

UNDERSTANDING TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA
THROUGH ITS LITERATURE: A GERMAN VIEW

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Professor Galinsky asks us to enclose a note saying that he strongly endorses "the idea of a tailpiece"--the comment by Professor French which follows this article. He also speaks frankly of the limitations of his English: "My American instructor from Rutgers, and my teaching fellow from Michigan have surely done their best to lick the German original into English shape but a hard core of pedantry seems to have survived the ordeal of translation!"

Although MASJ likes "high informal" English prose, it seemed to us as editors that our readers deserved the opportunity to read this essay; the difference in style between it and our normal prose is marked, but not all that disconcerting. Moreover, not merely for perspective, but also for methodology, one wants the outside view. If the methodology is foreign--for this is "A German View" in several senses--it is certainly worth knowing.

--SGL

I

Often one of the reasons one likes to take up a foreign literary work is that it appears to supply information about the foreign empiric reality. Choosing American literature as a source of examples, we see that it is not by mere chance that titles like America in Literature, American Life in Literature, USA im Spiegel der Literatur abound in the field of popular literary anthologies and histories. Attractive as they admittedly are to the American insider, they would seem to have a particularly strong appeal to the non-American outsider. They promise valid information about a nation's society and culture through its literature. Titles like the ones quoted may or may not reduce works of art to documents and underestimate the power of imagination. What then can the imagination of American authors, what can the imaginative reality of their productions offer toward our comprehension of the United States? What can imaginative reality contribute which empiric reality cannot also offer?

Before I attempt an answer--one confined, however, to the twentieth

century--I would gratefully remember forerunners who were on the way to the same destination. Robert E. Spiller's dictum, "... the primary function of art is to comment on life implicitly through the use of symbols and not to record life explicitly through the use of photographic reproductions",¹ proved a useful word of warning. The late Perry Miller's essay, "The Image of America in the American Novel and Its Impact on Europe",² apparently written first for European readers, Heinrich Straumann's addresses "The (Literary) Image of the American"³ and "On the Changing Image of Man in Contemporary American Literature,"⁴ and, finally, the late William Van Connor's paper "The Novel and the 'Truth' about America"⁵ saved me from many pitfalls.

Nevertheless, compared with those four literary approaches to an understanding of America, my approach is less promising because it is more skeptical, even more skeptical than is Spiller's. I have learned to distrust conclusions proceeding from imaginative to empiric reality. American empiric reality is particularly complex since America is neither a "nation" nor a "country" in the European sense. It is a nation of just less than 200 million, filling half a continent and including a great many ethnic groups. What I have learned to understand of the American people of this century through American letters, I do not attribute to certain individual works in themselves, but only in so far as they embody typical "life functions" which American literature performs for America. Every literature of the world is exercising varying functions in the lives of men of a given period. These functions find more or less adequate esthetic realizations by works of art. Whether and to what extent a literature, say American literature, is primarily criticism or portrayal or interpretation of reality, whether American literature is an imaginative condensation of a transparent background reality or only an illusory substitute for life, whether American literature as intellectual or even spiritual leadership has the ability to create guide lines of human conduct, whether as prophetic vision it is capable of shaping projections of the future: all these functions, which, by language, express attitudes toward reality, their mixture and their changes help me to understand the America of the twentieth century a little better. This functional approach will be tested by means of several examples.

II

Does America become more understandable when we determine that the critical function of American literature is especially well-developed? The evidence is comprised of material from all six decades, all literary genres--narrative, verse, drama--and an abundance of different tones from pessimism to farce and to the absurd.

I will first give examples from the novel form. A continuous strand of socio-critical narration threads its way from Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis through James T. Farrell, Steinbeck, Norman Mailer and

James Jones, Saul Bellow and J. D. Salinger to the Negro authors Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. The scale of moods ranges from pessimism to enraged protest, from satire, the grotesque or the absurd to the humorous. The apparently impartial, pessimistic school of thought is the earliest, and to this school belongs the strongest artistic talent of the entire group, Theodore Dreiser. Both the extent and the limits of the critical function of American literature become especially clear in Dreiser's work. The critical impulse lasts from the creation of Sister Carrie (1900) through An American Tragedy (1925) to The Stoic (1947). Criticism of life, however, is finally subdued by interpretation of life, an interpretation leaning toward mysticism (cf. The Bulwark).

Dreiser is, as is well known, not of Anglo-Saxon, but of German origin, one of the 'first-generation' German-Americans. He also serves as an example of the older generation of the 1870's.

In the middle generation the intensity of the critical function of American fiction reasserts itself in the same form type, the socio-critical novel, with J. T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy standing for Chicago, Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath serving for Oklahoma and California, Dos Passos's Manhattan Transfer representing New York, his District of Columbia trilogy speaking for Washington, D. C., and his U.S.A. trilogy taking in all of America. Once again the proponents of this criticism are not Anglo-Saxons; Farrell is Irish, Steinbeck, German-Irish, and Dos Passos is paternally of Portuguese descent.⁶

The novel of war criticism connects this thread of accusation of the Middle generation with that of the younger writers of the 1940's. The two great war novels of the 1920's, Cummings' The Enormous Room and Dos Passos' Three Soldiers, find, in spite of all variations, recognizable counterparts in Mailer's The Naked and the Dead and in Jones' From Here to Eternity. What is new in the narrative art of the 1940's through the 1960's, is the transformation of social to racial criticism. Again the non-Anglo-Saxon, this time the Negro, contributes to this criticism. Wright's Native Son, Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain, and Ellison's Invisible Man are obvious examples. But once more, as in the late work of Dreiser, criticism arrives at its limits. It is in Ellison's fiction that criticism is subdued not by a religious, mystical interpretation of reality but by a humanist interpretation of life as a search for identity. The 1950's and 1960's introduce yet another two new characteristics into the realm of the critical narrative. The first is of relative, the second of absolute novelty.

1. Social criticism becomes cultural criticism with three variants: Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye takes a boy who is no longer a child and not yet a grown up through a New York cross-section of present-day American civilization; Katherine Anne Porter sends the Atlantic community on a veritable fools' errand aboard a Ship of Fools, Saul Bellow in his comic novel of

adventure, Henderson, the Rain King, adds to the old Euro-American a new Afro-American variation upon the intercontinental theme.

2. Social criticism discovers the absurd and applies it to a presentation of reality that follows the principle: "In human corporate existence things happen senselessly." John Cheever's chronicles of the brothers Wapshot illustrate this brand of criticism.

I have passed in review over 60 years in the development of social criticism in the American novel. There is no lack of dramatic and lyric counterparts to these few, though representative, examples from the narrative genre. The tone of accusation recurs in the "Living Newspaper" of the Federal Theater of the New Deal era and in the Clifford Odets plays as performed by the Group Theater of New York City. Since the 1940's the same tone has permeated the work of Arthur Miller. A much subtler variant of critical tone, the tragi-comic one, informs O'Neill's late masterpiece A Touch of the Poet. As to the shrillness of furious disillusionment Edward Albee's variation upon the seemingly conventional theme of academic frustration and conjugal infelicity stands unrivaled.

In American twentieth century poetry the range of criticism is as wide and varied as it is in the narrative and dramatic genres. The controlled voice of racial protest in the verse of Langston Hughes, the subdued voice of scientific exposure of human ills that marks a good deal of Doctor William Carlos Williams' poetry, especially that composed during the Depression and the early New Deal, the voice of cultural criticism which is as unmistakable in Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" and The Cantos as it is in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and in the verse of E. E. Cummings--no further examples are needed to remind the reader of both the extent and the caliber of the American "poetry of criticism." The greatest artistic power of American twentieth century literature functioning as criticism of life seems to me to lie in poetry, its greatest consistency in the narrative, its relatively latest appearance in the drama.

What does this critically functioning literature contribute to an understanding of the United States? Probably at least four things: The critical function attests on the one hand to the fact that civil rights campaigns, the sit-ins and teach-ins, the critical speeches and writings of educational reformers, and the slow but continuous revisional work of Congress and the Supreme Court are manifestations of a trend characteristic not only of empirical but also of imaginative reality. The critical function attests on the other hand to the fact that in American culture being critical and being alert represents such a high value in life that this value challenges the imagination and stimulates the creation of symbolic form, even in the case of the first-rate authors. The existence and vitality of the critical impulse attests to a third fact: The continuously smiling cover girls and boys of the mass periodicals, the "hidden persuaders" of Madison Avenue, and the facade-

like quality of so much "life as being lived" have found a counter-equivalent in this critical literature. Finally, the way in which criticism is used in the work of its great representatives--Dreiser, Pound, Ellison--is evidence enough that in all these literary productions critics do not turn monomaniacs, but remain capable of interpreting life and thereby apprehending a meaningful connection between criticized reality and reality in toto. Thus the critical function as exercised by American literature helps us to understand why America has sought to solve its difficulties in the twentieth century by amendment and not by revolution, through the New Deal and the desegregation policy, by freedom train and freedom march.

III

Criticism of reality puts such a strain on the poetic imagination that it is natural for two other functions of literature, the portrayal of reality as it simply is, and the depiction of exemplary, heroic or saintly, persons, to be rather weakly developed in American letters.

True imaginative representation, which should not be confused with mere reproduction, demands a state of mind that feels quietly at home in this world. It demands also a joy in the life of our time. Ideally, a literary work of representational function would seem to be in a state of balance. On the one hand it makes the reader recall the existence of an objective world, which its denotative language obviously refers to, a world of empiric (e.g. autobiographical and biographical) facts as well as of imagined events, persons and settings of high probability. On the other hand the same work will reveal an undeniably subjective attitude taken up toward the objective world, the subjective response showing in intensity of imagery and variety of tone. In German literary scholarship "poetic realism" has become the accepted term for works of this functional type. Basic to them is the tone of internal secular contentment in spite of all adversity. In twentieth century American literature it has found expression in William Saroyan's short stories of the late 1930's and 1940's, in his play The Time of Your Life (1939), furthermore in some tales and poems of William Carlos Williams, especially in the cycle Journey to Love. William's stylistic and prosodic attempts to transform the linguistic reality of his America, the American English of colloquial speech, into a poetic medium are signs of such true representation. How difficult such equilibrium between the subjective and the objective world is, and how tempting the tendency to take refuge in the impersonal report, is shown by some short stories from Hemingway's In Our Time (1925). The same difficulty, but a different imaginative way of trying to overcome it manifest themselves in a fascinating phenomenon of the 1930's and of recent years, the revival of the picaresque novel. Its protagonist puts up with his surrounding world and with himself, since one cannot change either one. Picaresque comicality is the tone of such narration. In the 1930's this tone was realized in Thornton

Wilder's Heaven's My Destination, in the present in Saul Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March and in Herzog. This novel of the year 1964 aptly begins with the seemingly paradoxical words: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me." These are the few examples which I can offer to illustrate more or less pure forms of contemporary literary 'representation' of reality.

For the literature of spiritual guidance I can only give one example: T. S. Eliot. The dramatic experiments Murder in the Cathedral, The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk display variants of the religious--Christian--way to humane and merciful perfection: the martyr, the potential missionary, the mission nurse and actual martyr, the couple sticking it out in unhappy marriage, the organist as a type of God as creative artist. American twentieth century letters have largely preferred to remain silent on the possibility of the author or his literary figure serving as Virgil-like guides to Purgatorio or Paradiso.⁷

This remarkable silence on the part of American authors helps me again to grasp something of this America of the twentieth century. It explains:

1. Why other organs of national life regard the task of intellectual or spiritual guidance as their duty. I am thinking of the press, radio and television as well as great orators such as Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy or eminent theologians and preachers like Niebuhr, Tillich, Billy Graham and Bishop Sheen;
2. Why the American educational system has become skeptical about John Dewey's goal of "adjustment to reality";
3. Why the attitudes toward wealth, power, love, science and religion have become so obviously divergent: on the one hand we find the attitudes of the affluent society, on the other those of the beatniks; on the one hand a push for armed might, on the other a desire for non-violence; interest in sport and "body building" versus the attitude of the not inconsiderable number of those tired of physical existence; an active congregational outlook in the churches side by side with that of the religiously uncommitted. I consider it a good sign that this America is not satisfied with itself and that its literature remains honest, that is, does not glide over into sentimentality or idealization, but rather prefers silence with respect to questions it cannot resolve.

IV

From a functional standpoint this literature has a third characteristic. It may be somewhat clumsily defined as a consistent amalgamation of the already analyzed portrayal of reality with two functions not yet here examined: the simultaneous imaginative condensation and interpretation of the world. If one regards the process of amalgamation stylistically, it appears as a curious union of naturalism and symbolism. When studied with special reference to the world views expressed in them, the products of this amalgamation embody four views: a tragic and a Christian one, a view

across the Pacific Ocean back to the wisdom of old East-Asian and Indian philosophers, and a--largely self-created or borrowed--mythical view of the world.

The first of the four variations, the amalgamation of naturalism and symbolism as a stylistic expression of a tragic interpretation of life, begins at the earliest during the first World War, in the drama of O'Neill and later in that of Maxwell Anderson; this variant reaches its height not merely accidentally in 1931, when the most extreme proximity to the Attic tragedy was striven for by O'Neill in Mourning Becomes Electra. In the younger generation Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have attempted the same tragic interpretation of reality. O'Neill, the dramatist from the Northeast, sensed the tragic elements which lay in the conflict between the received moral norm and vital instinct. Williams, like Faulkner from the South, from Mississippi, discovered, as had Faulkner before him, the tragic qualities contained in the dissolution of the other norm-governed society on American soil, the plantation aristocracy of the South. The last flight before the dissolution of the received aristocratic values, the flight into illusion, into the dream, is a basic motif of Williams' dramatic world. The decline into decadence of an entire social structure as an experience of the South lies at the root of such works as The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire and Camino Real.

The narrative form of the tragic interpretation of reality in a style blending naturalism and symbolism had issued from the same southern environment, but before rather than after World War II, in the novels and short stories of William Faulkner. Prevailing as it did in his fiction of the late 1920's and the 1930's, it is not succeeded by a resumption of the satirical criticism of life which permeated his early works. The Faulkner of the 1950's begins to let the spark of hope of the Christian world of revelation flash up over his tragic reality. In the year 1951 Faulkner's drama Requiem for a Nun appeared, the title of which upholds the interplay between the two levels of naturalism and symbolism by the ambiguity of the word "nun"--"street walker" in American slang, and "nun" or "sister" in the colloquial language. In this very work Faulkner comes closest to the Christian interpretation of the world as a world redeemed by the Son of God. Faulkner's approaching to the realm of biblical parable in the narrative A Fable (1954) points in the same direction, from the tragic to a Christian view of reality, but one which is admittedly interspersed with Manichaeic elements.

Perhaps it is more than coincidence that at almost the same time the other great tragic narrator of America, Hemingway, transformed a key figure of the New Testament, Peter the fisherman, into the symbolic figure of the Cuban fisherman in The Old Man and the Sea, and for this work took over the language of the Bible.

But this very Hemingway had, 20 years previously, in 1932, clearly demonstrated his knowledge of Attic tragedy and its cultural origins

(cf. Death in the Afternoon). The confrontation of man with death as well as the introduction of young, naive man to the world of evil and guilt thread their way as "leitmotifs" through the multilevel structure of Hemingway's novels and short stories. In so far as his fiction prefers cosmopolitan settings for the action--France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Cuba--it forms a supplementary counterpart to the southern regionalism in the poetic universe of Faulkner.

In the younger generation Carson McCullers and John Updike seem to me to pursue the tragic vision of reality. The continuity of this vision is attested to by the fact that it has won exponents not only in drama and narrative but also in lyric poetry. Admittedly, its climactic achievement is found in the verse of an older poet, a member of the O'Neill and Eliot generation, the Californian Robinson Jeffers. While the tragic world view of an aging Faulkner and Hemingway opens at places to admit Christian elements, the sense of the incompatibility existing between the tragic and the Christian interpretation of life only seems to become more pronounced in the poetry of the aging Jeffers.

The path from the satirical and pessimistic criticism of reality, on which the narrative artists Faulkner and Hemingway also began, a path leading to a Christian view of the world, was followed most consistently by a poet from the Mississippi Valley, T. S. Eliot. The author of such great cyclical poems as "Ash-Wednesday" and "Four Quartets" found companions of the same age or younger than himself in the Old and Deep South, in oldest New England, and in modern New York: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, Jose Garcia Villa. Naturally, a Christian interpretation of life expressing itself in dramatic shape may be pointed up in Eliot's plays. But it has already been mentioned that with Eliot the dramatist interpretation is subservient to spiritual guidance. The more pure form of a drama which limits itself to interpreting life is in my opinion present in the work of Thornton Wilder. Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Alcestiad: the interplay of the portrayal of reality and its imaginative compression, with an unobtrusively Christian view of reality can be demonstrated nowhere more vividly or drastically.

When Wilder constructs his Christian and therefore hopeful world theater without scenery, he borrows from the Chinese theater. As the son of an American consul general he learned to know and appreciate this theater in Hong Kong. The eye of Ezra Pound also focused on China, not, however, on its stage, but on its philosophy and above all on its great teacher of life, Confucius. Ezra Pound, from whom so many talents like Eliot and Hemingway, and even some beat poets learned linguistic discipline, found repose in moral philosophy, in the doctrines of a Chinese sage, after a lifetime of physical and intellectual wandering.

East Asian philosophy gave the American interpreters of reality a second lease on life in its Zen-Buddhism and motto of non-attachment. Such

East Asian infusions are unmistakable in the narrative and lyrical works of the younger generation, e.g. in the cases of Salinger and Jack Kerouac (above all in On the Road and The Dharma Bums) or in the lyric poetry of the Beat generation. It is generally known that South Asian, Indian, mysticism contributed to Eliot's "Waste Land" and the "Four Quartets".

A fourth view of the world, the mythical view,⁸ will stand at the end of this survey. It is a type of literature which functions primarily as an interpretation of life. The "mythologizing" of America affects lyric poetry as well as the novel and also one of the recent variants of the drama, the radio play. The American ancestor of the mythical view in poetry is Whitman, and his dissimilar grandchildren are Wallace Stevens, an insurance executive, and William Carlos Williams, a pediatrician and obstetrician from the New York suburbs in New Jersey. I have mentioned the occupational backgrounds of these poets intentionally. These men were not dreamers, but highly practical persons, who, as members of the older generation, attempted a mythical interpretation of their America. The poem "Sunday Morning" by Stevens and the "long poem" Paterson mark out most forcefully the mythical line of the generation between Dreiser and Eliot.

The middle-age group of the turn of the century produced at least four mythologists and their poetic mythologies: Hart Crane and his poem cycle The Bridge; the epic tetralogy of Thomas Wolfe (the cardinal and mythically significant part is called Of Time and the River); East of Eden by John Steinbeck; and the radio play The Fall of the City by Archibald MacLeish, a myth warning against the forces undermining American democracy. Crane's work presents the myth-building imagination of the middle generation at its most fascinating, yet he died even younger than Wolfe. With MacLeish the mythical interpretation of reality seems to have dried up unless one were to discover its continuity in the play J. B., and its mythification of the Old Testament. In the fiction of Steinbeck mythologizing has led a life threatened by sentimentality.

The younger generation of dramatists and novelists as represented by Tennessee Williams and his play Orpheus Descending or by John Updike and his novel The Centaur⁹ has fallen back on borrowing from, and adapting, Greek mythology, the Western world's traditional reservoir. Younger poets, above all Robert Lowell, seem to conceive of myths as analogies for the truths of Christianity, as did Eliot, and not--like Crane--as an 'ersatz' for them. Some poets--like those of the Beat Generation--have chosen the path to the philosophy and the mysticism of East Asia or they retreat before any interpretation of the world, regardless of whether it is tragic, Christian, East Asian or mythical.

What does this portraying as well as condensing and interpreting type of American literature contribute to a German understanding of America?

1. The pluralism of the literary interpretation of reality facilitates an understanding of the pluralistic character of American

culture and also of a characteristic of everyday life, the separation of Church and State.

2. The tragic interpretation of reality creates a comprehension of other remnants of antiquity in America: the Greek Revival architecture of the plantation aristocracy or the astonishingly widespread interest in translations of the literature of Ancient Greece.

3. The Christian aspect of some literary interpretations of life makes comprehensible the fact that behind much convention a living essence of the Christian heritage is still at hand in the educational system and in the continually conspicuous Christian "revivals."

4. The East Asian elements of some literary views of the world increase our awareness of two inter-related, though often forgotten, facts: America possesses not only an Atlantic "face" which is turned toward Europe, but also a Pacific one, and California, like Hawaii, --but each in its own way--serves as a bridge between the opposite East Asian coast and the continental interior.

5. The connection of naturalism and symbolism in the style of these works with the life-interpreting function, and the function itself furnish a counterweight to the America of the material superficiality of business, luxury and glamor. Especially the symbolic aspects of American life, the salute to the flag, the conventional celebration of "Arbor Day," or a well-known picture or statuette of World War II--the raising of the flag on the hard-contested island of Iwo Jima--will seem to a foreigner to be part of an isolated, arbitrary residue of the symbolic in American daily life. But all this takes on a curious depth when one looks at it in connection with the symbolism of present-day American literature, and does not forget in the process that the forefather of European symbolism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was an American: Edgar Allan Poe.

V

It was thus perhaps not entirely unprofitable to inquire first about the functions of American twentieth century literature, then to follow one of them (the critical function) in especial detail, then to outline two others (the functions of representing reality and offering spiritual guidance) and in conclusion to illuminate this seemingly queer amalgamation of functions (representing, imaginatively condensing, and interpreting reality). Finally, each function was examined concerning its potential contribution to a German understanding of America. Robert Frost will help the foreign observer not to overstate the efficacy of such a contribution. The following verses

cunningly, even sarcastically answer the question of our theme retrospectively, in reference to the first European to write letters about America, Columbus:

America is hard to see.
 Less partial witnesses than he
 In book on book have testified
 They could not see it from outside--
 Or inside either for that matter.
 We know the literary chatter.¹⁰

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Footnotes:

¹ "The Alchemy of Literature" (1958), The Third Dimension: Studies in Literary History (New York & London, 1965), 155. Cf. Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism (New York, 1955), xii.

² "Das Amerikabild des amerikanischen Romans und sein Einfluss auf Europa," Universitas, VIII (May, 1953), 457-460.

³ Das Bild des amerikanischen Menschen, Festrede des Rektors... gehalten an der 128. Stiftungsfeier der Universität Zürich am 28. April, 1961. (Zürich, 1961).

⁴ "Zum Wandel des Menschenbildes in der zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Literatur," Mitteilungsblatt des Allgemeinen Deutschen Neuphilologenverbandes, XVII (August, 1964), 119-127.

⁵ Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images, ed. Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie (Minneapolis, 1960), 74 seq. Other valuable studies include Walther Fischer, "Über einige Zusammenhänge zwischen Kultur und Literatur in den Vereinigten Staaten der Gegenwart," Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen, CLXXXIX (August, 1952), 1-23; Terence Martin, "Rip, Ichabod, and the American Imagination," American Literature, XXXI (May, 1959), 137-149; William Randel, "The American Search for an Image Abroad," The Mississippi Quarterly, XV (Fall, 1962), 15-22. John S. Brushwood, Mexico in Its Novel: A Nation's Search for Identity (Austin, Tex., 1966) makes interesting reading for its method.

⁶ Cf. for comparison's sake Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," The Sewanee Review, LXII (Spring, 1954), 223-246.

⁷ For such symptomatic metamorphoses of the figure of the saint as "the picaresque" or "the absurd saint" cf. R. W. B. Lewis, The Picaresque Saint (London, 1960), and David D. Galloway, "The Absurd Man as Saint: The Novels of John Updike," Modern Fiction Studies, X (1964), 111-127.

⁸ Cf. Alfred Sauvy, Mythologie de notre temps (Paris, 1966).