



Mimesis and Castration 1937

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DENIS HOLLIER

translated by WILLIAM RODARMOR

"I think it will interest American readers to acquaint themselves with the latest and most peculiar phase of French literary reaction, which appears also as a bold manifestation of avant-garde thought."

These words can be considered the first American reference — though not an explicit one — to the group that called themselves the Collège de Sociologie. They begin Meyer Schapiro's *Kenyon Review* article on Roger Caillois's book *La communion des forts*, which had just been published in Mexico.¹ The article, "French Reaction in Exile," appeared in the winter of 1945. Though the war was not over when Schapiro wrote the essay, the Allied victory was imminent. Caillois was then in exile in Argentina, about to come home, and, reading his book, Schapiro tried to anticipate what kind of regime postwar France could expect from the coming victory. His prediction was somewhat pessimistic: the return of emigrés like Caillois would strengthen the odds of a reactionary Gaullism.

Comparing him to Auguste Comte, another believer in a spiritual force that would maintain society's hierarchical cohesion, Schapiro noted that "Caillois, too, lays great weight on the cohesion of society through sacraments, and I am told he has attempted, together with certain surrealists, to create modern rites and idols."² This imprecise gossip probably refers to rumors spread about the Collège in New York's intellectual circles by European exiles such as Denis de Rougemont, Georges Duthuit, perhaps André Masson, and

1. Meyer Schapiro, "French Reaction in Exile," *Kenyon Review*, vol. 7 (Winter 1945), p. 29. First published in Mexico (Mexico City, Ediciones Quetzal, 1943) and then in France (Marseilles, Le Sagittaire, 1944), both versions of *La communion des forts* are in French. The table of contents of the second is a third shorter than that of the first. Caillois, who was in Buenos Aires at the time, later blamed the censor for these amputations. After the Liberation, however, only two of the four censored chapters — "Défense de la république" and "Athènes devant Philippe" — were reprinted, respectively, in *Circonstanciellles (1940-1945)* and *Le rocher de Sisyphe*. "Le vent d'hiver" and "La hiérarchie des êtres" remain uncollected, victims of a censorship which has nothing any longer to do with the Vichy regime.

2. Schapiro, p. 31.

even Lévi-Strauss, not to mention Patrick Waldberg, an American temporarily out of Paris.³

The accusation of reactionary avant-gardism made against Caillois was not new.⁴ Before the war, it had already greeted every sign by which the Collège had made its brief existence known. A Parisian avant-garde group, founded in 1937 by Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris, the Collège de Sociologie wanted to apply to modern societies those concepts of the sacred that had been developed by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss on the basis of primitive cultures. In the late 1920s and early '30s all three figures had been linked, however "dissidently," to surrealism, their differences with the movement having coalesced around their sense of the surrealists' complacent literariness and lack of epistemological rigor. But, by its refusal to engage in a Marxist problematic—choosing to view society in emotional and religious rather than economic terms; focusing, as in Durkheim, on myths instead of production; and remaining indifferent to the class struggle—the Collège had made itself the target, and a willing one, of all the accusations of reaction. In those days, rightly or wrongly, anything less than blind rejection of fascism was taken for complicity, as if even theoretical concern would inevitably constitute a first step toward sympathy. Merely by taking an interest in fascism, the Collège was suspected of having somehow become invested in it.

In any event, the accusation of ambiguity was by no means unjustified: it is perfectly clear that Caillois, at least, cultivated it as long as he could.⁵ Taking

3. Patrick Waldberg presents himself, on the cover of his *Chemins du surréalisme* (Brussels, Editions de la connaissance, 1965), as the former "secretary of the Collège de Sociologie." In June 1939 the last issue of *Acéphale* gives Waldberg's address in Saint-Germain-en-Laye for subscription and correspondence. His wife, Isabelle Waldberg, was apparently the only "feminine affiliate" of the "secret society" *Acéphale*. In February 1944 the fourth issue of *VVV*, directed from New York by Breton against Bataille and his German ideology, opens with a vituperative letter from Patrick Waldberg to Isabelle Waldberg, written a year before aboard a cargo ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

4. In "Résurrection de Corneille" (*N.R.F.*, October 1938), Caillois had commented positively on *Corneille* by Brasillach, the noisy extreme-Right intellectual. René Bertelé replied in *Europe* (December 1938, p. 559): "Of course, for Caillois, self-control and will are the most admirable qualities for a man, and Corneille's theater offers the most admirable examples of it, but I hate to be told that by Mr. Brasillach or Mr. Caraccio." An earlier article, "L'aridité" (reprinted in *La communion des forts*), had received similar comments from Walter Benjamin (who signed his review J. E. Mabin) in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, vol. VII (1938), p. 5: "Caillois's 'dialectique de la servitude volontaire' shows, horribly, the buried regions of thought in which loiters a Rastignac who has to do, not with the Maison Nucingen, but with a clique of authoritarian propaganda chiefs." Caillois exemplifies, he adds, "fascistic praxis." But these quotations do not express a simple condemnation. Caillois's every intellectual move was, in fact, immediately remarked upon by the Marxist (and even Communist) reviewers, who at times would just give him a patronizing warning (cf. Pierre Robin's review of *Le mythe et l'homme* in *Commune*, September 1938).

5. In the May 1939 issue of *Cahiers du sud*, Pierre Missac (Benjamin's Parisian friend) first blamed Caillois for an objectless aridity which, he thought, left him available to fascism. But, while correcting the galleys, he had to add a footnote: "Since I wrote this answer, Mr. Caillois officially proclaimed himself a Communist." Concerning this proclamation (probably the conclu-

a deliberately provocative stance, he carefully maintained his political undecidability for as long as possible, endlessly delaying the moment when he would have to make the choice that everything around him impelled him to make. But does this mean that we have any right to call reactionary the mere refusal to state that one is not? By settling the matter too quickly, the impatient questioner assumes the responsibility for a choice that he cannot stand to see another avoid.

Whether reactionary or not, this ambiguity was, however, far from accidental; it was part and parcel of the Collège de Sociologie's program. In "Le vent d'hiver," one of the militant pieces written for and inspired by the Collège, Caillois launched a campaign for the resacralization of society, calling on contemporary rebels to "oppose with all their might a society which has so totally profaned itself."⁶

As a matter of fact, the Collège defined primarily through the terms of ambiguity the sacred it had sworn to restore: *tremendum* and *fascinans*—that which attracts and repulses at the same time, an object both of respect and disgust. The fact that the Collège maintained an active, virulent ambiguity in the face of the most burning questions of its day, and refused to fall into step with the mandatory viewpoints of modern political life, cannot be understood without taking into account the Collège's overall strategy of reintroducing the sacred itself—that is, ambiguity—into contemporary social reality.

On one point, however, Caillois was careful to pronounce himself without the slightest ambiguity, and on this point Schapiro is perfectly right in calling his position reactionary. Sacralization, the goal of the Collège's activist sociology, implies the restoration of hierarchical differences, and during the 1930s and '40s Caillois rarely missed a chance to express his revulsion at total egalitarianism, or to reaffirm the hierarchical division of individuals into masters and slaves, or—to use his Saint-Simonian vocabulary—producers and consumers.⁷

As we shall see, the masters primarily define themselves by their power of secession, of retreat, of subtraction; they stand out and distinguish themselves by stepping back. Distinction, their exclusive privilege, is less an attribute than an ongoing process. It is the activity of beings that makes the difference. But here, unlike the undecidable flux of ambiguity, the differences are not reversible. A model for this irreversibility might be mapped onto the phenomenon of

sion of "La hiérarchie des êtres") see Schapiro: "Caillois will even admit the Communists as possible agents of the desired restoration of society, provided they are a secret minority distinct from the masses" (p. 33).

6. Reprinted in Denis Hollier, *Le collège de sociologie (1937-1939)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, p. 82. A revised edition of this volume is forthcoming in English from the University of Minnesota Press.

7. See "Le vent d'hiver," in *Le collège*, p. 89; "L'aridité," *Mesures*, April 1938, p. 9; "La hiérarchie des êtres," *Les volontaires* (special issue: "Le fascisme contre l'esprit"), no. 5 (April 1939), p. 324.

consciousness: what distinguishes being awake is that wakefulness distinguishes itself from sleep — wakefulness implies consciousness of not being asleep — while the reverse is not true — sleep is not able to distinguish itself from wakefulness, since being asleep does not imply a consciousness of not being awake. In these oppositions only one of the two terms carries the distinction, only one is able to distinguish itself from the other. And that is precisely why ambiguity ends at this point.⁸

The distinctions here are always oriented, or rather they orient; they have directional value. So the masters' sole privilege lies in that distinction by which they distinguish themselves from slaves. The difference between masters and slaves does not involve an opposition of antithetical attributes, such as the richness of the ones as opposed to the others' poverty. It is strictly a matter of form. It is a distinction that has no other content than distinction itself, the distinction, in fact, between those who are distinguished and those who are not. Schapiro mentions in passing the rituals the Collège de Sociologie had considered instituting. In several instances, Caillois holds up the formal rights of politeness as the keystone of a morality of masters.⁹ Distinction reaches its apex in protocol and good manners. Above all, slaves are people who do not know how to behave.

This split between masters and slaves is therefore more ontological than social, more moral than economic. It creates a setting in which — among other things — not only is there no reason any longer to pity the slave, but there is even the possibility of imagining a situation in which the slave would have no cause to pity himself; there is no reason, in fact, not to posit a satisfied slave, because that which defines the slave — or the consumer — is not his economic bondage or the loss of the power to work which that entails. He is not a slave because of what the reality principle makes him suffer, but, on the contrary, according to Caillois, because of his bondage to the pleasure principle.

The slave is unexpectedly defined as a consumer rather than a producer because, in the final analysis, a slave is always a slave of pleasure. He is a slave only for his pleasure, and through his pleasure. If he suffers, it is only because of the deeply pathological nature of pleasure, which demands that, in order to enjoy pleasure, one must consent and abandon oneself to it, suffer oneself to enjoy it. The master, on the other hand, refusing any ambiguity in his unalloyed activism, cannot suffer the hedonist pathology. Hence, in Caillois's hierarchy of beings, the importance of the line which separates the pleasure principle from what is beyond. It is strategically as decisive and as vital as the one which separates imagination from reality, sleep from wakefulness, life from

8. Concerning the strategic distinction between dreams and wakefulness see Caillois's 1934 antisurrealist pamphlet *Procès intellectuel de l'art* (reprinted in *Approches de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974) and *L'incertitude qui vient des rêves*, Paris, Gallimard, 1956.

9. Caillois, "Le vent d'hiver," p. 94.

death. The line must therefore be drawn simply, without splits or breaks. On this side of it, the slaves imagine that pleasure is “the highest goal of freedom.” On the other, the masters know that, quite on the contrary, it is “the main gate to slavery.”¹⁰

The hierarchy of beings is therefore above all a political sublimation of the sexual, the overcoming of the sexual by the political. It produces the political as nonsexual. But strangely enough, this overcoming itself is described according to the pattern of sexual difference. The difference between the sexual and the nonsexual occurs along the lines of sexual difference itself. Power—which the masters find beyond pleasure—is a phallic desexualization. Its presence, according to Caillois, depends on a purely factual contingency: some have it, others don’t. It is a distinctive characteristic which divides humanity into two groups, those who are endowed with power and those who have been deprived of it. Caillois writes, “Here one confronts a given as immediate, fundamental, and unsurpassable as the opposition between the sexes.”¹¹ The author titled one of his articles from that period “L’agressivité comme valeur.”¹² The relationship between that aggressiveness and sexual difference appears in the manner by which sexual difference itself is formulated in terms of opposition. One confronts it, he says.

It is not enough, however, to say here that the difference between pleasure and power is modeled on sexual difference itself. Power is the power not to feel the pleasure one gives, to project fully the pathology of pleasure onto the other, to spill onto the other the fullness of pleasure. Power, above all, is the capacity to separate oneself from the pleasure one gives, the power to give pleasure without losing oneself in it, not to confuse oneself with a pleasure one gives without letting go of oneself. It is not only a matter of leaving pleasure to others; one actually has to give it to them, even impose it on them; one has to rid oneself of it onto them. Pleasure often is described as an evacuation, an emitting, a mechanism of expulsion; here, it is pleasure itself which is being emitted. The division between producers and consumers demands that he who produces pleasure not consume it himself.

Caillois develops a fairly sinister fantasy around this motif. It is found in an article in which, against the pleasure of the imagination, he develops the theme that “domination is better than enjoyment.” Yet it is not only a question of opposing domination and enjoyment as two domains which are foreign to each other, since domination has to act on enjoyment itself. My giving up enjoyment is what causes pleasure in another. “One can imagine,” writes Caillois, “that there are people who in making love do not enjoy the pleasure they feel as

10. Caillois, “L’aridité,” p. 9.

11. Roger Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré* (1939), quoted from the third edition, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, coll. “Idées,” p. 111.

12. Roger Caillois, “L’agressivité comme valeur,” *L’ordre nouveau*, no. 41 (June 1937).

much as that which they give, because the former does not leave them in possession of themselves, whereas the latter gives them possession of the other. . . . Pushed to the limit," he continues, "if they commit rape, it would not be because they were driven by their instinct and for their pleasure, but to make their victims feel pleasure in spite of themselves, and seduced by that strange cruelty of imposing sexual joy itself."¹³

By now the fairy tale is close to a nightmare. Pierre Klossowski also suggests a similar "right to impose enjoyment" with reference to de Sade.¹⁴ What is involved here is not taking others' pleasure, not using them for one's pleasure, but pleasing them in spite of themselves. Punishment is usually the consequence of a sinful pleasure. In this strange, rosy sadism, pleasure itself becomes the punishment for those who enjoy it. My power is not to take part. All the pleasure is to be yours.

This reminds me of the schizophrenic's remark quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of Caillois's "Procès intellectuel de l'art": "Do you see these roses?" he asked. "My wife would think they were beautiful. To me, they're nothing but a collection of leaves, petals, stems, and thorns."¹⁵ Following typical sex roles, his wife, of course, is the one who enjoys that which leaves him, a man, cold.

And yet a difficulty arises here that threatens the distinction which is the whole point of this fantasy. Ambiguity returns just where Caillois wants to break away from it. Pleasure must be the other's pleasure, because if it were mine I would lose myself in it; it would leave me, he says, "not in possession of myself." In other words, if I let myself enjoy my own pleasure, I would no longer be myself, I would lose myself in an experience of otherness so profound that, in a manner of speaking, it would no longer even be me who was enjoying my pleasure. Therefore, that very pleasure would no longer be my own. And it is just so as not to lose myself in my own pleasure that I have to enjoy the pleasure of another.

Note, however, that the opposition of enjoyment and domination (or pleasure and power) has been surreptitiously replaced by an opposition that we can consider for the time being, as Caillois would have us do, as between two forms of pleasure: the pleasure one takes in one's own pleasure, and that which one takes in another's. But that opposition itself does not stand up for long. One must not enjoy one's own pleasure because one would lose oneself in it, and for that reason a pleasure is never the pleasure of the one who enjoys it. It

13. This article first appeared in the *N.R.F.*, September 1937, as a review of two books devoted to chess, one of them Marcel Duchamp's *L'opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées*. It is partially reprinted in *Cases d'un échiquier*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 45.

14. Pierre Klossowski, "Sade et Fourier," *Topique*, nos. 4-5 (October 1970), p. 89. The phrase in French reads: "le droit de contraindre à la jouissance." For an analogous kind of "generosity" in Sartre, see my *Politique de la prose*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 228; and "How not to take pleasure in talking about sex," forthcoming in *Enclitic*, Winter 1984.

15. Caillois, "Procès intellectuel de l'art," p. 41.

is precisely to avoid being expropriated by a pleasure which would not be their own that the strong and potent men whom Caillois celebrates prefer enjoying a pleasure which is not their own. They prefer to appropriate others' pleasure rather than allow themselves to be expropriated by their own.

For Caillois, the point was to establish an irreversible distinction between pleasure and that which is beyond it—power—to split one off from the other. Since one cannot enjoy with distinction, one should at least be distinguished from one's pleasure. And yet, at the very place stated to be that of power, by a surprising redundancy, pleasure itself reappears as that which is beyond pleasure—and a pleasure once again defined as the impossibility of enjoyment in the first person, a depersonalized pleasure. While avoiding losing oneself in one's own pleasure, one finds oneself in a pleasure that is not one's own. The cure for alienation is not different from alienation itself. The temptation of impersonality is at work at the very heart of its condemnation.

I have shown elsewhere how Sartre's program of "commitment"—which also appears as a way of resisting a subjective self-dismissal, the pathological depersonalization of the individual—actually has to be considered a paradoxical detour that is necessary to produce an impersonal, nonsubjective consciousness, a consciousness which would not be a center of activity, and for that reason would never be able to say "I."¹⁶ The ego's draining, its eviction into the world, its projection among transcendent objects, is but a necessary detour in the production of its transcendence. We shall see that for Caillois—as for Sartre—the clergy, as an institution, is still the surest way of attaining that egological *époque*.

Caillois's collection of short pieces, *Cases d'un échiquier*, ends with "Récit du délogé" ("The Evicted Speaks"). Certainly the strangest thing about this work of fiction is that, in spite of its subject, it is written in the first person. How long can a depersonalized consciousness continue saying "I"? How can one describe an experience of depersonalization while using the first person? Roquentin and Meursault would have something to say about that detail of narrative technique.

The first line of "Récit du délogé" throws us immediately into the heart of this narrative paradox: "I never really imagined that one could have found oneself depersonalized." In one scene in this short story, the narrator describes his first sexual experiences, and the thoughts they evoke in him are strikingly close to the fantasy that Caillois develops in the early article just described. As might be expected, those sexual pleasures left him somewhat cold. "It was clear enough that I was not impotent, but for a while I thought I was frigid." In fact, the height of orgasm left him "lucid, not to say critical, more focused on my partner's pleasure than carried away by my own."¹⁷ When frigidity is masculine, it has nothing in common with impotence; it is not that which falls short of an unattainable pleasure, but that which goes beyond a pleasure that

16. See my "I've done my act. An exercise in gravity," *Representations*, no. 4 (Fall 1983).

17. Roger Caillois, "Récit du délogé," in *Cases d'un échiquier*, p. 322.

has been surpassed. On the contrary, one should see in that frigidity the height of virile potency.

Yet giving up pleasure does not leave man any more in possession of himself than does giving in to it. This is where the figure of the cleric appears in Caillois, and with it, the projects of the Collège de Sociologie. For the Church not only demands that the clergyman renounce worldly pleasures and attachments; it demands that the clergyman renounce the strongest of those attachments, that is, his attachment to himself. Ordination is a sacrament that institutes an instance of impersonal consciousness in which the first person—a mere subjective prosthesis—becomes a parasite, a *parergon*, almost an imposter. A cleric's strength, says Caillois, "is not that of a man, but that of an organism where his person disappears. . . . Because in eliminating himself the cleric makes room within himself for the Church."¹⁸ The cleric therefore disappears into an order that absorbs him; he effaces himself in the milieu that envelops him; he blends into his surroundings.

"La sociologie du clerc," in which Caillois develops these thoughts, comments upon the debates concerning the commitment of the intellectual, which the conflicts of the Popular Front and both the threat and the temptation of fascism had revived. But Caillois does not take sides; he merely sets down a definition according to which one cannot call a cleric anyone who speaks in his own name, whether to take part in the affairs of his times or to set himself apart from them. A cleric is first and foremost a member of a church, and by that fact has given up the right to speak and even to think for himself, the right to say what he thinks. His membership in a church or a college has removed forever his "capacity for enjoyment and even his capacity for being himself."

It follows, among other consequences, that clerical ordination does not leave the subject in possession of himself any more than did the pleasure this ordination opposes. He is no more master of himself in giving up the pleasures of the world than he would have been in giving in to them. So what is the point of those severe virtues which demand that one give up pleasure, but whose thorny paths lead to the same result?¹⁹ At the heart of the clerical vocation lies the very temptation of the void which it tries to oppose, man's tendency "to default, to renege on himself, as by an act of self-desertion."²⁰ This pleasure in playing dead leads us to the question of mimesis, and thereby to the Collège de Sociologie.

Caillois wrote two memorable articles on the subject of mimesis some

18. Roger Caillois, "Sociologie du clerc," in *Approches de l'imaginaire*, p. 67. This text, an answer to Julien Benda, first appeared in the *N.R.F.* in August 1939. It was reprinted in both editions of *La communion des forts*.

19. "Dures vertus" is the title of the section of *La communion des forts* where "La sévérité" and "L'aridité" are collected (together with "Le vent d'hiver" and "Sociologie du clerc").

20. Roger Caillois, "Vertiges," in *Instincts et société*, Paris, Gonthier, 1964, p. 47. This text was included in both editions of *La communion des forts*.

years before the founding of the Collège, both of which appeared in the vanguard journal *Minotaure* (in 1934 and '35) before being reprinted in *Le mythe et l'homme*.²¹ The first begins by examining the sexual habits of the praying mantis, in which, as we know, the female devours the male during sexual intercourse. The second compares certain forms of animal mimesis with what Caillois calls—using Janet's phrase—legendary psychasthenia.

In the French psychiatric language of the time, psychasthenia meant—as its etymology suggests—a drop in the level of psychic energy, a kind of subjective detumescence, a loss of ego substance, a depressive exhaustion close to what a monk would call *acedia*. This is the last of the temptations to which Flaubert subjects his Saint Anthony: “to be matter.” Caillois had studied it along with those other antibiotic apparitions, the demons of noon.²²

Mimesis is described in terms of energy, along thermodynamic lines: any production of work implies a split origin, an original unevenness, the difference of level between a hot and a cold source. The topics of these two articles illustrate a moment outlined by Carnot's second principle, that is, the moment when the cold source, the condenser, starts in turn to warm up. The mantis assimilates the male during the sexual act, and mimetic insects, falling victim to a strange contagion, give up trying to stand out or distinguish themselves from the environment in which they live. Caillois presents himself as a provoker of energy. He makes the difference between those who make the difference and those who do not. The lure of the void may be universal, but some do not succumb to it. The virtue of dizziness lies precisely in the fact that some people overcome it. Having climbed to the summit, one may aspire to descend, but it does not follow that one does so.

Caillois's description of mimetic behavior is therefore no praise of psychasthenia; rather it begins with an argument for distinction: “From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of *distinction*: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc.—all of them, in short, distinctions in which valid consideration must demonstrate a keen awareness and the demand for resolution. Among distinctions, there is assuredly none more clear-cut than that between the organism and its surroundings.”²³

What makes mimesis strange is precisely the fact that an organism gives up that distinction, abdicates that fundamentally vital difference between life and matter, between the organism and the inorganic. As Bichat defines it, life is all that resists death. Here, it would seem that life has stopped resisting. “We

21. “La mante religieuse,” “Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire,” in *Le mythe et l'homme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1938.

22. See Roger Caillois, “Les démons de midi,” *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, March 1937, where the temptation is associated with the immobilizing effects of the Siren's song. It refers to Saint Anthony on p. 162. So do—through Flaubert—the texts on the praying mantis and on mimicry.

23. Caillois, “Mimétisme,” p. 100.

thereby reach," says Caillois, "that fundamental law of the universe which Carnot's principle illuminates: *the world tends toward uniformity*."²⁴

Caillois's article on mimesis therefore takes on the quality of a moral allegory, and it is in this context that the Collège's activity shows its full significance. The cleric—like the male praying mantis, like those insects which become a branch among branches, a leaf among leaves—no doubt also renounces possessing himself, but in so doing, instead of accelerating the general tendency toward entropy, produces the effect of a negative entropy, or what Caillois in *La dissymétrie* calls an "inverse entropy."²⁵

In our temperate societies—whose timid seasonal changes do not match those extreme swings that Mauss noted in Eskimo societies—the difference between hot and cold is less marked than one might wish. Nonetheless, an activist sociology can always correct our lukewarm climate by means of artificial freezers, centers of masculine frigidity which could limit the ravages of entropy. This is the very project which Caillois ascribes to the founding of the Collège in "Le vent d'hiver." For the physical world is not alone in tending toward uniformity. *L'homme et le sacré* notes that "social existence as a whole is sliding toward uniformity."²⁶ And his "Sociologie du clerc" had already pointed out that there was no role for a clergy in "a uniform society." The clerical function implies above all "a distinction between the spiritual and the temporal." The thinking substance and the *res extensa* are truly distinct—as Descartes would have wished—only if they are unequal. Against profane reversibility, the Collège undertook to restore a hierarchical asymmetry and to revive the difference between difference and nondifference. The sacred is a center of ambiguity, but an ambiguity which must be a distinct one, one that stands against the surrounding uniformity of the profane world.

When the Munich crisis broke out in September 1938, the Collège circulated job offers in which it described itself as an "energy center" dedicated to the struggle against what it called "man's de-virilization."²⁷ There is no reference here to the praying mantis, but it is clear that both mimesis and castration were equal threats to difference. War was close, reminding men that they are equal before death. The Collège took the occasion to remind anyone who was willing to listen that this equality per se did not prevent any kind of distinction. It undertook to teach whoever cared to learn how to maintain a certain distinction even in front of death, how to die with distinction.

The Collège's work was an explicit response to Caillois's undertaking to resist that entropy whose inevitable progress he described in his study of

24. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

25. Roger Caillois, *La dissymétrie* (1973), in *Cohérences aventureuses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 268.

26. Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, p. 170.

27. "Déclaration du Collège de Sociologie sur la crise internationale," in *Le collège*, p. 103.

mimesis. As we have seen, mimesis blurs the distinction—vital for an organism—between the living being and its environment, “so much so that, in fact, it is not *in* an ‘environment,’ it *is* that ‘environment.’”²⁸ The Collège, on the other hand, in a gesture of dissident integrism, became what Derrida would call an energetic *parergon* (“an outside called within the inside in order to constitute it as an inside”), detaching itself from the environment it is infiltrating, “like a cancer invading a structure that is more yielding and unstable.”²⁹ By its activism, it acted like an antimimetic and antipsychasthenic *pharmakon*.

And yet this opposition between the conclusions of Caillois’s studies of mimesis and the prescriptions in the Collège manifestoes needs to be examined. I have already noted that the Collège, like any clerical institution, was born of a renunciation of the self which is analogous to the subjective evacuation which is at work in mimesis. There, too, the individual makes himself disappear. It is true that impersonality as such is not necessarily a fault for someone who would call anthropocentric complacency a fraud. There is, however, something else. And here one would almost be tempted to suspect Caillois of bad faith.

His description of mimesis, which itself falls prey to the attraction by the very resemblance whose hold it describes, is resolutely silent on one essential difference. Seized by a “depersonalization by assimilation to space,” the mimetic insect, he says, plays dead.³⁰ So be it. But Caillois does not find it worthwhile to remind us that it can only play dead because it is alive. His entire analysis proceeds as if playing dead and being dead were one and the same. But in this very case, the difference between resemblance and identity is essential. It may be, as the article’s epigraph says, that by pretending to be a ghost you turn into one. Here, however, death is only a mask of life, a mask behind which life maintains its difference while pretending to renounce it. So it is by no means sure that the final outcome of mimesis is the apocalypse of entropy that Caillois saw in it.

Mimesis pretends to announce the end of differences, the great tide of indistinction, but only the better to reserve the vital difference. Life continues to distinguish itself from death, except that one cannot see it anymore. Only the status of differences has changed: they have become imperceptible, no longer distinguishable from their disappearance, at work in that very disappearance. This is obviously the point at which Caillois’s homology between the praying mantis and the mimetic insects breaks down. For the male mantis is being eaten for real; he is not just pretending.³¹

28. Caillois, “Mimétisme,” p. 131.

29. Caillois, “Le vent d’hiver,” p. 83.

30. Caillois, “Mimétisme,” p. 131.

31. This is the first difference between the two phenomena which Caillois identifies: the male mantis does not survive intercourse, while the mimetic insect not only survives mimicry, it often survives by means of mimicry. But there is a second difference on which I do not wish to dwell here. It concerns the fact that in the first case, that of the mantis, the assimilated creature and the

The Collège's fascination with the specter of secret societies shows, however, that in fact the Collège itself was under the spell of the same mimetic appeal. Contrary to the romantic tradition, the Collège did not intend to set opposites against each other. The conflict between individual and society gives way to more subtle strategies in which society, caught up in its struggles with its double, turns against itself. The confrontation takes the shape of a mimetic subversion. Resistance is not opposition, but overbidding. The dissidents are now society's true sectarians. Caillois reminds us that sect and society share the same etymology. "One only unites through severance," he says.³² Here secession no longer has anything to do with loosening the social ties. Quite the contrary, it is inspired by a desire for "oversocialization."³³ If the dissidents withdraw from society, it is because of the high idea they have of it. So that by a kind of *mise en abîme* analogous to mimesis, society finds itself on both sides of a secession which no longer shows.

It is in the nature of secrecy to be unsuspected. Neither its presence nor its absence can be proved. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to affirm that there is no secrecy in a given situation, because if it were present, it would not be known, or if it were, it would not be a secret. Democracy, a political regime that operates by advertising power, equates secrecy with abuse of power. But the practice of surveillance is haunted by that which cannot be perceived. Jeremy Bentham, the inventor of the panopticon, had a lifelong fear of ghosts.³⁴ Banning secrecy is not enough to free one from its obsession. Secret societies will in fact become the major theme of the democratic political fantasy.

Caillois once described the behavior of a child hiding a treasure. He takes "infinite pains in peeling off the wallpaper, digging into the plaster, depositing his prodigious treasure in it, and, as best he can, gluing back the paper, carefully torn so as to look as accidental as possible, or else painstakingly cut along the lines of the pattern."³⁵ As with mimesis, what is involved in this child's behavior is hiding a discontinuity from the eye. A heterogeneity hides behind the apparent evenness of an unbroken surface. A secret, says Caillois, "derives its value from being unknown." Such a reabsorption creates the secret, whose fascination implies that "its very existence" is unsuspected.

assimilating one belong to the same species (a species whose genetic patrimony obliges every individual to be one or the other), while both male and female of the mimetic species assimilate themselves to their surroundings. Caillois's discarding of sexual difference should not itself be discarded as insignificant. But one might wonder if the very disappearance of sexual difference in the shift from castration to mimicry might not itself be counted as one of the many tricks of mimicry: just another sham.

32. Roger Caillois, "L'esprit des sectes," in *Instincts et société*, p. 89.

33. For this neologism, see *Le collège*, p. 83, footnote.

34. "This subject of ghosts has been among the torments of my life" (cited in C. K. Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*, London, 1932, p. ix).

35. Roger Caillois, "Les secrets trésors," in *Instincts et société*, p. 41. This text first appeared in both editions of *La communion des forts*.

Power and *secrecy* are often linked in Caillois's vocabulary, for example when he writes of the false bottoms of Fantomas's Paris, or of the "taste for shadow and power" which is behind the secret societies' mythology.³⁶ For it is true that secrecy is a source of power, but this power is all the more potent for being secret, that is, potential, virtual, reserved.

A superficial look at the evolution which converted the political structures of the old monarchy into modern democracy illuminates the progress of entropy and undifferentiated egalitarianism. But it can also be seen the other way. Quoting Montesquieu is not inappropriate when speaking of Caillois;³⁷ in *L'esprit des lois*, we read: "If the pomp and splendor that surround kings is part of their power, modesty and simplicity of manners are the strength of the aristocratic nobility. When nobles put on no distinction, when they blend in with the people, when they dress like the people, that makes the people forget its own weakness." Monarchy contrasts with democracy by parading the hierarchical differences which distinguish it. But an aristocrat is no exhibitionist. He is not about to show his differences to the first person who comes along. A trace goes along with the erasing of that trace. Likewise, all of his distinction is in his reserve.

36. Roger Caillois, "Préambule pour 'L'esprit des sectes'" (1945), in *Instincts et société*, p. 68; also in *Approches de l'imaginaire*, p. 94.

37. From *l'esprit des lois* to *l'esprit des sectes*: one knows Caillois's lifelong admiration for Montesquieu, whose complete works he edited for the Pléiade Collection. The following quotation, from Book V, Chapter 8, can be found in this edition (*L'esprit des lois*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951, vol. 2, p. 284).