

The End of Criticism

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In a time when the value of literary criticism is radically uncertain because of the impossibility of defining its usefulness through the currently dominant utilitarian paradigm, Eric Gans's originary hypothesis provides a useful means of exploring this question from the perspective of the human. According to Gans, we can ascertain the primacy of any human institution by practicing what he terms "originary analysis": an exploration of the "fundamental phenomena of human interaction from the perspective of their origin" (*Originary Thinking* 9). Originary analysis is performed by entering imaginatively into humanity's scene of origin and considering whether the minimal form of the institution in question could have been enacted as a discrete moment of the originary scene. For any institution to be primary, "it must be conceived as present at the outset," since "otherwise human beings were able to exist without it" (10). In this paper, I attempt to place literary criticism in the overall human schema through an application of Gans's originary analysis.

The question of methodology in literary criticism is coeval with the theorization of criticism's purpose, since a methodology is the "conflation of a technique (method) with a theory that purportedly justifies that technique (-ology)" (*Signs of Paradox* 4). Thus, the question of methodology will be the starting point for my originary analysis of criticism. After demonstrating that Gans's methodology for his aesthetic history does not distinguish between the aesthetic experience and the cognitive act of criticism, an ambiguity which leaves both the primacy of criticism and the methodology for criticism insufficiently explicated, I will undertake an originary analysis of criticism, and in doing so propose a methodology for Gansian literary criticism. I argue that in Gans's paradigm, criticism is an act of mediating between the originary consciousness of the first humans and the later, more reflective consciousness of their descendants, and as such needs to happen in a three-part process: an unreflective experience of a literary work, a more distanced analysis of its content, and finally, a consideration of the relationship between the first two perspectives that positions the work in the context of the human. Despite this

somewhat complicated thesis, my basic intervention into the current state of criticism, which has become increasingly dominated by distanced and analytical attitudes, is the basic assertion that criticism can only be considered a primary human institution if critics remember its roots in the immediacy of the originary aesthetic experience. In other words, critics must continually recall their origin as readers.

Gans's aesthetic history in chapters 8-12 of *Originary Thinking* is premised upon the originary function of the aesthetic as a resentment-deferring mechanism. After the originary event, this link between the aesthetic and the ethical gives literature a privileged place in attaining ethical self-knowledge. In light of the status of the ethical as "the supreme human dimension" (*Originary Thinking* vii), and the "need for self-knowledge" as an "essential attribute of humanity" (1), it seems that criticism would have at least a derivative primacy in that its explication of literature facilitates awareness of the ethical.

However, in using literature as an anthropological discovery procedure, Gans does not clarify whether literature reveals the ethical simply through the act of reading or whether its revelatory function relies on a critical explication, such as his aesthetic history. On the one hand, many of his statements emphasize the individual and experiential nature of the process by which ethical insights are revealed through literature. For example, in justifying his explanation of the ethical through the aesthetic, Gans writes that "the ethical order is interactive, relational; it can never be experienced as a whole. Only the paradoxical experience aroused by esthetic form makes the critical foundation of this order accessible to its individual members" (23). He later clarifies and builds upon this by claiming that the aesthetic experience is "involuntary" because it is "not under the control of the initiator of the communication" and thus "is not socially enforceable" (123). This involuntary, individual experience seems to be directly linked to the unreflective aesthetic contemplation by the first humans, and thus seems more compatible with reading than the reflective attitude of criticism. Additionally, the interactive, relational nature of the ethical order which is opposed to the aesthetic experience in the first passage is suggestively similar to the institution of literary criticism, wherein critics must operate primarily in relation to each other's arguments rather than their involuntary reactions to the literature they write about.[\(1\)](#)

On the other hand, Gans makes a series of claims for the aesthetic's revelation of the ethical that seem to move the aesthetic experience into the realm of advanced cognition. "In the universe of the artwork," he writes, "the spectator effects the esthetic deferral of resentment by experiencing the specific content of desire as dependent on the total form; this relation of form and content is a model of that [which operates] in the society as a whole" (23). More specifically, the spectator

associates form with the strictures imposed by ethical systems and content with human desire in general, and “through this experience . . . comes to grasp the immanent principle of [the ethical] order as a means for regulating human interaction” (23). If we read “grasp” as an intuitive or subconscious apprehension that would suffice to defer resentment but never reach consciousness, it is possible to read this passage as in keeping with those I cited in the previous paragraph. However, even if this is Gans’s intended meaning, it should not be overlooked that the passage gives the initial impression(2) of a complex cognitive evaluation of the relationship between form and content, which would be impossible to perform in the immediacy of a first reading(3) unless the reader were trained in literary criticism. Additionally, Gans clearly states his belief in the necessity of reflective self-knowledge at the outset of *Originary Thinking*: “humans would not exist as self-understanding beings if such understanding were not necessary to their existence” (1). This is the premise from which he undertakes the project of *explicating* the ethical revelations of literary works, rather than merely experiencing them or letting readers experience them individually.

Therefore, there is a strong suggestion that Gans sees the more detached, reflective attitude of a second reading, whether undergone by the individual reader or circulated formally as criticism, as a necessary human institution. This reflective attitude is in contrast to the experiential immediacy of the aesthetic moment of the originary scene, so the fact that many of Gans’s justifications for undertaking the aesthetic history are *drawn from* the originary aesthetic experience points to a slippage between the experience of reading and the cognitive work of criticism in his argument regarding the aesthetic. However, this slippage can be explored and overcome through Gans’s own concept of originary analysis: an originary analysis of criticism reveals that originary aesthetic experience and reflective cognition can be conceived as two parts of an integrated process which is itself originary.

Since the work of literary critics is premised on the aesthetic quality of literature, I begin my originary analysis of criticism by examining the role that Gans grants the aesthetic in the originary scene. As “the oscillation between the contemplation of the sign representing the central object and the contemplation of the object as referred to by the sign” (117), the aesthetic is located in the consciousness of the observer as an experience. The later form of the aesthetic experience is “a wholly internal oscillation between the artwork as representation and the imagination of what it represents” (120), that is, between its form and its content. In that the primary task of literary critics is to observe the relationship between the form and content of literary works, the originary aesthetic experience can be seen as analogous to the act of criticism.

However, the originary sign was an ostensive: it referred to an object that was

present on the scene. This means that the originary aesthetic experience instigated by the first sign was a contemplative experience of the actual relationship between form and content rather than an imaginative attempt to ascertain content from form. From this perspective, there is a total separation between aesthetic experience and critical interpretation that seems irreconcilable with the identity between these two modes which I identified in the previous paragraph. However, Gans's more detailed treatment of the ostensive's implications in *Signs of Paradox* resolves this contradiction into a paradox.

Gans identifies the ostensive as "the truth of faith" (*Signs of Paradox* 51) because the originary sign was made in the absence of a concept for the central object: it arose out of the necessity for signification itself. The participants in the originary scene had to take it on faith that the first sign was an aborted gesture of appropriation, and must have "accepted this truth as the revelation of central Being" (53); that is, the guarantee of the central object's sacrality which rendered it worthy of being represented. With the emergence of the declarative after the originary scene, the ostensive's function as "the truth of faith," as opposed to the declarative's "truth of reason," could become a faith in something *not* present on the scene: "to conceive the ostensive that lies behind the declarative is already to 'believe' it, to accept on faith its presence-as-truth" (51). But the absence of the referent is already latent in the originary ostensive, since the purpose of the original sign was to designate the original referent's inaccessibility.

The relationship between the ostensive and the declarative is analogous to that between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives, which Gans explicates in regard to the origin of language. He brings out the distinction between the perspective of the participants in the originary scene and the critic who analyzes the scene by stating that "the event that we describe as the origin of language cannot have been so viewed by its participants, [who], in imminent danger of destructive conflict, must have performed the originary act of linguistic designation as though commanded by the central object itself" (*Originary Thinking* 15). He further clarifies this distinction by stating that "the categories of human culture are forms of experience rather than forms of language," and that "in order to speak of this event as the origin of humanity, we must introduce the 'etic' category of language" (15). The *emic* perspective of the participants in the originary scene is analogous to the originary experience of a first reading, while the later, critical perspective of a second reading is analogous to the *etic* position of the critic who analyses the scene after it has already occurred. There is not a strict dichotomy between the two perspectives, however. Since "the scene of origin . . . offers the basic paradigm for the transformation of categories of experience into categories of language" (15) and "thematization is already implicit in emergence" (16), the originary scene already contains the condition of possibility for its own analysis. Gans's discussion of the

potential thematization implicit in the emergence of language can be applied to any of the scene's separate moments, including the moment of aesthetic contemplation.

In the same way that the originary ostensive referent's experiential absence in the originary scene was later to become actual absence, the emic participants' experience of lateness "with respect to the apparently already formed community of the others" (20) can be seen as an anticipation of the actual lateness of the etic analyst with respect to the origin. The "falsity" of the first humans' experiential lateness can be seen only by the actually late observer, whose position outside the scene reveals "the real symmetry of this opposition of each to all" (20). The gap between the emic and the etic appears to constitute an absolute divide between aesthetic experience and criticism, but the human ability to surmount this temporal gap through "dialogue with our origin" (16) is the basis of generative anthropology.

Although "the narrative of the event that we construct is far from the version of it passed down by its participants to their descendants" (16), it is culture itself which allows us to have this dialogue with our origin, since "[the narrative of the event] is linked to this first version by an unbroken cultural chain" (16). This, along with Gans's later statement that "the time of separation . . . between form and its dissolution, is the time of deferral of violence—the time of culture itself" (141), suggests a link between deferral, criticism, and culture. Although he is speaking of the deferral of violence, taking up this suggested link can provide a more nuanced perspective on the notion that the potential for criticism is latent in the originary aesthetic experience. Perhaps the culture of criticism always-already has the temporality of deferral: the cognitive understanding of the scene latent in the scene itself initiates and prefigures the institution of criticism as it now operates, wherein completed understanding defines the enterprise, yet always lies just beyond the realm of actuation.

In beginning to imagine how the Gansian conception of criticism as a human institution might be applied to literature, a relationship is revealed between form and content that is analogous to the previously discussed ostensive/declarative and emic/etic relationships. The originary aesthetic experience, although it is an oscillation between sign and referent (form and content), can in a more general sense be associated with literary *form*, because form is arguably primary in the consciousness of the reader during a first reading. In the same way, content can be generally linked with a reflective later reading. However, apprehension of content is already latent in apprehension of form, because the originary oscillation between form and content configures them as inseparable. Cognizance of form leads automatically to cognizance of content, since the primary purpose of the originary sign is to confer a certain content—that of sacrality—on an object. Thus, the

relationship between form and content within the originary aesthetic experience is a microcosm for the relationship between the originary aesthetic experience and the critical perspective which can designate the content of this moment by thematizing it as the emergence of the aesthetic.

In fact, since the relationship between form and content is analogous to the previously discussed latent absence of the ostensive referent, the experiential lateness later to become actual, and the thematization already implicit in emergence, in a more general sense the emic perspective is a microcosm of the emic-etic relationship. Thus, Gansian criticism must mediate between the emic/etic conglomerate as revealed in originary (emic) experience and the etic itself, which points to the primacy of the emic perspective as a model for the overall critical process. In this way, Gansian criticism can be seen as a metacritical project which has the self-reflexivity necessary to interpret the interpretive act itself as it progresses from originary immediacy to critical distance.

In a very general sense, this progression of the critical act from immediacy to distance is analogous to the historical progression of the critical paradigm in literary studies. Since the romantic era's centralization of literature initiated the trajectory of literary criticism as we now practice it, it is appropriate to speak of the romantic era as the "originary scene" of criticism: a type of *belief* in literature analogous to the originary aesthetic experience of faith in the rightness of the relationship between the ostensive sign and its present-yet-inaccessible referent. This belief in literature existed not only as a general centralization of art, but also in the promotion of a certain kind of reading experience, which is perhaps epitomized in Coleridge's famous identification of "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (169). He formulated the concept in reference to his use of supernatural characters in poetry, realizing that a suspension of disbelief was necessary in order for his readers to "transfer [onto the characters] from [their] inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth" (168-169). Like the originary aesthetic experience's paradoxical "oscillation between [the] imaginary possession and recognized inviolability" (*Originary Thinking* 118) of the central object, a reader who experiences a moment of poetic faith inhabits the paradox of the recognized absence of supernatural characters from the real world and their imaginary presence on the internal scene of representation, which is the aspect of the originary scene foregrounded by the romantic aesthetic (see ch. 10 of *Originary Thinking*).

Of course, this dynamic does not only apply to the use of supernatural characters: such characters only function to make the fictional nature of literature explicit, and to emphasize the corresponding need for readers to imaginatively enter the *other scene* of representation that it refers to. This other scene is made possible by the

emergence of the declarative, in which the speaker refers to an object not present on the current scene. But faith in the presence of the spoken-of objects on this other scene is made possible by the real presence of the original ostensive referent. Thus, the originary critical paradigm of the romantic era, like the originary aesthetic experience, has the paradoxical status of unreflective belief that is always-already a “suspension of disbelief”—the later form of ostensive faith that returns the subject to the originary mentality experientially, though not actually.

The romantic critical paradigm seems to have been completely reversed in postmodernity, a shift perhaps epitomized in what Paul Ricoeur has termed the “hermeneutic of suspicion”: “a method of interpretation which assumes that the literal or surface-level meaning of a text is an effort to conceal the political interests which are served by the text” (33). In this paradigm, “the purpose of interpretation is to strip off the concealment, unmasking those interests” (33). Although it is clearly reductive to summarize all postmodern critical approaches with one method formulated by one critic, I have fastened on this phrase because of the telling opposition between “suspicion” and “faith,” which reveals the general reversal that the critical paradigm has undergone. The hermeneutic of suspicion treats the *emic* experience of first reading and the formal considerations that it foregrounds as a false perspective which must be surpassed in order to reach the actual object of interpretation: the political ideologies that constitute the work’s content. While the romantic paradigm seeks to enter the “other scene” created by language, the postmodern paradigm does not have faith in the “rightness” of the relationship between the sign and the referent or between form and content, and thus seeks to analyze the work’s covert mechanisms of formal counterfeit. Of course, not all analysis of content from the *etic* perspective is “suspicious”: the “hermeneutic of suspicion” is merely a useful way of discussing the nature of *etic* analysis because it epitomizes the *etic* perspective.

The progression from romantic faith to postmodern suspicion applies to both literature and criticism, so it makes sense that the paradigm of Gansian criticism, which mediates between these two poles, would have an intimate, even analogous relationship with the periods which lie between romanticism and postmodernism in the continuum of aesthetic history. This speculation is confirmed by the nature of what Gans identifies as the postromantic aesthetic: like the meta-critical stance of the third and most important stage of Gansian criticism, the postromantic aesthetic both recalls the romantic emphasis on immediacy and anticipates the postmodern distanced reflection on the problem of mediation. As such, applying the Gansian methodology for criticism to postromantic literature should be a dialogic process in which literature informs theoretical speculation just as much as theory informs literary analysis. Since the postromantic aesthetic occupies a special place in Gans’s schema as the ultimate model of how criticism should operate in general,

postromantic literature is an ideal means through which to demonstrate the Gansian methodology for criticism that I have proposed.

In what follows I briefly outline a possible Gansian reading of Wallace Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which many critics have identified as Stevens' most mature formulation of his theory of poetry. Stevens is usually considered a modernist poet strongly influenced by romantic ideals, but his work can be more specifically classified in Gans's schema as postromantic. Although much of his work displays a strikingly modernist "formal opacity" (189), Stevens' work deviates from modernism proper on the level of content: he does not perform modernism's replacement of "esthetic askesis" with "esthetic hedonism," which followed from the belief that "all desiring experience is equally a reflection of the originary and therefore equally suitable for esthetic representation" (188). Instead, Stevens remains true to the postromantic dictum of seeking to "eliminate all vestiges of the empirical"—that is, all indications of the worldly desire that has its object in the material world—by exploring "transcendental modes of experience" (184), a project to which the formal difficulty of his work is integral.

Stevens is strongly influenced by Mallarmé, whom Gans identifies as "the most intellectually rigorous" exemplar of the postromantic aesthetic (185). Mallarmé's later work "was increasingly concentrated on the constitution of the (empty) scene of representation" (185): a purging of worldly desire through images of absence such as an empty room or the open sea. The Stevensian parallel to this is seen most clearly in "The Snow Man," in which the ideal reader and creator of poetry is identified by the poem's end as "The listener, who listens in the snow,/ And, nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens 54). Stevens' particular mode of transcendental exploration begins to take a more unique shape in "Notes," in which he configures the originary scene as "the first idea," a non-empirical imaginative event. This scene-as-idea, which can also be thought of as the idea of the scene, is perhaps a more distanced intuition of the event than the immediate phenomenology of the empty scene achieved by Mallarmé. However, this heightened self-reflexivity and emphasis on the theoretical renders "Notes" an especially productive exemplar of the special place of the postromantic aesthetic in my anthropoetic literary-critical methodology, and of the type of dialogic interaction that literary experience and theorization should achieve in this methodology.

My reading will follow the three steps for Gansian criticism outlined above to show how the poem both performs (through its formal characteristics) and thematizes (through its content) the paradoxical nature of transcendence, and finally how it

reveals the anthropological import of this subject through metapoetic theorization. The fact that the poem itself performs the temporal progression of the three stages of criticism, and initiates their enactment through the experience it incites in the reader, reinforces the primacy of the emic belief in literature which I have brought out as primary in the Gansian critical schema.

On a first reading, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” performs the paradoxical nature of transcendence by inducting the reader into a phenomenology of difficulty elicited by irrational, dreamlike images such as “At night an Arabian in my room,/ Incribes a primitive astronomy/ Across the unscrawled fores the future casts/ And throws his stars around the floor” (Stevens 209). Stevens explores the notion of empiricism through his use of images, which, as visual representations of the physical, are directly linked with the empirical world perceived by the senses. Since empiricism is associated with rationality and the real, the irrational, surreal nature of the images achieves transcendence of the empirical through the empirical itself. The reader is left on the surface of language, with only an experience of difficulty as a “meaning” for Stevens’s imagery.

The sense of irrationality is reinforced by the intermingling of abstract ideas (“future,” “primitive,” “astronomy”) with the concrete images, which also points to a second way in which Stevens transcends the empirical through the empirical itself: the images do not root the reader in the visual world but rather propel us out of it into the realm of abstraction. While an image is a surface-level phenomenon and is thus primary in the temporal experience of the reader, in a more general sense the image and the interpretation of the image (that is, idea) are inseparable in that image automatically leads to idea: the incomprehensibility of the poem’s images pushes the reader’s attention towards its more comprehensible abstract phrases, such as “you must become an ignorant man again” (207). The latency of the idea in the image is analogous to the relationship between form and content which I have theorized earlier; in fact, this is the very reason that I have been discussing images in the emic (formal) stage of my reading. This latency manifests performatively in the reader’s automatic movement from images to abstract phrases in the experience of the poem as a whole, and also thematically in individual passages: “How clean the sun when seen in its idea,/ Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven/ That has expelled us and our images” (207). The image is temporally primary in this schema, since only after the sun’s image is acknowledged and expelled can we access the idea of the sun. The paradox here is that although they are opposites, idea depends upon image; we transcend the empiricism of images through images themselves. Passages such as the above which thematize the movement from image to idea move the reader to the etic position *through* the initial emic encounter with irrational images.

Only after we have experienced the process of transcendence that the poem performs can we take the etic position, which allows us to pinpoint the poem's theorization of transcendence as a process. From the etic perspective, we can see that the poem thematizes the paradoxical nature of transcendence by making the relationship between opposites explicit: "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend/ On one another, as a man depends/ On a woman, day on night, the imagined/ On the real. This is the origin of change/ Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace/ And forth the particulars of rapture come" (218). Even though this passage does not deal with transcendence explicitly, it theorizes a general process of which transcendence is the epitomic example, as the emic experience of the poem has shown us: the generation of opposite from opposite and the paradoxical dependence of these opposites upon one another.

The intellectual theorization of "rapture," a state of being carried away by overwhelming emotion, is analogous to and thus thematizes the paradoxical conscious suspension of consciousness which characterizes the "willing suspension of disbelief." This thematization of emic experience moves the reader toward an apprehension of the metacritical stance which mediates between emic and etic, since being "carried away" is a transcendence of subjectivity which is necessary for the relationship between the subjectively experienced emic and etic perspectives to be thematized in the poem and conceptualized in the reader's interpretive process.

Later in the poem, this thematization of the relationship between emic and etic is fully realized in a passage which brings the reader through emic experience, etic distance, and a final metapoetic synthesis of these two perspectives. Beginning with an irrational image, "the golden fingers picking the dark-blue air" (225), the speaker then thematizes the difficulty of the imagery as a property of interpreting the poem: "But the difficultest rigor is forthwith/ On the image of what we see,/ To catch from that/ Irrational moment its unreasoning" (225). Finally, the speaker gives examples of these irrational images—"As when the sun comes rising, when the sea/ Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall/ Of heaven" (225)—in order to thematize the relationship between direct reading experience and distanced analysis of content: "These are not things transformed. Yet we are shaken by them as if they were./ We reason about them with a later reason" (225). "Later reason" refers to the lateness of the critic who adopts an analytical perspective after an initial aesthetic encounter, the perspective which transforms "things" (images) into ideas. But the fact that these images emotionally move the reader on a first reading *as if* they were already transformed reinforces the idea that content is already implicit in form and ideas are already implicit in images, with the additional insight that the affect generated by a first reading cannot be completely divorced from any cognitive implications. Catching "from that irrational moment its unreasoning" can be seen as a comment on the paradoxical nature of criticism: the critic must first

experience the irrational aesthetic moment and at a later time—which is anticipated proleptically in emic experience—express this irrational experience within the systematic and rational framework of an academic essay.

This metapoetic progression pushes the reader's analysis toward the metacritical level of generative anthropology. The persistent transformation of images into ideas, even within the emic encounter, gives idea priority over image in the world of the poem: Stevens not only foregrounds the process of transcending the immanent, but positions the transcendent realm as superior to the immanent. This overall privileging of the transcendent leads to the insight that what Stevens refers to as "the first idea" (209) is his particular configuration of the originary event. The reader, now aware of the significance of "the first idea," is primed to recognize the anthropological implications of Stevens's theory of poetry:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning
And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
From that ever-early candor to its late plural. (209)

The phrase "unconscious will" and the fact that the first idea is shared in a communal moment of insight recall the transcendence of subjectivity implied in the thematization of "rapture." Here, the transcendence of subjectivity is explicitly tied to the creation and interpretation of poetry: the poet, like the linguistic sign, mediates between the reader and the content of the literary work, and as such must transcend subjectivity in order to be a transparent medium through which the first idea can be communicated and understood. The critic must also transcend subjectivity in order to move between the emic ("ever-early candor") and the etic ("late plural").

Stevens insists that poetry itself can bring us back to the originary experience, which he conceptualizes as a belief in the "immaculate [i.e., transcendent] beginning" of humanity. The apparently contradictory idea that a poem, itself a mediation of experience, can provide access to unmediated experience of the origin is clarified by Stevens' earlier question, "Is there a poem that never reaches words/ And one that chaffers the time away?" (223). A poem that never reaches words is not a literal, material poem but the *idea* of a poem. The generation of idea from image that is fundamental to "Notes" suggests that this ideal poem has been generated from and thus made possible by "Notes" itself, although the interrogative form used to speak of it indicates that it is a possibility rather than a reality.

Paradoxically, the mediatory nature of language can be transcended through language itself if used in an aesthetic capacity which remains conscious of its function as *language*.

This paradox clarifies the apparent contradiction of the postromantic artist's elevation of literature and general suspicion of mediation. The postromantic ethical order "foregrounded the mediating function of exchange that had in fact existed since the origin," causing "the market [to be] blamed for the 'unnatural' evil of mediation" (*Originary Thinking* 183); hence, the postromantic artist desires the unmediated experience afforded by poetry. A further anthropological insight afforded by this passage is the association of the transcendence of mediation with "chaffer[ing] the time away": this is a desire to overcome our temporal alienation in an experiential return to the immediacy of the origin, a return that is a fundamentally temporal-linguistic enterprise, since originary lateness was inaugurated with the first linguistic sign.

Continuing with the anthropological level of interpretation, it is possible to ascertain an intense disdain for the appetitive satisfaction that concludes the originary event and is thereafter associated with the marketplace. Appetitive satisfaction is clearly denoted by phrases such as "the easy passion, the ever-ready love" and "accessible bliss" (221), but significantly, these phrases are embedded in such a beautiful and initially appealing passage that the disparaging tone in which they are uttered would be easy to miss if it were not for the emic experience of difficulty in reading the poem:

We have not the need of any seducing hymn.
It is true. Tonight the lilacs magnify
The easy passion, the ever-ready love
Of the lover that lies within us and we breathe

...

The lover sighs as for accessible bliss,
Which he can take within him on his breath,
Possess in his heart, conceal and nothing known. (221)

Because accessibility is directly opposed to the difficulty that the reader now *believes in* through an originary encounter with the poem, the speaker's negative tone toward accessibility in all of its manifestations can be grasped. Although the emic experience of difficulty forms the basis of this interpretation, the etic

“hermeneutic of suspicion” also has a crucial role to play in allowing the reader to discern a negative tone in “accessible” and “ever-ready.” In order to ascertain the speaker’s ethical promotion of a spiritual/intellectual rather than appetitive basis to human relationships, the reader must resist the passage’s tempting impression of beauty and its indications that we are to identify with the speaker (“we” and “us”).

The opposition of difficulty to the marketplace is reinforced by Stevens’ association of difficulty with the pre-linguistic ground: “The sun/ Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/ In the difficulty of what it is to be” (208). The use of “must bear” rather than “bears” shows that this desire is not fulfilled: in the world of the poem, the transcendence of mediation is infinitely deferred. But this deferral which is in fact a fundamental characteristic of the poem, signaled from the outset by the very title “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” can be more accurately identified as prolepsis: the poem’s title, along with its other intimations of unmediated experience, both perform and signal the absence/deferred presence of the paradoxical transcendence of mediation which they thematize.

The “supreme fiction,” which in anthropological terms is the narrative of human origin, is only gestured towards, and yet at the same time the poem itself is a supreme fiction, a means of access to “the first idea” through poetic language. The desire to access “a myth before myth began” (210), that is, the mythic origin that preceded the advent of “myth” as a discreet category, is fulfilled in the evolution of generative anthropology from the postmodern aesthetic. The inseparability of postmodern art from raw experience that makes this evolution possible gestures toward the inseparability that literature and criticism once shared in the originary scene, which can be recovered only in that forever-deferred proleptic space of the postmodern, literally “after now.”

In fact, Gans’s original statement about human self-reflexivity imbues his entire project with prolepticity. He states that “humans would not exist as self-understanding beings if such understanding were not necessary to their existence” (*Originary Thinking* 1), but if we already exist as self-understanding, why do we need studies such as *Originary Thinking* which are written in order to facilitate self-understanding? Our self-understanding, like the originary aesthetic experience, must have a proleptic temporality. The connection between the temporality of criticism and that of culture that is emerging here is clarified by noting that metacriticism operates from the principle of self-reflexivity, which Gans identifies as essential to the survival of the human community, and that prolepsis is implied in the futural orientation of every definition of the prefix “meta”: “occurring later than or in succession to,” “after,” “change, transformation,” and “more comprehensive: transcending” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

The final and fundamental prolepsis of the originary schema is found in Gans's definition of the human: "the paradoxical generation of the transcendent from the immanent, the vertical from the horizontal" (*Signs of Paradox* 4). Although it could be argued that he is speaking here of a process that happens once and for all during the originary event, the present continuous verb "generation" suggests a constant becoming rather than a static achievement. The association of the transcendent with the vertical in this definition of the human, along with the verticality of language, which indicates its metaphoric character, points to a close link between metacriticism and transcendence. "Horizontal" consciousness, conceived in terms of literary criticism, would entail primarily basing arguments on the content ascertained by other critics rather than on the vertical relationship between the form and personally perceived content of literature. Earlier in the paper I touched on the fact that, given the huge and swiftly-growing corpus of literary criticism, the critical experience often relies more on the horizontal critic-critic relationship than the vertical critic-work relationship. This seems to be unavoidable, although it is quite problematic from a Gansian perspective because it bypasses the originary aesthetic experience and is alarmingly reminiscent of the mimetic rivalry that made the vertical sign-object relationship necessary in the first place.

Just as language can be paradoxically transcended through language itself, the problem of criticism can be transcended through the doubling or surpassing of criticism which is achieved in metacriticism. Metacriticism returns the critical enterprise to the vertical dimension by treating criticism itself—both the personal interpretive process and the critical work of others—as an aesthetic object worthy of oscillatory contemplation. This paradoxical doubling and surpassing is the "end" of criticism, which, like Gans's "end of culture," has a double meaning as both "terminus" and "purpose." Although criticism's prolepticity seems to foreclose any pronouncement of "the end of criticism," criticism's end is to be interminable. Its continual process of becoming, like becoming-human, necessitates a continual act of transcendence, and in transcending criticism, metacriticism brings us back to the originary aesthetic experience that is the guarantee of criticism's primacy as a human institution.

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Notes

1. I recognize that this is an oversimplification; however, I simply wish to draw attention to the fact that if a critic’s personal revelation about a literary work has already been articulated by another critic, the necessity of making a new intervention in the critical debate will supersede the impulse to articulate the personal insight as it was originally experienced. I take up this point in more detail later in the paper. [\(back\)](#)

2. At several points in the paper my analysis will rely on a reading of Gans as literature, with attention to connotations, visceral impressions, etc. This is in keeping with the eventual evolution of literature into anthropological theory, which Gans explains in chapter 12 of *Originary Thinking*, and it is also in keeping with my own argument regarding metacriticism, which will become clear later in the paper. [\(back\)](#)

3. Throughout the paper, I use the term “first reading” to designate an original encounter with a work which is analogous to the involuntary and unreflective aesthetic experience of the first humans in the originary scene, and “second reading” to designate a more detached, reflective, and critical attitude analogous to the perspective of a descendant of the first humans who examines the originary scene as a whole from the etic perspective. Although the terms are not precise in that people trained in literary criticism are often able to jump immediately to the critical perspective during a first reading, they are nevertheless useful for my argument. [\(back\)](#)