
IT CAME TO HER unexpectedly—not unwelcome but still unsought. *I had moved to Texas in December of 1980, and I stayed at a farm . . . and it just came over me as I was here in all this beautiful, peaceful country that I owed God a lot, and I said, “O.K., God, take the rest of my life.”*¹ William James would perhaps have found in such an inkling of transcendence one of those “original experiences” of which he thought all religions to be born.² Yet its resonant gratitude, its sigh of relief, had a past—and would have a future.

Amo Paul Bishop Roden, who refuses the anonymity usually accorded ethnographic subjects, was born on 20 January 1943 in Fort Marsh, Florida.³ She shares her given name (the Latin “I love”) with her mother and her daughter. Her middle name honors her maternal grandfather.⁴ She has an elder brother and is the oldest of three sisters.⁵ She spent her childhood winters in Florida, where her mother’s parents lived and where her father found seasonal work in the shipyards.⁶ When not in Florida, her family and she resided in Maine. Ms. Roden notes nothing remarkable in such transhumance; she neither speaks nor writes of any sense of uprootedness, any sense of drift. She does, however, refer to her family as *extremely dysfunctional*. She mentions sexual tensions and sexual errancy.⁷ She mentions sibling rivalries. Hence, among other things, her lackluster academic record: *I was an underachiever. My brother was a year older, and there was a rivalry between us, and I dealt with it just by becoming an underachiever. That’s as simply as I can explain it.*⁸ She nevertheless reports that she was a National Merit Scholarship semi-finalist and that she received a partial scholarship from the University of Maine, from which she earned a degree in mathematics, *with a minor in psychology.*⁹

A CONVERSION

Ms. Roden's maternal great-grandfather was a minister. Her parents followed another path. *My father's basically an atheist, and my mother is a Christian, but she's kind of what you call a lukewarm Christian.* Her siblings *are very psychically gifted*, but their gifts *not aimed at religion*.¹⁰ Nor, as a child, were her own. She attended a Protestant church of short-term ministries and eclectic doctrines. Her attendance was regular but more a matter of habit than passion, querulousness, or fascination.¹¹

In college, the focus of her conscience, and of her anxieties, was political. *I have been told by an FBI source that a file labeling me subversive exists. And the March on Washington to protest the war in Vietnam is my best guess as to how they first got my name. I booked a seat from Boston to Washington in my own name.*¹² *At the end of the sixties, I was so distressed . . . that I left the country and went to Canada. When I was in the country before I went to Canada, I was a very normal kind of person. I just had regular jobs, and I went to work, and I watched t.v. All the things that normal people do, you know.*¹³ While in Canada, Ms. Roden met the man who would become her first husband, and with whom she would have her first child, a son. Several years later, their marriage would end in divorce. *And I spent ten years in Canada being a normal person, and very out of touch with the United States, because it got so much worse between the late sixties and when I returned in '80.*¹⁴ Her son accompanied her on her move south.

As it turned out, the relief that initially came to her was short-lived. A few short months later: *I felt a call from God to go to a church, and I went to a Pentecostal church out on Robinson Road—I'm not sure I can remember the name of it; I think it's called the Calvary Assembly of God—and I met a woman there, . . . and basically, I was so ignorant. . . . It was in '81, I guess. I would have been a little short of forty, and she taught the Bible some, and she took my hand that first day and talked me into going right down and being saved, taking communion there.* Two years beyond, in the summer of 1983, *I began to have visions.*¹⁵ By autumn, she had decided to distribute an urgent letter to her family, and to several individuals whom she thought to be of local prominence:

Dear Sir: My name is Amo B. I am a systems analyst by profession. Although both my mother's parents' families have a history of precognition or clairvoyance, incidents of this kind have been infrequent in my life. Nonetheless, when I dreamed of a nuclear war in November,¹⁶ I was concerned enough to watch the news for warning signs. Some items did seem particularly relevant, leading me to do a feasibility study of a surprise nuclear attack this fall using a Russian point of view.

A CONVERSION

I found the bottom line alarming, so I prepared the attached for your review. Would you please study it carefully.

Although I can't predict what the Russians will do, I felt the need to warn people in Waco to prepare. You are one of a few people I felt could help to quietly spread the word as your acquaintance should touch a broad segment of the community.

If you are willing to help would you please make copies of the enclosed study and distribute it to your friends, family, neighbors, and workmates. If you feel you can't be involved in this effort, would you please put this letter, envelope and all, in tomorrow's mail so that I may attempt to replace you.

I will be sending some comments on how to survive radiation exposure shortly (when I finish them). If you have any questions you may reach me at . . .

Best regards . . .

P.S. In an effort not to worsen a grave situation would you please keep this study away from the press.

The argument Ms. Roden offered ran as follows:

- 1. The United States under Ronald Reagan has a hostile and aggressive attitude toward Russia; this will likely continue another five years with his re-election.*
- 2. Arms-reduction talks have produced no result beyond political posturing; indeed, while Reagan announces new proposals, the United States Secretary of Defense discusses arms sales to China.*
- 3. The United States is reinitiating the arms race with an economic recovery and a huge budget. Historically, the United States has dominated such competition.*
- 4. The recent grain deal allows Russian stores of grain to be maximized before [the] onset of hostilities.*
- 5. The country which initiates the war, particularly if by surprise, has numerous advantages: (a) [a] few missiles targeted at major missile emplacements could, with their multiple warheads, substantially reduce counter-attack; (b) key people and technology can be safeguarded; (c) the choice of time of attack during daylight hours in Russia would reduce casualties.*
- 6. The following military considerations apply: (a) Pershing missile deployment will substantially increase Russian casualties; (b) the United States' lead in laser targeting was confirmed with successful testing of bomber defense lasers (five anti-aircraft missiles were destroyed from the B59 they were chasing in sixty seconds). Obviously the United States will equip its long-range bombers with this technology immediately; (c) with improved laser targeting (a marriage of two*

A CONVERSION

*fields the United States appears to dominate, radar and computerization), a defense against nuclear weapons will shortly be reality. With its deployment, the United States could fight nuclear war with relative impunity.*¹⁷

She received no reply, no return—or rather, the return made was very different from what she had expected it to be. *I was so naive back then.*¹⁸

Social and cultural historians have ready evidence that the prospect of nuclear holocaust has exercised a diverse array of religious imaginations in the United States for several decades. In a recent survey, Paul Boyer traces a stream of commentary and concern about “the bomb” and what it might portend flowing with equal vigor through popular and more esoteric theologies from the destruction of Hiroshima to very near the present (1992: 115–51). Among the majority of the established or “mainstream” denominations, orthodoxy has licensed drawing no more than moral lessons from the ghastly instrument that had somehow found its way into human hands.¹⁹ Among the New Denominations, however, eschatological speculation acquired increasing urgency, and the “final days” increasing imminence, as the race between the United States and the Soviet Union quickened in pace. In the 1970s, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Billy Graham were merely the best known of a new wave of evangelists exhorting their audiences to expect a thermo-nuclear gigantomachia (Boyer 1992: 137–39). Hal Lindsey’s *Late, Great Planet Earth* proffered a similar “Armageddon theology” (cf. Halsell 1986; Kierulff 1991). Published in 1970, it had sold nine million copies by 1978 and ranks as the premier nonfiction best-seller of the decade. It had sold twenty-eight million by 1990, a year before its release in a revised edition.²⁰ All the while, the congregations of the New Denominations continued—and still continue—to grow at the mainstream’s expense.²¹

Of course, none of this implies that the worries of our recently atomic era have given rise to Ms. Roden’s religiosity any more than they have given rise to that of even the most anxious of her contemporaries. Much less does it imply that religious sentiment or religious commitment has its general source in fear, whether of the known or of the unknown. The emotional tenor of what—borrowing a phrase from Marshall Sahlins (1985: 150–51)—could be called the “symbolic interest” of the bomb is in any event complex. Bleak distress is frequently of a piece with relieved confidence. So, for example, influential evangelist M. R. DeHaan could assure the auditors of his “Radio Bible Class” and the readers of his several exegetical treatises that it was precisely the unprecedented horrors of military technologies that confirmed the promise of the im-

A CONVERSION

minent salvation of the faithful.²² So, too, Lindsey, whose contemplation of the conflicts and cataclysms of the future is, as Michael Barkun has noted, unflaggingly exuberant (Barkun 1985: 24; cited in Boyer 1992: 128). Like DeHaan, indeed, Lindsey expresses every confidence that, for the faithful, the story he tells has a “happy ending.”

The prevailing state of mind might simply seem incongruous—and perhaps would be, if it rested merely in the ironical observation that the very invention that had saved the “free world” has also unleashed the specter of planetary ruin. Yet, for Lindsey as for his eschatological company, the bomb is not genuinely an irony. It commands awe; it provokes terror, humility, and resignation. It attracts the most grand and grotesque of descriptive language. It is a figure of power and often resonates with all the hyperbolic excess proper to the sublime—or, more often, the countersublime. An allegorist could easily enough fit it out as a demon. For most latter-day eschatologists, however, the bomb remains a machine. Its emplotment renders it sublime or countersublime only as a metonymic stand-in, as a sickle might stand in for the reaper who wields it. The reaper—the real god, or demon—lurks elsewhere.²³

Scholars of Christianity generally classify the type of emplotment at issue as “premillennialist.” It allows for further subdivision, and for an indefinite number of variations, but its poetic architecture remains relatively constant.²⁴ The prophets of both the Old and the New Testaments refer occasionally to the “last days” (for example, Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1) or the “time of the end” (Dan. 11:40) of the world, a historical culmination that Timothy pronounces “perilous” (2 Tim. 3:1) and Daniel “a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that same time” (Dan. 12:1). The author of the final book of the New Testament, Revelation, prophesies its tumultuous course in considerable if often cryptic detail. He tells of the ascent of a succession of “beasts.” The eighth in their line (Rev. 17:11) has a powerful dragon at his service, the distinguishing mark of “six hundred threescore and six” (Rev. 14:9–10), and no earthly rival. Those who worship him prosper. The faithful remnant of God—some “hundred forty and four thousand”—suffer torment and retreat to Mount Zion to receive the Lamb, who appears at last in their midst (Rev. 14:1). The beast and his forces inscribe a line of ultimate battle at “a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon” (Rev. 16:16). In the engagement, the faithful suffer, but the army of God prevails. Among its members is “an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand.” He captures the dragon, “which is the Devil, and Satan,” and binds him “a thousand years,” and locks him within the bottomless pit, “that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled” (Rev. 20:1–3).

A CONVERSION

This thousand years is the “millennium” on which all Christian millennialisms dwell. In his youth, Saint Augustine seems to have been something of a millennialist himself. His later thought, especially the thought of *The City of God*, is resolutely antimillennialist (Desroche 1969: 56; cf. Funkenstein 1986: 258–59). He had come to understand Revelation’s imagery—not least, its temporal imagery—to be largely allegorical and its real story the tale of the success the church would ultimately enjoy in bringing all the world’s peoples into its fold (1952 [413–426]: book 20, chaps. 7–17). His opinion has remained canonical for Catholicism and finds no challenge from Eastern Orthodoxy. Among Protestants, postmillennialists can agree with Saint Augustine that the church must be the agent of the cleansing and conversion of the world, but they locate themselves near the close of the process and expect the literal return of the Christ in its immediate aftermath. Premillennialists deem the agent of cleansing and conversion to be none other than the Christ and await his (or her) return all the more anxiously the more they are convinced that the extraordinary troubles of the last days of the world are, indeed, their own. At this juncture, the bomb joins the roster of an already dense biblical catalog of troubles, which includes “the dragon” but also earthquakes, thunder and lightning, plagues, predatory animals, the blood of the dead, lakes of fire fuming with brimstone, and Peter’s apocalypse of the “day of the Lord” as a day “in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10).

Thus emplotted, such monstrosities and misfortunes are doubly evocative. If tropes of power, they are more precisely tropes of a power that looms as a transcendent threat, an implacable and encroaching doom. In sights and sounds and odors and unbearable physical pain, they sensuously encode the practical sense of danger, of the body in peril. Nor is that body merely material, nor merely individual. It is also social, a body of persons interacting and communicating with one another. It is also political, the body of subjects and those who rule over them. In all its dimensions, it is a body ill at ease, a body of suspect integrity. Yet what it experiences, what it anticipates, is not simply the visitation of evil, not even as a test. In the Bible itself as in so many of its premillennialist elaborations and extrapolations, the catalog of troubles is replete with devices that might equally serve Satan or God. Like such Old Testament prophets as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the author of Revelation in fact has far less to disclose of the devices of Satan’s corruption than of the devices of God’s wrath and retribution. Nor is Satan the deity’s only victim. So, too, is the body of those whom he has corrupted—the body of idolaters, of the lapsed and the errant, of all those who are mired in sin.

A CONVERSION

I remember a dream that must have come to me in 1962 or 1963, when I was six or seven. In it, I was watching a tiny dot in the distant sky. As it neared, I was able to see that it was an airplane flying at a spectacular speed. It released something from its belly—another dot, which rapidly grew larger in its fall and soon took on the dimensions of a zeppelin, as imposing as the Hindenberg. It, too, opened its belly, the contents of which, a veritable peasant arsenal of pitchforks and spears and boiling oil, rained down from the sky in an endless, lethal train. I awoke terrified. My older brother was soon blamed for having poisoned my imagination with gruesome explications of the news of the day. I took comfort in the accusation, however unjust, and soon returned to sleep. The nightmare passed, or gave way to others. Yet, I do, after all, still remember it; and at the droning sound, or sight, of a zeppelin, still feel the slight but distinct nausea of dread.

As we know, there is always more to a dream than the dream itself. So perhaps the wars, hot and cold, of my childhood and adolescence left their imprint more indelibly than I can now discern. I vaguely recall the controversies over Cuba. I remember John Kennedy's funeral procession, televised over and over again like the refrain of a dirge; Walter Cronkite's sober, nightly recitation of body counts during the Vietnam War; and the announcement over the intercoms of my elementary school of the assassination of Robert Kennedy (but not of Martin Luther King). What I remember most vividly is a tense day I spent during my senior year of college in the stuffy rooms of an inescapable skyscraper with more than a dozen fellow candidates anticipating advancement to the national finals of a competition for a prestigious graduate scholarship. The initial round of interviews had generated no obvious winners. During the second round, the panel in charge of the interviews told me that recipients of the scholarship were expected to have a special role in "fighting the good fight." They asked me what I thought might especially qualify me for such a battle. I have no retrospective idea of what I actually said. I recall only my scornful thought that if the panel hoped for an earnestly missionary response, I would be happy to be among the losers—which, none too happily, I was.

In fact, it was only in retrospect that Ms. Roden came to identify her dream as a "call to prophecy." *God had started giving me visions, heart-wrenching knowledge of the time of trouble . . . [but] I was ignorant of the Bible; so was my family. In the end-time God will pour his Spirit on many people. I know that now, but I didn't then.*²⁵ Her letter went unanswered. It was not, however, entirely ignored. *I suspect that I was reported to the government by my landlord, but that's just a hunch. The day after I gave him a copy, I was under surveillance. My food was*

A CONVERSION

poisoned, my house was sprayed with chemicals, people who hid their faces from me started fishing in my landlord's pond. Alarmed, I told my family. . . . Between the visions, and the concern that someone was trying to kill me and my reputation for honesty, I was easy prey.

The deputy sheriff arrived within minutes after my sister . . . and took me to the mental health ward of Providence Hospital. . . . I spent forty-five minutes denying what I could and explaining the rest. The doctor . . . advised further treatment, and I signed an agreement to attend twelve therapy sessions. I was strong-armed by two people to consent to court order, but I wasn't about to sign. . . . I did not attend the therapy sessions I signed up for. . . . That left me without a mental health record.²⁶ The government of this country feels that it is necessary for anyone remotely suspected of being subversive to have a mental health record. . . .

The persecution started again in June 1984. This time I didn't tell anyone. Again my food was poisoned and my house sprayed, and this time intimidation was added. One of my carving knives was left in the dishwasher with its blade broken in half. Finally, I moved down to my farm, where I was to build a house. It was fine summer weather, but there was little shelter, and the persecutors had a great day.²⁷

Her son remained with her. Something hot to the touch was sprayed on our clothes and bedding. Airplanes flew over, and when we hid under a wet sheet under the bridge from the hot stuff, the water got hot. [My son] saw a man through the sheet throwing something into the water. Mostly, I was busy scooping water from the bottom of the pond up around my son. He was getting burned by the water, and it scared him, so I kept bringing up cold water from the bottom. I saw my dog, Buddy, take a drink from the pond, and he lay down at once. I started yelling, "They murdered my dog! They murdered my dog!" He didn't move for twenty minutes; then he got up and walked away.²⁸ After awhile the airplane went away, and the water cooled down, and I got out and fed [my son] and put him to bed. When I lay down, the sheet under me made my back burn, and I realized that they might come after me to kill me and kill [my son], too. I wasn't thinking too clearly, but I felt that keeping him with me was endangering him, and I was afraid that the hot stuff was radiation. I got him up, sent him into the pond to wash, and went in myself. I didn't dare put his clothes back on; I didn't know what was on them. I sent him naked to a neighbor's house. I didn't bother with my clothes, either. I sat down on the bridge and waited for the government to finish its job.²⁹

Two deputies arrived; I ducked down when they arrived, then stood up as they approached with flashlights. I asked one for a blanket, and he gave me one. I took them to the rented house and tried to get them

A CONVERSION

to take samples of the food, but they weren't interested. The deputies took me to a hospital, and I was examined, and two people harassed me to sign forms. When I arrived at DePaul Mental Hospital, I snapped, and stated my opinion of the Texas mental health industry in a very loud voice. I was prepared to die rather than spend more time with these fools. One hypodermic wasn't enough to shut me up once I started; I'd been through too much. It took two. . . . After six days, they cut me loose. The court record shows that no mental health services were ordered.³⁰ They lied to me, as the social worker's statement confirms. They told me I had to attend therapy sessions until the doctor released me.

When I was released from the hospital, my sister . . . took me to my lawyer's office.³¹ [The lawyer] gave me a document to sign, stating that if I signed this, [my son] would go directly into his father's custody; otherwise he would have to spend two months in a foster home. I signed it without reading it. I feared to keep [my son]. I wasn't admitting that people were trying to kill me, but I wasn't going to endanger him anymore. The thought of him in a foster home appalled me. [The lawyer] was my legal representative. Would she set me up and lie to me? Turns out she would. The inner pages of this agreement contained an admission of child abuse and neglect. However, not only does the court no longer have a copy, [the lawyer] claims she doesn't, either. She would be without custody of her son for two years. He came back loving me, but thinking I was insane.

And was she? Is she? One can only guess at what those who received her letter must have thought: that she was “a crackpot,” perhaps; or, more gently, that she was “letting her imagination run away with her.” But what she wrote, what she actually put down in words, was hardly unreasonable. On the contrary: it was very much in accord with all those more or less official pronouncements that had driven so many concerned citizens in the 1950s and 1960s to stockpile necessities, to construct or to finance the construction of underground shelters, and to identify and label local structures sturdy and impervious enough to offer them safe refuge—or so, mistakenly, they believed—if and when the bomb finally fell. By the early 1980s, shelters had largely gone out of fashion, though less because the fear of nuclear assault had abated than because the very idea of finding safe refuge in the face of nuclear assault had been ever more forcibly unmasked as a fantasy. Ms. Roden was, moreover, evidently as well versed as any other ordinary citizen in current strategic affairs. She was not setting out to repeat the obvious. She was instead setting out to subvert or, in any event, to contravert it. The official rationale for the ongoing investment in nuclear development at the time was precisely contrary to what her own analysis had compelled

A CONVERSION

her to conclude. She saw what the Reagan administration put forward as the optimal means of containing Soviet “aggression” as the optimal means of stimulating it. One can imagine that some of her readers would have disagreed. Even those who found her argument plausible might nevertheless have found the depth of her implicit distrust of the political order somewhat odd. They might have found her implicit conviction that she had somehow won the privilege—and thanks to a dream, of all things—of divulging a horrible and dangerous secret to be somewhat odd as well. They would no doubt find her reports of persecution odder still.

Ms. Roden, who rarely refrains from giving voice to what remains on the tips of more polite tongues, has this to say about her condition: *I believe that my experience with the government is by no means unique; as a way to deal with people thought to be politically destabilizing it is so successful that it has probably been widely used. That the Encyclopedia Americana records American paranoids to be generally better integrated than other psychotics is likely a symptom of our police state.*³² The anthropologist does not dispute her sincerity but seeks a broader structural context, and finds an approach to it in what would seem to be a most unexpected source. Emile Durkheim plainly did not have the paranoiac in mind when he formulated his definition of the “social fact.” Seeking a positive, an empirical ground for a social science, he appealed to what he evidently presumed to be a virtually universal human experience: that of a “force” imposing itself “coercively” and as “constraint” from without (Durkheim 1938 [1895]: 1–4). He would much later argue that the sense of the sacred had its original and enduring wellspring from the same experience (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 195–216). Pierre Bourdieu, among others, has suggested that the social, thus delimited, is virtually “empty” (Bourdieu 1977: 23). At a first reading, Durkheim indeed seems to conflate a variety of modalities of coercion that are experientially distinct: that of the conclusion validly derived from its premises with that of moral duty; that of moral duty with that of such practically inescapable conventions as driving on one or the other side of the road; that of convention with that of punishment; that of punishment willingly suffered from that of punishment unwillingly suffered; and so on. But, some of these confluences are surely intentional.³³ Whether or not intentional, they bring to light a number of structural relationships that intuition may hesitate to entertain.

With the addition of only a single variable, Durkheim’s experiential model of the social fact yields an experiential model of paranoia. Intuition may incline toward positing that what the sense or sensation of being subject to an external coercive force lacks in order to be paranoid is a “reality check.” But not only is such an addition extra-experiential,

A CONVERSION

it is also insufficient, even for as secure a sociological realist as Durkheim, who would have to admit with the rest of us that even paranoiacs occasionally have real enemies. What the experience of the social lacks in order to pass as paranoid is simply that additional sense, or sensation, of “election”—positive or negative from one “case” to the next. If positive, the paranoid sense of election often finds its symbolism in the imagery of the messenger or messiah, in the symbolism of a sometimes burdened but distinctive blessedness that psychomedical discourse casts as the “delusion of grandeur.” If negative, the paranoid sense of election often seeks out those symbologies of the scapegoat and sacrificial victim that psychomedical discourse takes as the stuff of a “persecution complex.” Nor are the values mutually exclusive: the sense of election can be negative and positive at once.

The phenomenological proximity of social and paranoid experience does not merely suggest that paranoia is itself a social, not a psychological, phenomenon. It further suggests that each of the two modalities of experience implicates the other, as presence implicates absence or, better, as one pole of a continuous scale implicates the opposite pole of the same scale. The difference between the two seems, in other words, to be merely a matter of degree, not genuinely one of kind. Durkheim hints at their fundamental unity in noting that, at its most social, social experience goes unnoticed. Or at least it passes for something else: having been internalized, having become an aspect of the habitus, external coercion has the feel of personal inclination (Durkheim 1938 [1895]: 2). At such an extreme lie those practitioners of Bourdieusian theory for whom “the conditions of the production of the habitus and the conditions of its functioning are identical or homothetic” (Bourdieu 1990: 63) and who thus reproduce the schemas of perception and patterns of action that have made them who and what they are without knowing or needing to know what they are doing. The palpable externality and coerciveness of the social both increase, however, with even the slightest failure of the reproductive circuit, with even the slightest lessening of structural investment. The tension between duty and desire (between what one is obliged to do and what one wants to do) occupies the structural interstices, the little rifts that thus appear in the practical web, as do its closest sentimental companions—the half-surprised, half-scornful tingle that comes when *fusis* (nature) is unveiled as mere *nomos* (convention); the egoistic irritation that comes with unnecessary burdens, the slightly aggressive resentment that comes with distrust, the hollow cheer that comes with skepticism.

Such skepticism, in turn, finds its readiest and perhaps most pure methodological instrument in what might be called a *sémiotique du soupçon*, a semiotics of (the) suspicion, of the inkling, clue, or trace.

A CONVERSION

The author of the Book of Revelation posits a limit, at once logical and historical, at which that semiotics would no longer have any methodological rationale whatever: “the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, [and] the mystery of God should be finished” (10:7). Beyond its threshold, all signifiers would be fully adequate to their referents; a condition of absolute semiotic clarity and absolute semiotic transparency would hold sway. The evidential relationship would be delivered of all its semantic poverty and pragmatic insouciance. “Theory” would be nothing more than idle speculation. Or it would revert to its Aristotelian—which, in modern parlance, would have to be deemed either its “pre-theoretical” or its “post-theoretical”—modality.³⁴ No longer sustained by phenomenal or factual indeterminacy, theory could be nothing more (nor anything less) than the synchronous contemplation of the real. It would demand no specialization, no research, no expertise. Like critique in Marx’s communist society, it would be radically popular. A semiotics of suspicion is a semiotics for a far less perfect world, less crystalline and less crisply visible, like so many reflections in a dark mirror. In such a world—in our world—signifiers are likely to distinguish their referents crudely at best, or even to have no referents. Both semantic and pragmatic obscurity are constant and often incorrigible. Intentions are often articulated vaguely even when they are not actively being disguised.³⁵

A semiotics of suspicion is a semiotics, in short, for a world that cries out—just so long as it cries out—for interpretation. It is thus peculiarly well suited to the still imperfectly revealed world recounted in the Bible, and especially to the biblical world of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, in which every pivotal historical moment is the “figure,” the always suggestive but always partial figuration of yet another later historical moment, and in which history itself, “with all its concrete force,” thus “remains forever a figure, cloaked” and so forever inviting and forever in need of the final disclosure, the final demystification, of which the author of the Book of Revelation dreams (Auerbach 1953: 58; cf. Lambropoulos 1993: 11). Auerbach’s habit of identifying the biblical view of the historical process with the Judeo-Christian view should, however, be resisted (1953: 73; cf. Lambropoulos 1993: 14). It is at the very least ethnologically uninformed, all the inspiration that the Bible has provided to millennialists and theorists of conspiracy alike—especially during the past two centuries—notwithstanding.³⁶ As Vassilis Lambropoulos has pointed out, it also constitutes the first principle of an anti-Hellenic celebration of Judeo-Christian tolerance and Judeo-Christian relativism against an allegedly Homeric and allegedly pagan attraction to “everything sceptic, static, autocratic, absolutist” (1993: 14). Lambropoulos might have suggested more forcefully that it further constitutes an equally

A CONVERSION

prejudiced refusal to acknowledge the myriad semiotic obfuscations on which the central events of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (among many other texts in the Greek corpus) turn. Or perhaps one might better and more accurately write less of prejudice than of self-deception. Auerbach, a fierce critic of Nazi tyranny, was compelled to cast himself and his readerly enterprise as direct heir to a Judeo-Christian legacy of epistemological fallibilism, epistemological openness. Was he thus compelled to suppress all that his enterprise owed to the precedent of the godly point of view adopted and consecrated by so oracular and so wry a poet-interpreter as Homer—whoever he, or they, might have been—himself?

Some two centuries ago, Friedrich Schiller declared ancient Greek poetry, and with it the ancient Greek sensibility, “naive”—semiotically untroubled, perhaps even semiotically self-satisfied (1965 [1794–95]). Long before Auerbach, Schiller may thus have been the first modern Occidental thinker to turn away from what might well have been an uneasy, somewhat unflattering, and somewhat too revealing encounter with the ancient hypostasis of the interpretive craft. Aristotle’s epistemological self-confidence aside, the Greeks certainly knew of both the necessity and dangers of interpretation. Their theology suggests indeed that they knew of both all too well. Hermes was among the first order of their gods, though not the equal of Zeus—law-giver and the hand of justice. Hermes’ special domain was that of the *metafora*, the “transference” or “haulage” but also “change,” as of one phase to another, also “metaphor.” Divine messenger, Hermes also presided conjointly over boundaries, crossings, and journeys. He was the master of commerce; the master, too, of *logos*—of communication, of speech and writing and eloquence. And who, after all, but the god whose distinctive virtues were those of making and securing connections should also be able to boast of that complementary virtue, that accessory power or talent called *deinōtēs*, “cunning” or “guile,” but also “marvelousness,” “awesomeness”?

One must accordingly be struck by the symbolic overdetermination of that gesture through which a group of conspirators (whose identity was never firmly established) undertook one March night in 415 B.C.E. to cast a pall over the success of what the good citizens of the Athenian assembly had agreed to be a most timely invasion of Sicily. Throughout the Athenian city-state, Hermes stood in small stone effigies, “Herms,” registering and attesting to the limits of lots and parcels of private property. He bore most often only what might be thought of as his barest essentials: the formal, smiling face of the benign host or patron; and an erect penis, the ubiquitous ancient icon at once of the power of continuity and the power of transgression. The conspirators, who seem to have

A CONVERSION

gone undetected in spite of the noise their chisels must have made, mutilated what Thucydides carefully specifies to be “the faces” of the Herms.³⁷ Other commentators have insisted that the mutilations were more thorough.³⁸ Partial or more complete, the widespread desecration amounted to a slap in the face of a democratically adjudicated policy, and so in the face of the Athenian democracy itself. But the scandal was not merely political. It was also moral and religious, a matter of what ancient wisdom continued to regard as a cardinal sin. The conspirators had committed *hubris*, the “outrage,” the “overweening arrogance” of having done insult to a presence to whom they should only have done honor. Even worse, in having sought to spoil through their own devices the divine auspices under which the Sicilian expedition could have been expected to sail, in having thus taken the matter of the blessedness or cursedness of the expedition into their own hands, they had not merely dishonored Hermes. They had—the very quintessence of hubris—presumed to dethrone him, to put themselves in his place.

Whoever they were, the conspirators managed to inaugurate an enduring tradition. Their epigones appear again in the Renaissance. Some are Neoplatonist mystics; others are alchemists. They are united in their dedication to the Egyptian god Thoth, whom they presume to be a more original, more pure, and more mighty incarnation of the Greek Hermes and whom they accordingly call Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes “Thrice-Great.” Pious, perhaps, but there is little question that these “Hermeticists,” as they called themselves, were hardly content merely to honor the divinity whose cunning gave him special entry into the realm of the secret, the mysterious, and the occult. There is little question that they also sought to acquire his secrets from him. And if not heirs to theirs, then to whose example are “we”—secular and modern semioticians of suspicion—proper heirs? Do we not—almost conspiratorially—strive to dissemble, by appeal to such secular pieties as those of “scientific rigor” and “methodological restraint,” the actual ambitions that come almost to light especially when we refer to ourselves by that most precious of our occupational titles: “hermeneut”?

Or should I really speak, not for whom I presume the majority of my readers to be, but instead only for myself? So be it, then. I certainly found Ms. Roden’s letter odd. I am inclined to believe that there is now an FBI file dedicated to her but doubt that it came into existence as early on as she claimed that it did. I found her tales of persecution quite incredible—and a counterinterpretation ready enough at hand to be virtually spontaneous. Yet, what could I have brought forward to justify my suspicious opinions? What evidence could I claim to possess that would have proven her wrong? What did I know that she did not? I am

A CONVERSION

not privy to the archives of the FBI. I was not witness to any of the events she reported, nor acquainted with anyone else who might have had evidence sufficient to warrant a different, contrary report. My sole “proof” lay merely in the fact that she was telling me such things, that she herself seemed sure of their veracity. Nor would even that proof have functioned as such, much less functioned quite so spontaneously as such, had I not long ago absorbed, and come to apply with all the unreflective reproductivity of the best Bourdieusian practitioner, a psychomedical behaviorism that at once permitted and impelled me to conclude that, like any other person who would tell me such things—and so avidly—Ms. Roden must be mad. The taking of such interpretive liberties was, moreover, all the more extravagant (or hypocritical?) in my particular case, since I prefer to posture myself a critic of psychomedical behaviorism, even among its most unremitting skeptics. But there is skepticism, it would seem, and then there is skepticism. My own is tempered far more rigidly than I once realized by all the investments that—proud marginal though I be (or posture myself)—I nevertheless retain. The psychomedical model still belongs to my world: modern, secular, and “scientific” (if in a broad sense of that term). Whatever doubts I might harbor about it do not reach far enough to undermine my conviction that it still must be taken seriously—even when it leads to error or injustice. Nor, a fortiori, do my doubts reach far enough to undermine at least my abstract trust in the potential benignancy of the politico-economic orders within which secular science has become so comfortably settled. I can of course expound on the “evils of capitalism”; I can shake my head in libertarian and democratic disgust at the internal and external imperialism of my government. But Ms. Roden has made me acutely aware how much, unreflectively and reproductively, I have continued to have faith—my own little civil religion, or some decrepit version of one. I simply could not believe that the government would do to any of its citizens what Ms. Roden claimed its agents to have been doing to her; I just could not imagine it. I wonder if I can genuinely imagine it even now. What I can at least entertain is the thought that, deprived of the bulwark of my good burgher’s assurance that in the ultimate analysis my world is the lesser evil, I would have nowhere else to drift, semiotically or imaginatively, but toward increasing darkness.

Ms. Roden is not a good burgher and so partakes of virtually none of his comforts. She is much farther from the pole of unreflective reproduction than from its opposite, from the extreme of Weber’s charismatic leader and his, or her, radically revisionary slogan: “It is written; but I say unto you” (M. Weber 1946: 250). In the company of the charis-

A CONVERSION

matic, standing nearer or farther away, are those like-minded souls who, for no doubt widely variable reasons, find themselves inclined to listen, perhaps to realize their own election, negative or positive (or both) from one case to the next. Here, paranoia has its structural *agora*, its structural forum.³⁹

Though Durkheim would probably have chosen a different label, the extremes at which paranoia thrives can well enough be deemed—and have often been deemed—extremes of “alienation.” But from what? Not from the social itself, for even such extremes stop short of the boundary that divides “deviance” or even resolute enmity from actual anomie. Nor do paranoiacs stand altogether beyond or leave altogether behind the realm of the cultural. They are not preoccupied with meaninglessness, with the Absurd. They are rather preoccupied with mysteries. They are aware of the sometimes terrible ironies of ignorance. But the aura of the uncanny that abides in even the most abstract of paranoid revelations stems from an anxiety over more than mere ignorance. The paranoid are the inheritors of Cassandra’s curse: their suspicions meet with bemused dismissals; their knowledge falls on obstinately deaf ears. It is not truth from which they are alien but from what Michel Foucault has called the “regime of truth,” or what might more broadly be called the “regime of signification”—the social organization of the production and the distribution of the truth, of epistemic authority, of intellectual and moral legitimacy, which also might provide for secrets to be harbored, plots to be hatched, and deceit to flourish like a parasitic vine behind any number of hermetic doors.⁴⁰

Even the rare paranoiac who entertains no thoughts whatever of conspiracy still often speaks of some warp or perversion that has placed both power and truth beyond human managing. At its paranoid extremes, alienation leaves the personal, the political, and the social body equally ill at ease. Whatever the political or social status of the body who suffers it, such alienation would appear to have the sense of election, positive or negative, as its most common and spontaneous externalization. Whatever its precise sources, which are surely multiple, its objective measure lies in the gap between the personal body—its embodied subjectivity—and that political and social subjectivity most finely adjusted to use and to serve the steering mechanisms of the political and social regime in which it subsists.⁴¹

Such considerations are unlikely to give pause to our contemporary legion of psychic workers. However, they at least aid in the clarification of what is at stake in the perpetration of an exclusively psychomedical model of paranoia and in the consequent codification of the paranoiac as a psychomedical “case.” If Hegel and Marx could, for once, agree, that was perhaps because they were simply registering the obvious: the

A CONVERSION

alienated are rarely ardent devotees of the status quo ante; potentially at least, they constitute instead the forward guard of its overthrowers. From the vantage of the status quo ante, alienation is indeed the seed of subversion. Against it, the psychomedical model seems to operate retroactively, guiding intervention in the aftermath of the manifestation of a symptomatology that has already proven too persistent and too telltale to ignore any longer. In fact, it also has a proactive function, for in effecting the reduction of what might be defined as a structural situation into an internal, perhaps organic syndrome, it endows its patient or client not merely with a disease but also with a constellation of susceptibilities and habits that require a veritable lifetime of monitoring, treatment, insulation, protection, and therapeutic mollification. As Erving Goffman and Foucault have endeavored to show, the psychomedical model casts the alienated body not simply as a suffering body but further as a suffering subject, whose anxieties and pains and delusions are clues of less visible debilities, less visible handicaps or wounds.⁴² Hence, the alienated body emerges as an abnormal subject and its abnormality as a matter of what it cannot accept, or cannot tolerate, cannot bring itself to do or not to do (cf. Foucault 1997 [1975]). Its stigma is the stigma of incompetence (cf. Goffman 1963: 128–29). (Not to say that our psychic workers should thus either be suspected or accused of conspiracy; that would indeed be paranoid.)

Following the neo-Lacanian, one might describe what is personally at stake in such a reduction, or casting, as a descent into “abjection.”⁴³ Yet, however degrading the stigma of mental illness might still be, the psychomedical also has its comforts, its compensations to offer suffering subjects, whose suffering, which may sometimes well be due to one or another organic syndrome, is itself very real.⁴⁴ As the moral champions of deinstitutionalization learned somewhat awkwardly during the campaigns of the 1970s, at least some thought the asylums to which they had been confined genuinely worthy of the name and had no wish whatever to be freed.⁴⁵ Nor have the events of the subsequent two decades entirely undermined their wisdom. If, moreover, neurosis consists as it does for Lacan in the patient’s incapacity to construct and embrace a coherent and unbroken narrative of his or her life, psychomedical discourse itself provides ample symbolic curatives to those who would be or become its subjects. It is, after all, replete with narratives that explain the etiology and the dynamics of suffering, which make sense of suffering in attaching it to a genetic legacy or traumatic past and render it all the more bearable in promising at the very least that every effort will be made to lessen it in the future.⁴⁶ From the paranoiac, what such narratives require in return is a single concession: that what he or she believes to be true is in fact false; that his or her suspicions are ground-

A CONVERSION

less; and that his or her experience is nothing more than a symptom, nothing more than the invalid effluence of a pitiable and common mutation.

That Ms. Roden struggled against and sought to distance herself from her psychomedical subjectivation should not be ascribed to anything so deliberate and calculative as “choice.” What will, what judgment came to bear in carrying her along her way allows for no precise determination. It must suffice to note that she was in any event never entirely bereft of alternatives. She was never entirely without friends and mentors. She was never entirely emptied of the force of her passions.

Beyond her family and the other recipients of her letter, Ms. Roden told at least one other person of her dream: the woman she had met at the church she attended several months before. *She put me onto Bible studies because she said if it was true, it would be in accordance with Scripture. And so that's how I got into Bible study . . . I hadn't ever read it, and I started heavily studying it. Hard-core Bible study for four years . . . I found the visions in the Bible. It was like being given a key.*⁴⁷

But, the key was slow to turn. Upon her release from De Paul Hospital, deprived of her son, Ms. Roden *was lonely. I attended six group therapy sessions, said I had a breakdown (true enough, if not the whole truth; I was physically exhausted and suffer from chronic anemia even now as a result of the chemical warfare) and helped other patients with their problems. I suppose the therapists were glad to get rid of me. They released me after the six sessions. [The wife of the presiding physician] remarked that I had a good understanding of my problems and didn't need therapy. I began to meet people again. Among them was [the man] who shortly became my second husband. Between us we built my house. [My husband] had severely damaged his liver making illegal chemicals and abusing drugs and alcohol. He grew strong while he was eating the high-protein, organic vegetarian diet that I lived on. After awhile I realized that he was compulsively abusive; when I complained about one form of abuse, he shifted to another. He only actually hit me twice. Both times he claimed were accidents, but it stopped when I refused to accept the accident theory. When he could no longer abuse me, he began to abuse himself. I couldn't stop him, and after awhile I couldn't watch. Despite repeated stomach hemorrhages, he continued to drink and abuse drugs. In March of 1985, he died of liver failure at the age of thirty-two.*⁴⁸

Several months would pass before she would finally meet George Roden: *son of Ben and Lois Roden and elected president of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists.*⁴⁹ George had offered to help her in transporting the frame of a small house from the property of the acquaintance who had bestowed it upon her to her own property, several miles away. *George made a Branch Davidian of me in an hour, just*

A CONVERSION

*talking about V[ictor] T. Houteff's message—he was preaching Houteff's message of the Davidian kingdom, and certainly from everything he said, I knew it was biblically true, biblically correct. And so I started reading Branch Davidian literature, and studying that.*⁵⁰ Nor was George's appeal merely doctrinal. *Somewhere in the middle of moving the house, I realized that we were becoming emotionally very close, and I asked him about his family and discovered that he had a wife. At which point I started backing off. But the two agreed to study the Bible together, and he suggested that I come up and get water from his well, because I require quite a pure drinking water. I came here to Texas for my health; I find that the chemicals in the water trouble me. This is an extremely pure water. At least it was; the well was destroyed in '93.*

*So we were seeing each other a couple of times a week, and talking about religion. Eventually, he came up to the farm one afternoon and asked me to marry him. He said he'd divorce his wife. His wife had moved to Israel a year before. He came, and he said that he'd called her up and asked her to come home for their thirtieth wedding anniversary, and she refused. And so he came and asked me to marry him.*⁵¹

She accepted his proposal. She soon moved to George's home, a seventy-seven acre tract of land known as New Mount Carmel, or simply Mount Carmel. *Throughout the history of Israel, God has used Mount Carmel to teach men respect for himself, his prophets, and priests.*⁵²

“Conversion” derives from the Latin verb *converto*—to turn back or around, to change, to translate, to turn in a particular direction, to direct, to devote. Its canonical example is that of Saul of Tarsus, a “Pharisee” who left behind his “zealous persecution” of the Christian church (Phil. 3:5–6) after witnessing an epiphany of Jesus. The author of Acts recounts the episode with compelling vividness:

And Saul, yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what will thou have me to do? (Acts 9:1–6)

After passing three days in blindness, without food or water, Saul arrived at Damascus. Shortly afterward, the Lord sent a certain Ananias to restore his sight, baptize him, and inform him that he had been ap-

A CONVERSION

pointed to bear Jesus' name "before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Thus, the commencement of the apostolate of Saint Paul.

Scholars appropriately observe that not every experience or every confession of conversion conforms to that of Saint Paul. Suggesting a vaguely dialectical relationship between any such experience and those available paradigms or motifs that channel expectations of what conversion is and should be like, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd acknowledge the Pauline as the Christian prototype (1981: 375–77). But, they count it as only one of six motifs that might shape conversion (or at the very least, its narration, whether in the first-person of the convert or the third-person of the analyst). The Pauline is the "mystical" variant—perhaps solitary, always relatively brief, passive, emotionally and cognitively intense, and the prelude to "participation in the ritual and the organizational activities" of the religion thus revealed (1981: 378).⁵³ The "intellectual" variant of conversion might similarly be wrought in solitude, but it is of more extended duration and less a passion than a quest for "illumination" (1981: 376).⁵⁴ Here, doctrinal conviction largely precedes congregational or denominational affiliation. With the "experimental" variant, in contrast, the would-be convert "tries out" the religion to which he or she would belong well before believing what it espouses or finding meaning in the rituals it prescribes (1981: 378).⁵⁵ With the "affectional" variant (which Lofland and Rodney Stark first identified as such in 1965), "personal attachments or [a] strong liking for practicing believers" is the primary stimulant of conversion; social pressures have a role, "but more as 'support' and attraction than [an] 'inducement'" (1981: 380).⁵⁶ The intellect cedes priority to sentiment, as it does with the "revivalist" variant, for which the pressures and the emotional ecstasies of the crowd are the motor of the turning of the individuals engulfed within it (1981: 380–81). Pressures are the exclusive premium of the "coercive" variant, in which the deprivation of liberty, isolation, frequent exhaustion, torture, and humiliation together compel the infidel toward the convictions of his or her masters (1981: 381–82). Lofland and Skonovd conclude that even if their typology proves eventually to be obsolete, it at least has the virtue of registering conversion as a process whose prevailing motifs might be expected "to differ significantly from one historical epoch to another, across societal boundaries, and even across subcultures within a single society" (1981: 383).

Conversions do, of course, differ from one another across such dimensions and divides. The documentary evidence is overwhelming; only the normative imposition of a distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the genuine and the spurious, could license the inference

A CONVERSION

that conversion is really only one and not many different things. In the most comprehensive synthesis of scholarship on conversion to date, however, Lewis Rambo places equal emphasis on another of the aspects of conversion: that more often than not, it is many things at once, partaking of plural motifs, of a typological mixed bag. Rambo accordingly grants the heuristic utility of Lofland and Skonovd's synopsis but pursues the construction of a model that renders typologically "simple" conversions the limit cases of what is usually a multifaceted process. The model at which he arrives specifies seven stages of that process. It allows for some measure of sequential flexibility; but what in any event must always already be in place is the context in which or out of which any conversion must emerge (Rambo 1993: 20–41). Rambo is rigorously inclusive and accordingly fashions a context that is simultaneously macrosocial and microsocal, simultaneously social, cultural, religious, and psychological. In general, though, he draws most systematically from theorists who, in the footsteps of Anthony Wallace, deem most productive of conversion those contexts most rife with "stress" and "strain"—whether structural, personal, or (at their most dynamic) both.⁵⁷

The second of Rambo's stages—"crisis"—encompasses Lofland and Skonovd's mystical motif but sensibly ranges over a much broader sweep of experiences, from illness and recovery to the yearning for transcendence, which might sometimes (as with Saint Paul) provoke or trigger conversion but more often act as the catalyst of the budding believer's ensuing "quest" to give sense to and make sense of what he or she has seen or undergone.⁵⁸ The latter constitutes an additional processual stage: an initial response to a crisis experience, the intellectual or imaginative current within conversion, an intensification of the quotidian search for meaning which Rambo, like Lofland and Skonovd, assumes most often to have the character of an active engagement rather than that of a passive reaction or surrender to indoctrination (1993: 56–57). The quest assumes the character of an interaction once it brings the seeker to an encounter with the advocates of an established church (or once such advocates come calling, as they often do). Following Thomas Beidelman, Rambo recognizes the advocate as the agent not merely of interpersonal but of structural change (1993: 69; cf. Beidelman 1982). Invoking the accounts of the missiologists, he nevertheless emphasizes that the encounter between potential convert and advocate most often unfolds as a mutual negotiation, and that the "influence" of the one on the other is often mutual as well (1993: 67). In light of such encounters, the potential convert may at last arrive at "commitment" (1993: 124–41), and with it, be left to face the "consequences" (1993: 142–76).

A CONVERSION

One might object to a certain establishmentarian excess in Rambo's model. Highlighting those conversions that result in the seeker's incorporation into an already institutionalized church, it may unduly neglect others, less routine and perhaps more critical or more radical in their inventiveness.³⁹ It gives little regard to "ultimate origins." It gives even less regard to that "internalization of authority" that Robert Bellah claimed to be among the most salient hallmarks of distinctively "modern" religion and often churchless "modern" religiosity (1972 [1964]: 46–50; cf. Greer and Roof 1992). One might further object to Rambo's psychological catastrophism. The remarks with which he closes his study are especially telling: "Conversion is personal and communal, private and public. It is both passive and active. It is a retreat from the world. It is a resolution of conflict and the empowerment to go into the world to confront, if not to create, conflict. Conversion is an event and a process. Conversion leaves us devastated—and transformed" (1993: 176). In discussing the details of their "experimental" variant of conversion, Lofland and Skonovd warn against inferring that "a dramatic change of life orientation" could only be the result of experiences and forces equally dramatic, equally "deep" and "strong." They see in such an inference an instance of what they call "the fallacy of the uniformly profound" (1981: 379).

To be fair, Rambo does not treat every instance of conversion as uniformly profound or devastating. His model, however, betrays a preference for the more devastating over the less. Perhaps precisely for this reason it proves to be strikingly consonant with the stages of Ms. Roden's own transformation, her own turn to devotion. Even so, it would do Ms. Roden an injustice to leave her within the dualisms—of personal and communal, private and public, passive and active, retreat and confrontation, internal and external—that have long infected the hermeneutics of conversion as a whole. Rambo's particularly forthright dualism stems in part from his very effort at hermeneutical synthesis. It stems additionally from a holism that inhibits him from assigning greater interpretive weight to any one of the stages or moments of his model over any other. There is much to admire in his synthesis and in his caution. Yet, as Harold Bloom has pointed out, dualism is the imagistic way of metaphor, and metaphor a trope that dissipates meaning even as it seems to foster it (1975: 100–101). The humanist might be content to let conversion be not just many but virtually all things at once. A practical woman in her way, Ms. Roden demands—of herself and of her interpreters—greater resolution.

One has her testimony. Her dreams and visions set her apart; they left her ready to act but uncertain what precisely to do. Not until she met George Roden was she able to begin to clarify the exception that she

A CONVERSION

had become, the name and the stigma that she would subsequently wear as her own: *Branch Davidian*.⁶⁰ One has the testimony of the author of Acts. Saul's vision on the road to Damascus had its effect on him, to be sure. It left him blind, unable to eat or drink, a veritable dead man for three days. It was not until the arrival of Ananias that "there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and was baptized" (Acts 9:18). It was not until Ananias informed him of it that he understood his mission and went "straightaway" to preach "Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). In his letters to the early Christian congregations, he would never use his Jewish but rather always his Roman name: Paul. The anthropologist might notice the traces of a familiar pattern in both these testimonies. The vision isolates, separates the visionary from the "ordinary" life to which she or he had formerly been accustomed. It is the prelude to a period of uncertainty, of disorientation, of the suspended animation of the self. The time is troubled indeed but culminates in a pivotal inspiration that is itself the prelude to a renaissance, to the reentry of a self revived and rechristened into something of the same—if by no means entirely the same—life from which she or he had been removed. The pattern is of course that of the classic rite of passage—but I shall return to this point later. At this juncture, only the pivot of the pattern, its transformational fulcrum, needs scrutiny. In neither testimony—the Branch Davidian's or Saint Paul's—does that fulcrum consist merely in an "encounter" between the seeker of definition and the advocate of a revelatory lexicon. Nor does it hinge on "mutual negotiation," on diplomatic conversation or barter. Its structure is instead pedagogical; its scene, a pivotal scene of instruction.

There are, perhaps, virtually as many pedagogies as there are ways of conversion and virtually as many techniques and apparatuses of instruction as there are criteria for charting the progress and graduation of the convert. The primal scene of instruction must, however, be public, or in any case social, for many of the same reasons that Wittgenstein adduced in arguing that language itself must be public, or at least derive from interactive "games" and "forms of life." Educational progress and graduation must permit assessment and so must permit palpable expression—the production of the correct answer, the right gesture or response, the appropriate move or procedure. Criteria of rectitude must also be stable, or at least stable enough to be palpable in practice and as practice. Criteria are not always rules or laws, however widespread the civilizational (and social scientific) penchant for reifying them into rules or laws might be. They are instead touchstones, which usually offer only indirect and partial evidence of the capacity or competency to which they attest. They owe what stability or regularity they have to the

A CONVERSION

necessary regularity of capacities and competencies themselves. Criteria might be decreed by arbitrary fiat, but they cannot function as criteria without undergoing conventionalization or, as Weber would have it, “routinization.”

The portrait of the solitary reader in her carrel is thus pedagogically misleading.⁶¹ Detached from the scenes in which the arts of decryption and comprehension must first have been acquired, it makes a fetish of the reader and her library alike. Gadamer’s picture of hermeneutical inquiry is more complete. But its depiction of a reader who brings his tradition along with him to his meeting with a text is still pedagogically truncated; it relegates too far to the background the scenes in which tradition is received and absorbed. Even Aristotle’s sketch of pedagogy in the *Nicomachean Ethics* fails to be exhaustive, but the scene it evokes has a sort of skeletal adequacy about it that can hardly be surpassed. For Aristotle, pedagogy directs an *askēsis*, a program of exercise or training in both the characterological and the intellectual *aretēs*—“virtues,” but also skills or fluencies. At its most minimal, it requires only the pedagogue; his repertoire of recipes and principles and primers; and a student, whose absorption of his lessons would one day be realized as and in *eupraxia*—“practicing well,” or being good at what he does. Bloom locates a more ancient and, to his mind, more primal pedagogy in the *askēsis* of ritual communion. H. Wheeler Robinson’s *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* is his point of departure:

[I]n his study of Old Testament inspiration, [Robinson] moves toward the trope of a Scene of Instruction when he sees that while oral tradition rose to interpret written Torah, written Torah itself as authority replaced cultic acts. The ultimate cultic act is one in which the worshipper receives God’s condescension, his accommodating gift of his Election-love. Election-love, God’s love for Israel, is the Primal start of a Primal Scene of Instruction, a Scene early displaced from Jewish or Christian into secular and poetic contexts.⁶²

The constellation remains triadic: God as pedagogue; the materialization of his love in the teachings of the Covenant; and his beloved, Israel. If substantively of narrow scope, it has myriad structural iterations: in Aristotle’s “secular” alternative; in the relation among prophets, their prophecies, and their audiences; and in the relation among charismatic leaders, their visions and revisions, and their followers the world over.⁶³

Missing from both Aristotle and Bloom is that particular dualism that would impose a strict separation between the education of the body and the education of the soul, or spirit, or mind. That it is missing is doubly advantageous: first, because analysis is thus freed from the terms and the sides of long-standing but civilizationally particular debates (over

A CONVERSION

the essence of faith and freedom, for example) that are probably incorrigibly moot; and second, because analysis is thus free to proceed immediately to the lineaments of conversion as practice or, more precisely, as a reorientation in and of practice. The ancient Greek for “convert,” *prosēlutos* (whence the English “proselyte”), broadly denotes someone who lives as a foreigner, or who has gone to live in a foreign city or foreign land. It more specifically denotes someone who has gone to Israel, or “gone over” to Judaism. Hence, one of the most outstanding lineaments of conversion as practice: it transpires as a displacement and as a replacement. Nor is the Greek too literal; it is merely too literally geographical. The practical convert need not alter her residence. She must instead alter (or suffer the alteration of) that “structured set of structuring dispositions” that constitute the habitus itself (Bourdieu 1990: 52; cf. Mauss 1973 [1934]). Such an alteration may be more or less extreme, but it must in any case involve more than the riddance of an extraneous opinion or the cultivation of an isolated taste. It must be systematic because the habitus itself is systematic. It is a replacement that is also always a reintegration, and not merely that reintegration of the “consciousness” that hermeneutical or phenomenological inquiry might raise. The lessons that the convert might at first consciously absorb must ultimately seep into his very body. So he must give himself, or be granted, time enough for what he has acquired to be realized as what Bourdieu calls “a practical *mimesis* (or mimeticism) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an *imitation* that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a model” (1990: 73; emphasis in original). The story of Saint Paul’s conversion is in this respect highly condensed; if not that, his conversion is, in its extreme brevity, astonishing enough in itself to merit his sanctification. The ordinary convert must change, and the change become him, at a much slower pace, with much “backsliding,” as Ms. Roden might put it, and with far less assurance and—it would seem—far less confidence than Saint Paul had that one would become a legend not merely in one’s own time but also in times to come.

The exercises of practical conversion must thus be exercises of reembodyment, of a disciplined self-renovation. Their full sequence can and often does include reflexive sessions—exercises that the self performs by itself upon itself. But, the frequent services of the master, the coach, the advisor at even these sessions once again suggest the semiotic and pragmatic insecurities of excess privacy. The original agent of discipline must in any case always be external to the self, must always be another (or others). Were it not, the self would itself already have to be in possession of sufficient *savoir-faire*, of sufficiently activated virtue, to be its

A CONVERSION

own pedagogue—*per impossibile*, at least if Aristotle's view is largely correct. The implication is somewhat discomfiting, but inescapable, and may as well be stated baldly now and qualified later: education is inherently oppressive (or suppressive, or repressive, or all of these at once) and remains so even at its most reflexive, even when the self exerts control entirely by itself only over itself. Or as Antonio Gramsci observed rhetorically:

In education one is dealing with children in whom one has to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise), ability to concentrate on specific subjects, which cannot be acquired without the mechanical repetition of disciplined and methodical acts. Would a scholar at the age of forty be able to sit for sixteen hours a day at his work-table if he had not, as a child, compulsorily, through mechanical coercion, acquired the appropriate psychophysical habits? (1971: 315)

He would, one might say, only if, with the practical convert, he could somehow garner the means of disciplining himself anew.

Only a dualistic diremption of body from mind would, moreover, prevent Gramsci's comments on habituation from applying *mutatis mutandis* to belief. The discipline of embodiment and reembodiment is also a discipline of informing and reinforming, or is an aspect of it, the giving form or another form to that which is, in rough but regular parallel, becoming informed or reformed. Before dualism, or beyond it, Bourdieu's own rhetoric loses some of its materialist brutality but retains a hard, Gramscian edge:

[H]ow can one fail to see that decision, if decision there is, and the "system of preferences" which underlies it, depend not only on all the previous choices of the decider but also on the conditions in which his "choices" have been made, which include all the choices of those who have chosen for him, in his place, pre-judging his judgements and so shaping his judgements. The paradoxes encountered by the endeavor to conceive belief in terms of the logic of decision show that the real acquisition of belief resolves [them] in practice. Genesis implies amnesia of genesis. The logic of the acquisition of belief, that of the continuous, unconscious conditioning that is exerted through conditions of existence as much as through explicit encouragements or warnings, implies the forgetting of acquisition, the illusion of inattness. There is therefore no need to invoke the last refuge of dignity and the freedom of the person, "bad faith" in the sense of a decision to forget decision and to lie to oneself, in order to account for the fact that belief, or any other form of cultural acquirement, can

A CONVERSION

be experienced simultaneously as logically necessary and socially unconditioned. (1990: 49–50)

With an even harder edge, Bourdieu further asserts that “practical belief is not a ‘state of mind,’ still less a kind of adherence to a set of institutional dogmas and doctrines (‘beliefs’), but rather a state of the body” (1990: 68). Once again, however disconcerting, the implication must be drawn. The discipline of what appears to be remembering is always also a discipline of forgetting. The training of the wit is also a training in being unwitting. The will—even the will to convert—is the student of its conditions, of its structural impetuses, its often hidden and often impersonal, or suprapersonal, disciplinarians. The body that is its own is not its own, after all.

Nor is this true of the converted body—the body already practiced, the body already believing—alone. It is true of the body in crisis as well. The point is not that the “objective conditions” in which one or another body finds itself allows the analyst to infer its being in crisis without further inquiry. As Michael Barkun has come to admit, the objective structural disasters he once identified as the causes of the millennialist revivalism that swept the northeastern United States in the decades preceding the Civil War are not as determinative as he was initially inclined to argue (Barkun 1974). He would still insist that disasters are a necessary condition of the sociogenesis of millennialism. But, he would further point to disaster as a “mental construct which can be linked not only to observable death and destruction but events that symbolize the loss and control of meaning” (1986: 153–54).⁶⁴ He thus avoids reducing the perception or experience of disaster to the merely psychological—as many other scholars of millennialism have been inclined to do (for example, Brummett 1991: 28). Concomitantly, he moves toward the trope of a scene of instruction that makes up for what it may lack of the primeval in suggesting that what Rambo would identify as the pretext of conversion is no less the object of pedagogical scrutiny and pedagogical interchange than the quests and the encounters to which it leads. Or to put the point more directly, the solitary reader in her carrel is no less analytically misleading than the solitary Saul on his way to Damascus; the psychologization of disaster is no less misleading than the psychologization of epiphany or crisis. Paul’s epiphany—as epiphany—is not removed from the scene of his instruction but already a part of it. Contrary to what Rambo’s model of stages would seem to imply, what constitutes a crisis—as opposed to hard times or a momentary lapse or a mere rebuff or a merely personal trauma—is itself a matter of pedagogical scrutiny and pedagogical interchange. It is a matter of intersubjective legitimation—with which God has little to do,

A CONVERSION

or so the anthropologist—professional infidel, inevitable vulgarian—would be inclined to press.

I would be guilty of the worst sort of deception were I to perpetrate yet another dualism, to feign too great a divide between the anthropologist and me. However, I was forced to confront the difference in considering my reaction upon first meeting Ms. Roden and forced to confront it repeatedly as the reaction persisted, with an eerily fresh spontaneity, for several years. I had come upon her by accident (though she would likely dispute that). In February 1993, I was teaching at Reed College, and preparing a lecture on early Christian millenarianism for a first-year course in the humanities. Two or three days before the lecture was due, I heard the news of the eruption of violence at the Branch Davidian compound, about ten miles northeast of the center of Waco, Texas. What I had to say gained little in topicality because few students in the course bothered to attend to the news. I was nevertheless struck by the coincidence and subsequently followed the events at the compound more assiduously than I might otherwise have been inclined to do. In early April, I was unexpectedly offered the position at Rice which I continue to occupy. On 19 April, the compound burned—the ghastly climax, but by no means the end, of what would later come to be known, and rendered iconic, as the Branch Davidian “fiasco.” By August, I had moved to Houston, but it was not until the following summer, after all the explanations and retractions, the accusations and counteraccusations, the social commentaries and psychological commentaries, and the arrests and trials had already begun to bore the media, that I decided to join a steady stream of curiosity seekers, pilgrims, and tourists of disaster and visit the compound myself. The staff of the Waco Visitor’s Center provided directions to the site discreetly, but graciously, upon my request.

The site, Mount Carmel, lies in a slight depression of the open prairie, an expanse of ranches and farms, sparsely populated, verdant in the summer with grasses and wild sunflowers. When I arrived at it, the ruins of the compound were surrounded by a wire fence, inside of which security guards kept a twenty-four-hour watch and bulldozers ploddingly scraped charred wood, broken concrete, blackened shards of metal, and soil into the twisted piles of a gruesome sculpture garden. A quarantine was in effect; the ground had been contaminated with lead. Visitors could not pass through the fence, at the foot of which was a collection of seared and mangled tricycles and other toys, and on the front of which hung a long row of small, white crosses commemorating the dead.

Above the ruins, nearer the road, Ms. Roden was keeping her vigil.

A CONVERSION

From the scraps of the compound, she had constructed a small hut, which a sign identified as the office of the Seventh-day Adventist Branch Davidians. There were a great many other signs and postings in the vicinity—quotations from Ezekiel and Jeremiah, “before” and “after” photographs of the compound, reprints of the writings of the former leaders of the church, photocopies of the deed to the Mount Carmel property. Ms. Roden also had photocopies of her own writings on display—biblical exegeses, a denunciation of the government and its courts, a timely reinterpretation of the “*mene, mene, tekel, u-phar sin*” of the fifth chapter of the Book of Daniel, and a brief history of her church and of the fiasco, which she had arranged as a list of answers to questions she had evidently been asked a great many times. She was nevertheless happy to continue talking and answering questions, as still another sign proclaimed, and was talking to a curiosity seeker, or pilgrim, or tourist of disaster when I first saw her. The conversation went on at such length that I confined myself to an introduction, a short outline of my interest in “the comparative study of religion,” and the fixing of an appointment for an interview several days thence.

Ms. Roden is striking: slim but by no means frail; very fair, her long hair bleached even more blonde under the prairie sun, her skin tanned and sere, her eyes liquid and always watchful. Our interview—the first of many interviews and conversations—went well, I thought, though I learned shortly later that she had already produced written expositions of virtually every query I had raised. Even so, she was never impatient with me. On the contrary: I found her astonishingly forthright, sparklingly bright, and of a delightfully wry humor. I have never ceased to admire the courage of her convictions and the fortitude that has sustained her through what would have proven to me to be insufferable hardship, many times over. I have never ceased to admire her charm. Our acquaintance would extend and deepen. Yet, nearly three further years would pass before I was able to leave behind, to assign to the past, a distress that was at first the constant companion of my preparations for every new journey to Mount Carmel, and on several occasions the cause of their disbanding. It would begin as a knot in the stomach, or a tightening of the chest, then a loss of appetite, sleeplessness, fatigue, an urge for solitude—the unmistakable psychosomatology of fear.

I would still like to be able to claim that the object of that fear was Mount Carmel, the site itself. It is certainly disturbing: a scar roughly scratched in a placid landscape, only all the more raw and indelible since a regional militia financed the planting of a memorial grove of crape myrtles, each shading a stele etched with the name of one of the dead; a ghost of holocaust, which can only conjure up other holocausts, and the possibility of still others in the future. Nor did all violence die

A CONVERSION

out with the flames themselves. Mount Carmel is a property under dispute, and among its claimants are representatives of three schismatic factions of the Branch Davidian church: one loyal to David Koresh, the messiah in residence throughout the fiasco, and dead at its climax; another loyal to no one after George Roden's mother, Lois; and Amo, who continues to press her husband's legal entitlements even though he, too, is now dead. All appear to have adhered consistently to the adage that possession is nine-tenths of the law. Of late, they seem (largely) resigned to coexist. Formerly, a few of them, Ms. Roden among them, had occasional resort to weapons, now and then for intimidation, now and then for self-protection. I was consequently relieved that I do not drive and so never had even to consider visiting Mount Carmel alone. The antagonisms in the air soon led to my opting against focusing on the Branch Davidian "community" in favor of focusing on Ms. Roden. I did not, however, seriously believe that I would ever have to endure anything more damaging than mild hostility from any of her adversaries, and I rarely had to endure even that. I found Mount Carmel a bit eerie; I was afraid of Ms. Roden herself.

Auto-analysis has gradually uncovered an experiential *mélange*, composed in one part of the uncanny and in the other of ambivalence. So far, I have made much of my differences from Ms. Roden, even if I have cast them only as differences of degree. Yet what made her uncanny to me was that, our obvious differences notwithstanding, she reminded me so much—too much—of myself. In her political and semiotic suspicions, in her alienation, in her passion for making sense, in her scholarly devotions, I could not but recognize emphatic expressions of my own. What made me ambivalent toward her was her very being, a self whose courage, whose singleness of missionary purpose, whose fierce enactment of dedication to its calling stood concretely before me as a seductive but forbidden alter ego, a self I might even yearn to be but could become only with the transgression of all the standards of my thoroughly secular upbringing, and of the standards of the undersecretary of secular rationalism that I now am, and—because I am not, after all, so radically alienated from what I like sometimes to tout as the manifold absurdities of the temporal order I inhabit—have no compelling wish to surrender being. But again, the hiatus between the two of us has always only been one of degree, not of kind. Of course, if I thought myself thus to be confessing to an idiosyncrasy, I would not confess at all. To declare what could, at this point, probably go without saying: I think that I am far from alone, and think instead that a subjectivity similar to my own lurks in a considerable number of others who have decided—if decision there was—to pursue careers in the academy, especially careers

A CONVERSION

in its hermeneutical sectors and subsectors, anthropology prominent among them.

I have argued for such a position at greater length elsewhere and will not repeat my argument here (Faubion 1999). I will merely adduce one of its corollaries. Too much of the scholarship on religious activism, and far too much on millenarianism, now seems to me to be infected analytically and textually with the same defensive strategy that I have so often felt impelled to deploy: a strategy of distancing, which would seek to disguise what is in fact familiar, all too familiar, in the costume of the far-flung exotic. Some of its devices are transparent: rationalist mockery, bemused or belittling, which is content to dismiss as foolish or infantile whatever might threaten to reflect back to it the extra-rational grounds of its own complaisance; and that sort of behavioral scientism that rapidly weaves the feathery headdress of a psychopathological profile to crown whoever might threaten to reflect back to it the most arbitrary of those social conventions that saturate its schemas of perception and diagnosis. Other devices are more subtle. Among them, I am inclined to include a frequently sympathetic historicism that manages to stitch an uncanny or forbidden religiosity seamlessly to the past of a tradition that is somehow never the historicist's own. Anthropologists have needed even less sleight of hand when they have sought to ensconce "cultists" once again within the unique and insular mythologies of their ancestors. Yet, however venerable such ethnographic particularism may be, it has always run the risk of delivering difference over to the realm of the absolute, of reifying alterity into an Otherness that belongs nowhere better than among the exhibits in a believe-it-or-not museum—or, though anthropologists might protest, in an asylum; or in that place that seems well on its way to resuming its former double duty as asylum, the prison.

The particularists, however, seem at least to have realized that their project cannot abide by the hermeneutical standard. It cannot be one of somehow incorporating the "cultic" Other into their own horizons, of showing the Other to be really the Same. Nor can it quite be the Geertzian project of translating the unfamiliar into the more familiar. For me, it has rather been one of holding on to a resemblance, a dark mirror, that I have had every temptation to let slip and shatter. It has demanded not translation—there was no "foreign language" for me to gloss—but *metafora*—transference, change of phase, frequent appeal to metaphor.