respond to any and every objection that occurs to you along the way. The one you have just raised is extremely important because of its relation to the problem of the disappearance of sacrifice from the cultural institutions that emerged from it and that depend on it for their very existence. We will take up this problem another time.

J.-M. O.: We were talking about sacrifice.

R. G.: If rituals conclude with sacrifice, it must be that to religious societies the sacrifice seems like the conclusion of the mimetic crisis enacted by the ritual. In many rituals everyone assembled is required to participate in an immolation that might easily be mistaken for a sort of lynching. Even when the sacrifice is performed by a single person, that person usually acts in the name of everyone involved. The community affirms its unity in the sacrifice, a unity that emerges from the moment when division is most intense, when the community enacts its dissolution in the mimetic crisis and its abandonment to the endless cycle of vengeance. But suddenly the opposition of everyone against everyone else is replaced by the opposition of all against one. Where previously there had been a chaotic ensemble of particular conflicts, there is now the simplicity of a single conflict: the entire community on one side, and on the other, the victim. The nature of this sacrificial resolution is not difficult to comprehend; the community finds itself unified once more at the expense of a victim who is not only incapable of self-defence but is also unable to provoke any reaction of vengeance; the immolation of such a victim would never create fresh conflict or augment the crisis, since the victim has united the community in its opposition. The sacrifice is simply another act of violence, one that is added to a succession of others, but it is the final act of violence, its last word.

In certain sacrifices the victim becomes an object of such hostility one must believe that it and it alone has been held responsible for the entire mimetic crisis. It might be subject to insults and physical abuse before being killed. The real question is this: How is such unity against the victim possible in so many divers rituals? What force unites the collective against the victim?

G. L.: In Totem and Taboo, Freud answers that the victim is the father of the primal horde. According to Freud all ritual preserves the memory of the one murder that founded culture.

R. G.: Everything that Freud says on this subject is worthy of careful examination; for Freud, having taken into account ethnological observations that are less outdated than people think, is unique in having understood the necessity of real collective murder as a model of sacrifice. All the same his response is not viable. His single murder, which occurs only once for all time, cannot explain the repetition of rituals.

Freud does a poor job of situating this murder, by the way, when he places it at the beginning of the ritual sequence. The rituals that bear him out are rare and are examples of a reversal of the normal order. The normal sequence is the one we are in the process of describing. The mimetic process occurs before the collective murder, which constitutes at once its paroxysm and its conclusion.

The idea that a group would gather to immolate any sort of victim in order to commemorate the ‘guilt’ they still feel for a prehistoric murder is purely mythical. What is not purely mythical, by contrast, is the idea that men would immolate victims because an original, spontaneous murder had in fact unified the community and put an end to a real mimetic crisis. In this light, ritual becomes comprehensible as an attempt to avert the real threat of crisis; the crisis would be reproduced not for its own sake but for the sake of its resolution; it would be a matter of achieving what is perceived to be the only satisfactory resolution to any crisis, past, present or future. This would resolve the paradox confronting us. There would be no contradiction in intent between prohibitions and rituals; prohibitions attempt to avert the crisis by prohibiting those behaviours that provoke it, and if the crisis recurs nonetheless, or threatens to do so, ritual then attempts to channel it in a direction that would lead to resolution, which means a reconciliation of the community at the expense of what one must suppose to be an arbitrary victim. In fact no individual victim can ever be responsible for the mimetic crisis.

Only an arbitrary victim can resolve the crisis because acts of violence, as mimetic phenomena, are identical and distributed as such within the community. No one can assign an origin to the crisis or judge degrees of responsibility for it. Yet the surrogative victim will eventually appear and reconcile the community; the sheer escalation of the crisis, linked to progressively accumulating mimetic effects, will make the designation of such a victim automatic.

J.-M. O.: I find this hard to follow. You assert that the mimetic crisis, an anarchy of conflict and violence in a community, not only can but must end with a certain type of arbitrary resolution. It would mean
that the resolution is something like a natural mechanism. This seems to me to be a difficult point in your theory, one that requires clarification.

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

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

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

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

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

Except in certain cases, there is no telling what insignificant reason will lead mimetic hostility to converge on one particular victim rather than on another; yet the victor will not appear to be any less absolutely unique and different, a result not only of the hate-filled idolatry to which the victim is subject, but also and especially of the effects of the reconciliation created by the unanimous polarization.

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

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

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

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

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

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