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## The Past and Future of Generative Anthropology: Reflections on the Departmental Colloquium

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*Eric Gans*

The recent departmental colloquium was a demonstration of the effectiveness of generative anthropology (GA) both as an anthropological theory and as an approach to the study of cultural phenomena. The participation of Marvin Harris and Allen Johnson was of particular significance; the dialogue thus begun between GA and empirical anthropology was a step toward bridging the gap between the humanities and the social sciences which is the latest incarnation of the rivalry between religion and metaphysics. The nascent dialogue showed that an anthropology based on the originary hypothesis is fully compatible with the results of empirical research—indeed, to listen to Professor Harris, perhaps more so than some of the theories now in vogue among professional anthropologists.

These “soft” theories are in fact signs of the weakening of the defenses of the canonically “objective” discourse of the social sciences against the deconstructive influence of the dominant discourse of the humanities. As a result, it may not be long before anthropology departments call on GA, which is already as it were inoculated against deconstruction, to help defend them from this influence. The guilty fascination with the necessary impurity of language that makes us reluctant to describe other humans from without provides the thrill that attracts readers to the “thick” or “emic” descriptions of Clifford Geertz and to the more clearly deconstructive writings of James Clifford. Much as this may dismay cultural materialists, I think this trend reflects in distorted fashion a genuine sense of the

need to reincorporate the originary hypothesis, hitherto available only in theological form, into the discourse of the human sciences. Anthropology cannot indefinitely ignore the consequences of the coeval origin of language and the religio-esthetic, or what, in the traditional, non-technical sense of the word, I call "culture."

What is the place of this colloquium in the evolution of GA itself? There was no time at the end of the Saturday session for an attempt at synthesis and it is probably just as well that none was attempted. As long as GA remains a living theory, it will be more important to explore its heuristic possibilities than to reach agreement on any specific thesis, even on the originary hypothesis itself. In this space kindly provided me by the editors of *Paroles Gelées*, I would like to offer some thoughts on what I think we have learned from this particular set of explorations of the originary heuristic.

The term "generative anthropology" (coined with an assist from former UC Press editor Jack Miles) reflects the need to distinguish the theory developed in *The End of Culture* from the "fundamental anthropology" of René Girard. For Girard, mimetic desire, or desire-as-mimesis, is the source of the primal indifferenciation that leads to a *crise sacrificielle* in which new differences are created through the sacralization of the victim of a collective "lynching." Cultural phenomena—the productions of religion and the arts—are seen as more or less disguised representations of such lynchings, as a series of partial revelations and remystifications of mimetic desire.

In view of the centrality of mimesis to Girard's anthropology, it is no surprise that his analyses focus on cultural representations. Yet this anthropology includes no theory of representation as such, and, in particular, only the most cursory statements concerning (the origin of) language. Although the *crise sacrificielle* is "fondatrice," the term partakes of the *toujours déjà*, since it implies a previously existing sacrificial order. The lack of a specific determinant of humanity makes it possible to avoid posing the question of the uniqueness of the scene of origin. This is no longer possible once man is defined by his possession of language. Since all human languages are constructed on a common foundation, (and some researchers have attempted to trace their derivation from a common ancestor), it is unproductive, and certainly unparsimonious, to assume that language originated more than once. The origin of a *conventional* rather than instinctual sign-system can only take place in a single event.

That the sacrificial crisis and the event of the origin of language are not strictly speaking incompatible is demonstrated by the fact that in *The Origin of Language* I was able to discuss this origin without modifying the Girardian scene in its essentials. But the shift of focus from violence to representation gives the originary event a *cognitive* emphasis that is lacking in Girard, who attributes the gradual emergence within the Judeo-Christian tradition of an understanding of the identity of the sacred with human violence to a miraculous provenance.

I have developed these considerations on the subject of the scene of origin elsewhere. What I would like to discuss here is the more professionally relevant question of how this divergence in the theory of origin permits GA to transcend the thematic limitations of girardian literary analysis.

GA affirms that our experience of the literary text, and of culture in general, is significant because it reproduces in imaginary form the experience of the founding event. The unique event becomes a "structure" through cultural repetition, at first in ritual and then in art, with which we are specifically concerned. How then does the shift in focus I have referred to in the model as the basis of the analysis affect the analysis itself? How does the refocusing of the originary scene on the origin of language allow us to expand the scope of an analysis based on the model of emissary victimage?

It might be thought that literature, although filled with often transparent metaphors of founding violence, does not offer very much evidence of a concern for the origin of language. There are plenty of gestures of aggression, few apparent signs of the "aborted gesture" that GA hypothesizes to be the first linguistic sign. And yet, what has critical theory been telling us for the last twenty years if not that literary works are *always* about the origin of language, that is, about their own genesis qua language. But this insight is typically given in un-anthropological, indeed, in anti-anthropological terms. The relation between literary works, or texts, in general, and the origin of language is seen as reflecting the intertwined destinies of language "in itself" and a depersonalized Subject through which language speaks, often in Lacanian accents. The inter-personal dynamic of literary experience is forgotten for the benefit of the ahistorical emergence of language in the isolated subject.

By restoring its anthropological basis to this intuition of the centrality (more precisely, the fundamental peripherality) of language,

GA allows us to understand its historical emergence alongside the theory of mimetic desire. Deconstruction, in both its "literary" American and "philosophical" French versions, is a revelation of the conflict-averting properties of language that sacrifices the anthropological concreteness of this revelation to the necessity—a necessity that is in historical terms radically Christian—of remaining marginal, peripheral with respect to its object. Deconstruction, in other words, takes to an extreme an intuition that, unlike GA, it cannot explain: that the central figure of the scene, however metaphorically conceived, remains always a figure of potential, and obligatorily deferrable, violence.

Thus deconstruction teaches us to avoid the centralizing focus of the analyses that depend on the "discovery" in the text of a predetermined figure of *theme*. No doubt crisis and origin, mimetic rivalry and resentment are everywhere in literature. The question is how to find them in the text without leaving ourselves open to the accusation that we have imposed upon the text a Procrustean thematic system.

How then can GA avoid the narrowness of thematic analysis? Anthropology is by definition extra-textual; it makes the functioning of texts within the human community their determining feature. And GA makes explicit the necessity of constituting the human in an event, the configuration of which, as the very basis of all cultural forms, inescapably becomes the thematic center of its cultural analyses.

For me the major result of the colloquium is a sense that, on the level of analytic practice, this problem has been solved, and that it is now up to the theory to incorporate the result. The "practice" I am referring to is the work of my students and colleagues, which attained at the colloquium a kind of critical mass. Ken Mayers' analysis of the construction of the originary scene(s) confirmed for me the intrinsic durability of GA's "pre-deconstructed" hypothesis. Whatever difficulties I may have with Chris Juzwiak's introduction of a sexual element into the originary event, his theoretical construction of "bisexualism," which could be only partially presented in his talk, is a remarkable demonstration of the productivity of originary analysis. More directly related to the subject at hand are the textual studies: Douglas Collins' pregnant analysis of the Proustian esthetic as a paradigm for the modern era and Tom Bertonneau's nearly completed doctoral dissertation on Stéphane Mallarmé and William Carlos Williams, no doubt the most "monumental" GA-inspired

literary analysis yet produced. Matt Schneider's work on Thomas de Quincey makes use of the originary heuristic to demonstrate, as I do not believe has previously been done, the unity of this author's autobiographical works and his lesser-known but often prophetic social analyses.

The emergent "solution" is this: we cannot and should not attempt to avoid the thematic implications of GA, but we may retain full confidence in their cultural universality. For genuine anthropological categories are not "extra-textual" at all.

Thus we observe that not only other generative schemes (notably the Freudian and the Marxian), but the so-called autotelic approaches to the text, inevitably make use of disguised but recognizable forms of the same anthropological categories that GA elucidates. This is a point that Girard and some of his followers have developed at length with reference to Freud, but that Andrew McKenna (both in his closing talk at the colloquium and in his forthcoming book) has made, perhaps even more tellingly, with respect to Derrida. The real power of deconstruction, like that of psychoanalysis, is anthropological.

Culture defers conflict by creating significance through representation. This means that literary texts, and philosophical ones as well, attempt to defer the potential violence of indifferenciation by creating differential significations. Deconstruction's denial of a worldly basis for its metaphors of textual violence (the "expulsion" of writing) reflects a persistent misunderstanding of the relation between cultural and extra-cultural violence. The metaphoric "violence" of language constitutes a deferral of the *real* violence that poses a concrete threat to the social order. This has been perceptively pointed out by Toby Siebers in *The Ethics of Criticism* with reference to a passage of *Tristes tropiques* analyzed in *De la grammatologie*. The gradient between real and figural violence is present in its simplest form in Levi-Strauss' text in the distinction between one Nambikwara girl's revelation to him of another's secret name and the physical blow for which this "violent" act was a retaliation. This gradient is inverted by the ethnologist, who blames himself for introducing violence into tribal life, whereas Derrida's more sophisticated reading denies real violence an originary status. Yet the same gradient is present in all cultural forms: in the progression of sacrificial ritual from crisis to resolution, and ultimately to the abolition of sacrifice itself, or in the movement of the literary experience from passionate identification to detachment.

The weakness of thematic criticism in the traditional sense ("love

and death in *Manon Lescaut*") is its lack of an other than naively empirical justification for the themes the critic chooses to discuss. Because its analyses, however perceptive in individual cases, are not explicitly related to a general hypothesis, this kind of criticism appears ad hoc, which is another way of saying that it lacks an explicit anthropological basis. A stronger form of thematics is associated with the aforementioned critical schools—the Marxian and the Freudian—that derive from genuine anthropologies. Here the themes are determined *a priori* by the underlying theory, the literary analysis becomes a test of its anthropological universality. The limitation of these theories as foundations for literary analysis reflects the peripherality of the cultural, and more fundamentally, the linguistic-representational, to their vision of humanity. For Marx, cultural phenomena are part of the "superstructure," whereas for Freud they express in sublimated form the fundamental structures of desire determined in pre-cultural childhood. No lack of theoretical mediations have been drawn between the central themes of these anthropologies and the domain of culture, but like the epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy they "save the phenomena" by rendering less intuitive the operation of the system.

GA is, on the other hand, a culture-centered anthropology. Before man can engage in economic activity, before he can desire in the human sense of the term, he must pass through the event of the origin of language. Hence the themes that GA finds in texts are not simply those the text is overtly about, nor must they be posited as the products of a textual or political "unconscious." What GA uncovers is the esthetic operation of the text, which its overt themes both hide and reveal in a historically dependent dialectic. The center/periphery opposition that structures the originary scene is that of the literary scene as well, with its central figure both worshipped and resented. The flight of the moderns from the monumental centrality of the traditional esthetic figure—a flight that deconstruction pursues on the theoretical plane—is an attempt to forestall this resentment which is nevertheless a structural component of the scene of representation. The central figure is a "victim" but his subsistence as a figure of significance makes him a divinity. This is a structure that cannot be transcended by the revelation of its victimary nature, for it is the very structure of signification. Or, in other terms, victimage is still a *particular* thematic; the only truly general thematic is that of signification itself.

The "end of culture" is the liberation of mankind from its dependence on the specific configuration of its origin, with its dichotomous opposition between center and periphery. Hence the end of culture is the liberation of the ethical from the cultural. All the paradoxes of the various contemporary critical modes are contained in this statement. This never-ending liberation is an open-ended dialectic; it can never be given a definitive figure, because each epoch's figure of cultural liberation is what the following epoch must liberate itself from. (And the same could be said, on a finer level, of individual writers and theorists.) Our analyses cannot therefore be content to take as their aim the uncovering of the concealed victimary violence of cultural texts as though this were the ultimate revelation and abolition of difference. Here the term "deferral" (*différance*) is surely preferable. At the same time, we must not deny the ethically progressive nature of the series of deferring revelations that constitute human history. In opposition to both deconstruction's post-Nietzschean "eternal return" and Girard's absolute promotion of the evangelical ethic, our theory must remain open to the new ethical lessons that both the texts and the institutions of our era provide us. Our analysis can be confident in its ability to understand the ever-new themes that confront it as mediations of the originary themes of culture. For GA teaches us that what is original in human history is never more, nor less, than the radical revelation of the potential of the originary.

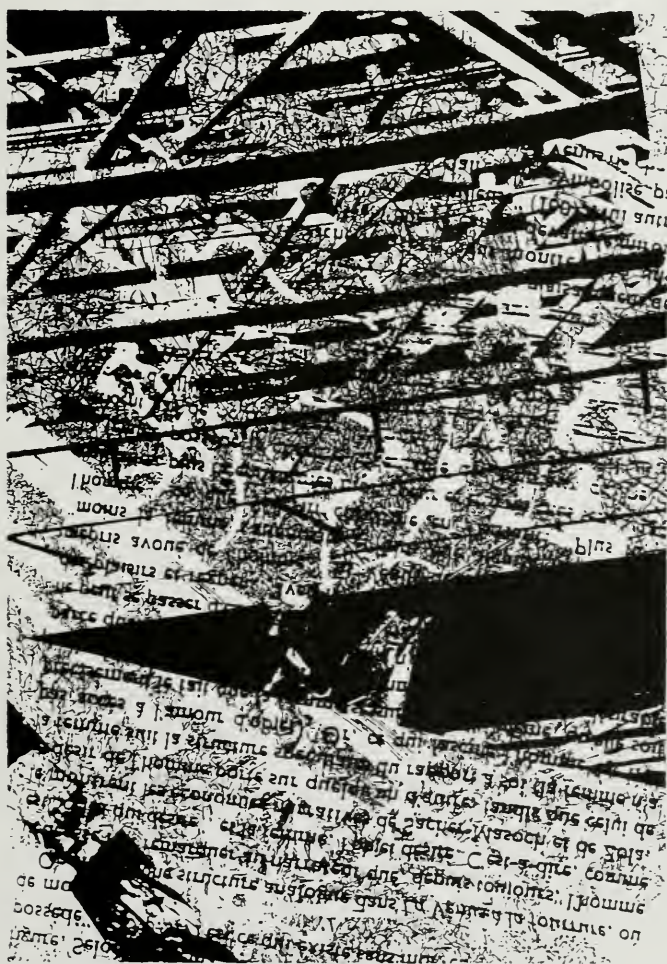
*Eric Gans is a professor in the French department, UCLA.*





# PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies



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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait  
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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