

Immanence, Transcendence, and Interdividual Desire in Nietzsche, Bataille, and Levinas

Benjamin Barber

United International College
Zhuhai, China
bbarb056@uottawa.ca

René Girard's mimetic theory and Generative Anthropology (subsequently GA) have produced conceptions of cultural and language origin that insist on the "interdividuality"^[1] of desire as fundamental to, and constitutive of, human relations and experience. This paper will explore how interdividual desire in the sacred and aesthetic experience is the basis for the ongoing contemporary valorization of theories of immanence over and against theories of transcendence. Both Girard (in his study of social undifferentiation in religious rites) and Generative Anthropology (in its account of the appearance of language) locate the most powerful experiences of interdividuality in sacred awe, wherein a mimetically desired centre alternately attracts and repels a periphery of desiring subjects. To illustrate the important role of mimetic desire-driven violence in the appearance of the sacred as the foundation of culture, Girard foregrounds the Dionysian bacchanal by emphasizing its celebration of unrestrained interdividual desire (*Violence* 126-27). For its part, GA highlights the way that the potentially violent volatility of such desire establishes the scenic configuration upon which the first sign and first language users appear. Desire's continuous and unifying quality resonates with the metaphysics of immanence that has its roots in the thought of pre-Socratic philosophers (notably Heraclitus). The concept of immanent desire reappears during the Enlightenment in Spinoza's conception of a single universal substance (*Ethics* 1, Propositions 7 and 14), and it has continued to reappear up to the present day. In the first section of this paper, I will focus on the concept of immanence as it appears in Nietzsche's aestheticized *das Ur-Eine*, or the primordially One in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In the second, I will consider how *das Ur-Eine*—as a manifestation of the will to power in the whole man—informs Georges Bataille's immanentist, anti-linguistic vision of totality or general economy. Deploying both Girard's anthropology and Eric Gans's theory of cultural origin, I will suggest that the current posthumanist penchant for theories of language's immanent embeddedness arises from Nietzsche's and Bataille's visions of totality insofar as posthumanism is informed by Derridian deconstruction (which is itself heavily influenced by Nietzsche and Bataille). In a final section, I will explore how the primordial self's encounter with the face of the other—described by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*

(61)—brings about the transcendent experience of the infinite via interindividual desire. By setting Nietzsche, Bataille, and Levinas's respective theories of immanence and transcendence alongside each other, I will illustrate how the mimetically engendered conception of immanence competes with mimetically generated theories of transcendence. I hope that, by placing these theories in mutual conversation through the medium of Girard's mimetic theory and GA's originary thinking, the tension between theories of transcendence and immanence—a tension which signals a kind of ideological mimetic doubling—may be deconstructed.

* * *

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* figures the individual subjectivity of the artist-poet as an illusion to be forgotten in the artist's act of immanent creation. Describing the artist's project, Nietzsche claims that the Attic unification of Dionysian lyric poetry and Hellenic-Apollonian epic poetry created the circumstances under which a true perception of the single universal subject might be affirmed in the aesthetic experience of tragedy. Examined by Gans using GA, Nietzsche's vision of the poet's role in tragedy's emergence presents the mimetic violence of the Dionysian *Rausch* as a benign aesthetic vision of, as opposed to a threat to, the earliest human communities in which the cult of Dionysus existed. For this reason, in chapter six of *The Scenic Imagination*, Gans claims Nietzsche's account of tragedy's origin, by idealizing the Dionysian as the means through which the illusion of the artist's subjectivity is purged, displays a limited understanding of the threat posed by contagious mimetic violence. Nevertheless, as Tobin Siebers argues in *The Ethics of Criticism*, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*—by foregrounding the violence of tragedy as an escape from the constraints of subjectivity—forces its reader to examine the mimetic nature of violence and its potential to efface the basic cultural differences constituting individual subjects (Siebers 156). If Nietzsche's rendering of the Dionysiac artist, Archilochus, is read via Girard's mimetic theory, the violence proceeding from mimetic desire (which Gans posits as a requisite for the emergence of the language-using human) corresponds to the painful Dionysian state that Nietzsche's lyric poet affirms in his engagement with Apollonian representation. *The Birth of Tragedy's* understanding of the lyricist's subjectivity as it appears within a project that examines the life and work of poets in terms of an anthropology of mimetic desire lies in its unflinching affirmation of non-differentiated mimetic violence, or, what Nietzsche terms the "Dionysian process," since it presents the structure of violence as a phenomenon warranting further examination and description. Nietzsche's characterization of the Dionysian, which affirms mimetic violence, provides an illuminating contrast with the account of the subject in mimetic society given by Girard's and Gans's anthropologies.

In section V of *The Birth of Tragedy*, contrasting his view of the lyricizing subject with Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche maintains that the true artist is neither subjective nor objective, in the Kantian aesthetic sense of disinterestedness. Rather, when the individual artist-

subject engages in the production of art, he is “released and redeemed from the individual will and has become . . . a medium, the channel through which the one truly existing subject celebrates its release and redemption in semblance” (32). The “one truly existing subject” channeled by the artist is what Nietzsche defines later in section XXIV as “the Will, [which] in the eternal fullness of its delight, plays with itself” (113), referencing Heraclitus’s Fragment 52, wherein a child plays alone, alternately constructing figures and destroying what he has made (114). Nietzsche wishes the reader to understand that each subject, when he encounters a work of art, should feel simultaneously humbled and elated to find himself represented in the aesthetic phenomena, which the artist, in “the act of artistic procreation, merges fully with,” being subsumed into “that original artist of the world” (33). Thus, in the case of the artist’s act of creation, the individual will is most fully realized in relation to the “non-individuated reality behind all appearances, what Nietzsche calls *das Ur-Eine* (‘the primordially One’)” (Geuss xxiv). Subjectivity—the selfhood and being of the artist—is, in the act of creation, able to “turn its eyes around and look at itself”; in this moment the artist “is at one and the same time subject and object, simultaneously poet, actor, and spectator” (33). The artist, or lyric poet, is to Nietzsche “a Dionysiac artist,” who having slept in an ecstatic “Dionysiac-musical enchantment” awakes at the touch of Apollo’s laurel to deliver his “lyric poems which, unfolded to their fullest extent, are called tragedies and dramatic dithyrambs” (30).

In the following passage from section V, Nietzsche sketches the creative process as the tension producing the artist’s realization of his experience of Dionysian unity first by repeating it in music and then—under the influence of Apollonian imagery—as a symbolic image of the dream:

In the first instance the lyric poet, a Dionysiac artist, has become entirely at one with the primordial unity, with its pain and contradiction, and he produces a copy of this primordial unity as music, which has been described elsewhere, quite rightly, as a repetition of the world and a second copy of it; now, however, under the influence of Apolline dream, this music in turn becomes visible to him as in a *symbolic dream-image*. (30)

The subjectivity of the artist—as it discovers itself in *das Ur-Eine*—exists in tension between its Dionysian musical representation of *das Ur-Eine* and the representation of Dionysian music in the concrete imagery of the Apollonian. Throughout this process the artist’s subjectivity subsists in the relationship of the individual to the art object, which is itself the object of “the one truly existing subject,” or *das Ur-Eine*.

Nietzsche prefaces the possibility of realizing this unified aesthetic subjectivity by figuring the emergence of the Dionysian-Apollonian balance as resulting from the infusion of Hellenic culture (which focuses on the grand sweep of historically oriented epic poetry) with Dionysian culture (which favors the personal reflections of the lyric poet). To illustrate this

transformation, Nietzsche invokes the ancient depictions of the poets Homer and Archilochus, whose likenesses appeared “side by side on brooches and other works of art, [which designated them] as . . . progenitors and torch-bearers of Greek poetry” (29). Nietzsche denominates the epic poet Homer as an “Apolline, naive dreamer,” while characterizing the lyric poet Archilochus as the embodiment of “the warlike servant of the Muses, driven wildly through existence” (29), and the one who discharges “the flood of the Dionysiac” into the “‘naive’ magnificence” of Homer’s sleepy Hellenic world (28). “Compared with Homer,” says Nietzsche, “this Archilochus frankly terrifies us with his cries of hatred and scorn, with the drunken outbursts of his desire” (29). Archilochus (the wine-loving, mercenary, lover-poet of the seventh century B.C.) is a “Dionysiac artist,” whose lyric self-centric music becomes, “under the influence of the Apolline dream” (32), the aesthetic experience that allows the poet to realize himself as simultaneously “subject and object” (33). Indeed, the subject is immanent to—united with and indistinguishable from—the world he reflects in his representations.

The perfect balance characterizing the enlightened subjectivity of the Dionysian-Apollonian artist, writes Gans in his analysis of *The Birth of Tragedy*, constitutes an indifference to the real-world violence represented in the aesthetic objects the artist creates. Nietzsche presents his reader with an “opposition . . . between two modes of participation [in art]: the impersonal Dionysian flux and the individualized Apollonian vision, each one of which is *already* formalized art” (*Scenic* 137). For example, both Archilochus’s wanton drunken violence and Homer’s detached rendering of Achilles’s rage within the larger context of the siege of Troy are—according to Nietzsche—elements of the world, which are “*justified*” by virtue of being “*aesthetic phenomena*” (*Birth of Tragedy* 33). Since, for Nietzsche, the violence of Dionysian and the fixity of Apollonian representation are always already aesthetic, Gans argues, Nietzsche’s historical theory of tragedy’s emergence bypasses discussion of the socio-historical circumstances that lead to the original scene of Attic tragedy, which his work endeavors to describe. For Gans, whose cultural anthropology posits the threat of mimetic violence as the impetus for the appearance of the aesthetic, Nietzsche’s passing references to the bloody agon of real-world social-formation, which tragedy depicts, constitutes a limitation in his understanding of the aesthetic. Nietzsche’s Attic “[t]ragedy” Gans writes,

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. (*Scenic* 134)

Concerned chiefly with demonstrating how the artist and spectator of tragedy may make the most of their experiences by discovering themselves (not as significant by virtue of their individual acts, but by way of their participation in painful destruction and its representation in the aesthetic phenomena of *das Ur-Eine*) Nietzsche appears to reject—as

part of his rejection of the Socratic and Christian tradition—reflection upon the social utility and ethical import of art.

While from Gans's perspective Nietzsche's apparent rejection of the social function of tragedy in order to reflect on the individual's experience of the aesthetic is a crucial limitation of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's fixation on embracing the vicissitudes inherent to the immanent nature of *das Ur-Eine's* appearance in the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy continues to force his readers to consider the issue of violence in representation and reality. Focused on explaining how the aesthetic emerged with the human, Gans characterizes Nietzsche's replacement of "the triumph of historical reason with the triumph of the individual will over the imprisoning forces of falsely universal truth" as a misguided romantic attempt to evade questions of origin (*Scenic* 14). Gans goes on to observe that the "paradoxical struggle of the Nietzschean self with its 'own' representations has been the obsession of philosophy ever since" (14). Notwithstanding Gans's misgivings regarding Nietzsche's perceptiveness toward the generative capacity of primal violence, philosophy's continuing interest in Nietzsche's artist-subject, who heroically affirms and immerses himself in the immanence of *das Ur-Eine* through art, has made *The Birth of Tragedy* an important starting point for considering the experience of the individual as continuous with a social context that coheres through mimetic desire and mimetic violence.

By foregrounding tragedy—an aesthetic scene laden with ethical concerns raised by violence for the artist, who produces it, and the theatergoer, who experiences it—Nietzsche tacitly posits an anthropology that imagines the problem of mimetic violence realized as immanent to existence via the affirmative act of creative acceptance. In a chapter of *The Ethics of Criticism* that examines Girard's polemical position vis-a-vis Nietzsche, Siebers claims that "*The Birth of Tragedy* describes tragic drama as the mirror in which the Dionysian man contemplates himself . . . [and this] mirror is hardly narcissistic" (156). Siebers further suggests that Nietzsche's vision of tragedy "illuminates the absurdity of belief, the desire for revenge, and the bloody foundations of social existence. It portrays the human struggle to affirm life in spite of its horrors, and [suggests that] the beauty of this affirmation is the only hope for our future" (156). The affirmation Siebers references appears in Nietzsche's account of how the lyric poet, Archilochus, rises—purged of his false subjectivity—from the "Dionysiac process" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 30). Though he is vague in these passages regarding the exact nature of the poet's involvement in Dionysian desire and violence, Nietzsche's invocations of the dreaming Archilochus, sleeping like the ferocious Bacchantes in Euripides's play, provides a point of departure from which to schematize the violent mimetic processes at work in his vision of immanence (or *das Ur-Eine*) in the Dionysian prelude to the birth of tragedy.

Nietzsche's comparison of the subject-poet Archilochus to the worshipers of Dionysus provides a social dimension to what he has termed the "Dionysiac process," which reflects a crisis of mimetic doubling that leads to violence. In section II of *The Birth of Tragedy*,

Nietzsche describes the “*Dionysiac Greeks*”’s veneration of the god—and his avatar the satyr—as the basis for festivals that “led to an excess of sexual indiscipline, which flooded in waves over all [ancient Greek] family life and its venerable statutes” (20). Nietzsche notes that in these rites “the very wildest of nature’s beasts were unleashed, up to and including that repulsive mixture of sensuality and cruelty which has always struck me as the true ‘witches’ brew’” (20). Nietzsche’s cryptic reference to the sexual violence of the Dionysian rite as a “‘witches’ brew” takes on clearer dimensions as a social phenomenon when he presents Archilochus as the progenitor of the Dionysian in the Apollonian Hellenic world. Archilochus, Raymond Geuss explains, is a

[s]eventh-century poet who sings of his military experiences as a mercenary, his enjoyment of wine, and his various likes and dislikes. The traditional story [of Archilochus] relates that he was in love with a woman named Neobule, and subjected her father, Lykambes, who refused to allow a marriage, to poetic abuse so effective he killed himself. (29)

Archilochus’s fame derives from his rivalry with a father over his daughter, who constitutes the sexual object for rival doubles striving in the triangular configuration of mimetic desire, as it is elaborated by Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. The story of Archilochus illustrates how mimetic rivalry, when the oscillations of reciprocal assaults reach their paroxysm, leads to violent death. In this instance, Lykambes imitates the violent intentions of Archilochus’s poetic invectives by ending his own life. Nietzsche, describing the poet’s efforts to revisit Lykambes’ rejection of his advances towards his family by redoubling his poetic assault, argues that the subjectivity of Archilochus’s lyric “I,” as a representation of amorous and violent desire, in fact reflects the universal *das Ur-Eine* manifest in the Hellenic drama of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, in which Dionysus is depicted arriving to establish his cult in Thebes:

When Archilochus, the first lyric poet of the Greeks, simultaneously proclaims his crazed love and scorn for the daughters of Lycambes, it is not his passion that dances before us in orgiastic frenzy: [instead] we see Dionysos and the maenads, we see the intoxicated enthusiast Archilochus sunk in sleep—as Euripides describes it in the *Bacchae*, asleep on a high alpine meadow, in the mid-day sun. . . . (*The Birth of Tragedy* 30)

The final line is a quotation from the play that describes the maenads and their God’s sleeping drunk after their revels, but poised to fall into the play’s final paroxysm of contagious mimetic violence that will result in the sparagmos of Pentheus. Nietzsche’s vision of Archilochus’s subjectivity as fully realized in its channeling of the one truly existing subject rests on a tacit acknowledgement of the mimetic violence inherent to the socio-historical Dionysian mode, which is represented in *The Bacchae*’s depiction of violence in ancient ritual practices. Further, the mimetic desire of Archilochus to overcome Lycambes’

rivalrous resistance reflects the contagious nature of desire, which—in its most radical form—is the de-individuated unity of all desire.

Unchecked mimetic desire is Nietzsche's Dionysian process, through which "the artist . . . [gives] up his subjectivity" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 30). In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard observes that the imitative violence in the *Bacchae* represents—as it does in the ancient bacchanal rites it depicts—"an essential aspect of the sacrificial crisis: the destruction of differences" between subjects (127). This destruction of differences is the result of mimetic desire, which Girard in *Deceit* claims "is always the desire to be Another" (83). To illustrate his thesis, he draws examples from the desire Dostoyevsky examines in his novels, wherein the protagonist ceases to desire the concrete objects valued by his models and instead desires the very desire of the model. When this occurs, the protagonist "is often torn between several simultaneous mediations. He is a different person every moment . . . this is the *polymorphosis* of the Dostoyevskian being" (91-92). As the "revered object" of the mediator's desire (embodied in the person of the mediator) "come[s] closer; it seems within reach of the hand; only one obstacle remains between subject and object—the mediator himself" (85). It is at this moment that mimetic desire threatens violence as subjective desire transforms into non-differentiated desire, since "the closer the mediator comes, the more feverish the action becomes" and the less the desire of one subject can be distinguished (by the subjects and the onlookers) from the other subject's desire (85). For this reason, "[i]n Dostoevsky, thwarted desire is so violent that it can lead to murder" (85). For Nietzsche, the violence of the Dionysian, as it appears in the non-differentiated mimetic desire of the maenads and the drunken passion of the lyricist Archilochus, remains an immanent, unified, and fluid desire, as it passes through the artist to manifest itself as "single symbolic likeness" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 30).

The psychology and anthropology of mimetic desire accept the principle of the painful universality of Nietzsche's Dionysian process as a pre-linguistic, pre-conscious, proto-human state. Gans's originary scene supposes a pre-individuated state inhabited by languageless protohumans. Prior to the moment when the collective, mimetic emission of the sign-founding aborted gesture of appropriation establishes a scene of collective attention, hominids lacked an individual self-awareness. In this period, the delineations between self, other, and object did not exist because the sacralizing prohibition placed on a collectively desired object by the aborted appropriative gestures of all present hominids (which constitutes the first symbolic act) had not yet engendered the originary scene. As Gans explains, "[t]he birth of the self within the communal context defines it *against* that context" (*Originary Thinking* 18). In order for the subject to exist outside of the chaos of the non-differentiation of imitative appropriations and animal dominance hierarchies, "the individual language-user [must have] internalized the context of the originary event in a *scene of representation*, a private imaginary space independent of the community" (18). Thus, subjectivity for Gans subsists in the "contrast between the private and public scenes, between imaginary fulfillment and real alienation from the centre, that gives rise to the

originary resentment that is the first mode of self-consciousness” (18). Gans’s account of the birth of individual subjectivity takes for granted Girard’s reading of Nietzsche’s Dionysian state, wherein the difference between self, other, and object is lost in the usually violent fluidity of desire circulating among the mimetically acquisitive entities.

Unlike Nietzsche, Gans positions this non-differentiated mimetic state in a pre-human, liminal time, which becomes and remains unreachable after the advent of the symbolic engenders subjective self-awareness. Girard, somewhat differently from Gans, emphasizes the possibility of reverting to the violence of the non-differentiated, hyper-mimetic state through the unchecked proliferation of mimetic rivalry in the modern world, a possibility which Dostoevsky acutely apprehends. Both Gans and Girard look upon Nietzsche’s aestheticized enthusiasm for the Dionysian purgation of the artist’s and theatregoer’s subjectivity and embrace of their immanence as dangerous, since it seems to gleefully indulge a nihilistic lust for the destruction of distinct individuals. Sympathetic to such concerns regarding the violence of Nietzsche’s Dionysian process, Siebers emphasizes Nietzsche’s effort in *The Birth of Tragedy* “to affirm life in spite of its horrors” (*Ethics* 156). By looking squarely at the violence of mimetic desire, Nietzsche—deploying the figure of Archilochus as an allegory for the Dionysian poet—raises the issue of how the ethical value of the aesthetic relates to the individual subject. Siebers argues that, for Nietzsche, the aesthetic offers the artist and audience the possibility of accepting their lots as figures honored in their depiction by the “original artist of the world” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 33), who frames them as subjects immanent to the world’s scenes of mimetic violence. In Gans’s mimetic anthropology, by contrast, contemplation of the aesthetic occasions the subject’s ethical response to the community that collectively produces aesthetic objects as a means of deferring mimetic violence. The tension between these positions foregrounds Nietzsche’s and Gans’s shared interest in the violence that constructs and threatens the subject who remains “at one and the same time subject and object . . . poet, actor, and spectator” (33). According to *The Birth of Tragedy*, lyric poets (be they ancient, romantic, or modern) may resemble Archilochus and—if, by their subsumption to *das Ur-Eine* that occurs with their creative act, they describe the mimetic violence of the universal subject—they also become anthropologists of a kind, providing, in their art, ethnologies of an immanent world of mimetic tumult.

* * *

Nietzsche’s *das Ur-Eine* is the template for Bataille’s idea of totality, wherein the subject is immanent to and continuous with the whole of being. In *On Nietzsche*, Bataille outlines his reading of Nietzsche’s “whole man.” In his analysis, he quotes a passage on the fragmentation of humanity from *The Will to Power*: “[w]hole ages, whole peoples are . . . somewhat fragmentary; it is perhaps part of the economy of human evolution that man should evolve piece by piece,” so that “lower men, the tremendous majority, are merely preludes and rehearsals out of whose medley the whole man appears” (qtd. in *The Bataille*

Reader 336). In his analysis of the passage, Bataille explains: “Man’s fragmentary state is, essentially, the same thing as the choice of an object. When a man limits his desires, for example, to the possession of power within the state, he acts, he knows what he has done” (336). Here, Bataille locates the individual subject’s desire within what he will shortly begin speaking of as the totality, wherein exists the “whole man” who is opposed to the “fragmentary man.” The subject who has not yet realized totality “[i]nserts himself advantageously within time. Each of his movements becomes *useful*. [. . .] Every action makes of man a fragmentary being” (336). What is the solution to this fragmentation? How does one reach the state of the “whole man” lauded by Nietzsche? Bataille further explains:

Life remains whole only when not subordinated to a precise object which transcends it. Totality in this sense is essentially freedom. [. . .] Totality within myself is this exuberance: it is only an empty yearning, the unhappy desire to be consumed for no reason other than desire itself—which it wholly is—to burn. (337)

This conception of totality is the realization of immanent *das Ur-Eine* and the rejection of transcendence in Bataille’s reading of Nietzsche, where Nietzsche’s subject-artist is wholly absorbed in the movement of desire, which he also observes and gives lyrical voice to. Bataille aspires to be Nietzsche’s Archilochus, who is the same as the whole man who loses the particularity of his action—of his moment in time—in the all-consuming movement of an “empty yearning,” or “unhappy desire.” The subject’s loss of a definite position relative to others in the tumult of the Dionysian chaos of *das Ur-Eine* tends to efface the distinctions and differences that language itself depends upon. Thus, within lyric poetry, and literature generally, the ambiguity of signs lends itself to the drama, or play, of the undifferentiated crises precipitated by mimetic rivalry, where reason gives way to imitative passion and where meanings tend to be become obscure or even irretrievable.

Jean-Luc Nancy has described George Bataille’s work as “writing *against* meaning” (62). Attending to the influence of Bataille’s assault on meaning on Jacques Derrida’s critique of metaphysics, I will now elaborate how Bataille opens the way for contemporary posthumanist theory’s marginalization of the transcendent in language. Contextualizing Derrida’s response to Bataille’s “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” in GA’s originary scene, I will suggest that Bataille’s writing-as-sovereign-expenditure is a mimetically generated all-encompassing ostensive gesture that points not to a positively sacralised appetitive object but to the negatively sacrally-profane space that subsumes the object of collective desire. Bataille’s “writing *against* meaning” constitutes ostention that eschews the designation of any particular object, seeking instead to direct readers’ attention to the immanent excessiveness of existence—or sovereign totality—and, thereby, erode the specificity needed for the generation of meaning in language. This all-encompassing gesture acts as a prerequisite for marginalizing language in favour of an immanent assemblage of synthetic and organic bodies that language merely unites.

GA holds that it is most parsimonious to view the linguistic form known as the ostensive as preceding the sacrificial in the emergence of non-instinctual attention. In *Originary Thinking*, Gans contends that the declarative sentence—which is the foundation of philosophers’ efforts to establish truth through discourse—emerges from the ostensive of the originary event. When first repeated after the originary event, the gesture of aborted appropriation sacralises an appetitive object (perhaps a carcass) by focusing the mimetic desire of the group on it and “select[ing it] out from its worldly context” (65). This moment of non-instinctual attention, by reinforcing the centre’s desirability and prohibiting its unilateral appropriation by any individual, constitutes the collective experience of the sacred and presages the emergence of sacrificial rituals—re-enactments, or *re-presentations*, of the originary event—wherein an object of mutual desire is killed and equitably divided among the peripheral participants. Gans’ theorization of the origin of the ostensive differs from that presented by René Girard in *Things Hidden*, wherein the shock that comes from the death of an arbitrarily slain combatant in a proto-human mimetic-desire-fueled-melee propels the group into a state of sacred awe which itself constitutes the first instance of non-instinctual attention.

As Gans notes in *The Scenic Imagination*, Girard’s thesis bears some resemblance to the sacrificial anthropology forwarded by Bataille (15), which is deeply influenced by Alexandre Kojève’s reading of Hegel. In “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” Bataille writes:

Concerning sacrifice, I can essentially say that, on the level of Hegel’s philosophy, man has . . . revealed and founded human truth by sacrificing; in sacrifice he destroyed the animal in himself, allowing himself and the animal to survive only as the non-corporeal truth which Hegel describes. . . . (286)

Bataille goes on to complicate this origin of the symbolic (or “non-corporeal truth”) by claiming, with Kojève, sacrifice’s causal association with Heideggerian desire, or “ontological relation of ‘negativity,’ [that is] the incompleteness of [the] human being, its constitutive ‘lack’” (Yar 4), which GA—following Girard—explains in terms of mimetic desire. Thus, for Bataille, the negativity of desire leading to sacrifice “makes of man—in Heidegger’s words—a being unto death (*Sein zum Tode*), or—in the words of Kojève himself—‘death which lives a human life’” (286). Since (as Bataille asserts) “[w]hether he lives or dies, man cannot immediately know death” (286), the negative desire for self-recognition or knowledge (*a la* Hegel) necessitates the “*spectacle*, or . . . *representation*” of “rites and performances . . . tragic or comic. In tragedy . . . it is a question,” Bataille states, “of our identifying with some character who dies, and of believing that we die, although we are alive” (287). In carefully following Kojève’s Hegelian vision of the animal-turned-human via sacrifice, Bataille’s main objective in “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” sometimes seems to be to refine Hegel’s anthropology. However, as Derrida shows, Bataille’s project is, in fact, to exceed any anthropology by repeatedly asserting the sovereignty of the totality, of which the language-using-animal feels himself to be separate from, while he in fact remains an

indissoluble, immanent part of its sovereign whole. As Bataille puts it, “[t]hese elements [that the ostensive gesture attempts to isolate] (this tree, this bird, this stone) are in fact inseparable from the whole” (283).

In his reading of “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” in his own essay, “From Restricted to General Economy: Hegelianism without Reserve,” Derrida demonstrates that Bataille’s anthropological elaboration of death-bound negativity (or desire) in the primordial encounter that devolves into the master-slave dialectic is, in fact, designed to point out an ultimate form of sovereignty that exceeds the false lordship of the master and the ostensible sovereignty of the philosopher (Hegel) whose juxtaposition of declaratives supposedly urges the dialectic ever onward towards its ultimate culmination: full knowledge and the end of history. Asserting Bataille’s fidelity to Hegel’s concepts, Derrida views Bataille’s elaboration of Hegel’s thought as an elaboration “of the entire history of metaphysics” (320), which Bataille finds risible after exposing its inherent and absurd self-contradictions (323); specifically, Derrida argues, Bataille laughs at the contradiction inherent to Hegel’s conception of sovereign lordship. He laughs because he perceives that the achievement of sovereignty depends on *either* complete indifference to death born of pursued desire (that is risk of death qua *abstract negativity*)—obliterating the possibility of conscious apprehension of Truth-that-is-sovereignty—or attainment of the sovereign knowledge that follows from “the negation characteristic of consciousness . . . that . . . preserves and maintains what is sublated . . . , [so that] self-consciousness becomes aware that *life* is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness” (Hegel qtd. in Derrida 323). Only in death and dismemberment, Bataille notes, can the Sage (Hegel) gain true knowledge, but death and dismemberment are only ever to be found virtually in the conscious representations and discourse of the thinker. At this impasse on the way to absolute sovereignty, Derrida writes, Bataille’s solution is laughter:

henceforth, everything covered by the name lordship collapses into comedy. [. . .] Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, and absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. [. . .] This burst of laughter makes the difference between lordship and [Bataille’s sense of true] sovereignty shine, without showing it however and, above all, without saying it. [. . .] Bataille pulls [sovereignty] out of dialectics. He withdraws it from the horizon of meaning and knowledge. (Derrida 323)

After making this assertion and establishing it with lengthy quotations from “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” Derrida must explain how Bataille manages to direct the reader’s attention to the sovereignty that is “[s]imultaneously more and less a lordship than lordship” (323) without slipping back into dialectics. To do this, Derrida delineates two forms of writing that Bataille uses to express “in language—the language of servility—that which is not servile” (332). Derrida quotes Bataille’s *Interior Experience* to explain how this non-servile writing is accomplished: “That which is not servile is unspeakable: a reason for laughing . . . the same

holds for ecstasy. Whatever is not useful must be hidden (under a mask)” and “[i]n speaking ‘at the limit of silence,’ we must organize a strategy and ‘find [words] which reintroduce—at a point—the sovereign silence which interrupts articulated language” (qtd. in Derrida 332). Derrida lauds this form of writing because its goals and outcomes are similar to those that his own exposition of the deep contradictions in metaphysics achieves. Derrida’s deconstruction of metaphysical distinctions repeats Bataille’s comic exposition of Hegel’s self-dismemberment, an exposition which constitutes an all-encompassing ostensive that attempts a sovereign gesture towards the totality of existence, a totality of being wherein representation—and any possibility of transcendence—is embedded and continuous with material reality.

Bataille’s laughing disintegration into totality foregrounds imitated appetite as the element that exceeds and subsumes the abstractions of representation. In a section of *The Accursed Share* titled “The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real,” Bataille gives his clearest definition of what he terms “a sovereign totality which is not divided by abstraction and is commensurate with the entire universe” (*Reader* 265). The definition unfolds by noting that, when the individual undergoes the passionate experience of the sacred with minimal intellectual engagement, she has an intimation of totality which manifests in the sensation of oscillating attraction and repulsion inspired by sacrificial spectacle in, for example, tragedy and the mass. However, Bataille continues, “[t]he intellect fails [to apprehend totality] . . . in that with its first impulse it *abstracts*, separating the object of reflection from the concrete totality of the real” (264). For Bataille, the ostensibly transcendent symbol of the sacrificial victim fails—through its special position at the centre of the spectacle or scene—to guarantee the experience of totality. Admitting that his reader may have “some trouble in following” him (264), Bataille proposes that a purer experience of totality is accessible through “the domain of erotic life” (265), where “[t]he object of sensual desire is by nature another desire” (265). In this formulation, Bataille’s Kojèvean Hegelianism anticipates Mimetic Theory’s desire that desires according to the desire of the other. It is tempting therefore to imagine that Bataille’s intention is—as Girard does in *Violence and the Sacred*—to draw a line from the mimetic desire of eroticism directly to the violent expiation of conflictual desire through sacrifice. However, Bataille’s insistence on taking the sexual embrace as the closest human experience of totality subsumes all symbolic representations including those of ritual and tragedy. Bataille asserts “that in the embrace the object of desire is always the totality of being [. . .]. in a word the object of desire is the *universe*, in the form of she who in the embrace is its mirror, where we ourselves are reflected” (267). Bataille claims that in the sexual embrace there exists “*total contact*,” which has no “*isolable moment*,” and, therefore, “*everything* is revealed anew” (266). This experience surpasses the capacity for description (267), but Bataille attempts to give his reader an intimation of it by providing a literary account of how he claims to encounter totality in the sexual embrace:

It seems to me that the totality of what is (the universe) swallows me (physically), and

if it swallows me, or since it swallows me, I can't distinguish myself from it; nothing remains, except this or that, which are less meaningful than this nothing. In a sense it is unbearable and I seem to be dying. It is at this cost, no doubt, that I am no longer myself, but an infinity in which I am lost . . . (267)

Bataille describes a complete loss of distinctions—a kind of immanent substance of being—which clearly resembles Nietzsche's expression of *das Ur-Eine*. Totality shares with *das Ur-Eine* the feature that it is only finally expressible as a lyric depiction of desire that culminates in coitus and destruction—the dissolution of the self—which appears as a type of undifferentiated violence.

For GA, the importance of Bataille's emphasis on the mimetic nature of inarticulate sexual appetite as the key factor in the experience of totality is in the way it turns away from represented appetite—what GA terms "desire"—and directs attention to the sensations experienced in the oscillating play of attraction and repulsion that establishes the sacred during the first gesture of aborted appropriation. This move is what I'm calling Bataille's *all-encompassing ostensive*. Bataille wishes his reader to dwell on the field of imitative appetite and never move beyond to comprehend how particular objects and—eventually—ostensive gestures emerge from the totality to create significance, meaning, and (potentially) transcendence. As Bataille puts it: "the horror I experience does not repel me. Were I more naïve I might even imagine . . . that I did not experience this horror and disgust. But I may, on the contrary, *thirst for it*" (269). By comparing Bataille's discussion of the repulsive "horror and disgust" that accompanies the peaked appetites of the sexual embrace to GA's discussion of the centripetal (fear of violence) and centrifugal (mimetic) impulses that engender the sacred on the originary scene, contemporary theory's continued fascination with—and assumption of—Bataille's sovereign totality as an end in itself comes into focus.

Bataille's ostensive—which he elects to exemplify in the mimetic context of the sexual embrace—becomes possible when the originary scene's nascent hominid group ceases to emit the gesture of aborted appropriation and collectively moves to peaceably divide the carcass among themselves in the sparagmos. In *Originary Thinking*, Gans theorizes that "the appropriation of the central object must proceed through communal attention to and awareness of the establishment of equivalence" (9). In the resolution of the adrenaline-producing tension caused by the potential—but deferred—mimetic fight over the carcass, the originary scene's participants' attentiveness would indeed be elevated. Their gazes would follow the hands of the others to the carcass as it is torn asunder. As they consume the meat and watch the others consumption, they experience its equitable subsumption into the periphery of the scene—the sign-marked object becomes one with the commensurate bodies of the group. During the peaceful originary sparagmos, the periphery merges with the centre, and—like the bodies in Bataille's sexual embrace—the object of desire and the desiring bodies become indistinguishable.

Here are Bataille's oldest sign-using ancestors: the centrifugal-centripetal power of the sign-designated appetitive object is diffused through the peaceful sparagmos and thus its significance moves through the bodies of the group and beyond to the world, or sovereign totality, they inhabit. The group's senses are heightened so their attention flicks from stimulus to stimulus: grasping hands slick with gore, the odour of offal, the play of light between moving limbs, blood staining the earth, and swarming flies all together confuse the prohibitive boundary line—formerly so distinct and inviolably sacred—that moments before barred-off the mouth-watering carcass. In this context, the subject has her first experience of immanence. The force that stalled all action now seems to be diffused and immanent in the feeding group and the environment the participants make contact with. Without any single, shared focus of attention (as foci are multiplied in each individual's food object and the ground each body occupies), they begin to intuit that among the infinite—indeed universal—array of objects and gestures before them the still-recalled sensation of attraction and repulsion may yet inhere. Since, as they eat, they consume the sign-marked meat and do not actually produce the sign, the pause in sign-use allows for its demotion from the place of transcendent pre-eminence it held so lately. Its memory is only one of a multitude of things that still appear vaguely charged with its power. The reappearance of the gesture of aborted appropriation at the next scene will serve its purpose before being reabsorbed into the universe of things that overtakes the increasingly satiated and peaceable group's attention. The first instance of non-instinctual attention has prepared the way for the first all-encompassing gesture towards the immanent totality of the real. The preoccupation with totality continues in contemporary posthumanism's subsumption of transcendent particularity (or centrality) to a leveled immanent reality.

In their discursive strategy, posthumanist subversions of distinctions between the symbolic and organic—notably N. Katherine Hayles's and Donna Harraway's championing of *informatics*—recapitulate the deconstructive writing Derrida lauds in Bataille's works as a "sovereign expenditure" (Botting and Wilson 4), an expenditure which gestures towards a immanent totality or general economy, what Bataille terms: "the sacred, God or created reality" (*Guilty* 59). Derrida deems Bataille's ecstatic laughter at Hegel an exemplary deconstructive act and he uses it to attack language-based transcendentalist metaphysics that attempt to delimit the totality of the real in knowledge. Poststructuralism's assault on the idea of language-generating-presence has opened the way for contemporary posthumanist theory's rejection of the privileged category of the human. This puts posthumanists in a paradoxical position, for when they denounce totalizing essentialisms, they repeat Derrida's Bataille-inspired explosion of the possibility of expounding totality in language. Thus, posthumanist projects enumerate the ways that language and matter interpenetrate to construct a litany of relations between signs and matter so that language is deemed to be embedded in material reality. In this respect, posthumanist attempts to marginalize the language-using animal in discourse are reminiscent of Bataille's literary account of the experience of the sexual embrace or my attempt to figure a protohominid's experience of immanent significance during the peaceful sparagmos of the originary scene.

Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway are two posthumanist theorists whose works repeat Bataille's all-encompassing ostensive gesture as they struggle to articulate the totality of the real by insisting on the inextricability of material bodies and signs. Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) fixates on the way that technologically advanced information systems affect material bodies, positing the emergence of a "posthuman cyborg" as a "multifaceted and flexible identity that is constantly being deconstructed and recombined in different configurations along various informational circuits" (Leitch 2162). In this account, the machines that route digitized language (in Hayles' term, "information") are united with organic bodies through the same language, all of which forms a "network of relations" that Hayles—borrowing from Haraway—calls *informatics* (Hayles 2169). Haraway's contribution to posthumanist theory contains similar visions of a profound continuity between the organic and symbolic, a style of enquiry which may best be described—as John Lechte has done—as plumbing "for immanence . . . over transcendence" (337). For Haraway, Lechte writes, "[k]nowledge is . . . always 'embedded' in a situation, rather than being external to it" (337). Lechte points out that this immanentist critique of transcendentalism "is only possible because of the very transcendence that this same tradition makes possible" (337). Whatever its inherent problems, the posthumanist effort to embed transcendent symbols in matter seeks to decentre the human by focusing on a vast complex of organic bodies, synthetic technologies, and language that is continuous with a universal field of relations that bears a keen resemblance to Bataille's sovereign totality of the real.

From GA's perspective, the intuition of this totality by Hegel, Bataille, Derrida, and the posthumanists is in fact a sacralised conception of immanence—which emerges from the centrifugal and centripetal force of desire—and derives from the originary scene. The possibility of such an intuition of the sacred—as inherent to and uniting all things—rests on our capacity to articulate our appetites in language and, thereby, express a desire for being itself, a desire which (as Girard's Mimetic Theory demonstrates) is shared, or unified. In a sense, the sharing of this unified desire occurs in the ongoing sparagmos inaugurated by the first gesture of aborted appropriation, wherein we—from our finite, limited, and apparently transcendent or centralized perspectives—continue to recall the sacred and discover its residue in our coequals' gestures, bodies, and associated objects. The play of mimetic desire in this ongoing sparagmos focuses, distracts, and refocuses attention on the plethora of stimuli that the apparently immanent totality contains. From the perspective of many—particularly posthumanist theorists whose ideas are currently in vogue—language is not a mode of transcendence but merely one element in an infinite array of interconnected, immanent elements.

* * *

The preceding discussions of Nietzsche, Bataille, Derrida and posthumanism have elaborated ways that reflection upon desire—as its mimetic nature generates the experience

of the sacred—engenders an ongoing, immanentist critique of transcendentalist metaphysics and theory. However, Levinas's account of desire as the pursuit of the infinite in the encounter with the separate and distinct Other provides an alternative to visions of desire that affirm totality, or pure immanentism, over and against transcendentalist theory. In his preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explains that, "we can proceed from the experience of totality [or being] back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other" (24).^[2] Levinas goes on to explain that "[t]he rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity" (24-25). This experience of infinity, which occurs when the "I" (in the original French, *soi*) encounters the face of the Other and experiences transcendence or an escape from totality, which occurs—as Levinas later explains—through the inordinate nature of the Other's desirability. It is important to note that, for Levinas, desire is not a sea of intersubjectivity, wherein the individual's desires are shared with the multitude and thereby become continuous with the Other; rather, the limits that bar one subject off from the other are the conditions in which the experience of infinity and transcendence occur. Levinas explains, "[b]ecause the separation of the separated being has not been relative, has not been a movement away from the other . . . the relation with the other does not consist in repeating the movement apart in a reverse direction, but in going toward the other in Desire" (61). For the separate being, desire is an impetus, a movement, toward the other. Levinas's vision of desire is a departure from Nietzsche's and Bataille's conceptions of it as part of a primordial sea which symbolizes a radical continuity between subjectivities in a fluid vision of being and history. Levinas instead insists on the separateness of each individual and the distinctness of the experience of desire that moves the individual.

Levinas elaborates his understanding of the desiring individual's pursuit of the infinite in the Other early on in *Totality and Infinity*. In a section titled, "Desire for the Invisible," he clearly differentiates his understanding of desire from the version of desire posited in Bataille's account of the sexual embrace, where the distinction between individuals is completely lost to the movement of desire, or—put another way—the two lovers seem to absorb one another. Key to Levinas's account of desire is his insistence on the radical alterity that desire draws the subject towards. Levinas uses the term "metaphysical desire," to describe this turn "toward the 'elsewhere' and the 'otherwise' and the 'other,'" and his description of metaphysical desire bears some resemblance to the "metaphysical desire" elaborated by Girard in *Deceit*. Levinas repeatedly writes of this desire as a "turn" or "movement" that attempts to escape the realities of being or totality:

The other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this "I," that "other." I can "feed" on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends towards

something else entirely, toward the absolutely other. (33)

The alterity that may be absorbed (food, landscape etc.) corresponds to the experience of absorption that occurs during the *sparagmos*—the consumption of the sacralised object—which, above, I related to Bataille’s conception of totality in the sexual embrace. Thus, the desire Bataille speaks of resembles something like appetite; whereas, metaphysical desire exceeds a mere appetite for the totality of being—the wish of the subject to occupy the whole ground of being and history (22-23). Instead, Levinas’s metaphysical desire “is a desire that can not be satisfied,” as desires “satisfied [are like] sexual needs, or . . . moral and religious needs” (34). Thus, even the craving for sacred awe—which may be obtained through contemplation of an immanent totality—is not the metaphysical desire for radical alterity:

The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.

It is generosity nourished by the Desired, and thus a relationship that is not the disappearance of distance, not a bringing together, or—to circumscribe more closely the essence of generosity and of goodness—a relationship whose positivity comes from remoteness, from separation, for it nourishes itself, one might say, with its hunger.
(34)

Levinas’s capitalization of “the Desired” signals that he is referring to the Other—or the personal other expressed in the original French with the term *autrui*. Desire therefore only exists if there is no possibility of subjects or their desires comingling. Thus, to speak of interindividual desire in Levinas’s terms is to assert that metaphysical desire, or “desire without satisfaction . . . *understands* [*entend*] the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other. [. . .] It is understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High” (34). Metaphysical desire is the pursuit of the infinite in the unbridgeable space that separates one subject from another. It is therefore transcendent in that it opens on “[t]he very dimension of height” (34)—the other that is transcendentally far beyond the subject’s reach.

As I noted above, Levinas’s definition of metaphysical desire is comparable in many ways to the definitions of vertical transcendence and deviated transcendence (or triangular desire) that Girard presents in *Deceit*, which (as also noted above) asserts that “[i]mitative desire is always a desire to be Another” (83). In the various triangular configurations Girard studies, “[t]he object [of desire] is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is [in fact] aimed at the mediator’s being” (53). “There is only one metaphysical desire,” Girard writes, “but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety” (83). Girard demonstrates the excessiveness of this primordial, metaphysical desire and, through his readings of novelistic characters, its propensity to cause various types of

conflict as subjects pursue the futile goal of appropriating their mediators' being. A Levinasian reading of Girard's observations would assert that metaphysical desire itself "*understand[s]* . . . the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other" (Levinas 34). However, though *desire* may understand, the subject herself may not consciously understand the radical inaccessibility of the other. If the desiring subject intentionally joins her metaphysical desire in its understanding of the inaccessibility of the other, she will be engaged in—what Girard terms—"vertical transcendence," which he defines in Christian terms: "Christianity directs existence toward a vanishing point, either toward God or toward the Other. Choice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model" (58). For Girard, then, vertical transcendence is when a subject chooses to imitate Christ, or—at least—recognizes that the draw of desire for the being of a human other is a movement of metaphysical desire that will never be satisfied—that is, it is a desire for the infinite. Indeed, metaphysical desire itself, as Levinas states, may "*understand*" the inaccessible remoteness of the Other, be it "the Other" or "the Most-High" (*Totality and Infinity* 34); however, the subject entranced by the mediating Other may fail to perceive that she is engaged in "a relationship whose positivity comes from remoteness, from separation" (34). Taking up Levinas's perspective, the subject may fail to recognize that what seems to be the desire for the Other's being—or totality—is, in fact, a desire for "*something else entirely, [which moves] toward the absolutely other*" (33). This misunderstanding on the part of the subject leads to what Girard terms "deviated transcendence." "Deviated transcendency," Girard asserts, "is a caricature of vertical transcendency" (61), wherein the subject strives to become the Other or be absorbed into the Other's being. Levinas comments on the subject's potential misunderstanding of her metaphysical desire for the infinite (that is, the Other) as a particular need or lack of being:

Infinity is not the "object" of a cognition (which would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates), but is the desirable, which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*. [. . .] It is Desire that measures the infinity of the infinite, for it is a measure through the very impossibility of measure. The inordinateness [*démesure*] measured by Desire is the face. [. . .] [D]esire is an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its "object;" it is revelation—whereas need is a void of the Soul; it proceeds from the subject.

Truth is sought in the other, but by him who lacks nothing. (62)

Thus, Levinas's phenomenology of desire affirms Girard's claim that the subject's desire is a desire for the other (not a needed object) that is aroused by the desire manifest in the measure-defying face of "the desirable" Other. Though the subject may imagine she pursues "the Desirable" out of a lack, in fact, "[t]he separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other" (62). Accordingly, what Girard identifies as vertical transcendence manifest in the subject's urge to imitate the desire of a divine model, Levinas

sees as a revelation of the infinite in the face of the Other that compels the subject to move towards her—this turn is itself desire. Further, what Girard terms “deviated transcendence” is analogous to what happens when Levinasian subjects who experience desire as lack and erroneously imagine that they will find fulfillment by attempting to merge their beings with the beings of Others. Subjects who act based on this misapprehension partake of the mimetic interdividuality that Nietzsche—citing the life and work of Archilochus—lauds as an experience of Dionysian unity that realizes *das Ur-Eine*; that Bataille—following Nietzsche—calls totality or general economy; that posthumanists view as the inextricable and radical interconnection of material bodies through informatics; and that Girard critically describes as an undifferentiated crisis that culminates in sacrificial violence.

From the perspective of GA, the possibility of an unbounded mimetic crisis is foreclosed by the gesture of aborted appropriation, which interrupts subjects’ attempts to appropriate the beings of their mediators on the originary scene. In GA’s account of the origin of language, the deviated transcendence that arises from metaphysical desire is transmuted into originary resentment through the deferral effected by mimetic reproduction of a gesture, wherein a subject stops in the middle of her attempt to grasp an object that has taken on significance due to the interest that the Others afford it (*Originary Thinking* 8-9). In this moment, the experience of appetitive, instinctual desire for a food object is subordinated to the presence and interest of the Others. In GA’s account, the gesture of aborted appropriation is the inaugural expression of interdividual, metaphysical desire. Thus, representation allows for the possibility of positively acknowledging how metaphysical desire defines what Levinas terms the “untraversable, and at the same time traversed” distance between the subject and the Other (62). A GA hypothesis that seeks to incorporate Levinas’s conception of desire would take the originary sign as the first opportunity for the “I” to recognize itself as distinct from the Other and experience the possibility of going towards the Other in desire as a generous gesture that acknowledges the radical alterity and autonomy of the Other. Indeed, the desire that Levinas speaks of “is a desire that can not be satisfied” by taking a portion of an appetitive object that has been the stake in a mimetic standoff, since desire is not a lack but, rather, the “I” moving to apprehend an alterity that it understands as beyond its capacity to apprehend (34). This movement is, Levinas posits, the point at which language appears:

The separated being . . . searches after the other. . . . Such a situation is language. Truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him. Language which does not touch the other . . . reaches the other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him. . . . Separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the categories of the idea of infinity or metaphysics. (62)

Initially, GA seems to align with Levinas’s primordial vision of the distinct, desiring, and language-using “I.” As already noted, Gans asserts in *Originary Thinking* that “[t]he birth of the self within the communal context defines it against this context” (18). GA’s insistence on

the self's constitution in a "private imaginary space [that is] independent of the community"—a space which contrasts with the self's real alienation from the public centre that generates "*originary resentment* . . . [which Gans calls] the first mode of self-consciousness" (18)—affirms the interdividual movement of desire in history (that is the totality of being animate in deferred mimetic conflict) as the pre-condition for a discrete selfhood. For GA, the individual is first distinguished from its conspecifics by the ambivalent mixture of mimetic interest in, and fear of, the Other. This fear derives from the totality of the real insofar as it manifests a primordial chaos where violence is as likely as coitus and the lack of symbolic distinctions holds neither possibility back.

Thus, it is at this point Levinas's understanding of a primordial, sociable, sign-using *existent* (or selfhood) seems to depart somewhat from that of GA. *Existents*, Levinas explains, "have an identity 'before' eternity, before the accomplishment of history, before the fullness of time . . . [and] exist in relationship . . . but on the basis of themselves and not on the basis of the totality," which includes the history of conflict or of conflict deferred (23). Levinas's concept of a supra-history—where discrete *existents* abide in relationship to each other—supposes a self prior to the originary self born of GA's originary resentment. This primordial self emerges through positivity in relation to the other and through the generosity of desire as opposed to the subject's experience of the Heideggerian negativity, or "lateness," that GA deems equivalent to originary resentment or fear of violence (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 19). Nevertheless, there may yet be an accommodation between GA's and Levinas's respective conceptions of the subject, as—Levinas explains of the self—"[t]his 'beyond' the totality and objective experience" of the excessive, infinite being of the *existent* "is . . . not to be described in a purely negative fashion" as, say, *not-totality*; rather, "[i]t is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (23). Thus, in the same way that GA proposes that "[t]he minimal condition of the perpetuation of language in time" occurs as "members of the community recall . . . the sign" (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 18), Levinas affirms that *existents'* experience of totality and history occurs in face-dependent language, as *existents* call and respond to one another and, thereby, move towards each other in desire. For Levinas, these desiring encounters between *existents* are always an overflow of totality that expand infinitely and result in transcendence emerging out of immanence: "To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object. But to think what does not have the lineaments of an object is in reality to do more or better than think" (49).

* * *

In Levinas's conception, desire is the call and response that occurs between the distinct subject and the Other, wherein the Other inspires desire in an entirely separate subject. In the conceptions of Nietzsche and Bataille, desire is an underlying, unifying element of reality that precedes, constitutes, and subsumes both subject and other. For these thinkers, language, including discourse, and knowledge—in its attempt to impose order on the fluid

movement of desire—succeeds only provisionally and only insofar as language’s success reveals the sovereign reality of the underlying, unifying totality. Confronting these conceptions of desire as an extension of immanent totality, Girard’s and GA’s theories of imitative, language-generating desire provide a means to trace the movement of desire as, simultaneously, a generative force in immanent reality *and* the reality of distinct individuals’ transcendent escapes from totality toward a radical alterity. An interpretation of the tension between theories of transcendence and immanence that draws on the elaboration of desire’s mimetic nature (as Girard and GA do) highlights the way the movement of desire—as an element of totality—propels subjects beyond the apparent limits of their own being and being itself. Indeed, exploring the binary distinction between immanence and transcendence with the conceptions of desire afforded by Girard and GA may ultimately allow for the deconstruction of the opposition between immanence and transcendence and the formation of a third category: transimmanence.^[3] Thinking about desire in transimmanent terms has been Girard’s and GA’s tacit practice in elaborating their originary hypotheses, which tend to produce an ethics that respects the fundamental integrity of the individual subject by refusing to over-determine her and her possible relations to the Other. Formulations of the nature of desire—like those of Girard and GA—that acknowledge desire’s transcendent trajectory while enumerating the multiform, immanent impasses of resentment, dispel needless misunderstandings in discussions of the metaphysicality of desire. Following on Girard and GA, a conception of transimmanent desire might serve to identify new configurations of originary resentment in totality, being, and history while discovering ways in which these configurations of resentment are evaded through the positive movement of desire towards Others—those primordial subjects who remain coequals in their unique manifestations of the infinite.

Works Cited

Bataille, Georges. *The Bataille Reader*. Edited by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

—. *Guilty*. Translated by Bruce Boone. The Lapis Press, 1988.

Botting, Fred and Scott Wilson. Introduction. *The Bataille Reader*. Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Derrida, Jacques. “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve.” *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Routledge, 2006.

Gans, Eric. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford UP, 1993.

—. *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day*. Stanford UP, 2008.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.

—. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford UP, 1978.

—. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.

Geuss, Raymond. Introduction. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge UP, 1999.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "From How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Lechte, John. "Donna Haraway." *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Post-Humanism*. Routledge, 2008.

Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Excription." *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991), 62.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge UP, 1999.

Oughourlian, Jean-Michel. *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*. Stanford UP, 1991.

Siebers, Tobin. *The Ethics of Criticism*. Cornell UP, 1988.

Spinoza, Benedict. "Ethics." *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. 2 vols. Edited and Translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton UP, 1985.

Taylor, Mark Lewis. "Philosophical Note: On Jean-Luc Nancy's 'Transimmanence.'" *Mark Lewis Taylor: Professor of Theology and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary*. Blog. 15 Jan, 2013.
marklewistaylor.net/blog/philosophical-note-on-jean-luc-nancys-transimmanence/

Yar, Majid. "Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
iep.utm.edu/kojeve/

Notes

[1] The term “interdividual” was introduced by Girard in Section III of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978) and “interdividuality” and “interdividual desire” are used by Jean-Michel Oughourlian throughout his elaboration of Girard’s Mimetic Theory in *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis* (1991), which explores the way that desire is mimetic desire is never simply confined to the experience of a discrete individual; rather, every individual desires according to the desire of some specific, or collective, other. Desire is always shared among or between individuals.

[2] The note included by the translator of *Totality and Infinity* with reference to the decision to use a capitalized “Other” is important to understanding Levinas’s meaning, so I have included it here: “Le visage d’autrui. With the author’s permission, we are translating ‘autrui’ (the personal Other, the you) by ‘Other,’ and ‘autre’ by ‘other.’ In doing so, we regrettably sacrifice the possibility of reproducing the author’s use of capital or small letters with both these terms in the French text” (fn. p. 24).

[3] In a forthcoming dictionary of Jean-Luc Nancy’s terminology, Mark Lewis Taylor provides the following definition of “[t]ransimmanence,” as “Nancy’s concept for naming and locating the place(s) and movement(s) at work within his unique and expansive notion, ‘the sense of the world.’ If the world’s ‘sense’ is its continual ‘taking place’ . . . always circulating and opening through incessant joining, playing, speaking, sharing, passaging within both the knowing and being of bodies in the world . . . then transimmanence is Nancy’s word for naming these interplaying dynamics and locating them “ (para. 4). Nancy’s “sense of the world” as “taking place” in a multiplicity of material, psychical, and linguistic interactions may be thought of in terms of the movement of interdividual desire, which I have argued contributes to the development of theories of immanence and transcendence for the thinkers discussed in this paper. The term’s definition (as given by Taylor)—which encompasses bodies, locations, and movement—seems to place it close to Bataille’s conception of totality and the posthumanist vision of a totalizing assemblage which involves interdividual desire. However, the definition could just as easily be read as having affinities with Levinas’s vision of transcendence through interdividual desire, as this “sense of the world” involves speaking, sharing, and passaging, which might be thought of as happening between *existents*. Thus, though a thoroughgoing exploration of Nancy’s transimmanence is beyond the scope of this paper, his concept may be a useful tool in further understanding the way that interdividual desire shapes –as Nancy puts it—“the sense of the world.”