Intentionality, Originarity, and the "Always Already" In Derrida and Gans

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Jacques Derrida's practice of deconstruction and Eric Gans's genealogy of culture known as Generative Anthropology likewise approach, from their respective viewpoints, the question of "the origin of language." Derrida's critique of metaphysics and Gans's anthropological model of culture are similarly theoretical, non-empirical, and non-empiricist attempts to generate a post-philosophical "human science" (assuming the Heideggerian erasures that such a non-philosophical thinking would require of both terms of this characterization). Gans's and Derrida's perspectives on language are certainly divergent in proportion to their respective modes of discursive engagement with the tasks, on the one hand, of a Derridean "double science" of grammatology or, on the other, of a Gansian originary thinking about a generative scene of culture in the emergence of representation. Yet, despite such opposing structures of thought about language's definitive status, in Gans's most recent book, *Signs of Paradox*, Derrida emerges as the most frequent and significant interlocutor for GA. Indeed, deconstruction is cast in *Signs of Paradox* as "GA unrealized." Toward, the end of the "Introduction," Gans asserts:

> If indeed language from the very first is a trace supplementary to a lost presence, so that the event it pretends to commemorate does not precede it but is in effect coeval with it, . . .–I think this a fair summary of Derrida's position in *De la grammatologie*–then all the theory of writing, of the supplement, of deferral, is in effect a theory of the originary event. (7)

The emphasis by Derrida on the mutually generating relation of language and consciousness sustains the enclosure of thought within an internal, disseminating, infinitely deferred

relation between human beings and their object(s). In being “always already” within the horizon of a language through which we come to know ourselves as definitive over against other species (at least immanently) by our very use of language, then we cannot know ourselves “objectively,” in accordance with the canons of a logic defined by the principles of noncontradiction and adequation.

Gans goes on to say in the above passage:

> It suffices to understand the always-already not as an abstract model formulated in the framework of metaphysics, but as a concrete one realized in an ostensive context among beings who only learn about their death because thinking is a life-and-death operation. (7)

Gans sets the co-implication of language and specifically human consciousness within an hypothetical originary narrative that can give concrete form to our thinking about the human and cultural objective, thus enabling a representation of the contradictory and paradoxical character of experience and a constructively heuristic model of culture. Gans presents the latter as an alternative to deconstruction, insofar, he says, as it is open and generative of understanding rather than infinitely regressive and disseminative:

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> When [theorists of the “always already”] have deconstructed the categories of human thought down to their founding paradox, they think they have found our thinking’s fatal weakness, when in fact they have arrived at the source of its strength. Thought acquires new degrees of freedom not by expelling paradox, but reproducing its pattern of supplementation. (7-8)

I propose to explore Gans’s assertions here regarding the deconstruction of “the categories . . . down to their founding paradox” and also his alternative reproduction of the “pattern of supplementation” of paradox. I will use Gans’s and Derrida’s respective analyses of Plato in the former’s chapter in *Signs of Paradox*, titled “Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought,” and the latter’s “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1972).

I

In “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida locates a “founding paradox” of Platonism in the permutations undergone by the term *pharmakon* across Plato’s work. Derrida focuses on the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates debates the nature both of erotic love and of rhetoric with his friend Phaedrus, a passionate lover of oratory. Early in the dialogue, Socrates refers to the manuscript of a speech by the sophist Lysias, which Phaedrus has on his person, as a drug (*pharmakon*) by which he is drawn to leave his habitual abode within the city walls. Liddell and Scott tells us that, as drug, *pharmakon* is either “healing or noxious”; it is also “an enchanted poison, philtre: hence, charm, spell”; and also a “medicine” or “poison.” The at least bivalent, ambiguous reference of *pharmakon* serves Derrida well as a “founding paradox”:

> This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be–alternatively or simultaneously–beneficent or maleficent. The *pharmakon* would be a *substance*–with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy–if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite abyss of what founds it. (70)

Derrida finds, in the ambivalence of *pharmakon* and in its association with the written text of a speech (in this case a sophistic, and, thus, *ghostwritten* speech [69]), the locus of a founding instability in Plato’s discourse between rhetoric and dialectic, persuasion and reason, dead and living knowledge, falsehood and truth, *mythos* and *logos*. That such an ambivalent term should arise early in the text of the *Phaedrus* in reference to so ambiguous an entity as a written speech speaks volumes to Derrida in that it initiates a relation between speech and writing which is threaded throughout the dialogue and which emerges in the concluding lines as capstone of its themes and arguments. The association of *pharmakon* with the relation between speech and writing becomes Derrida’s principal concern in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” a text which traces the argumentation on the status of writing begun in *Of Grammatology* (1967) in relation to Saussure and Rousseau to its earlier emergence:

> . . . to the permanence of a Platonic schema that assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, to the paternal position. Not that this happens especially and exclusively in Plato. . . . But the fact that “Platonism,” which sets up the whole of Western metaphysics in its conceptuality, should not escape the

> generality of this structural constraint, and even illustrates it with incomparable subtlety and force, stands out as all the more significant. (76)

Note here that Derrida is apparently concerned not to locate either the priority of the father, of speech over writing, or of the "whole of Western metaphysics" in "Plato" or even in "his" texts, but rather in the entity "Platonism." What the relation is between Plato and Platonism is not here explored. The rhetoric of the passage is odd. Why would one expect Platonism to escape "the generality of this structural constraint" of paternal originarity? The inconsequence of the assumption might be argued to inversely suggest that Plato is indeed the origin of a "schema" that pervades Western metaphysics "in its conceptuality," a schema that is designated by the concept "Platonism," however mediate its filial relation to Plato's works. Plato's authorship and paternity of those interests of Derrida's here in a schema distributing historic and structural relation between speech and writing is internally and necessarily very much at issue.

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In the passage previously cited in which Derrida observes the emergence of the signifier *pharmakon* in the text of the *Phaedrus*, with its inherent instability, we should again pay close attention to his rhetoric: "This *pharmakon*, . . . which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence" (70). *Pharmakon* "acts," as it were independently, and "already introduces itself" as if prior to any design or paternity of Socrates the speaker or, indeed, of Plato, the dramatist. Indeed, it is not until the very end of the dialogue, with Socrates' account of writing in the myth of Theuth, that Derrida is prepared to attribute any intentional connection on Plato's part of *pharmakon* with writing:

> Up to this point in the dialogue, one can say that the *pharmakon* and the grapheme have been beckoning to each other from afar . . . with an effectiveness that is quite discrete and after all unintentional. (73)

This until "the last phase of the dialogue": "This time it is without indirection, without hidden mediation, without secret argumentation, that writing is proposed, presented, and asserted as a *pharmakon* (274e)" (73). Plato, then, is not directing the plot of such a convergence in the closing lines of his dialogue, but responding belatedly to *pharmakon* and grapheme "beckoning to each other from afar," their "hidden mediation," their "secret argumentation" (who is "arguing" here?), the agency of a discursivity of which he as author is not author, master, or father in some not fully specified sense, a discursivity which is always already beyond a containment in the "structural constraint" of a "Platonic schema."

Derrida has earlier reminded us that the dialogue contains “the only ‘rigorously original Platonic myths: the fable of the cicadas in the *Phaedrus*, and the story of Theuth in the same dialogue'” (67; citing Frutiger). The latter tell of the god Theuth (or Thoth) “who first discovered number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, as well as the games of checkers and dice, and, above all else, writing” (274 c-d). Theuth comes to Ammon, king of Thebes, to persuade him of the benefits of all his arts for the city. Of writing, Theuth asserts: “O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory” (274e). Ammon, however, accuses Theuth of partiality toward the art he has invented:

> [Your] affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. . . . You have not discovered a potion (*pharmakon*) for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught . . . they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so. (275a-b).

Derrida glosses this passage and the role in it of writing as *pharmakon*, contrasting the *lethe* of writing with the *aletheia* of “living speech”:

> If one takes the king’s word for it, then, it is this life of the memory that the *pharmakon* of writing would come to hypnotize . . . it will sink down into *lethe*, overcome by non-knowledge and forgetfulness. Memory and truth cannot be separated. The movement of *aletheia* is a deployment of *mneme* through and through. (105)

Mneme as living *anamnesis*, a recollection that makes present, is contrasted with *hypomnesis*, a mere recalling of signs through the mediate, monumental and dead letter of writing. But Derrida points to the dialectical interimplication of these distinctions, their inability to sustain strict autonomy or the stability of their semantic frontier:

> The boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-) producing a presence from rememoration as the mere repetition of a monument. . . . The space of writing, space *as* writing, is opened up in the violent movement of this surrogation, in the difference between *mneme* and *hypomnesis*. The outside is already *within* the work of memory. . . . A limitless memory would in any event be not memory but infinite self-presence. Memory always therefore already needs signs in order to recall the non-present, with which it is necessarily in relation.

> The movement of dialectics bears witness to this. (109)

The *pharmakon*, as an undecidable medicine/poison, represents for Derrida, then, the fund of differences not yet stabilized into substances, entities, identities. The introduction of this space, the difference between writing and speech, is an expulsion of space and difference from speech as an interior, self-present immediacy, projecting all delay and mediation into an externality of sign and inscriptions in the world. Dialectics is the art by which the crucial distinctions and connections are made, but it is conditioned, Derrida argues, by a founding "antidote" to the unstable difference of the *pharmakon*; dialectics is the *pharmakon* (medicine) against the *pharmakon* (poison):

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> In order to cure the [*logos-zoon*] of the *pharmakon* and rid it of the parasite, it is thus necessary to put the outside in its place. To keep the outside out. this is the inaugural gesture of "logic" itself, of good "sense" insofar as it accords with the self-identity of *that which is*. (128)

Dialectics as antidote, then, is a differentiation of self and other, a marking off of those differences which are extraneous and alien to each other from those capable of an interweaving (*sumploke*) and uniting in a noble tension capable of the "divine bond," as between moderation and courage in the *Statesman* (310a). "Dialectics," as Derrida observes, "an art of weaving, a science of the *sumploke*" (122), which unites those elements which are in a tension with one another capable of sublation, excluding those which are merely heteronomous, endlessly proliferating and disseminating. Between those differences which can be dialectically reconciled and those that are merely alien to one another, between a symploke (a weaving, hence unifying) and a chiasmus (a mere intersection without blending) what is the identity/difference? Is there a Platonic and Hegelian identity of identity and difference or a Heideggerian and Derridean difference of identity and difference (Gasche 87)?

II

While Derrida, in "Plato's Pharmacy," argues that Plato achieves the stability of the conceptual signified by means of a repressive expulsion of difference and of the materiality of the signifier, Gans, in "Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought," argues that it is the

avoidance of the rich ostensivity of the originary scene that constitutes the founding gesture of a metaphysics overtaken by a historicity of culture that it felt the need to foreclose. Both arguments confront metaphysics with ethical-analytic criticisms: “conceptual reason” has failed by reason of a residual violence or violation in its self-constitution. In Derrida, this violence is an arbitrariness that haunts and equivocates the internal structure of reason itself, while in Gans reason forecloses on the historical and experiential rootedness of thinking as a concrete project of human culture: the openendedness of human life is defined by the avoidance of a violence which constantly conditions and threatens that quintessential freedom.

As with Derrida, metaphysics emerges for Gans with Plato, and it does so as a forgetting of the concrete, temporal and experiential relation between language and the textured world of empirical and virtual objects that it represents, objects which appear to constitute for Gans the authenticity of human action and aspiration. Whereas metaphysics dissolves the relation between sign and referent, “fetishizing the work in its difference from the thing” (79), GA returns us, through its minimal hypothesis of the originary scene of culture, to a *real* rather than a reified “transtemporal guarantee of communal peace” (91). Gans recognizes common purpose with Plato against romantic liberalism in the necessity to achieve an articulate solution to cultural conflict:

> When Plato attempts to constrain the tyrannical excesses of individual desire, it is to avert crisis in a barely postritual society, not to put a phallocratic brake on the pristine appetites of originary humanity. . . . The Sophists are dangerous because their rhetoric restores to language its originary power of creating meaning, but in a context where the speaker is no longer subject to the transcendent communal order incarnated in ritual. (91)

However, Gans’s description of the postritual crisis to which Plato responds is qualified by sympathy with the greater proximity of ritual culture to the ostensive potency of reference lost in philosophical investment in the logic of the declarative sentence:

> The deferred, discursive presence that presides over metaphysics is not the real presence that the rite claims to realize. The ostensive is banished by the linguistics of the philosophers, who replace faith in the divine presence it designates by confidence in the self-presence of philosophical language. (80-81)

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But Gans is in at least practical agreement with Heidegger in the latter’s characterization of

the Western tradition as uniformly onto-theological. Greek metaphysics and Hebrew monotheism, as determined by the latter's declarative, supraworldly self-definition, form the "founding homology of Western culture" which performs an occultation of the ostensive dimension and its "originary function of designating the sacred center of the communal circle" (80).

It is, not surprisingly, then to Gans's constitution of the ostensive richness of this originary scene that we must look for the specificity of his theoretical model. For Gans the "vertical" structure of distinctively human relations emerge from the "horizontal" indifference of animal appetites in response to an inevitable crisis in animal behaviour: the stasis produced by the mimetic modeling driving all behaviour and the conflict over objects of desire which it inherently produces. Within animal communities such conflicts are avoided by clear hierarchies and pecking orders established by tests of strength and prowess, i.e., by unreflective master/slave dynamics. The "internal contradiction in the (mimetic) mode of behaviour" (20) produces a moment of crisis in which conflict with the model over the object of desire will either be pursued or avoided by submission. Gans argues that the distinctively human response emerges as a choice neither to appropriate (and so to fight) nor to submit but rather to represent, to produce a purely formal gesture that constitutes the object as sign–as the original word or gesture and the originary act of a distinctively human relation between subject, model, and object. The originary sign, then, "is the conversion of a gesture begun in imitation of the model's appropriative gesture into the 'imitation' of the object that was the aim of this gesture" (23). Gans affirms that the birth of a second order imitation, one that initiates a liberation from imitation itself, therefore, by imitation, illustrates the inherent paradoxically of the human-as-such, a formulation which "guarantees the inexhaustibility of originary thinking" (24). In this second order mimesis of the object, "the subject is not copying another's gesture, but representing the object itself" (25). It is a "conscious thematization"; rather than an imitative act of appropriation, it is a reflective act of representation, "an intention to recall [the object] into being, to double it using only my own resources" (26). But such doubling is complex, since it re-presents the object not only to oneself but to the model (and implicitly to others):

> The aim of the action now having shifted to communicating a representation of the object to the other, the beginning and end of this action . . . are ultimately determined by the internal or formal coherence of the gesture itself, since it is this coherence that makes *it* an object of perception and thereby communicates to the other the intention to represent the object. (28)

The richness of the ostensive, then, resides in this minimal narrative construction of "the formality of the gesture," its "objective" stature as "an autonomous object of perception or *Gestalt* in itself" (28-29).

The richness, of course, of this founding sign is multi-dimensional: it encompasses at once the emergence of the object of desire as this new entity, a *sign* (over against its renounced *referent*); it constitutes the *subject* in a reflective act of secondary mimesis that creates a new sphere of relation to itself and to the other, one in which the subject-to-be steps out of strict submission and initiates a recognition of the referent-to-be-renounced-as-object-by-being-indicated-as-referent, in which the subject asserts a symbolic, purely formal and mediate appropriation of the object. However, this "subjective" appropriation can only function if reciprocally acknowledged in its formal autonomy by the model. This formal coherence of the sign in its complexity instantiates the multi-dimensionality just mentioned, in which the specifically human community emerges as a society of *subjects* of a formal gesture of renunciation. The "objective" and "formal" status of the founding gesture, as a *Gestalt*, initiates a necessarily dialogical and dialectical differentiation of such an originary scene. Gans's discussion and explication of his model in *Signs of Paradox*, its most recent formulation, seem to me to thematize the objectivity and formality of the founding gesture to the neglect of its necessary and correlative subjectivity. The sign would not only formalize the referent as representation of renounced desire, but also as complex sign of its non-renunciation in mere submission to an Alpha, of its appropriation as formal object, and of the assertion that there is more than appetite at stake in the newly emergent relations of the "subject," "model," and "object" (quotation marks indicating that each of these entities are precisely at stake in the very contextuality and ostensivity of this founding sign).

Gans addresses this transition in which the object as referent of the founding sign–prior to which there is, strictly speaking, no "object," since there is no self-determining subject–is constructed in a turning away from simple mimesis of the model:

> This movement reflects an internalization of the model's motivation, the self's closer assimilation to the other's own reality. The more closely I imitate my model's goal-directed action the more I share the goal of this action, which is not located in the action itself but precisely in its external object. (23)

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The crucial moment, the turn from appropriation of the object to thematization of it as referent, entails the mentioned complexity of recognition, not merely in the subject since it calls forth the intersubjective communication that shifts the object to the vertical axis of reference, representing simultaneously the renunciation of simple mimesis. The formal coherence of the gesture of reference/renunciation must also captivate the model:

> Within the practical realm the goal is no longer to appropriate the object in imitation of the human mediator but to imitate the object to the latter's

> satisfaction, that is, well enough to make him understand the new sense–which can already be called the meaning–of the gesture. . . . This closure is not perceived within the practical world but on the other's imaginary scene of representation. (28)

One question that arises is this: how can the model/mediator be said to be motivated by possession of the object, if he too is still acting out of simple mimesis? Further, and implicitly, what is the "satisfaction," the desire that the subject finds captivating in the model, when not only is the model not itself a subject, but is not "originarily" motivated to become one through the generative and renunciative sign? That is, what is the model's motivation to recognize such an imaginary scene? Gans appears to have constructed an "originary" model whose motivation is autonomous and yet pre-human, committing as it were the cardinal sin of all arguments from origin as viewed by deconstruction.

III

Gans's critique of Plato and of metaphysics as a "fetishizing of the word in its difference from the thing" (79), then, is qualified in the light of a tendency in his own model of concrete ostensivity to reify the object, to render it originary in the absolute, unmediated sense. The object becomes such in his narrative prior to the emergence of any sign that would make it distinguishable in the horizontal plane of appetite, since it mysteriously captured the intention of a mediator who has himself somehow therefore removed it from its mimetic relation to his own model. Rather than a transtemporal guarantee of communal peace," precisely what Plato was after all striving for as "justice" in the *Republic*, Gans's originary sign hovers in that equivocal realm between sign and referent, subject and object of desire/knowledge.

Derrida reproaches Plato with a similar charge of reification to Gans's of fetishization, but from the other side of the equation. It is the equivocity of the sign rather than the instability inherent to representation of the object that is Derrida's focus in "Plato's Pharmacy." But it is significant that here, too, it is the problem of "intentionality" that is the crux of Derrida's, as it was central to Gans's, argument. As argued earlier, Derrida's attribution of a certain signifying agency resident in the polyvalence of "*pharmakon*" depends upon a reading of Plato's authorial intentions in the *Phaedrus*. Not only is the appearance of any connection between *pharmakon* and grapheme in the dialogue, before its explicit linking in the final passage, "perhaps after all unintentional":

> But in order to lift this doubt and on the supposition that the categories of the voluntary and the involuntary still have some absolute pertinence in a reading–which we don't for a minute believe, at least not on the textual level on which we are now advancing–let us proceed. . . . (73)

Does the absence, then, of an "absolute pertinence" render the notion of intentionality utterly irrelevant and unviable? Is there either absolute intentionality and authorial agency or else none at all . . . no qualified or negotiated interaction between author and language system? Derrida's hermeneutic choice to read Plato's construction of writing as *pharmakon* as a closed rather than an open and qualified one attributes to Plato a tolerance for self-contradiction at the authorial level in direct contrast to the relentless critique of such within his texts themselves. One would think it incumbent upon a deconstructive reading to take an open stance tolerant of polyvalence rather than a closed and monovalent one on such a question of authorial intention, in the presence of both textual and contextual evidence that Plato was capable of condemning writing as poison when used in one way and qualifiedly allowing it to function as medicine when used in another (Ferrari [220-22] persuasively argues the textual evidence for such a reading).

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To reiterate Gans's critique of both metaphysics and deconstruction:

> It suffices to understand the always-already not as an abstract model formulated in the framework of metaphysics, but as a concrete one realized in an ostensive context among beings who only learn about their death because thinking is a life-and-death operation. (7)

That we are precisely always already within the horizon of the "always already" is surely the point of the modern/late modern/postmodern concern with immanence and the attempt to think from within. Whether we consider ourselves to be thinking from within "thinking from within" itself or thinking from within our "experience" or "language" remains a serious question for readers of both Gans and Derrida.

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