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GIRARD

things hidden since the foundation of the world

ATHLONE CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN THINKERS

RENÉ GIRARD

Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World

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BOOK I

FUNDAMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Man differs from the other animals in his greater aptitude for imitation.
Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4

I saw a vision of us move in the dark:
all that we did or dreamed of
Regarded each other, the man pursued the woman,
the woman clung to the man, warriors and
kings
Strained at each other in the darkness, all
loved or fought inward, each one of the lost
people
Sought the eyes of another that another should
praise him; sought never his own but
another's; the net of desire
Had every nerve drawn to the center, so that
they writhed like a full draught of fishes,
all matted
In the one mesh; when they look backward they
see only a man standing at the beginning,
Or forward, a man at the end; or if upward, men
in the shining bitter sky striding and
feasting,
Whom you call Gods

Robinson Jeffers, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*

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take the form of the disappearance of questions when their non-pertinence has finally been recognized. People attempt to convince themselves that this is the case with religion, but I believe they are mistaken. If one compares the many admirable monographs on individual cultures accumulated by ethnologists since Malinowski, particularly by the English, one can see that ethnology does not possess a coherent terminology for investigating religion. This explains the repetitive character of descriptions. In true sciences, previously described objects or accomplished proofs can always be replaced with a label, a symbol, or a bibliographic reference. In ethnology this is impossible because no one agrees on the definition of the most elementary terms, such as ritual, sacrifice, mythology, etc.

Before proceeding with our discussion, it would perhaps be advisable to comment briefly on the current situation in the human sciences, since we want to justify the liberties we intend to take with the beliefs of our time.

The period that is now coming to a close has been dominated by structuralism. I believe that in order to understand structuralism it is necessary to take into account the climate of intellectual scepticism fostered by the failure of broad theorizing. By the middle of the twentieth century there was no longer any doubt as to the failure of the great theories. Durkheim is no longer prominent. No one ever took *Totem and Taboo* seriously. It was in this context that structuralist ethnology was born, specifically from the encounter of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in New York during the war, with the structural linguistics of Roman Jakobson.

Cultural phenomena, for Lévi-Strauss, are like languages in that they are composed of signs that signify nothing if isolated from one another. Signs signify by means of other signs; they form systems endowed with an internal coherence that confers individuality on cultures or on institutions. And the task of ethnologists is to describe a particular systematic coherence and individuality. Symbolic forms should be deciphered from within, and the great traditional questions, which simply reflect the illusions of our own culture and would have no meaning except as a function of the system in which we operate, should be forgotten. We must limit ourselves to the reading of symbolic forms, Lévi-Strauss tells us; meaning must be sought where it resides and not elsewhere. 'Ethnological' cultures do not ask themselves about religion as such.

What Lévi-Strauss advocates, in sum, is that ethnology and the other sciences of man undertake a major strategic retreat. Because we are prisoners of our symbolic forms, we can do little more than reconstruct the operations that generate meaning, not only for ourselves, but for other cultures also; we are unable to transcend particular meanings in order to inquire about man himself, his destiny, etc. The most we can do is to recognize man as the one who produces symbolic forms, systems of signs, and who then confuses them with 'reality' itself, forgetting that in order to make reality meaningful he interposes an always particular system of signs between reality and himself.

J.-M. O.: Structural anthropology has obtained remarkable results in some areas. Far from being arid and dehumanized, as some of its critics have charged, the structuralist's rigour has produced a remarkable poetry in its reading of forms; we appreciate the specificity of forms of culture as we never have in the past.

R. G.: I believe that the structuralist's renunciation of the 'great questions', those posed before Lévi-Strauss in the context of an impressionistic humanism, constituted the only viable path for ethnology at the moment when Lévi-Strauss in some sense took charge of the field and radically transformed it.

Nothing has been more essential for ethnology than learning to apprehend meaning only where it resides and being able to demonstrate the inane character of certain traditional questions concerning man. Structural anthropology has definitively discredited an entire set of problems inherited from the nineteenth century.

G. L.: That is why the post-structuralists have proclaimed that after God, man himself is about to die, or is already dead; it is as if there can no longer be much question of man.

R. G.: On that point, however, I no longer agree; the question of man persists and will become more acute in the future.

The notions *man* and *humanity* will remain at the centre of a complex of questions and responses for which there is no reason to renounce the name 'science of man'. But a displacement is occurring, due in part to new disciplines, such as ethology, and due in part to structuralism itself, insofar as it designates for us, however negatively, the precise domain in which the question of man will be asked, and is in fact being explicitly asked. This domain is that of the origin and genesis of signify-

ing systems. It is already recognized as a definite problem in the life sciences, although of course it is encountered there in a somewhat different form; it is the problem of what is called the process of hominization. We know that the problem is far from being solved, but no one doubts that science, one day, will succeed in resolving it. No single question has more of a future today than the question of man.

Acquisitive Mimesis and Mimetic Rivalry

J.-M. O.: In order to think concretely about the process of hominization, it would be necessary to move beyond the mutual incomprehension of structural ethnology on the one hand, and of the life sciences, such as ethology, on the other hand.

R. G.: I believe this is possible, but in order to succeed one must take up an old problem, one not fashionable at the moment, and radically rethink it. In the science of man and culture today there is a unilateral swerve away from anything that could be called mimicry, imitation, or mimesis. And yet there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behaviour that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish. Neurologists remind us frequently that the human brain is an enormous imitating machine. To develop a science of man it is necessary to compare human imitation with animal mimicry, and to specify the properly human modalities of mimetic behaviour, if they indeed exist.

I think it can easily be shown that the silence about mimesis among contemporary schools of thought is the result of a movement that goes back to the beginning of the modern period. In the nineteenth century it proclaimed itself in romanticism and individualism; in the twentieth century it asserts itself even more strongly in the fear of researchers that they will appear too obedient to the political and social imperatives of their community. The belief is that insisting on the role of imitation would unduly emphasize the gregarious aspects of humanity, all that transforms us into herds. There is a fear of minimizing the importance of everything that tends toward division, alienation, and conflict. If we give a leading role to imitation, perhaps we will make ourselves accomplices of the forces of subjugation and uniformity.

The psychologies and sociologies of imitation that were developed at the end of the nineteenth century were indeed strongly influenced by

the optimism and conformity of a triumphant *petite bourgeoisie*. This is true, for example, of the most interesting of such works, that of Gabriel Tarde, who sees in imitation the sole foundation for social harmony and 'progress'.[2]

The indifference and mistrust with which our contemporaries regard imitation is based on their conception of it, that ultimately has its source in Plato. But already in Plato the problematic of imitation is severely curtailed. When Plato speaks of imitation, he does so in a manner that anticipates the whole of Western thought. The examples he selects for us are consistently limited to *representation* – to types of behaviour, manners, individual or collective habit, as well as words, phrases, and ways of speaking.

What is missing in Plato's account of imitation is any reference to kinds of behaviour involved in appropriation. Now it is obvious that appropriation figures formidably in the behaviour of human beings, as it does in that of all living beings, and that such behaviour can be copied. There is no reason to exclude appropriation from imitation; Plato nonetheless does just this, and the omission passes unnoticed because all of his successors, beginning with Aristotle, have followed his lead. It was Plato who determined once and for all the cultural meaning of imitation, but this meaning is truncated, torn from the essential dimension of acquisitive behaviour, which is also the dimension of conflict. If the behaviour of certain higher mammals, particularly the apes, seems to foreshadow human behaviour, it does so almost exclusively, perhaps, because the role of acquisitive mimesis is so important in their behaviour, although it is not as central as it is for human beings. If one ape observes another reach for an object, it is immediately tempted to imitate the gesture. It also happens that the animal visibly resists the temptation, and if the imitative gesture amuses us by reminding us of human beings, the failure to complete it, that is to say the repression of what already can be nearly defined as a desire, amuses us even more. It makes the animal a sort of brother to us by showing it subject to the same fundamental rule as humanity—that of preventing conflict, which the convergence of two or several avid hands toward one and the same object cannot help but provoke.

It is certainly no accident that the type of behaviour systematically excluded from all discussions of imitation, from Plato onward, is one that one cannot consider for a moment without being struck by the flagrant inaccuracy and mythical character of a conception that makes

imitation a 'faculty' and ascribes to it only gregarious and pacifying effects. If imitation does indeed play the fundamental role for man, as everything seems to indicate, there must certainly exist an acquisitive imitation, or, if one prefers, a possessive mimesis whose effects and consequences should be carefully studied and considered.

One might object that in children – as in animals – the existence of acquisitive imitation has been recognized by researchers. This can be verified experimentally. Place a certain number of identical toys in a room with the same number of children; there is every chance that the toys will not be distributed without quarrels.

An equivalent situation rarely occurs among adults. That does not mean that mimetic rivalry no longer exists among them; perhaps it exists more than ever, but adults, like the apes, have learned to fear and repress rivalry, at least in its crudest, most obvious and most immediately recognizable forms.

G. L.: A good part of what we call politeness consists in self-effacement before another in order to avoid mimetic rivalry. But mimetic rivalry is a persistent phenomenon and can often reappear precisely where one believes it has been successfully suppressed, as, for instance, when the self-effacement of politeness itself becomes rivalry, which is a well-known comic technique. . .

R. G.: In certain cultures this type of phenomenon can take on considerable importance, as in the potlatch, in which acquisitive mimesis is inverted into a mimesis of renunciation and is capable, like its opposite, of attaining a disastrous intensity.[3]

Even these brief remarks suggest that the repression of acquisitive mimesis must constitute a serious concern for human and also for animal societies; it is a problem whose solution could involve many more aspects of culture than we might first imagine.

Everything we have said up to this point is quite simple and banal, and as such not apt to attract the attention of our contemporaries. Simplicity and clarity are not in fashion at the moment.

The discovery of conflictual mimesis and its repression, in itself hardly very surprising, nonetheless immediately threatens various dogmas of contemporary thought. Psychoanalysis tells us that repression is a human characteristic *par excellence*, and that the Oedipus complex makes it possible. Yet we have just mentioned that in certain animals one can observe the provocation and almost immediate re-

tual autonomy, a specificity that is utterly unknown to primitive societies. We tend to focus on the individual act, whereas primitive societies attach only limited importance to it and have essentially pragmatic reasons for refusing to isolate such an act from its context. This context is one of violence. What permits us to conceive abstractly of an act of violence and to view it as an isolated crime is the power of a judicial institution that transcends all antagonists. If the transcendence of the judicial institution is no longer there, if the institution loses its efficacy or becomes incapable of commanding respect, the imitative and repetitious character of violence becomes manifest once more; the imitative character of violence is in fact most manifest in explicit violence, where it acquires a formal perfection it had not previously possessed. At the level of the blood feud, in fact, there is always only one act, murder, which is performed in the same way for the same reasons, in vengeful imitation of the preceding murder. And this imitation propagates itself by degrees. It becomes a duty for distant relatives who had nothing to do with the original act, if in fact an original act can be identified; it surpasses limits in space and time and leaves destruction everywhere in its wake; it moves from generation to generation. In such cases, in its perfection and paroxysm mimesis becomes a chain reaction of vengeance, in which human beings are constrained to the monotonous repetition of homicide.[4] Vengeance turns them into *doubles*.

J.-M. O.: In your view, then, prohibitions are evidence of a knowledge that we lack. Our inability to see their common denominator corresponds to our ignorance of the primary role of mimetic behaviour in human conflict. Reciprocal violence is an escalation of mimetic rivalry, and the more divisive it is, the more *uniform* its result.

R. G.: Of course. We can interpret prohibitions when we take into account what we have just said concerning imitation and appropriation.

Certainly the assertion that primitive prohibitions demonstrate more knowledge of human violence than does our social science is somewhat paradoxical, the more so since certain prohibitions are truly absurd, such as the one regarding twins, or the fear of mirrors. The simple illogicality of the prohibition, however, confirms rather than weakens our thesis, for in the light of mimetic conflict one can very well understand why certain absurd prohibitions should exist, or, in other words, why certain primitive societies judge twins and mirrors to be nearly as dangerous as vengeance. In the case of vengeance, as in the former ex-

amples, two phenomena reproduce themselves mimetically in a way analogous to two individuals that imitate one another, and any mimetic reproduction suggests violence or is seen as a possible cause of violence. The proof that the primitive thinks this way is the kind of precaution taken to insure against any mimetic propagation of twins. They are eliminated as non-violently as possible so that the response to the mimetic seduction of these doubles is held to a minimum. The parents and sometimes the neighbours of twins are subject to strictures that clearly reveal the fear of spreading violence.[5]

G. L.: How do you account for the obvious concern in many primitive religions with natural catastrophes, such as floods or droughts? They have nothing to do with mimetic desire.

R. G.: Prohibitions are intended to keep distant or to remove anything that threatens the community. The most external and unpredictable threats, such as droughts, floods, or epidemics, are roughly equated – often on the basis of resemblances in their ways of spreading and propagating – with the deterioration of human relations at the heart of the community and with a shift toward reciprocal violence. The rising of flood water, for example, the gradual spreading of the effects of a drought, and especially the spread of contagious disease, resemble mimetic propagation.

Until now thinkers have always centred religious systems on the effects of external threats and natural catastrophes, or in the explanation of natural and cosmic phenomena. In my opinion, mimetic violence is at the heart of the system. We need to see what results can be obtained if we suppose that such violence is in effect the motor of the religious system. Little effort has been made in this direction and yet the results are surprising.

I believe that this path of inquiry will allow us to solve the enigmas one by one. So I do not claim that the fear of natural catastrophe plays no role whatsoever in religion. The fact that flood and epidemic serve as metaphors for mimetic violence does not mean that real floods and epidemics are not objects of religious interpretation, but that they are perceived primarily as the result of the transgression of prohibitions against mimetic behaviour, be it that of human beings or of the divinity itself, which can also transgress, often in order to punish human beings for having been the first to do so.

The point is that we must emphasize mimetic behaviour and violence

in order to understand the phenomenon of prohibition as a whole, which includes the reaction to threats that have nothing to do with relations among members of the community.

J.-M. O.: Earlier you emphasized the formal unity of prohibitions; the structure of symmetrical and identical reproduction, the absence of difference, these are always perceived as terrifying. The prohibition against twins, then, would amount to a mythic translation of the relation of doubles.[6] But why should the doubles appear precisely in the guise of twins? You assert that there is a knowledge of mimetic desire at the origin of the prohibition, a knowledge that escapes us; if that is the case, what is to keep the doubles from appearing as real doubles?

R. G.: The knowledge contained in the prohibition is superior to ours, but it is nonetheless very incomplete. It is incapable of formulating itself theoretically, and, above all, it has been transfigured by representations of the sacred. Mimetic conflict is there, however, as the true common denominator of prohibitions. But it rarely appears as such; it is always interpreted as an evil manifestation of the sacred, the vengeful fury of the divinity. We will see why.

Early anthropologists perceived something of the religious character of mimesis and spoke of *imitative magic*; for instance, many primitives guard against having clippings of their hair or nails fall into the hands of potential adversaries. Any part of the body that can be detached, no matter how small or insignificant, is a potential double and therefore a threat of violence. But the presence of the *double itself* is what counts, and not the harm that might come once an enemy possesses it – like the doll figure of an adversary that one sticks with pins. In such magic we see inessential and perhaps late developments that occur at a time when the danger of a double as such has diminished and when the magician, in his relation to religion, knows almost as little as contemporary ethnology. Magic is never more than a poor use of the dangerous properties of mimesis.

If we extend our observations we see that so-called imitative magic is much too narrow an interpretation of the prohibitions that cover mimetic phenomena. One would have to study closely, in this context, those religions that prohibit *all images*, as well as many other phenomena that one would not think of relating to the primitive prohibition but that remain quite close to it nonetheless, such as the fascination and fear inspired, in many traditional societies, by the theatre and actors.

J.-M. O.: When you bring these topics together it is impossible not to think of a philosophy in which they are all related; I mean the work of Plato, of course.

R. G.: Plato's hostility toward mimesis is an essential aspect of his work and it should not be seen as confined, as it always is, to his criticism of art. If Plato mistrusts art it is because art is a form of mimesis, and not the reverse. He shares with primitive peoples a terror of mimesis that has yet to be sufficiently explained.

If Plato is unique in the history of philosophy because of his fear of mimesis, he is for the same reason closer than anyone to what is essential, closer than primitive religion itself. Yet Plato is also deceived by mimesis because he cannot succeed in understanding his fear, he never uncovers its empirical reason for being. Plato never relates conflict to acquisitive mimesis, that is, with the object that the two mimetic rivals attempt to wrest from one another because they designate it as desirable to one another.

When, in *The Republic*, Plato describes the undifferentiating and violent effects of mimesis, one can note the emergence of the theme of twins and also that of the mirror. It must be admitted that this is remarkable, but then no one has ever attempted to read Plato in the light of ethnology. And yet precisely such a reading is necessary in order truly to 'deconstruct' any 'metaphysics'. Aside from the pre-Socratics, to whom Heidegger and contemporary Heideggerean thought return, there is only religion, and one must understand religion in order to understand philosophy. Since the attempt to understand religion on the basis of philosophy has failed, we ought to try the reverse method and read philosophy in the light of religion.

G. L.: In a discussion of *Violence and the Sacred*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe criticizes you for presenting a Plato who does not understand what you yourself understand, whereas in reality, according to his critique, Plato understands these matters very well, and the writers to whom you attribute a superior knowledge, such as Cervantes or Shakespeare, are inscribed in a 'Platonic closure'.[7]

R. G.: Lacoue-Labarthe mistakenly assimilates the theory of mimetic desire to a Hegelian conception of desire. But one should not be surprised if Lacoue-Labarthe is unable to see where Plato fails with regard to mimetic rivalry. Where Plato fails is exactly where he fails as

well, right at the heart of the matter – the origin of mimetic rivalry in acquisitive mimesis. Our point of departure is the object; we cannot stress this enough even though no one understands it, apparently. Yet it must be understood in order to make clear that we are not philosophizing.

One has only to read the episode in *Don Quixote* in which the barber's basin, because it is an object of mimetic rivalry, is transformed into Mambrino's helmet, in order to understand that Cervantes has an intuition which is entirely foreign to Plato or Hegel, the very intuition that makes literature suspect because it emphasizes, through comedy, the vanity of our conflicts. Similarly, during the classical period in England, Rymer's rationalist criticism, which was influenced by the French, reproached Shakespeare for building his tragic conflicts out of trivial events, or even out of literally nothing.[8] Such criticism sees a mark of inferiority in what constitutes the prodigious superiority of Shakespeare over most dramatists and over all philosophers.

I will not go so far as to say that Cervantes and Shakespeare reveal mimetic conflict in its entirety and leave us nothing to decipher. For the moment we can say that they know more than Plato because they place acquisitive mimesis in the foreground. Cervantes and Shakespeare therefore never experience the 'irrational' terror of mimesis (although they never underestimate it) that strikes Plato, and which is a direct inheritance from the sacred. In the sacred, of course, we will find no reflections on acquisitive mimesis and its infinite consequences.

However, we have no difficulty understanding the originary role of acquisitive mimesis, since the principal prohibitions, which we have not yet mentioned, always concern objects – the sexual or alimentary prohibitions, for example – that are nearest at hand and most accessible. These objects belong to a group living together, such as the women born into it or the food gathered by it; they are thus more susceptible to becoming a stake in rivalries that threaten the group's harmony or even its survival.

There is no prohibition that cannot be related to mimetic conflict, the principle of which we defined at the beginning of our investigations.

G. L.: Your constant use of the term *mimesis* will perhaps create certain misunderstandings.

R. G.: No doubt. It might be better to speak only of imitation. But modern theorists of imitation limit its scope to behaviours that depend

J.-M. O.: But are not the differences between one culture and another too great to make a unified theory, such as yours, plausible? Surely some societies encourage or require precisely what others prohibit? Are there not also examples, in a single society, of actions that are normally prohibited being allowed or even required in certain circumstances?

R. G.: True, and what we have said thus far appears to be contradicted by other data. But if we are patient we will see that the contradiction can be explained. For the moment we have arrived at a fundamental principle, which is the antimimetic character of all prohibitions.

When all antimimetic prohibitions are considered as a whole, from those bearing on the most harmless act to the most terrible (the blood feud), it becomes apparent that they correspond roughly to the steps of an *escalation* of mimetic contagion that threatens more and more members of the community and tends towards progressively more aggravated forms of rivalry over objects which the community is incapable of dividing peacefully: women, food, weapons, the best dwelling-sites, etc.

Here again we observe a continuous process, and ethnologists, because they do not see the unity of the mimetic crisis and the necessity of avoiding it, tend to focus on specific prohibitions that appear to be independent of one another. In summary, prohibited objects are first of all those that might give rise to mimetic rivalry, then the behaviours characteristic of its progressively violent phases, finally individuals who appear to have 'symptoms' thought to be inevitably contagious, such as twins, adolescents at the stage of initiation, women during their menstrual period, or the sick and the dead, those excluded temporarily from the community.

G. L.: Does not ritual attest much more directly to the possibility of such a crisis?

The Function of Ritual: Imperative Mimesis

R. G.: This is indeed the point to begin a discussion of ritual. In moving from the prohibition to a consideration of this second great pillar of religion, we are able confirm our model's degree of correspondence to the concerns of religious societies; in this case the concern is not to avoid, but to reproduce the mimetic crisis. If the prohibition

provides a rough sketch of the crisis, ritual places it sharply in relief. There can be no doubt that the mimetic crisis bedevils all of religious thought. In fact, as we will see later on, there are few myths that, when given a more complete description, do not make at least some allusion to it.

None of this presents much difficulty to the trained observer, for the mimetic process is literally one of culture difference being reversed, unravelled and effaced as it gives way to reciprocal violence.

G. L.: Here as before, then, we need to begin with acquisitive mimesis.

R. G.: Without hesitation. When ethnologists speak of role reversals accompanied by reciprocal parody, insults and mockery, degenerating at times into organized battle, they unknowingly describe the mimetic crisis.

G. L.: Ethnologists speak of rituals that consist in 'violating prohibitions'.

R. G.: Of course. If prohibitions are antimimetic, any ritual enactment of the mimetic crisis will necessarily consist in violating prohibitions. Keep in mind that we are describing a conflictual upheaval that destroys social organization. At the acute point in the crisis men violently dispute objects that are normally prohibited; ritual incest, meaning fornication with women one ordinarily has no right to touch, is therefore frequent.

G. L.: One can nonetheless oppose your reading of ritual by pointing to the existence of rituals that are non-violent and harmonious in character, which seem to be shaped by an aesthetic impulse.

R. G.: Certainly, but if you compare ethnological descriptions you will confirm that they offer no integrative term for the extent of variation throughout ritual, from brutality and unimaginable disorder at one extreme to serenity at the other. Yet there is little difficulty in locating all the necessary intermediary forms that together constitute a range without any break in continuity; we thus hypothesize that the development of ritual constitutes a normal evolution, because rituals consist in the paradox of transforming the conflictual disintegration of the community into social collaboration.

The expressions used by ethnologists reveal this continuity. In des-

cribing one end of the spectrum, they speak of 'mêlées', discordant clamour and frenetic charges. Then come the 'simulations of combat' and the rhythmic foot-stamping accompanied by 'war cries', which are transformed imperceptibly into 'martial songs'; there are then 'bellicose dances', which give way finally to simple dances and songs. The most delicately choreographed patterns, positions exchanged while partners remain face to face, mirroring effects – all of this can be read as the purified and schematized trace of past confrontations.

In order to reproduce a model of the mimetic crisis in a spirit of social harmony, the enactment must be progressively emptied of all real violence so that only the 'pure' form is allowed to survive. It is enough to observe such a form to conclude that it is always a matter of *doubles*, that is, partners in reciprocal imitation; the model of the most abstract ritual dances is always that of the confrontation of doubles, although it has been entirely 'aestheticized'.

This means that the least violent forms of ritual do not compromise the idea of a single conflictual model. In order to understand ritual it is necessary to begin with the most manifestly conflictual forms rather than with the most pacific; during an interregnum in certain African societies, for example, violence and anarchy lead to such a degree of social decomposition that ethnologists are unsure how to define the phenomenon and unable to decide if it should be seen as ritual repetition, a type of ordered disorder, or as an actual historic event with unforeseen consequences.

J.-M. O.: Your point, then, is that all prohibitions and rituals can be related to mimetic conflict. The common denominator is the same, but there is a paradox in that what is prohibited in one case is required in another. If the mimetic crisis is indeed as threatening as our reading of prohibitions leads us to believe, it would seem incomprehensible that the ritual should be an attempt to reproduce, often in a frighteningly realistic manner, precisely what societies fear the most in normal times, with an apparently well-justified fear.

There is no innocent, harmless mimesis, and one cannot ritually imitate the crisis of doubles without running the risk of inciting real violence.

R. G.: You have given a fine presentation of the extraordinary paradox constituted by the juxtaposition of prohibitions and rituals in all religious societies. If ethnology has until now failed to solve the enigma

of religion it is because it has never completely uncovered this paradox, and the latter failure in turn is due to the fact that ethnologists have always been able to find in religion itself the means to elude or lessen the degree of paradox. This does not mean that the paradox does not exist, but rather that religious consciousness is capable of reaching a stage at which, as with us, it finds this paradox intolerable and unthinkable; it then attempts to *arrange things*, to soften the edge of contradiction, whether by making prohibitions less stringent, by moderating the ritual crisis, or by doing both things at once. Instead of minimizing the opposition between prohibition and ritual, instead of blurring the distinction – which amounts to following the procedure of religion itself, as, for example, in viewing a celebration as simply a temporary and joyous vacation from the prohibition – we ought to heighten the opposition and stress its mystery; we should admit that we simply do not understand why these things happen in this way.

Primitive societies abandon themselves, in their rituals, to what they fear most during normal periods: the dissolution of the community in the mimetic crisis.

J.-M. O.: If mimesis is a power that is at once irresistible and insidious, as both individual psychopathology and religious precautions against pollution suggest, then the ritual looks like an invitation to disaster. Either we will have to dismiss the theory of mimesis or we will have to suppose that religious systems have good reason for engaging in transgression. What could these reasons be?

R. G.: The paradox we have pointed to becomes even more extraordinary in rituals that have no fixed calendar date but are enacted in order to avert the immediate threat of a crisis.

Just as in French folklore the character Gribouille seeks shelter from the rain in a river, communities throw themselves deliberately, it seems, into the evil they fear most and believe that by doing so they will somehow escape it. Religious institutions that are ordinarily quite cautious can act with unbelievable temerity in times of crisis. They not only abandon their habitual precautions, they conscientiously mimic their own dissolution in mimetic hysteria; it is as if they believed that a simulated disintegration might ward off the real disintegration. But the distinction is dangerous: it is in effect the very difference between the original and the copy that is compromised by the religious conception of mimesis.

G. L.: Certain theories support the functional aspect of ritual. The techniques that consist in the collective mimicking of conflict might indeed have the beneficial effect of deflecting the participants' desire away from the actions that might cause real violence.

R. G.: I also believe there is a functional aspect to ritual, but then it is never guaranteed; there are rituals that give way to real disorder. Yet what must be understood above all is that the existence of an institution can never be fully explained in terms of its efficacy in any domain. We do not want to fall back into the naivety of functionalism.

The mystery is that societies that usually react to a certain danger by attempting to evade it should suddenly reverse their tactics, particularly when the danger seems acute, and take up the opposite strategy, the one that ought to terrify them the most. Whatever the answer, it is really impossible to imagine that the cradle of human cultures was once watched over, as by the legendary good fairy, by a distinguished group of ethnopsychiatrists, who, in their infinite wisdom, endowed these cultures with ritual practices and institutions.

No science or doctrine is capable of a complete invention of ritual and none would be able to construe spontaneously systems that are as constant beneath their apparent differences as are humanity's religious systems.

In order to resolve the problem we must take care not to exclude any aspect of the institution we are trying to understand. Yet in limiting our study of ritual to the mimetic crisis we have excluded something that normally takes place in rituals and often functions as their conclusion. This conclusion consists generally in the immolation of an animal or human victim.

Sacrifice and the Victimage Mechanism

G. L.: Are there no rituals that conclude without sacrifice?

R. G.: There are. The conclusion of a ritual might be limited to ritual mutilation or to exorcism, but these are always the equivalent of sacrifice. Yet there are also ritual or post-ritual forms that include no sacrifice whatsoever, not even of a symbolic kind. We ought to defer this question for the time being, however, for otherwise we risk losing our way in too many digressions. Our line of argument will not be convincing until it has been followed through to the end, so I will not be able to

that the resolution is something like a natural mechanism. This seems to me to be a difficult point in your theory, one that requires clarification.

R. G.: It is necessary to think through the logic of mimetic conflict and its resulting violence. As rivalry becomes acute, the rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are, in principle, the cause of the rivalry and instead to become more fascinated with one another. In effect the rivalry is purified of any external stake and becomes a matter of pure rivalry and prestige. Each rival becomes for his counterpart the worshipped and despised model and obstacle, the one who must be at once beaten and assimilated.

At this point mimesis is stronger than ever but no longer exerts any force at the level of the object; the object has simply dropped from view. Only the antagonists remain; we designate them as doubles because from the point of view of the antagonism, nothing distinguishes them.

If the object is excluded there can no longer be any acquisitive mimesis as we have defined it. There is no longer any support for mimesis but the antagonists themselves. What will occur at the heart of the crisis will therefore be the mimetic substitution of antagonists.

If *acquisitive mimesis* divides by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same object with a view to appropriating it, *conflictual mimesis* will inevitably unify by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down.

Acquisitive mimesis is contagious, and if the number of individuals polarized around a single object increases, other members of the community, as yet not implicated, will tend to follow the example of those who are; conflictual mimesis necessarily follows the same course because the same force is involved. Once the object has disappeared and the mimetic frenzy has reached a high degree of intensity, one can expect conflictual mimesis to take over and snowball in its effects. Since the power of mimetic attraction multiplies with the number of those polarized, it is inevitable that at one moment the entire community will find itself unified against a single individual. Conflictual mimesis therefore creates a *de facto* allegiance against a common enemy, such that the conclusion of the crisis is nothing other than the reconciliation of the community.

Except in certain cases, there is no telling what insignificant reason

will lead mimetic hostility to converge on one particular victim rather than on another; yet the victim will not appear to be any less absolutely unique and different, a result not only of the hate-filled idolatry to which the victim is subject, but also and especially of the effects of the reconciliation created by the unanimous polarization.

The community satisfies its rage against an arbitrary victim in the unshakable conviction that it has found the one and only cause of its trouble. It then finds itself without adversaries, purged of all hostility against those for whom, a second before, it had shown the most extreme rage.

The return to a calmer state of affairs appears to confirm the responsibility of the victim for the mimetic discord that had troubled the community. The community thinks of itself as entirely passive *vis-à-vis* its own victim, whereas the latter appears, by contrast, to be the only active and responsible agent in the matter. Once it is understood that the inversion of the real relation between victim and community occurs in the resolution of the crisis, it is possible to see why the victim is believed to be *sacred*. The victim is held responsible for the renewed calm in the community and for the disorder that preceded this return. It is even believed to have brought about its own death.

J.-M. O.: Perhaps we ought to try to sum up your presentation. Once acquisitive mimesis has produced a sufficient degree of division and conflict it is transformed into conflictual mimesis, which tends to have the contrary effect of grouping and unifying the community. The structure of rituals the world over suggests that it is a question of a necessary rather than accidental evolution, one linked to the nature of the crisis and to that of mimesis. Is this resolution an inevitable occurrence?

R. G.: It is impossible to say, but I am inclined to think not. It is possible to think that numerous human communities have disintegrated under the pressure of a violence that never led to the mechanism I have just described. But the observation of religious systems forces us to conclude (1) that the mimetic crisis always occurs, (2) that the banding together of all against a single victim is the normal resolution at the level of culture, and (3) that it is furthermore the normative resolution, because all the rules of culture stem from it.

J.-M. O.: All of them?

R. G.: In order to understand primitive rules, prohibitions and

rituals, one must postulate a mimetic crisis of such duration and severity that the sudden resolution, at the expense of a single victim, has the effect of a miraculous deliverance. The experience of a supremely evil and then beneficent being, whose appearance and disappearance are punctuated by collective murder, cannot fail to be literally *gripping*. The community that was once so terribly stricken suddenly finds itself free of antagonism, completely delivered.

It is therefore comprehensible that such a community would be henceforth wholly animated by a desire for peace, and bent on preserving the miraculous calm apparently granted to it by the fearful and benign being that had somehow descended upon it. The community will thus direct all future action under the sign of that being, as if carrying out the instructions it had left.

In summary, the community attempts to consolidate its fragile hold on things under the still strong impressions of the crisis and its resolution, believing itself to be under the guidance of the victim itself. Clearly, two principal imperatives must come into play. (1) Not to repeat any action associated with the crisis, to abstain from all mimicry, from all contact with the former antagonists, from any acquisitive gesture toward objects that have stood as causes or pretexts for rivalry. This is the imperative of the prohibition. (2) To reproduce, on the contrary, the miraculous event that put an end to the crisis, to immolate new victims substituted for the original victim in circumstances as close as possible to the original experience. This is the imperative of ritual.

Human beings do not understand the mechanism responsible for their reconciliation; the secret of its effectiveness eludes them, which is why they attempt to reproduce the entire event as exactly as possible. They realize that the saving event had not come into play until the paroxysm of the fratricidal struggle. This paroxysm and the unanimous resolution form a whole that religious thought for the most part refuses to disconnect, understanding that it is indissoluble. It is here we must look if we are to understand the conflictual madness, the cultural undifferentiation that constitutes the initial phase of many rituals, the preparation for sacrifice.

Lévi-Strauss believes that the aim of ritual is to achieve undifferentiation for its own sake. But this is far from being the case; the crisis is seen simply as a means to assure differentiation. There is no reason whatsoever to consign all rituals to the realm of nonsense, as Lévi-Strauss does. Order in human culture certainly does arise from an ex-

treme of disorder, for such disorder is the disappearance of any and all contested objects in the midst of conflict, and it is at such a point that acquisitive mimesis is transformed into conflictual mimesis and tends toward the unification of conflict against an adversary. Lévi-Strauss is mistaken in expelling ritual from his structuralist seminar. The disorderly pupil knows more about order and disorder than the professor.[9]

In initiation rites, for example, undifferentiation is equivalent to the loss of a previous identity, a particularity that has now been annulled. The ritual at first emphasizes and aggravates this loss; in fact, it is made as complete as possible, not because of any supposed 'nostalgia for the immediate', as Lévi-Strauss would say, but in order to facilitate for the initiate the acquisition of a new identity, of a definitive differentiation. Baptismal rites clearly represent submersion in undifferentiation, from which something better differentiated then emerges. The most humble adherents of all the world's religions have always known this; it might happen that an initiate drowns but it is never in order to drown that one submits to baptism.

J.-M. O.: Are you not coming rather close to a mystical definition of ritual?

R. G.: Not at all, since I realize that the *experience* of initiation offers only a particular perspective on the mimetic crisis, and this for identifiable reasons. The aim is to make the initiate undergo as severe a crisis as possible so that *the salutary effect of sacrifice will be released for his benefit*. This is why an initiate is occasionally lost wherever rites of initiation are truly alive, and for the same reason a fear for the life of initiates is often feigned in circumstances in which the ritual has lost its power.

G. L.: There can be no doubt that your theory resolves the apparent contradiction between the antimimetic prohibitions on the one hand and the enactment of the mimetic crisis in ritual on the other hand. In the latter case the crisis is not enacted for its own sake; its purpose is to provoke the sacrificial resolution. And if the theory of mimesis is correct, there is reason behind the apparent belief, evident in all ritual, that a paroxysm of disorder is necessary if the resolution is to occur. Rituals and prohibitions can be seen as directed toward the same end, which is the renewed order and peace that emerge from the victimage mechanism; the prohibition and the ritual attempt in different ways to ensure that peace.

R. G.: Prohibitions attempt to achieve this directly by prohibiting everything that touches on or appears to touch on the crisis, whereas rituals make the same attempt through the intermediary of the collective mechanism, which they attempt to release each time. One can thus understand the recourse to ritual whenever a real crisis threatens; there is no paradox in a disease that cures a disease. It is a question of augmenting the forces of destructive mimesis in order to channel them toward the sacrificial resolution. There is no difference in this between the so-called rites of passage and other rituals. The model that functions in order to perpetuate the status quo is also the model of change, which in any case functions to bring about the return of the same. The crisis must simply be replayed in order to bring about the resolution with its desired effects. The fact that contemporary thought is unable to make sense of these mechanisms does nothing to change their existence or the fact that they have existed as long as our world has been a world. Moreover, in a certain sense this inability of contemporary thought to make sense of the crisis and its resolution does it honour and clears the way for a rational revelation that structuralism is still incapable of apprehending. In the end such limitation is preferable to any vaguely mystical syncretism or pantheism, which, in the name of 'human nature' but nonetheless as direct descendants of the gods of violence, submit themselves all too easily to the mechanism of the sacred. I understand and share Lévi-Strauss's distaste for that sort of attitude.

The Theory of Religion

J.-M. O.: It seems impossible to solve any problem in the domain of religion without sooner or later being confronted with the opposite problem. In certain religious systems the antimimetic character of prohibitions is quite evident, as is the mimetic crisis in ritual. Behind this contradiction, as you show, there is a shared intent. That much is clear so far, but it still does not explain why this contradiction, if it is as justified as it seems, is so attenuated in certain religions, or in others seems to have disappeared altogether.

R. G.: You raised this same objection not long ago, and now we are prepared to answer it. As long as the memory of the original experience is vivid, religious thought has little difficulty with the contradiction between an enforced enactment of the crisis on the one hand and the pro-

of identifying them objectively any more than those who live within primitive religion are able to identify them. Modern society no longer produces religion in the sense of the systems that we are currently studying. For reasons that we have not yet discussed but that we shall bring up soon, the founding mechanism functions much less well than in the past, even if it has not completely ceased functioning. We speak of the 'scapegoat' not only in the sense of the ritual in Leviticus[11] and analogous rituals, but also in the sense of a spontaneous psychological mechanism. No other society, I believe, has been capable of such an insight. This unusual aptitude deserves some reflection. In fact I take this to be the essential task of ethnology, the one it has always avoided. I employ the phrase *surrogate victim* only for the spontaneous mechanism.

J.-M. O.: Our knowledge of the phenomena under discussion is increasing but remains unclear and full of controversy. Our present discussion would be impossible outside of this specifically modern situation.

R. G.: We have said that the ability of the victimage mechanism to produce the sacred depends entirely on the extent to which the mechanism is misinterpreted. In a society in which everyone knows at least vaguely what a 'scapegoat' is, given that national, ideological, or personal adversaries are constantly being accused of 'looking for a scapegoat', the mechanism is to all evidence still there but has lost much of its power to accomplish, as effectively as in the past, the role that human culture has assigned to it, or rather that it has assigned to human culture.

J.-M. O.: Your point, then, is that we can find phenomena in our midst that are *sufficiently analogous* to give us some understanding of the phenomena that must be postulated behind forms of religion, but *not enough so* to enable us to assimilate the two. In our society such phenomena are always touched with a certain self-knowledge that checks their full expression and any re-creation of true religious systems. Therefore, to assert that 'scapegoat mechanisms are not capable of founding human culture' is to misunderstand the theory. The scapegoat mechanism can be compared to the proverbial Freudian tip of the iceberg—the submerged portion is by far the more significant. But what is submerged in this case is not an individual or collective unconscious, it is rather an

immemorial history, properly speaking, a diachronic dimension that remains inaccessible to modes of contemporary thought.

R. G.: I could not have put it better myself. The production of the sacred is necessarily and inversely proportional to the understanding of the mechanisms that produce it. And we must recognize that the grain of knowledge in the mechanism of the surrogate victim does not mean that there will be no more victims, for the opposite is more likely. We cannot afford to be happy optimists. The more radical the crisis of the sacrificial system becomes, the more men will be tempted to multiply victims in order to accede, finally, to the same effects.

In *Violence and the Sacred* I did not sufficiently stress the danger of vague analogies. What is interesting in our work here is not the possibility of making impressionistic applications of the theory in order to denounce any aspect of society we please; rather, our purpose is to produce a rigorous reading of prohibitions and rituals, a reading made possible by the postulate of an intact mechanism of unanimous victimage functioning at a maximum degree of its potential, which must have constituted the normal condition for humanity during most of its existence. The paradox is that this normal condition is not directly observable.

But it is precisely because this condition is not directly observable that our thesis must be defined as a hypothesis. The term does not in the least imply that 'I don't believe it myself', as a gentleman, who must never have heard of what one calls a scientific hypothesis, once suggested in *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Our hypothesis makes sense, since the functioning of the mechanism can be easily accounted for by reasoning. One can then easily verify that all religious institutions, all notions included in religion, such as the sacred, divinity, etc., correspond to what one might reasonably expect from the mechanism if the cultures misinterpret its operation along the lines we have suggested.

In order to understand the necessity of this hypothesis and in order to justify it, one must also consider the silence that in our society surrounds all intensely mimetic phenomena. Wherever social integration is only partially complete or in a state of regression, phenomena such as trance states or possession occur frequently and attain a quasi-normal status within the human group, provided that the latter agrees to accept them.

J.-M. O.: Without denying the existence of these phenomena, we tend to minimize them or to reduce them to the modern notion of *hypnosis*; we classify them as belonging to a strictly limited category consisting of medical consultation, therapeutic application, or simple entertainment. Such classification is obviously determined by what we call our individualism or our rationalism, which is to say our misunderstanding of mimesis. We will take this up again later.

R.G.: The comparative study of ritual and non-ritual trances and other religious phenomena suggests that the accelerated reciprocity of mimetic reactions within the human group can alter not only the relations among the participants, which become *interdividual*, as we will suggest, rather than *interindividual*—that is, which progress beyond the point at which ego and other can still be meaningfully distinguished—but also perception as a whole, causing mixing and interference effects that determine the composite nature of ritual *masks* as well as the monstrosity of mythological creatures. The so-called cults of possession attempt to reproduce the mimetic trance and its conclusion in victimage because they view this, justifiably it seems, as a fundamental religious experience. Hallucination and perceptual scrambling can only favour the transition from acquisitive and then conflictual mimesis to the reconciliatory mimesis centred around a single antagonist (the scapegoat). The victim polarizes and *arrests* the hallucinatory phenomena. This is why the primitive deity is quintessentially *monstrous*.

G. L.: No one ever makes a systematic attempt to relate such indices to one another. People object that they stem from too many disciplines at once: ethnology, psychopathology, group psychology, etc. There is no single discipline that can accommodate all such phenomena, which means that we are either unwilling or unable to devote genuine attention to them.

R. G.: There can be no doubt that for many of us such phenomena provoke an indefinable but certainly unwelcome feeling. Taken together they constitute the 'undifferentiation' that horrifies and exasperates the structuralist, even though he can never do without it and must make it the obligatory backdrop of all his differentiating activity.

However, there is no reason to suppose any ideological plot to 'suppress' these things, or any obscure but faultless vigilance in the inevitable 'unconscious'. It is time to abandon all these Marxist and

Freudian bogymen, who are rather worn and moth-eaten, like mythology itself, precisely because they constitute little more than a modern return to ritual monstrosity rather than its rational interpretation. I think that our world can be characterized, for reasons not yet defined but that will continue to occupy us, by a historically unprecedented release from the power of mimetic effects on individuals and even larger groups. I would emphasize that I mean a lull, and not a complete release.

This release is extremely important but remains ambiguous in all respects, particularly in the sense of the self-knowledge of which it is capable. In spite of its unusual extension, over the last three centuries especially, its character remains elusive. For if it does in fact increase our ability to observe mimetic phenomena clearly without being 'contaminated' by them, and therefore allows us to study them scientifically, it begins by making these phenomena disappear, or by changing them. It removes what is by definition most essential to the observation it has enabled us to perform.

We would assert that this release is responsible for the current prevalence of 'psychopathology' where once there was a question of ritual trance. (This does not mean that there were no pathological phenomena.) Probably an initial release of the same kind was responsible, with the Greeks, for the transition from ritual trance to the theatrical universe. In our own time one tends to interpret ritual possession as a theatrical phenomenon, as Michel Leiris does in his study of the Ethiopians. We find the reverse intuition in Shakespeare, however, one that is rare and infinitely more radical, for it locates the source of all theatrical effects or of any 'identity crisis' in violent mimetic conflict, the source common to all mythology and collective murder, even in its most historical instances, notably that of Julius Caesar, the founder of the Roman empire.

Probably no text is more decisive concerning the phenomena of violent and collective mimesis than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but no one has yet been able to explicate fully the extraordinary message that this text contains.

I repeat that we must beware of basing our thinking about the founding mechanisms of religion on what we know or think we know about 'scapegoat' phenomena. We must attempt the reverse. We should recognize that in contemporary phenomena of violence and collective suggestion, which are incapable of attaining the true sacred, we are con-

fronted with remnants that, due to this incapacity, are all the more threatening in terms of violence.

Religious phenomena are essentially characterized by the double transference, the aggressive transference followed by the reconciliatory transference. The reconciliatory transference sacralizes the victim and is the one most fragile, most easily lost, since to all evidence it does not occur until the mechanism has completely 'played itself out'. We remain capable, in other words, of hating our victims; we are no longer capable of worshipping them.

It will soon be possible to gain a scientific understanding of these areas, and I want to stress its scientific nature. Even though we no longer have examples of the true sacred, it can nonetheless be observed in surviving, vestigial forms, which, although difficult to discern, allow confirmation of the actual structural processes.

In the example of people who habitually attract wide public notice, such as political leaders, celebrities, notorious criminals, etc., we can easily observe the phenomenon known in psychoanalysis as ambivalence. This so-called ambivalence consists first of all in attributing excessive responsibility for currents of public opinion and sentiment to figures who have been artificially isolated or placed in the spotlight. Without such symbolic individuality it would impossible for collective movements to crystallize or achieve any self-awareness, a process that never occurs without a certain inversion of roles in the relation between the collectivity and the individual, between the active element and the passive subject.

Because the popular imagination tends to polarize its hopes and enthusiasms, and of course its fears and anxieties, around a chosen individual, the power of the individual in question seems to multiply infinitely, for good or ill. Such an individual does not represent the collectivity in an abstract manner, but rather represents the state of turmoil, restlessness, or calm of the collectivity at any given moment of representation.

It is clear, in any case, that in our time the kinds of transference that one could call beneficent have become increasingly weak, sporadic, and ephemeral; they are also scorned by intellectuals, whereas malevolent kinds of transference have extraordinary power and are denounced only selectively. There is always a favoured malevolent transference which is exempt from criticism, and any criticism of it is even held to be immoral: it is the ideological opponent, the class enemy, the older gener-

own. We are not engaged in the same intellectual enterprise. It seems to me to be a sign of decadence in the human sciences to allow an invasion by the spirit of a certain literary criticism. Yet even in literary criticism there is nothing more banal and mystifying, finally, than the obsessive emphasis on the infinite diversity of literary works, on their ineffable and inexhaustible character, on the impossibility of repeating the same interpretation—on the negation of any definite statement, in other words. I cannot see in this anything more than a huge unionization of failure. We must perpetuate at any cost the interminable discourse that earns us a living.

G. L.: A harsh judgment.

R. G.: It is certainly too harsh, but we live in an intellectual universe that is all the more conformist for its belief in possessing a monopoly on nonconformist views and methods. That much obviates any genuine self-criticism. Time is spent breaking down doors that have been wide open for centuries. This is still the modern war on prohibitions that rages on all fronts, whereas it was already ridiculous during the surrealist period. As in the Greek Buphonia, we keep stuffing the old and dried sacrificial skins with straw and standing them up in order to beat them down for the thousandth time.

J.-M. O.: This game belongs to the continuing process of the degeneration of the old sacred. In order to give it a *coup de grâce*, one has to believe it contains a *hidden* scapegoat.

R. G.: We have seen that, in the founding murder, the victim is held responsible for the crisis; the victim polarizes the growing mimetic conflicts that tear the community apart; the victim breaks the vicious cycle of violence and becomes the single pole for what then becomes a unifying, ritual mimesis.

The experience of disorder and the return to order, for which such a victim is made responsible constitute an experience too intolerable and incomprehensible to allow for rational understanding. Since the victim seems to be capable of first causing the most disastrous disorder and then of re-establishing order or inaugurating a new order, it seems legitimate to return to that victim whenever it is a question of deciding what one must and must not do, as in ritual and prohibitions, the resolution and the crisis.

This *knowledge* will then take precedence over all else. It is logical to

think that the victim has shown itself only for the purpose of giving this knowledge to the community; it is logical to think that the terrifying aspect of the epiphany is designed to impress in all hearts and minds the rules that the deity wants established. The deity appears to be the founder of either a particular cult devoted to it or of the society itself. We can therefore understand why in so many myths the rules of culture spring directly from the body of the victim.

If, as a present and living member of the community the victim brought death, and if, once dead, the victim brought life to the community, one will inevitably be led to believe that its ability to transcend the ordinary limits of the human in good and evil extends to life and death. If the victim possesses a life that is death and a death that is life, it must be that the basic facts of the human condition have no hold on the sacred. In this we witness the first outlines of religious transcendence.

Our hypothesis explains not only why prohibitions and rituals exist everywhere, but also why all cultures attribute their foundation to supernatural powers which are also believed to demand respect for *the rules that they transgress*, and to sanction their transgression with the most terrible punishments.

These punishments are quite real. The transgression of religious prohibitions does in fact increase the risk of renewing the cycle of mimetic rivalry and vengeance. Religious systems form a whole in this sense, such that the infraction of any particular rule, no matter how absurd it may seem objectively, constitutes a challenge to the entire community. It becomes an act of hubris capable of provoking violence, for others will be tempted to accuse the wrongdoer or to imitate and surpass the transgression. In either case mimetic rivalry is reintroduced into the community. In societies that do not have penal systems capable of halting the spread of mimetic rivalry and its escalation into a vicious circle of violence, the religious system performs this very real function.

J.-M. O.: The return of vengeance, then, is said to be divine retribution. This would be how the religious imagination sees the deterioration in human relations resulting from a lack of respect for the religious system: that is why a divinity can be called *vengeful*.

R. G.: If the mimetic crisis and the founding murder are real events, and if in fact human communities are capable of periodically breaking apart and dissolving in mimetic violence, saving themselves finally, *in extremis*, by means of the surrogate victim, then religious sys-

tems—despite the transfigurations brought about by interpretation of the sacred—are based on a keen observation both of the kinds of behaviour that lead human beings into violence and of the strange process that puts an end to violence. These are generally the kinds of behaviour that religious systems prohibit, and it is this process, roughly, that they reproduce in ritual.

The sound empirical insight behind the supernatural disguises of prohibitions would be more readily apparent if it were not for the insipid modern fascination with transgression, the influence of which, even in the best minds, isolates and accentuates the more absurd aspects of prohibitions. The supernatural disguises themselves have a role in protecting human beings from their own violence. By linking an infraction with the notion of divine vengeance rather than with intestine rivalries, religion provides a twofold defence against them: it envelops them in an imposing mystery and guards against the mistrust and suspicions that would inevitably result from a less mythic view of the threat they pose.

J.-M. O.: The clear advantage of your interpretation is that it illuminates the effective and predictive aspects of religious rules without drawing in any of the metaphysics of the sacred. On the contrary, for the first time, this metaphysics has been *reduced* to purely human relations.

R. G.: If the sacred were nothing other than the combination of banality and nonsense, as it has been variously conceived from the Enlightenment to psychoanalysis, it would never have maintained the prodigious power it has held on humanity throughout the quasi-totality of its history. Its power derives from what it has said in real terms to human beings concerning what must and must not be done in a given cultural context, in order to preserve tolerable human relations within the community.

The sacred is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis. Far from being a leap into the irrational, the sacred constitutes the only hypothesis that makes sense for human beings as long as these transferences retain their power.

The hypothesis of the sacred reflects the human mind in its recognition that it is surpassed and transcended by a force that appears to be exterior to it, since at any moment this force seems to exert its will on

the entire community for reasons which, though they seem ultimately incomprehensible, seem nonetheless to be beneficent rather than malevolent.

The sacred is therefore not a concept whose contours can be clearly marked in language. Durkheim, for example, made the opposition between the sacred and the profane too absolute.[14] One must also not make the opposite error and proscribe all ethnological discussion of the sacred, as has been urged by some lately, for that would be to forbid oneself any study of religion.

G. L.: I would like to return to the principal objection to your theory, namely, that it reduces heterogeneous phenomena to a unity. It seems that unless they have lost all sense of what constitutes scientific endeavour, researchers ought to feel obligated either to refute your theory immediately or to adopt it.

R. G.: It is troubling to see people write: 'It works too well to be true' and suppose that the whole question can be settled and dismissed with this aphorism. Should one then conclude that the dominant currents of thought today work too poorly to be entirely false? There is no longer room for anything but discontinuities, incoherence, and disorder. On what basis is one to choose between rival theories? Is it really necessary to choose the least effective, most fragmentary theory, the one utterly incapable of integrating any given data? Indeed, one wonders what degree of incoherence is required for a theory before it is ready to be approved by the experts.

I am not entirely serious, of course. It would be better to assume for the time being that we all remain faithful to the principles that have assured the success of Western science for several centuries, and to show that in the context of these principles, the objections raised so far carry no weight.

Some people, for example, cannot be bothered with examining my particular analyses because they have decided in advance that it is impossible to reduce all religious systems to 'a single concept', or to 'force them' into a 'single mould'. An *a priori* decision determines that the diversity of religious phenomena is too great and that the contradictions between particulars are too striking for any unitary schema to be possible.

I do indeed describe an event that is always more or less the same, but it has nothing to do with a concept or mould or any sort of receptacle. In

reality it is a question of a *model* for religious phenomena, one that puts into place certain constraints, surely, and these do correspond to constants observable in real phenomena; but the model includes the possibility of infinite variation precisely because the event it describes is never concretely observed—it is, in fact, the object of a fundamental and founding misrecognition. Such misrecognition opens the way not only for difference itself, for religious and cultural differentiation, but also for the infinite diversity of concrete forms of religion. The whole theory is based on the already *interpretive* character of religious phenomena in relation to the founding event. What critics do not see, when they accuse me of forcing the extraordinary diversity of religious phenomena into a strait-jacket, is just this element of interpretation—the interpretation is necessarily skewed but its skewedness can be traced and observed.

J.-M. O.: It seems that readers of *Violence and the Sacred* have never completely understood the nature of your theory. Even if you are not wrong to insist on the 'reductive' aspect of the theory, in distinction to the formless eclecticism that surrounds us, you still risk contributing to the misunderstanding. The theory of the surrogate victim is proffered as the only true reading of an event that has already been interpreted by all cultural texts, even those that deny its existence, since any such denial is only a particularly mystified form of interpretation. In other words, your thesis is primarily not a theory of religion but a theory of human relations and of the role that the mechanism of victimage plays in those relations. The theory of religion is simply a particularly noteworthy aspect of a fundamental theory of mimetic relations. Religion is thus one means of misinterpreting mimetic relations, but modern psychology is another, as are ethnology, philosophy, etc. In your view of fundamental human relations, the texts of a culture and their cultural interpretation are automatically interpreted and traced to forms of mimesis that have gone unnoted because of the dominance of these very forms. Your position with respect to the forms of religion is not essentially different from your position on the work of Freud. All readings remain mythic if they do not take into account the radical reading of mimesis and its consequences.

R. G.: I agree. The situation of the interpreter who has the mimetic reading of human relations at his disposal is similar to that of the historian of science who is aware of the scientific solution to a certain prob-

recognized as such, in whose guilt they have an unshaken belief.

Up to this point it has been necessary, as well as intentional on our part, to present our fundamental hypothesis in a very schematic fashion. We can now begin gradually to add detail and substance.

CHAPTER TWO

The Development of Culture and Institutions

Variants in Ritual

J.-M. O.: You argue that ritual practices that at first sight seem diametrically opposed can be traced to the victimage mechanism. What examples can you offer?

R. G.: There are rituals that demand unanimous participation in a sacrifice, whereas others forbid such participation and even all contact with the victim. The immolation is reserved for those who specialize in sacrifice, priests or others, who are quite distinct on the religious level from the rest of the community.

The question is how could two such opposed methods of sacrifice be traced to one and the same mechanism, and above all, how could each of them, in spite of their contradiction, reveal anything accurate about this mechanism?

The death of the victim transforms relations within the community. The change from discord to harmony is not attributed to its actual cause, the unifying mimesis of collective violence, but to the victim itself. Religious thought tends to think of everything in terms of the victim, which becomes the focal point of all meaning; the actual principle in the return to order is never perceived. Religious thought conceives of a malevolent quasi-substance, the sacred, which becomes polarized around the victim and is transformed into a beneficent force through the accomplishment of the sacrifice and through the victim's expulsion from the community.

Religious thought is thus led to make the victim the vehicle and transforming agent of something sacred—mimesis—which is never conflictual or undifferentiated except in so far as it is spread throughout the community; its concentration in a victim makes it a pacifying and regulating force, the positive mimesis found in ritual.

Religious thought can on the one hand accentuate the malevolent as-

pect of sacrifice, the concentration of the evil sacred in the victim, or on the other hand the beneficent aspect, the reconciliation of the community. In the first case, any contact with the victim can be seen as extremely dangerous and thus is absolutely forbidden. The sacrificial immolation would then be reserved for priests, who are particularly well suited to resist the danger of contamination. No doubt these priests, after having accomplished their task, will undergo an obsessive ritual of 'decontamination'.

In the other case, in which the beneficent transformation is emphasized, the logic of the interpretation points to unanimous participation.

The two practices reveal something about the founding mechanism, but this goes unnoticed by ethnologists because they see neither the effectiveness of the surrogate victim nor the *double* transferential interpretation made by religious thought.

G. L.: Can you provide other examples?

R. G.: Here is another. Certain rituals involve often very ingenious aleatory procedures in order to deprive people of the opportunity to choose the victim, that is, to prevent any chance of disagreement.

But there are other rituals that leave nothing to chance and that make every effort to emphasize the purported specificity of the victim. Here again there is an opposition that seems to exclude a common origin. Girard doesn't see the differences, they say, or he suppresses them in order to believe in a common origin.

Once one has understood the founding mechanism, and the interpretation in terms of the sacred necessarily made by those who benefit from it, it becomes clear that one interpretation is as possible as the other. During the mimetic crisis, the victim is only one antagonist among others, a double among others, their twin enemy, until mimetic polarization succeeds in converging all the signs of crisis and reconciliation on the victim. The victim them becomes extremely significant and specific. The passage from the aleatory to the specific, from the end of doubling to the return of differentiation, occurs through the victim.

Religious thought will almost never balance the two moments simultaneously and give them equal weight. One or the other will be accentuated; in one case, then, aleatory procedures will be devised, whereas in the other the concern for specificity will dominate. Once again the two contrary practices confirm rather than contradict the violent origin,

each one isolating an essential aspect of the founding mechanism as that aspect would appear in the perspective created by the transferences.

At this point we should take note of a new and extremely important point that has emerged through our analysis: this is the tendency of religious thought to exclude major elements of the object of its interpretation; it retains only one of the contrary aspects of the whole constituted by the transferences and concentrates on a single facet of an extremely complex phenomenon.

Because of the two transferences the victim becomes the source for a practically limitless range of significations. Religious thought is incapable of encompassing or of extricating itself from such a polysemous abundance; choices will therefore be made in the midst of the whole phenomenon that will propel religious systems in different directions. I see in this the principal source of institutional variation.

Religious thought seeks the stability of difference; it will concentrate on one synchronous moment of the whole operation and accentuate it, thereby neglecting the others. However 'synthetic' it might appear to the modern mind, religious thought is nonetheless analytic from the beginning when it comes to the mystery it attempts to recall and reproduce. We will see that it proceeds with a series of successive cuts and dismemberments that have a strange resemblance to the sacrificial procedure itself, constituting the intellectual equivalent of the dismembering of the victim by the participants, for it is always a process of *exclusion*. Religious thought, one might say in summary, has always been differential and 'structuralist'. It has no understanding of its origin and progressively distances itself from it.

In my view the whole of this process belongs under the sign of the prohibition. The spirit of the prohibition is no different from the spirit of differentiation that dominates all ethnological thought and that continues more than ever in our own time in structuralism. For this type of thought reveals the contradictions between ritual practice and the demands of prohibitions.

Any realization that religion is an 'insoluble contradiction' is necessarily linked to a loss of its origin, and vice versa. For this reason the increasing realization and differentiation of human culture are also a tenacious mystification, an effacement of bloody tracks, and an expulsion of the expulsion itself.

Sacred Kingship and Central Power

G. L.: The foregoing must also apply to the incestuous and sacrificial sacred monarchies that you analysed in *Violence and the Sacred*.[15] If I follow you on this point, you claim that an understanding of monarchy is only possible on the basis of an understanding of sacrifice.

R. G.: At first there is neither kingship nor any institution. There is only the spontaneous reconciliation over and against a victim who is a 'true scapegoat', precisely because no one can identify the victim as that and only that. Like any human institution, monarchy is at first nothing but the will to reproduce the reconciliatory mechanism. One attempts to find another victim that resembles the original victim as closely as possible, which of course means not what the victim was in reality but what the victim has become through interpretation, and the latter idea is determined by the *effectiveness* of the victimage mechanism. How is one not to believe that this victim actually committed the crimes it has been accused of when it has only been necessary to kill the victim to bring about a return of order and peace? The community desires to replay the scenario of an indubitably guilty victim capable of first disrupting the entire community and then of reunifying it through the victim's death. To assure that every rule of the game is respected, what could be more simple and effective than requiring that the substitute, before ascending to the role of victim, commit all the crimes that the first victim was supposed to have committed?

We do not understand sacred monarchy because we do not see that the effectiveness of the founding mechanism structures a misinterpretation of the victim, namely the unshakable conviction that the victim is guilty, a conviction carried over into the ritual requirement of incest and other transgressions.

We share the ignorance of primitive peoples concerning the mechanism which they attempt to reproduce, but they at least know that the mechanism is real and that is why they attempt to reproduce it. In short, we add our modern ignorance on to the ignorance of primitive peoples.

The rules of what we call 'royal enthronement' are those of sacrifice; they attempt to make the king a victim capable of channelling mimetic antagonism. One indication of this is that in many societies the inauguration of a king is accompanied by collective threats against him, and these are required by ritual just as are the expressions of submission and

There can be no question of the analysis being politically naive or of it lacking plausibility. A lack of plausibility would be much more pertinent in the case of those who describe a structural matrix outside of any real social context, or for those who, for the sake of a real social context, completely ignore symbolic analogies.

R. G.: We should note that the sociological point of view is never more than a variation of the idea that ritual is secondary, something added on or supplementary in relation to institutions that in the end manage to free themselves of ritual and whose existence does not in any way depend on it.

This perspective is so natural and instinctive to us that it is inscribed in the terminology we use. We say *sacred monarchy*, as if the monarchy were primary and the sacred simply a secondary modification of it, something added to a pre-existing monarchy whose origin requires no explanation.

If one observes royal power, or even what is called central power in the most modern, deritualized state, it becomes clear that such power, even at its most absolute, is nonetheless never limited to oppression pure and simple and that it puts a quite different element into play.

Royal power is situated at the very heart of society. It demands observance of the most fundamental rules; its purview extends to the most intimate and secret aspects of human existence, such as sexual and familial life; it insinuates itself into what is most personal in us and yet, in many respects, it remains independent of the rules it embodies. Like the god of St Augustine, it is at once more intimate than our intimacy and more exterior than the outermost exteriority.

The idea is much too complex to have been the invention of power-hungry individuals; it would be necessary to attribute to them a literally immeasurable intelligence and strength, which would only amount to sacralizing them. The king is not a glorified gang-leader, supported by pomp and decorum, capable of dissimulating his origin with deft propaganda concerning 'divine right'.

Even if human beings had discovered the centrality of an at once immanent and transcendent power by looking within themselves or outward to the world around them, even if they were capable of completely inventing it, one would still not be able to understand how they could have established such power among themselves, imposed it on the whole of society, and transformed it into the concrete institution and mechanism of government.

G. L.: In other words you do not see how the most abstract tyranny or the abstract good will of the 'social contract' are able to account for the institution of royalty. To all evidence, only religion can account for it; the paradox of ritual gives rise to the paradox of central power.

R. G.: The proof that such power is not simple and self-explanatory is that in many societies, particularly in those called dual societies, royal or central power has never existed and no individual has ever completely invented it.

There can be no question of denying that power can be disguised in the trappings of religion. On the contrary, once power has been genuinely consolidated it is all the more likely to adopt such disguises, given that religious forms are always already present and at the disposition of power. But a purely sociological theory can never explain why the royal theatre, supposing that it is always theatre, should always be a *sacrificial* drama. Nor can sociology ever explain why the ritual murder always accords symbols of sovereignty to the victim.

Why is it that a prisoner of the Tupinamba, before being eaten, is sometimes made an object of veneration in ways analogous to those accorded the sacred king? How can such a mystery be explained? The symbolic link between sovereignty and sacrifice exists everywhere. Royalty is only one among many forms of the same juxtaposition, one in which real social power happens to be on the side of sovereignty. An explanation that would be valid for kingship only, such as the theory of political power in disguise, is not credible. We must find, if possible, an explanation that would be valid for traits common to many institutions.

J.-M. O.: In other words, in your view an overly sociological emphasis obscures symbolic structures, just as structuralism tends to obscure sociological realities. One should not be forced to choose between these two distortions of the real. Your theory of the surrogate victim permits their reconciliation.

R. G.: I am confident that it does. The homologies between sacred monarchies and other forms of religion are too striking to be accidental or the result of superficial borrowing.

G. L.: How would one conceive of divinity in relation to monarchy?

R. G.: I think that a fundamental difference is evident. In monarchy the interpretation accentuates the interval between the selection of the victim and the immolation; it is a matter of the victim being still alive,

one that has not yet been sacrificed. In the case of divinity, by contrast, the interpretation accentuates a victim that has already been sacrificed and it is a matter of the sacred having been already expelled from the community. In the former example, the power of the sacred will be above all present, alive and active in the person of the king; in the latter it will be absent, in the 'person' of the god.

This absence of the sacred principle immediately renders aspects of divinity more abstract and necessitates more extensive separations and divisions. Because the divinity is outside, for example, sacrifice cannot be the exact reproduction of the origin. Yet because sacrifice nonetheless remains the equivalent of the primordial event, it will generally evolve toward the idea of attenuated repetition; it will be thought to produce the sacred, but in lesser amounts that will in turn be expelled and so serve to *increase* and *nourish* the divinity. Such would be the source of the idea of sacrifice as an offering to a sacred power.

In monarchy, however, the origin is repeated in each reign and in each sacrifice that occurs, in principle, exactly as the first sacrifice occurred. There is thus no room for anything but this repetition. Ultimately there is not even a myth of the origin independent of the inauguration of the monarch. Royalty is a mythology in action. There is nothing to venerate beyond this king himself. This is why monarchy, as long as it remains linked to sacrifice, is a particularly revealing institution. Even some ethnologists recognize that enthronement makes the king a scapegoat. Luc de Heusch, for example, in his book on incest, cites the Ruanda ritual of enthronement, in which the king and his mother figure next to one another like two prisoners condemned to death, and the following pronouncement is made: 'I wound you with the spear, the blade, the boomerang, the gun, the club, the hook. If any man, if any woman, has ever perished from the wound of the arrow, of the lance . . . I give you these wounds.'[17]

Here it is clear that the sacred king is a 'scapegoat' and that he is a scapegoat for real violence and not for more or less fantastic or Freudian transgressions. Many ethnologists recognize that the king is certainly a scapegoat, but do not pause and dwell on this strange union of exalted sovereignty and extreme subjugation. They either see in it something completely 'natural', a function supplementary to monarchy, somewhat like that of the Grand Master of the Legion of Honour for our President of the Republic, or they dismiss the whole matter as something unthinkable or unlikely, even though such a conjunction of extremes can be noted, with more or less emphasis, in all sacred mon-

archies, without exception, and finally in all sacrificial institutions. The refusal to consider anything that contradicts our own notions can be remarkably tenacious.

If the principles of kingship and divinity exclude one another, at least at their origin, it is because they constitute two somewhat different responses to the basic question of ritual: How should the violent resolution to the crisis be reproduced? In kingship the dominant element is what happens *before* the sacrifice, in divinity it is what comes *after* the sacrifice. In order to understand that the two responses are equally possible we must keep in mind the polysemousness and polyvalence that were discussed earlier. The sacrificial resolution is the sole matrix of all institutions, so polyvalent that it is therefore impossible to reproduce as such and concrete rituals will always accentuate one synchronic moment at the expense of others. But the consequences of this can be predicted and one can ascertain that they do correspond to actually existing institutions.

J.-M. O.: The theory of the surrogate victim cannot be considered a fantasy once one has begun to note these correspondences. But ethnologists do not realize the plausibility of the theory because they are unaware of the extent to which they remain influenced by modes of thought that they believe they have repudiated. They persist in believing that the concept of divinity is a 'natural' one; the sacred king is held to be a kind of reversal of divinity for the sake of a political power which is supposedly independent of ritual.

R. G.: Everyone repeats that the king is a kind of 'living god' but no one says that the divinity is a kind of dead king, or at any rate an 'absent' king, which would be just as accurate. In the end there is a persistent preference for viewing the sacrifice and sacredness of the king as a secondary and supplementary idea, for we must beware of rocking our little conceptual boat. Yet what guides our interpretation is only a conceptual system dominated by the idea of divinity, a *theology*. Scepticism concerning religion does not abolish this theological perspective. We are forced to reinterpret all religious schemata in terms of divinity because we are unaware of the surrogate victim. If one examines psychoanalysis and Marxism closely it becomes evident that this theology is indispensable for them. It is indispensable for all modes of contemporary thought, which will collapse whenever what we have said concerning the king and the god is finally understood.

The Polyvalence of Ritual and the Specificity of Institutions

J.-M. O.: If institutions that are quite different when viewed from a sociological perspective but quite analogous structurally, go back to a common origin, there must have been a time in human culture when they had not yet separated. Perhaps there are still some indications of such an absence of distinction in the data of ethnology, say phenomena, to which terms of kingship and sacrifice are equally applied, or institutions that are so ambiguous they remain beyond the reach of the rigid and overly specialized vocabulary of our cultural Platonism.

R. G.: I think that such institutions exist or rather once existed and that some of them have been described, however inadequately, in revealing ways. As you might expect, contemporary ethnology takes a very dim view of such institutions, for they hardly respect the laws of differential thought. In fact the books that describe them have become scapegoats and have been dismissed as being more or less fantasy.

In the work of writers like Frazer one sometimes comes across descriptions that correspond well enough to what our theory requires. But rather than citing a particular example, I think it would be preferable to offer a comprehensive summary. Frazer describes a rather strange type of kingship in which those who hold power succeed one another through a type of election or lottery process. All the young men of the village are eligible, but rather than compete with one another and dispute the sexual and other privileges enjoyed by the monarch, the candidates flee at top speed into the bush. In the end the next chosen one is only the candidate who was slowest on his feet, the first to let himself be caught during an epic chase in which the entire community takes part. Absolute power lasts only for a moment and its attraction is never sufficient to counterbalance the certainty of being finally massacred by one's own subjects.

Contemporary ethnology rejects this kind of description because it can find no way to apply its favourite techniques of differentiation and classification. It is certainly possible to describe the event in terms of 'kingship', and because earlier authors did so they judged it to be a sort of parody. The event appears much less funny if one replaces kingship with sacrifice, but there is no reason to adopt one term rather than the other. If we will only examine it closely, we will see that the institution constantly offers new perspectives. Once we stop smiling about the sexual privileges and consider the phenomenon as one of transgression, the

ments in religious thought. In other words, wherever the spontaneous Platonism of institutional development has not been fully realized, the Platonism inherent in ethnological thinking steps in and completes the process of evolution. This Platonism is the heir of a powerful tradition that makes any independence extremely difficult. The mind that seeks progressively finer distinctions everywhere, that seeks to classify institutions in accordance with a predetermined schema, *necessarily believes* the procedure to be the correct one; it completes a process which is that of all cultural evolution. We are therefore the victims of intellectual mechanisms so deeply engrained that we cannot see the necessity of a radical revision of ethnological thought.

The unconscious decision to impute structure to ambiguous institutions is somewhat similar to the decision we allow to intervene when we are confronted with the figures that Gestalt psychology once used to illustrate its theories. If we look at the lines of a cube traced on a blackboard, perception can structure the figure as projecting inward or outward from the surface. But once one of the possibilities has become stable, our perception remains its prisoner and cannot easily switch to the other. The same is true in ethnology once we have decided that an institution has one meaning rather than another or several others.

If it is difficult to move from one structuration to another it is even more difficult to reject both solutions and remain open to the two at once, in other words to see the figure as a matrix of possible structures each of which is relevant to specific cultural forms but ultimately deceptive in that they all exclude one another.

G. L.: An ethnology that relies entirely on classification and seeks to sort and arrange institutions the way a postal employee sorts mail, an ethnology for which the last word in science is the exactness of a difference, is unable or unwilling, in the name of pseudo-rationality, to envisage the possibility of a common structural matrix. It simply refuses to consider any institution that seriously challenges its own order of certainty. The desire to classify everything leads ethnology to an unconscious attempt to forget or discredit anything that eludes its appetite for such classification. Such an ethnology is blind to the perspectives that are now opening up. The most disturbing institutions in terms of classification are the most interesting because they show us a condition prior to an already attained degree of specificity.

R. G.: There is no question of confounding everything, of seeking

out mystical ecstasy or a cult of violence. Nor is there any question of destroying specificities; rather, they must be 'deconstructed' as Derrida would say, though we must not follow his self-defeating taboo on the search for an origin. Once the mechanism of the surrogate victim has been recognized, the beginning and the end of the 'deconstruction' are at hand, since its accomplishment amounts also to a 'reconstruction' which begins at the common matrix. The genetic and structural perspectives are joined in a type of analysis that transcends the limits of previous methods.

Rather than constantly projecting evolution toward cultural specificity, we must realize that evolution often remains incomplete, that indeed it has hardly begun in the example we have been referring to. The description does not seem implausible because of any intrinsic impossibility. Our own intellectual taboos make it seem so. Such descriptions are, on the contrary, quite likely to be reasonably valid because they have been made in spite of these taboos; they present tableaux in which one can show theoretically and schematically, with reference to the scapegoat mechanism, that they have in many respects a necessary correspondence to a certain stage in the development of human culture.

Traces of the polyvalence of ritual are to be found almost everywhere, and an observer ought to gather them carefully rather than contribute to their effacement. Rather than judging such vanishing elements as superfluous or supplementary, we should realize that they can be combined with the dominant elements of an institution in a whole that will always include the same ingredients but in different proportions, at least ideally. If one juxtaposes institutions that have not been completely deritualized and rituals that are not yet completely institutionalized, one discovers everywhere that the most humble position is linked to the most exalted one. One discovers a trace of subjection in domination and vice versa.

Phenomena of this type should not be made the basis for asserting, as do Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl, that primitives confuse their own categories; nor is it necessary to say, with Lévi-Strauss, that ritual is a deliberate refusal of thought and language. The scandal should be recognized rather than rejected. But this does not mean that we must embrace the scandal in the manner of religious or philosophical thought. There can be no question of returning to mystical formulations or their philosophical counterparts, such as the 'coincidentia oppositorum', the

magical power of the negative, and the value of the Dionysian. There can be no question of returning to Hegel or Nietzsche.

We should not allow the last-ditch efforts of classificatory rationalism, which amount to the opposite of reason, to divert our attention from the essential paradox. For in most ritual institutions the structural elements that 'contradict' one another are such that, given differences in concentration, emphasis, and practical importance, it is always possible to deny, with only a slight effort at obfuscation that any paradox or contradictions exist. It can always be maintained that they are the inventions of theologians and philosophers. This temptation has accompanied the sciences of man, with few exceptions, since their beginning; one can always manage to smooth over contradictions somehow and the temptation to do so should be resisted.

The supposedly no-nonsense dismissal of the vestiges of ritual in human institutions, with its accompanying note of mocking scepticism, is the direct descendent of theology. Once religious belief is no longer a factor, the refusal to conceive of an institution's origin will necessarily take such a form, for there is no other possibility. The Voltairean interpretation, which is still dominant, makes religion the widespread conspiracy of priests to take advantage of *natural* institutions, and this view directly follows religious thought in its refusal to think through the origin of these institutions. The refusal is the same, but it necessarily takes the form of scepticism once the cults of sacrifice and the more primitive forms of mythology have died out.

Durkheim was the first firmly to oppose the sceptical obscurantism concerning religion, which is certainly why the narrowest empiricists accuse him of being a mystic. And they will no doubt claim that I am even more of a mystic, despite the rigorously rational character of the genetic model that we have begun to elaborate.

J.-M. O.: The 'deconstruction' can be completed once we have explained the genetic mechanism; we see the alpha and omega of human culture when we understand the surrogate victim as the result of the mimetic process.

R. G.: The discovery of the scapegoat as the mechanism of symbolic thought, human thought itself, justifies a deconstructive discourse and at the same time completes it. It can also explain the characteristic aspects of this contemporary discourse. Because much of contemporary thought is still without an anthropological basis, it remains given to