THE
LAWS OF IMITATION

BY

GABRIEL TARDE
Professor in the College de France, Member of the Institute

TRANSLATED FROM THE SECOND
FRENCH EDITION BY

ELSIE CLEWS PARSONS
Lecturer on Sociology in Barnard College

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

FRANKLIN H. GIDDINGS
Professor of Sociology in Columbia University

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PETER SMITH
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at first enough for it to multiply uniform copies of itself. But self-propagation and not self-organisation is the prime demand of the social as well as of the vital thing. Organisation is but the means of which propagation, of which *generative* or *imitative* repetition, is the end.

To sum up, to the question which I began by asking: What is society? I have answered: Society is imitation. We have still to ask: What is imitation? Here the sociologist should yield to the psychologist.

IV

1. Taine sums up the thought of the most eminent physiologists when he happily remarks that the brain is a *repeating* organ for the senses and is itself made up of elements which repeat one another. In fact, the sight of such a congery of like cells and fibres makes any other idea impossible. Moreover, direct proof is at hand in the numerous observations and experiments which show that the cutting away of one hemisphere of the brain, and even the removal of much of the substance of the other, affects only the intensity, without at all changing the integrity, of the intellectual functions. The part that was removed, therefore, did not collaborate with the part that remained; both parts could only copy and reinforce each other. Their relation was not economic and utilitarian, but imitative and social in the sense that I use that term. Whatever may be the cellular function which calls forth thought (a highly complex vibration, perhaps?), there is no doubt that it is reproduced and multiplied in the interior of the brain every moment of our mental life and that to every distinct perception a distinct cellular function corresponds. The indefinite and inexhaustible continuation of these intricate and richly intersecting radiations constitutes memory and habit. When the multiplying repetition in question is confined to the nervous system, we have memory; when it spreads out into the muscular system, we have habit. Memory,

so to speak, is a purely nervous habit; habit is both a nervous and a muscular memory.

Thus every act of perception, in as much as it involves an act of memory, which it always does, implies a kind of habit, an unconscious imitation of self by self. There is, evidently, nothing social in this. When the nervous system is sufficiently excited to set in motion a certain set of muscles, habit, properly speaking, appears. It is another case of non-social, or, as I might better say, of *presocial* or *subsocial* self-imitation. This does not mean that, as alleged, an idea is an abortive act. Action is only the following up of an idea, the acquisition of a steadfast faith. Muscle works only for the enrichment of nerves and brain.

But if the remembered idea or image was originally lodged in the mind through conversation or reading, if the habitual act originated in the view or knowledge of a similar act on the part of others, these acts of memory and habit are social as well as psychological facts, and they show us the kind of imitation of which I have already spoken at such length.[1] Here we have memory and habit which are not individual, but collective. Just as a man does not see, listen, walk, stand, write, play the flute, or, what is more, invent or imagine, except by means of many co-ordinated muscular memories, so a society could not exist or change or advance a single step unless it possessed an untold store of blind routine and slavish imitation which was constantly being added to by successive generations.

2. What is the essential nature of the suggestion which passes from one cerebral cell to another and which consti-

[1] While correcting the proofs of my second edition, I read in the *Revue de métaphysique* a brief review of an article of Mr. Baldwin's which appeared in 1894 in *Mind* under the title of *Imitation: A Chapter in the Natural History of Consciousness.* "Mr. Baldwin," writes his reviewer, "wishes to define and generalise the theories of Tarde. Biological imitation, or imitation which is primarily subcortical, is a circular reaction of the nerves, that is, it reproduces its own stimulus. Psychological or cortical imitation is *habit* (expressed in the principle of identity) and *accommodation* (expressed in the principle of sufficient reason). It is, in short, sociological, plastic, and only secondarily subcortical."

tutes mental life? We do not know.[1] Do we know anything more about the essence of the suggestion which passes from one person to another and which constitutes social life? We do not; for if we take this phenomenon in itself, in its higher state of purity and intensity, we find it related to one of the most mysterious of facts, a fact which is being studied with intense curiosity by the baffled philosophic alienists of the day, *i. e.*, somnambulism.[2] If you re-read contemporaneous works on this subject, especially those of Richet, Binet and Féré, Beaunis, Bernheim, Delbœuf, I shall not seem fanciful in thinking of the social man as a veritable somnambulist. I think, on the contrary, that I am conforming to the most rigorous scientific method in endeavouring to explain the complex by the simple, the compound by the element, and to throw light upon the mixed and complicated social tie, as we know it, by means of a social tie which is very pure, which is reduced to its simplest expression, and which is so happily realised for the edification of the sociologist in a state of somnambulism. Let us take the hypothetical case of a man who has been removed from every extra-social influence, from the direct view of natural objects, and from the instinctive obsessions of his different senses, and who has communication only with those like himself or, more especially, to simplify the question, with one person like himself. Is not such an ideal subject the proper one through which to study by experiment and observation the really essential characteristics of social relations, set free in this way from all complicating influences of a natural or physical order? But

[1] At the time when the foregoing and the following considerations first appeared in print, in November, 1884, in the *Revue philosophique*, hypnotic suggestion was but barely spoken of and the idea of universal social suggestion, an idea which has since been so strongly emphasised by Bernheim and others, was cast up against me as an untenable paradox. Nothing could be commoner than this view at present.

[2] This old-fashioned term shows that at the time of the first publication of this passage the word *hypnotism* had not as yet been altogether substituted for somnambulism.

are not hypnotism and somnambulism the exact realisation of this hypothesis? Then I shall not excite surprise if I briefly review the principal phenomena of these singular states and if I find both magnified and diminutised, both overt and covert, forms of them in social phenomena. Through such a comparison, we may perhaps come to a better understanding of the fact that is called abnormal by showing to what extent it is general, and of the fact that is general by perceiving its distinctive traits in high relief in the apparent anomaly.

The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action. Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous. To appreciate the truth of this sociological point of view, we must not take ourselves into consideration, for should we admit this truth about ourselves, we would then be escaping from the blindness which it affirms; and in this way a counter argument might be made out. Let us call to mind some ancient people whose civilisation differs widely from our own, the Egyptians, or Spartans, or Hebrews. Did not that people think, like us, that they were autonomous, although, in reality, they were but the unconscious puppets whose strings were pulled by their ancestors or political leaders or prophets, when they were not being pulled by their own contemporaries? What distinguishes us modern Europeans from these alien and primitive societies is the fact that the magnetisation has become mutual, so to speak, at least to a certain extent; and because we, in our democratic pride, a little exaggerate this reciprocity, because, moreover, forgetting that in becoming mutual, this magnetisation, the source of all faith and obedience, has become general, we err in flattering ourselves that we have become less credulous and docile, less imitative, in short, than our ancestors. This is a fallacy, and we shall have to rid ourselves of it. But even if the aforesaid notion were true, it would nevertheless be clear that before the relations of model and copyist, of mas-

ter and subject, of apostle and neophyte, had become reciprocal or alternative, as we ordinarily see them in our democratic society, they must of necessity have begun by being one-sided and irreversible. Hence castes. Even in the most democratic societies, the one-sidedness and irreversibility in question always exist at the basis of social imitations, *i. e.*, in the family. For the father is and always will be his son's first master, priest, and model. Every society, even at present, begins in this way.

Therefore, in the beginning of every old society, there must have been, *a fortiori*, a great display of authority exercised by certain supremely imperious and positive individuals. Did they rule through terror and imposture, as alleged? This explanation is obviously inadequate. They ruled through their *prestige*. The example of the magnetiser alone can make us realise the profound meaning of this word. The magnetiser does not need to lie or terrorise to secure the blind belief and the passive obedience of his magnetised subject. He has prestige—that tells the story. That means, I think, that there is in the magnetised subject a certain potential force of belief and desire which is anchored in all kinds of sleeping but unforgotten memories, and that this force seeks expression just as the water of a lake seeks an outlet. The magnetiser alone is able through a chain of singular circumstances to open the necessary outlet to this force. All forms of prestige are alike; they differ only in degree. We have prestige in the eyes of anyone in so far as we answer his need of affirming or of willing some given thing. Nor is it necessary for the magnetiser to speak in order to be believed and obeyed. He need only act; an almost imperceptible gesture is sufficient.

This movement, together with the thought and feeling which it expresses, is immediately reproduced. Maudsley says that he is not sure that the somnambulist is not enabled to read unconsciously what is in the mind through "an *unconscious* imitation of the attitude and expression of the person whose *exact* muscular contradictions are *instinctively*

copied."[1] Let us observe that the magnetised subjects imitates the magnetiser, but that the latter does not imitate the former. *Mutual imitation,* mutual prestige or *sympathy,* in the meaning of Adam Smith, is produced only in our so-called waking life and among people who seem to exercise no magnetic influence over one another. If, then, I have put prestige, and not sympathy, at the foundation and origin of society, it is because, as I have said before, the unilateral must have preceded the reciprocal.[2] Without an age of authority, however surprising this fact may be, an age of comparative fraternity would never have existed. But, to return, why should we really marvel at the one-sided, passive imitation of the somnambulist? Any act of any one of our fellows inspires us who are lookers-on with the more or less irrational idea of imitation. If we at times resist this tendency, it is because it is neutralised by some antagonistic suggestions of memory or perception. Since the somnambulist is for the time being deprived of this power of resistance, he can illustrate for us the imitative quiescence of the social being in so far as he is social, *i. e.,* in so far as he has relations exclusively with his fellows and, especially, with one of his fellows.

If the social man were not at the same time a natural being, open and sensitive to the impressions of external nature and of alien societies, he would never be capable of change. Like associates would remain forever incapable of changing spontaneously the type of traditional ideas and desires which had been impressed upon them by the conventional teaching of their parents, priests, or leaders. Certain peoples have been known to approach singularly close to this condition. Nascent communities, like young children, are, in general, indifferent and insensible to all which

[1] *The Pathology of Mind* [p. 69. Henry Maudsley, M. D., New York, 1890. The italics are the author's.—*Tr.*].

[2] On this point I need correction. Sympathy is certainly the primary source of sociability and the hidden or overt soul of every kind of imitation, even of imitation which is envious and calculating, even of imitation of an enemy. Only, it is certain that sympathy itself begins by being one-sided instead of mutual.

does not concern man or the kind of man whom they resemble, the man of their own race or tribe.[1] "The somnambulist sees and hears," says A. Maury, "only what enters into the preoccupations of his dream." In other words, all his power of belief and desire is concentrated on a single point. Is not this the exact effect of obedience and imitation *through fascination?* Is not fascination a genuine neurosis, a kind of unconscious *polarisation* of love and faith?

Now many great men from Rameses to Alexander, from Alexander to Mahomet, from Mahomet to Napoleon, have thus polarised the soul of their people! How often has a prolonged gaze upon the brilliant point of one man's glory or genius thrown a whole people into a state of catalepsy! The torpor that appears in somnambulism is, as we know, only superficial; it masks an intense excitement. This is the reason why the somnambulist does not hesitate to perform great feats of strength and skill. A similar phenomenon occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century when military France fell into a passive and, at the same time, feverish state of mingled torpor and excitement and performed prodigies in obedience to the gesture of its imperial fascinator. There is nothing better fitted than this atavistic phenomenon to plunge us into the remote past, to make us realise the influence which must have been exerted upon their contemporaries by those great semi-mythical persons to whom all civilisations trace their origin and to whom their legends attribute the revelation of all their knowledge, laws, and industries. Oannes in Babylon, Quetz-alcoatl in Mexico, the *divine* pre-Menes dynasties in Egypt, etc., are cases in point.[2] Under close observation, all these *king-*

[1] Science, then, is the source of every social revolution. It is this extra-social research which opens for us the windows of the social phalanstery in which we live and lets in the light of the universe. How many phantoms are scattered by this light! But then, too, how many perfectly preserved mummies it crumbles into dust!

[2] In his profound Asiatic studies of the religious and social customs of the Far East, Sir Alfred Lyall (who seems to have studied on the spot the actual formation of tribes and clans in certain parts of India)

gods who figure in mythologies and dynasties are seen to be inventors or importers of foreign inventions. They are, in a word, initiators. Thanks to the deep and intense stupor caused by their first miracles, each of their assertions and commands opened out an immense vent to the vast, vague, and impotent aspirations, to the blind and futile desires for faith and activity, which they had called into being.

At present, when we speak of obedience, we mean a conscious and voluntary act. But primitive obedience was far different. When the subject weeps at the bidding of the hypnotist, it is not the ego only, but the whole organism, that obeys. The obedience of crowds and armies to their demagogues and captains is, at times, almost equally strange. And so is their credulity. "It is a curious sight," says M. Charles Richet, "to see a somnambulist make gestures of distaste and nausea and experience real suffocation when an empty bottle is put under his nose and he is told that it contains ammonia, or, on the other hand, to see him inhale ammonia without showing the least discomfort when he is told that it is pure water." We have a strange analogy in the artificial, absurd, and extravagant, but none the less deep, active, and obstinate, beliefs of ancient peoples, of those, indeed, who were the freest and the most cultivated of all the ancients; and this, too, long after

attributes a preponderating influence in primitive societies to the individual action of men of note. "To borrow Carlyle's words," he says, "the perplexed jungle of primitive society springs out of many roots, but the hero is the tap-root from which in a great degree all the rest were nourished and grown. In Europe, where the landmarks of nationalities are fixed, and the fabric of civilisation firmly entrenched, people are often inclined to treat as legendary the enormous part in the foundation of their race or institutions attributed by primitive races to their heroic ancestor. Yet it may be difficult to overrate the impression which must have been produced by daring and successful exploits upon the primitive world, where the free impulsive play of a great man's forces is little controlled by artificial barriers. . . . In such times, whether a group which is formed upon the open surface of society shall spread out into a clan or tribe, or break up prematurely, seems to depend very much upon the strength and energy of its founder" [*Asiatic Studies, Religious and Social*, p. 168; Sir Alfred C. Lyall, K. C. B., C. I. E., second edition, London, 1884.—*Tr.*].

their first phase of autocratic theocracy had passed away. Were not the most abominable monstrosities, Greek love, for example, deemed worthy of the songs of Anacreon and Theocritus and of the philosophy of Plato? Were not serpents, cats, bulls, and cows worshipped by prostrate populations? Were not mysteries, metempsychoses, dogmas in absolute contradiction to the direct evidence of the senses, not to speak of such absurdities as the arts of augury, astrology, and sorcery, unanimously believed in? On the other hand, were not the most natural sentiments repressed with horror, paternal love, for example, in communities where the uncle took precedence over the father, or sexual jealousy among tribes whose wives were owned in common? Has not the most impressive beauty of nature or art been overlooked or condemned, and this even in modern times, because it violated the taste of the period? The attitude of the Romans towards the picturesqueness of the Alps or Pyrenees, or that of our own seventeenth and eighteenth centuries towards the masterpieces of Shakespeare or the art of Holland, is an example. In short, are not the clearest experiences and observations controverted and the most palpable truths arraigned, whenever they come into opposition with the traditional ideas that are the antique offspring of prestige and faith?

Civilised peoples flatter themselves with thinking that they have escaped from this *dogmatic slumber*. Their error can be explained. The oftener a person has been magnetised, the easier and quicker is it for him to be remagnetised. This fact shows us how it is that societies come to imitate one another with increasing ease and rapidity. As they become civilised and, consequently, more and more imitative, they also become less and less aware that they are imitating. In this particular, mankind is like the individual man. A child is, unquestionably, a true somnambulist; the older it grows, the more complex its dream becomes, until it thinks that, because of this very complexity, it has been awakened. But the child errs. When a ten- or twelve-year-old boy leaves his family for school, he

seems to himself to have become demagnetised, to have been aroused from his dream of parental respect and admiration. Whereas, in reality, he becomes still more prone to admiration and imitation in his submission to the ascendency of one of his masters or, better still, of some prestigeful classmate. The alleged awakening is only a change or piling up of slumbers. In the substitution of *fashion-magnetisation* for *custom-magnetisation,* the usual symptom of incipient social revolution, we have an analogous, although magnified, phenomenon.

We should also observe, however, that as the suggestions of example become more numerous and diversified around an individual, each of them loses in intensity, and the individual becomes freer to determine his choice according to the preference of his own character, on the one hand, and on the other, according to certain logical laws which I will discuss elsewhere. Thus it is certain that the progress of civilisation renders subjection to imitation at once more *personal* and more *rational.* We are just as much enslaved as our ancestors by the examples of our environment, but we make a better use of them through our more logical and more individual choice, one adapted to our own ends and to our particular nature. And yet, as we shall see, this does not keep extra-logical and prestigeful influences from always playing a very considerable part.

This part is remarkably potent and interesting in the case of an individual who suddenly passes from an impoverished environment to one rich in all kinds of suggestions. Then there is no need of such a brilliant and striking object as personal glory or genius to bewitch him and to put him to sleep. The college freshman, the Japanese traveller in Europe, the countryman in Paris, are as stupefied as if they were in a state of catalepsy. Their attention is so bent upon everything they see and hear, especially upon the actions of the human beings around them, that it is absolutely withdrawn from everything they have previously seen and heard, or even thought of or done. It is not that their memory is destroyed, *for it has never been as alert* or as quick to re-

spond to the slightest word which recalls to them, with a wealth of hallucinating detail, their distant country, their home, or their previous existence. But memory becomes absolutely paralysed; all its own spontaneity is lost. In this singular condition of intensely concentrated attention, of passive and vivid imagination, these stupefied and fevered beings inevitably yield themselves to the magical *charm* of their new environment. They believe everything that they see, and they continue in this state for a long time. It is always more fatiguing to think for one's self than to think through the minds of others. Besides, whenever a man lives in an animated environment, in a highly strung and diversified society which is continually supplying him with fresh sights, with new books and music and with constantly renewed conversation, he gradually refrains from all intellectual effort; his mind, growing more and more stultified and, at the same time, more and more excited, becomes, as I have said, somnambulistic. Such a state of mind is characteristic of many city dwellers. The noise and movement of the streets, the display of shop-windows, and the wild and unbridled rush of existence affect them like magnetic passes. Now, is not city life a concentrated and exaggerated type of social life?

If these persons end by becoming *examples* themselves, this also is due to imitation. Suppose a somnambulist should imitate his medium to the point of becoming a medium himself and magnetising a third person, who, in turn, would imitate him, and so on, indefinitely. Is not social life this very thing? Terraces of consecutive and connected magnetisations are the rule; the mutual magnetisation of which I spoke above is exceptional. In general, a naturally prestigeful man will stimulate thousands of people to copy him in every particular, even in that of his prestige, thereby enabling them to influence, in turn, millions of inferior men. It is only at rare moments, after the movement down the scale is spent, that an inverse movement takes place and that, in a period of democracy, millions of men collectively fascinate and tyrannise over their quondam

mediums. If every society stands forth as a hierarchy, it is because every society reveals the terracing of which I have just spoken and to which, *in order to be stable,* its hierarchy must correspond.

Besides, social somnambulism, as I have said already, is not brought about through fear or the power of conquest, but through admiration and a sense of brilliant and irksome superiority. And so it sometimes happens that the conqueror is magnetised by the conquered. Just as a savage chief or a social upstart is all eyes and ears, is *charmed* or *intimidated* in spite of his pride, in the midst of a great city, or in a fashionable drawing room. But he sees and hears only what astonishes him and holds him captive; for a singular mixture of anæsthesia and hyperæsthesia of the senses is the dominant characteristic of somnambulists. Consequently, they copy all the usages, the language, the accent, etc., of their new environment. The Germans did this in the Roman world. They forgot German and spoke Latin. They composed hexameters. They bathed in marble baths. They dubbed themselves patricians. The Romans themselves did this in the Athens which they had conquered. The Hyksos conquerors of Egypt were subjugated by its civilisation.

But is there any need to ransack history for examples? Let us look nearer home. The kind of momentary paralysis of mind, tongue, and arm, the profound agitation of the whole being and the lack of self-possession which is called *intimidation,* deserves special study. The intimidated man loses, under the gaze of another person, his self-possession and is wont to become manageable and malleable by others. He feels this and struggles against it, but his only success lies in bringing himself to an awkward standstill; he is still strong enough to neutralise any external impetus, but not strong enough to regain the mastery of his own power of motion. It will be admitted, perhaps, that this singular state, a state that we have all more or less passed through at a certain age, has a great many points in common with somnambulism. But when timidity is routed, when one is put

at his ease, as they say, has demagnetisation set in? Far from that, to be put at one's ease in a given society is to adopt its manners and fashions, to speak its dialect, to copy its gestures, in short, to finally abandon one's self unresistingly to the many surrounding currents of subtle influences against which one first struggled in vain, and to abandon one's self so completely that all consciousness of this self-abandonment is lost. Timidity is a conscious and, consequently, an incomplete magnetisation. It may be compared to that drowsy state which precedes the profound slumber in which the somnambulist moves and speaks. It is a *nascent* social *state* which accompanies every transition from one society to another, or from the limits of the family to a wider social life.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that so-called rough diamonds, people who strongly rebel against assimilation and who are really unsociable, remain timid during their whole life. They are but partially subject to somnambulism. On the other hand, are not people who never feel awkward and embarrassed, who never experience any real timidity upon entering a drawing room or a lecture hall, or any corresponding stupor in taking up a science or art for the first time (for the trouble produced by entrance into a new calling whose difficulties frighten one and whose prescribed methods do violence to one's old habits, may be perfectly well compared to intimidation), are not such people sociable in the highest degree? Are they not excellent copyists, *i. e.*, devoid of any particular avocation or any controlling ideas, and do they not possess the eminently Chinese or Japanese faculty of speedily adapting themselves to their environment? In their readiness to fall asleep, are they not somnambulists of the first order? Intimidation plays an immense part in society under the name of Respect. Everyone will acknowledge this, and, although the part is sometimes misinterpreted, it is never in the least exaggerated. Respect is neither unmixed fear nor unmixed love, nor is it merely the combination of the two, although it is a *fear which is beloved* by him who entertains it. Respect is,

primarily, the impression of an example by one person upon another who is psychologically *polarised*. Of course we must distinguish the respect of which we are conscious from that which we dissemble to ourselves under an assumed contempt. But taking this distinction into account, it is evident that whomsoever we imitate we respect, and that whomsoever we respect we imitate or tend to imitate. There is no surer sign of a displacement of social authority than deviations in the current of these examples. The man or the woman of the world who reflects the slang or undress of the labourer or the intonation of the actress, has more respect and deference for the person copied than he or she is himself or herself aware. Now what society would last for a single day without the general and continuous circulation of both the above forms of respect?

But I must not dwell any longer upon the above comparison. At any rate, I hope that I have at least made my reader feel that to thoroughly understand the essential social fact, as I perceive it, knowledge of the infinitely subtle facts of mind is necessary, and that the roots of even what seems to be the simplest and most superficial kind of sociology strike far down into the depths of the most inward and hidden parts of psychology and physiology. *Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism.* This is the epitome of this chapter. As for the second part of the proposition, I beg the reader's indulgence for any exaggeration I may have been guilty of. I must also remove a possible objection. It may be urged that submission to some ascendency does not always mean following the example of the person whom we trust and obey. But does not belief in anyone always mean belief in that which he believes or seems to believe? Does not obedience to someone mean that we will that which he wills or seems to will? *Inventions are not made to order,* nor are discoveries undertaken as a result of persuasive suggestion. Consequently, to be credulous and docile, and to be so as pre-eminently as the somnambulist and the social man, is to be, primarily, imitative. To innovate, to discover, to awake for an instant

from his dream of home and country, the individual must escape, for the time being, from his social surroundings. Such unusual audacity makes him super-social rather than social.

One word more. We have just seen that memory as well as habit, or muscular memory, as I have already called it, is very keen in the case of somnambulists or quasi-somnambulists, while their credulity and docility are extreme. In other words their *imitation of self* (memory and habit are, in fact, nothing more than this) is as remarkable as their imitation of others. Is there no connection between these two facts? "It cannot be too clearly apprehended," Maudsley says emphatically, "that there is a sort of innate tendency to mimicry in the nervous system."[1] If this tendency is inherent in the final nerve elements, we may be permitted to conjecture that the relations between the cells within the same brain have some analogy to the singular relation between two brains, one of which fascinates the other, and that this relation consists of a special polarisation in the latter of the belief and desire which are stored up in each of its elements. In this way, perhaps, certain curious facts might be explained, the fact, for example, that in dreams there is a spontaneous arrangement of images which combine together according to some inward logic, and which are evidently under the control of one of them which imposes itself upon the others, and gives them their tone through the superiority, undoubtedly, of the nervous element in which it was contained and from which it issued.[2]

[1] [*Mental Pathology*, p. 68.—*Tr.*]

[2] This view agrees with the master thought developed by M. Paulhan in his profoundly thoughtful work upon mental activity. (Alcan, 1889.)