

A MODERN ESTIMATE OF ANCIENT
RELIGION: THE WORK OF
CHARLES KERÉNYI

“For in no wise do the gods appear
in manifest presence to all.”

Odyssey, Canto 16, Verse 161

Charles Kerényi began his research before 1927. In that year he achieved brilliant renown, thanks to a suggestive and wonderfully comprehensive book on the Greco-oriental novel that is replete with ideas.¹ He wrote it from the illuminating standpoint of the history of religions. Following the author of the classical *Psyche*,² and with innumerable contributions of his own, he once again gave proof of that delicate sense of the religious subconscious which could have subsisted, more or less

1. *Die griechische-orientalische Roman-Literatur in religions-geschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (1927).

2. French readers are very familiar with this classical treatise, thanks to the famous translation by Auguste Reymond; furthermore, the authoritative work of Erwin Rohde has often been re-edited; since 1893 there have been ten editions in Germany; the original text has always been reprinted without alteration. This deference is justified.

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

somnolent, in the composite spirit of the Mediterraneans of yesterday and today. We are eternally indebted to the curious, folkloric inquiries which have transported us to their time, introducing us to an ancient religiosity, secret, and perhaps unconscious. The Hellenistic or Greco-Roman novels, forerunners of some of our most modern literature, drew substance at will from eternal, human belief. In stoically scrutinizing their content—one might even say balderdash—we tend therefore to forgive them much because of the richness of their soil, infused as it was with popular legends which carry with them a highly tonic and savory mixture of old rites, discarded superstitions, half-extinguished cults. Where, for example, can one seek a better statement on the notion of the pure and the impure, which still preoccupies us so much today?³ Or on the sensitivity of those who, in quest of virtue, went off whenever necessary and with great ado to meet the assembled gods?⁴

Shortly thereafter, despite the difficulties and the inevitable distant journeys necessitated by a scholarly life that Nemesis had spared but little, Kerényi attracted the attention of humanist specialists as well by his series of essays edifyingly entitled *Albae vigiliae* ("White Vigil"). From then on, without any faltering or weakening of purpose, so many remarkable monographs appeared, to be followed by so many more, that only a few of them can be enumerated here. *Pythagoras und Orpheus* in 1940: both protagonists—vivified, valiant figures—were among the first beneficiaries in such a troubled era! *L'Enfant divin*, published during the same period in collaboration with C. G. Jung, opened up avenues along which many, myself included, found it profitable to travel. Then we had the treatise, so rich in suggestive ideas, on *Hermes der seelenführer*, written—judging by its date, 1944—at the very gates of Hell. Trusting in his highly novel, bold, and, at times, perhaps rather imaginative method, the historiographer of these divine or human adventures found no dearth of ancient destinies of unusual flavor. Then, in 1945, at Zurich, the curious *Die Geburt der Helena* appeared, extending in time and remoteness the mysterious horizons of

3. The latest: Louis Moulinier, *Le Pur et l'impur dans la pensée et la sensibilité des Grecs jusqu'à la fin du IV^e siècle avant J.C.* (1950).

4. As a glossary on studies concerning the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman novel, it would be profitable to consult the exchange of correspondence (forty letters) between Thomas Mann and Charles Kerényi on the subject of the relationship between mythology and the novel (*Briefwechsel über Romandichtung und Mythologie* [Zurich: Rhein-verlag, 1945]).

Notes and Discussion

the Aegean. It was followed by studies on *Prometheus* (1946), on *Niebe* (1949), the *Labyrinth Studien*, and on *Die Jungfrau und Mutter der griechischen Religion* (1952). Moreover, while continuing the series "Die Analyse und die Synthese"—that vast renewed investigation into the small world of pagan gods and ancient heroes—and announcing in Geneva *Fripon divin*, written in collaboration with C. G. Jung and P. Radine, Kerényi carried on other studies. His fine book on the *Médecin divin* (1948), which extols Asclepiades, appeared in its proper time to pave the way for the modern miracles of the new Epidaurus. In all these we encounter an identical quest, at once suggestive and imperious, into the religious secrets of earlier days—illuminated at times by those of today, by knowledge of all the protracted primitivisms from ancient times to the present.

"And what period was ever more fertile in miracles?" With proper regard for the great Olympian protagonists—Zeus, Poseidon, the established Cronides, Athene, virgin of the Desert of the Love of Knowledge—it is only too plain that the "Kerényi Pantheon" was not to be limited to the *dii consentes*, the "twelve most classical gods," showing a preference for secondary summits, rustic routes, and even the infernal portals of the shades. It combined the magic philter of the Phrygian or Syrian Orient with the pure nectar of the Aegean region. Around the court of the summit gods, who comprise our own Western heritage, appeared the symbol of many of the disinherited—vanquished Titans like Prometheus, unfortunate heroes more or less plunged into the Erebus. The "obscure" came to life and appeared as in a *Nekyia*. One of the most incontrovertible merits of the "Albae vigiliae" ("White Vigil") series—in which there is much to assess, to learn, and also occasionally to correct, if we can be pardoned for saying so—is all this multicolored evocation that has been added to our vistas in a whirlwind of appealing, though curious or transparent, entities. For example, one has only to examine the lists of reviews in France and elsewhere to be convinced of the active interest shown in this work, whether it be a question of acceptance, or of refusal inspired by the hesitation of the timid in the face of so many personal views.⁵ On closer examination one readily perceives that there was a concomitant preparation of the comprehensive

5. In France alone, for example, a single treatise like the 1944 one on *Hermes du seelenführer* gave rise to the most attentive commentaries, in spite of the troubled times (cf., e.g., A. J. Festugière, *Revue des Études grecques*, 1945, pp. 305–8; J. Treheux, *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique*, 1944–45, pp. 420–21; P. Boyance, *Rev. Et. Anc.*, 1946, p. 136; etc.)

scholarly treatise on *Die Antike Religion*, recently translated into various languages.

Is this not an example of an author who, skilled in immersing himself in the past, in living in it and making it live for others, seeks to justify in advance the “fundamental core” of the exposé republished in 1957? By undertaking to uncover for us the true countenance of the ancient gods, even of the heroes and sages who were still enveloped in the mountain fogs surrounding the courts of Nephelegeretes, “the Collector of Clouds,” he perhaps suggests that everything has not yet been discovered, or clearly explained, despite the discriminating attempts in the careful exegeses of our finest scholars. And perhaps we have been too complacent about the results of their theoretic and somewhat dogmatic asceticism as regards ways and means. What, in fact, is mythology, that shining mantle of ancient and modern religions?⁶ Its name should not lead us to believe that the ancients codified it or established it initially solely for their own recreation, their pleasure and diversion, as if it were a game. It surely conceals as well a major and fruitful treasure of latent history.⁷ And it would be rather a grave error to persist in thinking that from Prometheus to Pythagoras, from the time of Helen, like Pandora, a woman of destiny, to that of the “Divine Child” of Hellenistic religions—“he is so beautiful—the Child!”—the perpetual classical fable, Plato’s as well as that of the trite *Deisidaimon* of the crossways and the streets, Theophrastus’ “superstitious man,” had always retained its same immutable mask. On the contrary, there are enough nuances to trouble Ernest Renan in regard to the Acropolis! The truth is that the human spirit has never ceased to labor in its own way, at every moment, ever since Deucalion and Pyrrha; imagination governs the world, day and night, endlessly, and not only in theaters.

The persistent efflorescence of sagas, *Märchen*, and fairy tales in every country and in all places represents one of the most spontaneous forms of expression of man’s invincible faith in the face of the divine, the sacred, the miraculous, and of eternal fear. For, at least since Homer, it is perpetually incumbent upon each succeeding generation to re-create this profound and invisible activity, never perceptible to all, although

6. In 1948 Charles Kerényi published the *Prolegomeni allo studio scientifico della mitologia* (Turin: Einaudi), somewhat prior to a study on the *Figlie del Sole* (Turin: Einaudi, 1949).

7. Cf. *Gnomon* (1956), pp. 553–55, for an account given by Charles Kerényi himself on Robert Graves’s essay in two volumes, *The Greek Myths* (“Penguin Books”) (1955).

Notes and Discussion

experienced by each. Polymorphous and polychromic image, garden of the mind's reverie within a continuous ethnic culture, in every spiritual garden of the world—no race exists that has not been both obliged and able to enjoy its favorite form of illusion by interpreting the secret of the cosmos and of nature: what we would like to call “our truth”—and how it changes! How many different exegeses of paganism have appeared since the period illuminated conventionally but falsely by the sunlight of “solar” and astral symbolism! Why should this surprise us? Is it not true that we still see almost as many new, interpretive myths spring up under our very eyes?

This is what Charles Kerényi attempted primarily to demonstrate. No one can regard it as an unimportant warning—especially today.

It is a lengthy and arduous task to give an appropriate portrayal of the ancient religion of the Mediterraneans that will more or less satisfy the modern historical mind. It was the compensatory good fortune of the eminent humanist Kerényi, his immense luck, that he had an extensive documentation to work with. As he scrutinized in depth the secret archives of a very composite religious past in order continuously to revivify the portrayal and understanding of it, archeology and ethnology brought him an enviable collection of new conquests from the oldest treasures of early civilizations. The anticipated consequence of the intense work of discovery that is still going on today—from Egypt and the India of Mohenjo-Daro and the old country of Sumer, where history is said to have begun (or at least historiography!),⁸ to the foggy banks of the Cimmerians and even to the “New World”—everything that has reappeared might still seem replete with lacunae. But who would venture to deny the importance of results in preparation or already available for scrutiny? Who would minimize the number of points of view that have already been corrected? In particular, studies on the beliefs of the ancient Mediterraneans have already appeared in many domains, transposed for those who know how to interpret them; in any case, their importance has become exceptionally enlarged and varied as well as catalyzed. In the nineteenth century one could believe that the history of the primitive Aegeans had, temporarily, gone scarcely beyond the beginning of the Olympiad's official computation. To be sure, since Arthur Evans it has been necessary to go back gradually to

8. Cf. Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1957), and the review in the *Revue archéologique*, I (1958), 117–23.

the second millennium of our origins about which we had given up trying to ascertain more than we already knew. At any rate, the illustrated but textless Bible to be found in the archives of the Minoan palaces need not now remain mute, at least beginning with the period that we still call, for lack of a better term, "Mycenaean" or "Achaean." If the deciphering of linear drawing B is accomplished,⁹ and this seems at least a possibility, perhaps we shall soon be able to see and hear the pre-Achaean pray—those *forti multi* whose existence before the time of Agamemnon we suspected. The adventurous story of the Greek, Etruscan, and Latin worlds thus simultaneously recedes more or less into the past, especially in the proximity of the Orient! And thus the ironic warning given by the old priests of Saïs to Herodotus ("Oh, Greeks, you are but children!") proves to be justified. But, in order to dress this old wound of injured pride, a little village full of an artistic past, evocative of Troy, has just been discovered at Poliochni de Lemnos.¹⁰ Even the tiny civilization of Sesklo extends its modest antenna toward the civilizations of Cilicia, of southern Syria—toward all the countries where a privileged life had been organized, either on the banks of the Aegus or near the large, internal rivers, during the fifth and fourth millenniums.¹¹ It now has become more legitimate to hope that one day the steps may be supplied that are still missing in the ladder of human thought. At any rate, no one will deny any longer that the Mediterranean area, beginning with Crete and elsewhere, underwent the composite influences that restored prosperity in the East from Phoenicia to Ionia. The pre-Hellenism of Crete and the Cyclades, utilized by Homer and the author of the *Theogony* in order to establish—actually to sort out—the hierarchized levels of the divine world, no longer possesses the aspects of a previously assumed complexity.

It was inevitable that the history of the gods as well as that of earthly beliefs should also require a good deal of rejuvenation. This occurred opportunely at the very moment when the profound researches of Kerényi and others finally offered the ancient Pantheon a psychological

9. We must hope that the tragic fate of one of the decipherers, Michel Ventris, will not seriously slow down the work.

10. Italian excavations being currently continued by Bernabo Brea.

11. Cf. in this regard particularly the studies of Fritz Schachermeyr, *Die ältesten Kulturen Griechenlands* (1955). The author's most recent views are expressed in studies which he has given to the *Nouvelle Clio*, I, (1950), 567 ff., and to *Diogenes*, No. 4, Autumn, 1953), pp. 17–30, entitled "The Genesis of the Greek Polis."

Notes and Discussion

youthfulness, bringing it back to small beginnings, those of inspired infancy.

To be sure, if we wish to measure the contribution of ancient religiosity to human spirituality, we no longer lack a positive documentation—the result of expert research. And the instructive treatises of Martin P. Nilsson on Greece, for example, or the broadly conceived essays by the leading figures and specialists in the study of the Roman world, today bring us a rich provender whose occasional lacunae might still be discovered only by experts. And so many studies and analyses are being added almost every day to this comprehensive material! It has already been observed in this periodical¹² that “only a Scandinavian,” freed from the passions and exaggerations of “Continental”(?) thought, could have successfully undertaken this enterprise on Greece and “avoided the extremes.” But perhaps we will perceive what we have risked until now: was the subconscious, even the subjective, excessively repressed by the scrupulous use of only verifiable facts, classified as historical, in a domain that is not specifically a public one—that of belief? It might be interesting to note that in a period when certain modern historians deliberately pass over men’s acts and the so-called current events of our days, we have been so venturesome; imperiously we attempt to chronicle and apportion the very usages of belief, all labeled in good order, as well as the silent or vocal practices of faith.

The official obscurity of the great international indexers, of the classifiers of public utility—official statistics on gods and heroes—this is what has mainly been made available to us from time to time. And so we must be grateful—and perhaps indulgent as well—to those for whom the moving enigma of ancient or modern religion always remains present and active, from magic to superstition, to martyrdom. They are right to isolate and redeem, if need be, the role of intuition and reverie. They also remind us that the fact of the cosmos was not a matter of indifference even to the most primitive and destitute man—any more than was the mystery of death. If we are now to believe that spiritual life during the Paleolithic era, when already expert and pious artists existed, might have tended more or less consciously toward a calm reverie, then we will feel increasingly that we should not rely too heavily on details in the *Handbücher* or on collections of precise data. We have not as yet arrived at our destination; every day forces us to revise analyses which sometimes end up by taking on the appearance of

12. *Diogenes*, No. 14 (Summer, 1953), p. 115.

masterpieces of the imagination—so much so that we have become somewhat giddy! But how fortunate we now are at least to be able to inscribe on the portals of our ancient French colleges the confession and warning that they are concerned too with the “human sciences”! And so we find ourselves freed a bit from the danger of hypotheses and theories; we can now appreciate the special nature of pagan fabulation, as exemplified by the myth and the mystery, without ever overestimating it.

At this international turning point in scholarship, two of Kerényi's recent studies seem to me to demonstrate his original position: first, the work published in Italian in 1950 and entitled *Miti e misteri*; then *La Religion antique*, in 1957. The latter study, which appeared under different titles in diverse languages and countries, summarizes and enriches the themes of the comprehensive treatise first published in Bologna in 1940. Moreover, the principal thesis, although presented under various aspects, is the same. It demonstrates that apart from objective researches on ancient cults—archeology, epigraphy, philology—that have attained the highest degree of apparent documentary objectivity, we perhaps have not yet fully and with utmost satisfaction fulfilled our profession as historians of religion. In achieving this end, we should also be able, after studying temples and altars, gods and heroes, priest-hoods and feasts, to discern exactly what the evolutive faith of paganism really was, to penetrate the dim light of subjective life and reach the virtual substratum of the ancient soul! Here ethnology, psychology, and archeology give one another their indispensable help. This is all the more true because we must no longer go back solely to Homer and Hesiod in re-examining every problem—as was done complacently from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and is still being done today. And, fortunately, we have been deprived of the convenient expedient we used to have when it was permissible to proclaim as “unique” if not miraculous both the Greek and the Latin civilizations which were actually constituted and nourished by so many sources! Moreover, how can one henceforth venture to juxtapose simply and far too unilaterally the “ancient religion” of the Mediterranean with the religion of the Semites of Israel, the Psalms and Prophets?

Let us look at the passage in Kerényi's *Miti e misteri* devoted to the curious “Die Geburt der Helene,” the story of the magical egg that recalls the veneration for decorated ostrich eggs frequently deposited in

Notes and Discussion

the sanctuaries and tombs.¹³ According to Frobenius, for example, we reach beneath the Aegean and Cretan rite and myth a special and limitless world of European and Continental fables; these are different from the fables of the Pacific Ocean regions, of which Russia's vast expanses have retained such rich abundance. The adventure of Nemesis itself—that goddess-bird whose nuptial flight into the heavens, associated with a Zeus-Swan, created the Sacred Triad of the Dioscurian Twins and Helen—is significant because of everything that it added to the primitiveness of a religion that was never wanting in metamorphoses and to a piety, at times skeptical, which, despite all that has been said, preserved behind the guise of symbolic forms the ancient cult of trees and animals. And how much more there is to be found in Asia, and above all in Egypt, from which certain doctrinal exaggerations have deflected us, but to which the study of popular fables is redirecting us on all sides.¹⁴ Turning then to Hermes, the “guide of souls,” Kerényi tells us that he has discovered in the very life of this god a revelation of the masculine origins of life. And, indeed, we note that twice Hermes was the responsible and passionate savior of the little god: when he came to Semele, dying on her couch from a lightning stroke, and when, after Dionysus has been “born a second time” from the “thigh of Zeus,” Hermes assiduously rescued him from the wrath of Hera, claiming he was a future pawn for the salvation of souls.

The great Praxitelian group of Olympia, the object of so many revivals and imitations, including even the Mithraic shrine of the Rhine fortification, would remain a dark fantasy were it not for the secret of metaphysical faith which alone can explain it. If we do not realize that the “Psychopompus” is, above all, the messenger to Hades, the genie of Accessory Night, the disturbing companion of the Sileni whose hammer cracks and, at times, opens the hiding place of the burial mound—in this akin to Hecate, born as he was from the mystery of the Pillar—

13. We must remember that we have help on this point, thanks to the exact and novel studies of Miriam Astruc. In the very midst of the archaic and classical epoch in Greece and in Italy, eggs were deposited in the tombs, frequently in pairs. Regarding the decoration of the ceramic, funeral egg, from the “series” of Helene Stathatos, I confess that I do not share H. Metzger's ideas, inspired by M. P. Nilsson. For the custom at Paestum cf. A. Maiuri, *Peinture romaine*, Album Skira, Pl. 21.

14. The *Revue archéologique* gave an account (I [1954], 238–42) of the “Romans et contes égyptiens de l'époque pharaonique,” the admirable collection of Gustave Lefevre, 1949, stressing all that could be learned in it about the religion of the ancient Egyptians and that of other river folk of the Mediterranean, both north and south.

then we will never be able to understand why, in the frame of the door to the Anactoron of Samothrace, just as in the entrance to the Attideion of Ostia at the Porte Laurentine, symbolic, essential, and related figures were stationed. And can we not see that in Samothrace, for example, two ithyphallic bronze figures stood in front of the site for initiations? Later on, some people imagined that these figures represented two preliminary Cabiri, or two Dioscuri.

The obscure mysteries of paganism profit in turn either from an excess of attention—when there is an imprudent desire to see in them the precursors of the Christians—or from a relative deterioration, when the attempt is made to preserve in their post-Hellenic ceremonies only quasi-profane feasts and banquets. Kerényi has stressed the influence and the profound significance of these mysteries. He has a feeling for the revealed meaning of the religious ceremonies that were celebrated near the shores of the Pylos during the time of Telemachus; he does not misinterpret the sanctity of the court reunions where the Homeric Aëdon, Phemios, and Demodocus had already joined in commemorating gods and heroes. When one understands that all primitive art exists to serve belief, it becomes no longer possible to have any doubt about the magic that also surrounded the first divine images. During the whole of the ancient period, this magic wove a continuous novel of adventure from the secret life of the Greek statues, those of the cult as well as of the others. Wrathful and fanciful, on occasion, these statues seemed to possess the very soul of their worshipers! The symbols themselves also had their fair share of trials, of journeys and returns. This was true of the Delphic Omphale, for example, and later of the Alexandrine *betyles* (sacred stones), the consecrated recipients of the fertilizing water of the Nile that may be seen solemnly exposed at Rome and in Campania in the Egyptian-like shrines.¹⁵

The Reverend Father A. J. Festugière has written some charming pages about the variable meanings of these “marks” of authority and miraculousness; their instructive value is mainly to be found in the Necropoli: in the Athenian Ceramicus, for example, where as early as the fifth century the emblem of the bull signified the presence of Dionysus; just as at Eleusis, the gathered grain of wheat presented during the night of the Eoptae evoked, among the band of silent faithful, the mute passion of Demeter, nurturer and hope of revivification.

15. I dissent from Kerényi's interpretations in *La Religion antique* (1957), pp. 203 ff., as regards a mural painting in Livy's house in Rome.

Notes and Discussion

Moreover, symbols and implements of immortalization played their role in the initiation ceremonies, not only at Eleusis but at Samothrace and Thebes as well (since 1938–39 we have become more confident that this is true). Candidates for pagan survival were primarily urged to acquire knowledge about the duality of their feeble nature as mortals; we know this today.¹⁶ Such duality enabled them to become “Sons of the Earth and of the Starry Heavens” sometime after death. Protected by the gods from above, in the shadows of the *Telesteria* (mystery shrines), they solemnly prepared to resume possession of their powers of procreation after life, as the faithful of the Osiris in Egypt had done before them.¹⁷ And it is indeed instructive to note that the name of Demeter had already appeared on the tablets of linear drawing B in Crete, where she had had her adventure with Jason, and also in Mycena, where we see her as part of a precious ivory group in which she is seated on the ground with Corinna and with the little Dionysus, who is playing near them. The evolution can now be traced from the neolithic epoch, when already figurines of nude goddesses were deposited in the tombs, until Homer and after him down to the Neo-Platonists. There is no reason to deny or scorn the progress of the light shed so long ago upon the pagan world merely because the route is not evenly illuminated all the way. If those who do not see the light refuse to accept it, should we too be blind to it?

Kerényi's ideas are especially enticing and perspicacious when he deals with the gods and the “savior” heroes. A perfect connoisseur of ancient texts and of the smallest details that are often disdained, he developed unexpected insights here and there in his capacity as an experienced man of letters. “Prometheus has been endlessly written about,” Nilsson declared in 1941.¹⁸ Even twenty years later there was no dearth of inquiries into this troublesome subject. We might smile at early and even recent explanations of the Promethean myth—the stealer of fire, the Titan who deceived Olympus about the weight and cost of sacrificial flesh. Knowing full well that the extreme antiquity of fire has now been established—it antedates even the beginnings of the

16. Charles Picard, the mock “initiation baptism” at Eleusis and the formulary of the mysteries of the Two goddesses, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (1958).

17. Cf. Chr. Desroches-Noblecourt, *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, LIII (1953), 7–47, Pls. 1–5 (concubines of death “. . . on the occasion of a prayer for a birth”).

18. *Histoire de la religion grecque*, I, 709.

age that is called "of the Reindeer"—and knowing also that Neanderthal man (and perhaps even the *Sinanthropi* themselves, at least at the start of the quaternary) feared the "red flower," Kerényi did not corroborate the imaginative story of a pre-Freudian Caucasian; as such, the latter would represent no more than a vigorous(?) lover, one that in the last analysis could justify those heroes of Racine who burned with a greater fire than was ever lighted by psychoanalysis.

The Hermes of Cyllenius' invention—why should we forget this?—had taught the "prelunar" lighting of fire in Arcadia which was accomplished by friction, by tenon and mortise; the so-called Homeric *Hymn* written in his honor proves this. But it is altogether credible that the preservation of fire had been the main purpose of the titanic Pyrophoros' cunning. This is a difficult problem! Those who, not so long ago, saw the Yourouks of the Meandra plains transporting lighted embers on horseback from camp to camp can understand the titanic champion's daring in the face of the cruel arbitrariness of Olympus, who wanted to monopolize fire and lightning for his own formidable temples. The guile of Mekone's sacrifice, the preservation of fire obtained from the hollow stem of a narthex—these are diverse episodes of the struggle against nature led by the first non-sedentary men. Kerényi relates Prometheus—the crucified, defeated man of the Caucasus, the Rebel against Force and Power—precisely to the curious mysteries of the Cabiri of Lemnos, where there had been a labyrinth and where Hephaestus, the crippled genius, had involuntarily fallen from the sky. It was first in the Cabirian Island, before the diffusion in Boeotia (which Bengt Hemberg¹⁹ was not able to deal with fully), that Prometheus supposedly hid the fire, after he had previously concealed it, or so it is said, in the altar of Hephaestus and Athena. Cicero was not wrong when he spoke of the "theft of Lemnos." The Cyclopien forge of Mosychlos, a volcano that is now extinguished, was the first to redden the fire that became Promethean. A cruel vengeance was wreaked upon the outcast by the jealous gods. Kerényi believes that the "Cabirian" ring we see on Prometheus' hand (which holds an Etruscan mirror) and his forehead crowned with willows—a reminder of the bonds of servitude in the Caucasus—are the stigmata of the Cronides' punishment:²⁰ signs of expiation which later became the symbolical emblem

19. *Die Kabiren* (Uppsala, 1950).

20. Cf., for the Etruscan mirror, Gerhard, *Etruskische Spiegel*, II, 138, 1.

of those initiated into the mysteries of Samothrace. A crude chip of stone, the souvenir of the rocks placed at the limit of the ancient world, was mounted in the ring. To be sure, it is interesting to think that the *nartheocophores* (bearers of reed or fennel) are to be found in the second row, behind the *bacchoi*, in the hierarchy of the Dionysian initiates and that our Christian churches have occasionally preserved, near their entrances, the sacred site of the narthex in expectation of candidates. Kerényi cites the phrase that Martial causes the personified Narthex to utter: "*Clara Prometheo munere ligna sumus.*"²¹

In contrast to Kerényi's essays, bubbling over with fresh intuitions, how pale seem the flat monographs, based, at times, upon a superficial archeology! Yet they deal with the heroes and men of epic times, from Heracles to Achilles. We do not have space here to mention Kerényi's many other researches, like those on "l'Homme primitif et les mystères" (*Miti*, pp. 379 ff.) and "l'Homme et le mesque" (*ibid.*, pp. 457 ff.); to say nothing of those that deal abundantly with Roman religion, its rites, feasts, and sacrifices. But I must add a few words on Dionysus. Kerényi was one of the first, and for this I thank him, to accept my studies on the *Mitréphoros*,²² the primitively winged god with the small band around his forehead of which the Delphian excavations have given us such a moving picture. It is now our good fortune to learn that Dionysus, possibly bearing a theophorus name patterned after his own, reappeared, thanks to the tablets of linear drawing B in Crete and in Pylos.²³ Here is proof once again of the antiquity of this master of the animals. As early as the epoch of the Cretan Thalassocracy, he was represented in the labyrinths of the palace by the anthropomorphous bull; a derisive Greek legend one day changed the bull into the Minotaur. The "Minos" of this venerable island worshiped it just as the Pharaohs worshiped Apis in Egypt. On the days of princely competitions, trial races brought credit to the hybrid master of the labyrinth. In Crete these races took place in the vast inner courts of the seignorial manors set up for this purpose. Possibly the Athenian *tributi*

21. From now on we will remember and understand Peisistratus' surprise (he was the "faithful companion") when Prometheus unveils himself, the *crown on his head*, as we read it in Aristophanes' *The Birds*.

22. Cf. *Mélanges Glotz, Dionysos Mitréphoros*, 1032; for the Ptilas or Psilax (primitive winged Dionysus); cf. *Mélanges O. Navarre*, 1935.

23. I studied the worth of the new documents on this point at the recent meeting of the history of religions in Strasburg (June, 1958).

(tribute-bearers) organized the acrobatic teams and choruses—seven young men and seven young girls—for these palace ceremonies. And to think of the teratological adventures of Pasiphaë, evocative of the Hathorian sculptures in the bodies of the sacred cows of Egypt! Furthermore, from now on we find Dionysus-Bacchus in Lydia, in the Tmolus regions, thanks to a bilingual inscription in Lydian and in Greek; the cult of this god, evidenced in Italic Etruria as well, had come from afar with the migration of the Tyrsenes. Aeschylus and Euripides knew more about this than we do. The tragedy of the *Edoni*, in the country where Lycurgus threatened the Sacred Nurses with a double ax, described the bellowing taurines which ritually heralded the arrival of the god and his servants. Kerényi believes that the latter must have worn masks which made them resemble the Minotaur of the archaic, terra cotta cymas that reappeared recently in the Roman Forum.²⁴

Doubtless we are but beginning to make discoveries; the excitement provoked by the first revelations of linear drawing B is sufficient evidence: decipherings, interpretations—we still have so many arduous tasks to accomplish!

At a time when *Die Antike Religion*, published initially in Bologna in 1940, has appeared in French, with an additional hitherto unpublished chapter on symbolism (a sequence of essays rather than syntheses), can but congratulate the author who has been uninterruptedly preoccupied with fitting together the elements—I was going to say the weapons—of his doctrine. A courteous polemicist, the historiographer of Prometheus and Pythagoras wanted to present afresh to French readers the external adornments of his erudite stronghold. Thus he offers us, as he himself says, “a morphology” of the history of pagan religions, a project he has thought about for a long time. It is modestly presented to the representatives of our disciplines for evaluation; as the author puts it, each of us has his own “style.” Inquiring minds—when they exist—often differ and are sometimes unequal. In Kerényi’s opinion, the establishment of a science of religions that tends to be historical, positivist, somewhat “eventful-minded,” based primarily on

24. Recently discovered in the Forum, in the quarters of the sanctuary of Vesta; one can see on these documents the sacred race run by Dionysus-Minotaur surrounded by panthers who remained attached to his cult. The scene evokes Pharaoh’s ritual race near Apis in the *dromoi* of the sanctuaries of primitive Egypt.

erudition, does not justify neglect of a different trend. We should now give ancient religion, which draws further away from us in time, an interpretive language that does justice to its secret and specific power. The present theological point of view is not adequate; it merely weighs the values of the past on a modern—and often more or less confessionalist—scale. Religion is not an economic or literary matter. We must admit that Kerényi's position does not seem to be unparadoxical when we remember that no non-“sacred” primitive art existed either on the northern shores of the Mediterranean or in Asia and Egypt. And skill is involved in attempting to borrow certain norms of its ideal methodology from the history of art. Art, which is everywhere, is the aspiration of discriminating people; it is no less a personal thing than belief.

But Kerényi is somewhat hard on the erudition of the nineteenth century when he asserts that the classical study of antiquity scarcely progressed beyond K. O. Müller's *Prolegomena*. Let us allow him this retrospective evaluation which simply contradicts the facts. And let us now try to ascertain what might have suggested this to him. The scientific mind, like language, is forced to cut up the immense field of its investigations into discontinuous fragments. To be sure, this should not lead us to make mistakes about certain continuities; at least there is a more “religious” attitude in the perception of the profound, permanent requirements of the work that hopefully remains to be done at a deeper level than that of historical erudition. The fruitful renewal of knowledge that has resulted from the continuous unfolding of ancient history, *the most intense in a century*, and which has benefited us more and more, would not confer all these advantages if it were studied vertically. For ancient religiosity has varied in time and space; and along with so much fine work it is not impossible to uncover lacunae, contradictions, and even worse. Knowledge is developing, to be sure; but each wave brings something in and takes something away. How many abandoned theories have already been deposited upon our beaches! In attempting to stress underlying stability at least as much or more than surface revivals and chance happenings, it is seemingly possible to achieve greater insight, accuracy, and fairness.

The diptych of *Die Antike Religion*—Greece-Rome—proved to be justified. Our only regret is that it was not a triptych because the addition of Etruscan religion, which was so inspiring to Rome, would also have been welcome. The many fruitful trips, even the involuntary ones, that Kerényi made enabled him to become very familiar with the

country of the Tyrrhenians of Italy. But in Tuscany he would have found impressive arguments for his theory about the importance of festivities and games, the substratum of religious activity. The federal sanctuary where the Lucumo gathered, and where annual athletic contests, at times resembling bloody sacrifices, took place, and where a temporary fair was set up—like the one at Delos during the exotic Ionian festivities of the Cyclades—with, it seems, precisely the Etrurian Council—all this would have been helpful to the author's project. On the other hand, it is regrettable that Kerényi stressed here and there criticism of "science" and of what he calls "positivism" in matters of religious history; this is a pardonable reaction to the interpretations of his point of view ventured by some critics. Let us be tolerant. What all of us think of as our fundamental ideas about the world might at times be no more than confidence in the youthfulness of our minds; and the scholar is taking a chance when he labors to define some aspect of the world suggested to him by his own heritage and race "without taking into account the motives that might limit his free research" (*La Religion antique*, p. 65). In any case, the thesis that has been so courageously maintained since 1940 is valid. And we can still assert as late as 1957 that neither the essential religious fact of the Mediterraneans nor the moral of the myths that intrigued Plato's Socrates in the shadow of the flowering agnus-cactus of the Ilissus is entirely explicable despite the diligent compilation or summing up of the ostensible history of gods, heroes, and cults. What then should be added to it? Recognition of what formerly was the pure religious act in all its solemnity—this is what the author reiterates most aptly. When the Athenians who were contemporaries of Solon or Pericles fetched and drank wine in the presence of a symposiarch, on a day dedicated to Dionysus, sacred action, a collective festivity, was enacted. When the families of the Cheronea gathered once a year to stage a mock pursuit of the "starving" slave whom they chased from the house with twigs of agnus-cactus, this too represented a game which surprised the priestly Plutarch and which apparently evoked the primitive veracity of the nomads before agriculture or cattle-breeding existed. A history of ancient Mediterranean religion that shows no constant awareness of its profound, ludicrous impact might seem inadequate and even incorrect. In the course of his protracted studies, Kerényi came to realize this, and he quite properly draws our attention to the matter. We must remind the reader that the French scholar L. Garnet, in his fine study on *Le Génie grec dans*

Notes and Discussion

la religion,²⁵ has already deduced the importance of fairs and meetings from the alternating constraints and liberations of the feast. His penetrating researches, extending to the theater and the stadium, have revealed variously and in more or less extensive form what the latent religious life of *homo ludens* primarily signified. In his opinion, Roger Caillois's *Les Jeux et les hommes*²⁶ illuminates one of the most popular activities of human beings.

We must give some credit to erudition, even to "positivism," when we consider all that archeological research unceasingly adds to our still incomplete knowledge regarding the place occupied by festivities and games in ancient religion. Only yesterday²⁷ an inscribed fragment from the marbles of a destroyed ancient prytaneum in Thasos yielded a list of the little insular capital's festivities. An entire unpublished chapter on local rites, to which we have access today, presents the complex picture of what might have been, not far from Lemnos and Samothrace, the annual calendar of the honors due gods and heroes in the fourth century B.C. Everywhere during moments of the festivity—some related and others conflicting—contact between the human and the divine could periodically reach its zenith. A desire for energy and piety is reactivated in experiences such as these; surely man requires this periodic "incantation," this method of sublimating the daily realities in order to withstand the dreariness of Work and Time. Games and festivities make possible the access to superior, intrinsic ideas; the laws of experience and of requisite hope are founded upon these notions, albeit sometimes obscurely, in our biocosmic and ever enigmatic universe! The Greek and Roman agrarian rites (Th. Zielinski, the author of *La Sibylle*, has already suggested this)²⁸ illustrated this invisible presence of the gods in nature and the comfort that men derive from prayer, sacrifice, and group games. In Rome, it must be said, the intervention of the *numina* had assumed the most secret as well as the most insistent form.

It is this vast element of shadow and mystery in ancient religion that

25. Collection: *L'Évolution de l'humanité* (Henri Berr), First Series, Vol. XI.

26. (Paris: N.R.F., 1938).

27. Fr. Salviat, *Bulletin correspondance hellénique*, I (1958), 193–267. Twenty-odd public festivities are anticipated and listed according to the order of the seasons or of the calendar.

28. Publication (in 1924) of Th. Zielinski, who thus left in his brief history of *La Religion de la Grèce antique* (translation of the Association G. Budé, 1926) original and charming opinions. He, too, did not care for the "positivists."

Kerényi forcefully urges us not to overlook: a concept essential to an understanding of the Mediterranean world described by Thales as “full of gods.” This ancient religion must be viewed *as art*; for it is also art in its way, and poetry, and that naïve and still subjective magic that can move mountains. The deeds and metamorphoses of the gods, the unceasingly re-elaborated “Gesture” of the heroes whom Festugière looks upon as the precursors of the Christian saints—all this lies in the domain of the archives of a historiography or a hagiography of the heavenly world. But religion is *of man*, an earthly asceticism; it implies primarily constant intervention on the part of a human being, whether a genius or not, the bearer of the future fortunes of the world. It is up to us not to forget the signs, whether they be obvious or symbolic. It is very interesting in this regard to note that Kerényi added a chapter on symbolism to his *Religion antique* of 1957. It might perhaps have been worthwhile at this juncture to go into the problem of funeral images which has given rise to many erudite controversies between Franz Cumont, A. Nook, and others—on the subject, for example, of the Roman sarcophages. The problem of ascertaining the role of symbolism in the Greek steles had arisen previously. I do not believe—I must state this here—that Friis Johansen’s negative solution²⁹ has resolved the debate. These are difficult studies; ever since Goblet d’Aviela wrote about the migration of symbols, these non-sedentary aspects have not ceased to intrigue the various exegetes. But unfortunately the fact of the matter is that the symbolists have done symbolism a good deal of harm. Is Kérényi quite certain that he himself correctly interpreted what he calls the “club of Orion”? More than one reader will have doubts.

Although we must still feel our way in correcting possible errors, at least a mode of life has been delineated; and an alarm has been sounded against those who subscribe to an excessively positivist interpretation of the history of religion. To be sure, this attitude is helpful in collecting facts and in organizing the documentation, but it should not go beyond this preparatory stage or attempt to achieve an understanding in depth of ancient religious thought. Despite the excessively strict limitations Kerényi imposed upon his 1957 study, despite the fact that he juxtaposed too closely two forms of pagan religion that are quite different, he nevertheless shed light on the most primitive experiences—that of men’s festivities, which are never entirely identical or yet altogether different. Should we reproach him for having added a few uncertain-

29. *The Attic Greek Reliefs* (1951).

Notes and Discussion

ties? But, as believers, as scholars, are we not all very different from each other? To each his own faith, his "truth." Each of us is caught up in a network of intermittent light that other eyes may not see. At any rate, the collective edifice is constructed stone by stone; any mind that is truly sensitive to ancient religion will always find in it its own inspiring fountain of youth.