The Afterlife of Genre: Remnants of the Trauerspiel in Buffy the Vampire Slayer

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It is not a question here of passing judgment on *Buffy*, and least of all from the perspective of a theological faith in a transcendent god. *Buffy* indeed deserves no small credit for revealing with exceptional clarity the theological horizon that underlies not only the genres of the action show and television serial and the video and cinematic media as a whole, but also the mode in which, at the present moment of time, the experience of reality is possible. In this respect, it stands in sharp contrast to such shows as *Seinfeld* or even *The Simpsons*, which find it too easy to revel in the comic reflexes of a violent irony, allowing the viewer, having identified himself with the demonic intrigues of a cyclic fate from which there is no escape, to rejoice in a Satanic laughter. Moreover, because of the force with which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with its splendid parade of demonic manifestations, haunts its own origins, it cannot help, despite the purity with which it exemplifies its genre, occasionally gesturing beyond these limits and breaking free from the demonic circle. Some of these gestures, no doubt, point back toward theism. When *Buffy*, for example, is forced to sacrifice her vampire lover, whose soul had just recently been returned to him, in order to keep the world from being sucked into hell through
a dimensional vortex, her actions assume a moral aspect utterly incompatible with the gymnastics of the action hero. Yet other gestures point beyond theism and atheism and toward a nature that, no longer fallen, is immanently endowed with a creative potency. This is the case in the climax to the third season. It is significant that the high school graduation and the mayor’s “ascension” to a pure demonic form coincide with the centennial of Sunnydale’s founding. The town of Sunnydale, like the court of Sleeping Beauty, has existed for a century under the spell of the demonic powers upon which it was founded, and, consequently, the two courts that, together with the cemetery (in German: Friedhof), provide a show-place for the action of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, are intimately bound to secularism: to the secularized, cyclic time characterized above all by the division of human time into saecula: epochal periods of one-hundred years. For these reasons, the killing of the mayor and the destruction of the high school do not merely defer one more catastrophe, but involve the catastrophic destruction of a spatialized, secularized catastrophic time. That the destruction of the high school was necessary to kill the mayor hardly negates its figural significance. Just as the temple, the site of the high priest’s machinations, quakes and falls
at the conclusion of *La Bayadère*, the high school’s incineration and collapse signals the fall of the demonic court and the rupture of its hold over creation. It announces nothing less than the coming of new gods: not the restoration of the creator to creation, but rather the divinity, the immanent creativity, of nature. It is of the greatest importance, moreover, that this seemingly final action, the last plot against the demonic order, does not depend in the last instance principally on Buffy, but rather on the collective effort of all the students acting *en masse*. Armed with weapons, they have for the first time become responsible for their own fate. It is as if the fall of the demonic powers had to coincide with the loss, if only temporary, of Buffy’s auratic privilege as uniquely chosen. Although she was still needed, it was in an almost passive function: acting as bait in order to distract and lead astray a demonic power whose one weakness consisted in its own fixation with the slayer and her uniqueness; or in other words, in its own incapacity to free itself from the all-too-human principle of individuation. 17

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, this is to say, should have ended with the third season. Then it would not only have discovered, but also overcome the law of its genre. Instead it went on, submitting itself to the strictures of this law de-
spite all the insight that it gained; indeed despite the fact that, caught under the glare of this insight, the genre could not persist, and that, however strictly one tried to preserve the law at a formal level, its substance and content would change. As a result, a cloud of irony swept over Sunnydale. The repetition of catastrophe, the plurality of apocalypse, becomes a sort of inside joke among characters who accepted it willingly, recognizing in it the condition of their continuing employment. The first and second season reached a pinnacle of sinister intensity with its depiction of a Satanic fraternity sacrificing high-school girls to a giant snake in return for worldly riches and power (“Reptile Boy,” 13 October 1997). But the motley band of college vampires occupying a vacant fraternity that inaugurate the fourth season—an animal house for the un-dead—appears altogether farcical (“The Freshman,” 5 October 1999). Vampires, it seems, have as little place amidst the chaos of minds and bodies becoming liberated as Cordelia and Harmony’s petty snobberies or Xander’s irredeemable goofiness.

Yet this intrusion of irony and farce is only the first symptom of decay in a show that has outlived itself. In the fourth season, the comical parade of vampires—creatures whose fierce and nostalgic sensuality make them almost lov-
able—soon becomes nothing more than a side-show for a main event that takes place elsewhere and involves an altogether different sort of intrigue. The court and staging ground for this new plotting is the university itself, whose spatial configuration already suggests the conflict that is to play itself out. Just as the high school was divided into the classrooms at the periphery and the library at the center, UC Sunnydale is organized around an opposition, now vertical rather than horizontal, between the sunlit campus classrooms and the subterranean lairs of the Initiative. Yet if in the high school, the learning that took place in the classroom was nothing more than a foil for the true knowledge found in the demonological lore of the library, the conflict vividly manifest in the spatial layout of the university is between two epistemic regimes, which each have their own claim and competence: on the one hand, a modern scientific attitude regarding reality with objective detachment and depriving humanity of all special claims, and on the other hand, a “humanistic” spirit of teaching, devoted to the cultivation of the capacities of the individual and the remembrance of the written word.

The first is exemplified, above all, by Professor Walsh. Not insignificantly, her field is psychology: the science which, touching on the
same field of concerns as the humanities, best exhibits the transformation that the world undergoes under the gaze of the scientist. For if the chemist and physicist’s manipulations of reality, couched in an exotic symbolism and involving utterly imperceptible forces and processes, retains a magical aura in the eyes of the layman, the psychologist is able to aim her words directly at the language of our naive self-awareness. Nevertheless psychology, acting on a mental reality principally through the mediation of various symbolic media, can have little direct power over an inhuman—brute, inanimate, dead or even mechanical—reality. Thus Walsh, needing hands as it were, is paired with Dr. Angleman, whose direct penetration into an inarticulate matter suggests in the most visceral terms the particular violence of the means and method of science, just as the psychologist’s disenchantment of the human psyche, freedom, and the ethical order, exposes its result.

While the scientific attitude and activity of Walsh is in no way magical—it denies all inherent mystery to nature and refuses all traditional knowledge, conceiving of demons as nothing more than a more opaque, less understood aspect of perceptible reality—its manipulation of reality is, at one and the same time, a
manipulation of signs; a form of semiosis unique to itself. Gathering up the corpses of demon and human alike, sundering limbs from the whole, it stitches these together while even adding electronics and mechanical devices, and thus encompassing the extremes of creation. Just as the allegorist’s ultimate triumph is over the human body, which it separates into parts, destroying its unity, in order to have these mean something other than their organic function, Walsh and her partner require for their work the *disjecta membra* of the creaturely world in its abundance of forms. Yet their ultimate aim is not allegory but its opposite: the resurrection of scattered corpses into a higher form of life, a higher unity. It is as though they sought, by way of the most extreme embrace of the fragmentation of a fallen and shattered nature, a greater perfection than the organic perfection of the human body. They seek, as it were, a higher symbolism by way of allegory. Integrating the strengths of the demonic, human, and mechanical, this new creation is not only seemingly invulnerable to decay, almost free from death and fear, but even capable of creating more life. It is, in other words, a nature that, through its complete saturation with the scientific spirit of its makers, knows itself in such a way that grants it power over creation,
allowing it to control the creative potency of life, freeing it from the need to project itself outside itself into an object of its worship. Whereas mankind is for the most part incapable of fathoming let alone controlling the force of life and hence still remains haunted by the thought of its creator, Adam, Walsh’s monster, is able to quickly dispense with all dependence on his origin, not merely killing his mother, but transforming her into an almost-mechanical slave: instead of the *deus ex machina*, a *machina ex deo*.

This also suggests the special significance of the name Adam. He is Adam not only as the first of a new race, but as one who still exists in a paradisial state. And indeed a paradise from which, unlike his namesake, he cannot fall. Not only can woman no longer tempt him, since he possesses in himself the power over new creation, but, animated solely by a scientific spirit, the knowledge he seeks has nothing to do with the knowledge that precipitated the fall; the fallen knowledge of good and evil. He is able to know his nature completely, without knowing himself at all; without the slightest trace of self-reflection or the moral knowledge to which it gives rise, and hence also without mourning. Unlike Frankenstein’s monster, who received a humanist education from *Plutarch’s Lives*,
Sorrows of Young Werther, and Paradise Lost, Adam (perhaps in this a most characteristic product of the new university) is not given over even for a second to brooding, but is, from the get go, a man, or rather a monster, of action.

Adam’s source of life is a radioactive core. Electricity, magnetism, and chemistry—the great obsessions of the natural sciences during the Romantic period—lend themselves to allegory, just as the biological order finds its correlate in the symbolic, which—a finite form that, infinitely reflected in itself, expresses the infinite—demands an organic structure. Yet the process of fission where the “fragmentation” of the seemingly inviolable “atom”—the degeneration not just of organic substance but of matter itself—emits radiation suggests a mode of signification in which the most extreme form of decay goes hand in hand with the creation of new energy. The fantastic promise of nuclear power is nothing less than a higher synthesis of the symbolic and allegorical, the organic and inorganic—and hence, once again, a control not just of the principle of organic life but of the divine creative act itself.

With Adam human life transcends its own most fundamental limit: dispensing altogether with ethical knowledge, the knowledge of right and wrong, it gains in its stead an almost abso-
lute power over a creative power immanent in nature. In this way, as I already hinted, the fact that he kills his mother and creator is not a sign of his fallenness and corruption but of his perfect innocence and unchallenged right to remain in paradise. Nor can we regard Walsh’s murder as the just punishment for the human hubris of trying to usurp god. The significance of her death and subsequent resurrection as a walking corpse escapes a tragic logic: it is neither punishment nor a necessary sacrifice, but her return into Adam’s own paradisal condition. All that she really loses, with the loss of reflective self-awareness and moral knowledge, is the altogether lamentable capacity to enjoy her creation in a state of exile from paradise. Moreover, her death, far from blocking her will, allows for its perfect realization. In Adam, her innermost intention, the scientific spirit, lives on purified of human desire, weakness, and limitation.

Yet the regained paradise of the new Adam belongs entirely to the demonic order. His innocence is not outside of the fallenness of creation, but occupies its innermost center. It is the intoxicating, vertiginous bliss of absolute falling: a falling that falls away even from itself, and thus can never know its own fallenness since it has lost all relation to a non-fallen point
of reference. In a similar way, the creativity that science would restore to matter by creating a form of life endowed with sovereign control over its own life-source is not a divine, but a demonic creativity. It is not a creation from nothing, but rather from chaos: the dissolution of matter into its elements. Hence for Adam, the imperative to create is inseparable from the imperative to destroy; the pursuit of life inseparable from the pursuit of death.

It is telling that while Buffy ultimately defeats Adam through an act of physical virtuosity, she could not do this alone, but needed the support of a magical spell. It is above all a good magic that opposes itself both directly and symbolically to the evil science of the Initiative. If the latter represents the extreme tendency of the spirit of science, the former is a dire attempt to hold on to a humanistic tradition whose foundations had been torn away from it through the triumphal march of a scientific worldview. For indeed, all the loves of the humanistic philologist of yore—musty books, dead languages, emblems, strange lore, even the oddities of nature—gain a new hold on life through the magician. The power these things gain, transformed into a spell, seems even to issue directly from their refusal to accept the verdict that a future time has pronounced on them. The magical spells, however
diverse and strange and preposterous in their effects, are perhaps nothing more than allegories for the ability of the mustiest antiquities to persist in the world despite their groundlessness, as though through sheer force of their aura; as glamour if not as grammar. Whereas science refuses all essential differences in kind, reducing all reality into a single homogenous field, the magician not only depends on differences of species, but on the special auratic properties of objects and even on the irreducible difference between the different languages and the absolute uniqueness of the name. In this way, moreover, the magician preserves, through his very mode of signification, human language itself, forbidding it to become a mere tool for the exposition of the “true language” of the natural world. Nor may we forget that magic and science ultimately share the same end: both involve the attempt to restore to the created world a sovereign creative vitality, though the former seeks this not by unleashing the inner forces of nature, but by approximating human language to the creativity of the divine word.

In the fourth and subsequent seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* magic and science confront each other as diametrically opposed intrigues operating at once with and against nature. Each attempts in its way to overcome the difference
between humanity and nature, either by rendering nature compliant to the human word or by dissolving humanity into a purely natural existence. Both are ultimately symbolical in character, and both, moreover, restore an immanent creative potency to the created realm, considered either as nature or language. 19

But magic is no more able than science to overcome the fallenness of creation. The mark of this is a peculiar limitation to which it is subject: it at once cannot and must not overcome the frailty of human flesh. On the one hand, as Giles explains in answer to Willow when she suggests using witchcraft to heal Buffy’s mother Joyce, the powers of magic end precisely where the surgeon’s begin. And even while it can (or almost can) succeed in raising the dead, its own ethical code demands that its practitioners refrain from interfering in the “tissue of life” and gaining a god-like power over creation. For it is in this way, above all, that magic remains a thoroughly humanistic discipline. It is radically committed to human finitude: its powers perhaps only exist to enable its foundational discipline—the refusal to forget the difference between humans and god—to appear in the clearest light. Nowhere is this so clear than when Dawn tries to resurrect Joyce. That at the last moment, her mother already arisen and at
the door, Dawn annuls the spell, suggests not merely some psychological maturation, the successful transition beyond the first stage of mourning. It is Dawn’s own *apoanthroposis*: her induction into the creaturely realm. Even though her origins are mysterious; even though she was immaculately conceived by an order of monks and exists only as a fantastic incursion onto reality; even though her life is itself a sort of dream, she is nevertheless able to become human, fully human, by accepting mortality as the human condition; accepting, in other words, that to be human, to exist as human, is to exist mortally, and that hence one can never be resurrected as human but only as something inhuman and monstrous. For the demonic itself, stripped of metaphysical mystification, is ultimately perhaps nothing else than the refusal of this insight: the denial, by conscious life, of finitude. Demons are those who have not grown up to this knowledge; whose adolescence is infinitely suspended. With demons, as with adolescents, the denial of finitude is only possible through the denial of consciousness. But there are also those demons, like Angel and later Spike, who are subject to a second transformation. They become conscious of their infinitude, and indeed infinitely conscious. Previously existing in a paradisal absence of self-
knowledge, they thus acquire an immortal soul.

6: The n\textsuperscript{th} Degree of Afterlife

Magic and science define the two poles of the conflict through which \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer}, having outlived the possibilities inherent in its genre, continues to live on. It is as though its after-life consisted in the confrontation of different attempts to restore the possibility of closure, the redemption from the cyclic and catastrophic time of the serial, that had been irrevocably lost after the end of the third season with the denial of the series’s own graduation beyond itself and its laws. Even the strange plot line of the fifth season—with the introduction of a hell-god and the more positive appropriation of messianic imagery—may be understood in this way. Like the nutcracker in Hoffman’s tale, the key is nothing else than the power to open up the present moment, rescue it from eternal repetition, and allow a new and radical turn in history (a truly historical event) through the new dawning, the arrival of new gods. And if this key, like the nutcracker, must assume human form, it is above all because it too has come too late, has missed its time, and thus can only be preserved for the future through a symbolical representation. In contrast, glory, the god in exile, is already past her time, and her