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

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1. Introduction

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

In any given epoch, then, whether ancient Greece, Renaissance England, 17th century France, or 19th century Scandinavia, one might somewhat abstractly understand the function of tragedy to have been that of reformulating the originary event in the terms of the current culture's ethical understanding. This event, as readers of Eric Gans' work recall, is hypothesized to have occurred in a moment of stymied impulse when the protohuman group was arrested in its hungry convergence on an object of collective desire by the countervailing force of that desire itself. Each individual was prevented from reaching out to take sole possession of the object by the assembled force of the encircling ring of identical, i.e., mimetic, desires. In that moment of pause and rigid attention, the group found itself compelled to designate the object to itself–that is, convert it from mere instinctually targeted thing to cognized sign by an operation that was both magical and radically paradoxical. Indeed, it produced *the* fundamental paradox of which all human culture was to become the endlessly complex unfolding. That the object had to be lost as thing in order to be recovered as sign is the conundrum which religious ritual celebrates–fixing on the aspect of transformation, of transubstantiation–and

secular ritual, i.e., tragedy, deplores–fixing on the aspects of loss and arbitrary victimage. In this issue of *Anthropoetics*, which is devoted to the topic of religion, I would like to bring Henrik Ibsen's religious tragedy *Brand* (1866) into a kind of dialog with Generative Anthropology–with the hope of contrasting their views regarding some of the religious implications that flow from the double nature of the human sign. I find that GA helps clarify the radically anthropological nature of Ibsen's drama, just as I also find that the anthropological Ibsen poses certain fundamental questions to GA.

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

2. The Sacred, Religion, Tragedy

I would like to take a slightly more differentiated look at the process by which the central object becomes sacred. Two moments in the originary scenario can be distinguished: the first when the object holds the group at bay, the second when it serves as the substrate for the transcendental sign. The first moment is that of impending violence, the second that of the advent of peace. When it first magnetizes the group with its presence the object is like a bomb, charged with the

appetitive charge of collective desire. If it does not explode, i.e., if the group does not tear itself to pieces, it is because it has generated a sign which can be known by all equally, i.e., shared in the mind. This mental communion leads to a third moment when the object can be shared equitably in concrete fact. Thus, somewhat in the manner of the prototypical scheme envisaged by René Girard, at least as regards outcomes, the object gives itself to the group in a way which saves it from its own incomprehensible violence. Incomprehensible because collective. No individual within a group has a 360 degree apprehension of the situation. The group's violence, whether manifest or latent, of which s/he is only one component part, flows around him/her with the impersonality of the divine. And again as René Girard has often averred, the radical change produced by the sacred object from a situation of imminent destruction to one of established peace is of such magnitude that it registers to the group as a miracle. Ensuing religious rites, as both Gans and Girard agree, are the formal reiteration of this magical (i.e., not comprehended) transformation.

While the affective charge of this transformation may be difficult for modern people to grasp, the Bible contains several episodes that give us at least a hint of its impact upon people of a primarily religious imagination. The example I would like to cite not only illustrates this immediate point, but will be relevant to my subsequent discussion. The example I have in mind is that of the Moabite king mentioned in 2 Kings 3:24-27:

> But when they came to the Israelite camp, the Israelites sallied out and attacked them, driving the Moabites in headlong flight. The Israelites pushed forward into Moab, destroying as they went. They razed the towns to the ground; they littered every good piece of land with stones, each man casting a stone on it; they stopped up every spring of water; they cut down all the fine trees; and they harried Moab until only in Kir-hareseth were any buildings left standing, and even this city the slingers surrounded and attacked. When the Moabite king saw that the war had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred men armed with swords to cut a way through to the king of Aram, but the attempt failed. Then he took his eldest son, who would have succeeded him, and offered him as a whole-offering [burnt offering] on the city wall. There was such great consternation among the Israelites that they struck camp and returned to their own land.

The fear inspired in the Israelites by this act of royal filicide gives us an index of the affective charge inherent in the religious sign. The killing of the boy becomes a sign

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

In addition to giving us a hint of the affective power of the sacred, this example also helps us think about the relation of religion to tragedy. For when we consider this Moabite king, we of course think of Agamemnon, or Euripides' Heracles, or, for that matter, the mothers in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. And then comparing these accounts of child sacrifice, both the religious and tragic ones, with GA's hypothetical originary scene, we are given a sudden, startling hint concerning the nature of the sign. If at first it arrests violence it does so not by overcoming it but by transmuting it to a state of permanent virtuality. Within the peaceful sign flickers the ember of violence that gave rise to it.. In a new situation, in a new configuration of forces, the ember flares to a blaze and the sign recharges itself by crossing back over the line from metaphor into concrete fact. It wouldn't have served for the Moabite king merely to perform an animal sacrifice on top of the wall, for example, recalling to mind the sign by which Isaac was replaced on the altar. That sign would not have been sufficiently powerful to arrest the Hebrews. Only by dipping the sign back in the human blood which gave birth to it could the king invoke its full power. What does this suggest to us about the long-term relationship between human beings and their sacred signs? Generative Anthropology finds in the equality of access to the sign which is proffered to all in the originary scene a hopeful prognosis for human culture, as if such equality, when sufficiently clarified and raised up in consciousness, might ultimately lead to a condition of mutual reciprocity for all humanity. But for such an outcome to occur, the would have to somehow overcome the antithetical energies imparted to it at its origin. In suggesting this outcome as realizable within historical time Generative Anthropology is of course placing itself in continuity with the eschatology of Judaism which finds in the name of God a whole and unitary means of salvation. But the intuition of tragedy as it repeatedly arises in the course of Western history stands in direct opposition to this understanding of the sign. Where religion points to the sign as the instrument of peace, tragedy in turn points to it not only as the precondition but under certain circumstances as in fact the cause of war.

Tragedy does this most insistently, of course, in the aftermath of a given war when it looks to the partisanship which sparked it and makes of it a non-partisan analysis. Eric Gans writes: “Tragedy first reached a high-cultural level in a period of patriotic fervor–that of the Persian war–and it could surpass this level only by becoming independent of civic considerations.” (Gans, 1985, 290). By extrapolation, we might say that tragic authors in every age are those who, when they contemplate the bloody facts of war, realize that religion which keeps peace within the group is somehow unable to accomplish this task between groups, for obviously there are few wars of historical record where the religious expedient employed by the Moabite king would have produced a comparable effect. This leads the tragic author to bring the lesson home and inquire into the sacred mechanisms undergirding his own culture.

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

3. Ibsen’s situation in 1865

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

Full of compassion for Denmark and of indignation toward Germany, Ibsen settled in Italy and tried to formulate some sort of artistic response to the situation. He worked hard for a year but with minimal results–producing only a fragment of a narrative poem, now known as *The Epic Brand*, in which the figure of a passionately

idealistic clergyman by the name of Brand takes up rhetorical arms against Norway's torpid, unheroic, and self-centered citizens. Month after month Ibsen labored on the poem, and at last ground to a halt. Then, all at once, during a visit to St. Peter's, Ibsen experienced a moment of inspiration that changed everything. I would like to present this event in the words of Vigdis Ystad, a noted Norwegian Ibsen scholar, from her recent book "*–livets endløse gåde" Ibsens dikt og drama* (1997) [*"life's infinite mystery" Ibsen's poetry and drama*]. Ystad writes:

> After about a year the work was still in a rudimentary form. The poet was in despair. But then a decisive event occurred, which Ibsen has described in a letter of September 12, 1865 to his fellow poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. "Then one day I went into St. Peter's–I was in Rome on an errand–and there, suddenly, the form for what I had to say came to me, forcefully and clearly." In the same letter he wrote the famous words, "I read nothing but the Bible,–it is powerful and strong!" In other words, Ibsen describes a sudden and revitalizing inspiration that caused him to put aside *The Epic Brand*. During the summer and fall of 1865, he worked on his great verse drama *Brand* in a state of near intoxication.Scholars debate about the nature of Ibsen's experience in St. Peter's and its impact on the finished work. Most frequently they interpret it as a *religious* experience, and place it in relation to the religious problematic at the heart of the drama. (Ystad, 1996, 130, my translation)

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

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

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

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

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

4. The plot of *Brand* and its form

The plot of *Brand* is complicated and difficult to narrate because everything in the work carries allegorical significance, so that even the descriptions of landscape–mountain and valley, sunshine and shadow–are charged with second-level meanings. It is a reading drama not intended for the stage, its language charged with echoes, allusions, cunning word plays, and cross references, so that as with any successful poem its meaning is elusive and unstable. But stripped to its bare narrative, the story is as follows: Brand, a Christian minister is returning to his childhood village. He is driven by a sense of mission, which is to awaken his countrymen to the moral necessity of a spirit of self-sacrifice, what he calls *offervillighed*, i.e., a willingness to sacrifice. His motto is *All or nothing*, which of course never means *nothing* but always *all*. Everywhere he is met with resistance. The one exception is Agnes, the fiancée of his childhood friend, Ejnar. When she hears Brand engage Ejnar in debate, she is so impressed by Brand's moral seriousness that she switches her allegiance and love to him. Eventually she and Brand marry and have a son, Alf, who in Act 3 falls ill. The village doctor tells Brand that to save his son's life, he must leave the dark, unhealthy north and take him to the south. Brand is eager to comply but encounters resistance from the villagers, who have taken him as their spiritual leader and interpret his departure as a betrayal of a sacred trust. For an agonizing moment, Brand hesitates, torn between his paternal and spiritual obligations, but then decides to follow his own lofty motto and sacrifice his son's life. Alf dies. This proof of spiritual valor augments Brand's authority among the populace, and brings him into conflict with the local civic and religious authorities. Defying them and responding to the people, Brand supervises the building of a huge new church in town, but when it comes time to consecrate it, realizes that his vision has been too small, too mundane. He casts the keys to the church door into the fjord and leads the villagers up into the mountain, promising

them a higher form of spirituality, again premised on a higher notion of self-sacrifice. For a brief enthusiastic moment the people follow him, but when the first pangs of hunger set in they turn on him and curse him for a false prophet. They take up stones and Brand narrowly escapes with his life. Brand has so obviously merged with his prototype, Jesus, that one of his followers, the expelled Gypsy girl, Gerd, falls to her knees and tries to worship him as the returned Messiah. Rejecting her worship, Brand climbs higher into the mountains, and there in a penultimate moment encounters the specters of dead family members who have all died as a result of his moral crusade. i.e., the ghosts of his son Alf and his wife Agnes (who died as the result of losing her son), and of his mother, whom he allowed to die unshriven and unattended because she was unwilling to heed his call to renounce her earthly goods. Facing the glacier, Brand suffers a final agony of indecision as to whether he has been guided or misguided in his spiritual striving. By way of answer he is buried in an avalanche of snow, unleashed by a rifle shot of the crazy Gerd, as a heavenly voice responds to his question with the words: “He is Deus Caritatis.”

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

> Agnes. [*lifting the child high in her arms*]
>
> God on high! The sacrifice thou cravest I dare raise up towards Thy Heaven! Lead me through the terrors of this world!
>
> [*She goes into the house.*]
>
> Brand. [*stares unseeingly a short while, bursts into tears, clasps his hands together over his head, throws himself down on the steps and shouts*]
>
> Jesus! Jesus! Give me light. (Ibsen, 155)

5

Surely this scene reminds us of the Offertory of the Mass. Why else would Ibsen have Agnes elevate her doomed son? Brand’s collapse and anguished prayer ironically recall the priest’s prayerful genuflection after the elevation of the host. And why otherwise does the play conclude with Brand being rejected and nearly stoned by his followers? Is this not in consonance with the prologue of John’s Gospel– “He came unto his own and his own received him not”–which used to be recited as the “last Gospel” of the Mass? And, finally, why the Latin phrase which

ends the play if not so serve as a vague echo of the “Deo Gratias” which formerly closed the Latin Mass? We recall that the critic Hallvard Lie found a close resemblance between *Brand’s* verse form and that of a Requiem Mass. My suggestion would be that the parallels extend to the form as well. I think, in other words, that when Ibsen stepped into St. Peter’s, where in all likelihood a Mass was in progress, he had a flash in which he understood that if he cast his *Brand* in the form of a Mass, it would, purely in its form, pose a fundamental question concerning the paradoxical link between Christian culture and war by subtly lifting up the culture’s central religious ritual for esthetic consideration. For here in St. Peter’s, Ibsen found himself standing in Christian Europe’s central temple and observing with eyes undulled by habit a sacrifice of substitutionary atonement in which the Son is offered up to the Father for the benefit of all, a theologically *non*-symbolic reiteration of a sacred process not unlike that effected by the Moabite king. (Non-symbolic because Christ is really present under the appearance of bread and wine.) Perhaps Ibsen, like the Israelites, was jolted. For although Ibsen was a Lutheran who was not in the habit of attending church, he was a thorough Bible reader and he had been precisely informed by Paul as to the sense of what takes place on the Catholic altar:

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

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

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

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

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

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

But notice that at the very moment that Paul tries to disentangle the two leavens,

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

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

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

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

> God's "I am who I am" affirms the permanence of the imaginary scene as a prerequisite not only of linguistic communication, but above all of human relations. The God who "is what he is" is the God who exists only

> to maintain an imaginary scene purged of any preconceived central object. (Gans, 1990, 64)

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

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

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

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

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

In other words, the "locus of pure presence" is situated within a line of patriarchs, a line of fathers, whose distinguishing characteristics are a) that they did not kill their first- born sons b) but instead instigated rivalry among their sons, setting brother against brother for the long term benefit of the national group. In this stratagem, of course, they were following the example of the God of Genesis, who obviously could have accepted the sacrificial smoke of *both* Cain and Abel, but instead chose to ignite the fire of resentment in the heart of the more enlightened brother by showing a preference for blood sacrifice. Now the fact that these tribal fathers did

not sacrifice their first born sons, as was perhaps the (occasional) practice among other tribes in the area, e.g., the cults of Moloch and perhaps Baal, is obviously in our eyes a cultural advance, but it is also one which, since this abstention first occurred at YHWH's arbitrary behest, must always be understood as being instantly and arbitrarily reversible. In other words, within human culture filicide is not some archaic remnant, some by-passed, benighted phase of development, but an ever present potentiality whenever the Center requires it. For the point, as Jewish commentators on the Akedah (binding of Isaac) always insist, is not the killing or non-killing of Isaac, but rather Abraham's faith and perfect obedience. Which means that "throughout all generations " the son's life must remain forfeit *in principle*. (Some midrashim say that Isaac was killed not by the knife but by the fire, since the sacrificial fire would already have been lighted before he was placed on it. See Robin M. Jensen. "The Binding or Sacrifice of Isaac–How Jews and Christians See Differently." *Bible Review,* Vol IX, Number 5, October 1993.)

For how else could the Center ever raise an army?

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

> Moses saw that the people were out of control and that Aaron had laid them open to the secret malice of their enemies. He took his place at the gate of the camp and said, 'Who is on the LORD's side? Come here to

> me’; and the Levites all rallied to him. He said to them, ‘The LORD the God of Israel has said: Arm yourselves, each of you, with his sword. Go through the camp from gate to gate and back again. Each of you kill brother, friend, neighbor.’ The Levites obeyed, and about three thousand of the people died that day. Moses said, ‘You have been installed as priests to the LORD today, because you have turned each against his own son and his own brother and so have brought a blessing this day upon yourselves.’

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

8

> Und er sprach: Nimm Isaak, deinen einzigen Sohn, den du liebhast, und geh hin in das Land Morija und opfere ihn dort zum Brandopfer auf einem Berge, den ich dir sagen werde.
>
> God said, ‘Take your son, your one and only son Isaac whom you love, and to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the heights which I shall show you.

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

7. What does God want?

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

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

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

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

And ever afterward, whenever a theologian has attempted to understand this rite of sacrificial substitution in a less sacrificial or sanguinary sense, Rome has refused the metaphorical shift, insisting under pain of excommunication on the presence of

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

8. Conclusion

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

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

conventional culture always finds it. The religious sign is inherently ambiguous, not only as to sense but as to its impulse power, so to speak. Generative Anthropology finds in the suspension of violence provided by the first sign an ultimate hope for humanity; Ibsen finds in the suspended violence, which is religion, a potential for violence forever waiting to unleash itself.

In short, the question which Ibsen’s tragedy may be seen to pose to Generative Anthropology is that of determining in what sense the origin of culture is ultimately determinative. Or, phrased somewhat differently: whether it is possible to credit the human sign with the potentiality to discharge the violence that gave rise to it within the closed loop of contentious human culture.