

In the Yoruba instance, strikingly similar to the Chinese *I Ching*, it is not so much the text of the poems that constitutes the canon, but rather the mathematically fixed number of possible divination figures. These give access to a possible set of interpretations (the poems) which vary in number according to the skill and training of the tradent. But it is the individual who must decide which one is the most plausible. It is the individual who serves as his own hermeneute.

As one examines the great variety of such canons and divinatory situations, he will be struck by the differences in exegetical techniques and skills, by the variety of presuppositions. But the essential structure of limitation and closure along with exegetical ingenuity remains constant. It is this which provides a suggestive base for a redescription of canon.

Other work remains to be done: an examination of the rules that govern the sharp debates between rival exegetes and exegetical systems in their efforts to manipulate the closed canon. There is need for a careful study of individuals who may be termed tribal theologians, who raise the endeavors of exegetical ingenuity to the level of a comprehensive system. I look forward to the day when courses and monographs will exist in both comparative exegesis and comparative theology, comparing not so much conclusions as strategies through which the exegete seeks to interpret and translate his received tradition to his contemporaries.

I have attempted a redescription of canon from the perspective of an historian of religion. I have argued that canon is best seen as one form of a basic cultural process of limitation and of overcoming that limitation through ingenuity. I have proposed some basic distinctions between list, catalog and canon. I have suggested that for nonliterate peoples, canon is most clearly to be perceived in divinatory situations and have described the range of the roles interpretation and application play in such procedures. By such a redescription, I hope to have suggested how the categories used by historians of religion might be "modulated" by taking seriously structures characteristic of western religious traditions, and vice versa. It is only by such mutual modulation, within the context of comparison, that progress in the study of religion will be possible.

## 4 The Bare Facts of Ritual

*I may be doing wrong, but I'm doing it in the proper and customary manner.*

George Bernard Shaw

I

There is one aspect of scholarship that has remained constant from the earliest Near Eastern scribes and omen interpreters to contemporary academicians: the thrill of encountering a coincidence. The discovery that two events, symbols, thoughts, or texts, while so utterly separated by time and space that they could not "really" be connected, seem, nevertheless, to be the same or to be speaking directly to one another raises the possibility of a secret interconnection of things that is the scholar's most cherished article of faith. The thought that the patterns and interrelationships that he has patiently and laboriously teased out of his data might, in fact, exist is the claim he makes when his work is completed as well as the claim that appears to be denied by the fact that he has had to labor so long. The scholar lives in the world that the poet Borges has described. And this is why coincidence is, at one and the same time, so exhilarating and so stunning. It is as if, unbidden and unearned by work and interpretation, a connection simply "chose" to make itself manifest, to display its presence on our conceptual wall with a clear round hand.

I should like to begin this essay with one such coincidence and juxtapose two texts separated in time by some eighteen centuries. The one is from Kafka, the other from Plutarch.

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

At Athens, Lysimache, the priestess of Athene Polias, when asked for a drink by the male drivers who had transported the sacred vessels, replied, "No, for I fear it will get into the ritual."<sup>2</sup>

These two texts illustrate the sovereign power of one of the basic building blocks of religion: ritual and its capacity for routinization.

Both fragmentary stories take their starting point in what we would most probably call an accident. Both give eloquent testimony, in quite different ways, to the imperialistic eagerness with which ritual takes advantage of an accident and, by projecting on it both significance and regularity, annihilates its original character as accident.<sup>3</sup> But our two texts, while remarkably similar in structure, differ quite sharply in how they see and evaluate this process. They seem to suggest, at least by implication, two differing theories about the origin of religion.

Both texts set the action they describe within a temple. In Kafka, the locale is apparently some jungle shrine; in Plutarch it is a sacred place within the heart of a cosmopolitan city—the dwelling place, north of the Parthenon, of the ancient wooden statue of Athene Polias, “the holiest thing” within all Athens.<sup>4</sup> This temple setting is more than mere scenery. It serves to frame all that follows.

When one enters a temple, one enters marked-off space in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, is of significance. The temple serves as a *focusing lens*, marking and revealing significance. For example, in Jewish tradition gossip in the temple and in the Land of Israel (which they understood to be an extended temple) is Torah.<sup>5</sup> If an accident occurred within its precincts, either it must be understood as a miracle, a sign that must be routinized through repetition, or it will be interpreted as impurity, as blasphemy. Thus the lamp in the temple that unexpectedly burned for eight days according to a late rabbinic legend was retrojected as having given rise to the festival of Hanukkah, the first feast to enter the Jewish liturgical calendar without scriptural warrant, claiming only human decree rather than divine command, and hence, itself, potentially blasphemy.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the oil lamp, the interpretation was one of miracle. On the other hand, when the high priest in Jerusalem spilled a basin of sacred water on his feet rather than on the altar the accident was understood as blasphemy and he was pelted by the crowd.<sup>7</sup>

A sacred place is a place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods are held to be transparent to one another. It is a place where, as in all forms of communication, static and noise (i.e., the accidental) are decreased so that the exchange of information can be increased. In communication, the device by which this is accomplished is redundancy; in our examples, through ritual repetition and routinization. In Kafka's story, the leopards were received as a message (a miracle, a sign) and incorporated, through routinization and repetition, into the ritual. In Plutarch's story, this potential was refused by the priestess, who saw the possibility of blasphemy.

There is a vast difference between the actors in the two stories. But we are in danger of dwelling on this difference in such a way as to mislead ourselves badly. There appears to us to be something mysterious, awesome, and awful about the leopards, but there is nothing at all extraordinary about the mule drivers. Therefore the first may appear to us as being inherently religious, the latter, quite commonplace and secular. From the vantage of such an understanding, Kafka would appear to be drawing on romantic theories of religion as the epiphanic. That may well be what he had in mind, but I would opt for a different understanding. For leopards in a jungle seem as commonplace as mule drivers in an ancient city. The leopards in Kafka's story do nothing mysterious; in fact, they do what the mule drivers desire to do. They are thirsty, and they drink. That they drink from a “sacrificial chalice” is what the readers and celebrants know. The leopards presumably do not. They simply see a bowl of liquid, as the pigeons that sometimes make their way into Catholic churches do not know that the stand of holy water at the entrance was not put there for their relief as a bird bath.

Indeed this is necessarily so if we take seriously the notion of a temple, a sacred place, as a focusing lens. The ordinary (which remains, to the observer's eye, wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by *being there*. It becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way. This is a most important point, one that is only recently gaining acceptance among historians of religion although it was already brilliantly described by A. van Gennep in *Les Rites de passage* (1909) as the “pivoting of the sacred.”<sup>8</sup> That is, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is sacred in itself, only things sacred in relation.

To digress from Kafka and Plutarch to another set of ancient stories about ritual. In the extensive Egyptian *logos* in book 2 of his *Histories*, Herodotus tells that Amasis, “a mere private person” who was elevated to king but despised because of his “ordinary” origins, had a golden foot pan in which he and his guests used to wash their feet. This was melted down and remolded into the statue of a god which was revered by the people. Amasis called an assembly and drew the parallel as to “how the image had been made of the foot pan, in which they formerly had been used to washing their feet and to deposit all manner of dirt, yet now it was greatly revered. And truly it has gone with me as with the foot pan. If I were formerly a private citizen, I have now come to be your king, and therefore I bid you to do honor and reverence to me.”<sup>9</sup> This is a sophisticated story which foreshadows the kinds of subtle distinctions later political thought made between the king as divine with respect to

office and human with respect to person. Divine and human, sacred and profane, are maps and labels not substances; they are distinctions, of "office." This is almost always misunderstood by later apologetic writers who used the Amasis story to ridicule idolatry.<sup>10</sup> Likewise the analogous *topos* found independently in both Israeliitic<sup>11</sup> and Latin<sup>12</sup> tradition of the carpenter who fashions a sacred object or image out of one part of a log and a common household utensil out of the other.<sup>13</sup> Similar too is the opposite theme to the Amasis story, that a statue of a deity would be melted down and used to fashion a commonplace vessel: "Saturn into a cooking pot; Minerva into a washbasin."<sup>14</sup> The *sacra* are sacred solely because they are used in a sacred place; there is no inherent difference between a sacred vessel and an ordinary one. By being used in a sacred place, they are held to be open to the possibility of significance, to be seen as agents of meaning as well as of utility.

To return to Kafka and Plutarch. Neither the leopards nor the mule drivers can be presumed to know what they do or ask. The determination of meaning, of the potentiality for sacrality in their actions, lies wholly with the cult. The cult in Kafka's story perceives significance in the leopards' intrusion and, therefore, converts it from an accident into a ritual. The leopards no longer appear whenever they "happen" to be thirsty: "It can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony."<sup>15</sup> In the Plutarch story, the priestess rebuffs the potential for significance. Whether the mule drivers will ever thirst again, whether or not they wished to drink from the sacred vessels they had just transported or from some "ordinary" cup makes no difference. If done in the temple, with the authority of the priestess, their act is potentially a ritual.

Why does the priestess refuse? What should we understand her answer, "No, for I fear it will get into the ritual," to mean? There is a thin line, as Freud most persuasively argued, between the neurotic act and religious ritual, for both are equally "obsessed" by the potentiality for significance in the commonplace.<sup>15</sup> But this presents a dilemma for the ritualist. If everything signifies, the result will be either insanity or banality. Understood from such a perspective, *ritual is an exercise in the strategy of choice*. What to include? What to hear as a message? What to see as a sign? What to perceive as having double meaning? What to exclude? What to allow to remain as background noise? What to understand as simply "happening"? The priestess is exercising her sense of the *economy of signification*. To permit something as apparently trivial as a drink of water to occur in the temple runs the risk of blurring the focus, of extending the domain of meaning to an impossible degree. It is to run the risk of other ritual acts being perceived as banal, as signifying nothing. We do not know whether, in this particular instance, she was right. But we can affirm that, as priestess, she has acted responsibly.

## II

I invoked, earlier, the name of Jorge Luis Borges as the mythographer of scholarship. I shall take my clue for the latter part of this essay from this gifted Argentinian writer. In his short story, "Death and the Compass," Borges has his police commissioner, Lönnrot, declare to a colleague, "Reality may avoid the obligation to be interesting, but hypotheses may not. . . . In the hypothesis you have postulated [to solve the murder] chance intervenes largely. . . . I should prefer a purely rabbinical explanation."<sup>16</sup> Let me raise a "rabbinical" question. What if the leopards do not return? What if the mule drivers had taken their drink without asking anyone and then were discovered? What then? Here we begin to sense the presence of one of the fundamental building blocks of religion: its capacity for rationalization, especially as it concerns that ideological issue of relating that which we do to that which we say or think we do.

This is not an unimportant matter in relationship to the notion of ritual as a difficult strategy of choice. It requires us to perceive ritual as a human labor, struggling with matters of incongruity. It requires us to question theories which emphasize the "fit" of ritual with some other human system.

For the remainder of this essay, I should like to offer a concrete example which not only will illustrate the problematics and rationalizing capacities of religious ritual and discourse but also allows us to reflect on the dilemma created for historians of religion by these capacities. I should like to direct attention to a set of bear-hunting rituals as reported, especially, from paleo-Siberian peoples. I have chosen this example because it is well documented in ethnography and has been of great importance in a number of theoretical discussions of ritual.

We need, at the outset, to fix on a traditional cultural dichotomy: agriculturalist and hunter. Within urban, agricultural societies, hunting is a special activity, remote from the ordinary rhythms of life, in which man steps outside of his cultural world and rediscovers the world of nature and the realm of the animal, frequently perceived as a threat. The hunter tests his courage in an extraordinary situation. It is this fortitude in confronting the dangerously "other" that has been celebrated in the novels of authors such as Hemingway, or in the compelling *Meditations on Hunting* by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. Within agricultural, urban societies, the religious symbolism of hunting is that of overcoming the beast who frequently represents either chaos or death. The hunt is perceived, depending on the symbolic system, as a battle between creation and chaos, good and evil, life and death, man and nature, the civil and the uncivil. The paradigm of such a symbolic understanding is the royal hunt which persists from ancient Sumer and Egypt to the contemporary queen of England, mythologized in legends of heroic combats with drag-

ons, and partially secularized in the relatively recent ceremony of the Spanish bullfight. The king, as representative of both the ruling god and the people, slays the beast.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, among hunting societies, hunting is perceived as an everyday activity. It is not understood as an act of overcoming but as a participation in the normal course of things. The hunter and the hunted play out their roles according to a predetermined system of relationships. This system is mediated, according to the traditions of many hunting peoples, by a "Master of the Animals," a "Supernatural Owner of the Game," who controls the game or their spirits, in northern traditions most frequently by penning them. He releases a certain number to man each year as food. Only the allotted number may be slain in a manner governed by strict rules. Each corpse must be treated with respect. The meat must be divided, distributed, and eaten according to strict rules of etiquette, and the soul of the animal must be returned to its "Supernatural Owner" by ritual means. If the system is violated, game will be withheld and complex ceremonies, frequently involving the mediation of a shaman, are required to remove the offense and placate the "Master."<sup>18</sup>

Beyond this mythology underlying the hunt, it has long been clear that the hunt itself can be described as a ritual having several more or less clearly demarcated parts. In what follows, I am largely dependent on the outlines provided by A. I. Hallowell's classic study, *Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere*, as well as Evelyn Lot-Falck's more recent monograph, *Les Rites de chasse chez les peuples sibériens*, supplementing them, where appropriate, with details from other ethnographies.<sup>19</sup>

The first group of rituals may be brought together under the heading "preparation for the hunt."<sup>20</sup> One set of rituals Lot-Falck interprets as ceremonies designed to "insure the success of the hunt" under which she includes various forms of "divination" (oracles from bones and flight of arrows predominate) and rites which she terms "magical ceremonies employing sympathetic magic"—a theme to which I shall return. These may be of several types: mimetic dances "prefiguring" the hunt, the stabbing of an "effigy" of the animal, and the like. There are also invocations to the "Master of the Animals" or to the individual hunter's "guardian spirit," or attempts, through ritual, to "capture the game animal's soul."<sup>21</sup> The bulk of the rituals of preparation are concerned with the purification of the hunter, purification by smoke being the most widespread. A variety of avoidances are observed, particularly of women and sexual intercourse and of contact with the dead. Finally, almost universally, there is a ceremonial hunt language.<sup>21</sup> The animals are believed to understand human speech, and it would be a gross violation of etiquette to announce that one is coming to kill them. A variety of euphemisms and circumlocutions are employed.

The rituals surrounding the second important moment of the hunt, "leaving the camp," appear to express the hunter's consciousness of crossing a boundary from the human social world into a forest realm of animals and spirits.<sup>22</sup> Leaving in a rigidly prescribed order, as if to carry human social structures into another's domain, the chief rituals focus on gaining permission from the forest to enter, with the key image being that of guest. Thus the earliest extant Finnish bear rune addresses the forest as "lovely woman—hostess good and bountiful" and requests entrance.<sup>23</sup> I would argue that the complex of host/guest/visitor/gift comprises the articulated understanding of the hunt. The forest serves as a host to the hunter, who must comport himself as a proper guest. The hunter is a host inviting the animal to feast on the gift of its own meat. The animal is host to the hunters as they feed on its flesh. The animal is a gift from the "Master of the Animals," as well as being a visitor from the spirit world. The animal gives itself to the hunter. The hunter, by killing the animal, enables it to return to its "Supernatural Owner" and to its home, from which it has come to earth as a visitor.<sup>24</sup>

The third moment in the hunt seen as ritual is the "Kill," which is likewise governed by strict rules of etiquette.<sup>25</sup> Most of the regulations seem designed to insure that the animal is killed in hand-to-hand, face-to-face combat. For example, in some groups, the animal may be killed only while running toward the hunter or (when a bear) only while standing on its hind legs facing the hunter. It may never be killed while sleeping in its den. In addition, it may only be wounded in certain spots (the most frequent interdiction is against wounding it in the eye) and the wound is to be bloodless. The controlling idea is that the animal is not killed by the hunter's initiative, rather the animal freely offers itself to the hunter's weapon. Therefore, the animal is talked to before the kill; it is requested to wake up and come out of its den or to turn around and be killed. To quote one example, from D. Zelenin:

The Yakuts say that if one kills a bear in his hibernation den, without taking care to awake or warn him, other bears will attack the hunter, while he sleeps. A Nanay hunter, upon encountering a bear in the open, does not kill him at once, but begins by addressing dithyrambic praise poems to him and then prays that the bear will not claw him. Finally he addresses the bear: "You have come to me, Lord Bear, you wish me to kill you. . . . Come here, come. Your death is at hand, but I will not chase after you."<sup>26</sup>

Among almost all of these northern hunting groups, there is a disclaimer of responsibility recited over the animal's corpse immediately after it has been killed.<sup>27</sup> "Let us clasp paws in handshake. . . . It was not I that threw you down, nor my companion over there. You, yourself, slipped

and burst your belly."<sup>28</sup> Even responsibility for the weapons will be disclaimed: "Not by me was the knife fashioned, nor by any of my countrymen. It was made in Estonia from iron bought in Stockholm."<sup>29</sup>

The conclusion of the hunt proper, the "return to camp," has been described by Lot-Falck as a "strategic retreat."<sup>30</sup> The hunters leave the world of the forest and return to that of the human, bearing the corpse of the slain animal. There is continued need for etiquette in the treatment of the corpse, in the reintegration of the hunters into human society, in the eating of the flesh, and in insuring that the animal's soul will return to its "Supernatural Owner." The corpse may be adorned and carried in solemn procession. The hunters continue to disclaim responsibility, reminding the animal that now its soul is free to return to its spiritual domicile and assuring it that its body will be treated with respect. "You died first, rather than us, greatest of all animals. We will respect you and treat you accordingly. No woman shall eat your flesh. No dog shall insult your corpse."<sup>31</sup> Ceremonies of purification are performed by and for the hunters on their arriving at camp; women play a prominent role in ritually greeting the men, reintegrating them into the domestic world.

The animal's corpse is butchered and divided according to strict rules of rank and prestige so that its body becomes a social map of the camp. Certain parts are set aside, in particular the head and bones. Among northern hunters, bones play an analogous role to that of seeds in agrarian societies. Bones endure; they are the source of rebirth after death. The bones are a reservoir of life; they require only to be refleshed.<sup>32</sup> The meal is governed by rules, as the animal is an invited guest at a banquet held in his honor and consisting of his meat. Each piece of meat, as it is consumed, is wedded, in some traditions, to the life of the one who eats. The animal's "generic" life endures in the bones; its "individuality" is preserved by its consumer.<sup>33</sup> The majority of these return elements are joined together in the series of ancient texts which were collected by Elias Lönnrot as the forty-sixth rune of the Finnish *Kalevala*.<sup>34</sup>

Having followed the standard reports and interpretations to this point, we must, at this time, ask some blunt questions. In particular, can we believe what I have summarized above on good authority? This is a question which cannot be avoided. The historian of religion cannot suspend his critical faculties, his capacity for disbelief, simply because the materials are "primitive" or religious.

First, some general questions. Can we believe that a group which depends on hunting for its food would kill an animal only if it is in a certain posture? Can we believe that any animal, once spotted, would stand still while the hunter recited "dithyrambs" and ceremonial addresses? Or, according to one report, sang it love songs?<sup>35</sup> Can we believe that, even if they wanted to, they could kill an animal bloodlessly and would abandon

a corpse if blood was shed or the eye damaged? Can we believe that any group could or would promise that neither dogs nor women would eat the meat, and mean it? Is it humanly plausible that a hunter who has killed by skill and stealth views his act solely as an unfortunate accident and will not boast of his prowess? These, and other such questions, can be answered from the "armchair." They do not depend on fieldwork but upon our sense of incredulity, our estimate of plausibility. Our answers will have serious consequences. For if we answer "yes" to these questions, if we accept all we have been told on good authority, we will have accepted a "cuckoo-land" where our ordinary, commonplace, common-sense understandings of reality no longer apply. We will have declared the hunter or the "primitive" to be some other sort of mind, some other sort of human being, with the necessary consequence that their interpretation becomes impossible. We will have aligned religion with some cultural "death wish," for surely no society that hunted in the manner described would long survive. And we will be required, if society is held to have any sanity at all, to explain it away.

If our sense of incredulity is aroused, we need, as historians of religion, to get up from the armchair and into the library long enough to check the sources. For example, despite the description of the hunt I have given, most of the groups from which this information was collected do not, in fact, hunt bears face-to-face but make extensive use of traps, pitfalls, self-triggering bows, and snares. In more recent times, the shotgun has been added to their arsenal.<sup>36</sup> This precludes most of the elements of ritual etiquette I have described: no hand-to-hand combat, no addressing of the bear, no control over where it is wounded. The Koryak and Chukchi are characteristic of those who actually encounter a bear. When attacking the bear in winter, while it is in its den, they block the entrance to the den with a log, "break in the roof and stab the beast to death or shoot it." When bears are encountered outside their den, in spring or autumn, they set packs of dogs on it to "worry the animal."<sup>37</sup> No sign of ritual etiquette here! Of even greater interest is the following. The Nivkhi say that "in order not to excite the bear's posthumous revenge, do not surprise him but rather have a fair stand-up fight;" but the same report goes on to describe how they *actually* kill bears: "a spear, the head of which is covered with spikes, is laid on the ground, a cord is attached to it and, as the bear approaches [the ambush] the hunter [by pulling up on the cord] raises the weapon and the animal becomes impaled on it."<sup>38</sup> As this last suggests, not only ought we not to believe many of the elements in the description of the hunt as usually presented, but we ought not to believe that the hunters, from whom these descriptions were collected, believe it either.

There appears to be a gap, an incongruity between the hunters' ideological statements of how they *ought* to hunt and their actual behavior while hunting. For me, it is far more important and interesting that they say this is the way they hunt than that they actually do so. For now one is obligated to find out how *they* resolve this discrepancy rather than to repeat, uncritically, what one has read. It is here, as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located. It is its skill at rationalization, accommodation, and adjustment.

I first became aware of this particular set of issues when reading the account of pygmy elephant-hunting in R. P. Trilles's massive study, *Les Pygmées de la forêt équatoriale*. Let there be no misunderstanding. A pygmy who kills an elephant by means other than a deadfall does so by an extraordinary combination of skill and nerve. After shooting it with poisoned arrows, an individual, possessing what Trilles terms an *audace singulière* runs under the elephant—what one of their songs describes as “this huge mass of meat, the meat that walks like a hill”—and stabs upward with a poisoned spear.<sup>39</sup> The corpse is then addressed in songs. Combining two of these, one hears an extraordinary set of rationalizations.

1. Our spear has gone astray, O Father Elephant.  
We did not wish to kill you.
2. We did not wish to kill you, O Father Elephant.  
It is not the warrior who has taken away your life—  
Your hour had come.  
Do not return to trample our huts, O Father Elephant.
3. Do not make us fear your wrath.  
Henceforth your life will be better.  
You go to the country of the spirits.

We have taken you away, but we have given you back  
a different sort of life.  
Against your children, Father Elephant, do not be angry.  
You begin a better life.

This is immediately followed by the ecstatic cry:

O honor to you, my spear!  
My spear of sharpened iron, O honor to you!<sup>40</sup>

The progression is clear. (1) We did not mean to kill you; it was an accident. (2) We did not kill you; you died a natural death. (3) We killed you in your own best interests. You may now return to your ancestral world to begin a better life. The final ejaculation may be paraphrased: “Never mind all of that. Wow! I did it!”

Once we have heard this last prideful cry, and remember the details of the poisoned arrows and spears, we are in danger of dismissing the rest as hypocrisy. The hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts; he does not think about his hunting as he says he thinks. But, unless we are to suppose that, as a “primitive,” he is incapable of thought, we must presume that he is aware of this discrepancy, that he works with it, that he has some means of overcoming this contradiction between word and deed. This work, I believe, is one of the major functions of ritual.

I would suggest that, among other things, *ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment* where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced *precisely* because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. *Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.* Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized.

There is a “gnostic” dimension to ritual. It provides the means for demonstrating that we know what ought to have been done, what ought to have taken place. But, by the fact that it is ritual action rather than everyday action, it demonstrates that we know “what is the case.” Ritual provides an occasion for reflection and rationalization on the fact that what ought to have been done was not done, what ought to have taken place did not occur. From such a perspective, ritual is not best understood as congruent with something else—a magical imitation of desired ends, a translation of emotions, a symbolic acting out of ideas, a dramatization of a text, or the like. Ritual gains force where incongruity is perceived and thought about.

Two instances may be provided from the northern hunters by way of illustrating the implications of such an understanding of ritual.

As is well known, a number of these circum-polar peoples have a bear festival in which a bear is ritually slain.<sup>41</sup> To give a brief, highly generalized description. A young, wild bear cub is taken alive, brought to a village, and caged. It is treated as an honored guest, with high courtesy and displays of affection, at times being adopted by a human family. After two or three years, the festival is held. The bear is roped and taken on a farewell walk through the village. It is made to dance and play and to walk on its hind legs. Then it is carefully tied down in a given position and ceremonially addressed. It is slain, usually by being shot in the heart at close range; sometimes, afterward, it is strangled. The body is then divided and eaten with ceremonial etiquette (the same rules that pertain

to the consumption of game). Its soul is enjoined to return to its "Owner" and report how well it has been treated.

Many valuable interpretations of these festivals have been proposed, each illuminating important elements of the ritual. I should like to suggest another aspect: that *the bear festival represents a perfect hunt*.<sup>42</sup> The etiquette of the hunt—the complex structures of host/guest/visitor/gift—presupposes a reciprocity that cannot be achieved in the actual hunt because, at the very least, one of the parties, the bear, will *not* play its appointed role. In the actual hunt, the hunter might attempt to play his part; the animal will not reciprocate, nor will it respond in the required manner. And the bear's failure to reciprocate will prevent the hunter from making his attempt if the hunt is to be successful qua hunt (i.e., the gaining of meat without injury or loss of life to the hunter). But in the bear festival all of the variables have been controlled. The animal has been compelled to play its part. The bear was treated correctly as a guest. It was constrained to rejoice in its fate, to walk to its death rather than run away, to assume the correct posture for its slaughter, to have the proper words addressed to it (regardless of length) before it is killed, to be slain face-to-face, and to be killed in the proper all-but-bloodless manner.<sup>43</sup> It is conceivable that the northern hunter, while hunting, might hold the image of this perfect hunt in his mind.<sup>44</sup> I would assume that, at some point, he reflects on the difference between his actual modes of killing and the perfection represented by the ceremonial killing.

I would advance a similar proposal for interpretation of what is usually termed "mimetic" or "sympathetic hunting magic."<sup>45</sup> The basic idea of such magic, according to most scholars, is that of "like producing like," with the notion that when the hunter has made a representation of the animal and then acted out killing it, there is an "expectation that the hunter will be able to inflict a corresponding injury to the real animal . . . [and] what was done to an accurate portrayal of the animal would, sooner or later, happen to the animal itself."<sup>46</sup> I would insist, on the contrary, that "sympathetic hunting magic" is not based on the principle that "like produces like," but rather on the principle that *the ritual is unlike the hunt*. Such "magic" is, once more, *a perfect hunt with all the variables controlled*. The figure, the representation of the animal, is immobile because it is inanimate. The proper words may be spoken, the animal may be placed in the proper position, it may be wounded in the proper place, and it surely will not bleed. Such a ceremony performed before undertaking an actual hunt demonstrates that the hunter knows full well what ought to transpire if he were in control; the fact that the ceremony is held is eloquent testimony that the hunter knows full well that it will not transpire, that he is not in control.

There is, I believe, an essential truth to the old interpretation of "sympathetic magic" as an "offensive against the objective world"<sup>47</sup> but that the wrong consequences were deduced. It is not that "magical" rituals compel the world through representation and manipulation; rather they express a realistic assessment of the fact that the world cannot be compelled. The ritual is incongruent with the way things are or are likely to be, for contingency, variability, and accidentality have been factored out. The ritual displays a dimension of the hunt that can be thought about and remembered in the course of things. It provides a focusing lens on the ordinary hunt which allows its full significance to be perceived, a significance which the rules express but are powerless to effectuate. It is in ritual space that the hunter can relate himself properly to animals which are both "good to eat" and "good to think."