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23.

Notes on Molière's Dom Juan

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1. Background: Corneille's Alidor

The comedies of Pierre Corneille (Mélite, La Veuve, La Galerie du Palais, La Suivante, and above all, La Place Royale), form a series of thought experiments dealing with a single question: what is the dynamic of human desire when it is allowed to unfold within a social vacuum? Corneille's question is similar to that of the physicist who calculates the velocity of the fall of a body in an idealized situation where there would be absolutely no friction. But how can Corneille conduct an experiment dealing with a social vacuum? In fact, he does not have to look very far in order to discover such a situation, for the social vacuum is presented to him in the form of the aristocratic order, which is precisely the context that he chooses for the action of his comedies. As Dubrovsky comments, the aristocrat is "the fallen nobleman, the warrior who has exchanged his armor for lace." The aristocrat is a warrior who has "gone soft, emasculated by courtly society." No longer risking his life in military tests of courage and strength, he can only try his valor and merit in the contests of love. The excellence and greatness which the nobility previously sought through action (be it military or political) is now sought in an unfettered pleasure, which has become the principal goal of a domesticated aristocracy confined within the king's court. As Paul Bénichou puts it, in this context "a spectacularly enlarged pretension to greatness becomes increasingly futile, increasingly prone to self-negation, losing itself in the allurements of pleasure instead of being stirred and

ennobled by them. The superhuman ideal gives way to dissolution, and a scorn for morality becomes a matter of complacency."[1] In such a context, the predominant mode of social relations is that of privilege. As Bénichou remarks, "the notion of privilege, or of a gratuitous superiority that one does not dream of justifying, only takes on a dominant role within noble life to the extent that the aristocracy no longer has an effective social function, and thus feels incapable of grounding its rights. Social uselessness is inscribed within the word privilege along with social priority."

Within this social context, or rather, this reduction of the social context to an absolute minimum, desire enjoys free range. Everything that would normally set a limit to desire--such as social and moral constraints and the reality principle--is singularly weakened. An unbounded desire projects humanity into the infinite; just as in Molière's Amphytrion the gods are incarnated as men, it becomes possible for men and women to believe that they are the gods' equals.

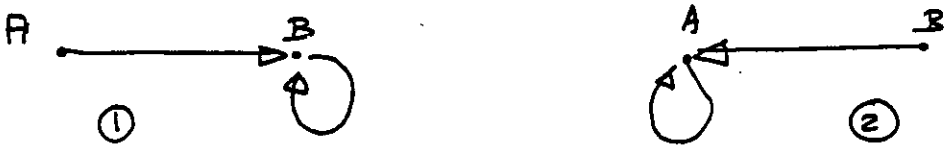
Our study of Corneille's comedies has shown that this liberation of desire, far from granting humanity sovereignty and self-mastery, causes human beings to behave in truly strange ways. It is as though people were intent upon guaranteeing their own unhappiness as well as that of those around them. Thus they bind themselves to mechanisms which they themselves set in motion, but which turn against them once started. Everything begins with the hero's seeming renunciation of his own desire--in the case of Alidor, it is a matter of an action of apparent "generosity" by means of which he gives the object of his desire to a friend. Yet this action starts a chain reaction that brings

[1] Paul Bénichou, Morales du Grand Siècle (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 273.

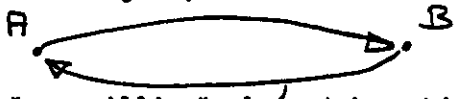
everyone's misfortune. According to Doubrovsky's interpretation, which is of Hegelian and Sartrian inspiration, Alidor's character involves a "project of mastery" that turns against itself because it is the product of "bad faith." Mastery is understood as the winning of autonomy, the triumph of freedom over nature. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, the seeming renunciation of the object of desire is in fact desire's most supreme device, and hardly manifests any true will to escape from desire. In fact, the moment when possession is renounced is the climax of the desire to possess the object. Alidor's impotence is not the product of a lack of appetite for the object of desire, rather, it manifests a pathological and excessive form of desire. As Denis de Rougement correctly remarks in Love in the Western World, even if Alidor says the opposite, what he really wants is to desire: "Suffering because nothing separates him from Angélique any longer, but ashamed of admitting this suffering, he complains of being overly captivated by this faithfulness--whereas we see on the contrary that he despairs of not being captivated enough."

I have advanced the following axiomatics for unbounded desire (desire as it would unfold within the idealized context of a perfect social vacuum). It has the merit of being able to generate mechanisms which at a phenomenological level reveal the very same properties that contemporary French theorists assign to the "quasi-object" and related categories (such as the concept of the circulation of the "lack" within the structure, etc.). Now, the authors in question use every means available to them to try to show that these categories escape from all forms of conceptualization. Yet I am able to demonstrate that these categories not only can be conceptualized, but that they can be reduced to certain mechanisms.

A first observation, then, is that in the order of unbounded desire, reciprocity is impossible. A more abstract way to put this is to say that desire generates polarizing dynamics. If A desires B, and if B knows or believes that this is the case, then B does not desire A. From A's perspective, it is as if B were self-sufficient, or desired himself. Thus two polar figures are possible, depending on which of the two agents occupies the focal position defined by the convergence of desires:



Each of these two figures is asymmetrical. Reciprocity, which would be represented by a symmetrical figure, is ruled out:



The most typically "corneillian" alexandrine which expresses the famous "dilemma," or better, double bind, asserts nothing but a wavering between these first two figures, and the impossibility of realizing the third, symmetrical figure. The lines in question are from La Galerie du Palais, where Célidée says: "Quand je le veux chasser, il est parfait amant, / Quand j'en veux être aimée, il n'en fait plus de compte" ("When I want to be rid of him, he is the perfect lover, / When I want to be loved by him, he no longer heeds my wish"). And compare Angélique's remark in La Place Royale: "Si j'aime, on me trahit; je trahis, si l'on m'aime" ("If I love, I am betrayed; I betray, if I am loved").

Another example should be mentioned here because it proves that the oscillation in question is also present in the tragedies. L'Infante, in Le

Cid, loves Rodrigue, but considerations pertaining to rank prevent her--or so she says--from giving in to her love. The best she can do is save her love by "giving" Rodrigue to Chimène: "Quand je vis que mon coeur ne se pouvait défendre, / Moi-même je donnai ce que je n'osais prendre, / Je mis au lieu de moi Chimène en ses liens, / Et j'allumai leurs feux pour éteindre les miens" (emphases mine). (When I saw that my heart could not be defended / I myself gave what I did not dare take, / I put Chimène in my place in his embrace, / And I lit up their passion to put out my own").

"To put out my own," she says, like Alidor, and with the same bad faith, for we soon enough hear her express the conflictual emotions brought by her painful involvement in a double bind: "Jusques à cet hymen Rodrigue m'est aimable, / Je travaille à le perdre, et le perds à regret, / . . . Je sens en deux partis mon esprit divisé, / . . / Cet hymen m'est fatal, je le crains, et souhaite, / Je ne m'en promets rien qu'une joie imparfaite, / Ma gloire et mon amour ont tous deux tant d'appas / Que je meurs s'il s'achève, et ne s'achève pas" (emphases mine). (Until this union Rodrigue is loveable to me, / I work to lose him, yet I lose him with regrets, / . . . I feel my mind divided into two camps, / . . . This union is deadly for me, I fear it and hope for it, / I can only promise myself an imperfect joy, / Both my glory and my love have so much appeal/ That I will die if ~~they are~~ it is ended, but also if ~~they do~~ it is not ~~end~~").

We have seen that in each of Corneille's comedies, the chain of desiring relations breaks up, first of all, into a link of reciprocity, the existence of which can only be ephemeral. (In such a context,) It is vital for ego that he, and not alter ego, occupy the focal point defined by the convergence of desires. Should the opposite pole be realized, this means for ego that the Other will rob him of his substance, drawing his being away. (Let us recall here the lines of

Tircis, spoken under the influence of the shock of his meeting with Mélite: "Elle a je ne sais quoi / Qui ne peut consentir que l'on demeure à soi" ("She has a certain something--I know not what / that will not allow one to remain within (in possession of) oneself").

The game of desire is thus a war in which the object is to make oneself the focal point where desires converge. Everything happens in such a way as to suggest that there is a fictive object, which we will call a "quasi-object," which everyone desires to possess. To possess this quasi-object means that everyone else's desire converges upon oneself, which also implies that one has a better chance of possessing this quasi-object in the following moment (this latter clause only means that the convergence of desires is a self-reinforcing mechanism). It would seem that all cultures have interpreted this mechanism specific to desiring relations in terms of an object, thereby reifying the relationships involved, for all cultures have given a name to this fictive object. The Greeks called it kudos (the kudos belonged to the winners in a contest. But men could only possess it in a wholly ephemeral way, for only the gods could keep it permanently). The Polynesians called it mana; the New-Zealanders studied by Marcel Mauss used the term hau, and so on. We employ words like "prestige," the etymology of which reminds us that the term designates an illusion.

Desire, then, seeks to possess the quasi-object, the kudos. But what Corneille teaches us is that at the same time, desire wants to rid itself of the quasi-object so that the Other may possess it. Desire does not do this out of generosity, nor through some kind of "masochism" (yet let us recall that ego indeed suffers, losing his substance when the kudos slips out of his grasp); rather, desire gives up possession of its object--if we are to believe

Alidor--in order to satisfy itself! Thus in La Place Royale, Alidor says: "Je vais faire un ami possesseur de mon bien: / Aussi dans son bonheur je rencontre le mien. / C'est moins pour l'obliger que pour me satisfaire" (IV, 1). ("I will make ~~myself~~ a friend his possessor of my own goods: / Thus in his happiness I will meet my own. / I do this less to give to him than to satisfy myself.")

How can we explain this paradox? The explanation is simple once we add the following, supplementary axiom: everything happens as though the quasi-object, the kudos, only had value if it were possessed by the Other. Thus the corneillien double bind can be schematized in the following way:

1. I want to possess the quasi-object because it has value;
2. The quasi-object only has value if I do not possess it.

The quasi-object is such that I desire it if I believe that the Other possesses it. If I obtain it, it goes up in smoke. For me to desire it and obtain it, it must exist, therefore, the Other must have it. But in winning this object, I lose it. This description is, of course, only paradoxical if we stubbornly go on speaking in terms of objects, when in fact what is at stake is entirely a matter of desiring relations. No real object has the properties which we attribute to the quasi-object.

Alidor's "solution" to this double bind is to cause the quasi-object to oscillate back and forth between himself and the other, so that he alternately does and does not possess it. La Place Royale stages for us at least two back-and-forth movements of the object of desire.

We may note in passing that we have managed, by using an axiomatic description of a mechanical model, to generate a phenomenology which is wholly isomorphic to what the theoreticians of the quasi-object have described. In

this light, we can take up the two central metaphors employed by Michel Serres in his description of the quasi-object, namely, the games of football and hunt-the-slipper:

> We have all played the game of hunt-the-slipper or button, button, who's got the button: in French, the "furet," the ferret (the animal and the marker in a game of the same kind). The one who is caught with the furet has to pay a forfeit. The furet points him out. One person is marked with the sign of the furet. Condemned, he goes to the center. What is the furet? This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world. It is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, it is stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is "it" (in French: "mort" = dead). The moving furet weaves the "we," the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I" . . . . The ball circulates just like the furet. The better the team, the quicker the ball is passed. Sometimes the ball is said to be a hot coal that burns one's fingers so badly that one must get rid of the ball as quickly as possible" (The Parasite, "Theory of the Quasi-Object").

What is noteworthy in this passage is that even if he does not say it explicitly, Serres is basing a phenomenology upon a mechanism. The mechanism is that of the scapegoat as described by Girard, with its substitution of victims. Now I have arrived at the same phenomenology by starting with the mechanisms of desire. This is hardly surprising: in Girard's system, the logic of victimization is in fact a derivation from the logic of desire and keeps its basic forms. This leads us to add that the figure of the circulation of the quasi-object which I have presented above is a combination of two basic mimetic figures: that of "pseudo-narcissism" (the polarizing characteristic of desire), and that of "pseudo-masochism" (what the subject is after in passing the quasi-object along to the Other is not suffering, but a future satisfaction, for this renews the quasi-object's value--a point missed by Denis de Rougemont).

The same phenomenology and the same metaphor are found in John Maynard Keynes's theory of financial speculation. As Keynes himself puts it, speculation "is, so to speak, a game of snap, of Old Maid, of musical chairs--a pastime in which he is victor who says snap neither too soon nor too late, who passed the Old Maid to his neighbour before the game is over, who secures a chair for himself when the music stops. These games can be played with zest and enjoyment, though all the players know that it is the Old Maid which is circulating, or that when the music stops some of the players will find themselves unseated" (The General Theory, Chapter 12, "The State of Long-Term Expectations").

This rather striking similarity is hardly an accident. Without going on at the present moment to develop our theory of money as the quasi-object, we can already see how money can make possible a solution to the conflictual oscillation between self and other which is constitutive of the subject of desire. To possess money is to manage to possess virtually all that the others possess and that I desire. Yet at the same time, I actually possess nothing, except for the intrinsically valueless material embodiment of a sign. And this sign cannot be possessed, since it has the value of transcendence. The possession of money is the climax of the desire of possession as it manifests itself in the guise of a renunciation of possession.

Let me evoke yet another astounding isomorphism, which will give us reason to think that what is at stake here is one of the fundamental forms taken by human relationships. In the first chapter of Capital, Marx sets forth a theory of the commodity form. In this theory, relations between commodities obey the same rules of polarization which we have set forth in relation to the mechanisms of desire (but Marx is the first to remind us, with

his notion of commodity fetishism, that the relations between people take on "the fantastic form of a relation between things"). Vulgar economical thought falls into the trap of appearances insofar as it believes that commodities are, by virtue of their very nature, interchangeable according to reciprocal forms. Marx indeed recognizes that "the form of immediate and universal exchangeability does not reveal at first glance that it is a polarized form . . . We can (thus) imagine that we have the faculty of making all commodities immediately interchangeable, just as we can imagine that all catholics can become the Pope." Now Marx forcefully proclaims "the impossibility of an immediate exchange of commodities." The first "forms of value" (F1 and F2) are polarized forms. Like human desire (in a vacuum, or in the absence of "transcendence"), it is only in relation to a model external to oneself that one can measure oneself, and not in a simple or immediate relation of self to self. In the beginning were disymmetry and focalization. Reciprocal exchange can only appear with the emergence of a new form of value, that of the "general equivalent" (which in practice is essentially translated by the "monetary" form). Marx specifies that this emergence cannot be but "the common product of commodities as a whole." In Marx's own terms, a special commodity must be "excluded" from the world of ordinary commodities so that the latter can take this special commodity as their model and measure. In order for this to be achieved, there must be a collective phenomenon, a unanimity. Yet Marx says nothing about how this occurs.

Let us return to Corneille's comedies. We agree with the structuralists and others who claim that there can be no society in the absence of exchange. For example, the relations between the two sexes require some form of matrimonial institution. Yet unlike the structuralists, I hold that

reciprocal exchange is not a "natural" form. Even less is it an a priori category of the human mind. For this reason we require an explanation of the social possibility of reciprocal exchange. Corneille's comedies shed a great deal of light on this question because they reveal the alternation of two types of moments in the dynamics of social relations. These moments are brought forward in the movement from one play to the next within Corneille's corpus, yet they are also made to alternate within a single play (particularly in La Place Royale, which is a synthesis of all of the author's previous comedies). What, then, are these two moments? The first is the moment when desire unfolds without limits, rendering reciprocity impossible. The second is the moment, typically marking the end of a play, when society once more asserts its rights and reciprocal exchange again becomes possible. Generally speaking, the female characters are less likely to fall into the traps laid by the self-reinforcing polarizations of desire. We have only to think of Phylis in La Place Royale, whose strategy of "indifference" may be contrasted to the stance of la Célidée in La Galerie du Palais. This asymmetry in gender roles involves the womens' tendency to submit more readily to social hierarchy. Reciprocal exchange is made possible by this element of "hierarchy" (taken in the sense which Louis Dumont gives to this term), a hierarchy that cannot be dissociated from the "transcendence" of the social in relation to individuals. The result is that there is never any "pure" reciprocity, if by this is meant relations on an entirely "horizontal" plane. Every reciprocal exchange takes place within the shelter of a "vertical" transcendence, which designates the individual's subordination in relation to the social totality.

It is true, of course, that Corneille does not show us how this vertical dimension was established. Nor does he need to, for the specificity of an

hierarchical society is quite precisely to naturalize its own hierarchical institution. What Corneille does show us is the possibility that this hierarchy may collapse as a result of the gravitational forces weighed upon it by a polarizing form of desire. In the comedies, social hierarchy is manifested doubly: first of all, it appears in the form of the parents' judgements, for the parents are charged with maintaining such traditional values as family, honor, rank, and so on. Hierarchy also appears in the form of the power of patrimonial wealth (inherited "goods"). We should note, then, that money does not always appear as a quasi-object in circulation, but can serve as one of the pillars of social order and stability. Whence a problem, noted by Doubrovsky: "Money appears as the concrete substitute for courage in the justification and maintaining of a hierarchy. Consciousness only has the mediation of things to deal with." But the noble consciousness can only disapprove of this: the trials to which it submits itself must be renewed incessantly, and consequently the noble consciousness can hardly be satisfied with a permanent reification of its superior value. In La Suivante we see Florange hurl "to wealth the challenge of the sword." The problem is that there can be no stable order, and thus no society, if those who hold the kudos constantly put it back into play, for sooner or later they will have to lose. For there to be a society, there must be reifications, an immobilizing of a certain quasi-object (the solution that Doubrovsky sees at work in Le Cid, which makes Rodrigue an "invincible" being, certain to keep the kudos forever, and thus a kind of human divinity, is quite patently a mythological solution).

Let us recapitulate our findings. In order for the play of desire and the circulation of the quasi-object (which is the object of desire) to be compatible with the possibility of reciprocal forms of exchange, there must be

some kind of social transcendence. The existence of the latter requires the reification of another quasi-object.

Here we are able to grasp what is so very singular about those social orders where the marketplace is a central institution. For in these cases, one finds the same quasi-object at both levels of organization, that is, at the level of circulation as well as at the level of transcendence. This quasi-object is money. (In its purely material dimension, money can be "possessed"--that is, in a manner which is just as illusory as the possession of any quasi-object; in its symbolic dimension, money cannot be possessed, since it merely signifies a reality which transcends it, such as "wealth.") This splitting of a single (quasi)-object into two levels follows a logic of "self-transcendence" and "bootstrapping" which we will have the occasion to study.

2. Dom Juan and the logic of desire

Between the composition of La Place Royale (1633-1634) and the first performance of Dom Juan in 1665, there was the Fronde, the last great feudal revolt. As we all know, the Fronde was crushed, and by the time Molière conceives of his play, the aristocracy's forfeiting of political power is virtually complete. As Bénichou writes, the aristocrats "could only devote themselves so shamelessly to the religion of pleasure by losing to some degree their responsibility before the whole of the social body. Their moral libertinage amounts to a cynical disavowal of the old idea following which "noblesse oblige," an idea which Don Juan's father had set in opposition, at great length and quite futilely, to his son's vice. This libertinage results in barring its proponents from all tenable social positions, and consequently, from every solid and effective form of sovereignty."

Don Juan's desire unfolds and reveals its pretensions to what Bénichou calls a "divine lack of limits" within precisely this sort of aggravated social vacuum. Don Juan addresses his grandiose challenge not only to christian morality (which is what is typically underscored in the commentaries) but also to every dimension of the traditional and hierarchical social order. But what the play admirably reveals is that this challenge is animated entirely by the dynamic of unbounded desire. As a result, the unfettering of desire and the collapse of the social order engender each other by means of a self-reinforcing causal loop. This is, I believe, the central lesson to be learned from the play in our present context. In regard to this lesson, the question whether Molière was on the side of Don Juan or on the side of those who condemned him is of little importance. I agree with Bénichou in thinking that the author wanted most of all to describe in as faithful manner as possible a rather astounding historical and social state of affairs.

In his essay on Dom Juan, "Apparition d'Hermès: Dom Juan," Michel Serres focuses entirely on what he calls the "sociological" Don Juan. Consequently we are presented a Don Juan who is a kind of Lévi-Straussian specialist in the "law of exchange" that governs primitive societies. Serres complains that a long tradition, stretching from Kierkegaard to Otto Rank, has spared no effort to make Don Juan into a romantic hero questing after an impossible love. As a result of this tradition, Don Juan has become for us "nothing more than a metapsychological archetype." Here Serres belongs to a tradition of commentators who base themselves on the following observation: unlike his Spanish predecessors (Tirso de Molina) and his Italian sources (Cicognini, Giliberto, etc.), who stack up the seductions and rapes, Molière shows us a

Don Juan who never really acts. As Janine Krauss remarks, from the third act forward, "religious libertinage supplants and eliminates the libertinage of morals. Don Juan is punished for his insubordination to God and not for his sexual incontinence."

Yet it would seem an error to try to separate and oppose to each other the Don Juan who is the man of desire, and the Don Juan who defies all religious and social transcendance. The most important lesson of the play is that these two poles are identical: the exacerbation of desire is what destroys these two forms of transcendence (which is not to say that desire does not create new ones).

In what follows I shall study in turn the logic of desire and the logic of social "demystification," my goal being to show that in the final analysis they are identical.

The structure of the play's action is that of a continual flight forward, ending in the cauldron of hell. Don Juan is a hunter who is hunted, fleeing from those who follow him: his wife, angry relatives in quest for revenge, his father, creditors, even a living statue. Don Juan is clearly looking for something or for someone. But what, or whom, is it? Christians obviously respond to this question by saying that what Don Juan is looking for, without knowing it, is God. This is true even if Don Juan spends his time defying God--or better, it is true precisely because Don Juan spends his time this way. Now it seems more precise to me to say that the object of Don Juan's quest is a predicate of God: infinity, the absence of limits. As Bénichou writes: "desires are not only sovereign in him, they do not merely occupy the entire field of his consciousness . . . but their very object is limitless and surpasses human

dimensions. Don Juan's inconstancy is not merely the consequence of an overly sensual character, for it manifests an essential dissatisfaction, a disgust for all limited forms of pleasure, as well as the ambition to surpass all victories already won."

The logic of the quasi-object (which is, in my view, entirely a logic of appearances) allows us to perceive the similarities between Don Juan and Alidor, but also, their differences. Alidor is a man devoted to a single woman, Angélique. Consequently, the quasi-object oscillates back and forth between them. Don Juan, however, "devotes" himself to a multitude of women--one thousand and three, if we are to believe Da Ponte's libretto. Consequently, the quasi-object seems to wander about endlessly, and Don Juan appears to chase after it. But the underlying mechanism is the same: all women desire Don Juan because he deceives them; and because all women desire him, he does not desire them in return, or more accurately, he can no longer desire them once he has made his conquest, which alone provides him with his supreme pleasure. Let us reread Don Juan's magnificent profession of faith:

> Quoi? tu veux qu'on se lie à demeurer au premier objet qui nous prend, qu'on renonce au monde pour lui, et qu'on n'ait plus d'yeux pour personne? La belle chose de vouloir se piquer d'un faux honneur d'être fidèle, de s'ensevelir pour toujours dans une passion, et d'être mort dès sa jeunesse à toutes les autres beautés qui nous peuvent frapper les yeux! Non, non: la constance n'est bonne que pour des ridicules; toutes les belles ont droit de nous charmer, et l'avantage d'être rencontrée la première ne doit point dérober aux autres les justes prétentions qu'elles ont toutes sur nos coeurs. Pour moi, la beauté me ravit partout où je la trouve, et je cède facilement à cette douce violence dont elle nous entraîne. J'ai beau être engagé, l'amour que j'ai pour une belle n'engage point mon âme à faire injustice aux autres; je conserve des yeux pour voir le mérite de toutes, et rends à chacune les hommages et les tributs où la nature nous oblige. Quoi qu'il en soit, je ne puis refuser mon coeur à tout ce que je vois d'aimable; et dès qu'un beau visage me le demande, si j'en avais dix mille, je les donnerais tous. Les inclinations naissantes, après tout, ont des charmes inexplicables, et tout le plaisir de l'amour est dans le changement.

On goûte une douceur extrême à réduire, par cent hommages, le coeur d'une jeune beauté, à voir de jour en jour les petits progrès qu'on y fait, à combattre par des transports, par des larmes et des soupirs, l'innocente pudeur d'une âme qui a peine à rendre les armes, à forcer pied à pied toutes les petites résistances qu'elle nous oppose, à vaincre les scrupules dont elle se fait un honneur et la mener doucement où nous avons envie de la faire venir. Mais lorsqu'on en est maître une fois, il n'y a plus rien à dire ni rien à souhaiter; tout le beau de la passion est fini, et nous nous endormons dans la tranquillité d'un tel amour, si quelque objet nouveau ne vient réveiller nos désirs, et présenter à notre coeur les charmes attrayants d'une conquête à faire. Enfin, il n'est rien de si doux que de triompher de la résistance d'une belle personne, et j'ai sur ce sujet l'ambition des conquérants, qui volent perpétuellement de victoire en victoire, et ne peuvent se résoudre à borner leurs souhaits. Il n'est rien qui puisse arrêter l'impétuosité de mes désirs: je me sens un coeur à aimer toute la terre; et comme Alexandre, je souhaiterais qu'il y eût d'autres mondes, pour y pouvoir étendre mes conquêtes amoureuses.[2]

What? You want us to bind ourselves forever to the first object that attracts us, to give up the world for its sake, and have no eyes for anyone else? How lovely it is to want to pride oneself on the false honor of being faithful, to entomb oneself forever in one passion, to be dead already in one's youth to all of the other beauties that can catch our eyes! No, no! Constancy is for fools: all beautiful women have the right to charm us, and the fact that one of them happens to have the advantage of being first must not deprive the others of their fair claim to our hearts. As far as I am concerned, beauty can ravish me wherever I happen to come across it, and I readily give in to that gentle violence with which it carries us away. I may well be pledged to one woman, but my love for her does not pledge my soul to do injustice to the others; I still have eyes for all of their merits, and so I pay due homage and tribute to them, there where nature requires it. In any case, I cannot refuse to give my heart to all that I find loveable; the minute a beautiful face asks me for it, if I had ten thousand, I would give her all of them. After all, budding affections have an inexplicable charm, and all of love's pleasure is in change. There is an extreme delight to be had by subjugating, with a hundred compliments, the heart of a young beauty. It is a delight to see the progress one makes with her day by day, combatting, by means of tears, sighs, and outbursts, the innocent modesty of a soul that finds it difficult to give in. To overcome her resistence inch by inch, to conquer the scruples upon which she prides herself, to lead her slowly where we want to take her. But when one has been her master once, there is nothing more to say or to hope for; the beauty

[2] Molière, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1971), II: 35-6. Henceforth cited as OC.

> of passion is over, and we fall asleep in the peacefulness of this kind of love--unless some new object awakens our desires, presenting to our heart the attractive charms of another conquest to be made. Finally, there is nothing sweeter than triumphing over the resistence put up by a beautiful woman. On this score I have all of the ambition of the great conquerors, who constantly move from one victory to the next and could never decide to put a limit to their wishes. Nothing could ever put a stop to the impetuous character of my desires. I feel in myself a heart capable of loving the whole earth; like Alexander, I wish there were other worlds, so I could extend my amorous conquests to them.

Every object upon which the quasi-object momentarily settles in its unbridled movement automatically loses its desirability in the next moment. Don Juan is unlike Alidor, who tries to "recharge" the value of the sole object of his passion by "giving" it to a friend; Don Juan has no time to indulge in the uneasy games of surrogate possession; he pushes along on his arithmetical pursuit which aims at embracing the totality by means of an exhaustive enumeration of its elements. In a certain sense, Don Juan is someone who has taken too much to heart Pascal's lesson concerning concupiscence. According to Pascal, man loses himself in conscupiscence whenever he seeks to find in a particular good what the universal good alone could truly grant him. For Pascal, of course, this universal good was God, and there was no question of man being able to arrive at it through his own efforts. Don Juan only retains the clause about not remaining attached to particular goods, the infinity totality being the only real source of satisfaction. As a result, his destiny is already clearly prescribed in Les Pensées:

> Qu'est-ce donc que nous crie cette avidité et cette impuissance, sinon qu'il y a eu autrefois dans l'homme un véritable bonheur, dont il ne lui reste maintenant que la marque et la trace toute vide, et qu'il essaye inutilement de remplir de tout ce qui l'environne, recherchant des choses absentes le secours qu'il n'obtient pas des

> présentes, mais qui en sont toutes incapables, parce que ce gouffre infini ne peut être rempli que par un objet infini et immuable, c'est-à-dire que par Dieu même?[3] (my emphases)
>
> (What is it that cries out to us this greed and impotence, if it is not the fact that there was once in man a true happiness, of which there remains only the [illegible] and empty trace, and which he uselessly tries to fill in with everything that surrounds him, seeking in what is absent the succor he cannot obtain from what is present? But these things cannot help, for this infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, in other words, by God himself.

mark

In the passage immediately preceding this one, Pascal notes: "Et ainsi, le présent ne nous satisfaisant jamais, l'expérience nous pipe, et, de malheur en malheur, nous mène jusqu'à la mort, qui en est un comble éternel" (And thus, the present never satisfying us, experience dupes us, leading us from misfortune to misfortune, until we reach death, the eternal and crowning misfortune"). This "Pensée" ends with the following lines, which Don Juan could very well take up as his own thoughts by inverting the meaning and conclusion:

> D'autres . . . ont considéré qu'il est nécessaire que le bien universel, que tous les hommes désirent, ne soit dans aucune des choses particulières qui ne peuvent être possédées que par un seul, et qui, étant partagées, affligent plus leur possesseur par le manque de la partie qu'il n'a pas, qu'elles ne le contentent par la jouissance de celle qu'elles lui apportaient.[4] Ils ont compris que le vrai bien devait être tel que tous pussent le posséder à la fois, sans diminution et sans envie, et que personne ne le pût perdre contre son gré.
>
> (Others . . . have thought that it is necessary for the universal good, which all men desire, not to be any of the particular things

[3] Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1954), no. 370, p. 1185.

[4] "Leçon des Copies et des éditeurs: qui lui appartient." Oeuvres complètes, 1507, n. 1.

> which could only be possessed by a single person. For such things would, once shared, cause more pain than pleasure to their owner--the pain resulting from his lack of the things not possessed, the pleasure being the happiness provided by those he owns. They have understood that the true good must be such that all may possess it at once, with neither loss nor envy, so that no one could lose it against his or her will).

The quasi-object that Don Juan seeks to possess has the form, then, of universality and totality. There is another way to characterize it, a way provided by Don Juan himself in his second admirable tirade of Act I, Scene ii. In my view, this passage provides us with the key to the articulation of the logics of desire and social demystification:

> Ah! n'allons point songer au mal qui nous peut arriver, et songeons seulement à ce qui nous peut donner du plaisir. La personne dont je te parle est une jeune fiancée, la plus agréable du monde, qui a été conduite ici par celui même qu'elle y vient épouser; et le hasard me fit voir ce couple d'amants trois ou quatre jours avant leur voyage. Jamais je n'ai vu deux personnes être si contents l'un de l'autre, et faire éclater plus d'amour. La tendresse visible de leurs mutuelles ardeurs me donna de l'émotion; j'en fus frappé au coeur et mon amour commença par la jalousie. Oui, je ne pus souffrir d'abord de les voir si bien ensemble; le dépit alarma[5] mes désirs, et je me figurai un plaisir extrême à pouvoir troubler leur intelligence, et rompre cet attachement, dont la délicatesse de mon coeur se tenait offensée; mais jusqu'ici tous mes efforts ont été inutiles, et j'ai recours au dernier remède (OC, 38).
>
> Oh, let us not worry about the bad things that can happen to us, and think instead only about what can give us pleasure. The person I am telling you about is a young bride, the most winsome in the world, who has been brought here by the man she is about to marry. By chance I saw this couple of lovers three or four days before their journey. Never have I seen two persons so happy with each other, nor seen so much love shine forth. The visible tenderness of their mutual ardor stirred up my emotions; I was struck in the heart, and my love began with jealousy. Yes, at first I could not bear to see them so happy together; spite inflamed my desire, and I imagined the extreme pleasure of being able to disturb their mutual understanding and break the bond linking them, for my heart's delicacy was offended.

[5] Ed. 1683: "le dépit alluma." Lectio difficilior. OC, 1304, a.

> Yet until now all of my efforts have been in vain, and I will have to take recourse to the ultimate tactic.

Don Juan is moved, and then offended, by the sight of a reciprocal and shared love. He is in pain; he suffers; his stomach tightens. Finally we see what can affect this person who usually exercizes such a strong effect on others. What is the nature of his suffering? He suffers from being excluded from an autonomous totality, for nothing provides a better idea of autonomy and self-sufficiency than the sight of a reciprocal love.

We should note that Don Juan is in general attracted to women who are engaged in a relationship of this sort: fiancées (Charlotte as well as the bride in the passage just cited), nuns--who are wedded to God (Elvire). To describe his suffering, he uses the word "jalousie." This is clearly not the correct term: one can only be jealous of what one already possesses, whereas Don Juan feels excluded from ever possessing what he is after. Yet it is quite common, even among the best authors, to use the word "jalousie" incorrectly in the place of "envie." Yet "envie" would also be out of place here. We only envy someone who fascinates us and whose happiness is a source of pain. Within a girardian interpretation of envy as mimetic desire, the relationship to the mediator is primary, and the desire for the object possessed by this mediator is secondary. Here, however, neither God (in the case of Elvire), nor Pierrot (in the case of Charlotte), nor the young fiancée's lover is what really fascinates Don Juan in the first place. If he becomes interested in them, this is a consequence of his desire, not its cause. The problematics of jealousy and envy are simply not appropriate in this case.

It is necessary to recognize, then, that the object of Don Juan's desire (the quasi-object specific to him) is the closed and autonomous totality which excludes him. Moreover, he desires it insofar as it excludes him. Is this a matter of "masochism" or the "death drives," as a whole tradition of commentaries would have it? (cf. Audiberti: "Dom Juan révèle une incohérente ténèbre où se découpe/des formes qui, pour une fois, la seule (chez Molière), touchent au monde nocture, mythique, astral. Nous sentons bouger les grands êtres préhistoriques du songe humain, le temps, le désir, la peur, la mort. A force de rôder sur la lisière lyrique de l'ombre, Molière a fini par les frôler" (Dom Juan reveals an incoherent shadow where there stand forth forms which, for once, the only time (in Molière), touch upon the nocturnal, mythical, and astral world. We are made to sense the movements of the great prehistorical beings of the human dream--time, desire, fear, death. Molière ended up brushing up against them because he had so long prowled about at the lyrical border of the shadow").

The problem with an interpretation couched in terms of the death drives has to do with the unsatisfactory state in which Freud left this concept, a concept which was a late addition to his theory. (Let me recall in passing that Lacan's theory of the symbolic was an attempt to salvage the notion of Todestrieb.) I will only mention the following point in the present context. The text in which the concept first appears, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), is marked by a strange tension. It is with a certain obstinacy that Freud insists upon the necessity of including the "death drive" alongside the pleasure principle (and the sexual and life drives connected to the latter). The death drive manifests itself in the famous Widerholungszwang, or repetition compulsion, which Lacan will turn into a cybernetic automatism.

Yet throughout the text it would appear that the militant dualism distinguishing sharply between these two kinds of drives was in fact contradicted by an irresistible force. Freud finally concludes that "the pleasure principle seems in fact to be in the service of the death drives." In spite of himself Freud comes close to discovering a disturbing truth: the libidinal drives and the death drives are identical. In fact, this finding was already implicitly contained in Freud's definitions--definitions that Freud tries to situate within a scientific, biological, thermodynamic, and economic framework. The pleasure principle arises from the organism's tendency to keep its inner quantity of excitation as low as possible. The life drives are a source of perturbation and tension, and pleasure is the consequence of their release. Moreover, the death drive arises from a tendency towards inertia and conservation inherent within the organism; this tendency seeks a return to the state prior to life, in other words, death, which is, we must admit, the state of minimal psychic energy! Thus, both of Freud's principles are physical principles having to do with the minimization of a potential, and this potential is the same in both cases. Therefore, the two principles are indistinguishable.

It is well known that the starting point for Freud's reflexions in Beyond the Pleasure Principle was the game of fort/da which his grand-son played in reaction to the comings and goings of his mother--as a kind of reproduction of them. Saying fort ("there it goes"), he made his little spool disappear, and saying da ("here it is"), he made it come back. As the story goes, Freud had needed a principle "beyond" the pleasure principle in order to explain why the child would repeat a traumatic experience in this manner. Now, I would like to point out that the structure of the child's game is exactly the same as

that of Alidor's actions in Corneille's play: fort, I give Angélique to my friend Cléandre; da, I take her back from him, and so on. Given this parallel, it may not be necessary to look beyond our explanatory model. Alidor is not seeking death and suffering, nor is what he is after the final rest (even if he says so, speaking as a kind of freudian before the letter). What Alidor seeks is to desire a desirable object.

(Our mechanism has at this point already accounted for the properties of the quasi-object according to Michel Serres; it has explained the circulation of commodities following Marx; the dialectic of the life and death drives in Freud; Keynes's model of speculation; and finally, the nature of desire in Corneille. The mechanism is taking on an air of universality!)

The same must be said of Don Juan. He is not seeking exclusion when he is drawn towards an autonomous totality that excludes him; rather, this autonomy seems worthy of his desire precisely because it excludes him. However, Don Juan is further along than Alidor in terms of a knowledge of the laws of desire. Alidor stills believes that it is possible to win one's autonomy (and thus he entertains what Doubrovsky calls the "project of mastery"). Don Juan, on the other hand, both knows and does not know that autonomy is an illusion. His relation to this illusion is a matter of fascination and a desire for destruction. Since he cannot have this autonomy, he must destroy it, or "demystify" it in others--just as Freud must demystify the narcissism he spots in others. Don Juan reveals this to Sganarelle in the passage in question here. And yet Don Juan's fascination finally gets the upper hand. This is the signification of his death. It is often said that if Molière staged the divine punishment of Don Juan at the end of the play, this was out of prudence alone, for he was afraid of going too far in his

provocation of the devout camp (the "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement," which was, by the way, dissolved by Louis XIV the year of the first performance of Dom Juan). This is a very weak interpretation, and not only because it is impossible to be certain about the true nature of Molière's intentions. Let me take up this latter issue before making my main point. If Molière was on Don Juan's side, the final expulsion can be read as the execution of the libertine by the dominant institution (power). In that case, Don Juan is a scapegoat, and the play says so (thus the scapegoat mechanism appears as a theme, as Girard would say). If, on the other hand, Molière condemned Don Juan's actions and attitudes out of sincere convinction or mere prudence, the play becomes the accomplice of the act of expulsion (in which case the scapegoat mechanism is its structure). Moreover, we could also think that the play is open to a double reading whereby Molière plays upon both of these keys at once--just as Shakespeare does in relation to Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, as read by Girard. This kind of double reading of Dom Juan is defended by Georges Couton in his preface to the Pléiade edition (OC, 28).

In any case, it seems far more worthwhile to me to say that Don Juan dies just as he has lived--fascinated by the autonomy from which he is excluded. As Pascal saw so very clearly, the logical outcome of concupiscence, for those who seek to move beyond the successive frustrations which their desire inflicts upon them, is death. Death is the most undifferentiated and elusive totality of all, and there is no doubt that it can never be mastered. It seems very significant to me that Don Juan's guide in this ultimate quest is an animated statue, or in other words, an automaton (Sganarelle: "Vous ne vous rendez pas à la surprenante merveille de cette statue mouvante et parlante?" ("You are not giving yourself to that surprising marvel, a moving and speaking

statue?" V, ii). An automaton is the most laughable form of autonomy--a form which is appropriate to the age of rationalism (here we think of those contemporary stories where the hero, both tragic and pathetic, dies of his passionate love for an inflateable doll. And Fellini built a crucial scene around this motif in his filmic adaptation of the life of Casanova).

Is it necessary for me to say at this point that I have been following the girardian model of "pseudo-masochism," which he has used to criticize Freud's conception of the death drives? Of the various mimetic figures, this one is probably the most paradoxical, cloudy, and complex. It remains out of reach of those who think that the mimetic theory amounts to a simplistic theory of imitation (for here neither the object nor the mediator has any existence prior to desire).

3. Dom Juan and the logic of social demystification

Our previous remarks make it possible to understand Don Juan's relation to God. Here, once more, the commentators have insisted upon seeing a "contradiction." The romantic christians turn Don Juan into a tragic figure, an atheist who has the curious habit of spending his time defying a God whose existence he denies! Mauriac: "He spoke to Him whom he denies and he only denies Him so as to defy Him all the more." Thus Don Juan would be a "christian who does not know it, anguished by the absolute and by a perpetually-renewed dissatisfaction." Victim of what Hegel called the "unhappy consciousness," he seeks the infinite; but what he seeks is the "bad infinity," that of arithmetic, and not the one true infinity, God. Other commentators note that like the libertines of Molière's time, Don Juan wades in a mixture of atheism and an attraction for the supernatural: "The skeptic

and atheist Don Juan does not refuse to enter in relation with the supernatural. Confronted with a statue that moves its head, he does not say: "Impossible!" Instead, he says: "We'll see about that." Other commentators--and this group is the largest today--see in Don Juan a kind of nietzschean superman figure who defends the values of life against the morbid and life-denying God of the christians: "In fact, the God that he defies is a God who in fact exists--the way images exist--since men have created him . . . One can very well want to defy an idol, or in other words an image, when one knows what power idols and images have in the world. And Don Juan knows this. He conducts a struggle against this transcendent phantom which is the basis for the faith of the ignorant and the foundation of the slave morality; such is the God he seeks to anger, "the only wrong for which he cannot grant man pardon" (Sade). And by the same stroke, Don Juan's negation of God takes the form of a settling of accounts" (Gilles Sandier, commentary on the staging of Dom Juan by Patrice Chéreau).

I have already set forth the essence of my position: neither "romantic christianity" nor the antichristian reading. Don Juan clearly does not escape from the logic of the image, he lives in and of the image, he nourishes himself entirely on absence and never on presence. As for the life forces which animate him, they are identical to the death drive. Transcendence is the ultimate image of the autonomy that excludes Don Juan, and this is why he wants both to possess and destroy it.

As is often the case, Sganarelle gives us the key here. He is an "inferior double" and "echo" of his master, that "profoundly inferior, timid and pitiful incarnation of everything which Don Juan's audacious deeds could ever scandalize." While pretending to hate "this great lord and evil man,"

whom he continues to serve, he says, solely out of fear, he proves on a number of occasions that "he admires his master enough to imitate him whenever he dares" (Bénichou). Here I am referring to the famous first scene of Act III where Don Juan has just declared that all he believes in is "two plus two make four." Sganarelle answers by taking up the old theological argument for the existence of God based on the necessity of there being a "final cause." Trying to illustrate the admirable organization of the human body, an organization impossible in the absence of a creator, Sganarelle falls down and smashes his face--and at the same time the chain of his reasoning is shattered. Let us follow this chain for a moment: "Why is there something instead of nothing?" Why are you here, Don Juan, and why are there these rocks and trees that surround us? There has to be a cause, and this cause must in turn have its own cause, going all the way back until we reach the first cause, which is its own cause, self-sufficient, full, and present: in other words, God. Such is the onto-theological argument, founded on the principle of sufficient reason (Leibniz), which according to Heidegger runs throughout Western metaphysics. To the question "why?" this argument answers in a typically metaphysical manner, for it postulates a fundamental being (a Seiendes, an entity, or étant): God. But such a postulation evacuates the ontological difference between Being (Sein) and entities (Heidegger: "The Being of entities "is" not itself an entity"; Being and Time, § 2). Sganarelle's reasoning gets "smashed" beneath the cunning gaze of Don Juan. Here we have the first "deconstruction" of Western metaphysics: the object of the attack is the supposed autonomy of the creative principle, which implies that the world itself, the creature, is not autonomous.

(as his relation to ~~social~~ religious transcendence.)

Don Juan's ~~The~~ relation to social transcendence is fundamentally ~~for Don Juan~~ the same. In Denis de Rougemont's marvelous phrase, Don Juan is the "demon of pure immanence." Social transcendence is also presented as plenitude and self-sufficiency. In a genuine society divided into distinct social orders and ranks, those who are placed at the top of the hierarchy have the role of signalling towards this transcendence which exists beyond and outside the social order. Such individuals do not hold their positions in society by virtue of their merits--which would be the bourgeois notion par excellence. Rather, they have received their privileges as a gift from an inaccessible entity who can neither be mastered nor put in question. Don Juan, however, wants to destroy these illusory autonomies which he desires too much, and thus he becomes a social demystifier--in precisely the same way, and for precisely the same reasons, that he feels compelled to destroy the couple's amorous autonomy. Here I must confess my strong desire to compare Don Juan to Pierre Bourdieu, France's principal exponent of social demystification. What is there, for Bourdieu, which simply cannot be tolerated in society, and more particularly, in concepts of social legitimacy? The charismatic ideology that grounds them and that has the role of putting them outside the scope of criticism. Here, for example, is what Bourdieu writes on the topic of the "cultural aristocracy" that is consecrated by the educational system:

> . . . les détenteurs de titres de noblesse culturelle--semblables en cela aux détenteurs de titres nobiliaires, dont l'être, défini par la fidélité à un sang, à un sol, à une race, à un passé, à une patrie, à une tradition, est irréductible à un faire, à un savoir-faire, à une fonction--n'ont qu'à être ce qu'ils sont parce que toutes leurs pratiques valent ce que vaut leur auteur, étant l'affirmation et la perpétuation de l'essence en vertu de laquelle elles sont accomplies (La Distinction, 22).
>
> (. . . those who bear the titles of cultural nobility are similar in one respect to those who bear real titles of nobility, those whose

> being is defined by its faithful relation to a blood, land, race, past, nation, or tradition. This being is irreducible to a doing, to a know-how, to a function--those who enjoy this status only have to be what they are because all of their practices carry the value which is that of their author, being the affirmation and perpetuation of the essence in virtue of which these actions are carried out).

Legitimacy is presented as something "self-evident," like tautologies in logic: they are their own principle of validity. Thus discourses of legitimation always take the circular form of self-reference. The discourse of demystification mimicks this same form, but only in order to demystify it more effectively:

> Dans une formation sociale déterminée, l'arbitraire culturel que les rapports de force entre les groupes ou classes constitutifs de cette formation sociale mettent en position dominante dans le système des arbitraires culturels est celui qui exprime le plus complètement quoique toujours de manière médiate, les intérêts objectifs (matériels et symboliques) des groupes ou classes dominants (La Reproduction, 23).
>
> (Within a determinate social formation, the power relations that exist between the constitutive groups or classes of that society will give one arbitrary cultural standard a dominant position within the general system of arbitrary cultural values. This dominant cultural standard is the one that expresses the most fully the objective (material and symbolic) interests of the dominant groups or classes--although this expression will always take a mediated form).

This gibberish, which is typical of Bourdieu's style, amounts to saying quite simply that domination is based on domination. One may note that the style and contents of this pasage are precisely those of Sganarelle's famous tirade when, in the second scene of Act Five, Don Juan has announced that he will henceforth adopt the marvelous profession of the hypocrite. Sganarelle loses his temper at this point and his language becomes quite mad, a kind of

verbal automatism, as is often said. Yet we must not lose sight of the content of what Sgnarelle says, for among the various platitudes that gush forth are some maxims of the following sort: "Les belles paroles se trouvent à la cour; à la cour sont les courtisans" ("Beautiful speeches are found at the court; at the court are the courtisans"), etc., but above all else: "Les richesses font les riches; les riches ne sont pas pauvres; les pauvres ont de la nécessité" ("Riches make you rich; the rich are not poor; the poor are in need"). Once more, it is Don Juan's "inferior double" who in a manner far superior to that of his master, does the work of demystifying illusory autonomies. He accomplishes this task in spite of himself--but not in spite of Molière.

It has often been said that Don Juan defies all social codes but one (cf. the final accounts made by Sganarelle: "Ciel offensé, lois violées, filles séduites, familles déshonorées, parents outragés, femmes mises à mal, maris poussés à bout" (The Heavens offended, laws broken, girls seduced, families dishonored, parents offended, women debauched, husbands driven to extremes"). The code that Don Juan does not defy is that of chivalry and honor: when Don Carlos is attacked by the bandits, he rushes to his aid. There is clearly no contradiction here, for as we have seen in regard to Corneille, no stable social order could be based solely on the code of honor, with its permanent putting in play of the kudos. Molière has Don Carlos express this quite admirably:

> Et c'est en quoi je trouve la condition d'un gentilhomme malheureuse, de ne pouvoir point s'assurer sur toute la prudence et toute l'honnêteté de sa conduite, d'être asservi par les lois de l'honneur au déréglement de la conduite d'autrui, et de voir sa vie, son repos et ses biens dépendre de la fantaisie du premier téméraire qui s'avisera de lui faire une de ces injures pour qui un honnête homme doit périr (OC, III, iii, 61).

> And what I find unfortunate about the gentleman's condition is that he can never rely uniquely upon all the prudence and honesty of his own conduct. The laws of honor enslave him to the disorderly behavior of others, and his life, his peace of mind, and his goods depend upon the whims of the first daredevil who decides to challenge him with one of those insults for which the man of honor must die.

From the perspective of the hardcore demystifier, the trials that the code of honor imposes on the nobleman, trials the outcome of which are always a matter of chance, help to reveal the ultimate truth of social reality: beneath the varnish of legitimacy there is raw violence. What is most specific about human conflicts is that their outcome is undecidable, by which I mean to say that this outcome cannot be deduced from any universal principle, such as Reason or Nature. The outcome is in general a difference, that which distinguishes between the winner and the loser, and this difference is always arbitrary. The consequence is that this difference can always be put back into question as soon as the conflict which it temporarily stabilized starts up once more. Eventually the valence and meaning of the difference may change. Thus the social order must decide the undecidable: it has to pass off the temporary stabilization of an arbitrary outcome as the true solution to a decidable problem. Such is the nature of the social order's primordial illusion.

The noble code of honor, but also the bourgeois code of meritocracy, partly unmask this illusion. They do so by making these deceptive stabilizations more precarious and by revealing the presence of the underlying conflict. Yet our hardcore demystifiers cannot stop at this point. The meritocracy also gives rise to a concept of legitimacy, that of individual value and excellence. Consequently, the problem of social difference is still

thought to be decidable, for we need only follow the maxim: may the best man win! The extraordinary modernity of Dom Juan resides in its extension of the process of demystification to include the bourgeois meritocracy. This is how I interpret the fourth scene of Act IV, in which Don Juan responds with unbelievable insolence to his father's lecture. The father's statements are rather surprising when uttered by a great lord, for they prefigure by a century the bourgeois criticisms to be uttered by Beaumarchais's Figaro:

> Ne rougissez-vous point de mériter si peu votre naissance? Etes-vous en droit, dites-moi, d'en tirer quelque vanité? Et qu'avez-vous fait dans le monde pour être gentilhomme? Croyez-vous qu'il suffise d'en porter le nom et les armes, et que ce nous soit une gloire d'être sortis d'un sang noble lorsque nous vivons en infâmes? Non, non, la naissance n'est rien où la vertu n'est pas (OC, 72-73).
>
> (Are you not ashamed to be so unworthy of your high birth? Do you think you have the right to be proud? What have you done in the world to be a gentleman? Do you believe that it is enough to carry the name and coat of arms, and that it is to our glory to have noble blood when we are living in infamy? No, no, high birth is nothing in the absence of virtue).

The lesson of Dom Juan, its most valuable lesson of all, is that the motor of modern demystification and nihilism is the logic of desire, a desire that is exacerbated by the weakening of social constraints, constraints that are in turn undermined by the unfolding of desire itself. This is, then, a self-maintaining process that can only conclude with the destruction of the traditional social order. Another form of social order will have to emerge, and that order is the market society. But that's another story.

The free unfolding of desire and the disappearance of all forms of social transcendence, which are mutually-reinforcing processes, both make reciprocal exchange impossible. Molière's Dom Juan demonstrates this fact. In order to explore the implications, we may usefully turn now to an analysis of Michel Serres's essay, which is entirely devoted to this aspect of the play.

The title of Serres' article is "The Advent (apparition) of Hermes." In his introduction to the English-language anthology of Serres's essays, Josué Harari has explored the connotation of the French critic's choice of his tutelary divinity: "Hermes is the Greek god of commerce and of theft, and thus of unfair exchange." Moreover, both Hermes and Don Juan are parasites. "What is a parasite? It is an operator that interrupts a system of exchange." In French, "parasite" means first of all an abusive guest, secondly a biological parasite; and thirdly, the noise or static which inteferes with a process of communication.

Continuing his analysis, Harari makes reference to the theory of symbolic exchange proposed by structuralism and post-structuralism: "Many recent discussions concerning social structures have tended to emphasize the problematic of exchange. Human interaction is seen as reciprocal, as a process of give and take in which one has to pay in kind for what one receives. The introduction of the notion of parasite puts into question the crypto-egalitarian ideology of exchange." Moreover, Harari adds: "The parasite violates the system of exchange by taking without returning; it introduces an element of irreversibility and thus marks the commencement of duration, history, and social organization . . . . What does a parasite do? He takes and gives nothing in exchange, or rather, gives words, noise, wind."

And Serres himself writes: "Exchange is not what is most important, original, or fundamental . . . the relation in the form of a simple, irreversible arrow, without anything in return, has taken its place." I can only agree with this much of Serres's analysis, for I too have insisted on the fact that exchange is only a derivate form, and that the primitive forms, those anterior to social transcendence, are necessarily asymmetrical. But let

us now see how Serres applies this general intuition in his analysis of Dom Juan. In a key passage, he says the following: "In fact the traditional prince is a three-headed devil, a character with three roles: as a ladies' man, he seduces; as a man of ideas, he discourses; as a man of money, he defers his debt. This third man serves to define the first two."

How can this statement be squared with Serres' oft-repeated claims to the effect that Don Juan is someone who breaks "the law of exchange?" It would seem that Serres must understand the "law of exchange" to be the rule of reciprocity that Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists hold to be the objective truth of relations of exchange. For if we held to the rule of exchange as perceived by Mauss (in a phenomenological mode, as Bourdieu would say), or again if we used the definition formulated by Bourdieu in his "theory of practice," we would have to recognize that the rule of exchange is "differance" (deferral and difference). The paying back of a debt is always deferred. This is certainly true in a monetary economy, for what would the world economy be if we did not permanently defer the paying back of the debts owed by the endebted countries? It is also true of an economy in which gifts are exchanged, for here the gift in return is always later than or different from the original gift.

Serres's discussion of the opening scene of the play, where Sganarelle praises the "law of tobacco," sets the stage for the rest of his analysis, and we see from the beginning that he will proceed exactly in the manner of Lévi-Strauss. Sganarelle talks only of gifts and of asymmetrical relations ("they do not even wait to be asked and anticipate the wish of other men"). But he uses the word "obligeante" (obliging): "Do you not notice, once men have taken some tobacco, how obliging they are with everyone?" Lévi-Strauss would

say that language betrays the primitives, and Serres concludes: "How does one become virtuous, a gentleman? By the offering which precedes the wish, by the gift which anticipates the request, by acceptance and reciprocity."

Yet is it really accurate to hold that the rule of reciprocity exhausts the reality of exchange? Not if we follow Mauss or Bourdieu--not the Bourdieu who, as a demystifier, is what Pascal would call a "semi-habile," but the Bourdieu of Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique (Sketch of a Theory of Practice). For then we would not conclude that the difference between Don Juan and the others resides in the play of "differance," for everyone engages in it. The point is that they do not all engage in this differance in the same way. Those engaged in traditional exchange do everything possible to signify to the others that their actions are not part of a system of reciprocity. Yet they arrange it so that they remain very close to reciprocity, thereby making possible exchange, and with it, society. Don Juan takes them quite literally, but he magnifies the differance to the point of making exchange and society impossible.

Let us take up some of Serres's examples. Don Juan has some dealings with his creditor, Monsieur Dimanche (Mr. Sunday), and like everyone else, he plays the game of making a disinterested present: "Etes-vous bien des mes amis?" ("Are you indeed one of my friends?"). As for me, he continues, "Je suis à vous de tout mon coeur . . . il n'y a rien que je ne fisse pour vous . . . et sans intérêt, je vous prie de le croire" (IV, [illegible]) ("I am faithful to you with all my heart . . . there is nothing I wouldn't do for you . . . and with no self-interest, I beg of you to believe it). Here Don Juan is making a gift, returning a gift already given. Now of course, if we calculate in terms of exchange, Monsieur Dimanche will have been paid back with words and

sentimentalities instead of hard cash. But Don Juan can always ask what the meaning of that sort of calculation is, since it does not correspond to the rules of the game.

In this example, Don Juan exaggerates the play of differance while still giving--although he gives far less than reciprocity would require. But he can also distort the motif of "this is not reciprocity" by taking instead of giving. Such is the case in II, v, when he orders Sgnarelle to put on his master's clothes and meet death [redacted] in his place. "C'est trop d'honneur que je vous fais, et bien heureux est le valet qui peut avoir la gloire de mourir pour son maître" (I am doing you a great honor, and happy is the servant who can have the glory of dying for his master), he cries, trying to make taking look like giving.

There is also the scene with the beggar (III, ii). Serres's analysis is overly elaborate because it remains caught up in structuralist notions. Don Juan gives alms, and according to Serres, this is the only "way to break the law and remain a gentleman, or, better yet, to become a nobleman. To give without receipt in kind is to give oneself honor and virtue, to display one's power: that is called charity." Serres forgets here that in fact traditional forms of exchange always present themselves in the guise of charity (as a disinterested gift). Moreover, upon rereading the scene, we notice that Don Juan does not really give the gold coin spontaneously since the beggar demands it of him in exchange for the information that he has furnished to Don Juan. This gives Don Juan the occasion to give the fellow a lesson concerning the rules of exchange. This lesson does not concern the structuralists' rule, but the rule of the disinterested gift. At the same time, Don Juan mocks the beggar for remaining poor in spite of his self-interested trade:

> Don Juan: Je te suis bien obligé, mon ami, et je te rends grâce de tout mon coeur.
>
> Le Pauvre: Si vous vouliez, Monsieur, me secourir de quelque aumône?
>
> Don Juan: Ah! ah! ton avis est intéressé, à ce que je vois. (OC, 59).
>
> (Don Juan: I am much obliged, my friend, and I bless you with all my heart.
>
> The Begger: If it please you, Sir, to help me with a little charity?
>
> Don Juan: Ah ... your advice is not unselfish, from what I see).

Given his premisses and his wish to show that Don Juan violates the law to the end, Serres must reason in the following manner. Don Juan, he says,

> asks for something in return: here is a louis, give me a word . . . The scene is the inverse of the one with the creditor--the nobleman gives and desires in return the same thing he gave Monsieur Dimanche: words for goods, love for money. He makes his position symmetrical because the law of charity is precisely a rupture of the law of exchange, the only gap permitted in the contract. Don Juan subsequently breaks the very law of rupture and once more finds himself an outlaw. He requests something in return in the only exchange which has no reciprocity; he demands the false reciprocity he customarily gives.

But this false reciprocity is that which is practiced by everyone--not just by Don Juan. Don Juan does not break any law of rupture here for he behaves as all the others do. What he does invert is the code (jeu) of what is hidden and what is visible. The others engage in reciprocity without saying so, and mask it behind differance. Don Juan makes reciprocity explicit ("Je m'en vais te donner un louis d'or tout à l'heure, pourvu que tu veuilles jurer" ("I am going to give you a gold louis in a little while, provided that

you are willing to swear"). Yet at the same time, Don Juan distorts the play of differance: what he demands in return seems to be nothing in relation to what he has given (he receives a word in return for a gold coin), but in fact, what he demands is enormous: the word he demands is an oath, and what is at stake in this word is the salvation and eternal damnation of a soul.

The game that Molière has Don Juan play is an astounding mixture of complex subtlety and outrageousness. The best illustration of this is given by the humorously "cornellian" debate between Don Carlos and his brother Don Alonse in III, iv. Don Carlos's life has just been saved by Don Juan, so he is torn between the two duties imposed upon him by the code of honor: on the one hand, he should give back to Don Juan what he has received from him--life; on the other, he should avenge his sister by killing this same Don Juan. We should note here as well that in traditional societies, the code of honor alone directly exhibits the form of reciprocity, doing so both in terms of the exchange of goods and the exchange of evils (the code of revenge). So when Don Juan has just saved Don Carlos, he comments: "Notre propre honneur est intéressé dans de pareilles aventures . . ." (III, iii) ("Our own honor is interested in such episodes . . ."). And when Don Carlos speaks to Don Juan in the fourth scene: "Vous voyez que j'ai soin de vous rendre le bien que j'ai reçu de vous, et vous devez par là juger du reste, croire que je m'acquitte avec même chaleur de ce que je dois, et que je ne serai pas moins exact à vous payer l'injure que le bienfait" ("You see that I take care to return to you the good which I received, and you should take that as reason for believing that I acquit myself of everything I owe with the same eagerness and that I will be no less precise in paying you back for your offense than for your favor").

That the code of honor is so visibly founded on reciprocity should not be surprising, for as we have stressed, it is by itself incompatible with the existence of a stable hierarchical social order.

Don Alonse has the answer to the dilemma confronted by Don Carlos. He assesses the weight of the two obligations and finds that the outcome is clear: "comme l'honneur est infiniment plus précieux que la vie, c'est ne devoir rien proprement que d'être redevable de la vie à qui nous a ôté l'honneur" (as honor is infinitely more valuable than life, to owe your life to someone who has stolen your honor is to owe nothing"). His conclusion? An immediate and savage revenge, the application of the pure reciprocity prescribed by the law of the talon.

Don Carlos, however, has a much more civilized solution: "Mon frère, montrons de la modération dans une action légitime, et ne vengeons point notre honneur avec cet emportement que vous témoignez" ("Dear brother, let us show some moderation in performing a legitimate action, and let us not avenge our honor with the anger that you are showing"). This solution is that of all the "systems of retribution" which bring about an institutionalization of revenge. It consists in applying the play of differance, usually exercized in the exchange of goods, to the exchange of blows returned for blows received. Thus the blow given in return for an offense is deferred and different, so that the reciprocity is dissimulated and muted.

Don Carlos responds to his brother: "Souffrez que je lui rende ici ce qu'il m'a prêté, que je m'acquitte sur-le-champ de la vie que je lui dois, par un délai de notre vengeance" ("Allow me to give him back what he loaned me; allow me to acquit myself right away of the life I owe him, by means of a delaying of our revenge"). And later, he adds: "Notre vengeance, pour être

différée, n'en sera pas moins éclatante" ("Our revenge will be no less brilliant for being deferred"). What does this mean? It means that the play of differance, which is the "normal" practice, the very norm itself, appears here as being based in fact on a brute reciprocity ("right away" engenders "delay")--the reciprocity inherent in the other obligation. One could hardly dream up a more subtle situation for expressing the demystifier's main point: behind the "this is not reciprocity" of exchange, there is hidden the reciprocity of selfish interests and violence.

Michel Serres is right, then, in presenting Don Juan as the "first hero of modernity" insofar as he is "a scientific observer of society." But we should add right away that the science that he develops is that of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism, the very same science that Bourdieu criticizes sharply in the name of his own "theory of practice." Don Juan makes explicit what the "primitives" must leave hidden unless their system of exchange, and with it their society, is to disintegrate: namely, reciprocity. Don Juan manages to do this by showing what would happen if one were to take the gestures of exchange at face value; he takes literally their manifest meaning, which is "this is not reciprocity." He reveals by the same stroke the double game of exchange, which is reciprocal and yet does everything not to appear as such. Such a science is fatal to the traditional social order.

Molière's stagecraft makes this clear. In V, i, Don Juan plays the hypocrite, he acts the part, but he is not really a hypocrite. In its etymology, hypocrite means "actor," a person who speaks behind a mask. Thus Don Juan plays at someone playing, he apes the ape, imitates the imitator.

And he does this with the aim of revealing that the person who imitates at the first level is an impostor. The person who imitates at the second level is not an impostor, for he reveals the imposture of the first level. There is, then, a distance between the first and second level imitations, and this distance is what allows the objective, "structuralist" truth of society to appear.

Don Juan plays at this particular game throughout the whole play, and thus well before the moment in the fifth act when, having announced his recent conversion to his father, he reveals to Sgnarelle that he has taken on the profession of hypocrite. In I, iii, he toys with his wife, Done Elvire: You are playing at being someone whose virtue has been violated, but who really broke their vows first? Thus Don Juan uses his own transgression to bring to light that of his wife. Yet at the same time we see that the distance between the hypocrite and the person who imitates the hypocrite is not so great, and in fact, it may verge on zero . . .

Molière has Sgnarelle, Don Juan's "inferior double," play the same kind of game. When in III, i, he puts on the clothes of a doctor, "the mystification cannot be detected: doctors and impostors are equivalent and thus interchangeable. They share the same ignorance, the same incompetence; they masquerade with the same mask and act out the same comedy."[6] Like the doctors, Sganarelle wears a mask, and it is by imitating the doctors that he is able to reveal their imposture. Sganarelle, then, is a very effective demystifier, but he does not know anything! The proof is that he maintains

[6] Janine Krauss, Le Dom Juan de Molière: une libération (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1978), 38.

his great admiration for the doctors right until the end. But how do we know? We know because we know that this character who plays at being a doctor, who in turn plays at being knowledgeable, is himself played by an actor. Moreover, this actor happens to be the author of the play, and we know with how much resentment he attacks the doctors. We are able to make this observation because we are situated at what the logician would call an "inviolate meta-level" (Hofstadter) that stands outside the mimetic vortices depicted by the play. This is what allows the distance between the first and second level imitators to be maintained. Yet let us reflect upon this for a moment. It turns out that the situation is the same for Don Juan, even if like his author, he pretends to know the difference between the demystifier and the impostor. Only because we know that Molière sought revenge against those who had Tartuffe banned are we able to perceive this difference. Since we know that this difference is the condition of possibility of objective science, we obtain the interesting result which is that this objective science is the daughter of vengeance and resentment.

The demystifier, who is the modern hero, often takes on the role of the economic theoretician. He wants to convince us that paper money is the signifier par excellence--pure, "autonomous," and having no "referent," no "transcendental signified." It is only the sign of a sign, the copy of a copy. Following the model of Strouvilhou in Les Faux Monnayeurs, he is ready to inundate the market with counterfeit currency in order to convince us that the "true" bills are just as fake as the false ones. As Michel Serres notes, "In spots populated by jokers, there can only be counterfeiters" (The Parasite, 163). Yet we would still have to take the demystifier seriously enough to position him at an "involate meta-level" so that the fakery at the second

level may appear to unveil the objective truth of the situation. Yet as we will have the occasion to demonstrate, no such meta-level exists, and the game of imitation extends to infinity, looping back upon itself. For this reason, an object like paper money, (inconvertible and lacking all intrinsic value, can incarnate value in a stable manner, remaining indifferent to the attacks mounted by the demystifiers. { As Serres notes: "Dans les lieux peuplés de jokers, il ne peut y avoir de faux-monnayeurs" (In a place peopled with jokers, there can be no counterfeiters" (Le Parasite, 217). }