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Anthropo-logos: the Congenital Hypothesis

Ken Mayers

For starters, we would need you to allow me to make a (hypothetical) quotation. No, wait, you would need me to allow us to make such a quotation. Or, perhaps one should say that I would need you to allow us to make it, or should we say her, or him. Already, before these starters, the order of the persons of the people, as well as those of the thing to be involved, be they first, second, or third, is problematic. What are we, you, etc., to do?—(quote-unquote) “ , ” quoth I, is only to have been a hypothesis.

The situation of this event of quotation, would be, at least to hazard a guess, a form of Eric Gans' hypothesis.¹ The process of situating and re-situating such an event would be the function of this hypothesis.

A quotation mark. “Les grands esprits se rencontrent (great minds meet each other, or great spirits meet each other).” Stop. End of citation. Or will one have read, quote: “les grands esprits se rendent compte (great minds realize).” Unquote. Who says this? A French idiom, it is occasioned by the event when several people interrupt each other, almost simultaneously, saying exactly the same words. They interrupt each other? But who had the floor? Who is to say? Perhaps no one had the floor. Then one should say, rather, that they all pre-empt one another—and someone does—she says: “les grands esprits se rencontrent” and “ils se rendent compte” (they realize)—she's got it! A fan of the game of bridge might call this sort of bid a pre-emptive double. But what if they all doubled each other—or should we say re-double—all saying, again as if at once, the words:

"les grands esprits se rencontrent!" The accounts would then not quite be rendered, not yet.

Let's try something slightly different. This time I'll cite Eric Gans, writing in the beginning of the *End of Culture*: "Instead of presupposing a 'mimetic crisis'. . ." (19)—allow me to interrupt this quotation to make two comments. First, unlike the other beginnings in Gans' book—the preface begins with the words "the end," the introduction begins with "primitive," the preface to part one of the book begins with "the fundamental"—unlike these beginnings, this first chapter of the book begins *in media res*, that is, in the midst of simulation, with the word "instead"; that is, with a gesture of substitution that will not complete the substitution, that will take the ground out from under the steadfast, the steady, what should have stood in good stead, only to leave what must henceforth remain unsteady. Second, let me call attention to the fact that Gans places the terms "mimetic crisis" between quotation marks. According to René Girard, a mimetic crisis will have preceded the event which, in its minimal form, Gans is about to describe. By putting Girard's terms between quotation marks, Gans does several things. First, he designates these terms, without naming Girard in the text, as someone else's. Second, he distinguishes these terms from the rest of the text. This distance, or difference, between terms, or between figures, such as those of Gans and Girard, would not be determinable during an actual mimetic crisis, during which, according to Girard, everyone would be confused, especially with everyone else. However (and the term "especially" might lead one to suspect this), Gans does not exclude Girard's mimetic crisis from his hypothesis, but questions its status as a presupposition or a precondition. We might say that, given the formulation of his hypothesis which follows, Gans will have implied that the "mimetic crisis" will already have been marked by quotation.

Once again, quoting Gans:

Instead of presupposing a 'mimetic crisis' as a precondition for the original act of representation, we shall consider a weaker hypothesis—bearing in mind, of course, that the 'weakness' of our presuppositions makes the hypothesis proportionally more powerful. We shall suppose only the scene of representation as such as the minimal state of our hypothesis: the members of the group surrounding an object, attractive for whatever reason, and designating it by means of an abortive gesture. Even the duration of this designation need not be specified. We

are not obliged to postulate a lengthy stasis resulting from a durable impossibility of appropriating the object. The constitution of the act of representation is alone sufficient: the recognition by each member of the group that both he [or she] and his [or her] fellows are in fact designating the object *for the moment* without actively attempting to appropriate it. (19)

Before we proceed to analyze this passage, I would like to sketch out some of the relationships between the title of this presentation ("Anthropo-logos: the Congenital Hypothesis") and the hypotheses in question. Gans' hypothesis—indeed one might find that the hypothesis-in-general—is congenital. The term applies in at least three ways. First, the hypothesis describes an event that is not natural; it is not determined by a single, pre-existing code, such as the genetic code. Instead, according to Gans, the event is historically given. This would correspond to the definition of "congenital" as: "existing (or occurring) at birth, or with birth, but not hereditary." The event would take place at the conjunction of several codes; one could say that it is intertextual—as Gans puts it, the hypothesis must be evenemential. It must explain an event. Second, the scene of Gans' hypothesis is peculiar to humans. In fact, he would argue, the event of the hypothesis constitutes the human. Language is the criterion which would distinguish the human; it is almost second nature. This would correspond to a second definition of "congenital" as: "having a specified character, *as if* by nature, as if innate, as if inherent." This second definition carries negative connotations. The second nature can be viewed as a flaw, a defect. It is supplementary, and, as such, calls the identity of that which it would specify—in this case the human, or language—into question. If something is to be identified by a criterion which is not natural to it, but which only seems to be natural to it, then one must suspect that the thing in question has not been properly identified. This specified character might be considered a con-genital defect, in other words, what is to be exposed (even, some might judge, exposed like an ancient Greek child), to be excluded, or, perhaps more optimistically, repaired, healed. So far, concerning the originary event, Gans and Girard are in accord. They agree that the event is not natural, but is instead historically given. They also agree that it is the originary human event. However, where Girard proclaims that the knowledge of this event is miraculous, hence incapable of having its source explained, Gans speculates on the possibility of an explanation, which, if it might not

exclude a measure of faith, would nevertheless not rely on the supernatural. For Girard, knowledge of the event is in itself an event of revelation, in a Christian sense of the term, whereas for Gans, any account of representation must refer to a *hypothesis* concerning the phenomenon of representation-in-general. This hypothesis, Gans would continue, must be a generative one that proposes a model of its scene from an earlier state in which it will have been absent. Gans' hypothesis of the scene, as opposed to Girard's Christian revelation, would correspond to a third definition of "congenital," calling attention to the term's construction: "*con-genitus*": "born together with."

Hence the hyphen in my title: Anthro-(dash)-logos. For Girard, this hyphen is a *trait d'union* (with emphasis on union), resolving the problem of the relation between the human and the word and redeeming any failings of a congenital second nature. This hyphen would indicate a destiny—logos becomes anthropos, the word becomes man. In Gans' hypothesis of the scene, however, anthropos and logos, born together, are problematic twins who, like rival brothers, remain at odds. One might develop possibilities of diminishing the violence of their relationship, but it could never be reduced entirely. At this point, a remark of Jacques Derrida, as we find it, for example, in his article on Emmanuel Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics," is pertinent: "Here, we only wish to foreshadow [Nous ne voulons ici que laisser pressentir] that *within history*—but is it meaningful [aurait-elle un sens] elsewhere?—every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*".² Later in the same article, Derrida will explain that the inevitability of a certain degree of violence stems from what he calls "the connaturality of discourse and violence, [which] does not appear to [him] to have *emerged in history*, nor to be tied to a given form of communication, or again to a given "philosophy," and that he would want to show that this connaturality belongs to the "very essence of history, to transcendental historicity, a notion which here can only be understood in the resonance of a speech common—in a way that still calls for clarification—to Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger." He then adds, referring to the descriptive practice of the "social sciences": "Historical or ethnosociological information here can only confirm or support, under the rubric of the factual example, the eidetic transcendental evidence" (316, n.46).³

In contrast to both Derrida and Gans, Girard's Christian revelation would proclaim the absolute reduction of violence. According

to Girard's evangelical scene, *anthropos* is the source of all violence, whereas *logos* is the non-violent God. He says in *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* that: "Man is never anything but a more or less violent denegation of his violence."⁴ In the scene of divine human sacrifice, the object at stake is a victim, and this victim is the transcendental signifier. This victim, the Christ, would signify, absolutely, non-violence. In Girard's theory, this opposition of human violence to divine non-violence is what distinguishes the violent religion that comes from man from the non-violent religion that can only come from God.

Gans displaces Girard's hypo-stasis, that is, Gans displaces what would be, by definition, the figure of the essential person of Christ in which his human and divine natures are united (what we would call, in the terms of this presentation, a seamless Anthropologos). Gans displaces this hypo-stasis by means of a formal hypo-thesis in which the possible significance of the position, occupied, for example, by the victim, may no longer depend on its contents.

Let us re-examine what Gans calls the minimal state of his hypothesis: "the members of the group surrounding an object, attractive for whatever reason, and designating it by means of an abortive gesture of appropriation." The scene is composed of three elements: the group, the object, and the gesture. A certain economy of signification is already inscribed in the scene, since the object is attractive. We do not know the source of this attraction, whether it comes from the object itself, from among the members of the group, or from someone or something off-stage. Even without the gesture, the sense of the scene, at least to an outside observer, would be clear. The structure of the circle of the group, motionless, around the object, could already be interpreted as a sign of abortive appropriation. The fact that the group is gathered around the object demonstrates its attractiveness; the fact that the group remains gathered around the object without approaching any closer demonstrates the interdiction. A certain discourse and its violence are already inscribed in the scene. This structure, composed of the group and its object, completes Girard's scene, since the object in Girard's scene is actually a subject—this central victim is the speaking word itself.

Gans hazards, however, that this structure is not complete, because he adds to it his "abortive gesture." If the circle of the group's members is in itself a sign designating the object, then what is designated by the abortive gesture? The circle should already be perfectly

adequate as a signifier containing its signified. A supplementary gesture would not make any sense. It would perturb the restricted economy of the circular sign.

Theoretically, such a gesture should be impossible. In the circular economy of the scene, there should only be room for a single, undivided signifier, (the object) and a single, undivided signified (the group)—or vice versa. The object in place signifies the dead subject. To appropriate this object and its place would be the *coup de force* of Hegelian mastery. Gans' gesture would simulate the Hegelian coup, but it displaces the master-slave dialectic in a way that I would compare, perhaps making a similar gesture of displacement, to what happens when Bataille translates Hegel's Master and his mastery (Herrschaft) with the sovereign operation and sovereignty (souveraineté). Derrida analyzes the distinction between mastery and sovereignty quite admirably in his article: "From Restricted Economy to General Economy: a Hegelianism without Reserve," operating displacements which, risking a more thorough-going bearing-out or bearing-under, a sovereign reading might bring to bear between any number of texts. Forgive me if I cite Derrida now, fairly extensively, in a somewhat undisciplined manner (thus somewhat uncritically), but observing the constraints of this occasion. I will be citing Alan Bass' translation of Derrida's text, but where Bass follows Baillie, the English translator of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, translating "Herrschaft" as "Lordship," I will substitute the term "Mastery." Bass explains the distinction in a footnote:

Hyppolite, the French translator, translates 'Herr' as 'maître,' (master) making the 'master's' operation 'maîtrise.' 'Maîtrise' also has the sense of mastery, of grasp, and Derrida continually plays on this double sense, which [Bass asserts] is lost in English. The difference between sovereignty and [mastery—Bass writes 'lordship' here] (maîtrise) is that sovereignty does not seek to grasp (maîtriser) concepts but rigorously to explode them. (334, n. 8)⁵

Derrida writes:

The operation of mastery indeed consists in, writes Hegel: "showing that it is fettered to no determinate existence (Dasein) that it is not bound at all by the particularity everywhere characteristic of existence as such, and is *not* tied up with life."⁶ Such an 'operation' (this word, ['opération,'] constantly employed by Bataille to designate the privileged moment or the act of sovereignty, was the current translation of the word 'Tun,' which occurs so frequently in the chapter on

the dialectic of the master and the slave) thus amounts to risking, putting at stake (*mettre en jeu*, *wagen*, *daransetzen*; *mettre en jeu* is one of Bataille's most fundamental and frequently used expressions) the entirety of one's own life. The servant [slave—*Knecht*] is the man who does not put his life at stake, the man who wants to conserve his life, wants to be conserved (*servus*). By raising oneself above life, by looking at death directly, one accedes to [mastery]; to the for-itself [*pour soi*, *für sich*], to freedom, to recognition. Freedom must go through the putting at stake of life (*Daransetzen des Lebens*). The [master] is the man who has had the strength to endure the anguish of death and to maintain the work of death. Such, according to Bataille, is the center of Hegelianism. The 'principal text' would be the one, in the *Preface* to the *Phenomenology*, which places knowledge 'at the height of death.' (254)

Further, Derrida writes:

[Mastery] has a meaning. The putting at stake of life is a moment in the constitution of meaning, in the presentation of essence and truth. It is an obligatory stage in the history of self-consciousness and phenomenality, that is to say, in the presentation of meaning [sens]. For history—that is, meaning—to form a continuous chain, to be woven, the master must experience his truth. This is possible only under two conditions which cannot be separated: [First, that] the master . . . stay alive in order to enjoy [*jouir de*] what he has won by risking his life; and, [second,] at the end of this progression so admirably described by Hegel, [that] the 'truth of the independent consciousness [be] the servile consciousness' (Hegel, p.237). (Writing 254-55)

The master of Girard's scene would be the Christ. In contrast to Girard's scene, there is no master of Gans' scene of the hypothesis; sovereignty may, however, be at or in play. Where the master has, because he wins, a sense, or meaning, where his coup constitutes this sense or meaning, a sovereign operation would not yield such figures. Citing Derrida: "Hegel's own interpretation can be re-interpreted—against [Hegel]. This is what Bataille does. Reinterpretation is a simulated repetition of Hegelian discourse. In the course of this repetition a barely perceptible displacement disjoints all the articulations and penetrates all the points welded together by the imitated discourse" (260). The poetic gesture of reinterpretation doubles mastery—without escaping the dialectic. Again citing Derrida:

What is poetic in sovereignty is announced in 'the moment when poetry renounces theme and meaning.' (EI, p. 239). It is only announced in this

renunciation, for, given over to 'play without rules,' [jeu sans règle] poetry risks letting itself be domesticated, 'subordinated,' better than ever. This risk is properly modern. To avoid it, poetry must be 'accompanied by an affirmation of sovereignty,' 'which provides,' Bataille says in an admirable, untenable formulation which could serve as the heading for everything we are attempting to reassemble here as the form and torment of his writing, 'the commentary on its absence of meaning.'(261)

The abortive gesture in Gans' hypothesis of the scene resembles such a commentary; it would be the gesture that attributes *encore un sens*, yet another sense, meaning, in the scene, to an absence of sense. Let me cite once again Gans' description of the minimal state of his hypothesis: "the members of the group surrounding an object, attractive for whatever reason, and designating (it) by means of an abortive gesture of appropriation."

Gans interprets the pronoun "it" in this phrase to refer to the object. However, a gesture which designated the object would not be abortive; it would be an outright gesture of appropriation. The members of the group, already to have been constituted to decide such a gesture, would decide the sense of the gesture as an act of violence against the group, because it would threaten to deprive them, as a group, of their object. The group's decision would identify the culpable subject, and this subject, thus constituted, would be subject to the violence of exclusion. A gesture which did not designate the object, but only its interdiction, would likewise be decided by the group as an act of violence against the group, because it would also threaten to deprive them, as a group, of their object.

The gesture of the hypothesis can neither simply refer to the object, nor can it simply be abortive. Instead, this gesture further impoverishes the scene by subtracting the "it" from the minimal state and leaving a question mark in its stead. The description should read: "the members of the group surrounding an object, attractive for whatever reason, and designating [?] by means of an abortive gesture of appropriation." In fact, displacing the sense of the "it" disjoints the articulations which would relate the terms "abortive" and "of appropriation," so that one might as well conclude the description with: "designating [?] by means of a gesture." The sense of this gesture cannot be decided; it suggests, without being able to indicate, a margin of nonsense at play in the scene.

This gesture operating in Gans' hypothesis of the scene is a hypothetical gesture—the hypothesis of the scene is the scene of the

hypothesis. Such a hypothesis is also the hypothesis of the sacrifice, and as such, to be opposed to the mastery of the hypothesis. The mastery of the sacrifice would be the presentation of the sense of death. The hypothesis operates as if it were sacrificing this sacrifice. As Derrida writes: "Sovereignty must still sacrifice [mastery] and, thus the presentation of the meaning [sens] of death" (261).

At this point, the flexion being operated on or in the scene of the hypothesis can be brought to a critical point. Gans asserts that the hypothetical gesture will be verified. It will have a Hegelian destiny—only provisionally will it have been hypothetical. By risking his credibility in the short term, Gans claims to speculate on winning mastery in the long term. This would be a bet that could not lose, because it would not have to be placed on the actual winner, but only bet that the winner be—in place of the bet. A better hypothesis might cover Gans' bet, only to win his bet for him. Flexing Gans' hypothesis towards Hegel, one could say that it would seduce the thesis with whose backing the hypothesis would be granted access to the restricted economy of verification.

However, Gans would distinguish his scientific wager from a metaphysical one. He writes: "[the] verification [of the hypothesis] can never become an established fact, but only a heuristic probability" (Origin 6). In other words, the odds would become increasingly in favor of the hypothesis, even if the final outcome is never actually determined. However, the hypothesis as it operates in the scene is not such a betting system. There is no figure of the hypothesis to win out over the master, nor simply to win him over. The bet of the hypothesis is not to beat the odds, to come up with more winners than losers. Nor is it a question of playing the odds, where the winners and losers would cancel each other out.

One might guess that to hypothesize is to bet on a tie. This would not, however, amount to the cynically rigged system of the house which would bank on cancelling out winners and losers and cashing in on the tie. The tie in question cannot be decided. One might guess instead that the hypothetical bet rides on a stalemate—that it rides on moves to be played, but which make no sense, which cannot decide the game. However, again, even the stalemate cannot be decided.

If the act of hypothesis meant betting on the true winner, this would mean betting on an outcome of absolute violence, whether the winner be absolutely violent or (as in Girard's hypostasis) absolutely non-violent. If it meant betting on the truly even break, the true tie,

the true match, this would mean betting on an utter reduction of violence, a nul match, which would accomplish the violence of canceling all differences (and all bets). Instead, the hypothetical operation "simulates the absolute risk" by betting on the lesser violence. Hypothesis can only evoke weaker hypothesis. The place of the bet (la mise) is not a place, but an abyss (abîme) which may yield to lesser hypotheses. Hypothetical betting may ride on the abyss which opens in the scene. This mise en abîme, in the weakest sense of the term, is the operative gesture of the deficit thinking of the deficit—where "les grands esprits se rencontrent—en s'abîmant!"

Ken Mayers is a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at UCLA.

Notes

1 This hypothesis is developed, notably, in Eric Gans, *The Origin of Language: a Formal Theory of Representation* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1981), and in *The End of Culture* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1985).

2 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978) 91, n. 21.

3 This "clarification" remains one of Derrida's heaviest burdens.

4 René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris, Grasset, 1978) 247. [my translation]

5 One wonders whether "explode" is the operative term here, not because of its violence, but rather in spite of it, given the peculiar sovereignty of the violence in question.


6 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 232.

PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

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

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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CONTENTS

ARTICLES

Nathalie Sarraute and the Thought from the Outside 1
Véronique Flambard-Weisbart

The Voice in the Bottle: The Love Poetry of Joyce Mansour
and Robert Desnos 11
Katharine Gingrass

Le troc des femmes ou la révolte de Dora 21
Marie Feldman

SPECIAL FEATURE: UCLA French Department Symposium—
Generative Anthropology: Origin and Representation
Editor's Introduction 31

The Past and Future of Generative Anthropology:
Reflections on the Departmental Colloquium 35
Eric Gans

Deconstruction and the Resistance to Anthropology 43
Andrew J. McKenna

Paper Money and Palimpsests: Thomas De Quincey and
Representational Crisis 49
Matthew Schneider

Generative Anthropology and Cultural Sexuality 63
William C. Juzwiak

Anthropo-logos: the Congenital Hypothesis 79
Ken Mayers

UCLA FRENCH DEPARTMENT
DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS 89