

Ritual Certification.

Notes On Ritual In General And On The Obsessional Ritual In Particular¹

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Summary:

Ritual, obsessional neurosis and bureaucracy have in common the characteristic of being a reply to a situation of mistrust towards the Other. By mistrust the author means the opposite of religious faith, but not this alone: it's not the certainty that the other is lying, but the doubt and diffidence towards the other, with the consequence that one doesn't know if he's lying or not. Bureaucracy becomes exasperating when it's based on a prejudiced mistrust towards the citizen and expresses a reluctance to concede any gift. Obsessional neurosis puts a fundamental mistrust towards the loved other (but to what extent is s/he loved?) into play, which leads the subject into perplexity regarding the debt which s/he should or should not pay to the other. Ritual, in the final analysis, at one and the same time expresses and tries to resolve the mistrust towards the Other, since one doesn't know if the Other wishes to concede the fundamental gift of her/his friendship and benevolence.

1.

I recall a television interview with an Italian trade-union leader while he was leading a workers' demonstration in the '70s. There had just been a terrorist attack in Italy and the trade-unions had replied with the usual strike and the usual procession to express the disapproval of the proletariat. The interviewer threw a question in the trade-union leader's face: "don't you think these strikes and demonstrations are just rituals?" The trade-union leader denied this in annoyance, saying that they were in fact concrete political acts.

¹ This essay is based on the paper presented by the Author at the international conference *Thinking and saying ritual*, held at the University of Urbino (July 5-17, 2002). The conference was organized by the International Centre of Semiotics and Linguistics of Urbino, and by the faculty of Aesthetics of the University of Rome 2 - Tor Vergata.

Even in this brief exchange one can find the essence of the theoretical problem of ritual. Ritual is always connected to a suspicion: when certain types of repeated acts ought to be efficacious, but there are serious doubts whether they really are, then we are dealing with “just rituals”. The trade-union protest was being proposed as pragmatic action. But was this really the case?

A possible difference arises here between rite and ritual, which I will not deal with here. In the present common + linguistic use of these two terms, we define a rite as something which is above all an act--usually religious, but not always--which is believed to explain and display an action, while the ritual is simply the external form of the rite². >From this derives the negative connotation that often, in our daily language, is associated with the term “ritual”: as the pure and simple exteriority of the rite. We will therefore seek here to define a theory not of rites, but of that which is ritual in every rite.

Indeed, those who believe in a rite usually imagine that it is an efficacious act. The Catholic Mass comes to mind. For the believer it certainly is a ritual, but one that always becomes a miraculous act: the wine is transformed into the blood and the bread transformed into the body of Christ. But is it really transformed? Or is it, in the interviewer’s words, only a ritual? The believer would say that the rite of Mass makes a transcendental event possible; the non-believer instead would say that the event is the rite itself³. Here we again find the same doubt and suspicion that we referred to in the trade-union protest.

The rite designates a passage

The human being, according to Wittgenstein (1967), is “a ceremonial animal”. Thus every attempt to explain ritual as a form of ceremonial life cannot ignore the fact that ritual, as the form of a rite, is always connected in a problematic way with an act--magical, miraculous, political, spiritual, or other--which is presumed to be efficacious. A ritual is an act which has its meaning in another act of which it is supposed to be the condition, the frame or the external expression. Every ritual is an ante-act or a pre-act or cum-act. It is

² On the difference between rite and ritual, cf. Bice Benvenuto (1994).

³ But in both these opinions also the opposite opinion is present. The believer can suspect that we are dealing with a ritual, and so he always resorts to the rite in order for the event to take place, while the non-believer must admit that the rite of the Mass is itself in any case a real social event and something that has a role and function for the community of believers.

something halfway between the utterance and the act--or, if one wants, between music and magic, even though there is magic in music, and magic itself can be actuated with musicality.

One may ask oneself why the efficacious act (or one which is presumably so) has to be preceded and accompanied by a precise ritual. Why can't the act be produced without the ritual premise that seems to allow it? And what does this act, which requires the ritual in order for it to be carried out, consist of?

My impression is that the act celebrated by every ritual is always a passage. It can be a passage of time, or a change of marital status, or of space, or of ownership, but we are always dealing with a passage. One can take as an example the rituals that in certain countries accompany the consigning of a degree: the degree is a passage from the condition of student to that of post-student, and a wedding is a passage from the state of being nubile/a bachelor to that of being married. The funeral is a ritual which marks the passage from life to death. The Catholic Mass is the ritual of the passage of a substance from bread to flesh. This conference opened with the video recording of the swearing-in rite of George Bush Jr. to the presidency of the US: a passage from one presidency to another.

In so much as they mark (always? almost always? in the majority of cases? frequently?) a passage, rituals therefore have a hermetic nature. Hermes, for the ancient Greeks, was above all the divinity of passage, of everything that alienates itself and thus changes: of the passage from life to death, from sleep to waking and vice versa, of commercial exchanges, of travel and movement, etc. Hermes is also the divinity of the fork in the road and the crossroads, where one shifts from one road to another. The rite, in as much as it indicates a passage, has this hermetic quality.

However, as we all know, participating in the celebration of a rite has a significance that is in some ways opposed to change: it reaffirms the fact that the participant belongs to the ritual community which, through the rite, persists and is reaffirmed. Those who take part in a Mass, for example, also take part in the dramatic passage of the Eucharist, but by doing so they confirm and underline their belonging to the Catholic community. In this way the rite reaffirms the divinity who for the Greeks was the exact opposite of Hermes: Hestia,

the hearth, who later became the Vesta of the Romans. She was the immobile goddess-virgin, the center of the home and of the city, the assurance of a permanent stability⁴.

Ritual is thus essentially double-face, something the Greeks expressed with the complementariness and opposition, at the same time, of Hermes and Hestia: a face of change, and an integral persistence. It is a ceremony which at the same time marks a hermetical change, and which nevertheless confirms the continuity and permanence of the Community which absorbs and integrates the change.

But the idea of passage as change always implies doubt, both on behalf of s/he who is passing and of s/he who is accepting and welcoming the "passer": will s/he be worthy of his/her new status? The ritual, by permitting the passage, evokes, as though silhouetted against the light, everything which is opposed to this passage: first of all the immaturity of the subject who changes his social or marital status.

For example, in the modern day wedding ritual--by now somewhat reduced--we can read all the (at one time serious) difficulties that need be overcome for the wedding to take place. For example, it is still the father who leads the bride into the church: an indication of a time when a wedding was the result of a negotiation process between two families, and thus the father's assent was fundamental. The bride still wears the virginal white dress and thus attests *coram populo* to her purity. With the honey-moon journey the newly-weds are allowed for a brief period the exact opposite of what matrimony in fact is: not a flight from one's own society to enjoy a sexuality without restraints and responsibilities but, instead, a greater degree of social commitment, a greater degree of integration of the man and the woman within their society, the production and the raising of new citizens. It's as if the ritualization brought into play exactly what impedes or resists matrimony, with the aim of reducing this impediment into a sort of game, and thus depriving it of its destructive power.

Rites therefore help carry out a precise act: the passage from one social state to another. This dynamic, like any change, has its traumatic side. But the rite, by repeating itself identically every time, blunts the trauma and absorbs the dynamic: the change ceases to be a radical event and is softened. By ritualizing important changes the ritualizing community reaffirms its continuity or its (dreamt of) immobility. From this derives the double face of the rite: on the one hand it ratifies change by symbolically representing

⁴ Cf. Vernant (). Regarding the significance of the dialectic figures of Hestia and Hermes in the philosophical tradition, cf. S. Benvenuto (1993).

that which opposes it; on the other hand it reabsorbs the change in the context of a continuity of atavistic social customs.

To supplicate/implore and permit (PUOI METTERE ANCHE PLEAD)

But the ritual does not only mark a passage. Often it also puts a halo on three specific acts: the magical performance⁵, the cult or praise of the Other, and the prayer addressed to the Other.

To pray or to implore the other--whether it be a human being or a god--is a fundamental transitive and intersubjective activity which is particularly apt to be ritualized. Praying and supplicating are not simply ways of asking for something: they are persuasive actions, the other must be convinced to give me what I, as a supplicant, am asking for. For the ancient Greeks persuasion was personified as a divinity, Peithos.

Is it a mere coincidence that the most ancient tragedy that has come down to us is *The Suppliants* by Aeschylus? In this tragedy we see Danaus and his fifty daughters engaged in trying to convince, with able rhetoric and ethical and political arguments, Pelasgus, the king of the Argives, so that he might defend them from the persecution of the fifty sons of Egypt. In the tragedy the supplication appears ritualized, as it indeed was in that epoch. It was obligatory to conduct it according to the accepted forms, by bringing olive-branches wrapped in bandages of wool. Moreover, here the supplicants choose as a place of prayer the altar of the agonal gods (Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo and Hermes), since that sacred place makes their requests more convincing. But, apart from the ritual setting, it is still necessary to persuade the other with rational arguments or move him to compassion, with efficacious words or with the attractiveness of the body, so that he might concede the gift or act of grace (*kharis*). Supplication is still a political act today: in fact as I write, newspapers worldwide speak about Nelson Mandela's entreaty to rich countries to help Africa.

But when and why does the act of prayer become ritualized?

On the 19th of September during the '70s I took part in the ceremony in the Cathedral of Naples which concludes with the miracle of Saint Gennarius (HO TROVATO CHE IN INGLESE SI LASCIA SAN GENNARO OPPURE ST. JANUARIUS), consisting of

⁵ In reality the magical act is itself an act of change, in so far as it is supposed to modify something real.

the liquefaction of mysterious coagulated blood inside a vial. I was struck by the fact that--despite the sincere fervor of so many of the faithful--it was all very highly ritualized: a leaflet was handed out in the church containing the prayers which everyone was supposed to recite together in a loud voice, in a prescribed and specific order. The miraculous event in fact became no more than a part, virtually relegated to the end, of the ritual itself.

Probably prayer becomes ritualized to the extent that the dramatic act of supplication loses value. If I pray the other with codified words which are thus devoid of illocutionary force, then I don't succeed in persuading him. Why then do religions so often reduce prayers to a simple execution of predefined sentences?

Evidently it is because there is not a great deal of trust in the persuasive power of prayer. There are various reasons for this. One is that the grace (the gift) will be granted in any case by the divinity: and so the prayer takes the form of a bureaucratic certificate, which it is sufficient to display in order to obtain what one wants. In fact the miracle of Saint Gennarius is repeated regularly every year and the patron saint of Naples never disappoints the faithful. Another reason for ritualization, the inverse of the first, is a lack of hope (even though it is hard to admit) to obtain grace--perhaps because deep down there is a doubt regarding the existence of the Other who is supposed to concede it.

In certain countries (such as the US) the awarding of a degree or its equivalent is accompanied by a precise ritual: the true act is the award of the diploma, which could also take place without the ritual. Why then does the act of graduation come with a ritual? It would seem to have a purely decorative function. In many cases is the ritual no more than a decorative act? But the decorative function--to give solemnity to the act--is the aesthetic face of a function which I would call permissive: the ritual seems to make the act possible, give it a perceptive and public form and basically give permission for the act to take place. Even the ritual of St. Gennarius basically seems to give permission for the act (the miracle) to take place.

This permissive function of the rite can oscillate between having a strong and a weak significance. It is strong when the act requires the ritual as a *conditio sine qua non* for it to take place, and it is weak when the ritual is just an optional, since the act would take place anyway, with or without it. We are however inclined to think that the weak permissive ritual is simply a weakened form of the strong permissive ritual. Our secularized society--which in fact deprives rites of their power, and reduces the ritual to a merely aesthetical façade--tries to take away from the ritual the permissive power which it enjoyed in archaic societies. Undeified modernity tries to deprive ritual of its performative

force. We can indeed say that modernity, in general, precisely because it is ever increasingly performant, is ever less performative.

The performative act is--as John Austin (1962) said--doing things through words⁶. Nowadays, every ritual--even when it is reduced to a purely decorative re-evocation--still seems to carry with it a performative force: the ritual is a sequence of signs which do something. In certain cases they do something directly: for example, in the rite of the Mass they cause the miracle of the Eucharist to occur. In the wedding ceremony ritual, for example in Italy, however, the wedding act is not identified with the ritual which accompanies it, although it is precisely this ritual that allows the act (which is the bride and groom's change of civil status) to take place. It is as if every ritual were saying "by doing such and such you will be allowed to become this..."

4. The ritual substitutes the act

But ritual is a particular permissive act: it consists of a well-defined and regulated--often rigid--sequence of acts (linguistic and otherwise). A ritual implies some rules, a liturgy. These liturgical rules are like a syntax: they prescribe the correct concatenation of the acts-signs, in a pure syntagmatic articulation.

Insofar as the ritual is an ante-act or cum-act--a series of acts which permits (or facilitates) an act--it does not matter whether the series of little acts, verbal or gestural, that constitute it have meaning or not: what matters is the right form of the series. But we have seen that this syntactical--i.e. regulated and repetitive-- sequence has a practical and active meaning: it permits (and thus facilitates) a social act. In magic ritual this act claims to influence physical reality too.

And yet, in many cases, this permissive function seems ineffective. The ritual then doesn't seem to permit the act, but rather substitutes it. This is what the journalist was saying to the trade-union leader I referred to above: "a political ritual is being substituted for political anti-terrorist action".

⁶ If I promise to come and visit you tomorrow, it is not a case of a description of a possible or future state-of-things: by saying "I promise to..." I am carrying out an act, which is that of promising. If I do not keep my promise I can in fact be accused of being an untrustworthy person. The performative linguistic act commits the person who makes it, and exposes him to specific social consequences.

As we shall see, this temptation to substitute the rite for the act which it should permit sometimes takes an unavowable course: the ritual is actually resolved in the inhibition of the act. This is the exact opposite of that which every ritual is supposed to do. In the so-called obsessional ritual, as we will see, this “morbid” function of rituality prevails: to put off, or make impossible, the very act which it is supposed to permit. Moreover, the ritual is a giving permission to the act precisely because something is inhibiting that act, or trying to. The ritual has to overcome a force which opposes--sometimes secretly--the carrying out of the act. There would be no need to permit something if this something were not, in some other way, forbidden. But--and here is the surprise--sometimes the inhibition that the ritual has to overcome for the act to take place... is the ritual itself! In this alarming dialectic, perhaps, we can find a key to the ceremonial life of the human being.

5. Bureaucratic rituals

Perhaps the nature of rituality can be clarified if we put the ritual into relationship with two things which it is not: certain aspects of the obsessive-compulsive neurosis and bureaucracy. In the first case psychiatry talks precisely of “obsessional rituals”. On the other hand we never think of the bureaucratic procedures necessary to obtain something as a ritual, and yet there are some clear analogies. Religious rituals, bureaucratic procedures and obsessional acts are certainly not identical, but they are related. In the words of Wittgenstein, between all these things there is a “family resemblance”⁷. There is thus not a genetic priority of one form over the others, but all three are in some way connected, in the same way as--by their common traits and differences--the individuals united in a family relationship are connected.

Like the ritual, the bureaucratic process too is based on a correct articulation of signs--it has a permissive function. And yet we know that bureaucracy in reality also has a tacit, unavowable function: the substitutive function.

I remember an interview with the Italian manager Mario Schimberni, who was telling a newspaper about his experience--substantially a failure--as the general manager of the Italian state railways in the '80s. Everything in the state railway system--he complained--was paralyzed by an asphyxiating bureaucracy. He described the infamous

⁷ Wittgenstein (1960; par. 66, p. 324).

“procedures of moving”, which, despite their name, were nothing to do with real movement: they were instead sources of non-action and immobility. In effect the various sequences of documents in the bureaucratic process were all derived from a single procedure of moving: a source-document which gave the impulse of movement not to trains and goods wagons, but rather to trains and convoys of heaps of paper, which almost never ended up as practical acts. As in certain rituals, bureaucratic degeneration leads the substitutive function to prevail over the permissive function.

The bureaucratic apparatus exists because the state (or the various institutions and authorities which require certificates) does not trust its citizens. The less the state--or the bank, or the company, etc.--trusts you, the more it forces you to supply proof of your reliability and genuineness; that you really are who you say you are, that you will not misuse whatever document, that you are not a thief, a swindler, that you have never lied to the state, etc. It is no coincidence that the countries where corruption prospers the most are also those devastated by a bogged down, pedantic and muddled bureaucracy. A country where dishonesty is rife is hyper-bureaucratic for two reasons which reinforce each other:

diffidence towards the citizen, given the multitude of tricksters and swindlers, pushes the state to increase its requests for documents of guarantee,

this bureaucratic cover allows corrupt functionaries to take advantage of the situation (by “oiling the wheels”) and permits swindlers to manipulate the bureaucratic machine, which has become blind, to their own advantage⁸.

Thus at the root of the bureaucratic machine there is a feeling of mistrust towards the citizen who is asking for something--whether it be a gift or an exchange-- from the authority. Mistrust, diffidence, doubt: we also find these feelings in obsessional phenomenology.

It is no coincidence that in Italy the recent adoption of self-certification was seen as a revolution in the bureaucratic system. In effect, by accepting the practice of self-certification, the state decided to trust the citizen and her/his declarations a priori. It has finally been realized that the tight bureaucratic control typical of the past--a sub-product of mistrust--costs the nation more than the frauds and deceptions that self-

⁸ The municipality and the publicly owned companies of Palermo, Sicily, are plagued by a plethora of bureaucracy. Carlo Sylos Labini wondered whether this muddled situation might be a way of defending the state from the abuses of the Mafia or whether it were not the Mafia itself that had created it in order to exploit the labyrinth.

certification facilitates. The fact that the documents and the declarations that the state demands from the citizen are called certificates in various languages says a lot about the fundamental need of every bureaucracy. The authority that gives--whether it be funding, a recognition, a diploma, a certificate etc.--wishes to be certain about you the citizen: the certificate has to banish doubt, uncertainty. Bureaucracy is "Cartesian": it wants to be certain about the citizen. In effect, with Descartes a way of conducting philosophy began that gives a central place to the need for certainty and thus for dissolving all the legitimate doubts regarding the reality of things: "I think, therefore I can be certain that I am". But a bureaucratic system from being permissive becomes inhibitive--and so becomes paralyzed--precisely because this certainty is never reached, because there is always the need for something more in order for it to be assured (but it will never be assured).

6. Obsessional ritual and debt

Once again we find that mistrust is the key when we pass from the bureaucratic "ritual" to that "bureaucracy of the soul" which is obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

For Freud obsessional acts are made up of various psychic acts: "wishes, temptations, impulses, reflections, doubts, commands or prohibitions"⁹. Here we will deal above all with doubts, because they are the aspect which is most closely connected to ritual.

Freud sees obsessive compulsions--which often take on repetitive and standardized forms--as an effect of opposite feelings towards a single person, essentially love and hate. The obsessional symptom makes it possible to alternate in expressing this ambivalence: it can be read as the incessant oscillation between hostility and love with regard to the same subjects/objects¹⁰.

Freud himself, in a short essay¹¹, proposed a comparative analysis of obsessional rituals on the one hand and of religious ritual practices on the other: it is appropriate to

⁹ S. Freud, *Notes upon a case of obsessional neurosis (Case study of the "Ratman")*, 1909, *SE*, 10, p. 222.

¹⁰ The fact that the language of psychoanalysis gives the name of "objects" to that which in everyday language instead we call "other subjects whom I love/I hate", tells us a lot about the original objectivistic intentions of psychoanalysis.

¹¹ "Obsessive actions and religious practices" (1907), *SE*, 9, pp. 115-127. *GW*, 7, pp. 129-138.

describe “neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis”¹². In both cases rituals--whether they be the individual rituals of neurosis, or the collective and socially shared rituals of religious practice--have the function of protecting the subject from inconvenient impulses which either her/his Ego or society in general cannot accept. The difference between “individual religion” and “collective neurosis” can be seen in the fact that while the neurotic protects himself essentially from inadmissible sexual impulses, the pious person instead protects himself essentially from egoistic and anti-social impulses. This thesis--the protective function of ritual--at first sight appears rather different from the one I have proposed in this paper, which underlines the permissive function of ritual. We will see however that the two approaches are not as exclusive as may appear at first sight.

One of Freud’s patients was the so-called Rat-man, a young 29-year-old man¹³. His real name was Ernst Lanzer and his obsessive syndrome had practically begun following the death of his father, some years before--the neurosis appeared in the form of an unresolved mourning. To put it briefly, Freud explained the coactive phantasmagoria of this case with the irresolvable ambivalence of the patient towards the two persons he loved most; his dead father, and his cousin Gisela whom he had loved for many years. They were both objects at one and the same time--and to an almost equal degree--of love and hostility on Ernst’s behalf, also because--for reasons that Freud partially explains--the father and Gisela appeared to be incompatible¹⁴. Ernst was therefore torn apart by contradictory sentiments towards the same persons, but was also torn apart by the contradiction of loving both these persons.

¹² S. Freud, “Obsessive actions and religious practices”, op. cit., p. 126-7. *GW*, cit., p. 138.

¹³ S. Freud, *Notes upon a case of obsessional neurosis*, op.cit., pp. 155-318. *GW*, 7, pp. 381-463.

¹⁴ In fact his father had disapproved of his relationship with his cousin, perhaps due to its incestuous aspect. But this historical fact, as we might call it, is certainly not enough to explain why Ernst sees both these people as rivals **in/ for** the hegemony of his heart. In effect no realistic reason explains this incompatibility between the two figures. It is as if the heart of the obsessional subject were not able to share its own love between more than one person, which is why, when this happens, this heart becomes the theatre of a permanent conflict between the two figures who have become candidates /**candidated** for the supreme love (even when it is a case, as it is here, of a dead man and a living woman).

In one episode Ernst sees a stone on the street where he knows that, some hours later, a carriage with his beloved will pass by. He is afraid that the stone could cause an accident and, to protect her, throws it aside. Afterwards he regrets this gesture as puerile and absurd: he goes back to the place and puts the stone back in the middle of the street¹⁵. This could be the beginning of a genuinely obsessional ritual. Freud explains it as a way of giving vent to the two contradictory tropisms he feels towards Gisela: on the one hand lovingly protecting her from accidents and, on the other, punishing her by exposing her to accidents. The obsession is like an oscillation between black and white, without ever resting in a gray area.

Jacques Lacan and his followers made further elaborations regarding obsessional neurosis, and pointed out that in this case the father and the cousin are the object of this ambivalence, and are placed in competition, in relation to something which regards the past life of the father. As a young man, Ernst's father loved a poor girl, but instead married a rich woman from a good family, who became the mother of the "Rat-man". Gisela too is poor, and also probably sterile: Ernst is tempted to follow in his father's footsteps and renounce his beloved in order to accept the socially convenient match that has been proposed to him. In his imagination his father is a swindler who does not pay his debts to his friends, a womanizer and a dowry hunter incapable of being faithful to his romantic desire--and the son seems to be tempted into following this model. The death of this father who has not paid, so to speak, his (romantic, financial and moral) debts, makes his drama still more acute: it is as if he had inherited the debt from his father. This is the source of the neurosis.

In general the obsessional form of life seems to rotate around a debt that the subject feels he must pay--usually a debt which is not his, but which belongs to a parent or some other ancestors--and which is impossible to pay. This debt in turn refers to a sort of mistrust towards the other--in this case towards the father. It is as if the obsessional person were eternally in debt due to his mistrust towards the other.

For example, Ernst had sent off for a pince-nez and had to reimburse the postal fee to the female employee of the local post office where the pince-nez had arrived and who, without knowing him, had trusted him and had paid on his behalf. Then, however, a certain captain had told him, by mistake, that he had to reimburse the sum to a certain lieutenant A. This mistake threw him into a terrible crisis and he was unable to pay

¹⁵ Freud, *Notes upon a case of obsessional neurosis*, cit., p. 190. *GW*, p. 412.

his debt. In effect although he had to pay the money to the post office employee, he felt that the literal command of the other ("pay the debt to lieutenant A.") should nevertheless be honored. It is a dead-end street. On the one hand he feels compelled to trust the captain, who tells him to pay lieutenant A.; on the other he must live up to the trust of the post office employee, who had generously forwarded the sum for him.

Let's now move on from this famous Freudian example to a personal example of my own. Ever since I was a child my next door neighbor was a seriously obsessional woman. "Tonina the nut" was well known in the neighborhood for her obsessive "rituals": every time she had to pass through a doorway--whether it be that of a shop, a building, an elevator or, above all, her own apartment--she stopped to carry out a very long series of enigmatic gesticulations and mumblings, which sounded like ejaculatory and private prayers. These sounds and gestures were accompanied by various attempts to go through the doorway, as if a tug-of-war were going on, until in the end (often with someone's help) she was able to go through. All this did not however take place when she had to leave her home.

I often spoke with Tonina, and I noticed the enormous degree of ambivalence she felt towards her father, with whom she lived (her mother had died when she was a child). She, an only child, reproached him in particular for not letting her marry. But she alluded to other "sins" of her father: she almost made insinuations that he had sexually molested her. Whether this was a fantasy or reality, the fact was that her interminable rituals of entry seemed to express the struggle between two equal and contradictory impulses: the impulse to enter the apartment where her father lived, and the impulse to run away. This was a conflict which flared up every time she had to enter a doorway.

Here once again we find the ambivalence that feeds obsessional symptoms--although ambivalence is not a specialty of obsessional persons alone--but above all we find mistrust towards the other. "Shall I go in or not?" seems to be connected to a sort of double face (real or imagined) of the father, a respected teacher of mathematics at a school in the town, but regarding whom his daughter insinuated her suspicions. The dissent which was expressed in the symptom seemed almost to testify to a fundamental uncertainty as to what her father could say or do.

The letter which certifies

A fundamental element of obsessions makes them very similar to rituals: the important thing is not the meaning but the letter. The fact that Ernst did not owe the money to lieutenant A. is much less important than the literal pronouncement of the other who told him to pay the sum. It is as if the meaning of words and signs in general were eclipsed, leaving all power to literality.

I can remember for example an obsessional patient in analysis. He had been engaged to a woman for many years--without ever making the decision to marry her, being the obsessional he was--who, despite being a girl from a good family, had had a child from a casual relationship many years before with another man. Until the age of 16 her son had been led to believe that his grandmother was in fact his mother and that his real mother was actually his sister. In addition the young mother had obtained a certificate from a sympathetic doctor which attested to her state of virginity. The obsessional patient knew all the details of this story, but the remarkable thing is that he himself used this extraordinary certificate of virginity on various occasions, as if he believed it. He showed it to his mother, for instance, who was perplexed by their relationship. It was not so much a case of deceiving others--for whom in any case the virginity of his girlfriend was not very important--but more a case of deceiving himself. That is to say, like every obsessional, of believing and at the same time not believing the truth. Between the letter and the truth there is often a contradiction, and the obsessive subject--despite knowing that the letter contradicts the truth--oscillates between the two poles of this contradiction. Between the letter and the truth the obsessional subject remains uncertain: he remains in doubt whether to believe in the truth of the fact or to "believe" in the words (commands, prohibitions, prophecies, promises). This is what I would call the splitting of the obsessional Ego, which seems to always repeat to itself--as in the case of a superstitious person--"it is not true but I believe it".

But why does the letter predominate over meaning (or have the same weight as the meaning) in the obsessive personality, even when the two are opposed to each other? Probably because the subject lived a catastrophic discrepancy between words and facts during his childhood. To put it briefly, at least one of his parents lied to him: there was a dramatic gap between words and truth. But how can a child doubt the word of his parents, since this word, for a child, is the very criterion of truth itself? The child believes everything his parents tell him, not because he thinks that they always tell him the truth,

but rather because for him the truth is what his parents tell him. The lying of adults can lead an immature subject into a genuine epistemological crisis: the priority that we all attribute to the truth over falsehood, to meaning over literality, is disturbed /unhinged from the very beginning. Between signs and things there is the obsessional sea¹⁶.

It's not by chance that the patient using the certificate of virginity identified himself deeply with the young son of his single mother fiancée: as if he too were the victim of a lie regarding his place in the chain of life. For example, he was deeply affected by the reaction of the boy when the truth about his mother was revealed to him and said: "what I should believe in or not is my business ". It was as if the boy were claiming his autonomy in believing the facts or not, independently of the objective truth itself. We all feel obliged to believe the truth¹⁷, because we basically assume that believing in the truth that has been demonstrated as such is one of our fundamental moral duties (how many times has this duty been disregarded though!). Not so for the obsessional subject: he always doubts whether he should feel obliged to believe the letter or the truth. For him, epistemology and ontology do not necessarily imply each other: one can believe in something while knowing it is not true--and on the other hand it is possible not to believe in something while knowing it is true.

It's well known to what extent every obsessional personality loves accounts, numbers, calculations, and tends towards mathematical studies. This is because, as often said, "mathematics is not a question of opinion"--in other words, only mathematics is certain. Like the bureaucrat, the obsessional person too yearns for certainty. But it is a derisory certainty: I can always make mistakes in my calculations (a computer doesn't make mistakes, but I can always make a mistake in giving it the wrong data). It is like the hyperbolic doubt hypothesized by Descartes in the Meditations: the malign demon can always deceive me, even when I resolve a simple equation or count the angles of a

¹⁶Reference to the Italian saying "tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo il mare" (between saying and doing there is the sea). [Translator's note]

¹⁷ We believe that we are obliged, but in fact this is not always the case. Some of us are hardly obliged at all. The great nebula called "superstition" is based precisely on the fact that we do not really feel so obliged towards the truth. From this derives the typical motto of the modern superstitious person, "it is not true but I believe it". There is a part of us--and it is by no means an unconscious part!--which believes what it knows to be untrue. But we could also find many much more complex and disturbing examples of the superstitious pseudo-belief. For example, up to what point do we really believe in the truth of certain political, religious or pseudo-scientific ideas which we would even be prepared to die for?

quadrilateral. Even the numerical calculation, the last bulwark of certainty, can be overrun / corrupted by doubt, which becomes so abysmal. And the obsessional in fact always has doubts regarding his accounts, his accounts do not add up right--and so he never stops calculating them over and over again. Obsessive-compulsive neurosis is a lived hyperbole of uncertainty.

That's why the compulsion to count is one of the most characteristic symptoms of obsessional persons. For example, Ernst Lanzer felt compelled to count the seconds between a lightning-flash and the crash of thunder. As Freud himself points out, this can be explained by the impulse to "certify" that which is uncertain, in this case the succession of the crash of thunder after the lightning. Because, if it is true that thunder usually follows lightning, it is also true that one does not always hear the thunder and then one cannot say how much time will pass between the lightning and the thunder. A dangerous space of uncertainty opens up, a fault-line in one's knowledge, which the computational compulsion both expresses and blocks at the same time.

8. The compulsion to not understand

This is what Freud wrote about Lanzer:

After [his lady's] departure he became a prey to an obsession for understanding which made him a curse to all his companions. He forced himself to understand the precise meaning of every syllable that is addressed to him, as though he might otherwise be missing some priceless treasure. Accordingly he kept asking: "What was it you said just then?" And after it had been repeated to him he could not help thinking it had sounded different the first time, so he remained dissatisfied¹⁸.

Freud links this compulsion to an argument the patient had had with Gisela. Ernst had interpreted certain words spoken by his girlfriend as if she wanted to contradict him, but then she had convinced him that he had misunderstood her words: her intention was not at all to deny or contradict what he had said. >From this stemmed a fear of continually misunderstanding the words not only of his beloved, but of everyone.

¹⁸ Freud, *Notes upon a case of obsessional neurosis*, cit., p. 190. *GW*, p. 412.

There are two things that one can understand well or misunderstand: literal words or their meaning. The patient had misunderstood the meaning of the woman's words, not the words themselves. But here the compulsion seems to be attached to the letter of the words, thus escaping the risks and the uncertainties of the meaning. It is as if the concentration on the letter--the decisive trait of every obsessional neurosis--had the function of certifying that which by definition is subject to the hazards of interpretation; the meaningful intention of the other. The obsessional subject clings to the letter in order to escape from the doubt regarding the meaning intended by the other. Why does Ernst continue to doubt the words of his beloved? He believes that he believes what she has said to him, which is that he had misunderstood the meaning of her words--but does he really believe this? In a part of himself, Ernst continues to feel denied and disavowed by his beloved. Within him there is still the struggle between a trusting self and a self which does not trust in the word of the other. Should he trust his own reading, according to which those words suggested mistrust towards him, or should he trust the reading of his beloved, according to which those words intended to make him more trustworthy? Should I trust myself or the other, the letter or the meaning, the interpretation of the letter or the interpretation of the meaning?

This compulsion to understand--or rather to not understand--reminds me of the obstinacy of many bureaucrats who are never satisfied with the documentation you bring them: there's always something missing, or the order of documents is not right. In fact, if the bureaucrat accepts the documentation you bring, you will receive the "grace" that you are requesting; if the certification is insufficient, the grace is postponed /delayed. The obsessive or sadistic bureaucrat does not trust you (or in any case does not love you, and thus does not want to help you), and so he requires more certification. In the same way that Ernst with his "what did you say?" expresses his diffidence towards that which the other says, the bureaucrat also expresses his diffidence towards you the postulant by hinting: "basically you do not deserve grace, and therefore I will not give you the grace of accepting your certification, since in any case it can never certify definitively".

But this prevalence of the letter over the meaning also occurs in religious ritual. Paul Claudel advised the unbeliever: "pray according to the correct forms, and in the end you will believe". The relationship between faith and prayer appears to be inverted here: the ritual of prayer edifies faith, not the other way round. In other words, the letter seems to certify the truth. The ritual is therefore a psychological and not an epistemological certification.

In fact, like the obsessional subject, the homo ritualis too doesn't trust his own faith. He doesn't trust the fact that the Other--whether it be a divinity or an earthly power--can concede the grace, the gift. The event that the ritual allows and introduces might not take place-- the uncertainty derives from this. The ritual therefore expresses and at the same time goes beyond the uncertainty, the doubt: if it is not certain that the divinity will gratify me, I certainly gratify the divinity with my rite. Before considering myself indebted to the divinity that has given me the grace, I bind the divinity by making it in some way indebted to me: the ritual is thus like a net in which I believe that, in a certain sense, the Other gets entangled in.

Doubts of the disappointed wife

Freud offers us an extract of obsessional symptoms regarding a woman who lived separately from her husband, while still remaining faithful to him¹⁹.

Another compulsion which she started--of writing down the number of every bank-note before parting with it--has also to be interpreted historically. At a time she was still intending to leave her husband if she could find another more trustworthy man, she allowed herself to receive advances from a man whom she met at a watering-place, but she was in doubt [Benvenuto's italics] as to whether his intentions were serious. One day, being short of small change, she asked him to change a five-kronen piece for her. He did so, pocketed the large coin and declared with a gallant air that he would never part with it, since it had passed through her hands. At their later meetings she was frequently tempted to challenge him to show her the five-kronen piece, as though she wanted to convince herself that she could believe in his intentions. But she refrained, for the good reason that it is impossible to distinguish between coins of the same value. Thus her doubt remained unresolved [Benvenuto's italics]; and it left her with the compulsion to write down the number of each bank-note, by which it can be distinguished from all others of the same value.

I am struck how ill-suited this example of compulsive behavior is to Freud's thesis, in this essay, regarding the obsessional neurosis: that compulsive forms of behavior are

¹⁹ S. Freud, "Obsessive actions and religious practices", op. cit., p. 121-2. *GW*, 7, p. 134.

the measures with which the subject protects him or herself against temptations of a sexual nature. What inadmissible temptation could be expressed in the ritual of writing down the number of every banknote? The woman admits to her desire of finding a man to replace her husband, since she seems, without too many scruples, to have led on the man who was courting her. Of course the context of this compulsion--like that of the others Freud speaks of regarding this chaste lady--is imbued with an amorous scent, but it is hard to see what guilty impulse is being manifested in this case.

And yet Freud himself inexplicitly suggests the key when he writes that there is a doubt here: "has that gallant fellow really kept my banknote or not?" How much can she trust the male with his romantic advances? Also, in this case, the symptom seems to want to ensure a certainty--that it is really the five crown note that had belonged to her. We thus apply the Freudian theory of displacement, according to which, in obsessions, actions which are affectively very significant are displaced onto anodyne, foolish and secondary actions and objects. And so we can say that the impulse to identify every banknote is the effect of the displacement of a more essential question: "for this suitor, am I an exchangeable woman, or do I mean something to him in so far as I am just myself?" This is a question which women often ask themselves while being courted. This doubt becomes radicalized in the obsessional subject, and spreads to situations a long way from the original doubt.

Freud underlines the lack of trust that the obsessional person has in her/himself--that is to say in his own capacity to resist ethically inconvenient drives. But what appears to be no less essential in the obsession (both of the neurotic and the religious type) is the lack of trust towards the other; in the specific example it is a mistrust of the capacity of the male's desire to truly distinguish her from every other woman. Banknotes are objects of exchange and it does not make sense to keep them. Even our genitals are something we exchange with the other, in the sense that they are a means of interaction with others; these organs can be seen as our physiological currency. What we never exchange, however, is our individuality, which is what distinguishes each one of us from others: it is this which comes into play when one speaks of love, beyond the mere sexual exchange. Love is not an exchange, but devotion to the uniqueness of the other.

This lady who is unable to evade an unhappy marriage seems to be particularly interested in issues of distinguishability and individuality. For example, as Freud tells us, she was only able to sit on a particular chair, from which she was able to rise with difficulty. For her this chair signified her husband. The phrase she herself used

was “it is so difficult to separate oneself from something [husband, chair] on which one has already sat down once”. What this lady seems to refute is thus the common point of view according to which any one chair is exactly like another, just as a banknote is worth the same as another of the same monetary value. But does the common point of view also affirm that any husband is worth any other... and that any woman is worth another who is equally young and pretty? Freud himself quoted George Bernard Shaw’s phrase: to be in love means to excessively exaggerate the difference between one woman and any other²⁰. Freud does not tell us a great deal about this patient, but we can suppose that the doubt that gnawed at her was directly concerned with the authenticity of love (one’s own love, as well as that of the other): in what sense is true love the love for someone else in as much as he/she is not at all exchangeable?

Freud reports two more of this woman’s obsessive symptoms. During meals she had the habit of leaving the best part of the food in her plate, and she ate only the marginal parts of every dish. This bizarre behavior went back to the day when she had refused to have sexual relations with her husband. For Freud the symptom meant “I have to leave aside the best part [of the plate, of the marriage]”.

Another bizarre compulsion also appeared in connection with sexual intercourse. This lady would sometimes run into a certain room and re-arrange the table-cloth laid on a table and would then ring the bell for the house-maid, so that she would come close to that table, and then would send the maid away with some trivial excuse. It was important for her that the table-cloth had a stain, and that the house-maid saw it. Freud observes:

The whole scene proved to be a reproduction of an experience in her married life [...] On the wedding-night her husband had met with a not unusual mishap. He found himself impotent, and “many times in the course of the night he came hurrying from his room into hers” to try once whether he could succeed. In the morning he said he would feel ashamed in front of the hotel housemaid who made the beds, and he took a bottle of red ink and poured its contents over the sheet; but he did it so clumsily that the red stain came in a place that was very unsuitable for his purpose. With her obsessive action, therefore, she was representing the wedding-night²¹.

²⁰ Freud, *Psychology of the masses and analysis of the Ego* (1921), *SE*, 18, p. 140. *GW*, 13, p. 158.

²¹ Freud, “Obsessive actions and religious practices”, cit., pp. 121. *GW*, 7, p. 133.

In this last symptom we once again find the theme, so essential to obsessions, of the lie, deceit and mistrust: there is a woman who should be tricked. The ordained victim of this deceit is the maid, but one should ask oneself whether, all things considered originally, this victim might not be the patient herself. Hence her mistrust towards her suitor, a mistrust already encountered in the syndrome of the banknotes: here her uncertainty about being an object of love, truly desirable, for a man is also revealed.

In the two latter cases we find ourselves confronted with a rather similar situation: both symptoms refer to the lack of a sexual act. In one case it is she herself who renounces it, while in the other it is her husband who is incapable of it. The obsessional ritual, unlike the religious ritual, neither permits nor facilitates the act--including the sexual act--but, rather substitutes it. It is as if the lack of enjoyment--of sexual intercourse--were transferred completely into the obsessional symptom, which compels the subject. Our lady seems to mistrust the man in the sexual relationship--as if she did not believe him--and she brings this mistrust into play by means of symptomatic signs. If we are to believe in Freud's reconstruction, it is as if all the lady's compulsions evoked the act of love-making, but at the same time substituted it. Like "Tonina the nut" who hesitated for hours in front of her apartment's door, even Freud's patient seems to delay and hesitate when confronted with sexual relations--even though she had enjoyed it--metaphorically outlining the irresolvable doubt "should I trust the man who says he loves me, or not?"

10. Mistrusting the god

After our long voyage through the bureaucratic and obsessional hybris, let us now return to the genuine ritual as such.

Let us take the rite of Catholic Mass. Does it also express an ambivalence, as Freud thought? For example, should we guess that the miracle of transubstantiation is something that the believer both desires and fears at the same time? But why is there this ambivalence? Perhaps because we are dealing with a "cannibalistic" act? But not all religious rites lead to something which is cannibalistic. The liquefaction of St. Gennarius's blood instead denotes a return to life, the blood is again ready to circulate following the petrification of death. The affective ambivalence is only one part, and not even habitual, of the supposed reasons at the root of the ritual. And yet Freud, by evoking ambivalence--which is to say an oscillation between two contradictory aims--captures something

meaningful both in obsessional neurosis and in the ritual: the fact that they both express an uncertainty, and therefore an internal dissension. The conjecture that I find most convincing is therefore that the ritual always expresses an oscillation between trust and mistrust. It is the aesthetic and syntactical form which the doubt--the not knowing whether to trust or not--assumes.

But what does the Catholic who goes to Mass trust or mistrust? Probably he doesn't trust what religion tells him: that the wine and the bread really undergo a transubstantiation. It is not only faith that explains the religious phenomenology (rituals included), but it is also incredulity. This doubt generally invests the divinity itself: "but does one really have to trust Him? Can we really expect the free gift from Him, His benevolence and protection, in short, Grace?" The gracious gift to us from the divinity can be denied.

Usually the divinity is convinced to grant us grace by means of prayer. Otherwise it is done by offering Him something in exchange, in an act of bartering--or in pagan religion, by means of sacrifices²². In the Christian religion instead, and even in Catholicism, this bartering with the divinity is viewed with suspicion: the Christian God gives for free, in exchange for nothing, due to His infinite mercy. The act of Grace is not a reward for our merits, but it is part of a "logic" of the divinity which is inscrutable for us. And yet the practice of prayer basically belies the official theology: evidently the divinity wants to be beseeched. But why then does prayer become ritualized, becoming--as with the rosary--a purely formal, syntagmatic succession of supplicant acts? How does it happen so often that the pathetic, dramatic, uncertain, open act of prayer dries up into a pure rite, which is to say a closed repetition of formulas which have lost their semantic and performative charge? Because prayer is open--it is necessary to wait and see if and when the Other will accept it by fulfilling it--while the ritual is usually closed. The very looped form of the rosary beads expresses this closure.

The ritual tends to be closed precisely because the wishing practice goes from being the act of prayer or proposal of exchange that it was to being an act in which the reply is included. This happens both when the reply is always positive, and when it is always negative. The fact that the miracle of St. Gennarius always takes place deprives

²² It should also be noted that in Greco-Roman sacrifices, for example, the sacrificial offerer did not hardly sacrifice himself at all: to the gods went the smoke of the cooked meat of the animals sacrificed, but the meat was eaten by the offerer... Historians today wonder whether the Ancients ate meat in order to sacrifice to the gods, or if they sacrificed to the gods simply in order to offer themselves a satisfying banquet of meat.

the event of its dramatic charge: the event itself is in fact incorporated into the preparatory ritual. The ceremony of St. Gennarius is a ritual because it is always too successful. But this very success makes the believer suspicious: what is the point of praying, if the Other always fulfils the prayer?

The opposite probably occurs in Mass. In a certain sense the miracle never takes place, at least not in physically discernible terms. We could say, maliciously, that Mass is the fundamental Catholic ritual precisely because it is as if the miraculous event were always being put off. The ritualization thus expresses the doubt as to whether the grace has truly been conceded--whether to consider the gift as received or not. But the ritual is at one and the same time an expression of doubt and its overcoming, an act of mistrust and a reassurance against mistrust.

Certainly many standardized prayers--for example, the Our Father or the Hail Mary--are also in praise of the divinity and lead to the genuine supplication, even if this is sometimes missing. The prayer is therefore not just a request for grace, it is basically grace itself, or a gift of praise to the divinity. The prayer is only apparently asking for a gift from the god, but in fact it is a gift made to the god--a gift which thus puts Him under obligation.

Let us consider the rosary. Old ladies recited rosaries not only to ask for grace, but also as a ritual in its own right, for the pleasurable duty or for the dutiful pleasure of reciting the rosary.

Every rite probably expresses the drama of faith: it is a device for continuing to believe. Every ritual basically celebrates a triumph over mistrust. But this triumph is never definitive, which is the reason why the ritual has to always repeat itself. In the same way that Achilles is never able to catch up with the tortoise, analogously the rite is never able to overtake our atavistic and radical mistrust towards the god.

11. Believing in the omnipotence of signs

Is believing in the efficacy of the ritual a superstition? Up to what point, and in what sense, is the ritual superstitious?

Let us see what happens in the case of the obsessive subject. He often appears to be superstitious, or he seems to believe in the so-called omnipotence of thoughts--which Freud rather called the omnipotence of the desires. I would call it belief in the omnipotence of signs. In reality, as we have said, a part of the obsessional subject

believes in the superstition, while another is skeptical just as every modern and cultured man must be. But I wonder if in every form of superstition—even in that which is apparently the most credulous—there might not be some kind of splitting in the subject, a mixture of credulity and incredulity²³. In fact, the superstition usually considers certain events as being signs which tell us something about our future: if we will have a good or a bad fate. The reading of events as if they were signs of destiny corresponds to a fundamental need of human beings: to minimize uncertainty over the future. We can say, in mythical terms, that each one of us is uncertain as to whether or not to trust the goddess Fortune.

How then can we obtain some sign that blind Fortune is our friend or not? In some way, superstition acts as a palliative for our mistrust towards Fortune. If I believe that there is a relationship between the fact that a black cat has crossed my path and the fact that the same day I lose a large sum of money, I believe that this loss was in some way announced by the black cat crossing my path. The goddess Fortune may be blindfolded, but the important thing is that I can see and know how to read the signs of her benevolence or lack of it. The superstition tries to give me an insight into the moods of the goddess Fortune towards me²⁴.

The future—which we tend to personify—may or may not give us the gift of success and happiness. But we don't know how to persuade this personified future to dispense this gift to us.

Like superstition, the ritual also aims at persuading the Other (whether it be divinity, fortune or the future) to concede its favors to us. But in what way does the ritual persuade the Other to be favorable towards us? Basically with the ritual we pay a debt. One way of convincing the Other to grant us the grace is for us to graciously give something to the Other. The ritual is therefore, always, also an “interested” gift, since it obliges the Other, in the same way sacrifice (which also included a ritual) did in the pagan world. In reciting the rosary the faithful in some way offer it as a gift to the divinity, and so, without ever admitting it, to indebt him to her.

²³ Cf. O. Mannoni (1969).

²⁴ We may consider particularly courageous people—for example, soldiers who go cheerfully off to war—as successfully superstitious. This also applies to those who practice very dangerous professions or sports. Deep down, they think that they are in the graces of Fortune. Rationally they may know that this is not true, but in a corner of themselves they believe they are invulnerable. Courage is a socio-syntonic superstition, which is even approved of by rationalists.

12. The superstitious capitalist

The most important essay in the whole history of sociology is certainly *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) by Max Weber. Still today books and essays are written for and against Weber's thesis, which are moreover, made still more relevant and pressing by the new religious wars of recent years. What's so striking in Weber's thesis--although it is often crudely misunderstood and misinterpreted--is that he dares to explain something as complex as capitalism on a purely psychological basis. In other words, according to Weber, capitalism, at least at its beginnings, used a mental device which was clearly superstitious. In effect the Protestant confessions absolutely never say that becoming rich in this life is a sign of the post mortem salvation of the faithful--and yet the Calvinist man and woman, according to Weber, behave exactly as though this had been said. They dedicate their lives to accumulating money precisely as if their worldly success were, if not exactly a guarantee, at least a proof of their eschatological salvation.

At the root of this there is probably the almost unbearable anguish connected to the idea of predestination, theorized by Protestantism: "I will be saved not because I behave well or badly in my life--salvation cannot be "bought" with good actions--but because God has decided thus, due to his own inscrutable reasons". God is like Fortune: a totally inscrutable instance. But precisely because neither God nor Fortune are connected to a countable logic based on merits and rewards, it becomes essential--for the superstitious person as for the Calvinist--to try to read his own destiny by himself through oblique and indirect clues and indications, not causally connected to this destiny. The chance meeting with a hunchback is an indication of good luck for a Neapolitan, while prosperity in his business dealings indicates to the Calvinist his probable eternal salvation--even if neither the hunchback nor the sensible management of one's business are causally connected to what they are presumed to promise.

Both superstition and Calvinism thus use in an extensive way that which Freud called displacement, which is to say the deviation of the truly important matter onto secondary events or objects, which are irrelevant in themselves. My riches and economic prosperity do not officially announce the state of Grace I will be rewarded with, but they are a sort of oblique signal of it, and it is not important that this prosperity is not a free gift of destiny, but something that I have procured for myself thanks to a careful management of my assets: "I help myself so that God may help me", or, in other words, I read the divine

benevolence towards me through an economic profit that I have provided for myself. It is a constant factor of many types of religious mentality: I attribute to the divinity a grace that I myself have supplied for myself--which moreover helps me to concede some graces to myself (since it is easier to help yourself if you think that a god is also helping you--and so faith becomes a good bargain).

But one may also guess at the reason why Weber's exceptionally bold thesis comes across as scandalous for all the sociologists and historians who wish to expel the unconscious and irrational dimensions from history: it is repugnant to think that something as serious as capitalism could be the effect of an essentially superstitious mental strategy.

13. The obsessional stasis

We have seen how the obsessional ritual--on a par with /similarly to a degenerated bureaucracy--fails in its function as the permission of a passage. In fact, the obsessional subject never passes. We have seen this with Tonina the nut: her rituals marked the passage through every doorway, but the point is that the poor woman never really passed through. She remained a spinster all her life: she never became "a real woman". I can imagine that someone may have wished to marry Tonina: but she'd have frozen at church doors and would have been unable to go either forward or backwards. Lanzer, Freud's patient, continually put off the moment of getting his degree and getting married. The obsessional ritual is a private ritual that does not permit the passage--an evolution--but which in fact blocks the subject in her/his previous state. The obsessive ritual aims towards the change of state, but this never takes place /is never carried out.

In many countries the bridegroom is expected to pick up his new bride in his arms in order to carry her over the threshold of their new house. What could a ritual of this kind "mean"? Various anthropologists have come up with various hypotheses--including the superstitious one, according to which if the bride were to fall down while entering the house, this would be a particularly bad sign. A more convincing hypothesis is that taking one's wife in one's arms to carry her into the conjugal abode is a stylized representation of an abduction or a rape. It is supposed that the woman resists going into the new hearth-place, and draws back from the sexual relationship, and that the man has to conquer and seduce her with both force and sweetness, by taking her up in his arms as if she were a child. Also in this case the ritual represents a resistance to marriage as a change of state, both social and sexual.

The obsessive ritual thus takes from social rituals only the facade of non-passage, of immobility, of non-history²⁵. The social ritual is a way of overcoming the mistrust and hesitancy which is felt towards every change, while the obsessive ritual is a way of not overcoming it: the obsessional subject gazes with longing at the change and the passage, but he does not realize them.

When Ernst falls into a state of neurosis following his father's death, it is precisely because this change of his civil status, as we could call it, of his father (from living to dead) implies also a passage of his son: now that he has become an orphan, he marry with no opposition. But it is this double passage of civil status which paralyses him--that is, the neurosis neutralizes the change. In this way, the obsessional subject seems to invert the passage from life to death. He's like a dead man who never passes into life. The famous rigidity of the obsessional character--which is often compared to the state of rigor mortis--basically expresses this lack of a transition/ passage to the flexibility and the movement of life.

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²⁵ As regards the obsessional symptomatology as an "attempt to stop the arrow of time", cf. Fachinelli (1979).

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