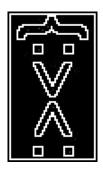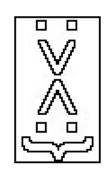# Chronicles of Love & Resentment
by Eric Gans

Originary Analysis, Revisited

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Some years ago I proposed that the originary hypothesis, which in the narrow sense concerns the origin of language, could become the basis of a rigorous anthropological methodology. If we accept the originary hypothesis: that the originary scene is the moment of transformation between animal and human, that this separation is digital and absolute just as language as a formal system of representation is digital and absolute, then everything *essentially* human is manifested in this scene. This corollary of the originary hypothesis is the basis of what I call *originary analysis*, the necessarily speculative tracing of cultural phenomena to their "moment" of the originary scene, a process that makes use of the fundamental hermeneutic circle from which all others derive, as each new moment of history reveals a new truth about our origin.

Originary thinking, the mode of thought that views the phenomena and categories of human history in the light of this analysis, is not a preformism that expects to find within the seed a miniature tree containing its own miniature seeds ad infinitum. No agency, human or divine, need have had from the beginning the Idea of which history is the unfolding (putting aside for the moment the process that this metaphor is meant to describe). But this does not absolve us, to turn the question around, from seeking an originary explanation for the ubiquitous notion that God's *logos* or the equivalent does indeed exist from the beginning, as God's omniscience includes all of future time. I think we have learned by now that the Enlightenment reflex of attributing this persistent model of history to wish-fulfillment-inspired hallucination is not good anthropology. The point is not to find a sophisticated justification for the simple translation of religious discourse into real-world phenomena that we call "fundamentalism," but to understand the *anthropological* truths expressed by these theological or metaphysical constructions, which are the only truths that either the believer or the non-believer can verify.

Originary thinking is a *minimal* preformism that postulates only that every use of representation reproduces the minimal conditions of its origin. It is a new way of thinking not because it thinks about the human with different means than before, but because it operates with qualitatively greater awareness of these means.

A Few Examples

1. God talk

The object of discourse that offers the most obvious demonstration of the advantages of originary thinking is the incarnate sacred, or "God." We can only *understand* our talk about God insofar as it is an attempt to explain our own nature by reflection on the agent of our origin. From the narrow standpoint of empirical falsifiability, every proposition we affirm about God is, as a logical positivist would put it, nonsense. Even the imaginary elephant that was standing on my keyboard last Friday can be said to look like an elephant; we can affirm nothing similar of God. A sentence such as "God is omnipotent" has no empirical content, even as a heuristic. Seen as an exercise in abstract logic, Anselm's ontological proof is absurd; if perfection implies existence, then not merely the perfect being, but the perfect cockroach must exist as well, and if we postulate an incompatibility between perfection and cockroaches we might just as well postulate one between perfection and beings in general.

Yet this kind of Enlightenment reasoning, while valid in its own terms, is not of *anthropological* interest. All that is real is rational, and whether God is real or not, the *idea* of God certainly is. However, to go to the other extreme and explain this idea by reference to my (subjective) faith in it or to its (objective) value as an evolutionary adaptation is an equally unsatisfactory exercise in a posteriori reasoning. "I believe in God; my faith ensures his reality." But *how* did you come to believe in God? Where did the idea of God come from that you could "believe in" him? Or if the idea of God (or the sacred) is merely an evolutionary adaptation that persists because it "works," what is it an adaptation *of*? My fingers "work," too, but I can trace them back to the fingers of more primitive mammals, and thence to fish fins and beyond; what can I trace the idea of God back to?

However arrogant it may sound, I believe that the only intelligent answer available to these questions is that of generative anthropology: God's emergence in the originary scene as the persistent being or "signified" of the originary sign is inextricably cause and effect of the permanence of the sign, which is the crucial means by which humans communicate their intention not to appropriate for themselves the central object of desire. All of God's usual attributes can be derived from this scene, and all the different things we say about God, even when we disagree, can be given a concrete meaning within the scenic context. No doubt we can have no direct proof that such a scene took place, but the fact that there is no more parsimonious way of explaining the idea of God, not to speak of the other fundamental phenomena of human representation, from the esthetic to the moral imperative expressed by the "golden rule" or Kant's categorical imperative, suffices to demonstrate the validity of the originary hypothesis, provided one believes that such things should be explained at all.

2. John Rawls' "Original Position"

More specific uses of the scenic imagination in history, notably the construction of the social contract or more recently, Rawls' "original position," are partially self-aware versions of the originary hypothesis. They are founded on the intuition that the human is best understood in a scenic configuration, but they offer no justification for their choice other than that it appears to clarify matters. The fact that these imaginary scenes have merely heuristic benefits does not distinguish them fundamentally from the originary hypothesis, which cannot be demonstrated otherwise than through its heuristic value; what is being explained is nevertheless not the same in both cases. These scenes are constructed as thought-experiments with no attempt at plausibility, for the purpose of justifying a certain conception of justice that strikes the author as intuitively valid. This construction creates a hermeneutic circle between the moral intuition and the fictional scene in which its justification is clarified. What helps to clarify this justification is the narrowing of the gap between moral intuition and practical advantage. To quote *The Theory of Justice*:

> … the question of justification is settled, as far as it can be, by showing that there is one interpretation of the initial situation which best expresses the conditions that are widely thought reasonable to impose on the choice of principles . . . This most favored, or standard, interpretation I shall refer to as the original position. We may conjecture that for each traditional conception of justice there exists an interpretation of the initial situation in which its principles are the preferred solution. (121)

In normal circumstances one feels a tension between one's "conscience" and one's selfish interest. In the "original position" as outlined by Rawls, one is offered the opportunity to experience the *advantage* of the just alternative; if we are not allowed to know which role we will be given, we will tend to choose a system that gives an optimum combination of the highest average quality of life and the lowest probability (as measured by the standard deviation) of choosing a really bad situation.

What is naïve in this construction from an anthropological standpoint is that the intuition of morality that presides over the scenic construction is never itself explained by such a construction. One begins with a notion of fairness and then constructs a thought-experimental scene in which this notion of fairness plausibly coincides with the participants' self-interest. But the reason for the success of this construction is that the intuition itself is *already* scenic and the construction, however artificial in detail, is a roundabout way of returning to the origin of human morality through the construction of an originary hypothesis. When an intuition about human interactivity that is the product of a personal conscience is illustrated by an artificially constructed scene that takes place outside of time and place, what is really happening is that the fiction restores to the individual intuition the collective, scenic basis without which it could not have arisen in the individual. Rawls' construction is less artificial and less "merely heuristic" than he thinks. The relative success of the hermeneutic circle, here as elsewhere, is that it spirals inward toward a minimal configuration of the human. It is this configuration and not the abstract ingeniousness of the argument or the apparent rightness of the intuition that gives this discourse its power, as it did in the various Enlightenment "social contract" scenes from Hobbes to Rousseau.

This assertion may be verified from the detail of the Rawlsian scene. The "veil of ignorance," about which conservative thinkers complain that it corresponds to the jettisoning of human temporality, notably that embodied in family continuity, cannot be justified in the context of a pre-existing human society; in contrast, its resemblance to the de-differentiated state

of the Girardian mimetic crisis cannot be fortuitous. It is not enough to say that because we are all morally equal we conceive a scene on which this equality can be understood as the result of stripping away our superficial differences to arrive at the underlying identity; how was that equality conceived in the first place, unless a scene took place on which all the participants faced each other denuded of social differentiation? At that point, they had to discover a means for establishing order on the basis of this new equality, and this non-hierarchical relationship is ignorant of any distinctions that might maintain outside the scene. Just as all are and remain equal with respect to the linguistic sign, so we retain the moral imperative that presided over the birth of the sign, that of reciprocal exchange.

3. Jacques Derrida's (non) concept of deferral

I have often had occasion to remark on the perverse proximity of Jacques Derrida's anthropological intuition to generative anthropology. The originary scene may be described in Derridean terms as the deferral of violence by the "supplement" of representation. The deferral that Derrida conceives as fundamental to the linguistic signifier in its structural distinction from other signifiers can only have become necessary in order to establish, not the specific meaning of the sign in contrast to others in the linguistic system of differences, but its *meaningfulness* as a sign in contrast to the worldly gesture of appropriation from which it derives. The function of the deferral inherent in the originary paradigm is to permit us to decide, not between meaning A and meaning B, but between meaning and non-meaning, sacred and profane. From the "horizontal" standpoint of appetite, the sign is itself a hesitation, an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that renounces its original objective. While emitting and interpreting the sign, we defer action that can lead only to chaos.

Structuralism as practiced by Lévi-Strauss under the inspiration of Jakobsonian linguistics lacks this originary opposition between meaning and non-meaning, sign and non-sign, without which the system of signifiers could neither come into being nor maintain itself. Part of what Jakobson calls the "phatic" is not a separate function but an element of signification itself. We emit the sign to get our interlocutor's attention, but the attention we request, as opposed to that solicited by a cry of "Hey!" renews that of the originary scene; the interlocutor is not called to attend to the caller as a fellow member of the species, but to conceive the meaningful event/thing being described on his imaginary scene, which derives from the originary scene. The idea that the shadow-presence of the other members of a given paradigm alone allows the sign to signify depends on a "structuralist," in fact *metaphysical* notion of what signification is in the first place: that meaning resides in *propositions*. The word "tree" is experienced as part of a paradigm only if we take it as one among many nouns that fill a certain slot in a syntagm, ultimately, a *sentence*.

Purely structural universes, such as library classification systems, are atemporal systems of differences that do not involve deferral. In the Library of Congress system, PR is British literature instead of English, given that American is PS; PQ is Romance instead of French, given that it also includes Spanish and Italian; each classification limits all the others. In this kind of representational system, the sign is not a supplement to the reality it designates but a merely differential marker. But this is possible only because the classification system is *secondary;* the significance of its *designata*–books–is taken for granted as determined elsewhere. We put a book in the library only once it has met a minimal criterion of significance; the true structural system exists *outside* the scene on which that significance emerges and is recognized.

In contrast, the separation between a primary cultural system such as language and its principle of emergence is a construct that reality can resemble for a time but never obey, any more than one can draw a perfect circle on the blackboard; significance must be constantly renewed, and the sign reaffirmed once more through the deferral of its worldly object. What associates meaning with *différance* is that it is assigned on a scene in which we differentiate the referent from its background by deferring any attempt to appropriate it for ourselves–which is by the same token to renounce not merely appropriating but also *turning away from* the object. The other potential members of the paradigm that limit the meaning of the sign participate in this deferral only as elements of this "profane" background. Deferral is not a consequence of the paradigm; it is rather the paradigm that is a consequence of deferral, which alone permits objects and their meanings to oppose one another. Derrida's intuition of the importance of *différance* as the way in which signification exceeds mere classification, like Rawls' intuition of the persuasiveness of the "original position" in the elaboration of his theory of justice, is the product of a scenic imagination that is taken for granted on the unsupported assumption that a model of the individual human mind, whether rational or paradoxical, is ultimately sufficient to explain the phenomena of representation.

The originary hypothesis is a minimal model of the communal genesis of human language and culture. Although this necessarily speculative affirmation is invulnerable to new discoveries in paleontology or neuroscience, neither of which can postulate the necessity of an originary scene, it is one that should, and perhaps some day will, guide our research into the "objective correlatives" of the phenomena of representation by which we define ourselves as human.

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