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Ritual Theories

> [In the nineteenth century] "Self-help" was a favorite motto with leading and characteristic men of all classes. In the twentieth century, on the other hand, self-discipline and self-reliance are somewhat less in evidence, and a quasi-religious demand for social salvation through state action has taken the place of older and more personal creeds.
>
> G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 523

4.1 SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Myth and society

Two major advances at the turn of the twentieth century altered our understanding of myth fundamentally and irrevocably. One was the discovery of the unconscious by Freud and his colleagues. The other was the assertion that myth had a fundamentally social nature. Both discoveries would eventually undermine Victorian anthropology's confident belief in cultural evolution.

The theory of cultural evolution had obvious benefits for Europe's imperial mercantile and industrial interests. It generated an image of the savage which grounded Victorian rationalism and economism in human nature. Moreover, it guaranteed a universal human nature without sacrificing European claims to an advanced position in the pursuit of what everyone supposedly wanted, namely science, technology, and economic expansion. The belief that other nations differed from Europeans not in their wants, but only in their capacity to satisfy them, actively promoted the economic development of the colonies by European interests, since by virtue of this myth colonial exploitation appeared to be a form of international development and foreign aid, as if European enterprise was largely a matter of sharing the science and technology which would save

savages from their eternal balance on the brink of starvation. And since philosophy grows out of a full stomach, all other cultural benefits, especially reason, morality, and good government, would soon follow.

In this economism and scientism the savage most resembled his creators' rugged individualism. If Victorian science identified hunger as the universal motive, as opposed, say, to sex, greed, envy, or the will to power, it was partly because hunger can be experienced and dealt with by an individual, alone, in Robinson-Crusoe fashion, without reference to any other individuals or to society at large. According to its canons of rational plausibility, it was the individual, not society, which proved the intelligent, creative, and dynamic force behind the material and spiritual progress of the species. The social group, as a whole, was, on the contrary, stupid, repressive, and inert. This individualistic bias repeatedly led Frazer to adopt the most absurd explanations for the invention of new concepts. We saw, for example, how Frazer attributed the origin of totemism to an error committed by a woman who discovered she was pregnant after an animal crossed her path, although the explanation presupposes the existence of the category whose origin it purports to explain (Section 2.4). The same circular logic can be found in Freud's explanation of the origin of totemism and human culture. The myth of the primal sons murdering the primal father cannot be the origin of guilt and remorse and hence the creation of the superego. The guilt and remorse could never have arisen unless the mechanisms of internal repression were already in place. But why do Frazer and Freud tell these tales as if the logic ran backwards? It is because they were committed to explaining historical developments through the experience of individual consciousness.

Categories of thought are not the products of individual consciousness processing new information. Totemism and religion are not created when distinguished intellectuals spot kangaroos and pigs. The formulation of such categories is the product of social, not individual, thought. The mind is never a *tabula rasa* before scientific observation and deduction. At best, the mind is a *tabula rasa* only, if ever, before the acquisition of language, and through it, social thought. If individual minds become aware of new categories and combinations, it is only because language has prepared them in advance and social discourse has provided the motive for their formulation.

But even if we were to allow that certain individuals are responsible for the creation of totemism or religion, the explanations offered are hardly sufficient. Totemism and religion are manifestly social phenomena and any adequate explanation must show how new ideas are transferred from the mind of the individual to society at large (let alone from the individual to all societies at a parallel stage of development). Frazer was content to

refer to the sheepishness of the masses, who follow wherever gifted individuals may lead. But he never attempted to verify or demonstrate his elitist theory of mass behavior and was even content to contradict it, whenever it suited his theories. The peasant and urban masses of Europe in Frazer's own day were notably so conservative and unmoved by the progressive thinking of their scientific elite that they lived in a state of virtual savagery, practiced magic, and would, if they were not properly policed, revert to human sacrifice and cannibalism.

It is doubtful whether the thought processes of the individual *qua* individual are of any relevance to the study of myth. A narrative is not a myth the first time it is told, but only a story or an account. What makes a story a myth is the fact that it is received by a given society and that a given society participates in its transmission. There are obviously difficulties involved in determining just when any story becomes a myth, but it is perfectly clear that, by almost any currently acceptable definition, a narrative is not a myth when it is first told. It may be, of course, that the intentions of the first narrator and the umpteenth narrator are the same, but this still does not give any special status to the creator of a myth. It is far more important to realize that the intentions of a given society in transmitting a narrative may have nothing to do with the purposes of its author. Thus both in theory and in practice we can never identify any individual creator of a myth. So long as myth is a collective narrative by definition, the only relevant consideration are the mentality and purposes of the society for which the myth is a myth.

Émile Durkheim

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) articulated the first significant theoretical and methodological departure from the individualistic, economistic, and materialist bias of Victorian anthropology. He replaced all of them with a new concept of "society." Durkheim's writings assert the primacy of society in history and in the development of individual consciousness. He was a founder of the modern science of Sociology and an important figure in the development of the French Socialist Party.

Durkheim was an idealist in the philosophical, as well as the political sense. Unlike most of his contemporaries he refused to take the individual as a starting point. "Society is not a mere sum of individuals; rather the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics" (1938: 103). One of the chief characteristics of this specific reality, namely society, is a form of consciousness, which he calls the "collective consciousness." The collective consciousness of a

social group is distinct from the consciousness of its members. It has its own objective existence which is perceptible through the effects it produces on the individual consciousness of the members of a social group. It is not the contributions of individual minds that create society and culture, but culture and society which create the contents and capacities of individual minds.

Division of Labour in Society (1893) is perhaps Durkheim's most effective assault on the Victorian trinity of individualism, rationalism, and economism. The work outlines a theory of social evolution which stands Victorian economic determinism on its head and it does so in the very realm where the economic seems most secure, namely, the division of labor.

Anthropologists like Spencer explained the division of labor as the direct result of the pursuit for happiness which, no one could doubt, was universal to all humanity. But in this case "happiness" means the accumulation of material wealth, which specialized labor increases because of its greater efficiency and productivity. Pushing this flawed logic to its limit, one might even argue that it was the need for specialized production which gave rise to the exchange of goods which, in turn, created the need for social structure which ultimately produced human civilization. For Durkheim this kind of argument mistook cause and effect. Greater productivity, he argued, is an incidental consequence of the division of labor, not the cause. "If we specialize, it is not to produce more, rather it is to make it possible to live when new conditions of existence present themselves" (1986: 259). Durkheim's explanation begins with society (without which specialization is inconceivable) and also ends with society: ultimately the "new conditions" prove to be the need to preserve society itself.

Primitive man, so he argues, cannot simply be assumed to desire material abundance. Where the conditions of life are simple, needs are few and easily satisfied. There is little technological development, little division of labor, and hence little social differentiation. Moreover, primitive societies have what Durkheim calls a "mechanical solidarity." Since one savage is as like another as two peas in a pod, they all bear the same mental stamp and common interests. The savage and his social group think and act as one. This situation only begins to change with social growth (the real prime mover in human history). As time goes on successful societies get larger, their populations grow more concentrated (what Durkheim calls "social condensation"), and they begin to break apart. The division of labor is not, says Durkheim, the cause of this breaking-up, but a result of it. Society responds to the breakup of mechanical solidarity by replacing it with an "organic solidarity" through the division of labor. The division of labor permits greater heterogeneity in the social system, but it also creates economic bonds of interdependence.

Advanced societies are the ultimate product of this process of social growth. The larger the social group, the farther the division of labor advances, until the interests and life-experiences of different members of the group grow highly variable. The collective consciousness grows weaker, and individual consciousness stronger. Only then can one talk of "true individuals" existing within (and apart from) the social group. Along with this relative independence from the collective consciousness comes the possibility of greater objectivity, the development of stronger powers of reason, and so on. Durkheim's new narrative of the evolution of human civilization effects a complete transvaluation of the dominant Victorian values. In particular: (1) it puts social change before economic change – indeed, social change causes economic change; (2) it puts the social before the individual – indeed, the social calls the individual into being, both in the sense that in primitive society each member of the tribe is a replica of the group personality, and in the sense that it is change in the social dynamic which calls into being "true individuals" in advanced and complex societies; and (3) it makes "reason" itself a recent arrival in human history, and consequently denies it any role in social evolution, and indeed, once again, the social is ultimately responsible for the evolution of reason, if only, in a sense, through its absence.

Though he makes wholesome havoc with Victorian science, Durkheim unfortunately does it in a way that is uncomfortably reminiscent of the usual Victorian teleology. We still see the evolution toward reason, science, and superior technological and economic development, which puts the European in a position of uncontested superiority over all other societies (contemporary as well as historical). It should, however, be noted that despite the general optimism this theory displays toward the division of labor, Durkheim was far less confident than most of his contemporaries that science and technology brought progress. The centrifugal forces unleashed by technological advancement, and the further social differentiation encouraged by the bourgeois-industrial cult of greedy individualism, threatened a complete breakdown of ethical and social norms. He further explored these themes in a book, *Suicide* (1897), in which he showed that suicide (and human unhappiness generally) was far less frequent in societies where the individual was better integrated into his culture.

The primary function of the collective consciousness is to bind the social group. Culture is therefore both infra-individual insofar as it takes its origin in the collective consciousness, and ultra-individual in that it aims at preserving the collective. Within this scheme, individualism can have only a negative and a passive role. The collective consciousness integrates the individual through its "collective representations" which embrace most of what we mean by culture. This is nowhere truer than in the realm of

religion. Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) argued that the idea of society is the origin and "soul of religion" – and just about everything else, since "nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion" (1991: 697).

The object of the book is not only to explain the origin and evolution of human culture, but to give an account of the origin and nature of the collective consciousness. In urging the primacy of sociology among human sciences, Durkheim felt it necessary to assert the autonomy of the collective consciousness and of collective representations. They could in no way be reducible to the material conditions of society, and still less could they merely amount to the sum of the individual consciousnesses that comprised them. Collective consciousness had to have a life and will of its own. Durkheim speaks of a synthesis of particular consciousnesses which (1991: 704–5):

> has the effect of disengaging a whole world of sentiments, ideas and images which, once born, obey laws all their own. They attract each other, repel each other, unite, divide themselves and multiply though these combinations are not commended and necessitated by the condition of the underlying reality. The life thus bought into being even enjoys so great an independence that it sometimes indulges in manifestations with no purpose or utility of any sort, for the mere pleasure of affirming itself.

"This," he concludes, "is often precisely the case with ritual activity and mythological thought."

The collective consciousness here emerges as autonomous, systemic, and rule-governed. Little wonder that Durkheim is often credited, alongside Saussure, with fathering structuralism (see Section 5.1). The autonomy, systematicity, and ruliness of collective representation is nicely exemplified by the discussion of the distinction between sacred and profane with which Durkheim begins *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. All religious systems presuppose a classification of all things, real or ideal, into two opposed categories, one designated by the term "profane," the other by the term "sacred." They depend on no natural cause, yet human thought offers no two categories so distinct, so absolute, and so opposed. The phenomenon of religion is misunderstood if it does not observe this distinction. "Sacred things" are isolated and protected by powerful interdictions; "profane things" are kept separate from the sacred by these same interdictions. Now magic differs from religion in that religion is a system of beliefs held in common by a community or practices performed in common by a community which serve to bind the community together; magic (which does not precede religion, but coexists with it) is practiced by individuals and practiced for private ends.

Because the comparatists fail to recognize the crucial distinction between sacred and profane, they suppose that the observation of empirical data led to the formation of religious concepts. Thus Tylor, Spencer, and the animists supposed that individuals seeing persons or animals in dreams give rise to the notion of free-ranging personal spirits; Max Müller and the nature school thought that individuals contemplating the power and splendor of natural phenomena came to anthropomorphize and ascribe godlike powers to them; Frazer, Boas, and others supposed that individuals observed natural phenomena and mistook the laws of natural causation. But the facts of common experience cannot give us a concept of something whose most fundamental characteristic is to be outside the world of common experience. Since neither human beings nor nature have the character of the sacred in themselves, this experience must have come from elsewhere, somewhere outside of nature and outside of the individual.

Durkheim searched for the answer in the most elementary form of religious life, the aboriginal societies of Australia. He correctly observed that they are not prereligious, as Frazer had claimed, but primordially religious. He also rejected the promiscuous comparisons of people like Frazer. You cannot compare the expressions of two different societies just because the expressions seem similar. To be comparable two societies must also bear each other a structural resemblance. He therefore confines himself to the close study of totem groups in Australia, though he allows some comparison with American Indian beliefs and practices, because, though more advanced societies, they express the totemistic concepts more clearly than the less advanced Australians who have only a primitive means of self-expression.

Durkheim begins his analysis by observing the centrality of the social element. Totemism is not just a belief system, it is a clan system, a form of social organization. The idea of the sacred embraces not only the totem animal or plant but also the members of the clan who *participate* in the totem. And even though the rest of the universe also participates, it is a notable fact that all other plants and animals are organized into clans and phratries no less than the members of the tribe. The principle of social organization is projected onto the cosmos. The natural world is sacred insofar as it participates in the totem emblem.

Frazer and others were wrong to think that religion necessarily involves personified or theriomorphic gods. It is true, says Durkheim, that the aborigines have no gods, but they do recognize higher concentrations of power. Within the realm of the sacred, differences are quantitative not qualitative. Impersonal forces, which different totemistic societies call *mana*, *wakan*, or *orenda*, are immanent in the world and diffused among its various material objects. The belief is not rooted in any ordinary experience

and not connected with any empirical observation of the power or majesty of nature. Totem animals tend to be things like grubs, caterpillars, or frogs, not the most powerful or awe-inspiring of creatures. Yet they inspire the most intense religious emotions and are credited with supernatural power. The reason is that they are symbols which stand for another source of power. That source of power is nothing other than the power of the clan in its collectivity which they symbolize. It is, of course, society itself which stands at the root of the religious experience. Both physically and morally superior to the individual, the power and authority of the collective are the source of the individual's experience of fear and respect.

Having explained the social origin of the idea of the sacred, Durkheim feels it necessary to explain how it arose, and to continue his narrative with an account of its growth into "more advanced" forms of religion. He finds the origin of the idea of the sacred in the periodic clan gatherings designed to maintain the solidarity of the clan. These gatherings replaced normal periods of dispersed individualistic economic activities, and were characterized by moments of intensified emotion and "collective effervescence." When transported from profane to sacred existence at these gatherings, the clan sought an explanation for their altered and elevated state. The gathering of the clan is the real cause, but too complex for the primitive mind to comprehend. So the clansman looks about and sees the symbols of the clan surrounding him and assigns the cause for his altered state to these objects. He supposes that the mana flows from the graven image of the clan totem, rather than from the collectivity of the clan itself.

Eventually, and by a similar process, there developed the idea of the "soul." Australian Aborigines believe that the old souls of dead ancestors of the clan enter into the bodies of newborn children and are reincarnated. Soul is "individualized mana," an individualized representation of the clan. Belief in the immortality of the soul represents the notion that society continues to live after its individual members die.

Once there developed a belief in the existence of "souls," primitives could posit the previous existence of original souls from which the others are derived. Through this logical process the primitive deduced the belief in spirits or original ancestors at the beginning of time. The same logical process was then replicated in a number of larger arenas: when the tribes came together for their ceremonies, the primitive sought an explanation for the homogeneity and generality of the rites of the clans, and hence assumed the existence of a "civilizing hero" of the entire tribe.

Gradually the concept of divinity was abstracted from that of mana. The catalyst was the growth in social complexity, which resulted in the separation of social groups, the consequent privileging of some groups

over others, and the eventual development of social hierarchies, which ascribed to some members of society higher concentrations of mana than to others. This caused the feeling of intensified group emotion to be concentrated on an individual representative, a priest or king. With the growth in social complexity and the consequent growth of communications between groups, larger social entities were formed, hence higher concentrations of mana, and the figureheads of these groups came to be regarded as gods.

One can see, in this brief account, just how much, and how little, Durkheim's vision differs from Frazer's. Frazer's economism has been completely replaced by "society" as a motive force driving evolution. But despite his effort to distance himself from the rationalism and individualism of men like Frazer, Durkheim still lingers under their spell. Notwithstanding the social origin of thought and culture, each evolutionary stage in his scheme is still played out in the heads of individuals trying to find causes for their feelings, individuals who are still inventing new concepts through observation and rational deduction. Moreover, religious concepts, if not the rituals, are still explained in terms of erroneous applications of the law of causality in the minds of these individuals.

Durkheim's theory, and in particular his demonstration of the social origin and social function of cultural forms, especially ritual, myth, and religion, had a profound effect upon the later development of ritualism and structuralism. It is, however, the approach that came to be known as functionalism that owes Durkheim the greatest debt. Functionalism came to dominate British and American anthropology for several decades. Its main exponents were Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Though they had very different notions of what constituted "functionalism," their essential orientation, which they owed mainly to Durkheim, was the same: they were mainly interested in myth (or rites, customs, and institutions) in their relation to a particular society (as opposed to a supposed absolute or universal context); they viewed myth in relation to the contemporary society that employs it and had no interest in myths as relics; they were interested in myth's social effect or social function; they treated cultures as systemic wholes in which cultural activities or products function in concert to reinforce and perpetuate the social system.

Bronislaw Malinowski

Malinowski was a young student at Cracow (then in Austro-Hungary), destined to be a scientist or a chemical engineer, when (according to his own account), during a period of convalescence, he read Frazer's *Golden*

Bough (then only three volumes), which changed his life. From Frazer he probably took his sense of the primacy of economic and practical activity. More decisive was undoubtedly the fact that World War I found him in the South Pacific, in enemy territory (Australia) and on an enemy research grant (British), limiting his movements and obliging him to extend his stay to include two full years in the Trobriand Islands, northeast of New Guinea, between 1916 and 1918. These years proved a happy mischance for the development and expression of this theory and method.

Malinowki's classic statement of the function of myth is a very short book, published in 1926, called *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. It begins with the claim that "an intimate connection exists between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales of a tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities, on the other" (1954: 96). Indeed, much more emphasis is put on the "practical" than his "even" implies. Practicality and hard work are leitmotifs which come to characterize both the savage and his myth: "myth, in fact, is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hard-working, extremely important cultural force"; elsewhere myth is an "hardworked active force," "a narrative told in satisfaction of . . . practical requirements," which "contains practical rules for the guidance of man"; it is "a vital ingredient of practical relation to the environment" (97, 101, 147). If Frazer's savage sometimes wore a lab coat, Malinowski's has a consistent preference for the hard hat.

Hard work and practicality are indeed the qualities that distinguish the man and his method. To find out how and how much a savage or his myths can labor, one has to be there beside him. These qualities mark the great difference between Malinowski and the earlier generation of armchair theorists. Even those who did practice in the field in his day he characterizes dismissively as conducting their interviews from a "comfortable position on the veranda of the missionary compound, Government station, or planter's bungalow . . . armed with pencil and notebook and at times with whisky and soda" (146–7). But Malinowski had not spent two years with the Trobrianders for nothing. He insists on the importance of a method of fieldwork that has since become standard among anthropologists. The researcher (147):

> must go out into the villages and see the natives at work in gardens, on the beach, in the jungle; he must sail with them to distant sandbanks and to foreign tribes, and observe them fishing, trading, and ceremonial overseas expeditions. Information must come to him full-flavored from his own observations of native life, and not be squeezed out of reluctant informants as a trickle of talk.

After all the anthropologist has (100):

> the unique advantage of being able to step back behind the savage whenever he feels that his theories become involved and the flow of his argumentative eloquence runs dry . . . [he] has the myth-maker at his elbow. Not only can he take down as full a text as exists, with all its variations, and control it over and over; he has also a host of authentic commentators to draw upon; still more he has the fullness of life itself from which the myth has been born . . . in this live context there is as much to be learned about the myth as in the narrative itself.

True, it was easy for Malinowski to adopt a superior posture about fieldwork, now that the era of turbine-driven steamships had arrived, but there is more to it than that. Malinowski's "practical" method presupposes the importance of social context and contemporary reality, things for which theorists like Frazer had little time.

Myth does indeed do hard practical work in Malinowski's book. It justifies the social order, its institutions, practices, customs, and moral codes. It "comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality and sanctity" (107). It provides "a statement of the primeval, greater, and more relevant reality by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined" (108). In other words, myths are the very expression and means of propagation of the collective consciousness. They justify and perpetuate the pattern of thought and behavior which makes up the particular mentality of a given social group, and serve as a foundation and warrant for its customs and institutions. They "establish a sociological charter" for individual components of the social system: "the function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial event" (144, 146). For future reference we should notice the special connection Malinowski establishes between myths and rites (85):

> There is no important magic, no ceremony, no ritual without belief; and the belief is spun out into accounts of concrete precedent. The union is very intimate, for myth is not only looked upon as a commentary or additional information, but is a warrant, a charter, and often even a practical guide to the activities with which it is connected.

It is from Malinowski that we get the term "charter myth." The term is used by later anthropologists to describe myths that behave in precisely the manner that Malinowski describes. Needless to say there are few who agree with Malinowski that this is how all myths function.

The most obvious kind of charter myth is a myth of origin. In many societies, including our own, origins are not simply meaningless historical events, but they are treated, quite irrationally (mythically), as having a special significance. They are reflections not so much of how things came to be, but of how they should be, or how they should remain. Insofar as they are not meaningless facts of history, "origins" are commonly retrojections of present-day cultural values. One need only think of the way the Victorian rationalists projected their own mentality upon the savage. The origin of myth in a failed act of scientific observation and deduction is a charter myth for Western science and rationality, as well as a functional affirmation of the benefits to subject nations of the imperial system.

Malinowski examines the following tale of the Trobriand Islanders (112):

> There are a number of special spots – grottoes, clumps of trees, stone heaps, coral outcrops, springs, heads of creeks – called "holes" or "houses" by the natives. . . . From one special hole, near the village of Laba'i . . . there emerged representatives of the four main clans one after the other. . . . First there came an . . . Iguana, which scratched its way through the earth as iguanas do, then climbed a tree, and remained there as a mere onlooker, following subsequent events. Soon there came out a Dog. . . . As the third came a Pig. . . . Last came a Crocodile. . . . The Dog and Pig ran round, and the Dog, seeing the fruit of the *noku* plant, nosed it, and then ate it. Said the Pig: "Thou eatest *noku*, thou eatest dirt; thou art a low-bred, a commoner; the chief, the *guya'u*, shall be I."

In order to understand this myth, one must know that each of these animals is the totem animal of a particular clan and that each of these clans is incorporated into a social caste system, in which the pig clan is supreme. Next comes the dog clan, and then the iguana and crocodile. It is also necessary to know the connection in Trobriand society between food and rank. Each clan has its own particular food taboos, as well as foods that are particularly cultivated. Hence to the pig clan, *noku*, the food of the dog people is particularly disgusting. Further, a correlation exists between the status of one's food and one's personal dignity, since you are what you eat. It is also important to know that in some parts of the territory the pig clan is still in the process of asserting its dominance. There the myth is very much "an active force." (The other clans' animals which are simply onlookers in the events are probably aboriginal people who were conquered by the dog and pig people.) Further, it is significant that the heaps of stones or "holes" are important landmarks of the community: often the chief locates his house beside them and identifies the spot as the place where *his* ancestors emerged to found the village. These few

bits of contextual information suffice to make clear the close correlation between social structure and the contents of the myth.

In contrast to his predecessors, Malinowski was interested not in what made all myths alike, but in what made all myths unique and different. To the functionalist, the comparatist or psychoanalytic approach to myth was absurd insofar as it brought together motifs and symbols from the myths of totally unrelated societies. It was a bit like trying to decipher Chinese by comparing its sound patterns to English words. Once it is established that myths are social, not individual, phenomena, this kind of promiscuity is not easy to justify. With the social origin of thought the common hardware shared by all humans is at best very basic, while all of the mental software is culturally determined, and integrally connected with a unique system of feeling and thought.

Though some theorists in rejecting evolutionary and diffusionist models also rejected cross-cultural comparison outright, most functionalists allow the possibility of comparative functionalism. One can acknowledge what is unique in a given society, without blinding oneself to the possibility of finding types of societies or social structures, or types of myths which may be compared in form and function (if not necessarily, as for the comparatists, in contents). One could, for example, compare with the Trobriand myth, just examined, the story of Noah's sons in Genesis 9 of the Old Testament. After the great flood, we are told that:

> The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."

Here we have a myth of origin, of the emergence of a new order. As in the case of the clan animals of the Trobriand myth, we must know that Shem, Ham, and Japheth are figures representing the ancestors of all the races of the earth: Shem is the father of the Semites, who include the Jews; Ham is the father of the Hamitic people, the ancient Phoenicians (through Canaan, hence they are called Canaanites), the Egyptians, and the black

races. To appreciate Ham's offense one has to know about ancient Jewish taboos against nakedness. The offense is comparable to the eating of *noku* by the Trobriand dog, since it constitutes an infraction which justifies a racial caste system which sets the Jews at the top of the hierarchy and makes slaves of the despised Hamitic races.

4.2 JANE HARRISON AND RITUALISM

Themis

The label "ritualist" can be applied to any theory of myth which puts myth as a general category into a significant relationship with ritual (either a specific ritual or ritual in general). In its more extreme forms ritualism insists that all myths are derived from or related to rituals. In a more moderate form a ritualist theory may characterize myth and ritual as parallel responses to an external stimulus. Normally, however, a ritualist theory will privilege ritual over myth, either as the origin of myth, or as lying somehow closer than myth to the point of their common origin. The distinguishing feature of a ritualist analysis is that it explains the meaning or function of a myth by relating it to a ritual.

Jane Harrison (1850–1928) is generally regarded as the chief exponent and founder of the ritual theory of myth. She was at the hub of a group of Classical scholars, retrospectively, and somewhat misleadingly, united under the label "Cambridge Ritualists." Frazer provided a main source of inspiration for this group, and is sometimes regarded as a "fellow-traveler." But the ritualists adhered to very different values from Frazer. The group included such socially and politically engaged and progressive figures as Gilbert Murray, an activist and "radical liberal" champion of such causes as women's suffrage and pacifism, and Francis Cornford, a Fabian socialist, who campaigned for women's and working men's rights, against imperialism, and against the role of the Church in education. More decisive than Frazer for the new orientation was the sociological theory of Durkheim. If myths could be thought to be the product of individual thought, rituals were more obviously and concretely social.

It may seem a bit odd, therefore, that another of Harrison's chief sources of inspiration was the very antisocial Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), a work fairly characterized as "also the birth of the ritual theory" (Friedrich 1983: 161), though Nietzsche's contribution would have been slight without Harrison's subsequent elaboration. Nietzsche drew a strong contrast between two general forces in Greek culture: the collective, primitive, emotional, and ritual Dionysian element, on the one hand,

and the individualistic, refined, intellectual, artistic, and aesthetic Apollinian element, on the other. It was the Apollinian which was responsible for the Homeric vision of the Olympian gods, and which eventually prevailed in Classical Greece, but Nietzsche's sympathy lay with the wild, creative, and dynamic Dionysian impulse. A self-styled "disciple of Nietzsche" (1963b: viii), Harrison, in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (first edition 1903), described Classical Greek religion in terms of decadence. For Harrison the worship of the Olympian gods could not properly be termed a religion: to her mind the Olympians were largely the products of art and literature. The Olympians were but the decadent remnants of the true religion, which lay much further back in prehistory. True religion meant not stories, art, theology, and the refinements of intellectual reflection on nature or the human condition, but was a matter of intense feeling and excited activity. Ultimately, as we will see, this distinction between mere art and true religion, intellect and feeling, reflection and activity, will boil down to a distinction between myth and ritual. Ritual is primary and authentic, but destined to be paired, and ultimately betrayed, by myth.

Harrison took up the task of elaborating her evolutionary theory of Greek religion in *Themis* (1912). Her ritual approach is nicely illustrated by the discussion of the myths of the infancy of Zeus and Zagreus in the very first chapter of the book. We have already had occasion to refer to the myth of Zeus's infancy: how Rhea hid the infant Zeus from Kronos, who wanted to swallow him (see Section 2.6); and how Rhea gave the infant to the Kouretes, a band of young men, who hid him in a cave on Mount Dicte (sometimes Mount Ida), and danced in armor to the pipes, beating their feet and clashing their shields, to cover up the sound of his wailing. According to the standard "Olympian" version of this myth, the ruse is successful: Zeus quickly grows to manhood, forces Kronos to vomit up the other children he has swallowed, banishes him, and by assigning duties, honors, and privileges to his newly "reborn" siblings, establishes the Olympian order.

Clearly related to this myth is another which survived into the Classical period in Crete, and in the "Orphic" mystery religion. In it Zagreus, the Cretan Dionysus, is called a son of Zeus and Persephone. Zagreus was also deposited with the Kouretes, but he was killed by the Titans, Zeus's enemies (cf. Section 3.3). They waited until the Kouretes slept, and at midnight they lured Zagreus away by offering him toys. The Titans tore him apart and ate his flesh raw. But Athena managed to save his heart and revive him by putting it into a gypsum body. Zeus blasted the Titans with his thunderbolt. The fact that Cretan myth spoke of the burial of Zeus by the Kouretes, and that Cretans even worshiped at Zeus's grave near Knossos, suggests that Zagreus lies behind the Cretan Zeus as well as the Cretan Dionysus.

Harrison's explanation of these myths was inspired by an inscription found in 1904 in Palaikastro in Eastern Crete. It contained the words of a hymn copied in Roman times, but preserving much earlier material. Harrison translates (1963: 7–8):

> Io, Kouros most Great, I give thee hail, Kronian [i.e., Son of Kronos], Lord of all that is wet and gleaming, thou art come at the head of thy Daimones. To Dikte for the Year, Oh, march, and rejoice in the dance and song,
>
> That we make to thee with harps and pipes mingled together, and sing as we come to a stand at thy well-fenced altar.
>
> Io, etc.
>
> For here the shielded Nurturers took theee, a child immortal, from Rhea, and with noise of beating feet hid thee away.
>
> Io, etc.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Io, etc. . . . . of fair dawn?
>
> And the Horai [seasons] began to be fruitful year by year (?) and Dike to possess mankind, and all wild living things were held about by wealth-loving Peace.
>
> Io, etc.
>
> To us also leap for full jars, and leap for fleecy flocks, and leap for fields of fruit, and for hives to bring increase.
>
> Io, etc.
>
> Leap for our Cities, and leap for our sea-borne ships, and leap for our young citizens and for goodly Themis.

Since the hymn was found in a sanctuary of Dictean Zeus, it is assumed to be the record of a ritual regularly performed there. The singers of the hymn describe themselves as dancing, then taking a stand around the altar, and singing to the music of harps and pipes. They invoke "the Greatest Kouros" to come to Dicte leading his throng of Daimones, who also dance, with magical effect for the prosperity of crops and men. A "kouros" is a young man at the age of initiation to manhood. (The word comes from the Greek *keiro*, which means to cut hair, referring to the ceremony by which young men cut off their boyhood locks to join the ranks of adult males.) Daimones are roughly "spirits," or "divinities," including many far more mysterious and less anthropomorphic than the Olympians. The Greatest Kouros is called son of Kronos and the hymn goes on to tell the myth of Rhea's hiding the infant Zeus with the Kouretes, referred to as the "shielded Nurturers" [the Greek is "shield-bearing child-rearers"], who are also dancers and presumably doubles of the dancing Daimones who will accompany Zeus. The hymn ends with a reference to "goodly Themis." *Themis* means "law" or "custom," but

Harrison will show that originally *Themis* was the projection of the social order itself: society will emerge as both beginning and end of the dance, of the hymn, and of religion itself.

Though the Greatest Kouros is identified here with Zeus, Harrison argues that he is older than Zeus. The Kouros shares something of the character of Dionysus/Zagreus insofar as Dionysus is always figured at the head of a troupe of other normally dancing divinities, usually satyrs, to whom ancient sources sometimes compare the Kouretes. The general confusion of these deities on Crete allows Harrison to conclude, probably correctly, that an older Cretan deity lies behind the cluster of deities (Zeus, Zagreus, and Dionysus), with overlapping myths known from Classical times. She identifies this older deity with the Kouros of the hymn.

Harrison began to study this inscription only a few years after the beginning of systematic excavations at Knossos by Sir Arthur Evans, and was much influenced by the mounting evidence for a flourishing Bronze Age civilization in Crete. If the Kouros was older than either Zeus or Dionysus, Harrison reasoned, the hymn from Palaikastro contained survivals of the pre-Greek, pre-Olympian religion of Crete. The survival was the cultic ritual implicit in the hymn. The reference to the son of Kronos and the position of the inscribed stone in a sanctuary of Dictean Zeus shows the degree to which the Kouros had been appropriated by Olympian religion. To make any progress, however, one had to look behind the "shifting manifold character of the myth" and fix upon the "comparatively permanent element of ritual" (16). This is the first major premise of ritualism. The myths speak of Zagreus, Zeus, Dionysus, or the Greatest Kouros, but, Harrison claims, one ritual unites them all.

The great problem for Harrison is that, apart from a reference to worshipers dancing and then singing a hymn while standing at an altar, there is no evidence for a ritual. To make any progress, therefore, Harrison articulates the second major premise of ritualism: myths are (more or less uncomprehending) explanations of ritual (i.e., myths are etiologies for rituals). "The worshippers say they invoke the Kouros because of the myth," because it was here that the Kouretes concealed the presence of the child by the noise of their dance, but "we may of course safely invert the order of things, the myth arose out of or rather together with the ritual, not the ritual out of the myth" (13). Relying on these two premises, Harrison can reconstruct the Minoan ritual *out of the myths that are derived from the ritual.* She begins by discovering what motifs all the myths have in common, i.e., reconstructing an Urritual (which, like the comparatist Urmyth, will then be used to explain the myths from which it was constructed).

The "cardinal elements" underlying the myths of Zeus, Dionysus, Zagreus, and the Kouros are (15):

1 A child is taken from his mother and carefully tended by men called Kouretes. To guard him they dance over him an armed dance. . . .
2 The child is hidden, made away with, killed, dismembered by men sometimes called Titans. . . .
3 The child reappears, is brought to life again. Sometimes this is effected by the [Titans]. . . .

Note that the death and rebirth motifs appear, properly speaking, only in the myth of Zagreus. Kronos's swallowing and vomiting up Zeus's siblings is treated as a distorted version of the same motif. To these main points Harrison adds some minor details: for example, she is convinced that the ritual involved a pretence of eating a child raw.

While the myths provide an outline for the ritual, the common motifs in the myths do not in themselves constitute either a complete or a convincing ritual. At this point she invokes the aid of Frazer's comparative anthropology. The comparative material allows her to reconstruct the ritual of the Kouretes as an initiation rite. Initiations most typically enact the death of a child, and his or her rebirth as a man or a woman. Frazer himself obligingly provided the decisive parallel. An initiation ceremony of the aborigines of New South Wales involved boys covered with blankets sitting by a roaring fire, while the elders swung bullroarers. An accompanying myth spoke of Dhuramoolan, a spirit (like Zeus) whose voice sounded like thunder, and whose office it was to kill the boys, cut them up, burn them to ash, and then remold them into human shape before taking them off to the bush to instruct them in the laws, traditions, and customs of the tribe. The name "Titans" had in fact since antiquity been connected to the Greek *titanos*, meaning "gypsum," and parallels could be found for elders disguising themselves as ghosts or demons to frighten groups of boys huddled together in terror as they awaited dismemberment. In this way the child experiences a second birth, this time a cultural birth, to emerge as a full member of the tribe. "Henceforth he belongs to something bigger, more potent, more lasting, than his own individual existence, he is part of the stream of the totemic life, one with the generations before and yet to come" (19). Comparable rituals thus show that the Kouretes are the young men of the tribe who perform the initiation rites, steal the young boys from their mothers, hide them, end their former existence in a symbolic death, and bring them back as fully socialized members of the tribe. Here, then, is a third common assumption of ritualism: that the rituals of the world are all more or less alike in important ways, and much more alike than myths – indeed, one no longer has to believe in the similarities of myths to be an effective comparatist, since they are all linked to ritual, a *tertium comparationis* which suffices to legitimate all broad-based comparisons.

Harrison's theory of evolution

The ritual explanation of this particular myth is just the beginning of *Themis*. Harrison goes on to explain: the origin of fertility magic in the rites of the Kouretes; their role in the development of dithyramb, the Dionysiac dance; the evolution of Dionysus and other Greek gods from an annual spirit, called the Year Spirit or Eniautos Daimon (who owes much to Frazer's corn-spirit and dying god); the evolution of Olympian deities from the Year Spirit; ultimately also (with the help of an "excursus" contributed by Gilbert Murray) the evolution of tragedy from dithyramb. Most important for our purposes are the generalizing and speculative intervals, scattered throughout the work: the assumption of the comparability of all ritual, or at least all ritual at different evolutionary stages, allowed Harrison to present her ideas about the development of Greek religion as a universal theory of the origin and evolution in human culture of ritual, of the idea of god, of myth, of religion, of art, and of conceptual thought.

Harrison's evolutionary scheme, when assembled from her often widely scattered comments and examples, would appear more or less as follows. In the beginning was a group of savages. Primitive man, Harrison assures us, is the slave of his emotions which he expresses physically. While together, little stimulus is required to start them hopping together with excitement. Very soon this frenetic collective movement becomes rhythmic and regularized as dance. The dances are mimetic, it seems, from the start. They begin with excited representation of real-life activities. Harrison gives the example of hunters returning to their village, still tense with the emotions aroused by the hunt. They release their pent-up emotions by dancing out the story of the hunt for the women and children of the tribe. These spontaneous, proto-ritual performances may include vocalizations: "the dancers dancing together utter their conjoint desire, their delight, their terror . . . in cries of fear or joy or lamentation, in shrieks of war" (45). Harrison fancifully suggests that perhaps "the first *muthos* was simply the interjectional utterance *mu*" (330). These proto-ritual utterances she regarded as a sort of proto-myth.

The next distinct stage is abstraction from the enactment of particular events to the performance of a generic dance which could be used for all hunts. As always, the collective dance created heightened emotion. But with the abstraction from particular to general, the mind, it would seem, was free to receive "emotional ideas," or images. It was in this stage that group emotion created a "feeling" of the sacred, in the form of supernatural, high-energy, mana, projected from the dancers' heightened emotions toward the world at large, and distributed evenly and indifferently

throughout: since the savage feels at one with his group, the feeling of unity was extended without limits.

A third stage is reached when the dance is reenacted before an event (e.g., hunt or battle) to release anticipatory tension. The dance can express the desired outcome. The dancers conceive the notion that mana can be managed. Since the mana of the world is continuous, to affect a part of the continuum that one can control is thought to have a sympathetic effect on another part that one cannot. Thus, by imitating rain with rattles or victory in battle with triumphant leaps, one can bring rain or victory. This is a crucial stage in the evolution of religion: it marks the dividing line between the merely passive reaction to emotion and the active manipulation of events. It is the beginning of magic; "first and foremost magic is . . . a thing predone," but Harrison still insists on the directness of its connection with emotion: "the oneness of desire and deed . . . comes out very clearly in the simplest forms of magic" (82–3).

At a later stage, when the original group has broken into smaller ones, a sense of differentiation begins to dawn. The savage begins to distinguish his group from other human groups, and the natural world fragments along with it, not dividing human from animal, but creating divisions that run vertically across the species boundary. For some unexplained reason having to do with diet, a particular animal is selected as continuous with the human group. This is the beginning of totemism. At this stage the dance involves vocalizations which express the same general idea as the dance. Harrison gives the example of the Grizzly Bear Dance of "North American Indians" who "shuffle and shamble about like a bear in his cave" and at the same time chant "I begin to grow restless in the spring/I take my robe/My robe is sacred/I wander in summer." This is not an explanation of the dance; rather the dancer "only utters with his mouth what he enacts with his shambling, shuffling feet, the emotions and sensations he feels in relation to the . . . Bear" (329–30). The totem group dance in imitation of their totem in magical fertility rites which cause their totem (animal and tribe) to multiply.

In a fifth crucial stage a gifted dancer stands out from the group. He becomes the center of attention at the cost of the collectivity. The strong emotion of the collective dance is concentrated upon the chorus leader and the dancers call him "spirit" or "god" – "primitive gods are to a large extent collective enthusiasms, uttered, formulated" (46). Thus the Greatest Kouros and his band of spirits are originally nothing more than the dancers and their leader uplifted and sanctified by their heightened emotion. Afterwards "gradually the chorus loses all sense that the god is themselves, he is utterly projected, no longer chief daemon, but unique and aloof, a perfected [god]" (46). The projected being acquires

a life-history, because of "the story-telling instinct," but the "sufferings" of the god are still at first projections of the "sufferings" of the worshipers (47). The final stage is reached when the ritual ceases to be a community performance and loses its original importance and effect, or ceases to exist. At this stage myth becomes etiological (it provides a reason for the performance of a ritual).

Society and emotion

Much in Harrison's account of the origin of religion comes straight from Durkheim. *Themis*'s subtitle, *A Study in the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, advertises the premium it places upon "the social fact." As with Durkheim, religion begins with tribal ritual which gives rise to a collective effervescence and creates the first feeling of the sacred. Society, always in the form of collective ritual, indeed normally in the form of collective dance, then goes on to produce all important religious concepts (28): "We are face to face with the fact, startling enough, that these religious figures arise, not from any 'religious instinct,' not from any innate tendency to prayer and praise, but straight out of social custom. Themis and Dike, invoked by the Kouretes, lie at the undifferentiated beginnings of things when social spelt religious." She might just as well have said "when religious spelt social:" "it was the social life of the group rather than the individual that became the object of religious representation" (47). Themis, which Harrison takes as "social order," is the mother of Dike, which Harrison takes to mean "natural order."

There are, however, important departures from Durkheim, some of which, remarkably, anticipate key themes in Freudian anthropology (she did not read Freud until much later). "Emotion" and, above all, "desire" play a larger role in Harrison's version of tribal religion than in Durkheim's. Durkheim's excessively rigid separation of "sacred" from "profane" obliged him to presuppose the existence of ritual, even in his attempt to account for its origin. True, he supposed that the collective effervescence of group gatherings gave rise to movements and shouts which "tended spontaneously towards the rhythmicisation and regularization which created song and dance" (1991: 380). But it was precisely to perform rituals that the clans gathered in the first place.

Harrison's causal explanation is more satisfying. Emotional discharge through dance is a facet of the savage's ordinary life-experience (which has little regard for maintaining the borders between sacred and profane). Durkheim gives the impression that when savages are not on holiday, they are mostly on their own and life is "monotonous, languorous, and dull"

(1991: 379); but with Harrison, savages are almost never alone, and there is almost never a dull moment. The "secular" activities of savages are full of tense, terrifying events, like thunderstorms, the hunt, or war. Pent-up emotions constantly erupt into activity. Even when the dance begins to be performed before the hunt: "the drama or dromenon here is a sort of anticipated desire, a discharge of pent-up emotions" (1963b: 45). Even when ritual dance is magical Harrison insists that it springs from desire: "*le désir c'est la père de la sorcellerie*" (83). Unlike Freud, Harrison makes the social group indispensable to the ritual discharge of emotion, just as the ritual discharge of emotion is indispensable to the social group; ultimately it works to shape and unify the emotional life of the tribe, and to "socialize" emotion (43):

> A high emotional tension is best caused and maintained by a thing felt socially. The individual in a savage tribe has but a thin and meagre personality. If he dances alone he will not dance long; but if his whole tribe dances together he will dance the live-long night and his emotion will mount to passion, to ecstasy. . . . Emotion socialized, felt collectively, is emotion intensified and rendered permanent. Intellectually the group is weak. . . . Emotionally the group is strong.

Like Freud, Harrison treats the history of religion as an archaeology of the mind. The stages of religious evolution advance in tandem with the development of the mental faculties. But while Freud's anthropology advances from domination by the id to domination by the superego, Harrison's advances from emotion to intellect. This is the overarching anthropological lesson of *Themis*: each age produced a god reflecting its own capacities. Harrison contrasts Greek and Minoan, as modern to primitive psyche: "it might almost be said that the Olympians stand for articulate consciousness, the Eniautos-Daimon for the sub-conscious" (xxi). There is some analogy, too, in the character of the catalyst. For Freud the growth of repression was the main motive force behind human evolution, and particularly cultural evolution, since repression creates the symbolic satisfactions of art and religion. For Harrison it is something that intervenes between impulse and action. In *Mythology* she makes it the distinguishing feature of the human character (1963a: xi–xii):

> In most animals, who act from what we call instinct, action follows on perception mechanically with almost chemical swiftness and certainty. In man the nervous system is more complicated, perception is not instantly transformed into reaction, there seems to be an interval for choice. It is just in this momentary pause between perception and reaction that our images, i.e., our imaginations, our ideas, in fact our whole mental life, is built up.

> We do not immediately react, i.e., we do not immediately get what we want, so we figure the want to ourselves, we create an image. If reaction were instant we should have no image, no representation, no art, no theology.

In *Themis* this pause that represses is "deferral" (1963: 44):

> Psychologists tell us that representations, ideas, imaginations, all the intellectual, conceptual factors in our life are mainly due to deferred reactions. If an impulse finds instantly its appropriate satisfaction, there is no representation. It is out of delay, just the space between the impulse and the reaction, that all our mental life, our images, ideas, our consciousness, our will, most of all our religion, arise. If we were utterly, instantly satisfied, if we were a mass of well contrived instincts, we should have no representations, no memory, no *mimesis*, no *dromena*, no drama. Art and religion alike spring from unsatisfied desire.

But there was relatively little deferral in the beginning. The primordial savage did not think, properly speaking. He acted – on impulse, without knowing why he acted, without design, but by nature. The "undifferentiated beginnings of things" was a reign of pure emotion. Little matter, then, what actually went on in the savage's head. Why does the totemistic savage affirm persistently that he is a kangaroo, or an opossum, or a witchetty grub "when he quite well knows that he is not?" He does it "because to know is one thing, to feel is another" (121):

> Because to know is first and foremost to distinguish, to note differences, to discern qualities, and thereby to classify. Above all things it is to realize the distinction between *me* and *not-me*. . . . Man in the totemistic stage rarely sets himself as individual over against his tribe; he rarely sets himself as man over against the world around him. He has not yet fully captured his individual or his human soul, not yet drawn a circle round his separate self. It is not that he confuses between himself and a kangaroo; it is that he has not yet drawn the clear-cut outline that defines the conception kangaroo from that of man and eternally separates them. His mental life is as yet mainly emotional, one of felt *relations*.

Indeed, Harrison maintains that the emotional conviction of the unity of the tribe actually obstructs the development of clear, individual, or rational thought (126):

> The totem-group when it performs its rites of multiplication has indeed some dawning sense of differentiation, but its main emotion and conviction is of unity, emotional unity with its totem, a unity which it emphasizes and enhances and reintegrates by its ceremonies of sympathy. The whole human group acts and reacts on the whole plant or animal group, the *mana* of the human

> and the animal group is *felt* as continuous. This is the first stage. But as intelligence advances and as actual individual observation tends to take the place of collective suggestion the sense of unity is obscured. Little by little the attention is focused on distinctions. Man, though he is dressed up as an emu, becomes more and more conscious that he *is not* an emu, but that he is *imitating* an emu, a thing in some respects alien to himself, a thing possessed of much *mana* but whose *mana* is separate, a thing to be acted on, controlled, rather than sympathetically reinforced.

Indeed, as with Durkheim, the history of the human race is a gradual movement from this confused unity toward clarity, individuality, and reason. But neither Harrison nor Durkheim is able to give a very satisfactory account of what ultimately motivates this pattern of change. Indeed, both simply assume evolutionary change, rather than argue it. For Durkheim, as we saw, there is always a movement toward growth, "social condensation," which makes things bigger and more complex. For Harrison, the real motor behind history is the growth of the human mental apparatus, as if one could simply rely on Darwin's proof that we started as animals and our brains got bigger and better, and that this overall pattern could explain differences between moderns and Minoans, or Europeans and Africans. For Harrison the key feature of the evolutionary growth of the human mental faculties lay in a supposed development of thought from the particular to the general and from the concrete to the abstract (68):

> The savage, like the child, passes from the particular to the general; the mature and civilized mind well supplied with ready-made abstractions is apt to start from generalities. To the savage this stone or tree or yam has *mana* or *orenda*, that is what concerns him; but gradually . . . from the multitude of things that have *mana*, there arises the notion of a sort of *continuum of mana*, a world of unseen power lying behind the visible universe. . . . This *continuum* . . . is perhaps primitive man's first effort at generalization.

It went without saying that humans would become more human. What argument there is, is expended to establish the proposition that, becoming more human, humans distanced themselves from emotion, from the feeling of unity with the world, and from the social group, to become more rational, individual, and self-centered.

Myth and ritual

The relationship of ritual and myth had long been a celebrated chicken and egg story, and Harrison came under fire for her clear affirmation, sharply

stated in her earlier books, *Mythology and Monuments of Athens* and *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, that rituals always precede myth. In *Themis* the relationship is stated more cautiously and ambiguously (16):

> In the study of Greek religion it is all important that the clear distinction should be realized between the comparatively permanent element of the ritual and the shifting manifold character of the myth. In the case before us we have a uniform ritual, the elements of which we have disentangled – the armed dance over the child, the mimic death and rebirth; but the myth shifts; it is told variously of Zagreus, Dionysos, Zeus, and there is every variety of detail as to how the child is mimetically killed and how the resurrection is effected. To understand the religious intent of the whole complex it is all important to seize on the permanent ritual factors.
>
> This does not, however, imply, as is sometimes supposed that ritual is prior to myth; they probably arose together. Ritual is the utterance of an emotion, a thing felt, in *action*, myth in words or thoughts. They arise *pari passu* [viz., at an equal pace, or "hand in hand"). The myth is not at first *aetiological*, it does not arise to give a reason; it is representative, another form of utterance, of expression. When the emotion that started the ritual has died down and the ritual though hallowed by tradition seems unmeaning, a reason is sought in the myth and it is regarded as aetiological.

Yet despite Harrison, *Themis* makes the distinction between ritual and myth anything but clear. This passage declares the theoretical priority of ritual (it is the constant and original Urform that clarifies the meaning of the disparate and confused myths that attend it), even while it ambivalently denies ritual any temporal or causal priority. But, despite the protest that they arise *pari passu*, the grand evolutionary scheme that Harrison constructs in *Themis* gives priority to ritual and ritual alone, whether that priority relates to explanation, cause, or temporal sequence. Harrison's importance to ritual theory depends on this clearly granted priority, even if it is obscured by statements like the above that do not carry the courage of her convictions.

I suspect that Harrison wavered in her explicit formulation of the relationship between myth and ritual because she sensed a problem, indeed a deep contradiction, between the simple outlines of her theory and the empirical evidence she used to support it – a contradiction she could not bring herself to confront head-on. Harrison's evolutionary scheme is simple and elegant. It involves a progress from the animal, the physical, the emotional, and the social towards the human, the mental, the rational, and the individual. This was ingrained in the common prejudice of her day and needed little exposition. Her original contribution, however, was

to draw a strong link between ritual and the qualities on the left-hand side of her evolutionary line, and between myth and the qualities on the right-hand side.

Action and ritual are not exactly the same thing. Action, even representational action, can be the direct or spontaneous discharge of emotion, as when the hunters release tension by re-enacting the event in dance. But "ritual" must always already involve some degree of abstraction and stereotypification beyond mere emotional reaction; it must always already contain mental imagery and symbolism; arguably it should always already require an intention to sway nature or the divine will; and normally it includes words and ideas as well as actions. All of these considerations threaten the neat distinction between impulse, action, doing, and ritual, on the one hand, and reflection, conceptualization, speech, and myth on the other. Indeed, the difference between ritual and myth is too often reduced, in Harrison's writings, to the difference between doing and thinking, as it is in *Mythology* (just before the distinction between animal and human cited above, 1963a: ix): "Each and every religion contains two elements, Ritual and Mythology. We have first what a man *does* in relation to his religion, i.e., his Ritual; then what he *thinks* or *imagines*, i.e., his Mythology." But words, images, and symbols, all the stuff that Harrison wanted to put on the side of myth, are arguably as integral to ritual as are actions.

Furthermore, ritual has not necessarily the direct connection with emotional impulse that Harrison posits, nor is it easy to maintain that mental imaging and conceptualization are at a further remove. Had Harrison read Freud she may have found her distinction between ritual and myth even more problematic. To say that strong emotions trigger excited movement is one thing, but quite another to say that rituals (let alone representational action) spring directly and spontaneously out of emotional impulse. Far from the direct release of natural emotional impulses, Freud conceived of ritual as the symbolic expression of *severely repressed* emotions, and analogous to the rituals of neurotics. Freud would have said that if any form of expression is close to its originary impulse, it is myth, which is given to the pleasure principle, both as a product of fantasy, and as a product of the relatively unrepressed savage mind. Actions are likely to be more repressed than idle words, precisely because actions *can give satisfaction* to the wishes that are the objects of repression, whereas words, thoughts, and images could only do so in a relatively harmless symbolic fashion.

However much it inspired the ritual school, Harrison's opposition between myth and ritual is awkwardly sustained. It requires all of her genius for argumentative rhetoric to keep it from collapse. The problems with

the opposition between myth and ritual are frequently elided and the opposition itself scrambled to avoid detection as simplistic and unworkable. For example, Harrison frequently uses Greek terms, or, more subtly, uses the English equivalents in the Greek sense, to do work that she cannot do in plain English. The Greek terms *dromenon* and *drama* are continuously used, in preference to "ritual," because they can make the connection between action and ritual seem much simpler and more direct. The root meanings of these words in Greek is simply "doings;" but they are useful precisely because they imply the cultural activities that evolve, according to Harrison, from these "doings," specifically religious rituals (*dromena*) and secular representation in the form of theater. In this way even these very sophisticated forms can be made to seem to belong on the side of emotion and action, in opposition to myth, speech, images, and thought (1963: 42–3): "[emotional] tension finds release in excited movement; you dance and leap for fear, for joy, for sheer psychological relief. It is this excited doing, this dancing, that is the very kernel of both drama and *dromenon*." To the *dromenon* (the thing done) Harrison opposes the *legomenon* or the *mythos* (the thing said). And, as with her use of Greek terms for action, the Greek terms for speech allow her to bring speech, thought, and myth together, as if they were variant forms of the same thing. Harrison knows, of course, that utterances are frequently part of ritual, but she is able to separate out this speech-component as if it were evolving proto-myth. The Greek terms *legomenon* and *mythos* mean "what is said," but they can also mean or imply "myth." After explaining the Greek meaning of *mythos*, she is then able to speak of "the other factor in a rite, the myth" (1963: 330), though she is really referring to the words spoken in a ritual. The Greek conveniently allows utterance to be part of ritual, since the plain fact is that utterances are very much part of ritual, but the Greek term also allows speech to be seen as something alien to and opposed to ritual.

The problem is more than merely rhetorical, however. In the above-cited passage Harrison puts myth on a par with ritual only so long as myth remains "an utterance of an emotion . . . in words or thoughts," so long as it does not give reasons, or ascribe motives. In other words, so long as myth is just emotional images it has the same status as emotional actions, but the moment myth partakes of the logical and intellectual, it ceases to have the same authenticity. The more myth becomes unlike ritual, the more it ceases to be a mental *reaction*, the more it evolves into its own element of logic and narrative, the more abstracted myth becomes from its emotional roots. The kind of myths Harrison would allow to be on a par with ritual, the "utterance of an emotion . . . in words or thoughts," is not myth at all by any definition that makes myth a narrative. Harrison creates a

new category of non-narrative mental images, which she identifies as a kind of proto-myth in order to save the oversimple distinctions that sustain her evolutionary scheme. The result is a more recondite, nonexplicit affirmation of the priority of ritual over myth.

If myth and ritual were truly equal, Harrison's theory of the evolution of religion would fall apart. As a theoretical construct, as a myth, it was beautifully shaped. This history presents us not just with the birth of religious thought. From the "undifferentiated beginnings of things," from the primordial chaos, everything suddenly began with a big bang (every bit as totalizing as Freud's Oedipal crime). The crucial moment for Harrison was a change in the dance ritual itself. The chorus chooses a leader, a gifted dancer, who more and more becomes the center of attention at the cost of the collective chorus itself. Then there comes a Durkheimian moment, a time when the group is experiencing the strong emotion of the collective dance and feels that this emotion is stronger than any individual experience. At that critical moment the consciousness of Harrison's savages, unlike Durkheim's, are focused on the chorus leader (45): "Strong emotion collectively experienced begets this illusion of objective reality; each worshipper is conscious of something in his emotion not himself, stronger then himself. He does not know it is the force of collective suggestion, he calls it god."

Harrison here takes a page out of Aristotle, who claims that tragedy developed from the *exarchos* of the dithyramb, Dionysus's quintessential dance-song. (The *exarchos* is one who improvises verse and prompts the choral refrain, and who is, in Dionysiac myth, frequently projected as the god himself.) By working the *exarchos* into her history, Harrison is able to condense, into a single nuclear moment: the fission of the erstwhile solid collective (leader vs. chorus), the origin of all social organization (hierarchy), the beginning of mental discrimination, the beginning of religion (concept of divinity), and the beginning of art (as the group separated into spectators and actor). All this happened under the aegis of the god Dionysus, the god of collective effervescence par excellence. It is here that Harrison's name for the ritual, *dromenon*, pays off, allowing *drama* to stand as a symbol for all the greatest achievements of "high culture," while retaining something of the emotional power of its origin in collective ritual.

But the most important product of this big bang is the human intellect itself. It begins with the creation of the first distinct idea, which is also the first truly "mythic idea." The evolution of the mythic or protomythic element is logically and chronologically posterior to the ritual action. And while ritual is more or less an immediate response to a collective emotion, the mythic idea is created by sensations first experienced in the ritual, and, so far from being an immediate response, the formation of the mythic idea

presupposes a process of abstraction and symbolization, distancing it still further from the originary collective emotion and even from the ritual itself.

It is this privileging and prioritizing of ritual over myth that makes Jane Harrison a "ritualist." But this is not entirely original with her. In this she simply followed many of the comparatists: Smith, for example, argued that "in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper" (1887: 18), or that actions, not ideas, formed the earliest religions and that the ideas were later additions and rationalizations of actions (1894: 18–22); and passages can be found in Frazer, too, which betray the same assumption (1922: 477):

> The myth that he [Hippolytus/Virbius] had been killed by horses was probably invented to explain certain features of his worship, amongst others the custom of excluding horses from his sacred grove. For myth changes while men remain constant, men continue to do what their fathers did before them, though the reasons for which their fathers acted have long been forgotten. The history of religion is a long attempt to reconcile old custom with new reason, to find a sound theory for an absurd practice.

However, passages and letters of Frazer can also be found in which he vigorously repudiates the belief that ritual always or normally preceded myth. That "myth" in the loose sense of theory or dogma preceded ritual was indeed required by the general tendency of his views on magic and religion: insofar as ritual action had in his view a rational purpose, it presupposed a theory of natural causation or a theology. But this left a lot of room for equivocation about the nature of myth proper, which are not ideas, but narratives. What is entirely new in Harrison is not only the exclusive and near-absolute statement of the dependence of myth upon ritual, whatever meaning is applied to "myth" – indeed, she would not give the name "myth" or at least "myth proper" to anything but "such stories as are involved in rites" (1963b: 331) – but the full, careful, and relatively consistent theoretical elaboration of their relationship.

More important is the very different context in which ritual, and, in its train, myth, is conceived. Harrison shares with most twentieth-century theories a tendency to affirm the social, the emotional, and the precognitive, in reaction to the individualism and rationalism of the nineteenth century. But Harrison is still too close to the rational and the individual for most modern theorists. In Harrison one can still find the trace of the Victorian belief that all rational and creative thought must necessarily take place in

the heads of individuals. Ritual could represent a pre-rational, even pre-cognitive stage. But myth involved thinking about the world, and was, for Harrison, almost as much as for Frazer, the product of individuals exercising their fledgling rational faculties. It is true that she described a form of protomythical thought, which was very nearly contemporaneous with ritual action, and which, like ritual, emerged from the symbol-making capacity of the subconscious under the influence of emotion, and group emotion sooner than individual emotion. But there was still a huge gap between these mental images and the assignment of motives and reasons which she regarded as the essential function of myth, once fully developed.

The struggle to liberate theory from rationalistic and individualistic thought was a gradual one. Many theorists tried to find something deeper and more primitive than "ideas" to help mediate this process. Some spoke of "experiences," and "deep perceptions." But the problem persists so long as myth is considered to be an attempt by a confused savage to provide a rational explanation for the existence of ritual, or its emotional impact, or its particular forms. From this perspective, all myths are basically etiological, and all necessarily rationalizations.

The problem is largely avoided if we avoid the arbitrary equations of ritual to action, myth to thought, and the consequent ranking of ritual with the precognitive, and myth with the rational. Ritual is not just action; it is a communication. It is a communication through actions and symbols, just as myth is a communication through language and symbols. Ritual and myth, when related, are not related as practice to theory. They are related as two different ways of communicating a message.

4.3 WALTER BURKERT AND SOCIOBIOLOGY

Biological determinism and constructivism

In Section 4.1 we drew a contrast between the Victorian tendency to explain myth in terms of individual experience and modern approaches which stress myth's social functions. Modern definitions generally insist upon myth's character as a "traditional" tale. Once the implications of "traditional" are grasped the Victorian theories begin to look naive and irrelevant. The errors of Frazer's wannabe scientist savage merely occasioned an origin for a tale, but for a tale to become traditional it must be received by a social group and handed down as part of the group's cultural heritage: what needs to be explained is the reception, not the conception, of the tale.

The same fault stands behind all other etiological myths about myth. Origins do not explain why any particular event or experience was considered

significant enough to merit so many retellings. What has to be explained is not the event behind the myth, but the criteria of social selection, and not the moment of conception, but the process of preservation. Thus, when Müller explained myth by an original fascination with natural phenomena which was later forgotten, this forgetting voided the theory of any explanatory power. Once a culture has forgotten its rapturous fascination with sunsets, sunsets can no longer explain why the myths are told. One cannot simply assume that cultural inertia will ensure a story's survival. There is a considerable amount of collective labor involved in making and preserving a myth. Social selection is an active force. At any moment a myth might be discarded and lost. Each moment of its survival depends upon its *continuing* importance to the society that transmits it.

For this reason modern theories are preoccupied with explaining the social meaning and function of myth. But there is one minor school that bucks this trend. This is what we might call the "biological school." The biological school continues in a line of descent from Julian Huxley (1887–1975, son of the great T. H. Huxley, "Darwin's bulldog") and perpetuates many of the attitudes of Victorian comparatism. This school sees the importance of myth in relation to basic human biology and explains myths primarily in terms of universal human needs and instincts. Its origin in the social application of Darwin's thought has also given it a particular focus on individual aggression and the satisfaction of the individual's "need" for power in the struggle for survival. Advocates of this approach generally cling to some conception of human nature which is more or less constant, though they may also, in somewhat contradictory fashion, maintain that different social formations are more attuned than others to the satisfaction of this nature. This approach still tends to privilege the individual over society, but not in exactly the same way as the Victorian theorists. The biological school sees individuals as species animals, and opposed to the larger collective mainly in a quantitative, not a qualitative sense. But this difference does not prevent the lessons of biological analysis from being employed to promote rugged individualism and to combat socialism. Biologism has a particular appeal for libertarians who view most government regulation as attempts at "social engineering," denounce them as impingements upon basic biological needs, and condemn them as dangerous experiments doomed to failure (e.g., Lionel Tiger [especially 1970, 1999]). Indeed, this does not prevent other biological determinists, who think social change has gone too far, from advocating a (reverse) social engineering of their own (e.g., Morris 1967). More often than not the "human nature" which cannot be tampered with shows a marked preference for selfish aggression over social co-operation, as if Nature herself endorsed laissez-faire cowboy capitalism.

Most opposed to the biologism is the "constructivist" approach, currently the most dominant, fully articulated, and extreme of the sociological schools. It regards individuals entirely as products of their social environments. This does not mean, of course, that humans are not born with some sort of basic biological hardware, which imposes certain physical needs and limitations. Rather, the constructivists regard anything that really is universal as too basic and obvious to be of much interest. A constructivist would maintain that the animal is human only insofar as it is *re-created* socially. The biological machine is too much like an empty computer disk, useless and dysfunctional until it is filled with various cultural software, of which perhaps the most important are language and mythology. This cultural software is vital to just about every function of human society, but constructivists tend to take a particular interest in the way language and social myths define and maintain the social group. Thus, a very large proportion of recent work on myth focuses upon myth's social-engineering and policing functions. According to this view myth is an active ingredient in the construction of the needs, behavioral reflexes, desires, feelings, perceptions, ideas, and aspirations of every member of the social group. As such, myth can have little interest in anything permanent and unalterable in the human machine, i.e., precisely those universal and permanent biological instincts and drives which interest the biological school.

For the constructivist, myth constructs the citizen by promoting certain patterns of behavior and certain values precisely where other patterns and values are possible. The meaning of a myth is therefore always to a very large extent culture-specific. The constructivist is most happy when he can show that desires and instincts and whatever is deepest in the physical being are not "biological" at all, but no less socially constructed as mental attitudes and ideas. Since constructivism is largely a reaction against all notions of both biological determination and cultural universals, it rejects any universal criterion by which one culture can be compared qualitatively with any other, and certainly rejects any notion that cultures can be lined up and compared on an evolutionary scale. Cultures are simply different: the representative of the genus *homo sapiens* is little more than Promethean mud; it is only cultural cooking which makes the individual human. In this way the constructivist approach, like the biological, neatly disposes of anything the individual might call his own. Constructivism is most evident in contemporary postmodern, neo-Marxist, and many current feminist approaches.

Naturally, there is plenty of middle ground between biologism and constructivism. The sociobiological school of myth and ritual is best illustrated by the work of Walter Burkert (1931–). As the name implies, the

sociobiological approach aims at a position close to the midpoint between these extremes. Burkert's theoretical points of departure are from biological ethology (a branch of the biologist approach), ritualism, and syntagmatic structuralism (examined in Chapter 5). He attempts to reconcile the biologistic, evolutionary, and comparative approaches with a later-twentieth-century focus on the social element in myth and ritual. As such, he provides an excellent illustration of modern biological approaches while providing a critical commentary on theories of raw biological determinism, which will prepare us for the more exclusively social orientation of structuralism and later theories.

Learning from animals

In *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* Burkert argues that we can learn something about human ritual (and myth) by studying animal behavior (1979: 35–58). We are too ready to assume that a wide gulf separates human and beast, as if we lived entirely in the mind, while animals lived simply by drives and instincts. But a study of animal behavior would force us to modify our assumptions that human behavior is learnt while animal behavior is innate, or that human communication is symbolic, while animal communication is rude and functional. Indeed, Western ideology has elaborated a series of differentiae between humans and animals which are exaggerated and misleading:

Culture	*Nature*
human	animal
psychology	biology
spiritual	mechanical
learned behavior	innate behavior
symbolic communication	functional communication

Biological studies show that animals have purely symbolic rituals. Greylag geese regularly perform a triumph ceremony in which they show common aggression toward a nonexistent interloper. Their aggressive gestures are accompanied by triumphant cries in a way that is both symbolic and functional, since by doing this the geese not only rehearse for the eventual repulsion of an invader, but also, in the meantime, assure each other of their friendship and solidarity. The ritual, says Burkert, is based on a natural program of action (chasing away an enemy), but is at least partially redirected for the purpose of demonstration. It is action separated from the practical sphere and attached to the symbolic.

Both humans and animals manifest innate behavior which has a secondary purpose of demonstration. Weeping, smiling, and laughing are innate but important forms of social communication. Apes also weep and smile and can combine this innate behavior with other learned behavior. When performing greeting rituals chimpanzees embrace one another, pat each other's shoulders, and kiss hands. In human ritual, however, innate behavior may be either positively or negatively present, in knowing what is forbidden, e.g., giggling at funerals. Thus ritual can be seen as embracing both behavioral compulsions and prohibitions (just as with Freud's study of obsessional neurotics and hysterics). In one way or the other, ritual, in order to function effectively, *taps* the most basic and primitive contents of the mind, some might say the infrahuman layers of the brain, but always to redirect them toward a higher social purpose (without which the act is not a ritual, but simply instinctive or primitively functional behavior). In this way, for Burkert, ritual necessarily implies a combination of a biological with a social element. Myth, like ritual, is "structured by some basically human action pattern," indeed frequently, just like ritual, by biological programs of action, but, like ritual, myth has a suspended "partial reference to something of collective importance" (57, 23). Myth and ritual thus both arise from a common or similar biological matrix and share a common social function, but they are not necessarily dependent upon one another. Myths and rituals may, however, support one another in a kind of "symbiosis" (57):

> The defect of ritual, in a human society, is the apparent nonsense inherent in its redirection of activity, the "as-if" element; here a tale may supply a plausible context and fill the vacant places. The defect of the traditional tale is its lack of seriousness and stability; here ritual may supply a basis; for the serious character of ritual is guaranteed by the role of anxiety controlled by it, and its stability is secured even by explicit sanctions.

Herms

Burkert applies the lessons of the study of animal behavior (biological ethology) to three Greek religious practices. Of these I will summarize only the first, which best supports Burkert's claim that myths, like rituals, "are founded on basic biological and cultural programs of action" (18).

In antiquity the icon of the Greek god Hermes generally took one of three nonhuman forms. He is sometimes merely a cairn, a heap of stones *(herma* in Greek). Sometimes he is a phallus. From the late sixth century BC he is commonly represented as an orthogonal pillar topped by a human head and otherwise endowed only with a human and erect phallus half-way up

the front of the pillar. This is what is normally referred to, in the modern literature, as a "herm." The phallus and the pillar (which is thus doubly phallic in form) were often supposed, even in antiquity, to be fertility symbols. But they are not placed in contexts where one might normally desire fertility. They do not appear in fields, folds, stables, or bedrooms. They are erected, rather, at the doorway, in front of the house, at the crossroads, in the marketplace, at graves, on highways, and at the frontiers. But not all phalli are herms: sometimes a phallus is simply a phallus. Phalli, notably, are drawn or carved on doorways and city walls and other places where one also finds herms. Both seem to serve a common function: their location clearly indicates that they served to mark territory or to avert a threat from outside. In later antiquity the phallus served as a charm to avert the evil eye (a function normally referred to as "apotropaic"). Like the graffiti of modern vandals, these artifacts are effective because they have a certain shock value and catch the eye, but this does not explain their popularity and success as an apotropaic symbol.

"In fact," writes Burkert (40):

> I cannot find any real explanation before ethology observed that there are a species of monkeys [quenons, baboons, and other ground walkers], living in groups, of whom the males act as guards: they sit up at the outposts, facing outside and presenting their erect genital organ. This is an "animal ritual" in the sense noted above: the basic function of sexual activity is suspended for the sake of communication; every individual approaching from the outside will notice that this group does not consist of helpless wives and children, but enjoys the full protection of masculinity.
>
> With man, at least in the more civilized areas of the historical epoch, there is only the artifact left, instead of real action. Still its symbolism, its signal function was understood even by those who called it "apotropaic." People consciously or unconsciously know what this action of display means: a demonstration which transmits a message of potency in its double sense.

Burkert is not in any way attempting to suggest that this symbolism is somehow inherited by humans from their primate ancestors. Rather the animal rituals are said to have "heuristic value" in that they provide instructive models for understanding otherwise puzzling rituals or symbols.

Priapus

Burkert's example helps explain the meaning of a symbol, but not a myth. I know no myths which directly explain how Hermes acquired this particular iconic form. It would, however, be an easy matter to test the

insights gained from the study of herms by applying them to myths of Priapus. The icon of Priapus is very similar to the herm, except that his genitals are much exaggerated in size. These figures were placed at the borders of gardens, at doorways, near tombs, and beside roadways. Not surprisingly, Priapus is in myth the son of Hermes and Aphrodite (though Dionysus and Zeus are sometimes also named as fathers). Functionally he is an ancient combination of scarecrow and security warning (I think especially of the lawn signs, found in the better neighborhoods of Los Angeles, which promise an "Armed Response"). The message of the Priapus figures was not always only symbolic. Often the enormous phallus of a Priapus was itself hung with a sign, generally in the form of a poem, warning that the god would assault any who attempted to steal from the orchard, house, or tomb. Several literary versions of these poems survive from antiquity. Martial provides a typical example (*Ep.* 6.49):

> I am not hewn from fragile elm, nor is my member which stands stiff with a rigid shaft made from just any old wood. It is begotten from everlasting cypress, which fears not the passage of a hundred celestial ages nor the decay of advanced years. Fear this, evil doer, whoever you are. If your thieving hand harms the smallest shoots of this here vine, like it or not, this cypress rod will penetrate and plant a fig in you [the slang implies anal intercourse].

Among the myths of Priapus we might examine a number of clearly etiological myths. In one story Priapus was at a revel with Dionysus and his companions. He spied the nymph Lotis (the name means "flower") fast asleep, and began to sneak toward her with the intent to rape her. The ass of Silenus (a companion of Dionysus) started braying and woke her up so that she was able to take flight. Alerted by her clamor, everyone laughed at Priapus's oversized and excited member. In revenge Priapus struck the ass dead. Very similar is the story of Priapus and Hestia (goddess of the hearth). She was fast asleep and he would have molested her, but that Silenus's ass brayed and woke her up and Priapus ran away before he could be apprehended by the companions alerted by the goddess's cries. Another story has it that when Hera had driven Dionysus mad, Dionysus journeyed to Dodona to consult the oracle about a cure. On his way he was confronted by a large swamp. He there met an ass which carried him over the swamp and all the way to Dodona. In gratitude Dionysus gave the ass speech. Later the ass and Priapus fell into an argument "concerning nature" (Hyginus [*poet. ast.* 2.23] says the argument was *de natura*, but the euphemism is explained by Lactantius [*Inst. div.* 1.21.28], who says they argued about whose penis was bigger). The ass won the argument and Priapus, enraged, killed the beast.

All of these myths link Priapus with the ass. The ass is in fact the cult animal of Priapus. At Lampsakos in Asia Minor, the center of the Priapus cult, Priapus was honored by donkey sacrifice. The connection between Priapus and the ass might be explained by their common reputation for ugliness, but especially for their well-known tendency to obvious displays of sexual excitement. One myth explicitly ascribes the ass's death to its proverbial lust. On Greek vases the ass of Dionysus is usually depicted with an erection. In all of these myths, oddly, the guardian function is transferred from Priapus to the ass: he protects travelers (Dionysus), and he guards the household (Hestia) and the garden (Lotis) against the threat of Priapus himself. The braying of the ass somehow acquired the same symbolic power as Priapus's phallus (in the battle between the Olympians and the Giants, the braying of Dionysus's ass is said to have scared the Giants away). The myths are etiologies not only for the donkey sacrifice, but also for the conspicuous sexual excitement of Priapus, since in every case he is frustrated.

It requires little further argument to establish a connection between these myths and both biological action (ritual phallus display) and cultural action (marking territory with phallic symbols). Indeed, they explain the very nature of Priapus in terms of a suspension of his biological pursuit which turns him into an object of display, and even public ridicule. In this way the myths do etiological service in explaining, at least partly, his grotesque and laughable form. The social importance of these myths is also manifest insofar as they relate to cultic activity: they establish a reason for donkey sacrifice and they establish reasons for placing images of Priapus in gardens, by doorways, or on roadsides.

Animal ethology and the analysis of myth

Brilliant and illuminating as Burkert's sketch of the utility of biological ethology for myth analysis may be, this example also helps illustrate some shortcomings of the biological approach. Not least is the problem of comparability. Earlier I complained of the promiscuity of comparatists who indiscriminately bring together the myths and rituals of disparate and unrelated cultures as if they all served a common purpose. But this pales beside the temerity of those who would compare rituals between species (Burkert will go on to compare the pouring of libations to dogs urinating on hydrants, and explain the use of suppliant boughs from the habits of birds). There is a very great risk that animal ritual is much more straightforward than its human counterpart and that the comparison may be too simple and reductive, obscuring more than it illuminates. What makes a

ritual for animals, according to Burkert, is the redirection of some biological function for communication. But however surprising or illuminating the information biologists collect on animal rituals, there can be little doubt that human communication is much more complex.

With material so remote, how can we measure its relevance to myth? And since animal rituals are many, what criterion is there to prefer one animal ritual for comparison over another, especially since we are warned against any possible linkage in the form of genetic inheritance? If the comparisons are merely heuristic, we can choose any that point in the direction already indicated by the myth itself. In this case the animal ritual is less of a control on interpretation than illustrative material for an interpretation we have already arrived at. It may be that it serves only to underscore the argument that we are dealing with something very basic and infrahuman.

The specific ape ritual that explains the form of herms has, according to Burkert, no parallels "in the more civilized areas of the historical epoch." If we really have to reach back this far, then the ape ritual gains in importance, and the example's "deep-biological" implications might seem more compelling. Suppose, however, we framed the relevant animal "rituals" differently. These ape rituals are peculiar and specific only to a small group of primates. If we are to look for parallels in the animal kingdom, we might be better served by comparisons with a much broader basis. For example, many social animals, from baboons to chickens, have rituals of domination by which they maintain their position within a social hierarchy. Cocks and even hens will mount their social inferiors in actual or mimed intercourse to establish or maintain their dominance in the pecking order. This seems to me a much more promising avenue for the investigation of ritual as "social communication." The baboon rituals would seem only a special, though perhaps especially interesting example of this type of behavior. If so the message transmitted is not precisely that "this territory is protected by adult males," but rather "don't mess with us or we will bugger you." This is precisely the message that is hung upon Priapus. But it is perhaps less appealing to the biologically minded theorist, because less a redirection of sexual activity than an extension of it.

If, for example, we were to look, for heuristic purposes, at the kind of animal activity which redirects sexual activity for the communication of not just territorial, but what we might call social limits, we would find that it is only part of a system of behavior. In animals, the rituals of domination involving sexual activity are accompanied by rituals of submission. Inferior animals, males as well as females, raise their buttocks, as a sign of submission, at the approach of a dominant male. Perhaps, then, the discussion should not be restricted to phallus display, or phallus display

at territorial borders, but be extended to the much larger number of animals which have rituals of genital display.

But once we decide that genital display in general is a relevant category for comparison, we find that there is little need for animal ritual. We know in fact of a large number of genital display ceremonies, real and symbolic, from human cultures, including many which must be considered historical and civilized by any standard. Detlev Fehling notably studied such rituals in Greek antiquity with ample comparanda from other cultures (1974). It seems, perhaps, a bit hasty to ignore these and look for remoter comparisons in the animal kingdom. How are the apes more relevant than the behavior, say, of the Yali tribesmen of Indonesia, who perform their war dance wearing penis-sheaths that stiffen, raise, and exaggerate the size of their members?

If, however, we broaden the basis of comparison in this way, we discover that the animal rituals are not only unnecessary, but misleading. Genital display ceremonies among humans include genital display by women as well as buttock display by both women and men. Here the message is clearly not that the group has the full protection of masculinity. If we were to look for help to the corresponding animal rituals we would have to conclude that these are rituals of submission. But here surely is a clear case where the symbolic communication of animals is too elementary to provide any help in interpreting the human communication. Everyone knows what it means to bare your buttocks at someone (this vernacular body language is alive and well even in our "civilized" society). For humans it has just the opposite meaning from that used in animal communication. Showing buttocks and vaginas are gestures of defiance, not of submission. Apparently, if we must translate these gestures into words, they communicate faith in the impotence of the receiver of the communication, as if one were saying "Here I am. Come and get me if you can. I am not afraid." It can of course take place at borders: "mooning" was famously practiced by soldiers on the Sino-Soviet border in the late 1960s and 1970s. But it need not be: the same years were famous for the fad of drive-by mooning practiced by American teenagers. Social boundaries play at least as much a role as territorial. You bare your buttocks at people who pretend to have power over you: but to deny, not to acknowledge this power.

The human ritual really is discontinuous with sexual activity in a way that the animal rituals are not. This raises another serious theoretical concern. The decision that something is biological, or a primary biological function, and something else a redirection too often seems difficult, if not arbitrary, in the case of animals. In establishing social dominance the animals sometimes have intercourse and communicate their relative social

status simultaneously: it is at the same time a biological program of action and a social communication, but without redirection. True, there is "redirection" from the procreative function, if the intercourse is merely mimed and left to gestures of readiness, but this seems no more disconnected with sexual activity than, for example, courting or flirtation. How are we to determine that establishing hierarchies through real or mimed intercourse is not as much a biological program of action as intercourse for the purpose of procreation? And if one can be termed primary and another secondary by some objective criterion, what real difference does that make when both are biologically determined? Baboons indeed seem biologically programmed for the activities involved in these "social rituals." Their physical makeup is even adapted to it. The leading biological ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, writes (1981: 170):

> in several species of baboons and of vervet monkeys, the male carries on his rump structures and colors imitating the genitalia of the estrous female. They are presented during the appeasement gesture to the dominant male. In the gellada baboon . . . a detailed imitation of the rear aspect of the female is shown on the front of the male's chest, and this is also presented during the gesture of submission.

In these animals the behavior displayed in domination and submission seems no less a biological program of action than procreation.

Just how helpful is animal behavior for the study of myth? One could certainly unravel the mystery of the herm without it. I rather suspect that no matter what animal ritual is chosen it will put the emphasis in the wrong place. In the case of Burkert's ape rituals he was tempted to see the ceremony as some sort of act of social self-definition ("we are a community protected by adult males"). But indeed, it is merely a use of body language to threaten an imaginary invader with humiliation and defeat, and an extension of the kind of daily communication that apes practice without regard to matters of social importance. It can, however, certainly be argued that the byproduct of the exercise is social solidarity, and this is certainly interesting in showing that something like rituals are practiced by animals. But human rituals will always provide a better basis for comparison for other human rituals. If they seem unavailable, one is probably looking in the wrong direction. At best, they seem useful for understanding myths and rituals that are inspired by observation of the behavior and properties of animals. At worst, animal rituals function to give the theorist, who wants it, some assurance that a ritual is performed in satisfaction of some very basic human need, indeed, some need even more basic than human.

4.4 BURKERT'S *HOMO NECANS*

Biological vs. cultural evolution?

In Section 4.3 I described the biological approach to ritual and myth in examining the theories of Walter Burkert. Burkert's main contribution as a theorist, however, is less his affirmation of the biological than his distinctively social reading of human biology. His masterpiece, *Homo Necans*, originally published in 1972, argues a "sociobiological" approach, which gives equal stress to both the social and the biological function of myth and ritual.

Homo Necans (= "Man the Killer") argues that men developed their aggression in order to become more efficient hunters. But these developments should not be construed, as many "Social Darwinists" prefer to see it, entirely in terms of an interplay between species and individual in which society only enters as a negative factor. Dawkins (1976), for example, argues that natural selection favors "selfish genes," and that the antisocial members of our species dominate the gene pool, as they dominate the economy. The moral lesson of this disclosure is that the callous exploitation of one man by another is "human nature," and that the vigor and survival of the species are only threatened by any attempt by bleeding-heart liberals and socialists to modify rugged and aggressive individualism.

Burkert's theory is simultaneously a response to both the biological and sociological schools and an attempt to mediate their positions. Natural selection, he says, prefers the social group over the individual, and social selection prefers altruistic over selfish genes. Cooperative group activity lies at the very origin of human evolution and is its precondition. Humans only began to diverge from apes with the organization of individuals into groups of hunters. Individually men were no match for the larger mammals which were the first objects of the hunt. But in groups they were a match for any prey. All those physical and mental features which distinguish humanity from apes are explained by the formation of the first society for the purpose of the hunt: the development of the upright position, of long, slender thighs for running, of prehensile hands for wielding weapons, and of speech for tactical organization.

Cultural and biological evolution worked hand in hand. If hunting in groups required adaptation on the biological side (running on two legs, the development of prehensile hands), it also required adaptation on the cultural side, most conspicuously with the specialization of labor between men and women. Men became the "breadwinners"; women were set free for the task of raising children. This cultural adaptation fed back into the

biological as men and women adapted physically, but differently, to their new roles and environments (1983: 17–18):

> Among human beings, hunting is man's work – in contrast to all animal predators – requiring both speed and strength; hence the male's long, slender thigh. By contrast, since women must bear children with ever larger skulls, they develop round, soft forms. Man's extraordinarily protracted youth, his neoteny, which permits the development of the mind through learning and the transmission of a complicated culture, requires long years of security. This is basically provided by the mother at home. The man assumes the role of the family breadwinner – an institution universal to human civilizations but contrary to the behavior of all other mammals.

Cultural and biological evolution worked hand in hand to produce the distinct characteristics of men and women. With the division of labor between the sexes, men, specialized in the hunt, became more aggressive, women less so; men grew stronger and more agile, women softer, gentler, more nurturing. In this way the social actually generated the biological, just as much as biology determined, limited, or predisposed cultural patterns. Or rather, from the point of view of sociobiology, it is no longer very easy to distinguish clearly between biological and social facts. In Burkert's scheme cultural change leads to physical change, which leads to further social and physical changes, in an evolutionary spiral. Social imprinting affects the physical makeup, just as much as the physical makeup determines social behavior.

Cultural troubleshooting with ritual and myth

The division of labor between men and women increased the need for murderous aggression in adult males since the survival of the whole community now depended upon their success in the hunt. At the same time sexual needs "clearly grew out of proportion in order to bind men to women and thus insure that the family would be supported" (Burkert 1983: 20). As a result the sex drive is far stronger in human males than among animals: their penises are disproportionately large, and the mating urge is not limited seasonally, as with most other mammals. (Penis-measurement is something of a fetish for the biological school – but the appeal seems to have more to do with the organ's mythical, than biological, properties: the assumption that there is a direct correlation between the size of the appendage and the size of the libido has never, to my knowledge, been demonstrated.) Both natural and cultural selection also favored those groups

in which sexual fidelity was reinforced by cultural practice and controlled by strong social sanctions.

The heightened sex-drive put more biological energy at the service of culture. Since sexual rivalry most threatened to turn the hunter's murderous aggression back in upon the community it was supposed to support, culture invented ways of channeling sexual energy outward from the community toward the hunt. Culture sexualized violence. Both myth and ritual leave many traces of this operation. A particularly apposite illustration of sexualized violence is provided by the plentiful myths of maiden sacrifice, frequently conflated with sexual and marriage imagery. Modern cultural parallels are easily found. But the passage from sex to violence is particularly easy in the world described by *Homo Necans,* where sexuality is just another form of aggression to begin with, primarily "sexual aggression."

Thus the biological and cultural evolution of the human species produced in men necessary, but also dangerously high levels of sexual and physical aggression. If sexuality had to be controlled by culture, even while it was promoted, so, obviously, did "murderous aggression." Without cultural intervention it would not have been easy to establish a clear distinction between aggression that is interspecific (hunting) and aggression that is intraspecific: "it is as easy, or even easier, to kill a man as it is to kill a fleeing beast, so from earliest times men slipped repeatedly into cannibalism" (1983: 18). From the beginning social ideology was riven by two contradictory codes of behavior and two contradictory value systems: aggression and the killer instincts were necessary for the hunt, but threatened to destroy the very social order that made the hunt possible. Aggression therefore had to be encouraged, but so had quiescence, compliance, and all those qualities which lead to peaceable social cohesion.

Cultural evolution required the suppression of "selfish genes." Human society would not have survived if culture had not exerted every means to block aggression when directed toward the detriment of the community while at the same time fostering the aggression that worked to its benefit. Ritual and myth proved the most important tools in society's struggle to control harmful and encourage helpful physical and mental reflexes. In the hunting society, at least, the chief burden of ritual and myth was to draw the line. Ritual, and especially sacrifice, proved effective in demarcating the spaces where violence was allowed and violence forbidden. Indeed, for Burkert animal sacrifice is not only the most ancient and the most universal form of human ritual, it is the ritual par excellence, which serves as an archetype or Urtype for most other forms of ritual.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice does, of course, have other functions. Burkert, with Durkheim, regards social bonding as one of its main functions. Social solidarity can be produced by acting together, by sharing beliefs, or by sharing meals. But the bonding function can be satisfied by any myth or ritual; it has more to do with the simple fact of participation in a ritual, or belief in a myth, than with the symbolic contents of either. A symbolic reading of animal sacrifice shows that its more fundamental purpose is to make a distinction, not so much between sacred and profane, as Durkheim would have it, but between the realms where the community forbids and where the community requires violence.

In its outward form sacrifice is a shared meal. Its root constituent action, says Burkert, is giving. Giving is not something innate. Renouncing egotism for the sake of others is a habit which has to be taught to children. This is "sacrifice" in the non-technical sense. It is also the prerequisite for community life and civilization. Human evolution begins when the individual learns to suppress his selfishness for the benefit of the community. In this sense sacrifice is not pure altruism, but more like enlightened self-interest. One gives to another in the expectation of receiving. One gives to the community and receives the benefits of others giving back. An element of time creeps in. Outstanding mutual obligations and expectations further bind the community.

But sacrifice draws on natural anxiety as well. By Burkert's definition "gift sacrifice is ritualized giving in a context of anxiety." This anxiety is rooted in the instinctual life of the animal, particularly the predatory animal. Having killed the prey, the hunter is anxious about his success in securing it from interlopers stronger than himself and able to appropriate the fruits of his labor. Similarly, when the band of hunters kills a beast, there is great anxiety about the distribution of the meat. If the hunters fell into a quarrel over the spoils, allowing aggression to be turned inward on the community, the social fabric would be torn asunder and the entire community would perish because of the egotism of individuals. In sacrifice, says Burkert, culture draws upon and develops the biological raw material of *homo sapiens* in two ways, through a negative ritual, viz., the prohibition of selfishness, and through the channeling of anxiety related to killing. Sacrifice is a sharing of food in the context of dramatized anxiety.

A pure functionalist might regard animal sacrifice as a means of providing meat from larger domesticated animals in a culture that had no sophisticated means of preserving flesh. The whole community was involved because no individual could consume a whole ox in one sitting. Thus

community sacrifice is a convenient arrangement for sharing meat. True, but there is much more to it. It is possible to share meat without making a big production of killing the animal. One could, as in our culture, butcher animals in isolated buildings outside of town, covert and anodyne, using efficient mechanical means, bringing the consumer no closer to the fact of killing than the plastic-wrapped, baloney package on the supermarket shelf. The Greeks, like most ancient and many modern cultures, did not go down this route. On the contrary, they made a spectacle of the killing, before the entire community, in the center of town, on the most holy ground. It was what you might call a "theater of death," since killing was sensationalized in every way.

At or very near the front of an ancient Greek sacrificial procession is a girl who carries a basket on her head. She is required to be a "virgin of faultless parentage" (i.e., noble family, both alive, both citizens, and of faultless reputation). She is called the *kanephoros* or "basketbearer." On her head she carries a basket covered by a cloth which conceals, barley groats (i.e., barley in its natural state, not yet ground for human consumption). And under the barley groats is the knife which will cut the animal's throat. The victim usually follows her more or less directly. There are points of similarity between the girl and the victim. The victim, like the basketbearer, must be a "flawless" animal in earliest maturity, and like the unmarried girl, one that has never "felt the yoke." Also, like the basketbearer, the animal wears its "Sunday best": the victim wears garlands, often also has ribbons tied to its horns, and its horns may be gilded. The participants, who also wear garlands, are also connected to the victim in other ways. In the vast majority of cases, the victim is a higher mammal. Its warm blood and internal organs most resemble human blood and organs. Also the vast majority of victims are domesticated animals like sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle: they are literally a part of the community.

After the animal comes the congregation. Somewhere near the basketbearer is a person carrying a jug of water which is also pure, taken directly from the mouth of a spring. Also close to the front is a musician. In accompaniment to the music the participants sing hymns as they walk. All are united by movement to the same rhythm and it is particularly important that the victim seem to move along of its own accord: being a herd animal it naturally moves along in step as one of the crowd, seduced by the music. The procession walks through the middle of town to the sanctuary of the god or goddess and, as it approaches the shrine and altar of the god, to the extraordinary sounds and movements of the procession are added extraordinary smells from incense burning on the altar, concealing the reek of death and rot near the altar where the decaying heads

of previous sacrifices are hung, and the sides of the altar are caked with blood.

The animal is led around the altar and the congregation follows, still singing and moving in rhythm, while the spring water is sprayed about to create a symbolically purified circle. Separated from the community and from ordinary life, this circle demarcates a space in which acts take place which cannot be sanctioned in ordinary community life. All the congregation now stands in the circle facing inward. Then further purification takes place. The participants wash their hands and also symbolically wash the victim by spraying its head with water. This causes the animal to shake its head downward away from the spray, a nod which corresponds to the standard gesture for consent.

Even with the victim's consent the killing does not take place directly. By a series of steps the act is built to a climax: two stages of symbolic killing are followed by the real thing. When the animal stands at the center of the congregation, the basket goes around and each participant takes a handful of barley groats. The priest then calls for a moment of concentrated silence after which he makes a prayer. When he has finished all the participants throw the barley at the animal and the altar. This is the first harmless act of symbolic aggression (in some rites stones were actually used). It implicates the whole community in the act of aggression. The priest now steps forward with the knife still hidden in the basket (but no longer covered in barley), removes the knife, and quickly brings it down toward the head of the animal, but only to cut a few hairs from its forelocks which he throws in the fire. This is called in Greek "the beginning." The victim has been physically violated but no blood has yet been spilt.

In the case of large animals, especially bulls, the final act is more protracted. Someone comes forward with a double ax and whacks the animal's forehead to stun it. A group of men raise the animal up onto their shoulders and the priest plunges the knife into its throat. To highlight the climactic moment and to conceal the death rattle the women in the congregation ululate (a kind of musical scream). Killing at the throat where the blood is under highest pressure adds to the sensationalism, as it jets out in pulses. It is important that no blood touch the ground. The blood is collected in a large basin and then thrown onto the altar. Smaller animals are held up so that the blood falls upon the altar. Now, in sight of all, the animal is cut open so that its entrails are exposed. The heart, often still throbbing, is ripped out and placed on the altar. The mood of anxiety is enhanced by the introduction of an augur who comes to check the animal's liver: if it has an unusual shape this bodes misfortune to the community. The guts are then taken out, lightly roasted over the fire and consumed by the inner circle of participants. The meat is cut from the

bones and made ready for cooking. Then follows what Karl Meuli called the "comedy of innocence." The bones are set back in their proper order. The head is raised up and fixed to a post near the altar. This is done to resurrect the animal, minus the meat, as if to deny, or make reparation for, a crime. In one especially ancient and guilt-ridden sacrifice (the Dipoleia), the man who hit the bull with the ax ran away after the sacrifice. In his absence there was a mock trial in which the waterbearers accused the men who sharpened the ax of murder, and these in turn charged the man who handed them the ax, and he charged the man who cut up the ox, and this last charged the knife, which couldn't speak and so was condemned and thrown into the sea. After the slaughter, the meat is boiled or roasted and distributed to all the participants. Feasting begins and there is a sudden change of mood from gloomy to festive.

Why the theater of horror and anxiety? It is a ritual which, through the manipulation of feelings of horror, guilt, and anxiety, functions to separate behavior appropriate inside from behavior outside the community, marking off the world of the hunter from the world of family and friends. The ritual of sacrifice licenses killing only when sanctioned within a fixed context, a circumscribed area, and within a fixed order established by ritual. In the language of myth, killing is allowed, in fact required, where and when the gods demand it. Other rituals, too, can support the function of separating these spheres of action. Hence the importance of initiation rites, especially for adolescent males, who move from the household and the world of women, to the hunting band and the world of men. Ritual therefore attempts to mediate and regulate the central contradiction in the very existence of the hunting community: the necessity of aggression on the one hand, the supreme danger of aggression on the other. Sacrificial rituals are also functionally important insofar as they create a stereotypical pattern whereby the entire community goes through an anxiety-producing situation and emerges triumphant (in partaking of the experience of killing followed by the meal all participants in a sense triumph over death): success is associated with community values and community solidarity.

Burkert's interpretation of sacrifice thus demonstrates his theory that cultural evolution builds upon biological reflexes. According to Burkert early man was both aggressive but also anxious about killing. Sacrifice and other rituals built upon both the aggression and the anxiety, but channeled them in different directions, culturally invigorating the aggression directed outward from the community, and culturally invigorating the anxiety about directing aggression inward into the community.

But it is possible to explain the ritual of sacrifice with a good deal less emphasis upon basic biology. Arguably nothing is lost in the interpretation

of Greek sacrificial ritual if we shift the emphasis still further from the biological toward the social. Burkert supposes that a good deal of anxiety about killing is already bred into the human animal. Sacrifice, in his view, is actually designed to help overcome anxiety about killing (1983: 21): "In the shock caused by the sight of flowing blood we clearly experience the remnant of a biological, life-preserving inhibition. But that is precisely what must be overcome, for men, at least, could not afford 'to see no blood,' and they were educated accordingly." But here biological ethology gives no real help. Burkert can cite no evidence of inhibition about killing in the behavior of any species of animal and it is doubtful that man in his most "natural" state has guilt which he must learn to overcome. Burkert does speak of the "anxiety" felt by predators about losing their prey to an interloper, or of hunters losing their prey to the egotism of one of the band, but this has nothing to do with inhibitions about *killing*.

Sacrifice, as described by Burkert, would seem to be orchestrated around four major themes: the symbolic identity of the individual with the victim; the symbolic identity of the individual with the community; the horror of killing (through the creation of a symbolic empathy between the victim and the human participants – in a sense this violent death is your death); and the theme of guilt and remorse – this violent killing is your killing. Greek ritual goes to great lengths to portray sacrificial killing as a culpable act, culpable but necessary in this case, because the gods demand it. It is a theater of horrors inducing pity and fear through a symbolic assimilation of the participants to the victim. But it is also a theater of guilt, demonstrating culpability: through a neurotic obsession with cleanliness and purity; through a systematic diffusion and denial of the responsibility for killing; and through evasive pussyfooting, or avoidance behavior, as foreplay to the act of killing.

It is not easy in all this to see much moral support for the poor hunter who needs to overcome putative biological inhibitions about killing. On the contrary, if the sacrificial ritual parades a guilty conscience, if it insists that everything must be pure and seemingly innocent, it may be precisely in order to instill the unsettling feeling that something is not. Sacrificial ritual does indeed seem to be a tool of cultural evolution by which human society instills inhibitions about killing while still sanctioning killing, but there is no good reason to suppose that this cultural work is founded upon any natural or instinctive anxiety or guilt. The evidence here is not inconsistent with the constructivist position that culture creates the specifically human attribute of conscience, not building upon – but even acting against – the natural tendencies of the biological animal.

Myth and ritual

What makes a ritualist a ritualist is the belief in the existence of a strong general connection between myth and ritual. But the nature of this connection has been variously interpreted. Some maintain that all myths are linked with rites, or vice versa (e.g., Hyman 1962: 25). But other ritualists are content to acknowledge the existence of many counterexamples, such as, for example, myths offering trivial etiologies for the crowing of the cock or the spots of the leopard. Many follow Harrison, too, in maintaining the priority of ritual; in the case of Raglan (1936), indeed, the priority of a single ritual, since he derives all myths everywhere from Frazer's king sacrifice. Yet a few ritualists can be found who would give myth the dominant role (Gaster 1945; Jensen 1963). Others dismiss the question of priority altogether, affirming that neither precedes, causes, or shapes the other, either because they are different aspects of the same thing (Hooke 1933: 3; more forcefully Leach 1954: 13: "myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same") or because they perform distinct but intricately interdependent functions (Kluckhohn 1942). This was essentially the view expressed by Harrison in *Themis*, that myth and ritual arise *pari passu*, but which was not sustained, and was indeed (as we saw) undermined by her discussion.

Burkert is the first to give a coherent theoretical account for the close relationship between myth and ritual without attempting to derive one from the other, or to deny each their separate and independent spheres. Myth and ritual really do seem to arise *pari passu*, both giving symbolic expression to "basic biological or cultural programs of action" (1979: 18). As such they tend to cluster around the essential needs, common crises, and most anxiety-ridden dilemmas facing the individual and the community, particularly those involving killing, sexuality, transitions, or death. Ritual's function is "to dramatize the order of life, expressing itself in basic modes of behavior" while myth "clarifies the order of life," and very frequently does so by clarifying the dramatized order of ritual (1983: 33). Above all, both create the distinctions necessary for the survival of the community: they direct energies and instill behavior patterns.

For Burkert myth is very much like ritual in that it focuses upon a series of actions. The most important aspect of myth is plot, and the most important aspect of plot is its capacity to represent basic and stereotypical biological action patterns. Burkert's interest in myth's stereotypical pattern of actions gives his theory a strong affinity to the structuralism of Vladimir Propp. To structuralism, therefore, we now turn our attention, postponing further discussion of Burkert's sociobiological interpretation of myth until Section 5.2.