

### On tradition as 'constitutive-dispossessive'

To appeal to tradition as constitutive of psychology's subject matter challenges in a fundamental way the discipline's self-understanding. A key implication of this challenge is that the criteria for evaluation of psychological knowledge claims shift from epistemology to philosophical anthropology. I explore some aspects attendant on such a shift in criteria, in particular those affecting the individualistic ideology that disciplinary psychology and its epistemological self-understanding continue to uphold. To understand the person as constituted through tradition is radically dispossessive of individuality. This paper articulates and defends the claim that only through such a dispossessive effort can a human science theory like psychology affirm the reality and significance of relationality, and restore the possibility of a language of qualitative evaluation in which to cast our moral, ethical, and spiritual aspirations.

#### Reference

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§ 1. *Introduction: The constitutive-dispossessive reversal of priority*

“I know that the more one loves a man’s words, the more one can assume he’s put everything into his work that he couldn’t put into his life” (pp. 206-7), says a protagonist in Anne Michaels’ poignant and profound book *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). This notion echoes that made some decades earlier by the great French psychologist and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that “the writer says what his language wants and passes for profound; each lack in him, once it is put into words, becomes a powerful form, and the sum of the accidents which go to make a book appears as the author’s intention” (1970, p. 15). These articulations attest powerfully to a fundamental reversal of priority by comparison to the still dominant understanding of our selves as autonomous, self-making individuals defined by our conscious choices that it is our right to make – a quintessentially modern understanding that psychology has, probably more so than any other profession or academic discipline, helped make commonplace. Perhaps the most famous phrasing of this reversal of priority is Heidegger’s: it’s not that I speak language, but that language speaks me. To rephrase Aristotle’s definition of human being in this light, we are not animals who possess language, as if it is our ‘property’, something we own, our instrument, a means to our ends; but rather we are animals possessed by a language that has its own autonomy. In this paper I sketch something of why this reversal of priorities – the notion that we are constituted as the kind of beings we are through a dispossession of our autonomy, our choices, our willing; a notion that I believe to be a more truthful understanding of human agency than the notion of autonomous individuality – will be met with suspicion, resistance, and misunderstanding. If not all three. In part, it is because this reversal shows clear continuity with the ‘pre-modern’

understanding of human being characteristic of tradition. (The nature of this continuity is ambiguous; a regressive return? a nostalgia-inspired retrieval? a rehabilitation or a renewal?) What ought to be of especial interest to psychology is how this ‘constitutive-dispossessive’ understanding of agency foregrounds relationship (i.e. relationality), rather than the individual self, as being the crux of the psyche.

*§ 2. On autonomous selfhood & individualism: Situating the question*

I’m not going to spend much time on the characteristics of our current notion of autonomous selfhood or of individualism, of which there are numerous critiques already. For example, anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1979) description is one of the most-quoted:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however, incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.

It is not only from a comparative anthropological perspective that the idea of autonomous selfhood is “rather peculiar”, but historical studies from numerous disciplines corroborate that this understanding is “a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation” (Taylor, 1989, p. 111; cf. also Baumeister, Foucault, Weintraub, etc.). From the wealth of studies available, this paper advances the necessarily narrowly selective interpretation, but one that is hopefully both true and insightful, that what is central to this conception of the person, and the rhetoric of individualism that envelops it, is that it provides an answer to the genuine contemporary need for an understanding of human agency. Clearly, critics

of the notion like myself think it a highly inadequate answer. Instead I want to elaborate a conception like Merleau-Ponty's, who argues

My "psyche" is not a series of "states of consciousness" that are rigorously closed in on themselves and inaccessible to anyone but me. My consciousness is turned primarily toward the world, turned toward things; it is above all a relation to the world. (1964, p. 117)

Assuming a general knowledge of our notions of an autonomous self and the individualism that goes with it, then, I will briefly summarize the historical development of modernity relative to the issue of how the self, as above all a relation to, an openness upon, the world, becomes transformed instead into a hermetically-sealed autonomy of self-possession, before sketching a 'constitutive-dispossessive' articulation as a better account of agency.

### *§ 3. Historical background: Modern institutions*

The motivation for theorizing agency adequately is heavily overdetermined by the social and historical conditions. I therefore focus on the psychological center of gravity to these conditions, which is the new form of collective organization that effectively bring about the demise of tradition, raise the need for an adequate theorizing of agency – in the literature, this is usually discussed through the theme of *identity* – and, literally, institute modernity. To oversimplify: the epistemological outlook of the Enlightenment, which is not a coherent singular viewpoint but a rich and contradictory plurality, comes to be, in the name of progressive social reform, "built into" society in the form of our modern institutions. This means on the one hand it is crucial to understand this epistemology. And on the other hand, in being institutionalized, in becoming social practice, in its alliance to power and desire and economics, etc., it ceases to be exclusively epistemology, it is not a

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theory of knowledge that translates perfectly and completely into life such that they are identical. Alongside an appreciation of the epistemology there needs to be a social history and a social theory; in short, to develop a theory of agency we need to make its overarching criteria of evaluation not epistemological but that of a philosophical anthropology which tries to think theory and practice, idea and embodiment, knowledge and life, together. (Note that in arguing for a move from epistemological criteria to those of a philosophical anthropology is implied a critique of the entire discipline of psychology insofar as it has remained exclusively within an epistemological self-understanding; Sigmund Koch has already made that critique, in detail.)

The numerous aspects that compose the rupture initiated by the Enlightenment now called modernization – science and technology, industrialization, the nation-state, democratization, the language of rights, etc. – break down the framework of tradition and undo the fixity of the social order. The manner in which they do so is, above all, through a transformation of social structures by creating *impersonal institutions* of an unprecedented state-wide scale that incorporate and configure all the forces of modernity. Modern forms of institutionalization create an entirely new form of collective organization, along with the need for a new legitimation for this form. David Gross (1992) argues that by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century “something novel happens, as previously recalcitrant institutions began to succumb to a totalizing rationality.”

...reason now appeared to have become materialized, embodied, and concretized in so many key institutions in the West that what had once been only a dream – the dream of a wholly rational existence – had now become (albeit in distorted form) a palpable reality. (p. 48)

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It need not be emphasized that this new modern form of rationality discovered through the creation of modern institutions, this new form of life, is not that of a universal human Reason, not our essential human nature, not the only or best kind of freedom, but a particular, one could say peculiar, form of rationality. Its particularity is best brought out by contrast to the tradition it supplants; to cite David Olson (2003) who has thoroughly analyzed the functioning of modern institutions,

...whereas in small-scale social organizations such as families, communities, and tribal groups both structure and control can be left largely implicit and managed through indirection, in larger-scale bureaucratic institutions such as business firms or schools, *control, responsibility, and accountability become matters of 'documentation'* including explicit rules and procedures, laws, principles, job descriptions, lines of authority, specialized expertise... (p. 39; emphases added)

Olson's description echoes that of Ferdinand Tönnies (1957), who distinguished *Gemeinschaft* (small, informal, face-to-face communities bound by ties of affection and sentiment) from *Gesellschaft*, (large, formal, anonymously functional associations, bound by instrumental purpose), more than a century earlier (i.e., in 1887). This echo expresses well the link between Olson's institutional analysis and Tönnies' sociological one: the transformation of Europe, and then North America, from tradition-based communities to modern 'rational' society is achieved through the widespread reorganization of collective life through the creation of modern institutions. Olson adumbrates Tönnies' account through careful attending to the role of formalization, making explicit, documentation; such documenting of detail and minutiae is precisely the manner in which Enlightenment rationality is "materialized, embodied, and concretized" in institutions. Modern institutions formalize, differentiate, make explicit, and take responsibility for social, judicial, political, legal, and economic *functions* that were once informal and undifferentiated, implicitly subsumed within traditional understanding and practice.

This dramatic transformation, or to use August Comte's apt phrase, the "positive reorganization of society", certainly does realize numerous progressive reforms. But this is only part of the story. We seem to be deeply and justifiably, if inarticulately, ambivalent about the most potent realizations of Enlightenment reform, namely modern technoscience and the nation-state. Frankly, we still don't know or understand the full extent of the changes wrought, to a large extent because we are living in the midst of them and not observing them disinterestedly from an external vantage point. According to the ideological view, of which the positivism developed from Comte is the most salient representative, it was supposed to be science as discovering through a neutral method of inquiry the objective truth of Nature that would direct and above all legitimate the reform of society. As Alasdair Macintyre (1988) has pointed out (and considerably substantiated), however, "the legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain" (p. 6). What in practice occurs is on the one hand, the problem of, *pace* Habermas, "legitimation crises"; on the other, the *power* of the newly-founded nation-state, exercised through the institutions that support it, which resolves without solving the question of legitimacy, proliferates. The problems of modern power ramify; a circumstance which continues, rightly, to exercise the bulk of critical thought, modern and postmodern. Foucault, who to my mind has provided the most penetrating analyses of the workings of this new "regime of truth", shows how the documenting, attention to minutiae, categorizing, analyzing, normalizing, surveillance, disciplining, etc., compose a whole "microphysics of power" totalizing and pervasive in its implementation. While this new form of power enabled by

and embodied in institutions is the crux of the matter of modernity, due to the tendentious nature of my argument here, attention must be drawn to some of its corollaries and effects.

§ 4. *The demise of tradition, the question of identity, universal language*

One prominent such theme can as corollary be discussed in terms of the need to theorize agency, while as effect this need comes to be articulated individualistically in terms of identity. Baumeister (1986), for example, shows how the demise of the dominance, both political and intellectual, of the traditional Christian worldview in Europe and North America is directly correlated with the simultaneous rise in interest in *the question of identity* (identity here construed personally-individualistically). The fixed cosmic background to human actions articulated by traditional Christianity, what Lovejoy (1964) characterizes vividly as the “Great Chain of Being” that structured one’s place, calling, and sense of self, validated socially, politically, and theologically by Church and State, in becoming unsettled opened great vistas for change, progress, and perhaps above all, the promise of greater *freedom* (Taylor, 1989). It also ushers in equally great uncertainties. Christian tradition, for better or for worse, had provided a whole framework for living in this world through an orientation to ‘the other world’; in George Steiner’s phrase, “a magnificent architecture of certitude” (1974, p. x). It reproduced a fixity of the social order wherein individuals inhabited prescribed roles. *Interpersonal* relations were ordered by the principle of universal access to the *transpersonal* domain of transcendent reality, while the *impersonal* roles played by Church and State officials and distributed through class differentials constituted the sociopolitical power structure. All this was always at the

expense of the *personal* domain; individuality and “personality” were subordinated to the needs and demands of tradition (Weintraub, 1978). ‘Self-knowledge’ was to come to terms with one’s already established place within the order of things. Identity was a *given*; not, as it has become, a *question*. The loss of the salience of a transpersonal horizon of meaning articulated by tradition, the threat to the customary sense of personal agency and to customary interpersonal relations engendered by the rise of modern impersonal institutions and the decline of the customary order of tradition, and the excitement and thrill generated through the promise of expanded possibilities for developing one’s personal horizon, means that the question of identity takes on a historically unprecedented significance. One of the most crucial functions of tradition, to subordinate – or if you like, repress – individual, personal desire and will for the sake of social order in the name of a correct or proper relation to the transcendental, sacred order of things, is in large part dissolved by modern institutions. Whatever remains is put into the inner subjective space of persons, into our potentials, our depths, our “unconscious”; the transcendent becomes immanent. Put simply, the concern with identity rushes to fill in the gap left by the demise of tradition.

Alongside the emergence of the question of identity, the functional use and the theoretical understanding of language changes, too. The rejection of the register of transcendence, of supernatural or spiritual reference as carrying any effective power, in favor of naturalistic accounts on the one hand, according to standards of a presumably universal human reason on the other – although as noted above the promise of these standards was never redeemed – in the context of the institutional imperative to document, make explicit,

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formalize, so as to maximally and most efficiently realize the institution's goal (the dispensing of education, justice, medicine, what have you) that was its reason for being, dramatically alters what language itself – that which 'bodies forth' meaning – means. Language is reduced from an opaquely mysterious medium for the evocation or expression of divine intentions or a realm of pure ideas, to a designative instrument which is a means to particular ends; a conception that has built into it that ends are definable outside language. To cite Charles Taylor, language becomes "an instrument of control in the assemblage of ideas... an instrument of control in gaining knowledge of the world as objective process" (1985, p. 226). While an epistemology that places emphasis on a certain conception of Nature and the method that gains Nature's truth is key for the plausibility that ends can be definable outside language, this alone is not enough. It requires in addition, an entire form of life, of collective organization, to give this plausibility enough power that the society which enacts that form of life will commit to that plausibility as reality. When the social historian Ernest Gellner (1983) in analyzing the rise of the nation-state characterizes the language or idiom that develops alongside it as follows: "that all facts are located within a single continuous logical space, that statements reporting them can be conjoined and generally related to each other, and so that in principle one single language describes the world and is internally unitary" (p. 21), it is clear that language – arguably the greatest expression of human collective life – has had a make-over: into the *image* of institutions as a competing form of life expressive of modern collectives, backed by enormous power. (Note this account of the transformation in our conception of language overlaps significantly with another theme of modernization that, as with the theme of the autonomous self, has an abundance of studies to draw upon:

that of the dominance of the narrow conception of instrumental reason at the expense of a broader notion of practical reason.)

*§ 5. From history to critique: the overdetermination of the autonomous self*

The demise of tradition as cosmology and practice that repressed the individual into his or her prescribed role; the ascendance of a naturalistic epistemology; the reduction of the transcendental register into the inner space of the individual subject; the ever-increasing formalization of social functions that were once achieved implicitly by tradition, through processes of documentation and explicitation; the development of a new scale and pervasiveness to the workings of power within the context of the nation-state; an emerging and ever-intensifying concern with identity; a reductive understanding and use of language as an instrument of control; all these as corollaries and effects circle around the central figure of institutions as the modern form of collective organization.

Without tradition – the collective organization of a society or culture toward the past and toward some transcendental Other to define and legitimate itself – the burden of definition and legitimation shifts onto the present, to what is current; the power of the modern present is to define itself, to make ever more explicit, documented, and detailed precisely “what is the (formal, instrumental, controllable) case”. Gone is the repressive subordination of personal desire, instead there are the modern obligations of freedom, to define ourselves. Put in different words: implicit within the ‘repressive subordinating’ function of tradition was a theory of human agency, that was not theorized as such but was interwoven with cosmology, custom, practice. With modernity, that ‘function’ is no

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longer necessary, and hence what becomes necessary is a theory of human agency. But given the form of modern collective life, and the corollaries and effects that accompany it, all of which are workings of that agency, the content of that theory has been overdetermined: we are free insofar as we make explicit and conduct ourselves in the ways modern institutions allow; insofar as we make ourselves transparent and conscious, in full possession of our selves; in good conscience, insofar as the space, time, quantity, and shape of ‘goodness’ and ‘conscientiousness’ has already been laid out, in advance and anonymously, by the institutions charged with that work. Modern collective institutions constitute us as the free autonomous self-possessed individuals we are, on the condition that we don’t question that form of constitution. Nikolas Rose, building on Foucault’s work, shows the workings of this in particular with regards to the “disciplines of psy” or the “psy-complex”, as those institutions of modernity that have taken it upon themselves as their particular function, to explain us to ourselves. As Rose (1996) puts it, “Our feelings, beliefs, desires, hopes and fears are suffused with the descriptions, injunctions, and evaluations of those who claim to know more about what is good for us than we do ourselves” (p. 224). I think Rose shows convincingly that we understand our selves according to what modern collective life calls for a self to be, and not in any other terms – what he calls “the psy effect”:

Perhaps most fundamental to the contemporary politics of our relations to ourselves is the way in which psychological modes of explanation, claims to truth and systems of authority have participated in the elaboration of ethical regimes that stress an ideal of responsible autonomy and have become allied with programmes for regulating individuals in the name of that autonomous responsibility. (p. 246)

So far, then, the history and its consequences. If we do not accept that the modern institutional form exhausts all that there is to collective life – and we shouldn’t, because it

doesn't, although its manner of working implies that it does and that it can – and that it certainly doesn't exhaust all there is to the whole fullness of life, then we are necessarily led to critique. Foucault and Rose are exemplary. If modernism is definable by its institutionalizing of the epistemological Grand Narrative of the Enlightenment, then postmodernism (arguably, of course) could be understood as definable by its critique. My interests, more and more, have moved to the attempt to think creatively and affirmatively of what comes after. It seems to me that life demands it.

*§ 6. After critique: intimations of irreducibility*

Critique reveals that the notion of the autonomous self and the rhetoric of individualism that accompanies it, are overdetermined by the modern collective organization of life into totalizing institutions instrumentally geared towards realizing particular functions. Their totalizing manner of functioning aims to make explicit, to document, to detail, to control, to account for... to use the old metaphor that still holds, to enlighten, to bring into the light. But, what of life, and how much, lies in shadow? Not just 'for now', but necessarily, in principle, essentially? The rationality of ever-extending reach, of progressive colonization of the life-world, says of the shadows, of ambiguity, of spontaneity, of mystery, of the unaccounted for, of the unarticulated, of otherness, either nothing at all – as if they have no reality worth speaking of, and by virtue of the power of modern institutions, this is to imply a death sentence – or “not yet”; as if the existence of these varied irreducibles is temporary and incidental to life. Against this not yet formalized, not yet accounted for, not yet articulated, the positive living significance of what is inescapably, necessarily irreducible to our reach, as inarticulable, unaccountable,

mystery, needs to be raised. And raised to the very broadest, richest, deepest, and highest degree. What of silence? (Think of Kierkegaard's Abraham, of Wittgenstein, of Rimbaud.) What of music? (Nietzsche, Schopenhauer) A fundamental reversal of priority appears called for. While the strengths of modernity lie in its ability for totalizing explication, this is so always relative to a particular context, aim, and interest; it seems to me increasingly apparent that it is those possibilities and modalities of life excluded by our discourses that require our cultivation. Let me conclude with a few gestures in the direction of what I take to be the key areas for developing both the language and the sense of life that bear witness to such affirmations of irreducibility.

*§ 6.1. Superceding tradition: nonrational relations & wisdom*

First, the problematic relation of modernity to tradition, behind which terms lies the more problematic relation, to religion. The scale, scope, pervasiveness, and power of modern institutions, the impersonality and anonymity of their functioning, have engendered a profound *distrust* of collective life and of institutions. The obvious effects of this, for which I adduce a hypersufficiency of grounds, are to be seen in problems of alienation, isolation, anomie, paranoia, pathologies of control, and so on. If we read traditions – whether the pre-modern tradition of European Christianity, or other non-European traditions – which were and are also totalizing institutionalized forms of collective life, albeit functioning differently than those of modernity, through this lens of distrust, I think we misread them and will find little to affirm in them or to be gained from them. But this says everything about us and little about the traditions. I would argue that what we will overlook is the extent to which traditions as collective forms of life embody the reality of

*nonrational relations*, of which something like trust is, significantly, the exemplar (but also fidelity, respect, affection, reverence; or friendship, or faith or hope or love). Such nonrational relations are in their very constitution not amenable to our modern modes of formalizing, making explicit, rendering accountable. They are empirical, in some sense, as we experience them; transcendental, in some sense, as they can be reasoned as *a priori* categories necessary for particular possibilities of experience; reflexive, certainly, but not objectifiable in any acceptable sense insofar as we cannot circumscribe them or stand outside them. In terms of their action upon us... our nonrational relationality seems best described as working “constitutively-dispossessively”.

While I agree in a strategic sense with David Gross’ notion that our own pre-modern traditions, in having become themselves “other” to us moderns rather than rooting and orienting our lives, provide an invaluable resource for augmenting our critical appraisal of modernity, I perceive this as ultimately too tentative. I want to argue in a more substantial, Polanyian post-critical, sense for the *wisdom* implicitly embodied in traditions and, yes, religions, precisely in terms of traditions as particular and historical, but also enduring, solutions to the problems of otherness; as complexly organized collective forms of life that recognize and stabilize human relations to otherness and mystery; and as time-tested paradigms of coming to know ourselves through appreciating our dispossessedness in the world, as expressions of the sense that life as a totality is ultimately irreducible. (Marcel Gauchet (1997) in fact defines “the essence of religion” as the gaining of “self-possession by consenting to dispossession” (p. 7)) It seems to me the wisdom embodied here that modernity lacks is of the constitutive consequences attendant

upon the recognition and acceptance of human limitation and constraint; that there is, if you like, an alternative third mode to active mastery or passive resignation which is participatory-responsive, “agonistic-collaborative” (Steiner). And it seems to me this is something urgently needed at present.

I am *not* advocating a return to tradition or any form of traditionalism. But the failure of the Enlightenment project – again I adduce a hypersufficiency of grounds – can be interpreted as a *falsification* (note the irony in using this epistemological metaphor!) of the theory that we can reject tradition and live from scratch. I do not understand what the effects of this ‘falsification’ would be on the work or self-understanding of the natural sciences, but it is clear that the extension of naturalistic discourse and Enlightenment epistemology to the human sciences has produced whatever it has of relevance, in spite of itself. Instead, as proponents of a human science approach – which arguably is a form of tradition in its own right – from Vico to Dilthey to the present have advocated, history stands at the center of all the human sciences. Thus the challenge we face is neither to reject tradition nor to return to it (as if we could!), but to genuinely *supercede* it. To do so means, among other things, taking tradition seriously.

The work of Marcel Gauchet is an intriguing and relevant case in point. Gauchet claims, and let me preface this quote by pointing out that Gauchet is conscientiously up front and emphatic about his being an atheist, that the “totality of factors” making up modernity

...only becomes intelligible after it has been reintegrated into the central process of reversing sacral otherness, a process whose formative background was supplied by Christianity. The wholesale reconstruction of human space under the influence of God’s paradoxical absolutization/withdrawal is the hidden source behind the

expanding fragmented components of our [modern] world, which seem contradictory but are essentially unified. ...Leaving religion is not like waking from a dream. We originated in religion, we continue to explain ourselves through it, and always will. (1997, pp. 103-4)

If this astonishing and disconcerting thesis is to any extent correct, and his world-historical evaluation holds to some degree – and note that my appeal to philosophical anthropology above implied world-historical evaluation as criterial, rather than an epistemologically-derived methodology – psychologists would need to read, or at the very least converse with, more historians and Christian theologians than we are accustomed to.

#### *§ 6.2. On language: creativity and poiesis*

The second key area I perceive as relevant for what could come after critique, is that of language, in particular in reaction to its reduced status in modernity. Language made over into the technical-instrumental image projected by modern institutions requires countering, not exclusively by critique, although critical prefatory work is indispensable, but by enriched articulations of what language means, what it does, and what forms of life it presupposes, expresses, and affirms. It is primarily creativity, and hence aesthetics, that provides the privileged site for enactments of the human encounter with the irreducible that discourses constituted by modern institutionalized practice exclude. In these regards I have found the unconventional and fiercely independent thought of George Steiner to be incomparable and I continue to follow his lead. Steiner (1989) has argued more passionately and cogently than anyone against the degeneration of language and for its appreciation as irreducible and mysterious. He (1989) claims that while “the relaxed ironies and liberalities” of the modern liberal thinker “are attractive”,

At the same time, it may well be that they inhibit not only a deeper, more vulnerable access to the matter of the generation of meaning and of form, but that they are, themselves, the reflection of a certain reduced condition of the poetic and of the act of creation in our culture. (p. 200)

Steiner's fear that our cultural condition has perhaps been diminished has animated a life-time of work; already in the 1960s he was advancing the thesis that language – “the word” – as the *sine qua non* of cultural life was “in retreat”.

...until the seventeenth century, the sphere of language encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality; today, it comprises a narrower domain. It no longer articulates, or is relevant to, all major modes of action, thought, and sensibility. (1967, p. 24)

Three decades later, he has developed and substantiated the thesis considerably, arguing that “it is this break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history and which defines modernity itself” (1989, p. 93). In light of this thesis, Charles Taylor's argument that language has become “a central area of concern” because it “reflects a largely inarticulate sense of ourselves which is widespread in our century” (1985, pp. 215-216) takes on even greater depth and interest. Steiner's unease over this state of affairs and his insistent questioning as to its significance open a post-critical appreciation of aesthetics and art in the context of modern institutionalized culture that remains underdeveloped and demands appreciation, on the one hand as critique of “lifeless clichés”, and on the other as articulate affirmation of the power, necessity, and irreducibility at work in aesthetic creation, and of the continuity between artistic creation and our most basic ‘common sense’ of the world as meaningful. Against the will to explicate, control, make accountable, Steiner (1989) contends:

Meaning is, in terms of proof, no more decidable, no more subject to the arrest of experimental demonstration than is the purpose (if there is any such) or ‘sense’ of

our lives in the unbounded script of time and the world. ... This unaccountability is the essence of freedom. It is the compelling licence of imagining and of thought. Literature, art, music are the willed compactions of that freedom. Their open-endedness to understanding or misprision, to welcome or rejection, their inexhaustibility, are the best access we have to the 'otherness', to the freedom, at once bracing and abyssal, of life itself. (p. 164)

The bulk of Steiner's considerable work, the genre of which owing to the rigor and power of his prose straddles both literature and literary criticism at once, appears intended to hold fast and sustain the richness possible in aesthetic experience. In this sense Steiner both argues for and exemplifies a defense of irreducibility, and articulates in seemingly inexhaustible fashion the sense of human agency, as evident in *poiesis*, as constitutive-dispossessive in a manner that continuously places the entire notion of autonomous selfhood into serious question:

...it is not the style of designation that matters: it is the affirmation, implicit and explicit, in poetry, in art, since the cave-paintings of the pre-historic, of the agonistic-collaborative presence of agencies beyond the governance or conceptual grasp of the craftsman. (1989, p. 211)

It is poetics, in the full sense, which informs us of the visitor's visa in place and in time which defines our status as transients in a house of being whose foundations, whose future history, whose rationale – if any – lie wholly outside our will and comprehension. (1989, p. 140)

I am certain that both Anne Michaels and Merleau-Ponty would agree; and it is the further suggestion implied by their work that this condition of the creative artist is not restricted exclusively to them, but is in effect paradigmatic for the understanding of all human action.

### § 6.3. *On myth: the symbolic and the transcendental*

While there is much more to be said, I will move on to briefly outline the third key area wherein I think affirmative work needs doing 'after criticism'; in many respects, it is the

confluence of the two already mentioned. That is, taking tradition and religion seriously and carefully on the one hand, while attending to the experiential depths borne witness to in creativity and art on the other, leads to a renewed focus on myth, the symbolic, and the transcendental. Perhaps, as Marcel Gauchet (1997) claims, it is because “art, in the specific sense that we moderns understand it, is the continuation of the sacred by other means” (p. 203). In this respect Gauchet seems to be in agreement with Steiner (1989), who suggests “that the embarrassment we feel in bearing witness to the poetic, to the entrance into our lives of the mystery of otherness in art and in music, is of a metaphysical-religious kind” (p. 178). It seems to me above all in myth, in its symbolizing of a transcendence over and above us that presumably – at least according to the thematizations of aesthetic experience available to us – has a life of its own quite outside ours, and wherein we find ourselves at the polarized extreme to the institutionally-constituted self-understanding of modernity. I believe it is in the Otherness we find here, whether we call it God, or the Great Spirit, or Nirvana, or the unconscious, that we need to go to counter the serious imbalances implemented by modernity, in particular where they become unlive-able; and, I believe it is where we need to go to genuinely supercede our pre-modern tradition rather than pretend to have left it behind. Whether it is best to speak of it as transcendent or immanent, as spiritual or as aesthetic or as human or as inhuman, I do not know yet. But I do feel it is crucial. I cannot as of yet substantiate this intuition, so let me leave ‘the final word’ of “my” essay – and really, it isn’t mine, this ‘essay’, this ‘venture’, is the resumption and engagement and stuttering and carrying on of a speech and a thought that exceed and outstrip me in all directions – to George Steiner (1989):

In most cultures, in the witness borne to poetry and art until most recent modernity, the source of 'otherness' has been actualized or metaphorized as transcendent. It has been invoked as divine, as magical, as daimonic. It is a presence of radiant opacity. That presence is the source of powers, of significations in the text, in the work, neither consciously willed nor consciously understood. (p. 211)

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