

NECK-RIDDLES IN MIMETIC THEORY

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The citation to Matthew 13:35 on the title page of René Girard's *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* points to the source of "things hidden since the foundation of the world." The Greek text reads κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς *kekrummena apo katabolês*.

These words of the Gospel are, as a footnote in the *Bible de Jérusalem* explains, a citation of Ps. 78:2: "*J'ouvre la bouche en paraboles, j'évoque du passé les mystères.*" The terms "*des choses cachées*" and "*mystères*" reflect the difference between the Greek phrases of the Gospel and the Septuagint. In the latter, Ps. 78 (77):2 describes the things that have been hidden from the foundation of the world as προβλήματα ἀπ' ἀρχῆς *problêmata ap'archês*. The Hebrew text

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renders for the parables in 2a *mašal*, and for the "problems from the beginning" in 2b, *hîdôt minnî qêdêm* 'riddles of old'.¹

A brief overview of the different terms in various languages, whose connotations overlap in part, suggests a complicated semantic field which needs to be examined in order to document the cultural meaning behind the diversity in rhetorical terminology. The distinctions resemble those of the well known *Familienähnlichkeiten* which Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses in chapter 67 of his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. *Mašal* (usually rendered

¹ The riddles referred to in Ps. 78: 4 concern the praiseworthy acts of YHWH and the wonders he has done.

in LXX as παραβολή *parabolê*) is to be translated, according to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 'comparison, saying, derived meaning'. It includes parables, fables, riddles, allegories, and proverbs.

If we restrict ourselves to the Hebrew word for riddle, *hîda*, it is interesting to learn that etymologically it means 'sharpness'. Hans-Peter Müller distinguishes four different meanings of *hîda*: folk riddle; symbolic dream and enigmatic oracle; riddle as means of the contest between kings; and a wisdom-genre of courtly schools (465).² The only text in the Old Testament where a complete riddle is rendered (image, solution, and context) is Judges 14, the riddle of Samson.

The *Bible de Jérusalem* employs another term in Judges 14, *énigme*, which goes back (via Latin) to the Greek αἰνίγμα *ainigma* from αἶνος *ainos*, meaning 'tale, story, saying, proverb'. *Énigme* is found in other contexts in the Bible as well. In 1 Cor. 13:12—"Car nous voyons, à présent, dans un miroir, en énigme, mais alors ce sera face en face" [Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face]—it corresponds to the original Greek ἐν αἰνίγματι *en ainigmati*. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines *ainigma* as follows: "The very essence of a riddle is to express facts in an impossible combination of language. This cannot be done by a mere succession of ordinary terms, but it can by the use of metaphors, as in the riddle, 'I saw a man welding bronze on another man with fire' and similar examples" (22).³ There is in Greek another word for riddle, γρίφος *grifos*, meaning 'fishing basket, creel'. André Jolles comments on their distinction: "*Irre ich mich nicht, so liegt in dem ersten mehr die Tatsache der Verrätselung, in dem zweiten dagegen, das eigentlich Netz bedeutet—ein Netz, das uns fangt, in dessen Verknotungen wir uns verwirren—, die Heimtücke der Verrätselung ausgedrückt* (144) [If I am not mistaken, the first term refers primarily to the act of riddling, while the second means originally 'net': to trap us. Our entanglement in the net's knots expresses the treachery of the riddle].

For a better understanding of the differences and similarities in the semantic field of 'riddle' it is useful to distinguish between, on the one hand, performance-oriented riddles as an element of discourse, in a speech situation, with a riddler and a riddlee, and, on the other hand, the use of the term in a more general sense, as mystery, problem, secret, paradox, etc., which do not

² Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ The solution to this riddle: a bronze cupping-bowl. Heated and placed over a small incision, it would, as it cooled, draw out the blood.

require an answer. When we investigate the conditions under which the speech event riddling takes place, it is also useful to undertake excursions into other languages and traditions to explore various riddle words, their uses, and etymologies. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga provides an example of such an inquiry in his discussion of the taboos about riddling among the Toradja of Central Celebes (now the Indonesian island Sulawesi):

The posing of riddles at their feasts is strictly limited as to time, and begins the moment the rice becomes "pregnant," lasting until the harvest. The "coming out" of the riddles naturally promotes the coming out of the rice-ears. As often as a riddle is solved the chorus chimes in: "Come out, rice! come out, you fat ears high up in the mountains or low down in the valleys!" During the season immediately preceding the above period all literary activities are forbidden, as they might endanger the growth of the rice. The same word *wailo* means both riddle and millet (i.e. all fruit of the fields) which staple was supplanted by rice. (108)

In this article I will confine myself to remarks on "riddles in contest," giving a few examples from world literature of rivalry in riddling between kings, gods, and giants. I will then discuss the folk tradition of the so-called 'neck-riddle', which follows this pattern. I will try to contrast some comments on this genre with insights from mimetic theory and will conclude with an interpretation of scapegoat representation in riddling.

Riddles in contest

The first book of Kings (chap. 10) relates that the Queen of Sheba came to test King Solomon with riddles. And "Solomon answered all her questions; not one of them was too hard for the King to answer." Although the text does not mention the content of the riddles, later rabbinical literature reports the questions ascribed to the Queen and the answers of the King, "to whom was given a wise and an understanding heart." One of the riddles from the Midrash Mishlae, as recorded by August Wünsche (16), is as follows: "A woman said to her son: 'Your father is my father, and your grandfather is my husband; you are my son and I am your sister.'" Solomon replied, "those are Lot's daughters." His answer, which refers to Genesis 19:32-38, displays the royal consciousness of incest.

Several researchers have acknowledged the relationship between the incest motif and riddling. Roger Abrahams notes that "the psychoanalyst-ethnographer Geza Róheim was perhaps the first to discourse on the relationship

between riddling and incest" (1980, 20). Elizabeth Archibald, quoting from Chiarini's study on *Appolonius of Tyre*, adds that "incest is not only the first sin, but also the first riddle" (24). While the substance in the queen's riddle is clear on this point, it is important to note that all riddles have the quality of merging what is in a certain sense meant to remain separate or forbidden to conjoin. They involve a comparison between entirely different objects.⁴ The riddles of the queen of Sheba are meant to test Solomon's wisdom concerning taboos and other curious things and events.

Mythology shows various examples of such more or less ritual emulation in secret knowledge, which at times is accompanied by violence. Riddles appear frequently in Old Norse myths, for example. In one of the Eddic poems *Vafthrudnismal*, the god Odin, who disguises his identity, matches his own lore with that of the giant Vafthrudnir. After an initial test of four questions about the secret names of mythological objects, they continue the wager with the loser's head at stake. The poem ends with the answer of the losing giant, who finally recognizes his antagonist.

The most famous riddles in medieval Scandinavian works are preserved in the contest between King Heidrek and Gestumbli (again Odin in disguise). One of Gestumbli's riddles: "From home I went / and left my home / and saw the roads on the road; / a road was above, / a road was below; / solve my riddle / correctly, king Heidrek" (*Medieval Scandinavia Encyclopedia*, s.v. "riddle").⁵

My final example of riddles in contest concerns the *brahmodya* in Vedic literature, the verbal contest in which the life of the Brahman is at stake, as discussed in chapter 6 of *Homo Ludens*. In his discussion of the astonishing similarity among agonistic customs in all cultures, Huizinga turns to the competitions in knowledge of holy things, of their sacred names, and of the origin of the world at the sacred feast: "The function of these ritual riddle-solving competitions is shown at its clearest in Vedic lore. At the great sacrificial festivals they were as essential a part of the ceremony as the sacrifice itself (105-6). In his view the riddle is "a sacred thing full of secret power, hence a dangerous thing. In its mythological or ritual context it is

⁴ "Riddles combine incombinales—as marriage does," comments Elli Maranda (214). James Fernandez adds that "this may be why so many riddles, incidentally, deal with sexual innuendo. In any event, riddles perform a union or conjunction of separated entities on the cognitive level that on the physical level is one of the species' primary preoccupations" (176).

⁵ The answer is that Gestumbli stood on a bridge, a river was under him, and birds flew in all directions above him.

nearly always what German philologists know as the *Halsrätsel* or 'capital riddle', which either you solve or forfeit your head. The player's life is at stake. A corollary of this is that it is accounted the highest wisdom to put a riddle nobody can answer" (108-9).

The neck-riddle

The English terms 'capital riddle' and 'neck-riddle' are translations of the German *Halslösungsrätsel*.⁶ In the examples from the royal contest the terms are employed in the broad sense to mean a wager with the loser's head at stake. Some folklorists use the terms specifically to refer to certain riddles recorded from oral tradition since the second part of the nineteenth century. While 'normal' riddles are embedded in a speech event (someone tries to give an answer to an enigmatic question), in the neck-riddle corpus the speech event itself is typically embedded in a narrative frame consisting of two parts: one tells about a condemned person who is able to save his or her neck by propounding a riddle the judge is unable to answer; the other contains the solution. A further condition in this restricted sense of the term is that all neck-riddles refer to private and curious experiences of the riddler. Most of them are in strophic form.

Many neck-riddles from the European oral tradition, and from other places of the world as well, have been recorded in nineteenth- and twentieth-century collections (see Wossidlo, Petsch, Norton, Meyer, Abrahams). They are generally classified according to four general categories: "ILO," "Living in the dead," "Morning Spring," and "Unborn."

1. "**ILO.**" The name "ILO," which derives from the German tradition, is a corruption of English 'My love'. The example which follows was recorded in Devon by Sabine Baring-Gould around 1890: "Love I sit / Love I stand; / Love I hold / Fast in hand. / I see Love, / Love sees not me. / Riddle me that, / or hanged I'll be" (Norton 35) [*Auf ILO geh ich I Auf ILO steh ich / Auf ILO bin ich hübsch und fein / Raft meine Herren was soll das sein* (Wossidlo I, 191)].

The narrative frame tells about a woman condemned to death. When she pleaded her case, her beauty and great goodness touched the judges to such an

⁶ The term 'neck-riddle' is reported to have been coined by Archer (Dorst 429. fn. 8). *Halslösungsrätsel* (also *Halslöserätsel* or *Halsrätsel*) means literally 'neck-saving riddle'. The earlier term, *Heidrekrätsel*, was derived from the name of King Heidrek in the *Hervararsaga* (*Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, s. v. "Halslöserätsel")-

extent that they promised to save her neck if she could propose a riddle they could not answer in the term of three days. She was given one day to prepare. When the judges were unable to guess the riddle, they acquitted the condemned woman. The explanation she gave to them in the frame story is: "She had a dog, called 'Love'. She had killed it, and with its skin had made socks for her shoes—on these she stood; gloves for her hand—and these she held; a seat for her chair—on that she sat; she looked at her gloves and she saw Love; but Love saw her no more" (Norton 36).

2. "Living in the dead." A story of a man condemned to death for stealing a sheep was recorded in Herefordshire in 1907 by Ella Leather. The magistrates said they would set the convicted man free if he could ask a riddle they could not answer. He was given three days in order to invent the riddle. When he left the prison, he saw a horse's skull by the roadside. When he returned to the prison on the third day, he noticed that in the skull was a bird's nest with six young birds. This is the basis for his riddle: "As I walked out, As I walked in, / From the dead I saw the living spring. / Blessed may Christ Jesus be / For the six have set the seventh free" (Meyer 33). According to the solution in the narrative frame, the first line refers to the convicted man's departure and return to the prison. Line two refers to the horse's skull and the living young birds. Line three contains a prayer formula. And line four states that the six birds have set the seventh, the prisoner, free.

3. "Morning Spring." In the early 1950s Leonard Roberts recorded the neck-riddle in Eastern Kentucky about a king who tells his servant that if he can pose a riddle the king cannot answer, the servant will win his freedom from bondage: "Good morning, good morning, your ceremony, king, / I drunk a drink out of your morning spring; / Through the gold the streams did run, / In your garden that was done; / If you can unriddle that I'll be hung" (qtd. in Abrahams 1980, 25). The solution is that the servant sought the help of the queen whom he met in the garden where she nursed him on the breast through a gold ring.

4. "Unborn." The narrative frame of our final example of the neck-riddle, recorded in Northern England around 1860, is comparable to the above three categories: "Under the earth I go / Upon oak-leaves I stand / I ride on a filly that never was foaled / And carry the mare's skin in my hand" (Norton 42). The solution is that the prisoner put earth in his cap and oak leaves in his

shoes; he then cut open a pregnant mare to obtain the foal, and made a whip of the mare's skin.

In the classification of Aarne and Thompson's *The Types of Folktale* some neck-riddles are represented under the heading "Clever Acts and Words" (920-9), specifically "Out-riddling the judge" (927). The motif of the execution evaded through the use of three wishes belongs to this classification. In romantic folktales, the riddler's experience both before and during wedding ceremonies also plays a role. The hero must pose or solve an 'unsolvable' riddle in order to save himself from execution or win the hand of the princess, and he succeeds by formulating a riddle based on his personal experience (851). In the riddle contest, a princess is offered in marriage to the youth who can propose a riddle she cannot solve. On the way to the contest, the hero is given a clue: he sees a horse who had been poisoned and eaten by ravens; the ravens fall dead and are in turn eaten by twelve men who subsequently also die of the poison. When the hero propounds a variant of the riddle of the unborn, the princess tries to solve it by visiting him at night and learning of its content from his dreams. He is, however, aware of her visit, keeps a token, and proves that she had visited him.⁷

As Aarne and Thompson illustrate, neck-riddles have also been associated with the motif of the devil as advocate (812, 1178). Wossidlo recounts one such example in the story of a man who gives his son to the devil: when the boy is fifteen years old, the devil comes for the youth and poses three riddles, each with an incorrect answer. The boy defeats the devil, however, by giving the correct answers.

Was ist süsser denn süß?
Zucker un honnig!
Weiche von mir, der mutter frust.
Was is weicher denn weich?
Dunen un feddern!
Weiche von mir, der mutter schooss.
Was is härter denn hart?
Stahl und isen!
Wiche von mir, des vaters herz. (223)
[What is sweeter than sweet?
Sugar and honey!

⁷ For specific examples, see Grimm, tale no. 22; the story of Turandot in *Les Mille et un Jour* (Pétis de la Croix, 63-81).

Leave me, mother's breast.
 What is softer than soft?
 Down and feather!
 Leave me, mother's womb.
 What is harder than hard?
 Steel and iron!
 Leave me, father's heart.]

The reference to the private experience of the riddler is an interesting factor of the neck-riddle, for it means that the questions are insolvable for outsiders and their solution cannot be found through wit alone. A prototype of the riddle with this feature of autoreferentiality is Samson's "Out of the eater comes something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet" (Judg. 14:14). One explanation of this riddle, which underscores its resemblance with the above mentioned "Living in the Dead" riddle, is that Samson refers to the living bees in the lion's carcass (for other interpretations, see Müller). Because of their insolubility, German researchers such as Robert Petsch have labeled neck-riddles *unwirkliche Rätsel* 'unreal riddles' (12).

The subject-matter in all neck-riddles derives from ancient stories. As John Dorst says, "the matter of... neck-riddles clearly has historical affinities with the secular prenovelistic prose of late antiquity" (418). Petsch, among others, further characterizes such stories as bizarre, grotesque, *grausig* (16). The "ILO" riddle often recalls the motif of a queen's lover, usually a slave, who is killed by her husband or son. The queen takes possession of the body, makes various objects of it, then challenges her lover's murderer with a riddle. If he guesses the solution correctly, she must die; if he fails, he forfeits his kingdom or dies. The "Morning Spring" riddle remodels the story of late antiquity of the faithful daughter who saves the life of her imprisoned father by nursing him. It is based on the reversal of generations. As Norton explains, "the story may be traced back through the *Gesta Romanorum* to classical antiquity, and is found in Valerius Maximus, the elder Pliny, and other Latin authors" (50). The riddle of the "Unborn" refers to ancient stories of unnatural birth which occur outside the judicial frame. A well-known example is the oracle of the witches in *Macbeth*, where the unborn hero—"from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd"—turns out to be to Macduff, the character who defeats Macbeth.

Modern research in folklore which develops the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin extends his dialogical theory of genre relationships to include the neck-riddle complex (see Bakhtin, especially 92-3). Its focus on the

carnival motif introduces a new way of thinking about old texts.⁸ Dorst, for example, situates the neck-riddle outside the canon of 'official' literary types and explains it "as the name for an arena of generic conflict within which a range of intergeneric accommodations can occur" (416). Some neck riddles are performed like *Anansi*, as a story with a riddle; others as a riddle that tells a story. In Dorst's view, the interpenetration of multiple voices in neck-riddles contains clear echoes of carnival practices: they are constructed of a system of imagery with murderous birth and parturient death, confusions of family relations, of youth and age, of wholesome food and poison, dismemberments, incest, and reversals.

Scapegoat representation in riddling

If we try to understand neck-riddles from the viewpoint of mimetic theory, intriguing questions arise. Specifically, why have researchers' analyses of this genre been so contradictory? For Petsch, neck-riddles are not riddles in the proper sense of the term. For Schultz, Huizinga, and Jolies they are basic to a better understanding of riddles in general.

If we return to Greek *parabolê*, we are reminded of Girard's hint in *The Scapegoat* that

we need only to consult a dictionary to learn that the parabolic distortion of a text involves a certain concession to the mythological representation of violence that results from the collective murder of a scapegoat. *Paraballo* means to throw the crowd something edible in order to assuage its appetite for violence, preferably a victim, someone condemned to death. Obviously, this is a way out of a very difficult situation. The speaker has recourse to a parable—that is, a metaphor—in order to prevent the crowd from turning on him. (192-3)

The "paraballo" distracts the avenging crowd; it mitigates the crowd's violence diverting it away from the victim.

Mutatis mutandis, this consideration is also relevant to the riddle, partly hyponym and synonym of *parabolê* and *mašal* (Sellin 398): the speech event can be characterized as a process in which rivalry eminently occurs, and violence, sometimes in ritual form, is at stake. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* opens

⁸ Roger Abrahams notes that "carnival becomes the genre of genres, in this [i.e. Bakhtin's et al.] view, because all others are subject to imitation and resuscitation in the license of this yearly moment" (1989, 206).

its entry "riddle" with the remark: "Among the ancients, as witness the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx, a riddle was a more serious matter than in modern times, more in the nature of a wager than of an amusement."

The riddle contest in world mythology clearly shows this aspect of riddling. In Vedic literature we find the mythic version of a murder in the story of a Brahman whose head falls from his trunk when he fails to answer a riddle in the contest. Riddles are to be joined to rituals around a scapegoat. In ancient Greece the one who failed to give the right answer in riddle sessions had to drink salt wine (Wünsche 14), which probably is a mitigation of the heavier punishment of beheading. In early versions of the riddle contest during wedding ceremonies, murder was also at stake. Jolies tells us that "they say that in former days in Hawaii people who were not able to solve a riddle were thrown into the cook-pit and their victory trophies were preserved. Some families accordingly refused to solve riddles, because their relatives had perished in this way. . . . Others comment on the questions of riddling, "Our bones are at stake (133)." Research on contemporary riddle session suggests that physical signs, such as people's need to be tuned up, or warmed up (Rickford 92), reflect the tension that surrounds the riddle contest. The metaphor "to lose face" for failing to give a good answer or propound a threadbare riddle, is an expression that belongs to the vocabulary of expulsion. Riddle-researchers themselves have reported being humiliated when, at their entrance in the speech community, they had to solve sexual riddles which gave opportunity to laughter.⁹

Taboos in riddling are customary in many traditional societies. During certain seasons and during funerals it can be forbidden. In other societies, however, such events require riddling. We might solve this paradox by conceiving the social events in terms of their regulation of rivalry. The position of the dead, for example, can vary according to the representation of the scapegoat mechanism. In this view, riddles make us aware of the ritual and social traces of scapegoating. People who solve difficult riddles attain power or display superiority in their competence to interpret the world around us. Riddles have the characteristic to selectively confuse the very domains we use as means of asserting order, in the sense Mary Douglas uses the term. What confuses order most is, of course, the transgression of the incest-taboo, which is why we stated that on a symbolic level riddles can be incest-like. By origin

⁹ Abrahams describes his status-reduction during fieldwork in Nevis (West Indies) by failing to label 'son' as the scrotum enlarged by elephantiasis, and 'poor-key' as 'porky', a word for vagina (1980, 18).

they belong to the royal domain, which justifies the hypothesis that they have been functioning as a strategy of the former scapegoats that kings were supposed to be (cf. Girard 1978, 60ff.; Simonse 421ff.).

Although the carnival practice as described by Dorst and others who employ Bakhtin's theory offers interesting insights, it can be analyzed more effectively if conceived in terms of the mimetic crisis which we find in the code of the neck-riddle. The system of imagery, the multiple voices, and the reversals are more likely to refer to a former social chaos and to the solutions the society had chosen in order to resolve it. "Living in the dead" riddles, in this sense, would be metaphorical stories about the wisdom of the murdered scapegoat who comes to life. The observed confusion in terminology referring to riddles and secrets leads one to suspect that carnival is more than just "the realm where voices confront one another in free and equal dialogue," as Dorst affirms (417), but also bears the traits of the confused noise of a crowded assembly.

In his monograph on the oral traditions about the genesis and transformations of a martyr cult in Southern Malawi, Matthew Schoffeleers summarizes five major positions in regard to the historiographical potential of folk narratives (to which neck-riddles belong). They can be considered (1) 'charters' to claim the right to control a particular institution, (2) symbolic interpretations of values, (3) topological representations from which it is impossible to extract historical information, (4) mythical or non-mythical elements in chronicles, and (5) mythical events that may contain historical information, albeit in symbolic form (11). The mimetic approach will reject only the third, the structuralist, position, which views the folk narrative as topological representations. If we consider the latter perspectives, we find in Hansjörg Meyer the warning to be cautious in claiming that neck-riddles actually did play a role in the reality of judicial processes (129ff.). Meyer does note, however, many parallels between those narratives and facts in medieval history of law. It is remarkable that the neck-riddle with the judicial frame has no place in the riddle collections of the sixteenth century; the stories were recorded only in the nineteenth century, a fact which might have to do with the disappearance of witch-trials.

The confrontation between judge and condemned reveals two types of scapegoat: the god/king/judge on the one hand, and the devil/criminal on the other. The grotesque experiences of the riddler can be traced back to the crimes of the gods. In their uniqueness they display the arbitrariness also found in what Girard calls "*les jeux de hasard qui correspondent à la résolution sacrificielle*" (1977, 111) [the games of chance that correspond to

the sacrificial resolution]. The position of the riddler is inside as well as outside the community.

In our modern eyes a remarkable change has taken place concerning the position of the actants: it is not the judge who examines the condemned, but the reverse. Chapter 4 in the Gospel of Matthew shows that the story of the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness has the same pattern. The presupposition in the neck-riddle is: the judge ceases to be a judge if he fails to answer, if he is unable to penetrate the secrets concealed in the riddle. In a formal sense, hierarchy prevails, but the speech event of the riddle referring to bizarre and arbitrary experiences creates a moment of *communitas*¹⁰ which enforces mercy. The condemned counterpart makes the judges aware of the references the riddle contains and, thus, of the arbitrariness which any accusation in a deeper sense contains. If the judges failed to answer, they would be forced to die. They are inferior, just as the condemned, in the process: "Beide Seiten sind nun in der Todeswürdigkeit ebenbürtig," says Herbert Leroy (43) [both sides are now equivalent in their being deserving of death]. The reversal is that both judge and prisoner are *ebenbürtig* 'equivalent' also in their right to live, which forms the ground for mercy. Riddler and riddlee, prisoners and judges, are interchangeable in the context of the neck-riddle. The doubles are victims: the prisoners in the actual situation, the judges by origin. The latter are supposed to dispose of the wisdom to get to the core of the mystery. In their recourse to the parable they will meet themselves in their search for evil transgressions—and for mercy. "And I sought whence evil should be, and sought in an evil way, but I did not see the evil in my very search."¹¹

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¹⁰ For an anthropological elaboration of this notion, see Turner, who attaches *communitas* to liminality: ". . . the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is to be low" (96).

¹¹ *Et quaerebam unde malum, et male querebam et in ipsa inquisitione mea non videbam malum* (Augustine, *Confessions*, book VII, V: 7).

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