MONDAY EVENING PAPERS : NUMBER 8

Cultural Fashions and History of Religions

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Cultural Fashions and History of Religions

THE QUESTION that I should like to discuss in this paper is the following: what does a historian of religions have to say about his contemporary milieu? In what sense can he contribute to the understanding of its literary or philosophical movements, its recent and significant artistic orientations? Or even more, what has he to say, as a historian of religions, in regard to such manifestations of the *Zeitgeist* as its philosophical and literary vogues, its so-called cultural fashions? It seems to me that, at least in some instances, his special training should enable him to decipher meanings and intentions less manifest to others. I am not referring to those cases in which the religious context or implications of a work are more or less evident, as, for example, Chagall's paintings with their enormous "eye of God," the angels, the severed heads and bodies flying upside down — and his omnipresent ass, that messianic animal par excellence. Or Ionesco's recent play, *Le Roi se meurt,* which cannot be fully understood if one does not know the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the *Upanishads.* (And I can testify to the fact that Ionesco *did* read these texts — but the important thing for us to determine is what he accepted and what he ignored or rejected. Thus it is not a question of searching for *sources,* but a more exciting endeavor: to examine the renewal of Ionesco's imaginary creative

universe through his encounter with exotic and traditional religious universes.)

But there are instances when only a historian of religions can discover some secret significance of a cultural creation, whether ancient or contemporary. For example, only a historian of religions is likely to perceive that there is a surprising structural analogy between James Joyce's *Ulysses* and certain Australian myths of the totemic-hero type. And just as the endless wanderings and fortuitous meetings of the Australian cultural heroes seem monotonous to those who are familiar with Polynesian, Indo-European, or North American mythologies, so the wanderings of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* appear monotonous to an admirer of Balzac or Tolstoi. But the historian of religions knows that the tedious wanderings and performances of the mythical ancestors reveal to the Australian a magnificent history in which he is existentially involved, and the same thing can be said of the apparently tedious and banal journey of Leopold Bloom in his native city. Again, only the historian of religions is likely to catch the very striking similarities between the Australian and Platonic theories of reincarnation and anamnesis. For Plato, learning is recollecting. Physical objects help the soul withdraw into itself and, through a sort of "going back," to rediscover and repossess the original knowledge that it possessed in its extraterrestrial condition. Now, the Australian novice discovers, through his initiation, that he has already been here, in the mythical time; he was here in the form of the mythical ancestor. Through initiation he again learns to do those things which he did at the beginning, when he appeared for the first time in the form of a mythical being.

It would be useless to accumulate more examples. I

will only add that the historian of religions is able to contribute to the understanding of writers as different as Jules Verne and Gérard de Nerval, Novalis and García Lorca.[1] It is surprising that so few historians of religion have ever tried to interpret a literary work from their own perspective. (For the moment I can recall only Maryla Falk's book on Novalis and Stig Wikander's studies of French writers from Jules Michelet to Mallarmé. Duchesne-Guillemin's important monographs on Mallarmé and Valéry could have been written by any excellent literary critic, without any contact with the history of religions.) On the contrary, as is well known, many literary critics, especially in the United States, have not hesitated to use the findings of the history of religions in their hermeneutical work. One need only call to mind the frequent application of the "myth and ritual" theory or the "initiation pattern" in the interpretation of modern fiction and poetry.[2]

My purpose here is more modest. I will try to see whether a historian of religions can decipher some hidden meanings in our so-called cultural fashions, taking as examples three recent vogues, all of which originated in Paris but are already spreading throughout western Europe and even the United States. Now, as we all know well, for a particular theory or philosophy to become popular, to be à la mode, *en vogue,* implies neither that it is a remarkable creation nor that it is devoid of all value. One of the fascinating aspects of the "cultural fashion" is that it does not matter whether the facts in question and their interpretation are true or not. No amount of criticism can destroy a vogue. There is something "religious" about this imperviousness to criticism, even if only in a narrow-minded, sectarian way. But even beyond this general aspect, some cultural fashions are extremely significant for the historian of religions.

Their popularity, especially among the intelligentsia, reveals something of Western man's dissatisfactions, drives, and nostalgias.

To give only one example: Fifty years ago, Freud thought that he had found the origin of social organization, moral restrictions, and religion in a primordial murder, namely the first patricide. He told the story in his book *Totem and Taboo*. In the beginning, the father kept all the women for himself and would drive his sons off as they became old enough to evoke his jealousy. One day, the expelled sons killed their father, ate him, and appropriated his females. "The totemic banquet," writes Freud, "perhaps the first feast mankind ever celebrated, was the repetition, the festival of remembrance, of this noteworthy criminal deed."[3] Consequently, Freud holds that God is nothing other than the sublimated physical father; hence in the totemic sacrifice it is God himself who is killed and sacrificed. "This slaying of the father-god is mankind's original sin. This blood-guilt is atoned for by the bloody death of Christ."[4]

In vain the ethnologists of his time, from W. H. Rivers and F. Boas to A. L. Kroeber, B. Malinowski, and W. Schmidt, demonstrated the absurdity of such a primordial "totemic banquet."[5] In vain they pointed out that totemism is not found at the beginnings of religion, that it is not universal — nor have all peoples passed through a "totemic stage"; that Frazer had already proved that of the many hundred totemic tribes only *four* knew a rite approximating the ceremonial killing and eating of the "totem-god" (a rite assumed by Freud to be an invariable feature of totemism); and furthermore, that this rite has nothing to do with the origin of sacrifice, since totemism does not occur at all in the oldest cultures. In vain Wilhelm Schmidt pointed

out that the pre-totemic peoples knew nothing of cannibalism, that patricide among them would be a "sheer impossibility, psychologically, sociologically, and ethically"; and that "the form of the pre-totemic family, and therefore of the earliest human family we can hope to know anything about through ethnology, is neither general promiscuity nor group-marriage, neither of which, according to the verdict of the leading anthropologists, ever existed at all."[6] Freud was not in the least troubled by such objections, and this wild "gothic novel," *Totem and Taboo,* has since become one of the minor gospels of three generations of the Western intelligentsia.

Of course, the genius of Freud and the merits of psychoanalysis ought not to be judged by the horror stories presented as objective historical fact in *Totem and Taboo.* But it is highly significant that such frantic hypotheses could be acclaimed as sound scientific theory in spite of all the criticism marshaled by the major anthropologists of the century. Because psychoanalysis won the battle against the older psychologies, and for many other reasons, it became a cultural fashion, and after 1920 the Freudian ideology was taken for granted in its entirety. A fascinating book could be written about the significance of the incredible success of this "roman noir frénétique," *Totem and Taboo.* Using the very tools and method of modern psychoanalysis, we can lay open some tragic secrets of the modern Western intellectual: for example, his profound dissatisfaction with the worn-out forms of historical Christianity and his desire to violently rid himself of his forefathers' faith, accompanied by a strange sense of guilt, as if he himself had killed a God in whom he could not believe but whose absence he could not bear. For this reason I have said that a cultural fashion is immensely significant, no

matter what its objective value may be; the success of certain ideas or ideologies reveals to us the spiritual and existential situation of all those for whom these ideas or ideologies constitute a kind of soteriology.

Of course, there are fashions in other sciences, even in the discipline of History of Religions, though evidently they are less glamorous than the vogue enjoyed by *Totem and Taboo*. That our fathers and grandfathers were fascinated by *The Golden Bough* is a comprehensible, and rather honorable, fact. What is less comprehensible, and can be explained only as a fashion, is the fact that between 1900 and 1920 almost all the historians of religions were searching for Mother Goddesses, Corn-Mothers, and Vegetation Demons — and of course they found them everywhere, in all the religions and folklores of the world. This search for the Mother — Mother Earth, Tree-Mother, Corn-Mother, and so on — and also for other demonic beings related to vegetation and agriculture is also significant for the understanding of the unconscious nostalgias of the Western intellectual at the beginning of the century.

But let me remind you of another example of the power and prestige of fashions in History of Religions. This time there is neither god nor goddess involved, neither Corn-Mother nor Vegetation Spirit, but an animal — specifically, a camel. I am referring to the famous sacrifice of a camel described by a certain Nilus who lived in the second part of the fourth century. While he lived as a monk in the monastery of Mount Sinai, the Bedouin Arabs raided the monastery. Nilus had the opportunity to observe at first hand the life and beliefs of the Bedouins, and he recorded many such observations in his treatise *The Slaying of the Monks on Mount Sinai*. Particularly dramatic is his description of

the sacrifice of a camel "offered," he says, "to the Morning Star." Bound upon a rude altar of stones piled together, the camel is cut into pieces and devoured raw by the worshippers — devoured with such haste, Nilus adds, "that in the short interval between the rise of the day star which marked the hour for the service to begin, and the disappearance of it rays before the rising sun, the entire camel, body and bones, skin, blood and entrails, is wholly devoured."[7] J. Wellhausen was the first to relate this sacrifice in his *Reste arabischen Heidenthumes* (1887). But it was William Robertson Smith who established, so to speak, the unique scientific prestige of Nilus' camel. He refers to this sacrifice innumerable times in his *Lectures on the Religions of the Semites* (1889), considering it "the oldest known form of Arabian sacrifice,"[8] and he speaks of the "direct evidence of Nilus as to the habits of the Arabs of the Sinaitic desert."[9] From then on, all the followers of Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice — S. Reinach, A. Wendel, A. S. Cook, S. H. Hooke — abundantly and untiringly referred to Nilus' account. It is still more curious that even those scholars who did not accept Robertson Smith's theory could not — or dared not — discuss the general problem of sacrifice without duly relating Nilus' story.[10] In fact, no one seemed to doubt the authenticity of Nilus' testimony, even though a great number of scholars rejected Robertson Smith's interpretation. Thus by the beginning of this century Nilus' camel had become so exasperatingly omnipresent in the writings of historians of religions, Old Testament scholars, sociologists, and ethnologists that G. Foucard declared, in his book *Historie des religions et Méthode comparative,* "It seems that no author has any longer the right to treat of History of Religions if he does not speak respectfully of this anecdote. For it is indeed an

anecdote . . . , a detail related as an 'aside'; and on a unique fact, so slender, one cannot really build up a religious theory valid for all humanity."[11] With great intellectual courage, G. Foucard summed up his methodological position: "Concerning Nilus' camel, I persist in the belief that it does not deserve to carry on its back the weight of the origins of a part of the history of religions."[12]

G. Foucard was right. Meticulous textual and historical analysis has proved that Nilus was not the author of the treatise *The Slaying of the Monks on Mount Sinai,* that this is a pseudonymous work written probably in the fourth or fifth century, and, what is more important, that the text is full of literary clichés borrowed from the Greek novels; that, for example, the description of the killing and devouring of the camel — "hacking off pieces of the quivering flesh and devouring the entire animal, body and bones" — has no ethnological value, but reveals only a knowledge of the rhetorical-pathetic genre of the Hellenistic novels. Nonetheless, although these facts were known already after the First World War, thanks especially to Karl Heussi's painstaking analysis,[13] Nilus' camel still haunts many recent scientific works.[14] And no wonder. This short and colorful description of the presumably original form of sacrifice and the beginnings of religious communion was tailor-made to gratify all tastes and inclinations. Nothing could be more flattering for that great number of Western intellectuals, convinced as they were that prehistoric and primitive man was very nearly a beast of prey and consequently that the origin of religion should reflect a troglodytic psychology and behavior. Futhermore, the communal devouring of a camel could not but substantiate the claim of the sociologists that religion is merely a social fact, if not just

the hypostatic projection of the society itself. Even those scholars who called themselves Christians were somehow happy with Nilus' account. They would readily point out the immense distance that separates the total consumption of a camel — bones and skin included — from the highly spiritualized, if not merely symbolic, Christian sacraments. The splendid superiority of monotheism and especially of Christianity as over against all preceding pagan creeds and faiths could not be more convincingly evident. And, of course, all these scholars, Christians as well as agnostics or atheists, were supremely proud and happy at being what they were: civilized Westerners and champions of infinite progress.

I do not doubt that the analysis of the three recent cultural fashions which I referred to at the beginning of this lecture will prove less revealing for us, although they are not directly related to History of Religions. Of course, they are not to be considered equally significant. One, at least, may very soon become obsolete. For our purposes, it does not matter. What matters is the fact that during the last four or five years Paris has been dominated — one might almost say conquered — by a magazine called *Planète* and by two authors, Teilhard de Chardin and Claude Lévi-Strauss. I hasten to add that I do not intend to discuss here the theories of Teilhard and Lévi-Strauss. What interests me is their amazing popularity, and I will refer to their ideas only in so far as they may explain the reasons for that popularity.

For obvious reasons, I shall begin with the magazine *Planète*. As a matter of fact, I am not the first to have pondered the cultural meaning of its unheard-of popularity. Some time ago the well-known and extremely serious Parisian paper *Le Monde* devoted two

long articles to this very problem, the unexpected and incredible success of *Planète*. Indeed, some 80,000 subscribers and 100,000 buyers of a rather expensive magazine constitute a unique phenomenon in France — and a problem for the sociology of culture. Its editors are Louis Pawels, a writer and a former disciple of Gurjdeef, and Jacques Bergier, a very popular scientific journalist. In 1961 they published a voluminous book, *Le Matin des sorciers,* which rapidly became a best-seller. In fact *Planète* was launched with the royalties earned by *Le Matin des sorciers*. The book has also been translated into English, but it has not made a comparative impact on the Anglo-American public. It is a curious mélange of popular science, occultism, astrology, science fiction, and spiritual techniques. But it is more than that. It tacitly pretends to reveal innummerable vital secrets — of our universe, of the Second World War, of lost civilizations, of Hitler's obsession with astrology, and so on. Both authors are well read and, as I have already said, Jacques Bergier has a scientific background. Consequently the reader is convinced that he is being given *facts,* or at least responsible hypotheses — that, in any case, he is not being misled. *Planète* is constructed on the same premises and follows the same pattern: there are articles on the probability of inhabited planets, new forms of psychological warfare, the perspectives of *l'amour moderne,* Lovecraft, and American science fiction, the "real" keys to the understanding of Teilhard de Chardin, the mysteries of the animal world, and so on.

Now, in order to understand the unexpected success of both the book and the magazine, one should recall the French cultural milieu of five or six years ago. As is well known, existentialism became extremely popular immediately after the liberation. J. P. Sartre, Camus,

Simone de Beauvoir, were the guides and models inspiring the new generation. Sartre in particular enjoyed a popularity equalled by no other French writer since the days of Voltaire and Diderot, Victor Hugo, or Zola during the Dreyfus affair. Marxism itself had not become a real attraction for the young intellectuals before Sartre proclaimed his own Communist sympathy. Very little was left of the French Catholic renaissance of the early nineteen-twenties. Jacques Maritain and the Neothomists had already gone out of fashion at the beginning of the Second World War. The only living movements inside Catholicism, outside of the Christian existentialism of Gabriel Marcel, were those which produced at that time the rather modest group of *Études Carmélitaines* (stressing the importance of mystical experience and encouraging the study of the psychology of religion and of symbolism) and the *Sources Chrétiennes,* with their re-evaluation of Greek patrology and their insistence on liturgical renewal. But, of course, these Catholic movements had neither the glamour of Sartre's existentialism nor the charisma of communism. The cultural milieu, from philosophy and political ideology to literature, art, cinema, and journalism, was dominated by a few ideas and a number of clichés: the absurdity of human existence, estrangement, commitment, situation, historical moment, and so on. It is true that Sartre spoke constantly of freedom; but in the end *that* freedom was meaningless. In the late fifties, the Algerian war prompted a profound malaise among the intellectuals. Whether existentialists, Marxists, or liberal Catholics, they had to make personal decisions. For many years the French intellectual was forced to live almost exclusively in his "historical moment," as Sartre had taught that any responsible individual should do.

In this gloomy, tedious, and somehow provincial

atmosphere — for it seemed that only Paris, or rather Saint-Germain-des-Près, and now Algeria, really counted in the world — the appearance of *Planète* had the effect of a bombshell. The general orientation, the problems discussed, the language — all were different. There was no longer the excessive preoccupation with one's own existential "situation" and historical "commitment," but a grandiose overture towards a wonderful world: the future organization of the planet, the unlimited possibilities of man, the mysterious universe into which we are ready to penetrate, and so on. It was not the scientific approach as such that stirred this collective enthusiasm, but the charismatic impact of "the latest scientific developments" and the proclamation of their imminent triumphs. Of course, as I have said already, science was supplemented with hermeticism, science fiction, and political and cultural news. But what was new and exhilarating for the French reader was the optimistic and holistic outlook which coupled science with esoterism and presented a living, fascinating, and mysterious Cosmos, in which human life again became meaningful and promised an endless perfectibility. Man was no longer condemned to a rather dreary *condition humaine,* but he was called both to conquer his physical universe and also to unravel the other, enigmatic universes revealed by the occultists and gnostics. But in contrast to all previous gnostic and esoteric schools and movements, *Planète* did not disregard the social and political problems of the contemporary world. In sum, it propagated a *saving* science: scientific information which was at the same time soteriological. Man was no longer estranged and useless in an absurd world, into which he had come by accident and to no purpose.

I must stop here with my rapid analysis of the reasons for *Planète*'s success, for I realize that many of

the things which I have said in connection with this magazine can be applied almost identically to the vogue of Teilhard de Chardin. It should be unnecessary to add that I am not speaking of the scientific and philosophic merits of Teilhard, which are unquestionable, but of the tremendous success of his books, all of which, as is well known, were published posthumously. And it is a strange paradox that the only Roman Catholic thinker who has gained a responsible and massive audience was prevented by his ecclesiastical authorities from publishing those very books which today are best-sellers both in the Old and in the New World. What is even more important, at least one hundred volumes and many thousands of articles have been published all over the world, in less than ten years, discussing, in most cases sympathetically, Teilhard de Chardin's ideas. If we take into consideration the fact that not even the most popular philosopher of this generation, J. P. Sartre, attained such a massive response after twenty-five years of activity, we must acknowledge the *cultural* significance of Teilhard's success. We have no books at all, and only a very few articles, about the ideas of Louis Pawels and G. Bergier (both articles in *Le Monde* are concerned with the popularity of their magazine *Planète*), but the majority of books and articles written about Teilhard discuss his philosophy and his religious conceptions.

Most probably the readers of *Planète* and of Teilhard de Chardin are not the same, but they have many things in common. To begin with, all of them are tired of existentialism and Marxism, tired of continual talk about history, the historical condition, the historical moment, commitment, and so on. The readers of both Teilhard and *Planète* are not so much interested in history as in *nature* and in *life*. Teilhard himself considers

history to be only a modest segment in a glorious cosmic process which started with the appearance of life and which will continue for billions and billions of years, until the last of the galaxies hears the proclamation of Christ as Logos. Both the ideology of *Planète* and the philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin are fundamentally optimistic. As a matter of fact, Teilhard is the first philosopher since Bergson who has dared to express faith and confidence both in life and in man. And when critics attempt to prove that Teilhard's basic conceptions are not a legitimate part of the Christian tradition, they usually point to his optimism, his belief in a meaningful and infinite evolution, and his ignoring of original sin and evil in general.

But, on the other hand, the agnostic scientists who read Teilhard admit that for the first time they have understood what it can mean to be a religious man, to believe in God and even in Jesus Christ and in the sacraments. It is a fact that Teilhard has been the first Christian author to present his faith in terms accessible and meaningful to the agnostic scientist and to the religiously illiterate in general. For the first time in this century the agnostic and atheistic masses of scientifically educated Europeans know what a Christian is speaking about. This is not due to the fact that Teilhard is a scientist. Before him there were many great scientists who did not conceal their Christian faith. What is new in Teilhard, and explains his popularity at least in part, is the fact that he has grounded his Christian faith in a scientific study and understanding of nature and of life. He speaks of the "spiritual power of matter" and confesses an "overwhelming sympathy for all that stirs within the dark mass of matter." This *love* of Teilhard's for the cosmic substance and the cosmic life seems to impress scientists greatly. He candidly admits

that he had always been a "pantheist" by temperament and "less a child of heaven than a son of earth." Even the most refined and abstruse scientific tools — the electronic computer, for example — are exalted by Teilhard because he considers them to be auxiliaries and promoters of life.

But one cannot speak simply of the "vitalism" of Teilhard, for he is a religious man, and life for him is *sacred;* moreover, the cosmic matter as such is susceptible of being sanctified in its totality. At least this seems to be the meaning of that beautiful text entitled "The Mass on the Top of the World." When Teilhard speaks of the penetration of the galaxies by the cosmic Logos, even the most fantastic exaltation of the bodhisattvas seems modest and unimaginative by comparison. Because for Teilhard the galaxies in which Christ will be preached millions of years hence are *real,* are living matter. They are not illusory and not even ephemeral. In an article in the magazine *Psyché* Teilhard once confessed that he simply could not believe in a catastrophic end of the world — not now, and not after billions of years; he could not even believe in the second law of thermodynamics. For him the universe was real, alive, meaningful, creative, sacred — and if not eternal in the philosophical sense, at least of infinite duration.

We can now understand the reason for Teilhard's immense popularity: he is not only setting up a bridge between science and Christianity; he is not only presenting an optimistic view of cosmic and human evolution and insisting particularly on the exceptional value of the human mode of being in the universe; *he is also revealing the ultimate sacrality of nature and of life.* Modern man is not only estranged from himself; he is also estranged from nature. And of course one cannot

go back to a "cosmic religion" already out of fashion in the time of the prophets and later persecuted and suppressed by the Christians. One cannot even go back to a romantic or bucolic approach to nature. But the nostalgia for a lost mystical solidarity with nature still haunts Western man. And Teilhard has laid open for him an unhoped-for perspective, where nature is charged with religious values even while retaining its complete "objective" reality.

I will not say too much about the third recent vogue, that of Claude Lévi-Strauss — first because it is of more modest proportions, and second because it is interrelated with a broader interest in structural linguistics and structuralism in general. Whatever one may think of Lévi-Strauss' conclusions, one cannot but recognize the merits of his work. I personally consider him to be important primarily for the following reasons: (1) Although an anthropologist by training and profession, he is fundamentally a philosopher, and he is not afraid of ideas, theories, and theoretical language; therefore, he forces anthropologists to *think,* and even to think hard. For the empirically minded Anglo-American anthropologist, this is a real calamity, but the historian of religions cannot help but rejoice in the highly theoretical level on which Lévi-Strauss chooses to discuss his so-called "primitive" material. (2) Even if one does not accept the structuralist approach *in toto,* Lévi-Strauss' criticism of anthropological historicism is very timely. Too much time and energy have been expended by anthropologists in trying to reconstruct the *history* of primitive cultures, and very little on *understanding their meaning.* (3) Finally, Lévi-Strauss is an excellent writer; his *Tristes tropiques* is a great book, in my opinion his most important work. Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss is what I might call a "mod-

ern encyclopedist," in the sense that he is familiar with a great number of *modern* discoveries, creations, and techniques; for example, cybernetics and communication theory, Marxism, linguistics, abstract art and Béla Bartók, dodecaphonic music and the "new wave" of the French novel, and so forth.

Now, it is quite probable that some of these achievements have contributed to the popularity of Lévi-Strauss. His interest in so many modern ways of thinking, his Marxian sympathies, his sensitive understanding of Ionesco or Robbe-Grillet — these are not negligible qualities in the eyes of the younger generation of intellectuals. But in my opinion the reasons for Lévi-Strauss' popularity are primarily to be found in his anti-existentialism and his neo-positivism, in his indifference to history and his exaltation of material "things" — of matter. For him, "la science est déjà faite dans les choses": science is already effected in things, in material objects. Logic is already prefigured in nature. That is to say, man can be understood without taking *consciousness* into consideration. *La Pensée sauvage* presents to us a thinking without thinkers and a logic without logicians.[15] This is both a neo-positivism and a neo-nominalism, but at the same time it is something more. It is a reabsorption of man into nature — not, evidently, dionysiac or romantic nature, nor even the blind, passionate, erotic drive of Freud — but the nature which is grasped by nuclear physics and cybernetics, a nature reduced to its fundamental structures; and these structures are the same both in the cosmic substance and in the human mind. Now, as I have already said, I cannot discuss Lévi-Strauss' theories here. But I would like to remind the reader of one of the most distinctive characteristics of the French "new-wave" novelists, particularly Robbe-Grillet: the im-

portance of "things," of material objects — ultimately the primacy of space and of nature — and the indifference to history and to historical time. Both in Lévi-Strauss, for whom "la science est déjà faite dans les choses," and in Robbe-Grillet, we witness a new epiphany of "les choses," the elevation of physical nature to the rank of the one all-embracing reality.

Thus all three recent vogues seem to have something in common: their drastic reaction against existentialism, their indifference to history, their exaltation of physical nature. Of course, there is a great distance between the rather naïve scientific enthusiasm of *Planète* and Teilhard's mystical love for matter and life and his confidence in the scientific and technological miracles of the future, and there is an even greater distance between Teilhard's and Lévi-Strauss' conceptions of man. But what we might call their "worlds of image" are somehow similar: in all three instances we are confronted with a kind of *mythology of matter,* whether of an imaginative, exuberant type (*Planète,* Teilhard de Chardin) or a structuralist, abgebraic type (Claude Lévi-Strauss).

If my analysis is correct, then the anti-existentialism and the anti-historicism patent in these fashions and their exaltation of physical nature are not without interest for the historian of religions. The fact that hundreds of thousands of European intellectuals are enthusiastically reading *Planète* and the works of Teilhard de Chardin has another meaning for the historian of religions than it might have for a sociologist of culture. It would be too simple for us to say that the terror of history is again becoming unbearable and that those European intellectuals who can neither take refuge in nihilism nor find solace in Marxism are looking hopefully toward a new — because approached scien-

tifically — and charismatic cosmos. We certainly cannot reduce the meaning of these vogues to the old and well-known tension between "cosmos and history." The cosmos presented in *Planète* and the works of Teilhard de Chardin is itself a product of history, for it is the cosmos as understood by science and in the process of being conquered and changed by technology. But what is specific and new is the almost religious interest in the structures and values of this natural world, of this cosmic substance so brilliantly explored by science and transformed by technology. The anti-historicism which we have identified in all three fashions is not a rejection of history as such; it is rather a protest against the pessimism and nihilism of some recent historicists. We even suspect a nostalgia for what might be called a macro-history, a planetary and later a cosmic history. But whatever may be said about this nostalgia for a more comprehensive understanding of history, one thing remains certain: the enthusiasts for *Planète,* for Teilhard de Chardin, and for Lévi-Strauss do not feel the Sartrian *nausée* when they are confronted with natural objects. They do not feel themselves to be *de trop* in this world; in brief, they do not experience their own situation in the cosmos as an existentialist does.

Like all fashions, these new vogues will also fade out and finally disappear. But their real significance will not be invalidated: the popularity of *Planète,* of Teilhard de Chardin, and of Claude Lévi-Strauss reveals to us something of the unconscious or semi-conscious desires and nostalgias of contemporary Western man. If we take into consideration the fact that somehow similar intentions can be deciphered in modern art, the significance of these recent vogues for the historian of religions becomes even more startling. Indeed, one cannot fail to recognize in the works of a great number of

contemporary artists a consuming interest in matter as such. I will not speak of Brancuşi, because his love for matter is well known. Brancuşi's attitude towards stone is comparable to the solicitude, fear, and veneration of a neolithic man when faced with certain stones that constitute hierophanies for him; that is to say, they also reveal a sacred and ultimate reality. But in the history of modern art, from cubism to tachism, we have been witnessing a continuing effort on the part of the artist to free himself from the "surface" of things and to penetrate into matter in order to lay bare its ultimate structures. I have already discussed elsewhere the religious significance of the contemporary artist's effort to abolish form and volume, to descend as it were into the interior of substance while disclosing its secret or larval modalities.[16] This fascination for the elementary modes of matter betrays a desire to deliver oneself from the weight of dead forms, a nostalgia to immerse oneself in an auroral world.

If our analysis is correct, there is a decided convergence between the artist's attitude towards matter and the nostalgias of Western man, such as they can be deciphered in the three recent vogues which we have discussed. It is a well-known fact that through their creations, artists often anticipate what is to come — sometimes one or two generations later — in other sectors of social and cultural life.

NOTES

1. Cf., for example, Léon Cellier, "Le Roman initiatique en France au temps du romantisme," *Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme,* Nr. 4 (1964), pp. 22–44; Jean Richer, *Nerval: Expérience et création* (Paris, 1963); Maryla Falk, *I "Misteri" di Novalis* (Napoli, 1939); Erika Lorenz, *Der metaphorische Kosmos der modernen spanischen Lyrik, 1936–1956* (Hamburg, 1961).

2. I discussed some of these interpretations in my article "L'Initiation et le monde moderne," in *Initiation,* ed. C. J. Bleeker (Leiden, 1965), pp. 1–14; see especially pp. 11 ff.

3. Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu* (1913), p. 110. Cf. A. L. Kroeber, "Totem and Taboo: An Ethnological Psychoanalysis," *American Anthropologist,* XXII (1920), 48–55.

4. Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion,* trans. H. J. Rose (New York, 1931), p. 112.

5. Cf. Mircea Eliade, "The History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912–1962," *The Journal of Bible and Religion,* XXXI, No. 2 (April, 1963), 98–109, 101 ff.

6. Schmidt, *op. cit.,* pp. 112–115.

7. Summarized by W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (new edition, revised throughout by the author; London, 1899), p. 338.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.,* p. 281.

10. Cf. the bibliography in Joseph Henninger, "Ist der sogennante Nilus-Bericht eine brauchbare religionsgeschichtliche Quelle?" *Anthropos,* L (1955), 81–148; see especially pp. 86 ff.

11. G. Foucard, *Histoire des religions et méthode comparative* (2d ed.; Paris, 1912), pp. 132 ff.

12. *Ibid.,* pp. lxv ff.; "Et pour le chameau de saint Nil, je persisterai à croire qu'il ne mérite pas de porter sur son dos le poids des origines d'une partie de l'histoire des religions."

13. See especially Karl Heussi, *Das Nilusproblem* (Leipzig, 1921). The bibliography of Heussi's work on Nilus is presented and discussed by Henninger, *op. cit.,* pp. 89 ff.

14. Cf. the bibliography, *ibid.*, pp. 86 ff.

15. For a critical appraisal of the neo-positivism of Lévi-Strauss, cf. Georges Gusdorf, "Situation de Maurice Leenhardt ou l'ethnologie française de Lévy-Bruhl à Lévi-Strauss," *Le Monde Non Chrétien,* LXXI–LXXII (juillet–décembre, 1964), 139–192. Cf. also Paul Ricœur, "Symbolique et Temporalité," *Ermeneutica e Tradizione,* ed. Enrico Castelli (Rome, 1963), pp. 5–31; Gaston Fessard, S.J., "Symbole, Surnaturel, Dialogue," *Demitizazzione e Morale,* ed. Enrico Castelli (Padua, 1965), pp. 105–154.

16. Cf. "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," *Criterion* (Spring, 1965), pp. 22–24. The article was originally published as "Sur la permanence du sacré dans l'art contemporain," *XX Siècle,* Nr. 24 (Paris, décembre, 1964), pp. 3–10.

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