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

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

In this paper I will not attempt to assess the scientific plausibility of mimetic theory's contribution the language-origin question, but will compare its two main versions as formulated by René Girard and Eric Gans. My purpose is not to champion one against the other, but rather to articulate some of the issues at stake between them. To this end I have found that Kenneth Burke's independent speculations on this question offer a useful third viewpoint on the question, in that they offer a means to formulate and negotiate the differences between Girard and Gans. At this point in the development of mimetic theory, it has perhaps reached the point where, rather than an orthodoxy, it can be seen as a hypothesis that can be fruitfully unfolded in a variety of modes, for as René Girard has frequently declared, the mimetic factor in human behavior is by no means his exclusive discovery. Rather, again as he has suggested, it is to be found revealed in foundational

religious texts and in major works of world literature. Girard's particular exploit was to develop his insight into the mimetic aspect of individual behavior into a general theory of human culture. By taking the quantum step from individual (or "interdividual") to group psychology, he fashioned a flexible hermeneutic susceptible to an open-ended process of refinement and development. Thus in this paper, I will begin with Girard's account of the origin of language, and then juxtapose it to Gans's account, and finally look at both of these from the vantage of Burke's speculation on the origins of language.

Girard and the Origin of Language

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

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

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

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

individual, there is the cadaver of the collective victim and this cadaver constitutes the first object for this new type of attention. (Girard, 99)

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

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

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

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

Eric Gans and the Origin of Language

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

> a circle of protohumans, possibly after a successful hunt, surround an appetitively attractive object, for example, the body of a large animal. Such an object is potentially a focus of conflict, since the appetites of all are directed to something that cannot belong to all.
> …
> But at the moment of crisis, the strength of the appetitive drive has been increased by appetitive mimesis, the propensity to imitate one's fellows in their choice of an object of appropriation, to such a point that the dominance hierarchy can no longer counteract the symmetry of the situation. (Gans, 1993)

Thus far, Gans is in complete agreement with Girard: mimetic desire brings human beings into conflict, but then Gans departs from Girard as to the effect of the mimetic crisis. Rather than culminating in an uncontrollably violent melee, Gans sees conflicting mimetic desire producing a pregnant moment of stasis:

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

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

In sum, from the identical cause, i.e., mimetic rivalry, two distinct scenarios unfold. On the one hand mimetic rivalry leads directly to violent conflict which generates the sign, on the other it leads to a moment of stasis which generates the sign. What are the stakes involved in these competing scenes? First and foremost there is the question of verisimilitude, of likelihood. But to try to decide on the basis of our present sensibilities which of these scenarios was more likely to have occurred at the dawn of culture is a fruitless task. Whatever their scientific aspirations, both Gans's and Girard's accounts are primarily useful as heuristic narratives not unlike Freud's in *Totem and Taboo*. Of the two, Gans seems less interested in fictional plausibility and more in the rigor of a logical argument, for he places only those elements in the scene that he feels are strictly necessary for later extrapolation as culture unfolds in history. Girard, on the other hand, seems more interested in verisimilitude. If violence is the keynote of our present existence, both in the form of end results and efficient cause, then perhaps it served the same functions at the start.

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

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

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

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

> The minimal scene is thus not merely a minimal deferral of violence against the

center [as Gans had suggested earlier], but a minimal mastering of the original movement toward generalized mimetic violence. In the sparagmos, where the violence of each is directed toward the object rather than the other participants, the state of prelinguistic chaos is *almost* reintroduced. But this is violence contained within the peace brought by the center. Disorder is contained within order, evil within good. (Gans, 1997, 135)

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

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

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

And again:

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

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

Rather than simply being a question of historical verisimilitude, i.e., of which version seems more likely to have actually occurred, I would suggest that the point at issue here concerns divergent understandings of the mechanics of violence. Both Gans and Girard agree that violence springs from mimetic desire, but part company concerning the role and function of the desired object. For Girard, once the conflict has been engaged, the object that served as its source tends to lose importance and fade from the consciousness of the disputants:

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

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

For Gans, on the other hand, it is not the model/obstacle but the object that remains primary. All the energy in his model is located at the center of the scene, where it remains,

even in the absence of the object. Thus for Gans the generative energy of the mimetic situation is not overt violence but covert resentment. In his scenario, the crucial moment is when the object has assembled the group around it and fixated its attention.

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

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

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

Kenneth Burke and the Origins of Language

One of the reasons why the writings of Kenneth Burke offer an interesting vantage on the differences dividing Girard and Gans is because he is less consistent than either. He clearly definitely a "fox" of theory to their "hedgehogs," to cite Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between the two basic types of theorists. Burke coined the terms "logology" and

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

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

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

> The objection may be raised that "historically" the ritual drama is not the Ur-form. If one does not conceive of ritual drama in a restricted sense (but allows for a "broad interpretation" whereby a Greek goat-song and a savage rain dance to tom-toms in behalf of fertility, rain or victory could be put in the same bin), a

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

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

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

Taking his cue from Bergson (and Hegel) that the negative is nowhere to be found in nature, each thing or situation being positively what it is, Burke concludes that the negative is purely linguistic. In fact, since the negative it is only to be found in language, it can in turn be taken to language's distinctive feature, as well as a clue to its origin. As Burke conducts his argument he moves back and forth between historical and "cumulative" perspectives. "Cumulatively" speaking, says Burke, the negative reveals itself most fully in the Decalogue, the "thou shalt nots" regulating the moral and ethical behavior of humans. Hunting for clues

to the negative's historical origin, Burke finds them in the "negative" behavior of animals, which, of course, is not really negative, but a kind of forerunner. Grunts of rejection or disgust, acts of aversion, acts of flight, these, although again they are simple positives taken in and of themselves, give evidence of acts of discrimination that can later "flower" as negative judgments in human language. The human body of course is the link to the animal sphere. And it too, says Burke, with its visceral rejections and aversions stands as source of negation that precedes the negative of language.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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Notes

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

2. See *The Origin of Language*, p. 144. [(back)]