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Bone of the Lamb, Blood of the Lamb: 
Ibsen’s *Brand* and Generative Anthropology

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1. Introduction

Generative Anthropology’s primary concern is not with literature but language, i.e., representation, but because literature consists of language that inherently shows the traces of the process by which it arose, GA finds in literature an ideal interlocutor. And among literary genres, perhaps the one most apt to engage GA in dialog is tragedy. As Eric Gans writes in *The End of Culture*: "If the epic converted myth into literature and the lyric did the same for choral marriage-hymns and the like, with tragedy, literature penetrated into the very heart of ritual: the sacrifice whose origin is traceable to the originary event." (Gans, 1985, 280)

In any given epoch, then, whether ancient Greece, Renaissance England, 17th century France, or 19th century Scandinavia, one might somewhat abstractly understand the function of tragedy to have been that of reformulating the originary event in the terms of the current culture’s ethical understanding. This event, as readers of Eric Gans’ work recall, is hypothesized to have occurred in a moment of stymied impulse when the protohuman group was arrested in its hungry convergence on an object of collective desire by the countervailing force of that desire itself. Each individual was prevented from reaching out to take sole possession of the object by the assembled force of the encircling ring of identical, i.e., mimetic, desires. In that moment of pause and rigid attention, the group found itself compelled to designate the object to itself—that is, convert it from mere instinctually targeted thing to cognized sign by an operation that was both magical and radically paradoxical. Indeed, it produced the fundamental paradox of which all human culture was to become the endlessly complex unfolding. That the object had to be lost as thing in order to be recovered as sign is the conundrum which religious ritual celebrates--fixing on the aspect of transformation, of transubstantiation--and secular ritual, i.e., tragedy, deplores--fixing on the aspects of loss and arbitrary victimage. In this issue of *Anthropoetics*, which is devoted to the topic of religion, I would like to bring Henrik Ibsen’s religious tragedy *Brand* (1866) into a kind of dialog with Generative Anthropology--with the hope of contrasting their views regarding some of the religious implications that flow from the double nature of the human sign. I find that GA helps clarify the radically anthropological nature of Ibsen’s drama, just as I also find that the anthropological
Ibsen poses certain fundamental questions to GA.

That Ibsen’s tragic sense was rooted in an intuition concerning the fatal entanglements generated by the paradoxical nature of the human sign is a fact not often credited in the critical literature, despite the fact that the line from Peer Gynt, "Only what’s lost may be held forever," is frequently cited as kind of a gnomic concentrate of his fundamental insights. Elsewhere I have written of Ibsen’s poetic apprenticeship which, as recapitulated in an autobiographical poem entitled Players, portrays the process of poetic election as having occurred by way of the painful experience of mimetic rivalry. Here Ibsen suggests that he became a dramatist by discovering at first hand that the object of desire can never, by definition, be obtained. The glamour which surrounds the object derives solely from the fact that it is contested by another. Thus personally attuned to the conundrum of the original scene, Ibsen went on in his major historical and philosophical dramas to explore the implications of mimetic rivalry as they operate in and among cultural systems. In Brand (1866), Ibsen wrestled with the ominous fact that ethical systems, i.e., religions--the very systems by which society attempts to pacify the violence generated by mimetic rivalry--tend by a further turn of the generative paradox to become mimetic rivals themselves. The sign which cleared a space and provided a moment of peace in the originary scene becomes in turn an object of desire because of its mystifying power. Between Christians and Jews, for example, the sign of the lamb is just such a disputed sign. Because Christians claim this sign of peace in an exclusionary manner, they recharge it with the very violence which the lamb gave his life to quell, i.e., the death of the first born.

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2. The Sacred, Religion, Tragedy

I would like to take a slightly more differentiated look at the process by which the central object becomes sacred. Two moments in the originary scenario can be distinguished: the first when the object holds the group at bay, the second when it serves as the substrate for the transcendental sign. The first moment is that of impending violence, the second that of the advent of peace. When it first magnetizes the group with its presence the object is like a bomb, charged with the appetitive charge of collective desire. If it does not explode, i.e., if the group does not tear itself to pieces, it is because it has generated a sign which can be known by all equally, i.e., shared in the mind. This mental communion leads to a third moment when the object can be shared equitably in concrete fact. Thus, somewhat in the manner of the prototypical scheme envisaged by René Girard, at least as regards outcomes, the object gives itself to the group in a way which saves it from its own incomprehensible violence. Incomprehensible because collective. No individual within a group has a 360 degree apprehension of the situation. The group’s violence, whether manifest or latent, of which s/he is only one component part, flows around him/her with the impersonality of the divine. And again as René Girard has often averred, the radical change produced by the sacred object from a situation of imminent destruction to one of established peace is of such magnitude that it registers to the group as a miracle. Ensuing religious rites, as both Gans and Girard agree, are the formal reiteration of this magical (i.e., not comprehended) transformation.

While the affective charge of this transformation may be difficult for modern people to grasp, the Bible contains several episodes that give us at least a hint of its impact upon people of a primarily religious imagination. The example I would like to cite not only illustrates this immediate point, but will be relevant to my subsequent discussion. The example I have in mind is that of the Moabite king mentioned in 2 Kings 3:24-27:
But when they came to the Israelite camp, the Israelites sallied out and attacked them, driving the Moabites in headlong flight. The Israelites pushed forward into Moab, destroying as they went. They razed the towns to the ground; they littered every good piece of land with stones, each man casting a stone on it; they stopped up every spring of water; they cut down all the fine trees; and they harried Moab until only in Kir-hareseth were any buildings left standing, and even this city the slingers surrounded and attacked. When the Moabite king saw that the war had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred men armed with swords to cut a way through to the king of Aram, but the attempt failed. Then he took his eldest son, who would have succeeded him, and offered him as a whole-offering [burnt offering] on the city wall. There was such great consternation among the Israelites that they struck camp and returned to their own land.

The fear inspired in the Israelites by this act of royal filicide gives us an index of the affective charge inherent in the religious sign. The killing of the boy becomes a sign of such potency that it causes them, on the very point of victory, to abandon their campaign and flee homeward in fear. As in the originary scene, the transmutation of the central object into sacred sign imposes peace. But with a crucial difference. Notice that this sign gains its potency by playing off an earlier sacred sign. For the Israelites the killing of the Moabite prince must have struck them as an inversion of their own founding sacred sign, the non-killing of Isaac. To the Israelites the sight of this king killing his first born son and heir, the being most central to the Moabite kingdom, must have struck them as a fundamental violation of the sacred order of things, an inversion of sacred centrality itself, so to speak.

In addition to giving us a hint of the affective power of the sacred, this example also helps us think about the relation of religion to tragedy. For when we consider this Moabite king, we of course think of Agamemnon, or Euripides’ Heracles, or, for that matter, the mothers in Euripides’ The Bacchae. And then comparing these accounts of child sacrifice, both the religious and tragic ones, with GA’s hypothetical originary scene, we are given a sudden, startling hint concerning the nature of the sign. If at first it arrests violence it does so not by overcoming it but by transmuting it to a state of permanent virtuality. Within the peaceful sign flickers the ember of violence that gave rise to it.. In a new situation, in a new configuration of forces, the ember flares to a blaze and the sign recharges itself by crossing back over the line from metaphor into concrete fact. It wouldn’t have served for the Moabite king merely to perform an animal sacrifice on top of the wall, for example, recalling to mind the sign by which Isaac was replaced on the altar. That sign would not have been sufficiently powerful to arrest the Hebrews. Only by dipping the sign back in the human blood which gave birth to it could the king invoke its full power. What does this suggest to us about the long-term relationship between human beings and their sacred signs? Generative Anthropology finds in the equality of access to the sign which is proffered to all in the originary scene a hopeful prognosis for human culture, as if such equality, when sufficiently clarified and raised up in consciousness, might ultimately lead to a condition of mutual reciprocity for all humanity. But for such an outcome to occur, the would have to somehow overcome the antithetical energies imparted to it at its origin. In suggesting this outcome as realizable within historical time Generative Anthropology is of course placing itself in continuity with the eschatology of Judaism which finds in the name of God a whole and unitary means of salvation. But the intuition of tragedy as it repeatedly arises in the course of Western history stands in direct opposition to this understanding of the sign. Where religion points to the sign as the instrument of peace, tragedy in turn points to it not only as the pre-condition but under certain circumstances as in fact the cause of war.
Tragedy does this most insistently, of course, in the aftermath of a given war when it looks to the partisanship which sparked it and makes of it a non-partisan analysis. Eric Gans writes: "Tragedy first reached a high-cultural level in a period of patriotic fervor--that of the Persian war--and it could surpass this level only by becoming independent of civic considerations." (Gans, 1985, 290). By extrapolation, we might say that tragic authors in every age are those who, when they contemplate the bloody facts of war, realize that religion which keeps peace within the group is somehow unable to accomplish this task between groups, for obviously there are few wars of historical record where the religious expedient employed by the Moabite king would have produced a comparable effect. This leads the tragic author to bring the lesson home and inquire into the sacred mechanisms undergirding his own culture.

Such, at least, seems to have the process that led Ibsen to write Brand.

3. Ibsen’s situation in 1865

Ibsen wrote Brand in 1865 in Italy, fifteen years after his first play, Cataline. He had left Norway in 1864 for a year’s study abroad. Stopping for a few weeks in Denmark, he was resident in Copenhagen during the weeks when the Germans attacked Denmark’s southernmost province, Schleswig, and appropriated it. Denmark appealed to Sweden and Norway to come to its defense, as they had promised to do, but faced with the superior might of Germany, both refused. Ibsen was appalled. A patriot and an enthusiast of pan-Scandinavianism, he had spent the past fifteen years of his career writing plays on national romantic topics. The general program for these works had been to portray historical Scandinavian kings and warriors, whatever their faults, as figures of great stature and consequence, possessed of a "greatness" that might serve as an incentive to modern Norway in its first years of independence and national self-definition. This phase of his work Ibsen brought to conclusion with The Pretenders (1864), a play about Norway’s civil war in the fourteenth century. In this resolutely ambiguous work, Ibsen presents national unity as a worthy ideal while at the same clearly showing the lynch-mob mechanism which the victorious King Håkon found himself constrained to employ to achieve it. Now, a year after completing The Pretenders, faced with the German attack on Denmark-- and Norway’s reaction to it-- Ibsen suddenly found himself having to rethink his understanding of national identity and of his role as Norway’s more or less self-elected national dramatist.

Full of compassion for Denmark and of indignation toward Germany, Ibsen settled in Italy and tried to formulate some sort of artistic response to the situation. He worked hard for a year but with minimal results--producing only a fragment of a narrative poem, now known as The Epic Brand, in which the figure of a passionately idealistic clergyman by the name of Brand takes up rhetorical arms against Norway’s torpid, unheroic, and self-centered citizens. Month after month Ibsen labored on the poem, and at last ground to a halt. Then, all at once, during a visit to St. Peter’s, Ibsen experienced a moment of inspiration that changed everything. I would like to present this event in the words of Vigdis Ystad, a noted Norwegian Ibsen scholar, from her recent book "--livets endløse gåde" Ibsens dikt og drama (1997) ["life’s infinite mystery" Ibsen’s poetry and drama]. Ystad writes:

After about a year the work was still in a rudimentary form. The poet was in despair. But then a decisive event occurred, which Ibsen has described in a letter of September 12, 1865 to his fellow poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. "Then one day I went into St. Peter’s--I was in Rome on an errand--and there, suddenly, the form for what I had to
say came to me, forcefully and clearly." In the same letter he wrote the famous words, "I read nothing but the Bible,--it is powerful and strong!" In other words, Ibsen describes a sudden and revitalizing inspiration that caused him to put aside The Epic Brand. During the summer and fall of 1865, he worked on his great verse drama Brand in a state of near intoxication.

Scholars debate about the nature of Ibsen's experience in St. Peter's and its impact on the finished work. Most frequently they interpret it as a religious experience, and place it in relation to the religious problematic at the heart of the drama. (Ystad, 1996, 130, my translation)

A little later in her discussion Ystad adds this interesting note:

That the work’s external form underlines its religious themes is fairly clear. Hallvard Lie has suggested that the verse patterns of the drama seem to have been influenced, among other things, by the Catholic Requiem Mass, in particular the Dies Irae. (Ystad, 131)

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I wanted to present this event in Ystad’s words because she succinctly frames it with the pertinent quotation from Ibsen and the relevant questions concerning the nature of Ibsen’s inspiration. As a final note, however, concerning the background of the work, I would like to point to a significant symmetry in Ibsen’s experience of the Danish/Prussian conflict. Not only did Ibsen happen to be staying in Copenhagen when the attack occurred, he also happened, some months later, to be staying in Germany, when the victorious troops came home. He writes in a letter:

I was in Berlin when the victory parade took place [in early May 1864 after the Prusso-Danish War], and I saw the mob spit into the mouths of the [Danish] Dybbøl cannon, and it seemed to me a sign of how history will one day spit in the faces of Sweden and Norway for their part in the affair. (Ibsen, 1)

Although full of partisan feeling when he wrote these words, we understand that Ibsen’s objective situation as a non-participant observer in both Berlin and Copenhagen in fact allowed him to experience the nationalist passions on both sides, the symmetrical fervors, so to speak, which meant that later in a more reflective moment in Italy he was able to hold them together analytically in his mind.

4. The plot of Brand and its form

The plot of Brand is complicated and difficult to narrate because everything in the work carries allegorical significance, so that even the descriptions of landscape--mountain and valley, sunshine and shadow--are charged with second-level meanings. It is a reading drama not intended for the stage, its language charged with echoes, allusions, cunning word plays, and cross references, so that as with any successful poem its meaning is elusive and unstable. But stripped to its bare narrative, the story is as follows: Brand, a Christian minister is returning to his childhood village. He is driven by a sense of mission, which is to awaken his countrymen to the moral necessity of a spirit of self-sacrifice, what he calls offervillighed, i.e., a willingness to sacrifice. His motto is All or nothing, which of course never means nothing but always all. Everywhere he is met with resistance. The one exception is Agnes, the
fiancée of his childhood friend, Ejnar. When she hears Brand engage Ejnar in debate, she is so impressed by Brand’s moral seriousness that she switches her allegiance and love to him. Eventually she and Brand marry and have a son, Alf, who in Act 3 falls ill. The village doctor tells Brand that to save his son’s life, he must leave the dark, unhealthy north and take him to the south. Brand is eager to comply but encounters resistance from the villagers, who have taken him as their spiritual leader and interpret his departure as a betrayal of a sacred trust. For an agonizing moment, Brand hesitates, torn between his paternal and spiritual obligations, but then decides to follow his own lofty motto and sacrifice his son’s life. Alf dies. This proof of spiritual valor augments Brand’s authority among the populace, and brings him into conflict with the local civic and religious authorities. Defying them and responding to the people, Brand supervises the building of a huge new church in town, but when it comes time to consecrate it, realizes that his vision has been too small, too mundane. He casts the keys to the church door into the fjord and leads the villagers up into the mountain, promising them a higher form of spirituality, again premised on a higher notion of self-sacrifice. For a brief enthusiastic moment the people follow him, but when the first pangs of hunger set in they turn on him and curse him for a false prophet. They take up stones and Brand narrowly escapes with his life. Brand has so obviously merged with his prototype, Jesus, that one of his followers, the expelled Gypsy girl, Gerd, falls to her knees and tries to worship him as the returned Messiah. Rejecting her worship, Brand climbs higher into the mountains, and there in a penultimate moment encounters the specters of dead family members who have all died as a result of his moral crusade. i.e., the ghosts of his son Alf and his wife Agnes (who died as the result of losing her son), and of his mother, whom he allowed to die unshriven and unattended because she was unwilling to heed his call to renounce her earthly goods. Facing the glacier, Brand suffers a final agony of indecision as to whether he has been guided or misguided in his spiritual striving. By way of answer he is buried in an avalanche of snow, unleashed by a rifle shot of the crazy Gerd, as a heavenly voice responds to his question with the words: "He is Deus Caritatis."

One advantage of stripping Brand to its bare outline, I think, is that thus reduced it offers us a dim but plausible clue as to the nature of Ibsen’s inspiration in St. Peter’s. Let’s turn for a moment to the crux of the play, the conclusion of Act III, where Brand informs Agnes of his decision to remain with his parishioners, leaving her to draw the fatal consequences in actual fact. The passage reads:

Agnes. [lifting the child high in her arms]

God on high! The sacrifice thou cravest

I dare raise up towards Thy Heaven!

Lead me through the terrors of this world!

[She goes into the house.]

Brand. [stares unseeingly a short while, bursts into tears, clasps his hands together over his head, throws himself down on the steps and shouts]

Jesus! Jesus! Give me light. (Ibsen, 155)

Surely this scene reminds us of the Offertory of the Mass. Why else would Ibsen have Agnes elevate her
doomed son? Brand’s collapse and anguished prayer ironically recall the priest’s prayerful genuflection after the elevation of the host. And why otherwise does the play conclude with Brand being rejected and nearly stoned by his followers? Is this not in consonance with the prologue of John’s Gospel-- "He came unto his own and his own received him not"--which used to be recited as the "last Gospel" of the Mass? And, finally, why the Latin phrase which ends the play if not so serve as a vague echo of the "Deo Gratias" which formerly closed the Latin Mass? We recall that the critic Hallvard Lie found a close resemblance between Brand’s verse form and that of a Requiem Mass. My suggestion would be that the parallels extend to the form as well. I think, in other words, that when Ibsen stepped into St. Peter’s, where in all likelihood a Mass was in progress, he had a flash in which he understood that if he cast his Brand in the form of a Mass, it would, purely in its form, pose a fundamental question concerning the paradoxical link between Christian culture and war by subtly lifting up the culture’s central religious ritual for esthetic consideration. For here in St. Peter’s, Ibsen found himself standing in Christian Europe’s central temple and observing with eyes undulled by habit a sacrifice of substitutionary atonement in which the Son is offered up to the Father for the benefit of all, a theologically non-symbolic reiteration of a sacred process not unlike that effected by the Moabite king. (Non-symbolic because Christ is really present under the appearance of bread and wine.) Perhaps Ibsen, like the Israelites, was jolted. For although Ibsen was a Lutheran who was not in the habit of attending church, he was a thorough Bible reader and he had been precisely informed by Paul as to the sense of what takes place on the Catholic altar:

And so, since we have now been justified by Christ’s sacrificial death, we shall all the more certainly be saved by him from final retribution." (Romans, 5:9)

5. The Mass as an exemplary instance of the sacrificial dialectic of cultural forms

Two features characterize the human signifier: it is arbitrary and differential. The signifier is always this not that, the this proposing itself through some aspect of non-identity with that rather than through some inherent or transcendent quality of self-sameness. Which is to say that human signification proceeds through dialectic, i.e., argument, which at the level of words merely results in differentiation--Pa is not Ma--but at the level of culture always produces a winner and a loser. In its conception of the founding scene of human meaning, Generative Anthropology provides a narrative which, as Eric Gans tells it, underlines the potential for peace inherent in the cognitive shift from thing to sign, but Tragedy, I am suggesting, takes us back to the same scene and the same story, and its reading always emphasizes the arbitrary--that is to say, sacrificial, that is to say, magical--nature of the object offered up for meaning. As Tragedy contemplates the provisional resolution of conflictual tension by means of the sacrificial signifier, it intuits the putting-in-place of a logic with implications of perpetual and lethal recursion. Eric Gans writes

The entire course of the dialectic of linguistic form, up to and including the supralingustic forms of discourse, can indeed be understood as a progressive revelation of he arbitrary character of the linguistic sign, and, at the same time of the (proto) dialectical symmetry of man’s relation to linguistic presence, the evolution of form being at the same time a revelation of human content. (Gans, 1981, 267 )

As an object lesson in the dialectical tension at the core of the human signifier, consider the streak of
lamb’s blood daubed by the Hebrews on the door posts of their houses on the eve of their exit from Egypt. To the Angel of Death this single sign conveyed a double message: a) Don’t kill the first born son inside this house. b) Do kill the first born son in the unmarked house next door. The lamb gives up its blood to produce both aspects (arbitrary & differentiating) of human meaning simultaneously. And at every Passover meal since that first blood smear, a lamb bone has been placed on the table as a sacrificial sign of recognition of that first sacrificial sign of liberation. Now this of course is this same lamb which in turn, i.e., appropriated and re-defined, becomes the founding signifier of the Christian Mass. The logic driving this act of symbolic permutation is animated by the utopian hope that it might constitute the final turn of the sacrificial dialectic, for Jesus, in the narrative lens of the New Testament authors, is positioned within the scene of the Last Supper as containing all aspects of the sign within himself in a perfect manner, i.e., finished and non-differentiating. He is both priest and victim, center and periphery, both slain and not slain, the first born son who dies and the first born son who lives. It’s a symbolic operation which re-writes both the Abraham/Isaac and the Passover scenes of Judaism in an to attempt to free itself from Judaism at the same stroke, defining itself against the Passover meal by an act of discrimination as if it might thereby free itself from sacrificial contamination. Indeed, this is precisely Paul’s trope, that the dough of the Mass might somehow not be leavened with the dough of the Passover:

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Have you not heard the saying, ‘A little leaven leavens all the dough’? Get rid of the old leaven and then you will be a new batch of unleavened dough. Indeed you already are, because Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. So we who observe the festival must not use the old leaven, the leaven of depravity and wickedness, but only the unleavened bread which is sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians: 6-8)

But notice that at the very moment that Paul tries to disentangle the two leavens, the Christian and the Jewish, he brings them into contact with each other through invidious comparison. The Jesus of the Gospels, of course, had preceded him in this maneuver, at least in the New Testament textual sequence, by discriminating himself from his spiritual brother Judas, when he dipped the unleavened bread into his cup at his last supper, prior to its consecration, and handed it to his betrayer, thereby marking him as the expelled one, doomed to suicide, whose removal from the scene could open a space in which the transubstantiation might occur without taint. Given this sacrificial prelude, the Mass, which on the theological level attempts to undo or overcome difference by containing all differences within its complex single signifier, on a cultural level obviously instigates a new differentiation whereby the "old" Jews, faced with the "new" Jews who have re-defined themselves as Christians, now find themselves shifted into the place of the Egyptians, i.e., into the house not marked with the blood of the Lamb, and thereby defined as "the leaven of depravity and wickedness."

Ibsen, I imagine, as he stood within the baroque enclosure of St. Peter’s, his eye moving from Michaelangelo’s Moses to his Pietà by way of the high altar, suddenly grasped in a flash that the religious field of culture consists of a closed loop in which symbolic figures change their valences from plus to minus depending upon propinquity or substitution, but that the logic is always sacrificial and the sum total constant. If the role of ancient Greek tragedy was to lift up the sacrificial basis of culture to aesthetic scrutiny, the role of a modern, northern, Protestant tragic artist was to point to the sacrificial logic by which Judaism had been appropriated and re-inscribed within Christianity, not to vindicate the one against the other, but to show how together they formed a closed symbolic loop whose effect, in time of war or impending war, tended to stimulate rather than to abate violence, whistle up the angel of death,
so to speak. For, again, the datum Ibsen was struggling to decipher had to do with the clash of Christian armies.

6. YHWH, Gans’ reading of the name of God, Moses, priesthood, Brand’s name.

When Moses, the liberator and lawgiver, asks YHWH, who has appeared to him in the form of a burning bush, by what name he wishes to be known to his people, YHWH instructs Moses to say that his name is "I am who I am" (or in other translations, "I am who I will be"). Eric Gans has analyzed this exchange in his *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (1990), and seen it as marking a major advance in the dialectic of representational forms:

God’s "I am who I am" affirms the permanence of the imaginary scene as a prerequisite not only of linguistic communication, but above all of human relations. The God who "is what he is" is the God who exists only to maintain an imaginary scene purged of any preconceived central object. (Gans, 1990, 64)

In YHWH’s declaration of pure self-identity Gans sees the center of the original scene of representation presenting itself as such, as a kind pure potential-for-representation, as if freed from the necessity of differential definition:

It is no longer a matter of replacing the Egyptian gods by another god, even if he be unique, but of substituting for the center closed by the rival Other an open center that is a pure locus of presence. (Gans, 1990, 62)

In making this claim Gans is obviously looking at the scene through religious eyes, i.e., in a manner similar to the Paul of the two leavens, as if there could be a Jewish "locus of presence" which might be utterly freed from its Egyptian antecedent. Now to this, of course, Gans might reply that in itself the "pure locus of presence" is indeed pure, a space cleared of concrete idols and so available to abstract thought. But in order to give this reading Gans must neglect two things: 1) the embeddedness of the scene within a textual and historical context, and 2) the force of dialectic which even in the absence of a concrete sign continues to operate in potentia... Let me take these points in order.

In focusing on YHWH's "I am who am," Gans takes only half of YHWH's self definition. For YHWH goes on to say:

God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.’" Exod. 13: 15

In other words, the "locus of pure presence" is situated within a line of patriarchs, a line of fathers, whose distinguishing characteristics are a) that they did not kill their first-born sons b) but instead instigated rivalry among their sons, setting brother against brother for the long term benefit of the national group. In this stratagem, of course, they were following the example of the God of Genesis, who obviously could have accepted the sacrificial smoke of both Cain and Abel, but instead chose to ignite the fire of
resentment in the heart of the more enlightened brother by showing a preference for blood sacrifice. Now the fact that these tribal fathers did not sacrifice their first born sons, as was perhaps the (occasional) practice among other tribes in the area, e.g., the cults of Moloch and perhaps Baal, is obviously in our eyes a cultural advance, but it is also one which, since this abstention first occurred at YHWH's arbitrary behest, must always be understood as being instantly and arbitrarily reversible. In other words, within human culture filicide is not some archaic remnant, some by-passed, benighted phase of development, but an ever present potentiality whenever the Center requires it. For the point, as Jewish commentators on the Akedah (binding of Isaac) always insist, is not the killing or non-killing of Isaac, but rather Abraham’s faith and perfect obedience. Which means that "throughout all generations " the son’s life must remain forfeit in principle. (Some midrashim say that Isaac was killed not by the knife but by the fire, since the sacrificial fire would already have been lighted before he was placed on it. See Robin M. Jensen. "The Binding or Sacrifice of Isaac--How Jews and Christians See Differently." Bible Review, Vol IX, Number 5, October 1993.)

For how else could the Center ever raise an army?

My second objection to viewing "I am who am" as disembodied center--which, to be sure, in the abstract, it is--is that it is posited without regard to the periphery which is its necessary concomitant, despite Gans’ own assertion that the model of linguistic presence is the model for human relations. To which Gans might reply that for the moment his concern was only with one half of the equation, with the potentiality offered by the emptied center for unconditioned representability. To which I would reply that the humans for whom representation thus becomes a larger option are situated on the periphery as overshadowing conditioning factors of the center. What effect does this swept-clean center have on them? A glance at Exodus suggests that when the Center becomes utterly central and utterly pure, then, like a convex lens, it concentrates the energy of mimetic rivalry which is ever active on the periphery into a focused potential for maximum violence. If the sacred object of the original scene could be thought of as a bomb that blessedly did not explode, the abstract and purified object who speaks to (and then through) Moses can be thought of as a far larger device that periodically (at divine behest) goes off and rips through the Periphery with devastating effect. For although Moses had what we (and one dead Egyptian official) might call a bad temper before his encounter with YHWH, that meeting filled him with a potential for absolute rage (which Michaelangelo, by the way, thanks to a translation error, depicted on his Moses’ forehead as two bulging horns). Exodus 32: 25-29

Moses saw that the people were out of control and that Aaron had laid them open to the secret malice of their enemies. He took his place at the gate of the camp and said, 'Who is on the LORD's side? Come here to me'; and the Levites all rallied to him. He said to them, 'The LORD the God of Israel has said: Arm yourselves, each of you, with his sword. Go through the camp from gate to gate and back again. Each of you kill brother, friend, neighbor.' The Levites obeyed, and about three thousand of the people died that day. Moses said, 'You have been installed as priests to the LORD today, because you have turned each against his own son and his own brother and so have brought a blessing this day upon yourselves.'

In short, the center as "pure locus of presence" translates into pure potentiality for infinite sacrificiality on the periphery, each priest, as agent of the center, a potentially consuming flame sprung from the non-consuming central fire. Which leads us back to Ibsen’s priest, who seems to have been named in recognition of this precise dialectic. Notice that Brand has no surname. To call him Brand Olsen, for
example, would have obscured his quality of allegorical essence. His name in Norwegian means fire, as in conflagration, and is cognate with the German word of the same spelling and meaning. In Ibsen’s German Bible, Brand is the first half of the word for sacrifice, literally "burnt offering," as for example in God’s command to Abraham in Genesis 22:2:

8


God said, ‘Take your son, your one and only son Isaac whom you love, and to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the heights which I shall show you.

In Ibsen’s play, Brand’s characteristic activity is to engage every person he meets in a no-holds-barred debate with the goal of demonstrating the moral superiority of an ethic of voluntary self-sacrifice, citing as compelling precedent both Isaac and Jesus as cognate examples. In other words, Brand, as spokesman for the center, necessarily becomes the rival of everyone of the periphery. Thus he stands as the embodiment of the paradoxical nature of the religious sign, noted above: namely to stand as spark and wind to the conflagration it attempts to quell. Or, as Eric Gans writes of Jesus: "He who comes to abolish ethical difference arrogates to himself by that very act an absolute difference." (Gans, 1990, 99)

7. What does God want?

Brand and Eric Gans seem to agree that the telos of religion, in so far as one might extrapolate it in a worldly sense, is perfect human reciprocity, each giving him- or herself for the other. Gans, as a philosopher/anthropologist who, standing to one side of religion and studying the dialectic of its historical forms, would seem to be tacitly suggesting that such a goal might perhaps be accomplished in an eventual aftermath of religion when, by a final cognitive turn, religion would have offered up to humans its abstract essence. On the basis of Brand, I would guess that Ibsen, as thinker, would have found himself in profound sympathy with Gans’s vision but on the other hand would have found in the sacrificiality of the originary scene a fatally conditioning factor trip wired to rise up and reassert itself. The bloodless sign entails the bloody sign, the two linked to each other as the plus and minus virtually present in any sign, even the most abstract. For although Christianity would like to posit itself as the replacement for Judaism in taintless Aufhebung, it finds it must always leaven the new dough with the old, for that’s the only leaven there is. At the risk of stating the obvious, let me recall that the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity are not two Gods but one. Jesus prays to the God of Abraham. The God of Abraham acknowledges Jesus as his beloved son at his baptism in the Jordan. On the cross Jesus calls out to the God of all the patriarchs when in the words of David he asks why his Father has abandoned him, showing that even in extremis he is operating within the logic of Judaism, making sense of his situation as an unreprieved Isaac.

When Jesus’ death in turn gets raised up as the founding sign of Christianity, it is presented as an overcoming of its sacrificial antecedent, Jesus himself perhaps attempting to accomplish this operation by proposing bread and wine as stand-ins for either animal or human sacrifice. But in this, we read, he was blocked by his father who, having stayed the hand of Abraham, apparently now needed a more
potent sign of differentiation.

Many readers, of course, are loath to impute such motives to God, but not Paul, the new Church’s first theologian:

> With all this in mind, what are we to say? If God is on our side, who is against us? He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all: how can he fail to lavish every other gift upon us. (Romans 8:31-32)

And ever afterward, whenever a theologian has attempted to understand this rite of sacrificial substitution in a less sacrificial or sanguinary sense, Rome has refused the metaphorical shift, insisting under pain of excommunication on the presence of real blood, real body, under the accidental appearances of bread and wine. Thus Ibsen’s Brand was standing on firm Pauline ground when, just prior to sacrificing his own son, he calls out in wrathful indignation to the timid Protestants who were trying to stay his hand: "Humane? Was God humane to Jesus Christ?" To which, of course there are theological and other rebuttals, but the point is that Brand speaks the obvious sense of the text, not its subtle or idealistic deconstruction. Perhaps Ibsen himself provided a rebuttal of his fiery preacher with his "He is the God of love" which ends the play. But if it is a rebuttal, notice that its provenance is not of this earth where the fires of mimetic rivalry are variously damped or driven by the variously (i.e., differentially) sacrificial modes of culture, and where, over the long haul, they grow progressively hotter and larger.

8. Conclusion

In short, the question which Ibsen’s *Brand* seems to pose to Generative Anthropology is whether, given its understanding of the sacrificial nature of the originary scene and the originary sign, which is to say of the human sign *tout court*, it can somehow envisage a non-contaminating turn of the dialectic by which representational forms might give way to each other. This is the utopian hope that drives, if not religions, then their theologians. Clearly, such a turn would have to occur in some way other than all prior cultural shifts, i.e., other than by way of mimetic rivalry. And when tragedy reads the Bible, it finds that Judeo-Christianity, which conceives of itself as the solution to the threat of mimetic rivalry, is, or can be in times of trouble-- i.e., more often than not-- its magnifier.

Brand is a priest and a father. At the turning point of the play he finds that, despite his love for his son and his own insight into the moral necessity of not yielding to the inertial pull of culture toward mimetic violence between father and son, he must kill his son. With his keen psychological acuity, Ibsen gives us hints of a whole array of psychological motives for this terrible action, all of which can be reduced to one form or another of mimetic rivalry, but the decisive responsibility for the deed must ultimately be laid at religion’s door. Brand is thrown off his own best instinct by the combined force of the Judeo-Christian cult. Not the moral teachings of Jesus, of course, nor the anti-sacrificial teachings of the Old Testament, but by the dark glamour surrounding child sacrifice as it persists even under prohibition in Judaism or theorized by Paul and his followers in Christianity. In both the New and the Old Testament the impression persists that what God requires of men is at least the willingness to kill their sons as a sign of perfect obedience, for this is what he required of Himself as the precondition of mankind’s salvation. There may be other ways to read these texts, but the sacrificial interpretation lies close at hand, and conventional culture always finds it. The religious sign is inherently ambiguous, not only as to sense but
as to its impulse power, so to speak. Generative Anthropology finds in the suspension of violence provided by the first sign an ultimate hope for humanity; Ibsen finds in the suspended violence, which is religion, a potential for violence forever waiting to unleash itself.

In short, the question which Ibsen’s tragedy may be seen to pose to Generative Anthropology is that of determining in what sense the origin of culture is ultimately determinative. Or, phrased somewhat differently: whether it is possible to credit the human sign with the potentiality to discharge the violence that gave rise to it within the closed loop of contentious human culture.
Irony is attached to this past fall's transferal of the remains of André Malraux to the Panthéon. The desacralized church of St.-Geneviève, recycled by the Revolution for the purpose of storing the ghosts of questioners of old faiths, now contains the body of the man whose most currently relevant achievement is perceived to have been his prediction that religion and not Enlightenment values would make possible and dominate the century that is about to be born. Michel Tournier's novel of the life of Moses appeared during this same autumn, and in an interview published on the occasion, the author excitedly reflected upon what in France has been called "le retour du religieux." "Read the newspapers, and books," he said, "they only speak of God. We are headed towards a century of religion; Malraux was totally right.

And here is Régis Debray, juxtaposing two famous prophesies, the first from Sartre, one the ex-revolutionary now feels to have been embarrassed by another, that of Malraux: "Between [the statements] that Marxism is the unsurpassable horizon of our time.' and 'The twenty-first century will be religious or it will not be,' the course of events seems to suggest that a choice has now been made."

This seemed to have been the only Malraux the year knew anything of. A third such 1996 reference, this from Luc Ferry: "The famous line of Malraux on the possibility of planet-scaled religious event marking the twenty-first century has caused us to speculate endlessly." The man whom Lyotard (plausibly) described as having believed in nothing but himself, is seen as imagining only a posterity that would exclude him, is reassigned by posterity as futurologist of faith.

The timing of the Malraux celebration might have made its opportunistic sense for the Gaullist government, eager for symbolic legitimacy at the moment when the more tangible variety proved unavailable, but it could not have been more curiously off at the moment the prediction of Malraux rushes towards its vast confirmation. As early as 1982 Marc Augé wrote that "the easily perceptible current of the day in France is the intellectual rehabilitation of religion and the Bible." Alain Finkielkraut reported: "And it is in this melancholic climate of farewells to the hopes of modernity that now begins a spectacular renaissance of religious feelings. [ . . . ] History once succeeded God; God has now succeeded his successor." Christian Jambet, formerly of the tradition of "la pensée 68:

"Religious belief has now become a central fact, a way of feeling power where power had almost entirely disappeared. After World War II religion meant the abdication of thought. But it now again has a role in the drama of thought." Ghita Ionescu, writing in the Times Literary Supplement in 1993:"[T]he real sea-change in the modern French moral and mental attitudes is the restoration of the dominant Catholic
spirit." (9) A year later in the same periodical, Henri Astier sought to explain the relative indifference of the French to 300th anniversary of Voltaire's birth: "Since the late 1970s, a markedly spiritual trend has made a comeback in French philosophy, in the writings of authors like Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas." (10) And more than a decade after the first examples of this movement, Jean-Pierre Vernant could observe: "Only ten years ago the people of my generation could be astonished to notice that religion no longer belonged to the past but to the present. One gets used to one's own astonishment, to such an extent that one is no longer astonished. It is true that today the resurgence of religion has taken on a considerable scale." (11)

"Too much God," Hegel famously complained of Spinoza. The charge has echoed through the Left Bank as this current has taken on ever greater vitality. The birthday of Voltaire may have been a dry affair, but this also Parthenoned ghost has retained some residue of his former authority. "Ecrasez l'infâme," the same Debray suggested, as he here contrasts the past with the present: "In Paris, Marxist theory was then all the rage, 'all powerful because it is true.' Its place has now been taken by the sacred and the return to the spiritual in no less terrorist a form. 'Heaven inside our heads' has eclipsed the earth and the Holy Scriptures have pushed aside the duplicated leaflets." (12) A discomforted Julia Kristeva reported on the agenda as of 1984: "At the moment we're in the middle of a regression which is present in the form of a return to the religious, a return of a concept of transcendence, a rehabilitation of spiritualism. It's a vast problem which can be interpreted in various ways. It is not uninteresting. There are now in France all sorts of spiritualistic movements: pro-Christian, pro-Jewish, pro this, pro that." (13) "Sartre was all right until he fell into the hands of the Jews," an early disciple said. (14) At the end of her life, rancorous Simone de Beauvoir described how Sartre spent his last decade discussing the meaning of the Torah with the, on her account, intolerably rude Jewish philosopher Benny Lévy, who like a number of former Maoists sought to reuniversalize through developing an interest in a draconian critique of representation. (15) Related is Sollers's complaint of Simone de Beauvoir's undisguised hostility to the late Sartre's frequentations: "The dubious company he kept. . . former revolutionaries now turned toward God and learning Hebrew. . . It's as if that's what shocks her most---God and Hebrew." Kristeva's husband imagines the words of an urgently indignant final Althusser: "For now the Opium's making a comeback--religion itself. . . That really is the last straw! Where can such a crack in the edifice have sprung from? Such a terrifying leaking away of meaning? Vigilance must have been relaxed. . . God? No Really! Anything but that!" (16) In January of 1996 Catherine Clément seconds the critique of laxity: "The rationalist rigor that has marked the years since the war is now threatened by the onslaught of religion that is not limited to the rise of fundamentalisms in far-off lands." (17) Complaining continues in May of 1996, when Christian Delacampagne wrote: "Alas, we have been flooded with this current return of the religious." (18)

2

Not only have we in this country not taken the measure of this vast phenomenon, with its dozens of figures and hundreds of books, but we have not even so much as honored it with the most uncomprehending, briefly dismissive cringe. (19) Among the most visible early examples was the 1979 appearance of Bernard-Henri Lévy's Le Testament de Dieu, a book that describes itself as owing its reasoning to Girard and Levinas. (20) whose own works have their complex roles in this tradition. Perhaps the earliest example would be the Lacan-inspired theology found in L'Ange, by Christian Jambet and Guy Lardeau. (21) Sartre's 1980 Nouvel Observateur interviews that dealt with his new, warm
feeling about religion provoked the raising of eyebrows already described. (22) Deserving of prominent mention are the numerous books of the Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, (23) as well as the journal Communio, in which he has had a prominent role. Numerous also are the books of the Jewish thinker Daniel Sibony, author of, for example, Le groupe inconscient, (24) La Juive, (25) and Les Trois monothéismes. (26) The books of Sibony, as well as the biblical readings of Mary Balmary--her Le Sacrifice interdit; Freud et la Bible (27) and L'Origine divine; Dieu n'a pas créé l'homme (28)--together with those of Bernard Sichère, for example his Histoires du mal, (29) provide examples of the impact upon this current of Lacan that will be my major focus in what follows.

Two Christians have their roles--the novelist Christian Bobin (30) and the philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien, author of La Voix nue; phénoménoénologie de la promesse. (31) Michel Serres's 1993 book on the legend of angels is but one example of many of his texts that have their roles in this current. (32) There has been the widely followed debate over the extensively translated work of the Catholic theologian Eugen Drewermann. The most recent books in this tradition to have achieved best-seller status would be philosopher Ferry's book, L'Homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie, (dealing in part with the public interest in Drewermann) and André Comte-Sponville's Petit Traité des grandes vertus. (33) The most dramatic and intellectually compelling of recent examples is certainly C'est Moi la vérité, a reading of the gospels by Michel Henry. This eminent historian of philosophy and thinker in the phenomenological tradition, author of much respected books on Marx, Husserl, Freud and Kandinsky, here describes what he feels to be the superiority of the logic of Jesus to the Western philosophical tradition: "Religious beliefs, two-thousand and more years old, only they are in a position today to instruct us about ourselves." (34) Notable as well are the writings of Shmuel Trigano, including his La Nouvelle Question juive, (35) and the new journal of Jewish thought, Pardès, with which he has been associated. Not untouched by Lacan as well are the projects of Christian Jambet, previously mentioned author of L'Ange, who now is an enthusiast and scholar of the history of Shiite Islam. (36) For American followers of French developments, the tip of the iceberg has been Derrida's new writings on religion.

Central has been the issue of the Biblical interdiction of representation, the issues of the ethical content, the sociological and political consequences of the Second Commandment and its relation to the First. A perspicacious critic has been caused by this emphasis to remark: "Everything is coming to pass as if the iconoclastic discipline of the people of Moses, after a millennial incubation in the theological compost, were regaining its critical virulence in the languages of the sciences and of the soul." (37) Now, as the theological ban on images can be understood to constitute a critique of the charismatic and charismatically excited unanimities, what Gans calls "the figural," the mediation that generates "compact" communities, we can easily understand its partial embrace by that body of thought we have come to term "critical theory." Here immediately coming to mind are the selectively warm remarks concerning Jewish thought we find in the writings of Adorno, Benjamin, Lyotard, or Derrida. The ambition of this movement, which it is my aim to contrast with "le retour du religieux," can be efficiently described. It is this--the complaint of charismatically organized group closure (appearing in Adorno in philosophical terms as "identity theory") from the perspective of the only minimally dialectical version of this same phenomenon, almost sociologically inert, historically but not economically ineffectual images of narcissistic closure.

Distinctions are required, Derrida noted: "Narcissism! There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called

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non-narcissism is in general the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is
much more open to the experience of the other as other, open and closed, generous and not." (38) To use
the vocabulary of economist Fred Hirsch, the organizing symmetry of critical theory involves the
juxtaposition of the positional, or exclusive, versus the relatively uninvidiously distributed availability of
the deaggrandized versions of an identical resource--the image of reflexivity. (39) The great polarities that
anchor critical theory illustrate the point: the distinction between molar and molecular in Deleuze and
Guattari, for example, between what Bataille terms "low materialism" and what he understands as
"sacrifice," between the spoken and the written word of Derrida, between what Adorno calls "identity
theory" and the modest irreducible by which it is said to be unaggressively undone, the included and
excluded forms of the parasite in Serres. (40) the split between what Lyotard terms ugliness and "la belle
totalité" in his Discours, figure. (41) The intractability of this symmetry is demonstrated by the large
number of synonyms it has generated, synonyms that are all recognized to posses gratifying levels of
explanatory power.

3

The goal in each case is the production of what I would call "sustained unpunishability."

Banal now is notice of the fact that what we term postmodern thought requires heterogeneity to rescue
from the universals that are perceived to be oppressive. Yet this same postmodern automatically
generates a climate within which there flourishes an identity politics, required, it would seem, if there is
to be a basis for negotiating between the differences it must inexhaustibly create and defend. Economist
Joseph Schumpeter has provided an explanation for the co-existence of these two requirements that
might appear to be impossible to reconcile. (42) "Sustained unpunishability," in his terms, would be what
was fervently aspired to by the risk-taking, innovation-oriented entrepreneur, who, more than cheap
labor, or the availability of raw materials, is the market's decisive resource. For Schumpeter, the
taboo-violator (the "intellectual" is his term for him) requires a protection that cannot be denied, for he is
the figure of the entrepreneur--his unfettered outlandishness creates a field of permissions that sustain the
market hero with whom he has a necessarily fraternal relation:

In capitalist society--or in a society that contains a capitalist element of decisive
importance--any attack on the intellectuals must run up against the private fortress of
bourgeois business which, or some of which, will shelter the quarry. [. . . ] In a purely
bourgeois regime like that of Louis Philippe, troops may fire on strikers, but the police
cannot round up intellectuals or must release them forthwith; otherwise the bourgeois
stratum, however, strongly disapproving some of their doings, will rally behind them
because the freedom it disapproves cannot be crushed without also crushing the freedom it
approves. [. . . ] In defending the intellectuals as a group--not of course every individual--the
bourgeois defends itself and its scheme of life. (43)

This providentially disruptive figure is thus what Serres calls the included third parasite. On the
symbiosis he writes: "[W]here does this come from, this need to have such a rogue traveling with you?
To such an extent that you even risked your life in running to protect him! In the same way that he lives
off you, is it maybe the case that you couldn't survive without him?" (44) Without his antisocial energies
we could know only the torpor of the anthropological situation. But precisely because of his minimal
sociability, his insistence upon seeing differently, he is, as Schumpeter argues, perpetually,
self-protectingly at the same time self-damagingly, in the process of secreting organizations and values
that would limit the scale of his anarchic freedoms. The entrepreneur must protect himself from himself, but as he does so, his identity as providential delinquent is ceaselessly menaced.

It would be, Schumpeter has argued, the hypertrophy of these anarchy-disciplining structures--state development, punitive or caring bureaucracies with their "new class intellectuals," what Carl Schmitt called "motorized legislation," that would deaden the innovative drive, and drive up the costs of transactions. The view of the police-loving outlaw may appear odd coming from an economist, but it is very modernly recognizable. Here is Nietzsche: "Thus we immoralists require the power of morality: our drive of self-preservation wants our opponents to retain their strength. . . ." (45) Finally a perverse branch of feudalism, according to Schumpeter, capitalism is not a self-sustaining formation, as it is parasitic upon traditional values it can also only have life through insulting.

What critical theory notices, in its own languages, but what Schumpeter was perhaps too early to see, is that decisive distinctions are to be made according to the character of the friendly fire the entrepreneur calls down upon his anarchic procedures, according to the levels of lethargy produced by the secreted disciplinary structures, according to whether the discipline comes from within or without, whether it is empathically motivated, emptily administrative or theologically grounded and if theologically grounded, the extent to which this theological position can be deployed to legitimize variously organized heteronomous administrative cultures, whether or not it can be called upon to sponsor charismatic organizations, for example. Distinctions are to be made according to which the disciplinary force--that cannot be dispensed with--is lived as entropic. To sustain the animating unpunishability is the challenge faced by the entrepreneur, to limit the impact upon his excesses of the antidote he creates to protect himself from the consequences of the resentment he produces as he produces. This is a fact of which, as we shall see, modern philosophy is very much aware. The categories of critical theory have provided our vocabulary for not simply noticing the Schumpeterian irony, but also for describing the conditions that would make possible the levels of sustained unpunishability needed for the free development of the entrepreneurial spirit.

4

It is with this as background that I would like to take notice of the fact that an unmissable feature of this "le retour du religieux" is a convergence, that is sometimes aware, sometimes unawares of itself as such, upon key aspects of the thought of Spinoza. Levinas has written two essays on Spinoza. (46) There are the books by Robert Misrahi and Catherine Challier, to mention but a few. (47) He was the only philosopher, according to Deleuze and Guattari, "never to have compromised with transcendence and to have hunted it down everywhere." (48) They have called him "the Christ of philosophers," and "the prince of philosophers." (49) and dedicated two books to him in addition to passages in other of his volumes. Vincent Descombes has written a useful book, in which he has convincingly described the centrality of Kojèvean Hegelianism in French thought since the 1930s. (50) Hegel was indeed the name of the game, but Spinoza became the name of the wanting out of the game. Here is Deleuze:

In the reproach that Hegel will make to Spinoza, that he ignored the negative and its power, lies the glory and innocence of Spinoza, his own discovery. In a world consumed by the negative, he has enough confidence in life, in the power of life, to challenge death, the murderous appetite of men, the rules of good and evil, of the just and the unjust. Enough confidence in life to denounce all the phantoms of the negative. Excommunication, war, tyranny, reaction, men who fight for their enslavement as if it were their freedom--this
forms the world in which Spinoza lives. [. . . ] In his view, all the ways of humiliating and breaking life, all the forms of the negative have two sources, one turned outward and the other inward, resentment and bad conscience, hatred and guilt. 'The two archenemies of the human race, Hatred and Remorse.' He denounces these sources again and again as being linked to man's consciousness, as being inexhaustible until there is a new consciousness, a new vision, a new appetite for living. Spinoza feels, experiences, that he is eternal. (51)

Related to Deleuze's praise is Ferry's notice of the Nietzschean relation to what he terms "this new Spinozism" (that he finds in Serres, for example):

[It] connects with one of the profound intuitions of Nietzschean vitalism, according to which life constitutes 'the most intimate essence of being,' the ultimate foundation of all things as well as the basis of all valorization. Recall that in the name of such a reference to life, Nietzsche came to denounce 'the absurdity' of the Platonic-Christian opposition between this (tangible) world and the (intelligible) world beyond. According to him, this dualism merely conceals a pathological and 'decadent' desire to negate real existence, which is nonetheless the only life that truly is, in favor of a pure fiction produced by the lucubrations of a sick imagination. Such is the essence of morality and religion, forever destined, neurotically so, Freud would later say, to seek a meaning to life elsewhere. (52)

Revealing here is the overly easy collapse of Spinoza and Nietzsche. Doubts are in order here for, as Foucault among others have noticed, including Nietzsche himself, Spinoza presented a particularly difficult challenge as well as a strong model for Nietzsche. (53) Equally important in France in causing Spinoza to be viewed with affection would be the possible compatibility with Marx. Althusser was famously intrigued by Spinoza. One of his associates, Etienne Balibar has written often on Spinoza, (54) and another, Pierre Macherey, author of no less than seven books on Spinoza, is responsible for the book with, for the French, the decisive title: Hegel ou Spinoza? "It is Spinoza who constitutes the true alternative to the philosophy of Hegel" he here argues. (55) The ground of the Marxist interest is explained by Fredric Jameson, as he asks: "How then to coordinate our very limited positions, as individuals or indeed as historical subjects and classes, within a History whose dynamics representationally escape us? The lesson was given as far back as Spinoza, surely the most dramatic of all the thinkers of totality, when he recommended a kind of stoic adjustment as a part or component, to that immense whole of being or nature of which we are the merest partial reflexes." (56)

But compatibilities with Marx and Nietzsche would seem revealingly to break down in the case of the thought of Bataille, Marxist and Nietzschean, against whom Spinoza has been posed as decisive contrast. Three examples follow. Invited to the inauguration of an urban legend, André Masson sent his excuses. Bataille had asked some twenty friends to the forest at Marly to silently meditate before a lightning-struck tree. Was the artist present? Bernard-Henri Lévy quizzed participant Klossowski: "No. He always maintained a certain reserve. As a fervent Spinozist, he reasoned differently." (57) "The system of Spinoza is a white pantheism; that of Bataille a black pantheism," Sartre wrote, (58) putting in the most condensed form the opposition that will be the concern here. In viewing Spinoza as decisive contrarian, Sartre, who was a reader of Julien Benda, was perhaps influenced by the author of Belphégor, who had seen in Spinoza the single solution to all that he viewed as unacceptably modern (Bergson was, for him, its proper name.) (59)
Now here is Lacan's lesson, in a moment of jarring clarity, dividing the posterity of his friendship with Bataille, and opening a space for something new as he moralizes the symmetry that had been noticed by Sartre: "It is the eternal meaning of the sacrifice, to which no one can resist, unless animated by that faith, so difficult to sustain, which, perhaps, one man alone has been able to formulate in a plausible way--namely Spinoza, with his Amor intellectualis Dei." (60) This remark on the sacrifice that is difficult to avoid without Spinoza as guide, was made in the "Eleventh Seminar," in the midst of Lacan's analysis of the Holocaust that is here seen to reproduce the logic of archaic ritual.

In France Lacan is quite routinely seen as a religious thinker. This is very clear in the many books of Sibony, for example, or in Marie Balmary, or in Sichère who has called Lacan "Doctor of the Law of the Jews." (61) But, if this thought is Jewish, it is in a special sense, one that caused one Jew to be expelled from the Synagogue in Amsterdam in 1656. As much of the recent Spinozism and near-Spinozism can be traced to Lacan, finds its footing in Lacan, the following of his path to the "polisseur de lunettes" as Lacan affectionately names him, (62) will clarify further developments in the current and facilitate necessary broader conclusions concerning the historical function of "le retour du religieux."

Lacan's impressively rigorous route to Spinoza begins with his break with Freud's pansexualism, replaced in his system with a focus upon, to use his expression, "the great winged hornet of narcissistic tyranny." (63) Under the influence of, to use Lacan's own words "my master Kojève," (64) the psychoanalyst understood "narcissistic tyranny" in terms of the struggle for recognition between the Master and Slave that Hegel had described, and that Kojève had redescribed in the way that has proved so influential. Their struggle, in Lacan, involves the battle to have access to what he termed "the object small a," that mysterious nonthing that is the cause of all desire, that object that is the sign of the absence of an object, therefore the absence of desire that characterizes the glorious (an)affectivity of the Hegelian Master, who, it will be recalled, risks his life for nothing in order to establish his sovereignty. We have seen Derrida noticing that there are many narcissisms and Lacan would have agreed, as there are differently gregarious experiences of the object a. Differently managed, our relations with the a can assume the most apparently benign of forms or those of ultimate evil. Episodes from two Lacanian vacations illustrate the point regarding the diversity of experiences of the a:

It's a true story. I was in my early twenties or thereabouts--and at that time, of course, being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at sea. One day, I was on a small boat, with a few people from a family of fishermen in a small port. At that time, Brittany was not industrialized as it is now. There were no trawlers. The fishermen went out in this frail craft at their own risk. It was this risk, this danger, that I loved to share. But it wasn't all danger and excitement--there were also fine days. One day, then, as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean, that's what we called him--like his family, he died very young from tuberculosis, which at that time was a constant threat to the whole of that social class--this Petit-Jean pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me--You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!
He found this incident highly amusing--I less so.(65)

A dangerous joke this was, and deeper into the same seminar we learn of the extent. The social function of the nothing is further explored in a passage in Augustine mentioned several times by Lacan, one in which the author of the *Confessions* describes the rage he felt seeing his brother at his mother's, for him, useless breast:

*Invidia* comes from *videre*. The most exemplary *invidia*, for us analysts, is the one I found long ago in Augustine, in which he sums up his entire fate, namely, that of the little child seeing his brother at his mother's breast, looking at him *amare conspectu*, with a bitter look, which seems to tear him to pieces and has on himself the effect of a poison.

In order to understand what *invidia* is in its function as a gaze it must not be confused with jealousy. What the small child, or whoever, *envies* is not at all necessarily what he might want--*avoir envie*, as one improperly puts it. Who can say that the child who looks at his younger brother still needs to be at the breast? Everyone knows that envy is usually aroused by the possession of goods which would be of no use to the person who is envious of them, and about the true nature of which he does not have the least idea.

6

Such is true envy--the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea, that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction. . . .(66)

The object-cause-of-desire is no object, or rather just barely an object, its minimal externality, minimal otherness, suggestive of the possibility of the lack of need for an object--it is the object form of lack of need that characterizes the Master's (an)affectivity, as we have noticed. Now what Lacan calls sacrifice in his analysis of the Holocaust is very difficult to avoid because of the fact that this desire to have exclusive access to the experience of unmediated relations with the object *a*, and to be recognized as being in this position of exclusivity, is the basic human drive. The Holocaust is the same experience, albeit very differently scaled. The urge is to cause oneself to be seen as sole owner and proprietor of the *a*, that is to say to experience the objectlessness of the narcissistic condition. The scene of sacrifice, he writes in another text, is a scene of seduction: "Let us say that the religious person leaves to God the ownership of the cause of desire, but that he thereby cuts off his own access to the truth. Thus is he led to give back to God the cause of his desire--this is properly the object of sacrifice. His demand is organized around the imagined desire of a God whom one must then seduce."(67) The wasting is a trick--the person or the group in a position to waste is the hoarder of the *a*. Derrida knows this: "But the sacrifice recaptures with one hand what it gives with the other, and its account must be kept on a double register."(68) An angry god, one we invent to function as humiliated witness to the ability to waste, this the role taken by Lacan himself in the fishing story, or the angry Augustine of the *Confessions*, presides over the experience of sacrifice, it is argued, his rage before the spectacle of human wasting, that is the contrastive experience of the *a*, being the guarantee that he, the god, the sacrificed to, contrasts himself depressively with the figure of realized desire that is the sacrificer.(69) Gans writes, compatibly, that "the figural. . . is also the sacrificial."(70) To be added to this remark is the fact that the sacrificial is the experience of the shift in the address of the figural--synonym of Freud's ego ideal, synonym of the entity that exclusively hoards the object *a*--from one position to another. A depression is overcome as one
moves from the unfavorable to the favorable pole of a contrast.

This fishing scene is to be juxtaposed with another, less painful vacation snapshot. During a wartime visit to the home of his friend Jacques Prévert, Lacan was exposed to the poet's collection of match boxes and its associated reward, empty match boxes, on the surface resembling the useless empty tin can of the earlier episode:

It was the kind of collection that it was easy to afford at that time; it was perhaps the only kind of collection possible. The match boxes appeared as follows: all the same, they were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the one next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result, they we all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and crept down again next to a door. I don't say that it went on to infinity, but it was extremely satisfying from an ornamental point of view.

Yet I don't think that was the be all and end all of what was surprising in this "collectionism," nor the source of the satisfaction that the collector himself found there. I believe that the shock of novelty of the effect realized by this collection of empty matchboxes--and this is the essential point--was to reveal something that we do not perhaps pay enough attention to, namely, that a box of matches is not simply an object, but that, in the form of an Erscheinung, as it appeared in its truly imposing multiplicity, it may be a Thing.

In other words, this arrangement demonstrated that a match box isn't simply something that has a certain utility, that it isn't even a type in the Platonic sense, an abstract match box, that the match box all by itself is a thing with all its coherence of being. The wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi absurd character of this collection pointed to its thingness as match box. Thus the collector found his motive in this form of apprehension that concerns less the match box than the Thing that subsists in a match box. (71)

This found object pastoral is a "little fable of the revelation of the Thing beyond the object," showing "one of the most innocent forms of sublimation. Perhaps you can even see something emerge in it that, goodness knows, society is able to find satisfaction in." Importantly he concludes: "It is a satisfaction. . . that doesn't ask anything of anyone." (72) Beyond use because beneath it, the boxes were just any body's now, and savingly so.

7

Now these objects are already familiar to us as occupying the poles of critical theory that habitually poses the image of an anonymously distributed insignificance against that of its provocative, exclusive capture. The indifferent distribution of indifference--match box vacation, is deployed to defeat the image of exclusive capture--sardine can vacation. An undernarcissism, a deniable narcissism, is summoned to replace its sociological polar-cap-producing charismatic double. This would be the distinction made by Serres between strong and weak parasites, that of Kojève between the Master who risks life for nothing and the modest successor form who, as post-historic snob, seeks recognition without fear of a violent comeuppance, as the object of his predilection is not provocatively, because exclusively housed by his person. (73) Lacan: "The patient says to his partner, to the analyst, what amounts to this--I love you, but, because I love in you something more than you--l'objet petit a--I mutilate you." (74) This summarizes what occurs in sacrifice and what is avoided through the free circulation of the same object, the free
levitation of which it has been the major project of critical theory to guarantee.

The reason for the choosing of sides is clear enough if we turn to the insights of Generative Anthropology, or if we consult the confirming Jean-Pierre Dupuy, for example, who writes: "[T]he economy is the negation of the crowd: the economy emerges entirely against the crowd; it is the return of the crowd that it works above all to prevent."(75) What is meant here is that charismatically generated unanimities do not produce the scattering affectivities that make markets possible.

This point can be differently made. In *Envy and Gratitude*, Melanie Klein describes how the infant's living of the contrast of the experience of its own weakness and dependency with that of the seemingly omnipotent source of its nourishment causes a killing desire that is immediately renounced.(76) Her description of a site of impossible happiness occupied by the figure who generates at once envy and gratitude recalls the grounding insight of Generative Anthropology that the sacred center is a dangerous place. The moment of the renunciation of murder is that of the birth of what Klein terms "the envious superego," that agency that blocks the drive to insist upon worldly centrality. As this story is clearly compatible with Lacan's, who borrows elements of it, we can say that what he terms sacrifice is the pedagogy of envious superego development. If, as Bataille knew, sacrifice is the critique of the charismatic individual, whose destruction is employed as mediation to produce the charismatic group, the of the imagery of the charismatic for the sake of its undoing, for the purpose of the creation of the envious superego, then the esthetic critique of representation is the charismatic autocritique, the using of the charismatic against itself for the sake of its free, ubiquitously, minimally contrastive life, the sustained unpunishability that we have described as required to excite the production of market effects.

One produces envious superego, the other blocks its development through generation of minimally inciting, prestressed figurality, one that is always already at a vanishing point, having placed itself at this vanishing point, not having been placed there by another. The immanent usurpation of critique makes unnecessary any external correction. The yield is this: asyndetically arranged images of autoaffection, minimally constrained, because immanently constrained, minimally adhesive, because minimally contrastive. The esthetic critique of representation is not about the end of contrast but the creation of an unmanageable and therefore manageable surplus of intentionally minimally effective, that is historically neutral but economically powerful contrasts. The metaphor is from a letter of Leibniz to Sophie-Charlotte: "When one throws into the water at the same time several stones, this produces a number of circles that cross without destroying one another . When the number of stones is very great the eye can no longer keep track."(77) In either case, whether it is through the esthetic critique of sacrifice or through sacrifice, an ethics is produced through the experience of an invidious contrast, more or less intensely lived, as the fact remains in each case that a circle has been created by a stone.

Spinoza for Lacan is the name of the vacation from both vacations. Spinoza calling it in all its forms "satire," rejected contrast tout court, rejecting it with a perhaps uniquely powerful consistency, and this is what has moved his logic to the center of current concern: "[S]atire is everything that takes pleasure in the powerlessness and distress of men, everything that feeds on accusations, on malice, on belittlement, on low interpretations, everything that breaks men's' spirits (the tyrant needs broken spirits, just as broken spirits need a tyrant."(78) If Lacan's two vacation objects stories are read together, without mention of his theological position that he has emphatically attached, it is as a postmodernist that he appears--as in the postmodern one form of satire is used against another. But at the invocation of the name of Spinoza he disappears from our map; no longer does he maintain residence in the space produced by the tensions of the organizing symmetry of critical theory as I have described it above. Now the esthetic (as well as
sacrifice) always involves the overcoming of a contrast one feels oneself to have been disadvantaged by, but this is quite different from the totalizing elimination of all experiences of derision, however they may be scaled, through the description of the absolute ontological impossibility of contrast—this being the position of Spinoza. From a letter to Oldenberg: "I attach to nature neither beauty nor ugliness, neither order nor confusion: things cannot be said to be either beautiful or ugly, ordered or confused, except according to our imaginations."(79)

8

Strictly, there can be no Spinozist esthetics.(80) Thus the absurdity of the following position of Schlegel: "Why won't you arise and revive those splendid forms of great antiquity? Try for once to see the old mythology, steeped in Spinoza. . . and everything will appear to you in new splendor and vitality."(81) Only an imagination unhappy and false could argue that there would be possible a reconciliation of this position with the great classical expulsions that only know of contrast.

Christopher Norris has written that "[N]early all the great debates in present-day literary theory have their origin in one or another aspect of Spinoza's work."(82) True, but not as he intends the point, for curiously unmentioned by him is Spinoza's striking relation to the decisive matter of mimetic desire. Spinoza's point of departure is identical to that of the Kojèveian Lacan, and hence the logic of Lacan's saving conclusion. In the Ethics there is abundant, central notice of the mimetic foundation of human interaction. Desire is the very essence of mind, he tells us, but objects are not desired on the grounds on intrinsic properties alone: "[W]e do not endeavor, will, seek after or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after and desire it."(83) This will is mimetically animated: "If we think that someone loves, desires, or hates something that we love, desire or hate, that very fact will cause us to love, desire or hate the thing." And: "Emulation is the desire for some thing, engendered in us from the fact that we think others to have the same desire."(84) Thus, "Anything can. . . be the cause of pleasure," because it is the mediation that is decisive.(85) The key notion in Spinoza of "external cause" is translatable as the presence of Girard's triangulation: "Love is merely 'pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause,' and hatred is merely' pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause.'"(86)

Unhappy contrasts and with them mimetic entanglements are dissolved into the monism of divine substance in the doctrine of "God or Nature," according to which whatever is, is God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God:

This doctrine [Deus sive Natura—"apart from God no substance can be or be conceived"] assists us in our social relations, in that it teaches us to hate no one, despise no one, ridicule no one, be angry with no one, envy no one. Then again, it teaches us that each should be content with what he has and should help his neighbor, not from womanish pity, or favor or superstition but solely from the guidance of reason.(87)

The critique of all transcendence, of the imagined external causes that are responsible for all human unhappiness, and Spinoza's suggestion of the necessity of the summum bonum that is the intellectual love of the God who is coextensive with all of nature, is understood to solve the problem of the ignorant servility of passion faced when man becomes a god to man, and the transfer of this imbalance into the seduction scene of sacrifice. Spinozism thus involves, to quote Christian Jambet, "the supreme denial of the a, from which we turn away in order to affirm rebellion."(88) If mediation there is in this system,
then it would have the character here described by Schlegel: "For the perfect Christian--whom in this respect Spinoza probably resembles most--everything would really have to be a mediator."(89)

Maimonides, a thinker studied by Spinoza, sought to explain the golden calf episode by arguing that a people that had so long inhabited a land of images could not be expected to remain completely uninfected with idolatry even after liberation. Spinoza's entire system might be described as developing from this position regarding the partial contamination by figurality. At the opening of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* he complains of what he felt to be the incoherence that exists between the ban of images and the fact that Moses is said to have heard the voice of God.(90) This selective critique of representation leads to the image of an unextended divinity, thus the possibly of Lacan's angry God. Consequences of charismatic slippage might include the owing of perfection to an external final cause, the idea of power as domination, the comparing of God's power to that of kings, a power that can advertise itself as divinely sponsored, and thereby lead the people of Israel to the alienation of the servitude to an earthly absolute. Fall-out from the claim of exposure to the voice is the possibility of reciprocal oppression, the social volatility due to the struggle for glory amongst various emerging leaders who may assert exclusive divine legitimacy. Within the culture of the voice of God, even the greatest of leaders cannot guarantee the absence of discord produced by anarchic claims of election: "Moses had gained the strongest of holds on the minds of his people not by deception but by his divine virtue, for he was thought to be a man of God whose every word and action was divinely inspired; yet even he was not exempt from. . . murmurings and criticism, and far less so were other monarchs."(91) The figure and the social order of the change of address of the figural (sacrifice) will not have been annulled unless God appears as the immanent rather than the transitive cause of all things.

9

The logic of Generative Anthropology has made possible a sensitivity to this issue of figural residue in Christianity. Eric Gans writes:

> Even if the figure of Christ cannot legitimately be called a figure of resentment, it remains a potential focus of concentration for the resentful, like the grain of sand that brings about crystallization in a solution at the saturation point. Pure water remains unaffected; but how many can apply this metaphor to their souls? The historical revelation of the single son of God cannot but provoke the envy of those not so honored, whatever assurance we are given of his infinite imitability. Today one might ask, for example, why not the daughter of God? No figure can be general enough to include the entire human community; as soon as attention is concentrated on it, someone is bound to see in it a sign of exclusion.(92)

But Spinoza finds the birth of the problem within the Old Testament itself, and locates the solution in the annulation of the transcendental separation between God and humanity that would eliminate the danger of the resentment of the human periphery. Whenever "the dialogue between center and periphery is unequal,"(93) whenever there is the ontological separation of divine and the world, there will be, following Spinoza, the inexhaustible tensions produced by lack and the concomitant threat of charismatic slippage, the threat of the drift from the unexperienceable to the charismatically experienceable, from its strongest forms to the modern variety of the coveting of the position of the victim, this last being denounced by Spinoza in his critique of pity that is found in the *Ethics*.

The themes of the indivisibility of divine substance, of God as immanent rather than the transitive cause,
of the infinity of mediation, are very much on display in Michel Serres's long poem in prose on angels:

For pantheism, everything is divine. Trees and stars are gods. You are a god too, you whom I love and who are now listening to me. So are angels still pantheists? Certainly they are, because by the fact that they pass everywhere and occupy all space, they enable divinity to be seen at all points; your guardian, who shadows you like your shadow, makes me see that you are God, just as my guardian, who abandons me, makes me forget it every day. There are so many angels, they exist in such extraordinary numbers, that one finds them everywhere, testifying to divine ubiquity. (94)

And in the same spirit:

No difference separates gods from men, archangels from animals, profane love from sacred love, body from soul, beauty from the beast, prayer from sex, coitus from high mystique. . . . The end of the reign of angels sounds with the birth of the Messiah, who makes flesh divine and incarnates love: immanence encompasses everything, in its unmoving equilibrium. (95)

In the absence of this position, Serres writes, implicitly setting Spinoza against Hobbes: "the war of all against everyone will continue to rage." (96)

Spinoza is revealingly absent in Grammatology. Is Grammatology a secular Spinozism, unable finally to sustain itself as such, a Spinozism waiting to happen?

Impossible to not notice the Spinozan cast of the following remark of Derrida, from his Donner la mort, because it involves the suggestion that the monotheist critique of representation falls short, and that a radicalization of it should be used against the tradition within which it is only selectively found:

Perhaps one should, following the Judeo-Christian-Islamic injunction, but also risking turning it against this tradition, think God and the name of God without this representation or this idolatrous stereotyping--and to then say: God is the name of the possibility for me of keeping a secret that is visible from within but not from the outside. As soon as there is this structure of consciousness, of being-with-oneself, of speaking, that is to say to produce an invisible meaning, as soon as I have in me, that to the invisible word as such, a witness that others do not see, and who is thus at the same time other than me and more intimate to me than myself, as soon as I can keep a secret relation with myself and not say everything, as soon as there is secret and secret witness in me, there is what I call God, there is what I call God in me, there is the possibility of calling myself God, a phrase that is difficult to distinguish from "God calls me," because it is on this condition that I call or am called in secret. God is in me, he is absolute self, he is this invisible structure of interiority that one terms, in the Kierkegaardian sense, subjectivity. (97)

But Derrida is certainly no Spinozist. (98) And neither is Michel Henry, who is immediately critical of anything resembling the "intellectual" love of God or involving the arrogance of an "intellectual" access to his existence. But if there is implied complaint of Spinoza here, it might be said to be leveled from the perspective of a metaSpinozism. The author of the Ethics would be describable by Henry as offering only a partial solution to what he had felt had been the only partial solution to the figural that was the key flaw
in the logic of Moses. Henry, who does not mention Spinoza, shares with him the belief that the experience of the radical otherness of God can only result in charismatic slippage. Following from this is the sense that a reorganization of the anesthetic is necessary—the critique of the figural must have its basis in an immanence rather than a transcendence. Spinoza had a higher view of Jesus than of Moses, consequently; and consequently Henry only has the harshest remarks for the Old Testament Law.

The umbrella distinction organizing Henry's book is the one he makes between belonging to "the truth of the world" and the authentic relation to what he terms "Life," by which he means living in the love of God, lived, as in Spinoza, as immanent and ubiquitous, fully, unhierarchically shared throughout all of experience. Repeating Lacan's first step, Henry describes what he terms "the world" as dominated by the experience of the spectacle. To belong to the realm means to seek to appear to the other as image and to be troubled by image of the other. Recalling the young Sartre or Lacan, he writes that "projecting itself outside of itself, towards a self, the ego finds outside of itself only a phantom." (99) The consequences are depressive: "[One is] conditioned... to despise oneself, to count oneself as nothing... admiring everything that is less than what one is, and despising all that is more than what one is." (100) As in Spinoza there is an association of the figural and with the idea of external cause, associated by both with resentment and feelings of impotence following from and resulting in the drive to identify: "Imaginary driftings [produced by external cause] are due to feverish representations of a... sickness... that involves turning against oneself, no longer desiring to be what one is, seeking to identify with another." (101) In Henry, as in Lacan, the image-impulse results in a movement towards sacrifice. (102)

The true person is said to not be the empirical individual, because this is a creature of the spectacle, always losing him or herself to the image of another. Authentic subjectivity participates in the essence of Life that is the self-love of God with whom we are all said to be fully coextensive. In this situation the other is no longer experienced as outside, as humiliating external cause: "Life [associated strictly with God's self-love and self-revelation] experiences itself without distance, without difference." (103) The pantheism is, like Serres's, lyrically thorough-going: "The Revelation of God is his autorevelation...[It] does not consist in the unveiling of a content that is foreign to his essence and communicated, one would not quite know how, to several initiates. To reveal himself to men can only mean for God to share with them his eternal self-revelation." (104) "The Word of Life" involves the defeat of all contrast, and thus the opening for the emergence of the esthetic that Gans saw in Christianity is closed, as anestheticism is reinvented on a basis that is identical to the one organized in Spinoza.

Now one could refer to a specifically French Spinoza requirement. We need scarcely fear contradiction if we characterize this current as the latest example of French totalism, as a product of the nostalgia for the universalizing vocation of the French intelligentsia, seeking, in its Leftlessness, new grounds to assert the prerogatives of its historical role, refusing to allow itself to be consigned to what Pareto called "the graveyard of aristocracies." Spinoza's thought might understandably appear to reconcile the sometimes mutually exclusive imperatives involved in the French sense of national destiny and belonging, so effectively described by Louis Dumont as forcing into uneasy coexistence the revolutionary heritage that is the drive to universalize, with the insistence upon the French, Catholic difference. (105) Bergson described himself as a Spinozist. (106) And so did Alain. Writing in 1946, in an introduction to one of his Spinoza texts: "It is astonishing that Spinoza reconciles the pure monk and the pure Jacobin in the same person." (107) He continues, describing adherence to Spinozism to be a matter of patriotic necessity:

Such is the meaning of Spinozism, a meaning that is positive and very easy to grasp, on the
condition that one is persuaded that one is in the presence of the universal spirit. This conviction will cause thinking to be bearable to you and suddenly you see yourself as a man in the light of the axiom 'Homo homini deus.' This view would be the key to the future Republic and of the view of equality associated with 1848. I say equality because it is impossible for to not have passions and because all affection ceases to be a passion as soon as one has an adequate idea of it. This is the secret of peace, which in every case is the peace of the soul, this being a truth that is very much misunderstood. In this manner we will for form the Party of Spinoza, that we will be careful not to call the party of Jews, but it is the party of Jews nonetheless. Without combat then Nazism, fascism and every kind of despotism will be defeated, and evil established to be the impotent thing it is (because it is nothing). Such will be the immediate future, the one contained in this little book. (108)

But it is the larger issue of the market's reconciliation with itself that should concern us, the issue of the postmodern's inability to advance against the Schumpeterian irony. This transcends in significance the specifically French issue of the reconciliation of key, seemingly incompatible features of one nation's historical experience--in Spinoza's appearing to Alain at once as Jacobin and monk.

As much as critical theory seeks to enlist the sponsorship of the theologically grounded anesthetic, it is clearly reluctant to simply dissolve into its harshest terms. Deleuze and Guattari illustrate this point as they describe Spinoza as the patron saint of drug addicts and schizophrenics, these last being manifestly less kin of Spinoza than of the prehumiliated heroes of waste of modern literature, of nineteenth-century dandies, tubercular courtesans, Beckettian marginals, etc. Because of his critique of transcendence that buttresses refusal to be involved in contrast, Spinoza is sensed to provide the extended wings of delinquency, enables it to live more easily, by supplying a discipline that Schumpeter had described as required, but one that is friction-free, thus not entropic.

The partial purchase of which I speak can be found in Bataille. The following Spinozist remark from Madame Edwarda: "God is nothing unless he is the transcendence of God in all senses." But elsewhere on the same page there is this: "God is a whore... in all respects similar to all others." At one moment we can find Derrida, as we have seen, wishing away residual figural features within the Judeo-Christian tradition, at another we spot him providing examples of unparalleled clarity of prehumilated estheticism. In Glas he collapses the strategies of Jean Genet with the logic of the Jewish law of circumcision:

By first incising his glans, he defends himself in advance against the infinite threat, castrates in his turn the enemy, elaborates a kind of apotropaic without measure. He exhibits his castration as an erection that defies the other. The logical paradox of the apotropaic: castrating oneself already, always already, in order to be able to castrate and repress the threat of castration, renouncing life and mastery in order to secure them. (111)

Fused in these examples are contrasted experiences of contrast--in one a fascination that comes to an end at the moment it is produced (in the prehumiliated), and in the other there is a monism that excludes the possibility of such a sequence, however minimally visible it might be. The remark about the philosopher's alliance with drug addicts and schizos obviously makes no sense at one level. But less interesting than the issue of an unembarrassedly inexact account of the positions of Spinoza is the
possibility that the yoking of logically mutually exclusive critiques of figurality may be designed to satisfy a historical requirement. This need would be the necessity of blocking the decay that is the work of the Schumpeterian irony, the erosion of the deviant energies that are checked by certain premodern moralities the market had allowed to continue to exist in order to rescue itself from the consequences of its providential disruptions. These ethical systems now come to be perceived as insufficiently respectful of difference, because they are involved in ontological imbalance and thus have the potential to sponsor the dreaded, compactingly affective charismatic and its terrible posterity, "the envious superego." In the positions of Deleuze and these others we see the market aspiring to guarantee difference through a specific kind of neutralization of the charismatic. The contrastively experienced figural is submitted to a double critique, through the pincer-like deployment of two complaints of representation, complaints that are oppositely vantaged, the tools of intensely conflicting imperatives. The logical failure involved, however, is of no consequence, disappearing as it does behind the likelihood of a shared material success.

As Philippe Ariès remarked, a novel intellectual position is only able to establish itself if it is "very close to" as well as "slightly different from the general feeling of its age." "If it were very different," he continued, "it would not even be conceivable by its author, or understandable. . . . If it were no different at all, it would pass unnoticed."(112)

Spinoza is lauded in part because, as Comte-Sponville notices, he supplies "a theory of desire in which a notion of lack is missing."(113) It is possible to say this, for, as Emilia Giancotti writes: "By opposing the Cartesian concept of extension to his own, Spinoza confirms . . . his original conception of substance and its attributes as a dynamic principle which, though it remains one, is realized by pluralizing itself to infinity. This structure makes the moment of mediation superfluous, since it is already within substance itself."(114) But we have already noticed Schlegel convincingly describe Spinoza as depicting the ubiquity of mediation. Hypermediation is indistinguishable from its opposite. Antisocial energies become nearly indistinguishable from the system that disciplines the excess.

We have seen Schumpeter arguing that capitalism was a feudal structure. The entrepreneur was a new human type, but not a free-standing one, finally a childish one who could not be the Enlightenment hero described by Kant, characterized escaping the need of a self-imposed tutelage. Schumpeter would have argued that Kant's figure would be capable of sustaining his newly free activities only on the condition that he permit the general field of his experience to be saturated with the values he would have appeared to have renounced, thus causing this field to be lived as a permanent state of ethical dissonance. But this partnership, characterized by Schumpeter as feudal, is always in the process of dissolving, its distinct elements blurring progressively to the disadvantage of the figure of anarchic impulse it had been engineered to preserve. The mutually exclusive requirements of postmodern thought-- for unabsorbed difference on the one hand and a totalization on the other, a totalization that assumes the form of identity politics or empathic moralities, mirror the Schumpeterian the poles that are destined, according to him, to not forever remain poles. The immanentization of the divine in the"Deus sive Natura" doctrine provides a new structure of security, a superior one in that there is not here the sclerotic undoing that is caused by this competing pull. This Sartre dimly grasped when he called Spinoza the opposite of Bataille.

Critical theory has always understood the internalization of disciplining myth as making possible the birth of the free modern self--Bataille said in response to the Holocaust: "We must practice upon
ourselves what we once practiced on others." Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* wrote that the history of the modern subject was that of the introversion of sacrifice. (115) But this position, the "prehumiliated," could be argued to be no less feudal; it is the feudalism of the immanentization of mythological tutelage, producing the estheticized version of entrepreneurial energies that are intentionally constrained. Spinoza's immanentization that replaces the immanentization of sacrifice that we find in the prehumiliated involves far more than the mere replacement of one discipline with another, for one is entropic and the other is arguably not. So sponsored, the entrepreneur might cease to be a figure of medieval sociology, as he might need to be no longer preemptively reduced, daring only to appear as drug addict or schizo.

"Among millions of decaying worlds, there is once in a while an acceptable one!" (116) Nietzsche's cry is that of Schumpeter's market, gasping in the heavy atmosphere within which it has been said to be condemned to breathe. And we can thus understand the appeal of Spinoza, who is imagined to suspend the iron law of cultural thermodynamics as it is described in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. The entrepreneur in this logic will no longer be threatened with the erosions that Schumpeter had darkly described, with being diminished by the cowing eruptions of transcendence, with being beamed up and away as self-offering to the angry god whom Spinoza had unmasked, with the eroding of his energies by the low burning empathies of the caring state, the pity that is inseparable from derision that Spinoza condemned. But rather, now as newly, unentropically sustained, the force is with this figure, who is with us, eternal below, for transcendence has been vanquished in this thought, but not the at once disciplining and energizing love of God that is what the world in this new ethical oxymoron has now become.

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**Notes**

9. In a letter to the editor, on "Catholicism in France" (April 9, 1993) p. 15. (back)


25. (Grasset, 1983). (back)

26. (Seuil, 1992). (back)

27. (Paris; Grasset, 1986). (back)


35. (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). (back)


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40. For his most thorough development of the issue, see his Rome; the Book of Foundations, trans Felicia McCarren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).


43. Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, p. 150.


69. Lacan's view of sacrifice seems influenced by Sartre's view of masochism: "Masochism is less an effort to fascinate the other through his experience of me as an object than it is a project to fascinate myself with my objectivity for the other." *L'Etre et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 443.

71. Le Séminaire. Livre VII, p. 136. (back)

72. Le Séminaire. Livre VII, p. 137. (back)


74. Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 263. (back)


83. Ethics, p. 110. (back)

84. Ethics, p. 149. (back)

85. Ethics, p. 113. (back)

86. Ethics, p. 113. (back)

87. Ethics, p. 100. (back)


89. Friedrich Schegel, Philosophical Fragments, trans. by Peter Firchow, foreword by Rudolphe Gasché (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 50. (back)


91. Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, p. 291. (back)

92. Signs of Paradox, p. 160. (back)

93. Signs of Paradox, p. 153. (back)

94. Angels, pp. 90-91. (back)

95. Angels, p. 185. (back)

96. Angels, p. 290. (back)

98. There is no mention of Spinoza in the most thorough study to date of Derrida's relation to religion--John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997). (back)

99. *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 181. (back)

100. *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 345. (back)

101. *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 148. (back)

102. *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 225. (back)

103. *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 43. (back)

104. *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 37. (back)


108. *Spinoza*, pp. 22-23. (back)


111. *Glas*, p. 46. The hidden imperfection of the body is one of Benjamin's themes: "And as birds seek refuge in the leafy recces of a tree, feelings escape into the shaded wrinkles, the awkward movements and inconspicuous blemishes of the body we love, where they can lie low in safety. And no passer by would guess that it is just here, in what is defective and censurable, that the fleeting darts of adoration nestle." *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), p. 68. (back)


113. *Une Education philosophique*, p. 245. (back)


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**Selected bibliography**

(Not included are the all ready well-known works of Girard and Levinas.)


Recent French Publications on Spinoza from 1968 to the present


Misrahi, Robert, Spinoza. Paris; Seghers, 1964.,


Raymond, Charles, Qualité et quantité dans la philosophie de Spinoza. Paris: Presses universitaires de


Christianity shares with Judaism the ability to provoke resentment against its own persistent undermining of resentment. Nothing infuriates the critics of Judaism and Christianity - but especially of Christianity - more than the gentle admonition to turn the other cheek. Like the swellfoot outsider, Biblical religion becomes a magnet for every imaginable accusation, inspiring a voluminous Schimpflexicon of calumny and abuse.

Thus, while my main theme is resentment as a response to Judaism and Christianity, with the emphasis on Christianity, I nevertheless wish to begin by addressing a specific form taken by resentment: Verbal mud-slinging, or vilification, which, although primitive, yet bears a relation both to philosophy and poetics. A remarkable continuity of anti-Biblical vilification unites Imperial Neoplatonists in the Second Century with Allemanic Antiplatonists in the Nineteenth and both again with academic investigators of the so-called historical or pre-Gospel Jesus in the Late Twentieth. At all stages of this continuum, the identical tropes lend their articulating power to the argument (namely that Judaism and Christianity distort some true doctrine and that we must regard them as examples of low-grade plagiarism, or that Jews and Christians themselves act out of resentment) and the identical animus blinds the arguer to his own limitations and prejudices. But such self-deceptions would seem inevitable given the internal logic of arbitrary accusation, and only he who is without sin ought run the risk of throwing stones, even when the stones are only verbal.

By virtue of its paradoxical nature, of course, vilification invariably makes a cynosure of what it wishes to quash or expel; mud-slinging foolishly grants importance precisely where it wishes to deny importance; and the vilifier inevitably betrays the weakness (his own) that he wants to mask under the appearance of strength. Vilification cannot escape the marks of engaging in a contest and a contest always entails a second party, a rival, whose presence demands attention and appears to force action. At the root of vilification, which bears all the marks of a ritual performance, lies resentment: The intuition that an interloping equal has manifested himself whose presence disrupts an existing settlement and in so doing threatens conflict.
"This town ain't big enough for the both of us," is the usual subjective formulation of the problem, and in it the challenger admits to his rivalry with the one whom his rhetoric would reduce, in advance, to submission. Insofar as any expulsion of the interloper requires the cooperation of one's neighbors, however, the rhetorical expression of the problem needs all at once to cast the interloper in a bad light and recruit a mob to aid in running him off, the rival's automatic submission not being guaranteed. The public utterance, intended as suasory, must therefore conceal the implicit equality of plaintiff and defendant inadvertently divulged by the intuition, so that what one says at last in the pre-lynching huddle is that "there ain't no room for varmints around here," a sentiment with which it is hard to disagree.

This transition from the sentence that a subject rehearses silently to himself to the one that he addresses to his fellow Lynchers can, moreover, be analyzed a stage further, for the second sentence, the one about varmints, is not really a sentence at all, but a type of ostensive. Varmint is not an explanatory category; it is, rather, a mere pointing-in-disgust, or alarm, whose pragmatic sequel is known almost instinctively to the Lynch-mob, who can act it out quite readily, should the need arise. Vilification, as it turns out, is simply another word for myth, just as myth in its turn serves as a synonym for accusation. A myth is an accusation. Consider, for example, Oedipus, that powerful interloper, who slew his father and slept with his mother and brought the plague to Thebes: Teiresias and Creon each at first argue, in two paradigmatic stichomythiai with their opponent, that "this town ain't big enough for the both of us." Yet it ultimately comes down to the reductive claim that Oedipus is a varmint (father-slayer, mother-lover, plague-bringer, etc.), so out with him. Not even Oedipus himself, at that point, can dissent from the pharmakotic solidarity: "Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable, / The most accursed, whom God too hates, / Above all men on earth," as Sophocles makes him say. Likewise, in Shakespeare, Brutus apropos Caesar must first "think him as a serpent's egg, / Which, hatched, as would his kind grow mischievous," whereupon he resolves to "kill him in the shell." Brutus is shouting snake! and a snake, of course, is a varmint.

The charge of varmintry, if I might be allowed to call it that, is made in explicit form against the Christians and the Jews together in Part IV of the Celsian Alethes Logos, or True Doctrine, a critique mainly of Christianity, but also of Judaism, ascribed to a philosophically eclectic author (now a Platonist, now an Epicurean) of the eighties of the Second Century. "As to the squabbles of the Jews and the Christians," Celsus opines, "I can only say that these sects remind me of a cluster of bats or ants escaping a nest, a bunch of frogs holding council in a swamp, or a clutch of worms assembling in the muck: all of them disagreeing over who is the worst sinner" (Hoffman's translation 79). Given the social and philosophical characterization of the Christians which Celsus has deployed in Parts I through III of his discourse, his sudden crying-out of worm! comes as no surprise. The faith of the Christians corresponds to a mere "hope of worms" (86), Celsus has earlier asserted. And to the followers of Jesus, Celsus has applied the adjective "wormlike" (79), making them even more obnoxious, in his estimation, than the Jews, who qualify as simple "runaway slaves who escaped from Egypt" (79). The Christians, in the Celsian picture of them, dwell in the subterranean spaces of the civic world just as the earthworm dwells in soil, under a rock, secretive and hidden from sight. The Christian miasma threatens to contaminate the larger situation in which it occurs.

In The True Doctrine, Part VII, Celsus refers to the worshippers of Jesus in the figure of the man who "demeans himself in a humiliating fashion, throwing himself headlong upon the ground; crawling on his knees; garbing himself like a beggar in rags; smearing himself with the dirt of the road" (94). In his
Celsus discards both his bats and his ants, selecting finally the grubbing, crawling worm. Elsewhere indeed Celsus endows the lucky ants with civic consciousness and science. It is well known, he remarks, that the ants "have a fully developed intelligence[,] and it seems they have as well a clear-cut notion of certain universal laws, and even a voice to make the experience of their learning known to others of their kind" (83-84). By comparison with the people of the Gospels, the ants reveal themselves under the type of a superior species, endowed with the same virtues as the proper Imperial citizenry whose social order Jesus and his followers threaten grubbily from within. The conceit that ants partake in a knowledge of "universal laws" even makes of them a kind of Platonic ideal citizenry, and the orderliness of the formicary thus contrasts positively with the blind and degraded digging of worms. Celsus' animosity against the Christians is obviously great, and his condescension high, and while the worm, disgusting and non-sentient, is his central metaphor for dispensing with them, his ire finds other, equally miasmatic figures.

A catalogue will give an idea of the range of vilification that Celsus deploys around his central and essential vermicular trope. Celsus styles the Christians as "scum" (75); "naught but dung" (102); "lower class, vulgar, ignorant" (57); perpetrators of "hypocrisy" (53); "gullible believers" (54); "ludicrously misled" (60); "babbling fools" (108); forsakers of the "natural inclination" to believe in the traditional gods (56); "thoroughly bound to flesh-and-blood concerns [and] not a little unsmart by most applicable standards" (121); "just as proud as the Jews" (70); concocters of "an absolutely absurd doctrine of everlasting punishment and rewards" (70); in their practice "no better than dog or goat worship[ers] at their worst" (71); "charlatan[s] who promise to restore sick bodies to health" (75); a people who "utterly detest each other" and "slander each other constantly with the vilest forms of abuse" (91); a people who "refuse their religious duties, rushing headlong to offend the emperor and the governors and to invite their wrath" (124); and finally, a people "who act as though they have some deeper revelation that entitles them to turn away from their friends and countrymen on the pretext that they have reached a higher level of piety" (89).

Celsus presents a critique of Jesus, too, who in his view constitutes "a mere man" (69); "arrogant" (61); "an evildoer" (62); "a sorcerer" (60); "a conspirator" (63); "a boaster and sorcerer" (60); the son of a woman "convicted of adultery" (57); a "so-called savior" (57); a consoiter with "unsavory characters" (59); "a coward and a liar" (65); "a low-grade character" (64) and an "author of insurrection" (116), the story of whose life is nothing more than "a monstrous fiction" (64).

As to the conjunction of the Christian people and their dubious God in the institution of the church, Celsus puts it this way:

> The cult of Christ is a secret society whose members huddle together in corners for fear of being brought to trial and punishment. Their persistence is the persistence of a group threatened by a common danger, and danger is a more powerful incentive to fraternal feeling than is any oath... They also practice their rites in secret in order to avoid the sentence of death that looms over them. (53)

Celsus views Christianity as, thus, a conspicuous and obnoxious species of internal flight from the order and reality of the great civic world, so that one will likely find its adherents skulking, rodent- or worm-like, in the dark corners of the worldly house. Conspiratorially secretive, Christianity suggests an actual fifth column and in fact has already fallen under legal proscription in an edict published by Nero.
after the fires that destroyed the tenement-districts of Rome and which Nero blamed on Jews, Christians, and other foreigners resident in the Imperial city. The Celsian phrase "sentence of death" seems in any case to imply that the Christians, in the moment when Celsus wrote, suffered from liability to prosecution, if they were not just then the object of widespread, organized harassment. We know that, in the late Second Century, the official attitude toward Christianity hardened: Even under the Stoic indifference of Marcus, significant regional persecutions occurred in Carthage and Lyons (in 177 and 180 A.D. respectively) and presaged the variously articulated universal crackdowns of the early Third Century, the most important of which was the edict of Decius (issued circa 240). Most of the martyrdoms occurred in the Third Century.

II

From the Celsian perspective, the continued presence of a subversive proletariat poses a real threat to the Imperial order, if not of direct or sudden action than by the more frightening means of creeping mimesis, for, as Celsus says, "if everyone were to adopt the Christian's attitude [of hostility toward the ritual forms of Imperial existence] there would be no rule of law: The legitimate authority would be abandoned [and] earthly things would return to chaos and come into the hands of the lawless and savage barbarians" (124). Nor does the danger lie at some distant remove. Celsus understands Christianity as an insurgency anxious to increase its membership through active recruitment and thereby to multiply the number of restive plaintiffs against the establishment. "Taking its root in the lower classes," writes Celsus, "the religion continues to spread among the vulgar: Nay, one can even say it spreads because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents" (57). In a theological variant on Gresham's Law, bad faith drives out good, and a debased theological coinage threatens the ecumene. Our critic of Christianity holds it against the Christians that they prey on the intellectually untutored and socially unassimilated, so that "wherever one finds a crowd of adolescent boys, or a bunch of slaves, or a company of fools, there will the Christian teachers be also" (73), plying their trade of subornation and deceit on those least equipped to detect it. These teachers, furthermore, engage in outright mischief: They brazenly claim that "they alone know the right way to live, and that if only the children will believe them, they will be happy and their homes will be happy as well" (73). It is Celsus, of course, who knows the right way to live, for his is the True Doctrine. Once again, we find ourselves witnessing a subtle stichomythia, a clash of rivals.

Celsus complains that the Christians not only confuse children by telling them absurd stories and making eccentric claims but actively turn them against their parents, urging them to maintain silence in their homes about their new belief, even while they mutely despise the traditional cults of the paternal household; the Christians even encourage children "to rebel" against their parents in the active way (73) which, from the Roman perspective, is a dastardly infraction of the most sacred of all social bonds. Here again, the Christians fill the role, for Celsus, of internal corrupters acting on the body social from within, breaking it down just as worms break down a infected organs or, latterly, a corpse. Robin Lane Fox reminds us that "in the 180s, we do happen to know of Christians in more prominent places [than previously] and there does seem to be a rise in the number of such people in Rome, Carthage, and Alexandria" (Pagans and Christians 272). Thus, despite their secretiveness, the followers of Jesus must have appeared to Celsus to be mounting a deliberate and growing challenge to the established order. The word *rebel* fits them in their boorish way, because they refuse to acknowledge the common duties and rites, and in this sense they represent a danger exemplified historically by events like the Spartacist Slave Rebellion and the Conspiracy of Catiline. The very conspicuity of the Christians' conspicuous internal secession, coupled with their bold recruitment, constitutes an impropriety which might easily become an enormity, thus sweeping order into chaos and opening the way for the barbarians.
I find it interesting, in light of the argumentative as opposed to the vilifying side of the Celsian case against Christianity, that Peter Brown, in his writings on Late Antiquity, refers to the period in which we find Celsus as an age of *philotimia*, or "ambition," which all at the same time recognizes ambition as one of its greatest problems. Quoting one of the protagonist's speeches from *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus, Brown remarks that the people of the second and third centuries sensed that the equilibrium of their ecumenical order maintained itself precariously and that the greatest threat to its stability came from the same forces that generated it in the first place: Zeal, competitiveness, a hunger for acquisition and a pride in display. The archaizing or conservative attitudes which historians associate with the Antonine phase of the Empire, Brown writes, stemmed from and were part of the complex of social instruments intended to exert control over "the disruptive forces of *philotimia*" (*The Making of Late Antiquity* 34) which emerged with the Antonine solidification of Roman world society. Thus the social "model of parity" (35) evolved by the Antonine elites to maintain social cohesion amounted to "firm upward limits to the aspirations of individuals" (35), and extended not just to economic or political ambition, but to theological self-assertion, as well.

Excessive holiness, as Brown explains, could be quite as destabilizing as excessive wealth:

> Men committed to constant competition within a "model of parity" are not likely to allow any one of their peers to draw heavily on sources of power and prestige over which they have no control. Appeals to the other world as a source of special status in this world had to be kept within strictly conventional limits if they were to be acceptable. Plutarch knew what he was talking about when he dismissed those who, in order "to be reputed the favorites of heaven and above the common sort, invest their doings with a character of sanctity." (35)

Syncretism, writ large, acquires a new comprehensibility under Brown's explanation. Committed pragmatically to relativism in the domain of religion, politicians, priests, and intellectuals needed to insist that one god was as good as another, except in the case where his adherents insisted that he was better than any other, or even exclusively the *God* to the detriment of all others. For at least one emperor, Alexander Severus (222-235), this was a matter of conscious policy: "In his domestic chapel," as Edward Gibbon reports, "he placed statues of Abraham, of Orpheus, of Apollonius and of Christ, as an honour due to those respectable sages who had instructed Mankind in the various modes of addressing their homage to the supreme and universal deity" (in Toynbee [V 549]). Yet like modern multiculturalism, the Severan type of syncretism could only have been a piece of official propaganda, or at best a half-hearted pose of the elites, since the adherents of the many cults remained parochial in their outlook. Those who revered Abraham did not also revere Orpheus and Apollo, nor did those who revered Christ also revere Apollonius, who, taking Philostratus at his word, was a remarkably rivalrous fellow for a sage.

In an age of ambition threatened by the destructive impulse stemming from its chief characteristic, *philotimia*, epistemological relativism functions not so much as an explanation of the *de facto* religious pluralism of the Empire but rather as a dogmatic prescription which prevents the accretion of too great a popularity around any particular divinity or revelation. The authority behind the tolerance among cults is, after all, the *Faustrecht* of the emperor. Celsus maintains the position of a steadfast relativist (if that is not a contradiction in terms) and part of his animus against Christianity involves Christianity's rigidly exclusive - therefore non-relativistic - claims. At one level, this concerns the parochialism of Jewish and Christian scriptures. A kind of *philosophia perennis et universalis* exists of which the plethora of
parochial doctrines of the ecumenic world known to Celsus add up to so many late and local developments. Or so Celsus argues. Thus "Mosaic history," for example, "is [only] one among many, and those who attempt to universalize it or disguise its partiality by treating the books of Moses allegorically [wiser though they may be than those who take such accounts at face value] are being led astray and deceived" (55). The "one among many" must not be allowed to arrogate and aggrandize itself into a an undivided and dominant "one" compared to which all others would shrink away into insignificance: That would put too much pressure on the Brownian "model of parity" and invite uncontrolled conflictual mimesis.

Again, says Celsus, "were we to read the literature of but one nation, we would conclude that there had been but one flood, one conflagration, one disruption of the created order. But in reality there have been many floods, many conflagrations - those floods in the time of Deucalion and the fire in the time of Phaeton being more recent than the rest" (55-56). Jews and Christians together, then, arouse the just ire of other people by insisting on the unique validity of their peculiar histories over all others, disturbing the parity that makes the Greek flood as significant in its field as, say, the Babylonian or the Egyptian. In the same way, the miracles of Asclepius ought to be honored as richly as those of Jesus, if he really effected any, but the Christians petulantly ignore those of Asclepius, bruiting those of Jesus as though there were no others. Nor does Jesus' having risen from the dead, if he did so, distinguish the Christ from "Zalmoxis... Pythagoras... Rhampsinitus... Orpheus... Protesilaus... Herakles... or Theseus" (67), for every one of those also enjoyed a resurrection from the dead or at least claimed to have done so. Celsus argues that the ubiquity of fundamental themes in myth and theology is explained by the ultimate derivation of them all from an ancient and primordial source which can be guessed at behind their similarity in multiplicity.

But the Celsian syncretistic relativism does not stop at the objection to an attempt at narrative monopoly (in which one story shall prevail over all others); it includes the domain of moral perceptions, as well. Finally, it will enter into the depths of epistemology and ontology.

5

Let me take up the problem of moral perception and Christianity within the Celsian argument. It is in this matter that Celsus begins to sound like a modern, or even like a contemporary, relativist, or like on of our advocates of mandatory respect for everything and anything. Celsus takes note of the Christian assertion - in his mind highly counter-intuitive - that men live in a flooding tide of evil. As the world stems from a single instance of creation and cannot suffer alteration, no part of it, material or moral, may either increase or decrease in proportion to the others. Thus, Celsus argues,

There is a sort of arrogance in the assumption of the Christians that evil is on the rise. Even if something seems evil to you it is far from clear whether it is really evil; one person with his limited perspective on the whole state of creation is unequipped to know whether what is good for you is good for someone else in the universe, and vice versa. (82)

This charge parallels the one, cited earlier, that the Christians assume an unjustifiable holier-than-thou attitude towards their fellow citizens. No knowledge exceeds the merely partial and any which pretends to exceed it offends against the decorum so necessary for maintaining the harmony of competing moral interpretations. Dependents on the Empire, subjects of the lowest order who should be grateful that their lot is not worse, the Christians as seen by Celsus nevertheless exhibit an uncouth inclination to Oedipal hybris. Brown reminds us that, in the context of an age of ambition, "tacit resentments" (21) tended to
accrue against any individual or group whose stance or behavior "clashed with the ideal of unaffected, unostentatious and unmanipulative relations current among his [or its] visible neighbors" (39). The Christians' voluble insistence on a singular and orthodox account of good and evil inevitably strikes Celsus as so much exasperating unphilosophic obstreperousness. Christian teachings pile "absurdities" (72) atop "preposterous suggestions" (73) atop "very stupid fables" (81) in an aggressive and offensive manner. While Celsus never invokes the Late Antique category of superstition by name, he nevertheless makes implicit use of it in these and other particulars of his case.

Origen designates Celsus as an Epicurean. The term superstition occurs prominently in Lucretius' Epicurean poem De rerum natura, where it refers to crude beliefs, of a magical or sacred character, which inhibit the exercise of reason and keep men in thrall to a pointless and often degrading tradition. In Book Two, for example, of his poem Lucretius invokes what he calls "the terrors of superstition" (61); later in the same book he refers to "the foul taint of superstition" (79); and later still, in Book Five, he characterizes superstition as the degrading "prostration on the ground with palms outspread before the shrines of the gods" (208) demanded by what he sees as irrational power-cults. Superstition is a mistake about the nature of reality, and to prostrate oneself before a mistake is akin to relinquishing one's humanity. Now the last of these irate dismissals finds an echo in The True Doctrine, in the Celsian image of the Christian oblatting himself wormlike in the mud, a figure to which I have already called attention. Brown, for his part, defines the Antonine notion of superstition as one which addressed, not the intensity of a man's belief, but rather the gentility or lack thereof in his expression of that belief. Thus, says Brown, "the superstitious man was like a sorcerer" (39) of the flamboyant type depicted by Lucian in his satires; and such a man followed his philotimia without reserve in order to sway clients to his cause and accrue the power of a demagogue. Such discomportment scandalized Antonine piety, in part, because it replicated the actual power structures of the Empire too nakedly, thereby arousing the awareness of resentment generally and inviting the conflict which inevitably springs from resentment.

Celsus emphasizes both the sorcery, hence the superstition, of the Christians and their internecine fractiousness. "The Christians claim to get some sort of power from pronouncing the names of demons or saying certain incantations, always incorporating the name Jesus and a short story about him in the formula," Celsus writes (53); and while the men whom he calls "the Christian healers" do indeed have the expertise "to produce noisy crashes and effects" while "pretend[ing] to do miracles in Jesus' name," they nevertheless "conjure [only] by means of silks and curtains, numbers, stones, plants and the assorted paraphernalia that one expects of such people" (98). Profligate displays of this sort galvanize the unlettered and turn them not simply against society at large but against each other. Ostentation leads to mimesis which leads in turn to conflict. Celsus has noted that among those who denominate themselves Christians one can find many sharply distinct sects or cults, many of which regard one another with intense mutual hostility.

While some of the Christians proclaim [that] they have the same god as do the Jews, others insist that there is another god higher than the creator-god and opposed to him. And some Christians teach that the Son came from this higher god. Still others admit of a third god - those, that is to say, who call themselves gnostics - and still others, though calling themselves Christians, want to live according to the laws of the Jews. I could also mention those who call themselves Simonians after Simon, and those naming themselves Helenians after Helen, his consort. There are Christian sects named after Marcellina, Harpocratian Christians who trace themselves to Salome, and some who follow Mariamne and others who follow Martha, and still others who call themselves Marcionites after their leader, Marcion.
The affront, for Celsus, arises less from the mere accumulation of competing sects within the overall denomination of Christian than from the fact that, internally, this multiplicity reproduces the same intolerant disjunction that keeps Christians stubbornly apart from their civic fellows, thus opening a rift in the social fabric. "The various [Christian] parties have taken to condemning one another," Celsus reports, so that "despite their clinging proudly to their [common] name, in most other respects they are at odds" (70). The internal conflict thus acquires a dangerousness in the Celsian critique, as though it might readily spread, quite like an outbreak of plague, from "the secrecy and obscurity of their little club[si]" (117) to the civic world at large. Such a mimesis is already occurring, for it is necessary for Celsus to speak of the Christians' "systematic corruption of the truth" (91) and of their "perversions" (114) of the same, offenses which strike at the very noetic basis of ecumenical order. Both the uncooperative denial of theological relativism on which the Christians insist and their own hypocritical fractiousness threaten to export to their neighbors a confusion in perception and understanding.

The Christians' obstinacy also reveals what Celsus sees as the power-play behind their seemingly simple-minded behavior. "Is it not precisely the sort of thing," writes Celsus in respect of the Christian position that only their God does genuine good, "that one would expect to hear from a magician, a sorcerer who is out only for his own gain, and teaching that his rival magicians are working their wonders by the power of evil, while he and he alone represents the power of good?" (99) Again, "it is petulance and the ambition for power that seems to determine the actions of the Christian God" (76) and by extension of the Christians themselves. If the Christians' disturbing claim to possess uniquely correct perceptions in the ordinary matter of good and evil violates the outward forms of propriety by which the Antonine world, in Brown's description of it, set such great store, then their quickness to "mutilate" (114) necessary ideas again attacks the established order in its very noetic substance.

III

So far I have been addressing that against which Celsus defines himself. But what about his positive belief, his own touted True Doctrine? Celsus maintains the Platonist vision of divinity. God is the Absolute Good of the The Symposium or the Ultimate Intelligence, beyond the Demiurge, of the Timaeus; God is the sunlike Logos in whose radiance all things become differentiated and intelligible. "What the sun is to visible things... so is God to intelligible things" (111). Christian literalism derails philosophical subtlety by displacing carefully differentiated concepts into gross figures: "A true son of God," writes Celsus, "like the sun that illuminated the world by first illuminating itself, ought first to have been revealed as a true god" (64). Had they insisted on no more than that Jesus was the son of God, or rather of a god, the Christians would not have exceeded traditional myth in plausibility or decorum.

Christian doctrine, however, offensively mixes the vocabularies of myth and philosophy; and where superstition is a threat that can only be kept at bay by philosophy - a tenet common to Platonism and Epicureanism so that it makes no difference to which camp Celsus at last belongs - this can only be interpreted as foretelling an epistemological disaster. "The Christians put forth this Jesus not only as the son of God but as the very Logos - not the pure and holy Logos known to the philosophers, mind you, but a new kind of Logos: A man who managed to get himself arrested and executed in the most humiliating circumstances" (64). Christian doctrine, according to Celsus, leads to "a general madness of beliefs" (111). Christian preaching, like the Bacchanalia suppressed during the time of the Roman
Republic or like the more recent and equally disturbing Rites of Cybele, "excite[s] [its] hearers to the point of frenzy with flute music" (71) while stuffing their ears with silly impossibilities and seductive notions. In discussing the origin of Christian doctrine in Jewish myth (the point being that Christianity is unoriginal), Celsus cites what to him is the absurdity of the serpent in the garden "prov[ing] himself superior to the wishes of God" (80). The Celsian point seems to be that the Christians themselves are snakelike, in addition to being wormlike, in that they seduce people, especially women, to false and destructive beliefs.

It is his Platonism, straight out of the *Timaeus*, however, that provokes Celsus to his central philosophical objection to Christian doctrine. No God-Logos would ever have descended out of the Empyrean into the grossness of the sublunary realm:

> God is that which is beautiful and happy and exists within himself in the most perfect of all conceivable states. This means that God is changeless. A God who comes down to men undergoes change - a change from good to bad; from beautiful to shameful; from happiness to misfortune; from what is perfect to what is wicked. Now what sort of a god would choose a change like that? (77-78)

Substituting anthropomorphic *change* for philosophic *changelessness*, the Christians thus dissolve the ontological category on which civic existence rests. To derive Jesus, via the Holy Spirit, from the Father God; to project divinity into mundanity; to attach attributes to the unattributable; and finally to assimilate contemplative calm to emotional frenzy: All of this subverts the Logos conceived of as a type of metaphysical agreement by which the many and distinct manifestations of the *philosophia perennis et universalis* evident in the teeming Imperial world can be reconciled as accents on a single antecedent utterance. Notice that all of the gestures, pragmatic and noetic, that Celsus condemns in the acts and thoughts of the Christians correspond to classic sacred crimes. They are profanations and adulterations. Notice also that, for Celsus, the Logos insulted by Christian misthinking functions as the bedrock of *accord* on which the structures of universal political life have been built.

Like Prometheus laying his stealthy hands on Olympian fire, Christians have abscended with the central term of the tradition which Celsus wishes to sustain and must therefore defend. Appropriating and *mutilating* this central term, the Christians have replicated the shameful deed of an Odysseus in sacking the Palladium or of a Kronos in parricidally assaulting his Father, Ouranos. Of course, the Christians cannot really steal the philosophic Logos, which remains the noetic property of the philosophers; but they can do something much worse when considered from the perspective of a society still immersed in sacred categories, like the society of Celsus: They can *double* the Logos, thus marking it with the conflict that it is supposed to defer. It is this doubling that strikes Celsus as intolerable and which, as he sees it, bodes an enormity. In his vilifications as well as in his arguments, Celsus is in effect saying to the emergent double of the philosophical Logos of which he is the spokesman, "this town ain't big enough for the both of us." He is trying to nip a stichomythia in the bud, but of course one cannot do that, for one is already...
fully in the midst of the stichomythia when one tries.

Brown has written of the way in which the forms of agreement and limitation in Antonine society inhibited the outbreak of destructive philotimia; he has also emphasized that decorum among the elite peers of that society to some degree served to disguise the actual domination of all minor parties by one major party, that namely of the reigning Caesar. Controlling philotimia required, in other words, the tacit denial by all participants in the body social that a primary model of philotimia existed and that everyone else involuntarily must bend his knee to it; we control ours, so to speak, that the emperor might exercise his. The Logos of philosophers, praised by Celsus, is really in the last resort the Logos of the Empire and as such is the coercive Logos that holds opposites in place through intimidation and violence. It is coincidental but instructive that the probable reigning Caesar when Celsus wrote his diatribe was Marcus Aurelius, Stoic author of the placid Meditations and military pacifier of the Germanic marches. Was On the True Doctrine intended to persuade the Philosopher King? Marcus issued no edict of persecution that with certainty can be pinned on him, but he did express irritation with the Christians. His heirs to the Empire tended to be less placid in respect of the emergent faith, possibly because they were responding to the Celsian or similar cases. Commodus, Marcus's son and immediate successor, was a sociopath who seized on any and every excuse to kill people. Origen's refutation of Celsus, from the mid-Third Century, suggests that Celsus was still very much current and that he was, in some degree, influential.

IV

That, for Celsus, argument as such functions more or less a matter of decorum, is suggested by the remark at the beginning of On the True Doctrine that Christians live under a momentarily deferred death sentence, and again by the naked appeal to violence (let none of them live to marry or procreate) in the concluding section of the tract. The syllogism begins in philosophy and ends in Faustrecht:

The wisest of the Greeks have said that even the human soul is allotted to gods from its birth; thus even we are to some extent under their control, and it is just as well if we do not slight them but rather do what we can to solicit their favor: The satraps or subordinate officers, not to mention the procurators who represent the Persian or Roman emperor - indeed even those who hold lesser offices - could make things very uncomfortable for anyone if they were slighted [as the Christians slight the gods]; and one should not expect the satraps and lieutenants of the earth and air to look kindly on the insults [of the new sect].

(118)

Celsus, who appears to have been a reasonably competent rhetorician, carefully imbricates his categories. The insidious thing about the passage just cited is the way in which it renders ambiguous the distinction between heavenly and earthly powers. Practically speaking, there is no distinction. After all, the emperor himself is a god, and "what you receive in life, you receive from him" (124), Celsus insists. In such a world, might is right in the manner post hoc ergo propter hoc: Thus "the men who tortured your god in person," says Celsus addressing the Christians directly, "suffered nothing in return; not then, nor as long as they lived" (119). The demonstration is pragmatic and theory follows the pragmata. The Christians allege, says Celsus, that their God suffered humiliation and torture because he willed to do so; but it would be just as easy to allege, and is indeed more plausible, that the traditional gods, not Jesus himself, willed the upset's arrest and execution. "When one considers these things objectively, it is evident that the old gods are rather more effective in punishing blasphemers than is the god of the Christians, and
those who blaspheme the former are usually caught and punished” (119-20). Celsus at last reveals the brutal reality which the Christians must assimilate if they desire not to feel the consequences:

If they persist in refusing to worship the various gods who preside over the day-to-day activities of life, then they should not be permitted to live until marriageable age; they should not be permitted to marry, to have children, nor to do anything else over which a god presides. If they are going to marry, have children, and have a good time of it, taking the bad with the good as all men must, then they ought to pray to the beings who have made life possible for them. They should offer the appropriate sacrifices and say the proper prayers until such time as they are free of their earthly entanglements, and ingratiate themselves to the beings who control all spheres of human activity. It is at best ungrateful to use someone's flat and pay [him] no rent (as Christians do the earth). (123)

Stop trying to differentiate yourselves so conspicuously from all others, Celsus is saying; cease your dangerous, because inevitably conflictual, doubling of the existing society, symbolized in your doubling of that society's key term, "Logos"; and do so by imitating, if only verbally, the established forms that signify agreement and subordination. Do so, moreover, or incur the positive displeasure of the community and face a lethal consequence. In simultaneously demanding of the Christians that they imitate the social norm and cease imitating the social norm, On the True Doctrine lays open the great cognitive limit of antique thought, the inability to understand mimesis in any stable way and the consequent entrapment of the thinker within a system of coercive violence of the type that René Girard has deemed the scapegoat mechanism.

I will need to touch on what Girard means by "scapegoat mechanism," but I can begin by calling attention to the fact that the Celsian Christians are a scapegoat, as the term is readily understood in common parlance, and in a way which Brown's discussion of philotimia clarifies.

The Celsian case can be reduced essentially to the following: The many ethnic people apply their many competing names to the presumed singular God and there are many cults within the Empire; all of them potentially conflict with one another, except that a Logos, a rhetorical equivocation, has been found which reconciles them in the concept of their parity. Nevertheless, the philotimia intrinsic to each remains and is a source of danger. That same potentially explosive philotimia can be channeled productively, however, through the invocation on the social scene of a conspicuous singular cult which all at once boasts of its superiority to all others and is demonstrably, by reference to what everybody knows, inferior to them. The cults will find their unity increased through their common animosity towards Christianity. The Celsian vilification of Christianity allows us to link this philosophical and social strategy to a strand of fundamental sacred practice whose roots are prehistoric. For in styling the Christians as vermin, as sorcerers, as "thieves, burglars, poisoners, blasphemers of all descriptions, grave-robbers" (74), Celsus makes use of a primordial vocabulary of execration which, in myth and ritual, invariably presages an expulsion or immolation.

Celsus even implies that Jesus was ugly (60), a typical characteristic attributed to those prone to be sacrificed. Indeed, On the True Doctrine makes the theoretical case, as one might nowadays say, for the conspicuous if not perfectly massive persecutions of the early Third Century, just as Mein Kampf made the theoretical case for the Holocaust, and just as Lenin's voluminous writings made the theoretical case for the extermination of the Kulaks. A scapegoat, according to Girard, is an internal, pre-differentiated, but otherwise arbitrarily selected other whose expulsion or immolation serves to polarize the general
conflict in a society and re-establish it as a solidarity. In cases where the breakdown in need of repair results from the clash of parties represented by clearly distinguishable agents, or doubles, one of the doubles will likely become the scapegoat. (If not Teiresias or Creon, then Oedipus; if not Caesar, then Pompey.) Paradoxically, when examined from outside of the sacrificial thinking that condemns him, the victim appears not as alien to those who immolate him but as similar. The purpose of vilification, or of myth considered as an accusation, is to disguise similarity so as to facilitate the lynching.

Even as he pronounces damning judgment and threatens a massacre, I would like to stress, Celsus betrays no consciousness that he is offending against the placidity of his expressed ideals: He must seem to himself, judging by his text, to be making a genuinely philosophical point and publishing what strikes him as a sane social commentary; he even at one point urges that he has written his treatise for the "edification" of the Christians, that "they can see for themselves the true character of the doctrines they have chosen to embrace and the true source of their opinions" (54). Is there any epistemological ground for doubting the man's sincerity? Not even Origen seems to doubt it, whose lengthy retort preserves his antagonist's work for posterity. But always Celsus recommends violence in order to defer violence, as when he reasons that if everyone imitated the Christians, a general civic collapse would quickly ensue, and the barbarians would manifest themselves tomorrow not just at the gates but within the precincts of the city. In defending the "True Doctrine" (Alethes Logos) which Christianity would undo, Celsus frankly admits that, as Plato made clear, this teaching "cannot be put in words" (92).

Christianity's devolving of the Platonic godhead into the bodily figure of the carpenter Jesus thus strongly offends Celsus because that "ultimate reality" which constitutes both godhead and the good is, as Plato says in the Phaedrus, "colourless, formless, untouchable, and visible only to the mind that guides the soul in its quest for the true knowledge that inhabits this sphere" (Celsus 95). In a startling way, the apologist for the "True Doctrine" has no doctrine; he only has an unspecifiable negative theology and a non-reflective practice, stemming semi-consciously from the pervasive fear of philotimia, and consisting of the maintenance of social cohesion through ritual expulsion of a victim.

René Girard has pointed out, in Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World (1978), that it is just this aspect of antique life to which Christianity responds through its withdrawal. The Logos of the Empire is the Logos of violence; the Logos of the Christians, however, "is foreign to any kind of violence," as Girard writes, and "it is therefore forever expelled... The Johannine Logos discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled" (271). One of the most baffling aspects of Christianity, for Celsus, is its refusal to engage in an explicit mimetic contest with its chief rival, the surrounding order, thereby proving its mettle. Celsus finds astonishment in the case that, if Jesus were God or a god, he did not smite those who abused him, for that is what gods habitually do. Thus Celsus holds the Christian admonition to "turn the other cheek" against Christianity on the grounds that it is an injunction stolen by them from the Crito, in which Platonic context he approves of it; but then he ignores Plato's caution not to seek revenge, for he urges massive violence against the Christians in response to their alleged offenses (113). Here again I insist on the remarkable semi-consciousness of the Celsian thought processes. Plato was right to condemn vengeance and we should avenge ourselves on the Christians (A) for absconding with the insight and (B) for getting it wrong in their restatement. As Socrates would say, these two statements do not chime together very well at all.

Celsus is simply doing, in his metaphysical style, what resident alarmists had been doing since prehistory
when they sensed the imminence of crisis, namely activating the scapegoat mechanism; but the Christians whom he relegates to disgusting worm-hood appear, on the other hand, to be doing something quite different. In Celsus' time, this difference is not yet fully differentiated (nor need it ever be for us to understand it as a difference), and in their internal sectarian battles the Christians, as Celsus himself tells us, could be just as vehement as their oppressors; but one can detect an emergent particularity nevertheless, especially in the Christians' withdrawal from the universal philotimia of the ecumene. "They are agreed," Celsus writes, "that outsiders are not to be trusted and they they themselves must remain perpetual apostates from the approved religions" (70). Since converts are admitted, however, the Christian withdrawal cannot itself be characterized as expulsory: It establishes itself without emitting a victim.

This withdrawal can, in turn, be traced to insights present in Biblical, or monotheistic, narrative which are not present in Pagan, or polytheistic, narrative, of which the Celsian combination of Epicurean and Platonic discourse represents a derivative species. As Eric Gans has written, in The End of Culture (1985), "what the biblical narrative accomplishes is the incarnation, in the figure of the 'jealous' monotheistic God, of an equilibrating reflection of human resentment, just as the more primitive divinities constitute similar reflections of human desire" (203). In this sense, the Celsian invocation of the God of the Philosophers is even less meaningful as an anodyne to Christian silliness, as an educated pagan undoubtedly saw it, than an invocation of Zeus would have been. As had Judaism before it, Christianity was replacing the scandal and relativism of many gods jealous of one another (because the followers of their cults were in de facto competition with one another) with the stability of a single God who, in Gans's words, "is jealous of man but never envious of other gods" (205).

10

To the objection that the Celsian god might bear a similar description, I would quickly enjoin again what I have only just noted, that the Platonic indifference of the God of the Philosophers masks the human, all-too-human jealousy of the reigning Caesar and his securitate. The God of the Philosophers is a prettification. Show-trials and massacres must have brought this home to the victims and their survivors in a radically toughening way. Fox makes a relevant comment when he writes that the burgeoning of Christianity "coincided with a particular phase in the history of public entertainment," namely gladiatorial spectacle, on the occasion of which Christians "were pitched into the cities' arenas for unarmed combat with gladiators or bulls, leopards and the dreaded bears" (Pagans and Christians 420). Fox adds that "these displays were financed and chosen by the great men of the cities" (420) out of civic pride. Brown, in his study, notes that the voluntary redirection of private wealth into public display was one of the ways of controlling philotimia, hence of diffusing resentment. That we moderns respond to gladiation, persecution, and mass execution with automatic revulsion is a sign that our fundamental way of thinking differs decisively from the Late Antique Pagan, and that it derives, in this aspect at least, from the proletariat of the Antonine Age rather than from its political or intellectual aristocracy.

V

Of modernistic thought, however - of all thought which makes a theme of its own discontinuity with the Judaeo-Christian, or Theological, or "Logocentric" tradition - the same cannot be said. If something irreducibly anti-Roman and anti-metaphysical and anti-sacred marks Christianity, then something irreducibly anti-Christian marks modernism, defined as I am here defining it, as a reaction, or even to some extent as an atavism, a return to Celsian rancor: Thus Voltaire, in the chapter on Christianity in his
Dictionnaire (1764), devotes a prominent page to the apocryphal contest-by-levitation between Simon Magus and Saint Peter in Rome before the emperor Nero and blandly records the hair-splitting doctrinal disputes of the early centuries as though these signified the new religion essentially. No wonder, Voltaire seems to be saying implicitly, that Nero casually proscribed the new cult. Who wouldn't have?

Voltaire's contemporary, Edward Gibbon, whose description of the Severan chapel I earlier quoted, blamed the fall of the Empire on the rise of Christianity. In fact, in respect of Alexander Severus, Gibbon opined that "the philosophic devotion of that emperor was marked by a singular and injudicious regard for the Christian religion" (quoted in Toynbee A Study of History [V 549]). For Gibbon, like Celsus, the supportable theological relativism encompasses Zeus, Orpheus, and Apollonius, but not Jesus, the inassimilable alien element. Modernist thinking brings other charges. "Christianity robbed us of the harvest of the culture of the ancient world" (183), writes Nietzsche a century later than Gibbon in his Anti-Christ (1886); "covert revengefulness, petty envy became master! Everything pitiful, everything suffering from itself, everything tormented by base feelings, the whole ghetto-world of the soul suddenly on top!" (183).

How amazingly like the Celsian is the Nietzschean anti-Christianism, or indeed how amazingly is Celsus like a proleptic Nietzsche! It is almost as though no time had elapsed from one to the other so that they are together one voice making one argument from the same irate perspective! Nietzsche even shouts worm! not once but twice. "Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against that which is elevated: the gospel of the 'lowly' makes low..." (157); Nietzsche meanwhile styles the early Christians as a mass of "stealthy vermin which, shrouded in night, fog and ambiguity, crept up to every individual and sucked seriousness for real things, the instinct for realities of any kind, out of him" (180), thus undermining the robustness of Hellenism and depriving posterity of the fruits that Hellenism would otherwise have borne. We of the modern present are still the victims of the Christian trespass, still the sufferers of ancient vampirism, and Nietzsche, like Celsus, has his own "True Doctrine" to proffer as an anodyne.

For Nietzsche, as for Celsus, Christianity represents cultural decadence merged with a devastating power of mimesis. Christianity seduces sufferers through the theme of "pity" (118), exacerbates the suffering, and spreads from one susceptible victim to the next: "The loss of force which life has already sustained through suffering is increased and multiplied even further by pity. Suffering itself becomes contagious through pity; sometimes it can bring about a collective loss of life and life-energy which stands in an absurd relation to the quantum of its cause" (118). Pity, says Nietzsche, "thwarts the law of evolution" (118) and sacrifices the higher type to the lower, the least fitted to survive to the best. Pity, finally, is a nihilism which "persuades to nothingness!" (118). Taking the Pagan side by assuming the superior insight of Aristotle, Nietzsche notes that the Greeks understood pity as a poison to be concentrated and expelled through the therapy of the drama (119). Again like Celsus, Nietzsche recoils at the weakness and foolishness of a god - or rather an image of god - who disdains to assert himself as an unequivocal potentate. This entails, moreover, Nietzsche's implicit acceptance of a plurality of tribal gods, each sufficient unto its cause. "A people which still believes in itself also has its own God. In him it venerates the conditions through which it has prospered, its virtues - it projects its joy in itself, its feeling of power on to a being whom one can thank for them" (126). God enfigures a people's power; not its moral but its effective power. To Christianity one must charge "the anti-natural castration of a God into a God of the merely good" (126), a construction paralleling the Celsian claim that Christianity mutilates proper ideas. In a typically Nietzschean gesture, the point resurfaces as the topic of an irate consummation:
The Christian conception of God - God as the God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit - is one of the most corrupt conceptions of God arrived at on earth: Perhaps it even represents the low-water mark in the descending development of the God type. God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes! In God a declaration of hostility towards life, nature, the will to life! God the formula for every calumny of "this world," for every lie about "the next world!" In God nothingness deified, the will to nothingness sanctified!... (128)

On the other hand, in the midst of his calumny, Nietzsche often understands Christianity with a clairvoyance that none of his modernist successors - and today they are legion - can reproduce. Nietzsche rejects, for example, the Romantic notion, typified by Renan, that makes of Jesus a genius-hero in battle against his foes. Impossible, writes Nietzsche, because Jesus is "precisely the opposite of all contending, of all feeling oneself in struggle" (141). Again like Celsus, Nietzsche identifies the keystone of Christian difference to be the injunction to "resist not evil!" (141), which however he regards as a morbid "incapacity" (141), not a strength. The pernicious effect of this peculiarly Christian Logos, moreover, is that through it and because of it "everyone is equal to everyone else" (141), as Nietzsche bitterly says.

In his treatment of Jesus, Nietzsche unlike Celsus begins to exhibit a certain measure of admiration; in his judgment Jesus really is unparalleled and without precedent ("a new way of living, not a new belief" [146]) in the radicality of his withdrawal from every established precept of social order and propriety. But once having established the uniqueness of Christ, Nietzsche then echoes Celsus again in his claim that, in their crude and erroneous attempt to understand the Master, the Apostles utterly misunderstood Him. The vulgarity of Jesus' contemporaries "must in any case have coarsened the type: The first disciples in particular had to translate a being immersed entirely in symbols and incomprehensibilities into their own crudity in order to understand anything of it at all - for them such a type could not exist until it had been reduced to more familiar terms" (142-143). Celsus objected that no true god would ever "come down" and besmirch himself in matter. Nietzsche is saying that the low-grade intelligence of the "first disciples" besmirched a rare entity by incarnating him in cheap figures and vulgar fabliaux and by dragging him into an existence incommensurate with his essence. Notice how Nietzsche refashions the genuinely transcendental transcendentalism of Platonic thinking into an "immanent transcendentalism" all his own and how, in doing so, he neatly reproduces Greek thinking for the selfsame modernism which, superficially, rejects Greek thinking.

The intellectual failure of the "first disciples" set the pattern for Christianity as "the history of [a] progressively cruder misunderstanding of an original symbolism" (149). Here once more Nietzsche's case runs in parallel with Celsus' case. In the latter, one finds the complaint, which I have cited, that Christianity at once depends on other cults for its stock of themes and orients itself exclusively toward the lowest elements of the society. Christ is simply a plagiarism on figures of greater antiquity and authenticity like "Zalmoxis... Pythagoras... Rhapsinitus... Orpheus... Protesilaus... Herakles... or Theseus." In Nietzsche, too, we read that Christianity "absorbed the doctrines and rites of every subterranean cult of the Imperium Romanum," and, along with these rites, "the absurdities of every sort of morbid reason" (149). Christianity employs magic because magic appeals to "the dross and refuse of mankind" (156) that the early Christian leaders chose to recruit. The Gospels should not be regarded as an "evangel," Nietzsche protests, but as a "dysangel" (151). To this extent, indeed, Nietzsche can boast that "in fact, there have been no Christians" (151) save for the first and only Christian, or Jesus himself.
There might be one exception to the rule, however, and that would be, by an irony which Nietzsche
calculatedly forces, Nietzsche himself, for if his discovery about the absolutely non pareil status of the
Redeemer is correct, then Nietzsche alone in two thousand years has really penetrated to the kernel of the
Christ Phenomenon. It becomes clearer, the further one reads in The Anti-Christ, that Nietzsche is
making himself the double of Jesus; and it is just at this point in the Nietzschean narrative that the
Author-As-Anti-Christ begins to make a theme of what Nietzsche names, using the French word,
ressentiment. Resentment, in Nietzsche's usage, refers to the subjective impression that life and being lie
elsewhere than in the self and belong to someone else. To the extent that one cannot appropriate that life
and being from the other, one contents oneself with denigrating it. Resentment as denigration serves the
purpose, to use the modern phrase, of feeling good about oneself even when all the facts indicate that one
ought to feel otherwise.

It is important to note that for Nietzsche, the death on the cross represents the Redeemer's "freedom from
[and] superiority over ressentiment" (153), so that the depiction of Calvary as a triumph completely
betrays the meaning of the act; but in the hearts of the disciples, who interpreted Calvary as the defeat of
a movement, "precisely the most unevangelic of feelings, revengefulness, again became uppermost" (153)
in the aftermath of the crucifixion, as Nietzsche argues. From that moment on, it was the
resentment of the defeated, of the outcast, and of the untouchable, against the strength of the Empire,
embodied in its gods, that fed and informed Christianity, a term which Nietzsche places implicitly in
quotes.

This line of reasoning is well known also from The Genealogy of Morals and Beyond Good and Evil,
where Nietzsche expounded his analysis of Judaeo-Christian morality as slave-morality, in which all
reigning values undergo reversal for the rhetorical purpose of disguising the ineffectuality of the
ineffectual, the weakness of the weak, and the lack of cleverness of the unlettered. Yet in the early period
of Christianity - the second and third centuries - before the religion gained official status, the behavior of
the Christians does not appear to have constituted a deliberate challenge to the Imperial order but, rather,
a withdrawal from it. That the Imperial order interpreted this withdrawal as a deliberate challenge does
not make of it a deliberate challenge. Even the behavior of the martyrs is pacifistic. Fox, among others,
notes that there is no record of Christians of the period seeking revenge on their persecutors. The
question ought to be posed, therefore, of whose resentment has provoked such ire in Nietzsche - and in
his successors.

If the radiant gist of Christian Revelation is, as Eric Gans has written apropos of Paul's conversion in
Science & Faith (1990), the fact that "faith and persecution are one" (87), that "to know Jesus is to have
participated in the crucifixion" (87), then one cannot achieve an assimilation of the message by the mere
inversion of the paradigmatic all-against-one expulsory structure of the death on the cross. Yet this is
what Nietzsche does in The Anti-Christ. Thus, starting with a general objection to Christianity, Nietzsche
then extracts a revalued Jesus from the Gospel account and revises the general objection so that it refers
specifically, not to the philosophically purified Jesus, that compound of symbols and non pareil
abstractions, but to the rabble who misunderstood and falsified their Master: "One would no more wish
to associate with 'first Christians,'" writes Nietzsche, "than one would with Polish Jews... Neither of them
smell very pleasant" (161). Christianity is so much "ill-smelling Jewish acidity compounded of rabbinism
and superstition" (175). No invocation of "irony" can neutralize these and other examples of vilifying
dismissal, of the rhetoric of immolation, in Nietzsche's book. Nor does Nietzsche's taking sides with the
revalued Jesus absolve him of the charge of intense resentment against Christianity, for this Jesus is as atheological as Nietzsche himself: He resembles, as I have already commented, the Platonic Godhead of Celsus' platitudinous negative theology; he also resembles Nietzsche's own counter-scriptural Anti-Christ, Zarathustra, a point that Nietzsche makes clear by alluding to his own text (171).

In fact, in these very operations, Nietzsche commits an error which, when he identifies it in Kant, he depletes. He makes of Jesus a Ding-an-Sich quite as unknowable as the Deus Absconditus of the Neoplatonists and other negative theologians and then, in effect, he makes himself the impossible revealer of this unfathomable being. But what epistemological basis is there for any of Nietzsche's speculations about the esoteric Jesus? Of course, there is none. Nietzsche has in fact fallen into an ancient and sacrificial logic from which a less dogmatically skeptical approach to the Gospels might have rescued him: He has succumbed to the lure of the numinous center and has entered into rivalry, not just with the evangelgs of Jesus, but with Jesus himself; he has then uttered a book-length sequence of antiquated denunciations aimed against Christians and Jews alike, blasting them as though he were Zeus and they mere arrogant godlings. And in this, Nietzsche compounds his error, blatantly so, for he violates a principle that he lays down in The Anti-Christ itself, and which I adduced at the beginning of my argument, using my own language. "The world-historical stupidity of all persecutors has lain precisely in their giving their opponents the appearance of honourableness -in bestowing on them the fascination of martyrdom" (171).

Even supposing that Nietzsche had divined the "true Jesus" behind the "false Jesus" reported in the Gospels, what difference would it make to the fact of historical Christianity? Very little. Quite aside from falling into the role of a mythic deletor, Nietzsche is arguing for a specious "True Doctrine" as against the effectiveness of an image, and the image, firmly ensconced in the Gospels, is so effective that, so to speak, it might as well be the reality.

Much of contemporary Jesus scholarship seems to me to be susceptible to the same criticism. While I would not be so naive as to comment on the erudition of a Barbara Thiering or a Burton Mack, I do feel justified in pointing out that their insistence on a "real Jesus" behind the "false" one makes them reminiscent of Nietzsche. More than this, each exhibits a certain animus against - what shall we call it? - the received, or better yet the effective, Jesus, or simply the Jesus of the Gospels. The ordinary, household-variety Jesus. Thiering shows an obsessive need to de-divinize Jesus and to de-Christianize Him, using her "pesher" technique of interpretation to transfer Jerusalem to Wadi-Qum-Ran, rescue Jesus from the Crucifixion (thus sparing him the embarrassing necessity of resurrection), and spirit him off to "a Herodian estate in the south of France" (Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls 160), where he dies in Gnostic serenity at the ripe age of seventy in 64 A.D. For Thiering, then, the Christianity rooted in the notion of the Death-and-Resurrection is a falsehood; the pacifist teacher and great spirit may be retained, but anything smacking of the supernatural must be discarded. For a summation of Mack's attitude, I cite a recent article in The Atlantic Monthly. Mack outlined his "next project" to the journalist, which would entail, he said:

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Putting together a scholarly consortium that would "redescribe" Christian origins in some way other than through the Gospel narratives and their "crucifixion drama," as he calls it. Because Q [the putative pre-Gospel source of the Gospels] contains no passion narrative, Mack believes that no one really knows how Jesus died and that the Gospel stories of his passion, like most of the other Gospel stories, are pure
fication. [...] "It's over," Mack said. "We've had enough apocalypses. We've had enough martyrs. Christianity has had a two-thousand-year run, and it's over." (67)

To which one is tempted to add, "thus spake Zarathustra!" But a scholarly "redescription" which corrects Christianity's vulgar and dangerous view of itself is only another way of pronouncing the name of Celsus, who under the sign of philosophical refinement remarked that the world would be better off with the Platonic uncontaminated God than with the Gospel God who descended into the sublunary muck. One need not say that the God of the philosophers could never have become the foundation of a universal religion; one need only say that it did not and that this fact radically lessens the possibility that it might have. The potential for millennial popularity of an academic non-god - a veritable "Q-Being" - must be even more minuscule. *Pace* Mack, there have been no further genuine apocalypses in the Western tradition since Saul's vision on the road to Damascus, and indeed the proclaimed revelations, Joachim of Flora's and Karl Marx's and Friedrich Nietzsche's, all have about them something distinctly anti-Gospel and anti-Biblical; they are intellectual attempts to subvert the massive extra-intellectual authority of the revelation that "took." None has been more than transient and at least two have generated enormous misery. If the objection were posed that the Gospels have caused misery too, in that the partisans of this or that interpretation of them have made war on each other, I would add that such war-making, since it abrogates the injunction to abjure violence, can hardly be laid to the Gospels themselves.

What was the truth that Paul understood and that Celsus might have understood, too, in his imperfect way, so that his resentment against the Gospel revelation was his response to it? I quote once again my friend Eric Gans, who has written so perceptively about the anthropology of revelation: "The truth that Saul understands, the power of which is figured in the text by his blinding, is that it is the persecution of the person Jesus that guarantees his presence beyond death and thus demonstrates his divinity. Saul intuits a fundamental connection between persecution and divinization. That the text fails to elaborate this connection, or that Paul's own writings explore it only indirectly, should hardly surprise us" (*Science & Faith* 89). Gans adds, in words which apply to the attitude of a Celsus or a Nietzsche or a Mack, that "the high point of revelation is expressed in words that bear the mark of authority precisely because they cannot be explained. In such moments the language of the human subject confronts him as the vehicle of an originary intuition that he would be unable to explain in conceptual terms" (89). This intuition, in Gans's terms, is the originary equality of human beings, or moral reciprocity, an intuition which necessarily affronts a vision as hierarchical in essence as that of Celsus or Nietzsche or Mack, each of which sees himself as the vindicator of a pure as against a contaminated vision. But the Pauline vision, with great force, insists on dragging the extraordinary back down to the level of the ordinary, the liberator back down the level of the persecutor. Everyone is a varmint, capable of persecution, unless possibly, in the simplest terms, someone reveals to him the human tendency to persecution. Resentment, like hypocrisy, is an honor granted by duplicity to the truth. I suggest in conclusion, and as an non-believer, that the resentment perennially aroused by Christianity and by the prior Hebrew revelation together is the sign of their continuing effectiveness in a post-Pagan world in which there is no "other" revelation and in which all attempted counter-revelations will remain absolutely derivative.

14

*Works Cited*


One of the New Testament's most memorable stories is John 7:53-8:11, the haunting and dramatic pericope de adultera, or as it is perhaps better known, the story at the center of which stands the famous saying "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her":

7:53 Then each of them [the apostles] went home, 1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

Homilists and theologians seeking to illustrate the "radicality of forgiveness" and "radical acceptance of sinners" practiced by the historical Jesus (Kysar 134) have frequent recourse to this pericope, since it seems so powerfully to embody the egalitarian morality of the Sermon on the Mount: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and prophets" (Mt. 7:12). But to see the story of the woman taken in adultery as little more than a dramatic vehicle for the delivery of a separable ethical commandment is potentially to overlook the moral significance of those aspects of the scene that give it its power: the ironic tone that suffuses Jesus' utterances and the cryptic action of stooping to write in the dust. The homiletic approach follows existential theologian Rudolf Bultmann in drawing a distinction between the story's significant content--the famous saying--and its form, the dramatic context in which the saying is pronounced. To Bultmann, the saying possesses historical and theological priority; the context, however, he assigns to what we might call the "mythic" background:

Here, in proper fashion, Jesus is first of all asked for a judgement, to which he replies with a saying that has been conceived of as an unity with the situation itself. But the initial silence
of Jesus is unusual and can be classed as novelistic; if so, the circumstantial ending, introducing the conversation with the woman, is more than anything else novel-like and secondary (63).

Is there an alternative to Bultmann's hard-edged form/content dichotomy, a way of reading this story--and, by extension, the other gospel texts it resembles--that demonstrates the equal theological significance of utterance and context in revelatory scenes like this one? This essay will present such an interpretation, by approaching the *pericope de adultera* from the standpoint of Eric Gans's "generative anthropology." First sketched out in *The Origin of Language* [University of California Press, 1981] and subsequently extended and tested in four books and numerous articles, generative anthropology represents a rigorous and far-reaching means of understanding cultural phenomena--such as religion--by viewing culture in light of its hypothetical origin. Culture's origin, Gans posits, was simultaneous with the emergence of humanity's defining characteristic, the ability to use language. But how, precisely, did this ability emerge? Gans rejects the widely-held view that language evolved gradually (that is, unconsciously) from non-significant animal communication because such a view ignores both "man's uniqueness with respect to his animal ancestors" (*Science and Faith* 2) and the logical necessity that "[c]onsciousness must originate all at once--it must originate consciously" ("Differences" 798). (1) The ability to use language, he argues, resulted not solely from the gradual accumulation of random physiological mutations in individuals, but in a collectively-experienced event--a scene--in which the capacity for linguistic signification deferred an imminent conflict that was threatening to break out among a group of proto-humans. For Gans, humanity's essential attribute is therefore its capability for deferring violence through representation.

2

But whence does the need for such deferrals arise? Generative anthropology answers this question by considering not how proto-human and *homo sapiens* differ, but what they have in common. Humans and higher animals share a capacity for imitation or mimesis, which is both the vehicle of non-genetic transmissions of information and a potent source of intraspecific conflict. Here generative anthropology follows the pioneering insights of René Girard, whom Gans credits with having rediscovered "the critical, inherently conflictive nature of [mimesis], a category of action that had previously been viewed, following Aristotle's *Poetics*, as an unproblematic source of esthetic pleasure" (*Originary Thinking* 8). Girard agrees with Aristotle that "the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood (actually man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative and learns his first lessons through imitation)" (*Poetics* 20). Girard differs from Aristotle, however, by holding that the intensity of the human capacity for mimesis (as Gans explains)

leads to intensified rivalry over attractive objects and thence to a generalized conflict that can only be resolved by the channeling of collective aggression against a single "marked" member of the group--one whose marginal status makes him an appropriate butt for the hostilities of the others. Because this victim brings peace to the community in crisis he is the first *sacred* object; . . .he is also the first *significant* object, and the source of all significance. ("Differences" 800)

The mob Jesus confronts in the *pericope de adultera* bears all the hallmarks of what Gans and Girard would identify as a "community in crisis": feeling their religious/legal tradition belittled by the imposition of Roman authority, and riven by competing ideas about how to re-assert the significance of...
Jewish nationality and identity, the crowd gathers and prepares to immolate a hapless woman in the hope that the execution of an adulteress will re-establish group unity. To this recurrence of an archetypal human event—a lynching—Jesus brings an originary intuition of the shared roots of significance and violence that enables him to short-circuit the sacrifice of the woman taken in adultery. In what follows, I will employ the methods and insights of generative anthropology to interpret two of the most puzzling and provocative aspects of the *pericope de adultera*: why, exactly, Jesus' famous words disperse the lynch-mob, and what is the meaning of writing in the dust, an action which Bultmann sees as just an atmospheric embellishment of the "novelistic" silence with which Jesus initially answers the crowd's challenge. I will then extend these insights to suggest how the pericope—though not written by the same hand as the rest of John—is thematically and theologically unified with the Fourth Gospel by its demonstration of the ethical dimensions of verbal and gestural irony. From this analysis will ultimately emerge a vivid illustration of generative anthropology's extraordinary capacity for extracting from religious texts and phenomena their innate, though sometimes obscured, cognitive and ethical insights.

Consideration of the story of the woman taken in adultery from the standpoint of generative anthropology begins with a kind of reader-response analysis: on what in the story does my attention focus, and why? Clearly, our attention to the pericope is as much drawn to the saying that stands at its center as it is to those more evocative details—the writing in the dust, the actions of the mob, and the puzzling exchange at the end of the episode between Jesus and the adulteress. Nevertheless, since the saying stands out from the rest of the story with a sort of epigrammatic intensity, I will begin with it before turning to the more mysterious aspects of the scene.

There is in the famous saying "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" more complexity than the homiletic tradition tends to grant it, complexity that restating the saying in the fullness of its context helps to identify. The primary source of complexity in the saying and context is the melange of impulses motivating the crowd to want to lynch the woman in the first place. Behind these sometimes suspect and contradictory impulses stands, however, the unifying feeling of resentment, directed first and foremost against the Roman conquerors of Judea. Captured after the Sanhedrin has been stripped of its power to enforce the sanctions for violations of Jewish law (believed to have occurred around 30 C.E.), the woman must be lynched—that is, executed without benefit of "official" due process—because, as Duncan M. Derrett observes, that was the only way in which she could be punished. Because the Sanhedrin was not allowed to hear cases involving the death-penalty, at any rate in Jerusalem itself, the constitutional method of seeking a penalty against her would have been to approach the Roman governor. The [Jewish] Law prescribed how and by what means an adulteress should be punished; but its application was hindered so far as regular administration was concerned, and the Romans provided no attractive alternative. No Roman judge would condemn to death a woman taken in adultery, and that was what the crowd (and the husband) wanted, it would seem, to happen to her. A smaller legal punishment, or even another at the judge's discretion, would by no means satisfy their zeal (10-11).

The pericope itself demonstrates, however, that the zeal of the crowd was aroused by more than just the
woman's violation of the law. Mixed in with their righteous indignation against the woman's sin are at least two kinds of resentment: the first against the constituted colonial authority of the Romans, the imposition of whose relatively lax legal code could be seen as yet another affront to Jewish religious and political sovereignty, and the second against Jesus, taken by the crowd as a self-constituted moral authority, whose self-evident righteousness also arouses resentment. When in John 7:19 Jesus asks an adoring throng, "Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?" he is greeted with shocked disbelief: "You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?" (7:20) Verse 6 of chapter 8 reminds us that the crowd's moral outrage against the woman is not unmixed with an animus against Jesus: the purpose of their question of "Now what do you say?", the story remarks, is "that they might have some charge to bring against him." This lynching is, then, a more involved enterprise than it appears on the surface. The woman is largely a pretext for the expression of other resentments, especially those of the scribes and Pharisees for any perceived threat to their civic and political authority. Understanding this aspect of the story enables us to appreciate even more the interconnectedness between Jesus' famous utterance and the context in which it arises. Note that "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" does not prohibit the contemplated action from taking place. Indeed, it is not even a direct answer to the question the crowd directs at Jesus; it is, rather, something of a mild suggestion ("Let him among you") qualified by what is under the circumstances an ambiguous psychic and moral condition: what does it mean to be "without sin?" Not presently in the act of sinning? Never having committed a sin? Incapable of sinning? And to which of the many varieties of sin and sinfulness is Jesus referring?

The vague and mild character of Jesus' response to the crowd's question presents, of course, a striking counterpoint to the malice and clear intent presumably emanating from the assembled group. There is, though, one part of this utterance that is crystal clear, and from it emerges the saying's overriding anthropological significance. The part of the sentence to which we should look for the saying's ethical importance is not the ambiguous expression "without sin," but the phrase "the first to throw a stone at her," especially the adjectival phrase "the first." "To throw a stone" is, of course, an unambiguous action, the motivation and consequences of which are obvious in this context. One cocks an arm, takes aim, and lets the stone fly, hoping it will strike the presumably restrained sinner squarely in the head. Jesus seeks unmistakably to bring to mind for each member of the crowd a clear picture of what is about to happen, and thus forgoes euphemism or any other type of figurative language. "First" is similarly unambiguous, and lies even closer to the revelatory kernel of the entire scene, for it brings to light the secret, fatal vulnerability that lurks at the heart of every lynch mob.

Generative anthropology sees the all-against-one configuration of the sacrificial mob as the sinister repetition of a moment of the event in which language originated, the moment of the sparagmos in which the violent impulses temporarily deferred by the emergence of linguistic signification are vented, as it were, upon the body of the central object. Since the center/periphery orientation of the originary scene of language was produced by a build-up of mimetic tension and rivalry between the members of the group, the aggression ultimately released on the body of the victim was not originally aroused by that victim per se. Thus the "sin" of the lynch-mob's victim, as my analysis has already suggested, is something of a pretext, since at least part of the real purpose of the punishment is to ward off a threat of group disunity. Establishing and securing the unanimity of the group of sacrificers is, as it were, the real purpose of the lynching; and anything that conduces to single out any member of the group thus threatens the entire enterprise. The precise means that this group has chosen to exact punishment on the woman caught in adultery is, of course, particularly well suited to this end, since in the aftermath of a hail of stones, who can say which was first and which was last? (2) (Or, for that matter, which merely injured the victim, and
which delivered the fatal blow?) The unanimity of the group's action ultimately confers anonymity on each individual, who, after all the stones have been thrown, enlists his own uncertainty concerning the precise order of events in order to still any pangs of conscience that might be stirred by having participated in what could, under other circumstances, be construed as a murder. Jesus' use of the word "first" is intended precisely to destroy the comforts of anonymous unanimity. And this is precisely what it does, for after another short pause, the story relates how the mob, originally an undifferentiated mass headed by "scribes and Pharisees," degenerates into a collocation of individuals, who depart from the scene "one by one."

A sophisticated understanding of what could be called the hidden anthropological strata of lynching thus undergirds Jesus' canny response to the question laid before him both verbally by the group and situationally by the circumstance with which he is presented. This understanding stems not from just a historic or scriptural knowledge, but from an intuition of the originary connection between scenes like this one and the internal scene of representation--the conscience--that results from the origin of consciousness itself. Were there no need for some sort of forestalling of the pangs of conscience that such events are capable of arousing, were there no ethical ambiguity in the action contemplated by the mob, then there would be no need for the elaborate measures the crowd takes to ensure the anonymity of unanimity. Jesus knows that the crowd's felt need to ask the judgmental question testifies to the presence of a latent moral pang. Human consciousness is originally constituted on a public scene (possibly, like this one, a scene of victimization); the scene leaves in each individual a trace, a remnant, that is the source of what is commonly identified as conscience. There is an originary link, then, between victimization and conscience. Awareness of this link is precisely what lynch mobs must try to forget, but which Jesus' carefully crafted reply is formulated to bring to light.

But what of this scene's other feature which the story is so careful to preserve, the mysterious moments in which the reluctant judge "bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground?" What is the purpose of these actions, and what, if anything, does Jesus write in the dust at his feet? These evocative details have understandably intrigued generations of interpreters, and over the centuries many have exercised their ingenuity in attempting to solve this tantalizing textual riddle. Some have taken the story's failure to specify the content of Jesus' inscription to mean that nothing identifiable was written--Jesus doodles in order a), to buy some time for the victim and then to allow his words to sink in, or b) to show his contempt for the entire proceeding. Others see the unusual word used to describe the act of writing--katagraphen, "writing down" or perhaps "tallying up"--as an indication that Jesus wrote something specific, such as the sins of his questioners. (3) Duncan Derrett enlists his formidable knowledge of the laws and customs of colonial Judea to support the hypothesis that Jesus wrote two passages from Exodus that comment upon the actions of the lynchers. The first is Exodus 23:1b, "You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness," and the second is Exodus 23:7, "Keep far from a false charge." (4)

These two schools of thought are, of course, mutually exclusive: either Jesus wrote a recognizable text the content of which somehow helped to shame the mob into dispersing, or his writing was illegible and achieved a similar purpose via less direct and obvious means. Of these two alternatives, the latter is preferable for two reasons. First, the chronicler shows meticulous care in preserving the delicate precision of Jesus' utterances. If Jesus had indeed written some text in the ground that directly commented on the event, it is likely that the chronicler would have carefully preserved it as well. Second,
some sort of written accusation, such as the crowd's violation of a law, or their sins, no matter how subtle or implicit, would jar with the resolutely non-accusatory tenor of both Jesus' central utterance and his concluding refusal to condemn the woman.

To hold that nothing recognizable was written does not, however, necessitate viewing the action of writing in the dust in the way that Bultmann does, as a secondary, "novelistic" detail included to dramatize the heightening tension of the situation. The importance of this element of the story lies more in the act of writing itself than in what is or is not written on the ground. The very action of writing, in other words, is itself symbolic, and forms an essential part of Jesus' ethically-oriented response to the situation. That such is the case may be observed by recalling exactly when Jesus pursues this cryptic action. Verse 2 relates that after Jesus' early morning arrival at the temple, "all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them." Though the text does not specify the precise configuration of this group, the fact that Jesus sat down to teach leads one reasonably to infer that the people were arranged in a rough circle, Jesus sitting with them seminar fashion on the periphery of the circle. That this was the arrangement is further suggested by verse 3, which relates how the scribes and Pharisees placed the woman caught in adultery "in the midst." The Scribes and Pharisees thus transform the egalitarian circle into a potential scene of violence simply by providing the circle with a center. Jesus' response is to bend down and write "with his finger on the ground," an action which, in its way, repeats the action of the scribes and Pharisees, though with a difference. Writing in the dust echoes the placement of the woman in the midst of the crowd by directing the attention of those on the periphery away from each other to the circle's center. Jesus' action differs from that of the scribes and Pharisees, however, in the extent to which it is ambiguous. Like the famous central saying, writing in the dust presents a striking conjunction of gestural clarity with representational ambiguity. Jesus touches the ground, and leaves a lingering trace of something in the dust--but what, exactly, is the inscription? Is it composed of letters, initials, pictures, or just random markings?

5

The intriguing combination of ambiguity and clarity serve something of the same purpose here as it does in the gripping central utterance. In the originary event, the production of the first linguistic sign occurred when a group arranged around an attractive central object reached for it at the same time, only to abort their gestures of appropriation in fear of the conflict that would break out if all managed to lay a hand on the object. The object's apparent ability to repel the appropriating gestures of the individuals on the periphery granted it a sacred aura, and, thereby, the "transcendent"--since it is capable of being both itself (an appetitively attractive object) and something beyond itself (the thing that forestalls conflict)--nature of the linguistic sign. On the originary scene, gestural certainty leads to sacred ambiguity, with the emergent capacity for language serving as a means to defer intraspecific, mimetic conflict. By writing in the dust, Jesus portrays how scenes of sacrifice like those urged by the scribes and Pharisees are capable of producing a decidedly less troubling and victimary outcome. The action symbolizes what generative anthropology offers as a minimal definition of the human capacity for language: the deferral of violence through representation.

III

The two aspects of the pericope de adultera upon which this essay has so far concentrated--the famous saying and Jesus' writing in the dust--have something in common: both seem calculatedly ambiguous and ironic, requiring of the hearer a degree of interpretive intrepidity far beyond that of even the most
obscure of the synoptic parables. In fact, the ambiguity of this pericope extends past obscurity to enter into the realm of irony, not in the narrow literary-critical sense of meaning the opposite of what one says, but in an existential sense akin to that developed in Soren Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard begins his examination of the unsuspected depths of irony with an observation about questions that emerges as remarkably pertinent to this essay's interpretation of the story of the woman taken in adultery:

It is manifest that the intention in asking questions can be twofold. That is, one can ask with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness, and hence the more one asks, the deeper and more significant becomes the answer; or one can ask without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind. The first method presupposes that there is a plenitude; the second that there is an emptiness. The first is the *speculative* method; the second the *ironic* (36).

Jesus' first utterance is a response to a direct question posed by the Scribes and Pharisees, and his second utterance is comprised of two questions he directs to the erstwhile victim of the mob, with whom he is now left alone: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Strictly speaking, these are rhetorical questions, since their answer is obviously provided by the context in which they are asked. The shamed crowd has trudged off, having abandoned in embarrassment their grim purpose. While, as Duncan Derrett observes, the text fails to provide any explicit guidance as to whether Jesus' tone in asking these questions is "sarcastic or humorous" (25), it seems likely that a faintly wry smile of irony--the look that says "Ah, I knew it" or "Just so"--crossed his face at that moment. The credulous woman answers the questions, which in the context of what has just occurred illustrate the unacknowledged ethical dimension of Kierkegaard's concept of the ironic mode of questioning. The ambiguity of Jesus' words and actions in the presence of the mob ironizes the menacing scene constituted by those who would condemn the woman to the extent that their scene is disassembled, leaving an emptiness behind. Or, to put it another way, the ironic distance Jesus is careful to put between himself and the woman's accusers has the ultimate effect of exposing the ultimately debilitating internal contradictions of "lynch law."

In addition, irony provides an important thematic and formal link between the interpolated story of the woman taken in adultery and the rest of the Fourth Gospel, which, for all the resolute Christology of its famous opening sentence--"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"--presents us with a picture of Jesus at his most human: loquacious, emotional, occasionally bitter and mocking, and almost always teasingly ambiguous when he speaks. It is, after all, only in John's gospel that Jesus' troubling rebuke of his mother at the wedding in Cana occurs: informed by Mary that the wine has given out, Jesus responds "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My time has not yet come" (2:3-4). It is also only in John that we find the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, in which Jesus may or may not declare himself the Messiah. The woman says to Jesus "'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'" Jesus' response in the original Greek is *ego eimi, ho lalon soi*: does that translate (as most Bibles have it) to "I am he (that is, the Christ), the one that is speaking to you?" Or is it just "I am the one that is speaking to you?" as if to say, "Don't talk to me of the Messiah now; listen to what I am saying to you."
By far the most striking and extended example of irony in John, though, comes in the trial before Pilate, longer and far more detailed here than in the synoptic gospels. As in the story of the woman taken in adultery, irony and verbal ambiguity arise in the context of a capital accusation. Unlike the lynch mob in the pericope de adultera, however, Jesus' priestly accusers admit--though not to Pilate, of course--that their real motivation for bringing the charge of sedition against Jesus is not to punish him for his crimes but to secure Jewish unity at the expense of a scapegoat. In chapter 11, the infamous Caiaphas berates his fellows on the high council with "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die than to have the whole nation destroyed," a statement which persuades the elders "from that day on" to plan to put Jesus to death. The Roman governor's ignorance of this conspiracy initially places him in something akin to the impartial stance Jesus assumes when called on to judge the woman taken in adultery. His anthropological intuition, though, is no match for Jesus': that this is the case is indicated by Pilate's mode of questioning, which is, in Kierkegaard's terms, predominantly speculative rather than ironic:

18:33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" 35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." 37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." 38 Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

There is a great deal of psychological and anthropological significance packed into this subtle and complex verbal dance, the complete elucidation of which lies beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes, it is necessary first of all to notice that irony and ambiguity once again arise during a forensic examination--that is, at a time and place in which discursive clarity assume life or death importance. Second, it is noteworthy that Pilate's famous ironic question--"What is truth?"--produces an emptiness similar to that revealed by Jesus' questions to the adulteress: without staying for a reply, the Roman governor leaves his captive and returns to the crowd to report "I find no case against him" (18:38). Again, questioning in the ironic mode reveals the moral emptiness of the charges brought against the scapegoat. But the events of the next few hours will demonstrate that there inheres yet another wrinkle to what the pericope and Pilate's examination reveal as irony's ethical dimension. By turning away from his interlocutee after asking his sardonic question, Pilate pinpoints the distinction between mere mockery and the revelatory irony Jesus employed to disperse the crowd in the pericope. In this context, mockery is irony's pale and ineffectual shadow, as is illustrated when Jesus, mocked and scourged as the "King of the Jews," truly has his body broken and actually dies on the cross.

IV

It may be observed from the above analysis of the scene between Pilate and Jesus that irony's structuring role in the Fourth Gospel is ultimately paradoxical, since what serves in the first case to avert a violent outcome appears to produce one in the second. How can this be?

Solving this riddle requires recognizing what the two episodes reveal in juxtaposition. In both, the essential function of the originary scene--the generation of meaning out of crisis--may be observed. In
employing verbal irony and gestural ambiguity to divert the attention of the woman's would-be lynchers from the object of their malicious intent, Jesus demonstrates the fragility of the sign/signified relationship which the lynching hopes to establish. The crowd, provoked by the scribes and Pharisees, want the dead body of the lapidated adulteress to serve as a guarantor of the authenticity of the Law which they feel has been delegitimized first by the Romans and then by Jesus. That is, they want to make the body into a sign that will derive an unshakable stability from the permanence of the woman's death. The law of Moses, say the scribes and Pharisees, "commands" this. Jesus' response is consistent with his statement in Matthew 5:17 that he came not "to abolish the law or the prophets." To reveal through ironic detachment the law's cognitive and linguistic sources is not, strictly speaking, to abolish the law. It is, however, to show how the law, as a system of representations, is vulnerable--perhaps even fatally so--to deconstruction. In the pericope, Jesus destabilizes the hoped-for sign--and thereby spares the woman--not by merely questioning the crowd's right to execute her or by suddenly superseding the old law with a new. Rather, he approaches the question of the law anthropologically: he tacitly asks the crowd, "What is a law? What is the relationship between the law and the language in which law is expressed? What, if any, essential characteristics of social interaction are exemplified in setting up systems of law and punishing transgressors?"

That he asks these questions ironically and indirectly indicates the extent to which Jesus' anthropology is generative—that is, it attempts to understand human interaction from the standpoint of the origin of humanity's defining characteristic, language. To do so, however, is to threaten to unleash the mimetic tension originally deferred by the emergence of language against himself, for, as Gans writes,

Irony is the necessarily indirect and allusive expression of the deconstructability of the formal structure of language that is the model for all formal structures, all of which are in the last analysis structures of representation. To think a formal structure is to conceive both its levels on the same plane, to deconstruct it--to ironize it. True thinking, originary anthropological thinking as opposed to the positive thought that unconditionally respects formal difference, is thus always ironic. (*Signs of Paradox*, in MS).

The task of sifting the teachings of the "historical Jesus" from apostolic emendations and corruptions, it seems, would greatly benefit from considering whether the text in question respects or questions formal difference. For all that can be said about the New Testament's varying depictions of Jesus--especially between the synoptics and the fourth gospel--there is a striking consistency in the lack of respect Jesus affords to the formal differences upon which his age set such great store. What are the parables of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37), the laborers in the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16), and the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32) if not reminders of the ultimate instability of human concepts of significant difference? What are the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12) if not a call to re-think the relationship between linguistic sign ("Blessed" or "Happy") and the collective contexts from which those signs originally derived their meaning?

That Jesus ultimately fell victim to the originary instability his characteristic irony was so effective in revealing does not, of course, invalidate either that irony or the truth it was capable of uncovering. As Gans writes,

because humanity depends on the maintenance of formal structures in order to defer conflict, ironic thinking is potentially tragic. Once the absolute formal barrier between sign and referent has been shown to be vulnerable, an end is made to deferral and the central
figure becomes subject to sparagmatic violence (Signs of Paradox).

Both the *pericope de adultera* and John's description of trial of Jesus by Pilate illustrate not only the power of generative anthropology, in Gans's words, "to extract from religious texts clearly formulated and in principle 'falsifiable' anthropological theses" (*Science and Faith* vii-viii). They also show the extent to which Jesus' theology and mission--his theory and practice--reflected an understanding of the originary links between mimesis, violence, and the definitive human attribute of language.

8

Notes

1. Thomas F. Bertonneau has pointed out how the discussion of language acquisition in Richard Leakey's *The Origin of Humankind* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) exemplifies this kind of gradualism. Following Richard Pinker's arguments in *The Language Instinct*, Leakey accepts that language is genetically programmed and therefore can be explained in terms of natural selection. However, continues Leakey, "what were the pressures of natural selection that favored the evolution of language? Presumably, the ability did not spring into being full-blown, so we have to wonder what advantages a less-developed language conferred on our ancestors. The most obvious answer is that it offered an efficient way to communicate. This ability, surely, would have been beneficial to our ancestors when they first adopted rudimentary hunting and gathering, which is a more challenging mode of subsistence than that of the apes. As their way of life grew more complex, the need for social and economic coordination grew, too. Effective communication would have become more and more valuable under these circumstances. Natural selection would therefore have steadily enhanced language capacity. . . . Language as we know it today [would therefore have] emerged as the product of the exigencies of hunting and gathering" (122-23). See Bertonneau 1994: 2-3. (back)

2. Derrett notes that the crowd is merely following tradition, not the law, in telling Jesus that "Moses commanded us to stone such women." Stoning was an all-purpose form of execution, "the traditional penalty to be resorted to whenever the Law said ‘he shall certainly die’ or words to that effect without prescribing a different penalty" (11). (back)

3. Some ancient manuscripts add the words "the sins of all of them" to the second instance of Jesus writing in the dust. This emendation is, however, widely held today to be a late textual corruption. (back)


Works Cited


----------. Signs of Paradox. In MSS.


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