

## The Sacred in Everyday Life

### Michel Leiris

[When this text appeared in "For a College of Sociology," it had already been read at the session of January 8, 1938. More information will be found under this same title in the lectures for 1937-38.]

What, for me, is the *sacred*? To be more exact: what does *my sacred* consist of?<sup>1</sup> What objects, places, or occasions awake in me that mixture of fear and attachment, that ambiguous attitude caused by the approach of something simultaneously attractive and dangerous, prestigious and outcast—that combination of respect, desire, and terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred?

It is not a question of defining my scale of values—with whatever is of gravest importance to me, most sacred in the ordinary sense of the word, at its summit. Rather, it is a matter of searching through some of the humblest things, taken from everyday life and located outside of what today makes up the officially sacred (religion, fatherland, morals). It is the little things that are required to discover what features would allow me to characterize the nature of what is sacred for me, and help establish exactly the point at which I know I am no longer moving on the level of the ordinary (trivial or serious, pleasant or painful) but rather have entered a radically distinct world, as different from the profane world as fire from water.

It seems obvious that we should first examine everything that fascinated us in childhood and left the memory of that kind of strong emotion. For the material pulled out of the mists of childhood is what, out of all we have available, has some chance of representing the least adulterated.

Thinking back on my childhood, I remember first a few idols, temples and, in a more general way, sacred places. First there were several objects belonging to my father, symbols of his power and authority. His top hat with the flat brim that he hung on the coat rack at night when he came home from the office. His revolver, a Smith and Wesson<sup>2</sup> with its small barrel, dangerous like all firearms and even more attractive for being nickelplated. This instrument he usually kept in a desk drawer or in his bedside table, and it was the attribute *par excellence* of the one who, among other jobs, had the responsibility of defending the home and protecting it from burglars. His money box where he put gold pieces, a sort of miniature safe that was for a long time the exclusive property of the provider, and that, until we each received one like it as a communion present, seemed to my brothers and me the mark of manhood.

Another idol was the salamander stove, "La Radieuse,"<sup>3</sup> adorned with the effigy of a woman resembling a bust of the Republic. A true spirit of the hearth, enthroned in the dining room: inviting with the warmth she gave out and her glowing coals, and formidable, for my brothers and I knew that if we touched her we would burn ourselves. At night when I would wake up with fits of nervous coughing, the spasms symptomatic of "false croup," they would carry me next to her and there, besieged by some supernatural nighttime evil, ravaged by a cough that got into me like a foreign body, I felt myself all at once become someone of importance—like a tragic hero—surrounded as I was by my parents' worry and loving care.

As for places, there was, first of all, the parents' bedroom, which assumed its full meaning only at night when my father and mother were sleeping there—with the door open, so they could look after the children better and where, by the faint glow of the night-light, I could dimly make out the big bed, epitome of the nocturnal world of nightmares that make their way through sleep like dark simulacra of wet dreams.

The other sacred pole of the house—the left-hand pole,<sup>4</sup> tending toward the illicit, in relation to the parental bedroom which was the right-hand pole, the one of established authority, sanctuary of the clock and the grandparents' portraits—was the bathroom. There every night one of my brothers and I would shut ourselves in, out of natural necessity, but also to tell each other animal stories that went on like serials from one day to the next and that we took turns making up. That was the place we felt most like accomplices, fomenting plots and developing a quasi-secret mythology that we picked up again every evening and sometimes copied out in notebooks, the nourishment of the most strictly imaginative part of our life: animals who were soldiers, jockeys, airline or military pilots, launched into contests of war or sports, or detective stories; murky political schemings with attempted coups d'état, murders, kidnappings; drafts of a constitution that was to ensure an ideal government; the poorest of all sentimental affairs that were usually summed up in a happy marriage, followed by bringing a

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lot of children into the world, but not necessarily foregoing a final episode of widowhood. The invention of instruments of warfare, underground passages, snares, and traps (sometimes even a pit concealed with leaves, its sides provided with very sharp blades and spiked with stakes, to pierce whoever fell in and cut him to bits); many battles, fierce struggles (on battlefields or racecourses); after each battle, detailed statistics with the exact number of prisoners, wounded, and dead for each of the opposing sides, which were, for example, the Cats and the Dogs, the former royalists and the latter republicans. All that we duly recorded in our notebooks, in the form of accounts, pictures, maps, sketches, with tables summarizing it all and with family trees.<sup>5</sup>

Of these long sessions in the bathroom, besides the series of legends we invented and our pantheon of heroes, it was the very secrecy of our meetings that was most clearly marked by the sacred. Granted that the rest of the family knew we were there, but behind the closed door they did not know what we were talking about. There was something more or less forbidden in what we were doing, which, moreover, brought us scoldings when we stayed shut up in there too long. As if in a "men's house" of some island in Oceania—the place where the initiates gather and where from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation, secrets and myths are passed on, we endlessly elaborated our mythology in this room, our clubhouse, and never tired of seeking answers to the various sexual riddles that obsessed us. Seated on the throne like an initiate of higher rank was my brother; I, the youngest, sat on an ordinary chamber pot that served as the neophyte's stool. The flushing mechanism and the hole were, in themselves, mysterious things, and even actually dangerous. (Once, when I ran around the opening pretending to be a circus horse, didn't my foot get stuck in it, and then didn't my parents, called to the rescue, have a terrible time getting it out?) Had we been older and more erudite, we doubtless would not have hesitated to consider these things directly in touch with the gods of the underworld.

Compared to the parlor—an Olympus closed to us on the days visitors were received—the bathroom can be looked on as a cavern, a cave where one comes to be inspired by contacting the deepest, darkest subterranean powers. There, opposite the right-hand sacred of parental majesty, the sinister magic of a left-hand sacred took shape. There it was, also, that we felt the most cut off, the most separate from everyone else, but also the closest to each other, the most shoulder to shoulder, the most in harmony, in this embryonic secret society that we two brothers formed. All in all, for us it was that something eminently sacred that any sort of pact is—like the conspiratorial bond uniting the pupils of the same class against their teachers, a bond so firm and compelling that very few, of all the moral imperatives commanding adult consciences, can be compared to the one with which children forbid themselves to "rat on" each other.

As far as outdoor places are concerned, I remember two that, with time's passage and ideas since formed, seem to have been permeated for me, a religious

child in other respects, with a sacred character: the sort of bush-country, *a no-man's-land*<sup>6</sup> that extended between where the fortifications lay and the racecourse at Auteuil, and also that racecourse itself.

When our mother or older sister took us for a walk either in the Bois de Boulogne or the public gardens adjoining the Paris greenhouses, it often happened that we would cross this ill-defined space. Contrasted with the bourgeois world of houses, just as the village—for those belonging to so-called savage societies—can be contrasted to the bush,<sup>7</sup> which is the hazy world specific to all the mythical adventures and strange encounters that begin as soon as the duly staked-out world making up the village is left behind, this was a zone where the scarps were really haunting. We were told then, if we happened to stop and play, to beware of strangers (actually, I realize now: satyrs) who might, under false pretenses, try to take us off into the bushes. A place apart, extremely taboo, an area heavily marked by the supernatural and the sacred, so different from the parks, where everything was planned, organized, raked, and where the notices forbidding you to walk on the grass, though signs of taboo, could only endow them with a sacred grown cold.

The other outdoor place that fascinated my brother and me was the racecourse at Auteuil. From a bridle path that skirted it in part, my brother and I could watch the jockeys—in many-colored silks and on bright-coated horses—jump a hedge, then climb a grassy hill behind which they disappeared. We knew that it was there that people (the ones we saw gathered in the stands and whose noise we heard at the finish) made bets and ruined themselves for the sake of those riders in glittering finery; as had my father's former colleague, who, having once been a man with "horses and carriage," had gambled away his entire fortune and now often touched my father for a dollar or so, when he met him at the stock exchange. Of all places the racetrack was most prestigious because of the spectacle that unfolded there, and the considerable sums of money won or lost there; of all places the most immoral, as everything there hangs on good luck or bad, and the place my father, disturbed by the idea that we might become gamblers when we were older, thunderously denounced.<sup>8</sup>

One of our greatest joys was when the starting signal was given near the spot where we stood. The starter, in a redingote, on his horse muscled like a wrestler, a big brute next to the thoroughbreds in the race; the racers dancing in place like roosters, swaying like swans, gathering for the start; then the lineup finished at long last, the pack's sudden gallop and the sound of horseshoes on the ground, whose deepest vibrations we seemed to feel. Though I have never had much taste for sports, from this period I have kept a sense of wonder that makes me look at any sports spectacle as a sort of ritual display. The paraphernalia of the jockeys' tack, the white ropes of boxing rings, and all the preparations: the procession of those entered in the race, the presentation of the contenders, the function of the starter or of the referee; everything one senses of the background, as well, in the

way of liniments, massages, dopings, special diets, meticulous regulations. You would say the protagonists act in a separate sphere, both closer to the public and more isolated from it than performers on a stage, for example. For here nothing is false: Whatever might be the importance of the staging, the sports spectacle whose ending is theoretically unforeseeable is a real act and not a sham, in which all events unwind according to what has been determined in advance. Whence, an infinitely greater participation at the same time as a much more intense consciousness of separation since the beings from whom we are here separated are not conventional mannequins—blurry reflections of ourselves, with nothing basically in common with us—but beings like us, at least as solid as ourselves and who might be us.

During this time when we were mad about races, my brother and I often used to imagine that when we were older we would become jockeys—the same way that so many boys from poor neighborhoods can dream of becoming racing cyclists or boxers. Like the maker of a religion, the great revolutionary or conqueror, it would seem that the champion has a destiny, and that the dizzying rise of one so often the product of the most deprived portions of the populace is a sign of unusual luck or magic force—of a mana—that in one leap lets him get to the top and reach a social rank that is, of course, somewhat marginal but out of proportion to anything that common persons have any right to reasonably expect, no matter what their birth. In certain respects, he reminds one of the shaman<sup>9</sup>, who, originally, is very often only someone who is deprived, but who takes an astonishing revenge on destiny, as a result of his being absolutely the only one who is hand in glove with the spirits.

Doubtless, my brother and I guessed that vaguely, when we imagined ourselves arrayed in jockey silks as if they were coats of arms or liturgical vestments, that would have distinguished us from others, at the same time that we were joined to them as focal points and as the medium for the collective tumultuous excitement, as the places and receptacles for the convergence of their gazes, which were fixed on our persons like so many pins marking us with prestige. Better than the father's top hat, his small-barreled revolver, and his money box, these thin silk tunics would be the sign of our power, the mana special to people who make every obstacle pass beneath their horse's belly and who, victoriously, are exposed to all the dangers of the fall.

Alongside the objects, places, and spectacles that exerted such a special attraction for us (the attraction for everything that seemed separated from the ordinary world, a brothel for instance—full of nudity and foul, steamy odors—at such a remove from the clothed, fresh-air world of the street, though separated by only a threshold, the concrete form of the taboo condemning the den of iniquity), I discover circumstances, events that were imponderable, so to speak, that gave me a sharp perception of a distinct realm, set aside, with no possible comparison to anything else, and that stood out from the mass of the profane with the

same strange, stunning garishness that powdered, shaved bodies have when they irrupt within an inch of the tables, showgirls, at nightclubs where dreary diners sit sweating. I want to speak of certain events of language, of words in themselves rich in repercussions, or words misheard or misread that abruptly trigger a sort of vertigo at the instant in which one perceives that they are not what one had thought before. Such words often acted, in my childhood, as *keys*, either because surprising perspectives were opened through their very resonance or because, discovering one had always mutilated them, suddenly grasping them in their integrity somehow seemed a revelation, like a veil suddenly torn open or some outburst of truth.

Some of these words, or expressions, are bound up in places, circumstances, images whose very nature explains the emotional power with which they were charged. I think of the "Empty Hall,"<sup>10</sup> for example, the name my brothers and I had given a group of rocks forming a sort of natural dolmen, in the vicinity of Nemours, not far from the house where our parents took us several years in a row to spend summer vacation. The "empty hall": It sounds the way our voices sounded beneath the granite vault; it evokes the idea of a giant's deserted home, or a temple whose impressive dimensions were hewn from stone of tremendous age.

A proper name, such as "Rebecca"<sup>11</sup> learned from biblical history, belongs to the strict realm of the sacred, evoking as it does an image that was typically biblical for me: a woman whose face and arms were bronzed, wearing a long tunic, with a full veil on her head, a pitcher on her shoulder and resting her elbow on the well's coping. In this instance, the name itself played in a specific way, making one think, on the one hand, of something sweet and spicy, like raisins or muscat grapes; on the other hand of something hard and unyielding, because of the initial "R" and especially the ". . . cca" that has some of the same effect today in words like "Mecca" or "impeccable."

Finally, another vocable was at one time endowed with the magical merits of a password or abracadabra for me: the exclamation "Baoukta!" invented by my elder brother as a war cry when we played Indians and he was the great, brave, and dreaded chief. What struck me there, as in the name Rebecca, was especially the word's exotic feel, the strangeness it harbored, like a word that might have belonged to the language of Martians or demons, or even had been wrested from a special vocabulary, heavy with hidden meaning, to which only my elder brother, the high priest, held the secret.

Besides these words that—if this can be said—spoke to me by themselves, there were other things in the language that contributed the vague perception of that sort of displacement or gap that still characterizes for me the passage from an ordinary condition to one more privileged, more crystalline, more singular, the shift from a profane to a sacred state. It is, in fact, a matter of very minor discoveries: corrections of what was heard or read that, by bringing two variants of

the same word together, with their difference caused a particular distress. One would have said that language was suddenly twisted and that, in the very slight gap separating the two vocables—both of which had become full of strangeness when, now I compared them to each other (as if each of them was only the other one mutilated and contorted)—a breach opened that was able to let through a world of revelations.

I remember one day when, playing with lead soldiers, I dropped one, picked it up and, seeing it wasn't broken, exclaimed: ". . . Reusement!"<sup>12</sup> Upon which, someone who was there—my mother, sister, or older brother—pointed out that you say not "reusement" but "heureusement," which struck me as an astounding discovery. The same way, from the moment when I learned that the name "Moses," Moïse,<sup>13</sup> was not pronounced "Moisse" (as I had always believed when, not knowing how to read very well, I was learning biblical history), these two words took on a resonance that was especially disturbing to me: "Moïse," "Moisse," the very image of his cradle, perhaps because of the word "osier" (wicker) (which the first was similar to) or just because I had already, but without realizing it, heard certain cradles called "moïses." Later, learning the names of the departments, I never read the name "Seine-et-Oise" without emotion because the mistake I had made reading the name in the Bible had attached a certain unusual value in my mind to all words that somewhat resembled "Moïse" or "Moisse."

In a way that was analogous to the way the word ". . . reusement" contrasted with its corrected form "heureusement," in the country where we used to spend vacations with our parents, my brothers and I used to distinguish between the sand pit and the sand quarry, (sablonnière/sablière) two sandy spots that were hardly different from each other except that the second was far larger. Later, we savored a pleasure like the one so-called byzantine discussions can provide, by baptizing two separate types of paper airplanes we used to make, one the *rectilinear* kind, the other the *curvilinear*. In doing this we were acting as ritualists, for whom the sacred resolves itself finally into a subtle system of nuances, minutiae, and details of etiquette.

If I compare these various things—top hat, as sign of the father's authority; small-barreled Smith and Wesson, as sign of his courage and strength; money box, as sign of the wealth I attributed to him as financial support of the house; stove that can burn even though, in principle, it is the protective spirit of the hearth; the parents' bedroom that is the epitome of the night; the bathroom, in whose secrecy we traded mythological accounts and hypotheses on the nature of sexual things; the dangerous area stretching out beyond the fortifications; the race course, where huge sums of money were staked on the luck or skill of important persons, prestigious through their costumes and deeds; the windows opened by certain elements of language, onto a world where one loses one's

footing—if I gather all these facts taken from what was my everyday life as a child, I see forming bit by bit an image of what, for me, is the *sacred*.

Something prestigious, like the paternal attributes or the great hall of rocks. Something unusual, like the jockey's ceremonial raiment, or certain words with an exotic resonance. Something dangerous, like the coals glowing red or the bush-country bristling with prowlers. Something ambiguous, like the coughing fits that tear one to pieces but transform one into a tragic hero. Something forbidden, like the parlor where adults perform their rituals. Something secret like the consultations surrounded by bathroom stink. Something breathtaking, like the leap of galloping horses or language's false-bottomed boxes. Something that, all in all, I scarcely conceive of except as marked by the supernatural in one way or another.

If one of the most "sacred" aims that man can set for himself is to acquire as exact and intense an understanding of himself as possible, it seems desirable that each one, scrutinizing his memories with the greatest possible honesty, examine whether he can discover there some sign permitting him to discern the *color* for him of the very notion of sacred.