

Introduction

Taking Rhetoric to Its Limits; or, How to Respond to a Sacred Call

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Rhetoric has always had a vexed relationship with the sacred. If the sacred is defined as that which exceeds human capacity—aspects of experienced reality that are beyond human understanding and that defy one’s ability to communicate them—then the sacred poses a limit to rhetoric. Experiences of the divine, recognition of aspects of the material world exterior to discourse, the sense that agencies are networked and beyond the control of any single actor, all suggest both what is problematic about the sacred (its exteriority to rhetoric) and what is compelling about it (its exposure of rhetoric’s limits). The rhetorical and the sacred are both powers and capacities, distinct but also inextricably linked. The sacred can be seen as a call that compels a response, and so one important aspect in tracking rhetoric’s relation to the sacred is locating the tension between the sacred as a manifestation of the divine (with a focus on a call or compulsion that makes itself apparent as a break with the material and human order) and the sacred as a *manifestation* of the divine (emphasizing the human and material dimension of the response to the call). René Girard captures this tension in *Violence and the Sacred* when he notes that ritual or liturgical expressions as responses to the sacred do not involve the identification of an already sacred object, but rather the production of a sacred object through ritual acts. The

sacred object is not sacred independent of the response. What this means is that rhetoric is crucial and necessary not just for the *call* of the sacred itself but also for the crafting of the *response* to the sacred mandate. It is not just that the response is rhetorical; it is that the call (however impossible that call may be) can only be understood in rhetorical terms. The sacred is rhetorical, and the rhetorical is (made) sacred.

This paradoxical relationship can be put another way. If the sacred is something set apart, a caesura that makes itself visible by means of the rhetorical, one must be able to ask *how* the sacred becomes manifest in discursive material. This notion of the sacred is visible in the Hebrew term *kadosh*, which translates both to “holy” and to “set apart.” But if the sacred is an expression of ritual, then it is also worth considering the means by which the caesura is made manifest in discursive (in Girard’s schema, ritual; in a rhetorical register, figural) terms. The Greeks’ understanding of potentiality (*dynamis*) and *kairos* provide us with a set of concepts with which to note something that inheres in and exceeds the capacity to make it manifest. It is in this sense that the sacred not only poses a limit to rhetoric, but also potentially does violence to it. The sacred makes the limit visible and confounds those schemes by which we would make sense of it. It makes those who contend with the limit vulnerable, because the rhetorical limit, the sense that we are only ever partly able to capture what is beyond human language in discursive terms, also marks a limit to the capacities of the human subject. In the face of the sacred object or the sacred word, the subject is laid bare and open to aspects of material reality that are only dimly glimpsed.

In the following pages, we will describe rhetoric’s relation to the sacred—as a capacity or openness to what is beyond us, and as a means by which to respond to that call—and define a set of key terms that will be used throughout the collection, though in slightly different ways by each of the authors. In the first section, we examine the extent to which rhetoric’s relation to the sacred is one of ineffability—in which the divine, as manifest in the sacred, causes a kind of material break in the human relation to the world—while in the second section, we take up the ways in which our responses to the sacred, in rhetorical terms, could be likened to Girard’s sense of ritual, an attempt to integrate the divine or the altogether other into the human order by means of repetition, albeit a repetition, in a Lacanian turn of phrase, that returns with a difference. In the third

section, we describe how the essays in the collection serve as responses to the sacred.

RHETORIC, THE SACRED, AND THE DIVINE

Rhetoric's relation to the sacred has two dimensions. The first is a capacity or openness to that which appears to us as altogether other. In rhetorical terms, that "appearance" might be called "exigence," or quite literally a call—as quasi-discursive—that, while it seems to be beyond our capacity for response, nonetheless demands one. In her work on the relation of rhetoric and ethics, Diane Davis has called this relation "rhetoricity," "a constitutive persuadability or responsivity that testifies, first of all, to a fundamental structure of exposure" (*Inessential Solidarity*, 3). Davis's book argues that rhetoric is an attitude as much as it is an instrument, one that takes as its first principle that the human is defined by its relation to something beyond it—a person, a circumstance, a power—and that rhetoric is the means by which humans engage in that relation. Michael Hyde, in much of his work, describes the relation between rhetoric and the sacred as one that creates a void or a space that quite literally *opens us up*. The divine, in its call to the subject *as* the call of the other, casts out that subject as one is compelled to respond, and casts out—makes strange—their language as well. Subjects become exiled from themselves, exiled from the community, and in rhetorical terms move outside the confines of the polis. To be called by the divine is to be called away. The divine call creates subjects sanctified by a violent ejection from what was believed to be true both about themselves and about their ability to speak. In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy describes this sacred break as a "laceration," a laceration not of being or of reason, but rather "the communal fabric," "immanence" (30). The cruelty of separation—the radical setting apart—makes plain that our *sense* of community, and our sense of ourselves as recognizable by name, has been dis-placed. For Michael Hyde, the confrontation with the altogether other creates a space, a "dwelling place, the Hebrew term for God, *makom*" (*Call of Conscience*, 114). The term is not a synonym but a synecdoche: God is *not* the place; the place is a displacement—God is here no longer—and so *makom* marks a displacement; the divine encounter *dis*-places the one who responds. The divine is made manifest *in the midst of* what we take to be reasonable and deliberative.

The second dimension of rhetoric's relation to the divine is as the means by which we respond to the call in the midst of that displacement. One of the canonical descriptions of this second dimension of rhetoric's relation to the divine—as a response to a call—can be found in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Plato's Socrates is called to respond to a task that he's not quite sure he's up to, and in order to do it, he manages to break a number of the rules he sets down for his task (albeit retroactively). Socrates is asked by the younger Phaedrus to show him how to persuade a person about the benefits of physical love, and so he does. But within Plato's treatise, Socrates also hears a different, more compelling call, and goes on to speak—and to succumb to the power—of what he calls “divine madness,” the madness of lovers and poets. Socrates's response to the call indicates places and times—which are not spatial or temporal locations at all—unknown to the speaker and listener but recognized (recalled) nonetheless. In fact, that call unmoored Socrates, quite literally displaced him, as he finds himself disturbed by Phaedrus's call, and forgets where he is as he speaks. A second canonical instance of a rhetorical response to a call can be found in the Torah, in the Akedah (Abraham's ritual near-sacrifice of Isaac). In that account, God directs Abraham to travel with his son Isaac to Mount Moriah, and once there, commands him to sacrifice his son. In her book *Stupidity*, Avital Ronell sees this call as doubly problematic. Not only is the circumstance of the call disconcerting; it puts the one who is called into question altogether: is this even meant for me? It is this calling into question that distinguishes the call of the sacred. Linking the sacred and the divine, Ronell asks, “Is this not an essential trait of God, to dispossess, to be the cause of one fall after another and, in so doing, to render ridiculous the very possibility of self-possession?” (307). If the call of the sacred is a *bêtise*, an interruption of the real, then the *content* of the response does not matter nearly as much as the openness with which it is offered: “Abraham's intention . . . does not need to be sealed in an act. . . . Intention is enough. Proneness to intention would suffice, a certain numbness that answers to a name prior to the constitution of any subject or any faculty of understanding” (309). His response amounts to a deterritorialization, an exile of sorts. Abraham's “Here I am” is not an agreement to go through with the sacrifice; it is the ultimate act of exposure in the face of a force that is as demanding as it is incomprehensible. As narratives marked by a singular call, and as requiring a singular response, *Phaedrus* and the Akedah show that it is not only the call of the sacred but

also the response that causes a kind of discursive disruption, and a spatial and temporal dislocation that begs to be made less frightening and disorienting. It is in this way that the sacred serves as a limit to rhetoric: as that which compels a response, albeit an unsettled one, and as the response itself, which does not do justice to or contain adequately the compulsion to respond. The limit is made manifest in the response that could be characterized as a way to wed the human, rational, and material aspect of our surroundings and its inhuman, irrational, and immaterial dimension.

Three Definitions

Before we go much further, it is necessary to define some terms and, in particular, to describe precisely what we mean when we call something sacred. There are three terms that are often used together, if not synonymously—"divine," "sacred," and "ritual"—whose definitions, while they differ somewhat in the essays that are included in this collection, remain fairly consistent throughout. While these terms have been imported from disciplines outside rhetorical studies (such as anthropology, religious studies, philosophy, and theology), they have been taken up in our field in nuanced and sophisticated ways.

Of these terms, the "divine" may be the most difficult to pin down, if only because, as a concept, it is elusive. In a brief chapter near the end of *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno writes of philosophy that "if thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims" (365). The extremity—what eludes our ability to conceptualize it, as phenomenon that exceeds our ability to think it, to give it attributes, to place it into language—was for Adorno that which causes a philosophical or conceptual anxiety (see "Commitment," 93). Jeffrey Kripal puts it similarly. In *Authors of the Impossible* he writes, "By the sacred, I mean what the German theologian and historian of religions Rudolf Otto meant, that is, a particular structure of human consciousness that corresponds to a palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment. Otto captured this sacred sixth sense, at once subject and object, in a famous Latin sound bite: the sacred is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that is the mystical (*mysterium*) as both fucking scary (*tremendum*) and utterly fascinating (*fascinans*)" (9).

For Kripal, it is hard to pry apart the structure of consciousness from the palpable energy or power to which it corresponds; it is also notable that in Kripal's definition, as in Adorno's "extremity that eludes the concept," the divine cannot exist apart from the consciousness or intellectual apparatus through which it is made apparent or registered. Peter Berger writes that the sacred is a quality of power that is visible on objects and experiences that "stick out" from the normal routines of everyday life but that depend on that ordinariness—something "other than man [*sic*] and yet related to him" (*Sacred Canopy*, 25)—in order to be apprehended. It is also notable that for Kripal, as for Berger and Adorno, there is an attraction and a repulsion associated with the sacred: it is an awesome power, something "extraordinary and potentially dangerous" (Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 26) that causes Adorno's anxiety, and what Mircea Eliade calls fear (*Patterns*, 14). As Michael Bernard-Donals has put it, the divine, "carrying with it a certain urgency and also a disruption rendered by that urgency," "compels the subject to engage with" it, a "manifestation of a radical otherness that interrupts discourse, that does not let you go, or that you cannot let go of, and that challenges what you thought you knew" ("Divine Cruelty," 405–6).

For the divine to be apprehended there must be a structure of human consciousness to which it corresponds. Eliade, a philosopher of religion, spent a lifetime attempting to understand this paradox, and in his book *The Sacred and the Profane* describes the relation of otherness and ordinariness as a *hierophany*, from the Greek meaning the bringing to light that which is holy or divine. The divine shows itself by punctuating the ordinary, whereby what had been previously considered profane—mundane, purely natural, ready-to-hand and readily assimilable to our previous experience—is endowed with another quality, something beyond, mysterious, and unfathomable ("the extremity that eludes the concept") that is nonetheless here, unmistakably present in one's midst and calling for a response. Antonio Cerella, writing about Émile Durkheim, describes the ambiguity of the sacred as that which results from its "all-pervasive tendency to penetrate into the profane world," forcing whatever is imbued with sacred character—its hierophanic quality—to "embod[y] (that is reveal[]) something other than itself" ("Myth of Origin," 214–15). To return to Kripal's description of the divine, what is so "fucking scary and utterly fascinating" is the fact that the divine has transformed that which was just a moment ago a normal part of our everyday worlds and has now become something else. The sacred is

a manifestation of the divine in our everyday worlds, and because of its violent eruption into that world—because it has displaced us, forcing us to recognize an otherness that cannot easily be squared with our current understanding—it becomes something other, and potentially makes us something other as well.

Putting things slightly differently, for Giorgio Agamben—writing about Roman law and the “state of exception”—the sacred object moves from the realm of the human to the realm of the divine, where something previously recognized as profane has now become sacred. The sacred—in the form of the *homo sacer*, the person cast outside the law—takes the form of a double exception, in which the sacred is neither divine nor human, recognizable as neither a material object nor a person, nor entirely an other. This strangeness, the sacred’s scariness and its fascination, calls for a kind of institutionalization or regularization, since confronting that which is altogether other is not only “fucking scary” but also potentially destabilizing and violent (a point to which we will return). The political theorist Kent Enns, writing about political violence from the perspective of Girard’s theory of the scapegoat, describes the process where secular societies attempt to make sense of instances where the profane has been punctuated by the divine via ritual, as a “deliberate repetition of elements of the crisis and collective dedifferentiation to stave off repetitions of full-scale dedifferential crises” (“René Girard,” 84). Ritual is one possible response to instances of the eruption of the divine into everyday life as manifestations of the sacred, a response that does not so much repeat the violence of the eruption itself so much as keep it at bay in a way that recognizes the instance’s otherness while also reintegrating it into the fabric of everyday life.

This brings us to the third term in need of definition, “ritual,” and while the next section of the introduction will take up the idea in more detail, here we describe how it serves to make sense of the divine as it manifests in the sacred object or event, and its relation to rhetorical practice. By ritual we mean expressions of the sacred, either those that attempt to confer order on that which is beyond it, or those that express qualities of the divine through the creation of objects or practices. Returning to Eliade’s term *hierophany*, the eruption of the divine into the everyday calls for practices in which those eruptions are given meaning, and over time humans have developed practices that repeat those eruptions—either as representations,

narratives, or ritual practices—so that the “conscious repetition of given paradigmatic gestures reveals an original ontology,” whereby the “gesture[s] acquire meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which [they] repeat [] a primordial act” (Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 5). Ritual is the “paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming” (Eliade, *Patterns*, 29), making what is beyond our understanding meaningful and affective through bestowing on natural objects or commonplaces a quality of the divine. What is important to note here is that rhetoric—finding the available means, the discursive and gestural and visual power to *move*, to respond to that which is other to us, including the altogether other—provides us with a way of shaping and regularizing those divine manifestations, while also through those expressions leave room for the divine’s capacity to interrupt and potentially hold open the rational and the material. Peter Berger correctly recognizes that “other worlds” are “not empirically available for the purposes of scientific analysis. They are only available as meaning-enclaves within *this* world, the world of human experience. . . . Put differently, whatever else the constellations of the sacred may be ‘ultimately,’ empirically they are products of human activity and human signification” (*Sacred Canopy*, 88–89). It is by means of rhetoric—human signification—that we respond to the divine call through the sacred, which may take the form of ritual, or may be shaped altogether differently.

Creating the Sacred in Ritual

The most common way we respond to the sacred is through the observation of sacred rituals. Qualitatively speaking, the nature of our response hinges on the level of faith we assign to the sacred being who compels it. To the faithless, a sacred ritual may be one type of action among many; they may respond with agnostic attention, a mocking gesture, or a simple shrug. But to the faithful, sacred rituals transform objects, human actions, human bodies, and physical spaces into “the receptacles of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value” (Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 4). According to Eliade, such meaning is tethered to a point in time when a sacred being revealed itself as “incompressible, invulnerable” (4). By staging the “rebirth” of this sacred revelation, sacred rituals “provide the moral renewal of individuals and groups” (Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 276). The faithful accept moral renewal as necessary to the

health of their community and thus treat sacred rituals as the appropriate response to a dangerous threat.

Because sacred rituals are commemorative imitations of a sacred being's actions, those who perform them are aware that the originating actor—hero, god, or otherwise—is off the spatiotemporal grid. This performative fact explains, at least in part, why sacred rituals require repetition. Because they are not performed by the sacred being proper, because those charged with repeating rituals exist in profane time and space and are thus exposed to the vicissitudes of history, the social order that sacred rituals establish will inevitably degenerate.

Achieving self-awareness in profane time and space is not the point of a sacred ritual, of course. But even if it were, self-awareness would not be possible. According to Catherine Bell, ritualization “does not see how it actively creates place, force, event, and tradition, how it redefines or generates the circumstances to which it is responding” (*Ritual*, 109). It only sees the desired outcome, “the rectification of a problematic” (109). In the attempt to rectify a problematic, sacred rituals “expose the limit that defines the very possibility of representation, the blank or blinded time/space that enables all representation to *take* time and space” (Stewart, *Poetry*, vii–viii). They do so by establishing a differential relationship between the sacred and the profane.

Insofar as sacred rituals are, “above all, an assertion of difference” they “effectively *create* the sacred by explicitly differentiating such a realm from a profane one” (Bell, *Ritual*, 157). Such differentiation is, in our view, qualitatively rhetorical in nature. Sacred rituals produce a “fragmentation of practices” that defer meaning as they travel into new times and spaces (Stewart, *Poetry*, viii). For this reason, Gregory Bateson asks critics to observe the dynamics of sacred rituals as they unfold over time: “When our discipline is defined in terms of the reactions of an individual to the reactions of other individuals, it is at once apparent that we must regard the relationship between two individuals as liable to alter from time to time, even without disturbance from outside. We have to consider, not only *A*'s reaction to *B*'s behavior, but we must go on to consider how these affect *B*'s later behaviour and the effect of this on *A*” (*Naven*, 176).

Even though the administrators of sacred rituals can only see “the rectification of a problematic,” their responses are not reducible to a desired

outcome. According to Emile Durkheim, sacred rituals are “celebrated because the ancestors celebrated it, because people are attached to it as a venerable tradition, and because they leave it with an impression of moral well-being” (*Elementary Forms*, 281–82). Sacred rituals thus carry at least a dual meaning where ethos is concerned. On the one hand, they “involve [the] symbolic fusion of ethos and worldview” that conceives a ritual response “as the natural or appropriate thing to do in the circumstances” (Bell, *Ritual*, 109; see also Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 113). On the other hand, because “people are attached” to sacred rituals “as a venerable tradition,” the ritual’s ethos is tied to the dynamic maintenance of in-group relationships that extend in and throughout history. In the first sense, sacred rituals imagine the sacred being as the audience; the ritual action thus needs to be felicitous with the sacred call. In the second sense, sacred rituals imagine the community as the audience; the tradition of ritual action must therefore maintain or augment social relationships in a manner that is felicitous with the group’s collaborative expectancies.

The dual meaning of ethos in sacred rituals indicates how they can be both a structured and structuring response to environmental demands. They are structured in the sense that there is a specific and predictable protocol for responding to an environmental demand; they are structuring in the sense that they alter the environment that has placed an unwelcome demand on them. Victor Turner has argued that prevailing social structures both facilitate and fail to fully explain the structured and structuring relationships created by sacred rituals. To underscore the processual dynamics of sacred rituals as they respond to the limits of prevailing social orders, Turner uses the term *communitas*, which he argues “liberates [individuals] from conformity to general norms” by enacting “undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou . . . relationships” (*Ritual Process*, 274). Such anti-structural relationships challenge the tendency of prevailing social structures to “hold people apart, define their differences, and constrain their actions” (275). We pay attention to the interplay between structure and anti-structure, then, in order to identify the transition points that connect the profane with the sacred. Such identification relies, at least theoretically, on the existence of a liminal space.

The liminal space between the sacred and profane is crucial to understanding how sacred rituals respond to environmental threats and sacred

calls. Turner argues that liminality is easiest to theorize in sacred rituals where community members transition from one life stage to another. For example, there are sacred rituals designed to elevate the status of a community member or to signify times in the year when those of low status can enjoy authority over their superiors (Turner, *Ritual Process*, 167). In either case, it makes sense to think about liminality in terms of Kenneth Burke's study of transformation in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Within this framework, the liminal constitutes the "dead center of motives" insofar as it defines the space of undecidability and, thus, the capacity for dialectical reversal. As such, it reveals "the moment of motionlessness, when the axe has been raised to its full height and is just about to fall" or, if you prefer, "the pause at the window before descending into the street" (294). Of course, liminality can only be posited theoretically since, as we have argued, the differential relationship between sacred and profane creates the conditions whereby one may document the transformation from one representative state to another. Nevertheless, liminality must be posited in order to account for transformation of symbolic and material in profane time. Independent of such transformation, there is no way to evaluate the efficacy of sacred rituals.

The social structure that precedes and is maintained by sacred rituals is *hierophanic* in quality. A hierophany, according to Eliade, "expresses in some way some modality of the sacred and some moment in its history; that is to say, some one of the many kinds of the experiences of the sacred man has had" (*Patterns*, 2). The revelation of the sacred is important, obviously, because it inaugurates the relationship between the sacred being and its community, as well as the relationships among community members in light of a sacred revelation. Eliade stresses the historical dimension of sacred hierophanies because this focus allows critics to track the "attitude man has had toward the sacred" over time (2). "A given hierophany," Eliade explains, "may be lived and interpreted quite differently by the religious elite and by the rest of the community" (7). As a result, those who are in greater or lesser proximity to the sacred being (e.g., those who administer sacred rituals vs. those who observe them) will convey different attitudes in response to a sacred call. Within a given community, there may therefore be a number of different types responses to a sacred call. Even where homogenous responses are prevalent, there may be heterogeneity in the attitudes of the various actors both in the immediate application and over

time; one's attitude may change, for example, over the course of one's life or in response to non-sacred historical circumstances. Thus, a rhetorical orientation toward the sacred must be nimble in how it conceives the structural cohesion established by sacred rituals with as much flexibility as possible.

Rhetorical critics can remain flexible by remembering that the performance of sacred rituals is an embodied phenomenon. Obviously, sacred rituals involve physical gestures that carry symbolic meaning. Our reference to embodiment signifies, as well, how an environmental threat exposes the nexus of social structures that shape and connect the bodies of believers and nonbelievers alike. This fact becomes readily apparent in anthropological accounts of conflict that results from the application of sacred rituals. For example, in *The Interpretation of Cultures* Geertz describes how a sacred burial ritual in Java produced conflict among the different members of the community. Geertz is clear that "there was no argument over whether the slametan pattern was the correct ritual, whether the neighbors were obligated to attend, or whether the supernatural concepts upon which the ritual is based were valid ones" (164). The conflict emerged as a result of "discontinuity between the form of integration existing in the social structural ('causal-functional') dimension and the form of integration existing in the cultural ('logico meaningful') dimension" (164). In other words, the embodied experiences of the kampong people as an evolving urban culture was increasingly placed in conflict with their folk history (164). We could interpret this conflict in symbolic terms, of course. But Geertz emphasizes that the embodied experiences of the kampong people—their evolving economic, occupation, and bureaucratic structures—caused the sacred rituals to appear retrofit even as the belief systems and their application structures remained relatively consistent. Evolving economic, occupational, and bureaucratic structures had disciplined the bodies of the kampong people in ways that made the sacred ritual seem more or less successful as a sacred response to an environmental demand. The upshot is that the rhetorical study of sacred rituals must account for the entanglement of bodies within political, economic, occupational, and bureaucratic systems that may be attached to the hierophanic structure that calls a community to respond. As we have noted, such entanglement must account not only for the structures that shape the bodies in question but also the dynamic unfolding of attitudes that grant insight into their motivations.

It is tempting, given the prevalence of dramatic criticism in rhetorical studies, to latch onto Victor Turner's claim that sacred rituals enact social dramas. Although we would not want to discount the value of the dramatic method, it does not encourage a theoretical engagement with the limits that sacred rituals place on rhetoric as much as we would like. So, we offer the rules of thumb presented in this section to emphasize sacred rituals as both an object and method that bring rhetorical theory to its limits. We know from scholars both within and outside rhetorical studies that sacred time and space is uninhabitable; we have learned, as well, that the performance of sacred rituals bends time and space to achieve ameliorative outcomes. So, perhaps we should ask what makes rhetoric such a habitable capacity of human existence. Or, if that question is not interesting enough, we might consider how rhetorical acts such as sacred rituals can reconstitute time and space in a manner where each becomes something other than itself. This collection is not designed to settle such questions once and for all, but rather to show how such questions may reframe what is possible in rhetorical theories and methodologies.

Rhetoric and the Limit

In the remainder of this section, we will describe the ways in which the sacred changes how we understand rhetorical notions of space and place, our sense of time (both chronological and *kairotic*), and the extent to which humans are defined—as subjects—by relations of vulnerability and violence. In all three contexts—space, time, and relation—the sacred serves as a *limit* to rhetoric, a point beyond which rhetoric cannot proceed, as the axis toward which an asymptotic curve reaches but with which it can never merge. Mircea Eliade introduces the idea of the sacred as a limit condition for space and place when he describes *hierophany* as a kind of chimera, a both-one-and-the-other, producing a heterogenous space: “Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 26). In fact, sacred space, heterogenous ground, is called forth in precisely the same way that the divine call is made manifest as Hyde's “call of conscience” or Davis's rhetoricity. Eliade writes that “some *sign*” makes itself visible, that the sign serves as a compulsion to respond, and that the result is the creation of a space—“countries, cities, temples, and palaces”—that serves as a center,

evincing the divine “center of the world” (27) but in fact carving out a kind of void, the same kind of void that was cleared by the divine in the mystical version of the creation story in Kabbalistic Judaism. It is this space that serves as both sacred and deterritorialized void, working as both a centripetal unifying force as well as a threshold for the chaotic, disordered cosmos. It is a disorder that serves as the impetus for a mobility, a destituent force that is troubling and potentially violent. Like the concept of “nomadism” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s section on the topic in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the hierophanic place has the capacity for upheaval, for radical change, that is not ultimately tied or susceptible to the power of ritual or the laws of the community in which it is located. Deleuze and Guattari write that such spaces “give time a new rhythm: an endless succession of catatonic episodes . . . and flashes or rushes” (“1227,” 356). They redistribute our bodies’ relations to habit, its relation to other bodies, and its relation to the material circumstances in which it is embedded, forcing a radical reconsideration of that material topography, and *moving* those bodies in a reconfiguration of space. Even the frame of a door, for example, makes manifest not just a way to get from one room to another, but “an unstable position, acting as an intermediary” (Teyssot, *Topology*, 270) between one space and another, two potential locations and moments, a border or a passage, a kind of “membrane” that defines and serves as a passage among “many opposite sets of spaces: the exterior and the interior; the illuminated and the adumbrated; the visible and the invisible; the manifest and the hidden” (255). These moments of dwelling—what might be called the fact or event of moving through the materiality of the material world—create *passages*, moving the subject in such a way that she is disoriented, in which she forgets the map of the location, where the fixed makes way for the transient, and where she is at home but never at home.

In the same way that the sacred dis- and reorients space, it does the same with temporality. Again it is Eliade who provides the best summary for how this happens. Time, he explains, has two dimensions, the profane and the sacred: “The one is an evanescent duration, the other a ‘succession of eternities,’ periodically recoverable during the festivals that made up the sacred calendar” (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 104). As with any hierophany, the two are not discrete; the latter interrupts and disturbs the former, creating a “transhuman” quality to liturgical time, in which the discontinuities of the “succession of eternities”—reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s description of

jetztzeit, or “now time” in which the chronology of historical time is blasted open in a flash (see *Illuminations*, 255–66)—become entangled in and find a place in the more normal temporal rhythms of chronological time. The interruption of chronological time by time’s void—what might, in rhetorical terms, be called *kairotic*—is described by Giorgio Agamben as “destituent,” a kind of in-between circumstance that “constitutes a threshold, passing through which domestic belonging is politicized in citizenship and, inversely, citizenship is depoliticized in familial solidarity” (“Elements,” 4). Stasis marks a temporal point of decision that “works like a reagent that discloses the political element in the final instance, as a threshold of politicization that itself determines the political or nonpolitical character of a particular being” (5). Stasis is not the same as a temporal suspension; rather, to be at the point of stasis—at the threshold of choosing, at the verge of both *oikos* and *polis*—is to be both the object and the agent of the process. Stasis is in a temporal zone of indetermination in which the subject is one that “constitutes itself only through the using, the being in relation with another” (7), in which the terms use refers to the “affection that [the body of the subject] receives inasmuch as it is in relation with another body (or with one’s own body as other)” (7).

In stasis, the human person, in serving as both agent and patient, becomes a kind of potentiality, “devoid of any specific vocation: a pure potentiality (*Potenza*), that no identity and no work could exhaust” (8). Think, says Agamben, of the Christian feast day or of Jewish Shabbat: during these days, human activity is “liberated and suspended from its ‘economy,’ from the reasons and aims that define it during the weekdays” (9). Stasis, as inoperative, functions as a middle state between doing and being done to, in which the subject is potential and *destituent*, in which mobility is not readily captured by the law and has the potential to call the law—and state power and its attendant ideologies—into question.

To put into question is to be put into a position of vulnerability. One element that definitions of the sacred have in common is the sense that it induces fear, or awe, or—in Agamben’s formulation—inoperativity and a kind of stochastic (rather than directional) movement. In his essay on Giorgio Agamben and René Girard, Antonio Cerella writes that for both thinkers, theorizations of the sacred were attempts to understand an ontological origin, in which—for Agamben—one speaks oneself into personhood: subjects “*invent themselves ethically*” (Cerella, “Myth of Origin,”

222). Referring to Agamben's short book titled *The Sacrament of Language*, about the oath's place in the moment of ontological origin, he writes, "The structure of the oath . . . reveals its original gesture that does not consist in merely binding together individual and society, private and public, but rather in the establishment of a '*subjectum*' on which to place the order of things and discourse. Language would be the mark of an ethical foundation: To become speaking beings, humans must make room for the *logos*, must open themselves *on* themselves and to the challenge of the world, continually binding things and words together not to lose them" (222).

This opening renders the speaking subject vulnerable. The capacity to be other—what Danielle Petherbridge calls "a general openness to the other" ("What's Critical," 591)—is a condition that is as enabling as it is limiting. Petherbridge sees the possibility of willing together underwritten by a basic mutual affirmation between subjects, which is in turn understood to be necessary because of our "biological under-specialization," the "fact of our biological or physical vulnerability at birth" (595). While there are situational vulnerabilities—those brought about by uneven distribution of material wealth, or by injustice, or by violence and oppression—they are premised on a common vulnerability that we all share by virtue of being human. But vulnerability *itself* has a kind of force, if not power, because its definition of the human agent is founded on the notion that we will *with* others, whether we want to or not; that those interactions are not overdetermined but are radically open; and that any instance of deliberation that comes as a result of the invitation to engage with others is also radically open, insofar as it involves an aporia between the compulsion to speak (in Avital Ronell's terms, the call) and the utterance itself. The constitutive openness—a kind of pure potentiality—initiated by a sacred call suggests that there is no necessary direction that rhetoric has to take. That openness has the capacity to undo rhetorical patterns of thought, can lead us to and fro with a lack of direction that is potentially liberating and also—because it suspends direction in favor of intensity and undoes fixity, because it is exogamous, brute, and forces us to be on the move. It is (in Kripal's terms) "fucking scary."

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In order to determine how rhetoric is responsive to the sacred, this collection of essays examines rhetoric's limited capacity to render phenomena

that simultaneously demand and resist conceptual understanding. The purpose of this collection is to engage a deeper theoretical and methodological study of the limits of rhetoric by focusing on how rhetoricians have responded to the sacred throughout history. Insofar as our collection is focused on the limits of rhetoric, it is not meant to be representative of religious faith traditions. Even if it were, it simply is not possible to treat forms of the sacred from all religious traditions; the present volume strives to include diverse views and acknowledges other views not treated directly.

The collection is divided into two parts. In the first, “Sacred Encounters,” contributors contend with ontological matters: how rhetoric and the sacred are defined, where and how they overlap, how they interact, and what kinds of claims can be made about the force of the sacred and of rhetoric and how those claims themselves have rhetorical or sacred force. The second section, “Sacred Practices,” takes a pragmatic turn. There the authors examine how rhetorical and sacred practices—through writing, divination, governance, forms of reasoning—make clear the ways that rhetoric and the sacred, as capacities, challenge one another *as methods*. Each of the contributors take up the relation between the rational capacity of rhetoric to understand the past and its irrational capacity, the *immanent* power of rhetoric as rhetoric’s surplus, in both theoretical and historical terms. Their contributions will address topics such as the status of signs as a rhetorical category, the notion divination in the work of Plato and Pascal, the rhetorical status and power of sacred texts, and the question of rhetorical knowledges that exceed the rhetorical apparatus (such as, for example, big data and historical materialist science). A fuller description of each of the contributors’ chapters follows below. Taken as a whole, this study of rhetoric and the sacred is fundamental to how we define rhetoric’s relationship to the unknown, the impossible, and the incomprehensible.

In the book’s opening chapter, Cynthia Haynes looks at the work of the philosopher H  l  ne Cixous. By definition, Haynes writes, the *sacred* belongs to no category or system of representation. It is beyond what can be communicated, perhaps beyond all knowing. Rhetoric, on the other hand, takes that barrier as its foremost challenge: seeking to permeate the impermeable, to relate to the unrelatable, to unveil so as to enlighten. It is a kind of sacred act. Rhetoric acts *within* the sacred, in words other than it otherwise would. This chapter aims to examine this unruly character of rhetoric by situating the two in a different kind of relationship, one that

forms an organic bond—a passageway through which things come and go, ebb and flow, to and fro. To enter this forgotten passage, one needs *passwords*. Hélène Cixous likens them to “wizard words, that deliver love’s password in parentheses, in clandestinity.” We must not only remember this passage (it having been forgotten), we must learn (again) how to pass through it. This chapter intends to weave rhetoric and the sacred into a *passing through* various forgotten passages and the passwords with which we gain entrance to “the answer itself. The one that was waiting for us” (Cixous), even the one that is *unholy*.

In subsequent chapters, the contributors examine how the sacred, as a concept of the ineffable, shows itself in the work of several thinkers, from theology to politics, as a way to theorize a role for a power that eludes our ability to make it plain, to describe it, or to respond readily to its call. David Frank makes the case that the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the humans this God created are rhetorical creatures affected by the vagaries of time, culture, and exigencies that invite argumentative exchanges using rhetorical reason. Hebrew scriptures and the Torah depict God and humans as inflected with sacred touchstones that reveal themselves in divine mystery, the ineffable, the permanent, and things spiritual that place limits on the reach of rhetorical reason. Rhetoric’s relationship with the sacred in the Hebrew scriptures form a philosophical pair that undergoes continuous dissociation. As Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca contend, the act of dissociation maintains the existence and importance of conflicting values and places them in nested opposition. In the case of the rhetoric-sacred philosophical pair, dissociation retains and honors both when they are in conflict, but seeks innovative compromises, negotiations, and hierarchies that account for the peculiar factors comprising rhetorical situations.

Turning from Judaism to Christianity, Steven Mailloux examines the attempt to develop, in the 1960s, a dialogue between Christian and Marxist thinkers in the West, an attempt that included the work of Gaston Fessard, a Jesuit who wrote a commentary on the Jesuit tract *The Spiritual Exercises*, which was an attempt to establish a Jesuit pedagogical rhetoric. In this essay, Mailloux argues that Fessard’s focus on the language in contemporary partisan debates about religion and politics led to the development of a framework for discussing the possible conditions of dialogue in general that depended on the role of “sacred mystery” and “supernatural

symbolic structures” in Communist as well as Christian discourses. The essay examines Fessard’s framework for activism and explores how the rhetoric of dialogue is both limited and enabled by his appropriation of the sacred, particularly as the dialogue relates to the Jesuit adage of “seeing God in all things.”

In the chapter that follows, James Martel takes note of a point in common in the work of Thomas Hobbes and Walter Benjamin: for both writers all texts are potentially sacred, and often those texts that we consider to be sacred are not necessarily so. Sacredness lies in our *reading* of texts; it is an attribute—a state of radical possibility, which has the capacity to undo our sense of what language does—that individuals bring to the discursive act. Martel argues, apropos Benjamin and Hobbes, that the sacred is not so much a theological force as such but a site in which force is marked as unknowable, serving to give the power of interpretation over to communities that Hobbes is often seen as robbing of that power. The sacred, in this articulation, evinces an anarchist tendency wherein the power to declare something sacred is a political one resisting demands by sovereign authorities to determine the dimensions of political and social life in a community. Finally, Richard Doyle and Trey Conner’s essay notes that most of those who study the divine and the sacred begin with Mircea Eliade’s genealogies of religion, which create a clear divide in human experience between the sacred and the profane. Typically, such analyses of the sacred proceed by means of the practice of division: the sacred is that which is ineffably but unmistakably different—and divided—from the profane. Other religious traditions—particularly those from the East—posit the sacred as immanent, as the “treasure beneath our feet,” as described in the Chandogya Upanishad. In this iteration, the sacred beckons not from some elsewhere, as a rupture of the ordinary, but must instead be explored through a “turnabout in the field of consciousness,” in the words of American philosopher Franklin Merrill Wolff. Doyle and Conner explore the patterns and practices of such turnabouts, wherein the sacred is understood to be hidden in plain sight, and the rhetorical practices such turnabouts require.

The essays in the book’s second part articulate the ritual or practical dimension of the sacred and the ineffability of the sacred in the realm of science and other disciplines. To begin the section, Jodie Nicotra claims that like big data, the relatively new science of the microbiome depends on vast sets of information that run through algorithms, relying on “wide,

dirty” datasets that stymie classical statistical techniques. But because of the complexity of the datasets, the outcomes of machine learning algorithms have an inevitable opacity, resist human attempts to know and understand, and make the algorithms of contemporary machine learning “uncanny.” Big data makes visible a struggle between the unknowable and the known. Nicotra takes a close look at the use of big data in microbiome science as a rhetorical practice, one that uses inferences based on attunement to the nature and interactions of the natural world that could be described as both mystical and to a certain extent sacred, a response, in the words of Teston, to imperatives that resist conceptual understanding.

In the following chapter, Michelle Ballif notes that rhetoric contains within it—in its tripartite distinction between the epideictic, the forensic, and the deliberative—a process of divination that portends the future, which has traditionally been devalued as a form of “divine madness.” Ballif addresses the suppression of divination in rhetoric and takes up how it is currently used in contemporary rhetoric as a way to challenge the binary of the rational and the divine. If deliberation is irrational, it is so only because it cannot count on logistical equations to make decisions; it is not so irrational, however, that it cannot make judgments. It can. The essay examines rhetorical strategies of divination—necromancy, telepathy—as methods from which the field of rhetoric can learn and that can inform the theorization of rhetorical practice today.

In the essay that follows, Ned O’Gorman and Kevin Hamilton note that the Nazi political theorist and jurist Carl Schmitt argues that the modern state, far from articulating a move toward secularization and away from the sacred, re-creates the sacred in the form of political sovereignty, a re-creation that is, as an act of naming, rhetorical through and through. Their essay argues that the re-creation of the sacred in the form of the sovereign is inscribed into late-modern American governance in the form of a “nuclear sovereign,” a figure that holds unilateral and exclusive right to bring about global destruction, and examines the modern presidency in terms of sacred rhetoric. More than “civil religion” or a “rhetorical presidency,” modern American presidential rhetoric is rooted in a commitment to the sacred status of the sovereign.

Turning once again to philosophy, Brooke Rollins examines “Pascal’s Wager,” the gambit in the *Pensées* in which the Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal justifies belief in the divine through the logic of risk and reward,

noting that logic fails in the face of the divine. Rollins's essay makes the case that Pascal's wager should be understood in performative terms, one that exceeds and disturbs the content of its claims. As a rhetorical response to the sacred—an attempt to turn an audience of nonbelievers toward an unknowable God—Pascal puts his logical claims under erasure: it is an impossible response to the sacred and thus signals the limits of rhetoric. And it suggests that when confronted by the limits of knowledge, chance (in the form of a gamble) is a powerful, even emblematic mode of response. The essay traces the consequences of taking the gamble as a rhetorical turn in which the subject, unmoored from traditional experiences of space and time, turns to an engagement with the radically unknown.

The book's final two essays take up rhetoric as communication, and the extent to which the sacred may be made visible if not in ritual then perhaps in the discursive response to the divine call. Jean Bessette focuses on the notion of *kairos* as exemplifying the sacred's conundrum; it is a force on the edge of rhetoric that exceeds yet makes possible human agency and communication. Indeed, if *kairos* denotes the "right" or "opportune" time for intervention, it is not a time a rhetor can choose freely, predict in advance, or explain fully. There may even be two *kairoi* in any given rhetorical situation: the sacred call we both choose and are compelled to answer, and the retroactive—and rhetorical—identification of temporal "rightness" after the moment has passed and success has been gauged. To advance this reconsideration of the complexity of *kairos*, this chapter turns to the Stonewall Riots of 1969. On the face of it, Stonewall seems to exemplify the *kairotic* moment: after years of raids (usually thwarted or diminished by paying off the cops), this time was different. And yet the case of Stonewall's *kairos* reveals that what is right for the rhetoric is not always right for the rhetor. If the uprising succeeded in mobilizing the gay liberation movement (and so the time was right to riot), the rhetors who heeded the sacred call were not always so sure of its rightness. It is through the archive and its traces that we can see how *kairos* abuts the limits of rhetoric.

Finally, Daniel Gross turns to the idea of "interpersonal communication," an idea that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century as an impoverished humanism where the basic problem was bridging the gap between individual agents who appear to take turns as speaker and listener. "Extrapersonal communication" is a late modern countermodel—resonant with traditional versions of rhetoric (the sacred most prominently)—that

can include next to individual human agents, collectivities, machines, institutions, objects, nonhumans, unconscious language, and spiritual entities. With reference to Aristotle's unartful means of persuasion, Gross outlines a genealogy of extrapersonal communication focusing on the pivotal work of Sigmund Freud and his persuasive contrivances, or *Veranstaltungen*, which he grounded in sacred practices, in order to offer a new, and practically suggestive, continuity in the rhetorical tradition.

In the end, all the contributors to this volume argue that the sacred not only poses a limit to rhetoric, but also potentially does violence to it. The sacred does violence insofar as it makes that limit visible and confounds those schemes by which we would make sense of it, and those who contend with it are rendered vulnerable. Each of the contributors to this collection takes up the relation between the rational capacity of rhetoric to understand the past and its irrational capacity, the *immanent* power of rhetoric as rhetoric's surplus, in both theoretical and historical terms and the vulnerabilities that the limit lays bare. Taken as a whole, this study of rhetoric and the sacred is fundamental to how we define rhetoric's relationship to the unknown, the impossible, and the incomprehensible.

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