6 PLAYING REALITY

"Revolutionary" was certainly a term of praise for Karl Marx. So it may be surprising that in one of his most famous passages Marx notes capitalism's revolutionary role. While it was for him the most repressive economic system in history, as the apotheosis of unequal economies, the exit from history into communist utopia, Marx gave it its due. Unlike all earlier systems of domination capitalist modernity is honest, its evil is naked. It demythologizes itself, tearing off the premodern masks by which ruling classes had gilded their power with aristocratic crests and divine robes. In contrast the capitalist says, "You aren't going to do what I say because I am superior, descended from the founders, or constructed of gold to your bronze. You're going to do what I say because *I've got the money.*" Thus in a famous passage from the *Communist Manifesto* Marx writes:

> The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part . . . wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations . . . pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest. . . . The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe . . . torn away from the family its sentimental veil. . . . All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Tucker 1978: 475–76)

It is ironic to note that half a century before, Edmund Burke, the archetypal English conservative, opponent of modern republicanism and equality,

had made a remarkably similar diagnosis. Burke attacked the French Revolution for its attempt to reform traditional political arrangements according to abstract Enlightened principles. In one of the most famous passages in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* he reacted to the events of October 6, 1789, when a Parisian mob marched to Versailles and took the king and queen into custody.

> It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles, and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. . . . [L]ittle did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, of men of honor and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. . . . All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. . . . On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order. (Burke 1987: 66–67)

Thus did Burke and Marx, the canonical conservative and the arch-revolutionary, express a common discomfort with modern apparel, or rather the lack thereof. Modernity tears off the traditional fabric of life to expose the naked ape beneath. We can now say that fabric was nothing other than *culture,* the costuming bequeathed by tradition. Note Burke's conflict, however. It is impossible not to believe that he truly regarded the French queen as more than a *mere* woman. At the same time he refers to such notions as "superadded" ideas and "pleasing illusions," implying that they are not true but good, that we *ought* to believe them for social and moral, not cognitive, reasons. Either way, modernity rips off the garments that make social life bearable and virtuous. This leads to the most basic philosophical question about culture and reason: is culture illusion? Must reason and truth reject culture? Or is culture *necessary* illusion? Are human norms, and perhaps even our sense of reality, dependent on artifice?

There is a particularly useful path of access to this question, one traveled by an eclectic historical line of thinkers who theorize culture as the development of a particular form of artifice, a human propensity that would seem to stand at the opposite pole from any sort of realistic or pragmatic dealing with the world. That dimension is *play.* The analogy of culture to play employs both sides of the ambiguity of the term, understanding culture as both free, creative, impractical activity and as the construction of drama. The point is implicit in Marx and Burke, for whom costuming, or in children's parlance, *dress-up,* is essential to premodern social life. Pursuing the question of play will lead to a deeper analysis of the function of culture in human experience and thought.

Schiller: Free Play

Play owes its modern philosophical elevation to German romanticism and in particular to Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). He argued that the dual human impulses toward sensuous concreteness and eternal form achieve their union in the play impulse, which seeks "living shape" or beauty as in art. Work results from the sanction of need, hence is serious; superfluity and superabundance manifest as physical play. But physical turns to aesthetic play when "free form" is imposed. Play is *the* premier manifestation of freedom. Like other proponents of play, Schiller feels the need to answer the objection, is it not a cheapening of art to call it a "mere" game?

> But why call it a *mere* game, when we consider that in every condition of humanity it is precisely play, and play alone, that makes man compete and displays at once his twofold nature. . . . Man is only serious with the agreeable, the good, the perfect; but with Beauty he plays. . . . Man shall only play with Beauty, and he shall play *only with Beauty.* For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly man when he is playing.*" (Schiller 1977: 79–80)

This is a lot to claim for play. But Schiller's explanation is straightforward, given the general terms of German idealism. Because play is the opposite of work, is not serious, unproductive of needed goods, it is therefore free,

like art. But like art, play is at the same time formal, an attempt to embody a structured whole. Play is not arbitrary or chaotic, it has rules that players must follow. Thus in its completed form play gives us a *free necessity,* an externality freely created by Spirit to which Spirit must then conform. This means that play alone expresses the whole or inner man, our freedom and our recognition of necessity, our inner instincts and outer, physical, social environs. Consequently, play arises at the meeting of the two halves of human nature, the impulse toward the concrete or particular and the impulse toward the abstract or universal. It is in this synthesis of particular and universal, sensuous and abstract, necessitous and free, that only play—and that adult play which is art—attains the highest fulfillment of human experience.

Mead: Just Gaming

The American philosopher George Herbert Mead presented perhaps the first fully naturalist and pragmatic account of human consciousness. He famously preceded the dominant philosophical perspectives of the mid- and late twentieth century by making social communication the womb from which meaning, mind, and self emerge. In his well-known *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist,* Mead imagined creatures, higher animals and humans, engaged in a process of mutual adjustment of response. A does something in response to a situation, B responds to the new situation set up by A's act, then A responds to the new situation that includes what B has done, and so on. This is "gesture." Humans alone are capable of *significant* gesture, in which A responds not only to B's but to its *own* gesture. That is, A's gesture calls out the same response *in itself* that it calls out in B. This can only happen if A is able to calculate its gesture through its anticipation of B's perception of and response to it, hence capable of taking the standpoint of B.

Play and games complicate this gestural dialectic, hence make sophisticated communication and thought possible (Mead 1974). Play is the adoption of the character of the other in pretending, acting "as if," being another to oneself. Games are the epitome of this process. In games the participants must be capable of imaginatively occupying a whole series of other viewpoints more or less simultaneously. I can play baseball acceptably well only if I can imagine the likely response of nine other people to events or to my own acts. It is from games that we begin to imagine a "generalized other,"

a social viewpoint on our own actions, the source of both morality and objectivity. So this generalized otherness which grants objectivity develops from an "as if," the capacity to modify one's behavior in light of the *ir-real,* something not actual, namely, how I *would* see events from the perspective of someone I am *not*. As Peirce had argued earlier, reality, in a sense we shall explore later, only emerges subjunctively, in terms of a perspective on states of affairs "I could" or "I would" but do not now embody (Peirce 1955: 272–73). Thus playing games is the school not only of self, society, and morality, but of reality as well.

Huizinga: The Play's the Thing

In his *Homo Ludens* (1938) or "Man as Player," Dutch historian Johan Huizinga provided a systematic interpretation of culture as play. For Huizinga play situations are constructed, artificial, marked off from the rest of social life as "nonserious," not a continuation of the projects, interests, or functions of the rest of life (namely, work). Play is, as he says, borrowing the phrase of Romano Guardini, "zwecklos aber sinnvoll," empty of practical aims but full of meaning. Players are free but play is rule-governed, hence action is ordered. There is always something at stake in play, hence tension, something to be lost or won. Last, part of the significance of the play is that it is "making a show," an appearance for players or audience in which participants are in effect actors.

What is remarkable about Huizinga's account is less his analysis of play than the range of social and cultural activities he traces to play: including rites, sacred performances, contests, art, poetry, religious sacrifice, riddle-solving, social costuming, and fashion. He argues that even legal trials and war evolved as ritual contests mirroring an agonistic conception of truth and divine favor. The heroic virtues are play virtues: honor, bravery, glory. When one adds to this list the representations of such activities and virtues in art, music, oral narration, poetry, and history, then Huizinga's remarkable claim for the importance of play becomes plausible: "Culture arises in the form of play" (Huizinga 1980: 46). What he really wants to say is that culture *is* play, except it becomes apparent that culture and civilization are capable of losing their play-element, which for Huizinga means that they have lost their true nature and function. He writes that "as a civilization becomes more complex, more variegated and more overladen, and as the technique

of production and social life itself become more finely organized, the old cultural soil is gradually smothered under a rank layer of ideas, systems of thought and knowledge . . . which have all lost touch with play" (Huizinga 1980: 75).

Huizinga argues that today we live in a decadent "age of seriousness," of work, of time devoted to production, social aspiration, education, and knowledge of "reality." The belief in progress is the antithesis of play. Starting with the French Revolution, "Culture ceased to be 'played.' Outward forms were no longer intended to give the appearance, the fiction, if you like, of a higher, ideal mode of life" (Huizinga 1980: 192). Leveling and democratization destroyed costume. Today the "systematization and regimentation" of contest has even invaded sport itself; we have a professionalization of sport, "sport among those for whom it is no longer play." Whereas, he insists, "Real civilization cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element . . . [the] limitation and mastery of the self, the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the ultimate and highest goal, but to understand that it is enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted" (Huizinga 1980: 211). Huizinga does not falter before the logical conclusion. Plato's *Laws,* the Book of Proverbs, Luther ("All creatures are God's masks and mummeries"), and the Hindu concept of divine *lila* (play) all describe the world as the play of God, "outside of morals, neither good or bad." It is the deepest wisdom to conclude that "all is play" (Huizinga 1980: 212).

Ortega y Gasset: Finding Game

There is a special meaning of "game," which in English goes back a thousand years, that deserves mention. In his fascinating essay "Meditations on Hunting" (1942), Jose Ortega y Gasset argues for hunting's unique place in human psychic history. The premier occupation of segmentary man, arguably the first occupation and skill, and perhaps the first subject of human art (as in the cave paintings of Lascaux), was elevated into sport by the privileged landowners of the agrarian period. Hunting became the premier peacetime demonstration of valor, strength, and endurance and came to be considered legitimate training for aristocratic and royal sons and one of the major leisure activities practiced by the wellborn (along with gambling, racing, physical contests, dancing, and conversation). It was envied by those below; one of

the first acts that (successful) modern revolutionaries committed against the aristocracy was to tear down their fences to open game preserves.

For Ortega, "sport" hunting is for humans a reentry into the zoological order, a return to the natural regulation of species. It is thus "an imitation of the animal" (Ortega 1972: 124). This imitation rests on artificial conditions in which man freely renounces some of his technical superiority to try to "take possession" of an animal with whom man has a specific "venatic" relationship. Thus "the fisherman who poisons the mountain brook to annihilate . . . the trout swimming in it . . . ceases to be a hunter" (Ortega 1972: 45). The animal is allowed its "wiles," principally evasive ability. It is most definitely not appropriated, as by Agraria, in the form of "livestock," species under human control. It is the prey who stimulates the hunt: "The only adequate response to a being that lives obsessed with avoiding capture is to try to catch it" (Ortega 1972: 120). Each shot is then a "risk," since it is likely to reveal the hunter and spoil future chances. Ortega regards the hunting relationship as profound. It is an intimate, ritual handling of death, the construction of a situation in which life is at stake, in which humans re-experience their ambiguous location in the animal order. The ambivalence is reflected in the moment of the kill, where, he claims, "Every good hunter is uneasy in the depths of his conscience when faced with the death he is about to inflict on the enchanting animal" (Ortega 1972: 88). Hunting then poses a rather remarkable example of *an artificial return to the natural,* a re-positioning of the human player in a sort of contest with an animal, a relation that is reciprocal but not between equals, a return to predation through the player's acceptance of limits on the use of power.

Winnicott: Playing Reality

British psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott formed a powerful account of the role of cultural artifacts in human development and their relation to play. In the essay "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1951), he argues for the necessity of "transitional objects" in early childhood, typically the beloved blanket or cuddly toy (Winnicott 1999). This play-object is the first "not-me possession," but it represents far more—indeed, it is the first representation, the first symbol. It stands for a novel zone of experience, of which the child cannot rightly be asked whether it is created or discovered, subjec-

tive or objective, *just* a projection of its feelings or *just* a blanket. Its psychic role in allowing separation from the primary parent rests precisely on its being understood neither as an erotically charged adjunct to the primary parent's body, nor as an uncathected object of indifference; it must occupy an intermediate zone of experience. Put another way, what makes separation possible is that we never do separate, not fundamentally, for the emerging zone of separation must be immediately filled with something that is not-mother-but-not-indifferent-either. That filling does not disappear in maturation, but is "diffused" across the whole domain where meaningful living takes place. Winnicott argues that domain is *culture.* As he says in a 1967 essay, among adults it is culture that fills the role of transitional object as the dimension of life which is neither internal nor external, subjective nor objective (Winnicott 1999). This "intermediate zone" turns out to be for Winnicott the center of existence, "the place where we live." Without it the world becomes divided into an unstable subjectivity that projects desire and fantasy and a value-less material reality whose only valence would be as the constraint on, or negation of, desire and fantasy. It is telling that the exploration of this topic is so deep that it compels Winnicott to put himself and his profession into the analysis.

> You may cure your patient and not know what it is that makes him or her go on living. . . . Psychotic patients who are all the time hovering between living and not living force us to look at this problem, one that belongs . . . to all human beings. I am claiming that these same phenomena . . . appear in . . . cultural experiences. It is these cultural experiences that provide the continuity in the human race that transcends personal existence. (Winnicott 1999: 117–18)

Winnicott's notion of transitional objects is rooted in an earlier argument of his that the child's capacity to be alone emerges through the experience of "being alone in the presence of someone else," that is, the experience of being within sight and sound of, say, a parent, but without having to encounter, attend to, or deal with the present other (Winnicott 1965). The presence of the parent not only secures the area, preventing anxiety, but enables the child to learn the possibility of being with another without effort or the fulfillment of demands. It is this meaning that is carried by the transitional object. It becomes a "symbol of union" with the primary parent

through the process of the parent going away long enough to provoke anxiety but returning before the anxiety becomes traumatic (that is to say, before it generates a felt break in personal continuity), thereby establishing a zone of supra-instinctual enjoyment.

Play and the play-object for Winnicott are then an area of concentration or interest, into which objects from external reality are drawn for interaction under rules that are of the child's free creation or adoption, in which there is active and skilled manipulation of these objects in service of a constructed theme or meaning made possible by trust or security provided by a parent or similar figure. This realm is precarious, threatened by erotogenic excitement, meaning that intense feelings can swamp the experimental "transitional" zone. Its unique position makes the division of other things into subjective and objective, inner and outer, possible, opening the way for noninstinctual valuation—that things may mean without directly serving instinctual demands—and hence the very perception of undesired reality. Winnicott writes, "The transitional phenomena are allowable to the infant because of the parents' intuitive recognition of the strain inherent in objective perception," the strain of representing and interacting with what is recalcitrant to fantasy and desire (Winnicott 1999: 15–16). The transitional object is then a symbol standing for union-in-disunion, the possibility of a world neither frustrating nor orgiastic, neither dead nor effortlessly controllable. It anchors a region where the self *makes things that matter.* It is, Winnicott claims, the source of the *feeling of living,* "what life itself is about."

Bateson: "This Is Play"

In a 1955 essay Gregory Bateson made the remarkable claim that communicative play presents an instructive logical paradox, itself the subject of much debate in early twentieth-century logic (Bateson 2000). Engaging in play with another requires a "metacommunication," itself internal to the play context, which must then be logically paradoxical. The joust, for example, must proceed in a situation guided by the metacommunication "This is play." To take a nonhuman example, the apparent bite one playing dog gives another must, in Bateson's terms, denote a real bite but in such a way that it does *not* denote *what a real bite denotes,* namely, hostility. This is a version of the ancient Paradox of the Liar, which arises whenever we try to interpret

statements like "I am lying." If the statement is true, it means that the speaker is telling a falsehood, hence his statement must be false. If the statement is false, then what the speaker says is not a lie and must be true. Bertrand Russell's famous analysis of this problem considered the set of all sets that do not contain themselves. Such a set must but also must *not* contain itself. This problem caused Frege, the godfather of modern logic, to doubt the adequacy of his own logical system and led Russell to formulate his "theory of types" in an effort at solution (Kneale and Kneale 1962: 656).

Bateson is suggesting that the mundane phenomenon of play, as well as drama, ritual, and art, are real-world expressions of this logical problem. In order to play with others some prospective participant must signal that "the following act is not to be taken seriously." (In the case of art we may think of Michel Duchamps's famous painting of a pipe, titled "*Ce n'est pas un pipe,*" "This is not a pipe.") Bateson concludes, not that these activities are devoid of sense, but that they presuppose a complex logic of communication. In a stream of behavior an agent indicates that the behavior now arising, or about to arise, is not to be taken in its "normal" way. This can only arise once the participants achieve the capacity to recognize their signals *as* signals and thus the ability to meta-communicate, to signal *that* one's signals ought to be understood in a certain way. For Bateson the logical paradox is irremediable and productive; it marks the development of a crucial human capacity. Human communication as we understand it is impossible without the ability to create such paradoxes.

Callois: Playing the Self

Having reviewed Huizinga's book, the French philosopher and anthropologist Roger Callois responded with his own account of play in *Les jeux et les hommes* (translated as *Man, Play and Games*). Callois distinguishes four types of games, separable into two pairs: *agon,* or contests, and *alea,* or games of chance; *mimesis,* or imitation, and *ilinx,* vertigo or ecstasy. *Agon* is a structured rivalry in which members desire to win on the basis of merit. *Alea* or games of chance involve no merit (except, we might say, the courage to risk). Such games are passive in the sense that one can only wait for fate to decide the outcome. *Mimesis* is the loss of self in another identity. *Ilinx,* as in carnival rides and amusement parks, is the creation of vertiginous, ecstatic states. *Mimesis* and *ilinx* are more primitive and predominate in segmentary

societies, whereas *agon* and *alea* remain prominent in what he calls civilization, presumably agroliterate, citified societies. Indeed, "the transition to civilization as such implies the gradual elimination of the primacy of *ilinx* and mimicry in combination, and the substitution and predominance of the *agon-alea* pairing of competition and chance" (Callois 2001: 97). All four vary in the degree to which they tend toward *paidia,* uncontrolled fantasy or "tumult," on one hand, or *ludus,* skill-employing play in which problems are created for the sake of solving them, on the other.

Callois implies that play and games form the root metaphors of a variety of modern social institutions. Capitalism is *agon.* Our "serious" social life is competition. We imagine, or want to make the competition, like a contest, hence purely fair and equal, purely meretricious. But this results in a great avocational need for *alea,* for games of chance, where merit can be overcome, where anyone can win at any moment. We also create "disguised" games of chance, forms of competition in which luck is decisive but a veneer of merit is added (as in many television game shows). Our notion of justice is tied up with *agon* and *alea.* They likewise reinforce identity in a context of the negotiation of social status. On the other hand, mimicry and vertigo permit the abandonment of identity. Callois invokes the Nietzschean distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the order-giving and order-breaking spirits of archaic Greek culture, relating them to *agon-alea* and *ilinx-mimesis,* respectively. Like Nietzsche, who connected the Apollonian and Dionysian to dreaming and intoxication, Callois argues that neither of the play pairs is realistic; each avoids reality, one by the construction of the pleasing illusion of a self and the other by the disintegration, hence dedifferentiation, of self and other. Callois suggests that the movement from segmentary to civilized life entails the movement from the desired loss of self in intoxication, or the Dionysian element of *ilinx* and *mimesis,* to the dreamlike Apollonian constructions of *agon* and *alea.*

Callois makes an important point of what he calls the absolute status of games. The equality of the players is established despite their unequal positions outside the game. The rules are absolute because they are arbitrary, that is, have no meaning outside the game. The response to the child or newcomer who asks why there is such a rule is a frustrated "Because that's the way we play!" The rules cannot be derived from outside. Play and game thereby embody *fictive necessity,* made-up obligation. Rather than "nonserious," Callois calls them "nonproductive," meaning they do not produce what is needed outside the play or game: in play "property is exchanged," he

writes, "but no goods are produced." Hence—and this is Callois's real improvement over a strain of thought about play from Schiller to Huizinga—rather than being nonserious, play and games are *nonhistorical*. The results of the preceding game are not retained, there is no progress between games. Each new game starts at zero. Play and game are nonefficacious reenactments of productive and serious activities, and thereby possess "the permanence of the insignificant" (Callois 2001: 81). For this reason Callois resists the direct connection of play and culture. While the "spirit" of play is essential to culture, "games and toys are historically the residues of culture," cultural activities whose "serious" meaning has been lost or truncated, as when war is mimicked in peacetime by the tournament. (This judgment, I would argue, is due to his inadequate definition of culture. War is clearly a social activity, but not particularly cultural, however much it has cultural ornamentation and stimulates cultural motifs, hence the tournament is not an inefficacious "playful" residue of war, but a cultural activity. Nevertheless, Callois is right that culture is not play *simpliciter,* as we shall see.)

Gadamer: The Art of Play

More than any other twentieth-century philosopher, with the possible exception of Ernst Cassirer, Hans Georg-Gadamer embedded human cognition in culture. In his *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method),* all understanding is a matter of dialogue between interpreter and interpreted, hence the cultural traditions of each. This is not the place to exposit or evaluate Gadamer's hermeneutics; we shall focus only on his notion of play and what it signifies within his account.

Gadamer emphasizes the "primacy of the play over the consciousness of the player" (Gadamer 1994: 104). The play requires a bounded space, a playing "field," a "closed world." The game "masters" the players in the sense that roles taken on by players can be utterly false. Art begins in and culminates such play, for play presents the primary aesthetic process of "transformation into form" *(Gebilde)*. The drama, for example, is the repetition of origin whereby the unfulfilled possibilities of real situations are actualized, revealing their truth in a "repetition that brings the essence forth."

All this is presented in a section of Gadamer's book titled "Play as the clue to ontological explanation [of the work of art]." It introduces the notion of "fusion" of present and past events, later to be articulated as Gadamer's

central concept. The dramatic or historiographical repetition of a past event actualizes a fusion of the performance and the original, both in drama and ritual; the original, as a "temporal" entity, exists only by *repeating itself as different* (Gadamer 1994: 123). His notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* or "effective history," historically effected/effecting consciousness, is that all historical research is already affected by the object which it investigates, by a "pre-understanding" that is partly the result of that very object as it has been understood through the tradition. Hence, knowledge of the object can never be "objective" or "complete." But how then do we know the past? It is Gadamer's achievement to suggest that our involvement with the past, our being affected by it, being part of it, hence lacking "distance" from it, far from being an obstacle to knowledge is *the necessary condition for understanding* the past. True understanding occurs when the "horizons" of the historian and the historical document "fuse" *(Horizonsverschmelzung),* when "we regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them" (Gadamer 1994: 374). We reconstruct the question to which the historical artifact or text or event is an answer by making it for ourselves a "real" question. Following Plato, all our knowledge of past cultural artifacts or texts is a dialogue with the artifacts, not an observation of them. We know them when we "make [them] our own."

From Play to Culture to Reality

All this may sound mildly interesting. Certainly many of the phenomena we have discussed as play are parts of culture, and perhaps play informs culture as a whole. But what can this tell us about any supposed role of culture in our understanding of *reality?* If a modern, might we say, "post-cultural" understanding of reality has cast a skeptical eye on culture as pleasing illusion, how much further removed from the real is play?

In drawing this connection we may start in what may seem an odd place, the feeling of *un*reality. One version of that feeling is nicely described in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited,* when the young Charles Ryder is leaving the scene of his youthful romantic adventures.

> But as I drove away and turned back in the car to take what promised to be my last view of the house, I felt that I was leaving part of myself behind, and that wherever I went afterwards I should feel

> the lack of it, and search for it hopelessly, as ghosts are said to do, frequenting the spots where they buried material treasures without which they cannot pay their way to the nether world. . . . I had come to the surface, into the light of common day and the fresh sea-air, after long captivity in the sunless coral palaces and waving forests of the ocean bed. I had left behind my—what? Youth? Adolescence? Romance? . . . "I have left behind illusion," I said to myself. "Henceforth I live in a world of three dimensions—with the aid of my five senses." I have since learned that there is no such world. (Waugh 1964: 190–91)

There is a deep truth here in the final sentence's recognition that in a real experiential sense reality can evaporate. That is, among the issues of Charles Ryder's life, loves, and accomplishments, or lack thereof, there remains a crucial underdetermination of decision by fact, a feeling that the tangible, stable, and mundane could, on the breath of a whim, be turned upside down, something that Milan Kundera called the unbearable lightness of being (Kundera 1984b). This is one of the senses in which *reality can seem unreal*. For the "real" has several meanings, and each one of them can only be encountered given a certain condition of the experiencer. A functional sensorium is not enough. Nor is desire, will, or the urge to survive. Nor is even objectivity, by which I mean a socially understood system of lawfully interacting objects. Something more is required. Not that feelings of unreality are, so to speak, bad, something to be gotten rid of, defended against. They may be, as in the Waugh passage, highly important and illuminating experiences. But one imagines they can only be so if the subject's general experience is one of reality, if the unreal is a passing, and not a normative, phenomenon. At any rate, my point is that the *sense* of reality is complexly funded. Simply put, reality is an acquired taste.

Here Charles Peirce's phenomenological categories provide a useful template for describing how "real" and "reality" function in human experience. One aspect of experienced reality is its sheer phenomenal quality, the redness of the red dress, the bite of the wind, which Peirce called "Firstness" (Peirce 1955: 75ff.). In a second sense the real is difference, opposition, the resistance of physical bodies in space, the "Secondness" that Peirce nicely exemplified by the feeling of a shoulder against a door. Third, reality is intelligible and represent-able order, the primary sense of "objectivity" confirmed by social agreement and ultimately science, which Peirce called "Thirdness"

(he does not imply that *all* is orderly). Peirce's categories are offered here not as metaphysically right or complete, although I do suspect the three are necessary, that experience lacking felt quality, spatial resistance, or ordered intelligibility would indeed feel "unreal." Expanding Peirce's description, whatever else we are, we each inhabit reality as an intentional consciousness with a functional sensorium revealing phenomena, as a physical object among other physical objects, as an animal driven by needs to respond to environmental stimulus patterns, and as an intelligent, fully socialized observer, and tester, of objective regularities. I suggest that another mode of encountering the world seems a necessary part of our experiential repertoire. We also inhabit reality as *agents* who act with *understanding* in a world containing *ends in themselves.* This means not that *all* reals are ends in themselves, but that *some* must be, and the world in general is experienced as structured by the significance rooted in these ends. The role of the human experiencer which encounters reals in this way is agency. My point will be that culture provides the conditions necessary for experiencing the world in this way. That is, culture provides conditions necessary for perceiving, negotiating, and understanding reality *as an agent does.* There are three such conditions provided by culture: a normative environment, framing, and drama.

The Normative Environment

There is an affective and normative dimension to our experience and perception of real things. "Real" is a normative and affective term as well as a descriptive one. Real means *not merely apparent,* not merely phenomenal. It means salient, resistant, intelligible, available for contemplation and/or manipulation and/or enjoyment and/or suffering. It is a term, if you will, of *respect,* of recognition. The recognition of the reality of a thing is a recognition of its importance, its being something that must be dealt with, not wished away. As noted, Dewey rightly argued against a reified stimulus-response model of human behavior that stimuli are constructed, or prepared, by motor activity, so that sensation-action is a circuit. Merleau-Ponty likewise saw the role of tactility and the "flesh," the bodily surface, as a "subject-object," a spatial thing that feels by acting (Merleau-Ponty 1968). I would add *affectivity* to this circuit. Sensation and action require as well affect, what Heidegger called state of mind *(Befindlichkeit)* or feeling. Reality is as much as an achievement of affectivity as of perception and motor activity.

We experience the affective and normative environment in our status as *agents.* In a broad sense, agency is the status of a human being as a comprehending actor in the world, a particular being in a process we call living, whose temporal sojourn is in some sense a unit, and whose surround is not only tolerably regular or intelligible, but structured by *significance.* Agents are personal, the peculiar owners of their experiences and history. They are selves. Agency is not *all* about acting or doing, but the other modes of the agent's appropriation of the world—its undergoing or experiencing, its physical subsistence, its arranging or constructing, and its cognition of the world—are within the perspective of agency processed *through* a history of and potentiality for action. It is as agent that I am, in Buchler's terms, "born in a state of natural debt, being antecedently committed to the execution or the furtherance of acts that will largely determine [my] existence" (Buchler 1955: 3). Likewise, the world for agency is a domain whose intelligibility, inertial force or resistance, and qualities are organized around meaningful and valuable beings, *beings that are ends,* valued in themselves and not merely as objects of, or means toward satisfying, desire or need. It not the case that all objects and events must be ends or that ends must be devoid of instrumental value or desired consequences, but some components of the world must be ends to provide its significant structure. This notion of the world as a structure of significance bears the echoes of Heidegger's concept of *Weltlichkeit* (world-hood), Arendt's world of artifacts, Johannes von Uexküll's *Umwelt,* or surrounding environment, and J. J. Gibson's conception of the "affordances" of things (Heidegger 1962; Arendt 1958; Gibson 1979; von Uexküll 1926).

If "subject" means consciousness, or more generally, *us,* and objectivity is what consciousness perceives outside itself as uncontrollable by thought, then there is something about culture which falls between, which *spans* the subjective and the objective. Pure phenomena can of course be salient and compelling; I do not presume they are a desultory, passing array of qualia. But clearly the infant brings something to experience besides sensory capacity. It brings *needs,* or if you will, *will.* As Hans Jonas argued in *The Phenomenon of Life,* wherever there is life, there is metabolism, and metabolism is the first arising of autonomy, the homeostatic process by which an entity maintains its existence as a particular identity throughout an exchange of materials with environment (Jonas 1966). As soon as there is metabolism, things start to matter in an experiential sense, to be relevant to the mainte-

nance of the organism. This is the *beginning* of agency, freedom, identity, and affectivity; an entity does something, namely, modifies self and environment to remain in existence as itself, and so remaining is a crucial issue, hence whatever impacts that likelihood matters. It is also correlated with a more complex form of objectivity. Desire or will, as embodied in action, discovers obstacles that must be negotiated, troubles that have to be faced. One might say, life brings teleology into the world.

But as Winnicott argues, need-satisfaction does not grant the reality of the need-satisfying object. While it prepares the experience of objectivity by focusing attention, it undermines the independence of the object. For the infant, the fact that when it cries the "object" magically appears—"I want food and, poof, she's there"—indicates the ontological continuity of the object with its own needs and fantasies—"She is part of me." As long as the object obtains in a zone of experience flooded by desire, it is not real in the sense of an independent object. There must evolve a zone of mild, moderate or sublimated interest. Psychodynamic theory traditionally regarded frustration, and hence separation from the primary parent, as the mechanism of realistic disappointment. "Reality" would thus be the name for what *withholds.* Winnicott's alternative is that such withholding could not become the kind of reality with which mature agency could interact; given the psychic environment described, it would be a "dead" reality, hence in a very important sense *not* real. Play is the first working-out of the experience of things independent from yet affectively related to the agent. Nobody plays without emotion; if they do, they're not playing. Enjoyment, fascination, pleasure, delight, anger, fear, envy, and so forth, must be present in play. It is in play that we work through the fact that thoughts can lead to events, but only via the mediation of muscular movement, that reals can be *made* by us, hence that "reality" is a phase or modality of being into which our thoughts and feelings can enter and achieve form, that something can be outside the magical continuity with self and yet at the same time be affectively worthy, real in the sense of deserving the agent's respect. *Play is the delimited environment for experiments in emerging agency in relation to meaningful reals independent of the subject.*

It arises, I suggest, out of *repetition.* At first this repetition is probably introduced by others in the simplest forms of play, like moving an object, hiding and revealing a face, repeating a song. Later the child will manipulate the repetition and reappearance itself, and this will be the first self-produced

meaning. Repetition creates the fundamental experiential form of intelligibility: the fulfillment of anticipation. Something in the world stimulates anticipation, and then the world matches this anticipation, giving the experience of satisfaction, as the return to the tonic chord in music will later, hence a primitive kind of control—the self is able to do something about the world, and the world confirms the validity of its doing, even though this will be interpreted initially as magical omnipotence. Eventually the experience of the outside as genuinely outside *yet* in tune with the inside, as matching the inchoate self's vitality, emerges as repetition ceases to be the magical continuation of the self, becoming instead a *dialogue* with the world. The imitation of series of actions comes to have the same satisfaction, the fulfillment of anticipation, only now in the register of the creation of meaning by the "agent," the child. *Mimesis,* imitation, hence what we call representation, has its root here. Things are real in so far as they are actually or potentially repetitive.

As the child matures, the role played by the received and selected objects of play come to be taken by objects that are made, transformed by imaginative handling and construction. The made objects, which become for Hanna Arendt the world of "work," provide the primary instance of objective ends, things that matter, and matter not merely in their function as satisfying needs, nor as means to such satisfaction, but as *ends in themselves.* This is particularly important, as Winnicott argued. For the spaciotemporal object that is in some significant sense made becomes the prime instance of value-things, or to use a tired terminology, a subject-object. It is that of which Winnicott says that we cannot ask whether it is subjective or objective, a fancy of the mind or a material object whose "meaning" is extrinsic to it, without undermining the special "transitional" role it plays in experience.

Now, my argument may seem to ignore an obvious alternative to play and culture as precondition for a fully viable sense of reality. As several branches of philosophy have learned in recent decades, knowledge or intelligibility of the world is based in some crucial sense in intersubjectivity. Simply put, objectivity is social: the individual's perception of things can only be understood as objective through the confirmation, testing, and disconfirmation that social communication brings. As Mead put it, to have an objective view of the world is to view it from the perspective of the "generalized other," the perspective of an open-ended community. Thus one might say against my current claim, "Look, we've known for most of a cen-

tury that, yes, society, social communication, or social action is necessary to the experience and/or understanding of reality. Pragmatism, ordinary language philosophy, hermeneutics, etc., have long since held this. And you yourself have cited this work! So why make the extravagant claim that culture, not just society, is crucial to the sense of the real?"

I am arguing that beyond the admittedly social constitution of reality for us, culture, as it supervenes on society, *adds* something to our objective perception that social interaction devoid of culture cannot. It adds to the socialized perception and intelligibility of things the organization of those things around ends in themselves, that is, around things understood as valuable *not* merely because they serve organismic or social purpose. The successfully socialized human of course has the capacity to test its experience in terms of the perspective of others, and picks out of its environment objects and events that speak to its socialized needs. But it can also cherish objects, gaze at the beauty and profundity of natural things and events, revere and wonder at things. When things are valued not for their role as need-satisfiers, tools, or markers of social approbation, but as ends, culture is at work. Culture thus provides *normative objectivity over time;* what is and has been valid in itself. It is the school of real, objective value. It provides the ontological basis of social norms. Without a cultural ontology, a cultural description of existing things that are ends, there would be no "worldview," no understanding of a suprasocial world, that would justify social rules of propriety and intelligibility. In effect, without the cultural ascription of value to things, societies would have to accept the *truth of conventionalism,* that their norms are humanly constructed, unreflective of the world beyond human agreement.

Now, as suggested in the preceding chapter, postmodern society has eviscerated the role of cultural ontologies. It is true that our era, as noted, eschews most of the ontologies of gods and spirits, leaving for its "official" ontology science, whose shifting and unperceivable metaphysics is uniquely unsuited to a social role. That is indeed an important fact about our society. But this does not mean *all* culturally posited entities are socially anachronistic. We may take one crucial case: *persons.* Scientifically speaking there is no clear line separating what we call humans from nonhumans. Humanity is a matter of degree. We are made of roughly the same stuff as nonhuman creatures, sharing with them the vast majority of our DNA. Ethology continues to shave away previously unquestioned human uniqueness, such as

language, whose use by gifted primates and dolphins under experimenters' tutelage keeps advancing. The modeling of human thought by digital and analogue devices shaves from the opposite side. Most of all, what we regard as persons today is one of a large number of hominid species that have populated the Earth in the past, at various levels of sophistication (that is to say, similarity to us). Would a thawed-out Neanderthal be allowed to vote in the next presidential election? What about *Homo erectus?* But despite the continuum of current humans and other species, virtually all our social and normative life depends on positing a discontinuity, a strict line between the human and the nonhuman which must appear arbitrary from a scientific perspective (a line even scientists must respect when deciding whom to admit to their universities). This line is, as Elizabeth Baeten puts it, mythical, meaning not a traditional belief known to be false by contemporary inquiry, but a normative belief unjustifiable by inquiry that nevertheless *must be presupposed by society, including by that inquiry itself* (Baeten 1996).

Adapting a Heideggerian figure, we may represent the context of experience as a place, a background, a *clearing,* in which everything meaningful, in the sense I have meant, "takes place." Hence we can hazard a further analysis of culture: *culture holds open the clearing.* That is, it holds open the place from which subjective and objective emerge as symbiotically related yet distinct phases of experience, of which, as Winnicott says of the child's experience, the question "Is it created or discovered?" must remain ambiguous. This makes a place for the teleological meaning of human existence, human society, and reality. Its absence is the death of meaning, which occurs either when fact ceases to mean and so ceases to be fact, or when meaning ceases to attach to being and so ceases to be. Culture maintains the context in which the *ends can be real,* and *reals can be ends,* hence the self's feelings are real and the real is felt by the self.

Framing

Culture does this in part by *framing.* Phenomena cannot be experienced or understood as real except through frames, which is to say, appropriated "under a description." In this sense Kant was right, and Cassirer's application of Kantianism to cultural or "symbolic" forms was prescient. The art object, the festival, the sporting event, the legal contest, not to mention

perhaps the most crucial case, "plays" or staged dramas, have their frames, dates, boundary lines, courtrooms, and prosceniums. Frames distinguish inside and outside. What do they keep out? All other contexts, but in the present case, primarily work, economic necessity, acquisition and production, brute physical necessity, and history. Frames must cancel many of the cognitive and social rules operative outside; so in the play I am not my usual pauper self, but a king. Those who are social unequals in the outside world are equal under the rules of a sport. This already means the play frame must be constructed, artificial, partitioned. Play requires boundaries that hold off the activities of the world outside.

Of course, all social contexts require frames of some kind. But play frames are particularly opaque, since they must rule out so much. As Callois claimed, "serious" activities progress in the sense of accumulating both products and changes in technique or experience, so are historical. The unique status of play is that in play we can *see the framing,* we are aware of the institution of boundedness. Most of all, play situations are bounded as *ends in themselves.* Play is perfectly circular; it is the epitome of the cyclical notion of time familiar from Mircea Eliade's analysis of segmentary societies (Eliade 1954). If instrumentality in its normal form is ruled out, the rules and vicissitudes must be played for their own sake. Play is thus not only *sui generis:* it is *the sui generis itself.*

This character is inherited by cultural frames. Thus what Huizinga lamented in a modern or postmodern context is an undermining of frames in which the bounded-ness of any social frame is regarded as mere appearance, its "reality" being its place in a universal process of cause-effect, instrumental manipulation, and progress. As Arendt claimed about the modern subordination of all social and political life to economics, modernity promotes a dynamic, processural view of the world in which each item and event is a point of receding intrinsic significance. Something about modern instrumental rationality or functionalization breaks down the cultural frames of social life, spilling out their contents as fungible means toward practical ends. Culture is then the *unframed framing of social contexts with teleological meaning,* meaning irreducible to practical accumulation.

For culture is all about the reality of socially drawn distinctions. G. Spencer Brown begins his provocative logic of distinctions with the stipulation, "Draw a distinction" (Spencer Brown 1994). Well, culture does that. The installation of distinctions, arranged in a system of orders, is the logic of

culture. Sneakers are proper in one context, leather shoes in another; what can be said to my wife cannot be said to my neighbor; a religious belief cannot be utilized by a liberal state; during the ceremony before the hunt the buffalo's horns make me a beast, but if I don them tomorrow during supper, my children will laugh at me. Distinctions hold only within contexts, and culture maintains the most important value-laden frames for social contexts. Without framing, no normative distinction can hold up. A world in which all is one cannot have culture in it. In Bateson's language, culture frames. What undermines culture is either the reduction of distinctions to unity, or the reduction of all unities to what Jacques Derrida called *différance* or sheer difference (Derrida 1973). Culture presents the meaningful reality of the distinctions societies draw. Its teleological connections argue for the necessity, validity, and reality of the key frames. If those are illusions, then culture is an illusion.

And we know this because we also have the impulse to destroy all frames and distinctions. That is the Dionysian impulse, which Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy,* to destroy the *principium individuationis,* the ego or principle of individuation (Nietzsche 1956). It is not only the self and its distinction from the world that are thereby eliminated, but all distinctions, anything holding apart from anything else, all the frames that make it possible to preserve contextual integrities. The Dionysian impulse says, "No, that's the end! No more subtle rules and distinctions that force reflection and refraction, that diminish by slowing energy. Enough foppery and decoration. Enough of 'each thing is what it is and not another thing,' of 'this is not the time for that.' We shall roar through all portals and windows, all limitations." But Dionysus is outmatched. Unity loses to difference. For the living make, and must make to keep living. Thus does Dionysus become a *moment in* the dialectical development of culture, the destruction of meaning and form takes its place in the history of meaning and form. Philosophical skepticism and nihilism, explosively antistructural forms of art, even violence itself, become part of the narration of contexts whose boundaries they deny. Hume and Nietzsche are studied in courses in modern philosophy, Jackson Pollock hangs in the museum with Rembrandt, De Sade becomes an historical precursor of Genet for students of comparative literature. Culture is thus the *socially shared framing of social contexts,* the making of contextual distinctions that allows the differentiation of value-spheres. In culture these frames are literally made, since they are marked by activities

and artifacts. The cultural products "hold up" the frames. Human beings cannot stop understanding by making. That making is our medium, and its name is culture.

Drama

In lamenting the failure to suspend disbelief that he found in contemporary cultural experience, the American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch wrote, "The illusion of reality dissolves, not in a heightened sense of reality as we might expect, but in a remarkable indifference to reality. Our sense of reality appears to rest, curiously enough, on our willingness to be taken in by the staged illusion of reality. . . . [T]he very idea of reality [is] dependent at every point on the distinction between nature and artifice, reality and illusion" (Lasch 1979: 160). I think this is true. More particularly, in our existence as agents our sense of the real is derivative of *narrative.* With Alasdair MacIntyre, Samuel Fleischacker, Michael Oakeshott, Kenneth Burke, and Bernard Lonergan I am suggesting that the characteristic form of intelligibility under which events are understood by cultural beings is narrative. The cultural construction which provides the framed teleological meanings available to human understanding is fundamentally *dramatic.* This drama is the construction of human agents, metaphorically "clothing" reality in an idiom that answers to the needs of those agents. We can live, act, and know in a fully human way only in a world structured by our own making. This construction is not a barrier to or shield from reality. To put it simply, *making is the way we know.*

Narrative is the organization of events into a historical process that proceeds, as Aristotle formulated it, from a beginning, through a middle, to an end, and in which the passage of events occurs at least partly through the acts of agents. It is inherently teleological in that the narrative is drawn so as to depict events in their meaning for the transition to a purposive end (even if the end is tragic). It must both tie events together and set them off from all other events. Narrative is the domain from which a series of fundamental human notions are drawn, like action, agent, role, character, motivation, performance, and history, notions that in turn largely make freedom and agency intelligible, and even serve as models of the possibility of causal explanation. The very distinction of "doing" from "undergoing" seems to

require a teleological or dramatic element, just as apparently nondramatic accounts of "events," happenings, or "news" entail the division of processes into bounded episodes characterized by the classical trinity of beginning, middle, and end. As Mark Freeman suggests, "Narratives . . . rather than being the mere fictions they are sometimes assumed to be, might instead be in the service of attaining exactly those forms of truth that are unavailable in the flux of the immediate" (Freeman 1993: 224). Without this, reality becomes phenomena without salience. The *feeling of reality* is gone. Absence of connection to goals undoes the sense by which will is connected to reality. As such, cultural things in the form of narration are *the* model of intelligibility for humans, the form of reality for us being primarily dramatic.

It has been argued that *consciousness itself* is narrative. John Dewey incorporated a narrative theory of consciousness into his naturalistic account of experience.

> Thus the purport of past affairs is present in the momentary cross-sectional idea in a way which is more intimate, direct and pervasive than the way of recall. It is positively and integrally carried in and by the incidents now happening: these incidents are, in the degree of genuine dramatic quality, fulfillment of the meanings constituted by past events. . . . Every case of consciousness is dramatic; drama is an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness. (Dewey 1958: 306)

Remarkably, this conception has been echoed by contemporary cognitive science. Antonio Damasio has argued that the structure of perception is narrative. What he calls "core consciousness," the "pulselike" rudimentary and fleeting stimulations of feeling, is a constant constructive process of "nonverbal story telling," a prelinguistic narrative of "images" or patterns, which is how the organism represents its own changing state to itself (Damasio 1999). This consciousness orders and appropriates the bodily responses to physical influences as events "owned" by a self. Consciousness thus constructs a particular way of interacting with the world, one that enhances perception of those objects whose presence induces feelings by patterning them as being available from a character's perspective.

It is useful to distinguish the narrative structure of experience as the first-person intelligibility of experience from the second-and-third-person telling of a story. The telling becomes the archetypal cultural event of rendering life, experience, and world meaningful and intelligible. It is the

experience of meaning/intelligibility made into *art,* whose illocutionary function—what type of act the utterance performs, e.g., a reporting—is cognitive or representative, even if its perlocutionary function—what consequence is accomplished by the utterance, e.g., socialization—is practical. As David Carr points out, the story "gathers" the otherwise lost moments of experience into a meaningful, memorable whole (Carr 1986). Unlike the character of the story, the narrator knows the end, hence the point, of the action of the characters. Events and actions are selected that carry the intimation of the dramatic end in themselves. As Carr explains, this is an ideal of human intelligibility to which real-life agents aspire but can never fulfill. I can carry into my experience the imagined perspective of a future narrator, a temporalized version of Mead's generalized other, through what we could call, leavening Heidegger with Carr, *anticipatory retrospection.* Such is a possible mode of my present experience. We seek this attitude of the storyteller on our own lives because it alone renders life intelligible, that is, understandable as the life, not of an organism or point in a social system or an unconscious dynamism—all of which are legitimate and important truths about me—but the life of an actor, agent, or character.

This does not mean everything cultural has a direct connection to, or itself embodies, dramatic narrative. It means most of the cultural phenomena of a particular society can be understood as grouping about such narratives, like data points around a mathematical line or curve. Neither does it means there is only *one story going on.* Many stories, as MacIntyre suggested, collect about key experiences, icons, and rituals. Arguably we are all like those medieval commentators whose subplots were written into the margins of their inherited scriptural stories. As Peirce said of signs, stories multiply. The story of the founder, like a coral reef, accretes the tales of the others who retell it, and the stories of subsequent leaders, as well as new interpretations of all of these.

Consider a postmodern American poem.

> "There must be some way out of here,"
> said the joker to the thief,
> "There's too much confusion,
> I can't get no relief.
> Businessmen, they drink my wine,
> Plowmen dig my earth.
> None of them along the line know what any of it is worth."

"No reason to get excited,"
the thief, he kindly spoke,
"There are many here among us
who think that life is but a joke.
But you and I, we've been through that,
and this is not our fate.
So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late."

All along the watchtower,
princes kept the view.
While all the women came and went,
barefoot servants too.
Outside in the distance
a wildcat did growl.
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl.

(Bob Dylan, *All Along the Watchtower*)

A rather unjovial joker despairs over the lack of appreciation of worth endemic to his instrumental social world, not unlike Job's perception of vanity or MacBeth's lament of life as a tale told by an idiot. But Dylan's thief takes a different view. Offering no justification, he ascribes to fate his own escape from nihilism. Yet he intimates that the joker is not speaking truthfully. And his warning compels: there isn't much time. There are things to be done. What are they? Here, in a remarkably conceptual move, Dylan conjures something so compelling yet generic that it is less a story than the sheer *idea* of story, a story about story-ness, a figure for *narrativity itself.* Something unknown but crucial is about to take place, as if we have been *thrown,* as Heidegger would say, into a Gothic tale at its climax, knowing neither what led us here nor what will happen, a present nestled between suspense in two directions. It brings a shift in our perspective whereby a mystery unfolds, a drama in time, perhaps a wildcat growling in the dark night as, unbeknownst to the castle's inhabitants, riders approach. The oscillation of experience between meaningfulness and absence of meaning, which is at the same time the oscillation between reality and unreality, hangs on the susceptibility of the world to narrative explanation. Only in narrative is the world meaningful for human agents. Our first question, upon discovering ourselves in any new and confusing context, is in sense if not in so many words, "What's the story?"

Now, there are obviously other ways of making the world intelligible. Science is all about intelligibility, but not narrative intelligibility. Even if it must insert beginnings-middles-and-endings into the physical register—for example, the recounting of the origin of things in Steven Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes*—its "stories" hardly compare to the kind of narrative we find in myth, history, or dramatic art. As noted, human beings function and experience in plural registers, for example, as material objects in a physical environment, and not only as dramatic agents. The world can be understood a variety of nondramatic ways, for example, as a single pantheistic substance (in the works of philosophers from Parmenides to Spinoza), as a collection of subatomic particles (in the works of philosophers from Democritus to Bohr), or as a realm of illusion (in the Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedanta). But one of the modes of human being is agency, the status of a unitary potential actor with sensibility, will, and cognition, who affects and is affected by the world over a limited life span. The world for agency is a field of interaction open to human experience and manipulation, success and failure, where something is always at stake, of which William James wrote, "It *feels* like a fight." It is in our status as agents that culture provides an intelligible world. If culture is illusion, so is agency. Even those metaphysical schemes that appear to deny drama, when employed in life as orientation for conduct and imagination, typically embrace drama; the Buddhist narrative of the heroic Gautama coming to understand that the world of agency is ultimately unreal is itself a drama of the first order.

Conclusion

Culture is the mature, socially generalized domain of the telic organization of reality, populated by practices, narratives, and artifacts that are cathected as ends in themselves, but nevertheless as social, external, objective. It offers repetition or re-presentation of the ends in terms of which the world and society attain intelligible and meaningful order. Culture presents the world as organized about those processes and things which speak to agency, hence affectivity and intelligibility, and the agent as a thing in that world which exists in continuity with that world's nexus of value. Culture is the place of a society's public drama. As such, *culture is the school of meaningful agency,* hence of the real world as it is intelligible to agents. For what we must come to

accept is the self as a source and proprietor of a cathected world, a world construed as valuable and meaningful, who is nevertheless a thing within that world. The world is ours, or more precisely, appears only in and through our projection, *and* we are in that world, part of an objective cosmos independent of us. Managing that paradoxical status is the business of culture.