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Introduction to the GASC 2013 Issue

Ian Dennis & Stacey Meeker, Guest Editors

The 2013 Generative Anthropology Summer Conference, "Putting the Human Back into the Humanities," was notable, by common observation, for the intensity and depth of its intellectual engagements. An almost relentless stream of strongly argued papers left participants both drained and exhilarated. It was clear to all, as we mingled for the final time on the balcony of Royce Hall and gazed out into the Los Angeles sunshine, that this had been an experience of extraordinary richness and promise. With GASC's return to the very room in which the first GA conference, "Generative Anthropology: Representation and Origin," was held in 1990, the vitality of GA and those who work with it have never looked better.

So many fine papers were presented that we will also devote the Spring 2014 issue of Anthropoetics to articles developed from them. The present issue offers our readers four remarkably diverse examples of the thinking on display at GASC VIII, plus one paper that certainly belonged there.

Professor Jean-Loup Amselle delivered our guest plenary, which we reproduce largely unaltered. "Did Africa Invent Human Rights?" is the work of an eminent anthropologist, tracing the paradoxical operation of what he acknowledges is "mimetic rivalry" in the context of the search for African national and cultural identity, and raising questions with obvious and profound originary implications.

These questions are taken up by Richard van Oort in a "Response" that highlights the commonalities and divergences between Amselle's Foucauldian analysis and those, firstly of such figures as Ernst Gellner and John Rawls, and then that of Generative Anthropology itself.

Ian Dennis' "Student Resentment and Professorial Desire in Higher Education" delves beneath the agonistic expressions of resentment between students and professors that are apt to surface in a de-ritualized world of higher education, which increasingly resembles the modern market where learning is commodified and distinctions blurred. Ian's sharp originary analysis probes beyond a merely mimetic interpretation to uncover the fundamental anthropological mechanisms behind asymmetrical resentments and the cultural means of productively deferring these tensions. Ian proposes that escape from the sterile mimetic muddle of master and disciple is possible if the professor becomes a model for the student by re-enacting the acquisition of his or her cultural firstness, re-experiencing and modeling originary vulnerability to the desire that culture-as-sign transcends. [SLM]

Martin Fashbaugh had the best of possible excuses for missing the UCLA conference—his wedding day! He was with us in spirit, however—our congratulations, Martin!—as his insightful probing of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1821 masterpiece "Epipsychidion" in "Creating 'An Infinite World All Its Own': The Poetics of Resentment in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Epipsychidion" amply demonstrates. Even at the heart of this arch-Romantic's desperate quest for an "atemporal originary scene" to be shared with his beloved, a quest whose failure he attributes to the nature of language itself, lurks another, more fundamental resentment.

Readers of this journal, who expect nothing less than ground-breaking work from Adam Katz, the originator of the GA's "first amendment" (on "firstness" itself) will not be disappointed with his contribution to issue 19.1. "Attentionality and Originary Ethics: Upclining" is a dense and ambitious re-examination, in originary terms, of the formation of moral reciprocity through shared attention and those human tendencies of "distraction" and "fixation" that threaten to interrupt it. This leads, through a revisiting of various aspects of cognitive linguistics, the "Sapir-Whorf" hypothesis, "grammaticalization," and "upclining," to an insistence on the priority of GA's constitutive concept of "attentionality" and a telling reflection on the pragmatics of maintaining ethical behaviour in the everyday life of a modern society.

Next year's meeting returns to British Columbia, where the current GASC series was inaugurated in 2007.
The Eighth Annual Generative Anthropology Summer conference in Victoria, organised by Richard van Oort, will include plenaries by both Eric Gans and the British polymath Raymond Tallis; it is probably the most eagerly anticipated yet. Stay tuned for the second installment of papers from the 2013 UCLA conference. We look forward to seeing you in Victoria!

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One should first of all note that, in this as in other cases, the fact that we are asking whether Africa invented Human Rights might prove more interesting than any actual answer to the question itself. We shall focus here on the "Kurukan Fuga Charter" and/or "Mande Charter" which are said to have been drawn up before the "Bill of Rights" (1689), the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" (1789), even prior to the "Magna Carta" (1215-1297). As Africa was the cradle of humanity, it might seem logical from an Afro-centric perspective that Human Rights should also have been born on that continent, in this case in West Africa, in the Sudan-Sahelian region. We shall firstly foreground the "invention of tradition" as the production of a "model," that is, the establishment of a maximal distance between Africa and Europe. An attempt will then be made to bring these two intellectual continents together, availing ourselves of certain aspects of the work of Michel Foucault that are capable of enriching this debate, or at least of decentering it. We shall then conclude by evoking the Revolutions of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya as counterpoints to the present historical study, even if it be placed under the banner of "African Renaissance."

The play representing the emergence of Human Rights on African soil is divided into several acts.

**Act One**

We begin with Maurice Delafosse (1870-1926), colonial administrator, ethnographer, and orientalist, and his *opus magnum, Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (1912), in which he paints an impressive ethnological-historical picture of the "civilisations" of that part of Africa, in particular the great "Sudanese" empires (Ghana, Mali, Sonrai) that succeeded each other, throughout this area, between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. We do not know who informed Delafosse because his work is based on secondary information gleaned from inquiries carried out by colonial administrators (heads of districts) at the request of the governor general of French West Africa at the time, Clozel. From the point of view of what interests us here, it emerges clearly from the inquiry that Sunjata Keita, having defeated Sumanworo Kanté, Emperor of Sosso, at the battle of Krina, in 1235 (a date essentially invented by Delafosse), became the founding sovereign of the Empire of Mali. But once having reported this major event, Delafosse makes no mention whatsoever of the Kurukan Fuga meeting during which Sunjata Keita supposedly enacted the famous charter.

**Act Two**

The first mention of the latter event in a book written in French took place in 1960, in the Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Sunjata or the Mandingo Epic*, a translation of an epic tale collected from the griot (*jeli*) Mamadou Kouyaté of Jeliba Koro in Guinea. This work, which does not include a complete literal transcription in the original Malinke, thus contains a chapter entitled "Kurukan Fuga or the division of the world," which tells of a meeting that Sunjata organised following his victory over Sumanworo, and which brought together the chief clans of the empire as well as the newly subjected peoples. It also announces the prohibitions (*jo*) and the norms of "joking relationships" (*senankuya*) governing relations between the various Mande clans. But in the final chapter of the book, "The Eternal Mandingo," Kouyaté and Niane not only describe the political organisation which Sunjata established during that meeting but call it a
“Constitution,” without making clear exactly which term in Malinke this French noun might correspond to (“Go to Kaba and you will see the Kurukan Fuga clearing where the assembly that gave the Soundiata Empire its constitution was held”).

**Act Three. Souleymane Kanté and the N’ko**

In 1949, Souleymane Kanté (1922-1987), a Guinean marabout, invented the N’ko alphabet by mixing Arabic and Latin graphemes, thanks to which he was able to translate the Koran and write many other books in Malinke. Among these books, we note a volume of "legislative customs," probably inspired by the colonial legal code or a variation of it in Delafosse’s Haut-Sénégal Niger. This volume contains the 130 "rules" or "laws" (ton) promulgated by Sunjata at Kurukan Fuga, which Kanté, adhering closely to Delafosse's chronology, assigns to 1236, one year after the presumed date of the battle of Krina.

The first set of laws concerns the old customs (landa), those drawn up by the elders and destined to be abolished later upon the adoption of new laws.

The second set concerns Sunjata’s sojourn in the Marka area, during which time the future sovereign came to appreciate certain Muslim customs of that country, especially the seven-day week.

The third set contains those established following the relinquishment of the laws in force during the reign of Sumanworo, the emperor defeated by Sunjata.

These "laws," "rules," or "customs" concerned a number of different domains: material possessions, ways of obtaining and transmitting them, marriage and the question of dowries, inheritance, the status of slaves, the organisation of labour within families and according to age, land rights, the prohibition of human sacrifice, the safeguard of foreigners, succession to chiefdom, rules concerning violent conflict and murder, oaths and ordeals, the calendar, social status (tontigi, tontan) and the associated "joking relationships," and so forth.

All these "rules" or "laws" arise from giving a fixed, standard juridical status to practices "performed" in various ways, over time, within what we might call for lack of a better term "the Mande cultural area." They comprise, therefore, a kind of oral codex "invented" for the most part by Kanté himself, given that the latter admits that the griots were incapable of formulating it. Its contents, however, probably derive from observations or historical inquiries carried out among the custodians of the "tradition" (elders, griots, etc.) of his own culture by that erudite Moslem. This oral codex, therefore, underwent a two-fold transformation: on the one hand, it became the object of transcription and of a written transformation into the kind of "list" that transcription typically produces; on the other hand, it was referred back to a distant past, to 1236, which date, as we have seen, is a total invention.

Fixing the oral codex in writing and dating it to the Sunjata era makes it a "false archaism," thereby placing its author, and his co-authors Kouyaté and Niane, in a position one might call "Afrocentric." For such a dating operation makes the "laws" and the "Constitution" of Kurukan Fuga precede, by five centuries, the English "Bill of Rights," and by six, the French Revolution's "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen."

Ultimately, however, the significant question is less whether these oral regulations may be compared to a "Constitution," whether or not their unwritten status disqualifies them as such, than of discovering their purpose. One cannot doubt that the pre-colonial Mandan world was endowed with rules, norms, and values, although these varied greatly depending on time and place, another complicating factor. The real difficulty is that it is impossible to compare a set of rules, be it even a "code" or a "charter" like that of Kurugan Fuga, with the "Bill of Rights" or the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen."

If one seeks to make a comparison at all costs, and supposes that the meeting actually took place in the thirteenth century, it is with the Hammurabi Code, for example, rather than a "Constitution" of any kind, that one should compare the Kurugan Fuga charter, seeing that the latter essentially intended to regulate relations between groups and questions of social status. The two issues are closely linked because they concern an extremely hierarchized society (warriors, "castes," slaves) where the maintenance of social and
political order was fundamental. In the story of the creation of the Kurukan Fuga charter, and in general in the epic of Sunjata, one can detect the clear intention of promoting a vast project for social and political reorganisation aimed at putting an end to "the war of all against all," which, within the Mandan and West-African context in general, meant factional warfare (fadenkele) between opposing provinces and chieftainships (kafo). From this stems the importance, as narrated both by Kouyaté and Kanté, of establishing pacts between rival "houses," the famous senankuya, "cooled down," "depoliticized" and transformed later into "joking relations" and "cathartic alliances" by colonial ethnology (Radcliffe-Brown, Griaule). These are no less than social and political contracts drawn up with a view to guaranteeing peace and maintaining order so as to control rival aristocracies; something, all else being equal, a bit like the way Philip the Fair, in the thirteenth century, tried to centralise the French monarchy by limiting the power of his vassals.

In the Sunjata epic, and the Kurukan Fuga assembly which marked its climax, one needs to detect the staging (by the dominant aristocracies, or the contemporary political elites that succeeded them, of a process of establishment or re-establishment of an imperial power, which took over from that of Emperor Sumanworó Kanté. This is why Kouyaté and Kanté's idea of comparing the Kurukan Fuga Charter to the "Bill of Rights" and the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" does not make much sense. Not because Africa or Africans would not have been capable of drawing up a "Constitution," but because the charter in question does not reflect in any way an uprising against absolute monarchy analogous to that of seventeenth-century England's Glorious Revolution—a revolution leading to the emergence of a parliamentary monarchy—or any preoccupation whatsoever with the rights of the individual. Once again, this charter concerned exclusively the establishment of pacts or alliances between groups, "social contracts" if you like, but social contracts which have strictly nothing to do with the political philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) aimed at guaranteeing—by recurring to the achievements of the Magna Carta and the Habeas Corpus Act, and by deploying a fictional opposition between a "state of nature" and a "social contract"—the transformation of subjects into citizens endowed with certain rights.

Act Four. The Kankan meeting (1998)

In any case, this anachronism, typical of all religious or cultural fundamentalisms, made its comeback in the context of the emergence of policies of decentralisation as well as policies favouring multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in the West African countries of the Sudan and Sahel areas. With the support of international organisations, financiers and NGO's, in Senegal and in Mali the values of humanity (maaya), hospitality (terenga), and power centered in the household (ka mara la segin so) have been promoted as proofs of good government, while in the various countries of the area palavers between families or groups and debates within villages are encouraged as useful ways of solving conflict and re-establishing peace between the various ethnic communities. In this manner, the Sudan and Sahel region of West Africa, seen as a land of concord, is "sold" on the international aid market as a perfect counter-example to be held up against central or costal Africa (Ivory Coast), torn by tribal conflict and genocide.

It was in this context that, following the initiative of the agency for the French Language (OIF) and CELTHO (Centre for the linguistic and historical study of the oral tradition), a seminar was held at Kankan, Guinea in 1998, open to participants from the various West African Sudan and Sahel countries. The official aim of this workshop was the improvement of mutual understanding amongst exponents of tradition, researchers, and communications experts, with a view to devoting themselves urgently to the collection and safeguarding of the African oral heritage.

During the seminar, bard-narrators were invited to provide, in turn, their respective versions of the Kurukan Fuga charter. Judge Siriman Kouyaté, a Guinean magistrate and a member of an important family of bards, took it upon himself—in purest colonial style—to draw up a "summary," in the form of a "constitutional text" containing 44 articles.

The outcome of the 1998 meeting and subsequent "rediscovery" of the Kurukan Fuga in fact brought about the marginalisation of the version by Souleymane Kanté, the Guinean marabout inventor of the N’ko alphabet, whose text of the charter, inspired by colonial juridical custom, impacted considerably on the
printed version provided in the final document of the seminar. Indeed, only the version drawn up during the
seminar, based on a "summary" of the various versions provided by the bards, and which ignored the Kanté
version completely, was authorised. Instead, the two contributions by the Mali researcher Youssouf Tata
Cissé occupy a position of primary importance: the "Sunjata Testament" narrated by his main informer, the
bard Wa Kammissoko, and the "Hunters’ Oath," an oral text claimed to precede (1222) the Kurukan Fuga
charter (1236) and to contain articles regarding "human rights."

Thus, by tracing the genealogy of the Kurukan Fuga charter to the "Hunters' Oath," it has been, possible to
"improve further" on Kanté who, for his part, had simply claimed that the Charter was older than the 1689
"Bill of Rights." Henceforth, the African version of human rights is presented as being contemporary with if
not anterior to the English Magna Carta (1215-1297). It is worth pointing out that if the Magna Carta
establishes, almost by inaugurating it, the freedom of the individual as opposed to the arbitrary authority of
the despot, it is difficult to find an equivalent in the Mandingo tradition prior to the Souleymane Kanté
texts, those of the Kankan seminar, or the "Hunters' Oath" as published by Youssouf Tata Cissé. One might
ask whether, in reality, such back-dating of the right of the individual to resist royal power—as found in the
entire tradition of English politics, from the Magna Carta to Habeas Corpus to the Bill of Rights—does not
derive from a "democratic" or "egalitarian" vision of the customs of the traditional associations of Malinke
hunters (donso ton). At any rate, this is how this back-dating operation was performed, beginning with the
investigations of Cissé and enhanced later by the theoretical elaborations of the anthropologist Claude
Meillassoux. The possibility cannot, therefore, be excluded that Cissé, having been in close contact with
Meillassoux, may have adopted in his work on the "Hunters' Oath" a perspective that provided a "traditional" legitimation of democratic processes implemented throughout Africa in the 1990's.

The meeting, which concluded with the "rediscovery" of the Kurukan Fuga Charter, therefore brought to
light a number of principles or preoccupations of a strictly contemporary nature, such as human rights,
gender equality, the environment, cultural diversity, and African unity, issues that appear as so many "false
archaisms," to cite again Lévi-Strauss's famous expression.

The outcome of the Kankan meeting: "Kurukan Fuga Charter" or "Mande
Charter"?

This process of the "invention of tradition" continued in a subsequent meeting held at Bamako, Mali, in
2004. There were many participants, some of whom had taken part in the Kankan seminar. The Senegalese
writer Boubacar Boris Diop, while trying to maintain his distance from the Afrocentric position of Cheikh
Anta Diop—whose ideas had, in actual fact, had an immense impact on the process that led to the
promotion of the Kurukan Fuga Charter—nonetheless mocks those who see the charter as "an a posteriori
construction drawn up by intellectuals prepared to go to any dishonest ends to find valid references for
their own history."

Contrary to this writer, although without going to the point of speaking of fraud, we cannot but think that
both the Charter and its appendices (the "Hunters' Oath" and the "Mande Charter") are indeed
constructions that find their place in a process capable of creating a cultural heritage. During the following
meeting, held again at Bamako in 2007 at the initiative of the Mali Minister of Culture, the charter's
development continued with the launching, by Youssouf Tata Cissé, of the "Hunters' Oath," now relabelled
as the "Mande Charter". This final version of the "tradition" has managed to prevail upon the international
scene of "world cultures," as it is the version chosen at Abu Dhabi in 2009 for inclusion in the representative
list of UNESCO's Intangible World Heritage.

It is impossible not to detect in this choice the outcome of a rivalry between the two main promoters of the
Charter, Guinea and Mali. This rivalry becomes particularly evident from the graphic choices made, seeing
that the name of the assembly convoked by Sunjata may be written in two different ways: Kurukan Fuga,
in the Malian manner, or Koudoukan Fouga, in the N'ko language of Guinea, which is the form in which it is
exhibited in the place where the famous gathering is supposed to have actually occurred. This "rivalry of
allegiances," to use the words of research veteran Bakary Kamian of Mali at the "National Seminar for the
Authentication of the Kurukan Fuga Charter" held in 2010 at Kangaba, should not, however, lead one to
forget, according to him, the "complementary nature" of this "undeniable conquest of national heritage,"
which reaches far beyond the borders of present-day Mali. During this seminar, an appeal was made, stated once more in "Afrocentric" terms, against "denial" of any kind—that is, against any attempt to question the "real nature" of the charter following its inclusion in UNESCO's list—as well as the consequent necessity for the Malian authorities to possess a consensual version of the document.

The final touch (for the moment) was added by the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Malian independence at Kurukan Fuga on the first of October, 2010, a ceremony during which Mali President Amadou Tournani Touré, in the presence of a large Guinean delegation, laid the foundation stone of a huge monument to be built in the famous "clearing," thus fixing in cement and engraving in marble the various laws of that "unwritten constitution,"(12) and completing the process of consolidation of Malinke identity, begun several decades previously.

Before concluding on this point, we should add that the debate surrounding Kurukan Fuga, far from being limited to the West African milieu, has also entered the French political arena. The occasion was provided by the speech made by Ségolène Royal at Dakar in 2009, in response to a sadly famous one by Nicolas Sarkozy.(13) During her speech, the then candidate for the Presidency of the French Republic referred to the Mande Charter to demonstrate that "Africans had already, decidedly, entered history."

We have to put an end to this false idea according to which democracy and fundamental rights had a sole cradle, the West. In a recent conference organised by Stéphane Hessel on the history of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, of which he was one of the authors, he yielded the floor to Souleymane Bachir Diagne. The latter recalled that in the Mande Charter of the thirteenth century, in this "Hunters' Oath " which also addressed the entire world, one finds a definition of the rights of the human being which still applies today.(14)

Rethinking the model

One cannot exclude a priori the possibility that the Kurukan Fuga assembly actually took place in the thirteenth century and that, during that gathering, Sunjata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire, promulgated a certain number of rules and passed or confirmed a whole series of pacts between the principal clans of the empire. But by the same token, one cannot exclude either that it is all a late reconstruction made by some griots and traditionalists anxious to legitimise the imperial power of the Keita or certain branches of it.

So far, we have emphasised the issue of the "invention of tradition," not as the "discovery" of a hidden treasure, that is, its "rediscovery," but as the creation of a new model. For this reason, my focus, willingly or unwillingly, has been on establishing the greatest possible distance between Europe and Africa, that is, between the individual rights of Western man and the hierarchical ideology of West Africa. I would like, at this stage, to take the opposite route in order to draw Africa and Europe closer together. In this perspective it is useful to recall Michel Foucault's work Society Must Be Defended—which unexpectedly, and without the author's being aware of it, provides a means through which to avoid maintaining an unbridgeable gap between the two continents.(15) The existence of this radical breach has, indeed, the unfortunate effect of attributing the monopoly of human rights to Europe, thus arousing the ire of the post-colonials who, by way of retort, seek to "provincialize Europe," in order to make it swallow its pride.(16)

In Society Must Be Defended, Foucault seeks to deconstruct philosophy, especially the political philosophy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his opinion, the political philosophy of natural rights and the social contract, that of Machiavelli, Grotius, Hobbes and Pufendorf, represents a simple legitimation of royal sovereignty. He opposes to the political philosophy model that of "the war of the two races" (devised in the seventeenth century by Boulainvilliers, and taken up again in the nineteenth century by liberal historians like A. Thierry and F. Guizot, and which supplied Marx with his class-struggle model). These two models, in Foucault's opinion, correspond to two legacies: that of Rome for political philosophy, that of Jerusalem for "the war of the two races."

This second model creates opposition, in a paradigmatic manner, in the context of the history of France, but also that of England, between two demographic strata or ethnic stocks: on the one hand, the Franks, invaders from Germany and the forerunners of the nobles, on the other, the autochthonous Gallo-Romans,
ancestors of the Third Estate. One finds the same dualism in the history of England with the Norman invaders as the ancestors of the aristocracy and the “native” Anglo-Saxons as those of the common people.

Foucault, who has little understanding of non-European societies despite the central position occupied by ethnology in his thinking, is unaware of the fact that the pattern of the war of the two races, which he analysed in an exclusively European context, may be applied to other areas of the world, in particular to the African continent.

Which political model, which theory of power is most widespread in Africa, and in particular in the West African areas of Sudan and Sahel, that is, in the region to which the "Kurukan Fuga Charter" is most relevant? Among the Mossi, the Bambara and other populations, it is the opposition between the conquering chiefs on the one hand and the natives, those connected to the land and custodians of rites, on the other. This conception of power is particularly suited to the famous practice of “joking relationships” mentioned above, which are really simple political pacts, oral “contracts” sanctioning power relationships between different groups (clans and lineages).

Would it not be better, therefore, to consider this binary opposition between powerful conquerors and autochthonous populations as a veritable structural pattern reaching beyond geographical continents, the famous “cultural,” even philosophical, areas? Is this not the kind of “good to think” opposition transcending “cultural” differences that Lévi-Strauss had in mind? Does it not permit us to avoid those terrible problems that lock thinking and philosophies within overly narrow geographical and cultural confines? Privileging this kind of pattern would, in any case, help to overcome some of the weak points of the "Kurukan Fuga charter," at least in its Kankan version. This latter version, indeed, unlike the "Kurukan Fuga Gbara" by Souleymane Kanté, provides no room for the “original dwellers” (lampasi), who are none other than the "old dominators," declassed following their defeat to “autochthonous” rank and "custodian of rites" status.

For this charter, which is promulgated by a power at the apex of the social hierarchy, that of the Emperor Sunjata, offers the vanquished no escape route, no pardon. The model of the war between the two races, a model common—let us recall—to Europe and Africa alike, is quite different. Siéyès notably detected this pattern in the clash within the Old Regime between the Third Estate, descended from the autochthonous Gauls, and the aristocracy, descended from the Franks, the Germanic invaders. This scheme of relative autochthony —and not absolute as in the case of present-day indigenous movements—offers the present struggle for political emancipation a highly effective intellectual tool. But not in its existential and racial form, as in the case of recent defenders of Ivory Coast “ivoirité”; simply as a means to oppose men of power, seen as invading conquerors. This old pattern of conflict between two strata of the population or two social classes, which goes beyond the usual North/South, Europe/Africa, West/other divides, may be recovered and used efficaciously in present-day political conflicts.

Beyond this, is it not time to renounce seeking at all costs "African" equivalents of the grand "European" philosophies and theories of human rights of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prompted by a kind of "mimetic rivalry" that leads only to frustration and misunderstanding? The recent "African" democratic revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, although they have already become the prey of partisans of cultural nationalism, were initially carried out in the name of freedom of expression and democracy, without creating any particular problems for their protagonists. The latter felt no need to seek in the Koran, in the caliphates, in "democratic" Berber traditions or elsewhere, political models capable of justifying their actions. The peoples of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya simply took their human rights and turned them against us, giving us an example of what needs and remains to be done to free ourselves too from "our" tyrants. They did not ask human rights for its passport, they simply expressed their own thirst for freedom and dignity. Nobody would dare accuse them of having thus betrayed any kind of "African" authenticity, be it that of the continent’s northern part.

References


**Notes**

* [Editor's note] This paper, delivered at the 2013 GASC, was responded to by Richard van Oort's paper, "The Challenge of Originary Thinking: A Response to Jean-Loup Amselle," included in this issue of *Anthropoetics.* (back)

1. On the life and work of Maurice Delafosse, see Amselle and Sibeud (1998). (back)


3. We say "written in French" because we have no dates for the transcription and publication of Souleymane Kanté’s *Kurukan Fuga Gbara*; cf. infra. (back)


5. Niane (1960: 152, emphasis added). One should notice that in the Sunjara epic collected at Kela (Mali) by Jan Jansen there is no mention of the Kurukan Fuga. See Jansen, Duintjer & Tamboura (1995). (back)


7. *To, "rule, law, regulation, government, groups subjected to the rule, something which may not be derogated, obligation, duty, assigned goal."* Delafosse (1955: 759). (back)


11. Whether within the framework of the administrative decentralisation in Mali or of the "African renaissance" so dear to Abdoulaye Wade, ex-president of Senegal (2000-2012). (back)

13. Sarkozy, while apologizing for European colonialism, aroused hostile reactions with his statement that Africans had "not sufficiently entered History." (back)

14. It is evidently possible to make an oral test like the "Hunters’ Oath" say what one wishes if one does not know the conditions in which it was enunciated. On this issue, see the article by Diagne (2011: 664-672), which avoids dealing with this question. (back)

15. Foucault (2003). (back)

Student Resentment and Professorial Desire in Higher Education

Ian Dennis

It will likely surprise few university or college teachers to be told that one finds reflected in the modern classroom, and at the heart of the project of education itself, what Eric Gans has recently reminded us is "the essential human ethical problem . . . posed by inequality."(1) In a world increasingly structured as a market—where exchange between equals establishes value—those being educated can be expected not just to perceive inequality in an arrangement that seems to aspire to deliver value unidirectionally, but to experience with increasing urgency that "sentiment of exclusion from the center," which Gans offers as a short definition of his key term, "resentment."(2) The analysis that follows focuses on the student-professor relationship and the evolving forms and intensifying consequences of the resentments—but also desires—provoked by its enduringly hierarchical character. We will grapple, that is, with a saliently contemporary form of a fundamental human paradox, and with its resultant pragmatic dilemmas. We will make, indeed, the paradoxical case that the resentment of professorial centrality cannot be eliminated by the abolition, replacement or ignoring of that center, but can be productively deferred and redirected by the professor's modelling of his or her position as one not of power or achieved identity, but of vulnerability, the vulnerability inherent in genuine desire.

Generative Anthropology (or GA) and its mode of "originary thinking" provide the best available heuristic, the simplest, most precisely articulated categories for such a purpose.(3) But we will apply these categories, of resentment, desire, centrality and exchange, to widely observed phenomena—as opposed to providing new observations or data. And we will try to remain at a fairly high level of abstraction. Assuming a rich store of experience and principled commitments in its presumptive readership, the argument will avoid the anecdotes, or the expressions of heartburn, to which the topic might lend itself. We know the struggles, and goals, we share.

The inquiry is, however, at least partially motivated by the sense—also frequently recorded, but which it can be no part of our purpose here to prove or quantify—that the attainments of students in higher education, if obviously various, are a frequent disappointment to all concerned. Still, we have no ambition to contribute to the "university-in-ruins" sub-genre,(4) to lament prevailing norms or identify (and denounce) immediate causes. Instead, we will try to conceptualize the changes affecting university education on what we might call a slower or deeper time scale, while fully conceding the diversity of experience from, say, decade to decade, that other anthropological or historical accounts have typically and properly enough insisted upon.(5) (In the same way we will assume only a North American geographical and cultural locus, and allow others to detail the also substantial diversity therein.) We will thus explore and theorize a situation the inevitability of whose overall ethical character we accept, thereby allowing us to propose a few broadly pragmatic forms of response, contributions, that is, to an understanding of the ethical possibilities available and emergent in our own historical moment. Not for us any whiff of nostalgia for an ancien regime of unchallenged, indeed sacred pedagogical authority.

There were doubtless no undergraduates on the originary scene.(6) Even so, we will attempt in these ways to remain as loyal as possible to the minimalism of GA's new way of thinking.
Resentment can express itself in many forms, as much by tuning out as by overtly rivalrous behaviours, in passive as well as active aggression. GA’s model of ethical development, however, suggests its most significant and indeed productive strategy: to attempt to resolve the impasse of desire in the confrontation with sacred inviolability by converting an asymmetrical relationship to a solitary, public centre into a sequence of individual and equal exchanges. Resentment, that is, aspires to divide centrality, make it plural, distributing its values and benefits through the more dynamic structure most simply referred to as a market. This, GA posits, is the historical trajectory of human culture, the current arc of which the modern student traverses. (7) With widely varying degrees of self-consciousness, he or she "embraces the market."

Amongst the more common expressions of this embrace one may find the following implicit or explicit claims:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Education is not something public or culturally central—it is a private and particular acquirement for personal advancement.}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{A professor is a human being like me—and we will both need reminding of this whenever I feel he or she aspires to any more exalted status. I may thus rate-my-professor for his or her intelligence, sexiness, entertainment value, or indeed his or her diligence in responding to my desires.}
\end{quote}

Above all,

\begin{quote}
\textit{An education is something I purchase. I have a right to—and intend to—get my money’s worth.}
\end{quote}

These claims are widely observed by educators. But other factors affecting the student’s relationship to his or her education are often advanced as more significant, putatively having little or nothing to do with resentment, especially personal resentment. (8) We might briefly survey some of these.

\begin{quote}
Modern students are lazy. (This can take many forms, and be attributed to various factors, individual or social.)
\end{quote}

Is laziness an originary category, like resentment? It is certainly not a category of the non-human world. Does anyone at the origin fail to imitate the sign out of sloth? Or, perhaps more to the point, is the original emission of the sign itself, and its imitation, an indolent evasion of struggle over the object of desire? A failure, even, of what one might call pre-manly will? Is the birth of language and of the human, also the birth of laziness? Perhaps "laziness" is really another way of designating the efficiency of the new route to \textit{sparagmos} and nutrition: ultimately, less energy, fewer calories, are expended.

William Wordsworth and the other Romantics who celebrated "wise passiveness" and indeed "majestic indolence" would probably have been quite receptive to an hypothesis of human origin based on a refusal of effort. They would be seconded by many a modern undergraduate—even those not consciously devoted to the cult of the Big Lebowski. But laziness in the face of mediated appetitive desire surely cannot be unmotivated, even or especially amongst the participants in the originary scene. Are we not obliged to understand it as an expression of resentment? I turn away from the object of desire in my resentment of its impenetrable centrality, and perhaps, but only later, also of those who celebrate their humanity in the sign and their goody-two-shoes suspension of appropriation. Those whose attention makes the object desirable. A pox on your sign and all its works; it’s too much trouble; go ahead, dance, point, divide your kill, have your feast—I’m going off by myself to sniffle for roots and berries. When I find one, I’ll just eat it.

Doubtless this is very generalized resentment. The case must still be built that its modern counterpart is provoked or can be mitigated by individual professors.

\begin{quote}
Students are distracted from their education by many other activities: jobs, drinking, sex, sports.
\end{quote}

But, as we have noted, resentment of the originary single centre blossoms through history into the proliferation of rival centres of desire. Any implicit or explicit refusal of a single focus of desire or meaning must be attributed to resentment, as GA uses the term, and the belief that the proliferation of multiple foci

is somehow natural and unproblematic is of course a quite recent development of human ethical history. At any rate, since about the time of Dr. Johnson’s Rasselas a growing minority of the world’s young has been making, and demanding the right to make, a “choice of life.” (9) The expectation of a particular destiny awaiting them has over the same period been in steady retreat. And unlike destinies, choices are in principle revocable, if the chooser’s desires are rebuffed. Desires for careers can be redirected at least as easily as those for lovers and creeds, from motivations that fit quite comfortably under the umbrella of the term resentment.

The question of jobs—one wishes to be able to say "other jobs" but even this student discourse does not tend to respect—is particularly vexed. (10) Perhaps we need here to respond to the objection that outside employment is not so much an expression of resentment as a practical necessity. This may certainly be a more telling argument in some contexts than in others, and for some individual students in any context. But such “needs” are surely still always functions of desires—it may be just as urgent to go partying or to attend a sports tournament. Who is to say? We should certainly eschew easy judgements about the relative value of the desires hailing students from every quarter. The calculations involved are exceedingly difficult to assess from the outside—even a matter like the widely assumed rise in the cost of a university education is more difficult to establish than might be thought. (11) Harder still to parse is the disposition of available funds in a typical student budget. It is patently obvious, however, that for many students, at the very least, a more frugal (and studious) lifestyle is at least theoretically possible. But to say this is not in itself to criticise or advocate, nor to dismiss problems of student costs and indebtedness. It should simply be to remind ourselves that desire and thus history finally mediate all human behaviour—true "needs" operate only in the non-human realm. (One "needs" to breathe? But a human being may choose to die.) All putative human needs are qualified by their ends, are needs-in-order-to-attain particular desires. And all human desires are mediated through other human desires, as represented to us. Not, of course, that responding to—choosing between—competing desires or "needs" is easy. It can be exceedingly difficult, wrenching ... agonising. And ever more so, as desires proliferate and more and more objects thereof shift out of the prohibited center and into the exchangeable periphery. This is the very agon of market life.

Ultimately, higher education too must compete, which is to say, must model desire for its project, and concede to mechanisms beyond its immediate control the sorting of student priorities. And attempts to compete for student time, energy and attention—to induce more study (this quantity also widely reported as having declined)—risk undercutting themselves with too-hasty assumptions about financial hardship or other exigencies. As allowances are made, through a process as inexorable as the mediated nature of desire itself, more allowances are required.

Student regard and desire for the culture represented and provided to them by higher education is displaced by their attraction to other cultures in our diverse society, perhaps popular or “alternative” cultures. (12)

Popular culture GA has long recognised as a playground of resentment and imaginary sparagmatic satisfactions. Indeed, the distinction between the competing sources of socially valuable wisdom here resembles that between high and low art; university education, perhaps, requires the longer term of oscillating attention to remain upon the unconsumable sign (13)—a question to which we will return. The main point is that this distraction, like others, flatters the resentment of a rival upon which it nonetheless depends, offering the more immediate gratifications which are its claim to superiority, but occluding always its tributary character.

That said, it is perhaps merely as a matter of delimitation of our subject that we do not consider here the desires of those who have not presented themselves at the doors of the institution. Genuine rejection or indifference—and we may certainly presume they exist—manifest themselves in absence. Our analysis does not engage questions of recruitment. Thankfully, we may assume in the students who turn up in the classroom some degree of desire for something higher education may be hoped to provide, whatever the resentments and other disincentives that might interfere with the process.

Students turn away from or do not flourish in higher education because of bad or irrelevant teaching.
But this we must identify not simply as Cool Hand Luke's "failure to communicate"(14) but as an alienation or shortfall of desire for the object putatively centralized, and thus subsume it into one or more of the categories just mentioned. This is not to dismiss it, though. Resentment knows certain things, has its own truths—failures of professorial modelling of desire may certainly be held to account. But qualitative distinctions are expressions thereof and are predicated upon the existence of another, rivalrous alternative. Only the concession of absolute perfection to the centre—religious adoration, even—completely constrains the resentment of those subjected, and no one's faith is so strong now, if ever it was.

Students are inadequately prepared at home or in previous educational institutions and are simply unable to benefit from higher education.

The analysis we attempt here of the professor-student relationship, if valid, will surely be applicable, mutatis mutandis, to other pedagogical relationships, including that of parent and child. The problems, and any imaginable remedies, are in certain fundamental ways common. The force of the objection just listed is also not to be denied. But if resentment of the centralities of higher education, including that of the professor, is not a major factor in the struggles of inadequately prepared students, the imperfect management of resentment and desire in earlier educational processes clearly might be. For the purposes of limiting the present argument, we will address only the education of students in post-secondary institutions who are in principle capable of obtaining more of it than they currently are.

All these factors, in short, important as they unquestionably are, may be seen as features or expressions of student resentment of a structure which seems or attempts to centralize other human beings. Thankfully, though, murder of professors is now comparatively rare. Again, following the historical narrative GA has opened for us, the fundamental aspiration of such resentment in our era is merely to convert subjection into reciprocal exchange.(15)

Professors, we should quickly note, are frequent partners in this effort. Modes of deprecation, for them, both of self and of the broader project, are various. Open-neck shirts and jeans, an unintimidatingly average command of language, the use of colloquialisms, are obvious examples of salves to or defences against anticipated resentment of the fact that one stands solitary at the front of the room, while the other groups in a range of seats before and below; that one grades what the other submits. Another, more explicit strategy of accommodation is for professors to enter into a resentment they assume is common to both groups. To express or demonstrate resentment of, for example, the university, the discipline, culture or other putative usurpers of centrality. Even professors whose self-understanding is as opponents of "the market" may assume this posture, whose widespread imitation in every form in fact constitutes the market. It is worth reminding ourselves, that is, that resentment is the market's life-blood. Every exchange dethrones a tyranny, an erstwhile monopoly on desire.

Such professorial efforts might be critiqued as attempts to be students, to evade the opprobrium of power or responsibility in a victimary age.(16) But we must surely have some sympathy for a strategy that is everywhere adopted in the market world—and commercial advertising, for example, is generally much more abject. It must clearly respond to a genuine challenge. Such behaviours, taken broadly, can even be thought of as a form of politeness, itself a doubtless indispensable hedge against resentment. All politeness apologises for hierarchy—the emission of the first sign may even be thought of as the first act of politeness.(17) The question, really, in the current instance as ever, is only whether any of these tactics are effective responses to resentment—effectiveness here to be measured in terms of student educational success. And this may be doubted, given the outcomes we allude to above.

The educational institutions themselves also strategically accommodate resentment's aspirations—here we are on ground so familiar that we should perhaps vacate it quickly, despite the temptation to bolster our own solidarity through a resentful critique of university administrations or their governmental and private sponsors. To restrict ourselves for the moment, though, to the student-professor relationship, such accommodation proceeds by communicating to both parties the adoption of a principle of exchange. This is done through such devices as student evaluation questionnaires, which ask, for example, "how well the instructor conveys the material."(18) Such questions can be mocked as invoking a kind of industrial operation involving hatches, belts and a central spout, but its underlying point is that higher education is now exchange, it effectiveness to be measured and its values established through market processes.
Indeed, the very provision of teaching evaluations aspires primarily to accommodate, soothe or flatter resentment and only secondarily—and distantly so—to improve pedagogical practice or detect professorial malfeasance. If we can grade you, you can grade us. How effectively the practice achieves either goal is, again, another matter.

Let us say then that we have, taken together, what we might call a posture, involving, for all participants, the expression, recognition and even facilitation of student resentment. Adopting this posture, we may add, is the truest or most basic sense in which higher education adapts itself to the market. For all that it must meet some evolving requirement of our situation, however, there are a number of problems with this response, and these too have been widely noted.

Tuition, for example, does not generally pay for all of an education. The exchange is by no means reciprocal, at least in the ways it is hopefully imagined or resentfully required to be. Taxpayers who themselves, or whose children will never attend the university help fund it, as do donors. Indeed, the funding of higher education conforms much more closely to the system of the gift as Marcel Mauss describes it. It is a delayed and distributed reciprocity, not a direct exchange. Furthermore, public resentment of students treating their gift as an exchange or purchase is an active factor here, helping to lead, for example, to the raising of tuition rates, which in turn has the perverse effect of pushing students more fully into the de facto market, drawing still more of their time and energy away from study. Admittedly, this is a complex situation, with many variables and interlocking factors, as well as considerable differences amongst institutions and jurisdictions. Suffice it to say, for present purposes, that a student in the present day in North America does not exchange value his or her own for an education entirely paid for by such contributions, at least not in the same way that he or she might later purchase a house or a car or a vacation.

Another problem is that the good the student arguably most needs to obtain, ostensibly through exchange, is precisely the ability to judge whether the exchange is indeed good or worthwhile. This leads to premature assessments of the process, often truncating essential further efforts. An educated judgement is required to judge an education.

But perhaps the most signal difficulty is that the resentments fostered by the market create various kinds of static or feedback which interfere with education, even with the transfer of inert "material," urging upon students a prioritization of difference over and above emulative adoption of the means to knowledge. Difference, identity, is at stake with every answer given, every expression ventured. Anger or diminished motivation and energy is experienced by students whose efforts and opinions are not treated with the respect their presumptive equality warrants. Grades like this professor gives are no way to treat a customer. Or an equal. What often follows is the kind of cynical passivity which dully and repeatedly asks "what the professor wants," as this is the price to be paid—but which is of course not at all the same as actually wanting what the professor wants. Certain kinds of hard but uninspired and ultimately unproductive work, indeed, can even be seen as a form of passive aggression, that the historian of undergraduate life Helen Horowitz does not hesitate to attribute explicitly to "resentment."

Another way to put all this might be to suggest that the market model can tend to foster a premature or over-intense desire for identity, a supposed "need," compromising the openness required for learning. We might here recall René Girard's perilously zero-sum conceptualization of the model-subject relationship. The problem could be expressed thus: one must be a subject to learn, but only models prosper in the market. Identity, as achieved desire, is the enemy of desire, of desire for knowledge, among other things. Identity, if it might be put it this way, can be a form of the very ignorance which education seeks to discomfit or disrupt—and the market alluringly offers and purveys and then requires identity above all.

Identity is what models possess and subjects desire. Or, it is a form of "firstness," in the sense proposed by Adam Katz, at least as experienced by the subject, whose subjection must feel like a kind of inchoateness, or incoherence, a fearful condition when surrounded by the apparently achieved identities that beckon mimetically on all sides. Beckon, challenge ... even mock. Student resentment may in particular focus on the apparently full and achieved identity of the professor, not least in that he or she has that paramount attribute of market identity, a job, and then spill over into a corollary contempt for the hapless lower order of adjuncts, part-timers and TAs. These people, already so very little different, have the
effrontery to demand I defer my aspiration to have what they have, to be what they are!

Educators sometimes respond to such challenges by suggesting that students are indeed being offered an identity, the identity of the educated person. But students, once caught up in the toils of rivalry, are quick to see that this is in fact only a future identity, and a doubtful one at that. We are back to the logic of the gift, which the market urges students to reject in favour of more immediate and verifiable exchange. It is an "identity" of becoming, not of being. And I am (or need to be) someone already! And indeed, other aspects of my culture constantly reinforce and insist upon this claim.(26)

One can well imagine such difficulties becoming more intractable the more "student-centred" education becomes—indeed, this slogan is another good example of the kind of reinforcement referred to above. We will return to it. The institution and then the professor risk the losing gambit of trying to distinguish and accommodate identities which are various, unformed, and almost by definition shifting and unsatisfiable—above all, which respond to overt attempts to identify or fix them by proliferating their differences.(27) The strategy, that is, falls into the feedback loop of desires and resentments, or what Girard calls mimetic rivalry. For the professor, the danger is obviously of self-consciousness, a term we may define as the distracting awareness or fear that our desires are subjecting us, that our model does not in fact derive them from us, or even share them naturally. Indeed, its paradoxical essence is a consciousness of others over and above the self, rather than vice-versa as the term might suggest. It is a preoccupying consciousness (justified or not) of the disconcertingly unaffected gaze of the other.(28) Unselfconscious desires even if always mediated are not experienced as such, or at any rate operate in that relation of defined distance from the model which Girard calls "external" mediation. (Don Quixote's desire to be like Amadis de Gaul, in Girard's famous example, is unselfconscious in this latter sense. He does not feel Amadis—or, really, anyone else—gazing at him. Hence the charm of such desire, its pleasing naivety.) The professor who might unselfconsciously desire, say, knowledge, or the improvement of society through education, when too much centred upon the student falls under pressure to abandon such desires in order to preserve cool, to protect him- or herself from subjection to a classroom full of other human beings with whom he or she has deliberately—we may even say perversely—entered into rivalry, into Girard’s "internal" mediation.(29)

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Not of course that professors are entirely without means of mitigating all these problems, which many are to different degrees successful at doing—means often involving techniques to deceive or redirect resentment into pursuing ends which resentment did not itself originate. But, again, current outcomes, even with the use of such tactics, are still, and are generally felt to be, inconsistent and far from fully satisfactory.

As this is a version, however, of the largest human problem, "the unending moral problem ... of hierarchy,"(30) let us see if we can approach it as GA approaches the latter. How, for example, might Katz's concept of "firstness" be applied to the pedagogical situation?

We do this not merely for a justification of the centrality of the professor, a tactical ethical appeal to the longer strategies of morality. We also seek pragmatic ways in which such a conceptualization of the relationship might help sway hearts, minds and practices of both students and professors in order to further improve short- and long-term outcomes for all, in the interest of the greatest of reciprocities, a human flourishing beyond the mortal welfare of any of the immediate participants.

The hierarchical structure of the professor-student relationship, then, let us designate an example of firstness, whose functionality is predicated on its eventual dissolution into enhanced equality—and indeed, as such outcomes go, sooner rather than later. Not for our students the millennia that Gans posits between the originary scene and the full adoption by women of the powers of language.(31) Students in the fraction of a single lifetime may themselves become professors, and may certainly out-earn them in any case.

Even so, our first observation must be that all firstness will now be promptly and openly tested by resentment. We must eschew any response which merely deplores this fundamental feature of modernity: again, no nostalgia, no protests of the "is-nothing-sacred?" variety. As the present author has argued
resentment at bottom is, or at least poses, a question: why you and not me? Culture's job is
the provision of at least temporarily adequate answers, an adequacy verified only by their efficacy with the
resentful questioner(s). Only, that is, by history. Higher education must participate in history. GA, we might
also note, in the train of democracy, emerges historically as the human self-consciousness which could
frame the relationship of resenter and resented in such terms. Self-consciousness, in this collective sense,
means an awareness that our desires and resentments are indeed subjected to a centrality which they have
themselves created—which I take to be the core chastening that the erstwhile Romantic, humanity, must
derive from GA. At any rate, both democracy and GA should make outmoded such categories as heresy or
even duty, and mandate responses—intelligible, respectful, implicitly egalitarian answers—rather than
various forms of denial or suppression. The only heresies ought now to be those postures which attract no
attention and yield no centrality, the only duties those whose performance is exchanged for some form of
compensation—calls for self-sacrifice, generalized appeals to a sacred centre, theological, national, or of
whatever provenance, are to be greeted with skepticism. We do ask what our country can do for us.
"Values" are an attribute of identity, and thus not to be imposed. We resent any such attempt. We must be
persuaded, heart and mind, shown why. We may be fooled some of the time, but not all of us, not all of the
time.

One of the most significant corollaries of GA is surely that other means of managing or supposedly stifling
resentment, of the varieties grimly foreseen by modern pessimists—Orwellian, Stalinist or Maoist,
Nationalist, Corporatist, and so forth, from the control of minds to the punishment of bodies—are to be
viewed with a skepticism anchored in the unity of the human, the universality of resentment, and the long
human history of firstness bearing the fruits of eventual reciprocity. Still, it must be granted that nothing in
the originary hypothesis requires this history to continue indefinitely. The human project remains
contingent,(33) which of course gives efforts like the current paper their point.

Those who go first, it might also be useful here to remind ourselves, do not necessarily do so—and indeed
it would impractical to require them to do so—out of any deliberate altruism or superiority of effort for the
common good. Nor is all centrality associated with a productive firstness. Maybe the Big Man did work
harder than everyone else ... for a while. But maybe his son didn't. And his lazy grandsons got out the
whips. Resentment sees how centrality corrupts, sees this through its own angry longings. Sometimes only
resentment-fuelled challenge, even violent challenge, eventually permits a firstness to produce a higher
form of equality. We might hope that if GA permeated our culture's understanding a certain consciousness
of how the process works would moderate some of its fury. But the Big Men of modernity, those going first,
whatever their motivations and degree of self-awareness, would still need to get ever better at explaining
why they should be permitted their interval of centrality. At answering the questions of resentment. And
answering them well—as duplicitous fobbings-off or self-righteous just-so stories will buy less and less
respite from resentment and its various threats.

An understanding of such modern realities must inform any attempt to transcend the impasse of
resentment in higher education. Reading a lecture on the benefits to students of their submission for the
time being to hierarchy—of self-stifling their resentments—will not do. This is not the sort of answer
required, not indeed the real answer. One of GA's debts to mimetic theory is the idea of the potent trend
towards what Girard called metaphysical desire, the drift of desire away from the object and towards the
model. While professors of good faith will strive to shift desire back toward objects—to "abolish" their
firstness in a "collective equality"(34) of shared desire for some external good—they will deceive themselves
if they think this can be managed by mere patience of explanation or intelligibility of instruction, important
as these are.

This is only to say that modelling is as ineluctable as desire is mimetic, and that education is fundamentally
the mobilization of desire after particular human models. The particularity is really the only issue worth
speaking of. Without desire, nothing is possible for students—the single most important factor in their
failure, when they do fail and to the degree they do, is a shortfall of usefully focussed desire.(35) Broadly
speaking, we claim here the primary importance of professors modelling a desire for specific kinds of
knowledge over and above other kinds of goods in the market. Admittedly, to say this does not take us
very far—it is, indeed, close to platitude, the widely shared goal of most educators. We must bear in mind
Gans's recent reminder that GA cannot "comport a value system,“(36) and note that the present argument
only asks how better to realize objectives upon which a consensus already exists. It does not invent them—
another reason why it makes sense to limit our focus here to the professor-student relationship, as a means of achieving established objectives. Students participate in forming this consensus, of course. Their voluntary presence in the classroom we again take as indicating at least tacit acceptance of the same objectives, even where their acceptance is only expressed in the paradoxical homage of resentment or soi-disant "subversion" or "re-purposing."

Originary analysis, however, may help us understand our shared goals better. We may begin, again, with the Girardian formulation. Higher education, thus conceived, requires the resistance to, the beating back of metaphysical desire. Girard calls this askesis, a renunciation of rivalry with the model, a retreat indeed from internal to external mediation, the abandonment of any aspiration to the model’s position. Clearly, some form of renunciation is what we are attempting to imagine in our chosen context.

Unlike Girard, however, because our pragmatic is institutional rather than individual, we are not here initially oriented towards the subject. That is, we can hardly expect such a renunciation to begin with our students, and it does little good merely to call for it. It is more likely a hoped-for product of their education, than a plausible pre-requisite. Can we realistically ask of the model, the professor, then, such heroic self-sacrifice? To eschew, even undermine any tendency to offer him- or herself up as a model of achieved identity, in favour of presenting the spectacle of one deeply desirous, not desirable, him- or herself? Can we ask for this kind of firstness?

If, indeed, desire is the enemy of identity and identity the freedom from desire, the professor it must surely be who first sacrifices the personal stability of identity to the desire he or she models for students. It is the professor who must model the heroic endurance of uncertainties, of incompleteness, so opposite from what the neophyte participant in the market craves. It might even be conceptualized as a kind of blowing or losing or recklessly throwing away of one’s cool. A professor who is hot rather than cool, one might hope, offers a very different model from others in the market. So we might put it, in these rather McLuhanesque terms—though not, of course, much in the way McLuhan himself used them.

If the professor does betray what we might call an altruistic vulnerability-in-desire and abandons the zero-sum struggle for identity, we might say he or she does so in testimony to and repetition of the originary and fundamental acknowledgement of human vulnerability, which in like fashion abandons the struggle for dominance in favour of the peace granted by the sign. And does it first, before any form of appropriation, and ahead of any of the attendant circle of warily hungering students. Because that peace must come first. Peace makes possible the sparagmos and its satisfactions, including, at length, the creation of identity. The human difference from the animal world, we would thus remind ourselves, is this priority, this sequence. Here we begin to apply the characteristic GA enhancement of Girard. The professor who models this vulnerability, this incompleteness, rather than the coolness or freedom from desire that the sparagmos itself offers, performs what we might think of as education because he or she models, teaches, the all-enabling deferral, the posture of contemplation of the sign above that of consumption of the object. (37)

From this perspective, the professorial function is to foster student responsiveness to the desires that are inherent in knowledge—knowledge itself, which must be represented, being the immortal form of otherwise evanescent human desire. Knowledge, professors must demonstrate, is really the sign, even if students think it is the object designated and the stuff of the feast. Even to "obtain" knowledge is ultimately to imitate and continue the desires of others, even if such knowledge is initially experienced as a personal possession, a conquest. The way, perhaps, even the originary sign initially was. It is, though, a virtual possession, and only has value because of the desires of others. It cannot finally be consumed or appropriated—only shared or imitated. This is to say, perhaps, to put it back into Girardian terms, and as Gans has in other contexts pointed out, that the human relationship to the sign is "externally mediated."

Higher education, we hardly need add, is of course rife with internal mediation and rivalry—but these are rivalries amongst persons. There cannot be rivalry with the sign any more than there can truly be with God, and the collective sign or knowledge is education’s god. The professor’s priestly function is to try to direct attention back toward higher things.

He or she does this primarily by directing his or her own attention thither, to the exclusion of other, more immediately beckoning rewards. The authenticity of this attentiveness is perhaps not most reliably witnessed through protestations of love and desire, however, but through attained knowledge, the
eloquent, unselfconscious testimony of long devotion. Here, too, is one often-acceptable answer to the question of resentment. Why are you at the centre and not me? Because I know things that you don't.

Still, even great knowledge can be worn in different ways. If some knowledge is not the spur to attaining more it falls back into the attributes of an identity, an object for consumption, not the evidence of an ongoing desire. Such modelling, that is, can only be effective when adopted in perfect sincerity—no tactically adopted posture will be proof against the heightened alertness to desire in the market world, and amongst those, the young, most intensely and continuously concerned with distinguishing the faked from the genuine. The rigours of this requirement might render it rare enough in practice. But even where one could imagine it, surely no individual professor's modelling of desire can be expected to be determinant for very many students, no matter how intense, sincere or openly betrayed. Saints are perhaps a necessary but insufficient component of any faith—and by a similar measure, while some smaller group of students may be the truly converted, the relative improvement of the broader mass must still be aimed for. The perfect must be made the ally of the good, or at least, of the better.

Somewhat less demandingly ascetic practices, more likely to be required of and adopted by the professoriate generally, might yet be only roughly of the kind just described, and still be valuable. More of this anon. The broad goal of any such practices, though, would always be to tune down the static of resentment sufficiently to allow the desirability of the object to swim back into view, or not be entirely displaced in the first place. Because, again, this putatively distinct object—knowledge—contains within it, or channels, a vast reservoir of human desire. To be educated is to be energized, moved, by this great power, to be shifted from one trajectory into another by the gravitational pull of its immense mass.

The power to move is also in the market, of course. But the market, like exchange itself, is a phenomenon of a given moment, even if it operates now across considerable global space, whereas human knowledge extends through both space and time. So perhaps, to continue the religious analogy a moment longer, the goal of higher education for the many can be thought of as merely to encourage what is humbly called "longer-term thinking." And if this risks reducing its methodology to dangling a crude promise of an eventually superior capacity to appropriate, on the model of pie in the sky when you die, doubtless this is better than the model of an exchange of tuition fees for an immediately deployable credential to be redeemed forthwith in the job market. And, again, we can't all be saints.

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Our analysis, then, surely suggests that professors must respect students as participants in the market, must remain unshocked by this, and not underestimate the potency of the rival powers pulling them towards other orbits. It is anthropologically naive to think students ought, by themselves, to understand their predicament in these terms, or to know better. To strive to educate them more effectively is not at bottom to "resist the market" but to compete more effectively within it.

But in attempting to win this competition it is unhelpful for professors to flatter resentment at the expense of the higher value of the peace brought by knowledge. To avoid doing this, they need as much as possible to ignore or be insulated from the feedback, not be drawn into a struggle over identity. Professioral modelling should not be of a persona, we might say. It should be of a desire for knowledge, whose productivity can and indeed must be displayed through a demonstrated accumulation of it—professors should know things. Not just different things than their students know. More and more valuable things. By attending first and above all to the signs that are knowledge, they should model the beauty of those things, not the coolness of knowing them.

If, however, professorial firstness is thus ultimately to be embraced and not abandoned or apologised for, it must also be constantly leavened with an explicit humility. This firstness, its posture must make clear, is itself actually a "secondness." After the originary scene, all human sign-creation is secondary, a repetition, gesturing to that which has already taken precedence. While it may be that all goods traded in the market—from cars and foods to houses and holidays—are to be thought of as signs, the difference with education, and knowledge, is in this explicitness. Knowledge really is only signs—and the askesis modelled by the professor should remind students of this.
Or, let us say again, the transaction between professor and student more closely resembles a Maussian gift than it does a market exchange. It is the first phase of a delayed reciprocity. The professor gives, not just knowledge, but the modelled means of desiring and receiving it, as a gift whose anticipated return is distributed outward across space and generational time.

This latter formulation does evoke the parallel situation of parent and child. The relation between professor and student, however, must be to a crucial degree more impersonal—as measured by the primacy of the professor's commitment to the external good of knowledge. The professorial posture is thus not, in this sense, student-centred, and indeed, students are unlikely truly to want it to be. In seeking identities in the market, students for the most part aspire to an emancipation from this kind of attention, which they rightly sense is at bottom not egalitarian. They want no more parents—or, rather, they now typically want parents to merge into the continuum of friends and rivals, partners in exchange. But with parents, as perhaps ideally with professors, the most basic feature of the ongoing relationship is latent, only overlaid by such superficial transformations. We speak here, again, of deferral: the gift does eventually establish a relationship of equality, but does so through the requirement it contains. Only when that requirement is fulfilled, is equality realised.

Practical corollaries of these points might be gathered together under the alternate slogan "knowledge-centred education." They might include an emphasis on the continued professional coupling of research and teaching both in preparation for and during a teaching career, the clear subordination of student evaluation and the resultant Faculty of Education style "training" for professors to primary research achievement as criteria for measuring performance, and a willingness to countenance measurements of student success along broader and longer-term scales of human possibility, as opposed to the tactical shorter-term measurements of market exchange. Indeed, ultimately, students and professors should be evaluated by the same criteria, for the same kind of achievements.

Beyond this the present exploration should perhaps not go, except to note that all such emphases prioritize the sign—and take this as an invitation to return to, and conclude with, originary analysis. Evidently enough, to value deferral is to direct attention to the sign as opposed to the appetitive object which it designates. The most significant of all our corollaries probably has to do with the specific character of the attentiveness our recommended pedagogy may seek to foster. That the classroom is a very particular "scene of joint attention" seems obvious. And that its kind of attention is purchased through a deferral of appropriation would appear equally fundamental—a restatement of venerable educational principles in originary terms. But what may perhaps be usefully added now is the way the kind of analysis attempted here makes higher education proximate to what GA has conceptualized as the aesthetic. That is, to the extended or privileged attention to the sign, in the oscillation between sign and object. We touched briefly on the beauty of knowledge above. But, to take a final and perhaps more troubling step further, to the extent we speak of or aspire to a "higher" education we also align our goals and procedures with those of "high culture," as against those of popular culture.

This distinction, for GA, is of course only one of degree, or of emphasis. In the oscillatory aesthetic experience "the moment of [high] art looks back to the renunciation of appetite implicit in the sign, whereas that of entertainment looks forward to the appetitive satisfaction of the communal feast which will follow." Both phases are integral to any aesthetic experience, but the longer or more intensely such an experience looks "back" or "forward," attends to the formal qualities of the sign or imagines the consummation of the desires that sign awakens, the more clearly we may speak of high or popular art. This is far from an isolated insight, and is to be found in different forms in many other commentators—one might cite Frank Kermode's well-known distinction between "spiritual and carnal reading."

While higher education rightly assumes that everything can and should be studied, very much including popular culture, the mode of attention it requires remains that characteristic of high culture. To acknowledge this is, of course, to risk reawakening venerable resentments of the privileges associated with that culture. But to answer these resentments the case must be made—to professors as well as to students of any discipline—that the core value to be preserved from that culture is a specific kind of attentiveness. This, high art and higher education are best positioned to model. The objective is reducible, even, to the idea of *lengthening* attention span, as the fundamental action education performs. Humanity itself, an originary re-statement of the same principle might claim, is the product of education. Indeed, of one
"lesson" above all, repeated in an infinite variety of modes and forms. The attention suddenly shared between the object of desire and its sign—the lengthening of that attention over the crucial original interval of deferral—taught the profound lesson of the sparagmos. This is still the good exchanged, the benefit purchased, the gift bestowed, less through the payment of tuition fees than in the energy and time and labour expended by students, and modelled to them by true teachers.

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A coda.

To lengthen attention span is very certainly also to strengthen memory—a dangerously eroding faculty amongst students now entering institutions of higher education. The originary scene’s repetition as ritual introduced and made revolutionary use of the faculty of memory. As one might also phrase it, the temporal dimension of the scene—the moment of contemplation of the sign—allowed a vertical escape from the hitherto tyrannous horizontality of time.

Thus memory, in a paradox perhaps Wordsworth most famously explored in English, enables what that poet called intimations of immortality, of futurity, of potentiality. If knowledge is not an object but the sign of desire, to pursue it is by definition to defer satisfaction, in the name of something greater and more fundamental to the fullness of human life. As he put it in a famous passage,

Our destiny, our being's heart and home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
Under such banners militant, the soul
Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils
That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward,
Strong in herself, and in beatitude
That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile
Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds
To fertilize the whole Egyptian plain. (46)

Notes


3. We will also make some use of GA’s important progenitor, the "mimetic theory" of René Girard, which we for convenience subsume here. (back)

4. After a prominent contribution to the species, Bill Readings’ The University in Ruins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). (back)

5. Amongst others, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz’s Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present (New York: Knopf, 1987) provides a particularly rich narrative. Still, for all that changes, she concedes that, for example, "Anger" has been "the characteristic mode of college professors" in response to their students from the late eighteenth century to her own present day (xi)—and no doubt been fulsomely returned. Pedagogical theory, we might say, has yet to find a means of educating without centrality, or inoculating that centrality against resentment. (back)

6. For a description of the GA concept of the originary scene and other basic features of the hypothesis,
7. "Human history may be described as the never-completable transition from the ritual system of distribution ... to the market system, where no central authority is necessary to mediate between human beings beyond the universal human order of representation through signs." Eric Gans, "The Free Market," Chronicles of Love and Resentment, no. 34, March 16, 1996, http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw34.

8. Rebekah Nathan, in her illuminating account of a year spent doing anthropological field work amongst undergraduates at a twenty-first-century university, makes this point. She sees little value, for example, in increasing contact time between professors and students, citing her own observations and surveys of student opinion that rated the "faculty" as of low importance generally to the student experience. This is doubtless a useful chastening—we must ask why she might have obtained such results, and whether and how professors might gain or regain some purchase on the desires of their students. My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student (New York: Penguin, 2006), 140.

9. The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia, 1759. The great English critic and moralist concluded his early account of the modern career search with a rejection of the enterprise and an affirmation of the superior value of the "choice of eternity." This aspect of the work has not caught on so well.

10. "School," must generally now be made to accommodate, to work around "my job."

11. Costs, and rewards, have clearly risen above the rate of inflation for professional degrees. Whereas, at least in the Canadian context, it is far from self-evident that a degree in the Humanities costs more in constant dollars in the 2010s than it did in, say, the 1960s. What count as necessary expenses while pursuing the degree has obviously also changed.

12. This, clearly enough, is the problem of "relevance," in one of its forms. Relevance can only ever be established, it might be worth remembering here, by asking and answering the question, "whose desires"? And remembering that desires are mimetic.

13. In the originary scene, to continue a brief introduction for those not versed in GA, human attention "oscillates" between the sign and the object of desire it designates, between the "vertical" axis of transcendence and the "horizontal" one of appropriation. The aesthetic effect is that part of oscillating attention which is devoted to the sign, and this in turn may oscillate between attention to the formal qualities of the sign and the imagined gratifications of appropriation, the sparagmos or feast which concludes the scene. The distinction then, between high and popular art, is one of the duration or intensity of attention devoted to the two poles, with high art more devoted to the form of the sign and popular art to the imaginary consummation. See Eric Gans, Originary Thinking (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 171ff.

14. The climactic line of the 1967 film classic of the same name. The bitterly anti-authoritarian ironies of the cinematic context may certainly be allowed here.

15. From laziness—which resentfully strikes a personally chosen "deal" with the providers of presumptively empty benefits concerning the level of energies the student in question is prepared to exert in order to obtain them—to the most frenetic devotion to other, competing gods whose promised returns seem sweeter, the operations are finally all of the same basic character.

16. For an introduction to "Victimary Culture," see Chronicles of Love and Resentment no. 40, April 27,
17. I am sorry, implies the first sign, to have presumed I might be the first to eat this, this very desirable morsel. That I am impelled to this archaic form of humility out of the fear that the rest of you will tear me apart does not change its fundamental character. (back)

18. This is from the author’s own institution, the University of Ottawa. (back)

19. The proportion clearly varies, but in Canada, for example, although it has risen in recent decades, the percentage of the cost of educating a student provided by his or her tuition never exceeds about 45%. http://www.ousa.ca/dev/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Tuition.pdf The for-profit, online universities are doubtless an exception to this principle, but their current share of the market remains very small. (back)


21. The promise of equality is made, in GA’s hypothesis, on the originary scene, in the sharing of the significance of the first sign. All subsequent arrogation of centrality, from the “firstness” of the individual to emit that sign, through the long train of hierarchical social arrangements thrown up by the ethical development of humanity, is ultimately a usurpation, which must be justified to resentment. GA’s conception of the never-to-be-complete transition from ritual to market social structure implies, again, an intensification of that resentment and the concomitant pressure on those in the center, very much including professors, either to justify or abandon their claim to it. (back)

22. Anthropologist Michael Moffat interestingly reflects on what he calls “Undergraduate Cynical,” noting how it is “just as mandatory and just as coercive as other forms of discourse” but that for this very reason must be assumed, “performed” by students amongst their peers. This might remind us of the contingent and malleable character of the desires for which professors compete, and of the uncertain territory we enter when we attempt to know and adjust ourselves to these desires, rather than more or less obliviously model the desires we ourselves feel. Moffat gestures to, if he does not really accept, the parallel difficulty with using any sort of empirical approach to measure or even really detect the sincerity of student resentment. Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 90-91. (back)

23. Horowitz identifies the first appearance of the phenomenon of “grinding.... Confronted with the awesome weight of faculty power, early-nineteenth century collegians turned from open rebellion to the covert war of the classroom. The New Outsiders [of the late twentieth century] merely retreat to a deeper cover. Blocked from a frontal or even side attack, they do an end run. They create the culture of grinding.... They must check any signs of open rebellion, even to the point of not allowing themselves to feel it." Campus Life, 269. (back)

24. As we note above, the category, for human beings, must be treated with skepticism. The wholesale conversion of desires into "needs" in pursuit of various kinds of market benefit is, however, too large a story to do more than gesture to here. (back)


26. "You gotta be who you gotta be!" exclaims a poster, directed at the young. Its authors clearly imagine their slogan to be emancipatory, beckoning towards freedom from desire in a paradise of achieved and embraced difference. But it surely communicates even more strongly the entirely unfree imperative to secure, defend and impose upon others such difference. You "gotta" do this, indeed. This also from Canada, part of an endless series of government campaigns to improve popular behaviour, following the diagnoses of our shortcomings and theories for their remedy current in the social sciences. Others are aimed at alcohol consumption, domestic violence, and so forth. This one, with surely rather exceptional naivety, imagines it can induce the young to follow their own clean-living natural urges and reject the insidious and artificial modelling of drug-use and other vices. Somewhere in its ancestry is David Riesman’s discovery that
the great problem with modern society is that its people are "other-directed." The Lonely Crowd. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950. (back)

27. We do not, of course, imagine by this to be able to return to thinking of students as "blank slates" upon which anything may be written, by professors—to deny the existence, as it were, of DNA. But the post-modern valuation of difference, with its concomitant claims of social, economic and historical victimhood, has surely understated the malleability of the human individual in the interest of a political program. Implicitly denying the power of mimetic desire, this is one of the romantic illusions denounced by Girard. (back)

28. One result of this problem is the adoption by the professor of various routines or practices which release him or her from the discomfort by imposing a persona upon students. For example, as Peter Schwenger reminds us, professors become skilled "performers" who practise an "erotics of instruction... in which the more my energies ... expand, the more those of my students contract into an appreciative but ultimately passive spectatorship." "Chili Pepper Pedagogy" English Studies in Canada 31.4 (December 2005), 30-31. This a very clear description of the rivalry over identity, in which the professor emerges as a clear victor, and education loses. (back)

29. A shameful instance insists upon itself—perhaps we may excuse it because it is an anecdote about a professor, not a student. Said professor—and mind you, this was in Europe and in the previous century—returned a mathematics test in which no errors were noted, with a grade substantially below 100%. The student, understandably, was curious to know why this might be, if everything was right. "This grade," she was told, "represents how much you know, by comparison to what I know." (back)


33. A perspective which also informs Gans' "Originary Ethics II," cited above. (back)

34. "Originary Ethics II," cited above. (back)

35. The techniques of transferring material are then less to the point: once one has desire, and the attention span and memory it fosters, one can perhaps get material anywhere, including online. This might lead one to wonder at the high drop-out rates and the lack of truly notable success thus far experienced by online course offerings in higher education. The question certainly needs further study, but might it be speculated that the lack of the immediate bodily presence of the professor mutes his or her capacity to model desire? Mind you, screen images, in cinema, have exerted a powerful capacity to attract desire, to say the least. (back)

36. "Originary Ethics II," cited above. (back)

37. This posture is perhaps not easily distinguished—but one must—from uncertainty and wavering self-confidence, which of course are very poor modelling devices. Perhaps what would be ideal is the model who could have been cool, but isn't. Who, like Socrates in his profession of knowing only his ignorance, demonstrates every qualification for a superiority he or she is nonetheless compelled not fully to exploit, subjected as he or she is to yet other models and other desires. An identity which risks identity. (back)

38. Not every element of Mauss’s formulation pertains, and certainly the donor’s ability to exert the control Mauss saw in "archaic" societies has weakened. Even parental gifts, of care and other legacies, may now quite easily go unreciprocated, for all that memoirists and novelists speak darkly of the lingering power of their progenitors, their capacity for inducing sentiments of culpability and so forth, the blindly obvious change of modernity is in its elders’ now feeble hold on their own and others’ young. (back)
39. The phrase can of course mean many things. Discussion at GASC VII for example connected it with a pedagogical practice which stressed the acceptance of student efforts—however flawed by relation to established norms—as foundational of further achievement. Such an approach is certainly to be lauded when effective. But we might say that the professor taking it models an enthusiasm for the development of new knowledge, a desiring openness for it. What the technique presumably does not say is that because the student produced something, it is of value—any more than it says it is for the same reason worthless. In this sense, might the better phrasing be “education-centered”? (back)

40. "What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?" The Gift, 3. (back)

41. This phrase has also been used by Roger Scruton, with whose formulation the present argument shares some perspectives, but from which it also differs in signal ways. "True teachers do not provide knowledge as a benefit to their pupils; they treat their pupils as a benefit to knowledge. Of course they love their pupils, but they love knowledge more. And their over-riding concern is to pass on that knowledge by lodging it in brains that will last longer than their own. Their methods are not ‘child-centered’ but ‘knowledge-centered’..." Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 29. The present argument does not require so instrumental an approach, for example, and its analysis and proposals hopefully do tend directly toward the betterment of students. Our GA-inflected understanding of knowledge as desire-in-the-sign means that the pedagogy we promote aims not at transmission of something fixed in character, but at fostering a capacity to respond to that desire. (back)


43. Eric Gans, Originary Thinking (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 171. Other parts of this discussion are pertinent to our argument. For example, that "the high esthetic accomplishes the deferral of resentment through the sublimation of appetite in the sign" while the popular aesthetic "denies the askesis of the sign by anticipating the alimentary satisfaction that follows its emission in the originary event" (173). (back)

44. "Carnal readings," Kermode adds, "are much the same. Spiritual readings are all different." Indeed, in the communal sparagmos we eat the same food, the same way. But each of us contemplates the sign in our individual solitude of desiring consciousness. The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 9. (back)

45. I must thank Adam Katz for alerting me to the directness of this application, at GASC VII at UCLA. It might be apropos here to distinguish attention span, the time a student is able to genuinely spend focussed on one thing, from its polar opposite, the much-celebrated "time management," that form of juggling which insists upon the measured, and brief, interval of flight allowed any given object of consciousness before it is caught and tossed again. (back)

46. The Prelude (1850) 6.604-16. (back)
In Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, René Girard famously claims the reason for the scarcity of jealousy, envy, and hatred in romantic and symbolist poetry is that romantics and symbolists want to think of their desire as "completely spontaneous" and therefore "turn away from the dark side of desire, claiming it is unrelated to their lovely poetic dream and denying that it is its price" (39-40). From the vantage point of generative anthropology, we are likely to offer a similar assessment of the romantic and symbolist traditions, but if we find ourselves in agreement with the distinctions Eric Gans draws between romantic and postromantic esthetics, we are inclined to argue that there is a significant difference in the extent to which a romantic and a symbolist would attempt to sever the connection between this "lovely poetic dream" and the "dark side of desire." Gans claims that what distinguishes the romantic from the postromantic is the greater degree to which the latter cuts himself off from empirical experience:

Whereas the romantics explored the scenic dimensions of their personal experience, the postromantic seeks to eliminate all vestiges of the empirical, to attain a universal, impersonal intuition of the scene. Instead of naively assuming that our membership in the human community makes us all capable of extrapolating back from present worldly experience to our common originary root, the postromantic sees worldly experience as a falling away from and forgetting of this root, and conceives the artist’s askesis as the exemplary return to it. The consequent bracketing of the worldly correlates of the imaginary and exploration of transcendental modes of experience makes the postromantic artist the creator of the first reasonably rigorous phenomenology of the scene of representation. (Originary Thinking 184)

Gans is arguing that romantics are much more likely than postromantics to show the relationship between the sign and their temporal, personal scenes. Despite their lyrical excursions, romantic authors still usually provide enough of a personal context for the reader to discover the relationship between poetic expression and empirical experience.

Consequently, the reader of a romantic lyrical poem can often discern the relationship between the esthetic vision and the poet’s personal resentment, a term Gans defines as the "sentiment of exclusion from the center where significance is generated" ("The Market and Resentment"). By providing the reader with some indication of the scenic origin upon which esthetic significance is found, the romantic poet helps the reader discover the connection between the lyrical rendering of the sign and the resentment over his or her segregation from the scene’s center. The postromantics, on the other hand, were inclined to attempt a complete separation of the lyric from personal and social contexts. In "bracketing" the imaginary from the empirical, the postromantic has thus far made the most focused attempt at conceiving, intuiting, and visualizing the originary scene of representation. This originary scene describes the first time that mimetic desire amongst members of a group for a particular object (most likely a hunted animal) rises to a crisis point, in which one or more members, fearing the violence which will ensue from the continued pursuit of
the object, decide to abort the "gesture of appropriation." The aborted gesture of appropriation is transformed into a gesture of representation out of fear of the mimetic rivalry of others" ( Signs of Paradox 17). This originary hypothesis explains the sign's origin and the proliferation of language that will follow from future mimetic crises. The postromantic, however, tries to refrain from contemplating his or her personal mimetic crisis in order to "eliminate all vestiges of the empirical" and intuit the originary scene. In doing so, the postromantic can create "an authentic self different from the worldly, appetitive self" ( Originary Thinking 182).

It is important to point out that Gans's conceptualization of the postromantic literary project appears to conflict with scholarship that suggests romantic poets were interested in creating such an unworldly, un-appetitive self. For example, in his book Romantic Origins (1978), Leslie Brisman argued that romantic poets were frequently interested in being "reborn," in creating a new identity consciously removed from temporal, mimetic scenes: "Returning to a second birth given both primary importance and something like temporal priority, the poets step outside the circle of imitation, repetition, and belatedness; they return to the sources of their power" (18). At first glance, Brisman seems to be describing Gans's understanding of the postromantic rather than the romantic. However, Brisman's assertion that this rebirth is given "temporal priority" helps us to distinguish postromanticism from romanticism. Brisman views the act of romantic renewal as being temporal because of the fact that romantic poets, despite their privileging of lyric over narrative, almost always frame their attempts at lyrical transcendence as emerging from a narrative circumstance. As readers, romantic poetry allows us to at least catch a glimpse of "the circle of imitation, repetition, and belatedness" from which the lyric poet longs to escape, and we can therefore see this "reborn self" as evolving from temporal resentment rather than hatching from a sublime, disinterested mind or originary genius. Girard's claim that romantics and symbolists want us to see their "lovely poetic dream" as being "completely spontaneous" is perhaps more true about the post-romantic symbolists than the romantics, who give us many hints that personal resentment generates their esthetic visions.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's Epipsychidion (1821) provides us with an allegorical, meta-poetic depiction of the romantic poet's earnest yet failed attempt at creating a new, postromantic consciousness—one that is not even slightly reliant on the "scenic dimensions" of his own experiences. With such a consciousness, the poet would be unbounded by the empirical, and it would allow for him to return imaginatively to the originary scene of language and cultural creation. However, the poem ultimately shows us how resentment, which is what created the originary scene in the first place, makes impossible the return to this scene. The poem therefore ends up foretelling the future lie of postromantic poetics, which is that de-personalized allusions to the originary scene are possible. Of course, the poem is romantic in that it does not refrain from exploring the "scenic dimensions" of the poet's personal experience, but Shelley's speaker is in the midst of what becomes a futile effort to evolve from a romantic to a postromantic condition—in which his poetic visions become purely originary and, therefore, separate from his everyday life. Conceptualizing the speaker as attempting to transition from a romantic to a post-romantic esthetic consciousness helps explain why, for instance, he provides us with an account of his love history while also attempting to forget it. In doing so, he ends up drawing attention to the endeavor to turn away from personal resentment—"the dark side of desire." The speaker's inability to meet this objective essentially foreshadows the insurmountable problem of postromantic esthetics. Shelley's poem anticipates the modernist-esthetic turn, which Gans describes as the movement away from recreating "the origin of the scene of representation" to exploring "the scenic operation of its esthetic itself" ( Originary Thinking 193). The modernist esthetic is made not from ignoring the temporal scene but, rather, from estheticizing it.

For the remainder of this essay, I will be first arguing that Epipsychidion anticipates the evolution of the nineteenth-century esthetic as Gans describes it—from the romantic privatization of the originary scene, to the effort to preserve the scene from the empirical, and, finally, to the realization of this endeavor's impossibility due to the fact that desire is derived from mimetic rivalry. By the end of the poem, we are to conclude that intimations of the originary are accessible only through the intercessory of temporal desire. Secondly, I am arguing that Epipsychidion, while famously an allegory of Shelley's love history, also addresses what Shelley anticipates as the devaluation of poetry in the literary marketplace due to the proliferation of prosaic literature. Shelley not only shows how the idealization of love inevitably stems from resentment over a beloved's unobtainability, but he also reveals that the act of exploring this connection relates to his professional resentment, which arises from the awareness that the emerging literary market was beginning to devalue the poetic occupation and, consequently, exclude the poet from its center. In
Epipsychidion, the idyllic world the speaker wants to create is one where the poet stands at the center of a mimetic scene, and the speaker’s awareness of language’s inability to realize his vision meta-poetically represents Shelley’s sense of being overwhelmed by determinist social forces. Therefore, personal resentment creates the need to escape from his temporal mimetic scenes and to journey to the originary scene, but his inability to suppress his personal resentment prevents him from meeting this objective; his lyrical discourse can only be romantic rather than postromantic in nature, emerging from “the scenic dimensions of [his] personal experience.” This failure, which Shelley makes obvious by situating the attempt of lyrical excurses within a narrative context, suggests that the postromantic symbolists’ suppression of narrative helped to conceal the fact that their supposed return to the “originary root” was, in fact, a return to the temporal and empirical.

II

One could say that my first claim, which is that Epipsychidion features the failed attempt to create a world apart from the empirical, has been made before. Paul de Man’s “Rhetoric of Temporality,” for example, famously argues that the symbol succumbs to allegory in Romantic poetry; even the most symbolic forms of lyric cannot escape the entrapment of temporal systems of signs. The transcendent project of lyrical symbolism in a poem like Epipsychidion is both valorized and regarded as futile, making the poem a work of skeptical idealism rather than of Platonic idealism. Poststructuralists like de Man therefore conclude that language has inherent contingencies that make it a continual deferral of Shelley’s romantic dream of oneness. But Gans’s generative anthropology and Girard’s mimetic theory go a step beyond this insight, for while poststructuralists underscore language’s inherent limitations as the reason for the poetic subject’s failure, Gans claims that both language’s capabilities and its limitations are rooted in originary resentment. The desire that the subject purports to be exclusively for the object at the center of the mimetic scene is, as Girard claims all forms of desire to be, “the mimetic crisis in itself”; and this crisis “always lacks the resources of catharsis and expulsion” (Things Hidden 288). Girard’s assertion that the object of desire is always a manifestation of the mimetic crisis and Gans’s claim that lyrical expression is one of resentment provide us with a more humanistic than technical explanation for lyric succumbing to narrative allegory. The skeptical idealism that both features and doubts the success of language’s transcendent capability is a consequence of language always alluding to the user’s personal resentment. Through Gans’s lens, we can see that resentment contributes to both the ambition that fuels the poetic discourse through much of Epipsychidion and the despair that occurs at the poem’s end when the speaker realizes that the language he employs to transcend the temporal ultimately fails.

While a poststructural critique of Epipsychidion would be in agreement with the speaker’s conclusion that the very words he uses to escape to an atemporal realm are the “chains of lead” (588) that ground him to the temporal, the speaker’s overview of his love history in lines 190-383 suggests an emotional rather than linguistic cause of his enslavement. We discover that Emily is the culminating love object in a long lineage of females (both spiritual and physical), for he reveals that from early in his childhood

There was a Being whom my spirit oft
Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,
In the clear golden prime of my youth’s dawn,
Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn. (190-93)

After this "Being" departed, his life became a singularly-purposed journey to become reacquainted with her: "In many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol of my thought" (267-68). These two passages reveal one of Epipsychidion’s two main plots: the one plot being referred to here is the speaker’s attempt to find a beloved who is closest to his ideal, and the other plot, which extends from the first, involves the state of affairs surrounding the speaker’s relationship with Emily, a character signifying Teresa Viviani, the woman to whom Shelley dedicates the poem. (4)

The inaccessibility of Emily and the chance that she will be married to someone else establish the mimetic scene of rivalry and provide the motive for the speaker to abandon pursuit of her in favor of the creative act of generating a sign for her. This sign, as Gans puts it, "arises as an aborted gesture of appropriation
that comes to designate the object rather than attempting to capture it" and serves as "an economical substitute for the inaccessible referent" (Originary Thinking 9). The aborted gesture "expresses a tension between the conflicting forces of attraction and repulsion" (The Origin of Language 47), and as long as the speaker is gesturing toward the object of desire, the representative discourse of lyrical designation is impossible. Only when the force of "repulsion" compels the subject to abort this gesture can the process of lyrical designation begin. Although jealous resentment does not apparently appear to be what the speaker suffers from, he is consciously re-sensitized to this longing for his original object of sexual desire because his temporal circumstances motivate him to, as the poem's epigraph states, "create ... in the infinite a world all its own."(5) In the speaker's case, Emily is in a location guarded by "sentinels," metonyms for the institutional structures that make a sexual relationship impossible. His desire for Emily is therefore rooted in the mimetic crisis, for within the structural constraints of the poem's narrative, it is Emily's inaccessibility that provides the opportunity for him to pursue imaginatively "the shadow of that idol of my thought." The sentinels make not only appropriating Emily impossible, but, more importantly, create the opportunity for a future rival (one whom Emily's father would deem as a more appropriate suitor than the speaker) to become her lover. Because the barriers to becoming Emily's lover are insurmountable, his only recourse in attempting to satisfy his mimetic desire is to engage in the resentful practice of imagining a romance with Emily. In his imaginings, the speaker transforms her into a signifier of the sisterly being who once accompanied him in "the clear golden prime of [his] youth's dawn" (189). In doing so, he is attempting to make the rivalry over Emily serve as an intimation of a more elemental mimetic moment (in his "youth's dawn"), one that alludes more directly to the originary scene. Furthermore, movement toward the originary scene brings him closer to completing the process of transformation from a romantic to a postromantic consciousness.

Of course Shelley's speaker wants the reader to think that such a transformation has always been his objective, one that his earliest of amorous relationships were predicated upon; he overlooks the mimetic possibility—which is that previous resentments over failed relationships have led him to imagine esthetic paradises where ideal love can exist. And with Emily, the speaker is leading us to believe that the many barriers keeping him apart from her are only preventing him from fulfilling his sexual desire rather than serving as the mimetic source from which his desire for her originates. The lover sees true love as being restrained by institutional forces within "the world by no thin name":

```plaintext
Emily

I love thee; though the world by no thin name unvalued shame.
Would we two had been twins of the same mother!
Or, that the name my heart lent to another
Could be a sister's bond for her and thee,
Blending two beams of one eternity!
Yet were one lawful and the other true,
These names, though dear, could paint not, as is due
How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!
I am not thine: I am a part of THEE. (42-52)
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Although this passage alludes to the narrative circumstance surrounding the speaker's love for Emily, resentment and mimetic desire do not appear to be a part of the equation. The lack of specifics allows the speaker to make it appear as if social forces merely get in the way of his pursuit of autonomous desire. The speaker's declaration that his love for Emily is independent from temporal experiences helps explain why in the above passage he wishes for an incestuous relationship—for them to be "two...twins of the same mother" (45). His wish that Emily would have been his sister is atemporal in that their love is imagined as being unconditional and permanent. Brothers and sisters are thought to be bound by inherent love, and sexual love, which is generally considered to be more vulnerable to changes in circumstance, can theoretically become permanent when fused with sibling love.

The speaker does, however, establish a mimetic, triangular structure in the above passage. While wishing that they were siblings, he realizes the best alternative would be to find another romantic partner who would become friends with Emily. The triangular relationship would therefore be between the speaker, Emily, and a third, undetermined female other. He reasons that if he cannot be with Emily directly, he could be with her indirectly through "another" woman, who could form "a sister's bond for her and thee. /
Fashbaugh - Resentment in Shelley’s Epipsychidion

Blending two beams of one eternity!" (45-46). Instead of holding out for the impossible, he instead reasons that he could find another woman who would form a sisterly bond with her. His love for the other would be indirect and temporal, a replaceable sign of his love for Emily. This is, of course, another demonstration of Gans’s concept of the "aborted gesture of appropriation": an "other" becomes the sign of his aborted attempt to appropriate Emily within the mimetic scene. The speaker's logic helps explain the narrative account of his relationships with other women previous to Emily, all of whom serve as imperfect signs of a female presence that accompanied him early in his youth and whom he believes is embodied in Emily. She was a spirit whose voice "came to me through the whispering woods / And from the fountains, and the odours deep" (201-202). Previous women have proven to be, to his dissatisfaction, noticeably imperfect "shadows" of his original love object: "And some were fair—but beauty dies away" (267-69). He uses his understanding that "beauty dies away" to justify the fact that he kept changing lovers; his life has been about the search for a lover who would essentially be the reincarnation of the original female presence. In what is commonly referred to as the work's "free love" passage, the speaker argues that sexual relationships are not meant to be monogamous, that they serve only as temporal representations of ideal love:

I never was attached to that great sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion, though it is the code
Of modern mortals, and the beaten road...
And so
With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,
The dreariest and the longest journey go.
(emphasis mine; 149-54, 157-59)

For the narrator, monogamous marriage leads to psychological enslavement in which couples are figuratively "chained" to each other by their marital commitment. Here, jealousy—"a jealous foe"—is suggested to be a product of the monogamous marital economy, which the speaker believes is part of an overall system of psychological oppression.(6)

Of course, the narrator excludes himself from being vulnerable to resentment, jealousy and mimetic desire; he pretends his desire for Emily is exclusively his, not mimetically derived from a potential rival. As Girard points out, an adult, unlike a child, "likes to assert his independence" from the mimetic paradigm by becoming "a model to others; he invariably falls back on the formula, ‘Imitate me!’ in order to conceal his own lack of originality" (Violence and the Sacred 146). That the Romantic subject would attempt to make himself the model who determines the objects for others to desire rather than acknowledge his desire as a derivative of another's helps explain the speaker's motivation for placing so much attention on the object rather than on potential rivals. However, we can view the speaker's very attempt to avoid mimetic conflict as evidence of mimetic desire's influence, as exemplified in the several epithets he gives Emily: "Sweet Spirit!" (1), "Poor captive bird!" (5), "High, spirit-wingèd Heart!" (13), "Seraph of Heaven!" (21), Moon beyond the clouds! (27), and "Star above the Storm!" (28). The symbolic identities for Emily function as aborted gestures of appropriating her; since he cannot possess her he is relegated to creating signs that stand in her absence. Another way the speaker asserts possession of Emily is by determining the conditions upon which she will be revered. The speaker wishes to sail with her across the Aegean Sea to

An isle under Ionian skies,
Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise,
And, for the harbours are not safe and good,
This land would have remained a solitude
But for some pastoral people native there,
Who from Elysian, clear, and golden air
Draw the last spirit of the age of gold. (422-28)

What he finds idyllic about the isle is that it is isolated, populated only by the native "pastoral people" who appear to be present in his imaginary paradise merely for esthetic reasons, materialized as products of
Elysium’s "clear, and golden air." Within such a place, there is no rival for Emily’s affections, and yet he thinks he would be able to sustain his desire for her.

Through this idealized vision, the speaker is attempting to return not to his own scene of self-origination, but to a time prior, to the originary scene, therefore making his quest postromantic rather than romantic. It is in later passages of the speaker’s description of the Ionian paradise that we understand the speaker to be rendering a scene that is as foreign to his own experiences as is possible. For example, he describes "a lone dwelling, built by whom or how" which "[h]ad been invented, in the world’s young prime" (484, 489). The dwelling is "Titanic"—which refers to the mythic period when Ancient Greece was ruled by the Titans, who were primitive compared to their Olympian usurpers—and void of "all the antique and learned imagery" (498) associated with Greek civilization. In place of the "learned imagery" of Greek culture is an exotic, natural scene: "The ivy and the wild-vine interknit / The volumes of their many twining stems" (498-501). He is therefore longing for a place within the cradle of Western civilization before this civilization came into being. The speaker, though, is unable to conceive fully this scene due to the limitations imposed by his self-consciousness. When he proclaims the house and Ionian isle to be "mine" and Emily "to be the lady of solitude" (512, 513), he projects his own identity and experience onto the scene, making impossible the transition from a romantic to a postromantic esthetic mentality. The interference, here, of the personal helps explain the speaker’s frustration at the end of the poem over his failure to imagine fully the originary scene.

With the speaker’s realization of his inability to use his poetic imagination to visualize fully an atemporal world, Shelley helps illustrate the problem with this postromantic turn: that his language cannot take him on a mental journey to the originary scene because his lyrical discourse can never separate itself from personal resentment. The originary scene can only be alluded to, or hinted at, through the lyrical expression of an individual’s resentment.

The speaker’s proclamation of his disdain for the institution of marriage earlier in the poem appears to foreshadow what occurs at the end, when he realizes that he cannot imaginatively sustain a vision of unification with Emily. His explanation for his failure is that the language he uses to "pierce / Into the height of Love’s rare universe" turns out to be "chains of lead around its flight of fire" (588-89, 90). The "chain" image that earlier alludes metaphorically to the psychological enslavement created by Judeo-Christian marriage laws and the institutionally-generated jealousies and other problems emerging from them reappears to refer more generally to a human being’s conditional enslavement to temporality; as quoted earlier, he describes marriage as being "chained" to a "friend, perhaps a jealous foe." Although the speaker certainly is not suggesting directly that his imaginative failure makes him susceptible to resentment, that is an inference we can draw based on the reappearance of the chain imagery and our understanding of the nature of mimetic desire as a structure that keeps the subject dependent on the desire of the rival. Language’s "chains of lead" signifies the enslavement of the individual to cultural, institutional desires, all of which emanate from the originary scene. Furthermore, we can view the speaker’s admittance of his failure to use language to transcend human temporality as an indicator that complete transformation from a romantic to a postromantic esthetic is not possible. The postromantic project of removing "all vestiges of the empirical, to attain a universal, impersonal intuition of the scene" (as quoted in Gans on this essay’s first page), which will allow for an unimpeded flight to the originary scene, is a futile endeavor because the individual is always entrapped within the snare of mimetic desire.

III

While we can determine the scenes of resentment to be responsible for Shelley’s lyrical vision, we can also reasonably argue that the speaker is alluding not just to Shelley’s love life, but also indirectly to the author’s profession during a time when the emerging middle-class readership and writers such as Thomas Love Peacock and Jeremy Bentham were questioning poetry’s efficacy. It is important to keep in mind, for instance, that Shelley’s idealization of poetry in "A Defence of Poetry" was in response to Thomas Love Peacock’s essay "The Four Ages of Poetry," which questioned the relevancy of the genre in modern life. Peacock forecasts poetry’s marginalization and conceptualizes it as "the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful." He boldly predicts that poetry’s audience “will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in comparison of
intellectual acquirement” (328). We can view Shelley's reply to Peacock in "A Defence of Poetry" as a resentful response to what the poet perceives as being a polemical attempt to marginalize his stature in the literary marketplace. In "A Defence," his resentment over Peacock's suggestion that poetry is outdated causes Shelley to draw for the poet lofty comparisons, likening him, for example, to a "nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude" (516). This comparison, in fact, epitomizes how the lyrical subject avoids his own resentment; for it shows him idealizing his solitude without suggesting that there is a temporal explanation for it; the implication, of course, is that there is no temporal explanation, that he is an inherently isolated character who harbors no resentment toward outside rivals. Another work of Shelley's that glamorizes the poet as an isolated, delicate genius is, of course, his elegy to John Keats, Adonais. In the poem's Preface, Shelley claims Keats's death was hastened by harsh criticism of Endymion in the Quarterly Review, which "produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind" (410). In this poem, the nightingale is again referred to, but this time as a kindred spirit of the poet rather than a direct metaphor for him: "Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale / Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain" (145-46).

Shelley's view of Keats or the ideal poet as an imaginative genius who is too sensitive to be engaged directly in the crudities of the quotidian life is indirectly expressed in Epipsychidion, for the poem's narrator casts himself as too idealistic for quotidian life. Epipsychidion can be read as an allegory that depicts a speaker's attempt to use poetic discourse to invoke a Platonic, hermetically-sealed, ahistorical world. Shelley essentially admits in a 16 February 1821 letter to his publisher Charles Ollier that this is his intention for the poem: he provides justification for Epipsychidion's obscure references by claiming that the poem was intended for "the esoteric few" in order "to avoid the malignity of those who turn sweet food into poison, transforming all they touch into the corruption of their own natures" (Letters 2: 606). According to Shelley, only “the esoteric,” learned few will be able to appreciate the beauty of his poetic language and understand the obscure references to ancient history and mythology. To use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, Shelley was writing for those encamped within the autonomous field of cultural production, rather than the heteronomous field of the literary market.(7)

In a 1 May 1820 letter to Leigh Hunt, which even more clearly demonstrates the antagonism Shelley felt toward the market, Shelley expresses displeasure over the level of control his publisher, Charles Ollier, has over his career and "the system in which [the bookseller] is placed" (Letters 2: 563). He is conveying a common frustration of many Romantic poets, that they were being victimized by the economics and politics of literary reviews, booksellers, and editors.(8) Romantic poets were placed in the precarious position of having to appease the interests of the literary-market establishment while still pursuing their own esthetic interests, interests that emerged as a counterweight to contemporary culture. John Keats perceived in Shelley's poetry a lack of concern for the demands of the marketplace, which he both respected and cautioned against. He shows a sensitivity to the readership's changing literary tastes when he advises Shelley to write with the specific purpose of earning a prosperous living—to "serve Mammon." Keats reminds Shelley that contemporary poetry "must have a purpose" and that the poet "must have 'self concentration' selfishness perhaps" (Letters 2: 323). Keats's assertion that an artist should be motivated more by the prospect of profit than by a "magnanimous" desire comes from his awareness that the changes within the new and growing literary market are beginning to have an effect on how poetry is to be written.

Epipsychidion demonstrates a stubborn determination on the speaker's part not to "curb" one's "magnanimity." The poetic speaker shares Shelley's disdain for the current institutional arrangements of modern society, suggesting that they are to blame for suppressing artistic and expressive freedom. Much as Shelley portrays himself in his letters as having talents suppressed by the superstructure of institutions, the speaker sees Emily as having expressive talents societal law suppresses:

Poor captive bird! who, from thy narrow cage,
Pour est such music, that it might assuage
The rugged hearts of those who prisoned thee,
Were they not deaf to all sweet melody. (5-8)

Like the common reader, who Shelley claims "turns sweet food into poison," "rugged hearts" have no appreciation for her talents and affections. Again, Gans would argue that the speaker is casting Emily as a "lyric subject," a "possessor of value that has gone unrecognized" (The End of Culture 271). In Emily, the speaker sees someone who, like him, needs to escape the oppressive confines of daily life and those who
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have no respect for her esthetic sensibilities and imagination. From the speaker's narcissistic perspective, Emily is a projection of himself—an "epipsyche," a "soul out of my soul" (238) whose spirit exudes a psychological freedom he longs to have. The speaker regards Emily in a fashion similar to the aforementioned nightingale in "A Defence of Poetry," which Shelley idealizes as the epitome of the independent artist, one who creates art that transcends the temporal, institutional constraints of modernity. The English translation for *Epipsychidion's* epigraph, which Shelley writes in Italian, typifies the high value Romantic poets placed on lyric transcendence and enhances the image of a poet as an autonomous artist, which is referred to as the "loving soul": "The soul launches beyond creation, and creates for itself in the infinite a world all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf" (392). This ideal view of love is similar to his conceptualization of poetry as an art form that "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one [and] as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not" (512).

This notion of art and love as taking part in the "eternal" by dissolving barriers between subject and object, different places, and different periods of time is best exemplified near the poem's climatic moment, when the Romantic hero envisions a scenario on an imagined Ionian isle where he and Emily will be

One hope within two wills, one will beneath  
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,  
One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,  
And one annihilation. (584-87)

Through sexual and spiritual love for Emily, he wishes for all differences to dissolve so he and she may become everything and nothing. We may want to say that this vision is the antithesis of resentment, for he is supposedly expressing the need to obliterate the self for the altruistic purpose of a universal peace embodied in the amalgamation of time, place, and matter. Love for Shelley is the force that eradicates all of these divisions, which "overleaps" the "fence" that separates him from Emily. Moreover, the passage reflects metafictionally on Shelley as a poet, alluding to his futile ambition for artistic autonomy, free from the constraints of mimetic desire.

Although aspiring to escape the temporal narrative circumstance, *Epipsychidion* inevitably becomes a psychological and allegorical narrative that enacts the resisting and succumbing to the interests of the literary market—where fiction and nonfiction prose were seemingly gaining in popularity at poetry's expense. By the end of the poem, the poetic speaker directs our attention to the limitations of poetic discourse, and these limitations draw our sympathetic attention not only to the frustrations of poetic invention, but also to the frustrations of being a poet in an age when poets were beginning to feel marginalized and underappreciated. In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley provides us with an alienated speaker who foreshadows what Lee Erickson has observed is a common theme of the Victorian dramatic monologue: "the poet's alienation from the publishing market" (44). Similarly, in *Adonais* Shelley casts Keats as an idyllic outsider, someone who very much fits the image of both *Epipsychidion*’s Romantic hero and Emily. He refers to Keats, for example, as a "Lost Angel of a ruined Paradise!" (107), which reminds us of his many epithets for Emily earlier in the poem.

As most Keats scholars attest, it is highly unlikely that the poet's death was caused or quickened by negative reviews. Shelley is undoubtedly projecting his own sense of being unfairly treated by the literary establishment, which he frequently viewed with contempt. For example, in a letter to Hunt he calls all booksellers "rogues" and asserts that "The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits" (Letters 2: 190). This frustration of being caught in such a system manifests itself through cathartic, lyrical excursions in his work, as we see in *Epipsychidion*. The text features the image of a poet who is critical of the institutions constructing contemporary society. The speaker's visualization of an alternative, atemporal life likely derives in large part from Shelley's own perceived alienation from the marketplace; the poet's underscoring of modern problems and proposing of atemporal solutions, in other words, is not a disinterested enterprise.

Both "A Defence of Poetry" and *Epipsychidion* end up revealing the ironic fact that Romantic poets such as Shelley, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, and Wordsworth profited from their image as writers outside the marketplace. By casting themselves as outsiders who are free from the pettiness and jealousies constituting
modern-day commerce, they could attract the attention that provides them with a certain amount of cultural capital that they desire. The fact that Shelley conceptualizes the relationship between reason and imagination as being unequal, with the former being subordinate to the latter, shows that he cannot (or chooses not to) conceptualize freedom without placing it within the context of a master-slave relationship. Of course, the famous statement at the end of the essay—"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (535)—both displays this need to be empowered and expresses the "resentment" of the lyrical subject, someone who believes his true worth is undervalued and unappreciated. Like a jealous subject, Shelley's essay is attempting to guard something that he fears will be lost to the rival, which is in this case his identity as an important literary figure. One of his techniques in guarding this status is to pretend that such a competition with the rival does not exist, that his possession of autonomous desire for the object is unquestionable. "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is to be read as a statement of fact rather than as Shelley's achievable objective.

Like Shelley, his surrogate-speaker in Epipsychidion also attempts to deny the threat of the rival by casting himself as an outsider who cannot physically enter the "vacant prison" where Emily is entrapped because "The walls are high" and "thick set" are the sentinels. He pretends that the walls and guards are not rivals to his imagination and to "true Love," which "overleaps all fence." Elaborating on this declaration, he asserts that love is

Like lightning, with invisible violence
Piercing its continents like Heaven's free breath,
... more strength has Love than he or they;
For it can burst his charnel, and make free
The limbs in chains, the heart in agony,
The soul in dust and chaos. (399-400, 404-407)

The speaker is claiming that "Love" has the imaginative power to transcend the constraints of time and space. Moreover, like Shelley's "A Defence," this passage cannot describe the concept of freedom from institutional barriers without submitting them to his will; his freedom is inexplicably connected to his usurpation of the place of the rival, and he is therefore reproducing the very power structures against which he claims he is rebelling. The speaker is illustrating how poetic language cannot completely detach itself from the empirical, that the presence of the mediating rival always forces the subject back into the paradigm of mimetic desire. In the end, the hero of Shelley's poem has become skeptical of his own ability to use language to construct an atemporal vision, which puts him in the same skeptical position as Shelley.

This return to temporality reflects on Shelley's realization that he is incapable of conceiving an atemporal, originary scene. Rather than accepting the GA explanation that this incapability results from the succumbing to his personal resentment (which is what to various degrees all humans succumb to) he blames it on the inherent problem of language. Shelley arguably suffered from two main types of resentment—the romantic and the professional. Romantically, he was resentful over Teresa Viviani's inaccessibility, and professionally he was resentful over the real and perceived restraints the publishing industry placed on him. Furthermore, Shelley feared that because of the possibility of poetry's obsolescence (as Peacock so warned) in the literary marketplace, his work would become marginalized in his own time. Like the speaker, who has to come to terms with the fact that his imagination is not strong enough to make him consciously forget the fact that an actual sexual relationship with Emily is an impossibility, Shelley the writer knows that his ideal views toward poetry cannot transcend his concern for his own position within the literary marketplace. In the end, both are, like all humans, victims of resentment and mimetic rivalry, which enable and place limitations on lyrical expression.

Works Cited


Notes

1. De Man asserts in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" that the supposed "superiority of the symbol over allegory" is a result of the "self mystification" which takes place in the midst of "the dialektical relationship between subject and object," and that this dialektical relationship is not "the central statement of romantic thought," but is instead "located entirely in the temporal relationship that exists within a system of allegorical signs" (208). (back)

3. Kenneth Neill Cameron's "The Planet-Tempest Passage in Epipsychidion" (1948) and Stuart Sperry's Shelley's Major Verse (1988) make note of the fact that his section of the poem loosely allegorize Shelley's love history, with the "One" untrue "Planet" signifying his first wife Harriet Westbrook, the "Moon" representing Mary, the "Comet" serving as metaphor for Clare Claremont, and the "Sun" signifying Teresa Viviani, who in the poem is Emily.

4. Like Emily for the speaker, Teresa was inaccessible to Shelley as a sexual partner due to the fact that Teresa's father had secluded her to a convent while searching for suitable husband.

5. Shelley attributes the quote to Teresa Viviani, and in footnote 1 on page 392 of the Norton critical edition, editor Donald H. Reiman translates from Italian this epigraph in its entirety: "The loving soul launches beyond creation, and creates for itself in the infinite a world all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf."

6. In William Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," Oothoon makes a similar point, that her sexual desire, which "burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound / In spells of law to one she loathes" (8.21-22). In one of the Romantic literary traditions, Blake and Shelley are attacking marriage as a resentment-generating institution due to the constraints it puts on sexual desire.

7. In The Field of Cultural Production, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of how the market changed the way literary texts were produced explains how tensions between popular and esthetic interests escalated as a result of the growth of the middle-class readership and spread of capitalism. Bourdieu conceptualizes the literary market as a "field of cultural production," a dialectical abstraction of two opposing principles—the "heteronomous principle" for "those who dominate the field economically and politically" and the "autonomous principle," otherwise known as "art for art's sake" (40).

8. Lord Byron, for example, was notorious for his criticism of the greed within the literary market. In a letter to his publisher John Murray, for instance, he expresses his anger over the fact that his works were being "pirated" out, and in the course of voicing his outrage, he criticizes the established literary booksellers and managers: "It is hard that I should have all the buffoons in Britain to deal with—pirates who will publish, and players who will act—when there are thousands of worthy and able men who can get neither bookseller nor manager for love nor money" (117). In a letter to Samuel Rogers, William Wordsworth also voices his lack of respect for the bookseller: "I do not look for much advantage either to Mr. M., or any other bookseller with whom I may treat, and for still less to myself, but I assure you that I would a thousand times rather that not a verse of mine should ever enter the press again, than to allow any of them to say that I was, to the amount of the strength of a hair, dependent upon their countenance, consideration, or patronage" (327).

9. Andrew Motion argues in his 1997 biography—Keats—that the portrait that Shelley's Adonis paints is "an archetype—not someone who had suffered uniquely, but someone who represented all artists oppressed by reactionary regimes" (571).
Attentionality and Originary Ethics: Upclining

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However paradoxical it may seem, I venture to suggest that our age threatens one day to appear in the history of human culture as marked by the most dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery of and training in the meaning of the ‘simplest’ acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading...

Louis Althusser, Reading Capital, 15

An act of pure attention, if you are capable of it, will bring its own answer. And you choose that object to concentrate upon, which will best focus your consciousness. Every real discovery made, ever serious and significant decision ever reached, was reached and made by divination. The soul stirs, and makes an act of pure attention, and that is a discovery.


In a recent Chronicle of Love and Resentment, Eric Gans frames the ethical function of language as follows:

In all the years in which I have attempted to explain GA in writing and in speech, I have tended to place the major emphasis on representation, and in particular on "formal representation" or language. One of the points I have insisted on is that human language is qualitatively different from animal "languages"; the researches and insights of such as Terrence Deacon have essentially ended the debate on this point. But it follows from my very "definition" of the human as the species that poses a greater problem to its own survival than the totality of forces outside the human community that the primary transformation of the proto-human into the human was ethical. Language and more broadly, representation emerged, per the originary hypothesis, to defer conflict, not to provide a cognitive or ratiocinative tool. But in the configuration of the originary event, the moral model of the reciprocal exchange of the sign is just as indubitably unique a human creation as language, and indeed more essential to the success of the event—and to the consequent emergence of our species. The urgent need that the event fulfills is to find a model of behavior that can defer violence within a community for which one-on-one animal hierarchy no longer provides an adequate solution. Eric Gans Chronicle 431, "Originary Ethics."

The question of appropriate emphasis aside, the distinction Gans posits here, between the sign as a formal representation of a transcendent object, on the one hand, and the sign as a result, means or manifestation of reciprocity seems to me one that the originary hypothesis itself transcends. In other words, "formal representation" is itself ethical, is indeed the origin and resource of any ethics, so that ethics cannot be thought outside of it. At the same time, formal representation cannot be thought outside of ethics, since the "formality" of the representation lies in the shared attention it effects, and in this shared attention lies any ethics. In shared, or joint attention, is the fundamental equality-on-the-scene that constitutes the human. All the resources we need for thinking about ethics lie in joint attention, in our ability to point to something, and approaching ethics in this way might enable us to create more minimal, more pared down, ethical vocabularies.
To start with, if we can fold moral reciprocity into the shared attention constitutive of the sign and scene, couldn’t we say that what is immoral and a denial of reciprocity is whatever interrupts that shared attention? There are two ways shared attention can be interrupted: first, through some kind of distraction; second, through some kind of fixation. Distraction (distracting others; allowing oneself to be distracted) tears us away from the scene of joint attention, opens the possibility of unchecked approach to the object, and thereby demands a renewed, necessarily risky effort to redirect attention to the object—that is, distraction causes regression to a higher threshold of significance; fixation involves tearing oneself away from the scene and, ultimately, turning the other participants into objects of rather than participants in, one’s now singular attention. Joint attention involves some equipoise amongst the participants of the scene: each knows that the other(s) could advance towards the object while accepting the signs given and given off by the other as warranty that they won't without sufficient advance warning. Distraction, we could say, is the introduction of noise into the information thereby exchanged—either not putting forward sufficiently unequivocal signs oneself or subtracting from the univocality of those put forward by other(s). Fixation, meanwhile, is the securing for oneself a system of processing information that reduces all information to univocality, on terms not subject to reciprocal exchange. Both distraction and fixation abort the scene, but both are also complementary possibilities of the originary structure of joint attention: the actuality or fear of distraction favors the formation of fixations, and so the ethical problem consists less in preventing than in recuperating and interrupting distractions and fixations. If we consider that anyone enters a scene by following a line of attention—by looking at what someone else is looking at and deferring appropriation as the other does in order to continue looking—one has not fully joined the scene until that line of attention has passed through oneself, and has been seen to do so. In other words, attention is not joint until all the participants show, through signs, that they are letting the object be so as to see what it has to show, to hear what it has to say—in which case, each participant must be inspected, so to speak, or credentialized, by having the sign they put forth validated. For one’s joining of the line of attention to become evident and thereby accepted as legitimate, that attention must first land on oneself as its object—in other words, each new participant on the scene represents a potential interruption of shared attention. At this crucial point upon which one’s entry into the scene depends, one can only avoid becoming a distraction and potential source of fixation in others by doubling that attention back on oneself by joining it, becoming a sign and hence invisible, insofar as others are redirected back to the object through you. In that case, you will have shown others that the line of attention passes through your own eyes; unless, of course, your self-referentiality simply intensifies your distractiveness. Whether a distraction has taken place will depend upon whether those attended to or, in Louis Althusser’s term, “interpellated,” as potential objects of resentment or desire will have restored the line of attention by incorporating the interruption into the scene’s founding sign. Perhaps an analogy would be helpful here. The neuroscientist Daniela Schiller has discovered that that

memories are not unchanging physical traces in the brain. Instead, they are malleable constructs that may be rebuilt every time they are recalled. The research suggests, she said, that doctors (and psychotherapists) might be able to use this knowledge to help patients block the fearful emotions they experience when recalling a traumatic event; converting chronic sources of debilitating anxiety into benign trips down memory lane.

If the originary event is event and sign together, then there is no event without the sign being both emitted and iterated by all the participants on the scene—just as memories are not completed until they are recalled, or represented (and are therefore never complete), the event will only have taken place once it is represented in the sign. There is thus a lag during which the event both has and has not taken place, and the sign, much like the therapeutic experience Schiller hopes to employ, uses that lag to convert chronic sources of violence into benign signification. Since in this lag “before” and “after” have not yet been completely settled, the benign sign can be secured both before and after the traumatic event has taken place. And what makes the sign “benign” is not that it excludes content (as Schiller remarks, the traumatic memories are recalled) but that violence marking the event remembered is not what makes it memorable. Instead, the sign can embed the violence in some other elements of the memory that mitigate its fearfulness by turning the event into a sign—a sign, I would suggest, that prevents the one violent event from becoming the first in a series of such events compulsively suffered and/or committed.

I would call this restoration of the line of attention the "loop" in the line of attention, and undergoing this looping is what I would call "ostentation," which is where ethical being is located. Whether one can undergo
or go through the loop depends upon the group's ability to see you as restoring the line of attention as well as your ability to do so—ethics involves both ostentation and conferring a completed ostentation upon others, or the conversion of attentionality into intentionality. And this means that whether one has distracted or patched together the continuity of the line of attention, or whether one has proactively identified a break or fixated upon (and thereby aggravated) the source of the break in that line can only be known in the aftermath on a new, converted scene of joint attention. We keep the line of attention going by language learning—every loop in the line of attention involves an encounter of idioms. While it would be absurd to say that each of us speaks our own language, I think it makes perfect sense to say that at the margins we all differ in the emergent idioms we speak and that it is at such margins that real ethical questions emerge: when I think I'm following your discourse and taking the next "logical step" but you think I am falsifying your most basic intuitions then a difference in language has emerged. Michael Tomasello, along with many others has made the argument that we learn language not as collections of single words with discrete meanings that then get combined in sentences, or as a series of grammatical rules applied to single instances of language use, but as pre-packaged chunks of discourse—phrases, formulas, commonplaces—that we can repeat appropriately insofar as we occupy scenes of joint attention with our elders. Over time our language base extends through discovering iterable patterns in and analogies with those chunks, noticing similar contexts, mixing chunks, exchanging elements of the chunks we are familiar with, and so on. This process never ends, continuing, say, for academics, when we read the sentences of one thinker through the sentences we have assimilated from another. We can identify patterns because we can re-arrange center-margin relations on scenes and still recognize a scene as the "same" scene (when I am done speaking and someone else takes "center stage," it will still be the "same" scene); and we can identify analogies because the materials of one scene can be referred back to other scenes. Iterating (repeating differently) chunks, patterns and analogies, that is, is the way we follow by repairing the line of attention. The novel sentences linguists note that we are able to compose are, really, then, variant constructions, and "thinking" a process of transforming chunks and commonplaces into such variant constructions.

Ethical being involves not so much learning the language of the other, or teaching the other one's own language, because "language" is not a static entity that can stand still long enough for it to be the same language once it has been learned as it was when it began being taught. Rather, ethics involves learning the emergent language that arises at the margin or rough edges of the convergent idioms. Joint attention is always liable to lapse, prey to distraction and fixation, must always be monitored and re-engaged—when we mistake ourselves and each other it turns out that we have not been attending to the same thing after all, and our recourse is to attend to what we normally attend from: language, or the possibility of joint attention, an indication of faith in the capacity of shared deferral. If new language is always emerging on the margins of any semiotic encounter then two things follow: first, that this emergent language upsets the rough symmetry of the originary scene and, as on that scene itself, the new language can only be engaged through the kind of asymmetry aimed at symmetry I have elsewhere called "firstness"; and, second, the hierarchical articulation of language, from phonemes meaningless in themselves but capable of meaningful combinations, to morphemes that are meaningful within larger words, to words which have meaning but minimally so until they are placed in sentences, which take on their full meaning in discourses, and so on—this entire hierarchical organization which makes the lower levels invisible (we don't notice phonemes, and barely individual words, when we are discussing serious issues) undergoes dislocation and the elements at different levels become visible and "out of joint." If we place these two characteristics of emergent language together, it follows that firstness, or what we can consider the irreducibly pedagogical dimension of language, involves attending to the normally subsumed "joints" of language. Language is irreducibly pedagogical because in any joint attention, someone must have pointed first in a more or less articulate anticipation of the interest of the other(s)—this indicative initiative is the interpellative act that introduces one into the attentional loop. At the same time, this pedagogical dimension is, we could say, "flickering." insofar as once attention has been joined that initial asymmetry is integrated into the newly formed joint attention—and joint attention is self-authenticating, recognizing only such precursors and origins as it needs to sustain itself in the face of distractions and fixations.

The joints of language include far more than the elements of speech—there is tone, for example, and also
within speech itself there is phonosemantics, but beyond that there is gesture and posture, which in turn open up onto broader tacit understandings of context. In interpersonal interaction, that is, the entire embodied mind (or, perhaps, minded body) is engaged in the manipulation of attention, while in the more advanced semiotic forms (writing and electronic communications) the senses are brought into play in various ways. There are many joints that an utterance or sign can be out of. The originary hypothesis, though, provides us with an effective way of studying, first of all, those semiotic elements closest to the originary scene: posture and gesture. The originary gesture is a gesture of aborted appropriation; doesn't it make sense, then, to see all gestures and postures as "aborted" versions of some threatening activity? Take a large, powerful looking man walking confidently down the street, head up, chest out, with long stride and arms swinging long and fast enough to knock over an average sized individual. On the one hand, he is taking up space, defending a territory, intimidating potential trespassers—but, more fundamentally, he is claiming this space by suggesting, through gesture and posture, not only what he might do if that space were to be transgressed but also therefore drawing attention to what he isn't doing, the possible actions he has aborted—for example, embarking on the unrestricted conquest of space. He is claiming some space, not all of it, and if he claims more than his "fair share," that just means one's notion of fairness, based on modern, civic notions of equality, is incommensurable with his notion, based, implicitly, on one's right to what one can defend. He does, though, have an understanding of fairness and is constituting a scene around himself through his gesture and posture.

Gesture and posture do not seem to work the same way as the levels of spoken language—they not are composed of a system of intrinsically meaningless elements, nor are they components of larger systems of meaning. But they are composed into larger wholes we call "situations," "character," "personality," and "culture"; and, as I suggested earlier, it may very well be that phonemes and, more generally, the sounds of language are not as meaningless as post-Saussurian linguistics assumes. Furthermore, we can integrate gesture and posture into the semiotic systems of speech, writing and beyond by considering, first, that gestures and postures are ultimately ostensive gestures of deferral, and that any meaning conveyed through the higher speech forms also involves an act of deferral. Eric Gans's analysis of the primary linguistic forms in The Origin of Language makes it possible to see the imperative as a deferral of the ostensive, under conditions where an ostensive would likely fail and exacerbate the violence it is meant to stay (interestingly first turned into an imperative by the one obeying the command); the declarative, meanwhile, is a deferral of the imperative, when that speech act is unlikely to be fulfilled (and hence risk a violent situation without resolution). There are many different kinds of ostensives—simple pointing at a desired or interesting object, promises, greetings, expressions of gratitude, and so on—and of imperatives—orders issued under emergency conditions, orders issued pursuant to some legitimate authority, commands received from divine agencies, or transmitted within a community and obeyed by generation after generation—and the analyses based on the principle I am proposing would get very complex. Indeed, all these forms of signifying are embedded in single acts, embodying knowledge on different levels—if I stand aside from that aggressive male occupying the center of the street, making my own, limited claim to space and signaling a refusal to challenge him (learning an emergent language of gesture and posture), while, perhaps shaking my head at the evident barbarism and in order to give a moral tincture to my resentment, I am most likely doing all that on the level of gesture and posture itself, not in sentences I speak to myself. All acts have an element of deferral (even if minimal or diminishing) insofar as one thing is done, and not another, and it is done in one way, not another, thereby holding back possibilities towards which the form of the act gestures. Even in the most intellectualized conversation, such gestural exchanges proceed unnoted, sometimes emphasizing or accentuating, sometime subverting, positions taken in the overt communication. And, finally, this mode of analysis can be carried forward into writing and electronic communications insofar as we realize that these take place within disciplines, genres and institutions with rules that can be violated and boundaries that can be transgressed and that each signifying act makes sense by heightening or singling out respect for at least some of these rules and boundaries, even if this respect is shown by violating and transgressing others.

The insistence upon the entanglement of mind and body in language events evokes the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that there are no universally shared cognitive concepts outside of language: that time and space, as well as cultural and moral concepts, are all encoded in the grammar and semantics of specific languages.[1] It seems to me that this claim, if taken to its logical conclusion, would lead us to assert the singularity not just of every language but of every speech act: why should we, that is, assume that shared cognitive concepts undergird different uses of the same words any more than uses of "similar" words across
languages? And yet it is very difficult to simply reject the question, since in our post-metaphysical world thought seems bound up with language in ways that continue to surprise. I therefore consider it fortunate that the hypothesis is alive and fairly well, drawing the interest not only of literary theorists and poets, but cognitive linguists. This is the case even though the hypothesis cannot really be formulated coherently—if you want to claim that we can only think in terms of the grammar of a particular language you are already begging the question of the relation between "thought" and "language," which the hypothesis nevertheless depends upon (if we were to just assert the simpler "thought is language, language is thought [and that is all ye need to know on earth?]"), the hypothesis would evaporate). I will suggest in a little while that the best use of the hypothesis is to identify the "emergent language" I am arguing is central to ethics, but a good way to get there is through a discussion of one way in which the hypothesis has proven generative for some cognitive linguists.

Dan Slobin sums up a problem, derived from linguistic theories of grammaticalization, and that has been engaging cognitive linguists, when he points out that "[t]here is a cline of linguistic elements from fully lexical content words to fully specialized grammatical morphemes" (426). The cognitive linguists Dedre Gentner and Lena Boroditsky use this distinction to modify the Whorfian problem by proposing what they call a "division of dominance":

At one extreme, concrete nouns—terms for objects and animate beings—follow cognitive-perceptual dominance. They denote entities that can be individuated on the basis of perceptual experience. At the other extreme, closed-class terms—such as conjunctions and determiners—follow linguistic dominance. These meanings do not exist independent of language. Verbs and prepositions—even "concrete" motion verbs and spatial prepositions—lie between. Unlike closed-class terms, they have denotational functions, but the composition of the events and relations they denote is negotiated via language. (216-7)

So, at the first extreme, thought is independent of language, which in practice we can take to mean first, easily and uncontroversially translatable; and, second, readily reducible to ostensive, referential gestures. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis wouldn't hold within this domain of dominance: we could assume a word in any language that would be roughly equivalent to, say, "tree." At the other extreme though, where possible relations are constructed intra-linguistically, the dependence of thought on language would be the greatest. We have no reason to assume, for example, that in other languages things are figured "out." As Slobin goes on to point out, though, the process of grammaticalization relativizes the distinction between the domains of dominance, since content items make their way down the "cline" to grammatical ones. "Basic verbs," according to Slobin,

appear at the beginnings of grammaticization clines because, when they are used in a conversational context, they contrast with the more specific verbs that could be used in that context, thereby signaling to the hearer that those more specific meanings were not intended. This opens the way for the kind of pragmatic inferencing and reanalysis that lie at the heart of grammaticization.

Given these facts, it is evident that the special character of grammaticizable notions has its origin, in part, in the lexical items from which grammatical items are prone to develop. That is, the "open class" is already organized into general and specialized terms—and this division can be accounted for by quite ordinary psycholinguistic and communicative processes... Why are such words prone to grammaticize? Because of their generality they are both highly frequent and likely to be used in contexts in which the speaker does not intend to communicate a specialized meaning. (433-4)

Slobin goes on to give the example of verbs designating "taking"—if I use a more specialized verb like "grasp" or "seize," I wish to draw attention to the manner of taking possession; if I use a more general verb like "take" I thereby draw attention to a more general domain of activity (watching over, accepting responsibility for, and so on). "Take" is now primed to enter the process of grammaticalization, which might involve becoming an "auxiliary" verb or, in the case of "take" entering into a range of idioms (take over, take on, take it to, take down, etc.).
The process of grammaticalization is surely shaped, as Slobin says, "by the online demands on the speaker to be maximally clear within pragmatic constraints and maximally efficient within economy constraints, and by online capacities of the listener to segment, analyze and interpret the message" (431), which is to say by the interest in establishing a sustainable form of joint attention—but the initial, implicit, marking of the distinction between more general and more specialized semantic domains that Slobin places at the origin must first of all involve a shift in attention that involves an experience of learning. I would go even further, and say that that semantic domain could not have been imagined until it had been opened up and shared. The more generalized semantic domain recuperates some interruption in the attentional loop—I would assume it is noticed when further descent down the cline would exacerbate the distraction caused by the interruption and that it wards off the danger of imminent fixation. What happens here is that a possibility within language opens a possibility within thought—the distinction between "take" and "seize" makes it possible to imagine "taking responsibility," or "taking one's time."

At this point, originary thinking moves beyond cognitive linguistics, because we must assume that there were a few words and then many, and those few words must have covered more semantic space than the later, specialized split-offs; even more, the earliest words must have been more thoroughly embedded in the imperative and gestural-postural worlds than we can easily reconstruct now. The original "take," then, must have included much of what was to be distributed to more specialized semantic domains. To "take," must have meant to acquire and possess in accord with sacred purposes and ritualized practices. The initial move towards grammaticalization, then—that transformation of a word, whose meanings have been evacuated and given over to specialized terms, into a word covering newly imagined cognitive, social and moral domains—is a retrieval of the originary content of the word. This is a retrieval forward, not a recovery of the identical meaning: "taking responsibility," "taking time," "taking over," and so on don't return us to that earlier ostensive world but, rather, create new ostensive possibilities of deferral, where promises can be made (in a promise, one allows oneself to be "taken"), initiatives "taken," obligations incurred. In other words, a backward ascent is a precondition of further descent down the cline, as the new mode of thinking in language takes over or becomes common possession. And this also means that the development of chunks and commonplaces, on the one hand, and the "de-chunking" that we can call "thinking," on the other, are complementary modes of language development and language learning: "thinking" is initiated when a piece of a chunk "sticks out" (because the chunk is used mistakenly, because it is learned so well as to become material rather than transparent, because it collides with other chunks...), is withheld from its normal circulation, and opens up a new grammatical and semantic domain. This withholding from normal circulation, in fact, conforms to the structure of deferral, whereby an act is converted into a gesture—gestures must be composed so as to indicate that a particular movement could be completed in many other ways, but is instead being (in)completed in this way. And the (in)completion in the case of the aborted act/gesture can also be generalized to a range of as yet unanticipated situations, whereas acts are bound to a restricted context.

The consequences for ethics of this reciprocal implication and generation of language and thinking are as follows. Ethical concepts like "equality" and "fairness" are not really ideas that people, as folk psychology would have it, believe in and act upon—for one thing, such terms only have meaning within some frame of reference; for another thing, "believe in" and "act upon" are extremely imprecise ways of determining our relations with signs. These and other terms take on their meanings not only negatively, as the rejection of specific, and threatening, forms of inequality and unfairness, but positively, as exemplified by those who resisted or renounced the benefits of the inequality or unfairness in question—and in doing so iterated the originary event by deferring some kind of (potential, perceived) communal self-immolation. Such figures serve as iconic signs that are made the center of ritual (whether religious, cultural or political), and the actions of those who commemorate and imitate those figures are themselves privileged. Generative ethical concepts, then, are those that clarify the activities of such moral exemplars. Ethical advances, then, are events that deepen a particular mode of deferral by bringing within the scope of deferral a precondition for the act that has been subject to the prior deferral. Such advances become possible and necessary when the original deferral has eroded, leaving members of the community with the choice of abandoning or restoring it—but the restoration must consist of more than insistence on the continuance of the frayed practice; it must diagnose and denounce the cause of the erosion and establish preventive measures against its recurrence. Hence the need for "deepening." When such a restoration or return is successful, those who represented it—undoubtedly extremely divisive figures at the time—will have been those who saved the community. The rest of the community will then be taken in tow by those who respond most
vigorously to the call of those founders, and by the practices, norms and institutions they found (or the community will become prey to its own indiscipline). This also means that the community need not hold itself to the same degree of rigor as the founders, only to revere them and preserve the possibility of perpetual renewal—the role of monasticism in Christian societies can perhaps be understood in this way: the point is not that everyone should be chaste, eschew worldly goods and honors, and devote themselves exclusively to searching the will of God, but rather that those called to such renunciation should be honored as models to imitate, to the extent that one can, in one's daily life.

A study in ethics, then, can be reduced to the study of those practices, norms and institutions, which is to say, a study of disciplines, in the fullest sense of the word\(^2\): including both systems, individual and collective, of self-control, self-refinement and self-overcoming, and institutions of inquiry, characterized by constraints upon observation and vocabularies of analysis and description. Indeed, ideas are nothing more than prompts to the construction of disciplines. And disciplines are constructed within language, also in the fullest sense of that word—from the ostensive, postural/gestural realm, up through imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives to discourse. The initiation of a discipline involves the recuperation of a word (again, in the fullest sense—including phrases, idioms, and grammatical constructions), a word with a disciplinary history, and turning that word into the center of a new set of constraints. And, I would argue, that recuperation is a step up the "cline," or what I will now call an "upcline," in which a word is deliberately removed from a circulation that splinters its uses, and placed within a new circulation, or idiom, that treats the word as a prompt for a new hierarchy of declaratives, imperatives and ostensives. (Perhaps the prototypical example of the foundational disciplinary move is Plato's withdrawal of "good" from its circulation as an adjective indifferently applied to "meal," "athlete," "house," etc., to a much more restricted use as the Good.) Disciplines are spaces set aside for continuous language learning, a perpetual, deliberate break from ostensive and imperative uses of signs, uses that habitually provide smooth paths to satisfaction, to new ways in which, as Tomasello puts in in describing the young child's internalization of the linguistic symbol, we can become aware of how the "current situation may be attentionally construed by 'us'" (13).

To institute a word in this way is to construct a rule for its use, a rule designed to prevent other possible usages, and a rule drawn from some actual or imagined domain of prior usage. Perhaps the earliest such procedure is the ubiquitous ban on pronouncing the name of God—the first word. If the name of God is interdicted, then a system of circumlocutions and euphemisms, drawing on putative "attributes" and "effects" of God, must be elaborated. Interdicting the name of God is one step beyond (a deepening of) the interdiction on appropriating God. The rules of politeness and civility work in a similar way, expressing through procedures applied to tone, gesture, and so on, one's commitment to not do certain things. In each case what is deferred is the blasphemous, coarse, brutal, barbaric—some form of violent appropriation. As Philip Rieff has argued, though, any system of interdictions includes a system of remissions: profane and forbidden practices that are allowed within a circumscribed space, like Bakhtin's "carnivalesque." The internal disintegration of a system of sacrality comes when the remitted practices are used to point out the "hypocrisy" of the defenders of the sacred and to reverse the causality between deferral and authority—that is, instead of authority being conferred upon those who submit themselves to greater ordeals of deferral, the system of deferral and discipline becomes seen as a mere justification of the privileges enjoyed by those with authority. Of course, there will often be quite a bit of accuracy in such charges, but we can distinguish attempts to dismantle discipline from calls to restore it insofar as the former turn their satirical weapons against the latter. A priori hostility towards the sacred and sacred authority, the central fixation of the modern world, and unremitting mockery of such authority, the source of its distractions, always serve the purpose of releasing inhibitions in the name of nature. Those who have been liberated from inhibitions while still in possession of the entire vocabulary of discipline towards the destruction of which they have dedicated themselves have considerable advantages over the defenders of deferral and discipline. This is the advantage exploited for quite a while by Marxism in which, in Michael Polanyi's terms

[s]cientific skepticism and moral perfectionism join forces... in a movement denouncing any appeal to moral ideals as futile and dishonest. Its perfectionism demands a total transformation of society; but this utopian project is not allowed to declare itself. It conceals its moral motives by embodying them in a struggle for power, believed to bring about automatically the aims of utopia...The power of Marxism lies in uniting the two contradictory forces of the modern mind
into a single political doctrine. Thus originated a world-embracing idea. In which moral doubt is frenzied by moral fury and moral fury is armed by scientific nihilism. (59-60)

Understandably, it took liberal citizens quite a while to find means of defending themselves from this combination of frenzy and scientific nihilism disguised as oscillations between skepticism and certainty; perhaps they have not yet completely learned how to do so.

A proliferation of disciplines comes in the wake of the decline of a shared sacrality—God is no longer named, but the word/names that found the disciplines ("society," "unconscious," "nature," etc.) are nonetheless attributes of that which arrests some act of appropriation and instigates shared acts of attention. Any discipline is based upon some form of deferral, and upon some innovative rule of language and, therefore, any discipline adds to our collected means of discerning ethical exemplarity. Even if we take the most extreme apparent counter-example, the euphemistic "language rules" by which the Nazis conspired to avoid overt references to the mass murder they were committing in the very documents facilitating and recording that mass murder, we can see why this is the case. In itself, an Oulipo-style language game devised to discuss horrific acts obliquely through rules regarding the uses of synonyms, periphrasis and other methods might be very interesting and instructive, providing markers of the devastation crimes against humanity wreak upon our language (or, perhaps, revealing the vulnerability of our bureaucratic language to totalitarian infiltration); in cases where one is trying to aid victims of such acts, such language games might be a necessarily tactful approach towards enabling the survivor to arrive at his own language for describing what he has undergone. They are only objectionable when they serve to distract others from the fixation upon the destruction of disciplines driving the murderers, playing upon most people's unwillingness to assume that anyone would be capable of such acts (or, less generously, most people's desire not to accept the responsibility such knowledge would bring with it) and consequent willingness to put the most charitable construction upon the euphemisms. In that case, the Nazis' resort to such language rules indeed contributes to our capacity for ethical assessment because the euphemisms break down in response to a demand to be provided with the referents that even bureaucratic discourse must ultimately supply.

Euphemistic discourse is ultimately a question of bureaucracy, central to market and democratic societies where everything is recorded and innumerable disputes must be publicly adjudicated according to ever accumulating rules. Since bureaucracies must both record and neutralize conflicts, euphemism is intrinsic to their functioning. They do so by ensuring all positions are included in the system and ensuring that any position that can't be named by bureaucratic vocabulary is rendered invisible and unthinkable. But part of that system is the mechanisms by which the invisible and unthinkable can be named within the system. As more of these processes go online and are governed by algorithms resistant to influence by the subjects of bureaucracy, it seems likely that important ethical questions will cluster around what is a set of globalized processes of normalization. The terms I have been developing here can address the question of bureaucratic language rules as follows: the way bureaucracies direct the attention of the bureaucrats themselves can be along the same line of attention as that provided for their subjects, or the subjects can be turned into objects of attention, treated as nothing more than potential distractions. The way we can tell the difference is by determining whether language learning takes place between the two sides. Can the bureaucratic terms be used outside of the bureaucracy and are bureaucratic terms permeable enough to allow for the borrowing of outside terms? Even more precisely, do the bureaucrats (in the very broad sense that anyone who publicly assesses others, including doctors, teachers, lawyers, and so on, could be considered one) treat their "charges" in such a way that assumes that those charges might one day, however distant or unlikely, themselves enter the bureaucracy and perform assessments themselves. These questions can only be answered performatively. The sign that the answer is "no" will be that outside idioms are diagnosed rather than integrated, and treated as symptoms of whatever is abnormalized by the bureaucrats. But such symptomatic approaches to the subject licenses exceptions to established procedure, exceptions that then become codified within established procedure. The licensing of exceptions is the licensing of the very desires that must be deferred if rulers are to be fit to rule—in this case, what might be the central modern desire, to rule humans effectively, without resistance, as the scientist handles his objects. And the licensing of those desires entails the discrediting of the source of their prohibition, and this discrediting must become a fixation since any interference in the fulfillment of the once prohibited desires comes to be treated in the most inimical way. In that case, we can see totalitarianisms, leaving aside the specific ideologies informing them, as titanic explosions of forbidden desires, above all the desires to
dominate absolutely, murder, avenge real and perceived injuries, and humiliate. That totalitarian movements are disinhibitory rather than disciplinary thus becomes transparent. But we need not set aside the specific ideologies, since Nazism and Communism are themselves nothing more than elaborate justifications for such a "weaponizing" of bureaucracy; but bureaucracies must now be assumed to be potential "incubators" of such outbreaks, and their monitoring a significant, if not central, concern of ethical thinking.

Proceduralist tendencies in modern art are part of this process of monitoring. Producing a work according to an arbitrary rule is preparatory for noting and countering bureaucratic potentialities: the randomundoesthe increasingly precise probabilism claimed, if not actually accomplished, by contemporary bureaucracies. In that case, any language game, or constraint, any placing of some piece of language within a restricted circulation, serves an ethical purpose insofar as the paradoxicality of the rule is not neutralized (and when it is, the rule can be re-presented along with the paradoxicality of that attempt at neutralization). It is increasingly possible to accept the claim of ancient revelations that the arbitrary has been removed from those revelations, leaving nothing but a historically and anthropologically necessary "content"—indeed, the originary hypothesis introduces into any revelation the paradox of the originary scene, that what is named as significant in any revelation is presumed to already have the significance it can in fact only have via the act of naming. In that case, we can start from the opposite extreme, with the assertion that any constraint, even or especially the most arbitrary (say, a rule against using a particular letter), provides ethical benefits. Some kind of "upcline," necessarily results from any constraint, as words (in the broadest sense) are shoved out of joint and become newly available objects of attention, as long as the shared attention it facilitates doesn't serve to distract attention from some fixation hoping to evade scrutiny. Further, any upcline enhances our capacity for joint attention, which can then always, even if slightly, be transferred to the reconstruction of other constraints. It is also helpful to consider how much of the arbitrary is involved in disciplinary constructions that have come to seem reflections of nature—we can readily see, by now, that, for example, Freud's re- and restricted circulation of the "unconscious," and Marx's of "labor power," had a great deal of the arbitrary to them (and there was much that was intellectually generative in that arbitrariness)—but such insights come much harder with prominent disciplines closer to home. If one were inclined to devise a "proof" for the originary hypothesis, it seems to me we might find one in the fact that it works equally well if we assume that those on the originary scene reflected, with the skill of the great realist novelists, the nature of all those congregated; or, on the other hand, that the originary sign was a contingent, arbitrary construct, arrived at in desperation, thoroughly pragmatic, devoid of ontological claims, and providing nothing more than a rule to cling to. Without an originary hypothesis, other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, to differing extents of course, smuggle in a lot of naturalized assumptions in order to keep the arbitrariness of their constructions at bay—they presuppose a good deal of humanness in the constructions of the human. There's no reason to object to that, but recognizing the ingredients of arbitrariness and idiosyncrasy in the mainstream disciplines might make them more generative of insights and less tolerant of complacent euphemisms. In the end, perhaps the best way of distinguishing the production of new, upclining idioms from obfuscatory euphemisms is that only former can read the latter into a new space by inhabiting the paradoxes of both, indeed all, sets of rules.(3)

The euphemism is the tribute evil must pay to joint attention and it can always be taken up so as to direct attention towards the complex of distraction and fixation constitutive of the euphemism.

Ethical behavior in everyday life, then, relies on the creation of little disciplinary spaces out of the available semiotic material. This doesn't mean that all those who "just" treat others as they would like to be treated are unethical; it just means that what, at a given moment and in a given situation, they take to count as "treating others as they would like to be treated" is "downcline," further grammaticized, from the procedures devised to refuse to participate in a newly perceived form of unequal treatment. Even more, in any action recognizable as ethical, we will be able to identify some "upclining," however minimal and however mixed with "remittances." It follows that ethical inquiries are best devoted to the exemplary practices initiating new procedures and the way those practices are imagined across various spaces of discipline and deferral. Some potentially exemplary practices must be winning out over others—others that allow for too little remission, or that are too blatantly arbitrary. (I happen to believe that a community that, every week, chooses to omit a specific sound or letter from its oral or written communications, will be, all other things being equal, more ethical than a community that doesn't. Probably happier, too. But such a procedure would not address what the community itself takes to be ethical dilemmas, something new disciplinary procedures must at least gesture towards. Some distinction between newly generalized/retrieved
term and more specialized instantiations will be necessary to constitute the space.)

My discussion, thus far, conflates religious, cultural, esthetic and scientific practices under the category of the "disciplinary." I think this is essentially correct, insofar as all of these disciplinary spaces, to the extent that they become more rigorously disciplinary, make society more ethical; even more, they contribute to a vision, like Michael Polanyi's, of a free society comprised of a vast extent of overlapping disciplinary spaces (what Polanyi calls a "society of explorers"). And while differentiations need to be made across these practices, the best way to do so is to attend to the ways in which they impinge upon one another, rather than trying to establish an a priori ethical hierarchy amongst them. Scientific disciplines that account, in their initiation of new learners, for the esthetic dimension in the attraction and intelligibility of any theory and in the construction of hypotheses, and that honor the "awe" at the unknown that leads one to replace everyday modes of perception with concepts that address the intangible will "upcline" more than those which imagine themselves to be purely "declarative" spaces. Artistic communities that account for their overlap with the sacred and the scientific, perhaps in inventing language rules that mimic the sacred, or in using mathematized procedures in generating rules of composition, will upcline more and be more ethical than those that don't; and those religious practices that invite the esthetic and rename as God's work the discoveries of science while reminding scientists that their disciplines, too, have scenic origins, will have more upcline than those that don't. In each case language learning is maximized because other discourses are allowed to induce the kind of semiotic crises that allow for new problems of language to emerge between us.

David Olson, near the conclusion of his study of the role of education in literate and therefore bureaucratic societies, asserts that

> In a modern bureaucratic world, knowledge, virtue and ability take on new form. Institutions such as science preempt knowledge, justice systems preempt virtue, and functional roles preempt general cognitive ability. Thus, ability, knowledge and virtue are construed and pursued less in the form of private mental states and moral traits of individuals than in the form of competence in the roles, norms, and rules of the formal bureaucratic institutions in which they live and work. (288)

Olson is, of course, right, and yet "we can conclude with x degree of certainty that, given the assessment of evidence according to the established procedures, subject to follow up research regarding certain inconclusive results..." cannot completely replace "I think that..."; nor can "the aggregate well-being of the community, measured according to the following metrics and subject to international comparison, is likely to decline..." completely replace "I refuse to...". "If," as Olson continues, "these institutions fail apart, personal competence and private virtues tend to vanish with them," it is equally the case that without reserves of personal competence and private virtues that are not solely dependent upon these institutions, the institutions will fall apart. (Why, after all, shouldn't modern bureaucratic institutions, once up and running, be perpetually and automatically self-reproducing?) These reserves are located, in part, in other institutions that import, as I have suggested, idioms at odds with the discipline in question (if all institutions are equally exhausted, though, these reserves will not be forthcoming). Change within disciplines come, as Thomas Kuhn most famously argued, from the emergence of anomalies that can no longer be reconciled with the prevailing research program. It's hard to see how the competency in roles and rules Olson refers to would enable one to identify, look for, or even anticipate the existence of such anomalies, though, since anomalies will by definition undermine those roles and rules. Only living in anomalies and paradoxes, originary thinking, iterating the oscillation between model and rival, sign and object, name and meaning, can sustain the generativity of the disciplines. Upclining is originary thinking—retrieving the word forward, withholding a more general meaning yet to be instantiated from the general semantic circulation, is the way of living in anomalies and paradoxes. It may be true that "I think that..." and "I refuse to..." are no longer worth very much but we can "post" ourselves within disciplines, iterating distracting entrances that allow for attention to be directed to the discipline as such, and attention to disciplinarity is the form attention to scenicity takes today.

The definition of ethics as upclining might, finally, allow us to revisit the critique of White Guilt and victimary discourse that has become such an important part of Generative Anthropology. White Guilt could, perhaps, be reframed as a deepening of the modes of deferral constitutive of liberalism and democracy,
that is, as a targeting of previously invisible preconditions and predilections that make the members of free societies more likely to advocate or remain silent in the face of violence against despised minorities. Language rules like referring to the "N-word" and, more generally, avoiding verbal formulations that single out members of particular groups and make them more likely to face scrutiny that might accord with collective probabilities (say, the greater proportion of black perpetrators of violent crime in the US) but would be unjust when applied to the individual, could be ethical advances. For this to be the case, though, the rules would have to apply to anyone within the "game," that is, anyone who has "standing" to hold another to the rules—whether this would mean that, for example, the "N-word" would be equally off-limits for blacks, or that it would be assumed that any black individual would have his own "blacks" before whom he would be expected to experience a form of White Guilt, or whether a complementary form of "Black Guilt" marking the desire for revenge against the oppressor might emerge, or something else altogether, could not be determined in advance. But new forms of deferral for some that are simultaneously remissions or invitations to transgression for others are unsustainable, and for the same reason that one person can't play chess while the other is playing checkers—a complete confusion of the rules results, ultimately "liberating" everyone from discipline. But without deferral and discipline values can only be derived by reversing the hierarchy between deferral/discipline and authority, so that values descend from the perpetual exposure of hypocrisy, and the liberated are delivered to the competition to commit the transgressions that expose the biggest gap between assertions of deferral and actual appropriation.

The cognitive linguistics from which I have drawn much of my discussion of language learning, joint attention and disciplinarity speaks, like the phenomenological and Gestalt traditions of which it is at least a distant cousin, of "intentionality." This is also the language of GA. I insist, though, on making "attentionality" the prior, constitutive concept. I certainly don't deny intentionality, in the sense of "intending" an object and so constituting and conferring meaning upon that object against a relatively undifferentiated background; nor, even, as a locus of interpretive retrieval of the meaning of texts and acts. Intentionality within GA is more strongly conceived, as the object is one of mimetic desire and shared deferral. But intentionality depends upon having one's attention drawn to the object, and having one's attention drawn depends upon attending to another who brings the object into view and, finally, upon becoming an object of attention of others (an attention one can't share). Seeing this broader attentional loop as the condition of possibility of intentionality enables the inquirer to direct attention to that in intentionality that is constitutively excluded and yet constitutive; to put it another way, "attentionality" provides a way of accounting for the alterity in language, that which in my utterances is not "mine" but is, rather, passing through me and carrying me along. The acknowledgment of the alterity of language, which we owe primarily to the various post-structuralist or post-humanist theories, makes it impossible to speak of the generic human (which would presuppose some universally shared world-as-scene and construct alterity as deviance) and imperative to speak of fields of human being: disciplinarity, or the iteration of a particular attentional loop in a way that makes the boundary between intentionality and alterity in language productive. Productive because knowingly composing a version of the human, and one open to the gazes issuing from other versions, through which come other gazings from more distant but maybe, once attended to within the disciplinary space, more intimate, overlapping spaces.

**Works Cited**


Notes

1. For discussions of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the best place to begin is Whorf’s *Language, Thought and Reality*; for a more recent discussion, see John A. Lucy, *Language Diversity and Thought: A Reformulation of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis*, Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. (back)

2. Such a study has gotten well under way in Peter Sloterdijk’s *You Must Change Your Life*, albeit not on the linguistic terms I will propose here. (back)

3. For a very enlightening and enjoyable example of the kind of thing I have in mind, or at least one kind, see Sam Kriss’s "The New Lamentations," an essay in the online journal *The New Inquiry* that reads Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition as a dystopian novel: http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/book-of-lamentations/. In this way, it seems to me, a hypothetical origin of psychiatry from which the discipline could be imagined to have deviated is indirectly proposed, and therefore a possible post within the discipline. (back)
The Challenge of Originary Thinking: A Response to Jean-Loup Amselle*

Richard van Oort

I am not an anthropologist. I have written no ethnographic studies of non-Western cultures. This is not to say that I have not had the opportunity to reflect on the problem of cultural differences. One of my earliest experiences of cultural difference was when my parents decided to move from Holland to Britain in 1975. I was six years old. I remember being puzzled by what I felt to be the peculiar British habit of championing anything that was made in Britain. The "made in Britain" sticker, with its prominent display of the Union Jack, was ubiquitous. It was only afterwards, when I was old enough to reflect more critically on the matter, that I realized that this obsession with plastering British consumer products with "made in Britain" stickers disguised a deep anxiety. At the time Britain had little to be proud of when it came to the competitiveness of its manufacturing. Not too long ago, and certainly in living memory for many, British manufacturing had been the envy of the world. But when I arrived in the 1970s, Britain was in the midst of a long-term and seemingly irreversible decline.

This anxiety about British manufacturing would manifest itself in all kinds of interesting ways. For instance, one of my school friends at the time would sneer whenever he saw a Honda or Toyota. "Jap crap!" "Rust bucket!" were his preferred terms to describe these examples of Japanese engineering. But in the end, cultural prejudice alone was not enough to support British car manufacturing. The Japanese now dominate the world market for cars. Aside from a few niche firms like McLaren, the vast majority of car manufacturing in Britain is done by the big German and Japanese auto manufacturers.

The story Professor Amselle tells about the African campaign to identify a uniquely African origin for human rights reminds me a bit of the "made in Britain" campaign of the 1970s. In both cases, the exhortation to remain loyal to one's own culture masks a great deal of nervousness about one's competitiveness vis-a-vis other cultures. Not to be outdone by the European story of the origin of human rights, Africa has invented its own. Moreover, the African one is, according to its proponents, more authentic because it is considerably older. The English may have their Bill of Rights (1689), but the Mali empire was founded on its own, much earlier Bill of Rights.

What is the point of this "Afrocentric" story of the origin of human rights? The point is to boost one's self-esteem. Like the patriotic exhortation to "buy British," the story of the Kurukan Fuga charter is an attempt to reassure oneself that there is nothing to be ashamed of when one contemplates—and, more importantly, when one eagerly and devotedly consumes—one's own culture. As a good Englishman, you should eat Marmite not because you like the taste, but because it is made in Britain. You may in fact dislike the taste, but this is a small price to pay for the knowledge that you are doing your bit for British culture. In other words, anxiety about one's global economic competitiveness is soothed by emphasizing not the product itself but the symbolic status of the product. Who cares if you actually like the stuff? The point is to eat it, and to eat it with pride. (An old joke: Why do the British like warm beer? Because they buy "made in Britain" refrigerators.)
This basic need to affirm one's national cultural allegiance is, very roughly, the point of the first part of Professor Amselle's paper. In his extremely interesting "four-act play," Professor Amselle describes an extraordinary story. The story explains how the founder of the empire of Mali, Sunjata Keita, leader of the Malinke people, defeated Sumanwor Kanté, leader of the Soso. After the battle, the victorious Sunjata Keita had the good sense to hold a general assembly with all the chiefs of the various clans, including the chiefs of his rival. Together they came up with a "charter" that established the equal rights of all. This was the Kurukan Fuga charter, and it beat the English Bill of Rights by some five hundred years, not to mention the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1793), both of which trailed the British constitution by about one hundred years.

I am not an Africanist, so I am not really qualified to comment on the accuracy of the facts of this story. Professor Amselle, however, has made it quite clear that most of this story is an invention. It is not even clear whether such a meeting took place, much less whether the object of this meeting was to establish a Bill of Rights as in the English, American, and French revolutions. But the fact that the story is an invention does not mean that it has no power. On the contrary, hypotheses of origin are, as we know, of the greatest importance.

Professor Amselle's account of the invention of an originary African "social contract" reminds me of something Ernest Gellner says in his great book on the structure of human history, Plough, Sword and Book. "Primitive man," Gellner says, "has lived twice: once in and for himself, and the second time for us, in our reconstruction" (1989, 23). He then asks a very interesting question. Imagine an archeologist who has been digging up an ancient site. He discovers a well-preserved copy of the original social contract. Naturally this discovery makes quite an impact. But what do we do once the discovery has been made? Do we feel bound by the terms of this original social contract? Do we declare all subsequent statutes null and void? Does this document supersede the United Nations Charter?

Gellner's point strikes me as similar to Professor Amselle's. There are two responses to the idea of human rights. On the one hand, there is the desire to create a radical break with the past in order to found a new social order based on the moral idea of universal equality. By sheer force of the imagination, we divest ourselves of any prior ethnic claims of culture and community. Gellner calls this the "Mayflower" style of philosophizing (1995, 19) because of its association with the United States, which, so to speak, constructed a new society from scratch. But there is another style of philosophizing, one that looks with suspicion on the Mayflower style. What this style of philosophy sees when it looks at history is not the kingdom of heaven, the "shining city on a hill," but the abject failure of humanity's attempt to implement the moral model.

The desire to make an absolute break with the past is a perfectly respectable philosophical position to take. It is taken, for example, by John Rawls (1971) in his notion of the "original position" and the "veil of ignorance." Rawls is a good deal more rigorous in his presentation of the original social contract than are the proponents of the Kurukan Fuga charter. But the same impulse to provide a moral model is present in each case, in Rawls's idea of the origin of the idea of justice, which is self-consciously represented as a fiction, and in the Kurukan Fuga charter, where the fictionality of the event is disguised as history.

Naturally this desire to postulate an absolute break with the past is less appealing to cultural anthropologists, who are, you might say, occupationally averse to the idea that human beings can divest themselves so easily of the prejudices of their own particular cultural traditions. The anthropologist's job is not to invent morally edifying stories, but to stand back, as much as this is possible, from the cultural prejudices of his or her own society in order to represent, as accurately as possible, the ethical structure of the societies he or she studies. Of course, as Gellner suggests, this is not as easy as it sounds, especially when it comes to imagining the social organization of historically distant societies. For how do we distinguish the real thing from our reconstruction of it? By the law of overcompensation, the anthropologist, self-conscious of his latter-day reconstruction, may decide to emphasize the moral failures of his own society, rather than risk being seen as too harsh a critic of the moral failings of the society he is studying.

These two contrasting tendencies—the desire for a clean break, on the one hand, and the desire to emphasize humanity's failure to live up to the moral model, on the other—correspond very roughly to the
two parts of Professor Amselle’s paper. Thus, the first part concerns his skepticism of the Afrocentric story of the “invention” of a cultural tradition on the model of the Enlightenment contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. I agree with Professor Amselle when he suggests that the analogy between Africa and Europe is a bit far-fetched. The social conditions of thirteenth-century West Africa do not correspond very well to the social conditions of seventeenth-century England or eighteenth-century France. The Kurukan Fuga meeting, if it did indeed take place, should be seen as an attempt to create an alliance between rival chiefs; in no way does it correspond to an uprising against an absolute monarchy on the model of the English and French revolutions.

However, in the second part of his argument, Professor Amselle makes a surprising move. Having rejected the idea that it is possible to provide a meaningful comparison between the Kurukan Fuga alliance, on the one hand, and the idea of the social contract and human rights, on the other, he seems to reverse his position. That is, in the second part of his argument, he attempts to restore a modified version of the analogy between Africa and Europe. He now argues that there is indeed some historical basis for the comparison. However, rather than attempt to look at Kurukan Fuga as a kind of prototype or precursor of the American Declaration of Independence, Amselle urges us to look at what lies behind the theory of the social contract itself.

What lies behind the theory of the social contract? To answer this question, Amselle turns to Michel Foucault’s theory of power. According to Foucault, the theory of the social contract is a mystification of the real structure of power. For Foucault, the asymmetry between ruler and ruled is more fundamental than the symmetry proposed by social contract theory. On Foucault’s view, society is in a permanent state of war between ruler and ruled. Carl von Clauswitz famously stated that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” But Foucault asserts that war, not politics, is primary. So we should invert von Clauswitz and say that “politics is the continuation of war by other means” (2003, 15).

Professor Amselle, in the second half of his paper, takes Foucault’s analysis of the European situation and applies it to the African situation. The "war between two races" that Foucault sees behind the theory of the social contract applies equally, Amselle suggests, to the historical situation existing in West Africa at the time of the Kurukan Fuga meeting. Here too we have a kind of permanent war, the war between an indigenous race and an invading warrior class. It follows that to interpret this situation as the origin of human rights, as was done in the seminars held in Kankan and Bamako, is to betray the historical reality of the situation. The Kurukan Fuga charter has nothing to do with human rights and everything to do with coercion, hierarchy, and submission. Amselle claims that this analysis of the situation allows us to see the similarity between Europe and Africa. "The pattern of the war between the two races," he says, "provides a scheme common. . . to Europe and Africa alike."

I would like to press Professor Amselle a bit on this point. It seems to me that Foucault’s analysis of the Enlightenment is a bit too pessimistic. It is a bit too concerned with overturning completely the "Mayflower" style of philosophizing. In other words, Foucault dwells, obsessively it would seem, on the failure of humanity to live up to the moral model. This obsession with failure has one very important consequence. It levels the difference between agrarian society and industrial society. Foucault takes the coercive structure of the agrarian state and applies it to the functioning of all societies, including the bourgeois societies of modern industrialized liberal democracies.

It is certainly valuable to be reminded of the fundamental role of coercion in human history. However, I do not think that coercion plays the decisive role everywhere and in all places. It is probably true that coercion—or, more specifically, predation—has been the dominant factor for most of human history, or at least for that part of human history that relies upon the storage and protection of a stored surplus. As Gellner has cogently argued, agrarian states have a tendency to be hierarchical, as well as being fundamentally resistant toward technological innovation and change. In the agrarian social order, the surplus is limited and Malthusian, in the sense that population growth is constantly pressing up against production. It follows that proximity to the surplus determines one’s place in the social hierarchy, which is sanctified as god-given and therefore unchanging.

However, at one point in human history, and for reasons that are very hard to explain, the pattern of coercion gave way to a rather different pattern. This new pattern was not based upon predation, but upon...
production. Foucault's "war of two races," which describes reasonably accurately the asymmetry between warriors and producers in agrarian societies, is much less plausible when applied to the situation obtaining in modern Western liberal democracies. This kind of society, the society that also "invented" the doctrine of human rights, does not reify the distinction between warriors and producers, between nobles and peasants. On the contrary, such a reification would undermine the economic order that is its precondition. The United Nations Charter is imaginable only within this context of a highly mobile and constantly changing egalitarian social order. This does not mean that there is no inequality. Of course there is. But inequality is constantly on the move. It is a "short-term" inequality between individuals rather than "long-term" inequality between groups. Of course, the whole system is based on the assumption that wealth is continually expanding—in other words, that the economy will grow. Production rather than coercion is the preferred method for maintaining the peace.

Despite appearances, I am not simply flag-waving for the Enlightenment. I agree with Gellner when he says that the original formulators of the idea of the social contract were mistaken when they believed that their view of human nature was universal, that it described all men everywhere. The "state of nature" which they understood to preexist society (Hobbes's war of all against all) is in fact a pretty good description of the situation existing among societies defined by kinship and religion. In other words, it is a pretty good description of the kind of social order that has defined humanity for most of its history. Despite what the social contract theorists believed, their view of the moral equality of all humanity was not self-evident. Indeed, the situation was rather the reverse. For most of human history, most people did not take it as "self-evident" that all "men were created equal," that they were endowed with the "inalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." So, on this score at least, I have no argument with Foucault.

Where I disagree with Foucault is in his claim that the peculiar kind of society that led to a belief in human rights was simply another version of the basic coercive pattern of "the war between two races." I don't think that this is an accurate picture of the situation. Something did change rather dramatically in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. The Enlightenment's fascination for secular theories of an original "social contract" was a symptom of this change. For the first time, it became possible to imagine a purely human origin for society independently of religion. Concepts were tied to one's experience rather than to one's identity in a predetermined hierarchical social structure. When Descartes emphasized the necessity of "clear and distinct" ideas, he was searching for a cognitive method that did not have to rely on the hierarchical, agrarian picture of cognition, on the "great chain of being" that defined one's role in the universe. This revolution in cognition in the scientific and technological sphere corresponded to a revolution in ethics in the political and economic spheres. In the political sphere, the sanctity of the individual was expressed in the right to participate in the political process; in the economic sphere, it was expressed in the individual's participation in a free market for consumer goods.\(^{(5)}\)

Let me end by trying to connect the concerns of Professor Amselle's paper with the basic premise of generative anthropology—namely, the idea of an originary hypothesis that stands at the basis of an analysis of human culture and history. Anthropology takes it for granted that humanity has a non-supernatural origin. The key question then becomes: How do we describe this non-supernatural origin? The social contract theorists were the first to take this anthropological question seriously. They attempted to answer the question by postulating a hypothetical transition from the state of nature to society. This all-or-nothing event was then expanded, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, into a longterm historical process. Clues to our past were evident in the "primitive" societies found in the colonies. Human history was imagined as a series of stages, from the primitive to the modern. In the British context, the evolutionary pattern dominated anthropology right up into the twentieth century. It is evident, for example, in the last great Victorian anthropologist James Frazer, who died in 1941. Sticking with the British context, Frazer's legacy was definitively rejected by Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski inaugurated a new pattern of anthropological inquiry that has dominated the field ever since. The key idea I wish to stress in Malinowski is his total rejection of the historical and evolutionary concerns of Frazer. For Malinowski, any reference made to the past is simply a "charter"—that is, a story invented to justify one's behavior in the present. Malinowski's deep suspicion of the past stems from Frazer's legacy, whose "magpie" comparative methods and evolutionary assumptions Malinowski abhorred. Since Malinowski usurped Frazer as the king of anthropology, few cultural anthropologists have dared to resurrect the question of human origin, which is now discreetly left to the biologists, a situation that strikes me as highly problematic.
In his extremely fascinating book *Mestizo Logics*, Professor Amselle raises the question of human origin, but only to reject it. I quote from the book’s closing lines: “The analysis. . . of ‘mestizo logics’ allows one to escape the question of origin and to hypothesize an infinite regression. It is no longer a question of asking which came first, the segmentary or the state, paganism or Islam, the oral or the written, but to postulate an originary syncretism, a mixture whose parts remain indissociable” (1998, 161). Professor Amselle makes this remark in the context of his critique of the magpie methods of colonial administrators in Africa. I don’t doubt that he is correct in his assessment of the colonial situation. But what about the context that precedes the colonial situation? What about the larger pattern of human history? Generative anthropology assumes that speculation on the larger pattern of human history is at some point inevitable. The challenge, therefore, is not to reject originary speculation, but to see that the analysis of power is itself an attempt to think in fundamental anthropological terms. Amselle's use of Foucault shows us that there is no escaping originary reflection.

Notes

* [Editor's note] This was the response to Jean-Loup Amselle's paper, "Did Africa Invent Human Rights?" delivered at the 2013 GASC, and included in this issue of Anthropoetics. (back)

1. A useful exercise would be to compare Rawls’s idea of the "veil of ignorance" to Gellner’s notion of the "veil of forgetting" (1987, 10). The latter refers to the need of modern industrialized or industrializing states to create a homogenous "national" culture. The "veil of forgetting" refers to the fact that this construction of a national culture requires the forgetting of any internal subnational cultural differences within the overarching category of the nation-state. (back)

2. In his highly illuminating comparative study of patterns of succession, the American anthropologist Robbins Burling writes candidly about the prevailing wind of cultural relativism in his discipline. Hoping to emulate the "anthropological objectivity" (1972, 10) of his colleagues by seeing American "electoral succession as simply one more imperfect solution to an eternal human problem" (1972, 10), he studied the problem of succession in a variety of other historical and cultural contexts, including precolonial Africa, seventeenth-century India and China, post-independence Latin America, and the Soviet Union. But instead of reaffirming his belief in the doctrine of cultural relativism, his study of power and the problem of succession in these contexts had rather the opposite effect. It led to his "renewed faith in our electoral processes" (1972, 10). The killing of kings and the military coup d’etat are regarded, at least by this anthropologist, as morally inferior to voting someone in and out of office. (back)

3. The prominence of coercion in hunter-gatherer societies is debatable. (back)

4. This is merely to say that the king and his nobles eat much better than the peasants. Note, furthermore, that this emphasis on stability does not mean that it is impossible for the individuals within each class to switch places. What it means is that the basic pattern of coercion and predation does not change. If, by some miracle, a peasant were to arm himself and his followers and lead a successful insurrection against the nobility, this would change nothing ideologically speaking. On the contrary, there would merely be a change in the occupants of the positions. The positions themselves remain static. The erstwhile dominators would now become the enslaved class. This is why Foucault’s notion of the "war of races" vividly dramatizes the basic condition of the agrarian social order. (back)

5. The consumer market is basically a system operated entirely by the voluntary transactions between individuals. As such, it is far more sensitive to the desires of the individual than is a ritual system of distribution. The exchange system is precisely where the "equality of individuals" is most clearly manifest. The consumer’s free choice influences the outcome of the larger social process. As Roger Scruton notes, the results of this process are seldom "very edifying" (1985, 59). Mass consumer culture is not high culture. But the less than edifying nature of the products of consumer culture is the price we pay for a system of distribution that has disengaged itself from the hierarchy of ritual systems of distribution and, in particular, from the coercion entailed by the agrarian pattern. (back)

References


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