

The Esthetic, the Sacred, and Originary Modernity

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In a fairly recent *Chronicle of Love & Resentment* (326), "Return of the Sacred I-the Sacred and the Significant," Eric Gans focuses on the distinction between the "sacred" and the "significant": "the sacred cannot be reduced to the significant; if the two terms were synonymous, we would not need both." The sacred "reproduc[es] the configuration of the originary event in a more or less formalized manner as ritual"; meanwhile, "language, in contrast, is typically a one-on-one phenomenon; as a self-contained gesture that has renounced any role in worldly action, the linguistic sign has no minimal energy requirement." But the qualification, in a part of the passage referring to the sacred I omitted, that "The sacred *tends to* inhere in stable *religious* institutions" [emphasis on "tends to" mine], points to the possibility of a form of sacrality that need not inhere in ritual. Indeed, Gans concludes this *Chronicle* by presenting the significant less in contrast to the sacred than as a more minimal form of it:

From the institutional standpoint of ritual, this utterance [i.e., the Word of God] is constrained by the event as a whole, but from the formal standpoint of language, it is in principle a free act whose *meaning* is constrained by its situation in the event, so that the freedom to utter the sign outside its originary context does not entail the freedom to alter what it signifies. The sacred inheres in the "profane" use of language in the constraint of meaning that binds the sign independently of any ritual context. This minimal sacred inherent in the laws of language is too weak to support a god or a law of ritual sacrifice; it can guarantee only the most parsimonious of anthropologies. Here, the scare quotes around "profane" seem to suggest that the use of the term is metaphorical, which is to say this marked usage is straining against the constraints of the situation in the speech event; and, if it is not altering what it signifies, "profane" must be another word for "sacred," a euphemism which is necessary insofar as we associate the sacred exclusively with ritual. If we release the sacred from this association (if we change the situation), we can amplify the tension implicit in the use of "profane" so as to scrutinize what is directly below designated a "weak" sacrality, since the only measure of such weakness is that provided by the assumption of that very association. If we abandon that assumption, the strength of any

mode of sacrality must reside in the strength of the “will that opposes the participants’ desire to possess the central object” (*Chronicle* 326). And there is no reason why the strength of that will must depend upon the presence of ritual.

Rather than viewing the significant as an attenuated form of the sacred, we can re-frame the issue by attributing “significance” to the *sign* and sacrality to the *object*. Both sign and object are constituted in terms of their material and immaterial dimensions. My hypothesis here will be that we can construct a chiasmic relationship between sign and object, wherein the sign in its materiality points to the immaterial object while the sign in its immateriality renders the material object accessible. The material is what makes the sign a singular semblance; the immaterial is whatever makes it the “same” sign across its various uses. The more we attend to the sign’s distinctiveness and irreplaceability in a given scenic setting, the more its details appear dictated by the imitation of the repellent (immaterial) power of the object; the more we address it as iterable, the more we attend to the horizontal imitation of the users by each other and to their preparing (therefore) for the sparagmos of the (material) object. Gans, in *Signs of Paradox* points out that the “significance of the central object and its sacrality refer to different relationships: the object is sacred for resisting the gesture of appropriation, it is significant for demanding the gesture of representation” (107).⁽¹⁾ I am suggesting that the “demand” is made by the object as sacred and, even more, the “lineaments” of the sign are dictated by the central, sacred Being. Similarly, I am suggesting a slight modification in Gans’ observation that the “signified is the trace of the referent made by the absence of the sparagmos” (109). While Gans’ formulation would defer the arrival of the sign’s (immaterial) meaning until after the sparagmos, my own would suggest that the sparagmos itself only becomes possible due to the emergence of the immaterial signified: my reasoning here lies in the necessity that the sign must already be repeated on the originary scene and, as I will go on to suggest momentarily, this iteration of the sign should be seen as regulating the sparagmos as well.

On the originary scene, the sign is put forth by the first user; which it to say, when it is put forth it is not yet sign; it becomes a “little bit” more sign when it is imitated by the second and then third, and “more and more” all the way until the *n*th and final user. The use of quantitative terms here is inadequate but unavoidable and harmless as long as we recognize a threshold at which the sign is deliberately “enough” copied so as to take its “authority” from the newly immaterial object whose centrifugally repulsive force is now being imitated and conducted. The sign would become a recognizable material object in its own right once we could (and they did) conceivably distinguish between more and less effective iterations; and this material form would emerge simultaneously with the sacrality of the object. It is this recognizable, formed, sign that then facilitates a roughly equal division and consumption of the object; which is to say in its (the sign’s) unity, the recognizable sign provides a minimally abstract measure of divisibility allowing for an orderly consumption. We might think about this in terms of the members of the group repeating the sign in the course of consumption in both “defensive” and “aggressive” maneuvers aimed at

determining the roughly fair share. In this case, the iteration and, we must assume, refinement of the physical form of the sign is completed once it provides this measure and thereby regulates, as an abstract “rule,” the activity of the group; and this activity re-materializes the object by making it available for consumption. Insofar as the sign provides such an abstract rule (once we know how, and what it means to, act upon or “implement” it), the sign has thereby been immaterialized.

This formulation is meant to address a serious problem we confront when we pursue the implications of my claim that the presence of the sacred cannot be diminished in any society: in a post-ritual order, what, exactly, is the “central object”? The whole point of moving past the ritual order would have been to transcend the limitations imposed upon our ability to defer violence within traditional forms: even the slightest weakening of the efficacy of the ritual would pose a deadly threat insofar as ritual breakdown would be immediately followed by a rush to the center and a general conflagration. In a post-ritual order, there are many objects and they are distributed through the market in a decentralized manner; hence there is no center to converge upon; or, we have what Gans has called an “omni-centrism.” In that case, though, our own analysis becomes just as omni-centric. The value of the concept of omni-centrism is that we are attuned to the vast multiplicity of esthetic self-creations that defer violence in post-millennial culture; the limit of the concept is that ordinary thinking would logically have to concede that it is no more than another localized center, another form of self-creation. GA would dissolve, like Marxism presumably would have in a fully developed communist order, into the social order it has prophesied. Which would be fine, if such an order didn’t require—and if GA, as a thinking of the center, wasn’t uniquely qualified to offer—critical reflection capable of transcending the daily verdicts of the market.

I am willing to wager that such an order does require such reflection because unqualified omni-centrism would further mean that the participants in the market are incapable of defending it from those who would pool their individual resentments and would have none of the difficulties or compunctions of normal participants in organizing and directing their resentments against a single and clearly defined target—that target being the market itself, figured as a kind of central intelligence that unfairly distributes access to its products. I would suggest that this configuration is intrinsic not only to market society but also to the ordinary scene upon which, if we are to presuppose a first signifier, we must posit a last. This “last” user might be hypothesized as one or more who refused or did not have the chance to voluntarily accede to the emission of the sign, who submitted due to the combined force of the emergent community, to its imminent use, or as an automatic response to what appears to be the typical operation of the pre-human pecking order. For this subject, not only would the central object/intelligence appear to be an intrinsically unjust fraud, distributing benefits in accord with inscrutable and arbitrary norms, but also it would be more sharply perceived *as* intelligence, with each outcome seeming to be the result of self-interested calculation.

The anthropology of the “last” is that of *Othello’s* Iago: humans are indeed equal, but in their determination to turn the constitutive biases of the system in their favor. That is, Iago, as well, is liberated by the market system. For the last, the center is nothing more than the combined force of the community operating under the aegis of the sacred center (which both makes its hypocrisy more outrageous and make individual members easier to gull) constitutive of the community. The center, then, is nothing more than rationalizing, calculating intelligence. The center’s claims to legitimacy therefore mask a distributive logic which can most effectively be manipulated by those capable of unmasking and thereby appropriating that mode of intelligence. This form of resentment, while it is the source of evil, provides us with insight into the form actually taken by the intelligence of the center. Since the resentment of the last(s) introduces rivalries amongst the participants on the scene (any of whom, after all, could turn out to be last and hence to be tempted by the short-cuts made available to lastness), the conductivity of the intelligence of the center would then be a product of the need to counter every claim of bias and fraud with claims and arrangements demonstrating that the system works to gradually de-link “pre-existing conditions” from outcomes. The paradox here is that both the market and constitutional government derive their superiority from the absence of any requirement that most citizens transcend the specific scenes upon which they stand and measure themselves. But that derivation of superiority is possible only if some will represent the intelligence of the center as a coherent institutional logic articulating spontaneity and complexity. And it is no more clear that the system is equipped to produce as many of such “guarantors” as might be needed, than it is clear that the conditions prior to the emission of the originary sign “produced” the capacity to emit it.

The lasts, by themselves, could not threaten society, except at the margins. It is the alliance of the lasts with the products of the ongoing crisis in firstness in the post-Christian West that constitutes at least one, and the more aggressive, tendency constitutive of modernity. My argument here is that delinking the distinction between sacred and secular, on the one hand, and between sacred and profane, on the other, will provide us with greater analytical power in distinguishing between the different trends and possibilities within modernity. Rather than sacred and secular, I would propose we distinguish between the liturgical and the secular, as different modes of sacrality conferring upon either God or humans respectively the generative power constitutive of a given institution or practice. The profane, as distinguished from the sacred, then, are “outstanding” desires and resentments: that is to say, those desires and resentments that can be normalized, or that remain within the prevailing cultural categories. Forms of sacrality, or hallowed sites, whether liturgical or secular in origin and character, would be the islands of transcendence framing and channeling those desires and resentments.

Modernity emerges out of the crisis of the unified Christian world of the late medieval period, so it would be most economical to assume that modernity would best be understood to consist of overlapping revisions of the Christian revelation. The Christian revelation, in

Gans' account, is that anyone who insistently asserts and represents the universalization of the mode of reciprocity implicit in the Judaic revelation of "God as the declarative sentence" will thereby bring upon himself universal antagonism. Jesus's would be the sacrifice to end all sacrifices: insofar as we recognize our own complicity in the crucifixion we would recoil from our tendency to seek out scapegoats to account for social crises, thereby liberating our capacity to construct institutions which reinforce solidarity. While the maintenance of Christianity would seem to depend upon the willingness of some to step forward as martyrs, as representatives of Christ and as defenders of the faith, for most people it is enough to acknowledge the sacrifice only in ritualized forms. A Christian society, then, would not be one in which everyone takes up the cross and literally imitates Christ, but one in which the ever-present possibility of doing so is explicitly acknowledged and instances of actually doing so are honored and remembered.

Once the specific liturgical forms in which this acknowledgement is bound up can no longer defer the new forms of rivalry and violence attendant upon the emergence of increasingly independent political entities, two broad possibilities, I would suggest, present themselves. One would be to propose a sign positing a kind of "Church-Absolutist complex" as the source of conflict. All the forces coming together to initiate the modern world—the urban bourgeoisie, previously or potentially independent nations swallowed up by the early modern empires, freethinkers—would find their own internal differences minimized by such a sign pointing toward such a "complex" as the primary source of conflict. We now know even better than its creators did that the indictment of the absolutist monarch and the priest disseminating myths and lies as the twin villains against which the modern could define itself has had a staying power well beyond the life-span of that alliance: the Marxist notion of ideology as "false consciousness," still prevalent in more careful formulations on the Left, essentially defines political absolutism and religious delusion as the Other of the Truth possessed by the rationalist subject, defined, tautologically, as one who is free from and sees through such myths.

Rather than simply jettisoning the Christian event, though, this would-be sceneless Enlightenment produces a parody of it: the founding, traumatic event of the anti-scenic Enlightenment is the martyrdom of that very rationalist subject, whose sacrifice is the central item on the indictment issued against the Church-Absolutist complex. We can trace a line of events, from Galileo's persecution to the Inquisition and up until "McCarthyism," which all share, in the imaginary of the potential victims at any rate, the same essential structure: freethinkers hunted down as heretics in the name of "order" but in fact serving as scapegoats frightening the masses in order to resolve some internal crisis on terms favorable to the powers that be. To put it in contemporary terms (terms, of course, largely shaped by such narratives), in recognizing our desire to lynch the freethinker, we accept our complicity in unjust hierarchies and outmoded mythologies. The Christian account sees such complicity as constitutive and beyond our power to eliminate within history. For the desacralizing Enlightenment, the martyrdom of the freethinker calls upon us to eliminate

such structures once and for all; but by virtue of that call for elimination, it in fact entrenches such structures permanently because, as I just suggested, defining one's own access to truth in terms of the Other's distance from it presents an ever receding horizon. If my analysis here is correct, it would dramatically reduce the difference between the radical Enlightenment and the Romanticism invented by Rousseau, which also involves a kind of inverted version of the Christian scene in the sacrifice of the marginal individual by "society."

The other possible remaking of the Christian scene would involve a retrieval of an Old Testament-inspired "political Hebraism": a form of republicanism defined territorially and institutionally as a way of situating a people within a series of historical trials, each of which requires a return to the founding, prompting a new birth of freedom articulated in a restored covenant. The supplementation of the New with the Old Testament paradoxically allows Christianity to remain at the center of the social order precisely by not relying upon a direct imitation *qua* parodic subversion of the Christian event. In other words, without the burden of anti-Christian resentment, the general possibility of new institutional forms consecrated in events dedicated to freedom can be abstracted from the specific liturgical form in which such a possibility has been preserved and consequently applied to all activity, political, artistic, scientific, and so on. Instead of reinventing and parodying the crucifixion, a republican Enlightenment continues to bear witness to the singularity of the Christian revelation by creating the position of the guarantor who protects potential martyrs and tries to make such martyrdom unnecessary precisely by remaining alive to the possibility that it might take place anywhere, anytime, and in unanticipated forms, supplementing without subverting the Christian model. Inventing, refining and defending rules aimed at minimizing scapegoating would provide the opening for free exchange, free speech, free movement and private property at the center of the republican Enlightenment. We could write the history of modernity as that of the tension between these two forms, from the struggles of the English and Dutch against the Spanish Empire, to the British struggle for New World dominance over the French, to the American founding, up through the struggle against the 20th century totalitarianisms and the presence of today's divergent paths separating Europe and America.

This latter, originary, modernity allows for the proliferation of spaces where firstness, in forms of freedom that can then be packaged and distributed in the marketplace, is possible; while it is precisely such spaces that victimary discourses, made up of the combination and collectivization of Romanticism and radical Enlightenment, take to be ever more cleverly disguised, powerful and insidious forms of scapegoating. Originary modernity can defend the sacred center or what I have called here the intelligence of the center insofar as it takes that intelligence to be bound up in institutions—the global market and nationally based constitutional self-government—that can be modified and re-shaped as needed to account for new rivalries and resentments. But it is precisely this adaptability and flexibility that accelerates the victimary stampede.

If what most enrages, though, is precisely the impersonal workings of the “machinery” of the marketplace and government—because it is this impersonality that is taken as a threat to the integrity of the freethinker, the uniqueness of the romantic subject, which is to say, seen as a mere front perpetrating fraud upon the “lasts”—the affirmation of articulations of hallowed sites provides us with a response to the rage. Inherited from Christianity and Judaism, embedded in the marketplace and constitutional government alike, the sacrality becomes, through its extension beyond its liturgical origins, that of the individual, understand as a distinctive array of signs which can never exhaust that to which it refers. That is how we take ourselves, as self-representing individuals; and that is how we treat and devise institutions so as to address others, placing faith in the inexhaustibility of even the most apparently “conformist,” resentful or thoughtless individual, conferring upon them a sacrality which in turn increases the likelihood that they will demonstrate further signs of it. Our defense of any articulation of hallowed sites ultimately leads us to re-trace the process of minimization through which the Christian and Jewish revelations could be resituated on terms both irreducible to those revelations and capable of preparing us for new ones; conversely, even the most far flung or, for that matter, deliberately blasphemous or “pagan” sites of resistant self-fashioning could be shown to be unintelligible without the groundwork laid by those prior transformative revelations.

This secular sacrality ensures that we can transcend any possible disjunction between the sacred and the esthetic, and render unnecessary any narrative that would see the latter as coming to displace the former. If the public rituals affirming national faith and the valorization of open-ended exchange between producers and consumers are consecrations of liberty, then liberal democracy and all its attachments—free inquiry in the university, free association in the streets and on-line, freedom for a diversity of faiths, and so on—are all stances one converts to, every bit as much as one converts to Roman Catholicism or Islam. The response to anti-Western, anti-semitic victimary movements would then be what I would call “evangelicism,” which involves affirming and entering the global market in faiths and acting as a screen for the frustrated desire of the Other, demonstrating in one’s own person the internality of the obstacles to that desire, and presenting poles of mimetic attraction upon scenes representing its transcendence.

Meanwhile, insofar as the sacrality we honor no longer depends upon its being protected from “secularizing” influences, it no longer needs to be distanced from the esthetic, which can in turn be seen as essential to the conversion strategies of evangelicism. The complement of conversion is simply “seduction,” which offers up access to an object, predicated upon the desiring subject’s demonstrating mastery of the proper rules of deferral; an object, moreover, like all objects of desire, which undergoes transformation in its being pursued and coming into possession. Insofar as the transformation results from the contribution made by this very interaction to the desired object, the object is thereby enhanced rather than subtracted from—the object, in fact, turns out to be one’s own conversion, one’s occupation of the admired place and one’s consequent realization and

willing acceptance that rather than providing closer access to the center, the object “possessed” intensifies one’s responsibility to demonstrate that such access is illusory and must remain so. In such a space, the last can be first and the first last. The new forms of deferral we need today involve setting in motion and taking responsibility for new chains of events which are nevertheless pointedly dependent for their completion upon those fellow sign-users who would have (and perhaps did) initially resist them.

Let’s return to the chiastic model I presented earlier. If what initiates any act of semiosis is the experience of the danger of mimetic rivalry, which is to say, an increase of doubt proportionate to faith in the efficacy of the sign in representing the object to all, or a diminishment of the object’s immateriality and proportionate increase in the scramble for material objects seeming to possess its force, the goal of that act of semiosis must be twofold. First, it must aim to restore the object’s immateriality, which is to say to make whatever specific, material object for which we are contending into a sign of the repulsive power of the center. Second, it must aim to create the object, in its materiality, anew—to provide for the production of more such objects, or to make the object divisible or sharable in some hitherto unimagined way. This new accessibility of the material object emerges along with the renewal of faith in immateriality of the sign, the immateriality of the sign as a rule regulating such access. Finally, though, this means that the new immateriality of the object, its renewal as a conduit of the intelligence of the center, resides in a new materiality of the sign, a new form of distinction, embodiment, enactment—a new style and norm which invites participation and an improvised iteration; a style and norm that draws attention to its own constitution as a dictation taken from the intelligence of the center.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Andrew Bartlett for pointing out the relevance of this passage from *Signs of Paradox* to my discussion. ([back](#))

Works Cited

Gans, Eric. *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford: UP, 1997.

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