

ON THE PERTINENCE OF ABRAHAM OR THE PARADOX OF THE FORBIDDEN SACRIFICE

No doubt all are familiar with the story of Abraham, of whom God demanded the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, and who, at the last minute, received from this same God the order not to touch the child since it was by then certain that Abraham would not refuse to do so. Ultimately, as the Bible itself seems to say, was this not simply a test in those remote times when, after all, sacrifice was a common occurrence? And so, perhaps, we might think this is all there is to this story, simply a matter of fear. Nevertheless, how can we not be amazed by the seeming gratuity of such an ordeal? Was not Abraham, and already since a very long time, the chosen one of God? Can we not, then, ask if a more attentive reading of the texts will provide a more substantial message?

No subject arrives at the Word other than by separation. No

one would seem to become a subject responsible for his word unless he frees himself from his constraints, unless, like the *ego*, he transcends his attachments and renews his relationships. If, as psychoanalysis has shown, the accession to language is the only means for human beings to step back from experience and to instill an order in the world, if symbolism, as the emergence of an order of signifiers distinct from reality, is the principle of differentiation, a mediating factor between self and the other or the world and, thereby, the only guarantee against a confusional or imaginary psychic and mental universe, it still is necessary for the subject, in order to achieve this, to speak in his own name. Subject of a recent study,¹ we ourselves have been led to deal with this upon reading Kierkegaard for whom, according to *Fear and Trembling*,² the figure of Abraham seems, in this respect, to represent the highest degree of humanity ever achieved.

In these pages we will furnish a personal reflection concerning these two works rather than a critical study of one by the other as such. There is, consequently, an almost constant shift from one to the other. However, the important thing for us, twentieth-century readers, whether believers or not, is to see, with the aid of the poet and the psychoanalyst, why it is still fundamentally pertinent to listen to the story of Abraham.

TWO APPROACHES: POETRY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

The crucial moment, the veritable turning point in Abraham's life was not when he left his own country and his father's house to go to an unknown promised land. Nor was it when he received, at a very old age and from a wife who was barren, "the child of promise", for all things are possible to God, even and particularly correcting "symbolic errors" that shackle persons with poorly attributed names, such as Abram, "father (too) noble" to procreate, and Saraï, "my princess", unable to give herself

¹ Marie Balmory, *Le Sacrifice interdit, Freud et la Bible*, Grasset 1986. Here cited with the abbreviation *SI*.

² *Crainte et Tremblement, lyrique-dialectique*, by Johannes de Silencio (pseudonym for Kierkegaard), translated from the Danish by P. -H. Tisseau, Introduction by Jean Wahl, Aubier 1984 (3rd edition). Abbreviated *CT*.

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to any man since she was thus a possession of her father.³ No, the truly crucial moment in Abraham's life occurred when Elohim put the "father of multitudes" to the test, asking him to sacrifice Isaac, the child of promise.

With regard to this biblical episode,⁴ the interpretation of Marie Balmory does not seem to us to contradict that of Kierkegaard, with the exception of one reservation, in that the latter examines Abraham's situation by considering it, as poet, directly from the point of view of faith, whereas Marie Balmory adopts the point of view of a psychoanalyst opening up to the universe of faith. Would Kierkegaard have approved of this approach? No doubt not completely. Marie Balmory speaks of Abraham's split personality,⁵ because he said one thing while acting in a different manner, and seems to suggest—using as proof the Hebrew text in which sacrifice is not explicitly mentioned⁶—that Abraham's imagination was not completely free of idolatry⁷ because his actions show that he had interpreted the divine command in terms of immolation.

However, if God has not asked for immolation, wherein lies the test? And how can we understand the end of the narrative: "Yes, now I know that you do indeed fear Elohim! You have not spared your only son for me ... yes, because you have *done* this command ..., I will bless you."⁸ In the account there is no doubt that Abraham understood exactly and responded to the divine command.

³ *SI*, 121.

⁴ Genesis 22, 1-19.

⁵ *SI*, 199.

⁶ *SI*, 196.

⁷ *SI*, 197-198, 203. We know that Freud used the term split personality to designate the coexistence within the ego or consciousness of two psychic attitudes foreign to one another, questioning the relationship of consciousness to reality, with one denying reality and the other reacting normally. Here Abraham's words would seem to derive from the second attitude whereas his acts, under the influence of impulses, would seem to indicate a phantasmic regression to ancestral customs that Abraham would have broken with long ago.

⁸ Genesis 22, 12 and 16-17 (our italics). Here, along with Marie Balmory, and with the modifications that she introduces, we are following the (French) translation of André Chouraqui. "... since you have *done* this command", meaning, "since you did in fact respond to my appeal with an act."

Thus, if there truly is a question of split personality, it should be seen more in the divine word than in the personality of Abraham. For if Isaac is the “child of promise”, God cannot ask for him in sacrifice without contradicting himself: the divine word turned against itself. And yet it is with this supreme contradiction, this “unheard-of paradox”⁹ that Abraham is confronted. At the risk of surprising perhaps, should we not say that idolatry in this context would consist not in preparing the sacrifice and leaving for Moriah, but in projecting human instability on the divine will, in thinking of God as capable of taking back what he had already given *for life*, not only in the present but also for the future; for through Isaac Abraham is, for the future and as shown by his new name, the father of multitudes. Yet this is precisely what Abraham does not do. Contrary to the hypothesis of Marie Balmory, he does not conclude from the fact that God is asking Isaac of him that God wants to “get him”. Otherwise how are we to understand that, even while he is preparing to sacrifice his son, he “prophesies” his return with Isaac? In reality, instead of yielding to an idolatrous yearning and of giving “what he knows to be a gift”,¹⁰ forgetting like Sarah the meaning of his name,¹¹ Abraham holds to the promise that he does not doubt for an instant, believing God to be sufficiently powerful to accomplish it. This is his strength. And in this way, according to Kierkegaard, his two-fold movement of faith—one in which he offers and one in which he does not cease to believe—unifies Abraham’s person immediately and forever.

How can this be expressed? In a sense, because they were correct, Abraham’s *word and silence become Act*; his actions—psychologically terrifying—were thereby immediately reabsorbed into the divine Word, the word of the promise that is thus fulfilled.

THE WORD OF IMMOLATION

In other words, for Kierkegaard all depends on the measured precision of Abraham’s words, that, through the weight of their si-

⁹ *CT*, 42, 81.

¹⁰ *SI*, 203.

¹¹ *SI*, 199.

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lence, always leave room for the breath of the Spirit and prepare him, against every apparent likelihood, to receive Isaac for the second time.

Again, if we must speak of a split in Abraham's words, no doubt it is not in the sense that his acts contradict his words but rather, because he has changed his sphere of existence, he *cannot* speak the language of promise without, at the same time, acting to prepare the immolation;¹² even more he *must* paradoxically prepare the immolation *in order to be able to speak* the language of promise, even though no one can understand him. He has broken with the human universe. This is why his response to Isaac, filled with silence and empty in content, "takes on the form of irony": "God will provide a lamb..."¹³ A Statement that will become true in the future; but at the moment it was spoken, it was experienced in a paroxysm of anguish and distress. Mary Balmory remarks quite appropriately with regard to this point that Abraham's suffering can be read in the repetition of "they both went together",¹⁴ and subtly notes that this little phrase "appears in the text each time in the place where the victim should appear".¹⁵ "Together", both of them? What irony! for Abraham was suffering from being absolutely separated from his son, unable to pronounce the name of the victim since this name, in itself, contained potentially the destruction of Isaac and the abolition of the promise, the implosion of the Divine Word, the disintegration of its substance.

It is in this absolute solitude, in which Abraham is deprived of all possible mediation by the word, that the unprecedented nature of this trial resides. Not that the sacrifice first "took place in language"¹⁶ since, paradoxically, it is to the contrary in the word that Abraham first received Isaac while he was going to Moriah. Listen to Kierkegaard questioning at this point: "What did Abraham do? He went neither *too soon*, nor too late. He saddled his ass and slowly followed the trail. All this time he had

¹² For we should note that without action there is no story.

¹³ *CT*, 198; Genesis 22, 8.

¹⁴ Genesis, 22, 6 and 8.

¹⁵ *SI*, 200, 201.

¹⁶ *SI*, 203.

faith; he believed that God did not want to take Isaac from him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him *if it was necessary to do so*. He believed because it was absurd ... and the absurd thing was that God, who was asking this sacrifice of him, would withdraw his demand a moment later. He climbed the mountain, and at the very instant the knife was flashing, he believed that God would not demand Isaac. He was surprised by the outcome, but, in a two-fold movement, he returned to his previous state. And this is why he received Isaac with greater joy than the first time.”¹⁷ And so, the poet continues, “through faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac; through faith, to the contrary, he obtained him.”¹⁸

Far from ceasing to believe, with his explanation that “God will provide a lamb”, at every instant he kept his own prophecy in mind: “The child and I will go there. We will bow down and then we will return home.”¹⁹ However, this word finds its mediating power only at the end of the test when, after having liberated Isaac from Abraham’s tutelage, God frees Abraham from the distress of the paradox. And then, out of the father that he was, Abraham became a father according to the Spirit and, as soon as his tongue was loosed, the relation of subject to subject could be established. It is important to stress at this point the power of Kierkegaard’s interpretation by comparing it to the passage in Genesis 2, 16 in which God says, “Yes, since you obeyed this command *and* you did not spare your son...”. Yet we could also translate this passage, like Marie Balmory:²⁰ yes since you have actively prepared the sacrifice *and* since, nevertheless in your words, you have not kept your son from the Word, from my promise. Or indeed: since even while preparing the sacrifice you were able to understand the Word fully... “I will bless you”.

At the conclusion of the analysis the poet and the psychoanalyst come together. Marie Balmory writes, “the child, he who has not

¹⁷ *CT*, 47-48 (*too soon*, italics by the author; *if it was to be necessary to do so*, our italics).

¹⁸ *CT*, 72.

¹⁹ Genesis, 22, 5.

²⁰ *SI*, 202 (our italics since this interpretation would seem to depend on the conjunction).

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been kept back from the Word and from false unity, is no longer in the future. Now he *appears* in his father's twofold movement of offering him and of not killing him.—Fear of Elohim: respect for the Creator who separates creatures and who keeps their distance between them.”²¹

THE SELF AND THE OTHER: IDOLATRY AND DIFFERENCE

What does this exceptional trial signify? In what way is it determinant for every human being, if not—and this point is brought out quite fully by Marie Balmory—that humanity must rid itself completely, once and for all, of its idolatrous tendencies, these being denounced as powers contrary to the order of divine creation; and perhaps, going even further, become aware, through Abraham, of the true ontological foundation of ethics.

Could idolatry not be defined as the symbolic abolition of difference, either through identification of the self with the other or by reduction of the other to the self, an abolition derived from combination of categories of being and from having brought confusion into language and, precisely thereby, into man's relationships with the divine, with the world and with others. In this respect it is not without consequence to affirm, for example, that each being, each man and woman, is lacking because, in his or her difference, he or she is obviously not the other, or is lacking because he or she is not *like* the other. In the first case, in which attention is turned *toward* the other, the difference is recognized as being the relational element²² *of being* through which every individual “provides what is lacking to the other”, stirring up desire, source of the awakening for which the word becomes the expression. And so, when the divine Being had created woman and brought her to man, man recognized that she was both similar and different and began to exclaim, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She will be called Ishah, for she was taken from Ish”.²³ He describes himself when describing

²¹ *SI*, 203 (our italics).

²² *SI*, 170. “Element” is here taken in the sense that water is the element of fish.

²³ Genesis 2, 23.

her.²⁴ On the other hand, in the second case, where the eye is hypnotized by *that* which causes the distinction, the being recognizes only that he does not *have* the same attributes as the other so that the difference is here reified, artificially separated and envied, become consumable.²⁵ This second affirmation conceals the seeds of idolatry in its formulation.

During his trial Abraham was not an idolater because he immediately knew how to establish a hierarchy of values. The divine Word, essentially creative, was stronger than any human act, even if it seemed irremediable.²⁶ This is why, Kierkegaard would no doubt say, enclosed in the paradox he saw the absurd. Contrary to what he had done with Pharaoh and Abimelech by successively leaving them his wife,²⁷ he does not forget the promise incised in his name, or, in Lacanian terms, he does not “yield up his desire”. And so can he cause humanity to pass from the concept of an “imaginary god” or “idol”²⁸ to symbolic relation with the divine, himself passing, in fact, *in actu* through the appearance of the divine itself, “from the sense ‘of causing to rise by immolating’ to the sense of ‘lifting up toward the Other’, of not holding back (for oneself) from Him”.²⁹ Abraham, as we have seen, continuously experienced the passage into paradox from the first moment of his trial. However, the nature of this passage cannot be explained—even for him—other than by divine intervention, with an outcome in which its meaning seems to be found in the reality of the facts.

Nevertheless, should we to note that at the end of the trial, everything in Abraham’s life returns to normal, or does its message provide a new explanation of the true essence of the symbolic relationship as such? This question leads to another. Where does idolatry come from that it requires the very intervention of the divine in order to be extirpated from human consciousness?

²⁴ *SI*, 251.

²⁵ *SI*, 260-265. We know that primitives eat the flesh of an individual whose superiority they recognize in order to acquire his qualities for themselves.

²⁶ *CT*, 48.

²⁷ *SI*, 156-160; 174-177.

²⁸ *SI*, 212.

²⁹ *SI*, 216.

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SYMBOLISM, OTHERNESS

Marie Balmary shows us that idolatry derives from the disorder that it expresses, resulting from the original sin described for us in the third chapter of Genesis. Destroyer of the divine word, this sin consists in having “eaten” the forbidden or the “law of relation”³⁰ charged with showing man the constitutive limits of his being as it is prescribed. “From every tree in the garden you shall eat.... Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day you shall eat of it, you shall die”.³¹ Far from expressing the exercise of a tyrannical and totalitarian divine power, one that would abusively reserve for itself the exclusivity of knowledge, this interdiction, for the psychoanalyst, indicates to man only that the symbolic relationship cannot apply beyond certain conditions and limits imposed by his very nature, inherent in his essence. Moreover, it only concerns the domain of knowledge of good and evil, not that of knowledge in general.

In order for it to be established between two speaking subjects, the symbolic relationship requires a separation signified by a difference, the single element capable of creating in these beings the desire for each one to speak to the other. Maintaining the difference, respecting “the other’s place”, allowing “a point of unknowing that permits the other to exist as other”: this is the positive content of the interdiction.

Yet what is eating other than appropriating the other to oneself in order to make it become oneself by eliminating its difference. Interrupting the speech of another with the pretext that one knows what he is about to say is, from the symbolic point of view, eating his word, pretending to know the other fully and thus to deny him his unpredictable otherness.³² The interdiction, so it would seem, served to guarantee this difference, offering beings the possibility to speak *it* or also to inter-dict themselves.³³ Because they had destroyed it, eaten it, Adam and Eve provoked

³⁰ *SI*, 248; law in the sense of physical law, not in the sense of commandment.

³¹ Genesis 2, 16-17; cf. *SI*, 255-267.

³² *SI*, 255.

³³ *SI*, 265.

in themselves a phenomenon of dedifferentiation—the opposite of the movement of creation—symbolically sacking the space of otherness, a space intended, taken as a whole, as the place of the divine Other and as the place of the *alter ego*. Of course the difference subsists in reality, but because they abolished it in language, they introduced on earth the rule of confusion, both verbal and relational as well as ontological.

This is the root of idolatry, then. Since that moment, by confusing difference and inequality, the absolute and totality, idolatry introduces relationships of tyrannical possession and domination into the universe of being in which only the symbolic relation of otherness is admitted. And to project this confusion on the Other, the divine, man pretends to speak, but only as a result of his sin. Because by his sin he ate the divine word, man having become “*like one of us (Elohim) in knowing good and evil,*”³⁴ now imagines the divine to be anthropophagous. In particular he tends to perceive in certain calamities the expression of divine wrath that demands a human sacrifice in order to be appeased.

But in reality, no more than it spoke human language at the time of human creation, does the divine eat human beings after the sin. At the dawn of time the divine did not speak human language³⁵ because contrary to the rest of his creation issued directly from his word,³⁶ man and woman are each one fashioned and constructed by his hands and in his image, which means as relational beings, sovereign and free among creatures. Likewise, after the sin and while encouraging human consciousness to rediscover the true essence of the symbolic relationship, ever infinitely respectful of his work, the divine manifests his authority only in order to conform himself to the limits of his own interdiction.³⁷

³⁴ Genesis 3, 22 (our italics).

³⁵ *SI*, 248, n. 12. Marie Balmory notes that this means that God “does not know human speech”. This is why he “‘comes to see’ how Adam will name the animals”.

³⁶ Genesis, chapter 1.

³⁷ *SI*, 277.

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ONTOLOGY AND ETHICS

By testing Abraham, God dispossessed him of Isaac in order to differentiate the son from his father; but by refusing Isaac as victim, he revealed himself in absolute transcendence to the human with which, as Word, he could never nourish himself. Moreover, by according *his* content to the word of Abraham, that is by divesting this word of its ironic form, he declares himself, as Word, to be related to the Patriarch and frees human consciousness of any imaginary subjection to himself. But by making men differentiated from one another in this way, he attests to the equality of individuals in their essential otherness as subjects of the word.³⁸ In other words, thanks to the non-sacrifice of Isaac and through the mediation of Abraham, human consciousness is called to understand that the symbolic relationship, in its essence, rests on the irreducibility of the difference between beings as the condition *sine qua non* for its possibility, both in the relationship of man to the divine as well as between men.

But then to say that at the end of the trial the true meaning of the symbolic relationship through the proper expression of difference is, by right, re-established in human awareness, could ultimately lead to the belief that the “teleological suspension of morality”³⁹ effected by Abraham throughout the duration of his trial finds its full significance in the revelation to man of the true ontological basis of ethics, a basis whose principle could be formulated thus: every human being, having his origin not from his ancestors but from the Word, not from the flesh but from the Spirit, is, as a particular individual subject deriving from the Word, an inalienable absolute whose immolation cannot be justified by anything or anyone, nor by any cause, even a divine one.

TWO SACRIFICIAL SYMBOLS: ISAAC/IPHIGENIA

The recognition—as veritable ontological foundation of ethics—of the absolute value of the particular human individual becomes clear in the universe of relational consciousness as an invincible

³⁸ *SJ*, 240-241. Cf Genesis 1, 26-28.

³⁹ *CT*, 86, 105.

overwhelming force, a decisively corrosive energy, radically dissolvent of a morality that, in general and at all times, favors the superiority of the whole over the part and proposes a hierarchy of values in relationships between the particular individual and the various wholes on which he depends: family and State, for example. Also, from the point of view of the nature of the sacrifice as well as of its consequences, Kierkegaard reminds us that Abraham's trial has no analogy in universal history.⁴⁰ The Danish philosopher shows, in this respect, that there is no comparison between the sacrifice of Isaac and, for example, that of Iphigenia, with the latter alone being endowed with moral value since for Agamemnon, in an act of personal heroism, it was a matter of immolating an individual, his own daughter, "for the common good",⁴¹ for the good of the entire community.

Opposed to this, by his purely personal act where, withdrawn into himself, he is "radically isolated before God", Abraham goes beyond any moral realm, to which he becomes totally foreign. By determining himself independently of any common good, indeed by even going against the good of the community—the community that Isaac bears "in his loins"⁴²—he is, and should be, inevitably perceived as a murderer in the light of morality.⁴³

Let us carefully understand the difference that generally seems to have escaped observation in the course of history, for since the Middle Ages many authors, often theologians, have compared the sacrifice of Iphigenia with the biblical sacrifices of Isaac and of the daughter of Jephthah,⁴⁴ all of whom, equally innocent victims, must receive their death from the hands of their fathers. However, for Kierkegaard Abraham is completely foreign to the parallel that can correctly be established between Agamemnon and Jephthah. Why? Agamemnon and Jephthah are still rooted in morality. Both are tragic heroes and both are at war. One is linked to the divine by an insurmountable obstacle, the unwillingness of the elements, and the other by a vow. But there is noth-

⁴⁰ *CT*, 186, 87.

⁴¹ *CT*, 88; cf. Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

⁴² *CT*, 91-92.

⁴³ *CT*, 37, 38, 87, 105, 118.

⁴⁴ Jean-Michel Gliksohn, *Iphigénie, de la Grèce antique à l'Europe des lumières*, Paris, P.U.F. 1985, p. 62 ff; Judges 11, 30-40.

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ing like this in the case of Abraham. When God calls him, he does so in private and apart from any crisis. Moreover, in the case of the tragic hero, the slaying of the sacrificial victim conditions the destiny of the people whose harmonious cohesion can only be re-established by the sacrifice. The victim is thus the object of a deal between the divine and the human. Unlike this the appeal to Abraham has no compensation; it is unconditional. In addition, noble or semi-divine, the tragic victim with salutary innocence is taken from the heart of the people. The victim is not the child of promise. Isaac, however, granted late, is the son of promise, the child begotten directly by the divine word, the first-born of a multitude who, without him, has no chance to exist. And this is the source of the absurdity. The moral stakes proper to the dramatic sacrifice are absolutely lacking for Abraham who, from this point of view and in the fullest sense of the term, becomes a murderer.

On the other hand, if the “absolute relationship” is the truth of the relationship of the particular individual to the divine Absolute,⁴⁵ in itself and in that it serves as the basis for the symbolic relationship between humans, it follows then that in the purely personal act of Abraham, the divine Absolute is itself designated as the only proper measure for the individual as such, independently of any reference to a totality. This is why the *a posteriori* justification of the teleological suspension of morality as the end of the trial could signify—by the very fact that this suspension is capable of taking on an expression contrary to that of morality—that the moral sphere, in which the individual acts by virtue of the general, does not contain the most correct expression of the reality of relationships between men. Even more, this justification reveals that morality is, in its essence, but a form of idolatry. It denounces as abuses of language and of power the identification in it of the Absolute with totality since ultimately, even though deriving from this identification, morality establishes a hierarchy of values between totalities, declaring the State to be superior to the family, for example, so that it appears, in its essence, to contain an internal contradiction because it lacks a basis in reality. By basing itself in this manner on a variable, namely

⁴⁵ *CT*, 86, 188.

on the fluctuating notion of totality, it finds that it is necessary for it to order its determinations arbitrarily. The essentially idolatrous nature of such a structure then becomes evident, with telling acuity, in a time of crisis in that, by calling on this notorious identification, it dissociates the Absolute from the divine and does not hesitate, in sacrifice, to place the latter at the service of the human.

This is very much the case in the sacrifice of Iphigenia, where an eclipse of the word as the basis for relations between subjects leads to a mixing of categories since the real then takes on the value of symbol, raising doubts about the nature of each of them. Indeed, whereas the child of promise appears as subject in the Word in the course of an episode in which God speaks to Abraham in person, in the Greek legend, on the other hand, Artemis is absent from the entire story, of which she is, nevertheless, the principal figure. The tragic hero knows her decree only from a natural calamity and through a seer. And when the goddess substituted a deer for Iphigenia on the altar of sacrifice, the people remain deprived of any possible communication with the victim, still alive but essentially absent. Once the crisis has been overcome, the unity of the community can be regained only by cutting off one of its members. Placed at the service of the human, the divine seems, in man's imagination, to take possession of it in the end. Whereas at the end of his trial Abraham is delivered from the paradox and Isaac from the tutelage of his father, *Iphigenia in Tauris* shows that the young girl has, to the contrary, become the prey of the goddess in a sort of escalation of the sacrifice. "Artemis has made me priestess of this temple, and I must perform the rites that please her in a celebration (a word too beautiful for the reality it expresses, but I cannot say more for I fear the goddess) in which I offer in sacrifice ... all the Greeks who land on this shore."⁴⁶

And so, in Abraham's faith, in which *the relationship* to Isaac is experienced as the object of a symbolic offering in word, the real is safeguarded. On the other hand, in the sacrifice in which the individual takes on the value of symbol *in actu*, "Iphigenia is not only the symbolic victim; she is the figure through which

⁴⁶ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Prologue.

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the familial and political community *submits its destiny to images* in which it discerns transcendence. Iphigenia is, literally, victim of the symbol.”⁴⁷ We should add, eternally victim of the symbol since she, as devoured, participates, among the gods, in the devouring of the people that her sacrifice has saved. At that point, by abolishing itself as signifying and relational power in language, the symbol effectively abolishes the real and, conversely, by abolishing the real, eliminates its power to signify. But is “submitting one’s destiny to images” not the very height of idolatry?

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More precisely the spiritual experience of Abraham implicitly denounces a perverted use of categories in morality that leads to a double abolition of the real in language since in sacrifice it denies both the reality of the divine as Absolute and the only human reality absolutely irreducible in a concrete manner, namely the particular individual. For if the human being, in his concrete individual reality exists in certain respects of himself, the totali-

⁴⁷ J. -M. Gliksohn, *op. cit.*, 44 (our italics). These remarks concerning the sacrifice of Iphigenia should not, through an incorrect assimilation, lead us to ask the question, “What about the sacrifice of Christ?”. From the point of view of Christianity, Jesus, far from being simply one human individual among others, is also not simply a demi-god but God incarnate in person, the Word made flesh, itself symbolically transformed into bread to be given as food for men. An interpretation of this sacrifice should take into account, through contrast, the nature of the original sin, the effects of which can be discerned in the tragic sacrifice. In this sense Salomon Reinach shows, in his “Observations sur le mythe d’Iphigénie” (*Revue des Études grecques*, t. XXVIII, No. 126, Jan. -March 1915, pp. 10-11), that the interpretation of Euripides that links the sacrifice of the deer to the favor of the winds is quite late. According to him originally “the true object of the sacrifice of Aulis was more general. It was a matter of divinizing, through participation in a celebration in which a divine victim paid the price, those who, at the moment they were to undertake a perilous journey, needed to fortify the divine element in themselves.” This supposes a divinity conceived as immanent and thus unable to intervene from the outside in human affairs. In this case, “to avoid failure, disease and misfortune, man ... must capture it (the divinity) and eat it”. Although he was not aware of the meaning of these words nor of the reality corresponding to them, is this not what Adam did also? But the sacrifice of Christ cannot be seen prefigured in Iphigenia or in the daughter of Jephthah. Further study of this question, too large to be included in the framework of this essay on Abraham, should be the subject of later research.

ty on the other hand only subsists as the sum of the individuals that it includes as determined by certain relatively abstract criteria, such as consanguinity, identical language, attachment to the same set of social laws or dogmas, for example. However, once it has been understood that the Absolute, on the other hand, defines Being inasmuch as it subsists of itself,⁴⁸ it can easily be seen that, although it can find a correspondent in the individual, in no case can it be identified with the totality. Since this does not belong to categories of being and does not possess in itself any determination of existence in the concrete, it proves to be no more than an abstraction. Thus when it requires sacrifice, morality is powerfully mortal since it destroys human life in order to satisfy the imaginary creation of a perverse spirit in the name of an abstraction.

And this is the new element concerning ethics found in the message of Abraham. Not that the whole is greater than its parts; not that the individual exists for the totality of the whole, but on the contrary that the whole exists *through* and *for* the individual. For humanly speaking, the only reality, in its concrete determination, is the universality of the singular.

Let us refute the lie that consists in substituting for the “imaginary god” of the time of the Patriarchs the fiction of a new race of men or of a future Superman. There is no need to go very far back in history to realize the compelling pertinence of this irrefutable message.

Aude-Marie Lhote
(*Versailles*)

Translated by R. Scott Walker

⁴⁸ One can, of course, deny the reality of an Absolute transcending the human, but by affirming it, immediately and inasmuch as it defines Being in its plenitude subsisting in itself, it is *the* divine. Conversely, affirming the divine means affirming it as Absolute.