Of Which We May Speak: Meditations on Irony, Eccentricity, and Faith

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"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes–and ships–and sealing-wax–
Of cabbages–and kings–
And why the sea is boiling hot–
And whether pigs have wings."
(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*)

The standpoint of irony as such is *nil admirari,* but when it kills itself irony has, with humor, *scorned* everything including itself.
(Søren Kierkegaard, *Papirer*)

I

Intellectuals profess an admiration for irony. They watched *Seinfeld* in first-run and they buy the program on DVD because they take it, as they took it, for ironic. The same intellectuals usually also identify themselves as ironists, of a rarer variety even than the redoubtable television comedian, on the supposition that they stand askew to the prevailing social consensus, such that their perspective yields them an insight into matters opaque to *hoi polloi.* "I have baffled them," the late Joseph N. Riddell once said within earshot while emerging from the Haines Hall lecture auditorium at UCLA. The remark partook more in the self-congratulatory than in the ironic, but it was symptomatic of a certain enduring intellectual conceit in which the sense of a *privilege of irony,* or a *satisfaction in superiority,* is also rooted. The intellectual pretends to hover above the settled and the established, to gaze down upon the "culturescape," as though from a height; even while he declares himself "against Platonism" and works "to subvert metaphysics," he cannot help but to take, in the mode of *"as if,"* a transcendentally guaranteed view of life, the world, and everything.

Yet for a hundred years and more, intellectual discourse has meant *institutional*discourse, because, in the modern context, no such creature as a non-

institutionalized intellectual exists. The history of Western intellectualism indeed conforms to the pattern that its adherents have never actively resisted their own institutionalization; society has put them away into established Bedlams where they have tended happily to remain under the comforting delusion of their tenure. The grunting and squinting of deconstruction and the Brave New Worlds of Feminism and Multiculturalism have all taken place, thanks to the *largesse* of the taxpaying middle class*, within the walls,*where the *Neveu de Rameau*-like commotion will least bother ordinary people on their way to and from productive work. By axiom, the non-resistance of the intellectuals to their institutionalization amounts tacitly to agreement with the consensus. This would be the consensus with which the intellectual claims heartily–as it were, *in principle*–to disagree. The non-resister postures and fulminates, thus emphasizing his (or her) technical disagreement; but his (or her) consent to immurement, with a salary,adequately guarantees his (or her) essential docility. He (or she) hardly *hovers high above the world.* No: he (or she) lives under lockdown, each in his appointed cell. Women and minorities request and receive double immurement in their own set-aside programs. Regular ritual occasions in the quadrangle advertise the courage of it all and give the inmate an opportunity to exercise.

As Søren Kierkegaard once put it in an earlier stage of modernity than our own, so soon as a people has relinquished spiritual conviction, “the ‘Professor’ appears:

Through many arguments he is able to prove, to substantiate, and to comprehend. That glorious one, together with his life, is scientifically arranged in paragraphs. Graduate students are examined in what kinds of arguments, and how many, are needed to comprehend it. Then, if they know the arguments are good, they are appointed or “called” to a pleasant little living, with prospects of promotion, to lecture on the arguments to the congregation.

The “Professor” of course flatters himself and the respective graduate students and undergraduates and all their intended with the idea that the “Professor” is Evolution’s finest and richest flower.

Here, in a journal entry from 1851, Kierkegaard indulges his own rich irony: a hunchbacked social misfit, he jilted a beautiful girl who could see past his physical misshapenness; he then spent his life writing philosophical treatises and peculiar novels that few or none read and conducting debates in Copenhagen newspapers on arcane issues of state-sanctioned theology and the established church. Kierkegaard referred to himself in his private *Papers* as a “martyr of laughter,” meaning that, because of his awkward physique and because men of patented authority designated him as an intellectually incompetent *provocateur,* he served as a perennial butt of finger-pointing jokes in public. Kierkegaard, who rarely turned

down an opportunity to get into the fray, anticipates the “pre-humiliated personality” invoked by Douglas Collins; the philosopher-theologian’s lot constituted the opposite of what in the contemporary setting bears the designation of “celebrity” even while he enjoyed a similar conspicuousness. One newspaper, *The Corsair,* famously and regularly pilloried Kierkegaard, selling many copies by doing so; the journal’s cartoonist brutally caricatured his object’s physical deformities, intensifying public ridicule. Contemporary objects of cartoon satire and editorial lampoon occupy a lower rung on the ladder of self-development than did Kierkegaard, and yet contemporary journalism, circulating the coin of popular culture, consists of little else than sarcastic mockery. Undergraduates can define neither *irony* nor *satire,* but they know what *sarcasm* is–operationally, anyway. Philologically, sarcasm has to do with *mocking a corpse,* who can neither make objections against nor resist his ill treatment.

2

Kierkegaard had once naively seen for himself a career either as a holder of academic office in the state-funded university or a clergyman in the Danish Lutheran Church, likewise established; his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), nestles itself in the prevailing accepted language of Hegelianism, as it was then, and cites a bibliography of approved Young Hegelian authorities, such as Friedrich Christian Baur (1792-1860), a radical and a skeptic who extolled various Late Antique heretics. This gesture still generated a suspicion of excitement at the time. In the same way, a twenty-something doctoral candidate of the 1980s would have written in the jargonized style then regnant and would have cited the stellar poststructuralists, such as Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida, or in the 1990s, the prominent feminists and multiculturalists. The craze, nowadays, as it has been for two decades, is for so-called *transgressive* discourse. One pursues one’s career in the perfervid language of adolescent contrariness, championing the trivial against the serious and assuming the mien of an iconoclast. In the selfsame moment, however, when Kierkegaard seemingly accommodates himself to intellectual orthodoxy, he begins to undermine it. His dissertation is not merely a study of irony; it is practice in irony. It suggests the articulation, not of a professor, but of an anti-professor. Indeed, *The Concept of Irony* qualifies itself with the subtitle, *With Constant Reference to Socrates,* the man above whom, for Kierkegaard, none save Jesus ranks higher in the anti-professorial hierarchy.

More than one feature of Kierkegaard’s discussion of irony will strike *cognoscenti* of Generative Anthropology as familiar. The mere fact of Kierkegaard’s insistent and by-no-means-unmotivated linkage of irony to the person of Socrates, especially in light of the Athenian’s quasi-sacrificial demise, suggests the participation of things ironic in things sacred. Irony, according to the Dane, always but indirectly

constitutes an attempt to address the mob, which wants to hear nothing contrary to its motile will. The prominence of Socrates' "sign" or *daimon* in *The Concept* hints further at a relation binding irony to signification. Irony, says Kierkegaard, always *points* to something about which the rules forbid one directly to speak. The Kierkegaardian irony is related to the stubborn persistence, in societies that see themselves as the acme of sophistication, of primitive injunctions. The Kierkegaardian irony finally concerns the grammar of the "indicative." It will be useful, therefore, before expounding the pertinent features of Kierkegaard's investigation, to review briefly the "originary analysis" of irony found in Eric Gans's *Signs of Paradox* (1997). Apropos of irony as quasi-object of desire, as a thing or quality that one would possess, Gans remarks that the ironic perspective–or pose, or whatever it might be–is "always gifted with prestige" and that it supposes the "knowing superiority" of the subject "to the ironies of fate that await us in the real world." Here *irony* means *reversal,* as in an Athenian tragedy. While "irony is," as Gans sees it, "central to all thought" and while it indeed forms an element in the "historical human sign-system of language," mastery of irony, if irony is to function as a recognizable, differentiated aspect of that system, must be rare rather than universal.

Exactly this rarity of command over irony endows irony with its *prestige* and makes it, not only a focus of desire, but also and necessarily an occasion for resentment; Jews and Christians would say that irony occasions covetousness, a transgression explicitly enjoined in the Decalogue. Even those in the Athenian *Boulé* who vote to condemn Socrates, especially his trio of accusers, envy him his dialectical wit and wish they could slay as easily with the sword of repartee their own forensic opponents; once they have done away with him, he can no longer lord it over them as the living proof of their mental obtuseness. Real ironists annoy us, biting at our tail ends like gadflies, yet everyone in a modern context wants to wear the badge of irony. (That is to say, everyone wants to bite at his opponent's tail end–a perfect index of the prevailing psychology.) Given that possession of irony imbues the possessor with charisma, it would hardly surprise us to discover that some people believe themselves to be ironists who, objectively, are not. The possibility exists that the *Seinfeld* audience consisted (or consists) mainly of non-ironists who nevertheless *feel* like ironists when they are watching the episodes; moreover, as *Seinfeld* concerns the constituency of popular entertainment, this must be the case. It could even happen that groups of pretenders, organizing themselves, might lay claim falsely to the qualification of ironist and establish safeguards for protecting their domain. In an institutional setting, for example, where presumptive command of irony played a role in upholding status, outsider-investigators could perhaps find in place prohibitions of questions or topics that have the potential of drawing nigh embarrassing revelations.

Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) writes in *The New Science of Politics* (1952) of the stereotypical way in which institutions, when they fall into the rigidity of doctrine, seek the means for “preventing embarrassing criticism” and for quashing “theoretical debate concerning issues that involve the truth of human existence.” Voegelin refers to Cromwell’s Puritan Revolution and to the ideological empires of the Twentieth Century, but it is ever so. “In the university today,” writes William Irwin Thompson in his essay on “Mythic Narratives about Human Origins” (1996), “there is definitely such a thing as forbidden knowledge.” Should one “make a mistake”–which is to say, should one ask a prohibited question or invoke unofficial authorities and so “disturb the academic clergy”–then the promise of tenure can swiftly vanish; or, should one already have tenure, the administration can probably dig up a quality of moral turpitude sufficient to the punitive cause. Thompson takes more interest in paranoia, however, than he does in irony, which receives no entry in the index of *Coming into Being,* where “Mythic Narratives” appears.

But the discussion has taken us prematurely beyond the important analysis of irony in*Signs of Paradox,* or just maybe it has taken us to the heart of that analysis. According to Gans, irony being “inherent in the sign-system,” we should remark that:

The primary characteristic of the sign is that is that it occupies a different level of being from the reality it designates. This vertical difference, the basis of the opposition within the sign-system between signifier and signified, can only be thought concretely from an originary perspective. The sign as an abortive gesture of appropriation is on a different level from its referent because although it remains a physical gesture, it renounces the physical assimilation of this referent in becoming a representation of it. . . . In the phenomenological usage, the sign “intends” its referent precisely in the sense that the referent remains outside the immediate sphere of action of the intender.

3

The notion of “levels of difference” functions essentially in Gans’s discussion by reminding us that signification never expurgates its kernel of resentment, and that jealousy never proceeds *de haut en bas* but always *vice versa.* The contemporary established world characteristically employs a vocabulary, afflicted by the French disease, that attacks the putative complacency of received theories of *the sign* and of*signification.* In *Signs,* Gans mentions Jean-Marie Benoist’s *Tyrannie du logos* (1975) as both contributory and exemplary. Under this attack on our supposed naïveté, the taken-for-granted phenomenological intention and the equally taken-for-granted hermeneutic meaning are mere delusions, nominated compulsorily for deconstruction. But if irony inhabited and shaped signification from the beginning,

as Gans argues, then the attempt to leave people in bafflement about language would also be an attempt to deprive them of irony and of its benefits. The attempt to ball up language, so as to corrupt communications in the public square, would be the attempt to ball up irony itself, so as to deprive an independent criticism of one of the main weapons in its armory. When Gans invokes “the concrete,” he must be using that term, with its politically radical connotations, in a somewhat ironic manner. The irony of the materialist view of existence lies in its inability to accept the intangible as effective; hence it cannot understand renunciation, which it classes with *religious* phenomena such as asceticism that it regards as delusory and *ergo* as anti-progressive. The program of *progress* aims at appropriation of the concrete object so as to fulfill appetite, but the (ironic) program of *culture,* as Gans sees it, aims at reconciling the community to an inevitable frustration of mere appetite. Such reconciliation depends on the ability of a community to take a paradoxically satisfactory *partial satisfaction,* not in the object, but in the representation of it.

In culture, of course, the principle of reciprocity eventually generates the market, whose economic tide lifts all boats and increasingly satisfies most appetites, but one must never forget the relation of the market to the intangibility of the sign in its context of the originary human scene.

For Gans, irony articulates that “fragility of the absolute, or ‘vertical’ formal difference, inaugurated by the sign with reference to its source,” which he denominates as “the relative or ‘horizontal’ difference in the real world between subject and object.” In originary analysis, irony echoes the mutation of the *ostensive* into the imperative. The ostensive, we recall, emerges in the existential dilemma of the originary scene, where the convergent individuals of the *pack* cross the threshold from bestiality into humanity by recoiling from the item of appetite that has drawn them into dangerous centripetal confrontation. Through the ostensive, the incipient *community* designates the item whose appropriation each individual has renounced and that the crowd has renounced collectively: the ostensive refers to the object as an *inaccessible* presence, but as a*presence* nevertheless. The *imperative* refers to the *absence of the object,* for whose conciliatory power the community suddenly yearns in a renewal of crisis: the imperative “is [thus] uttered in the absence of [the] referent to make it appear. . . . Pronouncing the word . . . is expected to produce the object.” In originary analysis, the object that the community calls on to appear will still be beyond accessibility, for it is not really an object, but a *sign* of social cohesion. Recalling the object through the pronouncement of the imperative reinforces social cohesion, but it does nothing to diminish–rather, it intensifies–the frustration intrinsic to a turning-away from some tasty morsel. Irony must please the subject because the sign pleases, but “the pleasure of irony” will therefore qualify as an “esthetic pleasure” only, one

that oscillates “between ascetic form and seductive content,” never reaching the latter. Pleasure must always remain within the horizon of the esthetic because the utopia of repletion would mean the neutralization of culture and a relapse into animal existence.

For Kierkegaard, writing in *The Concept,* irony emerges in the Socratic commitment to conversation or dialectic, as opposed to oratory. The sophists practice oratory, and while not all of them behave so nakedly as do Thrasymachus in *The Polity* or Callicles in*Gorgias,* their overriding egotism, their desire *to command,* can hardly slip past even the most casual perusal. The sophists are utopians in the sense that they want to reorder the body politic for their exclusive convenience, although they are likely to invoke natural precedence or some other justification when they do so. *It will really be best for everyone,* they implicitly say. Thus Callicles focuses in his discourse on themes of strength and repletion, nominating them as indices of a primordial dispensation that modern ideas have illegitimately displaced. “Nature . . . demonstrates that it is right that the better man should prevail over the worse and the stronger over the weaker,” he says, thereby conflating “better” with “stronger”; and “a man should encourage his appetites to be as strong as possible instead of repressing them.” Callicles defines “the happy life” as “having all the . . . appetites and being able to satisfy them with enjoyment.” When Socrates questions Callicles ironically to show the contradiction in the latter’s theory, Callicles, like an undergraduate, misunderstands the irony and accuses Socrates of being “sarcastic.”

Kierkegaard says that with regard to the egomaniacs and proto-tyrants, Socrates’ ironic comments have the effect of *dispersing* pretense–and so of annulling the coercive aggression of the speeches–while avoiding direct contradiction. Kierkegaard’s general formulation about the relation of Socratic irony to power requires sensitive interpretation: “What [Socrates] desires to censure by contrasting discoursing with conversing is the egotistical quality in eloquence that longs for what might be called abstract beauty, *versus inopes rerum nugaequae canorae,* and which sees in the expression itself, torn loose from its relation to an Idea, an object for pious veneration.”

One might be excused for thinking of all that postmodern prose in all those journals for thirty-five or forty years. In its context, Kierkegaard’s observation conforms to, as it forecasts, the explanation in *Signs of Paradox* that irony binds together the “vertical” and the “horizontal” by commemorating both simultaneously through its “oscillating” type of double-awareness; the tendency of *oratory,* by contrast, is to forget the “vertical,” and to lurch along the plane of existence toward the indignity, which the orator foresees as a triumph, of mere appetitive consummation. The orator, like the dictator, doesn’t give a damn for conversation or for definitions or

for questions. The orator has no theory–he is not a theorizing type–but if he did have one it would undoubtedly resemble the postmodern view that the vertical dimension, which irony acknowledges, corresponds to a superstitious figment and that irony thus stands in the way of all things pragmatic, especially the immediate agenda of the orator. In a television documentary about religion, for example, the biologist Gerald Dawkins casually refers to the New Testament as “Saint Paul’s nasty, sadomasochistic doctrine of atonement for original sin” and equates religious education with child abuse. In*Gorgias,* Plato’s study of a purely secular type of fanaticism, Callicles warns his interrogator that, in confounding people as he does, Socrates is likely “to be dragged into court, possibly by some scoundrel of the vilest character,” and dispensed with by a vote. Thus did Leonid Brezhnev speak to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and thus has power always spoken to dissent.

4

An “essential connection” exists, writes Voegelin in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*(1959), “between the *libido dominandi,* the system, and the prohibition of questions.” Kierkegaard’s *Concept* distinguishes, in just this Voegelin-like way, between Plato’s open dialectical project and Hegel’s hermetic system: “With Hegel it is not necessary to question thought from without, for it questions and answers itself in itself. With Plato, on the other hand, thought answers only insofar as it is questioned . . .” The phrase, “is not necessary,” really means *is regarded as superfluous* or *is regarded as a presumption against the completeness of the system.* Kierkegaard writes that irony concerns both questioning and the relation of a subject to an object. When, under irony, “I ask a question,” it follows that “I know nothing and dispose myself receptively toward the object.”

Thus the Kierkegaardian irony is *indicative* and *subjunctive* at the same time; like the originary irony in *Signs of Paradox,* it oscillates between two noncompossible cases. In a casual remark committed to a journal around the time that Kierkegaard was writing*The Concept,* he noted: “The grammar of the indicative and subjunctive really contains the most aesthetic concepts, and occasions just about the highest form of aesthetic enjoyment (it borders on the musical, which is the highest).” The indicative, like the ostensive, calls attention to something in and for itself; the subjunctive declares that the case is what it is, despite any doctrinal or institutional object. Kierkegaard also wrote on the same occasion that the ironist necessarily takes up a stance against systematic authority, with its tendency to declare against *what* intuitively *is,* because, whereas the ironist admits, “I know nothing,” by contrast “the systematizer believes he can say everything, and that whatever cannot be said is wrong and unimportant.”

The ironist is a prophet, necessarily alienated from the people but observing the

scene, so to speak, on their behalf. He stands guard on the openness of existence, as it has emerged in the freedom of consciousness–and in freedom of conscience–on the human scene. Socrates' *daimon* listens to suasory speeches, to the orators, whispering*"no"* to its *protégé* whenever he feels the temptation to be persuaded by their seductive schemes. If only the oysters in Lewis Carroll's poem could have accessed the demonic! They might, as First Lady Nancy Reagan once recommended, have "just said no" to the Walrus. Irony, embodied in the Socratic *ethos,* will assume a form, as Kierkegaard puts it, *entirely negative,* but never *nihilistic* or fanatical. A fanatical ironist would be a contradiction in the adjective, while a fanatical connoisseur of oysters would not. Hence the professors, with their commitment to the *isms,* disqualify themselves as ironists. We note, however, that *envy of the ironist* need obey no such limit; that, as in every case of resentment, it can grow into a monstrosity. To profess, after all, is to orate; to orate, like an emperor, is to command. Yet once the sense of irony has been unleashed in a society, or in a cultural continuum like that of the West, the resentful non-ironist, seeking to command, will have a motive for arrogating the title of ironist to himself. He will obey the formula of seeming to be authentically knowledgeable, through the withholding of explanations, about pretentious false knowledge, to the putative pretentiousness of which he will constantly but non-specifically draw attention. He will verbally abjure power while lavishly exercising it; he will verbally champion victims while inveterately expelling those who remain insufficiently vociferous on the topic of championing victims.

It is not for no reason that Gans closes his chapter on irony by alluding to Francis Fukuyama and warning his readers against "the chimera of 'the end of history.'" Gans urges us to behave in a manner *"structurante"* rather than *"structurée."* It is not so much the long-standing and patiently developed institutions of a society that threaten us, but their derailment into ideologically self-justifying nodes of command, places of opportunity for opportunists. *Pace* the vehement Dawkins, God never threatens us, especially under the hypothesis of his non-existence, but the programmatic denial of him for the sake of some agenda, as in Stalinism, well might. Notice how in Dawkins' indictment God becomes a victimizer–indeed the very Arch-Victimizer, "vindictive, unjust, unforgiving, racist." Says Dawkins, "Religion may not be the root of all evil, but it is a serious contender." The evolutionist leaves the conclusion of his syllogism unstated but we can legitimately claim no doubt as to what it is. "May God," writes Gans, "or the ironic contemplation of his absence, save us from the utopian search for final solutions."

II

No doubt the institutions have always already grown ponderous, coercive, parochial in their outlook, and not a little bit dictatorial in their dispositions. Culture itself, as

Richard Weaver writes in *Visions of Order* (1957), has something of the dictatorial in its constitution: “At [the] center [of any cultural dispensation] there lies a ‘tyrannizing image,’ which draws everything toward itself. . . . Such centripetalism is the essence of every culture’s power to cohere and endure.” The ironist does not say “nay” against *this*“center” or “image,” concerning the metaphysical reality of which, as of Gans’s paradoxically absent God, he might indeed have his suspicions; rather the ironist, as in Kierkegaard’s journal discussion, always addresses the “actual” from the perspective of the “thinkable.” Should he say “nay” to something, he will say it to the actual, as to a lapse from the thinkable; the ironist implies, in his nay-saying, that the thinkable is identical with the preferable, morally considered.

One might remember Socrates’ conversation with Callicles in *Gorgias* in this regard. Callicles and the other sophists *are* as they are. Only the collision with reality, the mutual slaughter of their power-contests, will convince them (too late) of the vanity of their ambition. Part of what makes the sophists what they are–proto-tyrants who want to seize the city and arrange a life maximally convenient to themselves–is their refusal to think through their basic assumptions; often this refusal takes the form of a bitter contempt for received wisdom, which they denigrate as the equivalent in their terms of slave morality. They flail and they fulminate, forming committees and initiating litigation in the courts. Or better yet, in the same regard, one might remember the confrontation, not itself ironic but illustrative of that in which the ironist places his faith, between Antigone and Creon in Sophocles’ tragedy. No one orates or professes with the aplomb that Creon brings to his kingly task in long suffering Thebes. As comedian Jon Stewart has said *apropos* of someone else, Creon is the type of self-righteous strongman who really puts the *dic* in *dictator.*

5

Creon upholds an explicit theory of politics (he lectures the Thebans on it), according to which Eteocles will receive a state funeral while Polyneices, his brother and foe in the lately settled civil war, will remain unburied, food for jackals and vultures. Antigone clashes with Creon by carrying out the rites for Polyneices anyway on the argument that while Creon’s word might be law *actually,* an immemorial “unwritten law” nevertheless demands that *all the dead* receive proper treatment. Writes Weaver: “That cultures [or a polity] should be allowed to develop independently and exclusively not only is right, but is essential; there is a point, however, at which a culture encounters something comparable to ‘natural law.’” Such *natural law,* functioning as a *limit,*“derives sanction from a universal consideration of justice.” Weaver’s observation accords perfectly with the discussion of reciprocity in originary analysis, just as Antigone’s sense of justice in the tragedy accords perfectly, quite while it anticipates, the Socratic *anamnesis,* as

represented by Plato. Justice, as reciprocity, finds its matrix in the originary scene, which imbues the means of defusing the crisis–*language*–with the wisdom of the occasion and makes the insight available thereafter in the conversational, as opposed to the oratorical, model of speech.

It is true that Weaver uses the character of Antigone to illustrate what he calls the rhetorical or emotional tendencies, rooted in history and intuition, as opposed to the dialectical or analytical tendencies, which are destructive of history and intuition, and that he gives favor to the former. But Antigone never makes any speeches; unlike Creon she has no theory, only an inherited conviction about propriety. Haemon says to Creon that the people are *talking among themselves* about Antigone's advocacy of the unburied brother.

So, in Sophocles' tragic scheme, it is the peripheral phenomenon of conversation that articulates justice *against* the tyrannical center, which the play shows to have been usurped by an egomaniac, who intolerably flouts the unwritten law. *Antigone* relates to irony because, while its protagonist hardly qualifies an ironist (far from it), the drama turns, as tragedy must, on an ironic reversal that casts Creon down and makes for a brand of bitter justice after all. Irony, as Kierkegaard asserts, concerns the relation of the individual to his polity. Regarding Socrates again, Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept:*

When one considers that even in our modern states where, precisely because it has undergone a far deeper mediation, the state allows quite a different liberty of action to subjectivity than the Greek state was able to do, when one considers, I say, that even in our modern states the particular individual still always remains a rather ambiguous person, then one can surmise from this with what eyes the Greek state must have looked upon Socrates' attempt to go his own way and live as a private person.

The tension between the emergent "private person" and the state, by no means resolved in *l'affaire Socrate,* would become increasingly dire in the Ecumenic Age, to borrow Voegelin's term, that followed the dissolution of Athenian independence, taking the form of the succession of mundane empires beginning with that of Philip of Macedon and culminating with the *Pax Romana,* both in its first or Pagan and then again in its second or Christian phases. One puts it so notwithstanding the fact that a "Christian Empire" is another contradiction in the adjective.

What is the "ecumene"? A definition is needed because irony has a relation to the phenomenon. In the fourth volume (1974) of his *Order and History* (begun 1957),entitled *The Ecumenic Age,* Voegelin adduces a definition that one remembers for its poignancy but that eludes later relocation in his text. Voegelin

says that whereas a *polis*is a subject that governs itself, an *ecumene* is a parcel of geopolitical existence–consisting possibly of hundreds or even thousands of *poleis*–over the possession and control of which contending *concupiscent aggressors* destructively battle. Says Voegelin in a passage that this author has providentially succeeded in locating: “The ecumene is not a subject of order but an object of conquest.” It is also “a graveyard of civilizations.” Thus the vast swath of earth subdued by Alexander the Great immediately becomes a desire-object for the contentious successors, who carve it up duodecimally; they run into Parthian and Hindu limits in the East, where the locals respond mimetically to the pattern. The *Pax* eventually reconciles competing Hellenic claims by swallowing Hellas whole. The individual becomes more, not less, “ambiguous” than previously he was.

At the historical noonday of the *Pax* comes Lucian of Samosata (125-200), an almost exact contemporary of the “Philosopher King” Marcus Aurelius (121-180) who, like Hegel many centuries later, conversed mainly with himself, as in his *Meditations*. Talking to oneself is “cud-chewing,” says Kierkegaard in an aside on the Prussian *illuminatus* in*The Concept.* Talking to oneself is also inalterably derivative, in a defective sense, of the norm of talking with other people, in the same way that atheism is inalterably derivative of the norm of belief. Dialogue falls existentially prior to monologue just as belief falls existentially prior to denial. Lucian, a Syrian by birth and a Greek by education, scandalously but predictably did not receive a network television contract nor has his work appeared on DVD, although his repartee entails greater ironic subtlety by far than one-time matriculating SUNY Oswego undergraduate Jerry Seinfeld’s. Trained in Athens in rhetoric, the acknowledged royal road to power and riches of the time, Lucian experienced something like conversion, after which he scorned oratory and its pretenses; he wrote dialogues filling the Platonic form with the content of the New Comedy. He became, as far as historians can discern, the producer, writer, and stellar performer in a satirical road show that took him from Attica all the way to Gaul, during the course of which, as one says, he consistently packed the houses and brought down the rafters. Think of *Saturday Night Live* thirty years ago when the sketches were funny. Commentary takes Lucian’s *Two Charges of Literary Assault,* written around his fortieth year, for autobiographical. In Plato’s *Apology,* three orators bring the charges against Socrates; in *Two Charges,* Oratory herself, or rather Rhetoric, brings indictment against Lucian, but then so does Dialogue, in a case adjudicated by none other than Justice, ably assisted by Hermes, both examining the case at the behest of Zeus.

Before the gathered crowd (it more resembles a rabble), addressing herself to the jury and the two judges, Rhetoric complains: “It was I . . . who came upon this man, still wandering around Ionia not knowing what to do with himself. . . . He was pretty young, still spoke a barbarian language and was a hair’s breadth from going native

and wearing an Assyrian-style *kaftan*"; after she made him both eloquent and rich, "he fell passionately in love with that bearded fellow, Dialogue . . . who clams to be the son of Philosophy." Where previously the Syrian spoke with the ennobled "free flow of my language," Rhetoric says, he now merely "weaves a few brief arguments together and speaks them in a conversational tone"; instead of adhering to the topics, he deploys "novelty." Rhetoric asks Hermes to force the Syrian to reply *in dialogue,* but Hermes points out that, as "there's only one of him," he will need to defend himself in a speech. The Syrian says that while he was grateful for having been married to Rhetoric: "There came a time when I saw that she was not behaving sensibly any longer, nor retaining the seemly dress which she wore when the famous demesman of Paeania [Demosthenes] took her as his bride. Instead, she was wearing jewelry, had coiffured hair, had rubbed rouge all over her cheeks, and had a black line drawn under each of her eyes." *(Take my wife–please!)* The jury votes; the Syrian wins with only one vote against, after which Dialogue steps up to the dock to present his case. Dialogue lays it against the Syrian that: "He took off my sensible mask and put on another, comic, satyr-like and almost ridiculous. Then he shut me up in the same room with joking, iambus, cynicism, Eupolis and Aristophanes–men terribly clever at criticizing serious things and pouring scorn on what is right and proper."

6

Lucian imbues Dialogue's remarks with a measure of irony, as the satyr-mask, far from debasing dialogue, restores it to its Socratic origins. In *The Drinking Party,* Alcibiades describes Socrates as resembling a satyr. In *Two Charges,* the Syrian responds to Dialogue by telling how, when he first took up Dialogue, the latter had lapsed into misanthropy; he had grown "sullen-looking and withered with continuous question and answer sessions," whereupon "the first thing I did was to get him used to walking on the ground like normal people." Rhetoric having become meretricious, Dialogue seems to have inflated itself–in typical Late-Antique Theosophical fashion–into an arcane system that scorns existence. Kierkegaard remarks in *The Concept* how irony functions in response to "a foolishly inflated wisdom, which knows about everything." In this way, irony is more appropriate because more necessary to the Late Antique setting, distorted by its Second Religiosity, than it was in the Attic setting in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian Wars.

In *Signs,* Gans writes that irony signifies a recognition on the ironist's part that human wishes–the spells and requests and imprecations that people couch in language against some prevailing condition–are "impotent"; leaping beyond the ineffectuality of language as a technique for rearranging the cosmos physically, irony likewise aims its ire at "the Being who gave us language." Irony thus

presupposes the withdrawal of God and the deflation of theology, or at least the withdrawal of *a god* and the deflation of *a particular theology.* Irony thus also presupposes the opposite of what the withdrawal of God and the deflation of theology are typically taken to signify by those who strive to bring them about and subsequently celebrate them: namely the ascendancy of Man and his technical excellence *as deity* in place of the evicted deity. It might be the excellence of Man's machines or the brilliance of His political syllogisms. As religion wanes, or so the theory has always insisted, institutions and techniques shall come at last into their full effectiveness and people will be liberated from the weight of ages into the happiness of repletion. The emergence of the ecumene indeed corresponds with widespread skepticism and the death of god; it also coincides with the apotheosis of institutions and techniques, including magical substitutes for religion such as theurgy and formulas for the transformation of man into the Man-God.

Voegelin reminds us in *The Ecumenic Age* that apparent religious innovations actually partake in the anti-spiritual instrumentalist tenor of the times. Rulers of empire characteristically "support [and justify] their ecumenic conquest by the sanction of high-gods judiciously selected from the old gods or newly created for the purpose." Temporarily, "magic pneumatism gives its addicts a sense of superiority over the reality which does not conform." Such *hocus-pocus,* like the modern syncretistic piety of multiculturalism, is profoundly hostile to irony; it asserts its dogma fiercely and never tolerates the slightest hint of dissent from its literal-mindedness. Irony's annotation of the non-conformance of cosmic reality to wishes is tactical, not strategic; irony merely grimaces at tribulation–it then shrugs its shoulders and accepts tribulation, insofar as that tribulation is, in fact, cosmic, and not an injustice. In response to injustice, irony*notices,* and it may become subversive while yet wanting to keep its head. This is the difference between irony and sainthood. Shakespeare's Fool is a case in point. Features of *Two Charges* strongly suggest that Lucian has understood this pattern of deformation even while being immersed in it.

The comedy, culminating in the Syrian's acquittal, begins high on Olympus, where Lucian reveals Zeus as a deity whose troubles keep piling up: "Oh, to hell with the philosophers who say that happiness exists only among the gods!" All the gods are harried and fatigued, Zeus laments. Apollo, for example, has been "virtually deafened by people bothering him for prophecies." The Moon gets no sleep because she has to shine until late at night for carefree revelers. Says the King of the Gods, "I wish I could ask the philosophers, who think only the gods are happy, when the hell they think folks with so many problems to deal with have any time to drink nectar and eat ambrosia!" For one thing, the Arbiter of Cosmic Justice has to report "an enormous backlog of old lawsuits not dealt with."

Hermes tells Zeus that what people most fiercely hold against Olympus, hence against Zeus, is *“the time-lag”* implied by that “backlog.” The Olympus of *Two Charges* is not heaven, of course; it is the *Imperium.* Zeus is not the old familiar Homeric god, effective against injustice in *The Odyssey;* he is the human, all-too-human sovereign of*this world.* Since Alexander the Great, rulers of the world had enjoyed deification: Caesar was deified and so was his nephew-successor Augustus, by a vote of the Senate. The Antonine Emperors, beginning with Antoninus Pius (86-161), identified themselves with *Sol Invictus,* “The Unconquered Sun,” and found ideological justification for this divine conceit, which the coinage illustrated to the plebes, in the professorial discourses of Neoplatonist doctrine and Ptolemaic astronomy. The order on earth reflected the order in heaven, so the theory would have it. As the Platonic God rules serenely in heaven, so does his counterpart on earth. Whether anyone believed the theory is an open question. No doubt bad faith abounded. What is not in dispute is that the theory formed the basis of mandatory practice. Celsus, for example, who lived during the reign of Aurelius, holds it against the Christians in his notorious pamphlet that they slighted the official cult and maligned the image of the inviolate god; he recommends that the authorities punish the offense severely. The real crime of the Christians, of course, was to have noticed that they did not live in utopia and that many important human needs went unanswered in the kingdom. The Epicureans, who resemble the Christians in startling ways, also noticed this and, in fact, lived in some tension with the establishment when they congregated in communities. Even Constantine (280-337), who made careful *rapprochement* with the new religion, identified himself with *Sol Invictus;* his famous *sign,* seen by him at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, is not the cross but rather the sun, which gave him victory. Thus–*“in hoc signo vinces!”* It is the pseudo-transcendental claim of what Voegelin would call a concupiscent aggressor.

The more routine such deifications became (Commodus and Caligula proclaimed themselves gods in their lifetimes), the more obvious it also became that the self-styled*Soter* or “Savior” was simply a man, often a rather nasty one, and that his subjects were not in fact *subjects* in the autonomous sense but rather elements of a conquest. The “time-lag” is Lucian’s equivalent of what Gans observes when he writes how irony “both points out and repairs the inadequacy of the deferral of violence through representation that is the essence of human culture.” Before one can set about*repairing* injustice one must *notice it,* but noticing injustice can entail a risk for the enunciator, as every prophet discovers, and irony lets him articulate the problem indirectly. Gans notes that irony only rarely corresponds to “saying the opposite” of what a subject in fact means, primarily because not every enunciation has an “opposite.” Irony entails saying *other* than what a subject means, often by obliquity. Lucian’s “time-lag” is, by way of illustration, the irony of litotes, addressing enormity through a figure of the innocuously small and merely irritating.

In *The Concept,* Kierkegaard asserts that irony is “incompatible with the state” and that the ironist is necessarily other than “a good citizen.” In his private papers, Kierkegaard confided that he thought of irony as beginning with the sense “that the world is in some way ridiculing one.” Kierkegaard was addressing Socrates, but the insight applies as well, or perhaps even better, to Lucian, who distinguished himself by being an ironist who survived. In *Two Charges,* before the Syrian’s case comes up, the Stoa, in allegorical get-up representing the philosophical school of that name, accuses Pleasure, also in allegorical get-up, of having seduced away her lover Dionysius. Stoicism, like Platonism, and in weird combinations with it, informed the official discourse of the emperors and was interwoven in the syncretism of the establishment’s ritual. Stoa makes her case for alimony, roundly chastising Pleasure along the way. Pleasure “doesn’t even spare the gods,” Stoa complains: “In fact, she flatly questions their providential role. So if you’re wise, you’ll lay a charge of impiety against her as well.” Impiety provided the *focus* in the case against Socrates, as brought by Lykos, Anytos, and Meletos, who argued that the object of their litigiousness both *denied the existence of the gods* and *worshipped a new and heterodox god,* namely his *daimon.* Socrates remarks the contradictory idiocy of it in his address.

Unlike Socrates before the *Boulé,* Dionysius prefers not to serve as his own lawyer; he asks Epicurus–wrongly although popularly reviled as an advocate of hedonism–to state the defense on his behalf. Epicurus argues that had it been a case of Pleasure ensnaring Dionysius by “spells or drugs,” the jury would have to convict: “But this is a case of a free man, in a city which claims to be free, with no legal impediment [to the defendant’s] finding distasteful the unpleasantness preached by [Stoa] and judging [as] nonsense the happiness she tells him is the reward for his painful labours.” When Stoa attempts cross-examination, trying to trip up Epicurus over “the third figure of indemonstrables,” the jurors complain that they “don’t understand these polysyllabic questions,” and they immediately vote to acquit.

On its surface, the Dionysius-interlude of *Two Charges* amounts to little more than comic-satiric high jinks–it seems, at first blanch, rather more *sarcastic* than ironic. Lucian grasps that in his time philosophy has morphed into theosophy and that theosophy has become an instrumentality of the *Imperium.* Epicurus points out in the defense that Pleasure has *not* used “drugs or spells.” Insofar as Dionysius has escaped from Stoa (from the Stoic System) into *freedom (eleuthereia),* the previous negation*(no drugs or spells)* indeed implies that it is *Dionysius’ former relation to Stoa* that might well have had the nature of magical enthrallment. To complete the indirect assertion, however, readers of the sketch must recall the opening, where Lucian reveals the obsolescence of the old gods through the Zeus’ incompetence

and the resultant “time-lag.” Lucian may safely reduce the Olympians to figures of New Comic ridicule because no one any longer believes in them. Yet not believing in one set of gods–or in some particular theological idea–does not mean that one believes in nothing, religiously speaking.

On the contrary: into the vacuum left by the vanishing gods the Systems have expanded. The people, constituting the jury, find the Systems so much polysyllabic babble, but the members of the *intelligentsia,* entranced by them, respond through doctrinal adherence to their promise of immanent justification and even a kind of immanent redemption. Ironists are few, and they have *prestige.* Professors are many by comparison and they *want* prestige. The jurists want to go back to work so as to make a living. They participate in the market. One way of *faking* irony so as to garner prestige is to invent verbal-magical discourses that appear to elevate the user *above*the everyday world of ordinary conversation. The adherents of this discourse can then impress others by talking their secret language together, squinting in unison, and harrumphing on a pre-established cue. Kierkegaard speaks of “an inferior form of irony” that “seeks to realize itself in conventicles.” To see the phenomenon in its actuality, one could attend a meeting of either the MLA or the ALSC executive committee, or simply visit the conference-sessions, as the author of *Signs of Paradox* and I once did, in a locale in Manhattan that is now a large deep hole in the ground. Against the idols represented by the Systems, Lucian poses, putting the words into Epicurus’ mouth,*freedom.* Why does Lucian choose Epicurus rather than Menippus or Diogenes the Cynic to be his spokesman in this context?

Lucian calls on Menippus elsewhere in his *oeuvre,* as in the *Icaromenippus,* which lofts a gadfly up to Olympus. As for Diogenes–no one forecasts Lucian’s rhetorical insouciance better than the Cynic. The most plausible reason is that Epicurus articulates his atomism primarily as a weapon against superstition and so tries to neutralize numinous awe as a tool of social manipulation used by power-seekers and power-wielders. Epicureanism figures centrally in another work by Lucian, his biography of the religious swindler Alexander of Abonoteichus. *Alexander or the False Oracle* and *Two Charges* illuminate one another.

According to Lucian’s account, Alexander (Second Century) had learned the magical arts–prestidigitation and illusion making–from a lover and master who had in his turn studied with Apollonius of Tyana (born 4 B.C.), the miracle worker and prophet publicized by the writer Philostratus (early Third Century) in a biography commissioned by Lady Julia, wife of Emperor Septimus Severus (reigned 193-211). With a partner, Cocconas, Alexander established a notorious oracle in Abonoteichus in Cappadocia. He had discovered, Lucian writes, that “human life is ruled by a pair of tyrants called Hope and Fear, and if you treat them right you can make a lot of money out of them.” The oracle succeeds at first beyond Alexander’s dreams. As his

fame mounts he travels to Rome, where the emperor receives him at court; in a move to create a charismatic religious organization with him at its head, Lucian says, Alexander later “sent missionaries all over the Roman Empire.” But the *fakir’s* own extravagance soon betrayed him, for “the more intelligent members of the community began to turn against him.” Among these perspicacious segments of the populace, Lucian names the Epicureans, who, in good scientific fashion, revealed the stagecraft behind Alexander’s miracles. The confidence man was, as Lucian says, “permanently at war with Epicurus–for what more suitable opponent could be found for a professional liar than the one person who [has] really understood the truth about things.” Alexander tries to parry the exposure with an oracular message to the effect that the *Imperium* throngs with “atheists and Christians who had most viciously blasphemed against him.” On the other hand, Alexander “was quite friendly towards the Stoics, the Platonics, and the Pythagoreans, with whom he pursued a policy of peaceful coexistence.” Alexander died, writes Lucian, of *delirium tremens.* The biography ends with an encomium to Epicurus, “a really great man who perceived . . . the beauty of truth, and by passing that insight on to his followers, has given them a wonderful sense of freedom.”

8

Linking the Systems–Stoicism, Platonism, and Pythagoreanism–with the religious swindler, whose ambition is “ecumenical” precisely in Voegelin’s sense, allows Lucian to comment on the ideological aspect of Imperium. Alexander fears two segments of the universal community, the Epicureans and the Christians, the latter being lumped with the Epicureans into the false prophet’s defensive accusation after his tricks come to light. Unmoved by verbal chicanery, these two groups bring clarity and skepticism to inflated claims. Lucian makes one of the earliest mentions of the Christians in Pagan literature; and the acknowledgment of them is remarkable in being positive, at least by association. This was the time when official tracts with titles such as “Against the Christians” began to appear. By an ironic coincidence, Lucian dedicated *Alexander or the False Oracle* to a certain Celsus, his friend, but this is not the same Celsus of anti-Christian and pro-Solar notoriety; he seems to have been an Epicurean rather than a Platonist.

Returning to *Two Charges*, one can now say that, without committing himself to Epicureanism, in stating his own case in relation to Rhetoric and Dialogue, Lucian announces himself as free with respect to doctrinaire claims, for Rhetoric and Dialogue stand in parallel with Stoicism and Platonism, which have collapsed from the level of authentic insight into verbal-magical parodies of philosophy. Putting the pieces together–the parts of *Two Charges* and then *Two Charges* with *The False Oracle*–we can now also say that Lucian commits himself to truth, which, in the Venn Diagram that we might draw of these things, must coincide largely with

freedom. Lucian says none of this directly; he says it all by complicated indirection. He also says it in a superficially unserious way, inserting every potentially dangerous comment into the farrago of vaudeville and slapstick. Another characteristic of irony, then, is that it may conceal itself underneath satire, which is not quite the same thing as irony, or even under clowning, which is another thing again. We might also recur to Gans's statement about irony requiring us to behave *à la manière structurante*. We note that, to arrive at Lucian's meaning, we deconstruct nothing; rather, we must work hard to construct. Lucian fulfills Kierkegaard's remark in *The Concept* that irony "is a state of true freedom." But insofar as Lucian carries the imperative of *nil admirari* to an extreme (he exempts explicitly from his skepticism only the Epicureans), he fulfills another Kierkegaardian observation at the same time, namely that the ironist "achieves his satisfaction in solitude."

This feature of Lucian's irony becomes obvious when he ceases merely to lambaste falsehood and fatuousness and tries to create positive examples of a justified life, as we shall see in turning to his Demonax. Solitude is an ethical limit of irony.

III

Irony constitutes a species of *internal emigration.* It is a tactic for living, for survival, put into effect in times of enormity and troubles by spiritually sensitive types. In his discussion in *The Ecumenic Age* of the new type of post-Alexandrian empires that dominate the Mediterranean world in Late Antiquity, Voegelin describes, as we have seen, "an object of organization rather than a subject." Drawing on Polybius (202-120 B.C.), Voegelin characterizes the Iranian, Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and finally the Roman empires as spiritually nihilistic: "Above the ecumene there rises no cosmological symbolism as from the Near Eastern empires, no symbolism of world history as from Israel's present under God, no philosopher's theory of the polis as from the Athens of Plato." The ecumene is defectively "a power field into which peoples [are] drawn through pragmatic events," but it does not correspond to "an entity given once and for all as an object of exploration," and which might therefore be shown to have a rational, an understandable, structure, like a cosmos; the ecumene "rather was something that increased or decreased correlative with the expansion or contraction of imperial power." The ecumene "furthermore had degrees of intensity correlative with the degrees of direct jurisdiction or indirect political control maintained from the ruling center."

Because the prevailing ecumenic polity at any time is a vast distortion of order, it cannot satisfy a basic demand for order built into consciousness, no doubt at the basic level of the sign, as originary analysis maintains. The imperial dispensation casts every sensitive person in the role of Antigone *versus* Creon. In pre-ecumenic

situations, such as that of the Hebrews in Egypt, a logistics of exodus was in place; the dissatisfied or outraged parties could physically vacate the jurisdiction of the offending sovereign and his government. During Socrates' imprisonment in the days before his death, his friends made it clear that the way was open for a jailbreak and for quite comfortable exile elsewhere in Greece.

In the *Pax* under the Antonines, however, the route of geographical exodus closes itself off, for where might one go when the *Imperium* coincides with the known world? Fleeing to the Persian Empire in the east would be like having fled from Albania to Cuba during the Communist regimes. Hopping Hadrian's Wall to live among the blue-faced Picts would be equally absurd, although they say that the mead packed a wallop. Lucian himself speculated in a fantasy, *True Histories,* about islands beyond the Pillars of Hercules–and into space all the way to the moon–but Greco-Roman explorers never ventured into the Atlantic Main, which thus functioned symbolically as a boundary to conquerable reality. Voegelin writes: "If reality is understood in the comprehensive sense of Anaximander's dictum [*everything comes from the Apeiron and everything returns to it under the law of justice* (Bertonneau's paraphrase)], obviously [then] man can nether conquer reality nor walk out of it. . . . No imperial expansion can reach the receding horizon; no exodus from bondage is an exodus from the *condicio humana;* no turning away from the Apeiron can prevent a return to it through death." Should exodus occur under these circumstances it will necessarily occur by what Voegelin calls "pneumatic differentiation," a turning-within of the afflicted soul.

Insofar as contemporary scholarship sees Epicurus and his followers through the prism of Marxist doctrine, it fails to see that Epicureanism, far from being the rejection of religion for which base materialists take it, is itself not only a highly differentiated religious idea but a textbook case of *internal emigration* from a distorted existence. Epicureanism is not ironic but it can help us to understand irony as internal emigration and it can therefore help us to understand how irony must at last *give way to faith,*which it presages. It might be that *eccentricity* is the term midway between irony and faith.

9

In the didactic poem *On the Nature of Things* by Epicurus' first century B.C. Latin follower Lucretius, for example, in Book IV, we find a developed comparison between republics and empires. Lucretius takes empire as a ponderous given. In the aftermath of the Trojan War, which Lucretius reads as an attempt by Agamemnon to establish a Greek empire in Asia, much disorder ensued, with "each man struggling to win dominance and supremacy for himself." Out of this disorderliness–think of the suitors in Odysseus' palace in Ithaca–came a renewed

demand for order, acting on which, “some men showed how to appoint state officials, to establish civil rights and duties so that men would want to obey the laws” and “mankind, worn out by a life of violence and enfeebled by feuds, was the more ready to submit of its own free will to the bondage of laws and institutions.” Lucretius understands, as does Voegelin, that a *polis,* be it Athens in the time of Theseus or Rome in the time of Numa, is a subject that governs itself. Lucretius traces empire back generically to a particular legendary-historical event: “Remember how at Aulis the altar of the virgin goddess was foully stained with the blood of Iphigenia by the leaders of the Greeks, the patterns of chivalry. . . . It was her fate in the very hour of marriage to fall a sinless victim to a sinful rite, so that a fleet might sail under happy auspices.” Empire is thus *victimary* from its degree zero. The troubled present, stemming from Agamemnon’s lust to punish Troy by conquest, Lucretius calls “this brutal business of war by sea and land.” The civil wars then raging for control of what already possessed the form, if not yet the name, of *Imperium,*Lucretius calls “this evil hour of my country’s history.” Epicurus (331-247 B.C.) himself figures in the Prologue to *On the Nature of Things,* as a secular savior-martyr, which distinguishes him from a savior-monarch or dictator. It is worth recording that the generative event in Epicurus’ life was his family’s being forced to participate in a colonial enterprise by the Macedonian ruler of his native island of Samos. The ship taking citizen-colonists to their new rationally planned city foundered, orphaning the young Epicurus and predisposing him to view the so-called philosophical justification of political expediency with a jaundiced eye. *Stop invoking the geometric Forms to justify telling us where to live,* he might have said, addressing the regime.

Many must have shared his resentment because his school grew rapidly and soon counted adherents all over the Hellenistic world. Under Roman hegemony the popularity of Epicureanism grew. Like the early Christians, whose tactics theirs forecast, the Epicureans argued for withdrawal from the larger world into small, autonomous communities, the paradigm of which was the master’s Garden in Athens, where he settled as an adult.

Kierkegaard writes that Hellenism qualified as ironic even “without needing the railleries of a Lucian,” yet Lucian repeatedly measures up to the Kierkegaardian canon of irony and presages what Kierkegaard sees as the next phase of spiritual differentiation beyond Hellenistic irony, namely Christianity. Not meaning to do so, Kierkegaard nevertheless describes Lucian perfectly when he remarks in *The Concept* that irony “in the eminent sense directs itself not against this or that particular existence but against the whole actuality of a certain time and situation.” Lucian’s irony makes itself evident in the things and persons that Lucian admires, these being few. Now historians and scholars know of Demonax, whom Lucian claims for his teacher, only through Lucian’s encomium of him, but this is not to say

that Demonax never existed. Supposing him to be non-fictitious, Demonax's dates would correspond to the late first through the middle second Centuries. His name hearkens back to the distinguishing feature of the Socratic ethos–the *daimon,* that mark of negativity, which is also a declaration of subjectivity and freedom–and so puts us squarely back in the *topos* of irony. Lucian begins *Demonax the Philosopher* with this mordant formulation, which assumes the banality, hence the deficiency, of the prevailing scene: "Apparently it was the will of the gods that life even in our day should not be utterly bereft of memorable and noteworthy men." One could say that this condition of reality is *apparently* also true in the incipient twenty-first century–for irony is inextricably bound up in *appearances.* But back to Lucian. . .

Two men existed in his day that Lucian regarded as deserving of commemoration. Sostratus, a giant whom the Boeotians mistook for Heracles, was one, and Demonax was the other. Mistaking men for gods constitutes a vice of the time, as does attunement, also implied by the mistake, to physical rather than spiritual qualities. Sostratus, like Superman, excelled at "removing robbers" from the region and "crossing crevasses" in a single bound. Demonax, by contrast, who stemmed from a Cypriote family "not undistinguished for nobility and wealth," nevertheless "overcame this obstacle" and "turned to philosophy."

In a rather Kierkegaardian moment Leo Strauss once observed that when the prose of a competent writer-thinker seems to suffer a lapse into solecism this usually constitutes a deliberate attempt to throw off heresy hunters. It is once again this matter of appearances. We stumble across such a gaffe in *Demonax.* Lucian at first assures us that "there was no Socratic irony about him" only later to explore the parallelism, point by point, between the behavior and demeanor of Demonax and those of Plato's master. Demonax "seems to have modeled himself most closely on Socrates," epistemologically speaking, in that "he mixed many philosophical systems together" or rather took such truth as he could find from whatever source offered it. In contrast with Dialogue in *Two Charges,* Demonax always "went on foot"; he touched and was no doubt profaned by the vulgar earth. Lucian writes, "he joined in the work of the city with everyone else." Despite "the enormous respect for him among the Athenian people," however, Demonax's "independent spirit together with his habit of saying exactly what he thought had won him among the people exactly the sort of hatred they had once accorded Socrates." In asserting that Demonax always *said what he thought,* Lucian is again not quite saying what he means, for his quotations of the philosopher's witticisms suggest the subtle indirection of the ironist.

Kierkegaard insists in *The Concept* that irony never proposes a thesis external to itself. The ironist's purpose "is merely to feel free, and this he is through irony." Kierkegaard also insists that irony belongs essentially to epochal moments, in which

“the given actuality has completely lost its validity.” The ironist, who never loses contact with the “metaphysical,” senses the collapse of every existing institution into an “imperfect form” although he “does not possess the new,” which might replace the old. The *Boulé* once accused Demonax of failing to sacrifice to Athena and of having suspiciously excused himself from initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries, participation in which had evidently become socially mandatory. Demonax responded that he “did not suppose that [Athena] needed any offerings from me” and that, as for the Mysteries, if they lacked merit “he would not hold his peace, but would try to dissuade non-initiates from the rites” and if they proved themselves valuable “his love of humanity would force him to reveal them to everyone.” That would be profanation either way. Both remarks conceal doubt about sacred doctrine while invoking an apparent concern with safeguarding the very sacrality they tend to dissolve. Athena’s not needing Demonax’s offerings might well derive from her non-existence, after all; and his disinclination to be initiated might well derive from his regarding the Mysteries as a form of rank superstition. Demonax’s response has meanwhile had its intended effect of disarming a crowd “that had been holding stones in their hands, ready to use them.”

10

The Athens of Lucian’s *Demonax* both is and is not the Athens of Plato’s *Apology.* The same fundamental anthropology remains in effect, signified by the crowd’s readiness to lapidate the dissident. The Athens that condemned Socrates, however, was the *polis,* although in the throes of its dissolution, of the independent, the pre-ecumenic age; what occurred there signified *only* to Athenians or at most to a still restricted Hellenism. The polity ready to condemn Demonax has long since lost its independence to be absorbed, along with the rest of Greece, first into the Macedonian Kingdom and then into the Roman Empire. It now signifies for the ecumene as a whole, because the ecumene conforms elsewhere precisely to what it is either *here* or *there.* The “given actuality” that for the ironist has “completely lost its validity” extends itself conterminously with the *Pax* so that *from it* no exit any longer exists except by spiritual withdrawal. Even withdrawal entails danger. As in Demonax’s refusal to participate in civic sacrifices or mystic initiation, the public, always ready to reassert community at the expense of a victim, shows a proneness to interpret nonconformity as offensive to its norms. The ironist knows this. He can sometimes deflect hostility through a well-wrought fillip or he can turn attention from himself at the non-lethal expense of someone so ripe for deflation that the crowd will content itself with the sideshow.

When the sophist Maximus of Tyre (125-185) visited Athens, he extolled himself and made an ornate gesture of waiting to be summoned by one or the other of the

Athenian schools. In his speech, according to Lucian, Maximus said:

If Aristotle summons me to the Lyceum, I shall go with him. If Plato invites me to the Academy, I will be there. If Zeno asks me, I shall spend my time in the painted Stoa. If Pythagoras calls me, I shall seal my lips in silence.

Demonax arose from his seat, identified himself loudly, and shouted out, “Hey, Pythagoras is calling.” Demonax dismisses with equanimity the worn-out institutions of the old sacred as well as the attempts to revive the old sacred in putatively new metaphysical doctrines such as those of Maximus, one of the early Neoplatonists, hence a contributor to the stultifying official theosophy of the later Roman Empire. Maximus’ open invitation to the schools strongly suggests a mercenary inner nullity, as though a modern candidate for an assistant professorship were to say during his on-campus interview, “If Andrea Dworkin calls me, if Edward Said calls me . . . etc.” We would think to ourselves, this *geisha* is really powdering his cheeks with rouge, just as the Syrian says of Rhetoric in *Two Charges.* If only Pythagoras would call them all! Insofar as Demonax stands for Lucian, Lucian stands for the *carte-blanche* contrariness that Kierkegaard establishes as the *sine qua non* of irony.

Lucian, in praising Demonax, never restricts himself to targets, like visiting senators and the idle rich, of whom our contemporary professoriate would approve. Demonax beards Favorinus of Arles, a sophist whose testicular underdevelopment rendered him physically effeminate; he makes punning jokes at the expense of a “pretty boy” whom he takes for a passive homosexual. Of another swishing male, this one the son of a Roman official, Demonax says, “he’s a fine lad, worthy of you and the spitting image of his mother.” A whole series of Lucian’s dialogues, the courtesan dialogues, presuppose the meretricious character of the female sex. The usual situation in a courtesan dialogue concerns a mother’s advice to her daughter to employ her secondary sexual characteristics in order to manipulate men for access to their bank accounts. In the motto of Marx (Groucho), whatever it is, Demonax is against it, or rather *irony* is against it. One cannot *permit irony* and then arbitrarily limit it. The notion of *permitting irony* roundly contradicts itself, for irony never, under any circumstance, permits itself to*be permitted.* To do so would mean that irony had annulled itself. So irony remains transcendentally unconfined by the *politesse* of a speech code as duly instated by a majority vote of the academic assembly or any other body.

But something else is happening in the example of Demonax, inseparable from unconstrained freedom of speech. Everywhere in Lucian’s homage to his teacher the deflation of *hubris* goes hand in hand with the oblique annotation of an underlying coercive violence in the deep structures of the world-community. We have encountered the incipient lapidation in the *Boulé.* On another occasion, having

been attacked and bloodied in the street, Demonax refuses the crowd's urgency that he should invoke the proconsul and demand punishment for his attacker. On yet another occasion: "The Athenians were considering the setting up of gladiatorial contests in competition with the Corinthians. Demonax came forward and said, 'Don't vote this measure through until you've removed the Altar of Pity.'" The sensitivity to sacrificial and quasi-sacrificial violence that one encounters in Lucian, whether he speaks for himself directly or cites the remarks of his teachers and friends, belongs with his doubts about received religion and therefore belongs with his irony. Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept* that irony would illuminate the real; irony would "mystify the surrounding world not so much to conceal itself as to induce others to reveal themselves." Like the Hebrew prophets, like the Epicureans, like the Christians, Lucian's detachment from the intracosmic gods and their cults brings to light a purely human, immanent causality. In the remark to the Athenians about the Altar of Piety, Demonax affirms, without directly mentioning it, the humanity of the victims in gladiatorial spectacle. Lucian's indirect judgments apply not merely to Athens, a debt-ridden provincial city in the ecumenic scheme of the Roman Empire, but to the whole of the inhabited and politically abject world.

The image of Demonax, Lucian would also apply to the whole of this worn-out and de-valued world, offering it as an *exemplum* for imitation. But because, in true ironic fashion, Demonax had no positive creed to recommend in place of the false creeds that he incessantly mocked, his example could ultimately only be that of withdrawal. He took withdrawal seriously, never marrying, living frugally and alone, and finally starving himself to death when felt that he had usefully lived out his life. Christians and their post-Christian brethren no doubt find Demonax attractive for his stubborn loneliness and acerbity, traits that Medieval Christianity taught us to admire. The same might be said of Lucian–modern people are almost bound to admire him because they reflexively (although quite uncritically) admire a sharp tongue directed at a pompous fall guy. Medieval Christianity in the West, but not in Byzantium, scorned Lucian. The Enlightenment resurrected him. Cyrano de Bergerac imitated *The True Histories* in his*Empires et royaumes de la lune et du soleil;* Voltaire lavished praise on him and imitated the mocking aspect of his prose. Only Jonathan Swift really succeeded him.

11

One must admit, however, that the earnestness of the martyrs, not the acerbity of the ironist as such, is what ultimately disseminated the post-sacrificial dispensation of the Hebrew prophets and the Gospel evangelists. In a spirit of generosity we might say that an ironist like Lucian makes straight the road for those who surpass all criticism of the institutions by actually facing the beasts in the arena. In *Signs,* Gans writes:

We do not ironize when faced with the real power of the sacred center to defer human conflict. But whatever the flourishes of the cosmological imagination, this power is not transferable to the natural world; God lets it rain on the just as on the unjust, which is really to say he can do nothing for or against either. By our irony we reject *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* this attribution of impotence to God, implicitly reproaching him with deliberately choosing to not to grant our wish for sunny skies.

Demonax–or rather Lucian–seems to have recognized the principle, for Lucian records that his teacher's favorite quotation from Homer was, "The wretch and the hero find their prize the same." The Justice of Zeus has evaporated, if it ever existed. Despite proliferating claims of Hermetic or Apollonian epiphany, the divine essence no longer reaches down into the pragmatic sphere. The corollary of the principle is that people must organize their own lives, but they can do this only with difficulty in the inhuman largeness of the ecumenic setting, with its endemic wars and civil wars, its *ethos* of betrayal, and its bloody mass entertainments.

As the *Imperium* disintegrates in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries, devolving into the Gothic kingdoms in the West and ossifying into Byzantium in the East, irony temporarily loses its role in social criticism and, as it were, drops out of the vocabulary. Kierkegaard argues that antique irony forecast the dissolution of the old without prescribing the form of the new. Once the new arrives, whatever its form, the Socratic-Lucianic irony will have outlived its "zeal in the service of the world spirit," as *The Concept* would put it. Irony revives during the religious wars as the folk-hero and *provocateur*, either *Thyl*or *Simplicius,* one of whose better-known Twentieth Century avatars is Jaroslav Hašek's*Good Soldier Schweik.* Gans reserves nineteenth-century literary irony to the late or second-generation phase of Romanticism, that of the 1840s. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is not ironic, Gans argues persuasively in *Signs,* as he does elsewhere; Rousseau merely instantiates the usual Romantic case of a self-proclaimed "hapless victim" certain of bearing within himself "a divine self-consciousness for which the worldly separation between form and content, sign and thing is an illusion." The acuity of this delusion makes it original and productive in Rousseau's *Rêveries,* but as commoditized in the contemporary humanities it is irritating and corrupting. Not only is Rousseau's "not yet an ironic position," but its egomania suggests the total incompatibility of irony with two phenomena: narcissism on the one hand and Gnosticism (what I have been calling "theosophy") on the other. The nineteenth-century ironist, whether Baudelaire or Kierkegaard, "knows that his extraworldly stance makes him complicit in the worldly iniquities he denounces."

IV

If irony has a relation to the ecumene in Voegelin's sense (and such is the case)

then it necessarily has a relation to Gnosticism, the characteristic intellectual derailment of the Ecumenic Age, against the inflation of which Lucianic, if not Socratic, irony articulates its tactical negativity. As counterintuitive as it sounds, the suppression of the heresies, as *un*-ironic as that process was, also contributed to obviating the antique irony. The heresies typically show a Gnostic cast, which is not to say that no Gnosticism whatever managed to serpentine its way into the Christianity of the Nicene Creed. Nevertheless, melding with Plato's thought, particularly with his political science, as in Augustine, Christianity better reconciled itself to what Lucian calls the *time-lag* inherent in the world-situation than did the sub-Platonic, *bric-à-brac* Systems that also in their crude fashion constitute a kind of criticism of the *angst* of existence. Christianity could reconcile itself, for example, to the indefinite postponement of the Second Coming. Only Saint John of Patmos strains with impatience; Paul, while living in hope, remains calm.

All of Gnosticism in its textual aspect is like *Revelation* on steroids. In *Order and History,* Volume IV, Voegelin indeed denies that Gnosticism can be grasped as *stemming*from Christianity, as scholarship frequently claims, and he discusses the phenomenon in these terms: "Syncretistic spiritualism . . . must be recognized as a symbolic form *sui generis.* In the multicivilizational empire it arises from the cultural area of less-differentiated consciousness as a means of coping with the problem of universal humanity in resistance to an unsatisfactory ecumenic order." A twenty-first-century academic publisher would probably have refused Voegelin's manuscript outright for that one phrase, "the cultural area of less-differentiated consciousness." It is amusing to imagine the boiling off of ideological steam and the archly phrased but entirely predictable letter of rejection to the author. But the author of *The Ecumenic Age* never subscribed to cultural relativism, only to the latitudinarianism required by the search for truth.

Then again, twenty-first-century academic publishers are part of the unsatisfactoriness of *our* ecumenic order. In the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks on the East Coast, William Irwin Thompson immediately joined with the chorus of righteousness denouncing the United States for having invited the offense through the offense of its existence, castigating George W. Bush, and assuring his readers that Islam is a religion of peace. Thompson's statement of his *bona fides* in this regard takes the title of "We Become What We Hate: Reflections on 9/11 for Planetary Culture and the Global War on Terrorism." Curious parties will find it in Thompson's *Self and Society: Studies in the Evolution of Culture* (2004). Eight years earlier, however, in the essay on "Mythic Narratives" in *Coming into Being,* Thompson had asserted the following:

Every society has a cognitive structure of permissible knowledge that is managed by an elite and forbidden knowledge that is distributed in black or shadow markets

by cognitive outlaws, heretics, revolutionaries, or just plain crazies . . . In 1971, when I first described some weird things that were hanging out “at the edge of history,” I was accepted and praised by the normal world of *Time, Harpers,* and the *New York Times,* but as soon as I moved a toe over the edge from journalism about the evolutionary news to intellectual commitment to spiritual communities such as Findhorn, Auroville, and Lindisfarne, I was ostracized from the world of official notice and literary reviews. For the critics, I had fallen off the edge of history to dwell in outer darkness.

12

Thompson’s case qualifies as interesting because it illustrates the Gnostic *problem of the professor,* as we might specify it. One can read Thompson’s books, even *Self and Society,* with its ideologically predictable chapters, with pleasure and in expectation of real information and insight. I recommend particularly *Travels about Earth* (1975) and*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light* (1981). Thompson, sensitive to deformations of culture and the doctrinal parochialism of institutions, especially of academic ones, has striven to find livable non-institutional niches in which he might teach and write without restricting himself to the narrowly defined range of “permissible knowledge.” When the literary establishment spurned him in the mid-1970s for his un-vetted intellectual interests and unapproved spiritual affiliations, he could see the machinery of correctness falling into place against him. He understood the phenomenon. Yet in the moment of genuine crisis a generation later, perhaps through having become an institution of his own, and a kind of *guru* for a certain sector of academia, he automatically sided with the crudest strains of anti-Americanism. Who has noticed that reflexive anti-Americanism–or anti-Christianism, as in the recent elite attempt to substitute a neutral “holiday” for the more specific occasion of Christmas–is part of a contemporary “syncretistic spirituality,” to recur to Voegelin’s term? But it is. And Thompson is a specimen syncretist. As with all Gnosticizing syncretists, we can even sympathize with his plight.

Voegelin, in *The Ecumenic Age,* links Gnosticism with “the contraction of divine order into personal existence.” As the inherited forms of symbolic order in a large-scale society increasingly shaped by *libido dominandi* become incapable of bearing the idea of order, when, as Voegelin puts it, “the symbols have separated from the function they had in the cultural context of their origin,” then a type of person aware of his need for a viable vocabulary of existence, will select, as from a *smörgåsbord,* an eclectic mass of cast-off deities, demons, and monsters from the “graveyard of civilizations” to form a “pre-creational psychodrama.” The aim of the “psychodrama” is to demote existence in favor of a fantasy in which the urgency of the believer or believers will soon radically transform the cosmos by the abolition of

the existing order, seen by the dramaturge as an illegitimate interruption of a pre-existent and eternal cosmic dispensation. In the Second Century A.D., in Valentine's *Gospel of Truth,* for example, the *bricolage* amasses "Egyptian Ogdoads and Pythagorean Tetrads, Iranian, Babylonian, Israelite, and Christian symbols," and does so with an insouciance concerning provenance shared by Maximus of Tyre's intellectual willingness to embrace whatever philosophical school was willing to embrace him, including presumably all of them, if they all called. In Thompson's case, the *bricolage* includes: Plato's Theory of Ages from *The Laws* (in a literalized form), Marija Gimbutas' theory of Balkan Prehistory in the Neolithic Age, George Steiner's Anthroposophy, Feminism, New Age Spirituality, Catastrophe Theory, and Environmentalism.

Steiner's Anthroposophy is itself already an eclectic revival of Neoplatonic and Gnostic symbols from Late Antiquity, while Feminism and Environmentalism are modern forms of apocalyptic. "Global pollution and global catastrophes are having an implosive effect," Thompson writes, "as disasters such [as] the greenhouse effect and the ozone hole are bringing all of humanity together in the new planetary cultural phase-space." Voegelin reminds us that Gnosticism, while it is a spiritual "dead end," is also nevertheless a response to the perception that "pragmatic reality" has become "devoid of meaning." Gnosticism "tends to nourish its righteousness by pointing to the evil in the world," but it simultaneously "rejects the life of spirit and reason under the conditions of the cosmos in which reality becomes luminous in pneumatic and noetic consciousness." In other words, Gnosticism cannot abide the notion that God lets it rain on the just as on the unjust; indeed, Gnosticism does not want to admit that it is *God*who establishes the dichotomy of *just* and *unjust,* whence the deconstructive mandate that all the left-to-right prescriptions of *logocentric* oppression be reversed. Voegelin calls Gnosticism "a dead end" because

There is no alternative to an eschatological extravaganza but to accept the mystery of the cosmos. Man's existence is participation in reality. It imposes the duty of noetically exploring the structure of reality as far as it is intelligible and spiritually coping with the insight into its movement from the divine Beginning to the divine Beyond of its structure.

The Gnostic occupies the mere geometrical position of the ironist, askew to the world, without any of the consolation afforded by irony. The ironist knows what the Gnostic refuses to admit–that one cannot exit the cosmos to judge it from the outside, as the cosmos possesses no outside except insofar as such an outside takes the form of an agency–call it God–who, having established the cosmos and furnished consciousness with its luminosity, has now withdrawn to let free will sort out those things that pertain to it in a community. Gnosticism *knows* what it knows

vehemently. Irony suspects that it only knows a little, but that the name for all that it does not yet know is *not*“falsehood.” The Gnostic invariably orates. The ironist is not unwilling to converse, to let his feet touch the earth, as Lucian says. Augustine, who wanted to have a conversation with the Manichaean bishop Faustus, found that Faustus could only orate and that in a colloquy he came across as insipid and not at all knowledgeable. Faustus remained serene, however, in his conviction that in abstaining from beans he was preparing the abolition of *this* world and the restoration of Divine Light.

Is it so then that *faith* is a further differentiation of consciousness that grows in the soil prepared by irony? Kierkegaard thought so. “Irony as a mastered moment,” he writes in*The Concept,* “exhibits itself in its truth precisely by the fact that it teaches us to actualize actuality, by the fact that it places due emphasis on actuality.” Irony, says Kierkegaard, entails a “longing for a higher and more perfect” type of being, “but this longing must not hollow out actuality.” Under the sign of irony, “actuality will therefore not be rejected and longing shall be a healthy love, not a cowardly, effeminate ruse for sneaking oneself out of the world.”

Voegelin read Kierkegaard sympathetically, so it comes as no surprise that Voegelin’s analysis of Gnosticism resembles Kierkegaard’s discussion of Teutonic Idealism in the Systems of Fichte and Hegel. Rather, Kierkegaard foreshadows Voegelin. The Kierkegaard of the late *Papers,* just before his death in 1855, offers an even more startling remark about irony and language, one that will return us to both Voegelin’s “noetic” idea of consciousness and Gans’s *scenic* idea of the sign, and that will permit a concluding reconciliation of Voegelin’s history and Gans’s anthropology. Under the heading “MAN,” Kierkegaard writes that, “through language everyone participates in the highest–but participating in the highest through language in the sense of merely talking about the highest is just as ironical as being a spectator of the royal dinner-table from the gallery.” Under the heading “LANGUAGE,” Kierkegaard writes that: “language is an ideality which every person has free. What an ideality! That God can use it to express his thoughts, so that through language man has fellowship with God.” Language partakes of “spirit,” says Kierkegaard, “and in the sphere of spirit, irony is always present.” Let us bring into conjunction with Kierkegaard’s formulation two sentences from the chapter on “Originary Being, Originary Thinking” in Gans’s *Signs:*“Thought in the universe of language begins not with appetite but with human desire, which already contains its own obstacle. Instead of finding pleasure, as does the esthetic, in the formal perfection of the inaccessible figure, thought deconstructs the figural relation that maintains the obstacle in order to seek a way around it.” Language as *noesis* assumes in advance a cosmos at once inconvenient and fundamentally inalterable, but not unlivable, so that people, in a reasonable conversation about existence, can ultimately find their way around the obstacles of scarcity and convergence. The

most inconvenient and inalterable thing about reality as every individual finds it, *already constituted,* is the presence in it of other human beings. Thought and language emerge to defuse the crisis of convergence in the incipiently human community at its moment of transition to consciousness; thus does morality, as an idea, emerge at the same time, and with it the notion of a Being who posits morality.

13

Judaism and Christianity refine morality by repudiating sacrifice, but they cannot liberate human beings from a *scene* on which the "vertical" world of language and ideas intersects with the "horizontal" world of desire-objects; neither Judaism nor Christianity, in their shared wisdom, *tries* to do this impossible thing. "The Trinity," writes Gans in *Signs,* "is the closest theology has come to grasping the paradoxical structure of the scene of representation." Thus

The subsistent but invisible being of the Father engenders the worldly incarnation of the esthetically visible and vulnerable Son; the Christian God is both present at the origin and historically contemporary. The Holy Spirit, as the agent of the sign-system that links the originary and the contemporary, the being of the subsistent locus and the victim that temporarily occupies it, presides over the unity of trinitary theology . . . God is subsistent, yet he is also worldly.

Following in the steps of the Hebrew Prophets, Christianity illuminates the underlying sacrificial organization of the existing society. "The establishment in the ultimate clarity of the Spirit of the oscillatory identity of Father and Son, deity and victim, is intended to abolish the resentment of the human periphery." Christianity, like Judaism, is a religion of discussion between equal participants who recognize their equality rather than a religion of awesome mandatory regulations emitted from a sacred center. It is a religion of dialogue rather than of oratory. Kierkegaard's private confidences contain a prickly Lucianic statement that Gans's "trinitary" distinction between the sacrality of the center and the dignity of the periphery can help us to understand: "In early antiquity the philosopher was a power, an ethical power, a character–the Empire protected itself by*paying* them, making them 'professors.'" Then Constantine converted on his deathbed and the *Imperium* began to style itself Christian, necessitating Kierkegaard's little addendum, "Likewise Christianity," a comment on the perpetual pagan antiquity of even the newest, self-consciously postmodern and post-religious institutions.

In *The Ecumenic Age,* Voegelin remarks on the unbroken continuity from the *"I am"*who speaks out of *le buisson ardent* to Moses in Midian to the reiterated *ego eimi* of Christ in the Gospels.

The “I am” that speaks in Jesus . . . is the same “I am” that has formed the humanity of man in the past by evoking the response of faith. But the faith of Jesus does not have the compact mode of Abraham’s faith. In the epiphany of Christ, the formation of humanity in history has become transparent for its meaning as the process of transformation. In Jesus, the participation of this humanity in the divine word has reached the intensity of his absorption into the word.

Voegelin’s observation that humanity has been formed through the evocation of faith implied by the use of language ties his idea of history as humanity’s more or less witting participation in a world that the *logos* illuminates but does not create to Gans’s discussion of the implied linguistics in Christian theology. Faith is a mode of self-conscious existence that rises above that pragmatic plane where a restricted operational knowledge is adequate to the task at hand. Faith waits in expectation without mixing expectation with demand, but faith never exactly specifies what it expects, as this might diverge too much from what actuality grants. We must not suppose that faith wants nothing. Faith is a desire like other desires, after all. Faith might well expect the worst, and it knows what that is–death. But faith has learned to defuse the tension of waiting for it-knows-not-what by passing the time in conversation with its fellows. Faith can always revise its short-term goals, shrugging its shoulders at disappointment. Faith, for both Voegelin and Gans, as for Kierkegaard, is simply openness to the world as a continuous revelation of truths that may be taken up in language. Faith is thus not institutional, for institutions exist by projecting extremely specific images of both near-term and far-term goals, in the non-realization of which they tend to wax irate and point the fingers of blame.

Many years ago, in the utterly faithless *milieu* of a humanities graduate program at UCLA, I providentially stumbled into a seminar devoted to the French Symbolist poets, then much under discussion for their supposed anticipation of the great deconstructive project. Stéphane Mallarmé was supposed, in that vehement climate, to have anticipated the “grammatology” of Derrida–either that or Mallarmé had been fulfilled, as it were, by Derrida. My passage through the UCLA of the 1980s and my experience generally of the academic world has perhaps prejudiced me against institutions, but the institutional world seems to have followed the academic world in embracing the strictures and pieties of what one can only regard as Gnostic doctrines. Another way of saying the same thing is to remark that twenty years or so of experience has left me extremely suspicious of any *milieu* in which irony seems lacking. The proctor of the seminar on the Symbolists was none other than the author of *Signs* and the conceiver of generative anthropology. There was always something of the incorrect about Eric’s courses. Although smoking in the classroom had not yet been officially banned in the early 1980s, North America was already in its anti-smoking spasm. The fact that the Symbolism seminar or, later, the first Generative Anthropology seminar, took place in an atmosphere so charged

with the second-hand reek of serially consumed *Gauloises* was, if I may say so, curiously refreshing. Not all of those cigarettes were burnt away into nothingness by the seminar-leader either; many of the students–the French ones–also smoked like factories. Gnostics deplore the fog of worldly existence. That is why they instigate anti-smoking campaigns. The faithful say if it is foggy, let us devise together an esthetics of the fog, as in the painterly or musical schools of Impressionism.

14

The Generative Anthropology seminar stood in stark contrast to the English Department seminars on “critical theory” where the smoke was thick, verbal, and asphyxiating. No vivifying admixture of tobacco tainted it. Certain “texts,” one was told, were “unreadable.” We nevertheless had to “read” them and then discuss their “unreadability” *ad nauseam.* We had to do so, moreover, without any irony, and a low-irony diet is bad for health. Derrida is always-already an obtuse literalist, but the graduate students labored in Hercules-fashion to literalize even further his literalism. Without irony, a seminar participant who was devoted to the now deservedly forgotten work of Gregory Ulmer, *wrote down* on a sheet of paper two noncompossible statements and then solemnly explained to us how, in *writing them down,* he had shown the *“logocentric”* prejudice against the “excluded middle” to have no secure basis in reality. Or maybe it was “reality.” Tell that to your banker. That particular inestimably silly demonstration strikes me as the perfect example of what Voegelin means when he defines Gnosticism as suicidal flight from the world, as a fantasy of power over the cosmos.

I am painfully aware of having posed no thesis in the foregoing, of having reached no conclusion, two counts against me somewhat ameliorated, I hope, by my insistence that these are “meditations” and not a rigorous or scholarly essay. I have loved Lucian of Samosata since I was a teenager and have relished the opportunity to write about him in a public way. I have tried to restrict my references–to *one* book by Voegelin (although I cheated and quoted from *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* as well as from*The Ecumenic Age),* to one by Gans, and to one by Kierkegaard. Annotations seemed superfluous in the circumstance, so I omitted them. I guess that I shall have to serve time in one of the circles of Hell for having done so, but I expect to go there anyway. For Lucian I consulted the *new* Penguin anthology of his work, translated by Keith Sidwell and the *old* Penguin anthology, translated by Paul Turner, which I have owned since I was sixteen years old in 1970.

Oswego, New York, 23 January 2006