Originary Narrative

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Originary Thinking includes a chapter entitled “Narrativity and Textuality” that accorded the latter, as befitted the trend of the time, what seemed a definitive priority over the former. In our textual age, story-telling seemed a naïve activity grounded on the illusion of a historically self-displacing present. I explained the deconstruction of narrative in originary terms as the revelation of the primacy of the sign’s “textual” detemporalization of practical appetitive time over its narrative retemporalization as the object of a worldly-biographical quest.

The originary hypothesis proposes the minimal conditions for the generation of the transcendent sign. But these pre- and therefore extra-human conditions cannot be reproduced from within the human; they can only be represented, that is, imitated with more or less accuracy. The representations that accomplish “the deferral of violence through representation,” the endlessly renewed process of generating transcendence out of immanence, are what we call “culture.” The basis of the transcendent vs immanent dichotomy is the linguistic relation between sign and thing, which is doubled as signifier vs signified. This archetypal dichotomy is an anthropological artifact; it is with the human that the sign was introduced into “nature.”

All culture is textual in that it is made up of representations that are virtually if not actually copresent. The distinction between oral and written culture is secondary. The “inscription” of the story in the mind is not as accurate as that of the text on paper, but its relationship to the linear time of telling is essentially the same: in either case, any element of the whole can be accessed independently of the linear narrative sequence. Yet this sequence cannot be dismissed as epiphenomenal. As we frequently hear, we spend our lives telling stories; narrative is our source of meaning. My purpose here is to attempt an originary analysis of narrative.

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The question as to the originary narrativity of the sign is fundamental to our

anthropology. If we cannot conceive the human without narrative, then it is incumbent on us to include narrativity in the originary scene, in the emission of the originary sign. We must distinguish between the minimal linguistic or “formal” use of the sign as the “arbitrary” designation of the center and its cultural or “institutional” use as a reproduction of the event. The temporality of the sign is not that of worldly appetitive action, but that of a self-contained act of mimesis and its closure. The sign’s very existence depends on the deferral of the temporality of appetite and appropriation. But because the sign nonetheless exists in time (as a “signifier”), it cannot escape this temporality. The material sign is the basis of the arts: it is musical as sound, danced and figurative as gesture, and so on. The institutional inheres as a potential in any real use of the sign. But once we grant this, we must conceive the originary—and every subsequent—use of the sign as “narrative.” Narrativity requires nothing of the sign beyond its own inherent temporality.

Narrative emerges when the time of the sign returns to the world as a model of the time of action. In our experience, narrative involves a plurality of signs, such that the time “between” them takes on a semblance of practical temporality. In the time it takes to emit a number of consecutive signs, one might well have done something else, including perhaps the act designated or “imitated” by these signs. Narration in this sense is drama in words. How then can narration be understood in terms of the temporality of the single originary sign?

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The minimal criterion of narrative is making the temporality of the sign a model for worldly action. But “worldly action” in general cannot be endowed with a priori significance. The only action that we can consider *ab ovo* as equivalently human and significant is precisely that of the emission of the sign itself, that is, the deferral of violence through the representation of the (sacred) central object. That is, the originary sign *qua* formal linguistic sign represents the object, but *qua* institutional or narrative sign, it represents the process of its own emission.

Hence the story told by the originary sign is, in the first place, that of its own emission, which is to say, the story of the conversion of the gesture of appropriation into a gesture of signification. The sign begins as a movement to appropriate the object and ends as a gesture that imitates the object. It is this final state that constitutes the sign as a form *propremen*t *dit*; but in the originary scene, this state marks the conclusion of a process. We thus arrive at the unexpected conclusion that, although in terms of the already-human, textuality precedes narrativity, in terms of the becoming-human that the scene carries out, it is narrativity that constitutes textuality. The sign must “tell its story” before it can acquire a formal

signification.

In the resulting model of narrative as the constitution of the sign, the story is the generation of transcendence from immanence. The formal sign as signifier-signifying-signified is the final destiny of a gesture that had begun as an attempt to appropriate a real object. The deferral of appropriation gives the object meaning, and this meaning in turn "gives meaning" to the original gesture, which sought the assimilation of the object and, with it, the abolition of its meaningful identity. What is meaningful is what resists assimilation and causes it to be deferred. The sign is the "story" of this resistance.

Sparagmos and Narration

In the originary hypothesis, we assume that the appropriation of the object is only minimally deferred, so that the deferral of the sign is followed by the sparagmos or violent collective appropriation and division of the object. This element of the "narrative" no longer concerns the giving of meaning to the signified, but the signifier's worldly dissolution. After the temporal act of the sign's emission, the sign subsists as a transcendental reality but is no longer in the process of being enunciated. Just as the sign's emergence from the gesture of appropriation tells the story of its constitution, its giving way to renewed desire tells the story of its deconstitution.

The violence of the sparagmos reflects the "supplement" of resentment accrued as a result of the deferral of appetitive satisfaction. But this supplement should not be understood as a supererogatory accretion on the minimalism of our model. The object must be divided in order to be consumed, as would any appetitive object. Because it has been the object of the sign, what must be destroyed in this consumption is not a mere psychological Gestalt but a meaningful form. The violence of the sparagmos is the violence of the destruction of the worldly incarnation of meaning; it does not depend on an arbitrary translation of resentment into physical violence.

Deferral of appropriation constitutes the object as sacred. But once appropriation has been deferred, sacrality is no longer perceived as a quality of *this* object, but of the Being only contingently incarnated in it. When we renounce the appropriation of the object of our common desire, this desire inspires us to attribute to it a power that is by that very fact no longer a simple emanation of the object itself. Interpreted in practical terms, representation of the object removes its immediate danger to the community. But then that danger, which is experienced as the sacred, is no longer merely that of the object. As the sparagmos becomes immanent, the sign is increasingly less the signifier of the object *qua* object and more the "name-

of-God" that designates the Being in which the danger of mimetic violence transcendentally or "immortally" inheres.

In the spirit of the "return to Girard" of *Signs of Paradox*, we may rename the "aborted gesture of appropriation," the "*deferred* gesture of appropriation," for the horizon of Derrida's paradoxical temporality is the violence of the sparagmos. The sign is "but" a deferral of violence, the human is "but" an ever-extended hiatus between natural appetite and its violent demultiplication through desire, that is, through the very representation that had deferred it.

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In this perspective, the sign's representation of the object may be assimilated directly to Girard's semiotically undefined "designation" of the victim. But this designation is not the "psychological" product of quantitatively intensified mimetic desire. Representation is precisely what separates the object *qua* worldly referent from the object *qua* signified/"Idea," so that we come to resent the material object's occupation of the place of permanent Being that belongs to the sign's ideal referent-in-general. *The Origin of Language* did not do justice to the complexity of ostensive representation. To designate is to represent, but to represent is to transfer the "being" or "essence" of the physical object to the designatum of the representation, which we may already speak of as its "signified." The sign anticipates from the beginning the metaphysical forgetting of its violent ostensive origin that Plato's philosophy will articulate. (See my "Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought," *Anthropoetics* II, 2.)

This "speculative" analysis is founded on an intuition that is not metaphysical but anthropological; each step corresponds to an ethical and not merely a semiotic relation. The discovery that the danger posed by the desirable object can be deferred by the emission of the sign is also the discovery that the object is not itself the primal cause of this danger. The object appears thereby less dangerous, yet danger as such, the force of the sacred, remains as a potential to be actualized by emission of the sign. Without the sign, there could be no disproportion between the central being and its significance, for this being would be a mere object of more or less appetitive *cum* mimetic force. The persistence of the sign as the means of recalling the sacred danger is now scandalously confronted with the object that had appeared to be the source of this danger and that had provoked the consequent "aborted gesture of appropriation."

The revelation of the sacred is never its simple inherence in any worldly thing. The sacrality of place is powerful because the "presence" of the absent object in its empty place is a model for the operation of transcendence, the transfiguration of

the worldly thing into sacred Being—which is in turn a metaphor for the operation of the sign. In our originary story, the sign of the object is the product of our renunciation of it. But after this renunciation, the worldly object is not the desired Being but a mere token of it—not the "real" referent/signified of the sign but a mere token of the type it defines. The object has usurped the place of sacred Being through the "category error" of incarnation, which must be punished by its sacrifice *qua* material individual to this subsisting ideal (*idéel*) Being. (Conversely, to renounce sacrifice itself out of respect for individual being is to recognize the ethical reciprocity of all being.) The sparagmos is the punishment visited on the central object by each member of the community in resentment of the object's pretension to centrality.

The sparagmos ends the "story" of the originary sign. The latter's constitution *qua* sign in the divorce between the thing and its represented Being did not end the story because, just as the deferring transformation of the gesture of appropriation into the sign occupied the temporality of the sign's production, so does the undeferring transformation of the sign into a new, sparagmatic gesture of appropriation occupy that of the sign's dissipation. The formal or linguistic sign remains in its transcendental realm, but the institutional or cultural sign that has both a beginning and an end begins and ends in worldly appropriation. Originary narrative tells the story of the sign's constitution and deconstitution, of its constitution as separate from its original object and of the worldly consequence of this separation at the moment of deconstitution for the resented object itself.

To sum up our analysis thus far: the sign, in its birth and death, tells the story of its own constitution and deconstitution. The emission of the sign is an activity first taken up as a substitute for appropriating the object, then abandoned in the appropriative activity of the sparagmos. But this is not a fully symmetrical sequence. The abandonment of the sign is not its obliteration or even its forgetting; the sparagmos is not a forgetting of the sign but, on the contrary, an act of vengeance against the enforced memory of the sign. The deconstitution of the sign in worldly violence does not return us to a prehuman universe. The end of the sign's story tells of its necessary abandonment as the object of a worldly activity, that of its emission, but not of its disappearance from the world. On the contrary, originary narrative is *tragic*: the mortal being that had been the occasion for the sign, abandoned by the sacred Being that it incarnated, is delivered up to the violent desires of the community, to be survived by the sign's transcendent Being.

Originary narration is sacrificial. At the same time, it is a revelation of the limits of the sacrificial. The residue of sadness that follows a tragedy reflects the excess of our love over our resentment. The sign transcends its worldly exemplification; but our experience of this transcendence is dependent on *this* worldly mediator at *this*

unique moment. The origin of language as an event is both the constitution of a horizon of significance beyond the merely evenemential and the creation of our capacity to grant significance to the event within this horizon. The origin of language is also, therefore, the origin of narrative.

3

Myth and Story

The originary narrative is the story of the originary emission of the sign. But how does this analysis account for narrative's domination of our culture and of our lives? In our age of demystification, narration is the sole mystery that remains; indeed, it has come to be understood as the foundational category of cultural mystery—of transcendence. When we repeat that culture is about "telling stories," we revel in the undefinable nature of stories. Neither centuries of literary curiosity nor decades of literary analysis have taught us what makes a "good story," or in what sense a "story" represents an "experience" differently from the way a word represents a "thing." Nor will originary analysis solve this mystery. Its ambition is merely to reduce it to its lowest terms, to provide the most parsimonious way to think about storytelling. The originary understanding of narrative is not meant to help us to construct our own stories, but to ground our understanding of narrative on a minimal set of anthropological categories.

What we call "mystery" is the paradoxical relationship between the world of things and the world of signs, between immanence and transcendence. There is only one mystery: that of how the latter can be generated from the former. We cannot solve the mystery, but we can reduce it to minimal terms. We cannot know exactly what configuration of subjects and objects gave rise to the originary event nor exactly what configuration allows the event's generative effect to be reproduced. Ritual reproduction is always mechanical because it fetishizes reproducible elements of the scene at the expense of the unknowable overall configuration. Ritual seeks only to reproduce the mystery, not to pierce it, and for that very reason can never reproduce it fully.

Because ritual is not story; it is from the beginning supplemented by myth. Yet myth is not story either, since it is from the beginning supplemented by ritual. The mythical adventure is not a self-contained fiction; it takes its authority from sacred performance. Myth tells about gods, beings both worldly and transcendental who act in the world but who subsist atemporally like signs rather than perishable things. The paradox of the divinity is that of the substantive Being of mimetic desire.

If language is in the first place about gods, and only afterwards about humans, it is

because significance inheres in the atemporal Being of the signified. Even when they have animal or other form, gods are anthropomorphic; the real criterion of anthropomorphism is the use of language. Yet because they are “immortal,” the significance that founds their system of signification lacks appeal to human temporal experience. The death to which the gods are invulnerable is not in the first place death as an inevitable end to life, but the death that the sign was created to avert: death at the hands of one’s fellows. What separates God from man is not existential prolongation, eternal life, but invulnerability to the danger of mimetic desire.

Myths are stories with which the listener cannot fully identify. We are in the domain of story proper when the human companions of the gods begin to take center stage and the experience of mortal humanity becomes the basis of significance. Stories are essentially about mortals who do not share the Being that transcends mimetic desire. As I suggested in *The End of Culture,* Gilgamesh’s loss of the herb of immortality may serve as the exemplary dividing line between myth and literary narrative.

Whether we accept or reject the popular anthropomorphic notion of God, its infantilism should make us hesitate to declare ourselves liberated from the toils of superstition. To say that God is like us except that he is immortal is hardly to explain either the origin or the cultural function of his immortality. Immortality is in the first place a quality of the Idea, of that which is signified by the sign. The idea of the immortal god derives from the use of the sign to designate the originary central object; a god is a worldly being who at the same time partakes of the transcendental being of the sign.

This formulation makes more precise the Girardian concept of myth as the mystified narrative of the sparagmos. The sparagmos destroys the form of the object that provided the referent for the sign; but the sign no longer needs a referent, it has a signified. The myth mystifies the sparagmos by transforming the victim into a deity; his worldly integument is shed in the collective murder, leaving behind his “spiritual essence.”

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The classic Girardian example is the Tikopia myth analyzed in *Des choses cachées…*, p. 115ff. The “foreign god” Tikarau is invited to a feast. He stumbles and leaves a footrace, pretending to be injured, and instead steals the food from the feast. Fleeing the territory; he falls, leaving various foodstuffs behind, and, ascending the hills, returns to the sky. Girard points out that execution by forcing the victim to ascend and eventually leap off a high place is a standard ritual

procedure (*cf.* Rome's Tarpeian rock). The ascension that defines the separation of the god from the human community disguises his collective lynching. No doubt the protagonist's flight into the sky is unlikely to be a pure flight of the mythical imagination. But the point that is missed in this reading is that, murder or fantasy, the myth provides a model for the generation of transcendence from immanence—of the superhuman world of signification from the subhuman world that ignores it. The narratively disguised sparagmos of Tikarau is the genesis not merely of the material culture he leaves behind but of the distinction between signs and things that is the minimal characteristic of the human.

Myth is generative; it tells of the birth of the human through the agency of the object of collective mimetic desire. In myth, this agency is ostensibly exercised as a form of human intentionality. But the mythical narrative is only in appearance composed of a recognizable set of human actions: Tikarau's pretended stumbling in the race, his theft, flight, fall, and passage into the heavens, are not genuine intentional acts. From Girard's demystifying perspective, what appear to be the free acts of the hero are in fact the coerced acts of the victim; the narrative disguises the action of the collectivity. Tikarau pretends to stumble when "in reality" he was pushed; he leaps into the sky when "in reality" he was forced to jump. This sacred non-intentionality is the locus of myth's generation of transcendence from immanence, signs from things.

Because they conceal the ultimate agency of the human collectivity, the actions of mythical figures generate meaning without being themselves meaningful for the agents who carry them out. Tikarau's motives cannot be understood by reference to human intentionality. When "post-humanist" theory attributes ultimate intentionality to the "text," to language "in itself," it expresses in fact a central anthropological insight. The intentionality implicit in narrative is indeed inherent in the sign-system "in itself," because the in-itself of language is equivalent to our alienation to the sacred Other of our mimetic desire. The mythical protagonist's intentions are not "his own," but the projection of the community's collective desire and resentment.

The postmodern fetishization of language is nothing but a rhetorical repositioning of the sacred. If we ask a postmodern thinker whether he considers language to be sacred, he might well agree. But his use of the word "sacred" implicitly to denote an unknowable alien power is uninformed by the insights of primitive religious thought, let alone by mimetic theory's rearticulation of this thought. Language is sacred in that it unites the real and transcendental realms; our task is to provide an articulated model of their relationship.

Grammar and Narrative

Human intentionality is the criterion of fiction proper. Myth elaborates on the historical founding of the sign; it provides for our representations an etiology not so much fantastic as metaphoric. Stories are not explanations of historically given realities. They stand or fall by whether they hold our interest in the context of "everyday life" where, as a consequence of our successful deferral of originary violence, we find ourselves in a state of unattached desire, boredom, *le vague des passions*. Much has been written about the literary work's fulfillment or transcendence of the "horizon of expectations" that we associate with it. But our expectation is always that a story, however much its form and content may be bound by tradition, transcend any concrete expectations we may have of it. The story repeated to the child who asks to hear the same words every night is story at the limit of ritual; but in ritual, however much we may hope to experience the revelatory origin it repeats, it is repetition that is the sine qua non, whereas in story, it is the experience of newness. We participate in the rite's repetition in hope of renewing the revelation; we listen to a story in hope of obtaining a revelation, even if it be through repetition. The joy of the oral tradition is that the "same" story is never the same; to hear a storyteller tell a familiar story is always to hear a new performance. Ritual fetishistically repeats the known; in storytelling, originality is originarity.

The dynamic imperative of originality precludes the elaboration of a non-trivial general model for stories. Originary analysis provides a simple explanation for the failure of attempts to define the "grammar" of narrative: narrative begins not with articulated language but with the originary sign. What makes storytelling a useful paradigm for culture in general is precisely the absence of any simple correspondence between the formal structures of language and the institutional structures of narrative. This non-correspondence reflects the paradoxical nature of cultural self-generation. Originary narrative, the story of the sign's own generation, is a story that the sign itself is not structurally equipped to tell.

The attempt to reduce narrative to a structural pattern provides the fundamental paradigm of culture's necessarily inadequate attempt to think itself. It tells us why culture is more a marketplace than a rite; despite its ongoing and never more than partially successful attempts at self-analysis, it remains wiser "in itself" than "for itself." Originary thinking is the "final" form of these attempts because it theorizes their inadequacy; it tells us *about* the possibilities of narrative with no pretension of showing us its limits or of uncovering its procedures of generation. Generative anthropology is analogous in the cultural sphere to the theory of markets in the economic. The economist theorizes about supply and demand, and about what kind

of things have economic value, but he cannot predict what old products will be demanded nor what new ones will be supplied nor, in general, what procedures are conducive to market success.

The Narrative Derivation of the Declarative

The sign “tells the story” of its own emergence, but this telling is inadequate, since its own emergence is precisely what the sign cannot articulate. Whence its supplementation by a sequence of signs that model the chronology of this emergence. This supplementation provides a model for the evolution of linguistic form.

In *The Origin of Language*, I derived the declarative sentence from the negative response to an unperformed imperative. Predication, the association of a predicate with a subject or a comment with a topic, emerges as the solution to the paradox of the failed imperative. The simplest imperative form demands an “object” without distinction between nouns and verbs, things and actions. The imperative form makes presentation of the requested object a “transcendental” necessity; in the imperative, a worldly action is, so to speak, included in a representational form. The only possible response to an imperative is to obey it; the verbal replies we customarily give—”Very good, sir!”, “Coming up!”—specifically anticipate performance. The grammatical form of the imperative makes no means available to us to express non-performance, deliberate or otherwise.

The declarative sentence as a response to a failed imperative replaces presentation of the demanded object by predication about it—that is, by “presentation” on the interlocutor’s imaginary scene of representation. In the simplest case, the predicate tells us that the object is absent; to be present on the scene of representation is, in the first place, to be absent from the scene of worldly action. This substitution of an utterance for an object is the originary act of narrative “supplementation.” The predication that justifies non-performance of the imperative “tells a story” about its object. Articulated or explicit narration, as opposed to the implicit narrative embodied in the originary sign, provides an explanation of the significance of the object: the object is significant because it possesses *this* predicate. Timeless, “descriptive” predication and temporal narration are not distinguished at this stage any more than nouns are distinguished from verbs in the role of imperative object. The predicate tells why the object *must be spoken of*, that is, why it remains of interest although it is not available for appropriation. From the perspective of an ostensive understanding of signs as pointers to objects, the predicate is unnecessary; its necessity is only explicable from a generative perspective, where the sign tells of its own emergence and predication is the first formally explicit step in this telling.

Nothing in this analysis contradicts the derivation of the declarative from the imperative in *The Origin of Language.* But by presenting the passage from imperative to declarative in terms of the narrative supplementation of the sign, the present analysis is more parsimonious; it allows us to ignore the distinction between the sacred context of instituted ritual and the profane one of everyday speech, seen as the appropriate locus for linguistic change. It suggests that we conceive the originary ostensive sign as including the more advanced forms *ab ovo* within itself, that is, as provoking imperative and declarative "readings" not yet formalized in syntax.

The minimal, ostensive conception of the originary sign as the representation of the present central object by means of an "aborted gesture of appropriation," affirms the object's centrality in the face of the mimetic rivalry of the subjects who are about to appropriate it. *Qua* ostensive, the sign denies the conditions of its emergence in order to present itself as a passive reflection of what was "always already" there, a supplement to a sacred reality. It requests no performance but mimetically suggests non-performance, renunciation. The narrative of which I have spoken above, the becoming-sign of the sign, is excluded from our reading of the sign itself; it is part of its "unconscious." The ostensive sign is the negation of narrative; it defers history because it anticipates it as destructive violence. This is narrative as not even the "zero degree" but the negation of narrativity.

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The identification of the originary sign with the ostensive does not deny either the imperative or the declarative nature of the sentence-in-general; but it insists on the primacy of its ostensivity over its imperativity and its declarativity, both in its diachronic realization and in the syntactic traces of this realization.

The point of language is first of all ostensively to point out something, even if that "something" be a predication. But, by the same token, the point of language, after having made its point, is imperatively to get its interlocutor to do something, even if that "something" be to accede to this point. And the first, originary, point is the sacred significance of the object, which means, imperatively, its inaccessibility to appropriation. If, *qua* ostensive, the originary sign disguises its ambiguously creative relation to the sacrality of the object so that the interlocutor is expected to understand the sign's re-presentation of the object as a product of the object's prior significance, in reading the sign *qua* imperative, the interlocutor must be aware of what the emitter of the sign desires him to do. If the ostensive presents itself as revealing what already is, the imperative implies a historical sequence from sign to action. In other words, where the ostensive disguises its narrativity as textuality, the imperative is already explicitly proto-narrative.

To reprise the argument of *The Origin of Language*: Because the utterance of the ostensive implies the presence of its referent, the utterance of the sign in the absence of its referent is understood as making its referent present. The child who cries “Mommy!” uses as an imperative a sign he learned as an ostensive; he expects the utterance of the word to make his mother present. This derivation is implicit in our pedagogy; we teach our child to speak so that he may “express his desires.”

Before demanding that an interlocutor supply its (nominal or verbal) object, the imperative minimally asserts the necessary conjunction between the word and the thing that had presumably been established by the ostensive. At this point, we may already speak of the imperative’s “historical” or “narrative” function. The “necessary conjunction” of word and thing already implies a temporality that is no longer that of the ostensive sign. The conversion of the gesture of appropriation into the ostensive is a movement away from the time of worldly action to the internal temporality of the sign; the ostensive sign “imitates” the object not in its action but in its transcendental Being with respect to which action is inconceivable. In contrast, the imperative mode conceives the passage from an imperfect present to a more perfect future. It is not clear, and in fact irrelevant, what agency is to effect the presence of the absent object, just as it is not clear, and in fact irrelevant, to the child what agency is expected to bring about the presence of his mother. The originary sign *qua* imperative expresses the scandal of absence just as *qua* ostensive it expressed the beatitude of presence.

And the sign *qua* declarative “tells the story” of the impossibility of the imperative—of the desired object’s absence from the world of desire. Just as the sign’s proto-imperative function does not specify the agent responsible for the making-present it requires, so its proto-declarative function does not specify what agency is telling the story of its failure to make-present. Indeed, narrative may be minimally defined precisely by this absence of specific responsibility. Just as the worldly declarative is a necessarily inappropriate response—a “category error”—to a worldly imperative, a narration is a necessarily inadequate response to the conjunction between word and thing implicit in the imperative form rather than to any specific imperative.

The foregoing analysis suggests the following definition: *narrative is the declarative reading of the originary sign.* Originary narrative is the sign insofar as it responds (negatively) to its prior suggestion of the imperative conjunction of word and thing. By its very nature, the response is negative because, by the “logic of the supplement,” were the conjunction a simple reality, no response would be expected.

If the ostensive designates the object as sacred, the imperative redefines it as necessarily, “imperatively” accessible—as, in fact, the future sacrificial victim. Yet narrative, as Girard’s Tikopia story illustrates, is the story, not of the sparagmos, but of its “transcendental” negation: flight from the mob leads not to destruction but to apotheosis. To define this apotheosis as a mere disguising of the truth is to require at the outset the impossible choice between myth and the story of the “real” sparagmos, between the story of the unfortunate victim and that of the sacred Being referred to by the sign. The Christian understanding that divine Being is equally as mortal—and as immortal—as each human being is implicit but not articulated in the scene that created the ground upon which such a consciousness could evolve. For Being to be revealed as mortal, it must first be established as immortal. Which is to say that the human referent of the sign must be established as the protagonist of an originary narrative of transcendence.

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By what I referred to above as “telling the story of its own emergence,” the originary sign turns aside the imperative of physical presence. The sign’s presence is indeed conjoined with the presence of what it refers to, but it refers not to a physical referent—nor yet to a “signified” or Idea—but to the Being that stands behind its physical manifestation. The worldly referent “ascends” into the transcendental realm of immortal signs; narrative refuses worldly appropriation by situating its objects in a representational universe. The object is “here,” but here in this sentence, not here in this room.

The Girardian reading of narrative as the concealment of a real murder poses, independently of this analysis, a quandary to the analysis of narrative in general. Does every story conceal a murder? If so, which? How do we measure to what extent a story like that of Tikarau represents a specific event in Tikopia history and to what extent it represents the originary human event and similar events in between? Many founding myths involve violent expulsion and murder; but their very similarity in this respect, while lending corroboration to the originary hypothesis of unique human origin, cannot help us decide whether a given myth is based on a specific event resulting from the universal propensity of human societies to mimetic rivalry and crisis or on a transcultural representational model.

This caveat does not sanction return to a state of pre-Girardian innocence that ignores the violence of the sparagmos. But originary analysis displaces the emphasis from violence to transcendence. Myth conceals murder in order to figure the generation of the transcendent. For an undisguised “lynching” to provide this figure, we must await the story of the Passion. We cannot generalize the formula for transcendence either in myth or in fiction; it depends, in the former, on specific

historical circumstances crystallized in ritual, and in the latter, on the unpredictability of its ethical revelation.

Narrative cannot enact transcendence; the sign cannot represent the difference between its own realm and that of the world. It might appear that this could be done through metalanguage, as in this present analysis, but analytic discourse can function only because it puts the two ontological levels on the same grammatical plane, so that words and things are both talked about in parallel as two varieties of a broader conception of "thing." Metalanguage tells about ontological difference but cannot show it. Indeed, the very point of metalanguage, which explains its role in "secularization," is to efface the revolutionary nature of the difference effected by human language. Our linguistic metalanguage offers ostensible guarantees to those who would deny the difference between human language and animal communication systems rather than seek to understand it in a mode that can only be allusive and paradoxical—that is, *religious*.

Narrative can only *figure* transcendence; flying off into the sky is an obvious example. Whatever the degree to which mythical figures of transcendence correspond to the modes of ritual murder, the mythical figure defers our own appropriative desires only in the context of its accompanying ritual. It is fiction that liberates cultural deferral from ritual and allows us to participate mimetically in a world of human intentionality.

Narrative and Figure

Narrative is inseparable from figurality. Girard's conception of myth suggests a model of the figural as the metaphoric translation of a violent worldly deed into a transcendental one. The non-violence of flying through the air contrasts with the violence of the sparagmos principally in its preservation of the integrity of the central figure. It is not the skyward direction of the flight that is essential, but its preservation of the body from harm. The body that flies is "supernatural"; liberation from gravity figures liberation from mortality.

This example suggests that figurality is in the first place supernaturalism—in contrast with the commonplace understanding of the supernatural as a mere variety of figurality. The supernatural cannot be explained as the hyperbolic extension of natural attributes. Rousseau's suggestion in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* that early men out of fear spoke of strangers as "giants" expresses the superior intuition that the supernatural accomplishes "the deferral of violence through representation" through the transfiguration of our potential for mimetic violence. If the other is a "giant," he is not merely a bigger man than I but endowed with sacred powers that I would do well not to contest. Understood as an

imaginary incarnation of the supernatural, the figure functions to bridge the gap between the worldly and the transcendental-significant. Its concrete motivation in each case is the attribution to a worldly being of a power (flight, gigantism) that preserves the community from conflict in the circumstances of indifferentiation that characterize “mimetic crisis.”

8

The originary figure portrays the victim’s invulnerability to death within the world of human experience as an indication of the “immortality” of the transcendental realm of significance. The paradoxical passage from the worldly to the transcendental can only be figured: there is no way of describing the “ostensive” transcendental realm except in inadequate “declarative” terms. (Whence the mystic’s sense of an ineffable significance; before generative anthropology, only mystics and humorists practiced paradoxical thinking.)

In what I have been calling the “declarative mode” of the originary sign, the figural functions as a deferring response to an imperative demand for the central object. If the object is not here in this room but here in this sentence, the figure permits us to pass from one realm to the other in our imagination: “here in this sentence” becomes “here on my imaginary scene of representation.” In order to present this declarative formulation as *narrative*, we must conceive the absence of the object to be the result of its intentional, and therefore not irrevocable, departure. The sign *figures* or renders imaginable this departure by converting into an intentional sequence our paradoxical experience of oscillation between (1) its reference to this specific worldly being and (2) its representation of the Being that this particular being incarnates. Because the focus of mimetic desire that the sign represents is unavailable to us who demand it, we “figure” its mortal referent as immortal. We see the object as an object of physical experience, yet the sign that represents “it” refers to a significance beyond the temporality of physical experience. What is figured by specific signs of immortality, whether freedom from gravity or invulnerability to injury, is the simple fact of designation by the sign. To be represented by the sign is in itself the primary figure of immortality, which is in turn the basis for all figurality.

The historical ground for the articulation of the originary sign into explicit narrative in the form of myth is the sparagmos, the “Girardian moment” of the originary scene when the worldly object is sacrificed to the creation of a transcendental narrative. The act of violence that we call “sacrifice” takes place within the context of the human community defined by the sign and, rather than destroying the community, reaffirms the sacred or transcendental meaning of the sign on which its unity depends.

The originary sign, so long as its emission suffices as the sole human activity, must be conceived as an ostensive. But the stasis of the ostensive, by the very fact that it preserves the community from violence, is unstable; the deferral of danger leads to the resumption of desire. The imperative mode reflects a renewed demand for conformity between the sign and the world that eventually puts an end to the deferral of appropriation. In the ensuing sparagmos, the declarative mode, which denies the object's availability, acquires explicit narrative content. On the one hand, the object has disappeared; it has not simply been appropriated but "undone," torn to pieces. On the other, "it" is recalled through the persistence of the sign as the Being of the center. Narrative is neither the object's originary *formal* passage from immanence to transcendence in the ostensive nor yet its *institutional* passage in ritual, which reenacts the scene. It is, in its mediate, *esthetic* passage, the telling of the generation of transcendence from immanence as a story in which the object's absence is figured as eternal presence.

Coda: Supernaturalism and Religious Narrative

Religious narrative is demythified to the extent that it attributes human intentionality to its protagonist or, in Girardian terms, that it views sacrifice from the point of view of the victim. Unlike myth, religious narrative obliges us to concern ourselves with the potential literality of the figure. A figure of transcendence that permits the narrative subject to accomplish supernatural feats not only does violence to the order of the world but embodies in disguised form the transfiguring force of human violence. The imaginary violence Tikarau's flight does to the laws of physics reflects the potential violence of his lynching.

Our decreased tolerance for the supernatural element in religious narrative, like Enlightenment hostility to "superstition" (*survival, sc.* of ritual thinking), reflects our ethical progress away from the sacrificial. All portrayal of sacred powers independent of human interaction is an affront to the ethical. Whether I control such powers or they control me, my actions are detached from my relations within the human community.

9

In *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 118 (November 22, 1997), I examined the attempt by Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar in *The God We Never Knew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) to redefine our relationship to God in such a way as to avoid the anthropomorphic attribution to him of divine powers. Borg's solution is to consider God as a spiritual force that subsists within us—and within whom we subsist—rather than as a distinct being with power over physical reality. But the antisacrificial thrust of Borg's project loses itself in solipsism. His "spiritual"

conception of God avoids the sacrificial only by maintaining the emphasis on the isolated individual's relationship with him that characterized the "physical" conception. I inhabit my spiritual relationship with God to the exclusion of reciprocal relationships with other people. My only meaningful relationship with others is through "compassion," which is merely the inverse of resentment.

The New Testament, like the old, contains many supernatural elements. The motivation of the Jesus Seminar, as I understand it, is to weed out such elements from the Gospel story so that we may conceive how the historical Jesus might have behaved. To this end, Borg includes in his book a 150-word description of Jesus that substitutes plausible worldly guarantees of Jesus' transcendental status—healing, mysticism, charisma, metaphoric speech—for the supernatural ones offered by the text. This description is designed to make Jesus the protagonist of a strictly worldly narrative, in which the Crucifixion is followed not by "resurrection in the flesh" but by survival in the souls of those who learn his story. But the effect of this naturalism is to emphasize our attraction to the person of Jesus at the expense of the doctrine of mutual love by which he would have us relate to him as to all others.

Resurrection, like flying off into the sky, is a figure of transcendence, but one that demystifies the mythical concealment of sacrificial murder. The Resurrection does not undo the agony unto death of the Crucifixion. In his dual status as both entirely human and entirely divine, Jesus incarnates the paradox of the sacred; this duality is the core of the mystery that the Trinity articulates but cannot explain.

Clearly the story of the Passion and Resurrection is an advance over the tale of Tikarau. The supernatural is never naively conflated with the worldly; the resurrected Christ is openly paradoxical, since he both reveals and transcends the violence of the sparagmos. Although *credo quia absurdum* was the watchword of the early Christians, today's Christianity has set itself the goal of telling his story without paradox. In its praiseworthy desire to eliminate the sacrificial, it has lost sight of the core cultural intuition that to be the object of any story, *a fortiori* an exemplary religious narrative, is *ipso facto* to incarnate an "immortal" significance that can never be sufficiently explained by reference to worldly events. The point of originary thinking is not to eliminate but to *minimize* the narrative scene that we must postulate without proof as having generated this significance.

Whatever facts we may unearth about the historical Jesus, as about any other religious leader, our understanding of his story's significance for humanity will reflect our understanding of how human experience embodies the figure of transcendence. The supernatural narrative can be superseded only by one that explains still better the generation of transcendence from immanence. Thus it will not do to explain away the Resurrection as merely an external figure of internal

spirituality; we must supply an articulation of this spirituality that is more, not less, explicit than resurrection itself. In *Science and Faith*, I explained Jesus' resurrection in the light of Saul/Paul's own experience as the sign of our admission of responsibility in his sacrificial killing. The "supernatural" return of the victim reveals to us that our cult of the sacred defers but never forgets its originary roots in the ethics of human interaction.

* * *

The minimal conception of the human as the deferral of violence through representation constitutes a qualitative leap in anthropological understanding. Narrative cannot simply be demystified; it is an originary and integral feature of the human and of human discourse. But knowing this, we can focus on improving and tightening our generative model so as maximally to purge sacrificial violence from our figures of transcendence without unleashing the mimetic crisis that this violence had functioned to defer.

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