

The Critic as Ethnographer*

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The discipline of literature is no longer restricted to literature. Literature still forms a large part of what we study in English and Modern Language departments, but our interest in the interpretation of classic works by authors like Shakespeare, Goethe, and Proust has now been extended to embrace all kinds of other texts, including texts that do not appear to be literary at all, for example, oral testimonies, rituals, advertisements, pop music, and clothing.

But in what sense are these nonliterary objects “texts”? They are texts because they invite interpretation. But what is interpretation? Interpretation is the symbolic process whereby we translate the significance of one thing by seeing it in terms of another. For example, to those who worship it, the totem at the center of the rite is not just a piece of wood (that is, an object to be described in terms of its intrinsic physical and chemical structure); it is also a *symbol* of the deity who inhabits the wood as a living presence. The surest indication of the reality of this presence is the fact that the totem commands continued sacrifice from its worshippers, whose very lives are consequently understood to depend on it. In the act of sacrifice, the totem is interpreted to refer to the deity. This form of *symbolic* reference is not to be confused with more basic referential processes, such as stimulus generalization. The latter is a form of *indexical* reference (for example, inferring the presence of weevils inside the totem on the basis of seeing the kind of small holes weevils bore), and it is widely used by many other animals, for instance, in the alarm-call systems of vervet monkeys.¹ Animals do not interpret signs symbolically, in terms of their linguistic, aesthetic, or sacred significance. They interpret them indexically, in terms of cognitive processes that remain unmediated by the collective act of symbolic signification.²

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This irreducible anthropological fact explains the current preoccupation in literary studies with culture as an object of general symbolic interpretation. For if humanity is defined as the culture-using animal, and if culture is defined as that object which invites symbolic interpretation, then it follows that literary studies stands at the center of an anthropology founded on these assumptions. For who is better trained than the literary critic in the exercise of searching for symbolic significance, of reading beyond the literal surface to see the deeper, more *sacred meaning* beneath?

Consider, for example, the following remark by Stephen Greenblatt, as he reflects on the significance of his encounter, early in his career, with Clifford Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*: "Geertz's account of the project of social science rebounded with force upon literary critics like me in the mid-1970s: it made sense of something I was already doing, returning my own professional skills to me as more important, more vital and illuminating, than I had myself grasped."³ Notice how Greenblatt interprets Geertz's influence on literary critics like himself. It is not that Geertz teaches him something new, but that Geertz draws out the hitherto unrecognized significance of what he "was already doing." Before he read Geertz, Greenblatt (we may surmise) felt uneasy about spending his time writing about texts that make no ontological claims about the extratextual world. What indeed *is* the point of literary criticism? Geertz provides Greenblatt with an edifying anthropological answer. The point of reading literature is to discover the deeper significance of culture. And since culture is synonymous with humanity, as Geertz maintains, literary criticism is a privileged way of doing anthropology. When you read literature, you are learning something "more important" about what it means to be human.

Does this mean Greenblatt really wants to do anthropology rather than literary criticism? I think it is indeed instructive to read Greenblatt's work as an abortive attempt to found a kind of *literary* anthropology. I say "abortive" because Greenblatt's contact with anthropology remains in the end only tentative. This is not simply because he relies almost exclusively on Geertz for his idea of anthropology. It is rather because he fails to recognize the full anthropological implications of his own idea of a "poetics" of culture.⁴

What Greenblatt takes from Geertz is not in the end a theory of culture, but rather an analogy—or, better, a *model*—for how to think and write about the texts in his own field of literary criticism. Geertz's writing, in its style and manner of argument, serves as the model for Greenblatt to imitate, just as the talented disciple learns by imitating the acknowledged master. But the secret to a good imitation, which is to say, one that is genuinely culturally productive, is to imitate *with a difference*.

Like a good metaphor or analogy, the point is not perfect identity (A = A), but identity-in-difference or resemblance (A is like B). If the resemblance is too great, the analogy will be dismissed as unoriginal ("Greenblatt is just a pale imitation of Geertz"). If the resemblance is too weak, the analogy will be lost altogether, and the result will be, again, dismissal ("Greenblatt completely misrepresents Geertz, and, therefore, as a faithful Geertzian, I dismiss him"). Of course, the jury is still out (and will be for some time) on the long-term historical significance of Greenblatt (and, for that matter, of Geertz too), but over the recent short term Greenblatt's influence on literary studies is not in question.

Let me venture an altogether unremarkable hypothesis for Greenblatt's recent "short-term" success. Greenblatt has an uncanny ability to take ideas that are "in the air" and turn them to a practical use that is directly accessible to his more immediate academic audience. His use of Geertz is a good example. What Greenblatt takes from Geertz, what he "imitates," is the idea that literary criticism, like anthropology, is an ethnography of the cultural other. What makes his imitation different (and readily appreciable to literary critics) is the fact that Greenblatt applies his ethnography, not to those few premodern cultures still to be found on the farthest margins of the "developing" world, but to what is conceived to be the premodern element in the high culture of the West itself. Greenblatt's imitation is thus truly a *literary* form of ethnography because its very idea of ethnography is demonstrated to be internal to the literary texts themselves.

But what accounts for Greenblatt's timeliness? What makes his writings on cultural otherness so appealing at the present time, to the extent that he has become himself a much-admired model, imitated and emulated (and envied) by so many others? A full answer to such a question would no doubt require a consideration of multiple historical factors, but I believe underlying them all is a more readily grasped *desire*. What motivates Greenblatt in his aesthetic criticism is the same thing that motivated the original writers of nineteenth-century anthropology, namely, a deep fascination and curiosity for cultures radically different from our own.

But here we encounter a crucial historical difference. Compared to the early anthropologists, the anthropological writer today seems to be at a distinct disadvantage. The "classic" ethnographer wrote at a time when it was still possible to observe, in distant pockets of the known world, tribal cultures relatively untouched by Western ideas and institutions. In contrast, the contemporary ethnographer has no tribe to study, at least no tribe that has not been influenced by the spread of Western culture through its chief instrument of dissemination, the modern exchange system.

With no cultural other to encounter in the contemporary world (that is, no culture sufficiently different to shock the Western observer into recognizing the coherence of his own), the gaze naturally turns inward to the history of the very culture anthropology had originally hoped to turn its back on. But this inward turn, as Greenblatt's work at times poignantly demonstrates, is tinged with a sadness and nostalgia that is a reminder of the lost hopes of the old romantic anthropology. There are, to be sure, no longer any illusions about being able to observe the originary "elementary forms" of culture in some as-yet-undiscovered primitive tribe. Instead, the search for such an origin is henceforth shadowed by the realization that the origin is "always already" a representation, which is to say that culture is by definition removed from its historical origin, that historical self-consciousness is the condition of being human, whether you are from the West or not. But with this realization, the anthropological writer turns from the world of the present to the world of the past and, in particular, to those texts that seem to preserve some trace of the sacred, of which the modern world appears so obnoxiously bereft. Classic texts are reread for signs of the experience of sacrality, and the historical archive itself is opened to the search for strangeness, for the alterity that will show us *in fictional form* something of the original mystery of a world still enchanted by the sacred. What was for so long a rite of passage for the professional anthropologist, namely, the firsthand observation of a nonliterate tribal culture, has been translated into a "rite of passage" for the professional literary critic: the archival encounter with the textual otherness of discrete "historical cultures" or "aesthetic periods." Henceforth the critic's understanding of the canonical aesthetic work is mediated by those texts produced on the margins of the cultural period in which the aesthetic work originally emerged.

The new historicism is thus truly an "ethnography of the text," its fieldwork conducted in the historical archive, which is carefully combed for instances of unfamiliarity and strangeness (for example, pamphlets on long-since-forgotten religious debates, transcripts from court cases, manuals on witch hunting, and so on). The hope is that, by juxtaposing in loose analogic fashion these unfamiliar documents dredged up from the past with the familiar texts of the aesthetic tradition, the latter may be renewed for appreciation by the "happy few"—that handful of critics (mostly other professors and their willing graduate students) who have both the leisure and temperament to follow the literary ethnographer into the miscellany of the historical archive. The point is not to "reduce" the aesthetic text to the status of a historical document (a criticism too easily made by more traditionally minded scholars), but on the contrary to defend and preserve the aesthetic text as an object distinct from those

ephemeral cultural products offered for mass consumption by the modern exchange system. For by insisting on the necessary historicity of the aesthetic text, the critic distinguishes his authentic "historicist" reading from those inauthentic ones recycled for popular consumption. In this manner, the popular reading of the text is defamiliarized and negated, and in its place is substituted the unfamiliar one of the critic.⁵ But the underlying intention of the historicist reading has been clear all along. The real aim is to shock us with the experience of cultural otherness. For perhaps in our shock, we may catch a glimpse of the originary (sacred) difference that the early anthropologists had set out to find when they left behind the familiar shores of their own (desacralized) culture.

As I have implied in these remarks, there is a religious aspect to the ethnographic search for otherness. But it is religious in the paradoxical sense that the search for otherness is permanently haunted by the absence of religion, by the self-consciousness that the traditional ritual structures of a communal culture, rather than being universal and self-evident, are local and particular. The quest for cultural difference, which is to say, the romantic anthropology that arose in response to the "scientific" anthropology of the Enlightenment, can emerge only in a culture where religion itself is no longer a dominant force.

Hence, for example, the current interest among critics in the notion of "performativity," which is a combination of the pragmatics of speech-act theory (J. L. Austin, John Searle) with the romantic anthropology of the cultural other (Johann Gottfried Herder).⁶ Implicit in the idea of the text as embedded in the particular occasion of its original performance is the desire to return the lifeless words on the page to an imagined, more vital ritual context, one in which the immediate experience of collective belonging prevails over the loneliness and alienation that is the historical condition of the modern reader's relationship to the past.⁷ But because the desire for collective membership is by definition denied to those who interpret a ritual *as an aesthetic text*, the aesthetic experience of alienation becomes unavoidable. Instead of being returned to the collective context of the ritually integrated community, the reader is forced to remain an aesthetic outsider, like the anthropologist observing the rites of some exotic tribe. This alienating experience of the otherness of history leads to the assumption, subsequently taken to be axiomatic, that only a sufficiently "historicized" (that is, "ethnographic") form of literary scholarship is able to show us the true (that is, unfamiliar) meaning of the text—which is to say, its essential cultural difference.

And yet ethnography, whether directed at the contemporary other or the historical other, is still a part of anthropology in the broad sense.⁸ If

Greenblatt tends to ignore this fact, Geertz certainly does not. Indeed, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (which Greenblatt cites as having had such an enormous influence on him) is explicitly concerned with elaborating a general theory of culture. So why does Greenblatt choose to ignore this aspect of Geertz's writings? Surely the theory deserves to be carefully scrutinized before we decide to put the ideas to practical use?

I think the reason for Greenblatt's delicate sidestepping of the theory has to do with a variety of factors, the most prominent of which is that Greenblatt's interest in Geertz extends only as far as it enables him to justify his own disciplinary interest in the culture of a particular aesthetic period.⁹ Yet it would be both misleading and unfair to suggest that this theoretical shortcoming is somehow unique to Greenblatt. For the same shortcoming characterizes the discipline as a whole, which for all its talk of culture is less interested in exploring the anthropology implicit in this concept than in using the word as a convenient label for any object the critic deems fit to interpret.¹⁰

There is no question that the idea of culture has become ubiquitous in literary criticism. But the curious thing is that it has done so with very little fundamental reflection on what culture actually is—whether, for example, it is optional or not, and why it should be preferred to the category it has by now largely replaced and upon which the discipline of English was built in the first place, namely, literature. What exactly is the difference between literature and culture? And how can we explain this extraordinary gravitation toward the concept of culture among today's critics of literature?

Culture and the Market

There is no doubt that the old *high* culture, once singled out for special treatment by critics like Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis, is dying—if it is not indeed already completely dead. But as the old high culture dies, popular culture—the “culture of the people”—emerges to fill the void. But the impetus behind popular culture is not the same as the impetus behind high culture. It is not motivated by the same desire to attain, by long and arduous study, a place in “the great tradition” of Western literature, but by the far more pragmatic need to satisfy the desire of the individual *consumer*.

I think the same economic impetus lies behind the current use of the concept of culture in the universities. It is evident, for example, in the creation of fields like cultural studies: programs concerned exclusively with the popular culture of the present, which is to say, the culture of the marketplace. As our lives become increasingly suffused with the ephemer-

eral products of the market, the idea of culture hurries to keep pace, desperate not to lose out on such a rich profusion of material and symbolic wealth. The old division between sacred and profane, which, as Durkheim saw, subordinated economic to ritual exchange, has been reversed: culture is now everywhere *because* the market is everywhere, which is the same thing as saying that culture is nowhere. The centralizing function of culture—implicit in the old metaphor of a literary “high” culture—has been “decentered.” Modern critics like T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis believed high culture to be essential to the spiritual survival of the community, and they fought hard in their essays (and, in Eliot’s case, in his poetry too) to defend it and to oppose what they took to be the corrosive effect of the economic exchange system on human relationships. But their criticism was already the sign of the old high culture’s demise, which was the effect—and not the cause—of the rise of the market and of the increasingly global consumer culture it trades in. But when culture becomes decentered, which is to say, desacralized, it also becomes an object for systematic theoretical reflection.

It is in this broad historical sense that we should begin to understand the current fascination among literary critics for anthropology and the concept of culture. Greenblatt’s interest in Geertz is thus only a local instance of this broader picture. Indeed, I would submit that the “long” wave of theory in literary studies, from New Criticism through structuralism and deconstruction, to new historicism, cultural studies, and beyond, constitutes a single ongoing attempt to come to grips with the problem of, in Eric Gans’s phrase, “the end of culture.”¹¹

Yet few critics have been tempted by Gans’s further suggestion that the central problem of modernity—the problem of the end of culture—is best approached not from the (impossible) perspective of a projected “end of history,” but from its minimal hypothetical point of origin.¹² Instead, theory in the humanities remains in a state of permanent paralysis, caught in a kind of interdisciplinary no-man’s-land: on the one hand, forbidding itself the luxury of the “grand narrative” out of a superstitious fear of committing the teleological sin of nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology and, on the other, discontented with the ad hoc synchronic empiricism of the social sciences.

So where does the critic go? Greenblatt, as we have seen, goes to Geertz. But Greenblatt’s appropriation of Geertz is not really theoretical.¹³ What inspires Greenblatt in his reading of ethnography is the romantic desire to “go native,” to get inside the culture of the anthropological other. This is the real point behind the new historicist anecdote. Like the fetish or relic of an exotic ritual, it signifies the critic’s professional credentials as the uniquely qualified interpreter of the cultural other. Who else would have noticed so much significance in such an insignificant detail?

But I think we can do better. And I think we can do better by reading Geertz *theoretically*. This will enable us to see how, even in the case of an avowed “culturalist” (that is, someone who defines anthropology as the “interpretation of cultures”), the paradox of understanding how “culture” emerges from “nature” all too quickly results in the unconscious expulsion of culture altogether. That this expulsion is also the defining condition of the scientific explanation of culture merely underscores the fact that Geertz’s interpretive approach has not yet adequately synthesized the form of his philosophical presuppositions with their intended anthropological content. For despite his conviction that it is the *symbolic form* of culture that lies behind its immense historical productivity, Geertz is unable to translate this claim into a truly originary definition of the human. Geertz’s anthropology thus remains bound by the same metaphysical limitations that also motivate the scientific and philosophical traditions’ denial of literary anthropology’s right to exist. The fact that Geertz is usually derided by more hard-nosed, scientifically minded anthropologists as an obscurantist because of his interpretive or humanistic strategy is no argument against this point.¹⁴ On the contrary, it merely demonstrates the extent to which the modern discipline of anthropology, whether narrowly empirical or broadly humanistic, remains obstinately attached to this same metaphysical tradition. Yet it is precisely for this reason that the literary critics are better positioned than their colleagues in the social sciences to appreciate the fact that symbolic or interpretive anthropology—in a word, a *literary* anthropology—begins not with an empirically testable hypothesis of origin, but with a minimally conceived heuristic fiction or “originary hypothesis” that is tested not by what precedes it empirically, but by what follows from its minimal anthropological assumptions. But before we can explore these epistemological points further, we must understand the inadequacy of those answers implicit in the empirical approach.

Ethnography and the Evolution of Culture

How does Geertz explain the origin of culture? Geertz proposes that culture functions as a “set of control mechanisms . . . for governing behavior.”¹⁵ The implication is that culture continues a process that is inherent in the natural biological process of evolution. In this sense, culture is understood to be an extension (albeit a remarkable and unprecedented one) of the means whereby complex chemical structures evolve the means to reproduce themselves—to become, that is, more complex biochemical forms. For the origin of life may itself be described as the origin of a mechanism for self-replication. The genetic

“code” is the means whereby physical and chemical matter discovers how to replicate itself, where this replication is regulated by the process of natural selection. The difference between a DNA molecule and the proteins it encodes (not to mention the actual organisms, like amoebas and elephants, that ultimately evolve by natural selection) is a difference in complexity of structure. Rocks and water are relatively “stable” structures because they maintain themselves by the physical and chemical forces of atomic and molecular attraction alone. Compared to rocks and water, amoebas and elephants are breathtakingly complex. So how do they manage to “survive” the tendency for energy to disperse itself over simpler structures? The answer is that they do not. Amoebas and elephants (like all living things) die. But not before passing themselves on, so to speak, through their genes, so that new amoebas and elephants can come to exist and then die. Expressed from the viewpoint of the genes, rather than the self-contained unit of the organism, the function of things like amoebas or elephants is to increase the chances for the genes to replicate themselves. These phenotypes are, as Richard Dawkins puts it, “vehicles” by which strings of DNA, in the context of natural selection, manage to regulate their own reproduction.¹⁶

This is the struggle for life told from the point of view of its most basic ingredient: the gene. But what does human evolution look like told from the point of view not of biology but of humans seeking to understand themselves as cultural beings? This is the specifically *anthropological* question that Geertz at least implicitly poses by attempting to address the problem of the origin of culture. But the curious thing about Geertz’s answer is that he remains of two minds about it. On the one hand, he wants to follow his anthropological instincts and interpret culture as the *defining difference* in studying human evolution; on the other, he downplays this difference and instead explains culture as an extension of general biological evolutionary processes. These two contradictory tendencies form the unconscious subtext to *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Consider first Geertz’s biological claim for the origin of culture. Geertz argues that culture is causally necessary to complete the underlying biology of humans. Without culture, humanity would be, he says, an unfinished genetic “monster.”¹⁷ In a memorable phrase, Geertz calls humanity the “unfinished animal” because of its extraordinary dependence on extragenetic factors (46). Whereas the “behavior patterns of lower animals are . . . given to them with their physical structure,” for “man, what are innately given are extremely general response capacities” (45–46).

But to what extent is this really a causal argument for the origin of culture? Geertz bases his conclusion on the fact that genetically and anatomically *modern* humans require culture to complete the ontoge-

netic process. For example, linguists have long recognized the presence of a so-called “critical period,” from birth to around age twelve, when the child requires contact with other (adult) language users in order to become itself a competent speaker and therefore a participating member in the culture. But this already assumes the genetic completion of the phylogenetic formation of modern *Homo sapiens*, that is, a prolonged evolutionary period in which symbolic culture and genes coevolved to become, in terms of ontogeny, mutually dependent upon one another. The question still remains as to what motivated the initial origin of the “extragenetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms” (44). And it is this initial point of cultural origin that Geertz assumes, uncritically, to be a predictable consequence of more general evolutionary processes.

The larger issue here is the presence within the modern discipline of anthropology of a conflict between scientific and humanistic models of explanation. When Geertz discusses human evolution, he draws on the dominant scientific paradigm, the biological theory of evolution. This theory, which is all but undisputed in what Thomas Kuhn would call the “normal” science of biology, explains the origin of culture not as a sudden “big bang,” but as a gradually emerging trait with clearly recognizable evolutionary precursors. Taking this scientific approach, the evolutionary precursors of human culture—its “elementary forms,” so to speak—are to be inferred not merely from an examination of the fossil record but, more concretely, from observations of the living “protoculture” of such closely related primates as chimpanzees. Examples of protoculture among chimpanzees would include things like their call system, tool use, grooming, and group hunting.¹⁸

On the other hand, when Geertz turns to contemporary or historical examples of human culture, the biological theory of evolution recedes abruptly into the background, and Geertz instead relies on his own (highly cultivated) anthropological intuitions in order to explain the phenomena he observes. For example, in the context of a discussion of Balinese ritual, Geertz begins with an intuitively persuasive definition of religion that enables him to pinpoint what is distinctive about ritual as compared to what he calls the scientific, the aesthetic, and the commonsensical “perspectives” by which people grasp the world around them (110–11). Significantly, it is also in this context that Geertz asserts the originary necessity of symbols for explaining the function of cultural institutions like religion and art. The question is, what enables Geertz to assume the originary significance of symbols (for example, when he discusses particular cultural institutions like Balinese ritual), but to ignore this same significance when he discusses human evolution more generally? Or, to put it slightly differently, what enables him to assert, on the one hand, that symbols are unique to human cognition (and

therefore to the concept of culture) and, on the other, to deny this same anthropological difference?

The inconsistency has to do with the different epistemological contexts for Geertz's discussion of culture. Approached from the direction of biology rather than anthropology, culture is to be interpreted as simply another species-wide "trait," like bipedalism and binocular vision. In this context, culture is explained as one would explain any other biological trait, that is, by comparing it to similar traits observed in other species and then explaining its existence as a product of either homologous or convergent evolution. When, on the other hand, culture is approached from the perspective of anthropology, it is no longer considered to be simply one trait among others. On the contrary, it is taken to *constitute* our very understanding of what it means to be human: the origin of culture is the origin of anthropology. This is ultimately what leads Geertz to define, somewhat clumsily, symbolic representation as the "intertransposability of models for and models of," and then to assert that this capacity for symbolic transposition is the "distinctive characteristic of our mentality" compared to animal cognition (94). In other words, specifically human culture has the unique double-sided ability to refer to an already existing reality *and* to shape reality to itself: the former is an example of a "model *of* reality"; the latter, a "model *for* reality" (93).

Why Interpretation?

This indispensable link between the presence of symbolic culture and the need for human self-understanding—that is, for anthropology—is what makes it both possible and necessary for Geertz to rely on his intuitive, nonempirical understanding of culture when he engages in the anthropological task of the "interpretation of cultures." Now for the student of religion, it is certainly not atypical or controversial to work in this intuitive and illustrative fashion. Indeed, this has been the preferred method of comparative religion at least since the days of James Frazer and the Cambridge ritualists. It is, furthermore, no mere coincidence that students of literature work similarly when they propose a "theory" that will then be confirmed by their interpretation of a selection of literary texts. In both cases, it is never altogether clear how the theory is to be distinguished from the confirmation of the theory in the interpretation of particular texts; on the contrary, one is frequently tempted to conclude that the interpretation is itself an instance of the theory.

But why should cultural anthropology and literary studies be unable to separate the presentation of their constitutive theories from the

testing of those same theories? Why is it the case that when one interprets a particular cultural work one is, as is frequently pointed out by those who disagree with the interpretation, always already being “theoretical”? Or, to put the same question slightly differently, why are the most heated debates in the humanities always centered on the desire to expose someone else’s ideology, which is to say, the unexpressed theoretical presuppositions that are understood to be *unconsciously determining* the interpreter’s discourse?

These questions get to the heart of the debate about the epistemological status of interpretation. The implication is that the fundamental categories assumed by cultural analysis do not exist independently of their representation. To define one’s fundamental concepts or categories of analysis is also to identify the constitutive elements of one’s theory because the interpretation that follows from the theory has no other ontological guarantee than the existence of the definition itself. This does not mean that every interpretation is also therefore a “theory,” at least not in the sense that one normally understands this term. What distinguishes a theory from the broader category of interpretation is an epistemological and methodological principle: the theory functions as a *more minimal*—and therefore more easily sharable—interpretation of its object. It functions not merely to reproduce a preexisting historically specific interpretation of the cultural object, but to identify the minimal cultural categories necessary for the interpretation of the object to exist in the first place. It is, in short, the basis of a minimal anthropology. The first moment of any interpretive anthropology begins with the analysis of the originary categories that constitute its definition of the human.

An analogy from sports may help to illustrate the point. In soccer, the winning team is whoever scores the most goals in a given period of time. But what is a goal? The definition of a goal is when the ball crosses the goal line. But notice the peculiar thing about this definition. There is nothing inherent in the actual physical objects involved that enables us to explain the causal origin of the definition. There is nothing intrinsic to the structure of the ball, or the goal line, or indeed to the players involved, that determines the fact that when the ball crosses the goal line it counts as a score of one point.¹⁹ Interpreting the event as a goal requires understanding the definition because the definition constitutes its object. It is only because all those involved in the game (the players, the referee, the spectators) grasp this definition that they also understand the game.

Now imagine the arrival of an anthropologist from Mars who wishes to analyze the behavior of a group of humans kicking an inflated spherical object around an open space. He observes that the behavior of the players (as well as the spectators) centers on the ball. He also observes

the extraordinary ecstasy of one half of the players and the dejection of the other half when the ball crosses the goal line at one end of the field. He might even write an account of this behavior in his journal, so he can share his observations with his colleagues back on Mars. Has our Martian visitor truly understood soccer? He has seen the agony of defeat, the glory of victory, the wild cheers of the crowd, but has he really understood what is going on? Is he able to define for his Martian colleagues what soccer is?

Consider the problem from the point of view of the Martian. What categories does he possess by which to interpret the game? Suppose that our Martian is also an accomplished scientist. He has studied all kinds of life forms throughout the universe, including humans. He has a good understanding of human physiology and is well-versed in Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. So he goes to work interpreting soccer in terms of these biological categories. What does he see? He sees that playing soccer is good exercise: it increases overall muscle power and aerobic fitness; it enhances motor skills (especially of the feet and legs); and it coordinates the actions of the individual with those of the group. He concludes that soccer functions as a form of "play," that is, as a rehearsal for the real-life struggle for survival, which will select only the fittest individuals. Our Martian observer is pleased at his discovery. It is now clear to him why soccer—and other sports like it—are played by humans the world over: soccer enhances the individual's reproductive fitness. And why not interpret soccer in these functional biological terms?

Because that is not how *we* interpret soccer. Soccer is not just a form of exercise to increase muscle tone and aerobic fitness, or to attract mates, or to increase social intelligence. It is also a game, and as a game it includes a set of symbolic rules that constitute our way of interpreting what happens on the soccer field. And herein lies the key to our Martian's truly understanding the function of soccer: he must be able to grasp what he observes in terms of symbolic rules, which means minimally being able to define what counts as a goal. To be able to represent what soccer is, both to himself and to his fellow anthropologists on Mars, he would have to be able to grasp the constitutive symbolic categories of soccer. He would, in effect, have to be able to write a version of the rule-book of soccer in his journal. If he cannot do that, then he has not understood the game.

But notice what is assumed by this example. It assumes a desire on the part of the Martian to *enter into dialogue* with humans. For how could he possibly even begin to understand concepts like goal, game, player, defeat, or victory without also being a language user like us? But why should our Martian be capable of representing the world symbolically as

we do? Without this capacity, there is simply no way for the Martian to grasp the conceptual structure of soccer and hence no way for him to define its constitutive categories, such as the definition of a goal.

Symbolic Anthropology

Now reconsider Geertz's definition of culture as a system of symbols that both regulates and constitutes human behavior. The regulative function of culture is implicit in Geertz's notion of culture as a model *for* patterning human behavior. A religious rite regulates human action; it tells us *what* to do in *this* particular situation. The constitutive function, on the other hand, is implicit in Geertz's idea that the process of symbolization is responsible for creating the social reality of religion in the first place. In an important sense, the religious rite constitutes a reality that is quite separate from the world of everyday perception. This is the "model of" aspect of the rite. The rite does not just tell us what to do, it also functions as a model *of* the world.

But this world is not the same thing as the world of sensuous perception. It is not the world of rocks, trees, and cats—what Austin called the "medium-sized dry goods" of common perceptual experience. It is rather the social reality that is constituted by the very performance of the rite. For example, in undergoing the sacrament of marriage, two hitherto unmarried individuals are incorporated into the institution of marriage. But the rite of marriage exists only because it is itself part of a total social reality, which includes things like the church and its hierarchy of priests, as well as the church-goers, both married and unmarried, who make up its membership. A rite exists as part of a total institutional reality, and as such it functions as a representation of the world into which each individual—through its various rites of passage—is incorporated.²⁰

But here we seem to arrive at an impasse overlooked by Geertz. For how do we test the truth of religious representations? If religion indeed functions as a model *of* the world, as Geertz maintains, then this implies a difference between the model and the object it describes. Surely the model deserves to be tested by judging its ability to measure up to the object it also purports to represent? Ought we not to submit the religious model—if indeed it is a "model"—to the same standards of empirical falsifiability as we do any other scientific model?

To ask this question is to assume that there is ultimately no difference between religious and scientific representations of the world. Geertz sometimes talks as though this is the case. For instance, he refers to the example of a scientific theory of hydraulics used in the construction of a dam and argues that the theory is both a model *of* reality and a model *for*

reality: it is a model *of* reality because it seeks to explain the real physical relationships existing between the water and the dam; it is a model *for* reality because on the basis of the symbolic model, one can then manipulate reality to build nonsymbolic things; for example, one could build a real dam. Geertz then goes on to say that “for psychological and social systems, and for cultural models that we would not ordinarily refer to as ‘theories,’ but rather as ‘doctrines,’ ‘melodies,’ or ‘rites,’ the case is in no way different” (93).

But this last statement is simply not true. Culture is not the same thing as a scientific theory. Rites are not “models” in the same sense that a theory of hydraulics is a model. A scientific model is tested quite differently from a cultural “model.” Science aims to explain the intrinsic structure of the world. The latter is not held to be dependent upon the formulation of the model for its existence. The fundamental entities that a scientific theory aims to *discover* are not understood to be coterminous with the model used to explain them. What makes one scientific model ultimately preferable to another is the fact that a model is judged not merely against another model, but against the objective standard provided by a preexisting nonsymbolic reality. This is what we mean when we say that a model is empirically testable. It is empirically testable because it strives to give an account of a world that exists outside the medium of symbolic representation. Of course, the model must inevitably make use of symbols, but the latter are conceived to be “transparent” to their objects. For the scientist, symbols function as a useful means for accessing a reality that exists outside the mediating function of language itself. This does not mean that we must therefore naively believe that the model is *the same thing* as the reality it seeks to describe. How could it be, since representation implies the very division between the symbol and its object that makes scientific modeling possible in the first place? Precisely the model’s utility as a scientific explanation is a condition of the assumption that it refers to a reality that is ontologically separate from it.

But the same is not the case for cultural representations. Culture does not aim to explain the intrinsic causal structure of the physical and biological world. In an important sense, a cultural “model” (for example, a religious rite) constitutes the world to which it also refers. The rite is not a blueprint for the physical structure of the world. It is rather a blueprint for *human action*. Its “truth” is tested by its pragmatic value as a model for how to think and behave as a member of a community, where membership in this community is ultimately given by the constitutive function of symbolization itself.

The trouble with Geertz’s theory of interpretation is that, as in the case of the interpretive theories of Nietzsche and his postmodern

disciples, he does not recognize this distinction between scientific explanation and cultural interpretation. Geertz assumes there is no difference between a cultural performance and a scientific theory. Both are equally “models of” and “models for” because both are equally dependent upon the use of symbols. But this is to ignore a basic difference in how symbols function in each case.

Word and World

One way to grasp the difference is to see it in terms of the notion of “direction of fit” between symbol and object, word and world.²¹ A scientific model uses symbols (usually iconic models or drawings, rather than words in the narrow linguistic sense) to construct an accurate representation of the world, where this world (that is, the fundamental ontology assumed by physics, chemistry, and biology) is assumed to exist outside the constitutive categories of the symbols themselves. Its direction of fit is thus world → word: it manipulates symbols to fit, as closely as possible, the nonsymbolic structure of the world. A cultural “model,” on the other hand, uses symbols to construct *ex nihilo*, so to speak, a social reality that exists *on top of* the brute physical reality described by physics, chemistry, and biology. Its direction of fit is thus both word → world and world → word: it seeks to make the world conform to the word, but it also assumes the existence of the world designated by the word. In performing a rite, for example, the participants seek to recreate their shared experience of a world that is, in the final analysis, only available as a rite, as part of a social reality that is constituted by the very symbolic categories also used to refer to it. The rite is both a performance and a representation, both a “model for” and a “model of.” It constitutes the category (the sacred) that it also seeks to represent as an independently existing object. This constitutive or “performative” element of symbolic representation holds for all specifically anthropological categories, for example, the sacred, the aesthetic, the ethical, the moral, desire, linguistic and economic exchange, and so on: in short, precisely those categories assumed by culture and treated as objects of inquiry in the humanities. Without the symbols, there would be no possibility of, for example, religious experience because the very category of the sacred depends upon the symbols that are used both to constitute it and to make it accessible. Compare this cultural “model” of representation to a scientific theory of hydraulics. The physics and chemistry of the flow patterns of water do not owe their existence to the theory. Water would continue to flow in conformity to the physics and chemistry of water, whether or not a scientific model existed to explain these patterns.

In the normal course of things, we take the constitutive function of symbols completely for granted. When I buy a cup of coffee, I do not consciously think about the fact that my giving someone else money in exchange for the coffee constitutes the abstract exchange value of the coffee. Rather, I immediately grasp the situation as bound by the institutional status of coffee shops, money, customers, owners, employees, and so on, and my exchange of money for coffee takes place in the context of this immediately graspable social reality. But it is precisely the ease with which we interpret the brute physical phenomena of the world in terms of their symbolically mediated institutional functions that makes it so easy to forget that the possibility of interpreting the world in this symbolic fashion is an extremely remarkable and, from an evolutionary standpoint, quite unprecedented phenomenon.

But here is the central paradox: there is no way you can get just *a little bit* of symbolic culture. One often hears that chimpanzees and other nonhuman primates have “protoculture,” meaning they have “a little bit” of culture but not as much as we do. But this is the wrong way to look at the origin of culture. Culture is not a collection of things that we can add to and subtract from, like a pile of stones. Social behavior is either symbolic (and therefore an instance of culture, in the sense used by Geertz), or it is not symbolic (and therefore not cultural). There is no halfway point. You are either interpreting the world symbolically, that is, in terms of the symbolic imposition of value on the brute physical reality of the world, or you are interpreting the world in terms of more basic perceptual-cognitive functions. This is why accounts that seek to dilute the definition of culture in terms of the elementary or unconscious “protoculture” of chimpanzees or other nonhuman animals (including ancestral prehumans) are ultimately mistaking the symbolic function of culture for some *other* nonsymbolic function, for example, a more basic biological function, like reproductive fitness.

The Text as Origin

We have already seen, in the example of the Martian anthropologist, what is wrong with this kind of reductionist approach, but it is worth repeating the essential point, this time by focusing on what is specifically “anthropological” about the problem of human origin. From the scientific perspective, human origin is understood to be a strictly empirical problem. The solution is not to invent a story—a “text”—that explains why humans are the way they are, but to examine the available empirical evidence, including that of both our hominid ancestors (whose living patterns are to be inferred from fossil remains) and our

closest living primate relatives, in particular, chimpanzees and bonobos. This evidence is then to be interpreted not in the context of personally invented theories, definitions, or speculations, but in the context of the currently reigning paradigm in the life sciences, which is the biological theory of evolution.

I do not wish to dispute the explanatory power of this approach. On the contrary, its achievements in the life sciences are undeniable. In the social sciences, on the other hand, it is far from clear whether scientific method can eclipse the traditional discovery procedure of textual interpretation, which continues to be the tacitly accepted "method" in the interpretive text-based disciplines that constitute the central core of the humanities. This was most aggressively apparent during the heyday of deconstruction, which attempted to show that the ad hoc empirical methods of the social sciences ultimately depended upon the textual methods of the literary scholar. Today the lessons of deconstruction have not simply been forgotten. On the contrary, they have been assimilated to the point of a commonplace. The real inheritors of deconstruction are those literary scholars, like Greenblatt, who have turned Jacques Derrida's and Paul de Man's scrupulous attention to the blindspots and aporias of the canonical texts of the literary and philosophical traditions to nothing less than all culture. Not just Shakespeare and Hegel, but economic, juridical, governmental, and other assorted "cultural" objects that record the otherwise mundane interactions of everyday social life, are now up for grabs. All are "texts" to be interpreted for their ironies and paradoxes, using the methods of literary analysis. No document or cultural artifact is too insignificant to find its way into the web of semiotic significance spun by the new historicist. Indeed, the more apparently insignificant the cultural object, the more gratifying it becomes to demonstrate its hitherto unrealized cultural-aesthetic significance.

The interdisciplinary success of periodic literary offenses like deconstruction and new historicism seems obvious to me. It has nothing to do with the superior merits of one or other of the particular theories that continually jostle for attention in the small but vocal marketplace of academic literary criticism. Rather, it has to do with the basic definition of the human implicit in the very discipline of literature. For if literary critics can agree on one thing, it is that what takes primacy in the study of culture is the necessity of textual interpretation. Translated into a definition of the human, this premise becomes the basis of a literary anthropology or, as Greenblatt likes to put it, a cultural poetics. The human is a text to be interpreted, not because there is "nothing outside the text" but because without the text there is no humanity. To the biologist or physicist (as for any natural scientist), it is certainly absurd to

claim there is nothing outside the text. But to those concerned centrally with the study of the human (that is, those in the humanities and the “anthropological” social sciences), it is literally quite true that without the mediating presence of the originary scene of symbolic representation—“textuality,” if one likes—there is no humanity and therefore no object of study.

It should therefore be unsurprising that the anthropologist most widely known for his symbolic or interpretive approach to culture should also be the most congenial figurehead for literary critics in search of broader disciplinary legitimacy. For what could be more breathtaking than to discover, as Greenblatt did in the 1970s, that at the heart and soul of the human sciences, in the discipline of anthropology itself, lay a method that had been practiced by literary and biblical scholars long before the first anthropologists arrived on the scene.

Does this mean that literary criticism and cultural anthropology are ultimately concerned with the same thing? Is Greenblatt really an anthropologist? Is Geertz really a literary critic? Is it possible that the difference between literary criticism and anthropology is ultimately dependent upon an underlying unity that has been obscured by the modern university’s tendency to fragment anthropological knowledge into ad hoc areas of specialization?

My inclination is to answer this last question in the affirmative. I think that there is a great deal more to Greenblatt’s use of Geertz than mere superficial borrowing of another discipline’s concepts for reasons of prestige. The trouble is that Greenblatt himself fails to pursue this convergence to its ultimate anthropological source, thereby leaving himself open to the charge, unfair or not, that his appropriation is indeed superficial. In reading Geertz, Greenblatt recognizes something familiar to his literary sensibilities: that anthropology, like literary criticism, is constituted by the act of interpretation. But this moment of cross-disciplinary recognition is all too brief because it fails to ask the next logical question: what is (the origin of) interpretation? In the heady excitement of discovering that another discipline shares a similar “method,” it is forgotten that this similarity of method is a consequence of the similarity of the object.

This object is humanity itself. In anthropology, this fact is no doubt more obvious than in literary criticism, which deals with texts rather than with real people. But once we realize that texts are produced by humans alone and that the “exotic” non-Western cultures studied by classic ethnography are the products of humans essentially (that is, biologically) no different from ourselves, then we arrive at the conclusion that at the origin of both interpretive anthropology and literary criticism lies the assumption that the human is most succinctly defined

as the creature that represents itself by its culture, which is to say, by its “texts.”

But once we make representation the center of an anthropology, isn't this just to invite the radical relativism of poststructuralist theory? For if humanity knows itself only through its representations, then it becomes impossible to locate an origin that is not always already a representation. In attempting to trace a representation back to its supposed origin, the anthropologist or literary critic is engaged in a supposedly hopeless task because every origin turns out to be another representation. At no point in this “hermeneutic” circle can we definitively establish the priority of one representation over another. Nor, needless to say, can we hope to extricate ourselves from the circle altogether. The anthropologist who studies another society's representations is not thereby excluded from (the prejudices of) his own. On the contrary, contemporary cultural anthropology has hammered this point home more forcefully than any other. But after the routine accusations of ethnocentrism have died down, we are still left with the fact that the discipline of anthropology, ethnocentric or not, begins with the critical attempt by humans to understand themselves. That the need for this self-understanding was prompted by the discovery of cultures vastly different from those of Western Europe is not an argument against anthropology. On the contrary, it is a demonstration of its critical coming of age: that the anthropology implicit in the West's own self-understanding could not assume the historical inevitability of its own culture. Anthropology had to historicize itself, which meant comparing the texts of its own tradition with those to be found in the traditions of others and then sorting out the historical differences and similarities. That these other traditions were, more often than not, also oral traditions merely demonstrated the necessity that the anthropologist had to travel to witness the occasion of their performance in order to record them for (later) theoretical reflection. In an oral culture, there are no lending libraries that allow one the convenience of armchair study.

Ethnography Revisited

Geertz, like the literary critics who champion his work, is aware that the human is defined most significantly by its use of symbolic culture and, furthermore, that the interpretive methods of cultural anthropology are constituted by this definition. However, unlike the literary critics (who take this assumption more or less for granted), Geertz also seeks to justify the interpretive definition of the human empirically, that is, by giving a “scientific” account of human evolution that explains the origin

of what he calls the “extragenetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms” that constitute the human animal (44).

Why does Geertz do this? Is an empirical account of human origins a necessary prerequisite for the development of an anthropology? Geertz obviously thinks that it is, for why else would he venture to give such an account? But it is important to realize that Geertz’s empirical account of human evolution, though not substantively incorrect, bears no necessary logical relationship to his fundamental premise that the human is defined by its use of symbolic representation. All the empirical evidence Geertz cites to confirm his definition of the human stands outside the definition itself. You could grant Geertz every single empirical claim he makes, and you still would not have to grant him the further claim that the human is defined by symbolic interpretation. The latter stands prior to any possible empirical claim. It stands at the origin of the human itself.

To see the difference between the logical and empirical status of the claim that humanity is constituted by its use of symbolic culture, consider once more Geertz’s account of the origin of culture. Geertz argues that humans (or protohumans, for when could we properly speak of humans?) increasingly came to rely on nongenetic control mechanisms. This created a feedback loop between brain and culture. Over the course of hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of years, this in turn led to an increasingly plastic brain—that is, a brain that depended less on hardwired control mechanisms and more on external “cultural” forms of control.

There are a number of points I wish to make about this account of human evolution. The first is that it is entirely circular. All that Geertz is saying is that, biologically, humans came to depend on cultural specialization because culture was necessary for biologically unspecialized humans. The reference to coevolution between (internal) genes and (external) culture should not blind us to the circularity of the argument. For what is *not* explained is precisely how cultural control mechanisms became sufficiently externalized to become subsequently an indispensable element in human biological evolution. Instead, this process of externalization is accepted as self-evident. Implicit in the empirical description is the very definition of symbolic culture Geertz seeks to establish. The account functions not as an empirical explanation, but as an inference based on a preexisting conceptual definition that, as we have already seen, is assumed by the disciplines of both cultural anthropology and literary criticism.

The second point is related to the first, and it responds to a possible methodological objection. What is wrong with Geertz’s beginning with a conceptual definition of the human and then seeking to test this

empirically? Is this not simply good scientific method? I agree that this is good scientific method if one's definition of science is that a definition or hypothesis must be empirically falsifiable. But Geertz's definition of culture is not empirically falsifiable. The particular cultural examples Geertz cites (for instance, when he discusses Balinese ritual) are not empirical tests at all, but rather illustrations that lend plausibility to his definition of symbolic culture. In themselves these particular analyses do not serve to falsify the definition. On the contrary, they are illustrations of the definition at work because the possibility of seeing them this way depends upon accepting the definition in the first place. The same applies to Geertz's account of human evolution. The account is plausible, but it does not establish his definition of human culture empirically. In fact, if anything, it tends to do the opposite. By turning to the biological theory of evolution, Geertz risks undermining the anthropological claim he wishes to establish, namely, that humanity is defined by its biologically unprecedented use of symbolic culture.

This leads me to my third and final point. Geertz's account of human evolution actually displaces the anthropological claim he wants to make for the *difference* between cultural interpretation and scientific explanation. This is because Geertz ignores the fact that, evolutionarily speaking, the origin of symbolic interpretation must be regarded as anomalous, not typical.²² Geertz talks about the development of symbolic culture as though it were an entirely natural and predictable occurrence. But the fact of the matter is that there is no other species on earth that has evolved symbolic culture. We just have to examine the unfortunate situation of our closest living relative, the chimpanzee, to grasp the magnitude of this anomaly. Thanks to our capacity for symbolic culture—and hence to religion, art, science, and technology—we have adapted to every corner and climate of the globe. Meanwhile, the chimpanzee has been confined to marginal habitats in the rainforests of central and western Africa (habitats which are every day becoming more marginal, thanks to rapid deforestation by humans). The question that Geertz avoids asking is why chimpanzees, who are obviously a highly intelligent species, and who use rudimentary “tools,” live in groups, and apparently engage in coordinated hunts and intergroup raiding parties,²³ have nonetheless failed to evolve a system of symbolic communication. Surely, from the point of view of comparative biology upon which evolutionary theory is based, it is aberrant in the extreme to treat the marginal case (language) as representative of other systems of communication? By judging our case as typical, rather than as anomalous, we are forced to regard our nonhuman primate cousins as failures: a species who came close but did not quite make it to our capacity for symbolic cognition.

It may be objected that I am missing Geertz's point here and thus unfairly accusing him of something he does not say. Geertz does not talk about chimpanzees at all. So how can I criticize him for failing to notice the difference between chimpanzees and humans? I can criticize him for this failure because what I am concerned with is not the fact that Geertz ignores chimpanzees in his discussion of human evolution, but that his view of the origin of culture as an unproblematic occurrence ignores the fact that no other species has evolved it.

To put the point differently, the empirical problem of discovering facts about the origin of human culture cannot ultimately be separated from the theoretical problem of representing those facts in an overall narrative about the origin of human culture. It is no doubt comforting to believe that a sufficiently critical and skeptical mindset—in a word, a sufficiently *scientific* mindset—will be enough to safeguard against the countervailing desire to clothe the scant empirical remains in a more satisfying, more completely realized aesthetic narrative. But it is ultimately the latter, not the former, that responds to our *narrative desire*. Scientific accounts of human origin are of course not pure myths; their narratives of human development are inferences based on the available empirical data. But because these accounts are also narratives that fulfill a basic human desire for something other than the bare facts alone are capable of revealing, it is not always easy to separate the desire to tell a good story from the evidence that constrains the telling of that story.²⁴ No doubt this helps to explain the disproportional market share that automatically goes to scientific—rather than purely philosophical or anthropological—popularizers of the latest thinking on human self-knowledge. Scientists and their general reading public are by and large untroubled by the theoretical problem of the origin of human representation. On the contrary, armed with the latest facts they appear ever closer to solving the problem of precisely when and how language and symbolic culture originated. The speed with which these accounts need to be revised as more evidence is discovered just shows how these accounts are motivated by empirical rather than theoretical considerations. But the problem of producing a more accurate picture of human evolution is not just an empirical problem. It is a *theoretical* problem about how we choose to define the human in the first place.

The Regulative and Constitutive Functions of Culture

Let us return for a moment to Geertz's definition of culture as a nongenetic control mechanism that functions both as a regulation of an already existing reality and a constitution of a new reality. In what sense

does culture both regulate behavior and constitute it? The difference implies the duality of symbolic reference. In the performance of a culturally significant act there are two directions of reference: there is an “external” reference to past cultural performances, which are being commemorated or represented by the present performance; and there is an “internal” reference to the current performance, in the sense that something new is being produced. The performance is both representational in the classical Aristotelian sense (a “model of”) and performative in the sense of the speech-act theorists (a “model for”). As Austin was fond of pointing out, when the minister says, “I hereby pronounce you husband and wife,” he is referring both to past contexts (past marriage ceremonies) and to the present context (the current marriage, which did not exist before the speech act was produced).²⁵ As the central figure in the ordinary-language approach to philosophy, Austin’s attention to the performative dimension of language marked a welcome relief from philosophy’s longtime obsession with systems of reference based exclusively on the declarative sentence. Because the sentence can be separated from the scene of its performance in a way that “ostensive” ritual expressions (like those analyzed by Austin) cannot, it is easy to forget that the possibility of logical truth, based on the correspondence between a sentence or proposition and the state of affairs it refers to, depends upon a more elementary linguistic form (the ostensive), in which truth is produced by the context of the utterance itself.²⁶ When the child says, “Kitty!” while pointing to a coyote, the utterance is not false, for the purpose of the utterance was not to designate the object as a member of the semantic category “cat,” but to draw someone else’s attention (perhaps an inattentive mother) to the presence of the coyote. The response elicited by the mother would not be, “No, that’s not a kitty, that’s a coyote,” but rather an urgent cry to warn the child away from the offending animal. The child’s utterance is “felicitous” precisely because its semantic function is so impoverished. There is no occasion for ambiguity because the object appears within the same scene as the utterance of the word.

If the production of symbolic reference were restricted in this fashion to the physical proximity between the word and its object, human language would never have evolved beyond the indexical communication systems used by many other animals. This unignorable fact should alert us to the absurdity of the notion that symbolic reference evolved “naturally” from animal signal systems. And yet this is precisely the standard textbook explanation in evolutionary anthropology. Geertz is only reproducing this standard view when he claims that human culture emerged gradually, increasingly shaping the human brain to adapt to the artificial environment made possible by culture. But what is ne-

glected in this definition of culture as a control mechanism is precisely the wherewithal to produce the artificial "cultural" environment in the first place.

The problem can be put more sharply when we adopt Geertz's own terminology of "model of" and "model for." If the genetic code functions as the exemplary case of the "model for," in the sense that the genotype is the "model for" the phenotype, then culture models behavior not by storing its models in the genotype, but by storing its models *virtually* in the collective memory that we call symbolic culture. Of the two halves of the model-for/model-of dichotomy, the real difficulty lies in explaining the origin of the model-of side of the definition. For implicit in the notion of a set of signs functioning as a virtual model *of* something else (as a map stands to the territory it represents) are the twin features of arbitrariness and displacement that set symbolic reference apart from all other reference systems in the animal and biological world.

How Did Symbols Originate?

Whence came our capacity to think abstractly in terms of symbols? How are we to account for the "transcendence," or, in Geertz's scheme, the "externalization," of the sign on the basis of the "immanence," or "internalization," of genetic control mechanisms? The notion of the sign as a model *of* something else is only possible once the symbolic world of signs (which finds its psychological correlate in the separate "mental space" of internal reflection) has been separated from the world of things. Between the function of the sign as a symbolic model *of* something nonsymbolic, and its real-world application as a model *for* doing something, lies a space that cannot be simply erased by hopeful appeals to the dialectic between the genotype and its increasingly externalized phenotype. Culture and language are not phenotypic traits precisely because they cannot be genetically assimilated.²⁷ In order to explain their function, therefore, we cannot resort to the standard biological categories of explanation.

The problem may be put in terms of the opposition between the interpretive and scientific conceptions of human origin. Geertz knows that an interpretive anthropology properly begins with a definition of culture that makes clear the anthropologist's aims, methods, and assumptions. But he also knows that the definition is itself an interpretive act and therefore implicated in the very process it seeks to explain, which is the production of culture. This does not mean that the definition is simply equivalent to the "emic," or internal, perspective of

the culture observed by the anthropologist. The definition is the anthropologist's, not the informant's (which is not to say that the informant may not later choose to adopt the anthropologist's perspective). But it is nonetheless true that the anthropologist's method of discovery is to move back and forth between the "etic" perspective of his theory and the "emic" perspective of the cultures he interprets by way of that definition.

Is this the best that the interpretive anthropologist can do? For, if it is, how are we to test the truth of the anthropologist's definition of culture? By what standard are we to judge the merits of the anthropologist's interpretation over the interpretations provided by those he studies? On the one hand, the claim is being made that the anthropologist's perspective, given by his definition, provides the privileged perspective for understanding a particular culture. On the other, the claim is that the definition is an extrapolation of what is already implicit in the cultures under observation. So why should we privilege the anthropologist's perspective at all? Why not privilege that of the people he observes? After all, their perspective is closer to the originary source of culture, is it not? Should it therefore not also be a truer, more faithful expression of the "essence" of culture?

Geertz is well aware of this paradox. And he normally embraces it by moving quite easily between the twin perspectives of generalizing theorist (of the underlying concept of culture) and local historical and ethnographic observer (of multiple and different cultures). But inevitably at some point in this endless hermeneutic circle between etic definition (of the concept of culture) and emic participation (in a particular culture), it is tempting to put an end to all the interpretive instability. Geertz does this when he explains culture not by interpreting the concept, but by inferring its presence on the basis of nonconceptual empirical evidence. But in reducing the categories of cultural interpretation to those of biological explanation, Geertz eliminates, in one stroke, the fundamental interpretive crux of all culture, namely, the paradox between representation and performance, "model of" and "model for." Culture—and therefore the human itself—depends upon this paradox for its existence. Any anthropology that eliminates this paradox also eliminates the possibility of its own historical formulation. The solution is not to eliminate the paradox, but to include it as a constitutive element of one's anthropology. I will return to this point later.

The lesson to be learned is that it is impossible to derive the anthropological concept of culture from the scientific categories assumed by the biological theory of evolution. We may choose to infer the presence of culture from the empirical evidence (for example, from

anatomical changes, such as bipedalism, increased relative skull size, reduced incisors, decreased sexual dimorphism, increased manual dexterity, and so on). We may even interpret the discovery of sharp-edged flints as evidence of tool use and therefore of symbolic thought because the flints appear to have been intentionally flaked according to an abstract and repeatable design. But the only indisputable evidence of symbolic culture is when we unhesitatingly attribute to an object a symbolic function—as, for example, when we stand before the cave paintings in Lascaux. We have no idea what particular cultural function these paintings performed (were they perhaps part of a hunting ceremony?). But we nonetheless interpret them immediately as aesthetic objects—that is, as demonstrating a formal interest in the appearance of the representation itself. These are not merely models for, but models of. They possess the same formal relationship to their content as that presupposed by the art objects of our own and other contemporary and historical cultures.

But notice where we have now arrived. In pointing toward the exemplary symbolic function of art, we are drawing the same conclusion we noticed in Greenblatt's appropriation of Geertz: that art and (in particular) literature have a central role to play in anthropology. So what is it about art and literature that makes them such exemplary objects for criticism, which is to say, for cultural interpretation? Why is the criticism of culture to be modeled on the analysis of the aesthetic object?

Mimetic and Aesthetic Paradox

The reader will by now be unsurprised to hear that the answer to this question depends on an originary analysis of the structure of the symbolic sign. Such an analysis, however, is not without its obstacles, the most significant of which is simply the obstacle of the philosophical and aesthetic tradition itself. For well over two millennia, the category of representation has been dominated by the Aristotelian definition of mimesis as an artful imitation of its object. This definition is accepted uncritically by Geertz, as well as by Greenblatt, who explicitly associates his literary anthropology (as the designation "poetics of culture" makes unambiguously clear) with the kind of formal analysis of structure first conducted by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. In order to be able to mount a challenge to this all-but-impregnable tradition, we must therefore make a clean break with the traditional Aristotelian categories. Such "clean breaks" in intellectual history are of course very rare, and we should not be surprised by the lack of support they get at the time of their inception. The more original the idea (that is, the more clean the

break), the less likely it is to be noticed, and the more built-in resistance there will be to its adoption as an alternative paradigm for thinking about the traditional problems. But if a new idea really is an improvement over its precursors (and not just another crackpot theory from the lunatic fringe), then it will eventually prove itself in the marketplace of ideas. I believe René Girard's groundbreaking studies of mimesis are beginning to show us the chinks in the armor of the traditional "metaphysical" understanding of representation.²⁸ Girard's theory remains highly controversial. But it is the mark of new and powerful ideas that they inspire such controversy because they inevitably go against the grain of established opinion.²⁹ We are far from having appreciated the full implications of Girard's theory. In what follows, I wish to make a few suggestions about the relevance of his analysis of mimesis for understanding the "anthropological" turn in literary studies today. In so doing, I will inevitably be contributing to the wider debate about literary knowledge and its relationship to the social and biological sciences.

How does Girard understand mimesis? Girard reinterprets the Aristotelian definition of this category by drawing attention to the conflict implicit in all imitation. In effect, Girard shows that the Aristotelian notion of mimesis as objective (dramatic and tragic) form is grounded in the conflict that is also the explicit content of high literature and, in particular, of the Greek tragedy Aristotle took as the paradigm for his theory of catharsis. Girard's anthropology is thus explicitly "literary" in the sense that it insists on the wisdom of the content of great works of literature. But because this insistence is made on the basis of a translation of literary content into the self-consciously theoretical terms of an anthropological hypothesis, one cannot simultaneously accuse Girard of pursuing a merely "empty" formalism. On the contrary, what irks many a literary formalist is precisely Girard's insistence that the content of literary form, far from being "arbitrary," is in fact interpretable in terms of an anthropological hypothesis of origin.

But why exactly is imitation conflictive? We can answer this question by taking as our point of departure Geertz's notion of symbolic modeling. As Geertz's model-for/model-of terminology suggests, "models for" exist throughout the animal kingdom. The simplest example of a "model for" is when one individual imitates another: the latter functions as the *model for* the former. Given the greater efficiency of imitation as a mechanism for the transmission of valuable (that is, adaptive) behaviors, we can assume that it would be increasingly selected for among species where group living had evolved as a viable evolutionary strategy.³⁰ But what this straightforward conclusion neglects is that there are negative as well as positive consequences to imitation. The most obvious negative consequence is increased competition and

rivalry among conspecifics. Imitation is fine when what is imitated is the model's behavior alone. By imitating the alpha male, I may learn a good mate-attracting strategy, or an effective hunting technique. But it is in the nature of imitation to imitate not just behaviors but the direction of behavior toward objects that satisfy real appetitive needs. The alpha male's attention to females or to food attracts my attention to these objects too. The major problem for imitative social behaviors thus becomes one of controlling the conflict that imitated attention to external objects inevitably produces. This is usually done through pecking-order hierarchies. Given our sense of moral reciprocity, it is tempting to see these hierarchies as unpleasant impositions on a world of otherwise unconstrained "free" individuals. Nothing could be further from the truth. Animal hierarchies are implicit in the very structure of imitation. The evolution of a pecking order is a development that expands the possibilities of imitation as a mechanism for the transmission of innovative behaviors. Rather than regard the animal pecking order as an unnecessary repression of the individual's "free" behavior, we should understand it as an optimization of imitative possibilities within the context of the group as a whole. Since imitation increases rivalry among individual group members, it will tend to destabilize the group. The solution to the destabilizing effect of imitative rivalry is the pecking order which functionalizes the asymmetrical relationship already implicit in the mimetic subject's relationship to the other model-mediator. I may learn a valuable behavior by imitating you, but at a certain point in the mimetic process, your behavior will also become an obstacle to me, for example, when it leads to our convergence on the same object. Disputes over objects such as mates or food are settled by one-on-one fights that do not so much upset the hierarchy as reconfigure it, for instance, by my winning a fight for the alpha position. Such incessant jockeying for position in the social hierarchy has been fascinatingly documented by studies of nonhuman primates such as chimpanzees.³¹

It is at this point that we can identify the "missing link" in Geertz's deanthropologized concept of culture. What is missing in Geertz's idea of symbolic modeling is an appreciation for the "pragmatic paradox" implicit in all modeling behavior, human or otherwise, but which only becomes explicit or *represented* in the human case when the mimetic paradox latent within the structure of imitation itself becomes manifest in the pragmatic form of a collective "mimetic crisis," the formal solution to which is the originary symbolic sign.³²

What is a pragmatic paradox, and how is it related to the Girardian mimetic crisis? At the simplest level, imitation implies the cognitive capacity to treat analogous beings as "models for" behavior. This

capacity need not be terribly advanced. We often associate imitation with highly intelligent species, such as chimpanzees. The synonymy between the words "imitate" and "ape" points to this association. But even insects are capable of imitating one another, for example, when they swarm toward a food source. The important point is that imitation allows for the transmission of information from one individual to another independently of the genetic system. Each individual functions as a "model for" the behavior of another.

But let us take this argument a step further. If imitation functions as an extragenetic control mechanism for the transmission of behavior between individuals in a group, at what point in this relationship does the behavior of the model become not merely a "model for" me to imitate, but a "model of" something independent of both the model's behavior and mine? At what point in the imitative process do I become aware of the fact that I am not merely imitating others' actions, but imitating their actions as a *representation* of an object separate from the behavior itself, which is to say, as a formally closed gesture that *re*-presents the object to the other? The shift in mimetic attention depends on our capacity to interpret each other's behavior not merely as an instrumental action toward achieving an immediate goal, but as a collectively produced symbol that designates the object as prohibited, even if only for a moment, to immediate appropriation. This space of symbolic deferral constitutes the twin moments of the aesthetic and sacred functions of the originary sign: on the one hand, the aesthetic moment focuses our attention on the formal closure of the sign itself, thereby allowing us to profit from its minimal linguistic deferring function; on the other, the sacred moment leads us from the sign to the object, which is subsequently interpreted, in an inaugural act of sacralization, to be the divine origin of linguistic deferral.

The difference between simple imitative modeling and genuine symbolic modeling thus occurs when I interpret the model as a participant in the symbolic act of sacred designation. I imitate the other as a sign of the object's inaccessibility, of its sacrality. In conceiving the other-model's gesture toward the object as a representation, I convert my own gesture in conformity to his as a sign that makes the object "present" to us both on a *different scene* from that of immediate perception. This "other scene" is simultaneously subjective and objective, private and public: the object is publicly designated as sacred and therefore as prohibited to the community as a whole, but this very act of collective interdiction establishes within each individual a corresponding subjective "aesthetic scene" in which the external object may be possessed "fictionally," that is, in the individual's private "literary" imagination. Presence on this internal imaginary scene implies not just

the previously given perception of the object as satisfying to individual appetite, but the henceforth unavoidable fact that imaginary presence—symbolic meaning—is a consequence of the other's intentional participation in the designation of the object. The status of the object as intentionally significant is a consequence of its being mediated by the other's sign. The object now stands opposed to both of us. Publicly, the object is "sacred" because it appears capable of withstanding the desires of both subject and model. Privately, however, each individual imagines himself the sole possessor of the object. In the latter "aesthetic" scene, desire is fulfilled in imagination because it is deferred in reality. The private aesthetic scene compensates for the subject's necessary experience of separation from the sacred in the collective context.

The resulting "mimetic triangle," in which subject and model are situated equidistant from the central object, defines the fundamental center-periphery structure of the originary scene of representation. The scene is constituted around a sacred center, which stands opposed to the individuals on the periphery. But because the individuals on the periphery are also the ultimate source of the collective sign, the sacred center does not exist without its human periphery. The center is thus a locus of sacred meaning, the originary source of all historical forms of cultural significance. Culture is the history of the reproduction of the center-periphery configuration of the originary scene, first in ritual (in which a central sacred figure stands opposed to its profane worshippers), then in aesthetic works (in which the form of the artwork guarantees the deferred or narrative presence of its imagined content).

But what in this originary scenario motivates the inaugural separation between sign and object? When do both subject and other model-mediator become aware that they are imitating not merely a model *for* accessing reality but a symbolic model *of* a cultural reality that is also constituted by the production of the sign? What turns the gesture of appropriation *toward* an object into a symbolic designation *of* it?

Let us retrace the stages of mimesis so far. It is in the nature of imitation to lead the individual to the appropriation of external objects, such as food. But imitation leads to conflict when both hands converge on the same object. At this point, imitative behavior is blocked by the incompatibility between the imitation of the model and the appropriation of the object. This is the occasion for what Eric Gans calls a "pragmatic paradox": the subject imitates the model-mediator, but this imitation leads to the convergence of both subject and model-mediator upon the same object.³³ The intrusion of the model-mediator into the subject's awareness of the presence of the object feeds back into the subject's consciousness of the mediated status of the object: the subject sees that the model "intends" the object. The same pattern applies to the

model-mediator. As imitation draws both subject and model together toward the same object, they increasingly mediate each other's attention to the object. The shift from imitation ("model for") to representation ("model of") occurs when each rival's "aborted gesture of appropriation" is understood by both individuals as no longer a movement to be unselfconsciously imitated, but as an intentionally and collectively produced sign indicating the presence of the object to the other. This latter sign is not to be confused with the indexical signs used by other animals—for example, the submissive gesture of a subordinate to the alpha. On the contrary, the production of symbolic reference requires that both rivals maintain their "equality" with respect to the centrally designated object. There is no question of submission to an other-rival here. If we may speak of submission in this context, it is the submission of both subject and other-rival to the central object, which consequently becomes a sacred object.³⁴ The need to defer mimetic conflict thus becomes the occasion for reproducing, first in sacrificial ritual, then in literary and other aesthetic forms, the underlying center-periphery structure of the originary scene of symbolic representation. But the condition of the symbolic designation of the central object remains the reciprocity implied by the "equal" exchange of signs among the reciprocal "models" on the periphery.

Originary Anthropology

Why must we bother to formulate such an originary hypothesis? What makes it any better than the standard definition of humanity as simply that animal which uses culture? The answer to this question lies in the fact that every definition of humanity unavoidably assumes the paradoxical structure of the originary scene of representation, even when it seeks to expel this paradox from its definition. For we must not forget that the formulation of the hypothesis was itself a response to the inadequacy of the idea that humanity is definable, in fiat metaphysical terms, as the culture-using animal. In the most general sense, the priority of the originary hypothesis over other theories of representation lies not in the actual details of its particular formulation, but in the fact that it is formulated at all; the status of the hypothesis as self-consciously originary and hypothetical has priority over any decision we make with respect to the internal details of the hypothesis itself. Once we have decided on a particular formulation, however, we must take responsibility for it. The hypothesis defines not just our particular interest in this or that cultural work, but also the anthropology by which we are able to situate the historical significance of the work more broadly. Originary thinking

forces us to make a decision about what is historically significant and, moreover, to do so in terms that are not simply left to individual intuition but are rigorously traceable to the terms of our anthropology, which is to say, to our definition of the human implicit in the formulation of the hypothesis.

The hypothesis thus allows us to minimize the central paradox that any theory of culture inevitably encounters. In its minimal originary form, this paradox is simply the paradox of representation. Scientific and logical models of representation seek to expel all paradox from their definition. It is rather those explicitly cultural “models”—that is, the religious and aesthetic institutions that have, until recently, always stood at the ethical center of human social organization—that turn paradox into their greatest ally, because it is culture that itself originated in symbolic-mimetic paradox. Culture is both a representation and a performance, a “model of” and a “model for.” Scientific definitions of the human ignore this paradox as a matter of course. From a purely scientific vantage point, attributing an exceptional status to human origin seems like false hubris. But from an anthropological viewpoint, we have no choice but to consider human origin as exceptional because the very fact that we are self-conscious of this origin, in a way that other species are not, compels us to seek an explanation for it. Whether the explanation for human origin be conceived in the form of a myth, a science, or a literary anthropology, all are equally attempts to respond to the fundamental mimetic paradox that led to the origin of the cultural scene of symbolic representation. Only humans are self-conscious of themselves as historical beings because only humans have evolved the paradoxical ability to represent their own origin.

Literature and the End of Culture

What are the practical consequences of my analysis for literary study today? If I am right in my argument, there is a great deal of significance to the current interest in culture among literary critics. But this interest remains only “unconsciously” anthropological: the bigger epistemological questions that motivate the idea of a literary anthropology remain peripheral rather than central to theoretical debate in the discipline. As literary studies continues to expand its disciplinary borders to embrace all manner of objects as grist for its interpretive mill, it becomes increasingly imperative to grasp the originary anthropological categories that lie behind this expansion. The idea of culture as a general interpretive system is everywhere invoked, but there is very little dialogue on the underlying anthropological context implied by this defini-

tion. Instead, the analysis of literature continues to take for granted what is implicit in its very interpretive procedure. There is, for example, still a rather narrow preoccupation with the idea of discrete aesthetic "cultures" from different historical periods ("the Renaissance," "the romantic," "the modernist," and so on), without any fundamental reflection on why the interpretation of literature should be restricted to a particular historical period rather than applied to a wider anthropological-historical context. The widespread skepticism in the humanities that is routinely directed toward universal scientific explanations of culture (for instance, in sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, the cultural materialism of Marvin Harris, and so on) is no doubt well-founded, but unless this skepticism is also made the constructive object of a specifically anthropological approach to culture, it becomes impossible to respond to these scientific explanations other than purely negatively. Yet the function of the theorist in the humanities is not merely to play the negative role of the radical skeptic (the natural sciences having in any case proved themselves immune to the critiques of the theorists). The true potential of theory in aesthetic and cultural criticism lies in the elaboration of an independent research strategy that eschews the narrow empiricism of the social sciences, yet without also throwing out the theoretical baby with the empirical bathwater by then proceeding to deny the very possibility of anthropology itself.

This denial is implicit in Greenblatt's idea of a literary "ethnography," which refuses to see culture as anything other than a local manifestation of a particular historical-aesthetic period. Despite his frequent references to Geertz, Greenblatt has little interest in debating the fundamental anthropological premises that underpin *The Interpretation of Cultures*. My argument has been, on the other hand, that we must not lose sight of these broader theoretical questions because they define the very anthropology we use as a tool to analyze culture. Even the denial of anthropology, as in the case of Greenblatt and his disciples,³⁵ is itself to take a theoretical position, which in turn functions as the master strategy that enables the particular critic's interpretation of the concrete problems of literary and cultural history.

Geertz's work is instructive because it quite explicitly attempts to ground his interpretive strategy in a general theory of culture. But, as we have seen, his approach remains incomplete, largely because he is unable to translate his "metaphysical" definition of symbolic culture into a minimal anthropology. Thus, when he attempts to ground his definition of symbolic culture in a theory of origin he ends up, paradoxically, expelling culture from his very definition. No doubt anthropology's long-standing desire to emulate the natural sciences makes it proportionally more difficult for its individual practitioners to grasp the

essentially hypothetical and symbolic, which is to say, *fictional*, status of its founding categories. It is rather the ever-marginal literary critics—namely, those whose work remains relatively untouched by the empiricism of scientific method and by the lucrative funding and prestige attached to the notion of genuine scientific research—who are also therefore better positioned to grasp the full anthropological significance of the idea that humanity is defined by its use of symbolic culture. But to draw out this anthropological significance, literary studies must become aware of its central role in formulating the hypothetical and minimal cultural *scene* of human origin. This minimal “originary scene” is based not on the empirical evidence pursued by sciences like paleoanthropology and primatology, but on the “literary” evidence of the historical and cultural tradition itself. That the specifically Western tradition of a literary high culture has an important role to play in formulating such an anthropology is not to be dismissed, in knee-jerk fashion, as a narrow ethnocentric prejudice. On the contrary, to discern the anthropology implicit in the works of this tradition is to recognize that, like high culture itself, a literary anthropology is concerned not merely with the ephemeral consumer products of the present, but with the enduring works of the past. Certainly, this is, at the very least, implicit in Greenblatt’s insistence that Shakespeare is the privileged site for his reflections on culture as “the circulation of social energy.” But in order for these “Shakespearean negotiations” to become the basis for a genuine literary anthropology, critics like Greenblatt will have to bite the bullet and pursue their ambivalent relation to high culture to its more minimal theoretical and anthropological source.³⁶

Ultimately, the minimal faith of any anthropology is simply a faith in the general project of human representation. This is but another way of formulating the problem of human origin. Humans originated when the reality of mimetic crisis became too destructive to remain unrepresented: “too destructive” in the sense that failure to surmount it would lead to the extinction of the species. The deferral of this crisis via the originary sign is the first moment in the never-ending historical project of representing—and therefore attempting to understand—this originary crisis. To reject this minimal faith in representation is to reject, in nihilistic fashion, humanity itself. But nihilism is not a realistic alternative to anthropology, if only because the resentment of the nihilist depends upon the same cultural resources that it also wishes to destroy.

NOTES

- 1 For the original research on vervet monkey alarm calls, see Robert M. Seyfarth, Dorothy Cheney, and Peter Marler, "Monkey Responses to Three Different Alarm Calls: Evidence of Predator Classification and Semantic Communication," *Science* 210 (1980): 801–3. For a discussion of the fundamental difference between language and nonhuman primate call systems, see Robbins Burling, "Primate Calls, Human Language, and Nonverbal Communication," *Current Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (1993): 25–53.
- 2 For the evolutionary significance of the difference between index and symbol, see Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). For a discussion of the implications of this difference for aesthetics, see Richard van Oort, "Cognitive Science and the Problem of Representation," *Poetics Today* 24 (2003): 237–95.
- 3 Stephen Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real," *Representations* 59 (1997): 14.
- 4 See, for example, Greenblatt's work in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1–9; *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 1–20; and "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–14. Similarly hesitant theoretical gestures can be found in the introductory chapter to his recent new historicist "manifesto" (coauthored with Catherine Gallagher), *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1–19. In all of the above, Greenblatt resists the notion that one can define, in abstract theoretical terms, the business of cultural interpretation. Hence his insistence that cultural poetics (or "new historicism," as it is usually called) is a practice rather than a theory—which is to say, valued as the *expression* of a singular aesthetic experience rather than as a *representation* of an objectively established set of theoretical categories. That may in fact be true of the new historicism and other critical modes as they are currently conceived and practiced by their individual exponents. At least one agreeable consequence of the claim that one's practice is "untheorizable" is that it gives carte blanche to the critic, who may consequently continue to pursue his research without the impediment of having to justify it in terms of openly debatable theoretical premises, it being the mark of such premises that they also expose one's research to refutation, for example, on empirical or logical grounds.
- 5 Nowhere is this more apparent than in Shakespeare studies, where the desire to demonstrate the historical and ethnographic otherness of the text is felt to be all the more urgent given the monolithic "presentism" inherent in popular culture's recycling of the Bard for mass audiences. (Witness the steady stream of commercial movies based on the plays, which, as with most other products of contemporary popular culture, academic critics love to hate.) Add to this the assumption that Shakespeare wrote exclusively for the playhouse rather than the bookseller (but see Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], for a compelling counterargument to this assumption), and the critic is now able to argue for the unique performativity not just of the plays themselves, but of the different source texts that were previously held to be merely contingent versions of a single "authorial" play. On the principle that more is always better, we now have, for example, not one (judiciously conflated) text of *Hamlet*, but multiple texts of *Hamlet*. But what this insistence on the empirical "historicity" of the play-text tends to forget is that the material contingencies of textual production (as the text makes its way from the playwright's pen to the actors, to the stage, to the audience, to the printing house, to the composers, and so on) is not the origin of the general category of "text," but indeed its end. The precondition of the singular performance, whether on the stage or the page, is the historicity implicit in the category of textuality itself, which is to

say, in the origin of representation. It is in this "originary" sense that we should understand the current interest in the "historicity of the text." Otherwise such interest risks becoming a crude fetishization of history: the equivalent in literary studies of ethnography's romanticization of the non-Western other. As its filiation with romanticism suggests, new historicism is always in danger of reducing its interest in "the historical" to a fetishization of the cultural differences of a particular aesthetic period.

6 For a detailed study of the romantic origins of speech-act theory, see Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

7 This is the more serious point behind Greenblatt's habit of beginning (or ending) his works of criticism with an extended personal anecdote. The tactic is ostensibly designed to differentiate the author from the pack, but, of course, now everybody is doing it, and the confessional mode, rather than being a revelation of the personal, instead tends to come off as affected and pretentious. For example, *Shakespearean Negotiations* begins with the statement: "I began with the desire to speak with the dead," after which we are told that literature professors are "middle-class shamans" who seek to resurrect the voice of the dead through the self-conscious "textual traces" of fiction. But what this inward focus on the desiring self as a universal model of the literary (academic) reader obscures is the collective and mimetic context of desire. By paying our respects to the dead and the unborn in the *ritual* (not literary!) context, we reaffirm our desire for significance in the next world, thereby reminding ourselves of the ultimate insignificance of our less transcendent, more worldly (mimetic) desires. In an interesting (and inevitably slightly gossipy) take on the worldly mimetic context of Greenblatt's Hegelian desire for recognition or "authenticity of identity," Paul Stevens, in "Pretending to Be Real: Stephen Greenblatt and the Legacy of Popular Existentialism," *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 491–519, argues that Greenblatt's penchant for personal anecdote and name-dropping constitutes an attempt by the author to create an authentic identity for himself. The paradox for Stevens is that this runs counter to the high-theory idea that the self is decentered. Far from being postmodern, it turns out that Greenblatt is just another modern. I agree with this conclusion, but the basic analysis applies to many others besides Greenblatt. "Postmodern" academic criticism is characterized by this paradox between the glib deconstruction of the subject, on the one hand, and earnest professional cultivation of it, on the other. For pertinent analysis, see Mark Bauerlein, *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); and "Political Dreams, Economic Woes, and Inquiry in the Humanities," *boundary 2* 27, no. 1 (2000): 197–216.

8 Attempts by primatologists to bring chimpanzees under the rubric of the other make the mistake of assuming that this category can be expanded beyond the bounds of anthropology. See, for example, Jane Goodall and Dale Peterson, *Visions of Caliban: On Chimpanzees and People* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993). But, unlike the subaltern other, who like Caliban is perfectly capable of dialogue, the chimpanzee (with the marginal exception of famous laboratory chimps like Kanzi) must indeed be "spoken for," as the essays by Goodall and Peterson so movingly demonstrate.

9 Already in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt invokes Geertz's "control mechanism" metaphor of culture as a parallel of his own metaphor of "self-fashioning," which he suggests is quite peculiar to the Renaissance: "Self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of [Geertz's notion of] control mechanisms" (3). But what exactly is the point of borrowing from Geertz in this context? For in what sense is the "Renaissance version" of the control mechanism different from its "anthropological" prototype in Geertz? And if it is not different, why not? But Greenblatt prefers to ignore these questions concerning the relationship between anthropological explanation and literary history. Instead, as is customary in the literary analysis of history, he treats the Renaissance as a discrete

historical entity that can be conveniently interpreted on the model of the self-contained literary work: one pursues the relationships and contradictions within the boundaries of the given aesthetic period, without any consideration of the broader pattern of historical change that would connect it to other periods and ultimately to an anthropological theory.

10 For a characteristically sharp diagnosis of this problem, see Bauerlein's analysis of how critics use the terms "cultural poetics" and "cultural studies," in his *Literary Criticism*, 23–35.

11 See, in particular, Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); and "The End of Culture," in *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

12 For a notable exception, however, see Wolfgang Iser's essay "What is Literary Anthropology? The Difference Between Explanatory and Exploratory Fictions," in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael Clark (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 157–79, which compares Iser's "exploratory" model of literary anthropology to the "explanatory" model employed by Gans. The discussion is continued in Eric Gans, "Staging as an Anthropological Category," *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 45–56.

13 Why isn't Greenblatt theoretical? By the end of this essay, I hope the reason will be obvious. At this point, suffice it to say that Greenblatt's insistence that new historicism is a "practice" rather than a "theory" is based on the profoundly antitheoretical (and deeply romantic) assumption that abstract generalization is inherently a betrayal of the truth. In privileging individual expression over theoretical representation, new historicism demonstrates its affinities with the romantic thinker's general distrust of the universalizing and static anthropologies of the Enlightenment. Yet, at the same time, we must be careful not to confuse the irreducibly subjective character of aesthetic experience with the possibility of theoretical dialogue on that experience. It is of course true that my experience of an artwork is not the same as yours, but it does not follow that, because of the necessarily subjective character of aesthetic experience, we therefore cannot attempt to formulate an aesthetic theory—a minimal literary anthropology—that attempts to explain the basis of that experience in objectively acceptable theoretical terms. That is indeed the point of aesthetic criticism, which remains dissatisfied with the mere subjective experience of art, but also seeks to confirm that experience by referring to other interpretations by other interpreters. In their idolization of the aesthetic, the new historicists (along with their various poetically minded precursors and progeny) betray their romantic origins. But from the point of view of a minimal anthropology, it is inadequate to assume that the most profound thoughts, including those of the critic, are accessible only via aesthetic means. In seeking to emulate the aesthetic practice whereby the romantic artist taps into the life-spirit of the community, criticism forfeits its claim to be engaged in theory. Of course, the new historicism appears quite happy to accept this verdict. But that does not mean we have to too. On the contrary, an aesthetic criticism fully conscious of its own historicity is an invitation to a form of thinking that is resolutely anthropological in its theoretical presuppositions.

14 See, for example, Marvin Harris, "Anthropology and Postmodernism," in *Science, Materialism, and the Study of Culture*, ed. Martin F. Murphy and Maxine L. Margolis (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995), 62–77; and James Lett, *Science, Reason, and Anthropology: The Principles of Rational Inquiry* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 105–6.

15 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 44 (hereafter cited in text).

16 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 254.

17 Geertz's favorite image of humanity without culture is the monster (see, for example, 49, 68, 99). One notes a curious parallel between Geertz's vision of the origin of culture and the monstrous titans of Greek mythology, whose champion stole fire from Zeus in order to give humanity culture. Geertz's monster appears to fulfill the same mediating function between heaven and earth, culture and nature, as these more obviously mythical figures.

18 For his idea of "protoculture," see Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 47. For a more recent example of the currently flourishing area of evolutionary approaches to culture, see the essays collected in *The Evolution of Culture: An Interdisciplinary View*, ed. Robin Dunbar, Chris Knight, and Camilla Power (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

19 John Searle makes a similar point when he discusses the importance of language for the origin of "institutional facts." See *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 66.

20 The classic analysis of the "rites of passage" is Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge, 1960); first published in French as *Les rites de passage* in 1908.

21 I am adopting and modifying John Searle's notion of "direction of fit," which he uses in the more limited context of a discussion of types of speech acts. See "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," in his *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1–29. Searle eventually takes up some of the epistemological and anthropological issues implied by the word/object distinction in *The Construction of Social Reality*.

22 For the "evolutionary anomaly" of language, see Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*, 34.

23 The classic study of wild chimpanzees is Jane Goodall's *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971). For chimpanzee hunting and lethal intergroup raiding parties, see Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996). I note in passing that both these studies emphasize the continuity between human and chimpanzee "culture," the scientific approach being essentially a project in reducing anthropological categories to imagined presymbolic biological precursors in other animals.

24 For a provocative analysis of how "scientific" accounts of human origin are far more mythically inspired than most scientists would like to believe, see Wiktor Stoczkowski, *Explaining Human Origins: Myth, Imagination and Conjecture*, trans. Mary Turton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

25 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

26 In speaking here of the "ostensive," I have in mind not Bertrand Russell's (deanthropologized) analytic notion of a "referring expression," but Eric Gans's suggestion that the ostensive is the minimal *linguistic* form of an originary, collectively constituted "scene" of representation. See Gans, "A Generative Taxonomy of Speech-Acts," in his *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 62–85. This discussion of the anthropological context of the elementary forms of language is surely the most brilliant analysis of speech acts since Austin's original formulation of speech-act theory.

27 For a general account of "genetic assimilation," as well as the impossibility of genetically assimilating the symbolic function, see Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*, esp. 331–32.

28 See, in particular, René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

29 A good example of this is the response from the specialists to Girard's major work on Shakespeare, *A Theater of Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). The specialists are of course never going to be very happy with a book whose central thesis tends to undermine their own assumption that Shakespeare must be understood "historically," which is to say, as a product of *his* time (the counterargument that this "historicism" is always ultimately *our* view of his time is labeled, derogatorily, as "ahistorical" or "presentist"). This deeply ingrained suspicion of a "master" theorist's intrusion into the specialist's historical domain explains the pattern to be observed among the various responses, which range from ambivalent admiration, on the one hand, to utter incomprehension, on the other. In the former, the admiration is "ambivalent" because, despite the obvious originality and power of Girard's readings of the plays, it is felt that these readings must inevitably be flawed *because they depend upon an explicitly formulated anthropology*. Girard is thus rejected not for his reading of Shakespeare (the brilliance of which is frequently, if also rather reluctantly, conceded), but for being *too transparent* about the theoretical assumptions that generate that reading. (Note the irony of a historical specialist rejecting Girard on the grounds of the latter's anthropology—without, of course, deeming it necessary to replace his anthropology with a better one.) At the other end of the spectrum of responses, one finds utter incomprehension, which is a more transparent defense of the status quo. Refusing to judge Girard on his own terms, this response resorts to the non sequitur that Girard fails to cite any recent Shakespeare scholarship (as though the mark of excellence in the world of ideas is the number of citations one includes of one's immediate peer group). In the end, however, what is striking is less what has been said by the specialists than the controversy Girard's book has inspired among them. At least most are agreed that it is too important to ignore, even if the advice they offer is to ignore it!

30 The recent discovery in monkeys of so-called "mirror neurons" (neurons that are activated irrespective of whether the test monkey is grasping an object or observing another individual performing the same gesture) provides interesting empirical evidence for the evolutionary importance of imitative behaviors among primates. See Maxim I. Stamenov and Vittorio Gallese, eds., *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002).

31 See, for example, Goodall's already-cited classic study, *In the Shadow of Man*, as well as the account by Frans B. M. de Waal in *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

32 The provenance of the term "pragmatic paradox" ultimately derives from the psychological theory of Gregory Bateson by way of Paul Watzlawick. See Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1972); and Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967). My reference to the term here, however, owes more to Eric Gans, who adopts Bateson's and Watzlawick's psychology of the "double bind" to describe the originary mimetic context of the symbolic sign. In a subtle but far-reaching modification of Girard's originary hypothesis, Gans suggests that the origin of culture is not to be located in a foundational act of protosacrificial murder, but in "an aborted gesture of appropriation" that defers mimetic conflict by representing, rather than appropriating, the central object. In Gans's formulation, no empirical claim is required as to the specific nature of the contested object. It is therefore ultimately unnecessary to decide whether the central object is another human (as Girard insists) or, as seems more likely, a hunted game animal. What is crucial is that the *sparagmos*, or rending of the object, be preceded by the moment of its (peaceful) representation. See Gans, *Signs of Paradox*, chap. 2.

33 See Gans, *Signs of Paradox*, 20, 38–39.

34 This may be taken to be the anthropological modification of the familiar Hegelian dialectic between master and slave. The question Hegel avoids asking is how the concept of freedom can emerge from the purely naturalistic state of the struggle for survival between master and slave. Despite Hegel's reference to slave-holding societies such as the ancient Greeks, the master-slave struggle is more appropriately applied to the non-symbolically instituted pecking orders observed by primatologists in chimpanzee societies.

35 The real origin for the new historicist denial of anthropology, however, is not Greenblatt, but Foucault. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994); first published in French as *Les mots et les choses* in 1966.

36 Why is this attachment to high culture "ambivalent"? This is a topic for another essay, but, briefly, Greenblatt's obvious admiration for Shakespeare is always shadowed by a fear of committing the cardinal professional sin of Bardolatry. This explains Greenblatt's peculiar habit, particularly evident in his earlier works, of introducing his interest in Shakespeare with a cautionary tale of his own conversion to the project of Shakespeare's deconstruction. For example, we are told in beginning of *Shakespearean Negotiations* that originally he wanted to write a book about the "total artist" (2), but that instead of finding the great author at the center of the plays, what he found was nothing but the deferral of signs—signs which were themselves mysteriously trading on the notion of the absent authorial figure:

If one longs, as I do, to reconstruct these negotiations, one dreams of finding an originary moment, a moment in which the master hand shapes the concentrated social energy into the sublime aesthetic object. But the quest is fruitless, for there is no originary moment, no pure act of untrammelled creation. In place of blazing genesis, one begins to glimpse something that seems at first far less spectacular: a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies. (7)

The deconstructive rhetoric is perhaps a bit heavy-handed (the book was written in the 1980s), but one can nonetheless discern, behind the Derridean parable of the originless origin, a tale of self-flagellation and conversion. Greenblatt loves Shakespeare, but in the theoretical climate of the 1980s such open admiration for the canonical literary author, at least among the critical avant-garde, is a sure sign of one's complicity in the bourgeois abuse of power. Hence one's admiration for the artwork of high culture must take the form of its repudiation. But, paradoxically, this is simply another form of (ironic) tribute, albeit one that can only come at the "end of culture." Short of rejecting the artwork's historical significance altogether—a position, let us not forget, perfectly compatible with the practice of contemporary social science—the repudiation of high culture is the only remaining "high cultural" game in town. All too often, this paradox is overlooked. The real antagonist is not in fact the tweedy bourgeois humanist (a figure always more mythical than real), but the far more pervasive discourse of contemporary social science.