



R I C H A R D   V A N   O O R T

## The Culture of Criticism

### I

The peculiarity of culture is that you know it only by doing it. You know what culture is only by knowing what it is *for*. In this sense, culture is roughly like a tool, its form or shape—its definition—derived from its function. A hammer is used for driving nails, and its particular shape is well suited to this task. But if I have no hammer, I could (in a pinch) use a stone. The stone would become my hammer, its structure temporarily determined by my perspective—that is, by my knowledge of what hammers are for.

This analogy between tools and culture has prompted some to argue that tools are a kind of *elementary culture*. Clifford Geertz, for example, suggests that the originary form of culture can be found in the “protocultural” activity of early humans.<sup>1</sup> What is protoculture? Protoculture is culture without symbolic thought, and it includes such socially mediated or imitatively learned activities as hunting and toolmaking. Does this mean that lions, which hunt in groups, have protoculture? How about chimpanzees? They hunt in groups and use tools. Do they therefore have protoculture?

Consider the argument for chimpanzees as users of culture. In her pioneering studies of wild chimpanzees, Jane Goodall notes how they modify branches to make termiting sticks.<sup>2</sup> They tear a branch from a tree, strip away its leaves, and poke the stick deep into a termite mound. When the stick is withdrawn, they eat the termites that have gathered on it. Jane Goodall emphasizes the creativity of this task, which seems to rival our own much-vaunted creativity. Would not a man left naked and hungry in the jungle make a termiting stick in exactly this fashion? Goodall goes on to point to another, more significant feature of chimpanzee tool use. A young chimpanzee watching his mother at the termite mound attempts to imitate her, but he selects a stick that is too short and manipulates it “clumsily and incompetently.”<sup>3</sup>

The point is not just that the task is complex, but that it must be learned, first by observing the mother, then by imitating her action, then by repeating the

whole task, until the chimp becomes an expert at selecting, constructing, and using termiting sticks. Surely we must agree with the primatologist that this is an example of culture. The appetite for termites is instinctive, inherent to the biology of the chimp, which, like all animals, experiences hunger that must be satisfied. But the particular technique selected by the chimp for satisfying his hunger is not instinctive but learned by imitation. It is an unambiguous instance of the primatologist's definition of culture as "the non-genetic transmission of habits."<sup>4</sup>

From this assumption others quickly follow. For if we grant that the object exists only by virtue of those who intentionally see and use it as this kind of object, then we are committed to the idea that the object varies depending on the group using it. We can assume, for example, that different chimpanzee groups will develop distinctive "styles" of termiting, as they imitate different individuals who have hit on different techniques for eating termites. Each group develops a different "culture" of termiting. Perhaps one group favors green sticks, whereas another favors brown. Perhaps one group strips the bark off its sticks, whereas another prefers to leave the bark intact. And perhaps yet another, less innovative group has failed to develop the termiting stick at all! Will it not be necessary to divide the theory and analysis of each particular culture of different chimpanzee groups into separate disciplines? For if chimpanzees use culture, there is no such thing as a univocal chimpanzee culture, only the interpretation of multiple and different chimpanzee *cultures*.

This last remark is intentionally absurd. We do not have disciplines organized along the lines of a theory of different chimpanzee cultures, because we do not recognize culture as a property of chimpanzees at all.<sup>5</sup> It is no mere prejudice to observe that chimpanzees, for all their ingenuity, are not using culture. This is not because chimps lack the intelligence to produce culture. That would be to interpret them unfairly in terms of something they have no need for and therefore cannot be judged as lacking. Rather, it is because the concept of culture is meaningful only to those who are capable of grasping it as a concept in the first place. And chimpanzees do not need the concept, because they have no need of the language by which to express it.<sup>6</sup>

Why, then, do we insist on saying they have culture? The desire to impute culture to the chimpanzee is our desire, not the chimpanzee's. We want to see ourselves reflected in these comically humanlike creatures. We want to bring them, whether they want to or not, into our world. We can see this tendency in the way we treat our pets. We interpret the cat's indifference as proud haughtiness, or the dog's unhesitating obedience as loyal friendship. It requires a considerable critical effort to step outside this kind of "anthropological phenomenology" to avoid imputing to the gestures of these animals a significance that only we are able to see.

But why shouldn't we engage in this kind of anthropological phenomenology? Why shouldn't we interpret the world in terms of categories that we alone use—for example, categories like love and resentment, or morality and the

sacred? The answer is that we cannot abandon these categories without abandoning humanity itself. These categories constitute the symbolically mediated world through and by which we live. They are the “veil of appearances” that transforms the natural world described by science into a world that is humanly livable.

This fundamental difference between the anthropological world of appearances and the physical and biological world described by science is the generative basis of any anthropology that takes the human capacity for symbolic representation seriously. Scientific explanation depends on the assumption that it is indeed possible to lift oneself out of the world told from our point of view. Science looks for causes that are intrinsic to the structure of the world. Why did Joe get sick? Because he consumed meat infected with a harmful strain of the bacteria *Escherichia coli*. By attributing Joe’s sickness to E coli bacteria, we identify a cause that exists independently of our way of interpreting the world as imbued with meaning, and we explain Joe’s sickness by referring to this cause. The cause inheres in the physical and biological relationship existing between E coli and Joe’s gut, whereas symbolic meaning exists only among those who interpret the world symbolically according to concepts like revenge or justice. It is for this reason that we do not hold the E coli in Joe’s gut responsible for his sickness. For the concept of responsibility implies moral judgment, the deeply held belief (so deep that it is also an emotion) that we are answerable for our actions. If I had knowingly planted E coli in Joe’s hamburger, then I, not the E coli, would be responsible and therefore answerable for causing Joe’s sickness. But notice how the idea of a cause has now been transformed from the realm of the natural to become implicated in a web of meaning that does not so much explain the event in terms of physical and biological causes as judge it under a collection of concepts. Imagine that Joe takes a turn for the worse and dies, and that Sally now accuses me of murder. I admit to having intentionally put E coli in Joe’s hamburger, and the judge asks, Why? Neither he, nor Sally, nor the jury will be satisfied with a purely scientific explanation of how the E coli infection caused Joe’s death. They want to know what motivated me to introduce E coli into Joe’s hamburger. And the cause of my actions is predicated on concepts, not on a scientific account of the causal structure of the world. Perhaps I explain my actions as motivated by my resentment of Joe, who had become the intolerable object of Sally’s affections.

We arrive at the following conclusion that has important consequences for understanding the difference between scientific and anthropological explanation: scientific theory presupposes a stable ontological and epistemological difference between subject and object. The astronomer may be limited by the power of his telescope, just as the biologist is by the power of her microscope, but that doesn’t mean the existence of the objects they observe depends upon the instruments through which they observe them. On the contrary, the objectivity of their representation of these objects (for example, in a theory of the structure of Mars, or a theory of the structure of the cell) is dependent on the fact that their representations, which may

yet be wholly theoretical and speculative, are nonetheless empirically testable and therefore ultimately falsifiable, even if the possibility of empirical testing must await the advance of the science itself (as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was tested, first by Gregor Mendel's experiments with peas, and then by the discovery of DNA).

But culture is not an object like the stars or DNA. There is a self-referentiality to cultural explanation that makes it impossible for the inquirer simply to propose a theory and then submit it, like the scientist, to an arena where it is objectively tested. This is not because scientists are "objective" whereas cultural theorists are merely "subjective." The scientific arena is objective not because scientists are peculiarly free of all personal agendas, but because for a hypothesis to be empirically testable, it must refer to objects that exist independently of the particular thoughts and beliefs of those responsible for formulating and testing the hypothesis. What is being tested is not only the scientist's belief about the hypothesis, but ultimately the hypothesis's reference to an independently existing reality.<sup>7</sup>

Or think of it this way: if culture is only knowable while one is doing it, then what is to distinguish a theory of culture from the testing of that theory? The theory is presented as an objective representation of its object (culture); but if the object is available only while one is doing the theory, then the theory can be "tested" only by reproducing the theory. Theory and object collapse into each other. Theory is both subject and object. It is the product of the theorist, but it is also an object of study. The science of anthropology is inseparable from the art of cultural criticism.

## II

This movement away from the "scientific" object toward the subject's prior construction of the object is the characteristic mode of criticism as it is understood today in the humanities. Consider the critical method known as deconstruction. How do we judge it? Not by submitting its central claims to a procedure of empirical testing. Rather, it is judged by reproducing the style and argument of the writing of its master exponent, Jacques Derrida. Derrida serves as the model for reproducing the theory of deconstruction.

No doubt this is why literary critics so often explain, or, as Harold Bloom more provocatively puts it, repress the origin of their theories by referring to—or, à la Freud, agonistically displacing—their personal encounter with, and imitation of, previous master critics. "Poetry," Bloom writes, "is not a struggle against repression but is itself a kind of repression . . . In relation to the precursor, the latecomer poet compels himself to a fresh repression at once moral and instinctual."<sup>8</sup> It is unlikely that Terry Eagleton was thinking of Harold Bloom when he wrote in the preface to his widely read *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, "Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own. One purpose of this book is to lift that repression and allow us to

remember.” But he has it about right when he remarks that “criticism . . . for Bloom is just as much a form of poetry as poems are implicit literary criticism of other poems, and whether a critical reading ‘succeeds’ is in the end not at all a question of its truth-value but of the rhetorical force of the critic himself.”<sup>9</sup>

Or consider this remark by Stephen Greenblatt commenting on his encounter with Clifford Geertz’s writings in the 1970s: “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.”<sup>10</sup> Notice how Greenblatt stages this encounter with Geertz’s writings. It is not that Geertz shows Greenblatt something new. Rather, Geertz reflects back to Greenblatt the significance of what he “was already doing.” In demonstrating the preeminence of interpretation in the social sciences, Geertz reassures Greenblatt that literature too can be dignified with the appellation “social science.” But this is no mere empirical science. It is a science that is theory-savvy, because it understands that the objects to be analyzed are socially constructed and therefore that the barrier between theory and object breaks down. What we have are not empirical models of the world, but pragmatic models for doing criticism. Criticism becomes an end in itself, its prestige linked not so much to the communication and empirical testing of ideas, but to the personalities responsible for promoting ideas that are always already constructed. Derrida, Bloom, Eagleton, Geertz, and Greenblatt are celebrities in the culture of theories of culture.

But this fact should not surprise us if culture is indeed defined by how it is done. For what we should then expect of a theory of culture is not a model *of* the way the world actually is (a scientific theory), but a model *for* how to participate in culture (a discipleship). To be a critic in the humanities entails mastering a set of concepts and categories that are not intrinsic to the object but intrinsic to the master/disciple relationship itself. Grasping the meaning of the discipline’s underlying master concepts entails familiarizing oneself with their use in the particular “interpretive community” one has chosen to enter (literature, anthropology, philosophy, etc.). Indeed, one does not so much choose the discipline as get chosen by it.

The awareness that humanistic inquiry is “institutional” rather than “natural” has led to any number of polemics against a mythical old guard that, so we are told, mistakenly believed in nature rather than culture. In 1983 Eagleton could still thrill us with polemical statements like: “the idea that there are ‘non-political’ forms of criticism is simply a myth which furthers certain political uses of literature all the more effectively.”<sup>11</sup> But such statements do not so much diagnose the problem as reproduce it, by sacrificing over and again the mythical father. Other commentators have more shrewdly observed that what seems to structure the practice of academic criticism is the desire for institutional membership itself.<sup>12</sup> Hence the bewildering proliferation within the discipline of an

abstruse and recondite jargon, or the stubborn refusal to define terms clearly or argue systematically. Such tactics are deliberately alienating and mystifying, because what is thereby demonstrated is not a commitment to accepted standards of definition and argument, but a much narrower commitment to the terms of the group. This explains literary theory's ambivalent power over its disciples. It attracts only by simultaneously repelling. It promises membership into a select group that is distinguished from the merely ordinary by the difficulty of its prose, the abstruseness of its constitutive categories, and its oppositional stance toward the political and cultural status quo. The need for institutional belonging emerges as the primary function of critical practice in the humanities.

Such, at least, is the argument of Mark Bauerlein, who ends his brilliantly deadpan analysis of the discipline with the following comment: "Current usage shows that criticism is not about knowledge of objects, but about the politics of inquiry, which includes the political status of the inquirer. Literary study is no longer literary analysis. It is now an occasion for institutional certification. Those who use terms in the right way display their intellectual discernment, their cultural interest, their political sensitivity, and their moral regard, which is to say, their eligibility for entering today's academic order. Critical terms are tokens of belonging."<sup>13</sup> There is a certain plausibility to this argument, particularly when one recognizes that the elementary function of culture, as Emile Durkheim saw, is to establish group solidarity through the repeated performance of the group's rituals of membership. Entry into the discipline of literary criticism requires something like a rite of passage, one that is difficult to make sense of if you are not involved in the practice that gives the group its unity. Indeed, to the outsider these practices will be irritating precisely because their apparent uselessness (What is the point of literary theory?) is belied by the extreme seriousness with which they are undertaken. This paradox only exacerbates the outsider's desire for membership, which in turn reproduces the experience of membership to those on the inside who notice in the discomfort of the would-be disciple a confirmation of their own desirability and superiority. In this context, critical terms indeed function, as Bauerlein suggests, "as tokens of belonging."<sup>14</sup>

Yet rather than explore this point further, Bauerlein abruptly ends on it. This is regrettable, because it implies that the unconscious mimeticism of criticism is all but inevitable. Bauerlein is certainly justified in his criticisms of the discipline, but he offers no theory to replace those he criticizes. Instead he suggests (somewhat disingenuously) that his glossary of critical terms is intended to clarify, rather than critique, the institutional function of those terms.<sup>15</sup> In this larger sense, there is nothing ultimately to distinguish Bauerlein's critique from the critiques he critiques. For all take their central task as the critique of someone else. But at what point in this endless exercise of exposing the other's assumptions do we begin the more constructive task of identifying those minimal assumptions that are necessary for dialogue to take place at all? This is something Bauerlein shies from

answering. Having convincingly diagnosed the brutality of the murder of literature and literary criticism in his “autopsy,” there is little for Bauerlein to do except sharpen his scalpel and eagerly await another victim’s arrival in the morgue.

I do not wish to imply that Bauerlein’s criticisms are somehow invalid simply because they exploit the very thing he abhors. On the contrary, cleaning the pigpen means getting your hands dirty. Taken individually, Bauerlein’s analyses of the anti-methodological usage of critical terms in the discipline are unimpeachable. But the fundamental question Bauerlein leaves unanswered is why literary method should remain tied to literature other than for purely methodological reasons. Despite his generally sound criticisms of the state of the discipline, Bauerlein nonetheless shares with those he criticizes an assumption that itself remains unjustified. This assumption concerns the use of literature as the privileged vehicle for theoretical reflection. Even those who denounce literature as an ideological mask of the center’s power over the victimized periphery contribute to this privileging. For in exposing the ideological function of literature, they still insist that we must attend to the literary text as the privileged interpretive object in order to discover how power is secretly being manipulated. The difference is that Bauerlein believes he can justify this attention on methodological and pragmatic grounds alone. Since literature is a matter of institutional definition, then any discipline that bases itself on that definition must stick to it for pragmatic reasons, otherwise systematic inquiry becomes impossible. What Bauerlein objects to is not the fact that literature is institutionally defined, but the avowedly anti-methodological character of criticism itself. But is the choice to study literature a purely methodological choice? This is a question that needs to be considered if we are to understand the function of criticism today.

So let us consider it. As Bauerlein’s analysis of criticism’s paradoxical strategy of being methodically anti-methodological suggests, criticism in the “small world” of academia fulfills an important function that rarely gets noticed by those who otherwise accuse it of elitism and willful obscurantism. This function, however, though it shares something in common with religion, is not truly religious. But nor is it scientific. The central function of criticism is neither to sacralize the object nor to explain it. Rather, it is to engage the reader in an experience that is best described as aesthetic in structure. To read the work of one of the celebrity critics in the humanities—for example, a work by Stephen Greenblatt—is to be engaged in an experience that has more in common with reading high literature than with reading history, sociology, or economics (or any other social, let alone natural, science). For what separates a work of criticism from science, on the one hand, and religion, on the other, is the fact that, like literature, criticism makes no ontological claims about the nature of the world it represents. Science assumes the necessity of making such claims. Indeed its constitutive theories are formulated in such a manner that they can be tested empirically for their truth. For Karl Popper, this is how one distinguishes science from pseudo-sciences like psychoanalysis.<sup>16</sup> Scientific theories

are falsifiable because they are judged not just on their own terms for coherence and parsimony, but also by their ability to explain a world that exists independently of the theory.<sup>17</sup> Religion also makes reality claims, but these are not presented as hypothetical. They are, rather, the foundation for a world that is held to be transcendent with respect to the world of experience.

In contrast to both science and religion, criticism neither commands a collectively experienced belief in the sacred, nor submits its central claims to a well-defined procedure in which they are empirically tested. Instead, the truth of its assertions is guaranteed by the *desire of the reader alone*, who accepts them as provisionally true—that is, true for the duration of the analysis but normally no longer than that. Once you have finished reading an author like Geertz or Greenblatt, you are left with the impression of having been treated to a tour de force in cultural interpretation, but you are rarely left with a clear grasp of the motivating categories and concepts behind the analysis, of the overall coherence of the argument. It is the style that impresses.<sup>18</sup> If the analysis is sufficiently persuasive, as many have held Freud's to be, it may be granted the prestige and status of a theory, which is simply to say that the critical analysis has become widespread enough to be elevated to the level of a collectively held doctrine that functions as the mimetic basis for readers to discover *for themselves* patterns of hitherto unrecognized cultural significance. Criticism becomes theory when it can successfully take the place of literature itself.

But notice what is implied in this movement from criticism to theory. For a critical analysis to attain the status of theory implies a reversal of the traditional hierarchy between criticism and literature. A work of (mere) criticism becomes a work of (prestigious) theory when it successfully manages to overshadow the literary and sacred texts it interprets. Traditionally, criticism is an exercise in refining the reading public's aesthetic judgment. The point is not to outdo the originality of the poet. It is to contribute to his greatness by providing further commentary on his creations, as in Samuel Johnson's preface to his edition of Shakespeare. The cultural significance of the poetry itself is taken for granted. The shift from criticism to theory undermines and then reverses this hierarchy. First it destroys the assumption that there is such a thing as high culture and good taste. Then it resurrects it, this time in favor of the critic by implying that if there is any remaining significance to be found in the works of high culture, the critic alone is able to demonstrate this. But note the latent contradiction in this movement from criticism to theory. Criticism unproblematically assumes the aesthetic significance of the works it interprets. Theory denies this significance, but only by seeking to appropriate aesthetic significance for itself!

We arrive at what is perhaps a surprising conclusion. Theory is the last remaining holdout of what used to be called high culture. Hopelessly unable to compete with consumer culture on its own terms in the marketplace, theory is limited almost exclusively to the sanctuary provided for it by the university.<sup>19</sup>



This is not, however, to be taken as a sign of theory's intellectual impotence. On the contrary, it is an indication of its secret superiority, which is not for the many but for the privileged few. For what theory strives to give its readers is a position in the cultural vanguard. This is aesthetic modernism with a vengeance. And like aesthetic modernism, it seeks to capitalize on, and ultimately outdo, the aesthetic experience of reading Homer, Shakespeare, or Proust.<sup>20</sup>

Greenblatt all but admits to a version of literary modernism when he explains how reading Geertz helped him renew what was for him a stagnating discipline. What impressed him most, he writes in his 1997 essay "The Touch of the Real," was less Geertz's emphasis on literary analysis than the fact that Geertz had expanded literary analysis from canonical aesthetic works to noncanonical ethnographic texts: "The specific force of Geertz's work for New Historicism resided in the expansion of these [literary-critical] terms to a much broader and less familiar range of texts than literary critics had permitted themselves to analyze."<sup>21</sup> Following Geertz's lead, Greenblatt would seek to defamiliarize our experience of the canonical aesthetic work by juxtaposing it with culturally marginal texts, the point being "to surprise and to baffle" the reader who might otherwise "assume a comfortable place in a preexisting analysis" (15). Thus renewed, criticism "could venture out to unfamiliar cultural texts, and these texts—often marginal, odd, fragmentary, unexpected, and crude—in turn could begin to interact in interesting ways with the intimately familiar works of the literary canon" (20). In a particularly revealing remark, Greenblatt suggests that anthropology and literature both entail "a sustained practice of 'estrangement,'" an aesthetic device the "Russian formalists" first applied to "literature" (26). Like the modernists and romantics before him, Greenblatt hopes to renew the high-cultural project by scandalizing us with the centralization of the hitherto marginal figures of the cultural periphery.

Does this mean that literary criticism is reducible to a contest for power or "cultural capital" among competing charismatic personalities? Is criticism to be understood as the way we unconsciously legitimize the dangerous "charisma" of the high-cultural center, which has historically always been defined by its exclusion of those on the periphery?

I think there is a great deal of truth to this view of culture as a conflict between (dominating) center and (victimized) periphery.<sup>22</sup> But like all such institutional or sociological perspectives, it assumes a "macrosociological" or "anthropological" analysis of the origin of the center-periphery structure itself. In the third and final section of this essay, I will provide such an analysis. And I will do so by beginning with a celebrated instance of the critic as charismatic personality.

### III

Greenblatt begins his 1988 *Shakespearean Negotiations* with a portentous series of claims:

I began with the desire to speak with the dead.

This is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum: literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans. If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them. . . . It is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions, in places where there was no live bodily being to begin with. But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations—in the formal, self-conscious miming of life—than in any of the other textual traces left by the dead, for simulations are undertaken in full awareness of the absence of life they contrive to represent, and hence they may skillfully anticipate and compensate for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered them. Conventional in my tastes, I found the most satisfying intensity of all in Shakespeare.<sup>23</sup>

In claiming that his project began with the desire to speak with the dead, Greenblatt invokes religion, the chief function of which is to attach the individual to a community that exists beyond the death of its individual members. In paying our respects to the dead and the unborn, we guarantee the continued existence of this community by simultaneously renewing our attachment to it. By presenting the literary text as the living voice of the dead, Greenblatt self-consciously reproduces the religious motive to sacralize the object as a deity (“Speak to me!”). Like Aladdin rubbing his lamp, Greenblatt’s “touch of the real” magically produces presence where before there was absence.

But as Greenblatt himself implies (“it is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions”), the world of the sacred is subject to the same representational paradoxes as the world of fiction. In presenting his private aesthetic experience of Shakespeare in the context of a desire for collective belonging, Greenblatt implicitly acknowledges that this sacred context has been lost forever, lost because it never existed apart from its representation. The sacred is constituted “performatively” by its representation. It is the historical function of ritual—but not literature—to attempt to reproduce the collective context of this originary experience, to re-create the experience of communal belonging that all cultural representation points to but only religion promises to deliver as a reality.

On first glance it may seem surprising that Greenblatt should choose to represent the sacred in these minimal, literary terms.<sup>24</sup> But this “minimization” of culture represents a renewed return of the aesthetic to its anthropological basis. The weak point of Greenblatt’s criticism lies not in his anthropological intuitions, which are often profound, but quite simply in his lack of a more explicitly formulated anthropology, a lack that he perversely interprets as a virtue.<sup>25</sup> But with-

out an anthropology to grant his literary intuitions broader critical purchase, Greenblatt is forced to conclude that his criticism begins and ends not in anthropology but in the figure of the great artist himself, even if this artist has now been “deconstructed” into the fragments of the Renaissance period and its mysterious “Shakespearean negotiations.”

Consider the problem for a moment from the hypothetical perspective of an originary anthropology. By interpreting the central object as the referent of the mimetic other's sign, I am participating in the collective act of signification. The latter imposes on the object a symbolic significance that exists over and above any previously given, nonsymbolic significance the object may have held for us (for instance, as an object of sexual or alimentary satisfaction). In the ritual context the central object is sacralized by us as something that deserves, not our destruction or appropriation, but our piety and respect. As René Girard and Eric Gans have powerfully shown in their respective analyses of the sacred, the object is too significant because it is too dangerous as an object of mimetic contagion to remain unguarded by prohibition and taboo.<sup>26</sup> By sacralizing the object, religion guarantees the object's cultural difference, securing it from the merely ephemeral needs of the body. The body's needs are of course real, and must be taken care of if the body is to survive. But they do not determine what is sacred and what is profane. On the contrary, the distinction between profane and sacred is a consequence of the subordination of individual appetite in the face of the scene's potential for mimetic rivalry. In collectively designating the object as sacred, the conflict inherent to mimesis is momentarily deferred. The appetitive object now stands against us as a prohibition to unmediated appetite. Appropriation of it can now be pursued only within this context—that is, with the awareness that each individual's desire is in conflict with the desires of the others.

In the ritual context, the repelling force of the sacred appears to inhabit the central object, which is subsequently regarded as a god. But the perception of the object as a sacred figure or “totem” would not be possible without the prior mediation provided by the collectively produced sign. Thus, for example, in placing a taboo on the meat killed by the hunter, the community guarantees the subordination of the hunter's appetite to the needs of the group. These needs are not determined by the body (though they are necessarily constrained by it). They are determined by the desire for membership in the community itself, a membership that is secured only through constant and vigilant attention to the rituals of sacrifice through which this membership is both created and renewed. Ritual is thus itself a representation of originary deferral; it refers back to previous ritual events, which it meticulously attempts to both preserve and reproduce. As Gans puts it, what the theory proposes is that these commemorative reproductions must ultimately refer back to an originary event, “a hypothesis concerning the phenomenon of representation-in-general.”<sup>27</sup> And the minimal structure of this hypothetical originary event must be symbolic deferral itself. In

its most minimal anthropological sense, ritual interdiction is the reproduction of the originary deferral of desire before a central (appetitive) object.

Before returning to Greenblatt's purely aesthetic interpretation of the sacred, let us consider an actual historical example of ritual interdiction. In her fascinating discussion of the various types of prohibition among the Chewong tribe of the Malay Peninsula, Signe Howell refers to *punén*, a word used by the Chewong to acknowledge the potentially rivalrous desires of the tribe's members.<sup>28</sup> *Punén* is typically associated with the distribution of meat, the critical nature of which for the tribe needs no explanation. But it may also arise in the context of any desirable object that is not readily obtained by a tribe member:

The Chewong take all possible precautions against provoking *punén*. All food caught in the forest is brought back and publicly revealed immediately. . . . As soon as a carcass is brought back, and before it has been divided up, someone of the hunter's family touches it with his finger and makes a round touching everyone present in the settlement, each time saying "*punén*." . . . This is another way of announcing to everyone present that the food will soon be theirs, and to refrain from desiring it yet awhile. (185)

What is interesting about the Chewong use of the word *punén* is that it refers neither to the object of desire nor indeed to desire, but to the danger of unfulfilled desire. The Chewong are extremely superstitious of desires that are provoked but remain unsatisfied. "Once a desire has been voiced," Howell writes, "the person who can satisfy it must immediately do so. If he refrains, the person refused will suffer the consequences of *punén*" (185). The slightest mishap that may subsequently befall the refused party will be unhesitatingly attributed to the fact that this individual's desire has remained unsatisfied and continues to fester malignantly, causing all kinds of misfortunes. The individual is, so to speak, haunted by *punén*, by the ill will or resentment that unfulfilled desire engenders.

The obligation to fulfill the other's desire is not, however, a recipe for multiplying desire. The latter is, rather, a feature of the modern "consumer" market, which operates by relentlessly promoting new products and therefore "new" desires among its participants. Among the Chewong, the reverse is true. Desire is a menace to be purged in collective ritual. The threat of *punén* keeps the individual from believing that she can indulge her desire outside the context of a strictly collective and hence rigidly egalitarian system of distribution. Howell observes that the Chewong "hardly ever make overt requests for anything, and the fear of *punén* may easily have prevented people from requesting gifts from me" (185). Only on one occasion was a gift explicitly requested of her. An old woman asked her for a whetstone. Howell gave her the object lest the woman were to come under the spell of *punén*, but the rest of the group "commented unfavorably" on this woman's evidently aberrant behavior (185).

Now reconsider Greenblatt's rather more elevated description of desire, the desire to speak with the dead. What differentiates his representation of desire from that of the Chewong? The most obvious difference is the latter's proximity to the general problem of economic distribution. The Chewong ceremoniously provoke desire when appetitive fulfillment is all but guaranteed. The *punén* ritual is a pretext to the actual eating of the object. Yet this apparent difference in functionality, though fundamental, is not metaphysical or ontological. For what structures desire in both cases is given not by the real physical object, but by the preceding cultural or ritual task of *representing the object as collectively significant*. The object must be *sacralized*. The difference is thus primarily a temporal one. Whereas the Chewong permit the collective representation of desire only within the context of imminent appetitive satisfaction, Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead can never be satisfied. The focus on the subject's unfulfillable desire—a representation that would no doubt be considered scandalous or “blasphemous” by the rigidly egalitarian Chewong—distinguishes Greenblatt's “charismatic” representation of desire from the Chewong's prohibition against all such charismatic representations.

This is not to say that the Chewong know no such desire. On the contrary, all desires are publicly acknowledged but also publicly constrained; the utterance *punén* reminds the group that they must, in Howell's words, “refrain from desiring [the meat] yet awhile” (185). The word is a solemn reminder of the need to defer one's desire in the face of extreme provocation. The ceremony of touching each member of the tribe with the same finger that touched the meat heightens the ambivalence—the paradoxicality—of the desiring relation. On the one hand, it emphasizes the physical proximity between the individual and the desire object; on the other, it undermines this physical or *indexical* proximity by placing the meat under the symbolic or metaphoric taboo of *punén*. By touching first the meat and then each member of the tribe, the person whose task it is to distribute the meat indicates to each member that he will receive his just share but that he must also await this anticipated satisfaction. The word is a temporary substitute for the object, not simply in the linguistic or indexical sense that it indicates the presence of the object (as in the deictic “There!”), but more powerfully and more fundamentally in the performative or ritual sense that it designates the object as bound by a taboo. To repeat, *punén* does not refer to the meat itself but to the misfortune visited upon those who fail to defer their desire for appetitive gratification.

The ritual invocation of *punén* is thus occasioned by critical moments in the collective life of the tribe, exemplified by the ethical problem of distributing scarce and therefore desirable resources such as meat. Deferral in this context is limited to the time that elapses between the ritual centralization of the meat and its eventual consumption. But the key performative or aesthetic moment in this process of economic distribution occurs when the word *punén* is substituted for the thing. Desire is first provoked, and then renounced. The carcass is publicly

presented where all can see it, but only so that the onlookers can be reminded, one by one, of the association between the meat and its prohibition. The individual contemplates the entire portion of meat, but this subjective and therefore also germinally aesthetic moment of contemplation is permitted only within the collective context that is itself strongly reinforced by the repeated utterance of the word *punén* to each individual. The threat of *punén*, which is ultimately none other than the collective threat or “mimetic presence” of the other tribe members, hangs over the consciousness of each spectator contemplating the desire object.

It is this paradoxical experience of collective membership that Greenblatt seeks to re-create fictionally in his opening to *Shakespearean Negotiations*. By translating the critic’s aesthetic experience into this ritual context (“literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans”), Greenblatt authenticates his aesthetic experience of Shakespeare. The hope is that the latter will thereby become not merely a private but a publicly shared experience, and thus an instance of sacred membership. In paying attention to Greenblatt’s text, we are being invited to share in this more elevated high-cultural depiction of literary desire. Like the shaman who becomes momentarily possessed by the voice of the other, Greenblatt becomes a vessel through which we may peer briefly into immortality. Greenblatt deserves our attention because he has been touched by literature, and above all by Shakespeare.

As these remarks suggest, there is more than a hint of romanticism to this view of the sacred. Greenblatt may be influenced here by Geertz, whose theory of ritual shares much with the modernist idea of literature as an attempt to compensate for the loss of religion. Bereft of its practical economic function in rituals such as those of the Chewong, the representation of desire becomes instead an end in itself. But what this exclusive focus on the aesthetic tends to forget or repress is the anthropological origin of the aesthetic in the originary scene that includes not merely the aesthetic but the linguistic, sacred, and economic moments.

Despite its one-sided idealism, there is nonetheless a genuine anthropological truth to the romantic doctrine. The aesthetic moment of the originary scene occurs when the peripheral spectators contemplate the central object *before* it is divided up in the sacrificial feast. As Gans argues in his analysis of the aesthetic, what makes this contemplation specifically aesthetic is the “oscillation between imaginary possession and recognized inviolability.”<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, the originary sign points us to the content we desire; on the other, it forbids us access to it. The generativity of this experience is a consequence of our recognition that we cannot violate the mediation provided by the sign without also violating the aesthetic experience.

We have already seen how this structure of imaginary possession and recognized inviolability informs the Chewong’s ritual use of the word *punén*. In placing an interdiction upon the meat, the desires of the tribe members are both recognized and deferred. The close proximity of the meat exacerbates desire, but

the utterance of the word *punén* reminds the individual that the object is inviolable. The practical function of this paradoxical process of representing an object in order to forbid its appropriation is to defer or contain the conflict that is likely to break out when multiple desires are focused on a scarce object. The time purchased by representing the object as *punén* allows it to be more peaceably and equitably divided among the group. Desire is inseparable from this ethical economy of deferral.

Greenblatt implicitly accepts the priority of the aesthetic mediation of the sign. Indeed, he makes this priority the generative basis for his whole idea of a cultural poetics. But what Greenblatt ignores in his "poetics" of culture is the economic conclusion to the originary event. The aesthetic sign is thus divorced from its basis in a unified anthropology. But the consequence of this deanthropologization of the aesthetic is that literature is understood to be a unique product of Shakespeare, or as the new historicist is wont to put it, of the particular "cultural period" in which Shakespeare wrote his plays. But this is far too ambitious a hypothesis to serve as the basis of culture, for it thereby assumes, consciously or not, that culture is coterminous with "the age of Shakespeare." Despite its many protestations to the contrary, the new historicism is thus the mirror image of the unabashed romanticism of such "traditionalists" as Harold Bloom.

In his major theoretical essay on the sacred, "Religion as a Cultural System," Geertz argues, as Nietzsche did of Greek tragedy, that Balinese drama is "not merely a spectacle to be watched but a ritual to be enacted. There is," Geertz insists, "no aesthetic distance here separating actors from audience."<sup>30</sup> The outsider's detachment from the event he beholds creates a thrilling sense of alienation in the contemplating ethnographer, who feels excluded from the solidarity he senses among those he observes. "Where for 'visitors' religious performances can only be presentations of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations, realizations of it—not only models of what they believe, but also models *for* the believing of it. In these plastic dramas," Geertz concludes, "men attain their faith as they portray it."<sup>31</sup> The sacred is wherever the modern observer is not. As in Hamlet's first stage appearance, which finds the prince dressed in black and lurking resentfully on the periphery of his uncle's brilliant and colorful court scene, all the ethnographer can do is contemplate the scandal of his dispossession from the center.

But that is not all one can do, at least not from the "etic" perspective of a minimal anthropology rather than the "emic" perspective of the "culture of criticism." High secular culture, like religion before it, is a historical institution. It therefore can also be transcended historically. But this "end of culture" is also a return to its minimal beginning in the formulation of an anthropology. This is a more positive and constructive interpretation of the recently debated "end of theory." Contrary

to Greenblatt's and Geertz's implied historical arguments, the aesthetic is not specific to any particular literary period, because it is not specific to literature at all. It is an originary category of language, which originates as a deferral of the indexical sign/object relationship in favor of the symbolic sign/sign relationship.<sup>32</sup> Both religious and aesthetic uses of language depend upon this deferring function for their power. The difference is that religion defers the individual's relationship to the object by collectively sacralizing it, whereas literature exploits the sign's originary deferring function to designate the object as *a fiction*. In aesthetic contemplation, we return to the formally closed structure of the sign in our subjective experience of the object. It is on the model of the formal closure of the sign that we understand the object as a Gestalt—that is, as a coherent pattern or “imitation” of the formal sign. It is for this reason that literature, but not religion, is capable of reflecting hypothetically on its anthropological origin. Because the aesthetic insists on the necessity that the individual's subjective experience of the world is mediated by the collectively produced sign, it therefore also stands closer to the generative source of a theoretical anthropology, which begins not with the object but with the representation of the object. The best criticism implicitly understands the anthropological discovery power of literature. But it perversely refuses to grant this understanding anything other than a tentative basis in the institutional history of literature itself. It is therefore forced to interpret literary history not in terms of a history of increasingly more powerful reflections on the hypothetical event of anthropological origin, but as an ad hoc collection of aesthetic “periods” that may be studied synchronically, but from which all sense of a larger historical-anthropological narrative has been abortively, and I think quite illogically, removed.

Why, then, do we still need criticism? We need criticism because we need the humanities in which criticism flourishes. In an era in which the biological sciences of the human, the protohuman, and the parahuman (for example, evolutionary and cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics, biological anthropology, neuroscience, and primatology) are increasingly refining our sense of the continuity between human and animal life, we need the humanities because only the humanities are founded on the anthropological truth that the human is differentiated not ultimately by its biology but by its capacity to use and interpret symbolic signs. This does not mean we must go back to reading poetry as an abstract reflection of “the human condition.” It means we must take seriously the postulate that the minimal basis for any theory of culture is hypothetical and anthropological. From this perspective, criticism begins not with the maximal historical assumption that the aesthetic is an institution to be derived “empirically” from an ad hoc examination of various arbitrarily chosen cultural works or periods. Rather, it begins with a minimal hypothesis that seeks to explain the originary basis for those institutions deemed indispensable for cultural and aesthetic analysis (for example, language, art, ritual, and economic exchange). For without such a hypothesis



we cannot expect criticism to last much beyond its own narrow self-justifications of institutional membership. In the final analysis, knowing how to enter into the “culture of criticism” means much more than knowing how to gain membership into an academic elite. It means recognizing membership in its most minimal sense, as members of the originary anthropological community, the only community we have ever known and are ever likely to know.

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### Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 47.
2. Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 37.
3. *Ibid.*, 228.
4. Frans B. M. de Waal, “Cultural Primatology Comes of Age,” *Nature* 399 (1999): 636.
5. “We” in the humanities, that is. For scientists, culture—far from being an insoluble epistemological paradox between knowing and doing, description and performance—is simply a matter of definition. If you define culture as the “non-genetic transmission of habits,” as the primatologist Frans de Waal does, then clearly there are many other social animals—in particular, chimpanzees—that have “culture.” As always, the project of science has no time for the paradoxes of human self-understanding, so dear to those in the humanities.
6. The debate among scientists over the anthropological specificity of language is far from settled. For obvious reasons, primatologists prefer to downplay the difference between language and nonsymbolic forms of communication. However, for the view of a biological anthropologist, who accepts the “evolutionary anomaly” of language, see Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997). I have discussed Deacon’s work in considerable detail in my “Cognitive Science and the Problem of Representation,” *Poetics Today* 24 (2003): 237–95. See also Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Tomasello suggests that so-called cultural traditions among different populations of chimpanzees are most plausibly explained not as genuine social or imitative learning but as “environmental shaping” (29). In a series of ingenious experiments with two-year-old children and chimpanzees, Tomasello notes that whereas children focus almost exclusively on imitating the experimenter’s behavior, however “arbitrary” or bizarre it may appear (for example, using your head to flip on a light switch), among chimpanzees the focus is not on the experimenter’s behavior but on the object or objects involved in the overall action. Tomasello suggests that the latter type of behavior is *emulative* rather than properly *imitative*, because the object is not the imitation of a model, but simply the achievement of a goal. For example, the chimpanzee may learn that the switch operates the light, but it will not also associate a particular type of behavior or gesture with the switch. Children perceive the switch from the start as mediated by the experimenter’s gesture. In contrast, the chimps see the light switch as just a light switch, and the object receives no further symbolic or collective significance from the fact that it has been previously designated by the experimenter. Obvi-

ously, the ability to interpret a gesture as a symbolic sign requires a separation between mimetic gesture and object that is already latent within the attentional focus of the children but not the chimps. I have not come across any other scientific work that so clearly demonstrates the “scenic” origin of linguistic attention. It is a short step from Tomasello’s theory of joint attention to René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire and Eric Gans’s theory of the ostensive sign. See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); and Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

7. Note that this analysis does not deny the cultural significance of the preexisting symbolic paradigms that enable the construction and testing of particular empirical hypotheses. It is for this reason that Thomas Kuhn’s notion of “paradigm shift” is useful for philosophers and historians who wish to understand the history of science. Whether it is useful for the scientists themselves seems doubtful. On the contrary, “normal” science advances only by assuming the transparency of the paradigm within which it operates. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
8. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 99, 107.
9. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), viii, 185.
10. Stephen Greenblatt, “The Touch of the Real,” *Representations* 59 (1997): 14.
11. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 209.
12. See, for example, John Guillory’s Bourdieusian analysis of “cultural capital” in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), or James J. Sosnoski, *Token Professionals and Master Critics: A Critique of Orthodoxy in Literary Studies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).
13. Mark Bauerlein, *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 148.
14. Though the terms are Bauerlein’s, my analysis of “belonging” owes more to Emile Durkheim, Arnold van Gennep, René Girard, Eric Gans, and Randall Collins. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995); and Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960). For Girard’s analysis of mimetic desire, see *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. His later works, *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), develop the analysis in an explicitly anthropological direction. For Eric Gans’s important modification of Girard’s theory, see *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). For Randall Collins’s theory of “interaction ritual,” see *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). The reader may be surprised not to see Michel Foucault in this list, but Foucault deanthropologizes Durkheim’s analysis of the sacred. Compare, for example, this remark from “What Is an Author?”: “In our culture . . . discourse was not origi-

nally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act—an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous.” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 108. For Foucault, all cultural differences can ultimately be traced back to differences of power. But what explains the concept of power? Is it anthropological, biological, or purely metaphysical? On this score, Foucault’s theory represents a step backward from Durkheim.

15. “The equivocations of representational [i.e., political] criticism,” Bauerlein writes, “are subtle and complex, and unless one diagnoses its usages as the outcome of a pragmatic-representational opposition, much contemporary criticism will strike readers as confused, incoherent, or nonsensical. The following mini-essays on critical terms are designed to lift that incomprehension, to rationalize the confusions as natural consequences of criticism’s anti-method proceedings. The intent is clarification. If the result should be a critique, I leave its consequences for my readers to draw.” *Literary Criticism*, 15.
16. See Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1963), esp. 35–39.
17. Of course, science too is an anthropological endeavor, and therefore subject to the same desires and conflicts as the rest of humanity. In this sense, Thomas Kuhn’s notion of “paradigm shift” explains far better than Popper’s idealized notion of “falsifiability” the anthropology without which science could not exist. But precisely for that reason Kuhn’s history of science is really a version of anthropology. There are, for example, no indications that Kuhn’s idea of “paradigm shift” is changing the way scientists formulate and test their hypotheses. And this is ultimately because these tests are, in the final analysis, always empirical tests. For a useful comparison of Popper and Kuhn, see Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979), 15–28.
18. Douglas Bruster, in *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture: Early Modern Literature and the Cultural Turn* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), has recently suggested that the new historicism is primarily “indebted to Geertz for the style of the thickly descriptive essay,” a style that “entrances its reader with the accounts of things and events alternately wonderful, strange, violent, and odd” (36).
19. In *Cultural Capital* John Guillory states that the “perceived devaluation of the humanities curriculum is in reality a decline in its market value” (46). In an earlier and shorter version of the argument in “Canon,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Guillory argues that modernism and difficult poets like John Donne were only allowed into the academic curriculum after the universities could offload the teaching of standard English to the lower levels of education. Literature was now used to do “something more”—namely, to defamiliarize students with precisely the “standard” reading practices they were required to learn at the primary levels (“Canon” 246). Academic literary study in the postwar period evolves, rather like the old modernism itself, as an attempt to scandalize the bourgeois subject produced by the liberal-democratic marketplace. In other words, it is by definition always marginal.

20. Richard Halpern, in *Shakespeare among the Moderns* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), has traced an interesting genealogy of modernism from T. S. Eliot through Northrop Frye to Stephen Greenblatt. "High modernism," Halpern writes, "not only dominated the cultural and critical reception of Shakespeare during the first half of our century, but continues to exert a powerful influence that is often unacknowledged or disavowed" (2).
21. Greenblatt, "Touch of the Real," 19; hereafter cited in the text.
22. For a powerful analysis of Weber's concept of charisma in terms of the center-periphery structure of human societies, see Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
23. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1.
24. The representation is "literary" because Greenblatt isn't really a shaman conducting a ritual but a literature professor "pretending" to be a shaman. Less obviously, the representation is "minimal" because you don't have to believe in ghosts to get Greenblatt's point; all you need is a little imagination, like the actor who pretends he is Hamlet seeing a real ghost.
25. In *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher cite Johann Gottfried von Herder as their forerunner, because Herder understood that anthropology depends on "an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual" (6). Yes, but the new historicist's encounter with the singular does not obviate a consideration of what makes this singularity relevant to *us*. Without an anthropology to justify the latter "etic" context, new historicism's emphasis on singularity is merely self-serving, because it implies that only the new historicist has privileged access to cultural "otherness." Elsewhere I have argued that the real point behind the new historicist anecdote is the romantic desire to go native. See my "The Critic as Ethnographer," *New Literary History* (2004) 35: 621–61. Mark Bauerlein observes that new historicism's "methodological frailty" is too often ignored because it otherwise seems to offer an "antidote to cultural imperialism." *Literary Criticism*, 29. Are we beginning to see the end of this political strategy of romantic victimary self-centralization in the humanities? No doubt it is too early to tell, but the recent publication by Columbia University Press of a 725-page anthology of essays that are highly critical of criticism's strategy of victimary self-centralization suggests that the tide may be turning. See Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
26. In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard views modernity as ambivalently poised between, on the one hand, primitive sacrifice, with its potentially endless cycle of violent retribution, and, on the other, its Weberian "rationalization" by the modern state. The latter is granted a monopoly on "good" or "sacred" violence: "In the final analysis, then, the judicial system and the institution of sacrifice share the same function, but the judicial system is infinitely more effective. However, it can only exist in conjunction with a firmly established political power. And like all modern technological advances, it is a two-edged sword, which can be used to oppress as well as to liberate" (23). Gans, more secular than Girard, suggests that the modern "exchange system has become at

least conceivably capable of taking over the function, formerly carried out by religious institutions, of protecting the social order against the dangers of desire." *End of Culture*, 43.

27. Gans, *End of Culture*, 17.
28. Signe Howell, *Society and Cosmos: Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), esp. 183–91; hereafter cited in the text.
29. Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 118.
30. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 116.
31. *Ibid.*, 113–14.
32. For further discussion of the anthropological significance of the difference between symbol and index, see Deacon, *Symbolic Species*, and my "Cognitive Science and the Problem of Representation."