

# Creative Agonistics: An Introduction

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Every talent must unfurl itself struggling . . .

—Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest”

## I

“I am afraid that we do not understand these things in a sufficiently ‘Greek’ way,” complains Nietzsche in his essay “Homer’s Contest” (1872). By this, Nietzsche means modernity’s problem with thinking agonistically.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he refers to the late nineteenth century’s unhealthy, “softish” attitude toward competitiveness, contest, strife, creativity, and conflict:<sup>2</sup> in short, toward all phenomena inspired by the Greek *agōn*.<sup>3</sup> In his essay, Nietzsche is voicing not only an idealization of the ancient Greeks for their total incorporation of the *agon* into daily life, philosophy, art, sport, and war; he is also and more importantly projecting his own vision of an age to come in which the *agon* would recur. The age he is speaking of and to is postmodernity; Nietzsche is the agonal prophet of the postmodern world.

Not everyone shares Nietzsche’s vision for postmodernity as a new agonal age. For Jean Baudrillard, the *agon* in Nietzsche’s predicted neo-Greek format would appear to be dead or still-born. This is how we should absorb Baudrillard’s recent account,

in *The Transparency of Evil* (1990),<sup>4</sup> of current Western culture's decidedly non-creative fall from agonistic grace. In this post-orgiastic, deflated era after the loss of faith in modernity (something he sees as occurring in 1968, but which could conceivably be understood as happening much earlier), there is in the Baudrillardian vision of things no more birthing of ideas, no more new invention, no more struggle in the active sense. Where Nietzsche had once called for the "re-evaluation of values" in modernity, Baudrillard is now saying this has since happened and that we now exist uniquely in a rather repetitive postmodern aftermath or in a no-man's-land following such agonistic, creative re-evaluation. It is of course possible to take issue with Baudrillard's nihilistically inclined "black-hole" analysis of postmodernity,<sup>5</sup> where only the bleak prospect of hyperreal competition or performance exists. For Baudrillard, "total confusion" has overtaken real, engaged difference and agonal critique (8); technology has brought us to a stage where we can know only an agon of inauthenticity.

However, not all scenes of contemporary postmodern struggle and creativity are virtual or fractal in the technologically simulated sense that Baudrillard depends upon. At the same time, it is equally possible to disagree with Nietzsche's warlike call for a renewed postmodern agon out of the conceptual dullness of modernity. While most people would not dispute that these are indeed agonistic times, there seems to be a guilt-ridden, taboo-like hesitancy to name the human need to play and fight (and to play-fight) for what it is. Part of our post-Nietzschean conceptual paralysis before this characteristic has to do with the *Material-schlacht* of World War I and the Holocaust and Hiroshima of World War II, all of which demonstrated only too well that the agon in its original sense of combative honor has long been overtaken and dishonored by technologized procedures of impersonal, instantaneous mass extermination. In a parallel sense, the institutional work ethic has so overwhelmed our (late-) capitalistic society that the agonal play drive and the festivities it used to inspire are demoted, almost wholly commercialized, and openly acknowledged only when channelled into pre-accepted ritual functions that remain subservient to the routinization of postindustrial society.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the millennium, it is more difficult than ever to answer the question about what is worth struggling for and against. The issue is broader than even Nietzsche and Baudrillard have configured it. To use Fredric Jameson's phrase, the pedagogical endeavor of "cognitive mapping"<sup>7</sup> that this volume sets itself is to chart postmodernity and its relation to modernity in terms of the agonal problematic. If anything, people today are increasingly beset by a self-perpetuating, contradictory set of notions about agonal meanings and possibilities pertaining to postmodernized lives. The processes and arenas of the agon—here termed "agonistics"—are opened up in this volume of essays as a partial answer to such questions as: which aspects of existence are contestatory, and which (if any) are not? Are all forms of the agon integral to the play drive, as Johan Huizinga claims in his cultural-anthropological study *Homo Ludens* (1944),<sup>8</sup> or can some (non-)agonal environments be traced that are differential in character? If the agon is a biologically determined trait that humans have always shared with predatory-yet-playful animals, can (or should) it ever be totally transcended? What forms of sublimation does it take? How do we re-chart the agonal drive to suit the transformed playing field of human existence amidst high-tech productivity and bureaucracy, and to suit ourselves? Can any pragmatic truth be drawn from agonistic behavior's evolutionary gift of adaptability<sup>9</sup> and hence survival? How can boundaries be established and rules be set to avoid harm being done? To what degree is it ever preferable to allow open creative contest, and in which situations are restrictions necessary? What are the spatio-temporal configurations of the agon in modern and postmodern society? Where is the agon actively engaged in, and where is it passively enjoyed as entertainment or spectator sport? How does agonistics function in human discourse and artistic creativity? These are the kinds of speculative issues addressed by the contributors to this volume as well as by the major theorists of the agon that we refer to in this introduction, such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacob Burckhardt, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Harold Bloom, and Mikhail Bakhtin.

We turn initially to Lyotard, who, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), explicitly defines postmodernity in terms of agonistics. Lyotard declares that the postmodern age is undeniably agonistic

in the sense of a new liberation born of the loss of former stable monoliths in narrative, meaning, and the social bond, but for him this “delegitimation of knowledge” does not lead to “barbarity”;<sup>10</sup> on the contrary, he charts the social, creative, and educational advantages inherent in throwing out Socratic-Hegelian dialectics. This can be seen as a heraldic statement of the contemporary age: where once metanarrative and binary opposition ruled, we now have an “‘atomization’ of the social into flexible networks of language games” (17), and these performance-based language games follow the Nietzsche-Wittgensteinian rule that “to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall into the domain of a general agonistics” (10). Lyotard’s emphasis is on the introduction of the new, of the inventive, via such agonistic language “moves” (16)—“[I]nvention is always born of dissension” (xxv)—an epistemological version of Derridean playful *différance*. In a scarcely veiled attack on Jürgen Habermas’s consensus-theory, Lyotard declares that the aim of collective dialogue is not consensus but “paralogy” operating within both the “heterogeneity of the rules and the search for dissent” (66).

For Lyotard’s neo-Marxist and feminist readers, the most obvious limit of *The Postmodern Condition* is that its indubitably positive agon verges on stasis in societal terms, that it is not sufficiently politically conscious, and does not enable marginalized groups to develop their own voices or to effect collective change. In response to Lyotard’s pro-dissent attack on Habermas, Terry Eagleton, for example, critiques Lyotard for a lack of prescription and communality.<sup>11</sup> The feminist arguments of Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Linda J. Nicholson<sup>12</sup> take Habermas’s side against Lyotard, decrying the latter’s dependency on rhetorical performativity; his anti-social lack of participatory care; his silence on race, gender, and class; and the inability of his agonistic language games to differentiate between manipulative and non-manipulative uses of speech (e.g., in the abortion debate).

The Lyotardian postmodern agon is therefore perceived to be empty and meaningless unless it is also serving a justifiable, communal goal, particularly as part of emancipatory, multicultural aesthetics and politics. That is to say, advocates of cultural studies are wholly supportive of the collapse of metanarrative and the construction in its place of a non-hegemonic framework. Cultural

critics clearly perceive the vitality and inherent health of agonistic desires within and between social groups. Edward Said, for example, explains in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) how there was always an intensely agonal relation between colonizer and colonized, and how this relation was by no means one-sided.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, our present-day condition is an agonistic blend of this cross-cultural hybridity: “Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (xxv). Said is at pains to demonstrate that “culture” and “power” are at no time free of each other (57)—for culture *is* agonistic. Hybridity is the latest transformational term applied to the human agonal condition, one that no longer “isolate[s] cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain” (58). In the same vein, as Louis A. Montrose states, literature and the enterprise of literary criticism become significant for New Historicists and cultural critics primarily as “unstable and agonistic field[s] of verbal and social practices.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Chris Jencks has defined the practice of cultural studies as “predicated upon conflict rather than order. It investigates and anticipates conflict both at the level of face-to-face interaction but also, and more significantly, at the level of meaning. Culture cannot be viewed as a unifying principle, a source of shared understanding of a mechanism for legitimating the social bond.”<sup>15</sup> Contemporary analysts of culture as well as minority activists operate, then, within agonistic spheres that freely defy the former unity of Enlightenment principles which so conveniently propped up the hegemonic majority.

It is to this beneficial, essentially *creative* side of social and written agonistics under the sign of postmodernity that the attention of the present volume is turned. Aggressively agonistic behavior cannot be continually or effectively eradicated, avoided, or sublimated without strict censure; at best, under postmodern scrutiny, it can be utilized, transformed, or made self-aware. The regeneration of the postmodern agon, as displayed in the essays of this volume, is intended as a guide for the current post-Wall paradigm shift of postmodernism’s journey from the intertext to the extra-textual cultural and historical world. Rather than fading, postmodernism is changing its linguistic focus and becoming

more cognizant of social structures. The mode of the agon that we trace in this volume effectively provides a bridge from deconstructionist philosophies of language to studies of culture and history. Agonistics serves as a transition between paradigms in literary theory because it is inclusive and equally and inter-connectedly operational both in language and in society. An explicit analysis of agonal activities in our own academic arenas will prove to be a major step toward improving our self-awareness as critics of any transferences between personal and written histories, between the age we live and the books we write.

These considerations inform *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Contest* in its examination of agonal poetics and politics. The contributors to this essay collection focus on agonistics both as social struggle and as creative gesture, and demonstrate just how provocative the cathectic spectrum of agonistics can be. While the concept of the agon has been invoked by literary theorists and continental philosophers alike, and is firmly entrenched within classical studies, it has until recently remained relatively neglected—with the welcome exceptions of the work on the history of the play-concept in Western thought by Mihai Spariosu or the “méthodagonie” [*sic*] of Jean-Luc Boilleau—as the *explicit* subject of a broadly focused study of (post)modern intellectual thought.<sup>16</sup>

## II

The ancient Greeks experienced first-hand the agonal arenas in art and life, and it is this world that provides an optimal parallel context for the present volume’s more recent emphasis.<sup>17</sup> The first scholar to analyze Greek culture in terms of the agon was Nietzsche’s mentor and teacher Jacob Burckhardt, in his posthumous *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (1902).<sup>18</sup> Burckhardt saw Greek culture evolving in cycles that produced various types: “heroic” man, “colonial” man, and “agonal” man, then fifth-century man, fourth-century man, and finally, Hellenistic man, respectively. The agonal era, for Burckhardt, was the sixth century B.C. (namely at the height of the Panhellenic games at Olympia, held under a sacred truce of all warfare).<sup>19</sup> But Burckhardt’s theory that the

agon pertained only to this specific time in Greek history is something that Huizinga wishes to demote. Huizinga details how the “spirit of the contest dominated Hellenic culture both before . . . [the sixth century] and after” (73). Moreover, Huizinga states that Burckhardt may have coined the term “the agonal” but was not, as a cultural historian of the German nineteenth century, “equipped to perceive the widespread sociological background of the phenomenon” (71). Certainly, the archaic era of the agon refers by no means *only* to the ancient Greeks, as Huizinga amply demonstrates by giving countless worldwide examples—such as the rivalry and boastful generosity found in the gift-giving custom of the potlatch (59)—and by indicating how humans share agonistic behavioral traits with the entire animal kingdom. Nevertheless, Huizinga is overly harsh on Burckhardt, since the latter did in fact dare to suggest that the agon defined the entirety of Greek culture and was not just confined to its most obvious arenas, namely sports (especially wrestling and the race-events of the Olympic games),<sup>20</sup> rhapsodic singing contests, or dramatic contests held in honor of Dionysus. Moreover, Burckhardt’s theory of the agon displays an awareness of its presence throughout the entirety of Greek culture, even as it peaked during the archaic (what Nietzsche would call Dionysian) period. Huizinga perhaps overreaches in his extension of the agon to all cultures in almost equal dosage: clearly, not all cultures are as agonal as others, and no other culture in the history of the West has so intertextually defined itself as agonal as did that of the ancient Greeks.

The multiple expressions of the agon in Greek society assert the term’s significance as an enforcer of social, philosophy, and physical discipline that was applied to the benefit of all citizens. The agon is indeed visible in such varied Greek arenas as the Sophists’ competitions of public rhetoric (*agōnes logōn*), male beauty contests, drinking contests, Spartan youth initiation ceremonies, accounts of heroism in the Homeric epic, the agon of the Greek lawsuit, the Heraclitean view of the agonistically wrestling and eternally self-becoming nature of the universe, the poetic contest between Hesiod and Homer, and the Sphinx’s riddle-contest with Oedipus. As Foucault demonstrates, even the code of Hellenic male sexuality was determined by an “agonistic relationship with oneself”—indeed the agonal arena of the Greeks

was in its entirety a uniquely male phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche's Burckhardtian praise knows no bounds as he maintains that the agon represents the "supreme cultural event of history": for the agon formulated the development of healthy cultures as sites of positive, creative strife and anti-tyrannical, plural contention.<sup>22</sup> Benjamin C. Sax affirms that the agon "represents the central value system of the Greeks: for from it arises the quest for *aretē* [virtue/excellence]"; and what is amazing about the Greeks' agonistic understanding is that through it they created a society that was "at once nature and culture" (i.e., which knew nothing of the latter-day guilt of combining the one with the other).<sup>23</sup>

This indivisibility and non-contradictoriness of nature and culture in Greek society is demonstrated by Carrie L. Asman, who explains how one actual source of the agon, at least as far as tragic drama is concerned, may be traced back to the court trial of antiquity. Citing Florens Christian Rang's 1922 journal entry, "Agon und Theater" (penned by his disciple Walter Benjamin),<sup>24</sup> Asman explains how potential victims of human sacrifice could escape their fate if they successfully outran their pursuers in a diagonal race across the amphitheater to reach the altar. Rang perceives in this earlier practice the origin of the transformation from *Wettlaufen* to the verbalized altercation (*Wettreden*) of two protagonists on the stage, each aided and abetted by the alienation-effect of the chorus.<sup>25</sup> The Hellenic agonal act of human sacrifice (deed/body) was thus transformed into the contest of drama (word/representation).

### III

What, then, happened to Western civilization's agonistics after its Greek prerational apex? Nietzsche blames Socrates for having introduced "a new kind of *agon*" with his synthesis-oriented dialectics and philosophy of virtue (*Twilight of the Idols* 42). As Spariosu indicates in *God of Many Names*, Socrates favored "median [classical] over archaic agon" (174), using the techniques of the latter to introduce the scientific-philosophical ethos of the former, by adopting the Sophists' agonal art of verbal gymnastics



in his dialogic arguments against poetry as a ludic-cum-mimetic form (168–69). Through Plato’s rational form of play, the prerational agon was internalized and weakened from its former state of exteriorized social value.<sup>26</sup> As Nietzsche mythically stages it in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the agonal congeniality of the Dionysian and Apollonian art drives was subsumed by the Socratic. In Hellenistic Greek thought, mankind was increasingly separated from its instincts, which came to be depicted as “evil” in relation to the Christian “good”: in short, a process began that made the agon into something wholly negative (literally: antagonistic) rather than something life-affirming through the organic cycle of creation and destruction. Expressions of power began to get a bad name, so to speak. Michel Foucault tells a parallel tale regarding the discourses of power. In “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault explains the linguistic fall from agonal, Hesiodic grace to Platonic logocentrism: with the onset of Plato, “true discourse was no longer considered precious and desirable, since it had ceased to be discourse linked to the exercise of power. And so the Sophists were routed.”<sup>27</sup> For Foucault, there remains, however, an indivisible link between discourse and the agon (his terms here are “desire and power” [219]) that the Platonic belief-system has since done its best to disguise: “[S]peech is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination, but . . . the very object of man’s conflicts” (216).

Foucault’s thought on the history of power in fact tells us a lot about the post-Platonic agon. Foucault dedicated himself to undoing public preconceptions of power as something inevitably destructive, emanating uniquely from the “system of Law-and-Sovereign,” as he states in his *Introduction to The History of Sexuality*. He shows that power, defined essentially as the “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them,” is not a superstructural phenomenon but a producer of effects “from below” that are “local and unstable.”<sup>28</sup> In this wholly agonistic, Heraclitean-Nietzschean field of force relations, power can give rise to a “plurality of resistances” (96) in the same way Said claims for minority cultures. As Gilles Deleuze emphasizes, Foucauldian

power is “not essentially repressive . . . ; it passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters.”<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, most readers of Foucault take away with them strong impressions of the decidedly *non*-agonistic apparatus of the modern State in its various institutionalized configurations. In his depictions of the panoptic architectures of social control in the penal system, schools, hospitals, etc., Foucault has charted a trajectory of modern discipline that advocates solely the “power of normalization.”<sup>30</sup> But precisely within these arenas of repression, he detects that from the eighteenth century onward there exists a “synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise *within* the social body, rather than *from above* it.”<sup>31</sup> The question here is whether the agonistic force relations he sees simultaneously operating within repressive systems do in fact serve as sites of effective resistance (as generators of “power-knowledge” for all), so much as they end up merely legitimating institutional control.<sup>32</sup> Foucault’s agonal understanding of power from the onset of the modern age onward is too neutral for its own good. The critique of Foucault offered by Richard Rorty, for example, is based on Rorty’s need for philosophy to provide “social hope” and Foucault’s refusal to do the same.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV

Perhaps the primary descendant of the Socratic agon, and the theorist closest to most people’s clearly *negative* associations with the agonistic principle—as an exploitative will to power, or as psychic pain (the later sense of the term *agōnia*)—is in fact Freud. In a metapsychological text written in the wake of World War I and during the rise of Nazism and rabid antisemitism in Germany and Austria, namely *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud turns Nietzsche’s positive reevaluation of creative agonistics on its head and prefers instead to interpret the modern psyche as locked in an eternal agon between the life instinct, *Eros* (libido, or sexuality), and the death drive, *Thanatos*. In this dualistic-agonistic interplay of the two forces,<sup>34</sup> the death instinct is witnessed in all destructive, aggressive acts and desires, and in-

deed comes eventually for Freud to dominate the entire process of modern existence.<sup>35</sup> Spariosu has noted in *Dionysus Reborn* how Freud's theory initially requires the "primacy of Eros," but "later on it requires the primacy of Thanatos" (182). While Freud believes that the benefits of Eros-serving modern civilization far outweigh the disadvantages, he nonetheless charts how civilization imposes inevitable restrictions on the individual's sexual desires, resulting in a sociopathic impairment or neurotic inversion of the latter if these are not successfully sublimated: "In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration" (69). The concept of *homo ludens* has been dominated by Freud's deeply pessimistic vision of *homo homini lupus*,<sup>36</sup> and the consequences of Social Darwinism are not far behind.

A literary version of the Freudian spin on agonistic theory is found in the work of Harold Bloom. Bloom has basically suggested a *Leviathan*-esque literary history of inspirational wrestling between "strong poets" and an Oedipal agony or "anxiety of influence" that goads the former into creating and the weak poets into giving up. Implicitly inserting himself, in *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), into the agonistic order of those who have theorized or prophesized the agon (Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Freud, Huizinga,<sup>37</sup> and now Bloom), he displays strong traces of Freud's notion of sublimation as he analogizes artistic creativity to a neurosis with one's precursors. As he states in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), "Influence is *Influenza*—an astral disease. . . . Health is stasis."<sup>38</sup> Bloom's is indeed a theory for an Oedipally guilt-ridden, post-Homeric age: he presents us in *Agon* with a structure of creative agonistics that is—in its debt to Freud and its indirect debt to the priest-mentality of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887)—wholly a decadent, even "contaminated" one: "[O]ur instinctual life is agonistic and ultimately self-destructive and . . . our most authentic moments tend to be those of negation, contraction and repression. Is it so unlikely that our creative drives are deeply contaminated by our instinctual origins?" (99). It is possible to trace a chronological self-postmodernizing shift in Bloom's texts away from his original notion of author-to-author influence and the "desperate insistence upon priority" after the post-Miltonic modern fall (AI, 13),

and toward “relationships between texts” in which the writer’s intertextual “misreading” in the creative moment resembles the act of criticism.<sup>39</sup>

But Bloom remains resilient to change in one significant area: his faith in the literary canon as an infallible product of the agonal scene of literary production and reception has remained intact, despite its current state of siege in the age of multiculturalism.<sup>40</sup> This view follows from his insistence on divorcing literary identity from extra-literary influences that shape humanity. In *The Western Canon* (1994), Bloom politicizes for bestseller consumption the literary agon as an integral conservative support of the canon of “aesthetic value” against what he perceives as the “School of Resentment”<sup>41</sup>—whose cultural studies members are, he claims, out to destroy the agonistic nature of literature when they revise the canon to include e.g., more African-American or women’s texts.<sup>42</sup> He continues to believe ardently in the system of literary production that “cripples weaker talents but stimulates canonical genius” (10), and dismisses these alternative texts as weak. He wants to remain in a purified aesthetic realm, and will not entertain the notion that the reason a work of minority literature did not enter the canon at the time of its origin might have had something to do with its ideological suppression by a canon-forming hegemony. Bloom is hence missing the irony of the current situation: as past and present minority literature is entering the canon and changing the entire canonization process, it is demonstrating that the agonistic forces of literary production and reception are indeed alive and well and are fully engaged in the simultaneous field of social resistance.

Bakhtinian narrative theory, always a highly agonistic scene, offers a useful indirect response to the Bloomian *Angst*-ridden model. Bakhtin analyzes how words, discourses, and voices become de-privileged in their association with competing definitions and authorial and narrative voices.<sup>43</sup> All writers must contend with the agonistics of language, that is, with the dialogic nature of the single word and the tongues that recite it. Here we may refer again to Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* on the “agonistics of [creative] language” that breaks through the Jaussian horizon of expectations: “Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings, the process

behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary—at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation” (10). An awareness of the ways in which the agon operates in literary texts leads as well to an examination of the cultural and historical conditions that informed their creation. Literature not only dramatizes exchanges between voices in the text but also dialogizes with other voices of the culture through intertextual references and also by establishing for the participants in this dialogue “positions of compliance or resistance with respect to those other ‘voices.’”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Huizinga reminds us that *poiesis* has always been an agonistic “play-function” oriented in the social function (119)—comedy and tragedy were born of ancient Dionysian festivities; Greek dramas were judged competitively for the feast of Dionysus; and in German, drama is literally a *Spiel* (144–45). This is matched by Bakhtin’s emphasis in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* on carnivalization, a process of free play where “opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another”; the carnival as agonistic scene “strives to encompass and unite within itself both poles of becoming or both members of an antithesis” (176).

Bakhtin postulates a plural, dialogic self that complements his view of texts as carnivalesque polyphony. The text is produced through dialogue, involving for Bakhtin not only the exchange of viewpoints but also matters of cultural politics. The critic, in turn, defines dialogism, double-voicedness, in terms of a collision of contexts in a single utterance—textual contexts as well as immediate material (socio-historical) conditions. As a site for the dialogic interaction of a multiplicity of verbal / social voices, the text thus bears the marks of social groups, classes, and diverse discursive communities. Agonal dialogism, then, identifies the complex interrelationship of languages “when they face one another with appropriate force, and the struggle implicit in heteroglossia and stratification becomes visible.”<sup>45</sup> The act of reading establishes a dialogic tension between reader and text, text and context. In analyzing this activity, Bakhtin emphasizes the interpretative community and the concrete social and historical milieu in which the reader/critic is situated. Bakhtin’s concept

of the interpretative community is radically different from that of Stanley Fish, whose model of the operations of inter-communal persuasion precludes agonal conflict and change and is regraded from the outset as essentially authoritative.<sup>46</sup>

## V

Evidently, the agon is far from being the very opposite of community and culture, as Bloom would prefer it to be. Indeed, the goal of *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Contest* is precisely to show the agon as a practice of life and culture, not of the work of art in any rarified sphere. The essays of this volume may best be understood as agonistic contexts, arenas or applications that interrogate various aspects of the theory and history of the agon in familiar and new settings. They are arranged according to four interrelated groupings, “Contests in Cultural Philosophy,” “Psychoanalytic and Racial Conflicts,” “Agonal Aesthetics and Narrative Theory,” and “Agons of Gender and the Body”; each grouping thereby re-orientates, in an expanding concentric manner, the introductory comments of this chapter on the evolutionary history and theory of agonistics into larger areas of interest. These four comprehensive sections also reflect the diverse fields our contributors occupy: literary criticism and theory in various national literatures, intellectual history, gender studies, Jewish studies, continental philosophy, psychology, and sports studies. Their topics are even more far-reaching, ranging from criminology to chaos theory, film studies to mythicism, ancient Greece to science fiction, and Surrealism to social theory. Indeed, the wider spectrum of disciplines in which the agon is an active concept is a net extending yet further to include political science, zoology, art history, neurochemistry, materials science, and law. Each of our contributors provides rich comparative-intertextual readings of the agonistics of language and culture as creative contest. Each sets her- or himself the task of coming to terms with the acute problematic of the agonal drive, by suggesting a new ethos that best deals with the respective contextual situations of conflict under analysis. Even as the contributors to this volume are joined by their communal agonal outreach, they inevitably also disagree

both within and between their respective groupings over a definitive mode of analyzing and resolving representations of conflict. For the essays of this collection are struggling with the very notion of struggle.

Our volume opens with Nietzsche's posthumously published essay "Homer's Contest" (chapter 1), translated here especially for this volume. Nietzsche's essay, a vital *mise-en-scène* of the agon, effectively anchors the volume since it serves as a significant point of entry into investigations of agonistics in both its ancient and (post)modern contexts. Precisely because Nietzsche's essay is as symptomatic as it is paradigmatic, we have included it in the first part of this essay collection, entitled "Contests in Cultural Philosophy." This first cluster of essays posits the agon as a social and post-metaphysical agency in modern Western thought. Nietzsche's is not so much a backward-looking essay on ancient Greece as it is a wake-up call for modernity and beyond via a historicist idealization of the Greeks.<sup>47</sup> The iconoclastic function of Nietzschean agonistics serves to break up worn-out patterns of language, thought, and behavior and to invigorate genealogically those cultural and artistic practices deemed worthy of new life. Contestatory creativity in Nietzsche embraces at once literary moments of the struggle of intertextual and interpersonal influences, the educational formation of competing individuals, historical and cultural constructions, the push toward warlike transformatory stances, and the fate for the writer or performer of becoming imprisoned in language or in the historical continuum.

We leave it to Benjamin C. Sax's essay, "Cultural Agonistics: Nietzsche, the Greeks, Eternal Recurrence" (chapter 2), to provide—via the lens of Burckhardt—an in-depth interpretation of Nietzsche's seminal text on the agon as well as its companion-piece, "Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks." Sax argues that the significance that Nietzsche attributes to struggle and even violence is neither merely a playful inversion of modern values nor a vague and groundless call for an aggressive form of creativity. Rather, Nietzsche employs such terms as "creativity," "ascending values," and even "culture" in terms of his understanding of the position of the agon in the formation of archaic Greece. Mediated through the philosophy of Heraclitus, this positive notion—one that transformed natural aggression into the culturally creative

form of the agon—also gave rise to a non-Eliatic and non-Platonic understanding of the relation between thought and world. For Sax, this notion of the agon, once translated into a modern context, forms the basis of Nietzsche’s notion of the relation between the will to power and the thought of eternal recurrence. Sax concludes that in its historical, philosophical, and poetic form, Nietzsche’s agon provides one of the strongest arguments—even when unacknowledged or unappreciated—for an agonistic understanding of intellectual and artistic creativity.

Arkady Plotnitsky’s essay, “Closing the Eye: Hegel, Derrida, and the Closure of Metaphysics” (chapter 3), is a deconstructionist study of how philosophy and the act of philosophizing become the topic of agonistic interplay and transference by means of two interrelated cultural economies involved in the creative agon between Hegel and Derrida. The first is the economy of the closure or enclosure (*clôture*) of philosophy—in contrast to its end. The second economy is that of an infinitesimal proximity to and a radical distance from (specifically Hegel’s) philosophy. For Plotnitsky, the creative agon for postmodern philosophy remains a struggle under the Medusan eye of Hegel: the closure of metaphysics can re-open at any time. While Plotnitsky engages both economies in terms of Bloom’s theory of creative agonistics as the “anxiety of influence,” he also reconfigures Bloom within the matrix defined by these two economies and their interrelationships. The scene of agonal influence is here wholly transformed from the traces of the Bloomian Oedipal scene into a Derridean, intertextual agonistics that best characterizes philosophy’s ongoing relationship to the (Hegelian) precursor-texts as simultaneously divergent and convergent.

Chapter 4, the concluding essay in the “Contests in Cultural Philosophy” section, is Marcus Paul Bullock’s “Walter Benjamin: The Prophet’s War against Prophecy.” Bullock suggests through his reading of Benjamin’s letters to Gershom Scholem and the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that the site of the agon can be located, in the case of Benjamin, as an intense, inner, indeed tragic experience for the cultural philosopher. Benjamin’s curiosity drives him to discover how the world looks when tested for its worthiness for destruction. But the grand enterprise of laying bare the forces at work in cultural modernity always draws



Benjamin back to the intricacies of his own entanglement in the processes of that inheritance. The decision to take up a Marxist position only intensified these conflicts in a more overt form. Bullock goes on to explain how the Marxist demand led Benjamin to turn against his own situation as a bourgeois scholar and against his own contemplative subjectivity. In this way, Benjamin projects an idealized “destructive character” whose Apollonian serenity and youthful ability to act appears in stark contrast to his own disabling, suicidal melancholy. Bullock’s reading of Benjamin demonstrates how the letter’s self-imposed, agonal contest with the world of myth-bound modernity necessarily returned him to that troubled condition. As Bullock concludes, all such agonistic struggle involves that reflective confrontation with itself.

## VI

The essays of Part II of *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Contest*, a section entitled “Psychoanalytic and Racial Conflicts,” resituate the agon in the individually experiential fields of identity-formation in both psychoanalysis and racism. In psychoanalysis, agonistics may occur in the internal struggles of the patient as well as in the external conflicts between therapist and patient; in racism, it occurs in the stereotyping of the outsider who is culturally or racially different. As Bakhtin states, the “content of the individual psyche is just as social as is ideology,” and “ideological phenomena are just as individual . . . as are psychological phenomena.”<sup>48</sup> Evidently, the making of the Other occurs both within the psyche and without, and the process of agonal demonization is most often associated with transferentially inspired fantasies of aggression associated with sex and race. The essays of this section all contextualize this problematic in new ways.

In the first essay of this part, “Interpretation Interminable: Agonistics in Psychoanalysis” (chapter 5), Volney P. Gay re-examines Freud’s devotion to an agonistic theory of mind as anticipated by Nietzsche, with whom he shared a common idealization of the Greek models. Freud named his most famous clinical concept, the Oedipus Complex, after the greatest hero of

Greek agonistic drama. The role of the Greeks as partial validation of psychoanalysis itself also emerges when Freud cites Empedocles' doctrine of eternal strife and melds it to his own metapsychology. Gay examines Freud's famous essay "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" for its agonistic view of the human mind and of the inherent, endless struggle between patient and analyst. Gay charts how the concept of agonistic struggle helps us delineate two traditions of response to inner struggle and turmoil, especially to new discoveries about human nature. One tradition Freud identifies when he traces his thought back to Empedocles and the doctrine of eternal struggle between love and strife. The other opposing tradition is that of religious and mythical solutions to agonal struggles, wherein Gay examines the mysticism proposed by Pythagoras (or his disciples) and the metaphysics of Aristotle and Paul.

The unconscious versus the preconscious, the pleasure principle versus the reality principle, Eros versus the death instinct, civilization versus aggression—through Freud's work runs a concatenation of dualities. This is Freud's version of the agon: the notion of a clash between two antithetical entities, and the insight that this clash is a powerful explanatory key. Lorna Martens's essay, "The Institutionalization of Conflict as an Interpretative Strategy in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*" (chapter 6), examines the birth of Freudian agonistic dualism in its earliest form, namely conflict psychology, in the 1890s. The idea that the normal, healthy psyche is in conflict with itself emerges initially and tentatively in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), where Freud introduces the concept of repression, and definitively in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), where Freud "discovers" the unconscious. Martens shows how Freud initially conceived of trauma almost in racial terms as an entry from the outside. As Martens suggests, Freud then redefined his trauma theory into the more successfully agonistic battle between unconscious and conscious wills. The dream is the product of the conflict between two psychic systems that Freud adopts as a new and versatile hermeneutic tool. Martens argues that conflict psychology is the product of a convergence between Freud's hermeneutic and metapsychological projects. She demonstrates that long before Freud would anchor the notion of a conflicted psyche in the empirical antagonisms of the family

romance in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the agonistic idea of the dual psyche at this early stage served at once as a hermeneutic strategy that helped Freud interpret hysterical symptoms and then dreams, and as a model of the mind that accounted for its dynamic functioning.

The last two essays of this section provide two new arenas for revealing the surreptitious influence of racial stereotyping on both psychoanalytical and criminological methods of investigation. Specifically chapter 7, “The Jewish Genius: Freud and the Jewishness of the Creative” by Sander L. Gilman, examines contending cultural and racial discourses about creativity by analyzing Freud’s assessment of the same as an arena of irrationality and psychological abnormality. Gilman charts how Freud, particularly in response to Otto Weininger and Cesare Lombroso, challenges *fin-de-siècle* agonal representations of the essentially non-original, deviant, mad, and hypersexed Jew. Freud’s own brand of resistance takes the form of universalizing—but not normalizing—the entire question of the creative by locating such energies within the sexual drives and psychic phenomena of *all* humans, not just of the agonal Jewish Other. In this way, Freud reappropriates the potential of creativity for himself and for his theories of psychoanalysis. For Gilman, race and sexuality become blurred in Freud’s thesis, however, insofar as both the Jew and the artist undergo maskings of assimilation and sublimation.

The projection of racial and social anxieties onto an outsider or stranger is also the subject of Nancy A. Harrowitz’s contribution in chapter 8, the last essay of the section “Psychoanalytic and Racial Conflicts.” In “Criminality and Poe’s Orangutan: The Question of Race in Detection,” Harrowitz demonstrates how Edgar Allan Poe’s 1841 detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” reveals racial anxieties through the author’s curious choice of an orangutan as the perpetrator. Poe displaces the figure of the threatening outsider, a figure hinted at by a discussion of Asians and Africans in the story, onto this exotic ape. Through an analysis of the agonistics of race and the cracks in the detective Dupin’s epistemological method, Harrowitz leads us to Poe’s state of equivocation on the subject of race, criminal classification, and the semiotic detection of the criminal through the use of the orangutan. Her analysis is further contextualized through

an examination of the relation between the developing discipline of criminology (specifically, the establishment of genetic controls by the developer of eugenics, Francis Galton) and the detective genre. She also turns to Nietzsche's opposition of civilization and savagery found in his definition of agon, in order to highlight its dissociation from the oppressively xenophobic culture of criminology emerging in nineteenth-century Europe.

## VII

Part III of this essay collection, "Agonal Aesthetics and Narrative Theory," addresses the discursive-dialogic agon both in the interminable acts of creative writing and reading as well as in the literary or philosophical text itself. John A. McCarthy's essay, "'A Chain of Utmost Potency': On the Agon and the Creative Impulse" (chapter 9), is a study of philosophical, scientific, and literary creativity as it is depicted in *Faust*, Goethe's other writings, and in Nietzsche from an unusual viewpoint—that of chaos and complexity theory in the natural sciences. By means of this unconventional rapprochement of creators from different fields and eras, McCarthy interprets the term "agonistic" as designating a particular intellectual attitude that is not strictly and merely oppositional in the sense of "antagonistic." It is seen rather as a mirroring and convergence of an overall economy of existence without reducing each movement to a purely mechanical or linear relationship. Dynamically interactive and autopoietic systems thus stand at the forefront of McCarthy's investigation. His cross-disciplinary study of chaos theory in the text and in nature exposes the agonal tension that underlies creative performance both in the artistic and scientific worlds.

Elizabeth Sauer in chapter 10, "The Partial Song of Satanic Anti-Creation: Milton's Discourses of the Divided Self," examines the epic of the poet whom Bloom identified as the precursor and source of anxiety for all future poets. By reassessing John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the light of the agonistic processes of reading and writing, Sauer discusses the complex attempts at self-representation in the poem's soliloquies that challenge the hegemony of cultural and literary expression established in the epic.