

# A Call to Passion

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## Introduction

Raymond Williams says that “*praxis* is *practice* informed by theory and also, though less emphatically, theory informed by *practice*, as distinct both from *practice* uninformed by or unconcerned with theory and from theory which remains theory and is not put to the test of *practice*. In effect it is a word intended to unite theory . . . with the strongest sense of *practical* (but not conventional or customary) activity: *practice* as action.”<sup>(1)</sup> This paper will take as its theoretical departure point the belief that action, or practice, is encompassed by the realm of the moral—from an originary standpoint more specifically. Eric Gans distinguishes the moral from the ethical in noting that the “moral imposes an absolute and universal obligation whereas the ethical involves the weighing of historically specific principles.”<sup>(2)</sup> Furthermore, Geoffrey Galt Harpham defines the moral as a subset existing within the broader category of the ethical. While the ethical “places imperatives, principles, [and] alternatives on a balanced scale,” morality represents “a particular moment of ethics, when all but one of the available alternatives are excluded.”<sup>(3)</sup> We might say that morality corresponds to specific action, the ethical, to broad deliberation. Inherent in such a dichotomy is also an active/passive distinction: the ethical is a thing more passive in nature, the moral is active—that is, any action informed by our theoretical speculations: the moral as praxis. This active/passive dichotomy will be useful to us in trying to distinguish what constitutes the ethical in, say, speech. When do our words, for example, simply reflect a passive ethical negotiation? When do they constitute direct ontological action?

First, I will try to clarify an otherwise muddled notion of activity and passivity in the work of Walter Benjamin, in particular, his article, *The Storyteller*. By foregrounding the discussion of his work against the backdrop of originary thinking, I hope to isolate an originary reality behind Benjamin’s lament—that is, his lament as a harbinger to what Eric Gans calls the “postmodern esthetic.” Second, in an attempt

to understand the raised ethical ramifications of this “postmodern esthetic,” I will look at the work of Stanley Cavell, who, in response to what he believes is Austin’s “skipping in [his] treatment of the passions,”<sup>(4)</sup> extends Austin’s discussion on the perlocutionary effect of words to include what he calls the “passionate utterance.”<sup>(5)</sup> I will argue that the originary realization of the primacy of text over narration undermines the work of Benjamin’s storyteller. Thus, a modern-day lack of meaningful narrative makes the ethical ramifications of the perlocutionary utterance of critical interest to those who find themselves immersed firmly within the realities of a postmodern esthetic/ethic.

## Narrativity and Textuality

In *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin laments the loss of one who is capable of “tell[ing] a tale properly,” adding that what we lose are not stories per se, but, in our inability to tell them, “the ability to exchange experiences,”<sup>(6)</sup> the value of which, subsequently, “has fallen.”<sup>(7)</sup> The worth of such experiences is no longer assigned by the storyteller’s imagination, for example, but rather, by the accuracy of his “information.”<sup>(8)</sup> Where a storyteller’s authenticity once originated in his ability to remain faithful to a tale passed on to him from previous generations, now, his subject matter must appear “understandable in itself”:<sup>(9)</sup>

While the [storyteller] was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this[,] [information] proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.<sup>(10)</sup> Thus “[s]trategic experience” is undermined by “tactical warfare . . . economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.”<sup>(11)</sup> “Prompt verifiability”<sup>(12)</sup> ensures an asymmetric relationship of how one might experience life against how one believes it *should* be lived. One hegemonic narrative (say of tactical warfare) undermines the ability of a given individual to convey strategic experience “passed on from mouth to mouth,”<sup>(13)</sup> unique to a certain geography, say, and spanning generations. “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”<sup>(14)</sup> Furthermore, storytellers have “an orientation toward practical interests” predicated on passing “counsel.”<sup>(15)</sup> Yet the difference between the storyteller’s counsel and “useful” information is that the latter can only lay claim to verifiability while the former is rooted in lived experience.

[T]he nature of every real story . . . [is that] it contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or a maxim. In every case the

storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today “having counsel” is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.(16)2

The onus for narrative now, we might say, is to pass along credible information—a story of experience that seeks validity not by exploiting unique cultural precursors, but rather, by appealing to supra-specific worldly verifiability. The scandal of being unable to claim stories as one’s own has also reduced our ability to “exchange experiences,”(17) thereby reducing their value and removing the esthetic power of storytelling in our lives.

The power of the storyteller’s narrative can be derived from a distinction made by Eric Gans between narrativity and textuality. Indeed, Gans’s distinction begins at the origin of language itself. Thus, let us briefly touch upon his version of praxis. We must not forget (nor is Gans shy in reminding us) that his version of the origin of language is completely hypothetical, what one might call a thought experiment carried to its extreme.(18) The geography of this hypothetical scene presupposes a periphery of protohumans surrounding a central object, one of appetitive desire. Invoking an artifice of appetitive mimesis, Gans has it that each member of the first community of protohumans surrounding the object of, say, a hunt (Gans uses the example of a bison), defers his individual appetite for the *complete* appropriation of the central object not for the sake of communal survival per se, but rather, for the sake of individual survival that can only be guaranteed if the resentment of the community at large is kept at bay. That is, any *individual* dash for the central object will necessarily result in chaos, what Girard calls “the first mimetic crisis.”(19)

[A]t the moment of crisis, the strength of the [individual] appetitive drive has been increased by appetitive mimesis, the propensity to imitate one’s fellows in their choice of an object of appropriation . . . all hands reach out for the object; but at the same time, each is deterred from appropriating it by the sight of all the others reaching in the same direction. The “fearful symmetry” makes it impossible for any one participant to defy the others and pursue the gesture to its conclusion. The centre of the circle appears to possess a repellent, sacred force that prevents its occupation by the members of the group, that converts the gesture of appropriation into a gesture of designation, that is, into an ostensive sign. Thus the [first] sign arises as an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that comes to designate the object rather than attempting to capture it.(20)Aesthetic contemplation first arises for (and is unique to) man as a result of *aborted* appetite. Language does not precede the first act of awareness, but rather, defers the unique moment of originary appetite (which seeks *complete* satisfaction), transforming it into human desire—necessarily

deferred. Because individual human survival can be guaranteed only with the survival of the community, humans are unique in that “the central problem of survival is posed by the relations within the species itself rather than those with the external world.”(21)

The *performance* of the first ostensive sign constitutes originary ritual, the pragmatic function of which is to recreate the originary scene *post-facto*; through repetition, the reality of originary deferral in the name of human survival is continually hammered home.(22) In thinking about ritual, Gans reminds us that

[t]he irrational element of a ritual is constituted by the excess of its ethical structures over the needs of practical reality. . . . It is important to note that we can speak of “irrationality” only because ritual indeed does possess a conceptual content. This content is not yet thematic, as is the case in theoretical discourse. In order to make it thematic, so that it can take on a truth-value and be judged as to its rationality, it must be *interpreted*.(23) At this point, aesthetic contemplation simply *is*, and is unquestioned. The lack of thematic content is not testament to the ontological reality of the first ostensive sign, but rather, to a lack of contrast with any other rival ritual Others. Ritual is interpretation, certainly; however, the truth of ritual, at this stage, is accepted *a priori*.

Of course, blessed with consciousness, we are destined to apply scrutiny. Discussing the ritual function of myth, Richard van Oort reminds us that “the reception of myth differs from the reception of mythical *content*” and that “the audience of the former is not so much a spectator as a participant.”(24) Describing the nature of the classical aesthete, van Oort tells us that the myths that preceded him, as ritual, were concerned more with integrating “the individual into the collective life of the community” than in “tell[ing] fictions that may be contemplated whenever it is convenient for the individual to do so.”(25) Here, of course, ritual is not out of line with the agenda of Benjamin’s storyteller—that is, as a means of providing the community with counsel via cultural heritage rather than verifiable truths.(26) However, the Greeks’ scenic re-presentation of that very same mythical content *on the stage* divorced man from an active participation of ritual based on an aesthetic emanating from the centre in favour of passive contemplation of the nature of the ritual content while situated firmly on the periphery. While the “Greeks were the first to institute an aesthetic distinct from the ritual scenes which preceded them,”(27) the relative lack of a ritual Other negated any questioning of the classical protagonist’s occupation of the ritual centre. Eventually, with the rise of modernity (van Oort here is referring to the Renaissance), the question of “What should be represented on stage?” was posed anew. The neoclassicists, thus, were the “first to recognize, as a condition of their aesthetic project, their historical distance from their aesthetic precursors. . . . Hence the inevitable quarrel between

ancient and modern.”(28)

The undermining of participatory ritual for the sake of passive contemplation of the scenic content essentially characterizes the ancient/modern split (i.e., the application of passive ethical scrutiny to active ritual function). We can see, indeed, that however we choose to define our stages of “progress,” our application of scrutiny to that which occupies the centre, what Gans calls our (gradual) “liberation from the sacred”(29) is inherently hostile to Benjamin’s notion of experience, encouraging passive speculation at the expense of active ritual life. Furthermore, the type of scrutiny we are *now* applying (in our present age of hyper-intellection) no longer presupposes the existence of *something* capable of occupying the centre, but questions the entire ritual/scenic structure itself. Yet Benjamin is sympathetic to the anthropological necessity of such desacralization when he says:

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The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a “symptom of decay,” let alone a “modern” symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed *narrative* from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see new beauty in what is vanishing.(30) This takes us to the final phase of revelation, what Gans calls “the *postmodern* esthetic,”(31) marked by the realization of the primacy of text over narration: “To claim that narratives are first of all texts is to state a profound anthropological truth.”(32) After the first moment of contemplation, the subsequent performance of the aborted gesture of appropriation (though the use of signs) is narrative, that is, used to describe the “story” of our (mis)appropriation.(33) Temporality, though, exists prior to signification, on the periphery: “The narrative element is provided by the presignifying temporality of the gesture, that is, by what has been abolished by its conversion into a sign.”(34) The “fearful symmetry” described earlier negates “an internal temporal sequence of moving-toward and capturing the object,”(35) which can “legitimately be broken down into a series of subordinate acts. . . . The gesture of appropriation has a beginning and an end.”(36) The moment of “fearful symmetry,” however, becomes an aborted gesture of appropriation the moment the peripheral narrative is converted into “textual” abortion (i.e., an abortion of time).

The first aborted gesture, then, is straddled on both sides by the temporal, a peripheral temporality prior and a central temporality following: “The textual moment is the moment of revelation in which time is suspended and the sign itself replaces worldly action. But this moment could only have been preserved because

in the following-[central] narrative-moment, the sign was interpreted as a model of worldly action.”(37) Narrative is *reestablished* with the onset of generation (i.e., the narrative of interpretation), that is, generation out of and describing the atemporal quality of the first aborted gesture of appropriation: “The text is primordial because the existence of the sign depends on the abolition of the temporal connection between the practical gesture and its object.”(38) However, any subsequent interpretation of the textual moment necessarily depends on an “extended temporality that so readily attaches [itself] to narrative.”(39) The sign as the simultaneous foil of temporality and upon which the following narrativity depends, then, occupies a detemporalized zone.

Having established the primacy of texts over narration, what can we say to Benjamin’s storyteller? If, as Gans reminds us, the “text is not narrative [and if all narratives are first of all texts], so the reasoning goes, then it [text] has no beginning.”(40) Thus any story of origin that posits a beginning is necessarily misleading. Does the primacy of text abolish (the pragmatic function of) narrative completely? While the moment of aesthetic contemplation is atemporal, our ability to frame our relation to it can only occur through narrative.(41) Recounting our experiences can only occur as a temporal project. The difference between textuality and narrativity is one that pits atemporal passive contemplation of the sacred against the temporal activity of ritual, respectively. Yet Gans also reminds us that “[t]he hubris of textualism lies in claiming that text’s construal as narrative is necessarily deluded. Human temporality results by turning texts into narratives, and the return to the text is only of value if a new narrative can be extracted from it.”(42) The textual is meaningless if we lack the ability to act (i.e., construct narratives) in the name of it. Perhaps this is the true source of Benjamin’s lament-not so much a lack of experience (as ends), but rather, a lack of counsel (means) capable of *moving*, rather than instructing, us to action.(43) Immersed as we are in the textual, a call to action is lacking.

Benjamin is well aware of a tension between textuality and narrativity when he reminds us that the novelist cannot take up the slack left by the storyteller. “What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel . . . it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. . . . This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular.”(44) Furthermore, Benjamin reminds us that the novel can exist in book form only and must be produced in isolation.(45) Rather than opening up the space of esthetic contemplation in the hopes that the reader will be counseled to *act*, the novelist must “carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representations of human life.”(46) In so doing, “the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living.”(47) A novel seeks not to counsel its reader to action, but to offer him/her the ability to contemplate the numerous ethical possibilities it raises.



We might better be able to understand Benjamin's distinction between the novel and storytelling by looking at one of his examples. Discussing Herodotus' story of the Egyptian King Psammenitus, Benjamin begins:

When the Egyptian king Psammenitus had been beaten and captured by the Persian king Cambyses, Cambyses was bent on humbling his prisoner. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road along which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when afterwards he recognized one of his servant, an old, impoverished man, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning.[\(48\)](#) Having set out relevant conceptual material, Benjamin proceeds to highlight relevant thematic interpretation:

From this story it may be seen what the nature of true storytelling is. The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. Thus Montaigne referred to this Egyptian king and asked himself why he mourned only when he caught sight of his servant. Montaigne answers: "Since he was already overfull of grief, it took only the smallest increase for it to burst through its dams." Thus Montaigne. But one could also say: The king is not moved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own fate. Or: We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life; to the king, this servant is only an actor. Or: Great grief is pent up and breaks forth only with relaxation. Seeing this servant was the relaxation. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness. It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day.[\(49\)](#)<sup>4</sup>

The passive contemplation that follows the storyteller's tale and precedes subsequent ritual action ensures that the listener of a story is *moved* to act in accordance with culturally specific absolutes. On the other hand, the passive contemplation associated with speculation (in, say, a novel, or even on the stage) can only instruct a reader on how to carefully weigh a myriad of "historically specific principles." The novelist (or playwright) is unable to "counsel others" as he is "himself uncounseled."[\(50\)](#) The storyteller's narrative provides one absolute and

a myriad of interpretations; to act subsequently is an imitation of lived experience in the light of a chosen interpretation. A novelist, on the other hand, offers a myriad of textual possibilities whose agenda is not to move his reader to action, but rather, to prolong the moment of aesthetic/ethical contemplation. All the reader can expect from the novelist is a sort of guidance at best—but not counsel.

Yet if praxis is doing, can we say that narration is action, or simply its necessary precursor? This question is critical in isolating the nature of Benjamin's lament. It seems that a storyteller's counsel necessitates action, which, in turn, allows us to engage in meaningful experience. But the reality of the postmodern esthetic is that we are mired within a passive state of metaphysical contemplation that can lead to action certainly (or is itself the best sort of action we can hope for), but of the sort unanchored to any meaningful notion of the sacred. Benjamin, we might say, in writing *The Storyteller*, seeks to redact the parameters of the sacred (i.e., the realm of narrativity) for the sake of reclaiming meaningful ritual action unencumbered by an excess of passive ethical speculation. But as we have already noted a trajectory of esthetic desacralization, the critical question becomes: is this possible? Will an indulgence in theoretical passivity usher in a new version of the sacred, or simply undermine any attempt at re-sacralization before it begins?[\(51\)](#)

## Activity and Passivity

Equating active ritual to convention (that is, convention established through narrative and, we would hope, tied to some notion of the sacred), Cavell's critique of Austin begins with a dissymmetry in terms of truth value that Austin belies when he makes a distinction between locutionary and illocutionary utterances:

We are given the locutionary act (saying something meaningful [i.e. that can be assigned a truth value]), the famous illocutionary act (what is done *in* saying something [essentially Austin's performative utterance]), and the perlocutionary act (what is done *by* saying something [by, say, an 'Other'])."[\(52\)](#) The ternary distinction introduced by Austin is not done in the spirit of exploring perlocutionary utterance per se, but rather to "fasten on[to] the second, illocutionary act and contrast it with the other two."[\(53\)](#) Here is precisely where Cavell takes issue with Austin's program. For Austin reminds us that the performative (illocutionary) utterance can be "neither true nor false"[\(54\)](#) in the way we think about the descriptive, assertive, or constative gestures of speech.[\(55\)](#) Rather, illocutionary utterances are tied to conditions that fasten them to categories of "felicity or infelicity" rather than to "truth or falsity."[\(56\)](#) Yet the dissymmetry of truth or falsity on the one hand versus felicity and infelicity on the other raises the question of which sorts of utterances are worthy of philosophical interest. Is philosophy inherently more concerned only with that which can be assigned a truth, rather than



a felicitous, value? Yet Austin later “claim[s] that truth (truth itself, so to speak) is to be understood precisely as a dimension of what he calls the criticism of speech.”(57) But in raising the spectre of the performative, criticism proper, it could be argued, is concerned not solely with speech, but also, with “action more generally.”(58) The conditions Austin outlines for the performative are not done solely to distinguish them from categories of truth and falsity, but rather, *to bring them closer* to such categories, rather than relegate them to being simply “nonsense” statements.(59) Though Austin may sincerely want to “prepare the ground on which to bring . . . the philosophical concern with truth down to size”(60) (that is, by clearly outlining conditions upon which we can ascertain, if not the truth value of illocutionary utterances, then, at the very least, their felicitousness), an acceptance of felicity over truth value is, to Cavell, an “avoiding [of] . . . the issue of passion or expression in speech.”(61)

The philosophical stakes seem so disproportionate: the dimension of the felicitous turns merely—does it not?—on human conventions, whereas the dimension of truth invokes our fundamental relation to, or knowledge of, whatever there is, human or otherwise.(62) If the gestures implied by speech make them less intelligible in terms of strict categories of truth and falsity, then it is not for the philosopher to minimize the ambiguity of such speech by denying originary intent and playing up, say, the conditions of their felicity. To do so is to characterize (or to doggedly *try* to characterize) speech as something much more in line with describing action rather than expressing desire. Cavell’s critique of Austin raises the limitations of Austin’s program and “question[s] a theory of language that pictures speech as at heart a matter of action and only incidentally as a matter of articulating and hence expressing desire.”(63)

The problem of language as merely a descriptor of reality versus language as a vehicle of expression goes back to the pre-declarative ostensive stage of linguistic origin. Gans defines the originary linguistic form as the “*ostensive*, which names a present object.”(64) Furthermore, “[t]he originary use of the ostensive takes place in a collective scene where each participant designates the central object-referent to fellow participants at the periphery.”(65) Yet Gans also makes a key distinction between the “indicative” and the “designative” ostensives.(66) Beginning first with the indicative, Gans notes that

[a] typical example is the cry of “Fire!” addressed by the first observer of the phenomenon to no one in particular, which is to say, to everyone within hearing; the first hearers are expected to repeat the cry until all concerned are made aware of the danger. Under such circumstances, the significance of the designatum is considered to take precedence over all else in the situation. Hence the question as to whether such an ostensive is “performative” or “constative” is meaningless. The

indicative ostensive creates a model of present-experience-as-significant that, whether or not it suggests any specific behavior to the interlocutor (as the cry of "Fire!" is likely to do), is in any case presumed to effect a transformation of the latter's awareness of immediate reality. There is no "performance" here in the sense of an irreversible transformation of the real world, but neither is there merely the acknowledgement of an already existing reality. *The performance effected by the ostensive is that of proposing a model of significant experience.* [\(67\)](#)<sup>5</sup>

The indicative ostensive is unconcerned with strict categories of truth value. Indeed, at this stage, such categories are meaningless, for the cry of fire could not have been elicited without the worldly presence of the object in the first place. As noted earlier, the concept of fire is not yet thematic (we are not talking about ourselves talking about fire), but either significant or insignificant: "A cry such as 'Fire!' does not appear to modify the world to which it refers. The fire is a fire whether or not anyone refers to it. . . . We do not create the fire-ness of the fire by naming it." [\(68\)](#) The purpose of the first ostensive is merely to describe, rather than to transform, the surrounding reality. The subsequent communal acceptance of the danger of the fire does not transform the fire into something real (from the unreal), but transfigures it as something worthy of *significance*; the integration of this new ostensive into the scene of communal recognition presupposes a very real threat which the fire poses to the community at large. Such integration, of course, is not guaranteed:

It goes without saying that this model [i.e., of the indicative ostensive], once tested against the reality experienced by the interlocutor, need not continue to be accepted, but may be rejected as inappropriate—for example, if one decides that there is in fact no danger from fire at all. [\(69\)](#) The pragmatic function of the indicative ostensive is to bestow *significance* upon an object in the real world. Truth and falsity are not at stake. What appears to us via perception is granted significant status by the speaker of the ostensive. The validity of his claim, which requires communal mediation for communal *significance*, does not require communal mediation to be 'true' (or untrue, for that matter). [\(70\)](#)

Where the indicative ostensive is concerned with significance, the designative ostensive is concerned with representation, "within which [is] to be found in particular Austin's original performatives: expressions such as "I now pronounce you man and wife." [\(71\)](#) In the case of the indicative ostensive, "[t]he passage through the scene does not transform the object fire; it leaves it be as nature while designating it in the terms of culture." [\(72\)](#) The designative, however, differs fundamentally in that, say, marriage,

transform[s] [its] object [i.e., a man and wife] because these acts are

appurtenances of culture, wholly dependent on the scene of representation for their being as well as for their meaning. Such designative ostensives enact anew the communal accord in meaning, and without at least a vestigial communal scene they are meaningless; this accord is only implicit in the cry of "Fire!" (73) Whereas the indicative ostensive was concerned with making significant real world objects, "[r]epresentation [via first the designative ostensive] . . . creates a set of cultural realities that contrast with natural realities." (74) Though it may be useful to think of indicative ostensives as preceding the designative ones, the key difference is not a temporal, but a functional one. (75) We might say that the scope of the indicative ostensive, in simply naming some real world object (thereby transfiguring reality), is essentially a passive gesture. The designative ostensive, on the other hand, in seeking to represent an appurtenance of culture that exists solely in the imagination subsequently *transforms* reality; it is entirely active. Interpreting the gesture of marriage to its conclusion requires verifying its validity by analyzing it (and subsequent utterances) against our thematic understanding of the scene itself. Austin, only willing to grant the scene the power to make such a gesture "felicitous," is himself undermining the pragmatic function of ritual as secondary to that of the first indicative ostensive, trying desperately to assign a value of truth to the designative (we might say, from an originary standpoint) that binds it to natural rather than cultural realities. The subsequent philosophical implication, however, is a denial of culture, what Cavell calls an "avoidance" of the passional side of speech.

Positing Cavell's passive/active dichotomy against Gans's indicative/designative one, we can make clear the anthropological origins of Cavell's disappointment with Austin. Gans himself notes that "it is an all too typical mistake of our enlightened age to suppose that, once . . . rituals have been appropriately secularized, we are at liberty to understand them without reference to their religious origins." (76) Where Cavell appeals to a greater emphasis on passions, Gans, analogously, champions the "religious" side of speech.

What makes the indicative act immediately understandable to philosophers, whereas the consecrating designative retains a residue of mystery, is that the first, but not the second, function of the ostensive appears reconcilable with the metaphysical, deanthropologized version of the scene of representation that philosophy has inhabited since Plato. (77) Language does not act merely as a passive descriptor of reality, but rather, perhaps more often than not, wholly *transforms* our surrounding realities. The theoretical endgame for philosophers such as Austin comes in trying to occupy a "deanthropologized" zone of speech criticism, where everything we *do* (including speech) correlates to objects in reality. But to relegate strong principles of truth/falsity to the indicative and seemingly weaker ones of felicity/infelicity to the designative is to set up a dissymmetry in language that undercuts the importance of language as a mechanism that acts to defer human

desire first, and only secondly as a means of naming objects (or actions) in the real world.

From a pragmatic standpoint, this first ostensive designation, anterior to the category of “truth value,” is more indubitably true than any succeeding utterance, which could no longer be made to bear the burden of permitting humanity’s very existence.<sup>(78)</sup> Gans further reminds us that “truth requires declarative sentences.”<sup>(79)</sup> In the hypothetical scene, the first “fictional” declarative results not from the speaker’s disingenuousness, but rather, in his attempt to defer the originary desire of the previous speaker’s utterance of the ostensive away from the scene. That is, Speaker A utters the first ostensive sign away from the scene not as a means of making significant that which exists before him, but rather, in anticipation that his utterance will “realize in the world the content of the imaginary scene,”<sup>(80)</sup>—that which he, and the listener he is addressing, have already agreed upon as being significant. His utterance is now an imperative command, as opposed to a designative ostensive. Speaker B, knowing that the simple utterance of, say, “Hammer!” will not guarantee its actualization, responds in kind, with a predicative attachment:

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The interlocutor becomes aware that there is no hammer available. He notes, in other words, the noncorrespondence between the reality before him and the desired presence expressed by the imperative. Yet the speaker’s words require him to produce the hammer nonetheless; he cannot merely ignore the imperative in the same way that he might have ignored an inappropriate ostensive. Instead, he must attempt to communicate the absence of the hammer to his interlocutor, who might otherwise be inclined to take drastic measures. When the locutee of the imperative responds with “Hammer-no,” the noncorrespondence becomes itself the object of an utterance. One must, to understand this utterance, imagine a hammer, but imagine it as absent, that is, as present in an imaginary scene but not in reality.<sup>(81)</sup> Truth, as the correspondence of the ostensive to reality, can only arise once we have had the opportunity to consider the noncorrespondence of an ostensive utterance away from the scene (as an imperative command)—that is, once we have had the opportunity to consider its falsity in the form of the first declarative sentence, uttered “not for the purpose of deliberately misleading its hearer”<sup>(82)</sup>; rather, “the declarative model is in principle verifiable, although only after a delay that may be of help to its speaker.”<sup>(83)</sup> The predicative attachment introduces into the cosmos an element of temporality, whereby an utterance no longer conforms to an immediately present reality, but only to a possible reality that may or may not be verified in time: “Fiction can only arise when the intermediate stage of predication has been inserted between the imaginary construction of the

linguistic referent and its worldly verification.”(84) Temporality, then, has everything to do with truth, and is first established communally with the onset of narrativity. Austin’s outlining of his performative conditions, however, is an attempt to detemporalize language that we may ascertain a truth value much more in line with the pragmatic function of the first indicative ostensive—that is, as a passive descriptor of real world phenomena.(85) Yet fiction can only occur when the interim between utterance and real world verification is *delayed*. Austin seeks to end this delay by articulating his conditions of the successful functioning of the performative *at the outset*. But without this delay, the idea of the performative as being “untrue,” or even “infelicitous” is meaningless; yet we know that performatives can be uttered nonsensically (or, more precisely, infelicitously). Hence, performatives are beyond the scope of the indicative and instead, placed in the category of the designative—as appurtenances of culture rather than descriptors of reality—to be executed and verified *in time*. Holding performatives up to seemingly static conditions that mark their felicity/infelicity, or truth/falsity, or what have you, is misleading. These conditions presuppose the static existence of something that needs be described, rather than something that, in order to be “true,” needs be verified within a scene of representation.

But what if an utterance is made less in the hope of reaffirming the existence of the scene and more in the hope of expressing desire—unbeknownst to the speaker (or anyone else)? To hold such an utterance up to performative (or what have you) conditions, then, would be to deny the speaker’s intent. With that in mind, let us look at what Cavell adds to Austin, by outlining first the conditions for what Cavell calls the successful functioning of the “passionate utterance,”(86) a series analogous to Austin’s conditions for the successful functioning of the performative:

*Austin’s Illocutionary Condition 1:* There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect . . . to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.*Analogous Perlocutionary Condition 1:* There is no accepted conventional procedure and effect [what Cavell later calls “the absence of ritual assurance”(87)]. The speaker is on his or her own to create the desired effect . . .

*Austin’s Illoc 2:* The particular persons and circumstances must be appropriate for the invocation of the procedure.

*Analogous Perloc 2a:* (In the absence of an accepted conventional procedure, there are no antecedently specified persons. Appropriateness is to be decided in each case; it is at issue in each. I am not invoking a procedure but inviting an exchange. Hence:) I must *declare* myself (explicitly or implicitly) *to have standing* with you (be appropriate) in the given case.

*Analogous Perloc 2b*: I therewith *single you out* (as appropriate) in the given case.

*Austin's Illoc 3 (together with Illoc 4)*: The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

*Austin's Illoc 4*: Completely.

(Illoc 3 and 4 have no analogues for perlocutionary acts, there being no antecedent procedure in effect.)

*Austin's Illoc 5 (together with Illoc 6)*: Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves and further

*Austin's Illoc 6*: Must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.

(The setting or staging of my perlocutionary invocation, or provocation, or confrontation, backed by no conventional procedure, is grounded in my being *moved* to speak, hence to speak in, or out of, passion, whose capacities for lucidity and opacity leave the genuineness of motive always vulnerable to criticism. With that in mind:)

*Analogous Perloc 5a*: In speaking from my passion I must actually be suffering the passion (evincing, expressing, not to say displaying it—though this may go undeciphered, perhaps willfully, by the other), in order rightfully to

*Analogous Perloc 5b*: Demand from you a response *in kind*, one you are in turn *moved* to offer, and moreover

*Analogous Perloc 6*: Now. [\(88\)](#)

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By “inviting an exchange,” rather than “invoking procedure,” Cavell is temporalizing a project that Austin otherwise sought to fixate—that is, he is inviting us to imagine the noncorrespondence of passion with, well, anything preceding it, in the real world or otherwise. Though procedures as well as exchanges occur in time, in the former case, “[t]he procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and . . . completely.” Correspondence of the performative utterance to reality can be achieved through later verification. The temporal project has an end. However, in the case of passionate exchange, no prior means of verification exist. Indeed, Cavell notes that the “appropriateness” of the passionate “is to be decided in each case,” and is “at issue” in each case. Where the performative functions successfully



against certain conventional ritual, the passionate is such simply because it occurs away from ritual convention altogether. We might say that the “lie” (or infelicity) of convention has been exposed when the speaker makes a passionate demand: a “lie” that can only be overturned by the (metaphysical) reality of desire confirmed—confirmed that is, by a response, in kind, on the part of the listener. We might further say that the passionate exchange hearkens back to a pre-declarative originary exchange that seeks out significance *away from the scene altogether* rather than verification within an established scene of representation and/or against accepted natural realities.<sup>(89)</sup> We might also say: *a passionate utterance wants to become a designative one*—to have its antecedent affect signified and eventually verified within a scene, though any ritual means of doing so are lacking. The *passionate utterance*, then, is much more in line with the pragmatic function of the indicative ostensive and as such, is atemporal. Where Austin sought to fixate a temporal element in speech by giving us the criteria against which to judge the successful functioning of the performative: Cavell understands that because the passionate exchange requires immediate signification of the speaker’s desire rather than later verification of its truth, such utterances are, at heart, atemporal. The speaker demands a response from his locuttee that she is necessarily not instructed, but *moved* to offer, and furthermore (thus quashing the temporal), *now*. Austin denies temporality for the sake of verification where Cavell embraces atemporality for the sake of signification. Austin’s theoretical action is designed to reclaim the power of the passive descriptor in language while Cavell’s insistence of some measure of theoretical passivity is designed to assert the power of desire in causing action.

## **Sartre and Moral Responsibility**

Cavell’s passionate utterance exacts a greater ethical rather than moral burden on the individual speaker; the passionate exists not in the realm of his/her action, but in that of his/her passive contemplation. Indeed, the speaker is on “his or her own to create the desired effect.” The “desired effect” acts to legitimize the antecedent affect; its function is not one of description but of acknowledgement, of making significant (as opposed to real) the passions of the speaker. Indeed, because our passions exist in the mind only, what we are forced to consider now is a moral responsibility tied to ethical criteria necessarily unseen or unperceived in the physical sense—yet not so in the metaphysical sense.

The absurdity of such a proposition, however, is apparent in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly, his short paper on “Existentialism.” Where Cavell expressed a disappointment with the “skimping” by Austin of the passions, let me here express a similar misgiving—that is, with Sartre’s denial of passion altogether: “The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand

passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion.”(90) So vociferous is Sartre in his condemnation of passivity that even one whom we might consider a coward cannot escape the burden of responsibility *for his own cowardice*. “[T]he existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. He is not like that on account of a cowardly heart or lungs or cerebrum, he has not become like that through his physiological organism; he is like that because he has made himself into cowardly actions.”(91) The idea of an individual acting cowardly, but in *ignorance of his cowardice*, is a notion entirely foreign to Sartre’s version of responsibility. Indeed, “man himself interprets the sign as he chooses,”(92) an interpretation, to be sure, that can only be made manifest via action, for “what produces cowardice is the act of giving up or giving way; and a temperament is not an action.”(93) Such responsibility, Sartre notes, is cause for anguish:

First, what do we mean by anguish? The existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. His meaning is as follows: When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.(94) In this case, the significance of the sign is guaranteed first of all in the mind of the speaker, who seeks not acknowledgment from an Other, but verification against Kant’s categorical imperative. The burden of responsibility is in the speaker’s actions, but not his thought—for only *his* action can redeem his thought. With Cavell’s passionate utterance, on the other hand, the burden of responsibility does not end merely with the speaker’s utterance, but with the subsequent response/gesture of the locutee. Of course, Cavell, like Sartre, places the entire burden on the individual speaker when he says that “the speaker is on his or her own to create the desired effect.” With Sartre, the speaker’s action belies his own interpretation of the sign; in Cavell’s case, the locutee’s interpretation of the speaker’s desire belies the speaker’s passivity. In the former case, the speaker takes on the burden of the responsibility for his own interpretation of the sign. In the latter, the speaker demands to be interpreted by his locutee. With whom does the greater ethical burden lay—speaker or addressee?

The problem with Kant’s categorical imperative is that, like Austin after him, Kant seeks to end worldly delay by beginning with strong deductive principles which will *guarantee* future verification; anything that cannot be verified, from a moral standpoint at least, becomes morally unsound. The individual is free to interpret the sign in his own image, but that image is necessarily projected onto the world at large. The gradient flows in the opposite direction in the case of the passionate exchange. The surrounding reality projects an image onto the individual, perhaps

moves him. Yet in order to be affected by the world in the way his passions are suggesting, it is imperative that he get an Other to acknowledge, that is, make significant, that to which he seeks to grant central status:

In the case of performative utterance, failures to identify the correct procedures are characteristically reparable: the pursuer should not have undertaken to marry us, but here is the captain; you may successfully refuse to acknowledge that you had seriously accepted the offer of a bet beyond your means, but it had better not happen again . . . Our future is at issue, but the way back, or forward, is not lost. Whereas failure to have singled you out appropriately in passionate utterance characteristically puts the future of our relationship, as part of my sense of my identity, or of my existence, more radically at stake.[\(95\)](#)<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps if desire is unseen, or unperceivable, it is unfair to load any sort of burden, ethical or moral, upon a locutee. Yet because we are talking about an exchange occurring at a pre-declarative stage, whereby both parties are equally in the dark in terms of verification, the question of who carries what sort of ethical burden is pertinent. I seek not to answer this question here, but merely to raise its relevance when thinking about ethical/moral responsibility. If transcendence is based on the knowledge of the ritual constraints we operate under, in both speech and action, then the perlocutionary ramifications of speech are relevant because “to know what perlocutionary acts I am *liable* for ‘bringing off’ is part of knowing what I am doing and saying, or am capable of knowing and saying”[\(96\)](#)—a liability, we might say, entirely ethical and dependent, perhaps, on our prior knowledge and exploitation of cultural rather than natural realities.

If the ‘truth’ of the ethical is one based not on verification but acknowledgment (i.e., signification), then how far are we committed to entertain, say, a passionate demand that we would otherwise find wholly out of line with our own moral sensibilities or even, with accepted empirical verification?—remember, the passionate is beyond the realm of verification—or, at the very least, *the possibility* of verification is at issue. Sartre would respond by saying that to deny oneself is the greatest moral crime. Yet to cling tenaciously to the categorical imperative is, essentially, to deny Others. Thus the burden of the ethical is primarily a negotiation, with an active assertion of self and the denial of an Other on one end (perhaps a hubristic act), against the complete passive acceptance of an Other and the denial of self at the other, with the existences (significances) of both the speaker and addressee at stake.

## Conclusion

In the spirit of Benjamin’s lament, what we seek, intuitively perhaps, is a strong

central referent upon which we can establish meaningful narrative able to successfully mediate our ritual doings. The originary textual moment, existing anterior to any sort of thematic speculation, was wholly moral, imposing a central tyranny upon the first members of the human community at the periphery. It was this tyranny that Benjamin's storyteller was able to exploit; not for the sake of tyrannizing the community per se, but for the sake of moving them to perform the customary rituals necessary for their inclusion into society at large. Such rituals were concerned less with "truth" than with instilling in the citizenry an appreciation of the sacred for the sake of communal survival. This *movement*, rather than instruction, to action, was, for Benjamin, an essential element of his version of *experience*; and while such rituals were temporal (i.e., they had a beginning and an end), they were designed primarily to remind members of the human community of the first atemporal textual moment of aborted appetite. Now, our move towards desacralization has come full circle, so to speak, with the postmodern realization "that narratives are first of all texts," [\(97\)](#) that the temporal is first of all atemporal. Passive contemplation of active ritual has led us to believe that somehow, all cultural narratives are delusional. Thus we seek refuge not by indulging in the temporal retellings/reminders of the first textual moment; we deny such "cultural" realities and place our faith in narratives (such as Austin's conditions) that play up "natural" ones instead. Yet where Gans and Cavell embrace an element of atemporality in speech, Austin's "narrative" attempts to detemporalize language. That is, Austin attempts to have a concept of "truth" and atemporality *simultaneously*. Gans, in reminding us that "truth requires declarative sentences," understands that any statement that seeks verification can only do so in (with) time. To downplay temporality, then, as a vital factor in describing what is "real," (as Austin desperately tries to do) is to undermine the fact that that which seeks verification can only gain verification within a scene of representation over time. To "detemporalize" language is to try to hold declarative utterances accountable to natural rather than cultural realities that exist atemporally. Yet *any* declarative sentence (performative or otherwise) must be held accountable to culture—as it can only be verified within a scene of representation.

However, an atemporal element in language *can* exist. But to atemporalize language would be to understand that significance is the issue, not verification. This is certainly the case with the indicative ostensive. The passionate, rather than natural, realities are what drive such a pre-declarative utterance; passions *move* an individual to chose an event/occurrence in his/her surroundings as *significant* (rather than 'true') in the first place. What he/she seeks afterwards is acknowledgement by an Other of his/her passions. Because the idea is to bring that which exists outside of a scene of representation *into* existence, we must now consider the ethical burden of acknowledgement on the part of a listener who is *moved* to speak in reaction to the speaker's passionate utterance. (What, for

example, might be the consequences of the listener's silence?) What is at stake is the sacred, a sacred that—increasingly, it seems—can exist only in a minimal scene of acknowledgment consisting of two people. Van Oort's dictum is reversed: rather than narrative integrating the individual into the active ritual life of the community, esthetic/ethical contemplation of the passions seems to necessitate the creation of a scene when it proves convenient for the individual(s) to do so. The move away from the sacred, from the moral to the ethical, from activity to passivity, has placed a greater burden on speech; faced with an empty centre, we now look to speech to somehow establish the speaker's passive desire (the passionate utterance) and also, whatever subsequent moral action (acknowledgement) is required on the part of the listener. The goal, nonetheless, is still to create a narrative from our textual moment—to have the sacred *move* an Other to *action*. The passionate utterance (and its successful acknowledgement) may be the only means we now have of reclaiming the sacred in our lives—through the active and conscious construction of a “deluded” narrative (scene) by two people.

The relation of significance, then, to natural rather than cultural realities is pertinent. Signification is not an attempt to describe “what is” absolutely in the real world, but rather, to describe a portion of “what is” as being significant. Nor does “making significant” by any means exhaust the realm of “what is” or “what exists” in the “natural world.” Rather, to make significant is to designate something in terms of culture. Hence our relation to the natural—along with the conventional—world only makes sense in relation to culture. Our description of the atemporal passionate utterance only makes sense when we talk about the subsequent narrative acknowledgement that occurs in time and makes (or attempts to make) the first atemporal indicative ostensive a temporal designative one. Activity only makes sense out of passivity. A call to passion is, essentially, a call to action.

Though we may perform all sorts of actions nowadays, lacking a sacred centre, none of these acts will allow us to reclaim Benjaminian experience as mediated by a strong central referent. Our actions now are the result of passive speculation of what is “true” rather than of what is significant/sacred (and activity, we might say—of the type we are *moved* to offer, of the type we seek to reclaim—is dependent on the sacred, of *making* (or, of having had made) significant). Although we began with the first aborted gesture, which was atemporal and textual, the succeeding narrativity was predicated on truth statements that could be verified in time; our ritual acts had a beginning and an end. But now, mired within a postmodern ethical reality of passivity, how do we go about reclaiming action? How do we find the sacred? No doubt the realm of the sacred has shrunk; but the originary narrative

does not quash the category of the sacred, but makes us more aware of our passions as they exist in relation to an empty centre. Drowning now in the ethical-rather than the moral-moment, it becomes difficult to act without feeling some measure of “deconstructive” dread. By looking to “conditions” as a means of guiding us through the postmodern ethical morass, critics like Austin seek to whittle down the ambiguity behind speech by describing the conditions of its successful functioning; this, however, is essentially an exercise in describing the nature of the scene of representation itself—that is, of constructing a narrative capable of describing accurately how/why certain utterances work the way they do. Austin’s narrative does not make the utterances any more “true” or “untrue.” He simply describes the cultural realities behind their successful functioning—trying desperately to pass them off as natural ones.

Austin’s theoretical action is designed to pacify speech by holding our utterances accountable to “truth” and “verification.” Yet any “truth” must be verified in time. What Cavell raises in response to Austin is the existence of atemporal passion (passivity), which, according to Gans, is necessarily in the realm of the pre-declarative (i.e., the ostensive); temporal performance (action) is in that of the designative. Austin erroneously tries to place performative action, somehow, in the realm of the pre-declarative—in an atemporal and deanthropologized scene of representation where language acts primarily as a passive descriptor of what “there is,” and only secondarily as a means of expressing desire.

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## Notes

1. His emphasis; see Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976), 268. [\(back\)](#)
2. See Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), 45. [\(back\)](#)
3. See Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s essay, “Ethics,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 397. [\(back\)](#)
4. See Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 2005), 157. [\(back\)](#)
5. Ibid., 5. [\(back\)](#)
6. See Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken,



1968), 83. [\(back\)](#)

7. Ibid., 83-84 [\(back\)](#)

8. Ibid., 89. [\(back\)](#)

9. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

10. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

11. Ibid., 84. [\(back\)](#)

12. Ibid., 89. [\(back\)](#)

13. Ibid., 84. [\(back\)](#)

14. Ibid., 87. [\(back\)](#)

15. Ibid., 86. [\(back\)](#)

16. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

17. Ibid., 83. [\(back\)](#)

18. Gans, 47. [\(back\)](#)

19. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1977). [\(back\)](#)

20. His emphasis; Gans, 8-9. [\(back\)](#)

21. Ibid., 2. Gans has it that the alpha-beta pecking order, which serves to defer violence in the animal kingdom, is beyond the evolutionary (physical) realities of the protohuman. Even the strongest Alpha-male *within* the species cannot hope to challenge another Alpha-male from without. Indeed, what distinguishes the protohuman from other animals, and abets in his survival, is his propensity to engage in mimesis. For Gans, then, what allowed man to make the leap to consciousness is precisely his mimetic faculty: “[T]he protohuman was a primate that had become, so to speak, too mimetic to remain an animal” (8). Mimesis, then, is both man’s best hope for survival and his principal threat of extinction—the bane of his existence, if you will. [\(back\)](#)

22. For a complete discussion of ritual on the originary scene, see Chapter 5 of *Originary Thinking* entitled, “The Origin of Fiction,” pp. 86-99. [\(back\)](#)

23. His emphasis; see Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 131. [\(back\)](#)

24. His emphasis; see Richard van Oort, "The Idea of the Modern." *New Literary History* 37.2 (2006), 324. Also: Nicholas Lobkowitz reminds us that the Greek word for theory (*θεωδία*) also means "spectator at games." See Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept From Aristotle to Marx* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 6. [\(back\)](#)

25. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

26. Nowadays, we do not *experience* information, for example, as participants. Empiricism, it could be argued, necessitates that we are all, first and foremost, spectators. [\(back\)](#)

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27. van Oort, 324. [\(back\)](#)

28. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

29. Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 22. [\(back\)](#)

30. My emphasis; Benjamin, "Storyteller," 87. [\(back\)](#)

31. My emphasis; see Chapter 12 of *Originary Thinking*, entitled "The Postmodern Esthetic," pp. 207-219. [\(back\)](#)

32. Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 102. [\(back\)](#)

33. Gans notes a distinction between narrative which exists at the periphery only, and that which emerges from the centre: "In order that the [peripheral] temporal movement be reestablished as narrative [after the first aborted gesture of appropriation], the atemporality of the sign must be transcended through the creation of a new temporality that emerges not from the human periphery but from the sacred *center*" (my emphasis; Ibid., 105). This, for Gans, is the birth of textuality. [\(back\)](#)

34. Ibid., 105. [\(back\)](#)

35. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

36. Ibid., 104. One could reasonably argue that because consciousness has yet to materialize in the cosmos, the concept of time, at this stage, is premature.

Certainly, Gans is not talking about a time that can be, or is, *perceived*. The sense in which Gans subjects the protohuman to a “presignifying temporality” is done in the same spirit one would go about describing the biological happenings of any animal. But Gans also notes that “[t]he lesson of the scene is that the precultural narrativity of the gesture can only be transformed into *true narrative* once it has been abolished and transcended through the detemporalization of the sign” (my emphasis, 105). In either case, certainly, we are applying a concept of temporality *ipso facto*. This does little to discredit the veracity of Gans’s hypothesis, which is, to be sure, a hypothesis after all. [\(back\)](#)

37. Ibid., 106. [\(back\)](#)

38. Ibid., 105. [\(back\)](#)

39. Ibid., 113. [\(back\)](#)

40. Ibid., 109. [\(back\)](#)

41. More thoroughly: “The sign is always in the first place a text to be interpreted as a narrative. Language in itself is not narration. To consider it as such is the ‘innocent’ error of metaphysics. No doubt discourse generally follows a narrative order: it tells a story. But this temporal order would be inconceivable without the prior deferral of the prehuman temporal order in the originary event. The narrative sequence that is first reproduced in ritual and then in (mature) language is an attempt to fill the gap between the suspended temporality of signification and practical time, to naturalize language, the original function of which was to defer appetite, by transforming it into a model for appetitively goal-directed activity. This primal narrative succeeds only because we understand language from the beginning as text to interpret; our experience of language always seeks to transcend the frustration of the aborted prehuman project of appropriation. The text, which is the abolition of prehuman temporality, becomes the narrative model of human temporality” (108). [\(back\)](#)

42. Ibid., 112. You may argue here that by asserting, simultaneously, an inevitable process of desacralization *and* an anthropological necessity for narrative, generative anthropology has hung us out to dry—for if narrative only makes sense on the basis of the first textual moment, narrative is necessarily on a path to its own destruction in telling a tale of desacralization. Yet Gans is brave enough to accept, and think through, the full responsibilities of originary thinking. For what is originary analysis if not “essentially narrative” (10)! Indeed, by posing generative anthropology as a “minimal ethic” (47), Gans seeks not to indulge in human diversity, but rather, to isolate a common and fundamental anthropology (necessarily narrative). In this way, GA is essentially reductive (46). “The role of

generative anthropology is to provide an opening through which human historical experience can enter the anthropological sphere of the originary event. We must provide not a rewriting of history itself but a basis for dialogue between the different moments of history, a dialogue mediated by our common human experience of origin" (21). [\(back\)](#)

43. Ritual action, of course, may very well be a conflation of means and ends (i.e. experience as doing, and not the result of doing). [\(back\)](#)

44. Benjamin, "Storyteller," 87. [\(back\)](#)

45. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

46. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

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47. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

48. Ibid., 89-90. [\(back\)](#)

49. Ibid., 90. [\(back\)](#)

50. Ibid., 87. [\(back\)](#)

51. In this regard, according to Martin Jay, anyhow, Benjamin is optimistic: "The resulting poverty of experience, Benjamin warned, meant a new variety of barbarism, which involves much more than the individual; it suggests as well the exhaustion of culture itself. / But where there is such a collapse, Benjamin defiantly if somewhat desperately asserted, there is also a new opportunity. 'For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right.'" See Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 330-31. [\(back\)](#)

52. His emphasis; Cavell, *Philosophy*, 169. [\(back\)](#)

53. Austin qtd. in Cavell, *Philosophy*, 170. [\(back\)](#)

54. Ibid., 158 [\(back\)](#)

55. Ibid., 159. [\(back\)](#)

56. Ibid., 158. [\(back\)](#)

57. Ibid., 159. [\(back\)](#)

58. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

59. Ibid., 158. [\(back\)](#)

60. Ibid., 159. [\(back\)](#)

61. Ibid., 163. [\(back\)](#)

62. Ibid., 159. [\(back\)](#)

63. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

64. His italics; Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 64. [\(back\)](#)

65. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

66. Ibid., 65, 66. [\(back\)](#)

67. My emphasis; Ibid., 66. [\(back\)](#)

68. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

69. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

70. Even the first declarative sentence, uttered in the absence of real-world object, does not originate in the service of falsity, but rather, in the anticipation that such an utterance will lead to the reproduction of the worldly object away from the scene. "What is re-presented by the scenic imagination is endowed with significance, and for that very reason, transfigured. In the first moment of this transfiguration, when the only intelligible difference is that between center and periphery, no distinction can be made between truth and fiction." See Chapter 5 of *Originary Thinking* entitled "The Origin of Fiction," pp. 86-99. [\(back\)](#)

71. Ibid., 66. [\(back\)](#)

72. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

73. Ibid., 66-67. [\(back\)](#)

74. Ibid. 67. [\(back\)](#)

75. Indeed, in the case of indication, survival is not necessarily at stake, whereas with the first designative sign, survival is *necessarily* at stake. The temporal element occurring with the utterance of the designative ostensive *away from the scene* introduces an element of temporality, which, to be sure, must be deferred. Yet the stakes of this sort of deferral are far less grave than of the sort occurring within the eternal present of the ritual scene: "For Heidegger, a human being conscious of death is alone with time, the bringer of death; hence Heidegger makes time the primary object of our resentment. But the source of individuality is the communal locus of the originary event. If the human being is the animal for which death is significant, this is because human death is experienced not as the effect of the impersonal natural force of time, but as the potential result of the hostile actions of fellow humans." Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 19. [\(back\)](#)

76. Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 68. [\(back\)](#)

77. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

78. Ibid., 87. You may argue that we are not here talking about the designative, but the indicative. Yet the "first ostensive *designation*" (rather than *indication*) is such because it is necessarily accepted by the community at large; the first designation depends on a scene of representation that cannot, at this point, be questioned in terms of truth value; this is not necessarily the case with the indicative. [\(back\)](#)

79. Ibid. [\(back\)](#)

80. Ibid., 88. [\(back\)](#)

81. Ibid., 89-90. [\(back\)](#)

82. Ibid., 88. [\(back\)](#)

83. Ibid., 88. [\(back\)](#)

84. Ibid., 87. [\(back\)](#)

85. Lining up Gans's version of truth with Austin's, we are at an impasse. Gans's version has the first indicative ostensive "anterior" to the category of truth value, and requires "declarative sentences." Such sentences, i.e., in the form of the designative, for Austin, can only be "felicitous" at best. Gans has truth dependent on the scene of representation while Austin seeks to transcend it—a hubristic act, certainly, in that everything we know about the world arises from our metaphysical quest to make significant, rather than a metaphysical quest designed to hold speech accountable to all that there "is." All that can be assigned a truth-value is



necessarily performative—that is, all utterances that can be qualified as “true” (in any meaningful way) operate within a scene of representation, under conditions that make them true. The “truth” of Gans’s originary narrative simply exploits the power of human intuition vis-à-vis narrativity and textuality; as a “fundamental anthropology,” it seeks out no real-world verification. See *Originary Thinking*, pp. 9-13. [\(back\)](#)

86. The passionate/perlocutionary distinction may only be one of degree—both are passive, both demand action (or speech) on the part of an Other. The goal of perlocutionary utterance is to make something happen in the real world: if I say, “It’s hot!” in order to get you to open the window, the ethical ramifications are low; only my homeostasis is at stake. Though the goal of the passionate utterance is virtually the same, the stakes are far graver: the burden of the passionate is not merely to make something happen, but also, to make myself exist. C.f.: “[I]llocutionary acts are bound up with effects; and these are all distinct from the producing of effects which is characteristic of the perlocutionary act.” See J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962), 117 (Lecture IX in particular). We might further say that the perlocutionary is concerned with producing effects, the passionate with producing (or making significant) affect. [\(back\)](#)

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87. Cavell, *Philosophy*, 189. [\(back\)](#)

88. His emphasis; *Ibid.*, 181-82. [\(back\)](#)

89. On the originary scene, for example, an individual is *moved* to make an utterance at the sight of fire, before the fire has been signified within the scene itself. [\(back\)](#)

90. Sartre, 3. [\(back\)](#)

91. *Ibid.*, 8. [\(back\)](#)

92. *Ibid.*, 6. [\(back\)](#)

93. *Ibid.*, 8. [\(back\)](#)

94. *Ibid.*, 3-4. [\(back\)](#)

95. Cavell, *Philosophy*, 184. [\(back\)](#)

96. His emphasis; *Ibid.*, 174. [\(back\)](#)

97. See Note 32. [\(back\)](#)

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