In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald depicts the attitudes and character of the upper class in 1920s America. The residents of Long Island are drifting, with a feeling of having been uprooted. Both Nick, the narrator, and Gatsby, the protagonist, have been in World War I; Nick even confesses that he enjoyed the experience. War has made men restless and Nick claims that it has, at least temporarily, made him unfit to join the family business. Restlessness and a feeling of alienation have caused him to move East, to sell bonds instead of hardware. The feelings of restlessness and rootlessness, combined with a dream of new opportunities, have inspired the whole set—Gatsby, Nick, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan—to move from the Mid-West and West to the East. The East is the America of desire; of adventure, excitement and freedom. Society is on the brink of great upheavals as the result of desire, although the West is still rather entrenched in its regularity and established patterns. Thus, in contrast to the East, the West represents a traditional society, where desire is kept under control.

World War I transformed the USA into a global political and financial power, and marked the end of its isolationist policies and its sense of inferiority vis-a-vis Europe. By 1920, it is in a position of dominance, the most powerful nation in the world.(1) It had the capacity to impose its will on other nations. Given its position, America also became a leading cultural nation, creating what has come, partly through Fitzgerald’s writings, to be called the Jazz Age. The 1920s in America was a time of great contrasts, as well as of changes; for example, on the one hand, there was a breakdown of traditional moral values, and, on the other, a puritan revival that attempted to control this development by banning alcohol. This was also a time of great violence. Lynching reached a peak in the early 20th century and immigrant-dominated gangs roamed the big American cities.(2) Soldiers had returned from World War I, tired and confused after their nightmarish experiences, only to discover that there were no jobs. In this context of rootlessness, the dream of a new life seemed to flourish, creating the perfect setting to investigate how desire works.

René Girard’s Theory of Desire

In this article I will consider French philosopher and literary critic René Girard’s theory of desire, and apply it to The Great Gatsby. Girard considers that desire is evoked by other people’s desires. The common denominator in the European novelistic tradition is, according to Girard, the revelation of metaphysical desire. Metaphysical desire is contrasted with spontaneous desire and arises when the protagonist desires an object via a mediator/model. Usually, desire is considered object-related. However, if that is the case, it is possible to desire freely and attain the object of one’s desire. Girard views desire as less straightforward, postulating a triangular structure that includes a mediator. As long as there is a mediator present, there cannot, initially, be any freedom or autonomy in desire. The mediator can both receive and hinder desire so that one’s desires are transformed into secondary and rival desires. Thus, by imitating through a mediator instead of experiencing direct, object-related desire, the subject becomes entangled in the mediator’s desire. Desire may then work both ways and pave the way for intense rivalry between the subject and the mediator. As long as they desire through each other, their desires will become more and more symmetrical.

The romantic understanding of desire is that this phenomenon is original and individual. If desire were based on the object alone, it would be based on a spontaneous attraction towards different objects, such as money, houses, and cars. In contrast to these views, Girard claims that desire is not spontaneous,
individual, or primarily generated by objects, but is mediated through what other people desire. He maintains that there is no such thing as original desire, only mediated desire. Thus, desire \textit{is always reaching past its ostensible objects and finds little or no real satisfaction in them}.(3) Desire in mimetic theory is not static and therefore cannot be fixed except in stages. The stages of desire as described by Girard are stages of decline, developing from a fascination with the rival to the final stage of being possessed by the same rival; and they can be explained in terms of the increasing intensity of the imitation of the other, which gradually becomes more and more conflictual. There is a development from fascination to rivalry, to conflict, and hate, and eventually to madness/murder/suicide.(4) If there is a stage where desire is most poignant, it is clearly in the later stages, characterized by serious conflict, violence and illness. Thus, desire must be linked to and defined in relation to these negative phenomena.

Desire in this sense has no substance. At the same time, however, desire is the force that has the greatest impact on shaping individuals—and society as a whole. The deeper one penetrates into the process of desire, the more symbolic, blurred, and sterile the desired objects become in the mind of the subject. Moreover, the references to reality become more and more blurred. The process associated with the ongoing desire for pleasure results in pain, again and again. This is the process by which acting on one's attraction leads to wounding.(5) The process of desiring through desirous models leads eventually to nothingness.

Ultimately, desire leaves people barren inside, leading to a nothingness that resembles death. This does not primarily refer to physical death but to spiritual death, where all that really exists in the mind of the subject is the conflictual presence of the other. Within the logic of desire, the problem is the mediator or the model, but the model will, if the rivalry is heated, seldom respond to the other's wishes. In this gradual development towards a death-ridden existence, the desiring person does not understand that the problem is desire itself. When desire has the upper hand in human relations, it is always the desired and despised model which is the problem.

**Romanticism, Modernism, Mimeticism, and the Breaking down of Boundaries**

According to Girard, both the illusion of autonomy and the process of becoming possessed by the other are phenomena which have been addressed by great novelists. Fitzgerald has produced some of the greatest descriptions of desire in the 20th century. Typically, the characters in The Great Gatsby want to live with the illusion of spontaneous desire and they believe that they are doing so. Fitzgerald is, as will become evident in the following discussion, one of the great explorers of metaphysical desire. He hardly ever describes healthy and natural erotic relations. The joy of sex is not evident in his work and sensuous desire hardly seems to exist; everything is about rejection, social climbing, and a desire to be accepted.

The difference between the romantic novelist and the realist novelist is based upon their different perceptions of the mediator.(6) The romantic writer reveals and propagates the mediator's presence, often as a rival, but does not reveal his role in mediating desire. The romantic writer believes in the autonomy of the characters and, according to Girard, is himself governed by a desire for autonomy. The romantic lie consists in seeing desire as spontaneous and linear. In contrast, the realist novelist both presents and reveals the decisive role of the mediator in relation to the protagonist's desire.

In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald seems to shift between a romantic and a novelistic understanding of desire. The enchantment lies initially in the romantic dream and its remoteness from reality. (7) Gatsby is clearly a romantic hero who tries to live his life on the basis of a single romantic longing. His dream is what James E. Miller Jr. calls \textit{immature romanticism}(8) as it belongs not to the present but to a past transfigured by imagined memory.

This examination of how desire works in The Great Gatsby begins with the objects described initially in order to attract the reader. Desire in The Great Gatsby is enhanced by references to technical innovations such as phones, cars, and airplanes. For example, the name Jordan Baker is constructed from two brands of car,(9) emphasizing Jordan's machine-like character. Desirable objects are in the hands of people with desires who live outside conventional morality, having loosened their sexual and marital constraints.
In *The Great Gatsby*, everything is speeding up, and even the natural world is called into question as people's vision of what is real and unreal in nature becomes blurred. Leaves on summer trees, for example, are growing the same way things grow in fast-forwarded movies. People look perfect but slightly dehumanized, and their identities overlap. However, desire, which outwardly creates difference and individuality, is slowly turning everyone into clones, and even male and female are less distinguishable. For example, at the end of the novel, Nick is mistaken for Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 158). People are often described in fragments or gestures; a butler is reduced to a nose, Wolfsheim to nose and cufflinks. The descriptions of Daisy and Jordan emphasize fashion, luxury, and leisure; for example, Jordan looks like an illustration in a (sports) magazine. Gatsby is likened to a machine which registers distant earthquakes (Fitzgerald, 8), thereby highlighting his sensitivity and indicating that he will be present wherever some sort of frenzy for the new is aroused. Gatsby is in control of that which is new and he owns everything which is desirable. On the other hand, everything he owns and controls has a single purpose: to win back Daisy Buchanan.

**Desire and the Narrator**

Fitzgerald’s literary style combines Romanticism with Modernism. His prose is both poetic and psychological. Images and rhythms derived and developed from 19th-century poetry are combined with the precision, consciousness, and topical references that were, at the time, becoming the hallmark of Modernist writing in both poetry and prose. Fitzgerald updates Romanticism for the 20th century to meet the Modernist demand for high-impact language; every sentence is packed with both poetry and meaning. At the same time, he challenges the conventional Romantic opposition between technology and art, between machine and imagination.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald writes from a distance that enables him to discover a more refined literary structure. There is no longer any "authorial" author or narrator with full access to the characters. In his two previous novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), Fitzgerald was playing out his own life, letting his protagonists wrestle with his own conflicting ideas regarding such philosophical perspectives as Nietzscheanism, Naturalism, Romanticism, and Catholicism. The omniscient narrators in these novels are therefore constantly shifting perspectives in order to explore the author's ideological frustrations. In contrast, the story in *The Great Gatsby* is narrated by a character with limited access to the other characters. By making Nick Carraway the storyteller, Fitzgerald established the needed distance, especially between himself as the author and the protagonist. Nick dreams of absolute knowledge, but he is more and more inclined to see things from Gatsby's point of view. He vacillates between his father's bourgeois morality and Gatsby's romantic perspective. According to Gary J. Scrimgeour, Fitzgerald's first two novels reveal a fault that is common in the work of romantic writers, which is the inability to understand the true nature of the characters created. In his early career as a novelist, Fitzgerald clearly had difficulty in distinguishing himself from his characters. One reason for the success of *The Great Gatsby* is precisely the fact that he managed to create characters who were not his alter egos.

Nick’s reflections are always tainted by his snobbish and bourgeois background. Even though he comes from a privileged background, his attitude toward the wealthy elite is characterized by a certain aggression, as expressed in relation to Daisy, Tom, and Jordan. This aggression seems to be moral. At the same time, his descriptions of people of the working class (Myrtle and Mr. Wilson) reveal an attitude of mild disdain. Nor are the people from the lower middle-class, such as the McKees, exempt from his disdain, and his reflections on Gatsby are never completely free from this attitude.

While not a neutral observer, Nick is a relatively reliable observer. He is the only character in the novel who is low-key, observant, and perceptive enough to tell the story. The other characters are all prisoners of their own drives, uninterested in people other than those who can stir desire. Nick refers to himself as "slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes of my desires" (Fitzgerald, 58). His curiosity, nearing voyeurism, and his inability to act upon his desires make him a perfect narrator. Although his moral principles seem to be basically unchanged throughout the book, his perspective gradually changes; he finds Gatsby acceptable after experiencing the violent lives of the very rich—even though he represents all that Nick had previously despised.
The novels and short stories that Fitzgerald wrote in the early 1920s tend to chronicle events that extend over several years. This lengthy timespan was necessary in order to elaborate on the nature of desire. In contrast, the main story of *The Great Gatsby* is more condensed and takes place between early June and September 1922. However, these intense months are viewed against the backdrop of what happened five years earlier, in 1917, when Gatsby fell in love with Daisy. These two timelines come together when Gatsby arranges a surprise meeting with Daisy at Nick's humble and run-down cottage. In this extremely awkward, nervous, and initially uncomfortable meeting, the lovers are reunited after five years, and this inspires Gatsby to fulfill his great desire of recapturing the past as if nothing major has happened during the intervening years.

However, already at this reunion the impression is created that Gatsby is starting to lose his faith in his quest; doubts are surfacing (Fitzgerald, 82-85). It could hardly be attributed to suspense alone that he almost changes his mind and wishes he could cancel the tea party where he will finally meet Daisy again. This is one of the very few scenes in which the narrator actually enters into Gatsby's head, revealing Nick's growing identification with Gatsby.

**Nick as a Go-Between**

The first person narrator, Nick, is constantly trying to become an omniscient narrator, understanding everything that is happening. In order to achieve this, he acts as a go-between. His initial reaction to the notion of infidelity is extremely puritan; when he hears that Tom has a lover, his instinctive impulse is to call the police. However, he soon moderates his moralism and becomes Gatsby's aid in the process of winning Daisy back. Nick is moral in a traditional sense, but he clearly does not consider the fact that Gatsby's liaison is not very different from Tom's.

The word *pander* is used in the closing chapter of the novel (Fitzgerald, 171) to describe the settler's optimism. However, the word also sums up Nick's role in the affair between Daisy and Gatsby. *Pander* is derived from Pandarus, a character in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, who acts as a go-between to foster the love affair between Criseyde and Troilus. Just like Pandarus, who advises Troilus in the wooing of Criseyde, Nick enables Gatsby to fulfill his love. *Pander* means to gratify or indulge an immoral or distasteful desire or habit. In the original context in *The Great Gatsby*, "pander" is used in a lyrical description of America's past. Thus, the fresh green breast of the new world appeals to various desires such as nostalgia for the past and optimism upon arrival in the new world. However, it also hints at a decadent modern America by evoking the crime-scene where Myrtle's left breast swings lose like a flap, incapable of giving sexual pleasure.

**Snobbery, Class, and Money**

The concept of class is a more important theme in Fitzgerald's novels than in the works of any other writer in the American tradition. Whereas American writers such as Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Hemingway focus on World War I from a soldier's perspective, Fitzgerald records the preparation for war in *The Beautiful and Damned*; and although the aftermath of war is evident in *The Great Gatsby*, it is seen from the perspective of Nick and Gatsby, as something distanced, from the past.

Fitzgerald's postwar darkness is merged with class distinctions. According to Robert Emmet Long, class and success are issues that Fitzgerald both delights in and at the same time perceives as darkly apocalyptic due to the upheaval of the traditional social order. The young Fitzgerald combines Romanticism with Nietzschean cynicism, gradually moving away from his Catholic roots. However, in the midst of his ideological struggle, there is a more acute struggle for prestige, and a desperate desire for acceptance. For Fitzgerald, this meant being accepted by the elite, meaning the rich and beautiful. It seems correct to say that the young Fitzgerald was a romantic caught in his own trap. While Proust and Waugh were spellbound by the aristocracy, Fitzgerald is spellbound by the very rich. Hemingway had once said that the only difference between us and the rich is that the rich have more money; Fitzgerald, perhaps due to his family's mild slide from riches to rags, felt there was something rare, seductive, and mysterious about those who have great wealth.
In *The Great Gatsby* class consciousness is evident throughout the entire novel. Fitzgerald's marriage to Zelda Sayre, who belonged to a wealthy southern family, was only possible due to the great success, especially financially, of *This Side of Paradise*. Before his marriage to Zelda, Fitzgerald was denied the opportunity of marrying Ginevra King because her family was very wealthy.\(^{19}\) Ginevra, like Daisy, embodied refined elegance rooted in wealth. Le Vot claims that Ginevra did not love any man; she was in love with love. Only recurrent crisis, dramatic quarrels, betrayals, and reconciliations could keep her restless heart ensnared. Against any man who thought he had won her over, she used jealousy artfully as a weapon, never losing control, maneuvering him into indefensible positions until his dignity was lost. Each of her affairs was a campaign in which she played at being conquered, giving a little to take a lot.\(^{20}\) Ginevra later became the archetypal model in Fitzgerald's work for the unattainable and reckless woman men fall in love with.

Fitzgerald's father had told his young and ambitious son that "poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls".\(^{21}\) In much the same way as Fitzgerald, Gatsby longed to be loved by a wealthy and beautiful girl; and like Fitzgerald, Gatsby had great difficulty in establishing a permanent relationship with a girl from the upper classes.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald explores what money can do to a person without a wealthy background. In earlier novels, Fitzgerald had also been acutely aware of the themes of class and money, but he considered them from a different perspective, that of the seriously rich. In his two previous novels both protagonists (Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* and Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned*) come from extremely wealthy backgrounds. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shifts the focus and places a man from a poor background in the central role. His protagonist vacillates, therefore, between being the one who sacrifices others in order to fulfill his dreams and the one who himself becomes the sacrificed victim, cast upon a desirous altarpiece built by the super-rich to preserve their class from anybody who threatens to destroy their unquenched desire for more wealth and success.

While both Amory and Anthony are initially super-rich, spoilt, sensitive, well-spoken, naturally charming (and at the same time despicable), and capable of making the most unattainable girl fall in love with them, Jay Gatsby has had to make enormous emotional and moral sacrifices in order to arrive where he is. However, Gatsby's background enhances the drama and makes the character more multidimensional and mysterious. The theme of being rejected by the rich appears with great force repeatedly in Fitzgerald's works in the period 1920-26. In this period, Fitzgerald is constantly depicting scenes in which desire is at its hottest. This seems to be Fitzgerald's most fertile literary period. In several short stories, the theme revolves around the unattainable woman. In this respect, "Absolution," "Winter Dream," "The Sensible Thing," and "The Rich Boy" are short stories that are closely related to *The Great Gatsby*. Like Dexter Green in "Winter Dreams" (1923), Gatsby is a moneymaker and a romantic. The handicap both must overcome is their background. Dexter starts a laundry business that gradually makes him enormously wealthy, while Gatsby is initially able to cross the class border by becoming a soldier. As a soldier Gatsby is accepted into Daisy's upper-class society. The uniform becomes a shield against his humble background and allows him both to be someone else and to mingle with the rich.

Gatsby and Dexter, due to their modest backgrounds, are spellbound by wealth and money. For Gatsby, love becomes more important than the object of the love, revealing an advanced stage of delusion. Gatsby is in love with love, or the idea of love, which he thinks can bring some order into his confused and disordered life. There is scarcely a hint of real sensual love, either in Gatsby's relation to Daisy or Dexter's to Judy. In "Winter Dreams," Judy Jones is exciting and desirable, capable of making any man fall in love with her. She has understood that in order to always be the winner in mimetic desire, she has to be in a situation of continuous flirtation and give each man only a faint hope of success, never really giving in to anyone. However, her endless flirtations corrupt her, and in the end make her incapable of love. According to Roger Lewis, the wealth that surrounds her destroys at the same time as it creates.\(^{22}\) The girls in Fitzgerald's world frequently reject the men, making them feel like they are constantly being denied what they most desire, and this creates in them a world-view of the absurd.

Dexter's love, however, involves a simpler desire than Gatsby's, since it is devoid of any idea of recapturing the past, and this makes it easier for him to move on and accept the inevitable decay. Nevertheless, Dexter
does have a certain yearning for the past. Neither he nor Gatsby is able to perceive the illusions of the intense love game which has crippled them into yearning for the past.

In "The Sensible Thing," George O'Kelly, like Gatsby, wants to recapture the past. However, he is less of a hero initially. O'Kelly is madly in love with Jonquil, a girl from a wealthy background who gradually comes to question whether George, because of his lack of wealth, is the right man for her. In contrast to Gatsby and Dexter, George is desperate and oversensitive in the act of lovemaking. George suddenly becomes hugely rich and is able to win Jonquil and recapture his intense love for her. However, at the critical moment when he knows she is his, the magic has gone.

The common theme in these short stories is the nothingness of desire. These love affairs are reminiscent of a cherry tree in bloom. The flowers on the trees look intensely beautiful, then suddenly the blossoms fall. Similarly, the characters seem only to be really alive in the few years when they are young, vital, and physically attractive, before desire overcomes them. In The Great Gatsby, the name Daisy must also be understood in this context as having a short life span. This "Spenglerian" cycle of springing to life and waning into a dull and meaningless existence where only nostalgia is left is a theme which Fitzgerald returns to numerous times, although never with the same intensity as in the 1920's.

These motifs of rejection, loveless love, and impossible relationships all come together in The Great Gatsby. In this novel Fitzgerald further heightens the tension by creating a hero who tries to enhance his social status by means of criminal activities and lies, thereby slightly changing Fitzgerald's cherished scene where the poor, handsome, honest, and vulnerable men are being rejected by wealthy women. Gatsby, in contrast to the typical honest protagonist, tells Nick that he belongs to an old family with old money. By claiming to be an Oxford man and the heir of a San Francisco family, he tries to elevate his past to the level of Tom and Daisy's which, if possible, would grant him a similar social status.

Gatsby's deficiency lies partly in his belief that one can create an earthly paradise. However, this belief is naïve, stupid, and defenseless when juxtaposed with the world of Tom and Daisy. Tom and Daisy are incapable of not showing their contempt for members of a lower class. Daisy despises West Egg, the home of the nouveau riche where Gatsby lives, which is described as "this unprecedented 'place' that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigor (…)". This contempt, as well as the bond between her and Tom, is a matter of similar upbringing and education. The fact that Daisy, who represents old money, is appalled by West Egg foreshadows that her affair with Gatsby will be short lived. Her reaction to what she sees as a vulgar place and a rather vulgar party indicates that Gatsby will never succeed in his attempt to win her back and recapture the situation of five years earlier.

Although Gatsby is living a delusion, he perceives, in a flash, that Daisy's charm and sentiments are founded purely on money. "Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly. That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell on it, the jingle of it, the cymbal's song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl (Fitzgerald, 115). Gatsby is so spellbound by money, luxury and snobbism that the insight is merely an observation without any consequence, either in relation to Daisy or his own lifestyle. However, this voice full of money has been modulated by good breeding, confidence, and good schooling, as well as by always having been loved.

When Tom reveals Gatsby's background and criminal activity in the scene at the Plaza suite, fright and revulsion are reflected in Daisy's expression, which Gatsby, blinded by his narcissism and gnostic vision of life, is unable to see as a consequence of his exposure as a fraud. In this scene (Fitzgerald, 120-129), Nick is initially impressed by Gatsby's cleverness. Simultaneously he is baffled by the enormity of Gatsby's vision. Even after having been exposed, Gatsby clearly believes that he will still be able to change the past so that he and Daisy can start anew. Gatsby's rivalry is now so intense that the objects of both his love and his rivalry are totally blurred, and he seems to have reached the stage of madness at which there are no longer any objects present. Behind his gnostic canopy, his self-understanding, his sense of being a Son of God, lies the most intense desire to be among the elect, with the same status as the super-rich. At the end of the Plaza scene, everything is desire. The reader clearly sees that Gatsby's chances of realizing his dream are waning minute by minute, leaving only a pathetic shell that Tom does not consider a threat; he allows...
Gatsby to drive off with his wife, knowing that she will never leave him for a bootlegger and criminal.

After the car accident, when Gatsby is watching over Daisy outside Tom and Daisy's mansion, it is evident that desire has destroyed everything. Gatsby’s vision seems weak and pathetic. As he leaves Gatsby to himself, Nick's thought is that Gatsby is waiting for nothing (Fitzgerald, 139). Daisy has gone back to Tom, Myrtle is dead, and, some hours later, Mr. Wilson will kill Gatsby and then himself. Desire for love, success, and acceptance has been growing and maturing, and ultimately culminates in murderous acts, leaving the reader to unravel the puzzle of how class-consciousness, rejection of the lower classes, infidelity, and the yearning for success could end so tragically.

Despite his privileged background, Nick becomes gradually aware that although Tom and Daisy are not typical criminals, they are worse than Gatsby. In the course of the novel, readers come to see how little they value other people's lives. Nick concludes that they "were careless people . . . they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (Fitzgerald, 170). This critique of the careless attitude of the upper class is an indirect critique of the American culture depicted in The Great Gatsby, a culture which is surprisingly class-ridden. The American dream, as it appears in this novel, can never be fully attained because the people who have old money will never really accept the nouveau riche. In "The Rich Boy," Fitzgerald claims that the rich "are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early and it does something to them."(27) However, Fitzgerald also highlights the fact that, when people of different classes mix, despite their outward differences, their desires are similar.

Gatsby cannot win Daisy with his money, but without it he would not stand a chance of taking her away from Tom. However, this chance is not real; despite his fantastic ability to hope and no matter how hard he tries, he cannot change his past and he cannot change other people’s pasts. Gatsby dreams of restoring order amidst chaos, but his actions only create even more chaos.

In the novel, Gatsby is depicted as a superman based on his outward performance; he is the master of water, earth, and air, represented by boat, car, and plane; however, fire, the fourth element, symbolized by love, cannot be conquered.(28) As mentioned, this rejection by the rich is something Fitzgerald himself had experienced, although in a milder and less violent manner. Before his breakdown around 1934, Fitzgerald believed life was something that you dominated if you were any good.(29) Afterwards, in his later years, he came to see that life dominates you. Gatsby, on the other hand, like so many great romantics, dies young and does not experience this gradual downfall.

**Gatsby: Hero and Criminal**

There is a certain mystery about how Fitzgerald has been able to make Gatsby into a hero. Gatsby is depicted as being boorish; he has no friends, only hangers-on. He is a roughneck, a fraud, and a criminal. He is frightening in his own lack of morals and his lawless aestheticism is rather despicable. His taste is vulgar, his behavior ostentatious, his love adolescent, and his business dealings ruthless; and he is clearly dishonest on a personal level. He is interested in people only when he needs them to achieve his goals. His nice gestures stem from the fact that he does not want any trouble.(30) Most of what Gatsby is involved in is tinged with the most intense danger and desire; for example, bootlegging, fixing results in sporting events, and dealing with stolen bonds.

However, Fitzgerald does not describe in detail the shady and criminal sides of Gatsby's life; instead he hints, thereby holding the reader in suspense. The initial gossip is about his wealth, his parties, and his criminal past. When first introduced, Gatsby is described as a tanned, smartly dressed man of around 30, with short hair, exceedingly charming and discreet, and bearing an aura of mystery.

According to André le Vot, Fitzgerald at the age of nine noted in his diary his suspicion that he was not his parents’ son, but a foundling of more exalted origins.(31) This theme is taken up in The Great Gatsby when Gatsby disowns his poor and very ordinary background and denies that his parents are his parents. Instead he looked upon himself as a Son of God (Fitzgerald, 95).

Nick thinks that Gatsby turned out all right in the end because, in contrast to the Buchanans and Jordan, he...
had a goal in life beyond personal satisfaction. However, a closer examination of Gatsby’s Neo-Platonic self-understanding and his urge to recapture past experiences reveals little beyond self-satisfaction. In a way, Gatsby represents the American dream. However, he is also dishonest and passive in relation to religion, and therefore fundamentally estranged from the ideals of the founding fathers. (32) The references to the founding fathers are more nostalgic than real; their religious aims and ethos are inverted.

In The Great Gatsby religion or religious hope has evaporated. Nevertheless, Gatsby himself is enormously hopeful. His ability to hope makes Nick admire him. But because there is such a gap between Gatsby’s hope and the reality of his life, the novel is devoid of hope at the end; there is no fundamental change or breakthrough in any of the characters’ lives or world-views. Desire in this illuminating novel has thoroughly released the characters from conventional Christian morals, and in so doing, exposed them to violence and death.

The Workings of Desire

Desire is initially a weakness; it consists of an urge to acquire something which one thinks others have. However, the core of desire lies in the notion that if one has what the other person seems to have, one will be fulfilled. In the act of desiring, the other person’s weakness is not taken into consideration, since desire makes people blind to the underlying causes of desire. Therefore, the desiring subjects always have the feeling of being hindered in reaching their goal. They do not consider the fact that the other either desires the same object (and the last thing they will do is let the subject have it) or will begin desiring the object of the subject’s desire and compete with the subject for it. In both cases, rivalry will have the upper hand, and the chances of the subject achieving the desired object is minimal. Thus, the main weakness of desire is the fact that humans are not only unable to fulfil the goals set out by desire, their goals often end up the opposite of what one expected:

Modern people imagine that their discomfort and unease is a product of religious taboos, cultural prohibitions, even the legal forms of protection. They think that once this confinement is over, desire will be able to blossom forth. (René Girard. Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, 285.)

All the main characters in The Great Gatsby are liberal in the sense that they are willing to break the puritan code. (33) Tom and Daisy find the American dream in a dreamless, visionless complacency of mere matter. They represent substance without form. (34) Fitzgerald’s early novels contained a breathless adoration of flapper heroines whose passionate kisses are tinged with frigidity and whose daring freedom masks an adolescent desire for reputation rather than the reality of experience.

When viewed from a romantic perspective, only the negative sides of prohibitions are evident. Seen from the point of view of desire, prohibitions only exist to hurt or modify the life of individuals. Desire creates an anthropology of freedom, a freedom that is premised on the notion that if everyone pursues their heart’s desire, everyone will be happy. In deep contrast, Fitzgerald seems to indicate in this novel that desire threatens human relationships to such a degree that there is a need for prohibitions. Desire leads to conflict; it undermines relationships and, in extreme cases such as in The Great Gatsby, leads to murder, suicide, and madness.

Gatsby is incapable of compromising in relation to his inner vision. He is a Son of God, therefore he controls time. (35) At the end of the novel, the level of Gatsby’s desire has reached such a pitch that he seems to have lost sight of his object (Daisy). In the scene where he is waiting around Tom’s estate, there are indications of a development towards madness; his delusion that he can repeat the past seems to have lost contact with any rational, worldly reality.

Gatsby creates his own rules and his own private morality which ultimately prove futile. Nick, however, affirms the value of Gatsby’s failed dream. Since Nick is attracted to Gatsby, he is not able to lead the reader to the Promised Land, where desire is explored and revealed. At the end of the novel, he is still biased, although he has become less priggish and more broadminded.

In The Great Gatsby emptiness and moral indifference eventually lead to violence and death. Already in
Chapter I, the brutality in Tom’s behavior foreshadows death as a result of desire. At the same time, despite her wealth and beauty, Daisy makes the American dream look somewhat shallow and hollow. Her lack of contact with reality is exposed at one of Gatsby’s parties when she describes a woman as gorgeous, while Nick describes the same woman as an orchid, scarcely human (Fitzgerald, 101). In the beginning of the novel, she suddenly suggests that a bird outside of the house is an owl, in order to hide the fact that Myrtle has been on the phone to Tom. This is a reference to Keats’ "Ode to a Nightingale," a poem about beauty, desire, and death, which in the novel is a symbol that echoes the hollow notes of Tom and Daisy’s lost love. Tom’s infidelity makes her frivolity sterile and her sentimentality hollow.

The characters’ sense of uprootedness is partly a topological problem. Gatsby, Nick, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan are all from the West. One of the issues addressed in The Great Gatsby is the conflict between the surviving Puritan morality of the West and the post-war hedonism of the East. In a way, all of the main characters have become slightly decadent as a result of this move. Nick, however, can return to the West since he has not suffered the same moral degeneration as Tom, Daisy and Jordan.

Giradian Interpretations of The Great Gatsby

Two scholars have published articles on The Great Gatsby from a Giradian point of view. Both emphasize the scapegoat dimension in the novel. In "The Great Gatsby: Romance or Holocaust," Thomas J. Cousineau sees Gatsby as a classic scapegoat who, by his death, enables the other characters to continue living their violent and sacrificial lives. However, my main objection to Cousineau is the fact that he blames Nick for being the main scapegoater, a reading that focuses on deceptive self-understanding instead of the desires that stem from violent action. Stephen L. Gardner, in "Democracy and Desire in The Great Gatsby," sees democracy basically being born by a heightened degree of mimetic desire, and thus seems to want to defend the old aristocratic world, the world of those born into old money, against the upcoming romantic heroes who are about to rise from their poor backgrounds and threaten their privileges. This kind of interpretation probably exposes a weakness in Giradian theory where negative social upheaval is seen to be one-sidedly caused by the romantic lie. This leads to a naïve understanding of a sensualistic and naturalistic-oriented desire. Destructive acts such as the violent workings of Tom Buchanan are, therefore, less exposed. Tom is, in both Gardner’s and Cousineau’s articles, treated incredibly mildly. It is telling that both tone down the episodes concerning the affair between Myrtle and Tom, and the episode at The Plaza Hotel where Tom’s vulgar and dark social Darwinism is exposed. Thus the reader avoids seeing the close symmetry between romantic and naturalistic desire, where Tom, in the words of Richard Lehan, seems to represent the naturalistic, physical force of the new America—"the America in which force is embodied in corporations and in money institutions, embodied in the new urban process, and controlled by finance and the power of information." My aim is to show how desire among the characters only varies in degree, not in essence, thus paving the way towards an understanding of desire as wholly based on the other’s desire.

From Class and Ideology to Pure Desire

Tom Buchanan represents the old social elite, characterized as brutal, class-conscious, irresponsible, undisciplined, racist, idle, and philandering. The smug conceit of "The Rich Boy" has hardened into Tom’s arrogant cruelty. This is reflected in Fitzgerald’s prose, which in this novel treats racial prejudices as real prejudices to be taken seriously. In The Beautiful and Damned, this issue is addressed in relation to the character Gloria, who displays a mixture of playful romanticism and cynical Nietzscheanism. In contrast, the cynicism in The Great Gatsby is less admirable and less attractive, as evident in Daisy’s willingness to sacrifice everyone and everything that stands in the way of her pleasures.

In Fitzgerald’s work, there is often a connection between snobbery and racism. Fitzgerald’s ambivalence is evident in Maury Noble’s reflections on inferior races in The Beautiful and Damned. However, such reflections appear to be less smart, and more violent and despicable, when Tom Buchanan claims "it’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these others will have the control of things" (Fitzgerald, 18). Tom tries to defend his position by referring to science or, more correctly, pseudo-science. Nick, however, seems to view Tom’s racist remarks as an example of his limited intelligence and outmoded ideas rather than outright racism. Even though Nick is the most considerate character in the novel and never directly scapegoats anyone, his attitude towards Jews and blacks is condescending and he does not
incorporate them in his American dream.

Gatsby's urge to rise in society leads to naïve imitation, sometimes making him look ridiculous. His house is modelled on a typically European style. It looks like a Hôtel de Ville from Normandy. It has a Gothic library, a Marie Antoinette music room, and a study which imitates the design of 18th century Scottish architects Robert and James Adam. Similarly, Myrtle's apartment in New York reflects her social ambitions; the dining room is vulgar and its décor resembles French rococo paintings such as Fragonard's "The Swing," alluding to the frivolity going on in the apartment. Both Myrtle and Gatsby, despite the fact that they represent populist vitality, are romantics who lack taste and refinement. In contrast, Tom and Daisy have the taste that old money can buy, although Tom reveals a lack of taste by imitating the old colonizers’ style in his choice of his riding clothes. He is actually a parody of an English country gentleman. Daisy is hollow and lacks integrity. The split in her is marked by an inconsistency of her looks. Sometimes her hair is blonde, sometimes dark.

Lewis’ comment that one cannot buy integrity or taste seems generally valid. However, taste is relative. Tom and Daisy’s taste is a quality that is associated with their money and their backgrounds. The link between taste and integrity is no longer evident in either of them. Within a short time span, Gatsby has acquired the taste of the nouveau riche, and he is as lacking in integrity as Tom and Daisy, Jordan, Mr. Wilson, and Myrtle. Nick is the only person with any moral integrity, so despite their different backgrounds, he is able to like Gatsby. Otherwise, the lack of likeable characters in The Great Gatsby is remarkable. Only Michaelis, a young Greek who runs an all-night restaurant, is characterized in a really positive way.

The Victimizing Process

In The Great Gatsby, the seriously rich are both winners and villains. Nicolas Tredell, from a class perspective, sees Myrtle as the sacrificial victim whose dramatic death restores the equilibrium between Daisy and Tom. However, the victimizing game can be greatly expanded. Gatsby also becomes a victim of their thwarted desire, as does Pammy, Tom and Daisy’s daughter. Tom also turns Mr. Wilson into a victim, thereby provoking him to victimize Gatsby. Gatsby’s disruption of the Buchanan family, as if Daisy’s marriage and child count for nothing, mean that he is not an innocent victim. Jordan does not actively victimize anyone, as she is wrapped in an impenetrable narcissism. However, her haughtiness and arrogance reflect a softer form of victimizing.

The victimization process may be viewed as the pulse that drives the plot in this novel. In most of the victimization scenes, the outcome is to Tom and Daisy’s benefit. They are the novel’s primary victimizers, sacrificing anyone in their vicinity who threatens their hollow and wasteful lives, even each other. The novel actually culminates in the car crash, where all previous desires suddenly come together in one event and constitute what may be considered a typical modern sacrificial scene in which violence is engendered indirectly and at random.

According to Tredell, romanticism in early 20th century America is bound up with capitalism, materialism, brutality, waste, selfishness, and infidelity. He goes on to claim that romantic desire is insatiable and the desirability of the goal depends on its separation from the desiring subject. Once satiated, it ceases to be romantic desire. Harold Bloom actually attributes Gatsby’s greatness to the fact that there is no authentic object for his desire. Gatsby, Bloom, claims, "is both subject and object of his own quest."

Gatsby thinks he can realize his dreams by breaking a moral code. He clearly does not distinguish between money obtained by crime and money obtained by legal means. Tom and Daisy are also continually trespassing on moral ground, while Jordan lives her professional life by cheating.

Nick’s attraction for Jordan is superficial throughout the novel. In their first encounter, she acts as if she is totally indifferent. She is boyish, fresh, and arrogant, which attracts Nick. She reminds him of a good illustration. Their affair seems half-hearted and lacks sensuality—a typical trait in Fitzgerald’s work. However, Gary J. Scrimgeour claims that Jordan’s unconcern for any other standards beyond those of frank self-indulgence is evidence enough that the two became lovers. Nick accuses Jordan of being a careless
driver,(52) and she surprisingly responds with hedonistic honesty, saying that is why she chooses to associate with people who are not careless. In their last conversation, Jordan accuses Nick of the same carelessness that he has accused Tom and Daisy of; and at the end of the novel, Nick has come to the conclusion that Jordan has created her personality out of a series of successful gestures. Other than that her life is purposeless and empty.

Scrimgeour points out that the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are all weak characters, indicating that the novel lacks depth. Viewed from this perspective, Jordan may not seem to be a very significant character. However, she is a character of utmost interest when the novel is read as a depiction of the attitudes that prevailed in the 1920’s and the role desire played in people’s lives at the time. Scrimgeour does not succeed in distinguishing, therefore, between the characters’ morals and the moral of the novel. A novel is not weak because the characters are weak.(53) It is also a gross exaggeration when he claims that there is no difference between Nick throwing Jordan over and the brutality of Tom.(54)

Although Nick is not a detached observer, he is the only character able to tell a story from a perspective that is not totally dominated by his or her own subjectivity. While Nick’s moral insight is sometimes faulty, such as when he claims he never passes judgment on others while he does it all the time, he is, nevertheless, the least desiring of the characters and the one who sees the events most clearly. Nick’s ability to imitate, his openness to outside influences, brings him closer to Gatsby than he realizes. They both dream of a new and enchanted life in the East. Gatsby’s schedule for self-improvement is in essence not very different from Nick’s plans when purchasing books on banking.(55) They are both in search of the American dream, one by legal methods and the other by criminal means. Gatsby would probably not have been such a fascinating and mythological character if he had not been seen through Nick’s eyes.

Nick is a reliable narrator insofar as he discards what is false, exploits wild rumors and clears away misconceptions. His role resembles that of a detective. However, he is better at deciphering other people’s motives than his own. He is clearly vulnerable to the luxury of the Buchanans’ or Gatsby’s charm and attractive gestures. His relation to Jordan is, despite the physical attraction, tinged with irritation. Her arrogance, moral relativism, and carefree approach to life seem both to attract and repel Nick. However, due to the intensity of his desire, the reader never learns much about what really happens between the two.

### A Novel of Idolatry

Read as a novel about idolatry, about how people become gods in one another’s eyes, the Christian symbolism which runs through the chapters takes on new meaning. The biblically inspired prose indicates that, perhaps unconsciously, Fitzgerald is exploring a society in which idolatry has replaced Christian values. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* can be read allegorically as a story about the consequences of replacing a transcendent God with worldly gods. Gatsby is, one must remember, working in “*his Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty*” (Fitzgerald, 95), alluding to Jesus as a twelve-year-old in the temple telling his parents “*Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?*”(56) The replacement of a transcendent God with a penetrating but non-caring god in the form of the enormous billboard of a staring occultist, Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, creates a waste land where agape gives way to Eros. Desire for money, success, infidelity, and moderate violence has replaced traditional Christian virtues such as humility, patience, fidelity, and love of one’s neighbor.

The religious overtones imply that Gatsby becomes a Son of God and Daisy his Virgin Mary. Unlike Jesus in the Gospels, his conception is a matter of vulgar and meretricious beauty. His church is a fake, in the shape of an absurd mansion, an imitation of a Hôtel de Ville in Normandy; and in this place of worship, instead of pilgrims praying, there is a constant flow of lonely, uprooted people chattering indecently late into the night, sipping cocktails and drinking champagne.

Gatsby is a Platonist insofar as he holds an image of himself as a Son of God. However, I would refine this perspective by claiming that he is actually a modern gnostic; he is *thrown* into this meaningless existence, and has to fight his way through the emptiness clinging to a dream of recapturing the spark that was ignited five years earlier in Louisville when he experienced a sacramental unity with his goddess. The kiss is compared to an incarnation, a blossoming (*Fitzgerald*, 107). Gatsby’s dream of being able to stop time and
nostalgically repeat certain moments of the past can be viewed as replacing the Christian hope and longing for heaven. Moreover, the aesthetic scene in which Gatsby shows Daisy his piles of beautiful shirts (Fitzgerald, 89), a sight which causes her to weep, is reminiscent of a religious sacrament. (57)

Gatsby is working his way free of the material life, renouncing his parents because they are lost in the mire of matter, while he is saved by the exertion of great willpower, which enables him to recapture and prolong these moments of bliss. The madness of the whole project lies not in the attempt to repeat the past but in the attempt to repeat the past as if the circumstances have not changed. Such attempts are, in practice, impossible when one does not consider the changes. This seems, in the case of Gatsby, absolutely impossible. The fact that he keeps looking at Tom and Daisy’s daughter with surprise, without having really believed in her existence, (58) reveals the madness of his plan. Gatsby is incapable of considering the five years which have passed To Gatsby, the fact that Daisy has married and given birth to a daughter is only a preliminary hindrance. The urge to wipe out these five years is Gatsby’s madness, revealing an advanced stage of narcissism.

Gatsby’s modern version of Gnosticism is reminiscent of the classic gnostic worldview in which the development is from the material to the psychic. However, the psychic in The Great Gatsby is a development towards a form of sterility in which desire creates various forms of psychic prisons.

Even though Gatsby has been able to acquire all the material goods that people usually dream of, these give him no real pleasure. Gatsby’s sole pleasure lies in trying to win back Daisy in order to fulfill his dream of evoking the same deep feelings he had experienced five years earlier. Clearly, this sacred moment was, for Gatsby, a religious epiphany. At the moment when he kissed Daisy for the first time, he sees, out of the corner of his eye, that the blocks of the sidewalk form a ladder which climbs to "a secret place above the trees" (Fitzgerald, 106). The ladder alludes to Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28.10-19) in which angels are revealed going up and down a ladder, and the Lord is standing beside him in a place named Beth-El ("House of God").

Being a Son of God, Gatsby is linked to Gnostics such as Simon Magus and to later Gnostics who, according to Irenaeus, think they are spiritual by nature and do not have to live a moral life in order to be saved. As it is impossible for the earthly element to partake in salvation, spiritual man can "intemperately serve the lusts of the flesh and say that one renders flesh to the flesh and spirit to the spirit." (59)

While the romantics extolled the glories of nature, the world represented in The Great Gatsby gradually changes into a ghostly world in which nature becomes something grotesque. (60) Nick speaks metaphorically of the earth lurching away from the sun (Fitzgerald, 42). The earth is described as stumbling inelegantly and erratically away from the sun, which indicates that the earth no longer has any real life source on which to grow. At the end of chapter VIII, Nick tries to enter into Gatsby’s haunted mind the day after the car accident; he tries to imagine how unreal Gatsby must find the new world into which he has been thrown so brutally. Nick describes the sunlight as raw, a rose as grotesque, and leaves as frightening, (61) as if experiencing a world that is material without being real.

The depreciation of nature, which Hans Jonas claims is a common trait in both Gnosticism and Existentialism, (62) can, in The Great Gatsby, be the consequence of desire run wild. The last sentence in the novel, "so we beat on, boats against the current, born back ceaselessly into the past," indicates that it is impossible for those who give in to desire to fulfill their dream.

The theme of idolatry is further emphasized in the scene in which Nick stares for half an hour at Gatsby’s mansion in much the same way as Kant stares at the church steeples (Fitzgerald, 85). Nick is no philosopher but there is a certain existential curiosity in his attempt to discover some kind of meaning in the increasingly dramatic events of that summer. However, this meaning is so limited that it can be summed up in Gatsby’s incredible ability to hope, against all odds.

In The Great Gatsby, God has absconded, just like the gnostic God of the Spirit. Wilson is the only person in the novel who calls on God, but his God is strange and estranged. Wilson does not belong to any church or know any church. (63) His is a new god, symbolically linked to a billboard. Wilson is transfixed by the material god, the god who sees everything and cannot be fooled, but does not care, like the eyes of Doctor
T.J. Eckleburg. He is depicted as lifeless and grey, as someone who has been killed by desire before he kills himself. In the enormous advertisement of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, a change in religious outlook is evident. The Christian God has been replaced by a new and inactive God, who sees everything. This God, devoid of desire and compassion, broods over the godless valley of ashes with his blue eyes, his yellow glasses and non-existent nose, illustrating the nothingness which concludes the novel.

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Grande - Desire in The Great Gatsby


Notes


4. "The dynamism of mimetic desire has always been oriented towards death and madness." (See René Girard, Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, London: Athlone Press. 1987, 414.) "Mimetic desire thinks that it always chooses the most life-affirming path, whereas in actuality it turns increasingly towards the obstacle—toward sterility and death." (ibid, 415.) (back)


6. The difference between romantic and realist literature is not a difference according to epoch. The difference is based on an approach towards desire. There is, however, in Girard’s work, a preference for novels written in the realist tradition. (back)


9. Gunhild Enmo, "Borne back ceaselessly into the past. En lesning av F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great..."


14. Ibid, 80. (back)


18. Tredell, *Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, 75. (back)


20. Ibid., 48-49. (back)


23. Fitzgerald admitted "The Sensible thing" was based on him and Zelda, on Zelda breaking up with him and, later, the marriage issue. *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, 189. (back)


29. Ibid., 3. (back)


32. Tredell, *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, 81-82. (back)


34. Ibid., 52. (back)


37. Tredell, *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, 35. (back)


42. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and Damned*, NY: Scribner’s, 1950, 255. (back)


44. Tredell, *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, 44. (back)

45. Ibid., 47. (back)

46. Ibid., 86. (back)

47. Tredell, *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, 36. (back)

48. Ibid. (back)


50. Ibid. (back)


54. Ibid., 75. (back)

56. Tredell, Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, 21. (back)


58. Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, 111. (back)


61. Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, 153. (back)


63. Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, 150. (back)

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In this essay, I will discuss the "panpsychic" turn within posthumanism and situate it vis-à-vis Generative Anthropology by reading Dave Eggers' *The Circle* from 2013. I will roughly term these developments, after Brian Massumi, "the turn to affect" and trace it to his 2002 book *Parables for the Virtual*. These particular strands of thought take their provenance from some of the earlier philosophers' attempts to heal the Cartesian split by thinking in terms of *becoming* instead of *being*. Names that are frequently mentioned by these posthuman theorists are those of Deleuze, Alfred North Whitehead (the author of process philosophy), Gilbert Simondon (the philosopher of individuation), but also Baruch Spinoza and Leibniz. Another, independent, source of influence is Foucault, who appeals to these thinkers presumably by the fact that his ideas of power and biopower are conceived as delocalized forces. They also share his political engagement and critique of capitalism. What unites these thinkers is their commitment to thinking not only outside of the human subject but also outside of the subject-object-relationships paradigm. Can affect exist outside of the human or animal body? If so, how can it be conceived in an impersonal way?

In his interview with Mary Zourzani, Massumi explains what a wider understanding of affect implies by saying that affect is not an expression or experience of a particular emotion that belongs to a subject but a wave-front of energy associated with an individuated entity which has a potential to affect and be affected. "[W]hen we feel a particular emotion or think a particular thought, where have all the memories, habits, tendencies gone that might have come at the point? . . . There is no way they can all be expressed at any given point. But they are not totally absent either, because a different selection of them is sure to come up at the next step. They are still there, but virtually—in potential" (3).

Conceiving of affect and agency in impersonal ways invites a rethinking of the very notion of materiality and the matter-spirit separation. Thus, Jane Bennett argues for a vitalist conception of matter, writing that life and matter can no longer be separated, with matter being regarded as an inert and inactive substance serving the needs of and being shaped by human actors. Bennett explains that her "aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due. How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or "the recycling," but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?" (viii).

Similarly, Karen Barad has been arguing for expanding our notion of materiality. The disjunction between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, and material and discursive has been deepened, according to her, in the aftermath of the linguistic turn whereby language has been granted too much power. She also sees it as problematic that "matter is figured as passive and immutable" (132), proposing instead a model of discursive practices that are not human-based or language-derivative. Matter, in its broadest sense, is discursive because discourse, as she explains her position, "is not a synonym for language." Instead, "discursive practices are material conditions for making meaning" by staging "specific material configurings of the world through which determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted" such that "the world articulates itself differently" (335). The meaning that is extracted makes intelligible the causal operation of various components in a given configuration created by what she calls an *agential cut*. In contrast to the absolute Cartesian cut between the object and the subject, an agential cut divides the universe contingently into an *observer*, or the measurement apparatus, and an *observed*. Since the two parts of the system are not separate, the relationship in which they engage is not that of interaction but what Barad terms intra-action or a kind of action that illuminates or delineates a so-called "exteriority within phenomena" (135, 140). "'Observer' and 'observed','" as she explains, "are nothing more than two
physical systems intra-acting in the markings of the 'effect' by the 'cause'; no human observers are required (though humans may emerge as being part of practices)'" (340). In other words, what Barad argues for is an expanded, non-localized view of agency that makes no separation between matter and meaning. This new understanding of the entangled nature of material-discursive practices has implications for political action. She writes that "we are responsible for the world of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped" (390).

Both Barad's theorization of the intra-active agential cut and Massumi's broader concept of affect bear important similarities to Alfred North Whitehead's idea of prehension that underlies his process philosophy. For Whitehead, prehension is a form of grasping or apprehension that is non-anthropocentric, in that it does not have to originate from a human agent and have a symbolic component. Even unconscious or non-cognitive entities are capable of prehending other entities and phenomena in the sense of influencing them and being influenced in return. Prehensions display the property of space-time to make actual entities appear connected and coherent and form the perceptive glue that underlies our intuition of causes and effects. "The unity of a prehension," Whitehead writes, "defines itself as a here and a now, and the things so gathered into the grasped unity have essential reference to other places and other minds" (69). In using the concept of prehension, Whitehead articulates a teleological view of reality in which directionality and purposefulness do not arise from human consciousness, desire, and goals but are part of metaphysical causal connectedness and flow of what is.

Another recent theorist (roughly in the same group) influenced by Whitehead's idea of prehension is the author of Contagious Architecture, a "humanistic" interpretation of algorithms and computation, Luciana Parisi. Similarly to Massumi's claim that affect is not tied to a human experiencer but exists in itself, Parisi's assertion is that computer algorithms give rise to so-called "soft thought" that should not be limited to the idea that "data become embodied in a structure (a neural net, a brain, or any other material implementation). . . . On the contrary, soft thought is an actuality: a thought event. . . . Modes of thought are, indeed, as real as any object of feeling" (255). The main thrust of Parisi's argument is to counter the model of controlled calculation that is dominating today's digital culture as being promoted by the capitalist paradigm of interactivity and control. Not only does she claim that our view of algorithms as sequences of simple instructions that produce predictable results is wrong, but even the more subtle, next-level view of computation that has gained popularity in recent years is inaccurate, namely the view of algorithms as dynamically evolving, biological, and biophysical models of order emerging out of deterministic chaos. Deterministic chaos defines the evolution of systems where each element behaves unpredictably, but the whole behaves according to predictable statistical probabilities. These kinds of algorithms apply to modeling biological forms, mathematical models of reproduction, biophysical interaction, and other second-order cybernetic systems with statistically predictable behavior. However, according to Parisi, algorithmic thought assumes the next order of uncertainty, the uncertainty of incomputability. On this level, incomputable algorithms are infected and reprogrammed by random data that is generated by random probabilities. Parisi appropriates the idea of prehension to describe the relationship between algorithms and data they are fed, explaining that "as actual occasions, algorithms prehend the formal system into which they are scripted, and also the external data inputs that they retrieve. Nevertheless, this activity of prehension does not simply amount to a reproduction of what is prehended. On the contrary, it can be described as a contagion. This is because to prehend data is to undergo an irreversible transformation defined by the way in which rules are immanent to the infinite varieties of quantities that they attempt to synthesize" (xiii). As uncomfortable as the idea of infinite, incomputable data sounds, it and its ability to infect algorithmic objects with new instructions and axioms is a source of novelty and unpredictability. One of Parisi's goals is to break free from the anthropocentric perspective and theorize thought as existing and evolving independently from human reason following its own logic of computational aesthetics that makes increasing ingestion into culture. Unlike the other theorists among those already mentioned who consider the non-anthropocentric, posthuman perspective an unqualified improvement, Parisi makes a discrimination between the biological/autoptotic model of complexity (which she also identifies with second order cybernetics) and the digital one, cautioning that only the latter incomputable paradigm is capable of producing novelty while systems based on second order cybernetics can evolve and change but only within given parameters: "prediction of the future would remain a repetition of the past" (13).

Dave Eggers' 2013 novel The Circle reflects Parisi's ambivalence about self-organizing systems as templates
for digital architecture. The novel, which is set in the near future, tells a dystopian tale of a company that is on the brink of taking over the world. The company, which is called The Circle, could be a thinly disguised version of either Microsoft or Google. In either case, the story's referentiality is not essential to its impact; it is merely a literary tool used to evoke the reader's familiarity with a situation, namely a type of company, a recent giant of technological innovation founded by young and hip new-economy wizards that is rapidly expanding to a point of becoming too big and powerful to be challenged by any government. What brings The Circle its first success is a universal login product, TruYou. TruYou is tied to a person's real identity, created for the purpose of integrating all passwords and user identities on various commercial and media sites, its creators reasoning that having one real identity would save internet users the inconvenience of memorizing multiple identities and passwords. "Overnight, all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness" (22). More than a convenience to customers, TruYou turns out to be a great boon to marketers: "the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision" (22). And in a sinister but not unexpected development at the end of the book, the company is hatching plans to join with the government in creating one unified system that will make a TruYou account the only way to pay taxes, vote, register a vehicle, and perform other social and civic services. Customers and citizens will thus merge into one entity.

Another Orwellian product that is launched by this company is a small surveillance camera with very high resolution, called SeaChange. These cameras are inexpensive and easy to hide and attach to surfaces. The company hails it as an innovation that is heralding the coming age of global openness, accountability, and democracy—an empowering tool for influencing global events and building grassroots international communities. It is predicted that people will reach out to each other on an unprecedented scale in a bid to recruit each other for various consciousness-raising activities—and this is, in fact, what happens, as the workers of the Circle start being deluged by requests to join their professional networks and sign political petitions by their customers and old contacts. Another important social change will occur in connection with crime and policing because having an extensive network of ubiquitous and communicating cameras would make it much easier to both prevent crime as well as identify and apprehend fugitives on wanted lists. Thus, one of the characters designs a universal child-tracking system, which would greatly reduce or even eliminate kidnapping. In another example, during a trial run of the SeaChange system, a criminal is located and arrested by fellow citizens only six minutes and thirty-three seconds after she is randomly picked from a wanted list and her picture is broadcast world-wide. Not only is law enforcement made infinitely more efficient, it can also be made more fair, as one employee suggests, proposing a system which would make racial profiling redundant because image-recognition software would be able to pick out individuals with a criminal record and highlight them on video-feed monitors. In addition to these pragmatic concerns, around-the-world cameras will affect the quality-of-life intangibles, as people who cannot travel, for example, would be able to experience places they cannot visit physically, such as the summit of Machu Picchu or the dunes of Sahara.

The novel reminds us that new technologies have a revolutionary, radically transformative effect on all aspects of life. To be human in the near future will be a new, unfamiliar experience. One character likens this process to theosis: "Now we're all God. Every one of us will soon be able to see, and cast judgment as aspects of life. To be human in the near future will be a new, unfamiliar experience. One character likens this process to theosis: "Now we're all God. Every one of us will soon be able to see, and cast judgment upon, every other. We'll see what He sees" (395). The all-seeing collective camera eye will make the world transparent, transparency being one of the central themes in The Circle. The company tries to convince humanity that transparency is a force for progress because it brings knowledge, and knowledge is an unqualified good. Having necessary information at one's fingertips "would eliminate a lot of doubt and stress" (341), and being visible to everyone would endow one with "layers of self-awareness and a distinct sense of . . . power" (243). Eamon Bailey, one of the company's grounders, asks Mae Holland, the company's employee and the novel's protagonist, who gets caught by two SeaChange cameras when she takes a kayak for a paddle from a renting station illegally: "Do you behave better or worse when you're being watched?" "Better. Without a doubt," she answers (296). Transparency is also an important source of knowledge. As Bailey tells The Circle audience: "When you deprive . . . someone . . . of experience . . . you are basically stealing from them. You are depriving them of something they have a right to. Knowledge is a basic human right" (301).The slogan company adopts is "Privacy is theft" (303). This is because "You don't own the news, even if it happens to you" (236). This is doubtlessly a not so covert allusion to Sergey Brin, the founder of Google, who, according to Wikipedia, said that "knowledge is always good, and certainly always better than ignorance," a philosophy that is summed up by Google's mission statement "Organize
the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

Mae's misdeed serves as an excuse to coerce her to go "fully transparent," a newspeak for a person who wears a camera and microphone all the time and whose movements can be tracked by an audience worldwide. Not surprisingly, she notices about herself that "Since she'd gone transparent, she'd become more noble"—even about trivial things like making food choices or skipping meals: "Every day she'd gone without things she didn't want to want" (329). This is in addition to wearing a publicly readable health bracelet, which allows others to see her vital data, such as pulse, temperature, blood pressure, and so on, which leads to her doctor's admonition that she should stop eating salami. Becoming more accountable to herself, she becomes more accountable to her audience because "So many of her watchers . . . saw her as a role model and inspiration" (328).

Another, related, theme is a forced participation in social media circles. Mae is enjoined by her employer to participate actively in internal and external social media. Whatever social event she attends (and she is increasingly pressured to attend events exclusively on campus, as they call company premises—an allusion to Microsoft), she is required to take pictures and make comments in her several social media accounts as well as read, comment, and send "likes" to other people's accounts. In addition to strengthening the communitarian aspects of being a company employee, with the word "community" being another corporate buzzword, active social participation has a more nefarious, commercial implication. Employees are ranked on their social media participation, their PartiRank, and this, in turn, leads to two more scores, their Conversion Rate and Retail Raw, which show how many purchases they have inspired in their internet followers and how much revenue these purchases have generated. Mae's ex-boyfriend, Mercer, who expresses the authorial perspective and the novel's conscience, warns her: "your company is scanning all of our messages for information they can monetize. Don't you think this is insane?" (134). But Mae remains oblivious to manipulation and gradual loss of privacy and dismisses Mercer's concerns, ridiculing his position: "Mercer, the Circle is a group of people like me. Are you saying that somehow we're all in a room somewhere, watching you, planning world domination?" (259).

With Mae standing for Everyman and given her perception of reality, the novel cannot have a happy ending. Towards the end of the book, the cameras become so commonplace that every corner of the earth is observable and audible. In connection with this, more and more people feel obligated to become transparent: "the pressure on those who hadn't gone transparent went from polite to oppressive" (239). Mae is gradually brainwashed into the corporate way of seeing things, and even though she is in a unique position to instigate a reversal of the Circle's policies, being egged on and aided by one of the company's original founders who has since had a change of heart, she decides not to help him. It is suggested in the epilogue that The Circle takes over the world, fulfilling their slogan of "closing the circle." This devastating outcome is aesthetically punctuated by juxtaposing the metaphor of the octopus-like Circle closing its stranglehold on the world with the image of a "tear" (rupture) opening up in Mae psyche, which she sees "clearer" and "louder" (375) as the novel progresses. This symbolic abyss, which she intuits but is incapable of fully grasping, is meant to emphasize for the reader the uncompromising bleakness of the projected future developments conjured up by Eggers' pessimistic extrapolation of current trends.

Even though I agree with a number of reviewers who have criticized the novel's manifesto-like flatness as a consequence of its agenda-driven conception, it is hard to deny that its dark vision of surveillance society and human relations hollowed out by social media has a ring of truth to it, even more so now in 2015 than in 2013, the year of book's publication. What I want to focus on, however, is not how accurate the novel is in diagnosing the problems of our modern technological society or how prescient it is in outlining our near future, but the anthropological explanation of the type of paranoia to which the novel gives voice. Gilles Deleuze's name for this dystopia is the Society of Control. Building on Michel Foucault's theories in Discipline and Punish, Deleuze, in his article, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," extrapolates the idea of Foucault's disciplinary society to the present, claiming that the disciplinary societies of the industrial revolution gave way to the new type of society that we observe today. Even though the remnants of the disciplinary society, which produces "the environment of enclosure" in the form of the prison, school, hospital, family, and factory are still alive, "these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods" (4). According to Deleuze, disciplinary societies are analogical, while control societies are digital because "enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other" (4). It is logical that "disciplinary societies
Deleuze's analysis has captured something essential about our technological present and the vision of the near future painted by Dave Eggers in *The Circle*. What is particularly interesting to me, as someone engaged in the project of Generative Anthropology, is the way both Foucault in his analysis of biopower as technologies of subjugation and Deleuze in his dissection of the basic features of control societies use metaphors of mastery. Thus, Deleuze states that "The operation of markets is now the instrument of social control and forms the impudent breed of our masters" (6). Language like this suggests to me that there might be some unexamined mimetic assumptions that are operative in the logic of the text that I would like to bring to light. By using *The Circle* to uncover them, I assume that Eggers' novel reflects a political perspective on mechanisms of social control that is compatible with Deleuze's and other contemporary critics' and philosophers' cautionary projections about the totalitarian future that is awaiting us (and may already be here).

The issue of control is thematized explicitly in *The Circle*. Mercer delivers the diagnosis of this modern condition under the guise of a "cult taking over the world" by explaining to Mae: "like everything you guys are pushing, it sounds perfect, sounds progressive, but it carries with it more control, more central tracking of everything we do" (258-259). In what way then would the society of control be a more threatening model of social organization than that of discipline? Presumably because manipulation within the former would be more insidious and offensive to human dignity and thus violate the inherent symmetry of the originary scene. And symmetry is ostensibly preserved within The Circle, as a company. Nothing signals social distance and class struggle. When Mae is hired, she is told that company's ethos emphasizes community-building: "We want this to be a workplace, sure, but it should also be a human place. And that means the fostering of community. In fact, it must be a community. This is one of our slogans" (47). Love of sloganeering as a ubiquitous feature of contemporary business culture meant to obscure a self-serving pursuit of profit by an appearance of socially conscious concerns is one of the targets of the novel's satire. Slogans are constantly spouted by enthusiastic employees: "community and communication come from the same root word, communis"; "If you care about your fellow human beings, you share what you know with them"; "Privacy is theft"; "Secrets are lies"; etc… (95, 302-303). Moreover, solidarity and democratic atmosphere are signaled by the fact that the management of The Circle are young, hip, and energetic people, who not only look and sound the same as their subordinates but seem to share their political engagement and social concerns. The employees, for example, are encouraged, even pressured, to sign an unending flood of consciousness-raising petitions on such topics as environment and human rights and participate in various political and artistic events that take place on campus (the latter involving poetry slams, rock concerts, and stand-up comedy), provided that they take photos and post them in social media. Not only is the company trend-conscious, not only does it care about social and political issues, but is also presents a caring image of community-building, being concerned, for example, by the employees' physical well-being and thus giving them and their families (even elderly parents, as in Mae's case) free medical care. In addition to health, the company promotes an aesthetic education of its employees by organizing art events and performances and supporting artists in residence.

In what way would this model be control-driven and not democratic and/or voluntaristic? It would seem that the development and expansion of the company are not brought about by fiat but happen naturally, as if obeying some higher laws of self-organization. If everything is transparent, if openness is absolute, if information is complete and fully accessible, could we not see human beings that make up this kind of a fully transparent society as cells in one organism, acting in concert, cooperating harmoniously, making everything run smoothly and without wastage? As each cell loses its agentivity and individuality, would it make more sense to "zoom out" and declare an emergence of a higher level of description that deals with collective aggregates? In this sense, the posthuman analysis of nonanthropocentric and non-agential thought, affect, and materiality that follow their own logic of expansion and propagation seems applicable here. It is easy to see (and indeed happens in the novel) that each control-tightening turn of the screw takes place by itself, as if it were the next logical step, often proposed by the employees. And indeed, who
can object to labor-saving implementations, such as the universal TruYou identity, which make life so much easier?

Would the real problem with such an arrangement be the existence of true puppeteers, who will stay behind the scenes and pull the strings of control in order to "monetize information"? Or would there arise some other problems, inherent in this new beehive-type of social organization? For people will certainly embrace these developments voluntarily, seeing them as welcome changes that promote convenience and that are aligned with natural human desires. What drives the innovation is an understandable human desire for instant gratification that aims to make the navigation of the world more seamless, fluid, and immediate, to bring it closer to one's fingertips. Heidegger associated this desire with the existential human condition of being in the world, Dasein. To be in the world means to be in the state of caring about our worldly projects in a spatial and temporal way, which, in turn, implies a need to be surrounded by useful things, such as tools, with the help of which we achieve our objectives. Our kinesthetic awareness and orientation within a spatial region where useful things may or may not be handy, although implicit, forms the basis of the referential totality that underlies our goal-directed understanding of being-in-the-world. If useful things are far or not handy, we must bring them into our region. Heidegger uses the term de-distancing (in the sense of removing the distance between where I am and where I want to be). De-distancing is something we are constantly doing automatically without thinking about it. "Dasein [or being in the world]," he says, "is essentially de-distancing" (97). This is a useful way of understanding what technological development is all about: human civilization becoming increasingly more efficient and advanced at its essential mode of being, that of de-distancing.

In the computer age of algorithmic design, de-distancing takes the character of calculation. Instead of physical tools, we base our actions on automated expert systems and feedback-based interactive architecture as well as use calculation in the opposite direction by predicting and forestalling what Hans Blumenberg calls the "episodic tremenda of recurring world events" (26) and catastrophes. Both the action and counteraction of computational thinking are doing de-distancing with previously unseen facility, speed, and competence. The question of whether it is in principle possible to predict and calculate outcomes is at the heart of the branch of knowledge that deals with algorithms. According to Roger Penrose, instances of algorithmic thinking have been known to man since the ancient Greeks, for example Euclid's algorithm for finding the common factor of two numbers. To find the highest common factor we divide one of the two numbers by the other and take the remainder, and then repeat the step for the number we divided by and the remainder. If the final remainder is zero then the last number we divided by is the highest common factor. In other words, an algorithm is a systematic procedure that could be written as a sequence of steps. Can all problems be coded and solved by algorithms and is all human thinking algorithmizable? Alan Turing conceived of a thought experiment, an imaginary apparatus, later called the Turing machine, to answer this question. The Turing machine is represented by an infinite tape, which will be running back and forth through his hypothetical device as long as calculations need to be performed. When the calculation is completed, the tape will come to a stop with a final output. Turing asked whether we can determine in advance for any general case whether the tape would stop. The answer is that a general solution is impossible.

This does not mean, however, that we do not successfully solve many difficult computational problems with sophisticated, interactive, self-adapting digital architecture of increasing complexity, performing new, previously unimaginable tasks. How far will these developments go? Will computer systems escape our control and become our masters? Eggers' novel gives voice to our shared fear of runaway technology, although it is not clear whether his dystopian vision concerns evil people who intentionally dupe the simple-minded majority into submitting to a totalitarian system by distracting them with technological toys or whether expansion and transformation come as a result of collective de-distancing by the posthuman, larger-than-human man-machine aggregate, and then enterprising and unscrupulous people see an opening and take control. What then does this fear of control stem from? I would like to connect it to what Klaus Krippendorf in Communication and Control in Society calls the double bind between determinism and freedom (20). De-distancing successfully is to have the most accurate algorithm for calculating and predicting the behavior of the system of which we are a part. Everything in the system must be logical, law-abiding, and programmable in order for us to calculate what steps we need to take to reach our goals—except for ourselves, who are teleological, goal-articulating beings. But that cannot be, as this reasoning goes, because, by the same token, we must also be calculable and predictable within the constraints of the
algorithmizable system. Either we have to accept that we only think ourselves free but are, in reality, programmed and controlled or we have to give up on the paradigm of autopoiesis, self-organization, and second order cybernetics, which is so popular today and to which Parisi provides a corrective by saying that algorithmic (and, by extension, human) thought is incomputable and contagious.

Even though Parisi looks at contagion as an unforeseen and unavoidable side-effect of computation that infects virus-like the original algorithm, her choice of terminology might reflect an unacknowledged anthropological intuition—something that fears and fantasies of being controlled and manipulated lack. Modeling human behavior within the parameters of choice vs. deterministic calculation does not take into consideration the scenic structure of representation, where the differential relationship of the periphery to the sacred center stages various strategies of sublimating resentment. As Eric Gans explains in *Signs of Paradox*, "The problem of freedom versus determinism is . . . anthropological rather than cosmic, 'cultural' rather than 'natural.' To say that the future movement of a particle is 'determined' is to conceive a mind potentially aware of this determination. The simple anthropological test of determinism is the following: if after calculating the future state of a system, I can inform the system of my calculations without leading it to deviate from them, that system may be called determined. If, on the contrary, I must hide my calculations to avoid such deviation, then the system is free; for someone within the system could eventually perform the same calculations as I have" (26). In other words, framing the human condition as a dilemma between freedom and determinism disregards that "freedom is born with the sign" (24). Without factoring in language, without taking into the consideration the triangular, mimetic nature of communication, Deleuzian and Foucauldian analysis conceives of social organization as constraining, unchanging, and hopeless. Without explicitly recognizing the center-periphery structure of the scene, such resentful imagination perceives the center as closed (to use Gans's terminology in *Science and Faith*), permanently usurped by invisible controlling forces, and thus misses an opportunity to see the scene's adaptability, its creative power to change and open up in various ways. So far I have not seen evidence that posthuman theories that have shifted focus from the subject or human agent to broader perspectives of reified abstractions or from being to becoming, partly in order, I believe, to avoid the pitfall of resentful closure, have been more successful.

This is not to deny that the free will vs. determinism conundrum contains a powerful albeit unacknowledged kernel of anthropological truth. I believe it to be a restatement of the pragmatic paradox sans the scenic configuration of triangular desire. Gans defines the pragmatic or mimetic paradox in *Signs of Paradox* as the "incompatibility of the two roles of subject and other in the mimetic process" (19). In other words, "the sign originates as the solution to the 'paradoxical state' or 'pragmatic paradox' engendered when the mimetic relation to the other-mediator requires the impossible task of maintaining the latter as model while imitating his appropriative action toward a unique object. Put in geometric terms, the parallel lines of imitation must converge toward a single point" (20). Similarly, freedom vs determinism conundrum arises from the same contradiction. As I quoted earlier, to say that the future is either determined or free is to conceive of another mind who either knows or does not know what I know. I must occupy two peripheral consciousness positions at the same time, with both of these positions attempting to de-distance the same appetitive object, which is an impossible situation. The symmetry of the questions of "do I control?" and "am I controlled?" can only be contemplated from within the mimetic representational paradigm. Even though I do believe that the novel by Dave Eggers touches upon some truly worrying technological and social developments, I also think that the powerful analytical tools of Generative Anthropology will help us achieve deeper insights into these problems.

**Bibliography**


Introduction

Digital communication has amplified the rate and efficacy of the transference of cultural information, and has participated in the generation of a mode of symbolic exchange that demonstrates novel features. This modality—and the novelty associated with amplified transference—is often referred to as "virality," which is a label that resonates with Eric Gans’s Generative Anthropology, and his articulation of the originary singularity that marks the successful emergence of human language. For the symbolic sign to emerge, it must have carried a viral quality, able to be shared with contagious effect because of its intersubjective condition: such a pattern need not have unfolded at any particular speed, but by contrast with the evolutionary (biological) changes that language appears to supervene upon, the sharing happened suddenly. This is a circular argument—that language succeeded because it was successfully shared—but any engagement with the paradoxical emergence of the originary something of language from no-thing requires such a presentation. Every act of representation captures the mood of this inexplicable originary success, and thematises the knowledge that language is because it is shared. The paradoxical originary circumstances of language show us that while communities of language users may have risen and disappeared many times over without sharing their invention, the originary group of protohumans will have shared its invention within the group, and then contacted other groups of protohumans and "infected" them, and so forth, as part of a genealogy that demonstrates the generative impulse that has motivated the sequence of such scenes—the sum of which constitutes human history.

Thus, language and the symbolic representation it involves is analogous to viral biological phenomena, and it is not surprising that with expanded access to digitally mediated communication has arisen the popular label "virality" as a means by which to describe the novel suddenness that marks the emergence of certain cultural phenomena. The potential number of individuals one can conduct asynchronous exchange with has had a significant impact on a popular imaginary, and the staging of this imaginary upon public scenes of culture. These staging procedures are imaginary transactions that reflect the protean sense of this potential, which is performed by each individual participant on the scene of culture in question. As such, the colour and shape of the performances are in keeping with the historical circumstances of popular culture, and hold with its characteristics whilst updating them to reflect a paradoxical enhancement of the individuated conditions of the scene. That is to say, unlike the precedent popular cultural paradigm of one-to-many communication that leads to complex patterns of grass-roots sharing and appropriation, on this scene of culture exchange unfolds one-to-one and one-to-many in simultaneity(1).

The return to a biological analogy for this paradoxical intersection of the body with the symbolic is apropos, since (thus far) the scalable implication of language remains anchored by the originary force of the individual, embodied homo sapiens sapiens. There are immediately novel outcomes to this paradox, and interactions with what appear to be the markers of a larger shift toward a new set of epochal conditions. The current discussion pays particular attention to the aesthetic markers of this shift, and does so by examining a case study in virality: Ai Weiwei’s(2) "Leg-Gun Meme," which began with a photograph of the
celebrity artist in which he is holding his leg, aiming it like a gun (see figure 1). The purpose of this case study is not to explicate the conditions of so called "internet memes" (though it does employ this popular cultural title); instead it is to explore the large-scale reflexivity that seems to accompany the very use of the term in the first instance. The case study chosen is convenient for reasons too many to list here, but the ostensivity of the gesture in the image is crucial, in which he simply points with his leg. I argue that such ostensivity is a vital feature of media texts that inspire a viral response, because virality requires the parsimonious mode of the ostensive.

![Ai Weiwei’s original leg-gun pose, posted on Instagram on 11 June 2014: Ai Weiwei/Instagram](image)

**figure 1. Ai Weiwei’s original leg-gun pose, posted on Instagram on 11 June 2014: Ai Weiwei/Instagram**

### Ai Wei Wei’s Leg-Gun Meme

On June 11 2014, Ai Weiwei uploaded an image to Instagram of himself aiming his leg as though it were a rifle. He sits in his studio with only black socks and boxer shorts on, and a traditional rice picker’s straw hat atop his head.

Over coming days, his many Instagram followers posted thousands of imitative versions of the gesture on their accounts, of which Ai "regrammed" (republished via his own Instagram account) over 500 images within five days. This feedback loop promoted the virality of the phenomenon, the intensity of which gained the attention of the world’s news media. By the 13th of June this included stories in *The Guardian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, followed by coverage from several tech news blogs including *The Daily Dot*, *The Verge* and *Cnet*, as well as a number of major U.S. news outlets, including *ABC News* and *The Washington Post*.

Attempts to discern the meaning of the gesture were made both from within formal media outlets and folksonomical circuits of exchange, which tended to focus on the proximity of the posting to the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the strong similarity of the gesture with the
choreography in a ballet from the Cultural Revolution entitled "Red Detachment of Women." The Guardian reported on the 13th of June that:

One blog retweeted by Weiwei, Beijing Cream, noted the similarity of the pose to one seen in the Chinese ballet The Red Detachment of Women. The ballet was one of the eight model operas that monopolised the 1960s Chinese national landscape during the cultural revolution; a state-sanctioned depiction of one woman's rise through the Communist party. ("Is That Leg Loaded?")

There does seem a strong similarity, though this was not directly confirmed by Ai whose silence on the matter certainly stimulated the discourse. He posted the image along with a caption that translates to mean "Beijing Anti-Terrorism Series," and commented on the 16th of June in an interview with the Associated Press (AP) that this was in reference to an anti-terror campaign being conducted in China at the time. Ai said to the AP:

"Power is being used in the name of protecting you," Ai said. "But what they are actually doing is something which deserves a lot of discussion. And what is terrorism doing to you? It is hurting lives? Or is it putting a huge burden on everybody?"

("Kicking")

Attacks on civilians over the preceding year attributed to Muslim militants from the country’s far western Xinjiang region had seen many people arrested in Xinjiang, and security on subways throughout the China tightened, while police had now begun carrying guns. His comments on the need for a reflexive discourse about how these events inspired the use of punitive measures are clear in their intent, but perhaps more interesting was his interpretation of the strong response to his originary gesture. He discouraged any particular interpretation of the meme, observing that:

"The Internet is flowing. You come up with something basic, and everybody will find it easy to express themselves based on that." ("Kicking")

Thus, Ai comments that the original image is both laden with intent, in that he wishes to promote engagement with a particular agenda, but that this engagement should not be taken seriously, at least not at this, the primary tier of interaction inspired through digital networks of exchange. The intent, therefore, is caught up in a paradoxical arrangement with the exchange it inspires, since the attention gained in this way cannot be taken seriously. This I take as a primer for the discussion below.

**Virality and Digital Exchange**

Some important characteristics of memes(3) should be noted as context for this discussion. The meme, here, is interpreted as a kind of harbinger and indicator of less visible cultural impetus, and while the meme itself is not of any particular gravity or significance (it does reach a great many people but does not render a great deal of influence in its immediacy), the facility of the meme is of great interest. The meme-as-text discussed herein is taken to be an effect of patterns of symbolic exchange. This is related to Richard Dawkins' originary articulation of the meme in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), though as evidence against the reductive scientism it promotes. For Dawkins the meme is a selfish replicator of cultural information that copies itself after the manner of the gene. There seems no need to repeat here the many and convincing deconstructions of this argument, instead it is enough to observe that the appropriation of the term in the popular cultural expression reminds us that symbolic representation does not enact culture as simple transference of the kind Dawkins' theory presupposes, but as richly generative exchange. Subsequently, this discussion follows Eric Gans who argues that the meme has, in this way, become "a model of the cultural object and ultimately of the originary event of human representation" ("The Meme"). Indeed, the meme is of interest to us because of its basic emptiness, whereby as Gans asserts, "the meme does not convey useful information any more than the language of the sacred, it is an essentially esthetic object, a template for a minimal scenic event." The meme, in sum, provides for us a text that is paradigmatic of the originary circumstances of virality. The materiality of these circumstances bears inspection and consideration as an access to the context of representation that unfolds in contemporaneity, as it is associated with such
integral dimensions of culture as social subjectivity and patterns of language use. These secular artifacts, and the architectonic infrastructure of the digital networks through which they appear are kinetic just as the originary scene of language was kinetic, and generative of a potential that participates in the ongoing creation of the originary symbolic potential.

The Subjective Paradigm of Ostensivity

Two such dimensional quanta are: the discourses of selfhood and individual expression that accompany the "democratising" influence of digital (qua "access") culture; and the paradoxical rise of ostensivity that seems to have accompanied the instantaneity with which digital modes of representation are shared. These two observations deserve some unpacking and will be further explored below, but it is worthy of noting that the typical meme is tangled up with broader patterns in culture associated with subjectivity that can be discovered to have been generated by shifts in scale and modes of attention on digital scenes of representation. Attention is drawn in real time via paradoxically asynchronous and aspatial mediation; paradoxical because these liminal qualities are a product of speed and access. In other words, this digital scenicity is generative of attention that is both sudden—potentially violently so—and scalable, but only because it is of mediation that is not constrained by spatio-temporality in the manner that other, less "virtual" mediation is. This attention is both more volatile and more enduring simultaneously, a fact reflected in the enduring quality of the digital trace (depending on when the power is shut off).

Given that the individual plays a more prominent role in such a horizontally integral mode of representation and exchange, as it must for the virality to find its purchase, it follows that there is a paradoxical quality to the relation of individual and community in digital virality. The culture of the meme relies on the individual taking up and sharing via a variety of digital platforms of exchange ("social network" based ones in particular) information about or variations upon the originary meme event. This invokes the individual's "taste," or cultural discernment, and is thereby revelatory of any accompanying literacy as the subject stages "buy in," or a willingness to be aligned with the growing affirmation of the meme's value before the attention of the community. That value, however, is almost always based on the premise that this is a mode of attention predicated upon the destructible, or uncanny quanta in the meme that gave it traction in the first instance. This we see evidenced in the manner by which viral exchange unfolds, as the participants take up the media in question, modify it, and reinsert it into the network in patterns that reflect and update existing practices of modification. The individual thus delivers performances of selfhood in keeping with the abovementioned literacy by virtue of ritualistic deforming/reforming of the media on hand, which is transgressed after the fashion of the graffiti artist. Here, the surfaces of normally sacred artefacts such as audio recordings, photographs or films of domestic pets, celebrities and politicians are intruded upon and in some way treated as screens and stages available to the individual, permitting them to transact their relation with the community. This profane action is a reminder that such digital media and the modes of representation they generate are formats of culture at once removed from and intimate with the material reality from which they draw, elevating the intentional quality of the paradoxicality in play. Verisimilitude and distance are crucial to this sensibility, as the virtuous capacity of the digital for faithful representation is playfully disrupted with the effect of reminding the viewer just how far removed they are from the real Barack Obama/cat/Tyrannosaurus Rex/Wedding Fight/Einstein.

It is of interest that the performances in question are frequently humour driven, and given the specificity of the culturally determined parameters to humour the meme offers an unusually broad context for such a generative cultural force to function within. Thus, the humour often originates as benign misadventure or animal behaviour caught on camera that lends itself to existing anthropomorphic frames (think, goats that scream like people). But beyond humour there appears to be a mode of attention in play that involves a return to the primal form of human language: ostensivity. The mode of attention associated with such ostensivity operates in a fashion not dissimilar to that which accompanies the modern function of celebrity. In secular societies, operating on massive scales of mediation, the celebrity has taken on a role of increasing significance. However, the celebrity as a focus for attention is, like the meme, not to be taken seriously. Despite their centrality, they do not, as Gans has argued, fill any integral societal function ("The Last Celebrity"). From such an instrumental perspective, their function would seem to lie elsewhere, as temporary foci for resentment. They are "prehumiliated" figures, and due to their lack of consequence are capable vehicles for resentment in the popular mode. Which is to say, they mediate the deferral of
resentment via their centrality, becoming the victims of having successfully garnered attention. Thus, the *schadenfreude* that accompanies the unwarranted winning of attention by an individual on any given scene of culture is reserved for the celebrity. Similarly, though in more chaotic horizontally transmitted and mediated circumstances, the virality associated with the meme is wedded to a paradoxically granted attention: willingly individual and "democratic," but by its granting, communal and homogenous at a scale and speed not permissible in cultural exchange mediated by non-digital means.

**Ostensivity and Eshelman’s Monist Aesthetics**

When we copy the desire of another; that model for our desire is in danger of becoming the obstacle to our attainment of the desired object. The threat of a mimetic crisis that places us in direct competition with the model for the object of desire is ever-present, and in the originary hypothesis adopted by Generative Anthropology is the driver for the emergence of the symbolic sign, and language. The mimetic impulse, in this explanation, creates a doubly paradoxical situation that marks all subsequent scenes of culture, rendering paradox the basic condition of the human, here considered to be coterminous with the originary emergence of language.

Let us follow this doubling of paradox forward in time. The originary scene of language is firstly paradoxical in that the becoming-obstacle of the model that accompanies mimetic behaviour leads to a crisis as the subject and model compete for an object of desire. The model now doubles as an opponent, and the system that emerges to defer the violent potential in this paradoxical situation and to initiate the human community is language. The symbolic sign, here first emitted by a proto human and understood to be so by another proto human, is charged with the aural weight of this moment. It is mutually understood to be the means by which the two individuals competing for the object can move beyond animal means of differentiation via hierarchical organisation, which having failed will yield either violence, or something else. Something that indicates the shared understanding of the need to defer this violence, and the origin of the human animal who no longer relies on the differentiation achieved by animal means alone. That something is language, but language thus leaves us with the second part of the paradox, by simultaneously yielding the only means we have to explain language: language itself. Over time, this paradoxicality gives rise to the depths of human culture as history, which is constituted by the sequence of scenes generated from this origin. This paradoxical human situation we see unfold around us in real-time, where language mediates and is generative of the fundamentals of human experience, such as love and resentment, in simultaneity. A readily available means of access to these phenomena is the case of objects of desire that are in small supply, such as individuals. Romantic love, for example, is confirmed as a public phenomenon when we seek the affirmation from our close friends and family that this individual is indeed desirable, and a suitable partner. However, if in this situation my sister or brother covets the object of desire and eventually becomes a fellow suitor, the frequent result is eruption of sudden, ungoverned violence.

Thus, the sensibility of post-postmodern aesthetics, which are generated through secular, virtual domains constituted by horizontal networks of exchange in which the participants are continuously and reflexively engaged by the structure of mimetic desire. Post-postmodern aesthetics are realised during the event of the undecidable: a scene on which is continually staged and restaged performances of ambivalence and unresolved oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities. Here, conditions seem to have emerged that promote acts of representation that appropriate formally aesthetic modes of practice and media types from both precedent epochs as part of engagements that are intentionally paradoxical. These can be understood as attempts to mediate the reflexive relation to mimetic desire that is, arguably, the prime achievement of modernity, such that post-postmodern aesthetics are driven by an ethos of active resistance to the potentially destructive influence of the mimetic impulse. This yields a broad sweep of reflexive aesthetic engagement with the action of pulling back from the generative drive excited by mimetic desire.

The rising motif of monism and the ostensivity it is marked by is a recurring feature of post-postmodern aesthetics. Raoul Eshelman (2008) renders an account of this patterning under the title "performatism," setting out to provide analyses of aesthetic phenomena that do not fit within the range of culture we usually regard to be postmodern. Contrapuntally, Vermeulen and van den Akker began in 2009 to map the growing presence of dualist texts under the title *metamodernism*, asserting the emergence of conditions that permit
a liminal mode of aesthetic representation and experience that takes the form of unresolved oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities ("Notes"). In all cases, though, each of these conditions relies upon the next. Monism relies on dualism, undecided doubling relies on singular dedication, and both rely on the emergence of an absurd reflexivity that emphasises the double framing - or fundamental paradox - of representation. Eshelman\(^5\) notices this, and appropriates Gans in asserting that the sign creates an inner frame that serves as its immediate referential structure. The inner frame forms the container for the primary format of signification: ostensivity. An outer frame surrounds the inner, allowing the sign to become meaningful in a particular context. This paradigmatic frame shows us that all syntax - or primary signification, such as gestural - takes on its depth of meaning through an outer frame, that gives us paradigm and context. However, once the inner/outer frame is realised, the human understands that they are in language. Thus, beyond the outer frame is something that is nothing. Out there is the unknowable, sublimity, in sum, the sense of the abyssal beyond. So language brings us into paradox, since we know that we don’t know what is beyond our knowing in language.

This relation is complicit with the fundamental paradox of signification, since the sign is mobile from the instant it is emitted and does not indicate any particular object, but the object that it indicates as a performance. Thus, the sign is structured as follows: sign-\(\rightarrow\)object the sign has indicated). Or as Gans represents it:

1. the sign refers to an object (\(S \rightarrow O\))
2. by this very fact, this object is no longer a part of the object world, but the object-referred-to-by-the-sign (\(S \rightarrow (S \rightarrow O)\)) (“Fundamental”)

Paradoxically, the necessity for the emission of the sign is a mimetic crisis that accompanies shared desire for an object. Here, the model for desire has become an obstacle, and the sign emerges in order to designate the object as sacred and mediate resentment, deferring its violent potential and representing the status of the object, which is now designated as beyond appropriation. The object is thus no longer any old part of the real, but that which the sign points toward and therefore, part of the human world and its intricately structured performances of sacrality.

This intricacy changes with secularity, which by definition involves a shifting of emphasis away from formally designated centres of sacred attention, and the decline in significance of institutionally bounded spaces in which sacred rituals are performed. Instead, the secular scene of cultural exchange is marked by implicit sacrality, and when that secularity is mediated via digital networks that underpin growing horizontality of exchange, the effects are far reaching. Through digital mediation we are compelled to navigate the implicit sacrality of the secular scene of cultural exchange in a virtual setting, where the body remains integral, but representation is taken to a liminal space. Thus, undecidability plays a crucial role in post-postmodern aesthetics. What, after all, is at stake in the virtual is our humanity, since signification is a virtualising procedure, and our humanity is mortgaged on the back of a history that has generated culture through the sequence of scenes that constitute the passage of the sign forward in time. That non-space beyond the outer-frame of the human community, beyond context, gives us the continual sense of the impossible action of encompassing meaning through language, with its initial, virtual/transcendent removal of the sign from that which it represents. What occurs in the setting of viral cultural patternings mediated by digital modes of exchange reflects this founding in différance.\(^6\)

**The Paradox of the Meme**

The unknowable beyond and the fundamental paradox of signification are not separable phenomena of course. Together, they create the human sense of the real, and mediated under the liminal circumstances of digital networks of exchange and the secular conditions of late modernity, become the ubiquitous condition of culture. It is fecund: it is the deep sense of the fertile universe exceeding its own boundaries and invading our attempts to similarly exceed language. In making our continual attempts to exceed language, as we do in explicitly aesthetic modes of representation, we have begun to trip over into that state intentionally. We are deliberately paradoxical. This intent is evident in the example of virality that is at the origin of culture. That virality was necessary to the spreading of the virtualising potential of the originary
sign. It is therefore not surprising that viral exchange via the digitally mediated horizontal mode we label "meme" carries with it the post-postmodern tendency toward a return to the parsimony of ostensivity. Ostensive gestures have the broadest syntactic availability, and as individuals introduce paradigmatic information during their exchange, a paradoxical superfluity of meaning emerges. The minimal container of the ostensive gesture is appropriated and deployed during later acts of representation on scenes that in turn become the basis for still further processes of representation that grow in complexity, as do the resultant modes of cultural exchange.

When the individual participants in such a community are "jacked in" to the "network," they are linked one to one, and one to many, just as they are in any community. However, this potential is realised with novel facility and scale via digital communication technologies, and the meme by virtue of its popular definition is understood to exceed its historical precedents in and of the contagion with which it spreads. This potential we group together under the aegis "virality," and in this discussion, I demonstrate an example in which the latency of the material that "goes viral" is attributable to its minimal ostensive intent.

The originary mobility of the sign permits such parsimony to become the catalyst for large-scale exchange and appropriation popularly referred to as memish ("meme"-ish). It would be irresponsible to claim that all instances of memish virality are the kinetic outcome of an ostensive container, but my enquiry into this originary pattern is intended less as a proof for a universal explanation as to the circumstances of all "memes," and more as an exploration of how it is that the originary hypothesis can permit us to explain the viral spread of individual instances of material culture through human interaction that we popularly understand to be "meme"-etic. In establishing the originary and scenic parameters to particular circumstances of virality, we can thereby expose the machinery of a broader set of cultural circumstances, which in their richness display how it is that the participants in the network perform a reflexive engagement with the mimetic impulse.

Taken to its endgame, this hypothesis suggests that the ironic mode of engagement unfolding through memes—frequently parodic, but unerringly polysemic—takes advantage of the uncanny dimension of contemporaneous cultural emergences to promote a pulling back from the mimetic impulse. In other words, these are typically irenic gestures; gestures of deferral, and these are individuals demonstrating a sensibility associated with a novel set of cultural circumstances. In doing so, they challenge us to find a position for this activity on the continuum created by the delineation of popular from high culture set down by Gans, who writes:

"Popular culture takes advantage of the world of representation to take revenge on reality, whereas high culture never loses sight of the fact that the originary function of representation is the preservation of the community through sacrifice ("Popular")."

If we accept Gans's premises, it is possible to observe that in appropriating an instance of popular culture, altering it and rendering by virtue of some artifice or other the renewal of the original artefact for further activity of exchange, the participants in the meme are positioned between the conditions of popular and high culture. Indeed, irretrievably so, since on the one hand the promotion of the meme takes its revenge on reality by contributing to the volatility of its spread; whilst on the other, it comments on this very action and promotes the reflexivity that might turn our collective attention toward the community itself. The key, then, is the intervention of the agency of the participants who do not permit the circumstances of the original act of representation to go untested, but instead remediate these circumstances as expressly individual. The participants in the sudden community that forms up around the circumstances of the meme show their willingness to be part of yet apart from the mass of individuals that perform the assemblage that is the meme. Here, we see in evidence the intentional paradoxicality, and the ambivalence— the inbetweeness—that I have previously argued is a primary feature of the post-postmodern sensibility.(7)

The Context of Ai Wei Wei’s Leg-Gun Meme

I would like to introduce key biographical information before expanding on the circumstances of the Leg-Gun meme. Section IX of this paper offers extended biographical notes about Ai for the interested reader.
Ai is a Chinese contemporary artist and activist who is openly critical of the Chinese government. He comments in particular on the issue of human rights abuses and takes advantage of digital modes of communication to reach a global audience. He gained large scale attention for his participation in the successful proposal for the famous "Bird’s Nest" (see figure 2) design of the Beijing Olympic stadium (2008), on which he collaborated with renowned Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron during 2003—though he would later adopt a critical attitude toward the stadium, and argue that it was part of the general pattern of deception associated with the Olympics, during which China presented to the world a "pretend smile."

In typical fashion, Ai drove the point home with commentary on his blog and published photographs of his opinion in his social media, such as his series of photographs, entitled "Fuck Off," that capture him "flipping the bird" at Chinese government buildings during the period around the Beijing Olympics. This is, itself, a reference to the "Middle Finger" meme.

His next major work was Sunflower Seeds, which opened at the Tate Modern in October 2010 and consisted in 100,000,000 individual hand crafted porcelain seeds, arranged as a very large, thick rectangular layer on the floor of the Tate’s Turbine Hall ("Ai Weiwei’s Sunflower Seeds"). Audiences were invited to interact with the seeds, to walk upon them, play with them and be immersed in them with no restriction.

His passport was taken from him after an 81 day period of incarceration in 2011, but far from restricting his activities, this has only led to a heightening of his status and an invigoration of his work which has taken on a new authenticity as commentary on both Chinese and global conditions of culture.(8) He works with sculpture, photography, audio, video, and site-specific installations, employing simple forms and methods from conceptual and Minimal art, and deploying traditional furniture, ancient pottery, and daily objects in ways that question cultural values and political authority.

His recent work continues to engage with ongoing investigation into the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan
earthquake, and his detention and continual surveillance by Chinese authorities. He blogged frequently from 2006-2009, when his blog was closed down after vigorous and repeated criticism of the Chinese government, but he transitioned rapidly to Twitter and Instagram through this period, and posts to both platforms to the present day. His prodigious body of art has recently been represented in a twenty year retrospective entitled "Ai Weiwei: According to What?" which began in Japan in 2009 and was adapted for exhibition in 2012 at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington and progressed to major galleries throughout the USA through to 2014. It was updated over time to include more recent pieces including fibreglass models that portray his incarceration in 2011, and installations constituted by large numbers of ceramic crabs, bicycles, and stools. He has also recently exhibited a range of works at Alcatraz in the US and Blenheim Palace in the UK.

His work consistently incorporates aesthetic engagement with the paradoxical sense of a singular, protean mass made up of many individuals, and explores this moment via freighted symbols derived from the material culture of China. His oeuvre appears to be shaped by attempts to gain attention, responding to the media through which it realises publicity and in this way geared toward staging of spectacles that will command a larger audience than that typically dedicated to the consumption of works associated with the high cultural paradigm of art. He sets about contrasting historically and geographically delineated contexts of culture in order to generate comment, and the Leg-Gun Meme reflects this. He integrates the minimalism of an embodied, ostensive mode of delivery with his allusion to the high cultural format of ballet, and a paradigm heavily freighted with historical information. Paradoxically, his ostensive gesture intends the complexity generated by the reference. This effect is doubled, since the delivery adopts a popular photographic mode, but is not simply aligned with the popular because the pattern of consumption that becomes viral in the format of the meme demands interaction.

As such, the Leg-Gun meme offers a convenient example of a minimal ostensive gesture. It is uncanny, in that it takes the leg to be a gun, and into the bargain is mimicry of mimesis itself: a paradoxical non-stance (pardon the pun). Who, after all, really needs to use their leg as a gun, when the fingers and extended arm will do quite nicely? No, the inconvenience of the gesture shows us that this is both ostensive and reflexive, whereby the extra step in the precession of simulated gestural behaviour takes the observer beyond minimal, monistic ostensivity and into the metamodern domain of oscillation between the pointing toward, and the pointing toward the pointing toward, ad nauseam.

Each appropriation of the gesture follows suit, maintaining the surfeit of monism that seems to accompany the initiating intent. But what unfolds is a personalised gesture, as it must be, for to participate in the meme individuals are compelled to either mimic it in an embodied fashion, or create a representation that is recognisably mimetic of the model. The initial patterns of appropriation reinvigorate the originary circumstances of the artefact in what will build to propagate mimetic contagion on the scale of the meme, by making much of an ostensive potential that grows to become the more broadly realised condition of its humour/uncanny effect. In other words, the basis for the potency of the virality that subsequently emerges is both maintained in the gestures that follow, and commented upon in their remediation. This Ai encourages by remediating those who mimic the gesture, "regramming" their mimetic behaviour, and putting in place a further phase of intervention that becomes the real catalyst for the meme. This synthesis of the mimetic pattern of behaviour would not authenticate the meme in the usual circuits of culture, where such plastic intervention would itself become lampooned. The "authenticity" of memes is crucial, and where they are discovered to have been deliberately propagated they quickly atrophy, since to align oneself with the farce of intended virality is to naively participate in the vertically anointed hierarchical structure of the popular.

Celebrities, for example, if discovered to have set about generating virality are lampooned for their sophomoric intent. The followers of Ai’s Instagram account are not participating in the popular with such directness, however, and instead are complicit with the agency of a celebrity artist who is both dissident and activist. His status is generated by the attention he deliberately commands as a celebrity does, but his broadly recognised achievements under the high cultural paradigm of art, and his genuinely heroic public presence, intervene to calibrate this celebrity. The effect is such that Ai is permitted to occupy the centre of our attention without being subject to the usual pattern of prehumiliation to which a celebrity exposed. For example, his first works to gain a broader attention were exercises in experimental conceptualism: The Coca Cola Urn (1994); and Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995). In the former, Ai emblazoned a Han Dynasty urn
with the Coca Cola logo in red lettering, in the latter he was filmed dropping and destroying a Han Dynasty urn. He is able to play the clown, to destroy sacred objects associated with Chinese history, and maintains his heroic status as a celebrity would not. One imagines that Jacky Chan would avoid such a course of action out of fear of public derision. Mind you, if Ai were to burn the American flag, a different reaction could be assured, and so this license is not extended indefinitely, but constrained by the parameters of his "cause." These observations invite reflection on Gans's hypothesis that celebrity adds to the secular scenicity of modernity "a supplement of sacred presence" that operates on "a supplementary scene of interaction" ("The Last Celebrity"). Thus, Ai's actions fall outside of the usual constraints on agency, and this is realised as he commands attention on such an appended scene of interaction. However, his public presence adopts a mode of sacrality that extends beyond the prehumiliated domain of the relatively inconsequential celebrity and into the world directly via his status as artist and dissident.

In his oeuvre of works we see a pattern of performances and stagings on scenes of culture that are aesthetically framed, and whose prehumiliated status seems to be acknowledged by the artist from the outset. These are quite definitely a product of globalised conditions of culture, and function according to the logic of a digitally networked audience-as-community.

**Conclusion**

There is a crucial discovery to be made about cultural exchange under conditions of late modernity in the viral patterning we associate with the "meme," and this is revealed through originary inquiry. The willing assemblage of the participants in the meme shows us that the secularity of digital networks relies upon a scenicity that holds forth the necessity for some supplement of sacred presence that is reflected in the popular mode—thus the agency of the collective is corroborated by the individuals who take up the originary artefact and remediate it, leaving their mark, and demonstrating their sense of the sacred need for the community to be maintained. If the digital scene is a secular one, it is in keeping with modernity, where growing connectivity is characterised by immediacy, by suddenness, and the speed of this moment is the speed of loss. As Eshelman has argued, this has been realised in the growing success of the paradigm of ostensivity: monism. But as the metamodernists suggest, this monism is very rapidly consumed to become the oscillation that results from processes of remediation.

If, however, there is some redemption to be discovered here it is in reflexivity that marks the viral speed and scale of exchange that is feasible under such conditions, whereby the likes of Ai Weiwei can escalate what is, in the end, the irenic intention of his gesture in the Gun-Leg Meme, whose convenient ostensivity reminds us that the originary intention was shared as a gesture of deferral, to prevent violence and promote peace.

**Extended Biographical Notes on Ai Weiwei**

Ai grew up during the Cultural Revolution, when a child's education was primarily made up of working in the fields and studying the Little Red Book. The utopian socialism of this period is central to his work, but is also strongly influenced by the plight of his father, the poet Ai Qing, who was labelled an "enemy of the people" in 1957 just after Ai was born when he criticised the regime during the first Anti-Rightist Campaign. Before his political dehabilitation, Qing was a leading intellectual and supporter of the Chinese communist project. As a result, his family of five was sent to a prison farm, and his father made to endure:

- daily political humiliations, manual labour, re-education, and due to his particular fame and influence was assigned the most humiliating tasks. Ai Weiwei was too young to help, but he vividly recalls watching his father scrub the public toilets to nearly immaculate cleanliness. (Ai Weiwei's Blog xvii-xviii).

After the progenitors of the Cultural Revolution—the "Gang of Four"—were imprisoned, the family returned to the very liberal Beijing of 1976. Ai learned to draw, at which he excelled, and in 1978 enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy and participated in the so called Democracy Wall. This was a wall on which large posters were placed that commented on public affairs—its use was encouraged during the demise of the Gang of Four, but later became the site for growing calls for political change toward a more democratic
regime. This led to severe punishment of the supporters and activists, and the result greatly upset Ai, who went on to participate in Stars from 1979, a loosely defined group of artists who resisted the prescribed dogmatic realism of the preceding decade and left the country as soon as the opportunity emerged.

In 1981 he move to the USA where he enrolled in the Parsons School of Design with a scholarship where his remarkable technical skills set him apart and he was exposed to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, the two most influential artists on his work. He quickly dropped out after failing art history and losing his scholarship, but later claimed he was dissatisfied with feeling removed from the real world of art by the school. Instead, he participated in the art scene, making an income by doing manual labour, and obsessively attending art shows. He inhabited an East Village apartment that became a gathering place for Chinese expatriate artists and intellectuals, and while Ai exhibited few works of his own, he was immersed in the American cityscape with its cultures of resistance and creation for over a decade. This is evidenced now, as he obsessively photographed the period in a movement toward journaling his experience that is reflected in his later oeuvre of work. A small selection of the many thousands of photographs were exhibited in 2010 in Beijing and New York as Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983–1993. In one of these photographs you can see Wiewei with beat poet Allen Ginsberg. They became acquainted after a poetry reading where Ginsberg read out several poems about China—Ginsberg later travelled to China and met Ai Qing.

On his return to China, Ai became a central figure in the avant-garde Beijing art scene, known as the Beijing East-Village, and helped author a series of underground publications, the Black, Grey and White "Cover Books" that gained cult status for their reflexive content, a new element in the Chinese art scene where self-analysis was alien. These emerged from 1994 onward, and Ai’s engagement with experimental conceptualism was stimulated through this context resulting in his iconic works, The Coca Cola Urn (1994), Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995) and a photograph that lampoons the tourist gaze depicting Lu Qing, Ai Weiwei’s wife, lifting her skirt in 1994 to mark the five-year anniversary of the student movement that culminated at Tiananmen Square.

Ai went on to establish and expand spaces that facilitate contemporary art throughout China during the 1990s and 2000s, and build his oeuvre into the context of architecture, designing his well-known Beijing residence and studio based on a photograph of Wittgenstein’s Stonborough house. He established an atelier called FAKE Design in 2003 (pronounced Fuck in Chinese) and went on to complete over seventy projects throughout China.

Works Cited


Notes

1. The term "network" is applicable here, though used sparingly and largely replaced by the originary concept of the "scene" in this discussion due to the presence of an ongoing, over-determined discourse around the term that relies on a confusion of technological determinism. Here, networks of technological and subjective entities are too frequently imprecisely cited as being entangled in a poorly understood and articulated set of inter-relationships. As Adrian Mackenzie argued as long ago as 2010, "[a]fter a decade of heavily network-centric social, cultural, organizational, and mathematical network theory, there are reasons to begin to approach networks a little more diffidently. While it exhorts attention to relations, network theorizing can deanimate relations in favor of a purified form of networked stasis" (9). An analysis of this entanglement will no doubt form a very useful future engagement for Generative Anthropology, wherein it might be successfully argued that the scene and scenicity offer a less cluttered, parsimonious lens through which to view phenomena typically clustered around and under the term network. (back)

2. Section IX of this paper offers extended biographical notes about Ai Weiwei. (back)

3. Meme in this discussion refers to the general g category of phenomena popularly referred to by the label "internet meme", unless otherwise designated. (back)

4. My previous article on this topic conducts a broader exposition of the post postmodern conditions outlined here, see "Victimary Thinking, Celebrity and the CCTV Building." (back)

5. See pp2-6 of Eshelman’s (2008) Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism. (back)

6. For a fuller discussion of this relation, see pp4-5 and pp30-33 of Eshelman’s (2008) Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism. Eshelman’s analysis of différance and its connection to cinematic time shows a very interesting link to Derrida and digital disturbances of the linear flow of temporality-as-history. (back)

7. See "Victimary Thinking, Celebrity and the CCTV Building." (back)

8. After the completion of this essay, Ai’s passport was reissued on July 22, 2015. (back)
In this first part of the article the aim is to provide the reader with an anthropoetic key to Wordsworth's poem. Whether the attempt to unlock opens it up to a justifiable interpretation your assessment of the value of the key must decide. It has already been tested on works of Geoffrey Chaucer and Jorge Luis Borges (Wright, 2005, 2007).

There is a common habit of referring to the poem as Wordsworth's 'great ode.' Take Emerson's characterization of it as 'The high water-mark of intellect in this age' (Emerson, 1983, 928) and Thomas Noon Talfourd's declaration that it is 'the noblest piece of lyric poetry in the world,' 'a rainbow linking infancy with the realms of blessedness beyond the grave' (Talfourd, in his essay 'The Genius and Writings of Wordsworth,' 1820). For Coleridge the task of the poet was 'to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years has rendered familiar' (Coleridge, 1816, 86). For Gerard Manley Hopkins, after his reading of the ode, concluded that Wordsworth was 'one of the very few men, who have seen something that made him tremble' (Hopkins in one of his letters). There are other people who take a more openly religious line: Mary Wedd, for example, in a recent article, says that the ode resonates with us because 'we are still in touch with the fountain light'; the child may only have had 'a fleeting vision,' she adds, but 'there is a greater power that is everlasting' (Wedd, 1996, 156). And from Father J. Robert Barth, of the society of Jesus, we get the expected assertion that the ode bears witness to 'the existence of a reality that is ideal, eternal, and the true dwelling-place of the human spirit' (Barth, 2002, 119).

It is the aim of this article to propose an construal of the ode, not made before, that provides a key to how it can be read with good warrant without in any way acceding to a belief in pre-existence, or, for that matter, to post-existence. This would seen to run counter to the poet's own use of the word 'immortality' in the title. One seems to be put in the position of asking the absurd question 'How can a poem about immortality, not be about it?' The venture appear doomed to contradict itself! But a principled answer can be given: whether the theory behind that answer is acceptable is what the forthcoming argument will try to establish.

I. The Idealization of Reciprocity

The interpretation is based upon the theory developed from an insight of the sociologist Alfred Schutz, one of those Jews who fled from the Nazis, finding an intellectual home at the School of Social Research in New York. At the core of his theory is the claim that a specific mutual idealization is what launches all linguistic statements. In talk, he suggests, we reach across the differences in understanding between us (differences that Wilhelm von Humboldt, together with many others, insisted upon, Humboldt, 1999 [1836], 63) by performing what he called an 'Idealization of Reciprocity' (Schutz, 1962: 11-12). Given the lack of fit between our own sensory and conceptual selections from the flows of the real around and within us and the selections of others, Schutz concluded that the first mutual move in a linguistic act was to get a rough-and-ready convergence of our perspectives in order that the speaker, who believes that he or she has an improving update to offer the hearer on the portion of the real in question, may bring it about. We couldn't update the other in our dialogue unless there was a measure of overlap in the process; we would otherwise
be talking, as we say, at cross purposes. After all, we are trying to tweak the other's perspective so that our purposes come closer into line as regards future action together. If we value, even love the other, we must ideally aim—to use phrases of Ian Dennis's—at 'a fulfilment of all promises,' at 'managing and refining' our desire, to get it impossibly as near as to being the same desire. As Dennis says, there is joy to be had if we can 'break down the boundaries between self and other, humanity and nature' (Dennis, 2010).

It is worth noting that Humboldt's insistence on differences of understanding between persons has been given some current empirical support by the neuroscientist Blair Armstrong of the Basque Centre on Cognition, Brain and Language, who has been able to show that brains respond uniquely to words, such that identification of persons via such brain events is precise enough to provide a substitute for fingerprinting (Armstrong 2015).

II. The imagined singularity of 'the Referent'

So how, according to Schutz's analysis, do we arrive at this partial convergence? Why, by acting in imagination as if we have already agreed on the 'referent,' as the linguists call it. Knowing perfectly well that we do not perfectly match in our referential selections, we collaborate in assuming for the nonce that we have already picked out what we call 'the same thing' or 'the same person' or 'the same self.' To put it more simply, of a portion of the real we are homing in on, we take for granted that we are confronting 'the same entity.' We are both counting an ill-defined region of the real up to one. You can say that we are digitalizing it. Nothing seems more natural than to believe in the universal application of the linguistic trick, that is, that what lies about us is, as familiarly say, everything. But because of the Humboldtian differences we have—note the first verb in this phrase—we take for granted that 'the same entity,' the 'subject' of our statement, lies before us in a pure and timeless logical singularity. We are misled by the presence of the so-far-existing utal identifications that we habitually make, and have to make to speak at all, and so move on in an unnoticed slide, to equating to believing that all can be counted. We do not notice that the word 'count' curiously has two meanings, to enumerate ('one, two, three. . .) and to matter ("That doesn't count for me"), as if there was nothing dubious about thus blurring the logical and the motivational.

There really isn't one, we only take for granted that there is 'one' there. So much in the past seems to confirm it. Once the match of 'referent' is taken to be mutually achieved, then the Speaker can add the clue to the new adjustment of that match, the so-called 'predicate' of the statement, which effects the transformation (the word 'predicate' incidentally, comes from the Latin 'praedicere' meaning to proclaim or to preach — in adding a predicate, you are proclaiming a change in the language). The presumed 'certainty' of the mutual fix is shown in need of alteration. There was a custom among philosophers of the past to call the Statement a 'proposition'—one can see how appropriate a name this is because the Speaker, in spite of entering into the imagined pure agreement with the Hearer, is really only proposing a change in the fit of a word to the real. I have already said elsewhere that, although both Speaker and Hearer from the moment of utterance and acknowledged understanding are content to move the assumed singularity of reference along to the next shared focus of attention, this 'singularity' is really only a kind of catalyst needful for speech to take place. However, in our convenient and optimistic habit, we cannot help believing it has joined all the other 'things' we can count in the world.

Etymology gives us an unexpected insight here. So many of the words that we cannot help using in this process reveal a recurrent theme. There are many words that appear to home in on countable elements in our ordinary life which owe their origin to Old Saxon and Old Norse words that involve the two phonemes that our orthography without distinction indicates with 'th': ð [the voiced form, using one's vocal cords], as in 'the' and 'that,' and θ [the unvoiced form], as in 'moth' and 'thin.' Look at this list: the, they, their, theirs, them, thou, thy, thee, thine, this, these, that, those, then, thence, there, thither, thing, think, thought, thus, and several derivatives (e.g. thereby). In the meanings of all of them lurks the notion of a mutually identifiable singularity or singular group.

Interesting that where there is really nothing sensory to go on, scientists faced with the blankness of a black hole have to fall back on what the linguistic process demands if a statement is to be informative, for what do they say lies within a black hole? Since the only thing they have left to go on is the blank logical category that has been hiding under the dialogue all the time, they call it 'the Singularity'—a playful sleight-of-hand if
There ever was one, right in the middle of their scientific rationality!

That we everyday speakers are sensitive to such distinctions is shown in the way we stress our words: to the implied question 'Where is the cat?' we will reply with emphasis on the new knowledge ('The cat is on the mat'); to the question 'What is on the mat?', we will reply with emphasis on the linguistic predicate ('The cat is on the mat,' an example that makes the grammatical subject the linguistic predicate). Naturally we want to speak louder where the new knowledge is being conveyed.

To clear up a minor point: these are not necessarily the grammatical 'subject' and 'predicate.' In 'The cat sat on the mat,' the cat is the grammatical subject and sat on the mat is the grammatical predicate. But the actual linguistic subject and predicate as regards 'what is to be idealized as mutually agreed' and 'what performs the tweaking, thus updating the hearer' depend on what question is at issue: if the question is 'Where is the cat?,' then the grammatical subject and predicate correspond to the linguistic subject and predicate, but if the implied question is 'What is on the mat?' then the state of the mat is the linguistic subject, the focus of the idealized pre-agreement, and 'the cat' is the linguistic predicate, the new knowledge that changes the Hearer's take on the real. It all depends on what question is deemed to be asked. One could even imagine the unlikely question 'What is the spatial relation of the cat to the mat?' (where both the cat and the mat are idealized common identifications, the linguistic subjects) and 'on' thus being the linguistic predicate, what the Hearer didn't know. An early 20th-century logician, John Cook Wilson, was the first to draw attention to this distinction (Wilson, 1926, I, 123-6), and by noting the dependence of meaning on the implied question, although he did not use 'linguistic' as his distinguishing adjective, but 'logical.' To have used 'logical' now would have hidden the Schutzian trick inside logic, for the strictures and structures of logic, we can now see, are within the mutually imagined character of the Idealization of Reciprocity (for a thorough discussion of the requirement in pure logic that we never refer to the real, see pp. 171-88 in Wright 2005; pursuing the intricacies of logic is a wonderful and justifiable activity, but to treat it as if any of its symbols actually referred to the structure of the real is to move into fantasy).

III. The hidden mismatch and its relation to motivation

What is hidden under counting is the mutual imagining of singularity, the convenient temporary forgetting of the rival desires (and fears) involved in it. Consider how odd this is considering that we would not be picking out that portion of the real if we were not interested in it. However, as Aristotle pointed out, what is six apples for the seller may not be for the buyer. Conflict hides in the very process of a linguistic statement. Eric Gans quotes Roy Rappaport on this point: it is a 'formal act . . . not entirely encoded by the performers' (Gans's emphasis); this mutual imagining is a sharing,—a 'collective act,' a 'ritual imposing on those taking part' (Gans, 2008, 187, Rappaport, 1999, 24; see also Erving Goffman on the social aspect of language, Fine and Manning, 2003, 55; Alfred Schutz influenced Goffman). Gans, reflecting on whether the sacred and language are coeval, says that, if they are so, they 'are constructed round a sacred center' (188), and, this theory must maintain, that centre is Schutz's mutual Idealization. Gans's word 'imposing' is significant here, for the idealized 'ritual' of language is being entered into on the supposition that it will lead to the ultimate happiness of all bodies, and all bodies ought then to adhere to it: yet the purpose of the rule is to achieve the ends of the body's desire, so the ritual is always open to a suggested correction from a body of the rule's criteria of application—each statement thus being an attempt at an ironic updating of the existing 'custom.'

Consider how democratic this view of language is, for any speaker has the right to propose an updating of the shared word, which makes the 'imposing' a far from hierarchical one. Those who are keen to extend surveillance say 'If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear!' but this neatly forgets that the better update may lie with the person being spied upon and not with those spying. It is not just 'privacy' that Big Brother's watchers invade: they may be committing an 'original sin' of not being aware that the other they are watching can surprisingly point out something about them that they did not know. Theirs, of course, is an attempt to close down the novelty of the Statement.

The focus of so-called 'common' interest is thus irredeemably ambiguous. What has been counted up to one can become multiple at any time. This is a stubborn problem. To go straight to the central difficulty: Ask
'When two people who are bound to each other by human ties of affection and loyalty discover the failure of the idealization, do the rivalries thus revealed have to be regarded as open to resolution only by sacrifice, by one or both? The failure can be slight, in which case a comic outcome can be accepted; the ambiguity comes out as amusing, even perhaps for the one who suffers most. On the other hand, the situation can be tragic, as it was for Charles Dickens's Pip in *Great Expectations* when Magwitch makes his startling revelation. It must be reiterated that all this applies not just to 'two people,' but to the rivalries between the 'individual' and the 'authorities.'

**IV. Faith and the 'dark conclusion'**

So faith can't be left out. Faith brings the dark conclusion with it, the inescapable risk that, however 'sincere' or 'loyal' or 'commonsensical' or 'objective' or 'trusting' or 'truthful' you think you have been, the brute existence that lies behind a familiar word can break through your so-far-comfortable sorting of the world and gave you—and perhaps your hearer, perhaps someone so far treated as 'an authority'—a salutary shock. It is, of course, a shock to one's selfhood, a proof that selfhood is not solely yours to define. Conflict and the ways perhaps to resolve it should become the salient concern for both. It is faithful that both are then challenged to be. Faith is thus a very human quality, not divine at all; this is what gives it its 'sacredness.' It is thus an inescapable consequence of this theory that every-'thing' you have objectively identified, including your-'self,' not only remains open to change but also owes its 'certainty,' not to some overarching 'truth,' but to human faith. All those people who confidently shout about the 'certainty of truth' are not aware that they are really making a hidden appeal, not to some natural, or even supernatural origin, but to whatever faith we human beings have managed to maintain together.

This is all very well, for you may suspect that this argument is really playing a trick on you to get you to accept a sceptical argument down the road, and scepticism, many philosophers and theologians will tell you, has been blown out of the water long ago. This is because it brings the horror of 'Relativism' with it, where you are being seduced into believing that there is no such thing as truth or certainty, that the world doesn't consist of recognizable things, that everything is a dream you are having, and that everyone can make up his or her own rules! He may have told you, for example, that the last pope, on taking up his post, said that relativism was the greatest enemy of the church. If it were true, said Pope Benedict, no one could rely on anyone else! And there is a surfeit of philosophical books that set out to prove why scepticism is a self-defeating argument. But the objectors are overlooking an essential consequence of the theory here proposed: that it cannot be egoistic in any way because one's very self is up for updating too! Don't you readily admit that others can tell you something about yourself that is entirely new to you and which, henceforth, you may have uncomfortably to accept? Hardly a tenet of an egoistic ethic! And then it has at its core, not Relativism, but a mutual pledge of faith: this is not 'The Theory of Relativity' à la Einstein, but the *Theory of SOCIAL Relativity.*

But the argument is not yet over: its core feature has not yet been mentioned. There is something that Alfred Schutz did not explore even though it was an implied consequence of what he said. Some philosopher friend has probably told you that the 'little mutual play-acting' has trust hidden in it, that you couldn't speak at all unless you trusted your partner in dialogue. That is what 'granted' means in the key phrase *taken for granted.*

Why yes, of course. But one can ignore, as Schutz did, the 'taken for' in his own formulation. 'Granted' does mean *allowed, permitted, exposed to no expectation of opposition of will and desire from the other:* however, 'to take for granted' means *to accept an illusion of real agreement as a perfect agreement, an apparent blending of wishes with another as a perfect fusing,* as if there were possible in the future, as if there were an *item single in the same way out in front of you both.* What this means is that there is a bit of *play* in every statement, 'play' both as looseness, and 'play,' that is, *dramatic acting,* which has to be done seriously if it is to work. It is a matter of keeping a straight face though you both know perfectly well that both of you are working on judgements that are not quite the same. Better as you speak, like Groucho Marx, to wink at your partner in language, the reason being that there can never be a perfect 'reciprocity.'

One oddity of the position objectors to this theory hold arises of the fact that one can ask them 'How do
would you distinguish between two persons in dialogue holding your view (that they are making mutual reference to real singular entities) and two people performing the singularity notion (knowing full well that it is only the would-be convergence of their differing Humboldtian hypotheses). It is exactly like asking them what the difference is between a pair who believe in Santa Claus and a pair who, in all earnestness, go through the motions of believing in him (as one sees in good actors) precisely because it is a poetic acting out of the generosity that ought to characterize Christmas. To answer the question above, then, one cannot avoid bringing up the place of faith in the language pact, which is, blatantly, what the shouters of "Relativism!" do not and, given the present set-up of their argument, cannot do.

So, strictly speaking, although there is no denying that, since we are in the middle of an awesome real, capable of giving all sorts of surprises, good and bad, the 'things' and 'selves' that we so complacently 'count' from it are never exactly certain. Therefore one has to say to those who think that this is a solipsistic idealistic dream, it is, on the contrary, a hopefully courageous acceptance of existence: we are, as William Wordsworth put it, open to feeling the 'blank misgivings of a creature / Moving about in worlds not realized'(ll. 149-50). It is insidiously easy to vanish comfortably inside 'the' observer that is 'one's' 'self' and drop its unknown realness from the running of 'one's' life. All this particularly when we have to hypothesize a singularity in 'the' self to speak at all! Our continuing practical successes in the world drive the hypothetical foundation of the Statement out of sight. Our mutual motivations, once carried through, seem to have nothing to do with the 'identification' of entities: we happily talk in logic of 'satisfying' equations without considering the significance of the word. The unethical move is to glorify the partial success with the aura of eternal 'singularity,' a move which hides the part that faith plays in the process, faith that has always to be alert to the risks of identification.

One can now add to the remark above about this being 'The Theory of Social Relativity': it is also, not 'The Theory of Everything à la Hawking, but The Theory of Every 'Thing.'

I saw on television a month or two ago a scene in a film where a little girl got very annoyed with her father, who was supposed to be pretending to be 'the Big Bad Wolf,' because he was giggling while he was doing it. She knew perfectly well what 'playing' means, what deliberately and mutually taking one thing for another involves. She didn't for a moment believe that he was a wolf, but he had forgotten what a pretence that wasn't an act of deceit could be. Those parents who try to convince their children that Santa Claus is real are also making a crude mistake, the reason being that children are quite capable of playing this great Christmas game seriously, consequently, as was said earlier, enjoying together the myth of worldwide, generous, familial love. This is also how to play the Language-Game of 'God.'

Children are gradually initiated into language. Faced with the bewildering becoming of the flux of bodily experience, he or she is daily encouraged into, as we say, identifying 'things' and 'persons' and 'selves' in the world. Children soon find out that words, in T. S Eliot's lines in 'The Four Quartets,'

. . . strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

But child and parent enter into the Idealization of Recipocity with a will; after all it is what everybody else is doing even though no one is directly aware of it. It surely underlies all trust, especially that between child and parent—even more so in retrospect to Wordsworth, who lost both his parents at an early age, a fact that must have intensified the Idealization for him.

Whatever is named takes on the glory—one might say 'sacredness'—of the Idealization. The real behaves as if the promises are already fulfilled, as if the boundaries of self and nature were already breached. Instead of merely playing that the words have captured the real, children at first are likely to be tempted to believe the parents that the Idealization that binds him or her in love with the parental guides, the future that appears to promise joy and not fear, hallows all that is, as we say, identified a word, from the Latin idem facere, that means to make the same. And 'making the same' is what the child does,
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation. (ll. 107-8)

V. Love

'Love'—Inevitably the word has at last surfaced in the explanation as that which, hopefully, must guide the
parent-child interaction. Ask, as Schutz did not, just what the phrase 'Idealization of Reciprocity' actually
implies—and add one of his paraphrases for it, 'the interchangeability of standpoints, the taking for granted
that, if I were in your shoes, your standpoint would seem to be the same as mine, and you and I see things
with the same typicality' (Schutz, 1962: 11-12). This inescapably means, if one is to follow it out thoroughly,
that motivations are presumed to match exactly, all desires and fears being precisely the same. This, one
can see immediately, would be an absolute love— which is not only impossible but, further, paradoxical!
The beloved other would be just a narcissistic copy of oneself. In loving other human beings you do not
wish that every one of them has precisely the same desires and fears' that you do. Love has to embrace the
fact that the other has different desires and fears; you wouldn't be talking at all unless they did! But, openly
paradoxically, you both have then to go on the impossible idealization of a single common end for your
communication if love is what has to be shown. Schutz was nearer to the state of the case when he used
the word 'reciprocity,' for that implies give-and-take, not a perfect identifying of the motivations of each in
the social dyad.

VI. Play

Incidentally, the relevance of the word 'paradoxical' does not entail that we have moved into the realm of
the irrational, merely into that of play. One could say of every statement that it requires the need to take
the so-far 'literal' as newly 'metaphorical.' One is reminded of Gregory Bateson's definition of play:

These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand
would denote. (Bateson, 1978, 152)

On observing monkeys at play in San Francisco Zoo, he noted that a playful nip was not regarded as an act
of aggression precisely because the 'attacking' monkey had a special grin on its face. Both meanings are
simultaneously present: it is thus acceptable to use the word 'paradoxical' in this context without falling into
any irrational trap. We can enter into the hypothesis of a perfect resolution of all our differences that the
Idealization of Reciprocity is supposed to cancel out without losing sight of those irremediable differences.
This is where the too logically-minded fall into error, especially those for whom poetry, fiction, music—
indeed, all that is aesthetic—are to be regarded as suspect as against the certainty of the 'Objective,' the
'True,' etc., and for whom play is trivial, childish, immaterial—at its worst frivolous. This is where to remind
oneself of Daniel Barenboim's strange advice: that music should be given as much attention and investment
in education as mathematics and English. To neglect the significance of play is to be lacking in faith. Music
is the prime example of the pleasures and risks of play, for at every step through time it exhibits the familiar
and the unfamiliar together, each caprice bespeaking obedience to what went before, yet each repetition is
revealed as novel. So too for the Statement. One can, of course, add Drama to Barenboim's list of the
essential elements of education. Those who take a too-utilitarian view of education need to bring
themselves up to date. Look through the poem to see on how many occasions Wordsworth refers to music.

When the Idealization comes to reveal its impossibility, then the sacrifice of some so-far-cherished desire, as
we have just seen, is required by faith. Trust, which at its worst complacently believes the other will do just
as has been promised, is utterly inadequate; at the emergence of the unexpected mismatch of purposes it
can only see the discord as betrayal (as the surveillance police believe). What a trap for any child who has
not come to accept the 'cracks' and 'strains' of common speech as surprises that are inevitable if one is to
love, and consequently that possible challenges to deep-seated desires must be courageously anticipated.
The child, when it wants to amuse itself, may make all its mimeses the centre of its attention, as
Wordsworth emphasizes ('And see the children sport upon the shore,' l.172), but we cannot possibly credit
it with a philosophical understanding of what it is doing when it plays, although Wordsworth, with irony
directed more at us and himself, calls it 'Mighty prophet! Seer blest!' (l. 115). It looks as though parents are
untrustworthy, as indeed they are, if trust is not transmuted into faith. The little girl who reproved her
To use a crude contemporary analogy, take all the advice, example and admonition from the world of the grown-up as a vast program. It would include not only all moral persuasion (and unthinking misdirection) but also the foundational social requirements of selfhood, language, gender role, class, cultural preference, regional and national identification, and so on. This is what Humboldt insisted upon in his book On Language (1999 [1836]). Apply Schutz’s principle literally, and the program transmogrifies into a rigid input identical for all. This, it is plain, is where the program analogy fails, because programs represent a pure rationality. Unlike computers, (1) all the bodies subjected to the social persuasion and conditioning interpret them differently (recall Humboldt and Armstrong), and (2) human beings have the power to suggest changes to the program, either unconsciously by the differences in their performance of the input or consciously in proposing changes in words, customs, laws, and common habits. But this is what language exists for: to allow its evolution. Tyranny fearfully resists this challenge of evolution and ends in self-defeat. Yet if the principle is applied with faith in mind—and love in heart—one finds that the ‘program’ is held as the necessary hypothesis of initial agreement that allows the newly proposed transformation of the ‘program,’ the ‘common language,’ to be democratically assessed as possibly to be generally adopted, that is, as the little girl intuitively knew, mutually played as a hypothesis should be, and not held to rigidly as some kind of mechanical necessity.

It should now be no surprise that our culture is continually exploring the ambiguous implications of robot behavior, of avatar motivation. To take one current example, that of the film Ex Machina. The engine of the plot works on the transformation of a robot that had been a perfectly obedient slave to its masters into a self-directed entity whose motivations come to be at odds with those who had commanded it—in other words, on the way to becoming human. The film can be seen as interpretable on many levels, but one key relevance here can be seen as a warning to those who believe that their own favoured ‘programs’ in life admit of no exceptions. The current television series Humans has the same form of plot, as does the new film Chappie. The robot is not supposed to interpret the daily commands as a human hearer would: it is supposed to hold to a rigidly unchangeable set of word meanings, as if Schutz’s Idealization of Reciprocity held perfect sway. Conversely, we humans hack into the ‘language program’ every time we utter a would-be informative ‘proposition.’ Consider also the allegorical message of much current fantasy of the Marvel Comics kind (the ‘Incredible Hulk,’ for example, runs on the superiority of love to the rules that, backed up with violent force, are imposed by the ‘authorities’).

Recall Schutz’s method: in order to enter into the language-game, one has to begin by behaving as if the chosen portion of the real that is to be redescribed is exactly the same for Speaker and Hearer, which becomes the ‘Subject’ of the Statement, that which is to be updated; only then can one proceed to the updating of the selection of that portion by the ‘Predicate’ (for the value of the Joke as an analogy, see Wright, 2005). For this to succeed, it is not blind trust that must underlie the hypothesis of a common ‘Subject,’ but faith which at base countenances the inevitable risk. It should not then be difficult for a child, should it, to enter into the Play structure of language?—But are parents able to?

**Part II - Unlocking the Ode**

Now to use the key (as you will have noted we have already made a trial of the key: see the quotation above, ‘the blank misgivings of a creature / Moving about in worlds not realized’ [ll. 149-50]).

Let us use it first on the actual title: Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. It is the word ‘immortality’ that egregiously stands out. The word ‘intimations,’ with its connotation of reliable, intuitive clues, does nothing to qualify the openly old-religious character of the word. Yet there is a way of reading this poem that does transform what Wordsworth would have thought—and his presumed readers would have thought—about immortality. In the 21st century the notion is not to be naively accepted in its usual sense. What is to be retained is what has led to its use, and what is retained is not an aggressive, anti-religious element such as an old-fashioned atheist would produce. On the contrary.

It has been seen that Schutz’s formulation cannot escape an imagined projection of a final total agreement by the two engaged in the language-game with regard to the portion of the real upon which both are
endeavouring to bring their separate perspectives to merge. And the curious question arises: Just when will this occur? (in eternity?) The degree of overlap, if we may call it such, still remains incomplete. ‘Overlap’ is not even the right word because there will be regions of the real registering in their sensation-fields to which they have given no significance, regions different for both of them! One can't draw a simple Venn diagram of two overlapping circles for this situation. The outcomes of further action, mutual or otherwise, can always indicate areas of misconception, of perhaps ironic misinterpretation the motivational significance of which can lead either to a discovery happy to both of the copartners in the game or to a shocking confrontation, leaving them as possible antagonists. Thus parent and child may, in the first case, laugh at the mismatch of their understandings; or, in the second, find themselves unexpectedly hostile to each other—the 'dark conclusion.'

The whole social 'program' comes with vast implications. It is not only a parent's mundane and present wish that is loaded into the language-game, but humble speakers have to deal with the desires and fears with which the past has ballasted the words. To quote from another of Wordsworth's poems, *The Prelude;* from a moment of guilt he came to have nightmarish thoughts and dreams (he had taken someone else's boat to enjoy a row on a lake and had hurried back home in a guilty state):

Huge and mighty forms, that do not live  
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind  
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.  
*The Prelude, Book I, lines 398-400*

This is the alarm bell that heralds awareness of the dark conclusion, that faith demands its acknowledgement of risk. It is almost as if this moment in literature sees Plato's Forms for what they are, not divine certainties, but necessary but unreliable instruments of the imagination within language, and not nightmare rigidities 'that do not live/ Like living men.' This is not to say that we are all able to react safely to its warning, for the difficulties the attempt to be faithful brings with it have just been made clear. In particular we saw that the common aim is impossible of achievement because of the imagined nature of the coincidence of our desires and fears, as well as all the obstacles listed above which arise from the temptation to take our needful mutual imagining as literal. The trap lies in the fact that an unknown element of the real conceals itself in our attempt at ideal mutual understanding and neither of us has access to it; in addition, we each have a different sensing of it. The poets Emily Dickinson and Thomas Hardy have both presented the only possible notion of heaven as something forever out of reach, an acknowledgement that the goal was imagined. To believe that all words have a secure literal meaning common to us all is to turn our playing into the equivalent of religious fundamentalism, which takes the words of the holy book at their face value, whether it be the Koran, the Upanishads, the Bible or the Book of Mormon, etc. The Idealization of Reciprocity becomes an absolute guarantee of perfectly identical motivations, as if love were the exact match of all our longings. But the very belief in that final absolute eliminates all that love is, since love knows it must cope with the dark conclusion. At its heart such a belief in an absolute is timid, and, further, ignorant of what it is to be human, of what it is to be able to talk. No wonder that it was to the 'blank misgivings' Wordsworth gave his 'thanks and praise.'

**VI. The hypothesized, the imagined**

A modern sociologist, Benedict Anderson, has called nations 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991), and the best way of grasping that is to see nations (and families) as similar to plays, in which actors maintain the dramatic world on stage by trying to harmonize their and our participation. All social life is a great drama moving through time like a Mexican wave through a crowd of spectators, though, unlike spectators, its subjects were not alive and vulnerable to injury before it reached them nor after it has passed through them. It is maintained as a play is, by participants working together, with the difference that the bodies involved really feel what is produced by the action, intended or unintended, namely the pleasure and pain, the joy and the suffering that results. As Humboldt insists:

. . . the individual's *need for assistance* drives him to combine with others, and calls for understanding through *language* so that common undertakings may be possible (Humboldt's emphasis) (Humboldt 1999 [1836], 41)
What matters is our contribution. Our only 'immortality' is the influence we have had upon the future actors of the drama and, one must add, we must try to make, in Philip Larkin's words, love be what survives of us (in the last line of his poem 'An Arundel Tomb'), although we must remember that the old-religious did make the wicked 'immortal' too, for it cannot be denied that their influence also survives them—the 'spirit' of Adolf Hitler is active, if not alive, today. Thomas Hardy was tempted to think that immortality resided only in the memories of the dead in the minds of the living (see his poem 'Her Immortality'), but it rather lies in the thoughts and actions of the living that owe their origin to the influences at work in them that the dead have bequeathed, and those are indefinably complex and subtle, and, all the more important, the living may not be consciously aware of them. When the American historian David Blight discusses the 'legacy' of the Civil War, finding it in habits of body and language, in ideology, attitudes, traditions, and more, he is exploring such influences (Blight, 2002). Raymond Tallis has also explored these 'ripples,' as he calls them, that we make, consciously or otherwise, in the scenes of the great play that succeed us (Tallis, 2015, 327-32; see also Wright, 2011, 51-60; 2014, Step 6).

It may seem odd but one can say that all utterances have this end in view, that we are in a sense speaking so that posterity will benefit. When Groucho Marx and Thomas Gray the 17th-century poet ask 'What has posterity ever done for me?' they did not realize that the final aim of all their talk was, theoretically, the happiness of posterity.

VIII. The 'spiritual'

One ought not to be distressed by the thought that after the body's death your-'self' won't survive, for it was only ever a tentative mutual selection from the real, and what really has mattered about it will go on having a chance of influencing the succeeding language-players. It was never 'individual' in the first place! Isn't that legacy really the basic ground of why we talk at all? and that is something beyond your bodily life, isn't it? So this is how the notion of individual post-existence is to be seen, not as a magical prolongation of biological life, either before birth or after death. It can comfortably called 'spiritual' if you like, as long as you see its existence as part of the ongoing great social drama; it is certainly not something supernatural even though the influence is apparently spirit-like in its 'invisibility.' The very idea of a literal bodily resurrection becomes nugatory (there is no 'nut' left, only a broken shell—the word 'nugatory' comes from the Latin for broken nutshells). Unsurprising that our primitive forebears used the idea of the dead returning to life as a poetic expression of the Idealization; the impossible future goal underpinned all they spoke. It was also an implied admission that bodies and the satisfaction of their desires are what the rules, the commandments, supposedly exist for (literal programs don't exist for the laptops).

Thus 'pre-existence' and 'post-existence' would at first seem to lie only in the particles of matter that were to become or had been the body, that is, if we stick to the human game of conceiving of matter as consisting of countable quarks or gluons or electromagnetic waves! Shakespeare makes Hamlet play with the thought that 'the noble dust of Alexander' may now be 'stopping up a bunghole' (Act V, sc. 1, lines 184-5). Thomas Hardy, in a poem on some birds singing, 'Proud Songsters,' reminds us that those birds are now but

only particles
Of earth, and air, and rain.

But, plainly, there is no identifying such remnants; the attempt is futile—even though we may, as a poetic ritual, revisit a grave or place flowers at the place of the battle or the disaster. The human identities that were fostered in those bodies by the grand program or drama or epic poem that is human life, are, not no more, but active in the influences they have upon that ongoing drama, both in the expectations of them and plans for them before they were born, and in the thoughts, feelings and actions of those they had come in contact with in their lifetime: this is the only thing their 'pre-existence' and 'post-existence' can be. The ritual actions of mourners are tributes to that influence.

IX. The nature of a play

It is worth considering what the existence of an actual play-in-performance is. If we are going to use theatrum mundi as a prime analogy, as Jaques, Hamlet or Prospero did, we ought to ask a scientist to give
an account of it. It is obviously a shared imagined projection of the Anderson type, in which actors and audience join, and it proceeds through time as any playing does. One can learn from the little girl: we seriously join in a strictly false complex of actions such that their fictive import is treated for the nonce as if it were part of our own lives, whether as actors we are producing it or as spectators are watching it. And this is no surprise, as it thus falls within Bateson's definition of Play. The next question is to ask its purpose: Are not Nation, Neighbour, Family and Individual, etc., but pieces in the game of trying to ensure that impossible future happiness, the impossible love that is the core of the Idealization of Reciprocity? Actual plays, whether on stage or screen, or part of children's fun, are fragments 'of [our] dream of human life' (l. 92), contributions to our theories of what life is and should be. No wonder Wordsworth's child 'newly learned art' of acting, of 'Imitation' (ll. 93, 108), presents actual occurrences in life, such as death, since they are our prime way of moving through and out of it.

The 'Individual' is a piece like any other part of the social program applied to a body, and, as any other feature, able to be adjusted, as long as that intended adjustment does not constitute a brainwash, a wiping out of all that produced the application of 'I' and 'Me' and the rest to the 'delicate warm motion' that is the feeling flesh. Once the infant is no longer in-fans ('not speaking'), no longer outside the symbolic universe of gestures and words that is matrix of our sense of self, he or she has become a player in the game, with a right to change the program for us all.

In the early years, the Idealization can but enhance the parents' naming of (partially) shared parts of the real. There can, for a child that is loved, be little suspicion of the dark conclusion; trust will not yet have grown into faith. No wonder then that all that is named takes on an original wonder, a wonder that can be traced to an unquestioned assurance of safety guaranteed by the parents, relations, friends—all the speakers to the child. The wonder is grounded both in the animal selections that the child has already been making for itself, the percepts that any advanced animal is enabled to make from those parts of its surroundings that produce pleasure and pain, but the additional power gained from the language (both of word, gesture, facial expression and body-language) supplied by his or her loving mentors. The 'heaven that lies about us in our infancy'(l. 67) is derived from the shared Idealization, which is inculcated with every act of teaching, from the affection which hopes to ensure the future happiness of the child, and from the fount of original newness which marks every sight and sound. It gives a special connotation to the opening sentence of St. John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.' The Idealization can now be seen as what lies behind the philosopher Bishop Berkeley's belief that God guaranteed our perception of things, although it is interesting that he allowed the Humboldtian caveat that each person perceived differently: you could say that he was one step away from Schutz's insight, held back by his old-religious commitment (Berkeley in his Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, 1713: see Luce and Jessop, 1948-51, II, 245-7, 212).

The 'shades of the prison-house' which 'begin to close upon the growing boy' (l. 68) arise from the inevitable disillusionments which the use of language produces. He moves from the narcissistic conviction that a perfect trust in his parents (and in the great social order into which he is being inducted) will guarantee his immediate happiness, moves from this blind trust to the faith that some future time will fulfill their promises and assuage his sense of loss. Some of the 'common undertakings' which Humboldt speaks of are open to being found not common; recall T. S. Eliot's lines. Yet the seemingly miraculous freshness of sensory experience retains much of its intensity, and the sense of all things named around one being blessed by the real affection of one's familial mentors is not forgotten. However, Wordsworth at first arrives at the sad verdict that the grown man loses the initial wonder at gaining and using these first words for perceptions, using singularity as an essential part of the mutual method. The very singularity of a tree, 'of many one,' and of a field, 'a single field that I have looked upon,' bring the loss of that unique wonder to mind, a wonder based on an imagined identity with others that he cannot regain, although the memory of that wonder remains—the tree and field 'speak of something that is gone' (l. 54). So the contemporary critic of the poem, John Scott, who saw this progression as a shift from 'beatitude' to 'apathy' was profoundly mistaken (see Woof, I, 827).

X. Pre-existence

All we need to do now is sift through the lines of the ode for further signs of the Idealization at work (and it
is not necessary to find every one of them, for many can be left to the reader). Take the cardinal theme on
which the understanding of the poem must turn: the core notion of pre-existence. This has always been a
problem for would-be appreciators of this poem, even for religious believers, who often give the impression
of forgivingly tolerating this quirk in a poet who can thus still be drawn into the fold of the church. Examine
these lines where pre-existence appears to be openly proposed:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar (ll. 60-2)

Why should the child (and the adult) have this sense that all the marvellous identifications that are made at
hands of our mentors 'cometh from afar'? One can now see that 'afar,' rather than meaning from a pre-
existent spiritual world where we existed with the Creator Himself means 'afar' in the sense of drawn from
the history of all the speakers of our language for whom that identification had been part of the sublime
language-game in progress, unmistakably the deliverance of all those thoughts and observations made by
our ancestors, whose mutual idealizations subtly evolved into our time. No wonder many a primitive tribe
worshipped their ancestors. It will not be a literally immortal evolution, because it will not outlive our race,
the reason being that in time our race will come to an end, and leave not a rack behind. But the great and
subtle play that is a language in its ongoing development, that exists in the interplay between speakers and
in the thoughts that accompany it, will die with the last speaker. Is that a catastrophe? People like Stephen
Hawking who want human kind to travel on forever seem to think it is, but there is no necessity to take that
view.

No wonder that we think of the identifications and our own consciousness as 'spiritual,' because they exist
only as imagined within the twists and turns of language, but that 'spirituality,' nevertheless, as was insisted
earlier, is a real performance in existing brains just as a play on a stage is, and is thus in principle is not
outside science. It cannot be because those imagined concepts are sustained by actual pleasure and pain,
joy and suffering in the bodies that are in play as they interact with the real. Our children playing 'hobbits'
and 'orcs' do not turn into 'wraiths,' except in the story! One can accept that 'the Soul' is a construct within
the language that our forebears spoke, and is one of the essential elements in that language-as-program.
Feral children, who grow up unprogrammed, without the notion of being a 'self'-reflecting single entity,' are
unable to think beyond the limits of the brain of an advanced animal. There is no logical 'singularity' in the
ability of 'an' 'eagle' to catch 'a' 'rabbit': there is only the slow infinitesimal advance of evolution at work, in
which the conditioning makes its advance through the aeons, imperceptible to us. Our 'I's' and 'Me's' come
from the past historical endeavours of our speaking tribe to home in on the flows of the real of concern to
it, and, being past, they seem to come 'from afar,' and the drama-like programming is hidden like a secret
'spiritual' plot within our actions, loving and otherwise. It is our mutual imagining that enables us to ignore
the imperceptible advance of evolution as it involves us, but its very being a performance of the
hypothetical, the imaginary, allows us to adjust to the evolution of our social life. Martin Heidegger, from a
religious perspective, saw the discovery of 'truth' as an uncovering of a secret, an alethia (Greek for 'a
bringing out of concealment' ; Richardson, 1974, 211-12); the speech and gestures of the mentors hides,
both from themselves and from the children, what historically guides them. There is a preasage of this, and
of Wordsworth's lines, in a poem of Friedrich Hölderlin's, 'Brot und Wein' (the 'they' refers to the gods):

Unperceived at first they come, and only the children
Surge towards them, too bright, too dazzling this joy enters in
So that men are afraid (trans. Daniel Whistler; see Bibliography)

[Unempfunden kommen sie erst, es streben entgegen
Ihnen die Kinder, zu hell kommtet, zu blendend das Glück,
Und es scheut sie der Mensch]

There are several places in Wordsworth's poetry where a moment of ecstatic excitement is succeeded by
guilty fear (in Book I of The Prelude see the episodes concerning the Stealing of Woodcock and of Eggs
from the Raven's Nest, and the Appropriation of the Boat). He was well aware of this succession and of its
power over him: he called it 'a dark inscrutable workmanship' (my emphasis):
Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ;
Whether her fearless visitings, or those
That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light
Opening the peaceful clouds, or she may use
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable, as best might suit her aim.

(The Prelude, Book I, 351-56)

We can see why he reserves 'The song of thanks and praise' for the 'severer interventions.'

. . . for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings (ll. 146-8)

These are 'the blank misgivings' mentioned above. The experience being recalled is that of his childhood, when the real, in its refusal to match the complacent identifications pointed out by his parents, escaped the presumed safety of them, and left him fearfully without support. These sublime failures of identification were the result, he says, of 'High instincts before which our mortal Nature / Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised' (ll. 152-3). Not 'instincts' within this theory, but the moments of dim awareness of the gaps and distortions in the program of guidance handed on to us. Here one can detect an 'original sin' in the program; compare the claim by John Taylor Coleridge that in the Ode's glorification of the child, Wordsworth had 'forgotten original sin' in the child! (James Taylor Coleridge, 1821: see Woof, 2001, 807).

There is in the recollection of these moments of guilt a sense of the human source of the 'sacredness' of the love that should guide us in our own use of language. Some of those failures of identification, nevertheless, are the source of the body's proposals to change the language, of the very impulse to speak.

There is a certain pathos in the poem where Wordsworth seems to actually attribute 'blessedness' to the child, but it is at a moment where he is seeing the child as it grows, provoking 'the years to bring 'the inevitable yoke' of being adult:

Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life. (ll. 131-3)

He is allowing himself to pity the child whose strivings are to join the supposed success of the parent in moving about in the 'realized' world. Yet in this very envy of the 'innocent' state he is forgetting the risk of faith to which the child must be awakened. Yet there is an ambiguity here because the child's new response to the sensory spectacle around it contains the very freshness that can advance the language. We have all been amazed and amused by children interpreting words in unexpected ways. Language can indeed fall into desuetude as a result of 'custom,' the uninquiring acceptance of over-familiar interpretations; the impulse to speak comes from noticing what is not being noticed by others. This is one of the reasons why children have been divinized, for their supposed 'misunderstandings' have the form of all our attempts at updating others, all our statements. And, without question, sometimes they have updated us.

In The Prelude Wordsworth twice draws on this thought. Here is the first:

The song would speak
Of that interminable building reared
By observation of affinities
In objects where no brotherhood exists
To passive minds.

(The Prelude (1850), Book II, ll. 382-6)

In such cases, someone perceives for the first time a likeness in the sensory field that they have never captured before, and, in bringing it the notice of others, adds to 'that interminable building' that is the 'common' language and its so-far-successful hypotheses about the real. Wordsworth uses 'brotherhood' here to characterize the mutual task of selection from the real that is language. Wordsworth has become a
virtual psychologist—or philosopher—of perception, distinguishing between our automatic sensing of the real, which contains no knowledge, and the mutual selections human beings can fuzzily make from it together. To sense is not to know; as the American philosopher Roy Wood Sellars put it, 'Being is one thing and knowledge is another' (R. W. Sellars père, 1919, 407). In 'Lines written above Tintern Abbey,' Wordsworth describes himself as a lover of all the mighty world

Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive
(Tintern Abbey,' ll. 106-8)

The 'half-creating' is what the mind does with the sensory intake, what we now would call the 'perceiving'; for the actual sensing (in colour and tone and scent, etc.) he has used 'perceive,' but he clearly means the sensory input from outside. That our minds are engaged in the process of perception does not imply that our knowledge is without value: what we are continually 'building' (and readjusting) in the evolution that is language are our current theories about what best constitutes a 'thing,' a 'self,' etc. out of the sensory fields within us, themselves a part of the real, on behalf of the desires and fears in our bodies. The 'Lifeworld,' to use the Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl's term, does not disappear into idealism. We do our best to keep up with the flux of change, although 'progress' in the collaborative venture that is knowledge is not guaranteed. Our successes are only 'viable'; the choice of word is that of Ernst von Glasersfeld (Glasersfeld, 1984, 25). To accept that all percepts are viable and that the language group is maintaining the co-reference of them by an act of faith is not easy to recognize or accept—yet it is a central tenet of the present theory.

The second quotation from The Prelude bears witness to the imagined singularity which is constructed by the Schutzian idealization: he speaks of 'transitory qualities' which led to

. . . manifold distinctions, difference
Perceived in things, where, to the unwatchful eye
No difference is (ll. 299-301)

Whether it is a so-far-unnoticed likeness (as in the first quotation here) or a so-far unnoticed difference (as in the second), the speaker of an informative statement produces a clue which updates the now-sharing hearer who has not been able to 'watch'—with 'this most watchful power of love.' Love of the other has 'singled' out something worthy of his or her perceiving, something worthy of speech. 'Watch' is a favourite word of Wordsworth's: he takes 'watching' to be the action of ranging over the offerings of the senses while alert for newly significant likenesses and differences. These are what those, neglectful of the endless sensory novelty of experience, whose perceptions are bound by 'custom,' have missed. Ian Dennis (personal communication) draws attention, in the lines quoted above from the ode that express the fear that 'custom' lies upon us 'with weight / Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life,' that Wordsworth did use the word 'almost.' We are not forever condemned to be blind to what can be newly perceived in our sensations because we have others to help us to sort the real into the shapes they have discovered.

Towards the end of the ode, one finds Wordsworth taking leave of 'the radiance which was once so bright' (l. 180) that he gazed at in his childhood. This is not nostalgia for lost innocence that he is recalling (that nostalgia is a Victorian sentimentalization), for he now in later life can recognize the child's misconceptions of the source of language. What initiated it was the 'brotherhood' that sustains language at its best. He acknowledges the faith in the lines where he notes that there is a 'strength in what remains behind,' firstly,

In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be

Which, with our key, can be taken to be the mutual faith that should sustain our every utterance to another, without which we cannot really speak. Secondly,

In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering
which is a part of a creed that accepts sorrow as the inescapable, paradoxical accompaniment of bonds that 
love creates, and, lastly,

In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind. (ll. 190-1)

Faith is 'looking through death' both as death-as-bogy or death as eternal reward, when threats of eternal 
punishment or promises of endless joy are seen for the attempts at intimidation or inveiglement that they 
become if taken literally. Faith that is entered into with the expectation of the final erasure of the body 
accepts the animal fear as part of the commitment, nor could it accept the bait of 'heaven' as a 
compensation for the disadvantages of 'being good.' So, in this new interpretation, one can see that 'the 
heaven that [lay] about us in our infancy' was, understandably, an illusion, one born of the ignorance of the 
nature of faith, and that of death. Heaven must not lie about us in our maturity: it has solely to be accepted 
as the impossible goal that we all must imagine in the human performance that is language. It arises out of 
the poetic maintaining of the 'primal sympathy'; it finds 'soothing thoughts' in contemplating the actions of 
those who try to palliate 'human suffering'; and it looks 'through death' to see it for what it is, a false alarm. 
That there is no celestial city cannot fill us with regret, even though our every utterance should be an 
apparent attempt to construct 'that interminable building'— Wordsworth's own admission that it is no end in 
time.

However, the hell/heaven talk was a response to our conviction that our presence in the world has had 
effects, and one can argue that influence you have had on the ongoing game is what all your talk had been 
about. It takes years to live with a 'philosophic mind,' not because we learn to take the denials, as we 
loosely say, 'philosophically,' but because we must learn where our responsibility lies in the negotiations of 
the sharing of sacrifice— if, luckily, that turns out to be possible. It may not be, for the bouleversement of 
desires and fears may demand too much in the nature of a brain-washing for the self to survive it. This is 
where even science has to say that tragedy is an ontological possibility for social 'selves' (see the last 
paragraph of Section iii). To deny its place in human life is to abandon faith since the motive in such a 
denial is a wish to limit the extent of the risks that must be faced. There is a finer way of facing death than 
that of those 'martyrs' who were expecting after death to garner huge reward or, worse, who were afraid of 
unending punishment!

The 'philosophic mind' can also bring recognition of the power of imagination that embraces posterity, that 
our contribution will still have its influence long after our death, our real 'immortality.' There is an 
acknowledgement of this in the combined notes of hope and acceptance in the closing verse. He says that 
he can now

love the brooks which down their channels fret
Even more than when I tripp'd lightly as they (ll. 198-9)

a reminder that now, in maturity, he no longer 'trips lightly' but is aware of faith's confrontation with its 
denial. This matches Shelley's account of hope:

hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates
(Prometheus Unbound, Act IV, 473-4)

For Wordsworth the great drama is seen to continue beyond the deaths of the bodies of its actors:

Another race hath been, and other palms are won. (l. 204)

His choice of the words 'palms,' that is, acknowledgements of worthy actions (as of wreaths of palm or laurel 
leaves about the head), expresses the hope that those influences after death that have aided humanity will 
have their recognition, even if not formally or directly attributable to their originators. It is significant that in 
his closing lines it is not to divine inspiration he gives thanks but to 'the human heart by which we live,' for 
the sacredness of the pact that is language arises, not from the action of a god, but from our more humble 
acts of love. This humility went too far for a contemporary of Wordsworth's, John Scott, for whom these last
lines were 'mean and poor' as a result of 'raising what is low, and 'reducing what is high' (Scott; see Woof, I, 527). But the lines do neither: they acknowledge that God is the needful poetic instrument of our imagination. And one last comment: Wordsworth here goes beyond the grief of death, for the 'thoughts' inspired by the 'meanest flower' he finds to be encouraging to us all. We can be 'much happier' even at the moment of death, in the sense that Banquo was.

Such an approach dovetails with Lionel Trilling's comment on the ode, that in it, 'Wordsworth is talking about something common to us all, the development of the sense of reality.'

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