"GODSELF" AS STRUCTURAL-LINGUISTIC NONSENSE

Hold it! I'm not repeating myself! By now you may be bored with the theme of language for God, but I plead for your attention to this Thinksheet on the grounds (1) that the subject is of such weight & consequence as to be worth fighting through boredom on, & (2) that the angle of approach here, viz. **linguistic analysis** rather than hermeneutics or theology, is (a) fresh & (b) a relief from & (c) addition to the other coigns of vantage, angles of vision.

1   Isn't it awesome how much we're learning about chimps' communication among themselves &, with great patience in the observers, with us? But their learned manipulation of symbols does not rise to a level that can properly be called language. Why not? Because language develops, & is acquired, <u>structurally</u>, i.e. on the bases of (1) the particular structures of the particular language & (2) a general or common frame underneath & within all language ([for two digital analogies] as a computer's frame holds its functioning elements, and a computer's hardware accomodates its software). (Noam Chomsky calls this under-within frame the "primitive" structure, "*ur*structure.")....Since our primate fellows must hump along without our neocortex, which apparently houses all this language-potential, from communicating with them we can learn (1) how it would be for us if we had to grub along on not much more than our brain-stems & (2) how much of our perceiving/responding is sublinguistic, nonrational--learnings that can help us be more modest about the reach of reason & more generous with one another, less quick to shout "Nonsense!" at one another, which I hope I'm not doing in this Thinksheet.

2   This Thinksheet's thesis illustrates the principle that any sense extended far enough in a straight line becomes nonsense: the <u>narrowing</u> of God-language to exclude the masculine pronouns "he-his-him(self)" crashes up against the linguistic necessity of constructing a self-referential pronoun to replace "himself," which is a compound pronoun ("him" + "-self"). The Eng. language does not have the structure "noun + pronoun = pronoun." Might this be an urstructure? Improbable: it occurs in no lnaguage I'm aware of. But the speculation is irrelevant for those who live their linguistic lives exclusively or at least primarily within the limits of the Eng. tongue....Humorists, esp. Jewish comedians who grew up with Yiddish as well as English, play at <u>violating</u> linguistic structures. The violation is, as in this Thinksheet's title's first word, funny, which is a good Eng. adj. for humorous nonsense. Which brings us to the occasion for this Thinksheet:

3   Challenges to my #2779.18 statement that the appearance of "Godself" in the Preface of THE GODDESS REVIVAL "was enough to tip me off that this book would be a sellout of biblical religion. The Goddess' first move against Christianity is to convince its leaders to abandon the Bible's consistent pronominal way of referring to deity [i.e., by masculine pronouns]. Irony: This antiGoddess book is protoGoddess." Was the mere use of "Godself" sufficient evidence for my conclusion? I continue to think so, & in this Thinksheet am saying something of why.

4   Pronominally, the two types of language are (1) genderless (i.e., without sexual differentiation) & (2) gendered (the full structural range being masculine gender, feminine gender, common gender, & nongender).
          Eng. is a <u>defective</u> gendered pronominal language, thus: he/she/?/it, in which the "?" represents the absence of common-gender pronouns. What is true of Eng. is true also of the urlanguages, the source-languages, of our religion, viz. Hebrew, Greek, & Latin. Gendered efforts to overcome the defect--such as "heshe" & "hisr"--have failed if only because striking the public as comical; & as far as I'm aware, no ungendered effort has been made. Conclusion: A common-gender deity is, in Eng., a high improbability, so high as to approach being an impossibility. Yet some are asking us to think what we can't say, i.e. to think a common-gender deity even though we can say what we think only by using such a linguistic monstrosity as "Godself," which will continue to strike the public as awkward-comical along with the monstrosities "heshe" & "hisr."

5   The stratagem of THE GODDESS REVIVAL & of mainline-churches' theo-   +

logical schools is to <u>flee</u> from the pronominal anomaly into the mindless-endless repetition of the noun "God." This gambit is linguistically stupid, for it <u>violates</u> the anaphor urstructure. (Languages have a way of signaling that subsequent appearances of a sememe [meaning-reference] are the sememe, i.e. the same reality. E.g., a story line is "the girl...she...she...she...," whereas "the girl...the girl...the girl...the girl" would repeatedly raise the question whether the same girl were being referred to & if so, why not anaphorically signaled ["she" being the anaphor in "the girl...she"]?)

The linguistic principle involved here is that both encoder (speaker, writer) & decoder (hearer, reader) **expect** the anaphor structure; & when it does not appear, its nonappearance produces <u>shock</u>: "God...God...God...God" is shocking, for it strikes the neocortex not just as nonsensical but as antisensical, a calculating violation of sense-making. The motive is theological; the effect, disorienting; the effects of the disorientation include discomfort & may include anger & humor.

I accuse the "God...God...God" folks of linguistic naivete overlying a pernicious though well-intended effort to demasculinize the biblical deity...... a silly hat on a heresy.

6 Both linguistic-structural levels of a particular language, viz. the lower urstructure & the upper particularities, have **self-preserving**, conservative force. We cannot opt to interdict pronouns for deity; our range of options must be the pronouns our language provides. Not many of us are going to start saying "she" for the deity; & if we stop saying "he," "it" (1) is the only pronoun we have left & (2) will force itself on us--so I'm more & more hearing "God...it," as I did today. Atheism not by conviction but by pronominal scrupulosity.

7 When the letter #2783 responds to says God is "generic, not sexual," what does the writer mean by "generic" (see also #2783.8.3)? A genus is a category with (plural) species, so it'd be oxymoronic to speak of a genus whose content is singular, e.g. God is "generic." But the masculinity of God does not derive from the generic (feminine-inclusive) use of masculine pronouns.

8 Since we can't opt either to create (§4) or to cancel (§8) pronouns, how are we to account for the fact that our religion's formative languages (2 Semitic [Hebrew & Aramaic], 2 Indo-European [Greek & Latin]) **lack** common-gender pronouns & consequently, when pronominal referencing of deities (a referencing forced by the structure of these languages), must bespeak & view these deities either as <u>impersonal</u> forces or as <u>masculine</u> or <u>feminine</u> (though a god [e.g., the biblical] may incorporate feminine qualities & a goddess [e.g., the divine patroness of Athens], masculine qualities)? Does not linguistic analysis force us to conclude that God did not find these languages' pronominal defect (all things human being imperfect) an impediment to their being *vehicles of his self-revelation*? If he wanted to reveal himself as "generic" (in the sense of both genders), he could have done so in one of the languages that have "common" (i.e., generic) pronouns. Did God err in his choice of languages, leaving it to scrupulous linguistic spin-doctors the quixotic task of compensating for the defect? Not only is their project doomed from the start, but it's based on the false Feuerbachian premise which Carl E. Braaten (FIRST THINGS [May/96] 45f)nails thus: "The gospel can only be given *to* experience [by revelation], and can never arise *out of* experience [by what Geo. Lindbeck calls "experiential expressivism"]....'creative' substitutes for traditional language" make the results "increasingly alien to the lived experience of the Church. When this happens, a vacuum is created that invites the idols of modernity" &, I add, of premodernity (e.g., the goddess, the Earth Mother, Mother Earth, Nature subverting history) & postmodernity)....When the pencil is used reductionistically (the eraser end), what will its lead end write in the blank? In God language, "She" loves it when "He" is erased.

9 A plausible-looking but **false syllogism**: (1) Pre-feminist-sensitive language used the generic (masc. to include fem.) "he" for both humanity & deity. (2) The generic "he" for humanity is dying. (3) So the generic "he" for deity will soon die, leaving God as *exclusively* masculine. The syllogism falsely assumes (1) a tight pronominal interconnect beteen heaven/earth, (2) a greater formative force than pronouns, among the parts of speech, have, & (3) that the biblical femininity of God within his masculinity is too weak to continue to nuance "he" for God.