He was an original. Not that you could copy Valerio Valeri in any case; he was not duplicable for sheer erudition, intellectual power, or analytic finesse. He disliked the word “creativity,” considered it I believe some sort of American banality—which qualifies me to use it in reference to some of the astonishing connections he makes in these pages. As for example, ludic myths concerning Hawaiian gods that transpose, in a different frame, the structure of the royal sacrificial rituals that install the god in the temple and the king in the realm. Or the related exposition of the essential similarity of play, art, and ritual in their unification of things distinct in ordinary experience and discursive thought, together with how their similarities differ. Overriding such distinctions in the received anthropological discourse, much of Valeri’s work comes as an intellectual shock, as illuminating as it is iconoclastic.

As for erudition, there is not only Valeri’s global ethnographic scope and mastery of cultural comparison on the model of the anthropological greats of old: of whom we’ll probably not see the likes again, not in our generations. One would have to have the sensibility of the anthropological project, the knowing of humanity in its cultural variety, that Valeri testifies to here. True that, except for a revelatory exploration of Marx’s famous thesis on commodity fetishism, the studies in Rituals and Annals are concerned mainly with religious and political matters; one will have to go to Valeri’s other writings, especially his ethnographic accounts of Seram, to discover his infrastructuralism, so to speak, his cultural analyses of economic relations. True also, the book has a certain emphasis on Hawaiian kingship—its forms, myths, rites, and history—but comparison is invited in other
chapters with kingships the world around: including Japanese diarchy, Rwandan hierarchy, the relations of Brähman and Kṣatriya in India, and of the celeritas and gravitas kings of ancient Rome, to mention only some of the more notable polities. Then again, there is a lot more than kingship in these essays, which study a range of cultural practices from Ashanti fetishes to Northwest Coast potlatches, Oceanic kinship relations, Antwerp municipal festivals, and Chinese mortuary rites, together with many and diverse others, all examined with the same virtuosity. Erudition: when we were colleagues at the University of Chicago, I calculated that Valeri had a working knowledge of seventeen languages.

Yet Rituals and Annals is no mere ethnographic tour du monde. These specific cultural notices are well chosen sites of theoretical engagement with a remarkable number of famous and not so famous scholarly interlocutors, few of whom emerge completely unscathed from the encounter, yet many whose positive contributions as well are integrated in Valeri’s critical reinterpretations. Not that the book is an exercise in academic blood sports. Most of Valeri’s theoretical commentary is by way of a conscientious review of the pertinent literature. The common effect is like his take on the Freudian understanding of mourning practice as the support for the individual work of grief. Involving vast collections of relatives, friends, neighbors, and clients, all interacting through conventional forms of behavior, language, dress, and ornamentation that signify different categories and kinds of bereavement, in rites that may last for many days and entail transmissions of property and successions to titles, mourning cannot be reduced simply to its cathartic individual functions. Together with the psychological dimension, therefore, its study must take into account the sociological phenomena that encompass it—not to neglect either “a specifically cognitive dimension, for death also poses conceptual problems” (Chapter XII: 365).

By this commentary Freud joins a distinguished company of intellectual predecessors whose works Valeri likewise subjects to an appreciation tempered by the exposure of an ethnographic or logical insufficiency of some degree, including: Durkheim, Mauss, Comte, Frazer, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, Dumont, Bataille, J. C. Heesterman, K. A. Wittfogel, Victor Turner, Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, Mary Douglas, Rodney Needham, Robin Horton, Edmund Leach, Robertson-Smith, Meyer Fortes, A. M. Hocart, and others. I hasten to add that many of these, including Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach
have been more essentially at the core of Valeri’s thinking, along with others who may be cited more occasionally yet clearly foundationally—among them: Nietzsche, Fustel de Coulanges, Saussure, Kantorowicz, Bergson, J. L. Austin, Dumézil, and Marc Bloch. Some of these are hardly mentioned at all, Saussure for instance, but their influence is palpable. Then again there are the philosophers who make passing but illuminating entrances into specific matters of cultural order: Plato, Kant, Hegel, St. Thomas, Spinoza, Confucius, Wittgenstein, Hume, Voltaire, et al. And finally, the grace notes from Valeri’s vast literary knowledge: as, for example, the asides on “Tesauro, a court writer and creator of ideas and librettos for the Dukes of Savoy,” and Jean Golein, “in his famous fourteenth-century Traité du sacre.” The whole is much more than an academic treatise. It is an intellectual treat.

Finally, to return to “creativity,” there is probably something of that in Rituals and annals for everyone in the human sciences. As, for example, in the play between “structure” and “history” that runs through the Polynesian essays. Entailed therein is a series of theoretical moves that fruitfully redefines these supposedly irreconcilable ways of knowing and demonstrates fundamental relations between them. Rather than a synchronic configuration in which everything holds together (tout se tient), structure itself has an internal diachrony—as in Hawai’i, where the structure of the polity “was conceived as the scheme of a process” (Chapter III: 113)—in the course of which the elements change their attributes as they change their relationships. Foreign and violent by origin, the king enters society as a “conqueror,” only to be domesticated by it and become the source of good order and prosperity. Note that the kingship takes on antithetical qualities—outside and inside, violent and peaceful—although the structure is not contradictory in itself, inasmuch as it is processual. But then, by the presence of such opposed qualities, coded in traditional rites and narratives, the system is potentially open to actual diachrony. It can become truly historical by the selective and interested use of royal traditions to organize a contingent situation.

Hence the two kinds of history which, as Valeri shows, develop respectively from events and memories. Taking the form of one thing following from another in durational time, event history is syntagmatically ordered. Whereas the history that is generated from memory—as in the case of kings who act as the persons and in the relationships of dynastic ancestors; or kings who opportunistically adopt some tradi-
tional precedent for its current strategic advantages—this history is metaphorical, working by analogy to a distant past rather than as the direct effect of an immediate one. However, as Valeri persuasively argues, even an analogical history is not necessarily a stereotypic reproduction of the past. For not only are memories pragmatically chosen, but analogies, for all their similarities, also entail differences. One is reminded of the observation popularly attributed to Mark Twain: history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

Here in closing, then, is a summary passage on the interrelations of structure and history exemplary of the quality of the mind and the brilliance of the dialectics one will find throughout the book:

I have tried to illuminate a historical process by reference to a structure and, reciprocally, to illuminate a structure by reference to a historical process. In the latter, the structure displays itself; in the former, the process can be perceived as orderly. The structure is therefore a condition of intelligibility of the process as much as the process is a condition of intelligibility of the structure. Neither is intelligible without reference to the other. The paradoxical result of this fact is that the structure becomes fully intelligible only on the process of change, and the process is intelligible only if it displays a certain changelessness. (Chapter II: 112–13)