Leonardo's painting we are discussing, not some fifteenth-century Italian noblewoman. The possibility of preserving a image of human beauty adequate to its object arises only in what is famously known as the "era of mechanical reproduction." The fundamental difference between the esthetic of photography and that of plastic art proper is that a photographic portrait, however beautiful "in itself," must be taken as the image of a real person, unmediated in its detail by human intention, and it derives its power and poignancy from that fact. (The nineteenth-century dream of recording the sounds and images of reality is not coincidentally that of the first modern market societies: this is an idea that will be developed elsewhere.)

It hardly needs remarking that Carole's beauty was not hers alone; the beauty of her photographic image is that of a total package that includes clothing, cosmetics, hair styling and coloring, and jewelry as well as such external elements as lighting and, no doubt on occasion, retouching. In the glamour photographs that Carole posed for from the beginning to the end of her career, cosmetics and adornments are more than beauty aids; they are signs of reverence that affirm the photographic subject's transcendental significance. Carole's beauty is public and even publicity; most of her photographs were created to be distributed as advertisements for the star and her studio. The commercial intention of these photographs, far from tarnishing their "aura," is precisely what makes them objects of public beauty. (The star's public status once established, "private" snapshots then take on the aura of showing her as she really is.)



I would not be writing about Carole if I saw her as one among many beautiful and talented actress whose lives were shortened by exploitation and calumny and/or unjustly neglected by history. My experience of Carole is of someone unique, and it would be unfaithful to that experience for me not to begin from the premise of her uniqueness. This leads to an anomaly that must be faced head on. How can it be that during the era when Hollywood wholly dominated the generation of images of public beauty, only one person has left us a truly beautiful public image, and, if this is so, how is it possible that this person and her images are so nearly forgotten today?



Although many are reluctant to admit it, a woman's beauty begins with her body, which the glamour photograph can only suggest; with a few possible exceptions, such as the infamous Marilyn Monroe calendar, nude photography before the 1970s was either art photography or pornography, neither of which are modes of what I call public beauty. The subject of the picture says to us, "take this image as a substitute for what I cannot show you, but which I promise you is there." Yet the typical glamour shot (classically, an 8x10 black and white glossy), even of the presumably most beautiful stars, promises something it cannot deliver. The disparity between the physical beauty that the subject's dress and comportment promise us and what our objective judgment concludes is really there is a measure of the mimetic element in our cultural perception; one is expected to sacrifice one's judgment on the altar of cultural mimesis to the (implicitly collective) suggestion emanating from the picture itself. The spectator must supplement the image's failure to fulfill its promise (a relative failure, to be sure, but the promise is of "absolute" satisfaction) with images of the star's film roles, perhaps of her off-screen life. The success of the Hollywood publicity machine in determining our sense of public beauty is a tribute to the effectiveness of this sacrificial operation.

It was in the 1930s, with the coming of sound and the consequent expansion of the film audience, that the studios and their publicity operations acquired their mature form. An early byproduct of audience expansion was the 1930 Hays code, which strictly

limited sexual display, institutionalizing the photographic esthetic of promise within which Carole's career was encompassed. We may take three stars as paradigmatic of public beauty in this period: Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Greta Garbo.

Jean Harlow's screen image was typically (e.g., in *The Red-Headed Woman* [1932]), that of a woman undeterred by morality from exploiting her sexual value, whether in exchange for wealth or other social benefits, or simply for sensual pleasure. The salient characteristic of Harlow's body image is that she is often shown not wearing a brassiere or other constraining undergarments; her character as a "loose woman" is exemplified by this particular looseness. Harlow's dress, with occasional revealing poses, suggests her body's sensual presence much more explicitly than standard garb, without however making its form explicit.

Mae West, Harlow's fellow sex symbol of the 1930s, presents her body most often in the opposite manner: tightly squeezed into a corset or the equivalent. Where Harlow suggests her body's immediate presence, West discourages us from guessing at her real contours under the restraining clothing. Neither implies an unambiguously beautiful whole; both point to a behavioral narrative of easy availability as a supplement to the image.



At the opposite pole from Harlow and West is Greta Garbo, who, disdaining to present a sexual image of her body to the public, scarcely presented any at all, preferring to limit photographs to her face or appearing draped in flowing, formless clothing.

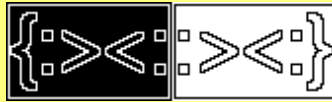
That those who purveyed the images of movie stars were reluctant to obviate the cultural mimetic effect by not just promising but delivering a truly beautiful body explains the

exceptionality attributed to Carole throughout her career. Carole's body was indeed exceptionally beautiful, but had her example corresponded to the generally accepted criterion of public beauty, other actresses of similar body type would surely have emerged. As it is, despite all the hype about actresses' bosoms, Carole remained in a class by herself; witness the catty remark of Esther Williams (an actress noted for her figure) that she wondered how Carole could stand erect--forgetting that Carole got her big break in *One Million B.C.* because she could run like an athlete.

The absence of beautiful implicit bodies in these images stands in contrast to the buxom figures of the fictional "Petty Girls" or "Vargas Girls" of the period. (One revelatory comment about Carole--*Life*, February 1, 1943--was that she had the body of a Petty girl.) When Carole was starting out in 1937-38 she was much in demand for cheesecake



photographs, which made use of young women whose figures were both more voluptuous and less hidden than those of genuine film stars. Although this kind of work was felt to be half way between legitimate photography and pornography, it was quite chaste by our standards. Very little of the bosom was shown; it was the legs that received the most attention—whence the synonym for cheesecake, "leg art." Long after her early days in Hollywood, Carole continued to pose for such photographs on occasion, no doubt in good-natured acquiescence to the demands of photographers. Carole's 1940 self-description as "a refugee from leg art" became a tag line for the journalists of the day. One way of describing Carole's place in the history of beauty is as the unique case of a cheesecake model who became a movie star.

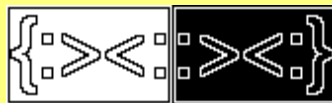


The canard that voluptuous, untalented Carole got into film by seducing X, Y, and Z is not only slanderous, it begs the question of why no other women with Carole's body type were found in Hollywood films. Carole herself was exceptional, but the key to her historical role is that her career benefited from an unusual institutional context.

Carole combined a beautiful body and face (perfected by a discreet 1940 nose job) with innate grace and unemphatic elegance. In a Photoplay article that appeared in November 1948, four months after Carole's suicide, her older sister Dorothy recalls that she and a friend would sit on the school lawn and listen to Carole sing, "enthralled by her singing, her grace and beauty." Carole was also talented in a variety of areas: she was a fine singer with a sweet and rich if not powerful contralto, she had an excellent comic sense, and she applied herself very seriously to acting. As she demonstrates in her early films, Carole was also quite athletic; during the filming of *Mystery Sea Raider*, she picked up the director, Edward Dmytryk, and carried him across the gangplank. How many of those who blithely dismiss Carole as "a lovely torso, not an actress" (Time) realize that in her first four films she plays a prehistoric girl, a pampered housewife transformed into a man, a nightclub entertainer caught up in Nazi spying intrigue, and a circus owner who sings and even performs rope tricks? Throughout Carole's career, although her films were often panned, she herself received generally favorable reviews and was never criticized for bad acting. One can only speculate what she might have been capable of with quality material and direction.

From the institutional side, the one word that explains the inhabital openness of the film world to Carole is war. Carole's film career began and flourished during the Second World War, which started, as Americans tend to forget, in September 1939. Even before Pearl Harbor, Carole was making war films and visiting military installations; she starred in *Mystery Sea Raider* in 1940 and *Cadet Girl* in late 1941, which reproduces one of Carole's real experiences of singing in uniform on a military base before 15,000 cadets. WW II obliged the United States to set an example for the other "bourgeois democracies" by affirming the superiority of its social order over Axis despotism. The Depression had indulged the distracting narrative of coquetry; war was a time for the genuine article.

Carole's devotion to the war effort was legendary; she visited both theaters of the war--contracting dysentery, malaria, pneumonia, and appendicitis in the process--and tirelessly traveled the US, selling war bonds, singing, dancing with the men, visiting barracks and hospitals, being sure to speak to every soldier in person. Carole was very much aware that her most precious gift to the fighting men was a vision of beauty, offered under circumstances where false promises were inappropriate.



The great lesson of the twentieth century was the triumph of liberal democracy over both left- and right-wing utopias that claimed to replace the anarchy of the market with a rational, conflict-free order. As we have learned, the freest and most prosperous social order is founded on the recognition that, because our mimetic nature makes us as different as it makes us similar, peripheral exchange is more effective in mediating our differences than centralized uniformity. It might seem to follow from this recognition of difference that such a society could not be united by a common image of desire. Yet market society's inherent optimism turns on the faith that our desires are mimetic elaborations of underlying appetites that are ultimately faithful to their natural paths of satisfaction. Carole's beauty is never perverse; too patently desirable to seek to whet our desires by coquetry, she need never overstep the bounds of good taste to display herself as living proof that there are indeed objects on earth by which these desires can be satisfied--suggesting that the free circulation of desire leads not to a vicious circle of mimetic rivalry but to a dynamic equilibrium between desire and the means available for its satisfaction. Carole's beauty gives proof that the world is a wondrous place whose reality outstrips our desiring imagination--proof that gave courage to many soldiers going

into battle.

The postwar era was less happy for Carole; the age of the postmodern critique of difference, however beneficial to society's victims, was not one in which the centralizing force of beauty, let alone beauty in the service of American patriotism, could be frankly celebrated. But the victimary paradigm that makes collective resentment the primary criterion of social justice appears to have run its course. Now that we are forced to defend our way of life against the destructive forces of those who make victimhood their alibi, we can find no better symbol of the inherent optimism of our liberal democracy than Carole Landis's incomparable American Beauty.

(For other photographs of Carole, see <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/cl/clpix.htm>)



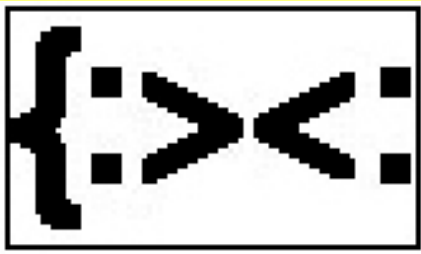
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Eric Gans

"Gay Marriage": An Originary Analysis

No. 289: Saturday, August 23, 2003

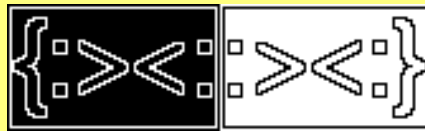
I have pointed out previously in these Chronicles that the victimary critique of institutions that dominated the postmodern era has lost its epistemological power to discriminate between victims and persecutors. A key example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has been prolonged in large measure by the ability of militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad to arouse in Europe and elsewhere a knee-jerk reaction in favor of "victims," with the perverse but deliberate consequence of making the lives of their fellow Palestinians all the more victim-like.

A less simplistic and only slightly less controversial application of latter-day victimary thinking--we might take our cue from the neo-Marxists and call it "late victimism"--is the movement urging the adoption of "gay marriage"--the colonization of the word "gay" by the homosexual community being an apparently definitive conquest of the victimary era. Is the exclusion of same-sex relationships from the financial and other advantages of marriage not a form of discrimination?

If marriage consists merely in the state's recognition of a pairing of individuals, then nothing essential distinguishes a same-sex couple, or indeed a more numerous "polyamorous" grouping, from a traditional husband and wife. Once we consider marriage to be independent of gender, there is no point raising objections to gay marriage on the plane of love and fidelity, even if, statistically speaking, male--but not female--homosexual couples have been shown to tolerate and practice infidelity considerably more than heterosexual ones, as biology would lead us to expect. Put the other way around, in order to defend the traditional concept of marriage, it is necessary to consider

heterosexual relationships--including sexuality and procreation, if not as an obligation, then as a thematically present option--as more legitimate than their homosexual counterparts. The legitimation of heterosexual relations is the purpose of marriage. In today's victim-addled world, such discrimination in favor of a single variety of sexual partnership appears very nearly scandalous. Because of the private nature of sexual acts, there is an understandable reluctance to grant a superior status to one set over another. But this is to misunderstand the anthropology of the institution of marriage.

Although modern society no longer takes an official interest in whether marital relations take place at all, let alone in whether they are geared to procreation, marriage is a license to perform such acts. In order to affirm the traditional concept of marriage, one must affirm not merely the social value of restricting this license to heterosexual couples, but the conformity of this restriction with the moral model of reciprocity that all humans as language-users carry with them. In liberal-democratic polities, ethical laws that are felt to come into conflict with moral law generally end up by being discarded. The gay marriage case is a crux because it points up the necessity of defending as moral an arrangement that appears to violate the symmetrical reciprocity of the moral model. It obliges us to choose between simplifying this model to eliminate any element of sexual specificity and defending this specificity as not an exception but a necessary extension of the originary model. Intellectually speaking, the first course seems much the easier, because we define the moral model today in sex-neutral terms. The issue of homosexual marriage forces us to examine the universal appropriateness of such terms.



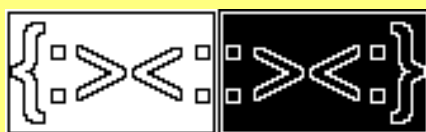
If (linguistic and ritual) representation originates as a means to defer violence, then the reciprocity of the originary scene must have operated exclusively among men, not between men and women. The subsequent extension of this reciprocity to women, which has only become definitive in our time (and still not universally) is rightly understood as a victory for the moral model, and, more specifically, as a major accomplishment of the postmodern victimary critique. But the entry of women into the public sphere is not the beginning of women's role in human society; from the outset, women have been bound to men through the asymmetrical institution of marriage in its various forms.

In the context of the extension of public reciprocity to women, it is tempting to see the institution of marriage, within which men have traditionally exercised power over their wives, as a fundamentally oppressive one that should be retained only if it can be purged of its asymmetry, even where this asymmetry favors women (thus men have successfully challenged women's exclusive right to maternity leave). Yet so long as women retain biological exclusivity in childbearing, sexual asymmetry will perforce persist. Asymmetry is not in itself a violation of the moral model, since asymmetry is not (and, despite appearances, never was) synonymous with domination.

Traditional marriage is not, and has never been understood as, a public relationship falling under the abstract model of moral reciprocity, but a publicly recognized private or "domestic" relationship

founded on the biological asymmetry that makes possible human procreation. This point is independent of the specific origin of any given marriage/kinship system. Proponents of gay marriage often assert that if homosexuals should be denied marriage because their sexual relations cannot produce offspring, then childless heterosexual couples are equally illegitimate. But this polemical thrust is incompatible with the notion of marriage as a relationship between two individuals; if children were required to legitimate marriage, then marriage itself would be only a provisional bond. It is marriage that legitimates procreation, not the other way around. Marriage within a given society must institutionalize the asymmetric relationship of the two partners in child-production independently of the symmetrical reciprocity of the originary scene before it can provide legitimacy to child-rearing, an activity which even in our fragmented society involves an "extended family" of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and so on, coupled by the same asymmetric bond whether or not they have children of their own.

No institution is immune to change or even abolition. But women's having achieved public equality with men does not imply that marriage has now become a contractual relationship between morally equivalent parties into which it would be discriminatory not to admit pairs of same-sex persons. Once we define, and we might as well say, define away, marriage as a form of civil contract between two abstractly defined individuals, its institutional specificity disappears; society has declared itself by default indifferent to the nature of child-producing and -rearing arrangements, if not to the welfare of the children themselves, which would have to be assured by new institutional means. Such a position, however unpalatable to most, has its own logic. But if marriage is merely a contract between individuals, then it becomes difficult to justify the state's taking a special interest in promoting it through such means as tax relief. If any two--or perhaps three or ten--people can "marry," then there is no obvious reason why the state should not deal with marriage in the same way as it deals with any other form of voluntary association; indeed, it becomes unclear in what sense "marriage" is a distinct form of voluntary association.



The foregoing analysis, although it refutes some arguments often put forth in favor of homosexual marriage, is not an argument against it but an attempt to make clear what is at stake in the debate. If it has a polemical element, it is a polemic in favor of originary anthropology, whose analytic power I have attempted to demonstrate.

Even in this respect, the content of the model I propose is open to revision. If there is a persuasive gender-indifferent model of the originary scene from which can be derived a concept of marriage as a contractual relation between a man and a woman, well and good; we need only determine which model accords better with the anthropological evidence. The primary point is that the establishment of a scenic model provides a heuristic for understanding the fundamental parameters of human institutions; conversely, this model can be modified in turn in order to fit more plausible sets of such parameters. The "hermeneutic circle" thus described is more rigorous than that attainable from textual analysis alone, the distance between cultural texts and fundamental anthropological categories being inevitably mediated by the same metaphysical presuppositions from which the

analyst is, or at any rate claims to be, seeking to liberate himself.



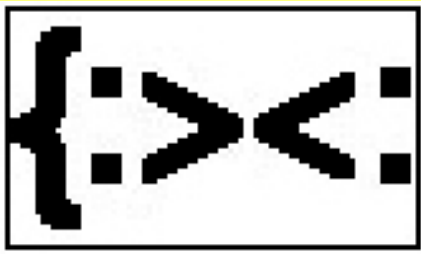
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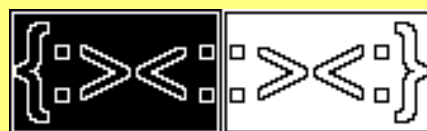
Eric Gans

The new antisemitism and the bankruptcy of victimary thought

No. 290: Saturday, November 1, 2003

As readers of these Chronicles know, I consider the Holocaust to be the inaugural moment of the victimary era from which we are now emerging. But what we are emerging into is not so clear. The decline of the victimary model by no means implies that the resentments of the postmodern era have been laid to rest. On the contrary, the virulence of these resentments obliges us to rethink the indulgence with which the postmodern era has viewed them.

One feature of the transition to a new era is the emergence not merely of "Islamism" but of a global Islamic antisemitism as the chief conduit for resentment against the global market system. Just as the victimary model arose in reaction to radical antisemitism, so the model's decline is accompanied by radical antisemitism's reappearance. One encounters today in the public press statements of Jew-hatred that not long ago were exclusive to the swastika-strutting lunatic fringe. A single issue of my daily newspaper, the Los Angeles Times of Saturday, October 18, 2003, suffices to illustrate this point.



1. The following article is reproduced in full.

Malaysian Premier Stands by Remarks

From Associated Press

PUTRAJAYA, Malaysia — Malaysia's outspoken prime minister refused Friday to apologize for a speech in which he said Jews ruled the world, and he accused Western countries of using a double standard for criticizing Jews and Muslims.

"Lots of people make nasty statements about us, about Muslims," Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said. "People call Muslims terrorists, they even say Muhammad the prophet was a terrorist.

"People make such statements, and they seem to get away with it. But if you say anything at all against the Jews, you are accused of being anti-Semitic," Mahathir said at a news conference after the close of a summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the world's largest Muslim body.

Mahathir was reacting to a wave of condemnation over his speech to the summit Thursday, in which he said: "The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million. But today Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them."

In his speech, Mahathir used allegations of Jewish dominance to underscore his chief point: that Muslims need to embrace modern knowledge and technology and overcome divisions over religious dogma that have left them weakened globally.

Mahathir said Muslims had achieved nothing in more than 50 years of fighting Israel. He also said the world's more than 1 billion Muslims "cannot be defeated by a few million Jews."

Mahathir, 77, a senior statesman in the developing world who will retire Oct. 31 after 22 years in power, has long taken pride in calling things the way he sees them. He is a staunch advocate of the Palestinians and strongly opposed the war in Iraq. He has also jailed terrorism suspects from the Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah group.

The U.S., Canada, the European Union, Israel, Germany, Britain and Australia all condemned Mahathir's remarks about Jews. State Department spokesman Adam Ereli called the speech offensive and inflammatory.

But Mahathir was unapologetic and said at the news conference that he opposed terrorism, suicide bombings and Israel's policy of massive retaliation in response to Palestinian violence. "What I said in my speech is that we should stop all this violence," he said, noting that historically, Jews had sought refuge in Muslim lands to escape persecution in Europe.

But since Israel was established half a century ago, he said, "there seems to be no more peace in the Middle East."

Mahathir was simply telling it like it is, Arab leaders said.

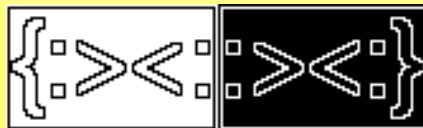
"I don't think [the comments] are anti-Semitic at all. I think he was stating the facts," Yemeni Foreign Minister Abubakr al Qerbi said.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher added: "There are people wanting to create trouble, invent problems that do not exist. I would advise them to read the whole speech."

The logic with which Mahathir and his allies accuse their accusers is typical of the sacrificial discourse of antisemitism: every criticism of the antisemite is but another proof of the extent of Jewish power. How scandalous that Moslems are accused of terrorism with impunity (one wonders if Mahathir thinks the Mossad was responsible for 9/11), whereas stating the simple truth that "today Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them" subjects one to opprobrium.

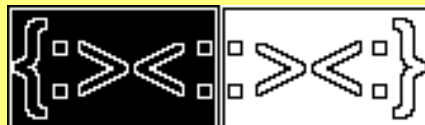
(As an illustration of how easily Americans get away with insulting Islam, three pages further on we find, "General Apologizes for Remarks on Islam," where it is reported that Lt. General William Boykin, in reaction to adverse comments, stated that "for those who have been offended, I offer a sincere apology." Nonetheless, a senior Saudi official is quoted as calling "outrageous" Boykin's remarks, in which he assimilated the enemies of the US--but not Moslems as such--to Satan and referred to "his [a Somali warlord's] God" as an "idol.")

Mahathir is not an Al Qaeda militant or a Wahhabi cleric. If anything deserves to be called Moslem public opinion it is a position articulated at "a summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the world's largest Muslim body" and supported by the entirety of its membership--there is no sign of a single dissenting voice. Whatever we think of Islam as a religion, we must face the fact that as a political community, mainstream Islam today is the vector of a renewed global antisemitism with which resenters of the market system increasingly identify. The humiliation inflicted by Israel on the Moslem nations that have been trying for two generations to "drive the Jews into the sea" has given rise to an "Islamic" world-view that is in fact pieced together from the tawdriest scraps of Western thought. Mahathir presents as empirical truth, and his fellow Moslems hasten to confirm by their own experience ("telling it like it is"), the hoary mythology of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Along the same lines, a few months ago the New Republic published excerpts from a "scholarly" article by a professor at a major Egyptian university explaining how Jews use the blood of non-Jewish children in the fabrication of their Passover matzoth. Vicious Western idiocy is presented as Islamic fact--as the Associated Press informs us, its "outspoken" promulgator "has long taken pride in calling things the way he sees them."



2. My second example is closer to home. The front page of the same newspaper that conveyed the Indonesian indictment of Jewry carried a story about Joseph Lieberman's visit, one hopes more foolhardy than cynical, to the Arab American Institute conference at Dearborn, Michigan. Unlike

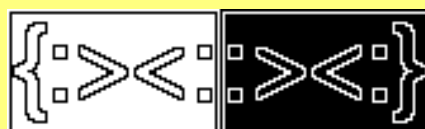
Howard Dean, whose pandering denunciations of the "religious right" elicited a standing ovation from the group on the following day, Lieberman was booed for denying that bulldozing the homes of terrorists and building a protective wall to keep them out--policies he hastened to condemn--was itself a form of terrorism. Israel is the only country in the world whose policies, good, bad, and debatable, are scrutinized in this manner; but let that pass. What is of interest is the language, reported without comment by the Times, in which the membership of the Arab American Institute expressed their opposition: "Go home to Tel Aviv!" And from a "Palestinian activist from Danville, Calif.": "He should be running for the prime minister of Israel... He is such a Jew." It is appropriate for Arabs to be Arabs, but for Jews to be Jews is contemptible indeed. Not that anti-Zionism has anything to do with antisemitism.



3. On a lighter note, Saturday's "Letters to the Times" section contains this little gem:

The 1st Amendment provides: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Only lawyers can read this language as condemning the use of the words "under God" [in the Pledge of Allegiance] while concurrently allowing the expenditure of billions of dollars maintaining the religious state of Israel.

This offhand crack from a presumed Christian is as frightening as the predictable hostility of Moslem activists. What separates us most radically from the era of my childhood is the legitimacy then accorded to expressions of racial superiority. Today the mainstream press considers racist statements unacceptable, but publishes without comment gratuitous references to "the religious state of Israel."



4. A final example, this time from a senior editor of the New Republic, America's leading weekly journal of ideas--one whose publisher is Jewish and a strong defender of Israel. In his "blog" (I hate that term) of October 13, Greg Easterbrook writes the following about the new Tarantino film, *Kill Bill*:

Set aside what it says about Hollywood that today even Disney thinks what the public needs is ever-more-graphic depictions of killing the innocent as cool amusement. Disney's CEO, Michael Eisner, is Jewish; the chief of Miramax, Harvey Weinstein, is Jewish. Yes, there are plenty of Christian and other Hollywood executives who worship money above all else, promoting for profit the adulation of violence. Does that make it right for Jewish executives to worship money above all else, by promoting for profit the adulation of violence? Recent European history alone ought to cause Jewish executives to experience second thoughts about glorifying the killing of the helpless as a fun lifestyle choice.

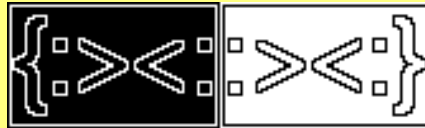
Three days later, Easterbrook made the following apology:

Easterbrook said he is prepared to defend the thoughts of his essay, but he regrets the way he expressed himself.

In accusing a Jewish person of worshipping money, Easterbrook said, "you invoke a thousand years of stereotypes about that which Jews have specific historical reasons to fear."

"What I wrote here was simply wrong, and for being wrong, I apologize," he said.

Whether or not we accept Easterbrook's apology--which was closely followed by that of the New Republic itself--it would be difficult to find a clearer confirmation of the growing acceptability of antisemitism than the presence of this kind of language, which even in the prewar era would have been used only by professed antisemites, in the discourse of a senior editor of the New Republic. In the guise of reproaching Jews with forgetting the genocide of which they were victims ("recent European history"), Easterbrook reproduces its premise: that Jews who "worship money above all else" are undermining social values by "promoting for profit the adulation of violence": entartete Kunst, Goebbels called it. No doubt Christians are involved too; as Marx put it in his essay On the Jewish Question, today the Christians have become Jews.

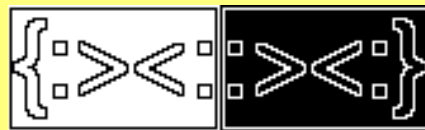


What is wrong with the victimary paradigm is not its defense of victims, but its means of identifying them. We should not forget that unlike garden-variety racism, which bases a claim of privilege on the superior abilities of the favored race, antisemitism has always presented the Jews as the victimizers; what is new today is that the Jews are credited with explicit as well as implicit power. For the traditional anti-Semite à la Edouard Drumont, The Jew is all-powerful only because the Aryan is too naively good-natured to suspect his adversary's malevolence. The antisemite works to bring The Jew's true nature to light, knowing that once revealed for what he is, he can be crushed with little effort. Nietzsche was no antisemite, but he supplied the model of this interaction in his description of the Christian, and originally Jewish, manipulation of the strong by the resentful weak so that the former are shamed out of enforcing their superiority over the latter.

Postwar victimary thinking rejects the Nietzschean paradigm. The implicit "strength of the weak," whose success Nietzsche himself could explain only by the resentful cleverness of the Judeo-Christian priesthood, no longer suffices as a pretext for persecution; in its place, the victimary thinker denounces the explicit strength of the strong. The Palestinians supply postmodern antisemitism with its alibi: they are the Jews and the Israelis are the Nazis. (Were this true, of course, there would be no Palestinians.) The diabolically clever Jew is no longer objectively weak; he has become the military Jew of Israel. The nature of Jewish "control" has also changed; in the past the Jews were accused of dominating the world by setting the great powers against each other

(e.g., in WWI); now, they are the great power, the principal agents of Western domination of the "Orient." (The 10/30 Times tells us that many Iraqis blame the recent rash of suicide bombings on... the Israelis.)

To accredit the fanatical hatred that reveals itself in suicide bombings as a legitimate form of political expression is to abandon the distinction between rational discourse and sacrificial myth that is the foundation of "Western" ethics, or, more precisely, to profit from its protection in order better to deny it to others. I will never forget the horrible incident in Ramallah in 2000: two Israeli soldiers who took a wrong turn were lynched by a Palestinian mob and their bodies displayed to an enthusiastic crowd who dipped hands in their blood. "Taking the side of the victim" means combating such behavior and the attitude behind it, not expressing "understanding" for it.



It is a red herring to accuse those who denounce Moslem antisemitism of denigrating Islam as a religion. Islamic theology is one thing; the state of official and unofficial Moslem opinion is another. The atmosphere that encourages remarks like "He's such a Jew" or "The Jews rule this world by proxy" must not be tolerated. Nor does the refusal to condemn them exemplify the Christian charity that underlies Western democracy. (French President Jacques Chirac, backed by the prime minister of Greece, stopped the EU from ending a summit meeting with a statement deploring Mahathir's speech; while Chirac--encore heureux!--disagreed with the latter's views, he considered that an EU summit declaration "would not have been appropriate." Mahathir thanked him for his "understanding.")

There is no simple way to absorb into the exchange system the resentments that have resuscitated The Jew as the hidden center of the now global centerless marketplace. But this task can be carried out effectively only if resentment is deprived of the a priori moral value accorded it in the postmodern era, when it was the only attitude that was never "deconstructed." Whatever the difficulties attendant on such real or potential phenomena as cloning and genetic engineering, the greatest challenge of twenty-first century ethics will be to remain attentive to the needfulness of which resentment is a symptom while denying the legitimacy of resentment itself.



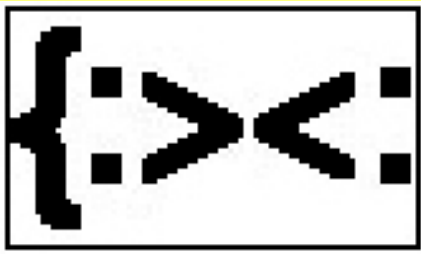
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Affirmation of Life: I - The Gift of Beauty

No. 291: Saturday, November 8, 2003

As one gets older, one grows more appreciative of life. I doubt if I would have conceived the same admiration for the beauty of Carole Landis had I encountered her twenty or thirty years ago. Knowledge and experience aside, appreciation of life is the basic component of what we can still call the "wisdom" of age. Life is finite for all, not merely the old; the latter's sharper realization of it reflects the growing coincidence of their personal horizon with the reality of the human condition.



The affirmation of life, whether by old or young, is something sorely lacking in our intellectual world, dominated more than ever by resentment. Resentment is the implicit agenda of virtually everything written over the last forty years or so under the name, now becoming quaint, of "theory." The resentful attitude is the only habitus immune to deconstruction, which casts humanity's fundamental life-preserving process of deferral as itself a mode of violence--an "error" that guarantees the good conscience of endless expressions of hatred for all that is, condemned as violence done to the entropic paradise that isn't.

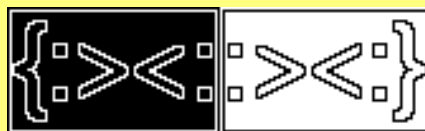
Today's nihilism dressed up as egalitarian distrust of authority reflects real problems--inequality is always a problem--but in the derealized mode suitable to tenured lifetimes of conference attendance--one of the more modest forms of life-affirming activity. This winter I am scheduled to teach our department's "theory" course, which examines a series of discourses whose story-line is

always the same: the uncovering of a new strand of the fiendish plot of being against nothingness, of the center against the periphery that the center defines--a paradox that the young Derrida had the intelligence to articulate, albeit in a mode that anticipates its forgetting.

The affirmation of life can begin but cannot end with the rejection of its deniers. This line of thought brings to mind Nietzsche, easily the most misconstrued of philosophers, whose message, for reasons not entirely extraneous to its content, has been distorted, first into an apology for Nazi brutality (in the name of the "blond beast"), and, more recently, as a lesser but more preposterous evil, into an apology for postmodern nihilism--nihilism, the very phenomenon against which Nietzsche fought so passionately, so desperately. Nietzsche's simple point, the point of a sick man as mine is of an old one, is that the fundamental criterion of all our activities must be the affirmation of life--the promotion of love rather than resentment. This simple idea, in practice, is not simple at all, the human being precisely defined by the moment in which he defers that which, absent the specter of intraspecific conflict, would contribute to the maintenance of life. Although Nietzsche's indifference to these anthropological niceties led his name to be invoked by personages whose idea of life-affirmation was putting Jews in gas chambers, the "artistic" self-affirmation he preached was meant to liberate others, not exterminate them.



Now that we have, not without success, devoted two generations to improving the lot of the world's victims, it is time we turned our attention to encouraging not the resenting but the rejection of victimhood. If this must come through the study of the coping strategies of the "post-colonial" world, so be it. Even if the only cultures our own intellectual culture allows us to affirm are those most different from--and most economically irrelevant to--our own, it is better to affirm something than nothing. But I will leave this task to my able colleagues. For the past several months, I have been at work at my own project of life-affirmation.



Last Spring a young man whose opinion I greatly respect took me to task for descending from the general to the particular, from the origin of language to the life, marginally world-historical at best, of a largely forgotten Hollywood actress. How can the life of Carole Landis be relevant to generative

anthropology, the science of the originary?



My answer, really only the beginning of an answer, is that human culture emerged as the result not of incremental evolutionary modification, but of a historically unique event, a singularity. This is not simply a "historical" observation. The human emerged in a singular event and is distinguished from other species by its preservation, through representation, of singular events, organized around singular objects. The founding intuition of Christianity is that human truth, even and particularly the truth of moral reciprocity before which all humans are equal, can be learned only in an experience that absolutely distinguishes from all others a single individual. It is only singular individuals--such as we all are--who can engage in the symmetrical actions of moral reciprocity. It is this singularity that we affirm when we speak of something as life-affirming. Our singular lives are made up, to be sure, of mimetically acquired components, but they are no less singular for that--there being no other model of singularity available to us.

My unplanned encounter with Carole Landis has given me a wholly unexpected insight into the affirmation of life. I learned, after sixty years of disbelief, that it is possible for real sexual beauty to exist in not merely in the private but the public sphere--that in the world of publicity that induces us to desire signs in the place of substance, a woman of real beauty was able for a time, albeit at great cost, to maintain herself.

A photograph of Carole's face alone suffices, but only because the beauty of her face is guaranteed by a perfect body, slim and full-bosomed, rounded rather than two-sided (compare the nonetheless beautiful Rita Hayworth), that inspires in whoever sees it not the least desire to add or subtract. That Carole was "strong as a lady wrestler" and able to "run like a deer" only confirms the perfect harmony her appearance makes manifest.

Why should we care about Carole's beauty, even if we cannot help appreciate it? I can turn the question around. If we don't care about the most beautiful human being we have ever seen, what indeed can we care about? If we are so devoured by invidious relations that we cannot stop to admire what our genetic endowment makes it

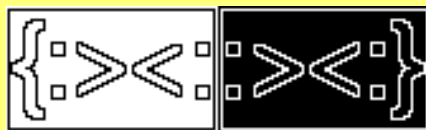


impossible for us not to admire, then we are nihilists indeed. But we aren't, really. I am encouraged by the fact that not only men but, especially, women to whom I have shown pictures of Carole always express amazement at her beauty, which inspires respect rather than rivalry. One need not desire her to find her incomparably desirable.

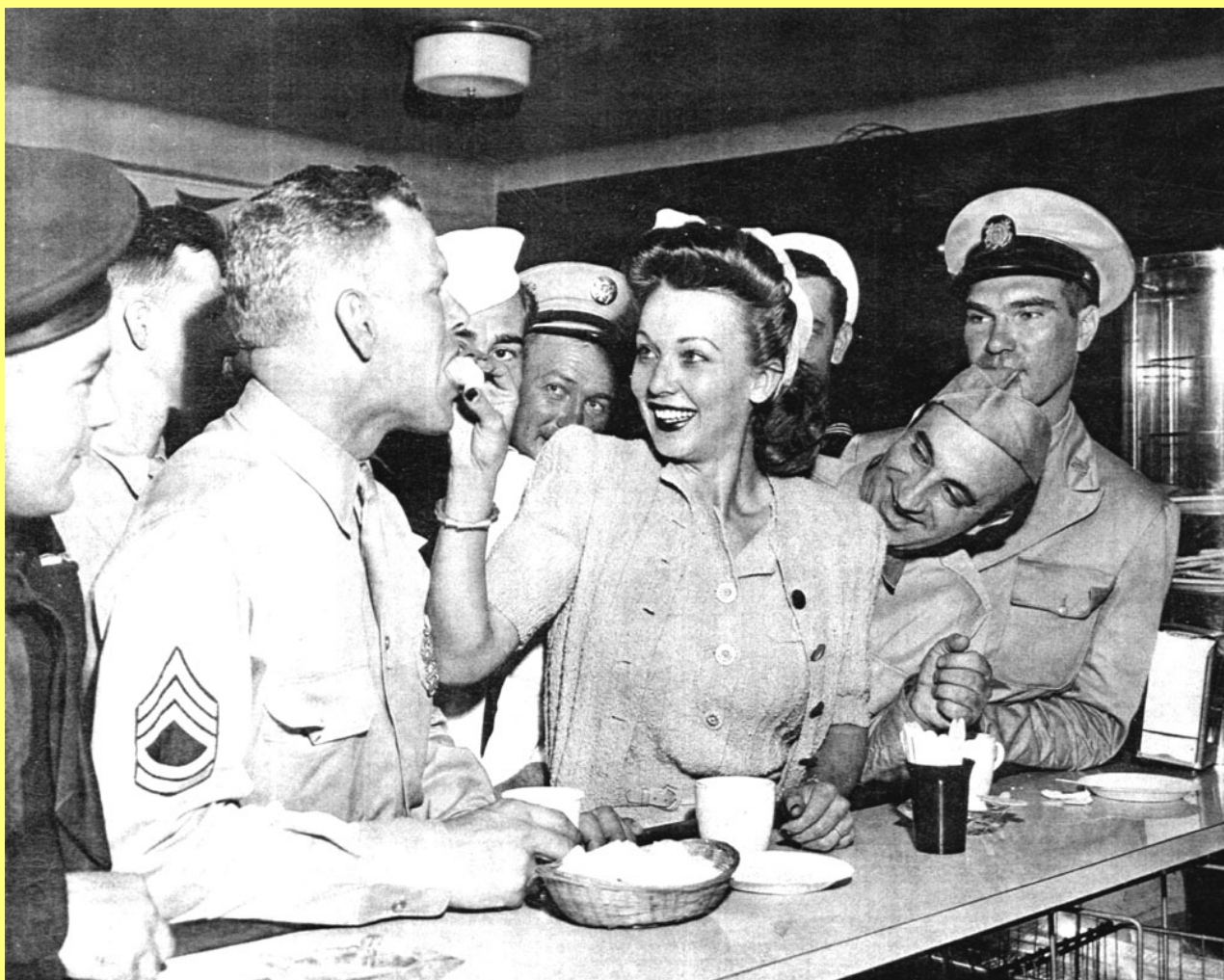
To the extent that Christianity captures the essence of humanity, it is in its doctrine that we are at once all equal before God and godlike before our equals. Precisely because Carole is more beautiful than the rest of us, her altogether exceptional beauty can serve as an example, so that each of us may conceive our own beauty as altogether exceptional as well. Because direct imitation of Carole's example is impossible, she teaches us to find our own way, not necessarily visual, to merit the attentive and admiring desire of our peers.

A human physical presence is in the first place a moral presence; I admire Carole's beauty because these images posed before still or moving film that are all we will ever have of her presence are radiant with the warmth of a human solidarity not subject to the limitations of mortality. The many historically attested demonstrations of Carole's selfless generosity only confirm what I think anyone can intuit from the contemplation of her recorded image. Our common humanity gives us a common sense of each other; a look of human kindness can mislead us, but not a lifetime of such looks. The dictum that appearances are deceiving is a Cartesian myth; appearances may deceive, but not too often, for they would cease to be appearances of what they pretend to be. In Clouzot's *Le corbeau*,

one of the best films to come out of the Vichy era, a young woman suspected by the protagonist of sending the poison-pen letters that have terrorized their town asks him to look into her eyes, for the truth is there. If we can no longer do this, we might as well not look at each other at all.



A few months ago, in [Chronicle 281](#) I called myself a "dialectical hedgehog." I would venture to say that this figure--rather, for example, than that of Rorty's "liberal ironist"--is the appropriate stance for the age of what my colleague Raoul Eshelman aptly calls "performatism." It is false to presume that one demonstrates a due respect for



one's interlocutor in dialogue by treating one's convictions ironically. Relativism is not a mode of thought but a rhetorical ploy, a tactic of thought rather than a strategy: there are no relative truths. Yet in the ethical domain of "practical reason" the assertion of a universal truth shows it to be something other than universal, since my assertion of it is asymmetrically situated with respect to you to whom it is addressed (compare, for example, a mathematical proof); however rigorously a law of conduct may be "deduced" from its premises, its enunciation is at least implicitly an imperative rather than a simple declarative. The post-millennial solution to this paradox is to affirm universal ethical truths in "performative" mode, one that seeks to persuade the spectator esthetically rather than by either logical demonstration or bald assertion.



Such persuasion does not narrowly take a proposition as its object. In the present case, my aim is not to persuade you of the propositions that Carole was the most beautiful actress in Hollywood, or the most beautiful woman ever photographed, but to show you her beauty in order to encourage you, as she herself did in her lifetime, to profit from your own experience of it as an affirmation of life.

For Carole the gift of beauty was the most general form of a generosity that she

also practiced very specifically; many anecdotes testify to her readiness to give not only her money but her time, whether in speaking individually to the patients in a hospital ward or in inviting groups of soldiers home to dinner and the movies. But with all the good will in the world Carole could not communicate personally with a million soldiers, and, more generally, no number of particular gifts could provide the reassurance not merely of one woman's personal generosity but of the ultimate harmony between human desire and reality.

Hence the relationship between what we might call Carole's visual generosity and the more substantive forms of generosity is not merely fortuitous. To give the gift of beauty is not a substitute for but the first stage of genuine reciprocity. When Carole visited the troops, she saw it as her duty to look her best; her physical appearance was an expression of her desire that each soldier go into combat knowing "what he was fighting for." The power of her image owes nothing, and everything, to mimesis. It owes nothing because it is self-evident; no side-glance at one's fellows is necessary to appreciate true beauty. But the transcendental guarantee of desirability that Carole's image bears with it is itself the product of mimetic tension and deferral. Beauty generates a scene of its own, but this scene itself is derived, like all scenes, from the originary scene. A woman's beauty that concentrates and focuses on itself the mimetic desire of the community is a sacred trust, and the greatest beauty is possible only for one who inspires in us the confidence that she is worthy of that trust.

(to be continued)



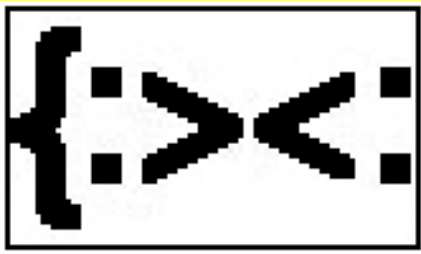
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Eric Gans

Affirmation of Life II - Life or Death

No. 292: Saturday, November 15, 2003

However necessary the turn from nihilism to the affirmation of life may be in the intellectual world, in the domain of practical politics it is truly a question of life or death. The great conflict of the 21st century is shaping up between those who believe in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and those who are willing to blow themselves up in order to prove this belief unfounded. The survival of humanity requires that we recognize and counter this threat.

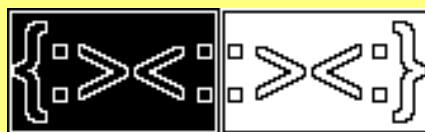
The now waning postmodern political configuration emerged from the conflict of WWII. Although, tragically as it turned out, Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews was not seen as a central focus of the war, both major Axis belligerents' doctrines of racial superiority were nonetheless perceived as challenging the fundamental reciprocity of the moral order; the consciousness of racial and ethnic equality thus raised would provide the basis of the victimary politics of the succeeding era.

In this context, the war had to be won at all costs. The enemy having chosen to massacre whole groups of people, the Allies felt justified in considering all enemy lives as more or less equally acceptable targets. As a result, the Allies, albeit for less condemnable reasons, shared with the Axis powers the dubious distinction of inflicting history's greatest violence on civilian populations. Voices continue to be raised against such conceivably unnecessary occurrences as the Dresden firestorm and, of course, the atomic bombing of the two Japanese cities. But although these critiques carry moral weight, they have purchase only within the context of Allied debates; in no way does the civilian death toll put in doubt the justness of the Allied cause.

The use of the atomic bomb nevertheless marked a turning point in the history of warfare; for the first time we had created a weapon that--and a fortiori the vastly more destructive fusion or "hydrogen" bomb that evolved from it--could no longer either justifiably or realistically be used in warfare. Awareness of this made a third World War unthinkable; the incipient West-East conflict froze into a Cold War standoff of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) accompanied by secondary, limited hot wars, in none of which were atomic weapons used or even seriously considered. As Adam Katz pointed out to me recently, this was the context of the birth of modern terrorism, whose threatened and real killing of civilians could be "justified" by the fact that the credible threat to kill unacceptably many enemy civilians was the basis of the foreign policies of the great powers.

In the postmodern configuration, the Hiroshima factor is subordinate to the Auschwitz factor; it is the identification with victims against their persecutors that supplies the context in which possession of the ultimate weapon is the ultimate sign of inhumanity. Terrorism is the ultimate weapon of victimary politics, which sees the terrorist not as a denier of life, but as one who defends the rights of the oppressed by wreaking violence on their--by definition less worthy--oppressors. The terrorist is a "freedom fighter" whose victims, civilian or military, are tainted by their own participation in victimization. By the same token, terrorism against the Soviet Union was unthinkable; their bomb protected the global proletariat. Yet ideology eventually yielded to reality; the "anticolonialist" USSR fought a guerilla war in Chechnya and lost one in Afghanistan.

Nietzsche's notion of life-affirmation, its Nazi perversion aside, could not serve as the foundation of postwar political morality. Eliminating ethnic, class, and later gender distinctions was felt to be more urgent than affirming life across the board--what affirms the life of the dominator denies the life of the dominated. As the term "affirmative action" suggests, affirmation tended to be limited to groups classified as oppressed. To translate "Black is beautiful" into White, or woman's liberation into men's liberation, is either caricatural or sinister; "White people's" organizations are crudely racist, just as the "Christian Identity" movement is a neo-Nazi organization.



The postmodern period entered its penumbra with the end of the Cold War and went black on 9/11. The end of the spurious symmetry between "capitalism" and "socialism" marked the triumph of the market system as the only system conceivable, of which first fascism and then communism were revealed to be merely nocive variants. Not that the disintegration of the Soviet Union put an end to victimary politics; on the contrary, this politics received a new impulsion from casting off the obvious vices of Sovietism. But the new race-gender-ethnicity triumvirate that replaced the class struggle lacked an alternative social model. Its political options were limited to the choice between incremental gradualism and utopian anarchism--"working within the system" or refusing to accept the lack of viable alternatives.

After 9/11, this mode of denial did not disappear, but it could no longer disguise its nihilism. The Chomskys and Sontags who continue to explain world affairs as the American victimization of

everyone else are exposed not merely as having nothing to put in the place of the system they condemn, but as accomplices of those who would destroy this system even at the price of exterminating the human race.

Nietzschean thought, as we have seen, came to grief over the lack of specificity with which the "artistic" affirmation of life was defined. The Nietzschean artist is not a victimizer, but, in the absence of originary morality, it is inevitable that the strong will define or at any rate confirm their strength by their ability to crush the weak. Hitler is only the most extreme in a series of obnoxious twentieth-century "Nietzscheans," from Gide's *Immoralist* and Lafcadio to Leopold and Loeb. Our contemporary predicament is, in its practical essence, far easier to define than Nietzsche's: the battle against the "decadence" of early consumer society was both less urgent and less winnable than the war against those who make our annihilation their principal goal.

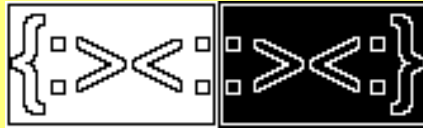
The opposition between the market-oriented liberal-democratic West and the ritual-centered, dictatorial (Middle-) East is often put in terms of "way of life": isn't the imposition of liberal democracy on other peoples colonialist, hegemonic, "Orientalist"? Although it is of the essence of liberal democracy that the members of the society choose their own rulers and, as far as possible, their own careers and consumption patterns, this choice is not made in a vacuum; it requires a context whose specificity--and relative rarity--we increasingly respect, and which may not be either available or attractive to the members of traditional societies.

The present context permits a simple answer to this objection. There is only one aspect of our "way of life" that we must, to ensure our own survival, impose on other peoples: the rejection of the nihilistic activity of terrorism. In the era of decolonization, stateless terrorism was tolerated as an evil means to a good end; the terrorist's statelessness was really the provisional form of a new national state that would one day replace the old colonial one. In the postmillennial era, tolerance of terrorism is globally suicidal. Terrorists no longer act in the service of a proto-state that awaits only decolonization to emerge. Increasingly, even in such places as Palestine, Chechnya, Kurdistan where the proto-state is the ideological basis for the terrorism--as it is not for al Qaeda, the most prominent terrorist organization of our time--there is no clear path from the terrorist act to the desired new state. Terrorism fails the Auschwitz criterion: it no longer constructively defends victims against persecutors, and it fails the Hiroshima criterion yet more clearly now that there is real danger of a terrorist group acquiring atomic or biological weaponry.

Instead of a limited action designed to drive out occupiers with no ultimate stake in the land they occupy--a model that de Gaulle shocked the Algerian colonists by applying to their "overseas department"--contemporary terrorists define as "occupiers" members of ethnic groups as committed to the land as their own: the Protestants in Northern Ireland, the Spanish in Basque country, the Sinhalese in the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka, and, of course, the Israelis in their part of Palestine. As the terrorist's political aims become more nebulous, he focuses more on killing now than on building later; the farther he gets from creating a state, the greater his interest in acquiring weapons "of mass destruction" previously reserved for states--and the more crucial it becomes to take preemptive action to keep these weapons out of his hands.

The terrorist's lack of a realistic political aim does not mean the lack of a political worldview. Moslem

fundamentalism has its model of the good society: the extension to the entire world, at any rate to those parts of the world Moslems care about, of something like the former Taliban government in Afghanistan. The Umma replaces the state because the modern state is necessarily corrupted by the instrumental rationality of the exchange system. But this disdain for the state and the rationalized economy that supports it is the functional equivalent of genocide. Who doubts whether bin Laden and his friends would have blown up the entire United States had they been capable of it? Stripped of the market and its culture--and of most of its population--the whole world would become a propitious terrain for the new Taliban.



The principal conclusion to be drawn from these well-known facts is banal: terrorism must be suppressed. But the banality belies a moral paradigm shift that signals the passage from the postmodern, victimary era to the post-millennial one. Terrorism in the preceding era was judged in the context of the victimary model, as a necessarily, or, at worst, unnecessarily evil instrument to a greater end. Now it is terrorism itself, the means, not the end, that is the problem. The originary configuration opposing persecutor to victim has been replaced by one that opposes order to violence.

This change in configuration reverses the relationship between center and periphery characteristic of the previous era. We have lived for two generations with the cliché that authority, power, indeed, success in any form, are essentially evil--that in the normal state of affairs, losers are good and winners are bad. In this context, any form of rebellion is justifiable, and its violence, excusable. Where a utopian horizon is posited beyond the present configuration, rebellion is the first stage of the revolution that will eliminate domination for good; where it is not, the cry for freedom generates "white guilt" that undermines, even if it cannot altogether destroy, the oppressor's authority. The latter case, as we began to discover well before the fall of the Berlin Wall, is far more stable; it makes no historical predictions that can be embarrassingly falsified and permits collective resentments to be focused on incremental rather than apocalyptic goals.

But now that rebellion, in the form of terrorism, poses a threat to civilization and even to the human race, we are obliged to affirm our respect for order and seek to preserve it. Resentment is no longer a guarantee of truth; it has become a symptom to be treated. Victims deserve our sympathy, but just as their plight is not a proof of virtue, neither is it unconditionally appropriate to relieve them of it at the expense of society as a whole. In a word, the Rawlsian-existentialist "original position" of faceless undifferentiation must give way to an originary scene in which the moral order emerges from an act of collective deferral.

Questions of this sort arise in domains other than politics, for example, in medical treatment: at what point does keeping someone alive become an inappropriate use of collective resources? What best "affirms life" in a world of finite wealth and conflicting interests is never self-evident. But whatever policies are decided on, the social order must be preserved, and those who threaten its existence, rendered harmless by whatever means necessary.

We would do well to recall the spirit of a simpler time:

Hitler wasn't guessing when he incorporated into his psychological warfare the strategy of "divide and conquer." It worked in Norway and it worked in France, and because there is no immunity to Fascism, it's trying hard right here in the United States. There is one antidote.

We've got to remember that we're all in this together. British, Russians, Chinese. And French-Polish-Yugoslav-Jewish-Irish-Mexican-English or what-have-you-Americans. Indians, whites, and Negroes. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, boys in the AAF or Merchant Marine. And civilians. Yes, civilians.

All the names from Pearl Harbor onwards are written on our memories and on our hearts and in your steel and your blood and your courage. The exploits at home aren't of this kind. But believe me, boys, they do exist.

In two and a half short years, the country has rolled up its sleeves, and our production record can be heard in the planes that roar over Germany; our War Bond record is built into every tank and destroyer, and the blood banks of the Red Cross are only one of the "musts" on the daily lists of the men and women on the home front.

None of us here can give as much as you. We all know it. That's why there is such a determination to give all we can, in time, spirit, money, work. We believe in you. We know you're good. But you've got to believe in us, too, because the home front is also a fighting front. And because this belief, this unity, brings the day of Victory right up there in plain sight. Unity is the one thing Hitler and his cohorts cannot cope with.

Carole Landis, "United We Stand" (MAST [Merchant Marine Magazine], November 1944)

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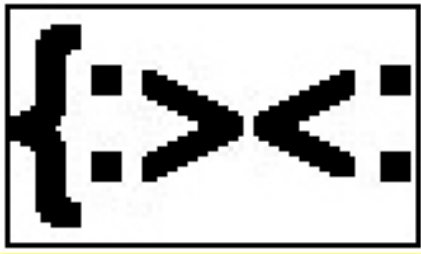
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of Love and Resentment

Eric Gans

Affirmation of Life III - Originary Analysis of Terrorism

No. 293: Saturday, December 6, 2003

Our most difficult yet most necessary exercise is to put ourselves in the place of those who want to kill us, not to espouse their resentments, but to affirm through this encounter the unity of the human and the primacy of moral reciprocity. If there is a psychological guide that allows us to distinguish between the satisfactions of resentment and those of love, it is the awareness that love denies the immediate emotional satisfaction provided by the resentful imagination. What we seek is not to understand the phenomenology of vicarious killing but to locate the element of our common humanity that can be made to justify the terrorist's ideology and actions. We can call this justification fallacious, but we cannot dismiss it as alien to us without denying the humanity of those whom we condemn for denying the humanity of others.

If the affirmation of life is a good, how is the negation of life possible? The human is founded on the deferral of satisfaction, that is, the suspension of life. Were we wholly immersed in the life-world, we would not be human. The various forms of sacrifice, including the jihadi's self-sacrifice, pay homage to this originary configuration.

War, the conflict between two societies, is not a component of the originary scene--happily, because this means that war is not an essential feature of human existence. The originary function of sacrifice is to maintain order within the social unit. Indeed, in its most general meaning of conflict

between communities, war is not specifically human; the "struggle for life" among different subgroups within a species is inevitable, and adaptations to intraspecific physical combat are found among insects. War as combat between communities does not depend on any specific constitution of these individual communities; what is different about humanity is not that it forms societies that tend to compete with each other, but that the mechanisms by which these societies are constituted and the events in which these mechanisms manifest themselves are derived from an originary scene. When two scenically constituted communities fight each other, they differ from animal communities more in their internal dynamic than in their mode of combat. Representational factors are relevant only at higher levels of organization; a man fighting a bear can profit from his humanity to improve his weaponry, but not to impose on the bear the human spirit of deferral--nor is this possible even among humans once they become engaged in violent combat.

In war, animals as well as humans sacrifice their lives for the cause; their "altruism" is predictable by the need to maximize inclusive fitness, the annihilation of one's community being clearly the most damaging of all contingencies to one's gene pool. In war, laying down one's life for one's comrades or one's country is hardly abnormal behavior. But today's suicide bomber is hardly performing the same function as the Kamikazes of WWII; the Japanese pilot who flew his plane into the side of an aircraft carrier has very little in common with the men who flew airliners into the sides of buildings on September 11. As compared to those motivated by the defense of the fatherland, the hijackers acted in the name of no established or emergent political unit. The power and significance of their act lies in the acknowledged asymmetry between the concrete reality--and lives--destroyed and the vague Islamic utopianism this act claimed to promote.

A terrorist International is in the process of forming, one that extends well beyond the Islamic limits of al Qaeda, drawn together by common resentment of the West and its market-driven prosperity. (In a recent book entitled *L'Islam révolutionnaire* [Monaco: Eds du Rocher, 2003], the infamous international terrorist Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, better known as "Carlos," a recent convert to Islam, urges "all revolutionaries, including those of the left, even atheists," to accept the "luminous" leadership of Osama bin Laden in the fight against the "incarnation of Satan" that is the United States.) The attitude of resentment is, as the evolutionists say, an adaptive behavior for reestablishing moral reciprocity within a given society. Sacrificial ritual and "scapegoating" in general focus the energy of this resentment on targets whose destruction does not endanger the social order as a whole. Between societies, war often serves the function of directing resentment away from the social order; if the ideal "scapegoat" is one whose destruction does not damage this order, then a fortiori the members of another political unit can serve the same function. Indeed, war makes more efficient use than sacrifice of the energy of resentment, since defeating an external enemy can bring economic benefits unavailable within the zero-sum terrain of one's own society. Arguably the battlefield, the originary locus of valor/value (French *valeur*), is where resentment first gets productively recycled into the exchange system.

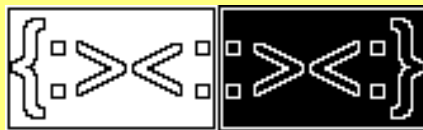


On the one hand, terrorism is the extreme degree of victimary politics--white guilt is expected to

excuse even one's own potential killers; on the other, it is a reminder of the sacrificial origins of the global exchange system. If scapegoating is an internal and war an external phenomenon, terror becomes a category in itself at the point where the distinction between internal and external breaks down--in a frontierless global economy that includes local cultures whose integration into this economy is, as might be expected, not always, or even usually, successful. Terrorism has been a technique of war, but contemporary terrorism is a war in itself--a new development that we should give George Bush and his government credit for recognizing, whatever one thinks of the specific policies by which they have been waging our side of the war.

The terrorist returns from exchange to sacrifice; from the marketplace, in which he is implicated insofar as he can act only from within the system he is attempting to destroy, to the originary deferral of desire that founds human culture. Death alone can guarantee the terrorist's denial of exchange, and, as a result of this denial, makes his action more effective, severing the final ties of shared self-interest between the killer and his potential victims. (As the Israelis will tell you, there's no foolproof way to stop a suicide bomber.) Suicidal martyrdom, a deterrent to those who love life, is a paradoxically effective recruitment device because it demonstrates to the terminally resentful the viability of the originary human alternative to the master-slave dialectic--as the market system is viewed by those unable or unwilling to conceive economic exchange as a rational process. It is not surprising that this position, characteristic of the Islamic "third world," has absorbed the radical antisemitism of the internal Western "critique" of the market system as a centralized conspiracy (see Chronicle 292).

The originary scene is successful because it preserves human life from the dangers of mimetic conflict. The event of deferral is not a visceral reaction of fear; the deferral of appetitive satisfaction is a mode of communication, a communion that prefigures the feast that will follow. One renounces life as an animal in order to live it as a human being. This renunciation is the source of human life as such, and every subsequent human life is dependent on it. Suicide bombing is the ultimate means of calling in the chips of this debt. It reminds us that the opposition between culture and economy as modes of exchange may be reduced in its starkest terms to that between death and life--the former as death to animal instincts and the latter as providing for their continued satisfaction.



The participants in the originary scene acted to control resentment by redirecting it toward the all-powerful center. The global economy dominated by the United States is for the Islamic militant a Satanic inversion of this originary configuration that can be combated only by an inversion of the originary deferral of violence. Instead of disorder transformed into order by the deferring focus on the center, violence to the center produces a disorder so chaotic that it can be restrained only by the sacrificial order in which desires are renounced rather than merely deferred. The terrorist's resentful fidelity to the originary constitution of the human emphasizes the renunciation without compensation of our most fundamental appetite--the "instinct of self-preservation"--in the service of transcendence: in a word, theism, in contrast with the deferral of appetite in the service of peaceful exchange: in a word, humanism.

There is no Archimedian equilibrium point from which to articulate and synthesize man's creation of god with God's creation of man, although Christianity articulates this paradox more sharply than any other religion, and generative anthropology offers a minimal model of it. But whereas religion is traditionally the domain where "the end justifies the means"--cf. Pascal's wager or pari--our era is the historical moment in which the means must be judged in themselves because the means have become the theology. The destruction of the human world order in order that God may impose his own order is Satanic rather than authentically theistic; by claiming to carry out the will of a divinity situated beyond human order the terrorist makes himself the origin of the transcendence he supposedly obeys.

Theological niceties aside, we must rely on our intuition of the difference between love and resentment. In this regard, the age of communism and its dialectical opposite, Nazism, is a historical watershed. Nazi propaganda stressed love of fatherland over its hate-filled racial doctrines, although the latter were by no means hidden, and communism played this game still more successfully--to such an extent that whereas de-Nazification is still a reality in Europe, de-communization is not even a word. We realize now that a solidary post-market community cannot be created by focusing the resentment generated by the market on the real or symbolic agents of market circulation, but this realization was not automatic: it required the elaboration and ultimate failure of monstrous historical experiments. Contemporary terrorism too is engaged in a historical experiment, but it cannot be realized in a economically viable society; it is a contest between the human order with all its faults and the social equivalent of nothingness.

Anyone who expresses sympathy for the terrorists by denouncing the global order as "capitalist" or "imperialist" is, deliberately or not, missing the point. Islamic terrorism does not seek to liberate "indigenous forces" kept at bay by imperialist control in order to create a new society; its goal is to produce a chaos so violent that it can be tamed only by the imposition of the Sharia at the hands of Taliban-like gangs, not as a stricter way of regulating economic relations but as a substitute for them. The apparently abstract opposition between love and resentment, order and chaos, becomes an opposition between the world as it is today and one that would be a nightmare for all but a few of its few survivors. One shudders to think how many hundreds of millions of deaths would be required to bring about such an outcome; it is this number, not the day-to-day tallies of terrorist victims, that is the body count we should use to assess the morality of Islamic terrorism. No anthropology that values its subject-matter can conceive this to be required by humanity's originary constitution; yet it is an option that has always been available to it in principle and that our global society has allowed to emerge as a real, and ominous, possibility.



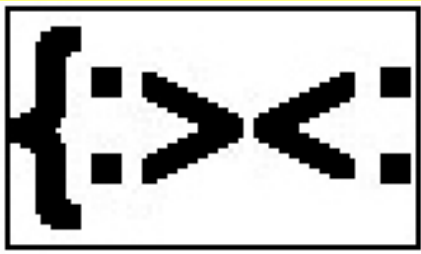
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Eric Gans

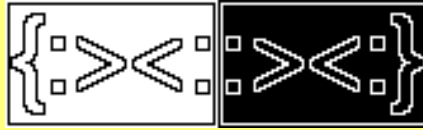
What is a Biography?

No. 294: Saturday, December 27, 2003

What symbiosis between narrative and life permits us to conceive of a "life-narrative"? Why is the information content of a book, some 100,000 or 200,000 words (I won't hazard a guess as to how many bits), appropriate for telling the story of someone's life? The multi-volume lives of the super-important are scarcely a degree of magnitude longer than the biography of a minor figure. Yet even the longest biography has no inherent proportionality to the information content of even the shortest lifetime.

We can tell someone's life story because we organize our lives in the form of stories, and only a story that occupies a book is acceptable for purchase and consumption as an independent unit. Book-length biography is a genre reserved for the extraordinary, which the ordinary can adopt only through pastiche or naiveté. The great life occupies the equivalent of a novel; the less-than-great life is tellable only as a short story. The thinness and triteness of Maupassant's characters is appropriate to this literary form--lives too thin for a full biography briefly recounted as failed, or trivially successful, experiments. Short-story characters live only to illustrate the futility of living--unless it be to show us that there is more in life than can be told in a story. But these latter are fictions whose lives can be sacrificed without qualm to the lesson they convey; a real person in such circumstances would easily find a biographer. Conversely, to be the subject of a book is a tangible sign of greatness. Carole Landis' career frustrations and suicide would seem less irredeemable were her life commemorated otherwise than in brief and ill-informed essays.

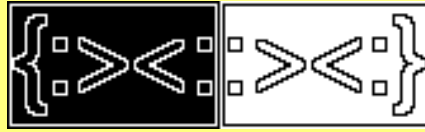
Commemoration in language is as old as language itself; it is the atemporality of the abstract sign that guarantees the time-bound permanence of the physical monument. Biography replaces legend as the social order becomes both more complex and more aware of its complexity. There can be only "one" legend--if multiple, legends compete--whereas biographies can line the shelves. Even if ordinary people are unworthy of biography, uncountably many can be classified as extraordinary. Indeed, the phenomenon of celebrity having weakened the link between this status and demonstrated achievement, we are all justified in thinking ourselves at least virtually extraordinary.



Most of what we consider our major cultural forms--movies, operas, plays, short stories, symphonies, concertos, suites, narrative poems--occupy in our lives the mediate duration of a typical rite (a mass, a synagogue service, a wedding ceremony); lyric poems, along with songs and short instrumental pieces, belong to the briefer category typified in ritual by a single prayer or gesture, whereas novels, epic poems, and Wagner's Ring cycle share the temporality of festivals, such as the Panathenaean where the Homeric epics were recited. The mediate form has the time-frame of a human event, composed in turn of individual moments, throughout all of which the periphery-center structure of the human scene is maintained. Conversely, it is virtually impossible to maintain one's concentration for the length of a long form; one cannot normally read a novel at a single sitting, and certainly not remain continuously active throughout a week-long festival. The long form is distinguished from the mediate one by an episodic structure incorporating our experienced variation in meaningfulness between explicit and implicit--sacred and profane--scenic moments, with biological roots in cycles of concentration and relaxation, sleep and wakefulness. The long form is not inherently more significant than the mediate: novels are not greater than dramas. But they involve a greater investment of time by both creator and audience because they transmit a degree of magnitude more information. The mediate form depends upon a shared context that in the modern world is cultural rather than empirical, so that it cannot help us to judge whether a real life is or is not of extraordinary significance. Thus a film biography tends to rely on a book's prior guarantee, normally even when fictional, inevitably when factual.

In the naturalistic short story that became a mass-produced genre in the late nineteenth century, scenic concentration subordinates living reality to form: a life that can be made into a short story is a life insignificant for all but a single moment. Conversely, the long narrative that extends over the unexceptional time separating one scene from another (the function of description in the novel being to fill the gaps between narrative scenes with something other than narration) models the temporality of human life as a whole rather than that of the sacred scene alone. The sacred is not indeed an end in itself; it defers the danger the human community poses to itself, which for our species alone is the greatest danger, in order that we may concentrate our energies on the lesser but crucial dangers of our environment, including the human environment outside the boundaries of our own society. Long cultural forms not merely reproduce the scene of sacred deferral but illustrate, and reflect upon, the function of this scene in everyday life. The greater significance of long as compared with mediate narration paradoxically corresponds to the presence in the former, in contrast with the latter, of the profane together with the sacred, the duration of dispersion together

with the moment of concentration. The story of a life worth living is less rather than more intensely revelatory, farther from rather than closer to sacredness, than that of a life worthy only of sacrificing.

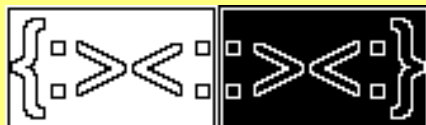


What then brings unity to the extended temporality of novelistic or biographical existence? In the Homeric epics that are the ancestors of all Western fictional narratives, what ties the beginning to the end is resentment. The "tragic" Iliad is the story of Achilles' (unjustified) resentment against Agamemnon, which he renounces by returning to battle and then magnanimously returning Hector's body to Priam; the "comic" Odyssey is that of Odysseus' (justified) resentment against Penelope's suitors, whom he massacres at the climax of the story. The French saying *La vengeance est un plat qui se mange froid* (recently quoted in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* as a "Klingon proverb") succinctly describes the basic structure of long narratives: "hot" resentment, preserved in memory, generates a strategy of "cold" revenge whose implementation can sustain an indefinite series of episodes. Integrated human time contrasts with the entropy of natural life whose continuity is genetic rather than individual; epic fiction is about resentment because resentment lies at the foundation of human temporality. Resentment is our mode of relationship to the mimetic configuration that controls our desires; it acknowledges both our dependency and our disaffection, as figured in the Homeric epics by Achilles' abortive withdrawal from battle and Odysseus' disguise as a beggar at the door of his own house.

This model makes sense for fiction, which commemorates the dependency of the very notion of "life history" on the narrative logic of the originary scene, but a model that gives meaning to an individual life cannot present this life as itself productive of meaning. We should not be too hasty to assimilate reality to representation, fearing to affirm "naively" that meaning is generated in our experience of a reality behind representation and only subsequently captured within it. What would indeed be naïve would be to assume that our models of human action are independent of cultural representations. Fiction provides new models for understanding facts; facts provide new data for the testing and modification of these models. Biography is one means for adjusting narrative form to new content.

At the public pole of biography, the historical significance of the subject is uncontested. In such cases, human temporality may be taken for granted rather than constituted; our overriding concern is not what makes possible the biographee's participation in the world but what he has accomplished during his time in it. At the limit, such biography simply borrows its formal coherence from that of the events it recounts and becomes what we may call biographical history. If the subject has accomplished great things, it suffices to give an account of these accomplishments; his biography is a collection of stories that only incidentally form a narrative totality. But because it finds its coherence in events rather than in their subject, biographical history can tell us nothing about the relationship between individual life and the scene of origin from which it derives its categories of significance.

To the extent that biography exists as a distinct narrative genre, it is as the attempt to find in a real life the material of a coherent narration. The purest form of biography is that in which the biographer is obliged to make a case for the significance of his subject to a public that has not yet accorded it. In this case alone is biography an independent cultural form.. The significance of the biographee remains latent until the biography reveals it; historically it is the creation of the biography itself. The life of someone who cannot be shown to have played a crucial role in significant events signifies not by contiguity but by example, like that of an actor in a drama rather than of an actor on the world stage. This mode of exemplarity is tragic by the very fact of its historical marginality. One thinks of Hegel's reading of Sophocles' Antigone as incarnating a set of values incompatible with the world as it is, but pregnant with the world of the future.



In the second part of this analysis I will attempt to make a case for Carole Landis as such a person; someone not behind but ahead of her time, who revealed in her lifetime, a revelation never really lost, a new potentiality of human beauty. It is surely a distortion to speak of Carole, as do some of her defenders, as a feminist avant la lettre. Carole did not disdain to exploit her unique beauty in ways incompatible with today's sexual egalitarianism; but her lesson for all of us is that the cultivation of our personal esthetic is a means to exchange both pleasure and moral reinforcement. Carole's beauty, so powerfully sexual, nonetheless suggests to us a path toward transcending the asymmetry of gender in mutual respect.

Since beginning my project on Carole I am better able to understand why no one has written a book about her. There are few sources of information other than movie magazines and gossip columns. Although she was friendly and easy to work with, although her beauty was spectacular and her personality scintillating, not a single one of her associates, not even actors who co-starred with her in several films, has written more than a sentence or two about her--in many cases, not even that. Perhaps they were deterred by the scandal of her suicide; perhaps they felt guilty to have done nothing to prevent her death; perhaps they sensed that she was not wholly of the world in which she lived and worked, even in the milieux where the gossip columnists assure us she was found. The "four Jills" is the only collective with which she is reliably identified--yet the memoirs of her colleague Martha Raye give her no more than a few sentences either.

Thus I must find a novel in a life seemingly earmarked for a short story. The talented girl typecast because of her figure; the wild girl whose body was her sole claim to fame; the sweet girl too vulnerable for Hollywood; the proto-feminist crushed by the patriarchy; the hopeless romantic who never found true love: one-line definitions of a one-page life, each less false than unworthy of its subject. The difference in the tribute we pay to objects of love and objects of resentment corresponds to that between story and novel; to care for someone, even dead and never known alive, is to want to make her the subject of a book. And whereas the biography of someone whose historical significance is assured takes its departure from the world's affection rather than one's own, no devotion is more personal than that which constructs a full-length story for one previously confined to the anecdotal. Like a declaration of love, the promise of a book is a commitment of the

fullness of time made in a revelatory moment of unsustainable plenitude.



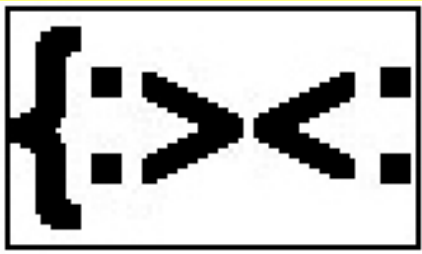
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Guest columnist: Matthew Schneider

It Was Forty Years Ago Today: The Beatles and the Triumph of Cowboy Culture

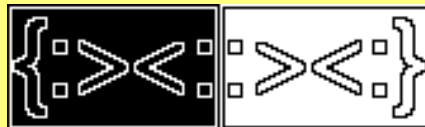
No. 295: Monday, February 9, 2004

On the evening of February 9, 1964, 73 million Americans—about a third of the U.S. population at the time—tuned in to the Ed Sullivan Show to see the Beatles' North American television debut, and forty years later Beatlemania is still going strong. In 2000, the Beatles were third on the Forbes' annual list of celebrity earners. Three years ago, Beatles 1, a compilation of the group's 27 number one hits, sold 12 million copies worldwide in the first 12 weeks of its release. Paul McCartney's "Driving USA" tour—in which the Beatles' former bassist played 22 of that band's songs—was the world's most successful concert series of 2002, earning \$103 million in gate receipts. The Beatles Anthology, released in April 2003, holds the record as the fastest-selling music DVD in the history of that medium. Let it Be Naked, a remix of their second-to last album, sold a million copies within four weeks of its release in November 2003. Beatle-related tourism now generates more than \$100 million a year for Liverpool, where the boyhood homes of John Lennon and Paul McCartney have been restored to their 1950s configurations and opened as museums under the care of Britain's National Trust.

The astonishing public hysteria that greeted the Beatles when they arrived in America four decades ago presents a textbook illustration of how Generative Anthropology views popular culture. The teenaged girls who screamed, fainted, and (in Beatles historian Philip Norman's incomparable phrase) "left their knickers ringing wet" at the sight of John, Paul, George, and Ringo were indulging

in "paradisiacal fantasies concerning [the] locus" (Originary Thinking 173) of their desires, four young men performing at the center of the biggest maelstrom of enthusiastic worship the world had ever seen. This makes a great deal of sense. But how might GA explain the Beatles' ability to continue commanding pop culture's locus of resentful desire through nearly a half century? Clearly, in comparison with other entertainment fads that came before and after them, the Beatles' commercial success is of an altogether different order of magnitude. Can GA help us discover the secret of the Beatles' ongoing appeal, which now stretches across three generations?

Of course it can; but GA's answer to this question bears little resemblance to the raft of historic clichés—heard and seen in the ubiquitous printed and televised tributes like last night's Grammy Awards—about the Beatles having eased American grief over JFK's assassination or their having memorably captured and expressed the rebellious spirit of the 1960s. It's beyond dispute that the precise historic circumstances surrounding their emergence played an indispensable role in creating the Beatles' initial success; but such explanations can't account for the group's seemingly magic capacity to keep being rediscovered by each new generation. (Capitol Records reports that 42.5% of the purchasers of Beatles 1 were 30 and younger—that is, people born well after the group broke up.) But to explain this—the most remarkable aspect of the Beatles phenomenon—we need to broaden our view both of the Beatles' aesthetic and cultural roots and of the crucial role they played in identifying the key aspects of what Winston Churchill called the "special relationship" between Britain and the United States. In both their music and the highly public identities they quickly assumed in the American imagination, the Beatles embodied the British origins of a cultural mode that in 1964 was just about to take up the central role in American life: the "cowboy culture" of the southern and western rural regions of the U.S.

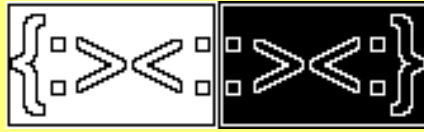


Everyone knows that as teenagers in the 1950s the boys who would become the Beatles were swept up in a folk music revival that was simultaneously occurring on both sides of the Atlantic; in America that revival would produce the other signal musical icon of the 1960s, Bob Dylan. GA helps us to see the recuperation and imitation of traditional folk cultural forms as the quintessentially romantic gestures they are. "Throughout the neoclassical period," writes Prof. Gans, "the popular esthetic never ceased to be operative at the margin of the high culture, where transitional forms such as imitation folk ballads had flourished. But only in the romantic era does the popular begin to enter into rivalry with the high" (Originary Thinking, 175). Clearly, the intensity of such rivalries varies; and we might define a revival as an interval in the ongoing struggle between high and popular culture in which the choice between them carries especially far-reaching lifestyle implications. In choosing to model themselves musically on the raw energy and folk simplicity of Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry instead of the ring-a-ding-ding urbanity and smoothness of Frank Sinatra and Perry Como, the Beatles took popular music in the direction it has followed to our day, in which rappers are regularly acknowledged in both the popular press and academia as "street poets." But in doing so the Beatles also inaugurated a new cultural era, first in the United States, and then, arguably, in the rest of the world—an era in which the values of the northern British folk culture that produced Elvis and Chuck Berry has increasingly emerged as the dominant mode of contemporary selfhood.

The American rock and rhythm and blues artists that the Beatles heard and resonated to in the late 1950s stand at the end of nearly two and a half centuries of British-American cultural exchange. The simple ballads and hymns today enjoying a revival as "roots music"—largely as a result of their being prominently featured in the Coen brothers' film *Oh, Brother Where Art Thou?*—derive from the rural folk hymns and tunes that came with the largest and latest of four major waves of British immigrants to North America. Between 1717 and 1775, some quarter of a million refugees—displaced by Britain's changeover from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy—landed on our shores and settled in what was then the American backcountry: Appalachia and the land spreading west from the Georgia Piedmont to the banks of the Mississippi. Called borderers because they largely came from the counties that bordered the ancient and frequently warring kingdoms of England and Scotland, these hardy immigrants brought to the new land the characteristics that had for generations sustained them in eking out a meager living from the harsh northern British countryside: stubborn individualism, clannish loyalty, hard drinking (and fighting), and enthusiastic religious worship. In the new world the borderers' old songs—played on stringed folk instruments like the guitar, banjo, and fiddle—encountered other folk traditions, eventually incorporating Afro-Caribbean rhythms and the melancholy tone of slaves' work songs and field chants to evolve into blues, country, and rhythm and blues. Many distinct influences contributed to the creation of these forms; but the simple three-chord progressions and melodic modes that recur in blues, jazz, and country point toward their common ancestry in the British folk tradition. Thus when John, Paul, George, and Ringo found themselves captivated by Elvis Presley's 1956 rendition of "Hound Dog"—a speeded-up version of an old Mississippi Delta blues tune—what they were hearing was at once exotic and familiar. Elvis was what northern British folk culture looked like after 225 years of transplantation in the backwoods, where its geographic isolation from the more rapidly evolving northeastern cultures allowed the borderers' folkways to remain relatively pristine well into the twentieth century.

When the Beatles brought their distinctive brand of American rock and rhythm and blues to the United States in 1964, they presented to the nation a picture of the vitality of its hybridized British culture, and in so doing brought an end to nearly two centuries of cultural and intellectual dominance by the descendants of Massachusetts Puritans and Virginia Tidewater cavaliers. Ninety-nine years after its defeat at the hands of the Federals, the South rose again, through the unlikely agency of four "youngsters from Liverpool" (as Ed Sullivan introduced them) barely out of their teens. The slick-backed suavity of Bobby Darin and Dean Martin gave way to the shouts and shaggy hair—reminiscent of the country revival or camp-meeting—of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, whose lilting northern English drawls reminded Americans of the origin of their southern accent. Fifties conformity was replaced by a spirit of individualism and rebellion against governmental interference that in the old world had made the borderers nearly impossible for kings and parliaments to rule and in Appalachia had spawned ongoing "whiskey wars" between federal revenue agents and distillers of moonshine, who stubbornly insisted on their right to produce and distribute a cherished folk beverage. America's Puritan and Quaker cultural inheritances—with their emphasis on politeness, emotional restraint, and public decorum—were finally overcome by the British borderers' raw energy, plain speaking, and penchant for unbridled emotional display (as may be glimpsed today on the Jerry Springer show). After the Beatles, this became the dominant mode of contemporary selfhood. But like the Beatles' music, this new paradigm was the product of the unique cultural relationship between Britain and the United States, in which a marginalized folk tradition,

transplanted to the new continent, not only survived but flourished. It was this folk tradition—along with its associated values—that the Beatles discovered in American country, blues, and rhythm and blues music and eventually spread to the entire globe.

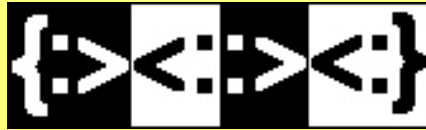


No musical act, before or since, has come close to matching the Beatles' influence on all aspects of the entertainment business. Their Ed Sullivan audience still holds the record as the largest number of Americans to watch a single broadcast; the Beatles were the first rock group to play concerts in stadiums; they were the first pop musicians to take the poetic step of printing the words of their songs on their album covers. Since the Beatles, their pared-down instrumental line-up of guitars and drums has become the industry standard for pop music success. What's less widely appreciated, though, is the role the Beatles played in bringing into being the present age, in which the borderers' traditions of individualism and democratic populism have emerged as the dominant American mode of selfhood, and therefore the object of either the world's aspirations or its abhorrence. Whether other nations largely love or hate America depends on the degree to which the borderers' values of flinty individualism and skepticism of constituted authority can be said to have infiltrated and spread through that country's culture. Misidentified by most left-leaning cultural commentators as merely "conservative," these values are really the same unexpected combination of fiscal tight-fistedness and social libertarianism that have made the politics of figures like Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger so difficult to classify on the old left-right spectrum. As its name serendipitously suggests, borderer culture—the culture of the American south, an area the size of Western Europe and inhabited by some 80 million people—happily crosses the lines that would confine it to a singular, consistent identity. It resents obligations of affiliated interest and responsibility imposed by governments—particularly those that carry the whiff of socialism—but respects, even exalts, ties of kinship and shared regional identity. Borderer culture encompasses the segment of the American populace that is at once the most fiercely private and openly religious. It is sweet and sentimental about what it loves, and merciless to what it hates. And it embraces the very adjective that Donald Rumsfeld's "old Europe" employs to heap scorn upon it: it's cowboy culture.

Is cowboy culture really in the ascendant? One need look no farther than at the history of the American presidency: five of the eight who have held the office since 1964 were either native-born or transplanted southerners (and three, Johnson, Reagan, and Bush, have owned ranches). Political consultants identify the crucial block of voters in the next presidential election as "NASCAR dads"—southern men who loyally follow America's biggest spectator sport: stock car racing, which traces its origins to impromptu speed contests between moonshiners and revenueurs on the windy mountain roads of Appalachia. Cowboy culture is even making inroads in Britain. Tony Blair plays the electric guitar and speaks with the Thames Estuary lower-middle-class accent that is quickly replacing the plummy public school accent that had been considered indispensable for English politicians since the days of Edmund Burke. (Blair also favors Scottish political autonomy, over which the borderers fought the English since the dawn of recorded history.)

"The originary hypothesis," writes Prof. Gans, "is in the first place a heuristic." As such, GA is

capable of producing—as readers of this column scarcely need to be reminded—remarkably supple and elegant interpretations of mass mimetic phenomena like Beatlemania. But in tying a fundamental category of the human to its "moment" of emergence in a hypothetical originary scene, originary analysis also fosters the habit of thinking punctually. It reminds us that things have origins, and that fleshing out a plausible model of those origins can go a long way toward helping us make sense of what we're able to observe around us. Where did American cowboy culture come from, and how did it achieve the ascendancy it enjoys today? It came from northern Britain, and lay fallow under the very noses of the American establishment until it was spectacularly re-imported to our shores by four mop-topped lads from Liverpool, England's major point of western embarkation. On a cold February night forty years ago today, these humble, undereducated, self-taught songsters started a revolution. They really were, as a campy memorial to them in their hometown asserts, four lads who shook the world.



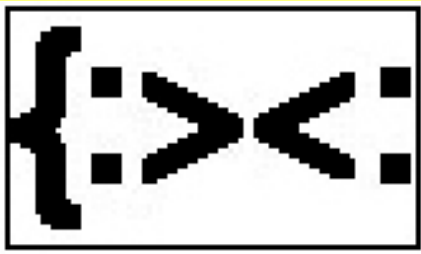
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Chronicles of Love and Resentment



Eric Gans

Gay Marriage II - The End of Kinship

No. 296: Saturday, March 6, 2004

I have a pretty good gay friend who hasn't answered my last couple of emails. He may be out of town, or his computer may be down, but the most likely explanation is that he was offended, perhaps permanently, by my previous "Gay Marriage" Chronicle ([#289](#)). One thing that has surprised even me, inured as I am to victimary thinking, is how quickly support of gay marriage has gone from tentative to Pharisaical. Statements of various public officials and letters to newspapers proclaim as a self-evident moral truth, which only an unregenerate Yahoo could think of opposing, a "right" that no one dreamed of until a few years ago and that no one dreamed of enforcing until a few weeks ago. Instant self-righteousness is a powerful thing.

A couple of examples from the 3/6/04 LA Times:

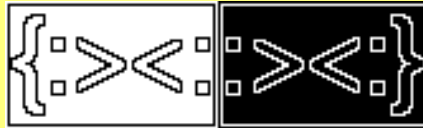
I am angered by President Bush's push for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriages. ... This is a time when we must look to ourselves and ask whether we're going to let our leaders perpetrate hate and second-class citizenship upon people or if we will join the fight for equal rights. Rise up from the back of the bus, demand your place at the counter...

So Bush wants to ban gay marriage. I thought the purpose of law and government was to protect people's rights and freedoms, not to diminish them.

And from the 3/7 issue:

I am a homosexual. I am created by God and nature. . . Those people who feel their beliefs entitle them to take away my equal rights have crossed the line from smugness to tyranny.

Thus gay marriage has become in the space of a few days a “right” that government is supposed to “protect,” denial of which is “perpetrat[ing] hate and second-class citizenship.” To deny a homosexual the option of gay marriage is to “take away” his “equal rights” and thereby to practice “tyranny.” The reference to Rosa Parks shows the power of the victimary paradigm to define any de jure difference as a shameful denial of human equality.



Victimary rhetoric may be on the wane; it has not lost a major confrontation yet. Gay marriage is beginning to look inevitable. President Bush’s proposal of a constitutional amendment to prevent it seems dubious; as a rule, an amendment designed to preserve a distinction that some court or other has determined to be invidious is destined to fail. Do I even support such an amendment? It seems to me that if amending the Constitution is the only way to enforce a once tacitly held social norm, then that norm is no longer generally accepted, in which case we certainly shouldn’t write it into the Constitution.

This may indeed be a special case, and I will say why I think so, but no one seems to be making much of a fuss about it. The general public has treated this as one more social-values issue somewhere down the scale from abortion, fetal stem-cell research, and Internet pornography; far from everyone supports it, but it arouses little passion among those who oppose it. After all, abortion, stem-cell research, and pornography may be said to have “victims”: who is the “victim” in a same-sex marriage?

The victim is our system of kinship, as it has been known since the dawn of human society. But perhaps we don’t really need a kinship system.

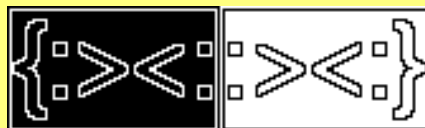
The only mentions of kinship in relation to the gay marriage issue that I have been able to find on the Internet are favorable to gay marriage. Here are two, the first from a relatively neutral source (atheism.about.com), the other from a gay newsletter.

In summary, what's the point of gay marriage? The point of gay marriage is the point of all marriage. Marriage is different from other contractual relationships because it creates bonds of kinship. These bonds are in turn different and more important than other bonds: they create significant moral, social, and legal obligations both for those who are married and between those who are married and everyone else. Some individuals may not choose to acknowledge those obligations, but they exist and they constitute the basis of human society - a society which includes both heterosexual and homosexual human beings.

Obviously marriage only begins to address the much bigger and more interesting question of equality of kinship. Kindness is what makes us kindred--a single act of kindness can be, therefore, a more powerful bond than any court decision or act of Congress. -- Scott Tucker, Editor Of Open Letter Online

Neither of these statements reflect a real understanding of kinship. Kinship is a means for creating family alliances, yes, but the central focus of kinship, which Lévi-Strauss described in the pre-feminist era as “the exchange of women,” is to confine the perpetuation of the species within the extant social order. Marriage has until now been between men and women because childbearing is both a human necessity and a potential disturbance to lines of ancestry that must be maintained within the kinship structure. It is interesting that the first paragraph above speaks about “bonds” and “obligations” without mentioning the children who are normally considered, particularly in modern, nuclear families, as the primary focus of these bonds and obligations.

We are now proposing to do away with kinship as we know it. Of course this can be presented in positive terms, as the extension of our kinship system to include a few same-sex couples among the many heterosexual ones. Those nice gay couples kissing on the steps of the San Francisco City Hall can hardly be said to pose a danger to the social order. But this reasoning assumes that with gay marriage, all outstanding invidious distinctions relating to marriage have been abolished. On the contrary, the institution of gay marriage makes marriage itself an invidious distinction.



A recent Weekly Standard article points out that polygamists have been waiting in the wings for gay marriage to be approved; if two men can marry, then the argument against marriage between six men, or two men and a woman, or any other combination, loses its main premise. And why should any two people, whether sexually interested in each other or not, be denied the benefits of marriage? Suppose I live with my sister--or my mother; why shouldn't we be able to “marry” in order to save on our taxes?

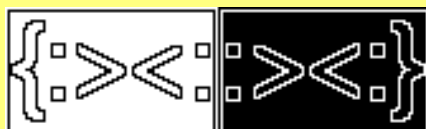
Marriage is between two people because it takes two people to produce children; this is a biological reality that goes back to well before we came on the scene. Once marriage is redefined as the creation of a “kinship” bond between two people, then the reason for forbidding the extension of this bond to arbitrary groups disappears. Gay marriage is an extension of traditional marriage that paradoxically relies on the traditional notion of marriage remaining intact. Those nice gay couples are acting just as nice heterosexual couples do. But once one need no longer be a heterosexual couple to marry, the very notion of a married couple loses its *raison d'être*. The presumptive legality of polygamy and group marriage is not the main difficulty posed by gay marriage; the main difficulty is the legality of marriage itself.

If we see marriage as a privileged state heretofore unfairly denied to a fraction of the general population, then gay couples, let alone polygamists, constitute only a tiny subset of this fraction. Most of the people who suffer from the lack of the marriage privilege are, very simply, the

unmarried. So long as marriage had a clear place in social tradition, its privileged status was more or less uncontested. But now that marriage is no longer conceived as a ritually derived adjunct to originary reciprocity but as deriving, like any contractual relation, from this reciprocity itself, its privileged status is no longer justifiable. The gay couple's argument that it is unfair that a heterosexual couple, but not they, should be eligible for the legal benefits of marriage can be turned against both sets of couples: why should a man or woman be forced to join with someone else in order to receive social benefits? Why should those who like to live in couples have an advantage over those who like to live singly? Polygamists may well ask how what is given to groups of two can be denied to groups of ten. But the more fundamental question is: why deny it to groups of one? How can our society justify denying the equal rights of the uncoupled? Is this denial at a moment when same-sex marriage is becoming legal not crossing the line from smugness to tyranny? It can't be long before lawyers begin making such arguments; for all I know the briefs are being written at this moment.

A counter-argument might be made that, precisely in order to maintain the structure of our kinship system, the benefits of marriage should be extended to homosexual couples but not to larger groups or incestuous pairs or single individuals. But the core of this argument is self-contradictory. If tradition is no argument for maintaining marriage in the face of the standard victimary argument for equal rights, then how can it be an acceptable argument for maintaining our kinship system in the face of the same argument?

Can we do without a government-supported kinship system? This would seem to be the logical conclusion of subjecting marriage to the moral model of reciprocal relationships. Europeans, especially Scandinavians, seem to do pretty well without marriage. This may or may not correlate with the fact that the original non-marrying ethnic stock of these countries is being replaced rather quickly with immigrants from other continents who do marry and whose families, unlike those they are replacing, average well above the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.



Since WWII we have lived through a victimary revolution in which the Nazi-Jew model has been applied to every form of unequal human relation. This revolution has now progressed to the point where marriage, the building-block of our kinship system, is seen as discriminating against homosexuals.

I had always thought that gay marriage would mark the point at which the victimary revolution would be forced to retreat. This may indeed come to pass, but my present impression is that I was wrong--that the moral imperative of inclusion in the reciprocal human dialogue outweighs all else.

When we were discussing this issue, my wife gave me the example of a couple of elderly ladies of our acquaintance who have lived together for many years. If, she asked, they decided to get married and invited us to their wedding reception, how could we dream of hurting their feelings by refusing to attend? But if that is so, then how can we oppose gay marriage?

The only reasonable answer to this question is the reasoning I have followed above. If homosexuals want to call their relation “marriage,” so be it. But at that point marriage becomes strictly a matter of personal preference, an institution of civil society with no a priori claims on legal advantage. This would not necessarily prevent couples or larger groups from receiving tax benefits, but such benefits would have to be justified by something other than the fact of living as a married couple--perhaps by that of sharing a single residence. These ramifications will no doubt take some time to work out, but it’s hard to imagine that our legal system will evolve in any other direction. Unless, of course, enough people feel strongly attached to our kinship system to force the advocates of same-sex marriage to accept a less radical form of government-approved consecration. This doesn’t look like a good bet at the moment.



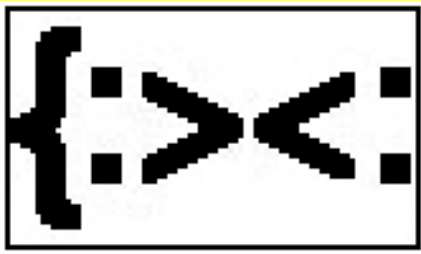
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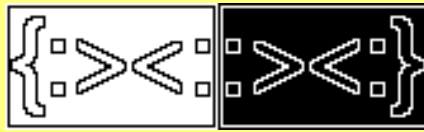
Eric Gans

The Youth Culture - Fifty Years Later

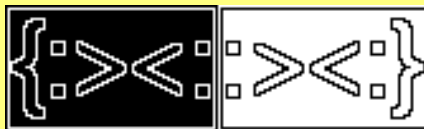
No. 297: Saturday, March 27, 2004

I sometimes reflect on the fact that I belong to the last generation that knew an era yet untouched by television and ball point pens, let alone calculators, copy machines, computers, cell phones.... But a recent article bemoaning the dominance of adolescent modes in American culture recalled to me a fact more relevant to our current predicament (culture is always in a predicament except in rare moments of apotheosis): that I belong to the last generation to reach adolescence before the onset of the youth culture. I was in junior high school at the birth of rock'n'roll, when my urban teenager friends began trying to talk and dress like rural southerners, abandoning the imitation of the rich and famous for that of the poor and commonplace. Perhaps needless to say, the new music and what it stood for were incompatible with Bronx romanticism. Not that I preferred the excruciating insipidity of those old Hit Parade songs, best exemplified by Patti Page's "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window? (woof, woof)," which were themselves addressed, if not to adolescents, then to young adults in a state of terminal complacency. Setting aside the twenties and thirties tunes I heard my mother sing while helping her with the dishes and a few more recent exceptions, I simply opted out of musical popular culture.

The point of these details about the moi haïssable is to claim for myself a certain historical privilege; no one more than a year or two younger than I has come of age in a world where popular culture was not specifically geared to the expression and purgation of postwar adolescent resentment, the kind that remains adolescent rather than following the etymology of the term and becoming adult.



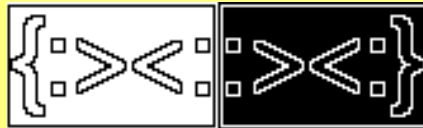
What is culture for, anyway? Why does this agricultural metaphor refer both to a "cultural" segment of our society and in a less colloquial context, to the social order as a whole? Culture in both senses serves to keep humans from killing each other, or as I prefer to put it, it brings about "the deferral of violence through representation." Cultural activity in the narrow sense is a profane supplement to religion, specifically geared to deferring mimetic violence the propensity for which defines us as human on the condition that we defer it long enough to profit from our mimetic abilities. Culture in this sense consists of a privileged set of representations that attempt to reproduce in profane experience, that is, esthetically, the effect of the originary scene. This reproduction is effected by the oscillation between the representation and its imaginary referent: the representation evokes the referent, but the referent cannot be contemplated without the representation; we assimilate the signs of art in order to stage on our internal scene of representation the imaginary world they evoke, but at every moment of this staging we return to the artwork in order to reinforce the presence of this imaginary world. The artwork deliberately, as do all objects of esthetic experience implicitly, attracts our desire into a world devoid of appetitive satisfaction, where the only pleasures are those of desire itself. This lack of appetitive satisfaction explains why the artwork cannot be transparent to a (propositional, moral) "meaning." The mediation of a unique artistic will--which we postulate even where its association with any individual is problematic, as with the auteur of a film--is essential not merely to reinforce our perception of the esthetic content but to establish this content in the first place, just as the meaning of the first sign was established in the originary scene.



The notion of originary will merits a discussion of its own, given that it is the real bone of contention between those who believe in God and those who do not. The cosmology of religious belief is more metaphoric than substantial; the force that "moves the sun and the other stars" at the end of the *Paradiso* provides no epistemological basis for distinguishing between a conscious and an unconscious agent, so that Ockham's razor dictates that we prefer the latter. But in human affairs, it is impossible to eliminate conscious will from the "arbitrary" choice of the sign and its meaning. This is not a logical necessity but an anthropological one; language is born as an act (the "aborted gesture of appropriation") of the several participants in the originary group that demonstrates their renunciation of a central object, an act that is taken as/becomes/is at the same time the collectively understood emission of a sign-of that object. This new intention of the individual members of the group binds the sign to its referent, so that the aborted gesture of appropriation becomes invested with the "meaning" of the object. But the source of the participants' intention is outside them, in the object, ultimately in the subsisting center itself. It is this central will that presides over the scene as God. The artist's will occupies the same place in the artwork, as the mediator of the desires aroused within it--and its subjective unity, like that of God, is vulnerable to contestation, as postmodern critical theory has shown us ad nauseam. Artistic representation is no mere perceptual mnemonic reinforcement of our imagination; when we return to the representation from our imaginary

construct it is not the artwork as such but the artwork as intended by the artist that reinforces our desire.

When we speak of a "youth culture" we are referring to a particular quality of this mediating will that defines our desire as adolescent. The adolescent is a consumer who does not (yet) produce; whereas the traditional notion of adolescence was the preparation of adult life, the imaginary realm of modern youth culture presents itself as a permanent refuge from adult life. The dominant role of the youth culture in our society is due to this utopian dimension, which offers a solace for resentment unattainable in an imaginary world that has compromised with the marketplace. The youthful revolt against the exchange system, by the very fact that it takes place within the system itself, gives it a paradoxical guarantee of authenticity. Resentment is the denunciation of a scenic configuration by those who participate in it; youth culture is the privileged mode of expression for the resentment of the victimary era. I have pointed out elsewhere the particular role of America's Black population as providing a guarantee of authenticity to the popular culture of revolt and in particular to the youth culture, a role that has maintained itself for over a century and that shows no signs of flagging in the era of hip-hop.



The broader revelation of the dominance of postmodern culture by its youth is the essential immaturity of popular culture and at the limit, of culture itself. Rather than contenting himself with the endless mediations of the exchange system, the consumer of culture requires and obtains closure, or in other terms, sacrifice: the generation of transcendence or "meaning" from within the world. In the past, culture's immaturity was on the side of history, not of the individual; as in Hegel's vision of tragedy, the cultural imagination showed the world its moral future. Conversely, today the maturity of human history is reflected in the immaturity of its sacrificial culture. I commented in [Chronicle 211](#) on the extraordinary sales of the Harry Potter series; the only cultural desire powerful enough to impose an epic-length narrative on the general population is not even that of adolescents, who prefer to act out their desires in increasingly elemental music, but that of children.

The oft-remarked coarsening of our cultural lives, in every domain from popular spectacle to everyday dress, reflects the immaturization of resentment in the postmodern era; the increasing remoteness of a credible long-term utopia is compensated for by the provision of increasingly short-term satisfactions--culture with ADD. (Whence the fascination on all levels, from oversize jeans to the Sopranos, with the criminal element, whose lives are dominated, as ours cannot be, by the search for immediate gratification.)

But the salvation of popular culture is that at any point, and in unexpected ways, real beauty can emerge within it. There is no fictional situation so simplistic that the complexity of human relations cannot be retrieved from it, no resentment so radical that love cannot be generated from its transcendence. So long as life can be lived, it can be affirmed. What one learns in getting old is that maturity is nothing but immaturity deferred.



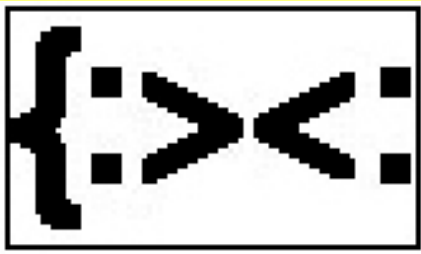
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Eric Gans

Why Art Defies Analysis

No. 298: Saturday, April 10, 2004

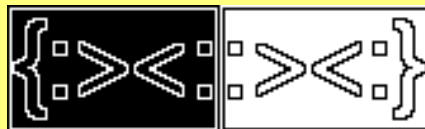
After many years interpreting literary texts for publication and in the classroom, I am struck by two things: how much one can say about them, and how recalcitrant they are to any kind of rigorous analysis. As I recall, when Tzvetan Todorov attempted to write a "grammar" of the Decameron some decades ago, the only general formulation he could come up with was that at the core of each story was a *sui generis* element for which no general pattern could be formulated. The various attempts at a "science of literature" in the 1960s and 70s were even less successful than the Chomskian efforts to reduce language to a computer program. Although certain esthetic effects are predictable and categorizable, the millions of hours thousands of intelligent people have spent analyzing cultural phenomena have given rise to no generally agreed upon set of models. It is perhaps not surprising that art has not improved over the centuries, but one might have expected thinking on the subject to have made a little progress.

Art stands in contrast to religion, whose operations are not merely relatively understandable but fall into a cumulative historical progression, a kind of Hegelian dialectic. Religions operate through moral revelations that reinforce and build on each other; art changes form throughout history, but only in order to produce the same fundamental effect. Hence although there are religions that we perceive as primitive and superseded, we never perceive art that way; we continue to admire the paintings of Altamira and Lascaux although we have long abandoned the kind of sacrificial ceremonies for which we must presume they were created.

As soon as narrative liberates itself from ritual, it becomes susceptible of the highest esthetic values. If the Gilgamesh Epic is still transitional (and linguistic and textual difficulties add to the effect of estrangement), the Homeric epics are sufficiently accessible for us to recognize them as unsurpassable. Yet this in itself requires some explanation. Why are we so quick to find "unsurpassable" masterpieces? Why do we so easily reach a point at which we give up seeking something better, no longer desire to find something better, as if we had fallen in love? The answer is that our relation to the artwork is not the formal relation of a subject to an object but a "triangular" intersubjective mediation--on which we depend all the more the less we profess belief in the Subject.

Art, like love, defies analysis. Our commitment to the mediation of the artwork is not, however, a promise of reciprocity like that shared by a lover and his beloved. We worship the artwork from afar; its governing subjectivity is modeled on divinity. The esthetic reveals and exploits the sacred that lies at the center of our internal scene of representation, whether we "believe in God" or not. The human imperative of equality begins from a position of absolute difference. The moral model of reciprocal exchange, of which language supplies the originary example, is conceivable only on the periphery of a sacred center. The institutions through which we attempt to realize this reciprocity, notably the "free" market, all imply this preexistent center that history neither abolishes or even demystifies, but disseminates, to use a Derridean figure. What is being disseminated, however, is not the placeless Subject of metaphysics but the center of sacred ostension and interdiction that is at the origin of the human.

As soon as we realize that our relationship to the artwork is a modality of unreciprocated mediation (external mediation in Girard's old terminology), we have half unraveled the mystery of its inaccessibility to the analysis that "murder[s] to dissect": our inability to objectify the artwork stems from our inability to model our subject-object relationship to it independently of our mediation by its implicit creator.

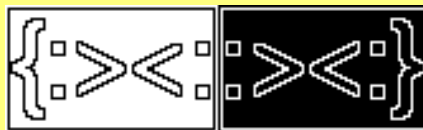


The other half of the mystery is that of temporality. Esthetic mediation takes place in time, as do the richest and most culturally significant esthetic experiences; yet it is not accidental that "art" and "esthetic" are terms most naturally applied to works of plastic art, or objets d'art. The objet d'art is analogous to the originary central object: it focuses desire on itself as both representational form and imaginary, inaccessible content--in the general case supplemented by a contextual authority of place, church or museum, or minimally, the (wealthy, well-ordered) home. Its apprehension has no temporality of its own because it is analogous to the object of the quest from which temporality itself is constructed. Its originary model is the subsistence of the center beyond ritual in a divine being of which the artwork is the reminder. The plastic artist's subjectivity exercises its mastery over us through this memorial function, as the surrogate of the divinity whose transcendent being guarantees the sacrality of the central object of desire.

Mastery exercised only in the moment must be virtually prolonged; the deferral of violence is

necessarily a durational phenomenon. Hence the most overt model of the temporality of esthetic experience is that of narration, whose one-sided exchange of language between narrator and listener follows the periphery-center structure of the originary event. This model contrasts only superficially with that of the communal rituals in which all participate; by the nature of ritual, such participation is conceived by the participants themselves as obedience to a law or norm--ultimately, to a central will. This notion of the will is crucial in all intersubjective relations.

Let me digress for a moment to anticipate the objections of postmodern thought bent on undermining the authority of the central subject. The anthropological intuition behind this enterprise, which Derrida alone can be said to have articulated with any degree of subtlety, is that the center is not indeed constituted from eternity, but revealed within a (proto-)human context. (Having given birth to the very notion of "eternity," this context supplies no victorious argument for either theism or atheism.) The authority of the author is only human and therefore, vulnerable to attack--who set him up as the master of discourse? But resentment of the central figure only reinforces its domination. The subtlest maneuvers of deconstruction bring satisfaction in what we must learn to recognize as an all-too-crudely human context: the agon in which the critical thinker seeks to humiliate his philistine bourgeois opponent. Deconstruction has the sacrilegious structure of the black mass: brûlez ce que vous avez adoré, which is nothing other than the structure of resentment in general. The dark secret of postmodernism is that not only its axiology of liberation but its epistemology of unveiling are based on resentment.



Storytelling is the archetype of the esthetic relation because it explicitly realizes the mastery over time that is the key to all interpersonal relations. In narrative, the narrator's transcendent mastery is realized from moment to moment in the telling of the tale. We listen in order to hear what follows, and we care to hear what follows because we know it as the continuous expression of the same will, giving proof that the will that imposes the meaning of the sign is capable not merely of maintaining its control through time but of transforming time itself into a revelatory process. We learn from narrative the magic lesson--the lesson that Plato's Socrates always taught but could never articulate convincingly--that the agon of conflicting and incompatible desires is in reality the product of a single will. The narrative of crisis and resolution attaches us to the transtemporal subject whose origin it reproduces.

We cannot provide a formula for this narrative pattern for the simple reason that we cannot experience narrative without surrender to the mediation of the narrating subject, whose freedom we cannot presume to confine. If we could generate stories by computer, they would come alive only when we, imaginarily or otherwise, endowed the computer with a desiring will. Cultural analysis addresses itself to the work, but its real object is the subjective mediation that the work facilitates. For the real locus of esthetic experience is not the esthetic object, but the mediations it embodies. These mediations lie on the interface between universal anthropology and historical particularity. There is no surer way to define this interface at a given time and place than through the artworks themselves; the worldly materials of desire and transcendence, before becoming the object of a

theoretical model, will be tested by the tales they inspire. Could cultural analysis outwit the artist's subjective mediation, it would replace culture itself.



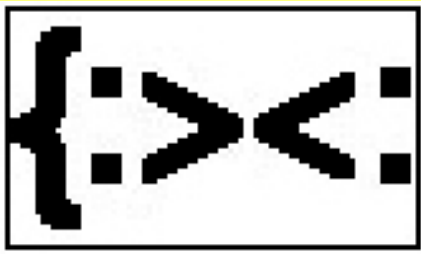
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Eric Gans

My Book about Carole Landis

No. 299: Saturday, April 17, 2004

For over a year I have been gathering data about Carole Landis in preparation for a book that I await only family data to begin writing. After watching all her films, viewing hundreds of her photographs, and reading the few significant things written about her as well as most of the insignificant ones, I know Carole very well--on the surface. Carole wrote a good deal more for publication than most movie people; how many of us publish a book, albeit ghost-written, at 25? But



her writings resemble what her conversations must have been; breezy, witty, guardedly superficial, not because Carole was herself superficial, but because she never found an outlet, save in her sister and a very few friendships--certainly not her husbands!--for what was in the depth of her soul. I doubt if her diaries, did they still exist, would reveal much more. How does one discover what is in the depth of Carole's, or of anyone's soul? What more can I do than begin at the beginning and end at the end, able sometimes to cite her words, at others only to describe her actions, or else presuming to invent words to go with these actions, as though one had the right to make another human being into a literary character?

Despite the easy cliché that appearances are deceiving, the best way to show who Carole is by showing her. At one point early in this project a friend suggested I write a coffee-table book with glossy pictures dominating the text. He later changed his mind, but he was on the right track. Carole gives proof, living proof, that the human image reveals human truth, that representation is rooted in presence. Few things seem more different than a beautiful woman and a theory of human origin, yet Carole is the exemplary incarnation of the originary paradox: desire's dependency on, and denial of,



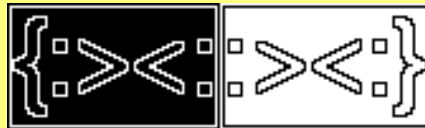
representation. It is sad that all we have left of Carole are

representations; but even the beauty of a living being is a mediated experience. We should not call a woman beautiful unless we feel called upon to look at her as if at a picture, as an object of worldly desire enshrined within the aura of the sacred. The beautiful object, human or not, withholds itself from our desire, maintaining its integrity as an object for contemplation rather than possession (Kant's "disinterest"). Because the moment of esthetic contemplation is not a "behavior," it does not dictate whatever action may follow it, from aggression to flight, from worship to insult.

Aware that beauty withholds itself, the beauties of Hollywood's glamour age were led to capitalize this withholding by embodying it as attitude--a strategy that has become only more insistent in the era of the pout that began in the fifties with Brigitte Bardot and is today far from ended. Carole's sexual attractiveness was too powerful to dissemble or coquettishly withhold. At her death some called her the original "sweater girl," but although Carole's figure was far more spectacular, arguably Hollywood's most beautiful ever, the term was created for Lana Turner, a studio-named and -manufactured beauty, a good-bad girl all the way to middle age while Carole was from the beginning a woman. Neither tease nor femme fatale, Carole never hoarded her beauty to increase its value--understanding that because it is representation that withholds, she herself has no need to, that, on the contrary, the situation of public beauty, beauty en représentation, allows her to give herself generously to all as she cannot in real life. It was this understanding that prepared her to perform selflessly for soldiers during the war. The withholding that belongs to the form of representation permits her to offer herself to others as a gift of love, in the timeless present of what some call the immortality of the soul. As with her other good deeds, Carole never sought compensation or recognition for this greatest gift of all. But her uncalculating generosity, although compatible with the esthetic of photographic and even filmic representation, stood in contradiction with film's narrative closure and the commercial culture it supported.

One might think that the promotion of physical beauty requires no explanation; if "sex sells," then the sexier the better. But there is a history of beauty as of everything else, and Carole emerged at just the time and place in which sexual beauty received its most powerful expression--a "good fortune" that unfortunately did not prove compatible with Hollywood's requirements for stardom. There was just enough ambiguity in the situation to allow for the miracle of Carole's public presence, and a miracle it was, however tawdry the roles to which Carole was confined by the studios.

Facile Hollywood cynicism, whether it reduces Carole to "a lovely torso, not an actress" (Time obituary, July 19, 1948), or on the contrary, condemns the studios for the meretricious callousness that destroyed so many "Babylon women" or "fallen angels" (Lupe Velez, Marie McDonald, Maria Montez, Barbara Payton, Inger Stevens, Jean Seberg, Linda Darnell, and of course, Marilyn Monroe), misses the point, as it always does. Because human beings are inherently resentful, the world is not a perfect place, but their resentment is the source of the very notion of perfection. When we look at Carole in photograph or film, we cannot admire her unique beauty without acknowledging Hollywood's indispensable role in its creation. As the old philosophical saw has it, a tree that falls in the forest doesn't make a noise if there is no one around to hear it; Frances Ridste the San Bernardino housewife could not be publicly beautiful; glamour requires publicity, with all the trappings of clothing, makeup, lighting and the rest that the production of public effect justifies.

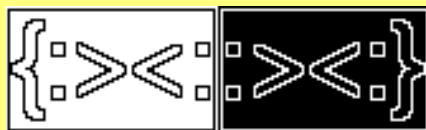


My affinity with Carole not only grants me the degree of psychological identification necessary to be able to write about her, it provides a link between the trivial contingencies of time, place, and personality and the seemingly outrageous generality of my own theoretical pretensions. My acquaintance with Carole, this woman so wondrously different from myself, gives me a confirming hint of the mysterious emergence of spirit from matter, of transcendence from immanence. I need not experience first-hand the mise-en-scène that prepares the belle victime for the sacrifice; Carole is herself my mise-en-scène.



I understand and accept Carole's success only because I share her failure, although academic tenure, and the domestic happiness that always eluded one who constantly overwhelmed reciprocity, make drastic solutions unnecessary. Carole failed in Hollywood not because she was a "bad actress," but because her presence was too extraordinary for the actor's mask. All movie stars play themselves, but Carole's self was compatible only with her own story. Carole played Carole most explicitly in two films: *I Wake up Screaming* and *The Powers Girl*. In the first, she is an ambitious New York waitress who wins a screen test in Hollywood but is sacrificed before she can leave, and before the film begins, to the desire of all the male characters, most memorably the investigating detective (played by Laird Cregar), whose apartment walls, not unlike my own, are covered with pictures of Carole (the protagonist, Victor Mature, is falsely accused of her death because he alone is relatively indifferent to her charms). Carole's flashback image, including a filmed song, dominates the film, to the real-life discomfiture of Betty Grable,

its purported star. This minor 1941 film noir was the high point of Carole's career. A year later, her role in *The Powers Girl* is a caricature of the previous one. Carole's ambition, her beauty, even her hairdo are turned to ridicule in this nasty comedy of which she is the eponymous, yet third-billed, anti-heroine. The only story Carole could have won an Oscar for is one she could not have made: *The Tragedy of Carole Landis*, the story of "the most beautiful girl in the world," too magnificently, generously present for the deferral required by fiction.



Carole was so beautiful that she never developed a sense of strategy. She freely admitted being "brazen" at the start of her film career; "Hollywood didn't discover me," she said, "I discovered it." Carole was breezily confident that she could get herself noticed wherever she went, then succeed through talent, intelligence, and hard work. Learning about Carole makes me realize that I too lack a strategy in life, that my reliance on my "one big idea," like Carole's on her beauty, has led me to

treat the details of professional life as tactical problems to be dealt with as they arise rather than elements of a long-term plan. Our professional standing is similar; modestly successful but never chosen for the big roles. Carole and I share the same constitutional incapacity for planning to gain and maintain power, the same conviction, however often belied by experience, that our uniqueness makes strategy unnecessary. The "beauty" of my one big idea owes its force to this lack of strategy, as does



the unifying grace behind the multiple modes in which Carole revealed herself to us. Carole never

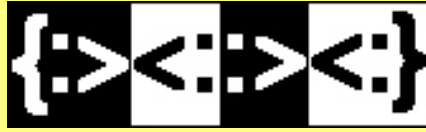
needed to cultivate her image; she was beautiful in any context, and her frequent changes in look and hairstyle testify to her self-confident unconcern for preserving an outward formula of beauty. Carole couldn't be bothered with fostering illusion; she knew her reality would always suffice. If she, or I, were otherwise, we would lose our uncompromising absoluteness.

Yet no one could be more different than Carole from myself. The rightness of my ideas is guaranteed only by

their internal logic, whereas Carole's appeal is rooted deep in the human brain. Whatever the mediations of resentment that move us back to the "democratic" norm, Carole's exceptional beauty is an unforgettable demonstration that qualitative, transcendental difference is inherent, originary quality of the human.

It reconciles me to mortality to know not only that Carole existed, but that traces of her public beauty have been preserved for posterity. A friend of mine who, I am proud to say, first became acquainted with Carole through my website, has vowed to leave flowers on her grave every January 1 for the rest of his life. If my book fulfills its purpose, there will forever be fresh flowers on Carole's memory.





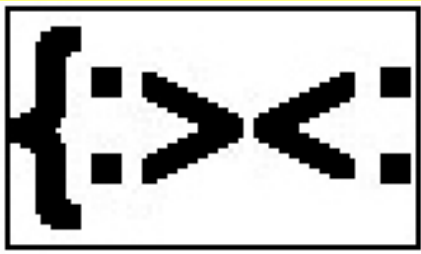
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High and Low Esthetics

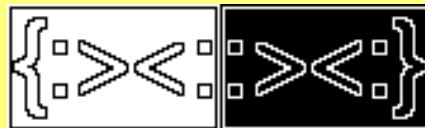
No. 300: Saturday, May 1, 2004

If the fundamental difference between high and mass/popular culture is that popular culture indulges resentment and high culture defers it, what does this imply about the defining intersubjective relationship between creator and consumer? The sacrificial system is run by the center for the benefit of the periphery; the central deferral of resentment permits the indulgence of resentment by the peripheral sacrificers, who are nonetheless under central control. The victim is an embodiment of the sacred sign whose destruction reaffirms its timeless meaning as the "name of God." Popular culture has the structure of the "inauthentic," that is, of resentment: the periphery depends on the center, but this very dependence provides the security to attack it. In order to understand the possibility of popular culture, we must show how the resentful peripheral mind can become the master of the esthetic scene. It is not enough to identify with the perpetrators of the sparagmos; we must explain how one of their number can tell his story of the sacrifice, and why this is the version most of us prefer to listen to.

The original cultural dichotomy is that between sacred and secular, preserved in modified form in that between tragedy and comedy. The "absolute" difference between sacred and profane cannot prevent its reduplication within the profane domain itself, involuntarily in the structure of desire, voluntarily in that of art. In religious ritual, one follows the dictates of the central will; the lesson is deferral, and whatever pleasures are experienced concurrently or subsequently exist in order to instill this lesson. The ritual moment exists in order to liberate the participants from the sacred scene; thus the profane world is not in the first place "cultural" at all. But the scenic structure of

desire is independent of ritual; it is the fundamental structure of the human. The scene of secular culture is that of private desire, desire that does not collect the entire community behind it. Love-songs go back to ancient Egypt and beyond; it is too simple to say that their purpose is seduction, but not too simple to point out that their function is the inverse of that of religious ritual; not to use appetitive satisfaction to teach the lesson of deferral, but to make the deferral effected by representation a means to the satisfaction of appetite.

Whereas the solidarity accomplished by religious rites is obtained by a turning away, however temporary, from the appetitive, the festival makes the appetitive itself a source of solidarity, on the condition that it be contained within a context furnished by ritual. A festival is not a secular event in the modern sense of the term; it is a profane complement to sacred ritual, Mardi Gras before Lent. Festival is a ritual conducted from the point of view of the periphery, where deferring appetite can await its later imposition by higher authorities. Thus the festival does not tell a story, but enacts its own loosely structured temporal sequence. Its typical manifestation is the parade, with a beginning and an end, a semblance of linear progression, but no narrative series of meaningful events that occurs in and defines a life. Traditional popular culture does not deal in totalities; like the satyr plays added to tragic trilogies, it offers comic relief from high-cultural rigor. High culture reinforces and justifies the social order as a whole, whereas popular culture leaves the totality to those in charge and concentrates on relieving the resentments of those who are, whether justly or unjustly, excluded from major responsibilities. The traditional approach to popular resentment, what Bakhtin called the carnivalesque, is incompatible with the development of individualized characters whose experiences in the world of desire are objects of cumulative mimetic identification, so that we "live their lives" rather than experiencing their resentments and satisfactions as a series of singular events; the concept of "plot" is a high-cultural notion.



In bourgeois society, economic and political power is more diffuse than in traditional society, and one might therefore expect the high-popular dichotomy to become less sharp. This is indeed borne out by the history of bourgeois genres such as the novel or the melodrama. However, the "rivalry of all against all" in a society where caste distinctions are blurred revalidates the notion of a high secular culture that is not merely aware of its sacred responsibility to the totality but anxious to impose a hierarchy of cultural prestige--as witness the long-ambiguous status of the novel, the supreme bourgeois genre, which consequently lacks inherent signs of such prestige. The cultural hierarchy superficially reinforces social distinctions, but its real effect is to permit their diffusion, just as the sign permits the common possession of the sacred center. Because cultural representations cannot withhold themselves from anyone who acquires the knowledge to understand them, culture is essentially democratic: the arts are "liberal." But cultural knowledge is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and a little learning is a dangerous thing. It should therefore not surprise us that the bourgeois era gives rise to mass popular forms that emulate the structures of high art. It is in fact in this era that high-popular tension begins in earnest.

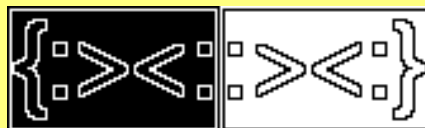
The mass popular culture that emerges in the nineteenth century with the generalization of literacy

as well as of at least nominal political power is more than a naive expression of popular resentment; it imitates the cultural forms hitherto reserved to the high culture. We encounter here for the first time a popular version of life-destiny that, whatever its crudeness, provides existential models for everyday life rather than limiting itself to the punctual realization of resentful fantasies. These latter are by no means excluded, but they are integrated into a storyline with pretensions to temporal continuity. Complementary to the high-cultural deferral of resentment through renouncing the illusions of desire, there appears a mode in which resentment is not simply discharged in carnivalesque fashion but recuperated by a worldly praxis.

This phenomenon corresponds on the cultural plane to the development of a "legitimate" left-wing politics--the parliamentary liberalism decried by Marx and his Bolshevik disciples. No doubt liberals exploit the existing social order by calling on it to favor those who have its overall interests least at heart; but precisely, a democratic society is one whose primary purpose in fostering the desires of individual citizens rather than the other way around. Such a society gives priority to recycling the most passionate resentments in order to assure the maximal circulation throughout its citizenry of desires as well as the goods and services that satisfy them; the more effective the society, the more "irresponsible" its Left can become.

Popular culture itself is not from the beginning on the left. Right-wing populism is its dominant mode up to World War II and beyond; the Left's definitive triumph occurs only after 1968. Even today, the zero degree of popular narrative is the thriller where a few good guys destroy countless bad guys. Sometimes, of course, the bad guys are working for the CIA, but their adversaries are as a rule patriotic citizens, not disciples of Noam Chomsky. The right-wing populist is suspicious of high culture, always suspected of falling into decadence; he seeks to renew the solidarity, and to revive the cultural legacy, of pre-cultural, "compact" societies.

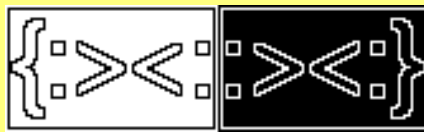
Yet right-wing populism *stricto sensu*, usually coupled with antisemitism, is not a stable mode in mature market society. (Its--relatively non-virulent--recrudescence in Europe today reflects the fears for this "maturity" provoked by the influx of large numbers of immigrants seen rightly or wrongly as unwilling to integrate themselves within it.) In contrast, socialism on the Left--in principle more radical, since its ultimate intention is not simply to create communal solidarity but to abolish the market--in fact accommodates itself easily to the parliamentary system as soon as it becomes something less than fanatical. Socialism's victimary attitude is well-suited to legislative debate, particularly in the postmodern era where victimary rhetoric is a reliable source of votes. In contrast, right-wing populism, anchored in the pre-WWII era, is not essentially victimary; it uses the sense of injustice to stir up its partisans, not to impose white guilt on its adversaries, of whom it asks no favors, treating them with contempt and worse.



Mechanically separating inside from outside, central from peripheral aesthetics misses the real point of the distinction between high and popular culture in the modern era. Whatever one can say about the naiveté of the "masses" in traditional societies, in modern society everyone has access to more

or less the same insights about the overall social structure. The peripheral consciousness with which we identify in modern popular culture is not naively so; the esthetic choice of peripheral resentment is also a political choice. The reformulation of a temporally coherent praxis from the perspective of the social periphery not merely ignores the sacrality of the social order, it denies it by appealing to the originary intuition that reciprocal exchange is the essential mode of human interaction.

Because in modern culture, the ostensibly distinctive forms of high or low culture are consciously chosen signs rather than organic emanations of their content, there are consequently no reliable formal criteria by which to evaluate a given work's adherence to a total or partial vision of the social order. The high-low distinction itself, and even its survival, become thematic elements of the works themselves, means of situating them in the cultural marketplace. Rather than consecrating the *ordre établi*, the artwork has the task of imposing via the esthetic effect its creator's vision of the social order. This does not prevent rereadings of the latter, as exemplified by the recuperation of Balzac by Marxist criticism. It should not be forgotten that when Lukács transforms Balzac the conscious monarchist into an unconscious revolutionary, he is reinterpreting a subtext, demonstrably present in the novels, that contests the social order in its present form. Significantly, this approach cannot be extrapolated without a good deal of question-begging to the interpretation of pre-modern texts, for example in Lucien Goldmann's controversial readings of Racine's "Jansenist" plays--and even then, the implicit critique of worldliness is transcendental rather than political as such.



The most striking indicator of the parlous condition of high culture today is that the more the artwork calls attention to its "high" status, the less esthetic effect it produces. The plastic arts, whose emphasis on the singular artifact effectively excludes the general public--museum-going treats the spectator like a student; galleries intimidate those who can't afford to buy; public art is seldom experienced as "ours"--notoriously present as artworks, in a "democratically" snobbish gesture, objects chosen to demonstrate that art is not inherent in the work itself but is an effect of its presentation. This is also true of the more radical forms of music, experimental film, theater and the like.

I think the best place to find masterpieces in our era of "no more masterpieces" is in the cinema. Film is the only medium not stifled by absolute masterpieces set beyond competition. No one can hope to outdo Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Michelangelo, Leonardo... or even Proust, Joyce, Stravinsky, Cézanne. But film is still open; for my money Claire Denis' *Beau travail*, made in 1999, is as good as any French film ever made. I will deal with the distinctive qualities of cinema in a future Chronicle.



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