

## DEATH AND SENSUALITY

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DEATH  
AND SENSUALITY

A Study of Eroticism  
and the Taboo



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research. I believe that eroticism has a significance for mankind that the scientific attitude cannot reach. Eroticism cannot be discussed unless man too is discussed in the process. In particular, it cannot be discussed independently of the history of religions.

Hence the chapters of this book do not all deal with the facts of sex directly. I have neglected other questions besides that will sometimes seem no less important than those I have discussed.

I have subordinated all else to the search for a standpoint that brings out the fundamental unity of the human spirit.

The present work consists of two parts. In the first I have made a systematic survey of the various interdependent aspects of human life as they appear from the standpoint of eroticism.

In the second I have brought together a number of **independent** studies where the same assertion is considered, namely, that the unity of the whole is indisputable. The aim is the same in both parts. The chapters of the first part and the various independent studies forming the second have been under way concurrently from the end of the war to the present time (1957). This method has one drawback, however; I have not been able to avoid repetition. More particularly in the first part I have sometimes reviewed from a different point of view themes dealt with in the second part. This procedure is excusable in that it reflects the general tone of the work, since each separate issue entails consideration of the whole question. One way of looking at this book is to regard it as a general view of human life seen from constantly changing standpoints.

With the presentation of this over-all picture as my starting point, nothing has intrigued me more than the idea of oncemore **coming** across the image that haunted my adolescence, the image of God. This is certainly not a return to the faith of my youth. But human passion has only one object in this forlorn world of ours. The paths we take towards it may vary. The object itself has a great variety of

aspects, but we can only make out their significance by seeing how closely they are knit at the deepest level.

Let me stress that in this work flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement.

I should not have been able to write this book if I had had to work out the problems confronting me on my own. I should like to mention here that my own endeavours have been preceded by *Le Miroir de la Tauromachie* by Michel Leiris, in which eroticism is envisaged as an experience wedded to life itself; not as an object of scientific study, but more deeply, as an object of passion and poetic **contemplation**. This book is dedicated to Michel Leiris particularly because of this book of his, the *Miroir*, written just before the war. I wish to thank him besides for the help he gave me when I was ill and unable myself to seek out the photographs which accompany my text.

May I also say how touched I have been by the earnest and active support of a great many friends who undertook in the same way to find relevant documents for me. In this context I should like to mention Jacques-Andre Boissard, Henri Dussat, Theodore Fraenkel, Max-Pol Fouchet, Jacques Lacan, Andre Masson, Roger Parry, Patrick Waldberg and Blanche Wiehn. I do not know personally M. Falk, Robert Giraud nor the fine photographer Pierre Verger to whom I am also indebted for some of the documentation. I am sure that the very subject matter of this work and the feeling of urgency that the book attempts to meet are important reasons for their whole-hearted co-operation.

I have not yet mentioned the name of my oldest friend Alfred Metraux, but I must acknowledge my great debt to him in general as I thank him for his help on this particular occasion. Not only did he introduce me to the field of anthropology and history of religions in the years that followed the first world war, but I have derived infinite assurance from his uncontested authority in my treatment of the fundamental issues of taboo and transgression.



rise to a desire for sexual enjoyment, to the neurotic at any rate. We cannot just pretend that a state of neurosis is the **cause** of this connection. I personally believe that there is a truth revealed in de Sade's paradox. This truth extends far beyond the confines of vice; I believe that it may even be the basis of our images of life and death. I believe, in fact, that we cannot reflect on existence without reference to this truth. As often as not, it seems to be assumed that man has his being independently of his passions. I affirm, on the other hand, that we must never imagine existence except in terms of these passions.

Now I must apologise for using a philosophical consideration as a starting-point for my argument.

Generally speaking, philosophy is at fault in being divorced from life. But let me reassure you at once. The consideration I am introducing is linked with life in the most intimate way: it refers to sexual activity considered now in the light of reproduction. I said that reproduction was opposed to eroticism, but while it is true that eroticism is defined by the mutual independence of erotic pleasure and reproduction as **an** end, the fundamental meaning of reproduction is none the less the key to eroticism.

Reproduction implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings.

Beings which reproduce themselves are **distinct** from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity.

This gulf exists, for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference. If you die, it is not my death. You and I are *discontinuous* beings.

But I cannot refer to this gulf which separates us without

feeling that this is not the whole truth of the matter. It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. None the less, we can experience its dizziness together. It can hypnotise us. This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotising.

It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, **death** means continuity of **being**. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death. I shall endeavour to show, by discussing reproduction and death, **that** death is to be identified with **continuity**, and both of these concepts are equally fascinating. This fascination is the dominant element in eroticism.

I am about to deal with a basic disturbance, with **something** that turns the established order topsy-turvy. The facts I shall take as a starting-point, will at first seem neutral, objective, scientific and apparently indistinguishable from other facts which no doubt do concern us, but remotely, and without bringing to bear any factors which touch us closely. This apparent insignificance is misleading but I shall take it first at its face value, just as if I did not intend to let the cat out of the bag the next minute.

You know that living creatures reproduce themselves in two ways; elementary organisms through asexual reproduction, complex ones through sexual reproduction.

In asexual reproduction, the organism, a single celi, divides at a certain point in its growth. Two nuclei are formed and from one single being two new beings are derived. But we cannot say that one being has given birth to a second being. The two new beings are equally products of the first. The first being has disappeared. It is to all intents and purposes dead, in that it does not survive in either of the two beings it has produced. It does not decompose in the way that sexual animals do when they die, but it ceases to exist. It ceases to exist in so far as it was discontinuous. But at one stage of the reproductive process there was continuity. There is a point at which the original















**PART ONE**

**TABOOS AND TRANSGRESSIONS**

## CHAPTER I 4

### EROTICISM IN. INNER EXPERIENCE

*Eroticism, an immediate aspect of inner experience as contrasted with animal sexuality*

Eroticism is one aspect of the inner life of man. We fail to realise this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the *innerness* of the desire. The choice of object always depends on the personal taste of the subject; even if it lights upon a woman whom most men would choose, the decisive factor is often an intangible aspect of this woman, not an objective quality; possibly nothing about her would force our choice if she did not somehow touch our inner being. Even if our choice agrees with that of most other people, in fact, human choice is still different from that of animals. It appeals to the infinitely complex inner mobility which belongs to man alone. The animal itself does have a subjective life but this life seems to be conferred upon it like an inert object, once and for all. Human eroticism differs from animal sexuality precisely in this, that it calls inner life into play. In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being in question. Animal sexuality does make for disequilibrium and this disequilibrium is a threat to life, but the animal does not know that. Nothing resembling a question takes shape within it.

However that may be, eroticism is the sexual activity of man to the extent that it differs from the sexual activity of animals. Human sexual activity is not necessarily erotic but erotic it is whenever it is not rudimentary and purely animal.

*The decisive importance of the transition from animal to man*

We know little about the transition from animals to men but its importance is fundamental. The events taking place during this transition are probably hidden from us for ever yet we are better equipped to consider it than it might seem at first sight. We know **that** men made tools and used them in order to survive, and then, quite quickly no doubt, for less necessary purposes. In a word they distinguished **themselves** from the animals by work. At the same time they imposed restrictions known as taboos. Quite certainly these taboos were primarily concerned with the dead. Probably at the same time, or nearly so, they were connected with sexual activity. We know the early date of the attitudes towards death through the numerous discoveries of bones gathered together by contemporary men. In any case, Neanderthal man, who was not quite a true man, who had not yet adopted exclusively an upright posture and whose skull was not so different as ours from that of the anthropoids, did often bury his dead. Sexual taboos certainly do not date from these remote times. We may say that they appeared as humanity appeared, but nothing tangible supports this view in so far as we ought to draw conclusions from prehistoric data. Burying the dead leaves traces, but nothing remains to give us the slightest hint about the sexual restrictions of earliest man.

We can only admit that they worked, since we have their tools. Since work, as far as we can tell, logically gave rise to the reaction which determined the attitude towards death, it is legitimate to believe that the taboo **regulating** and limiting sexuality was also due to it, and the generality of behaviour that is essentially human—work, awareness of death, sexual **continence**—goes back to the same remote past.

Traces of work appear in the Lower Paleolithic era and the earliest **burial** we know of goes back to the Middle Paleolithic. Of course we are talking about eras which lasted hundreds of thousands of years according to our present calculations;

these interminable **millenia** correspond with man's slow shaking-off of his original animal nature. He emerged from it by working, by understanding his own mortality and by moving imperceptibly from unashamed sexuality to sexuality with shame, which gave birth to eroticism. Man proper, whom we call our fellow, who comes on the scene at the time of the cave paintings (Upper Paleolithic), is determined by these changes as a whole; they are religious by nature and he must have felt them as a background to his life.

*The inner experience of eroticism; the degree of objectivity connected with the discussion of it; the historical perspective in which this must be seen*

There is one disadvantage in talking of eroticism in this way. If I call it a direct activity peculiar to man, this is an objective definition. Yet the objective study of eroticism, however interesting I find it, remains for me a secondary consideration. My purpose is to see in eroticism an aspect of man's inner life, of his religious life, if you like.

I said that I regarded eroticism as **the disequilibrium** in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question. In one sense, the being loses himself deliberately, but then the subject is identified with the object losing his identity. If necessary I can say in eroticism: **I am losing myself**. Not a privileged situation, no doubt. But the deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest; no one can question it. I intend to discuss the theme of eroticism quite deliberately from the subjective point of view, even if I bring in objective considerations at the start. But if I do refer to erotic manifestations in an objective way, I must stress that it is because inner experience is never possible untainted by objective views, but is always bound to some or other indisputably objective consideration.

*Eroticism is primarily a religious matter and the present work is nearer to "theology" than to scientific or religious history*

I repeat: if I sometimes speak as a man of science I only



seem to do so. The scientist speaks from outside, like an anatomist busy on a brain. (That is not quite true; religious history cannot deny the inner experience, past or present, of religion. But that is not important as long as it is forgotten as much as possible.) My theme is the subjective experience of religion, as a theologian's is of theology.

True, the theologian talks about Christian theology while religion in the sense I mean it is not just a religion, like Christianity. It is religion in general and no one religion in particular. My concern is not with any given rites, dogmas or communities, but only with the problem that every religion sets itself to answer. I take this problem for my own as a theologian does theology. The Christian religion I lay aside. If it were not for the fact that Christianity is a religion after ail, I should even feel an aversion for Christianity. That this is so is demonstrated by the subject of the present work. That subject is eroticism. I am making my position clear from the outset. It goes without saying that the development of eroticism is in no respect foreign to the domain of religion, but in fact Christianity sets its face against eroticism and thereby condemns most religions. In one sense, the Christian religion is possibly the least religious of them all.

I should like to make my position perfectly clear.

In the first place I want to rid myself of preconceived notions as rigorously as possible. Nothing binds me to a particular tradition. Thus in occultism or esoteric cults I cannot fail to see preconceived ideas that interest me because they reflect our religious nostalgia, but I must shun them just the same because they represent a given belief. I may add that outside the assumptions of Christianity those of occultism are the most awkward in that they deliberately deny scientific principles in a world where these are dominant. Thus they turn anyone who accepts them into the sort of person who knows that arithmetic exists but who refuses to correct his own mistakes in addition. Science does not blind me (if I were dazzled by science I would conform inadequately to its demands), and arithmetic does not worry me either. Tell me

two and two make five if you like, but if I am doing accounts with someone with a clear end in view, I shall forget that you claim two and two equal five. I do not see how anyone can put the problem of religion from the standpoint of gratuitous solutions denied by stringent scientific method. I am not a scientist, in the sense that what I am talking about is indirect experience, not objective material, but as soon as I do talk objectively I do so with the inevitable rigour of the scientists.

I would go so far as to say that for the most part in the religious attitude there is such a thirst for slick answers that religion has come to mean mental facility, and that my first words may make the unwary reader think that we have in mind some intellectual adventure and not the ceaseless search which carries the spirit, beyond philosophy and science if necessary, but by way of them, after every potentiality that can open out before it.

Everyone, however, will admit that neither philosophy nor science can answer the questions that religious aspirations have set us. But everyone will also admit that in the conditions that have hitherto obtained these aspirations have only been able to express themselves in indirect ways. Humanity has never been able to pursue what religion has always pursued except in a world where the quest has depended on dubious factors connected if not with stirrings of material desires at least with chance passions; it may have sturggled against these desires and passions or it may have served them, but it has not been able to remain indifferent to them. The quest begun and pursued by religion, like scientific research, must not be thought of separately from the chance events of history. Not that man has not been wholly dependent on these vicissitudes at some time or other, but that is true for the past. The time is coming, uncertainly enough perhaps, when with any luck we shall no longer need to wait for the decision of other people (in the guise of dogma) before attaining the experience we seek. So far we can freely communicate the results of this experience.

I can concern myself with religion in this sense not like a

schoolteacher giving a historical account of it, mentioning the Brahmin among others, but like the Brahmin himself. Yet I am not a Brahmin or indeed anything at all; I have to pick my way along a lonely path, no tradition, no ritual to guide me, and nothing to hinder me, either. In this book of mine I am describing an experience without reference to any special body of belief, being concerned essentially to communicate an inner experience—religious experience, as I see it—outside the pale of specific religions.

My inquiry, then, based essentially on inner experience, springs from a different source from the work of religious historians, ethnographers, and theologians. No doubt men working in these fields did have to ask whether they could assess the data under their consideration independently of the inner experience which on the one hand they share with their contemporaries and on the other resulted to some degree from their personal experiences modified by contact with the world constituting their fields of study. But in the case of such research workers we can state almost axiomatically that the less their own experience is brought into play the more authentic are their findings. I do not say: the less experience they have, but the less it is brought into play. Indeed I am convinced of the advantages of deep experience for the historian but if he does have a profound experience, since he has it, in fact, the best thing is for him to try and forget it and look at the facts objectively. He cannot forget it entirely, he cannot pare down his knowledge exactly to what he knows from the outside, and that is all to the good, but ideally this inner knowledge should influence his thinking in spite of himself, in so far as that source of knowledge is stubbornly there, in so far as talking about religion without reference to our intimate knowledge of religion would lead to a lifeless accumulation of inert facts churned out in no sort of intelligible order.

On the other hand, if I look at the facts in the light of my personal experience I know what I am discarding when I discard scientific objectivity. To begin with, as I have said, I can

impose an arbitrary ban on knowledge acquired by impersonal methods. My experience still implies knowledge of the facts I am dealing with (in eroticism, of bodies; in religion, of the ritual forms without which collective religious practices could not exist). We cannot consider these forms except as illuminated by historical perspective with the erotic value they have acquired. We cannot separate our experience of them from their external aspect and their historical significance. With eroticism, the modifications undergone by our bodies in response to the vigorous stirring within us are themselves linked to the delightful and surprising aspects of sexual creatures. Not only is it impossible to regard this precise data, garnered from many sources, as denying the corresponding inner experience, but it actually assists the experience to stand out from what is individual and fortuitous. Even if it were tied to the objectivity of the outside world, private experience is bound to have an arbitrary flavour and without its universality would be impossible to discuss. Similarly without private experience we could discuss neither eroticism nor religion.

*The conditions of an impersonal inner experience; the contradictory experiences of taboos and transgressions*

It is in any case necessary to make a clear distinction between a study which calls on personal experience as little as possible and one which draws boldly on such experience. We must admit further that if the former had not been attempted in the first place, the latter would remain condemned to a gratuitousness we are familiar with. More, the conditions which make the present viewpoint possible have not long been in existence.

Whether we are discussing eroticism or religion in general a clear inner experience would have been out of the question at a time when the equilibrium between prohibitions and transgressions, regulating the play of both, did not stand out clearly defined and understood. Knowing that this balance exists is not in itself enough. Knowledge of eroticism or of

religion demands an equal and contradictory personal experience of prohibitions and transgressions.

This dual experience is rare. Erotic or religious images draw forth behaviour associated with prohibitions in some people, the reverse in others. The first type is traditional. The second is common at least in the guise of a so-called back-to-nature attitude, the prohibition being seen as unnatural. But a transgression is not the same as a back-to-nature movement; it suspends a taboo without suppressing it.<sup>1</sup> Here lies the mainspring of eroticism and of religion too. I should be anticipating if I were to spend too long now on the profound complicity of law and the violation of law. But if it is true that mistrust (the ceaseless stirrings of doubt) is necessary to anyone trying to describe the experience I am talking about, this mistrust must also meet the demands I will at this stage formulate. Let us say first that our feelings tend to give a personal twist to our opinions. This difficulty is a general one, though it is relatively simple for me to imagine in what way my own inner experience coincides with that of other people and in what way it enables me to communicate with them. This is not usually admitted, but the vague and general nature of this proposition of mine prevents me from emphasising it. Leaving that aside, the obstacles opposed to the communication of experience seem to me to be quite another kettle of fish: they are connected with the taboo or, which they are based and this duplicity I mentioned, the reconciling of what seems impossible to reconcile, respect for the law and violation of the law, the taboo and its transgression.

One thing or the other: either the taboo holds good, in which case the experience does not occur, or if it does, only furtively, outside the field of awareness; or it does not hold good; and of the two cases this is the more undesirable. Most frequently, as far as science is concerned, the taboo is

<sup>1</sup> There is no need to stress the Hegelian nature of this operation which corresponds with the dialectic phase described by the untranslatable German "aufheben": transcend without suppressing.

not justified, it is pathological, neurotic. Hence it is seen from outside: even if we have our own personal experience, in so far as we see it as a neurotic phenomenon we regard it as an outside mechanism intruding on our consciousness. This way of looking at it does not do away with the experience but it does minimise its significance. Hence if taboos and transgressions are described at all they are described objectively, by the historian, the psychiatrist or the psychoanalyst.

Eroticism as seen by the objective intelligence is something monstrous, just like religion. Eroticism and religion are closed books to us if we do not locate them firmly in the realm of inner experience. We put them on the same level as things known from the outside if we yield albeit unwittingly to the taboo. Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance. The worst of it is that science whose procedures demand an objective approach to taboos owes its existence to them but at the same time disclaims them because taboos are not rational. Inside experience alone can supply the overall view, from which they are finally justifiable. If we undertake a scientific study indeed, we regard objects as exterior to ourselves; we are subjects: in science the scientist himself becomes an object exterior to the subject, able to think objectively (he could not do this if he had not denied himself as a subject to begin with). This is all very well as long as eroticism is condemned, if we reject it in advance, if we rid ourselves of it in this way, but if (as it often does) science condemns religion (ethical religion) which is patently fundamental to science, we are no longer justified in opposing eroticism. If we do not oppose it we must no longer consider it objectively as something outside ourselves.<sup>1</sup> We must envisage it as the stirrings of life within ourselves.

If the taboo conserves its full force there is a difficulty.

<sup>1</sup> This is valid for the whole of psychology, but without eroticism and religion psychology is nothing but an empty shell. I know that for the moment I am playing on an equivocal aspect of religion and eroticism, but only for the sake of the argument of the present work.

Taboos acted on behalf of science in the first place. They removed the object of the taboo from our consciousness by forbidding it, and at the **same** time deprived our consciousness---our full consciousness, at any **rate**---of the movement of terror whose consequence was the taboo. But the rejection of the disturbing object and the disturbance itself were necessary for the clarity, the untroubled clarity, of the world of action and of objectivity. Without the existence of prohibitions in the first place, man would not have achieved the lucid and distinct awareness on which science is founded. Prohibitions eliminate violence, and our violent impulses (those which correspond with sexual impulsions can be counted among them) destroy within us that calm ordering of ideas without which human awareness is inconceivable. But if this awareness is to bear precisely on those disturbed **impulses** of violence, that implies that it has first been able to set itself beyond the reach of taboos: this presupposes that we can direct the light of the questioning intelligence on to these taboos themselves, without whose existence it would never have functioned in the first place. The aware intelligence cannot in this case look on them as a mistake we are victims of, but as the outcome of the fundamental **emotion** on which humanity depends. The truth of taboos is the key to our human attitude. We must know, we can know that **prohibitions** are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in the anguish we feel when we are violating the taboo, especially at that moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still **holds good** and **yet** we are yielding to the impulsion it **forbids**. If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist: that is the experience of sin. That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it. The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great

than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish.

Anybody who does not feel or who feels only furtively the anguish, nausea and horror commonly felt by young girls in the last century is not susceptible to these emotions, but equally there are **people whom** such emotions limit. These emotions are in no sense neurotic; but they are in the life of a man what a chrysalis is compared with the final perfect creature. Man achieves his inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels---that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside **that** resists him. He goes beyond the objective awareness bounded by the walls of the chrysalis and this process, too, is linked with the turning topsy-turvy of his original mode of being.

## CHAPTER II

## THE LINK BETWEEN TABOOS AND DEATH

*The contrast between the world of work or reason and that of violence*

In the section which follows, whose subject is eroticism at white heat (the blind moment when eroticism attains its ultimate intensity), I shall consider systematically the relationship between those two irreconcilables already mentioned, taboo and transgression.

Man belongs in any case to both of these worlds and between them willy-nilly his life is torn. The world of work and reason is the basis of human life but work does not absorb us completely and if reason gives the orders our obedience is never unlimited. Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. Nature herself is violent, and however reasonable we may grow we may be mastered anew by a violence no longer that of nature but that of a rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself which he cannot bring to heel.

There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order. We are generally unable to grasp it. Indeed it is by definition that which can never be grasped, but we are conscious of being in its power: the universe that bears us along answers no purpose that reason defines, and if we try to make it answer to God, all we are doing is associating irrationally the infinite excess in the presence of which our reason exists with our reason itself. But through the excess in him, that God whom we should like to shape into an intelligible concept never

ceases, exceeding this concept, to exceed the limits of reason.

In the domain of our life excess manifests itself in so far as violence wins over reason. Work demands the sort of conduct where effort is in a constant ratio with productive efficiency. It demands rational behaviour where the wild impulses worked out on feast days and usually in games are frowned upon. If we were unable to repress these impulses we should not be able to work, but work introduces the very reason for repressing them. These impulses confer an immediate satisfaction on those who yield to them. Work, on the other hand, promises to those who overcome them a reward later on whose value cannot be disputed except from the point of view of the present moment. From the earliest times<sup>1</sup> work has produced a relaxation of tension thanks to which men cease to respond to the immediate urge impelled by the violence of desire. No doubt it is arbitrary always to contrast the detachment fundamental to work with tumultuous urges whose necessity is not constant. Once begun, however, work does make it impossible to respond to these immediate solicitations which could make us indifferent to the promised desirable results. Most of the time work is the concern of men acting collectively and during the time reserved for work the collective has to oppose those contagious impulses to excess in which nothing is left but the immediate surrender to excess, to violence, that is. Hence the human collective, partly dedicated to work, is defined by taboos without which it would not have become the world of work that it essentially is.,

*The main function of all taboos is to combat violence*

What prevents us from seeing this decisive articulation of human life in its simplicity is the capricious way these taboos are promulgated. They have often had a superficially

<sup>1</sup> Work made man what he is. The first traces of man are the stone tools he left behind him. According to recent research it seems as though *Australopithecus*, still far from the highly developed form which we exemplify, left tools of this sort; *Australopithecus* lived about a million years before us (while *Neanderthal man*, whose burial places are the earliest known to us, lived only some few thousand years ago).

insignificant air. The significance of taboos if we take them as a whole, particularly if we take into consideration those which we do not fail religiously to observe, is none the less reducible to a simple element. I will formulate this without demonstrating the truth of it immediately (that I will do systematically later and my generalisation will be seen to be a sound one). Violence is **what** the world of work excludes with its taboos; in my field of enquiry this implies at the same time sexual reproduction and death.

Only later on shall I be able to establish the profound unity of these apparent opposites, birth and death. However, even at this stage their external connections stand revealed in the universe of sadism, there for anyone who thinks about eroticism to ponder on. De Sade—or his ideas—generally horrifies even those who affect to admire him and have not realised through their own experience this tormenting fact: the urge towards love, pushed to its limit, is an urge toward death. This link ought not to sound paradoxical. The excess from which reproduction proceeds and the excess we call death can each only be understood with the help of the other. But it is clear from the outset that the two primary taboos affect, firstly, death, and secondly, sexual functions.

*Prehistoric evidence of taboos connected with death*

"Thou shalt not kill"; "Thou shalt not perform the carnal act except in wedlock". Such are the two fundamental commandments found in the Bible and we still observe them.

The first of these prohibitions is the consequence of the human attitude towards the dead.

Let me return to the earliest days of our species, when our destiny was at stake. Even before man presented the appearance that he does today, Neanderthal man, whom prehistorians call 'homo faber', was making various stone instruments, often very elaborately, with the aid of which he hewed stone- or wood. This kind of man living a hundred thousand years before ourselves was already like us but still more like the anthropoid. Although he held himself erect like

us his legs were still a little bent; when he walked he leaned more on the ball of the foot than on the outer edge. His neck was not as flexible as ours (although certain men have conserved certain of his simian characteristics). He had a low forehead and a jutting brow. We only know the bones of this rudimentary man; we cannot know the exact appearance of his face; not even if his expression was already a human one. All we know is that he worked and cut himself away from violence.

If we look at his life as a whole, he remained inside the **realm** of violence. (We have not yet entirely abandoned it ourselves). But he escaped its power to some extent. He worked. We have the evidence of his technical skill left by numerous and various stone tools. This skill was remarkable enough in that if he had not given it his considered attention, going back on and perfecting his first idea, he could not have achieved results that were constant and in the long run greatly improved. His tools are in any case not the only proof of an incipient opposition to violence; the burial places left by Neanderthal man bear witness to this also.

Besides work, death was recognized by this man as terrifying and overwhelming, and indeed as supernatural. Prehistory assigns Neanderthal man to the Middle Paleolithic era; as early as Lower Paleolithic, apparently some hundreds of thousands of years before, fairly **similar** human beings existed who left traces of their work just as Neanderthal man did: the heaps of bones of these earlier men that have been found encourage us to think that death had begun to disturb them, since they paid some attention to skulls at least. But burial of the dead, still a religious practice for humanity at the present time, appears towards the end of the Middle Paleolithic, a little while before the disappearance of Neanderthal man and the arrival of a man exactly like ourselves whom prehistorians, keeping the name 'homo faber' for the earlier type, call 'homo sapiens'.

The custom of burial is the sign of a taboo similar to ours concerning the dead and death. In a vague form at least the

taboo must have arisen before this custom. We can even admit that in one sense, so imperceptibly that no proof could have remained, and doubtless unnoticed by those who lived at the time, the birth of this taboo coincided with the beginnings of work. The essential difference is that between a man's dead body and other objects such as stones. Today the perception of this difference is still characteristic of a human being as opposed to an animal; what we call death is in the first place the consciousness we have of it. We perceive the transition from the living state to the corpse, that is, to the tormenting object that the corpse of one man is for another. For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end. The taboo which lays hold on the others at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence. The picture of violence which we must attribute to primitive man in particular must necessarily be understood as opposed to the rhythm of work regulated by rational factors. Lévy-Bruhl's mistake has long been recognized; he denied primitive man a rational mode of thought and conceded him only the uncertain and indistinct images that result from participation.<sup>1</sup> Work is obviously no less ancient than man himself, and though work is not always foreign to animals, human work as distinct from animal work is never foreign to reason. It supposes that a fundamental identity is accepted between itself and the wrought object, and it supposes the difference, resulting from the work, between its substance and the developed tool. Similarly it implies awareness of the use of the tool, of the chain of cause and effect in which it is about to become involved. The laws which govern the acquired skills which give rise to tools or which are served by

<sup>1</sup> Lévy-Bruhl's descriptions are none the less correct and of indubitable interest. If, as Cassirer did, he had talked about 'mythical thought' and not 'primitive thought', he would not have encountered the same difficulties. 'Mythical thought' may be contemporary with rational thought, though it does not originate in the latter.

them are laws of reason from the outset. These laws regulate the changes which work conceives and effects. No doubt a primitive man could not have made them explicit; his language made him aware of the objects it named for him, but was inadequate to deal with the naming process itself. A workman today, the best part of the time would not be in a position to formulate them; nevertheless he observes them faithfully. Primitive man as Lévy-Bruhl describes him may have thought irrationally some of the time that a thing simultaneously is and is not, or that it can be what it is and something else at the same time. Reason did not dominate his entire thinking, but it did when it was a question of work. So much so that a primitive man could imagine, without formulating it, a world of work or reason to which another world of violence was opposed.<sup>1</sup> Certainly death is like disorder in that it differs from the orderly arrangements of work. Primitive man may have thought that the ordering of work belonged to him, while the disorder of death was beyond him, making nonsense of his efforts. The movement of work, the operations of reason were of use to him, while disorder, the movement of violence, brought ruin on the very creature whom useful works serve. Man, identifying himself with work which reduced everything to order, thus cut himself off from violence which tended in the opposite direction.

*The horror of the corpse as a symbol of violence and as a threat of the contagiousness of violence*

Violence, and death signifying violence, have a double meaning. On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly. I shall return to this ambiguity. I can only point out in the first place the essential aspect of

<sup>1</sup> The expressions 'profane world' (= world of work or reason) and 'sacred world' (= world of violence) are none the less of great antiquity. *Profane* and *sacred*, though, are words from the vocabulary of irrationalism.

recoil in the face of violence which is expressed by taboos associated with death.

A man's dead body must always have been a source of interest to those whose companion he was while he lived, and we must believe that as a victim of violence those nearest to him were careful to preserve him from further violence. Burial no doubt signified from the earliest times, as far as those who buried the body were concerned, their wish to save the dead from the voracity of animals. But even if that wish had been the determining factor in the inauguration of this custom, we cannot say that it was the most important; awe of the dead in all likelihood predominated for a long time over the sentiments which a milder civilization developed. Death was a sign of violence brought into a world which it could destroy. Although motionless, the dead man had a part in the violence which had struck him down; anything which came too near him was threatened by the destruction which had brought him low. Death presented such a contrast between an unfamiliar region and the everyday world that the only mode of thought in tune with it was bound to conflict with the mode of thought governed by work. Symbolical or mythical thought, erroneously labelled 'primitive' by Levy-Bruhl, is the only kind appropriate to violence whose essence is to break the bounds of rational thought implicit in work. According to this way of thinking, the violence which by striking at the dead man dislocates the ordered course of things does not cease to be dangerous once the victim is dead. It constitutes a supernatural peril which can be 'caught' from the dead body. Death is a danger for those left behind. If they have to bury the corpse it is less in order to keep it safe than to keep themselves safe from its contagion. Often the idea of contagion is connected with the body's decomposition where formidable aggressive forces are seen at work. The corpse will rot; this biological disorder, like the newly dead body a symbol of destiny, is threatening in itself. We no longer believe in contagious magic, but which of us could be sure of not quailing at the sight

of a dead body crawling with maggots? Ancient peoples took the drying up of the bones to be the proof that the threat of violence arising at the time of death had passed over. More often than not the dead man himself held in the clutch of violence, as the survivors see it, is part and parcel of his own disorder, and his whitened bones are what at last betoken the pacification of his spirit.

#### The taboo on murder

The taboo relating to the corpse does not always appear intelligible. In 'Totem and Taboo' Freud, because of his superficial knowledge of ethnographical data, nowadays much less vague, thought that the taboo generally countered the desire to touch. The desire to touch the dead was doubtless no greater in former times than it is today. The taboo does not necessarily anticipate the desire; in the presence of a corpse horror is immediate and inevitable and practically impossible to resist. The violence attendant upon a man's death is only likely to tempt men in one direction: it may tend to be embodied in us against another living person; the desire to kill may take hold of us. The taboo on murder is a special aspect of the universal taboo on violence.

In the eyes of primitive man violence is always the cause of death. It may have acted through magical means, but someone is always responsible, someone is always a murderer. The two aspects of the taboo are interrelated. We must run away from death and hide from the forces that have been unleashed. Other forces like those which have overpowered the dead man and are temporarily in possession of him must not be loosed in ourselves.

As a rule the community brought into being by work considers itself essentially apart from the violence implied by the death of one of its members. Faced by such a death the body politic feels that a taboo is in force. But that is only true for the members of the community. Within it the taboo has full force. Without, where strangers are concerned, the taboo is still felt but it can be violated. The community is



made up of those whom the common effort unites, cut off from violence by work during the hours devoted to work. Outside this given time, outside its own limits, the community can revert to violence, it can resort to murder in war against another community.

In given circumstances, during a given time, the murder of members of a given tribe is permissible, necessary even. Yet the wildest hecatombs, in spite of the irresponsibility of their instigators, never entirely remove the malediction falling on murder. The Bible commands 'Thou shalt not kill', and this sometimes makes us smile, but we deceive ourselves in regarding the Bible as unimportant. Once the obstacle is overturned what outlasts the transgression is a flouted taboo. The bloodiest of murderers cannot ignore the curse upon him, for the curse is the condition of his achievement. Transgression piled upon transgression will never abolish the taboo, just as though the taboo were never anything but the means of cursing gloriously whatever it forbids.

In the foregoing proposition there is a basic truth: taboos founded on terror are not only there to be obeyed. There is always another side to the matter. It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement. "There is nothing", writes de Sade, "that can set bounds to licentiousness . . . The best way of enlarging and multiplying one's desires is to try to limit them".<sup>1</sup> Nothing can set bounds to licentiousness . . . or rather, generally speaking, there is nothing that can conquer violence.

## CHAPTER III

### TABOOS RELATED TO REPRODUCTION

*The taboo universally found in man as opposed to the sexual freedom of animals*

Later on I shall return to the complementary relationship uniting taboos which reject violence with acts of transgression which set it free. These counterbalanced urges have a kind of unity. From considering the significance of a barrier at the moment of its being overturned, I already have gone on to introduce a group of taboos parallel with those called into existence by death. The taboos centred on sexuality have now to be considered. We have very old traces of customs concerned with death. Prehistoric evidence on sexuality is more recent; what is more we can draw no conclusions from them. There are Middle Paleolithic burial sites but evidence of the sexual activity of the first men goes no further back than Upper Paleolithic. Art (representation) does not appear with Neanderthal man<sup>1</sup> but begins with homo sapiens, and such images of himself as he has left are rare anyway. These images are generally ithyphallic. Hence we know that sexual activity like death was early on a subject of interest to man, but we cannot deduce any clear indications from such vague data as we can with death. Ithyphallic pictures obviously show a relative freedom. Nevertheless they cannot prove that those who traced them believed in unlimited freedom in this field. All we can say is that as opposed to work, sexual activity is a form of violence, that as a spontaneous impulse it can interfere with work. A

<sup>1</sup> Neanderthal man knew how to use colouring matter but he left no trace of drawing at all, while such traces are numerous as soon as homo sapiens comes on the scene.

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to 'Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome'.

community committed to work cannot afford to be at its mercy during working hours, so to speak. We would then be justified in **thinking** that, from the first, sexual liberty must have received some check which we are bound to call a taboo without being able to say anything about the cases in which it applies. At the most we could assume that initially the time set aside for work determined the limit. The only real reason we have for thinking that a taboo of this sort must be very old indeed is that at all times as in all places as far as our knowledge goes, man is defined by having his sexual behaviour subject to rules and precise restrictions. Man is an animal who stands abashed in front of death or sexual union. He may be more or less abashed, but in either case his reaction differs from that of other animals.

These restrictions vary greatly according to time and place. All peoples do not feel the necessity to hide the sexual organs in the same way; but they do generally conceal from sight the male organ in erection; and usually a man and a woman seek privacy to accomplish the sexual act. In Western civilizations nakedness has become the object of a fairly general and weighty taboo, but our contemporary experience calls into question an assumption that once appeared fundamental. The experience we have of changes that are possible does not show the taboos as arbitrary, though; on the contrary, it proves their deep significance in spite of superficial changes of emphasis on aspects unimportant in themselves. We know now how mutable are the specific patterns which are read into the amorphous prohibition. This prohibition simply imposes the necessity for submitting sexual activity to generally accepted restrictions. But it gives us the certainty that there is a fundamental rule which demands that we submit, and in common, to restrictions of one sort or another. The taboo within us against sexual liberty is general and universal; the particular prohibitions are variable aspects of it.

I am astonished to be the first person to state this so unequivocally. It is ridiculous to isolate a specific 'taboo'

such as the one on incest, just one aspect of the general taboo, and look for its explanation outside its universal basis, namely the **amorphous** and universal prohibitions bearing on sexuality. Roger Caillois, however, is an exception to this tendency. He writes: "problems on which a great deal of ink has been used up, like the prohibition on incest, can only be given a fair solution if they are considered as special cases of a system that embraces all religious taboos in a given society".<sup>1</sup> As I see it, the beginning of Caillois' **statement** is perfect, but when he says "a given society" he is still referring to a special case, a given aspect. It is high time we gave our attention to all religious taboos in all ages and in all climates. Caillois' remark forces me to state here and now that this amorphous and universal taboo is constant. Its shape and its objects do change; but whether it is a question of sexuality or death, violence, terrifying yet fascinating, is what it is levelled at.

#### *The taboo on incest*

The 'special case' of the taboo on incest is the one that commands most attention, even as far as replacing on a general view sexual taboos proper. Everyone knows that a taboo on sexuality does exist, amorphous and indefinable; all **mankind** observes it, but this observance is so varied according to the time and the place that no-one has found a formula for it that would allow it to be generally discussed. The taboo on incest, no less universal, is translated into well-defined customs always pretty rigorously formulated, and a single unambiguous word gives a general definition of it. That is why incest has been the subject of numerous studies while the general taboo of which it is only a special case and from which springs an inchoate collection of prohibitions has no place in the minds of people whose business it is to study human behaviour. So true it is that human intelligence is moved to consider what is simple and easily defined to the exclusion of matters that are vague, difficult

<sup>1</sup> 'L'homme et le sacré' 2nd. edition, Gallimard, 1950, p. 71, note 1

to grasp and variable. Hence the taboo on sex has so far evaded the curiosity of scientists, while the various forms of incest, no less clearly defined than those of animal species, offered them what they liked, puzzles to solve, on which their ingenuity could be exerted.

In archaic societies, classifying persons according to their blood relationships and determining what marriages are forbidden sometimes becomes quite a science. The great merit of Claude Lévi-Strauss is that he found in the endless meanderings of archaic family structures the origin of peculiarities, that cannot derive only from the vague fundamental taboo that made men in general observe laws opposed to animal freedom. In the first place the dispositions concerning incest answered the need to bind with rules a violence that if it had been allowed a free rein might have disturbed the order to which the community desired to submit itself. But independently of this basic requirement fair laws were necessary for the distribution of the women among the men; certain dispositions, strange but precise, are understandable if one takes into consideration the desirability of an ordered distribution. The taboo made it necessary that a rule of some kind should be in force, but the particular rules decided upon could take secondary matters into consideration which had nothing to do with secular violence and its menace to reason and order. If Lévi-Strauss had not shown the origins of a certain aspect of marriage conventions, there would have been no reason not to seek the significance of the taboo on incest there, but that aspect simply met the need to find an answer to the problem of sharing out the available women.

If we insist on reading a significance into the general movement of incest which forbids physical union between close relations, we ought first to consider the strong feeling which has persisted. This feeling is not a fundamental one, but neither were the circumstances which determined the forms of the taboo. It seems natural at first glance to look among apparently ancient customs for a cause. But once this

research has gone a fair distance the opposite seems true. The cause we have sought out did not constitute a curtailment of freedom in principle, it could only use that principle for particular ends. We must refer the special case to the "whole body of religious taboos" known to us and to which we are still subject. Is there anything more firmly rooted in us than the horror of incest? (With this also I associate respect for the dead, but I shall not show until later on how **all** taboos are basically interrelated.) We look on physical union with the mother or father or with a brother or sister as inhuman. The persons with whom we may not have sexual relations are variously defined. Yet without the rule ever having been formulated we may not associate sexually with those who were living in the family home when we were born; this limiting factor would be clearer no doubt if other variable taboos, arbitrary seeming to those not subject to them, were not involved. At the centre, a fairly simple and constant nucleus, surrounded by an arbitrary and variable complex, characterises this fundamental taboo. Nearly everywhere can be found this solid core and simultaneously the surrounding fluidity and mobility. This mobility obscures the significance of the nucleus. The nucleus is not intangible in itself, but considering it we gain a more acute insight into the primal horror whose repercussions are sometimes due to chance and sometimes coincident with social convenience. It is always at bottom a matter of two incompatibles: the realm of calm and rational behaviour and the violence of the sexual impulse. With the passing of the ages, could the rules which spring from this dichotomy have been defined except in variable and arbitrary forms?<sup>1</sup>

#### *Menstruation and loss of blood at childbirth*

No less than incest certain other taboos seem to us to spring from the general horror of violence; for instance, the

<sup>1</sup> I have left over until the second part of this book (see the fourth study) a more detailed analysis of incest based on Claude Lévi-Strauss' learned work 'Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté', Presses Universitaires, 1949, 8vo, 640 pp.

taboos associated with menstruation and the loss of blood at childbirth. These discharges are thought of as manifestations of internal violence; blood in itself is a symbol of violence. The menstrual discharge is further associated with sexual activity and the accompanying suggestion of degradation: degradation is one of the effects of violence. Childbearing cannot be dissociated from this complex of feelings. Is it not itself a rending process, something excessive and outside the orderly course of permitted activity? Does it not imply the denial of the established order, a denial without which there could be no transition from nothingness to being, or from being to nothingness? There may well be something gratuitous about these assessments; moreover the taboos seem almost trivial to us even if we do feel disgust at such unclean processes. They have nothing to do with the firm nucleus of the taboo. They are subsidiary aspects to be reckoned among the mutable elements surrounding that ill-defined central area.

## CHAPTER IV

AFFINITIES BETWEEN  
REPRODUCTION AND DEATH*Death, Corruption and the Renewal of Life*

It is clear from the start that taboos appeared in response to the necessity of banishing violence from the course of everyday life. I could not give a definition of violence straight away, nor do I think it necessary to do so. The unity of meaning of these taboos should finally be clear from studies of their various aspects.

We come up against one difficulty at the start: the taboos I regard as fundamental affect two radically different fields. Death and reproduction are as diametrically opposed as negation and affirmation.

Death is really the opposite process to the process ending in birth, yet these opposite processes can be reconciled.

The death of the one being is correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible. Life is always a product of the decomposition of life. Life first pays its tribute to death which disappears, then to corruption following on death and bringing back into the cycle of change the matter necessary for the ceaseless arrival of new beings into the world.

Yet life is none the less a negation of death. It condemns it and shuts it out. This reaction is strongest in man, and horror at death is linked not only with the annihilation of the individual but also with the decay that sends the dead

<sup>1</sup> But the idea of violence as opposed to reason is dealt with in Eric Weil's masterly work *Logique de la Philosophie* (Vrin). The conception of violence at the basis of Eric Weil's philosophy, moreover, seems to me akin to my own.

flesh back into the general ferment of life. Indeed the deep respect for the solemn image of death found in idealistic civilisation alone comes out in radical opposition. Spontaneous physical revulsion keeps alive in some indirect fashion at least the consciousness that the terrifying face of death, its stinking putrefaction, are to be identified with the sickening primary condition of life. For primitive people the moment of greatest anguish is the phase of decomposition; when the bones are bare and white they are not intolerable as the putrefying flesh is, food for worms. In some obscure way the survivors perceive in the horror aroused by corruption a rancour and a hatred projected towards them by the dead man which it is the function of the rites of mourning to appease. But afterwards they feel that the whitening bones bear witness to that appeasement. The bones are objects of reverence to them and draw the first veil of decency and solemnity over death and make it bearable; it is painful still but free of the virulent activity of corruption.

These white bones do not leave the survivors a prey to the slimy menace of disgust. They put an end to the close connections between decomposition, the source of an abundant surge of life, and death. But in an age more in touch with the earliest human reactions than ours, this connection appeared so necessary that even Aristotle said that certain creatures, brought into being spontaneously, as he thought, in earth or water, were born of corruption.<sup>1</sup> The generative power of corruption is a naive belief responding to the mingled horror and fascination aroused in us by decay. This belief is behind a belief we once held about nature as something wicked and shameful: decay summed up the world we spring from and return to, and horror and shame were attached both to our birth and to our death.

That nauseous, rank and heaving matter, frightful to look upon, a ferment of life, teeming with worms, grubs and eggs,

<sup>1</sup> That is how Aristotle thought of "spontaneous generation", which he believed to take place.

is at the bottom of the decisive reactions we call nausea, disgust or repugnance, Beyond the annihilation to come which will fall with all its weight on the being I now am, which still waits to be called into existence, which can even be said to be about to exist rather than to exist (as if I did not exist here and now but in the future in store for me, though that is not what I am now) death will proclaim my return to seething life. Hence I can anticipate and live in expectation of that multiple putrescence that anticipates its sickening triumph in my person.

#### *Nausea and its general field*

When somebody dies we, the survivors, expecting the life of that man now motionless beside us to go on, find that our expectation has suddenly come to nothing at all. A dead body cannot be called nothing at all, but that object, that corpse, is stamped **straight** off with the sign "nothing at all". For us survivors, the corpse and its threat of imminent decay is no answer to any expectation like the one we nourished while that now prostrate man was still alive; it is the answer to a fear. This object, then, is less than nothing and worse than nothing.

It is entirely in keeping that fear, the basis of disgust, is not stimulated by a real danger. The threat in question cannot be justified objectively. There is no reason to look at a man's corpse otherwise than at an animal's, at game that has been killed, for instance. The terrified recoiling at the sight of advanced decay is not of itself inevitable. Along with this sort of reaction we have a whole range of artificial behaviour. The horror we feel at the thought of a corpse is akin to the feeling we have at human excreta. What makes this association more compelling is our similar disgust at aspects of sensuality we call obscene. The sexual channels are also the body's sewers; we think of them as shameful and connect the anal orifice with them. St. Augustine was at pains to insist on the obscenity of the organs and function of reproduction. "Inter faeces et **urinam** nascimur", he said—"we

are born between faeces and urine". Our faecal products are not subject to a taboo formulated by meticulous social regulations like those relating to dead bodies or to menstruation. But generally speaking, and though the relationship defies clear definition, there do exist unmistakable links between excreta, decay and sexuality. It may look as though physical circumstances imposed from without are chiefly operative in marking out this area of sensibility. But it also has its subjective aspect. The feeling of nausea varies with the individual and its material source is now one thing and now another. After the living man the dead body is nothing at all; similarly nothing tangible or objective brings on our feeling of nausea; what we experience is a kind of void, a sinking sensation.

We cannot easily discuss these things which in themselves are nothing at all. Yet they do make their presence felt and often they force themselves on the senses in a way that inert objects perceived objectively do not. How could anyone assert that that stinking mass is nothing at all? But our protest, if we make one, implies our humiliation and our refusal to see. We imagine that it is the stink of excrement that makes us feel sick. But would it stink if we had not thought it was disgusting in the first place? We do not take long to forget what trouble we go to to pass on to our children the aversions that make us what we are, which make us human beings to begin with. Our children do not spontaneously have our reactions. They may not like a certain food and they may refuse it. But we have to teach them by pantomime or failing that, by violence, that curious aberration called disgust, powerful enough to make us feel faint, a contagion passed down to us from the earliest men through countless generations of scolded children.

Our mistake is to take these teachings lightly. For thousands of years we have been handing them down to our children, but they used to have a different form. The realm of disgust and nausea is broadly the result of these teachings.

*The prodigality of life and our fear of it*

After reading this we may feel a void opening within us. What I have been saying refers to this void and nothing else.

But the void opens at a specific point. Death, for instance, may open it: the corpse into which death infuses absence, the putrefaction associated with this absence. I can link my revulsion at the decay (my imagination suggests it, not my memory, so profoundly is it a forbidden object for me) with the feelings that obscenity arouse in me. I can tell myself that repugnance and horror are the mainsprings of my desire, that such desire is only aroused as long as its object causes a chasm no less deep than death to yawn within me, and that this desire originates in its opposite, horror.

From the outset reflections like these go beyond all reasonableness.

It takes an iron nerve to perceive the connection between the promise of life implicit in eroticism and the sensuous aspect of death. Mankind conspires to ignore the fact that death is also the youth of things. Blindfolded, we refuse to see that only death guarantees the fresh upsurging without which life would be blind. We refuse to see that life is the trap set for the balanced order, that life is nothing but instability and disequilibrium. Life is a swelling tumult continuously on the verge of explosion. But since the incessant explosion constantly exhausts its resources, it can only proceed under one condition: that beings given life whose explosive force is exhausted shall make room for fresh beings coming into the cycle with renewed vigour.<sup>1</sup>

A more extravagant procedure cannot be imagined. In one way life is possible, it could easily be maintained, without

<sup>1</sup> Although this truth is generally ignored, Bossuet expounds it in his *Sermon on Death* (1662). "Nature" he says "as if jealous of her gifts to us, often declares and makes plain the fact that she cannot leave us for long in possession of the little substance she lends us, which must not remain always in the same hands but must be kept eternally in circulation. She needs it for other forms, she asks for it to be returned for other works. Those continual additions to humankind, the children being born, seem to nudge us aside as they come forward, saying 'Back now; it is our rum'. So as we see others pass ahead of us, others will see us pass, and themselves present the same spectacle to their successors".

this colossal waste, this squandering annihilation at which imagination boggles. Compared with that of the infusoria, the mammalian organism is a gulf that swallows vast quantities of energy. This energy is not entirely wasted if it allows other developments to take place. But we must consider the devilish cycle from start to finish. The growth of vegetable life implies the continuous piling up of dissociated substances corrupted by death. Herbivorous creatures swallow vegetable matter by the heap before they themselves are eaten, victims of the carnivore's urge to devour. Finally nothing is left but this fierce beast of prey or his remains, in their turn the prey of hyenas and worms. There is one way of considering this process in harmony with its nature: the more extravagant are the means of engendering life, the more costly is the production of new organisms, the more successful the operation is! The wish to produce at cut prices is niggardly and human. Humanity keeps to the narrow capitalist principle, that of the company director, that of the private individual who sells in order to rake in the accumulated credits in the long run (for raked in somehow they always are).

On a comprehensive view, human life strives towards prodigality to the point of anguish, to the point where the anguish becomes unbearable. The rest is mere moralising chatter. How can this escape us if we look at it dispassionately? Everything proclaims it! A febrile unrest within us asks death to wreak its havoc at our expense.

We go half way to meet these manifold trials, these false starts, this squandering of living strength in the transition from ageing beings to other younger ones. At bottom we actually want the impossible situation it all leads to: the isolation, the threat of pain, the horror of annihilation; but for the sensation of nausea bound up with it, so horrible that often in silent panic we regard the whole thing as impossible, we should not be satisfied. But our judgments are formed under the influence of recurring disappointments

and the obstinate expectation of a calm which goes hand in hand with that desire; our capacity to make ourselves understood is in direct ratio with the blindness we cling to. For at the crest of the convulsion which gives us shape the naive stubbornness that hopes that it will cease can only increase the torment, and this allows life, wholly committed to this gratuitous pattern, to add the luxury of a beloved torment to fatality. For if man is condemned to be a luxury in himself, what is one to say of the luxury that is anguish?

Man's "no" to Nature

When all is said and done human reactions are what speed up the process; anguish speeds it up and makes it more keenly felt at the same time. In general man's attitude is one of refusal. Man has leant over backwards in order not to be carried away by the process, but all he manages to do by this is to hurry it along at an even dizzier speed.

If we view the primary taboos as the refusal laid down by the individual to co-operate with nature regarded as a squandering of living energy and an orgy of annihilation we can no longer differentiate between death and sexuality. Sexuality and death are simply the culminating points of the holiday, nature celebrates, with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature's resources as opposed to the urge to live on characteristic of every living creature.

In the long or short run, reproduction demands the death of the parents who produced their young only to give fuller rein to the forces of annihilation (just as the death of a generation demands that a new generation be born). In the parallels perceived by the human mind between putrefaction and the various aspects of sexual activity the feelings of revulsion which set us against both end by mingling. The taboos embodying a single dual-purpose reaction may have taken shape one at a time, and one can even imagine a long time elapsing between the taboo connected with death and the one connected with

reproduction (often the most perfect things take shape hesitatingly through successive modifications). But we perceive their unity none the less: we feel we are dealing with an indivisible complex, just as if man had once and for all realised how impossible it is for nature (as a given force) to exact from the beings that she brings forth their participation in the destructive and **implacable** frenzy that animates her. Nature demands their surrender; or rather she asks them to go crashing headlong to their own ruin. Humanity became possible at the instant when, seized by **an** insurmountable dizziness, man tried to answer "No".

Man tried? In fact men have never definitively said *no* to violence (to the excessive urges in question). In their weaker moments they have resisted nature's current but this is a momentary suspension and not a final standstill.

We must now examine the transgressions that lie beyond the taboos.

## CHAPTER V ✓

## TRANSGRESSION

*The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it*

It is not only the great variety of their subjects but also a certain illogicality that makes it difficult to discuss taboos. Two diametrically opposed views are always possible on any subject. There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed.

We feel like laughing when we consider the solemn commandment "Thou shalt not kill" followed by a blessing on armies and the **Te Deum** of the apotheosis. No beating about the bush: murder is connived at immediately, after being banned! The violence of war certainly betrays the God of the New Testament, but it does not oppose the God of Armies of the Old Testament in the same way. If the prohibition were a reasonable one it would mean that wars would be forbidden and we should be confronted with a choice: to ban war and to do everything possible to abolish military assassination; or else to fight and to accept the law as hypo'critical. But the taboos on which the world of reason is founded are not rational for all that. To begin with, a **calm** opposite to violence would not suffice to draw a clear line between the two worlds. If the opposition did not itself draw upon violence in some way, if some violent negative emotion did not make violence horrible for everyone, reason alone could not define those shifting limits authoritatively enough. Only unreasoning dread and terror could survive in the teeth of the forces let loose. This is the nature of the taboo which makes a world of **calm** reason possible but is



itself basically a shudder appealing not to reason but to feeling, just as violence is. (Human violence is the result not of a cold calculation but of emotional states: anger, fear or desire.) We have to take into consideration the irrational nature of taboos if we want to understand the indifference to logic they constantly display. In the sphere of irrational behaviour we are reviewing we have to say: "Sometimes an intangible taboo is violated, but that does not mean to say that it has ceased to be intangible." We can even go as far as the absurd proposition: "The taboo is there in order to be violated." This proposition is not the wager it looks like at first but an accurate statement of an inevitable connection between conflicting emotions. When a negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendent we violate it. Such a violation will not deny or suppress the contrary emotion, but justify it and arouse it. We should not be frightened of violence in the same way if we did not know or at least obscurely sense that it could lead us to worse things.

The statement: "The taboo is there to be violated" ought to make sense of the fact that the taboo on murder, universal though it may be, nowhere opposes war. I am even convinced that without the prohibition war would be impossible and inconceivable!

Animals, recognising no taboos, have never progressed from the fights they take part in to the organised undertaking of war. War in a way boils down to the collective organisation of aggressive urges. Like work it is organised by the community; like work it has a purpose, it is the answer to the considered intention of those who wage it. We cannot say therefore that war and violence are in conflict. But war is organised violence. The transgression of the taboo is not animal violence. It is violence still, used by a creature capable of reason (putting his knowledge to the service of violence for the time being). At the very least the taboo is the threshold beyond which murder is possible; and for the community war comes about when the threshold is crossed.

If transgression proper, as opposed to ignorance of the taboo, did not have this limited character it would be a return to violence, to animal violence. But nothing of the kind is so. Organised transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is. The frequency—and the regularity—of transgressions do not affect the intangible stability of the prohibition since they are its expected complement—just as the diastolic movement completes a systolic one, or just as explosion follows upon compression. The compression is not subservient to the explosion, far from it; it gives it increased force. This looks like a new idea though it is founded on immemorial experience. But it runs counter to the world of speech from which science is derived and that is why it is found stated only recently. Marcel Mauss, perhaps the most remarkable interpreter of the history of religion, was conscious of it and formulated it in his oral teaching, but his printed work brings it out only in a small number of significant sentences. Only Roger Caillois, following Mauss's teaching and advice, has fully examined this aspect of transgression in his "Theory of Celebrations".<sup>1</sup>

#### *Transgression without limits*

Often the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself. No liberty here. "At such and such a time and up to a certain point this is permissible"—that is what the transgression concedes. But once a limited licence has been allowed, unlimited urges towards violence may break forth. The barriers are not merely raised, for it may even be necessary at the moment of transgression to assert their solidity. Concern over a rule is sometimes at its most acute when that rule is being broken, for it is harder to limit a disturbance already begun.

However, in exceptional cases unlimited transgression is conceivable.

<sup>1</sup> *L'Homme et le Sacré*, second edition, Gallimard, 1950, chapter 4, *Le Sacré de transgression: théorie de la fête*.





In order to define the nature and implications of transgression, rather than less complex cases I shall describe the peaks reached by overwhelming religious experience, Christian or Buddhist, where acts of transgression are accomplished. First, however, I must turn to less complex forms of transgression. I shall speak of war and sacrifice and then of physical eroticism.

## CHAPTER VI

## MURDER, HUNTING AND WAR

*Cannibalism*

Transgression outside well defined limits is rare; within them taboos may well be violated in accordance with rules that ritual or at least custom dictate and organise.

The alternation of taboo and transgression which otherwise would be hard to grasp is most clearly seen in eroticism. On the other hand a coherent picture of eroticism would be impossible unless this swing from taboo to transgression and back, in the main a religious phenomenon, is taken into account. But first let us consider the associations of death.

It is noteworthy that the taboo surrounding the dead has no complementary desire running counter to the revulsion. At first sight sexual objects excite alternate attraction and repulsion, hence the taboo and its suspension. Freud based his interpretation of the taboo on the primal necessity of erecting a protective barrier against excessive desires bearing upon objects of obvious frailty. If he goes on to discuss the taboo on touching a corpse he must imply that the taboo protected the corpse from other people's desire to eat it. This is a desire no longer active in us, one we never feel now. Archaic societies, however, do show the taboo as alternatively in force and suspended. Man is never looked upon as butchers' meat, but he is frequently eaten ritually. The man who eats human flesh knows full well that this is a forbidden act; knowing this taboo to be fundamental he will religiously violate it nevertheless. There is a significant example in the communion feast following on the sacrifice. The human flesh that is eaten then is held as sacred; we are nowhere near a return to the simple animal ignorance of

taboo. The object some indiscriminating animal is after is not what is desired; the object is "forbidden", sacred, and the very prohibition attached to it is what arouses the desire. Religious cannibalism is the elementary example of the taboo as creating desire: the taboo does not create the flavour and taste of the flesh but stands as the reason why the pious cannibal consumes it. This paradox of the attraction of forbidden fruit will be seen again when we come to eroticism.

#### *Duels, feuds and war*

We may find the desire to eat human flesh completely alien to us; not so the desire to kill. Not all of us feel it, but who would go so far as to deny that it has as lively, if not as exacting, an existence among the masses as sexual appetite? There is a potential killer in every man; the frequency of senseless massacres throughout history makes that much plain. The desire to kill relates to the taboo on murder in just the same way as does the desire for sexual activity to the complex of prohibitions limiting it. Sexual activity is only forbidden in certain cases, but then so is murder; it may be more roundly and more generally forbidden than sexual activity is, but the taboo, like that on sex, only serves to limit killing to certain specific situations. The formula has a massive simplicity: "Thou shalt not kill." Universal, yes, but obvious exceptions are implied—"except in wartime, and other circumstances allowed, more or less, by the body politic." So there is a nearly perfect analogy between it and the sexual commandment which runs: "Thou shalt not perform the carnal act except in matrimony alone." To this should obviously be added "or in certain cases hallowed by custom".

A man may kill another in a duel, in a feud, and in war. Murder is criminal. Murder implies that the taboo is either not known or not heeded. Duels, feuds and war do violate an accepted taboo, but according to set rules. In the duel of today with its complicated procedure the sense of something

forbidden is dominant. Not so with primitive peoples; with them the taboo could only be violated with a religious intent, and duels cannot have been the confrontation of mere individuals as they were from the Middle Ages onwards. In the first place the duel was a form of war; the two sides pinned their faith on the valour of their champions who met in single combat after a challenge duly given and received, fighting it out in front of the masses intent on mutual destruction.

Feuds are a kind of war where the antagonists belong to a tribe rather than to a territory. Like duels, like war, they are ordered with detailed precision.

#### *The hunt and the expiation of the animal's death*

In feuds and duels, and in war, which we shall consider later, it is a man's death that occurs, although the law forbidding killing is earlier than the distinction felt by man between himself and the larger animals. Indeed, this distinction comes quite late. To begin with man saw himself as like the animals, and this attitude persists to this day in hunting peoples with their primitive customs. Hence the hunting of primitive man is, no less than duels, feuds and war, a form of transgression. Yet there is one significant difference. It seems that murder of a fellow man was unknown in the very earliest times when humanity was closest to the animals.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, in those days it must have been usual to hunt other animals. We could maintain that hunting is the outcome of work, made possible only by the fabrication of stone tools and weapons. But even if the taboo were generally a consequence of work, it could not have come into being so swiftly as to rule out a long period during which hunting developed and no taboo on killing animals surrounded it. Anyway we cannot imagine a period dominated by the taboo and then a return to hunting after a deliberate

<sup>1</sup> There is no taboo as such on the killing by one animal of another like itself, but in fact such killings are rare in instinctive animal behaviour, whatever difficulties instinct may raise. Even fights between animals of the same species do not necessarily end in a lull.

act of transgression. The taboo on hunting offers the same characteristics as other taboos. I have stressed the fact that broadly speaking there is a taboo on sexual activity, but this can only be readily grasped through a comparison with the taboo on hunting among hunting peoples. Men do not necessarily abstain from the forbidden activity, but take part in it as a conscious infringement of the law. Neither hunting nor sexual activity could be forbidden in practice. The taboo cannot suppress pursuits necessary to life, but it can give them the significance of a religious violation.<sup>1</sup> It imposes limits on them and controls the form that they take. It can exact penance from the guilty. The act of killing invested the **killer**, hunter or warrior, with a sacramental character. In order to take their place once more in profane society they had to be cleansed and purified, and this was the object of expiatory rituals. Primitive societies give numerous examples of these.

Prehistorians usually ascribe a magical significance to cave paintings. The hunters were after these animals, and they were depicted in the hope that pictorial expression of the wish would make the wish come true. I am not so sure that this was so. Might not the secret and religious atmosphere of the caves have corresponded with the religious nature of transgression which indisputably invested the hunt with significance? Representation would then have followed on transgression. This would be difficult to prove, but if prehistorians were to visualise the alternation of taboo and transgression and perceive clearly the religious aura that surrounded the animals as they were done to death, I think we might adopt a standpoint in greater harmony with the importance of religion in the earliest development of humanity in preference to the magical image theory which has something poor and unsatisfying about it. The cave drawings must have been intended to depict that instant when the animal appeared and killing, at once inevitable and reprehensible, laid bare life's mysterious ambiguity. Tormented man refuses life, yet lives it out as he

miraculously transcends his own refusal. This hypothesis rests on the fact that expiation regularly follows upon the **killing** of an animal among peoples whose way of life is probably similar to that of the cave artists. Its great merit is to suggest a coherent interpretation of the Lascaux pit painting where a dying bison faces the man who has probably killed it and whom the painter shows as a dead man. The subject of this famous picture, which has called forth numerous contradictory and unsatisfactory explanations, would therefore be murder and expiation.'

This view has at least the virtue of replacing the magical (and utilitarian) interpretation of cave pictures with its obvious **insufficiency** by a religious one more in keeping with notions of the ultimate in human experience that are usually the concern of art and are here echoed by these prodigious paintings come down to us from the depths of the past.

#### *The earliest record of war*

Hunting must be considered as a primitive form of transgression apparently earlier than war which seems to have been unknown to the men of the "**Franco-cantabrian**" painted caves living during the Upper Paleolithic period. At any rate war would not have had the primary importance it attained later for these our earliest fellow men; indeed they put us in mind of the Eskimos who up to our own day have lived mostly ignorant of war.

War was first depicted by the men of the rock paintings of eastern Spain. Their pictures seem to date partly from the end of the Upper Paleolithic, partly from the succeeding period. Towards the end of the Upper Paleolithic ten or fifteen thousand years ago, the transgression of the taboo forbidding' originally the **killing** of animals, considered as essentially the same as man, and then the killing of man himself, became formalised in war.

<sup>1</sup> See G. Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, Skira 1955, page 139-140, where I have listed and criticised the various explanations then current. Others no more satisfactory have been published since. By 1955 I had relinquished the idea of putting forward my own hypothesis.

Just like the taboos surrounding death, the transgression of these taboos has left far reaching signs, as we shall see. I have remarked earlier that any certain knowledge of sexual taboos and transgressions dates **only** from historical times. There are several reasons in a work on eroticism for tackling first transgression in general and that of the taboo on murder in particular. It would be impossible to grasp the significance of eroticism without reference to the general pattern; eroticism is disconcerting and difficult to comprehend if its contradictory effects have not first been seen more clearly and earlier in time in another domain.

All that the Spanish **Levant** paintings show is how long ago two groups of adversaries first met in war. But archaeological evidence on war is in general abundant. The struggle between two groups demands in itself a few essential rules. The first obviously concerns the marking off of hostile groups and a declaration of hostilities before the combat. We have definite knowledge of the rules for a declaration of war among primitive peoples. The aggressors' own private decision might suffice, and then the adversary was taken by surprise. But it seemed more frequently within the spirit of the transgression to give him a ritual warning. The war that followed might itself develop according to rules. Primitive war is rather like a holiday, a feast day, and even modern war almost always has some of this paradoxical similarity. The taste for showy and magnificent war dress goes very far back, for originally war seemed a luxury. It was no attempt to increase the peoples' or rulers' riches by conquest: it was an aggressive and extravagant **exuberance**.

*The distinction between ritual and calculated **forms** of war*

Military uniforms have carried on this tradition right up to modern times; the preponderant consideration now, however, is to avoid attracting the enemy's fire. But this concern to **minimise** losses is foreign to the earliest spirit of war. Transgressing the taboo was first and foremost an end in itself, though secondarily it may have served some other

purpose. There are grounds for believing that war was first another outlet for the feelings that are given expression in ceremonial rites. The evolution of war in feudal China, long before our own date, is described thus: "A baron's war began with a challenge. Warriors sent by their lord would come and die heroically by their own hand before the rival lord, or else a war chariot would hurl itself insultingly towards the adversaries' city gates. Then the chariots engage in a **mêlée** and the lords make conventional charges at each other before the fight to the death begins in earnest." The archaic aspects of the Homeric wars have a universal character. It was really a game, but the results were so serious that very soon calculated action superseded obedience to the rules of the game. The history of China makes this plain: ". . . as time goes on, these chivalrous customs lapse. What was once a war of chivalry degenerates into a pitiless struggle, into a clash of peoples and the entire population of a province would be hurled against its neighbours."

War has in fact always oscillated between giving primary importance to adherence to the rules when war is an end in itself and setting a premium on the hoped for political result. Even in our own day there are two opposite schools of thought among military specialists. Clausewitz took his stand against exponents of the tradition of chivalry and emphasised the need to destroy the enemy's forces without pity. "War," he writes "is an act of violence, and there is no limit to the manifestation of this violence.?" There is no doubt that broadly speaking his tendency has slowly come to the fore in the modern world, superseding the ritual practices of the past with their hold on the older generation. We must be careful not to confuse the humanisation of war and its fundamental tradition. Up to a certain point the necessities of war have left room for the development of individual rites. The spirit of traditional rules may have favoured this

<sup>1</sup> Rene Grousset and Sylvie Regnault-Gatier, in *l'Histoire universelle de la Pléiade*, Gallimard, 1955, Volume 1, page 1552-1553.

<sup>2</sup> Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, London, Clowes, 1909 (translated A. M. E. Maguire).

development but the rules themselves never correspond with our contemporary concern to limit losses or the suffering of combatants. Limits were set to the breaking of the taboo, but they were formal ones. The aggressive impulse did not hold undisputed sway. Conditions were laid down, rules were meticulously observed, but once the frenzy was loosed it knew no bounds.

*Cruelty and organised war*

War was different in kind from animal violence and it developed a cruelty animals are incapable of, especially in that the fight, frequently followed by a massacre of the enemy, was as often as not a prelude to the torture of the prisoners. This cruelty is the specifically human aspect of war. I take the following frightful details from Maurice Davie: "In Africa, war captives are often tortured, killed, or allowed to starve to death. Among the Tshi-speaking peoples 'prisoners of war are treated with shocking barbarity.' Men, women and children—mothers with infants on their backs and little children scarcely able to walk—are stripped and secured together with cords round the neck in gangs of ten or fifteen; each prisoner being additionally secured by having the hands fixed to a heavy block of wood, which has to be carried on the head. Thus hampered, and so insufficiently fed that they are reduced to mere skeletons, they are driven after the victorious army for month after month, their brutal guards treating them with the greatest cruelty; while, should their captors suffer a reverse, they are at once indiscriminately slaughtered to prevent recapture. Ramseyer and Kühne mention the case of a prisoner, a native of Accra, who was 'kept in log', that is, secured to the felled trunk of a tree by an iron staple driven over the wrist, with insufficient food for four months, and who died under this ill-treatment. Another time they saw amongst some prisoners a poor, weak child, who, when angrily ordered to stand upright, 'painfully drew himself upright showing the sunken frame in which every bone was visible.'

Most of the prisoners seen on this occasion were mere living skeletons. One boy was so reduced by starvation, that his neck was unable to support the weight of his head, which, if he sat, drooped almost to his knees. Another equally emaciated, coughed as if at the last gasp; while a young child was so weak from want of food as to be unable to stand. The ashantis were much surprised that the missionaries should exhibit any emotion at such spectacles; and, on one occasion when they went to give food to some starving children, the guards angrily drove them back." Both the regular army and the levies in Dahomey show an equal callousness to human suffering. "Wounded prisoners are denied all assistance, and all prisoners who are not destined to slavery are kept in a condition of semi-starvation that speedily reduces them to mere skeletons . . . The lower jaw bone is much prized as a trophy . . . and it is very frequently torn from the wounded and living foe". . . . The scenes that followed the sack of a fortress in Fiji "are too horrible to be described in detail." That neither age nor sex were spared was the least atrocious feature. Nameless mutilations inflicted sometimes on living victims, deeds of mingled cruelty and lust, made self-destruction preferable to capture. With the fatalism that underlies the Melanesian character many would not attempt to run away, but would bow their heads passively to the club stroke. If any were miserable enough to be taken alive their fate was awful indeed. Carried back bound to the main village, they were given up to young boys of rank to practice their ingenuity in torture, or stunned by a blow they were laid in heated ovens, and when the heat brought them back to consciousness of pain, their frantic struggles would convulse the spectators with laughter."<sup>1</sup>

Violence, not cruel in itself, is essentially something organised in the transgression of taboos. Cruelty is one of its forms; it is not necessarily erotic but it may veer towards other forms of violence organised by transgression. Eroticism, like cruelty, is premeditated. Cruelty and eroticism are

<sup>1</sup> M. R. Davie, *The Evolution of War*, Yale University Press, 1929, page 298-299.



conscious intentions in a mind which has resolved to trespass into a forbidden field of behaviour. Such a determination is not a general one, but it is always possible to pass from one domain to another, for these contiguous domains are both founded on the heady exhilaration of making a determined escape from the power of a taboo. The resolve is all the more powerful because the return to stability afterwards is at the back of the mind, and without that the outward surge could not take place. It is as if the waters should overflow and yet be certain to subside again at the same time. The transition from one state to another may be made as long as the basic framework is not risked.

Cruelty may veer towards eroticism, and similarly a massacre of prisoners may possibly end in cannibalism. But a return to animality where all limits are removed is inconceivable in war. There are always some reserves made which stress the human character of even unbridled violence. Athirst for blood, the warriors still do not turn on each other in their frenzy. Here is an intangible rule which regulates fury at its roots. Similarly the taboo on cannibalism generally persists even when the most inhuman passions are raging.

We must point out that the most sinister forms are not necessarily linked with primitive savagery. Organised war with its efficient military operations based on discipline, which when all is said and done excludes the mass of the combatants from the pleasure of transgressing the limits, has been caught up in a mechanism foreign to the impulses which set it off in the first place; war today has only the remotest connection with war as I have described it; it is a dismal aberration geared to political ends. Primitive war itself can hardly be defended: from the outset it bore the seeds of modern warfare, but the organised form we are familiar with today, that has travelled such a long way from the original organised transgression of the taboo, is the only one that would leave humanity unsatisfied.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If its machinery were to be set going, that is.

## CHAPTER VII

### MURDER AND SACRIFICE

*The suspension of the taboo surrounding death for religious reasons; sacrifice; and animals regarded as sacred beings*

The unleashed desire to kill that we call war goes far beyond the realm of religious activity. Sacrifice though, while like war a suspension of the commandment not to kill, is the religious act above all others.

True, sacrifice is looked on basically as an offering, not necessarily as a bloody affair. Notice that most often the victims are animals, often slain as substitutes for men, for as civilisation developed the sacrifice of a human being seemed horrible. But this was not in the first place the reason for sacrificing animals. Human sacrifice is a recent thing, and the victims of the earliest sacrifices known to us were animals. It looks as though the gulf that now separates man and beast came after the domestication of animals, and that occurred in neolithic times. Certainly taboos tended to separate beast from man, as only man observes them. But primitive man saw the animals as no different from himself except that, as creatures not subject to the dictates of taboos, they were originally regarded as more sacred, more god-like than man.

The most ancient gods were largely animals, immune to the taboos which set fundamental limits to man's sovereignty. To begin with, the killing of an animal may well have aroused a powerful feeling of sacrilege, and performed, collectively, would consecrate the victim and confer a sort of godhead on it.

As an animal, the victim was an object of superstition

already because of the curse laid upon violence, for animals never forsake the heedless violence that is the very breath of their life. But as the first men saw it, animals must know the basic laws; they could not fail to be aware that the mainspring of their being, their violence, was a violation of that law: they broke it deliberately and consciously. But in death violence reaches its climax and in death they are wholly and unreservedly in its power. Such a divinely violent manifestation of violence elevates the victim above the humdrum world where men live out their calculated lives. Compared with these death and violence are a sort of delirium; they cannot stop at the limits traced by respect and custom which give human life its social pattern. To the primitive consciousness, death can only be the result of an offence, a failure to obey. Again, death turns the rightful order topsy-turvy.

Death puts the finishing touch to the sinfulness that characterises animals. It penetrates to the very depth of the animal's being, and the bloody ritual reveals these secret depths.

Let us return now to the thesis suggested in the Introduction, that "for us as discontinuous beings death implies the continuity of being".

On sacrifice, I wrote: "The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the sacramental element. This sacramental element is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity: what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular lulling carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice. We should incidentally be unable to imagine what goes on in the secret hidden depths of the minds of the bystanders if we could not call on our own personal religious

experiences, if only childhood ones. Everything leads us to the conclusion that in essence the sacramental quality of primitive sacrifices is analogous to the comparable element in contemporary religions."

To relate that to my present argument I should say that divine continuity is linked with the transgression of the law on which the order of discontinuous beings is built. Men as discontinuous beings try to maintain their separate existences, but death, or at least the contemplation of death, brings them back to continuity.

This is of primary importance.

As taboos came into play, man became distinct from the animals. He attempted to set himself free from the excessive domination of death and reproductive activity (of violence, that is) under whose sway animals are helpless.

But under the secondary influence of transgression man drew near to the animals once more. He saw how animals escape the rule of taboos and remain open to the violence (the excess, that is) that reigns in the realms of death and reproduction. It appears that this secondary accord between man and the animals, this rebound, as it were, belongs to the era of the cave paintings, to human beings as we know them, coming after Neanderthal Man who was still close to the anthropoids. These men left the wonderful pictures of animals familiar to us today. But they rarely depicted themselves, and if they did, they disguised themselves first so to speak; they hid behind the features of some animal or other with whose mask they covered their own face. The more accurate drawings of men have this curious characteristic, at any rate. Humanity must have been ashamed of itself at that time, not of its underlying animality, as we are. It did not reverse its earlier fundamental decisions: Upper Paleolithic man had upheld the taboos relating to death, he had gone on burying the bodies of those near to him; and we have no reason to doubt besides that he was no stranger to sexual taboos probably known to Neanderthal

Man (the taboos bearing on incest and menstruation that are at the bottom of all our behaviour patterns). But the accord with animal nature made the unilateral form of a taboo impossible to observe. It would be hard to point to a well-defined difference in structure between the Middle Paleolithic, the time of Neanderthal Man, and the Upper Paleolithic, when rituals of transgression must have begun to spread, as we know both from the habits of primitive peoples and from documentary evidence of antiquity. We are in the realms of hypothesis, but we are entitled to believe that if the hunters of the painted caves did practice sympathetic magic as is generally admitted, they felt at the same time that animal nature was sacred. This quality implies the observation of the oldest taboos and at the same time a limited degree of transgression, comparable with that which occurred later. As soon as human beings give rein to animal nature in some way we enter the world of transgression forming the synthesis between animal nature and humanity through the persistence of the taboo; we enter a sacred world, a world of holy things. What shapes this change assumed we do not know, nor where the sacrifices took place,<sup>1</sup> nor a great deal about erotic life in those far-off days. (All we can do is refer to the frequent ithyphallic representations of man.) But we do know that this newborn world held animal nature as divine and must have been stirred by the spirit of transgression from the very beginning. The spirit of transgression is the animal god dying, the god whose death sets violence in motion, who remains untouched by the taboos restraining humanity. Taboos do not in fact concern either the real animal sphere or the field of animal myth; they do not concern all-powerful men whose human nature is concealed beneath an animal's mask.

<sup>1</sup> The model of the headless bear, though, in the Montespan Cave (H. Breuil, *Quatre Cent Siècles d'Art Parietal*, Montignac 1952, page 236-238) might well suggest a ceremony something like the sacrifice of a bear, belonging to the late Upper Paleolithic. The ritual killing of a captive bear amongst Iberian hunters or the Aino of Japan has a very primitive character, I feel. They may well be compared with whatever the Montespan modelling implies.

The spirit of this early world is impossible to grasp at first; it is the natural world mingled with the divine; yet it can be readily imagined by anybody whose thought is in step with the processes<sup>1</sup>, it is the human world, shaped by a denial of animality or nature?, denying itself, and reaching beyond itself in this second denial, though not returning to what it had rejected in the first place.

The world seen in these terms is certainly not that of the Upper Paleolithic. To assume that it was the world of the men of the painted caves makes that period and its products easy to understand, but we cannot be sure that it came into existence until a later date known to us through earliest history, and its existence is confirmed by the findings of ethnography, the modern scientific observation of primitive peoples. To Greeks and Egyptians of historical times the animals had suggested a sovereign existence and given them the first images of their gods exalted by death and sacrifice.

These images must be seen as part of an extension of the picture I have already tried to give of the world of the early hunters. I was bound to mention this world first, for then animal nature formed a cathedral, as it were, within which human violence could be centred and condensed. The animality of the cave paintings and the domain of animal sacrifice cannot in fact be understood one without the other. What we know of animal sacrifice opens a way to an understanding of the painted caves, and they help us to comprehend animal sacrifice.

### *Beyond anguish*

The feeling of anguish responsible for the earliest taboos showed man's refusal or withdrawal in face of the blind surge of life. The first men, their conscience awoken by work, felt uneasy before the dizzy succession of new birth and inevitable death. Looked at as a whole, life is the huge

<sup>1</sup> Or if the reader prefers: whose thought is dialectic, capable of developing through the reconciling of opposites.

<sup>2</sup> To put it precisely: shaped by work.

movement made up of reproduction and death. Life brings forth ceaselessly, but only in order to swallow up what she has produced. The first men were confusedly aware of this. They denied death and the cycle of reproduction by means of taboos. They never contained themselves within this denial, however, or if they did so it was in order to step outside it as quickly as possible: they came out as they had gone in, with brusque determination. Anguish is what makes humankind, it seems; not anguish alone, but anguish transcended and the act of transcending it. Life is essentially extravagant, drawing on its forces and its reserves unchecked; unchecked it annihilates what it has created. The multitude of living beings is passive in this process, yet in the end we resolutely desire that which imperils our life.

We are not always strong enough to will this. We come to an end of our resources and sometimes desire is impotent. If the danger is too great, if death is inevitable, then the desire is generally inhibited. But if good luck favours us, the thing we desire most ardently is the most likely to drag us into wild extravagance and to ruin us. Different people stand up in different ways to great losses of energy or money or to a serious threat of death. As far as they are able (it is a quantitative matter of strength) men seek out the greatest losses and the greatest dangers. We tend to believe the opposite because men's strength is usually slight. But if a good measure of strength does fall to them they immediately want to spend themselves and lay themselves bare to danger. Anyone with the strength and the means is continually spending and endangering himself.

By way of illustrating these assertions valid in a general sense I shall leave very early times and primitive customs for the moment. I should like to put forward for consideration a familiar phenomenon experienced by the great mass of humanity among whom we live. I refer to the commonest form of literature, popular detective novels. These books are usually about the misfortunes of the hero and the threats which besiege him. Without his difficulties and his fears

there would be nothing in his life to hold and excite the reader and make him identify himself with the hero as he peruses his adventures. The gratuitous nature of the novels and the fact that the reader is anyway safe from danger usually prevent him from seeing this very clearly, but we live vicariously in a way that our lack of energy forbids us in real life. Without too much personal discomfort we experience the feeling of losing or of being in danger that somebody else's adventures supply. If we had infinite moral resources we should like to live like this ourselves. Which of us has not dreamed of himself as the hero of a book? Prudence—or cowardice—is stronger than this wish, but if we think of our deepest desires which frailty alone forbids us to realise, the stories we read so eagerly will show us their nature.

Following upon religion, literature is in fact religion's heir. A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion. Or rather a rudimentary form of stage drama reduced to the final episode where the human or animal victim acts it out alone until his death. Ritual ceremonies are certainly dramatic versions repeated on a certain date, of a myth, of the death of a god. There is nothing here that should surprise us. In a symbolic form this happens every day at the sacrifice of the mass.

Anguish always works in the same way. The greatest anguish, the anguish in the face of death, is what men desire in order to transcend it beyond death and ruination. But it can be overcome like this on one condition only, namely, that the anguish shall be appropriate to the spirit of the man who desires it.

Anguish is desired in sacrifice to the greatest possible extent. But when the bounds of the possible are over-reached, a recoil is inevitable.<sup>1</sup> Human sacrifice often takes the place of animal sacrifice, no doubt as the distance between man

<sup>1</sup> The Aztecs, to whom sacrifice was a familiar thing, imposed fines on those who could not bear to see children being led to their death and turned their heads away from the procession.



to think that they would not have committed it if only they had known. True, the Church sings *Felix Culpa*—happy fault! So there is a point of view which accepts the necessity of the deed. The echoing liturgy is in harmony with the depths of primitive human thought but strikes a false note in the logic of Christian feeling. Misunderstanding the sanctity of transgression is one of the foundations of Christianity, even if at its peaks men under vows reach the unthinkable paradoxes that set them free, that over-reach all bounds.

*The ancient comparison of sacrifice and erotic intercourse*

The harmony perceived by men of old has been made meaningless by this failure to grasp the nature of transgression. If transgression is not fundamental then sacrifice and the act of love have nothing in common. If it is an intentional transgression sacrifice is a deliberate act whose purpose is a sudden change in the victim. The creature is put to death. Before that it was enclosed in its individual separateness and its existence was discontinuous, as I said in the *Introduction*.<sup>1</sup> But this being is brought back by death into continuity with all being, to the absence of separate individualities. The act of violence that deprives the creature of its limited particularity and bestows on it the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things is with its profound logic an intentional one. It is intentional like the act of the man who lays bare, desires and wants to penetrate his victim. The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim. The woman in the hands of her assailant is despoiled of her being. With her modesty she loses the firm barrier that once separated her from others and made her impene- trable. She is brusquely laid open to the violence of the sexual urges set loose in the organs of reproduction; she is laid open to the impersonal violence that overwhelms her from without.

Doubtless early men would hardly have been able to

<sup>1</sup> See above p. 16.

expound an analysis in detail; only familiarity with large-scale thinking on the subject has made that possible since. The original experience and the development of numerous threads are both necessary if the similarities between two profound experiences are to be accurately mapped out. But the inner experience of piety in sacrifice and in untrammelled eroticism might by chance befall one person. That would make possible, if not a clear, analogy at least a feeling that there was a resemblance. This possibility vanished with Christianity where piety eschewed the desire to use violent means to probe the secrets of existence.

*The flesh in sacrifice and in love*

The external violence of the sacrifice reveals the internal violence of the creature, seen as loss of blood and ejaculations. The blood and the organs brimful of life were not what modern anatomy would see; the feeling of the men of old can only be recaptured by an inner experience, not by science. We may presume that they saw the fulness of the blood-swollen organs, the impersonal fullness of life itself. The individual discontinuous existence of the animal was succeeded in its death by the organic continuity of life drawn into the common life of the beholders by the sacrificial feast. There remains something slightly bestial about consuming this meat in an atmosphere of surging carnal life and the silence of death. Now the only meat we eat is prepared for the purpose, *inanimate*, removed from the organic seething of life where it made its first appearance. The sacrifice links the act of eating with the truth of life revealed in death.

It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening on to the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously death is a sign of life, a way into the infinite. Nowadays sacrifice is outside the field of our experience and imagination must do duty for the real thing. But even if



## CHAPTER IX

### SEXUAL PLETHORA AND DEATH

Reproductive activity seen as a form of growth

Eroticism taken as a whole is an infraction of the laws of taboos: it is a human activity. But although it begins when purely animal nature ends, its foundation is animal none the less. Human nature may turn from that foundation in horror but allows it to persist at the same time, and so effectively that the expression "bestiality" is continually linked with eroticism. It is false to imagine that breaking the sexual taboos means a return to nature as exemplified in the animals, and yet the behaviour forbidden by the taboos is like that of animals. Physical sexuality, always accompanying eroticism, is to it what the brain is to the mind; physiology remains the material basis of thought in just the same way. We must include the animal's sexual function with the rest of the data if we are to put our inner experience of eroticism in its proper place in objective reality, and even give it our first attention. Indeed, the sexual functions of animals have aspects which bring us close to the *inner* experience as we consider them attentively.

In order, then, to get at the inner experience, we shall now discuss physical conditions.

In the fields of objective reality life always brings into play, except when there is impotence, an excess of energy which must be expended, and this super-abundance is in fact either used up in the growth of the unity envisaged or it is quite simply wasted.<sup>1</sup> Hence sexuality has a certain

<sup>1</sup> All this is clear if we look at society's economic activity. The organism's activity is more elusive: there is always a connection between growth and the development of sexual functions both dependent on hypophysis. We cannot measure the calory expenditure of the organism regularly enough to be sure

ambiguity. Even sexual activity independent of its genetic ends is no less essentially concerned with growth. Taken together the gonads grow. To have a clear picture of this process we must go back to scissiparity, the simplest mode of reproduction. The scissiparous organism does grow, but once it has grown the single organism will one day or another split into two. Let us call the original cell *a*, the two cells it turns into *aa* and *aaa*, then the transition from the first state to the second is not independent of the growth of *a*, as  $aa + aau$ , compared with the earlier states represented by *a*, signifies the growth of the latter.

What we must note is that *aa*, although other than *aaa*, is not, any more than the latter, other than *a*. Something of *a* persists in *aa*, something of *a* persists in *aaa*. I shall return to the disconcerting nature of a growth which calls the unity of the growing organism in question, but for the present let us note this, that reproduction is nothing but a form of growth. In general this is clear from the multiplication of individuals, the most obvious result of sexual activity. But growth of the species in sexual reproduction is only one aspect of reproduction in primitive scissiparity, in the sphere of asexual reproduction. Like all the cells of the individual organism, sexual gonads are scissiparous. At bottom every living unity grows. If in growing it attains a state of plethora it can divide, but growth or plethora is the condition of that division which in the world of living things we call reproduction.

The growth of the whole and the contribution of individuals

Objectively, making love is a question of reproduction.

Hence, following our reasoning, it is growth, but not our growth. Neither sexual activity nor scissiparity provide for the growth of the being itself engaged on reproduction

which of two ends it serves, growth or genetic activity. But hypophysis appropriates energy now for the development of sexual functions and now for growth. So gigantism impedes sexual functioning and precocious puberty might coincide with arrested growth, though this is open to doubt.



whether it copulates or more simply divides. Reproduction brings about an impersonal growth.

The fundamental contrast referred to in the first place between loss and growth can therefore be seen in terms of another difference, where impersonal growth as opposed to sheer loss stands against personal growth. There is no basic, selfish growth unless the individual grows without changing. If the growth is for the benefit of a being or a group beyond the individual it is no longer a growth but a contribution, and for the individual making it, it is a loss of his substance. The giver will find himself again in the gift, but he must give first of all; he must first of all renounce more or less completely whatever is needed for the growth of the whole.

Death and continuity *in* asexual and sexual reproduction

We must first take a close look at the situation brought about by division.

Within the asexual organism there was continuity.

When *aa* and *aaa* appeared, the continuity was not immediately done away. Whether it vanished at the beginning or the end of the crisis is unimportant, but there was a moment of suspense. At that moment, that which was not yet *aa* was continuous with *aaa*, but the plethora was threatening this continuity. The plethora is what initiates the glide towards the division of the organism, but it divides at the very moment, the moment of the glide, the critical moment when these two beings about to become separate at any minute are still not yet so. The crisis of separation springs from the plethora; it is not separation yet but a state of ambiguity. In the plethora the organism passes from the calm of repose to a state of violent agitation, a turbulent agitation which lays hold of the total being in its continuity. But the violence of agitation which at first takes place within the being's continuity calls forth a violence of separation from which discontinuity proceeds. Calm returns when the separation is complete and two distinct beings exist side by side.

The plethora of the cell which leads in these circumstances to the creation of one, of two new beings is rudimentary compared with the plethora of the male and female organs ending in the climax of sexual reproduction.

But both crises have essential aspects in common. Both originate in super-abundance. Both are bound up with the growth of the group of beings reproducing and reproduced. And in both there is the disappearance of the individual.

Immortality is wrongly ascribed to dividing cells. Cell *a* survives in neither *aa* nor *aaa*, *aa* is not the same as *a* or *aaa*; in fact during the division *a* ceases to be, *a* disappears, *a* dies. It leaves no trace, no corpse, but die it does. The plethora of the cell ends in creative death, in the solution of the crisis in which appears the continuity of the new beings (*aa* and *aaa*), originally one and the same and now escaping into their final separation from each other.

The significance of this last aspect common to both modes of reproduction is of cardinal importance.

The overall continuity of beings is pushed to the limit in both cases. (Objectively speaking, this continuity is given by one being to another and by each to the totality of the others in the transitions of the reproductive process.) But death is always fatal to individual discontinuity and it appears whenever a deep continuity is revealed. Asexual reproduction conceals it at the same time as it invites it; here the dead individual disappears in death, is spirited away. In this sense asexual reproduction is death's ultimate truth; death proclaims the fundamental discontinuity of beings (and of existence itself). The discontinuous being alone dies, and death lays bare the falsehood of discontinuity.

A return to inner experience

In sexual types of reproduction individual discontinuity is a more robust affair. The discontinuous being does not disappear altogether when he dies but leaves traces that may even last for ever. A skeleton may last millions of years. At the highest level the sexual being is tempted, indeed

obliged, to believe in the immortality of his separate existence. He looks upon his "soul", his discontinuity, as the deepest truth of his own being, for he is taken in by the survival of his physical being although this may be only partial and its constituent parts may decompose. Since bones are so durable he has even invented the "resurrection of the body". On the day of judgment the bones are to come together and the resuscitated bodies bring the soul back to its original state. Here is an exaggeration of a physical condition in which continuity, no less fundamental in sexual reproduction, is lost: the genetic cells divide and from one to another it is possible to have an objective understanding of the initial unity. Continuity underlying each scissiparous division is always obvious.

On the level of the discontinuity and the continuity of beings the only new element in sexual reproduction is the fusion of the two minute entities, tiny cells, the male and female gametes. But the fusion makes the fundamental continuity finally plain; it shows that lost continuity can be found again. The discontinuousness of sexual beings gives rise to a dense and heavy world where individual separateness has terrifying foundations; the anguish of death and pain has bestowed on this wall of separation the solidity of prison walls, dismal and hostile. Yet within this unhappy world lost continuity can be found again if fertilisation takes place: fertilisation, fusion, that is, would be unthinkable if the apparent discontinuousness of the simplest animated beings were not an illusion.

Only the discontinuousness of complex creatures seems intangible to begin with. We do not seem able to conceive of their discontinuity being reduced to a single unity or of being doubled (or called in question). The moments of plethora when animals are in the grip of sexual fever are critical ones in their isolation. Then fear of death and pain is transcended, then the sense of relative continuity between animals of the same species, always there in the background as a contradiction, though not a serious one, of apparent

discontinuity, is suddenly heightened. Curiously enough, this does not happen under exactly similar conditions between individuals of the same sex. It would seem that only a secondary difference has the power to bring a deep-seated identity which might have lain concealed to the surface of consciousness. Similarly a loss is felt more intensely just as it takes place. The sex difference seems to stimulate this undefined sense of continuity due to similarity of race while at the same time betraying it and making it hurtful. Perhaps one should not compare the reactions of animals with man's inner experience after thus discussing objective data. Science sees it in a simple light: animal reaction is determined by physiological facts. Similarity of species is indeed a physiological fact for the observer, and difference of sex is another. But the notion of a similarity made more obvious by a difference is founded on some inner experience. All I can do is stress this change of emphasis in passing. It is characteristic of this work. I believe that a study with man as its subject is bound to make changes like this in places. A study that sets out to be scientific minimises the part played by subjective experience, while I on the other hand am methodically minimising that played by objective knowledge. Indeed when I put forward the findings of science on reproduction, at the back of my mind I intended to transpose them. I know that I cannot undergo the inner experience of animals, still less of animalcula; no more can I imagine it. But animalcula have an inner experience just as complex animals do: the transition from existence in-itself to existence for-itself cannot be assigned exclusively to complex creatures or to mankind. Even an inert particle, lower down the scale than the animalcula, seem to have this existence for-itself, though I prefer the words inside or inner experience; none of the terms used to describe it are wholly satisfactory. I cannot fail to know that this inner experience which I can neither undergo myself nor picture in my imagination implies by definition a *feeling of self*. This elementary feeling is not *consciousness of self*. Con-

sciousness of self follows upon consciousness of external objects, only clearly known with humanity. But feeling of self necessarily varies as the self concerned withdraws into its discontinuity. This withdrawal is greater or lesser according to the facilities available for objective discontinuity, in inverse ratio to those available for continuity. The firmness and stability of a conceivable limit are important but the feeling of self varies according to the degree of isolation. Sexual activity is a critical moment in the isolation of the individual. We know it from without, but we know that it weakens and calls into question the feeling of self. We use the word crisis: that is, the inner effect of an event known objectively. As an objective fact of knowledge the crisis is none the less responsible for a basic inner phenomenon.

*General facts concerning sexual reproduction*

The material basis of the crisis is the plethora; with asexual beings this is clear straight away. There is growth; growth determines reproduction and consequently division and the death of the plethoric individual. It is less clear in the realm of sexual beings but a super-abundance of energy is none the less a starting point for the activity of the sexual organs **and** just as for the simplest organisms brings death in its train.

Not directly, however. As a general rule, the sexual individual survives the super-abundance and even the excesses into which it leads him. Death is the result of the sexual crisis only in exceptional cases, but the significance of these is admittedly **striking**, so much so that the exhaustion following the final paroxysm is thought of as a "little death". Humanly speaking, death is always the symbol of the retreating waters after the violence of the storm, but it is not only to be seen as a remote **parallel**. We must never forget that the multiplication of beings goes hand in hand with death. The **parents** survive the birth of their offspring but the reprieve is only temporary. A stay is granted, partly for the benefit of the newcomers who need assistance, but the

appearance of the newcomers guarantees the disappearance of their predecessors. **Death** follows reproduction with sexual beings too, at a distance even if not immediately.

Death is the inevitable consequence of super-abundance; only stagnation ensures that creatures shall preserve their discontinuity, their isolation, that is. This discontinuity is a challenge to the pressure that is bound to abolish the barriers keeping separate individuals apart. The forward surge of life may require the barriers temporarily, for without them no complex organisation would be possible, no organisation effective. But life is movement and nothing within that movement is proof against it. Asexual beings die of their own development, of their own impulsion. Sexual ones can put up only a temporary resistance, to their own teeming energies as to the general surge of life. True, occasionally what they succumb to is only the collapse of their own resources and metabolism; there is no doubt about this. Only multiple death can resolve the dilemma of these **ever**-multiplying existences. The idea of a world where human life might be artificially prolonged has a nightmare quality yet gives no glimpse of anything beyond that slight delay. Death is waiting in the long run, made necessary by multiplying and teeming life.

*A comparison of the two elementary aspects as seen objectively and subjectively*

Those aspects of life in which reproduction is bound up with death are undeniably and objectively real, but as I have already said, even an elementary form of life has certainly a subjective experience of itself. We can even discuss this rudimentary experience while admitting that it is incommunicable. The crisis of existence is here. The being experiences being in the crisis that puts it to the test, the being's very being is called into question in the transition from continuity to discontinuity or from discontinuity to continuity. We agree that the simplest **organism** is aware of itself and of its limits. If these limits alter, its basic

consciousness is under attack, and this attack is critical for a being having consciousness of self.

In sexual reproduction, I have said that the objective aspects were ultimately the same as in scissiparous division. But when we examine the human experience of this in eroticism we seem to have come a long way from these fundamental aspects and their objective reality. Particularly, in eroticism, our feeling of plethora is not connected with the consciousness of engendering life. One might even say that the fuller the erotic pleasure, the less conscious we are of the children who may result from it. On the other hand, the depression following upon the final spasm may give a foretaste of death, but the anguish of death and death itself are at the antipodes of pleasure. If a reconciliation between the objective reality of reproduction and the subjective experience of eroticism is possible it has some other basis. One thing is fundamental: the objective fact of reproduction calls into question within the subjective consciousness the feeling of self, the feeling of being and of the limits of the isolated being. It questions the discontinuity with which the feeling of self is necessarily bound up because that furnishes its limits; even a vague feeling of self belongs to a discontinuous being. But this discontinuity is never absolute; with sexuality particularly a sense of the existence of others beyond the self-feeling suggests a possible continuity as opposed to the original discontinuity. Other individuals, in sexuality, are continually putting forward the possibility of continuity; others are continually threatening a rent in the seamless garment of the separate individuality. Throughout the vicissitudes of animal life, those others, those fellow creatures, are there just off-stage; they form a background of neutral figures, a simple one perhaps, but one that undergoes a critical change in times of sexual activity. At that moment the other individual does not yet appear positively, it is negatively linked to the disturbed violence of the plethora. Each being contributes to the self-negation of the other, yet the negation is not by any means a recognition of the other as a partner.

This attraction seems to be a matter less of similarity between the two than of the plethora of the other. The violence of the one goes out to meet the violence of the other; on each side there is an inner compulsion to get out of the limits of individual discontinuity. There is a meeting between two beings projected beyond their limits by the sexual orgasm, slowly for the female, but often for the male with fulminating force. At the moment of conjunction the animal couple is not made up of two discontinuous beings drawing close together uniting in a current of momentary continuity: there is no real union; two individuals in the grip of violence brought together by the preordained reflexes of sexual intercourse share in a state of crisis in which both are beside themselves. Both creatures are simultaneously open to continuity. But nothing persists in their imperfect awareness. The crisis over, the discontinuity of each is intact. This crisis is simultaneously the most intense and the least significant.

*Fundamental characteristics of the subjective experience of eroticism*

During this examination of the animal experience of sexuality I have moved some way from the objective facts of sexual reproduction commented upon a little earlier. I have been endeavouring to see the way clear through the subjective experience of animals starting from a few facts drawn from the life of infinitesimal beings. I have been guided by our human subjective experience and my inevitable awareness of what is lacking in animal experience. To tell the truth I have scarcely added anything to such suppositions as are permissible if a broad foundation is to be laid. Moreover I have been stating the obvious.

I have not given consideration to the objective facts of sexual reproduction in order to ignore them thenceforth, however.

Eroticism is the meeting place where all these considerations crop up again.

With human life we are fairly and squarely inside

subjective experience. The objective elements we perceive are **finally** reduced to their subjective terms. I believe that the transitions from this continuity to continuity in eroticism are what they are because of the knowledge of death that **from** the word go connects the rupture of discontinuity and the consequent glide towards a potential continuity with death. We may perceive these characteristics from without, but if we did not already feel them from within their significance would escape us. There is also a leap to be made from the objective fact showing us the necessity of death linked to the super-abundance of life across to the dizzy confusion which the subjective experience of death brings to mind. This disturbance, together with a plethora of sexual activity, brings a profound disquiet in its train. If I had not already realised from outside that they were identical, how should I have recognised in the paradoxical experiences of plethora and swoon bound up with each other, the movement of the individual transcending in death the always provisional discontinuity of life?

The first obvious thing about eroticism is the way that an ordered, parsimonious and shuttered reality is shaken by a plethoric disorder. Animal sexuality brings out this same plethoric disorder but no barrier of resistance is raised against it. Animal disorder is freely dissipated in untrammelled violence. The rupture is consummated, the stormy floods subside and the solitude of the individual closes in upon it once more. The only modification of individual discontinuity possible for the animal is death. Either the animal dies or else when the tumult has died down its discontinuity remains intact. In human life on the other hand, sexual violence causes a wound that rarely heals of its own accord; it has to be closed, and will not even remain closed without constant attention based on anguish. Primary anguish bound up with sexual disturbance signifies death. The violence of this disturbance reopens in the mind of the man experiencing it, who also knows what death is, the abyss that death once revealed. The violence of death and sexual

violence, when they are linked together, have this dual significance. On the one hand the convulsions of the flesh are more acute when they are near to a black-out, and on the other a black-out, as long as there is enough time, makes physical pleasure more exquisite. Mortal anguish does not necessarily make for sensual pleasure, but that pleasure is more deeply felt during mortal anguish.

Erotic activity is not always as overtly sinister as this, it is not always a crack in the system; but secretly and at the deepest level the crack belongs intimately to human sensuality and is the mainspring of pleasure. Fear of dying makes us catch our breath and in the same way we suffocate at the moment of crisis.

In principle eroticism seems at first sight the very opposite of this horrifying paradox. It is a plethora of the genital organs. An animal impulse in us is the cause of the crisis. But the organs do not freely enter this state of chance. It cannot take place without the consent of our will. It upsets an ordered system on which our efficiency and reputation depend. In fact the individual splits up and his unity is shattered from the first instant of the sexual crisis. Just then the plethoric life of the body comes up against the mind's resistance. Even an apparent harmony is not enough; beyond consent the convulsions of the flesh demand silence and the spirit's absence. The physical urge is curiously foreign to human life, loosed without reference to it so long as it remains silent and keeps away. The being yielding to **that** urge is human no longer but, like the beasts, a prey of blind forces in action, wallowing in blindness and oblivion. An indefinite general taboo is set up against that violence, known to us less from outside sources than directly, through the subjective knowledge that its nature is irreconcilable with our basic humanity. There is no formula for this **general** taboo. In the structure of acceptable behaviours only inessential aspects are seen, varying according to persons and circumstances, not to speak of times and places. What Christian theology says about the sins of the flesh shows as

much through the ineffectualness of the prohibitions proclaimed as through the numerous outspoken comments (in Victorian England for example), the gratuitousness, the inconsistency, the violence answering violence of the reactions against the taboo. Only the actual experience of states of normal sexual activity and the clash between them and socially approved conduct allows us to recognise that this activity has its inhuman side. The organs' plethora induces reactions alien to the normal run of human behaviour. A rush of blood upsets the balance on which life is based. A madness suddenly takes possession of a person. That madness is well known to us but we can easily picture the surprise of anyone who did not know about it and who by some device witnessed unseen the passionate lovemaking of some woman who had struck him as particularly distinguished. He would think she was sick, just as mad dogs are sick. Just as if some mad bitch had usurped the personality of the dignified hostess of a little while back. Sickness is not putting it strongly enough, though; for the time being the personality is dead. For the time being its death gives the bitch full scope, and she takes advantage of the silence, of the absence of the dead woman. The bitch wallows—wallows noisily—in that silence and that absence. The return of the personality would freeze her and put an end to the sensual delight she has abandoned herself to. The loosing of the sexual urge is not always as violent as I have described it but this is none the less a fair picture of the diametrically opposite poles.

The urge is first of all a natural one but it cannot be given free rein without barriers being tom down, so much so that the natural urge and the demolished obstacles are confused in the mind. The natural urge means a barrier destroyed. The barrier destroyed means the natural urge. Demolished barriers are not the same as death but just as the violence of death overturns—irrevocably—the structure of life so temporarily and partially does sexual violence. Indeed Christian theology identifies the moral degradation following the sins of the flesh with death. Inevitably linked with the

moment of climax there is a minor rupture suggestive of death; and conversely the idea of death may play a part in setting sensuality in motion. This mostly adds up to a sense of transgression dangerous to general stability and the conservation of life, and without it the instincts could not run their course unhindered. But transgression is not only objectively necessary to this freedom, for it can happen that unless we see that transgression is **taking** place we no longer have the feeling of freedom that the full accomplishment of the sexual act demands,—so much so that a scabrous situation is sometimes necessary to a blase individual for him to reach the peak of enjoyment (or if not the situation itself, **an** imaginary one lived out like a daydream during **inter-intercourse**). Such a situation is not always a terrifying one. Many **women** cannot reach their climax without pretending to themselves that they are being raped. But deep within the significant break there dwells a boundless violence.<sup>1</sup>

*The paradox of the general taboo on sexual freedom, if not on sexuality*

The remarkable thing about the sex taboo is that it is fully seen in transgression. It is inculcated partly through education but never resolutely formulated. Education proceeds as much by silence as by muffled warnings. The taboo is discovered directly by a furtive and at first partial exploration of the forbidden territory. At first nothing could be more mysterious. We are admitted to the knowledge of a pleasure in which the notion of pleasure is mingled with mystery, suggestive of the taboo that fashions the pleasure at the same time as it condemns it. The revelation through

<sup>1</sup> There are widespread and staggering possibilities of harmony between erotic urges and violence. I am thinking of a passage from Marcel Aymé (*Uranus*, Gallimard, page 151-152) which has the merit of presenting the incident in all its banality in an immediate and accessible way. Here is the last sentence: "The sight of these two cautious, dismal and mean-spirited specimens of the petty bourgeoisie eyeing the victims from their Renaissance dining-room and titillating each other and jiggling up and down in the folds of the curtains, just like dogs . . ." The passage describes the execution of some militia men, preceded by other horrible and bloody incidents, observed by a couple who sympathised with the victims.

transgression has certainly not remained constant throughout the ages. Fifty years ago the irony of sex education was more obvious still. But everywhere—and doubtless from the earliest times—our sexual activity is sworn to secrecy, and everywhere, though to a variable degree, it appears contrary to our dignity so that the essence of eroticism is to be found in the inextricable confusion of sexual pleasure and taboo. In human terms the taboo never makes an appearance without suggesting sexual pleasure, nor does the pleasure without evoking the taboo. The basis is a natural urge and in childhood the natural urge acts alone. But there is never any truly human pleasure at that age and anyway we can never remember it. I can imagine objections and exceptions but they cannot shake such a plain fact.

In the human sphere sexual activity has broken away from animal simplicity. It is in essence a transgression, not, after the taboo, a return to primitive freedom. Transgression belongs to humanity given shape by the business of work. Transgression itself is organised. Eroticism as a whole is an organised activity, and this is why it changes over the years. I shall try to give a picture of eroticism seen in its diversity and its changes. Eroticism first appears in transgression of the first degree, for that is what marriage is when all is said and done. But it is only really present in more complex forms in which the quality of transgression is stressed progressively more and more.

The quality of transgression, or in other words, the sinfulness.

## CHAPTER X

### TRANSGRESSION IN MARRIAGE AND IN ORGY

#### *Marriage seen as a transgression and the right of entry*

Marriage is most often thought of as having little to do with eroticism.

We use the word eroticism every time a human being behaves in a way strongly contrasted with everyday standards and behaviour. Eroticism shows the other side of a façade of unimpeachable propriety. Behind the façade are revealed the feelings, parts of the body and habits we are normally ashamed of. It must be stressed that although this aspect has apparently nothing to do with marriage it has in fact always been present in it.

Marriage in the first place is the framework of legitimate sensuality. "Thou shalt not perform the carnal act except in matrimony alone." In even the most puritan societies marriage is not questioned. But I have in mind the quality of transgression that persists at the very basis of marriage. This may seem a contradiction at first, but we must remember other cases of transgression entirely in keeping with the general sense of the law transgressed. Sacrifice particularly, is in essence, as we have seen, the ritual violation of a taboo; the whole process of religion entails the paradox of a rule regularly broken in certain circumstances. I take marriage to be a transgression then; this is a paradox, no doubt, but laws that allow an infringement and consider it legal are paradoxical. Hence just as killing is simultaneously forbidden and performed in sacrificial ritual, so the initial sexual act constituting marriage is a permitted violation.

Near relations having exclusive rights over sisters and daughters would perhaps relinquish these rights to strangers

who, coming from outside, had a kind of irregularity about them that qualified them to undertake that act of transgression which the first act of intercourse in marriage was taken to be. This is only a hypothesis, but if we want to see how marriage fits into the sphere of eroticism such a possibility is not to be neglected. In any case, that there is a feeling of transgression about marriage is a matter of everyday experience; popular wedding celebrations alone make that much clear. Sexual intercourse in marriage or outside it has always something of the nature of a criminal act, particularly where a virgin is concerned, and always to some extent when it takes place for the first time. With this in mind I think it makes sense to talk about a certain power of transgression a stranger would have and a man living in the same community would not possess.

Recourse to a power of transgression not possessed by the first comer seems generally to have been favoured, especially on serious occasions like the violation of the taboo making copulation a shameful thing when it is practised with a woman for the first time. That operation would often be entrusted to men who, unlike the bridegroom, had the authority to transgress. They must have had a quality of sovereignty in some way or another that protected them from the taboo valid for mankind in general. The priesthood would be the obvious choice, but in the Christian world it was out of the question to have recourse to God's ministers, and the custom of entrusting the defloration to the local lord grew up<sup>1</sup>. Sexual intercourse or the initial act at least was evidently considered forbidden and dangerous, but the lord or the priest had the power to touch sacred things without too great a risk.

### *Repetition*

The erotic side or, more simply, the transgressional aspect

<sup>1</sup> In any case the *jus primae noctis* which the feudal lord affected as the sovereign power in his own domain was not as has been thought the outrageous privilege of a tyrant who no one dared resist. At least it did not originate in that way.

of marriage often escapes notice because the word marriage describes both the act of getting married and the state of being married; we forget the former and just think of the latter. Besides, the economic value of women has long made the state of marriage the most important thing; calculations, expectations and results have focused interest on the state at the expense of the intensity of feeling that characterises the brief moment of the act. It is different in kind from the expectations it raises—the home, the children and the domestic activity which will result.

The most serious thing is that habit dulls intensity and marriage implies habit. There is a remarkable connection between the innocence and the absence of danger offered by repeated intercourse (the first act being the only one to fear) and the absence of value on the level of pleasure generally associated with this repetition. This is no negligible connection: it has to do with the very essence of eroticism. But the full flowering of sexual life is not negligible either. Without the intimate understanding between two bodies that only grows with time conjunction is furtive and superficial, unorganised, practically animal and far too quick, and often the expected pleasure fails to come. A taste for constant change is certainly neurotic, and certainly can only lead to frustration after frustration. Habit, on the other hand, is able to deepen the experiences that impatience scorns to bother with.

With repetition the two opposing viewpoints are complementary. Without a doubt, the aspects, the signs and the symbols which give eroticism its richness demand a certain basic irregularity. Carnal life would be a poor thing not far removed from the animals' heavy-footed endeavours if it had never been indulged in with a fair amount of freedom in response to capricious urges. While it is true that sexual life blossoms with habit, it is hard to say how far a happy life prolongs the sensations roused in the first instance by a troubled impulse or revealed by forbidden explorations. Habit itself owes something to the higher pitch of excitement



dependent on disorder and rule-breaking. We can ask whether the deep love kept alive in marriage would be possible without the contagion of illicit love, the only kind able to give love a greater force than that of law.

### *Ritual orgy*

In any case the orderly framework of marriage provides only a harrow outlet for pent-up violence.

Apart from marriage, feast days provided opportunities for rule-breaking and at the same time made possible normal life dedicated to orderly activity. Even the "holiday on the death of a king", that I mentioned, fixed a limit in time to apparently boundless disorder in spite of its prolonged and amorphous nature. Once the royal remains had become a skeleton, disorder and excess ceased to prevail and taboos came into force once more. Ritual orgies often connected with less disorderly feasts allowed for only a furtive interruption of the taboo on sexual behaviour. Often the licence extended only to members of a fraternity, as in the Dionysic Feasts, but it might well have a more precise religious connotation transcending eroticism. We do not know exactly what used to happen: we can always imagine a heavy vulgarity taking the place of frenzy. But it is no use denying the possibility of a state of exaltation composed of the intoxication commonly accompanying the orgy, erotic ecstasy and religious ecstasy.

In the orgy the celebration progresses with the overwhelming force that usually brushes all bonds aside. In itself the feast is a denial of the limits set on life by work, but the orgy turns everything upside-down. It is not by chance that the social order used to be turned topsy-turvy during the Saturnalia, the master serving the slave, the slave lolling on the master's bed. These excesses derive their most acute significance from the ancient connection between sensual pleasure and religious exaltation. This is the direction given to eroticism by the orgy no matter what disorder was involved, making it transcend animal sexuality.

There is nothing of this sort in the rudimentary eroticism of marriage. Transgression, yes, whether violent or not; but transgression in marriage is without consequence, it is independent of other developments, possible ones, no doubt, but not imposed by custom and even frowned on by custom. One might just possibly consider the vogue of dirty jokes in our own day as having something of the marriage ceremony about it at a popular level, but this custom implies an inhibited eroticism turned into furtive sallies, sly allusions and humorous double meanings. Sexual frenzy though, with its religious overtones, is the true stuff of orgies. A very old aspect of eroticism is seen in the orgy. Orgiacal eroticism is by nature a dangerous excess whose explosive contagion is an indiscriminate threat to all sides of life. The original rites made the Maenads devour their own living infants in their ferocious frenzy. Later on this abomination was echoed in the bloody omophagia of kids first suckled by the Maenads.

The orgy is not associated with the dignity of religion, extracting from the underlying violence something calm and majestic compatible with profane order; its potency is seen in its ill-omened aspects, bringing frenzy in its wake and a vertiginous loss of consciousness. The total personality is involved, reeling blindly towards annihilation, and this is the decisive moment of religious feeling. All this occurs within the framework of man's secondary assent in the measureless proliferation of life. The refusal implied by taboos confines the individual within a miserly isolation compared with the vast disorder of creatures lost in each other, whose very violence lays them open to the violence of death. From another standpoint the suspension of taboos sets free the exuberant surge of life and favours the unbounded orgiastic fusion of those individuals. This fusion could in no way be limited to that attendant on the plethora of the genital organs. It is a religious effusion first and foremost; it is essentially the disorder of lost beings who oppose no further resistance to the frantic proliferation of life. That enormous unleashing of natural forces seems to be divine,

so high does it raise man above the condition to which he has condemned himself of his own accord. Wild cries, wild violence of gesture, wild dances, wild emotions as well, all in the grip of immeasurably convulsive turbulence. The perdition ahead would demand this flight into the regions where all individuality is shed, where the stable elements of human activity disappear and there is no firm foothold anywhere to be found.

*The orgy as an agrarian ritual*

The orgies of archaic peoples are usually interpreted in a way that completely by-passes everything that I have tried to show. Before proceeding, then, I must discuss the traditional interpretation which tends to reduce them to rituals of contagious magic. The men who ordained these orgies did indeed believe that they ensured the fertility of the fields. No one doubts that this is so. But the whole story has not been told if practices which far surpass the necessities of an agrarian rite are explained only in terms of that rite. Even if orgies had at all times and everywhere had this meaning one would still be justified in enquiring whether this was their only meaning. To comprehend the agrarian aspect of a custom is indisputably of interest in that it thereby becomes part of the history of agricultural civilisation, but it is ingenuous to see all the actions accounted for by a belief in their efficacy. Work and material utility have certainly determined, or at any rate conditioned, the behaviour, religious as well as profane, of semi-civilised peoples. But that does not mean that an extravagant custom derives specifically from a wish to make plantations fertile. Work set up the distinction between the sacred and the profane. It is the origin of the taboos which made man deny nature. On the other hand, the limits of the working world supported and maintained in the struggle against nature by those taboos also delineated the sacred world. In one way the sacred world is nothing but the natural world persisting in so far as it cannot be entirely reduced to the order laid down by work, profane order,

that is. But the sacred world is only the natural world in one sense. In another it transcends the earlier world made up of work and taboos. In this sense the sacred world is a denial of the profane, yet it also owes its character to the profane world it denies. The sacred world is also the result of work in that its origin and significance are to be sought not in the immediate existence of nature's creation but in the birth of a new order of things, brought about in turn by the opposition to nature of the world of purposeful activity. The sacred world is separated from nature by work; it would be unintelligible for us if we did not see how far work determines its nature and existence.

The human mind formed by work would usually attribute to action a usefulness analogous to that of work. In the sacred world the explosion of violence suppressed by a taboo was regarded not only as an explosion but also as an action, and was considered to have some use. Originally such explosions, like war or sacrifice or orgies, were not calculated ones. But as transgressions perpetrated by men they were organised explosions, they were actions whose possible use appeared as a secondary consideration and were not contested.

The effects of war as an act were of the same order as the effects of work. In sacrifice there came into play forces to which consequences were arbitrarily attributed, just as if the force were that of a tool handled by a man. The effects attributed to orgies are of a different order. In human affairs example is catching. A man enters the dance because the dance makes him dance. A contagious action, and this one really is contagious, was thought to affect not only other men but nature as well. So sexual activity, which can be considered by and large as growth, as I have said, was thought to encourage growth in vegetation.

But only secondarily is transgression an action undertaken because of its usefulness. In war, in sacrifice or in orgies, the human mind arranged a convulsive explosion, banking on the real or imaginary result. War is not a political enterprise in origin, nor sacrifice a piece of magic. Similarly the orgy

did not originate in the desire for abundant crops. The origins of war, sacrifice and orgy are identical; they spring from the existence of taboos set up to counter liberty in murder or sexual violence. These taboos inevitably shaped the explosive surge of transgression. All this does not mean that recourse was never had to the orgy—or war, or sacrifice—for the sake of the results rightly or wrongly attributed to them. But in that case it was a secondary and inevitable business of frantic violence hurled in among the wheels of human activity as organised by work.

Violence in these conditions is no longer a purely natural and animal affair. The explosion preceded by anguish takes on a divine significance transcending immediate satisfaction. It has become a religious matter. But in the same movement it also becomes human; it finds its place in the chain of cause and effect that communal efforts have built up upon the foundation of work.

## CHAPTER XI

## CHRISTIANITY

*Licence and the making of the Christian world*

The modern view of the orgy must at all costs be rejected. It assumes that those who took part had no sense of modesty at all, or very little. This superficial view implies that the men of ancient civilisation had something of the animal in their nature. In some respects it is true these men do often seem nearer than ourselves to the animals, and it is maintained that some of them shared this feeling of kinship. But our judgments are linked to the idea that our peculiar modes of life best show up the difference between man and animal. Early men did not contrast themselves with animals in the same way, but even if they saw animals as brothers the reactions on which their humanity was based were far from being less rigorous than ours. True, the beasts they hunted lived under material conditions much like their own, but then they erroneously ascribed human feelings to animals. In any case primitive (or archaic) modesty is not always weaker than our own. It is only very different, more formalist, not so automatic and unconscious; no less lively for that, it proceeds from beliefs kept alive by a basic anguish. This is why when we discuss the orgy in a very general way we have no grounds for seeing it as an abandoned practice but on the contrary we should regard it as a moment of heightened tension, disorderly no doubt, but at the same time a moment of religious fever. In the upside down world of feast-days the orgy occurs at the instant when the truth of that world reveals its overwhelming force. Bacchic violence is the measure of incipient eroticism whose domain is originally that of religion.

But the truth of the orgy has come down to us through the Christian world in which standards have been overthrown once more. Primitive religious feeling drew from taboos the spirit of transgression. Christian religious feeling has by and large opposed the spirit of transgression. The tendency which enables a religious development to proceed within Christianity is connected with these relatively contradictory points of view.

It is essential to decide what the effects of this contradiction have been. If Christianity had turned its back on the fundamental movement which gave rise to the spirit of transgression it would have lost its religious character entirely, in my opinion. However, the Christian spirit retains the essential core, finding it in continuity in the first place. Continuity is reached through experience of the divine. The divine is the essence of continuity. Christianity relies on it entirely, even as far as to neglect the means by which this continuity can be achieved, means which tradition has regulated in detail though without making their origin plain. The nostalgia or desire that opened up these paths managed to get partially lost among the details and calculations often dear to traditional piety.

But in Christianity there has been a dual process. Basically the wish was to open the door to a completely unquestioning love. According to Christian belief, lost continuity found again in God demanded from the faithful boundless and uncalculated love, transcending the regulated violence of ritual frenzy. Man transfigured by divine continuity was exalted in God to the love of his fellow. Christianity has never relinquished the hope of finally reducing this world of selfish discontinuity to the realm of continuity afire with love. The initial movement of transgression was thus steered by Christianity towards the vision of violence transcended and transformed into its opposite.

This ideal has a sublime and fascinating quality.

Nevertheless there is another side to the matter: how to adjust the sacred world of continuity to the world of

discontinuity which persists. The divine world has to descend among the world of things. There is a paradox in this double intention. The determined desire to centre everything on continuity has its effect, but this first effect has to compromise with a simultaneous effect in the other direction. The Christian God is a highly organised and individual entity springing from the most destructive of feelings, that of continuity. Continuity is reached when boundaries are crossed. But the most constant characteristic of the impulse I have called transgression is to make order out of what is essentially chaos. By introducing transcendence into an organised world, transgression becomes a principle of an organised disorder. Its organised character is the result of the organised ways of its adherents. Such an organisation is founded upon work but also and at the same time upon the discontinuity of beings. The organised world of work and the world of discontinuity are one and the same. Tools and the products of toil are discontinuous objects, the man who uses the tools and makes the goods is himself a discontinuous being and his awareness of this is deepened by the use or creation of discontinuous objects. Death is revealed in relation to the discontinuous world of labour. For creatures whose individuality is heightened by work, death is the primal disaster; it underlines the inanity of the separate individual.

Faced with a precarious discontinuity of the personality, the human spirit reacts in two ways which in Christianity coalesce. The first responds to the desire to find that lost continuity which we are stubbornly convinced is the essence of being. With the second, mankind tries to avoid the terms, set to individual discontinuity, death, and invents a discontinuity unassailable by death—that is, the immortality of discontinuous beings.

The first way gives continuity its full due, but the second enables Christianity to withdraw whatever its wholesale generosity offers. Just as transgression organised the continuity born of violence, Christianity fitted this con-

tinuity regarded as supreme into the framework of discontinuity. True, it did no more than push to its logical conclusion a tendency which was already marked. But it accomplished something which had hitherto only been suggested. It reduced the sacred and the divine to a discontinuous and personal God, the creator. What is more, it turned whatever lies beyond this world into a prolongation of every individual soul. It peopled Heaven and Hell with multitudes condemned with God to the eternal discontinuity of each separate being. Chosen and damned, angels and demons, they all became impenetrable fragments, for ever divided, arbitrarily distinct from each other, arbitrarily detached from the totality of being with which they must nevertheless remain connected.

This multitude of creatures of chance and the individual creator denied their solitude in the mutual love of God and the elect—or affirmed it in hatred of the damned. But love itself made sure of the final isolation. What had been lost in this atomisation of totality was the path that led from isolation to fusion, from the discontinuous to the continuous, the path of violence marked out by transgression. Desire for harmony and conciliation in love and submission took the place of the overwhelming wrench of violence, even while the memory of early cruelty lasted. I spoke earlier<sup>1</sup> of the Christian evolution of sacrifice. I shall try now to give a general picture of the changes wrought by Christianity in sacred matters.

*The basic ambiguity: Christianity's reduction of religion to its benign aspect: Christianity's projection of the darker side of religion into the profane world*

In Christian sacrifice the faithful are not made responsible for desiring the sacrifice. They only contribute to the Crucifixion by their sins and their failures. This shatters the unity of religion. At the pagan stage religion was based on transgression and the impure aspects were no less divine

<sup>1</sup> See below p. 89.

than the opposite ones. The realm of sacred things is composed of the pure and of the impure<sup>1</sup>. Christianity rejected impurity. It rejected guilt without which sacredness is impossible since only the violation of a taboo can open the way to it.

Pure or favourable sacredness has been dominant since pagan antiquity. But even if it was nothing but a prelude to a transcendental act, impure or ill-omened sacredness was there underneath. Christianity could not get rid of impurity altogether, it could not wipe out uncleanness entirely. But it defined the boundaries of the sacred world after its own fashion. In this fresh definition impurity, uncleanness and guilt were driven outside the pale. Impure sacredness was thenceforward the business of the profane world. In the sacred world of Christianity nothing was allowed to survive which clearly confessed the fundamental nature of sin or transgression. The devil—angel or god of transgression (of disobedience and revolt)—was driven out of the world of the divine. Its origin was a divine one, but in the Christian order of things (which prolonged Judaic mythology) transgression was the basis not of his divinity but of his fall. The devil had fallen from divine favour which he had possessed only to lose. He had not become profane, strictly speaking: he retained a supernatural character because of the sacred world he came from. But no effect was spared to deprive him of the consequences of his religious quality. The cult that no doubt still persisted, a survival from the days of impure divinities, was stamped out. Death by fire was in store for anyone who refused to obey and who found in sin a sacred power and a sense of the divine. Nothing could stop Satan from being divine, but this enduring truth was denied with the rigours of torment. A cult which had indisputably upheld certain aspects of religion was now thought of as nothing but a criminal parody of religion.

<sup>1</sup> See Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le Sacré* second edition, Gallimard, 1950, pages 35-72. This text of Caillois is also published in the *Histoire Générale des Religions*, Quillet, 1948, volume I under the title *L'Ambiguïté du Sacré*.

Its very aura of sacredness was considered a profanation. The principle of profanation is the use of the sacred for profane purposes. Even in the heart of paganism uncleanness could result from contact with something impure. But only in Christianity did the existence of the impure world become a profanation in itself. The profanation resided in the fact that it existed, even if pure things were not themselves sullied. The original contrast between the sacred and the profane world subsided into the background with the coming of Christianity.

One side of the profane allied itself to the pure half, the other to the impure half of the sacred. The evil to be found in the profane world joined with the diabolical part of the sacred and the good joined with the divine. The light of sanctity shone on the good whatever good may have meant in practical terms. The word *sanctity* originally meant sacred things, but this quality became associated with a life dedicated to Good, to Good and to God at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Profanation resumed the original meaning of profane contact that it had in pagan religion. But it possessed another implication. Profanation in paganism was essentially unlucky, deplorable from all points of view. Transgression alone in spite of its dangerous nature had the power to open a door on to the sacred world. Profanation in Christianity was neither the same as original transgression, although rather like it, nor the same as early profanation. It most resembled transgression. Paradoxically, Christian profanation, being a contact with something impure, gained access to the essentially sacred, gained access to the forbidden world. But this underlying sacredness was simultaneously profane and diabolic as far as the Church was concerned. In spite of everything there was a son of formal logic about the Church's attitude. What she regarded as sacred was separated from the profane world by well-defined formal limits that

<sup>1</sup> However, the underlying affinity between sanctity and transgression has never ceased to be felt. Even in the eyes of believers, the libertine is nearer to the saint than the man without desire.

had become traditional. The erotic, the impure or the diabolic were not separated from the profane world in the same way: they lacked a formal character, an easily understood demarcation.

In the original world of transgression the impure was itself well-defined, with stable forms accentuated by traditional rites. What paganism regarded as unclean was automatically regarded as sacred at the same time. That which condemned paganism, or Christianity, held to be unclean was no longer, or never became, the subject of a formal attitude. There may have been a formalisation of Sabbaths but it was never stable enough to persist. If sacred formalism would have none of it, the unclean was condemned to become profane.

The merging of sacred uncleanness and the profane seems to have been for some long time contrary to the feeling about the true nature of things persisting in man's memory, but the inverted religious structure of Christianity demanded it. It is perfect in so far as the feeling of sacredness dwindles when it is encased in formal patterns that seem a little out of date. One of the signs of this decline is the lack of heed paid to the existence of the devil these days; people believe in him less and less—I was going to say that they have ceased to believe in him altogether. That means that the dark side of religious mystery, more ill-defined than ever, finally loses all significance. The realm of religion is reduced to that of the God of Good, whose limits are those of light. There is no curse on anything in this domain.

This development had consequences in the domain of science (which is interested in religion from its own profane point of view; but I must say in passing that my attitude personally is not a scientific one. Without committing myself to particular religious forms I regard, or my book regards, religion from a religious point of view.) The connection between the good and the sacred appears in the work, remarkable in its way by a disciple of Durkheim. Robert Hertz rightly insists on the humanly significant differences between left-hand side and right-hand

side<sup>1</sup>. A general belief associated good luck with the right-hand side, bad luck with the left-hand side; that is, the right with the pure, the left with the impure. In spite of the premature death of its author\*, the study has remained famous. It anticipated other works on a question which up to then had been rarely tackled. Hertz identified the pure with the holy, the impure with the profane. His work was later than the one which Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss had devoted to magic<sup>3</sup>, in which the complexity of the domain of religion was already obvious but the numerous confirmations of instances witnessing to the "duality of sacredness" was only generally recognised much later.

#### Witches' *Sabbaths*

Eroticism fell within the bound: of the profane and was at the same time condemned out of hand. The development of eroticism is parallel with that of uncleanness. Sacredness misunderstood is readily identified with Evil. While it conserved a sacred quality in people's minds the violence of eroticism could cause anguish or nausea, but it was not identified with profane Evil, with the violation of the rules that reasonably and rationally safeguard people and property. These rules, sanctioned by a sense of taboo, are different from those that proceed from the blind functioning of the taboo in that they vary according to their rational utility. With eroticism the preservation of the family was the main consideration, and the sorry plight of fallen women banished from family life was another. But a coherent whole only took shape within Christianity, when the original sacred character of eroticism ceased to be apparent at the same

<sup>1</sup> Hertz, if not a Christian, at least adhered to an ethic very like the Christian one. His study first appeared in the *Revue Philosophique*. It was reprinted in a collection of his writings, *Melanges de Sociologie religieuse et de Folklore*, 1928.

<sup>2</sup> He was killed in the first world war.

<sup>3</sup> *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la Magie* in *Année Sociologique* 1902-1903. The cautious position of the authors was opposed to that of Frazer (close to that of Hertz). Frazer regarded magical practices as profane. Hubert and Mauss regard magic as a religious phenomenon, at least *lato sensu*. Magic is often left-handed, unclean, but it raises complex issues that I shall not tackle here.

time as social considerations gained in importance.

The orgy with its emphasis on the sacred nature of eroticism transcending individual pleasure was to become the subject of special attention from the Church. The Church was in general against eroticism, but this opposition was based on the profane evil of sexual activity outside marriage. The feelings roused by the transgression of the taboo had to be suppressed at all costs.

The battle waged by the Church in this matter shows how difficult that was. A world of religion without uncleanness, in which nameless and unrestricted violence was severely condemned, was not accepted straight away.

But we know little or nothing of the nocturnal celebrations of the Middle Ages--or of the beginnings of modern times. The fault may lie to some extent with the cruelty of the repressive measures applied against them. Our sources of information are the confessions dragged by the judges from unfortunates put to the torture. Torture made the victims repeat what the judges' imagination suggested. We can only suppose that Christian vigilance could not prevent the survival of pagan festivals, at least in regions of deserted moorlands. We may well imagine a half-Christian mythology inspired by theology substituting Satan for the divinities worshipped by the yokels of the high Middle Ages. It is not even ridiculous at a pinch to see the devil as a *Dionysos redivivus*.

Certain authors have doubted the existence of witches' sabbaths. In our own day, people have even questioned the existence of the Voodoo cult. That cult exists none the less, even if it has sometimes turned into a tourist attraction. Everything leads us to believe that the cult of Satan, to which the Voodoo offers resemblances, did indeed exist, even if less frequently in reality than in the minds of the judges.

Here is what seems to emerge from readily accessible data.

The Sabbaths, vowed in the lonely night to the secret cult















































































































































































