

# **“In the Beginning was the Word...”: The Question of the Origin of Language in Goethe’s *Faust***

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Beginning with the Age of Goethe, the history of the question of the origin of language follows from the general questions, “What is man?” “What is culture?” and “What is language?”<sup>(1)</sup> The Berlin Academy of Sciences conjectured in its *Preisfrage* of 1769 whether human beings, “abandoned to their natural faculties,” are capable of inventing language. In response, the first sentence of Johann Gottfried Herder’s winning “Essay on the Origin of Language” gives the starting point for new anthropological thinking in the eighteenth century, changing the history of this question: “Already as an animal the human being has language.”<sup>(2)</sup> As Helmut Mueller-Sievers, the author of *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800*, points out, Herder’s rhetorical procedure is an attempt to deny both empirical and divine origins of language while unifying his philosophical project within the domain of language:

The quest for a satisfactory explanation for the origin and status of language at the end of the eighteenth century is, historically and structurally, related to the debate about the origin of living beings. As one of the more popular themes for academy competitions it was discussed with intense public participation and had split the *monde savant* into opposing camps of those who argued that the origin of language was natural (or animalistic) and those who insisted it was divine. (93)

Without determining the validity of Herder’s hypothetical scene of origin, such as his story of the bleating sheep designed to match the scenarios of Condillac, Rousseau, and Suessmilch, it is important to stress that the response to this *Preisfrage* proposes the existence of a *literary* human being. Instead of viewing

language as the product of instinct and evolution and favoring a gradual emergence of human language, Herder demonstrates the humanity of language by seeking the “necessary genetic cause [*Grund*] for the emergence of language” (108). As a literary response to the question of the origin of language, Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Faust*—specifically the episodes relating the professor’s experiment with the macrocosm sign, his conjuration of the Earth Spirit in “Night,” and his free translation of the *logos* script in “Study I”—represents a reorientation of anthropological thinking around 1800 and the creation of a new *literary* human being who rejects his own desire for knowledge.

Although Mueller-Sievers and others have described the history of the question of the origin of language in the Age of Goethe, no one has yet explained the cultural significance of Herder’s philosophical response or Goethe’s dramatic response to this question by offering a competing theory of the origin of language.<sup>(3)</sup> From the standpoint of anthropology as the foundational human science, the *Preisfrage* of 1769, Herder’s essay, and Goethe’s drama are a confirmation of scientific principles from within the world of humanistic discourse around 1800. Rousseau’s *Discourses*, Herder’s longer essay, *Ideas for a Philosophy of History*, and Kant’s little-known anthropological writing, *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*, make an attempt to dissolve the classical problems of metaphysics and to translate our humanistic paradoxes, such as the origin of language, into terms accessible to rational thought. In the same manner, recent anthropological approaches present us with the paradox that narrative non-performance—the actual breakdown of conventional meaning—reveals the dynamic of narrative self-generation. Whether in Wolfgang Iser’s “literary anthropology” or Eric Gans’s “generative anthropology” the problematic evolutionary development of culture calls for a conscious description of the origin of narrative forms. Iser provides an “exploratory” approach to literary study by denying an anterior referent, such as society or culture, to the act of representation. The “doubling structure of fictionality” defers the positioning of cultural forms within the “blank space” of the literary text. In comparison, Gans’s “explanatory” approach to literature based more on literature’s effect to reduce social violence—recalls the subject’s desire of a sacred object in a hypothetical scene of origin or “originary scene.” Iser and Gans thus propose models for different types of narratives that “explore” or “explain” the cultural phenomena of literary “innovations” and “theories of language.”

Goethe’s response to the paradox of language origin wonders about the possibility of compensating for a cultural “deficiency” (*Mangel*) (*Faust I* 1215). In the episode, “Study I,” Faust prefaces his translation of the *logos* script, “In the beginning was the word,” with indecision. Will the appropriation of this primal sentence into his

own primal writing scene establish a pattern of continued undifferentiation? Or a hoped-for self-differentiation?

Why does the river rest so soon, and dry up, and  
Leave us to languish in the sand?  
How well I know frustration!  
This want, however, we can overwhelm:  
We turn to the supernatural realm,  
We long for the light of revelation. (1212-17)[\(4\)](#)

Faust's "desire" (*sehnen*) for revelation is not to be grouped with the other alternatives to metaphysics that show the Faustian attempt to circumvent thinking and knowing. According to Albrecht Schöne, this episode is a return to rational thought first announced in line 1198: "Reason again begins to speak." Like Luther, Faust wants to see a pattern in history that governs the formation of cultural types and compensates for the "deficiency" of evolutionary concepts that explain the progress from representation (*das Wort*) to action (*die Tat*) (1224-37). Commenting on the significance of lines 1210-16, Schöne quotes Goethe's letter written to Zelter on November 14, 1816:

[Luther recognized] in the Old and New Testament the symbol of the great being of the world that always repeats itself, [so that] the Lutheran church could never be united with the Catholic church; it is not antagonistic to pure reason, as soon as it decides to consider the Bible as a mirror to the world, which in any case should not be difficult for it to do. (FA I: 7: 2: 247; my translation)[\(5\)](#)

Faust is indecisive, since he is not sure that his imitation of Luther and his translation of the Bible from Greek to German carries the same historical significance. Unlike Luther, he cannot decide whether his translation of "word" into "act" establishes a pattern for the emergence of culture that differentiates him from tradition—or from the former self that he wants to escape.

As a narrative form, the preface to the translation of the Gospel reacts to the conventions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conversion narratives. In this context, Goethe's German is more compelling than the English translation. "Davon hab ich soviel Erfahrung" [I have so much *experience* with this] (1213) is an expression of frustration, but it also represents his skepticism that language will represent conversion. Language is regarded as inadequate to signify the divine, conversion is problematic, and, in this sense, the conversion narrative becomes

self-deconstructing. We do not need to look beyond the text for Faust's experience with conversion and "anti-conversion" narratives.[\(6\)](#) Before "Study I," the scene of Faust's translation of the Bible, and "Study II," the scene of Faust's "wager" with the Mephistopheles, we count three prefaces to the play: "Dedication," "Prelude in the Theater," and "Prologue in Heaven." In addition, Faust presents three clear alternatives to Kantian categorical thinking in the Macrocosm scene, the conjuration of the Earth Spirit, and the suicide attempt interrupted by a clumsy *deus ex machina*. Finally, in the scene, "Before the City Gate," Faust announces to Wagner an excuse for his "frustration:"

Two souls, alas, are welling in my breast,  
And one is striving to forsake its brother.  
Unto the world in grossly loving zest,  
With clinging tendrils one adheres;  
The other rises forcibly in quest  
Of rarefied ancestral spheres. (1112-17)

The many prefaces, including the numerous "excuses" Faust gives for his frustration, act together to construct Goethe's "anti-conversion" narrative. The inversion of the traditional Faust material is Goethe's deferral of his own response to the question of language origin. Goethe maintains that his character of Faust is less an "idea," more an attempt to understand this character within the temporal unfolding of his own narrative. As Goethe famously remarked in a conversation with Eckermann on May 6, 1827, *Faust* reverses the direction of traditional allegory but does not offer an allegorical explanation:

They come to me and ask, what idea I sought to embody in my 'Faust'. As if I could know that myself! 'From heaven through the world to hell'-that would be a place to start; but that is not an idea, rather it is the progression of the plot.

As a narrative that deconstructs itself, breaking down, inverting, and deferring dramatic action, *Faust* develops its own sense of paradox. It becomes intertextual when it asks the questions, What is man? What is culture? and What is language?-in exactly this form and in exactly this order.

philosophical project in *The Origin of Language* denies the fundamental difference between human language and animal communication and then restores this difference by postulating a hypothetical scene of origin. The historical context for Herder's scene of origin is a reorientation of the original question of the *Preisfrage* of 1769 towards the "necessary genetic cause (*Grund*)" that would bring the question of language within the realm of pure reason and freedom. In Kant's opinion, the transition from inarticulate *cri de passion* to the general concept is an impossible basis for guaranteeing the category of identity through language. In comparison, Herder argues that language is a product or "innovation" of human culture and an assertion of man's freedom against the idea of necessity: "Language has been invented! Invented as naturally and necessarily to the human being as the human being was a human being" (118). As an alternative to Kantian categorical thinking, i.e., "I think," Herder's own assertion, "I speak," follows not only from a hypothetical scene of origin, whether real or imaginary, but also from a narrative that shows the evolution of forms of expression.

The scene of origin is hypothetical because its scientific status depends on his demonstration that the sign—in this case, Herder's "name of the sheep"—is a necessary condition for representation. Herder does not explain the historical and cultural phenomenon, but imagines something that Eric Gans calls an "originary scene." In this scene, the human being reflects on the possibility of the original sign, whether *cri de passion* or "bleating of a sheep," becoming a general communicative concept:

The sound of bleating apprehended by a human soul as the distinguishing mark became, by virtue of this reflection, [the] name of the sheep, even if no tongue had tried to stammer it. He recognized the sheep by its bleating: this was a conceived (*gefasstes*) sign, through which the soul reflected distinctly upon an idea—and what is that other than a word? And what is the entire human language other than a collection of such words? (118)

Naturally, Herder's "originary scene" does not provide sufficient explanatory power to fulfill the requirements of a scientific proof. Importantly, he does not try to erase the difference between man and animal. His "proof" simply states the limits of man's perception in his capacity as a sensible animal. The notion of difference, the "distinguishing mark," translates the sign into a concept:

No sensuous creature can feel outside itself [without a distinguishing mark] for there are always feelings which it has to repress, annihilate as it

were, since it can forever apprehend the difference between two only by means of a third. Thus through a distinguishing mark? And what was that other than an interior distinguishing word (*innerliches Merkwort*)? (117)

In this manner, the narrative of linguistic representation proceeds from the notion of an inner characteristic mark (*Merkmal*), i.e., the sound of bleating, to the inner characteristic word or concept (*innerliches Merkwort*), i.e., the name of the sheep, and then on to the external communicative word (*Mitteilungswort*).

Although Herder's narrative is compelling, deconstructionists criticize him on this point for "logocentrism" much as Derrida originally criticized Rousseau's own hypothetical scene of origin. For example, Mueller-Sievers argues that the process of translation, the becoming-sign of the sign, substantially "erases" contradictions between the scene of origin and the developing argument of the narrative of language origin:

To make [the necessary condition of the hypothetical scene of origin] plausible, however, the distinction between word, characteristic mark (*Merkmal*), and concept has to be erased. [...] The logical problems of Herder's example and the argument he draws from it-inherent in any reconstruction of a scene of unprecedented recognition-can be overcome only with the help of such an erasure. (Mueller-Sievers 97)

Despite these objections, however, Herder continues to provide a model for Goethe who cannot conceive of responding to the question of language origin without offering his own representation of the hypothetical scene of origin in the scene of Faust's translation of the *logos* script. For Goethe, translation is the preferred method of creating a literary space where his literary creation, Faust, rebels against the Kantian universe with which he is familiar. Goethe shows that the scene of language origin requires paradox and a love of contradiction in order to preserve the fundamental difference between man and animal, the human and the sacred. Words can be "erased," but, for ethical reasons, these differences should not be erased.

Instead of employing a technique of free translation, Goethe depicts Faust using the literary technique of appropriation in order to transform the "original text" (*Grundtext*) of the Bible into a personal response to the question of language origin. Whereas Kant and Herder are accused of "logocentrism" for their different versions of linguistic philosophy—"I think" versus "I speak"—Goethe makes the fundamental difference between sacred and profane texts the key to Faust's translation of the

Gospel of John. Once more, Goethe prefaces the scene, “Study I,” by emphasizing that translation results from a “personal desire” (*mich draengt’s*) to make something one’s own, “in mein geliebtes Deutsch zu uebertragen”:

I would for once like to determine-  
Because I am sincerely perplexed-  
How the sacred original text  
Could be translated into my beloved German. (1220-23)

4

But before translating a word, Faust is interrupted by the drama itself. For this translation scene, “setting the stage” means a conscious reflection on its historical significance—i.e., that Faust imitates Luther—as well as its local significance. Faust’s translation is not mere soliloquy. Since it involves his entire physical being, the act is marred by hesitation. The stage direction, “He opens the tome and sharpens his pen” (Er schlaegt ein Volum auf und schickt sich an,) presents the image of a writer eager to put pen to paper, but the hesitation is almost immediate. The translation is a false start that portends writer’s block. Unlike Herder’s scene of origin, Goethe’s scene of origin is full of friction:

It says: ‘In the beginning was the *Word*.’  
Already I am stopped. It seems absurd.  
The *Word* does not deserve the highest prize,  
I must translate it otherwise  
If I am well inspired and not blind. (1224-28)

The threat of non-performance in this originary narrative represented by the emphasis of scenic details over verbal ones demonstrates Goethe’s desire to supplant formalism with a language philosophy that encompasses the whole human being. Faust’s expressed desire to translate “otherwise” shows off a sensitivity to the absolute difference dividing the “sacred original text” from the multiple dialects of human language, “my beloved German.” The writing of personal narrative responds to the mystery that threatens to undo his personal identity.

Contrary to expectations, Faust is not greeted with the original *logos* script when he opens the sacred text and reads the first line. Faust must be reading the Greek, yet he reports finding that his “beloved German” has taken the place of Greek: “Geschrieben steht: ‘Im Anfang war das Wort’” [It says: ‘In the beginning was the

Word.’] Since the text has already undergone one translation, the quotation marks signal the fact that this passage represents neither the reality of the time, nor the actual beginning of his own attempt at translation. He soliloquizes about a possible translation and merely recapitulates the Lutheran translation: “Und das wort ward fleisch, und wohnete unter uns” [And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us] (*Joh. I*, 14). Aware that the concept of *logos* could find several equivalents in German, he hesitates to equate the act of representation with an empty predicate. He calls Luther’s translation into question. By abstracting the *logos* from its Christian context, he understands the sacred “Word” in relation to human language, mere “words.” The free translation that follows generates a number of other possible translations, including “Mind” (*Sinn*), “Force” (*Kraft*), and finally “Act” (*Tat*). Moving away from the “logocentric” narratives of Kant and Herder, he breaks down the transcendental signifier into a narrative of his own making: “I write: In the beginning was the Act.” Or, in German, “Ich schreibe: Im Anfang war die Tat” (1237).

Although Hitler would praise Goethe for giving such prominence to “deeds” over “words,” Faust’s signature, embodied in the phrase, “I write,” cannot convince us of his originality. Albrecht Schöne reminds us that Faust’s reflection on the mystery of the sacred text involves Goethe’s own assimilation of similar comments made by Herder regarding the concept of *logos*. Schöne identifies Herder’s profound influence on Goethe, thus adding one more layer to the complex notion of translation inherent to the writing of this hypothetical scene of origin:

Translating into words that are completely his own, [Goethe] follows Herder’s lead. In 1774 Herder wrote the following in response to the opening passage of the Gospel of John: ‘Word! But the German word does not express what the [Greek] translation says’; ‘no idea can encompass [the Holy Spirit]: no word name Him.’ And 1775: ‘To be comprehensible to man, the divine did not choose a symbol outside of us, but the most internal, holy, divine, effective, deep idea He chose, the image of God in the human soul, Idea! Word! Will! Act! Love! (FA I: 7: 2: 247; my translation)

Since affixing his personal signature is another attempt to appropriate what seems attractive and useful within his culture, it functions only as another method of deferral of action. The act of representation enables Faust to write a personal narrative, but there is no guarantee that this narrative will not be separated from him, entering his words into a system of infinite exchange. As a symbol of appropriation, the signature makes the translation secondary to Faust’s search for

personal freedom.

The first edition of *Faust*, commonly known as the *Urfaust*, did not contain the Faust translation of the Gospel of John, so that it was not until the publication of the second and final edition in 1805 that Goethe presented his response to the question of the origin of language. In his wide-ranging work, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (*Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*), Friedrich Kittler notes the significance of Goethe's lateness in his response to this question. He organizes his own master narrative of European culture for the past two hundred years around one binary notion, "1800/1900," and around another binary notion, "performance/non-performance." For Kittler, the theatricality of performance is the general condition within which—and depending on the technology used—something like "fiction," "literature" or "narrative" can take place. It is not Faust's proverbial thirst for knowledge that makes him an interesting case study for his diagnosis of a European "discourse network," but his love of spectacle and of the physical affect of astonishment. Upon discovering the magic sign of the Macrocosm, Faust shouts out, "What play! Yet but a play, however vast!" (454). Despite reservations about the superficial character of spectacle, he wants more of it, since it commands a sublimity not to be found in the drabness of his Gothic library. In Kittler's opinion, this appetite for the sublime is something conditioned by the cultural media of the Enlightenment. Faust's preference for theatrical gesture over linguistic expression grows out of a personal "resentment" against the word (Kittler 13). Accordingly, Kittler interprets the crisis of conventionality in the late Enlightenment as provoking the efforts of a new generation of Romantic writers to initiate a "paradigm shift" within the traditional pedagogical scene that Faust describes in the opening lines of his monologue (83).

5

Kittler counts neither Goethe nor his younger disciples, Karl Philipp Moritz and Jean Paul Richter, among the Romantics, but he does recognize that Goethe's staging of Faust's free translation of *logos* inspired a Romantic model of the public sphere around 1800 (19). Kittler underlines the importance of other scenes within the play, specifically the Macrocosm scene and the conjuration of the Earth Spirit, in which Goethe's "stage direction" commands Faust to open Nostradamus's book and to pronounce the magic ideogram or "name of the Ghost" "in a mysterious fashion." The pronunciation of this unspeakable, unnamable, and untranslatable "word" on the stage is a sign that the eighteenth-century's crisis of conventionality has been resolved. The "non-performable stage direction" (*undurchfuehrbare Regieanweisung*) indicates a synthesis of word and image, so that the letters of the page are like the Goethean symbol whose significance is "infinite" (13). Kittler explains, however, that the "discourse network 1800"—to which contemporaries can trace the most modern notions of writing—is threatened by the fact that the minimal

condition of cultural performance, translation, and assimilation is cultural non-performance, interruption, resignation. The introductory chapter of Kittler's work, entitled the "Scholar's Tragedy," thus exemplifies his brand of deconstruction through his choice of opening quotation, Faust's famous opening sigh, "Ach!"

I have, alas, studied philosophy,  
Jurisprudence and medicine, too,  
And, worst of all, theology  
With keen endeavor, through and through-  
[...] And see that for all our science and art  
We can know nothing. It burns my heart. (354-58; 364-65)

He calls Faust's opening monologue the "beginning of German literature" because it is a beginning without a beginning and, infinitely deferred, a beginning without an end: "German literature begins with a sigh" (Kittler 1). Devoid of a dramatic narrator or the statement of a unique style beyond the folksy *Knittelvers*, Goethe's *Faust* depicts a primal writing scene and a hypothetical scene of origin that refuses its originary status. This writing scene is the result of a collaboration or forces that merely "locate" the writing subject within a discourse network (2). Following the motto, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, Kittler situates Faust, the writing subject, after the signifier.

An "untimely meditation" if there ever was one, the melancholic sigh in the opening monologue of Goethe's play is an expression of Faust's obvious disgust with the uncomfortable, high-vaulted Gothic den where he lives and works. It is, moreover, an indictment of the circulation of words and books being endlessly renewed within the Republic of Scholars and the Four Faculties. According to Kittler, the beginning of German literature is the dismantling of this obsolete discourse network and the self-generation of a narrative newly oriented towards the reader's bodily experience of the text and of language. Faust undertakes a more solitary semantic quest for the transcendental signified by means of rhetorical variation. He differentiates himself from the Republic of Scholars whose resistance-free circulation of signs shows their indifference to the structural meaning of difference, crossing out not only the producer of texts, but also their consumer. Thus Faust's "story" is the one he initiates in the primal writing scene that culminates in his eccentric translation of the Gospel of John:

The sheet of paper on which Faust wrote must have looked something like this:

the Act

the Force

the Mind

In the Beginning was the Word

These crossings-out distinguish hermeneutical translation from rhetorical paraphrase. (Kittler 12)

As a response to the question of the origin of language, hermeneutical translation around 1800 qualifies as one version of what Eric Gans, using the terms of generative anthropology, calls “originary narrative.”<sup>(7)</sup> As Kittler’s explication of the scene demonstrates, the “transcendental signified, however remote from language it may seem, arises technically or grammatically from a sequence of reiterated crossings-out” (11). The particular scene that Kittler chooses to foreground as the origin of German literature is convenient, but does not comply with his overall thesis that “theatricality” is the general condition of writing. Although the free translation of the concept of *logos* takes place on stage, it is, in fact, one of the rare scenes not treated as a scene, a play within a play or *mise en abyme*. For this reason, free translation—the physical act of crossing out—should be considered as only one version of an “originary narrative” that investigates the origin of narrative forms. In this version, the “staging” of language involves more the product of the text than the producer.

6

In the opening monologues of *Faust*, the untheatrical staging of Faust’s free translation of *logos* compares favorably with the more self-conscious staging of the other experiments with language which appeared in the original *Urfraust*, the sign of the Macrocosm and the conjuration of the Earth Spirit. Whereas Kittler separates Faust’s earlier experiments with the book of Nostradamus in “Nacht” from the later experiment with the Gospel text in “Study I,” this episode precedes the Gospel episode not only in terms of the history of the genesis of *Faust* but also in terms of its grammatical complexity. The narrative quest for the transcendental signified does not begin and end with the crossing out or *rature* of the *logos* script. As a “hermeneutical translation,” this crossing out cannot restore the absolute difference between the secular and the sacred, the human and the divine, that is the purpose of Faust’s “originary” narrative. Although the Gospel episode more or less unselfconsciously stages Faust’s primal writing scene within the cultural context of Luther’s translation of the Bible from Greek to German, it suggests the Nostradamus

episode in which Faust completely fails in his pronunciation of the Hebrew sign of the Macrocosmos. The scene is narrated from the standpoint of a series of stage directions rather than from Faust's standpoint:

He opens the book and sees the symbol of the Macrocosm.

He contemplates the symbol.

In disgust, he turns some pages and beholds the symbol of the Earth Spirit.

He seizes the book and mysteriously pronounces the symbol of the spirit. A reddish flame flashes, and the Spirit appears in the flame.

As an example of a failed translation or mistranslation, this personal narrative misappropriates the Other that generates discourse and is generated by it. In this experiment, Faust wants to establish an identity between the Hebrew sign and his German soul, but the Earth Spirit knows better, rejecting and belittling him:

You have implored me to appear,  
Make known my voice, reveal my face;  
Your soul's entreaty won my grace:  
Here I am! What abject fear  
Grasps you, oh superman! [...] (486-90)

The "mysterious" sign opens an unbridgeable, untranslatable gap between Hebrew and German. The symbolic figuration of this gap will depend on originary forms of representation, "before the signifier."

Instead of thematizing the translation of the declarative form into another declarative form of narrative, "In the Beginning was the Word, Mind, Force, Act, whatever..." Goethe structures the scene in "Nacht" around the notions of "performance" and "non-performance," interrupting the temporal progression of the dramatic narrative. Kittler argues convincingly that the "mysterious" pronunciation of the sign at line 481 is "the first non-performable stage direction (*undurchfuerhbare Regieanweisung*) in European theatrical history" (6). The failure of this experiment, which leads eventually to Faust's suicide attempt, does not mask his true intentions:

‘Mysteriously’ indeed. This event, speaking out loud, is possible for books composed of letters, but not for a collection of magic ideograms, especially when the ideograms combine unsayable figures and equally unsayable Hebrew letters. Magical signs exist to be copied under the midnight moon, not to be spoken out loud. But the Faustian experiment consists in turning the semiological treasury of signifiers into the oral reserves of the reader. (6)

Taking this “non-performable stage direction” as evidence, Kittler draws conclusions about the failure of Faust’s experiment. Since all culture is textual, his dream of an oral culture before written culture reduces the act of reading to an “elementary and infantile form of consumption” (7). In an anthropological approach to narrative, however, the distinction between oral culture and written culture is secondary. More importantly, Kittler’s deconstructionist example of a “non-performable stage direction” consists of two separate actions—or, rather, two separate language experiments—that must now be subjected to an “originary analysis” of narrative. In this manner, we can judge the success (or failure) of Goethe’s response to the question of the origin of language. Before Faust seizes the book and “mysteriously” pronounces the foreign sign, he asks an important question that Kittler unfortunately glosses over:

Was it a God that made these symbols be  
That soothe my feverish unrest,  
Filling with joy my anxious breast,  
And with mysterious potency  
Make nature’s hidden powers around me, manifest?  
Am I a God? [...] (434-439)

7

Because Faust sees himself as a “superman” (*Uebermensch*), this question thematizes the absolute difference between man and the sacred being he renounces. The gesture of appropriation of the Other that recognizes this difference demystifies Faust’s “mysterious” invocation of the Spirit and refers to the temporal difference implicit in that which Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser define as originary narrative.

According to the terms of generative anthropology, the originary hypothesis concerning the origin of language proposes the minimal conditions for which originary narrative enacts the cultural deferral of violence. Eric Gans postulates an

“originary scene” for which “such activities as hunting generate plausible settings,” and in which “fear of conflict” is the sole necessary motivation for the “abortion of the original gesture of appropriation” (*End of Culture* 20). Mimetic or Girardian theory provides the greatest possible explanatory force with regard to language origin because it foregrounds the most common characteristic of human culture: its tendency to resort to internecine violence. With regard to the killed animal a ritual has to be imposed so that the huntsman do not kill each other in deciding who gets the prey. The establishment of ritual prohibitions ensures the continuous self-differentiation of culture and provides a pattern for the emergence of cultural institutions, including literature. In order to recognize this pattern, Gans distinguishes the “detemporalizing” moment of the originary sign from overlapping “temporal” narrative forms. He associates narrative performance with the mimetic rivalry of subjects about to appropriate the sacred object’s centrality:

[...] humanity is not originally constituted by narrative but by text, [...] the originary sign is not temporal but detemporalizing. Human beings cannot do without narrative; but narrative is only conceivable as the interpretation of text. (*Originary Thinking* 100)

If “text” refers to the absolute difference implicit in originary narrative, “narrative” provides the path from the “emission of the sign to the resolution of the originary crisis in communal appetitive satisfaction” (101). Nevertheless, in a recent essay, entitled “Originary Narrative,” Gans re-evaluates the preference which he gives textuality over narrativity. Calling into question the accepted notion of narrative based on the notion of an historical present, he demonstrates how temporality becomes atemporal and how performance also “mimetically suggests non-performance, renunciation.”

According to this definition, originary narrative is the “story of the emission of the sign,” of the “deferred gesture of appropriation”—or, to put it in more popular terms, the story of *différance*. From this perspective, we recognize “staging” as an anthropological category that responds to the question of the origin of language or, using the terms of Wolfgang Iser’s literary anthropology, “imagines” a narrative beginning in the “blank space” of the literary text (Iser, “The Use of Fiction”). The binary notion, “performance/non-performance,” presents itself as an active reflection on the originary forms of representation, before the institution of the signifier. As Gans describes it, this operation works in opposition to the sign’s actual intention:

[In its capacity as ostensive representation] the sign denies the conditions of its emergence in order to present itself as a passive reflection of what

was ‘always already’ there...The [ostensive sign] requests no performance but mimetically suggests non-performance, renunciation. [The originary narrative], 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. [Originary] narrative is not even the “zero degree” but the negation of narrativity. (Gans, “Originary Narrative”)

With the benefit of this re-definition of the historical “process” of narrative, the “staging” of Faust’s opening monologues in “Nacht” and “Study I” foregrounds the “unhearable” translation of Hebrew into German in the Nostradamus episode. Made “hearable” by the fact that it is in Faust’s “beloved German,” the episode containing the translation of the Gospel text is pushed into the background. As non-performance, the “staging” of the “non-performable stage direction” assumes the function of the ostensive sign of originary narrative. As ostensive sign-at once renouncing and designating the sacred center—the “non-performable stage direction” produces “readings” of the absolute difference between man and God that cannot be organized in the formalized structure of narrative, either the declarative syntax of the *logos* or, as Kittler would have it, its free translation.

In the originary model that Wolfgang Iser provides in his version of literary anthropology, the triadic relationship of the fictive, the real, and the imaginary describes the emergence of the “performative character of representation” as non-performance. The “energizing force” of literature interrupts cultural ideology, it moves beyond the linguistic dimension of the human, and it testifies to the human need for communication (“The Use of Fiction”). Although Iser criticizes the “totalizing” effect of the “originary scene” of generative anthropology, he agrees that the minimalism of the scene helps to explain the essential but problematic difference that separates the writing subject from the scene of representation (*The Fictive* xii). According to Iser, the performative nature of representation repeats itself in the semantic quest for the transcendental signified and the removal of difference (296). It is this repetition, triggered by the recognition that performance leads to non-performance (and vice versa), that initiates the movement of originary narrative from the aborted gesture of appropriation to the “fictive” translation of the “imaginary” into the “real.”

Using an anthropological approach, we can describe the emergence of narrative forms such as Goethe’s response to the paradox of language origin, which begins with the refusal of translation and ends with the assimilation of the declarative

syntax of *logos* into a personal narrative. As a response to the question of the origin of language, the Faustian narrative leads from the ostensive origin of the imaginary to the imaginary institution of the first linguistic sign. As an originary narrative at the level of declarative syntax—or that which Iser calls the “fictive”—the ostensive sign of appropriation leads to a further repetition of the imaginary origin through a negation of the imperative. As the “unconscious” of language, the imaginary—the representation of something indeterminate but nevertheless powerful—“allows [the subject] to first conceive what it is toward which [the linguistic sign] points” (2). As the “unconscious” of narrative form, the ostensive origin of the imaginary interdicts appropriative desire of the sacred object and, at the same time, triggers the originary narrative that progresses—or, rather, returns-to “culture” and the “real.” If, as Cornelius Castoriadis argues, the foundation of all cultural institutions is the imaginary, the invention of words transfers the subject’s consciousness to the consciousness of the group who shares in the performative act of representation. In this manner, representation, defined as the articulation of a shared figuration—or, more simply, as the presentification of an absence—becomes the foundational charter of a group.

As a result of their shared belief in the performative nature of representation, Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser can demonstrate the anthropological power of “staging” within an originary model that transforms the “blank space” of the literary text that competes with the real despite its unreality. However, as an anthropological category, “staging” also burdens the originary narrative in its function as the foundational charter of the group. Once the narrative is complete, the mimetic result of the narrative performance risks fetishization and totalization, making it indistinguishable from Kittler’s “discourse network” or the context of nature that produced it. For instance, Goethe’s original Faust play, the so-called *Urfaust*, critiques the pure staging of discourse generated by the Four Faculties when it laments that “staging” has become a game created for the sole purpose of removing differences and producing an endless circulation of signifiers:

What play! Yet but a play, however vast!  
Where, boundless nature, can I hold you fast?  
And where you, breasts? Wells that sustain  
All life—the heaven and the earth are nursed. (454-57)

Even Faust cannot abide the removal of absolute difference between man and God epitomized in the foundational charter of Western civilization, the Gospel of John. His free translation of the *logos* script in which he purposefully crosses out and generates his own possible iterations should be read as an attempt to restore this

absolute difference within a personal narrative. On the one hand, Friedrich Kittler's deconstructionist approach does not give Faust credit for being the producer of his own text: each crossing out sets Faust up for another trap. Neither the producer, nor the consumer of his own text, Faust is a mere signifier in a text he neither reads, nor writes, nor hears. Kittler's brief return to the origin of German literature is a denial of the origin. On the other hand, the anthropological approach of Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser offers Faust the possibility of becoming a true *literary* human being, both producer and consumer of his own text. Since the originary models that they propose turn out to be only a "partial" explanation of the generation of discourse, the non-performance of performance makes the repetition of the originary narrative possible (*The Fictive* 296). As non-performance, "staging" guarantees the proliferation of new "readings" of this text and an openness to difference. In the beginning was... the Word, Force, Mind, Act, and on and on and on... With the death of literature, we have the option of "explaining" these new readings or "exploring" the secondary worlds which they engender.

9

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## Notes

1. In our own time, cultural anthropology comes closest to taking these three questions seriously when it proposes that culture is not something added to an emerging subject; it is not a supplement; it is the continuation of a cultural performance that repeats, but also modifies the terms of all previous cultural events. Whereas cultural studies speaks of representations in the plural and thus avoids the theory of representation, anthropological thinking, exemplified by Clifford Geertz, understands the relevance of the question “What is language?” in a master narrative attempting to answer the question “What is culture?” In the essay, “Differences,” Eric Gans clarifies the importance of asking “What is...?” questions, especially these three questions, in spite of a critical climate that reflexively distrusts this type of question. On the other hand, the eighteenth century loved “What is...?” questions and big money questions of all types. [\(back\)](#)
2. Herder, J.G., and J.J. Rousseau. *On the Origin of Language*, p.87. Since this is the English translation of Herder’s essay, I will quote it parenthetically in my essay. [\(back\)](#)
3. See *Self-Generation*. Mueller-Sievers does not offer a competing theory as much as a deconstruction of Herder’s “originary scene.” In this regard, Friedrich Kittler, who will be discussed later in the essay, is an important figure for Mueller-Sievers’ brand of deconstruction. [\(back\)](#)
4. Because of the general makeup of the audience of *Anthropoetics*, all quotes from Goethe’s *Faust* will be taken from Walter Kaufmann’s English translation. [\(back\)](#)
5. I have decided to translate the quotes collected from Goethe’s text, because I believe that my translation is more accurate. [\(back\)](#)

6. One of the recurring themes of Goethe's drama, the "wager" between Faust and the devil, plays with the notion of a promise of salvation. Even Albrecht Schöne cannot decide the debate about whether the penultimate lines of the drama, "Whoever strives with all his power/ We are allowed to save," should be read with or without quotation marks.[\(back\)](#)

7. See Gans, "Originary Narrative." Originary narrative is the narrative of the "sign becoming the sign." The first sign is the ostensive or the gesture of appropriation, the second stage in the formation of the sign is the imperative, i.e. "Mommy!" and the declarative, according to Gans, is formed as the result of the negation of the imperative, i.e. "Hammer!"- "No!"[\(back\)](#)