

## **Theorizing as Artful Inscription**

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We now appear to have come to the end of a period dominated by an enlightenment fantasy in which an irrational world would be steadily improved and ultimately saved through the rationality inherent in the methodic sciences. Our initial hope for a vastly improved and more rational society through the steady development of scientific rationality has made place for various doomsday visions of a society brought to ruin by its own overgrown technical capabilities. In particular we have begun to question the very motivation of a scientific enterprise that appears to be guided by nothing more encompassing than a desire for gain and control or by a need to satisfy a curiosity, by a reflex to scratch the itch of "what if."

Even within the human sciences we have begun to question not merely the effectiveness or legitimacy of particular methodological strategies, but we also have become curious about these sciences themselves and what their widespread practice reveals about our contemporary Western way of life. We are now more than ever in need of a human science that begins to spell out the consequences of its projects and procedures in terms of the kind of society it makes possible and impossible, the kind of city it builds or prevents from being built

In his remarkable recent book about the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Tzvetan Todorov has sought to explore the link between western strategies of conquest in warfare

and those in economic and scientific pursuit. He speaks of a characteristic western curiosity about other peoples that, together with a capacity for empathy makes it possible to conquer or assimilate widely divergent cultures. In his account of the astonishing conquest of an entire Aztec nation by a mere handful of Spanish adventurers, the secret weapon is not so much that of horses or guns or purely military knowledge as it is a certain anthropological skill, a certain empathetic capacity that allowed Cortez to understand Aztec culture just sufficiently to explode it from within. In Todorov's view the achievement of Cortez in no way stands by itself as an isolated instance in the history of the West. He writes: "Since the period of the conquest, for almost three hundred and fifty years, Western Europe has tried to assimilate the other, to do away with exterior alterity, and has in great part succeeded. Its way of life and its values have spread around the world: as Columbus wished; the colonized peoples have adopted our customs and have put on our clothes" (Todorov, 1985, p.247).

We are confronted here by a victorious discourse in which an original difference is effaced, where one language swallows up another and where one people manages to incorporate and destroy another. To better understand such discourse and to draw from it some insight into the human sciences we might differentiate a metaphoric use of language which manages a passage between incommensurates, between what must forever remain apart, and a literal use of language, which insists on a wholly imaginary continuous world in which all fateful differences have been eroded and destroyed. Perhaps we may come to understand the ancient biblical injunction against graven images as precisely an injunction against such a literal use of language which fails to

observe fateful differences and no longer acknowledges these as thresholds that in being honored give us access to our language and our humanity.

The conquests of which Todorov speaks would refer us to a discourse that would adopt the metaphoric dimension and the honoring of differences as a kind of strategy to get eventually to an idolatrous literal discourse in which these differences would be effaced. The solicitous curiosity about the stranger, the drawing of inspiration from differences would merely set the scene for a final conquest of difference. Curiosity about the stranger would form a mere prelude to the actual task of effacing difference and establishing a kind of wasteland of homogeneity, of founding a blond and blue eyed Thousand Year Reich or a worker's paradise from which all traces of an outward or inward sign of difference would have been removed. Intellectual and spiritual life would come to resemble a giant stomach in which all the mysteries of self and other, of host and guest would disappear to feed a giant collective body.

The question that animates this paper concerns the possibility of a human science that would not be merely an elaborate disguise for the conquest of the other and that would not merely embroider in an intellectual style a fundamental project of eating and digesting 'the world. Such a human science can find its point of departure only in the initial acceptance of the irreducible nature of self and other. The first discipline of such a science would be to elaborate on this irreducible nature, on this distance of self and other. It would allow us to call upon our understanding to mutually situate the familiar and the strange in respect to each other, but never in such a way that one is thereby made to dissolve into the other. Understanding can be such only as long as it offers ultimate resistance to our urge to devour the stranger, to dissolve the strangeness of his presence

into the familiarity of our own flesh.

Freud taught us to understand barbarity in terms of a first thrust of a libido that seeks to devour and level and that remains intolerant of any limits imposed upon it from without and within. Psychoanalysis has made us aware of the great destructive dream of satiety, of tranquility and ultimate homogeneity that often lurks just beneath a thin veneer of genuine interest in others and in the world around us. Within the perspective of psychoanalysis this genuine interest in others and in our surrounding world is not the result of a natural or biological given but is understood instead as the resultant of sustained cultural labors. This genuine interest, together with other essential marks of our humanity is based in precarious cultural institutions that require a constant and devoted effort to keep them from falling apart.

In this context a human science would be understood as a cultural institution devoted to the maintenance of a vital difference. Such a science would not serve as preparation for conquest, absorption, cure, assimilation or adjustment but, on the contrary, would continually articulate the irreducible distance that is generative and regenerative of self and other, here and there, now and then. Such a human science could endure only as long as it understands all human relations as essentially bound by a metaphoric power that would hold the various terms together within a cultural composition that would withstand the pressures towards an absolute unification or merger. It thus becomes possible to think of a human science as a cultural institution guarding the primordial break between self and other, that preserves the trace of a wounding separation that is also at the same time the birth of our humanity.

A genuine work of culture can thus be approached as a piece of writing and reading

or as a work of building and inhabiting in so far as it guards the trace from which flows difference and delay. To enter such a work means to always be guided back to a seam, a scar, an ancient wound, a navel, a place of rupture and division and of the upsurge of human, cultural life.

Barbarity in our time is chiefly characterized by the fact that it hides the difference, that it presents life as a seamless whole, that it remains obsessed above all with growth, wholeness, completeness, merger, oneness, limitlessness. Barbarity hides the seamy side of life. It masks or seeks to eradicate differences. It erases history so as to make the present self sufficient and supreme. It denies death and neglects the work of succession. It dreams of heaven and of paradise and then, forgetting the distinction between dream and reality it begins to build the antechambers of utopia: the gas chambers, the gulags, the police-states understood as places of barbaric confluence, equalization, merger and erasure.

It is in the light of these antechambers of death that we come to understand viable cultural institutions as in essence works of inscription that both leave and guard a trace, that mark a place and a time in such a way that we are reminded at all times of the tear in the very fabric of our world and our person. There, where barbarity attempts to cover the tear, viable cultural institutions elaborate it into inscription and building. All truly human making and building begins by acknowledging and honoring a wound that marks us as mortal, divided, limited and sexed.

To understand cultural institutions and theoretical labors as wounds experienced as inscriptions means to approach cultural life as a kind of writing, that is at the same time a reading, and as a building that is at the same time a sojourning, journeying and dwelling.

Inscription refers here to a writing that is also at the same time the discernment of a path, a reading and a way of coming to understand what needs to be done or said. We speak in this context of *inscription* rather than of exploration or of understanding because all cultural institutions are viewed here as places of transformations where a wound becomes a mark and a sign that can be read. Yet, this reading cannot remove the wound nor can the understanding finally make it disappear. All cultural institutions, including the one created by the human sciences cannot help but lead us to perplexity.

Freud's work on interpretation traces a similar path which leads us eventually past many magnificent vistas to a thicket beyond which we can make no further progress. He writes:

"Even in the best interpreted dreams there is often a place (*eine Stelle*) that must be left in the dark; because in the process of interpreting a dream one comes upon a tangle (*ein Knäuel*) of dream thoughts which resists further unraveling and fails to make further contributions to the dream content. This then is the navel of the dream (*der Nabel des Traums*) the place where it straddles the unknown. (*dem Unerkannten aufsitzt*)" (Freud, 1900/1957, p. 530) "

At another place we read that "every dream has at least one place where it remains impenetrable (*unergründlich*) and where it connects as through a navel with the unknown" (*mit dem Unbekannten zusammenhängt*) (Freud, 1900/1957, p. 157).

The body of the dream reveals in the exploration a navel which, like any trace, can be read both as wound and as sign, as scratch and tear or as meaningful letter. To read the navel only as sign means to enter the dream from within a project of pure

intelligibility, within the phantasy of an absolute reading where the sign swoons and finally succumbs entirely to the meaning it releases. To approach the navel solely as wound means to lose ourselves into a night of utter unintelligibility. Only the dual awareness of the navel as both mark and wound, wanton tear and meaningful letter, situates us properly in respect to our cultural life. This interpretation does not aim at some point of absolute transparency, of an all-powerful perspective from which the entire scene can be encompassed and mastered. Interpretation resists here the temptation of the modern “synopticum” which in Foucault's analysis constitutes the guiding vision of the modern human sciences. Whatever emerges here into the light of visibility remains linked to the darkness that surrounds the unknown. Moreover this place of obscurity where light and impenetrable darkness mingle and where the indelible sign threatens to revert back to the status of a wound, is also the birthplace of hope and the new life of desire. "Out of the denser places in this meshwork, the dream-wish rises (*erhebt sich*) like a mushroom out of its mycelium" (Freud, 1900/1957, p. 530).

The erectile tissue of the wish thus rises at the border between an absolute obscurity and a dawning light or between wound and letter, scratch and mark. In this manner a link is forged between the wound that is the navel and the cut that is our sex, so that now the body of the dream and the human body proper appears all at the same time as wounded and inscribed, as suffering and voluptuous, as legible and illegible, as absolutely self enclosed and as pointing beyond.

Freud repeats this insight in his *Civilization and its Discontents* at the point where he describes mankind's emergence from an all-encompassing natural matrix. This emergence takes the concrete form of a standing up, of an erection that does not simply

“occur” but that must be personally assumed and “inhabited”. This “standing up” is all at the same time a wounding separation and an emergence into humanity; it is itself both a sign emerging into intelligibility and a wound drawing us away from all understanding. It is a sign only to the extent that the standing is personally assumed and it is wound and abyss to the extent that it fails to be inhabited. This “standing up” is all at the same time painful birth, exodus from paradise, and incarnate, emerging desire. Whatever may have guided life up to this decisive point remains obscure. Beyond this point human life takes the form of an assumed and inhabited desire and death appears here as a falling back into the primordial oblivion.

Within this perspective, mankind is itself incarnate desire arising from an undifferentiated matrix. Human existence makes its appearance here as both a liberated form of life and as a wounded and alienated part of nature. It can be understood as a wound that seeks to be healed or as a scar or sign that seeks to be read. If we think of the human sciences as incorporating these two distinct possibilities we come to recognize on the one hand a barbaric and sentimental human science that seeks to heal our wounds and to draw us back into an undifferentiated natural matrix where "all is one" and, on the other, a hubristic science that would transform without remainder all our wounds into readable letters and that would give the human world the form of a text.

We would meet on the one hand with a science that would urge us to dream on without any further awakening and, on the other, with another that would transform our dreams into unambiguous signs.

In this instance Freud's strategy of interpretation leads in a different direction. Here, our path to understanding leads us to a place where no progress is possible and where the

wound will no longer yield to intelligibility. Our quest ends when we come upon a wound, scratch, tear or navel that refuses to be read or when we attempt to decipher a letter that has lost all relationship to suffering and death.

From the dual unity of wound and letter emanates a metaphoric power and a light that illuminates the world. That light is extinguished the moment the metaphor collapses into total unity or falls apart in absolute duality.

This dual unity of the metaphor both institutes and sets limits to human interpretive power; we find it reflected in the dual unity of self and other that institutes and sets limits to human conversation. The art and labor of interpretation rests on the foundation of the dual unity of the human body that is all at once wound and sign, and on that of the human couple of self and other.

This analysis of the ambiguous unity of wound and letter gains an added dimension when we place it within the context of Heidegger's reflections on the origin of a work of art. Much of that reflection takes as its point of departure the enigmatic words of Albrecht Durer about the process of artistic creation. "Art is hidden in nature (*steckt in die Natur*) and whoever can draw it out into the open (*herausziehen*) gets hold of it" (Heidegger, 1977, p.80).

Much of Heidegger's analysis centers on the metaphoric power of the word "*herausziehen*", which we might translate here as "drawing" and "drawing out." If we imagine the coming about of a work of art in terms of a "drawing" and a "drawing out" we enter a world divided into incommensurate parts that are held together by a strange metaphoric power. Thus we may at first quite literally think of an artist as drawing a

work of art from nature in the manner in which a magician might pull a rabbit from a hat or as, perhaps, the way a midwife pulls a baby from the womb into the light of day. But we cannot help thinking at the same time of such expressions as "drawing from nature" and of imagining the artist as translating some life appearance in the form of traces of paint or ink left upon canvas or paper. Finally, the word "drawing" r

efers us to the act of pulling some heavy object across a resisting surface and it thereby transports us to a world of labor, to the struggle for existence, to the obstacles the physical universe places on the way to the realization of our plans and desires. We cannot fail to notice here the strange metaphoric shift which leads us from understanding "drawing" as an art of revealing traces to "drawing" as essentially a pulling against resistance in which the traces are no more than the dull and incidental markings of a struggle for life. A "laborious" drawing leaves us the incidental traces of an important event- a struggle for life- while an "artistic" drawing gives us the important traces of what in retrospect are merely incidental events. Moreover, this "laborious" drawing which leaves traces upon a virginal nature and which marks us as mortal and as never completely at home and at one with the world cannot fail to be understood as a kind of wounding. And yet, this laborious drawing can be lived in such a manner that it forms a meaningful design. "Drawing" then remains inexorably and all at once both a wounding of a surface a marking of mortality and of a fateful exodus from paradise. It is painful

separation, loss of womb and at the same time the creation of a design, the building of a cultural institution, the writing of a word.

Durer's own word *reizen* refers us in a similar manner both to a laborious pulling and tearing which is also a disturbing and a wounding and to an artful designing. The German *der Risz* can be translated both as "gap" or "tear" and as "plan" or "design." Our related word "writing" which remains intimately connected with the Old German *riszan* repeats this pattern of referring on the one hand to "tearing", "pulling", "tugging" and on the other to "sketching", "drawing", "designing." The Gothic *writs* gives us "stroke," "line" and "letter." And the dual pattern is repeated in the Greek *graphein* for "scratching," "carving," and "engraving" and "writing." Finally, the Latin *scribere* forms no exception in this respect. The word developed from a base *sqeribh*: meaning "to tear," "to scratch" while gradually developing the meaning: "to draw," "to paint," "to write."

At this point our excursus on Durer's words joins our earlier analysis of the works of culture as giving us access to our humanity by leading us back to a fundamental disturbance which is both wound and letter, accident and revelation, abysmal fate and fortuitous grace. In this way all our explorations of a human world lead us to an enigmatic navel beyond which human life sinks into incomprehension but from which it also arises in continually new configurations.

There remains for us the task of understanding theoretical effort within this context as a work of culture that draws us back to face a fundamental discontinuity in our life and that invites us to experience it both as wound and as sign. In a previous essay, I have traced the earliest configurations of a theoretical labor in ancient Greece to an essentially religious context (Jager, 1974). The very word theorist (*aner theoros*) strongly evokes

the components *theo* and *ooros* to read approximately: "he who regards and observes (the will of) God." It appears that our concept of theorizing originally emerged within a religious context to designate a particular serving and observing presence to the divine. Theognis of Megara makes mention in a sixth century poem of a theoretician (*aner theoros*) whose function it was to visit the Delphian oracle as an official representative of the city. Approaching the fifth century Pindar speaks of a theorion or a place where the theorists compete in the games as a part in a larger religious celebration. Koller shows in an unmistakable way that these early theorists were not mere spectators but rather actual leading participants in the religious celebrations. At the height of the golden age of Greece the function of the theorist could best be defined as that of an official delegate chosen by a city to attend an important religious celebration in another town. From the very beginning theoretical labor would require the undertaking of an often difficult journey that would lead from the familiar grounds to a largely unknown territory. In retrospect we can easily follow the evolution of the theoretical function from a purely religious task in Theognis to a more secular ambassadorial function in Plato to finally one of abstract knowledge and expertise in our age. No doubt the central metaphor remains one of a formative journey of exploration leading to an intimate contact with and knowledge of little known regions and distant peoples. But within the context of our present exploration we should stress the fact that the endpoint of the earliest theorist would take his place near the altar of the distant shrine to sacrifice in honor of the god. This altar, then, constitutes an absolute limit beyond which the journey could not proceed any further. This altar circumscribes the journey of the early theorist in the manner in which the navel of the dream circumscribes Freud's interpretive journey.

Beyond the altar or the navel there is no further theoretic progress to be made. The altar and the navel is the place where the dream and the religious rite meet the unknown ("*wo es mit dem Unbekannten zusammen hangt*") (Freud, 1900/1957, p. 157).

Both the navel and the altar embody the cut; it is the place where an earlier primordial unity is broken through on the way to differentiation and humanization. Hesiod makes this aspect of the altar clear in his story of the original separation between Gods and men, mortals and immortals. It is the story of a break in a natural unity and its replacement by a metaphoric unity between the divided groups. Prometheus, in his role as father of civilization is called upon to make the first blood sacrifice to consecrate the parting of the ways of gods and men. He kills the bull, separates the bones from the flesh and prepares the two unequal portions that characterize the fate of mortals and immortals. But this place of death and division is also the place of a meaningful gathering, of a reading of the signs, of the offering of gifts and the performance of ritual discourse between men and gods. This sacred site of the fateful passage between incommensurate realms and beings is also the place where the flow of blood becomes transformed into the flow of language and where the cries of the dying animal metamorphoses into prayer and where a wound manifests itself as sign and letter. The altar is itself a mark of division and thus a wound that in being honored becomes a source of humanity and understanding while it forms a bridge between what is mortal and immortal. In final instance, the altar as the place that marks and honors the division between two incommensurate realms is first and foremost the place of metaphor, the source of language. Metaphor reminds us that what is brought together in language is thereby not literally brought together and that it still eludes our absolute grasp. Only

idolatry and literalism offer the prospect of an absolute access to self and other. Metaphor permits us to gather together, to read and interpret, on condition that we honor the difference between self and other and the delay imposed by question and answer.

Where the navel would mark our emergence from a primordial confluence and natural unity there the altar would mark the place where mankind emerged from a confused omnipotence into a distinct mortal existence separate from that of the gods. And within this framework of understanding the mark of one's sex is at first a wound that marks the place of what is missing, of what we lost in being forever separated from a life of random and perverse pleasures outside the realm of sexual designation. To be sexed inevitably means to be cut (Latin *secare*) and to be and have thus always less than we desire. Like the altar, the mark of our sex is at first a wound left by a separation that in being honored heals and becomes the source and origin of metaphor. And finally the gravesite as a culturally elaborated place of burial presents us with a third source of language where a wound becomes transformed into a letter. It marks the place where a fateful end forever separates us from our innocence. No matter how much we strain towards the other we can no longer reach the one whom death took from us. The absolute limit of the grave that separates us from those we love transforms a simple and innocent commensurate world into an incommensurate one whose parts can be brought together only by means of metaphor. The work of mourning is above all a work of longing and a poetic labor that only ends when the story is told or the poem is sung or the analysis bears fruit. And if mourning is an artful work the reverse also appears to hold true. All great art bears the imprint of the transformation of an inchoate suffering into the creation of a metaphoric whole. The gravesite where we lose and find the ones

we mourn, together with the altar where we lose and find our gods, and finally the mark of our sex where we lose and find the other sex all are places where our desire is required to renounce literal fulfillment and where we learn to yearn and sing and where we come into language and achieve our humanity.

We may approach therefore the journey of the early theorists that lead to the shrine and the altar together with the *theoria* that lead the first philosophers to the grave and the art of dying and mourning and, finally, the labors of the first psychoanalysts that lead to the fateful limit of sexual desire and the mark of sex or to the navel of our dreams as essentially works of culture that inexorably lead us back to a place of separation and wounding that is also at the same time a place of the emergence of our humanity. And this journey takes of necessity the form of a reading of inscription, of deciphering messages.

This place of our wounding and of a first configuration is also the birth place of metaphor, and with it, of the other. Theoretical labor, as a work of culture, is thus bound to lead us back to the place of a painful division. As a work of anti-culture a theoretical labor returns us to the seamless life of barbarity, where metaphor dies and where the other is extinguished. Such anti-cultural theoretical works devoted to the obscuring of limits offer us the prospects of utopias and entice us with the delights of paradise, only gradually to ensnare us in a life of hell.

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