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Tracks on the Road-Myth^{1/2}

Indo-European religions beyond Georges Dumezil's *moyen d'analyser*

It would naturally seem presumptuous to describe the works of Georges Dumézil as a *failure*. Such a remark, however, does not necessarily concern the dismissal with half a century's theoretical efforts, it may simply allude to something Dumézil omitted to see and, fully aware of this omission (i.e. failing to “see the trees for wood”), the territory he left behind unexplored.

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Critics have mistakenly implied that Dumézil was oriented towards the reconstruction of an *Urgesellschaft*, and — as a consequence of this prejudice — accused him of regarding myths as social projections being inconsistent with the “hard facts” of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. This misconception is to be regretted (see, for instance, Renfrew 1988). As for me, I think (regarding Dumézil's own ambitions) that the crux of the matter was indeed the uncovering of a culture, but by no means the relics of a pre-historic society in Southern Russia: Dumézil pursued the Indo-European *sensus communis*, which in this matter may respond to a common *cultural* sense. The characteristic of this pursuit is the conception of a unique Indo-European “mode of analysis” (*un moyen d'analyser*), which

¹ Cf. Parmenides (DK 28B8). The term “road-myth” has as much bearing on Diel's rendering (*Weg-Kunde*) as on the original Greek phrase μῦθος ὁδοῖο.

² Immediately after the delivery of speech, Professor Lauri Honko draw my attention to his article “Traditions in the construction of cultural identity and strategies of ethnic survival” (1995: 131–146), of which I had been unaware up to then. While realizing to what extent Professor Honko had forestalled my efforts to reevaluate the concepts of “culture” and “tradition”, I presently regret that his theories and thorough analyses were not properly intergated into my paper. At the same time, however, I am delighted at the prospects of proceeding on good authority.

marked the crisis of Dumézil's thought during the 50's. This intercultural framework of interpretation, fluctuating between social and supernatural facts, is thus described in the retrospective introduction to *Mythe et Épopée I*:

"[A] decisive progress was accomplished the day when I recognised, towards 1950, that the 'tripartite ideology' is not necessarily followed up by, in the life of a society, the *real* tripartite division of this society, according to the Indian model; on the contrary it may not, where one observes it, be (no longer be, perhaps it has never been) anything but an ideal and, at the same time, a mode of analysis, of interpreting the forces which assure the way of the world and the life of mankind."³

Dumézil regarded the insistence on etymological equations as a blockage in consideration of the Indo-European ideology (1968: 11 f.), whereas the occurrence of a comparative grammar and a common religious nomenclature necessitated the advantage of genetic comparisons over comparisons excluding the notions of organic contiguity. He considered it self-evident that societies sharing a political, juridical, ethical, and religious vocabulary (*rex, flamines, ius, lex, credo, fides, ritus* etc.) likewise share a coherent system of thought, and that this system may be sought beyond the manifestations of signs.⁴ This presupposition led Dumézil to compare sets of ideas, circumscribed by their inherent systematic constancy, yet dissolved in an irreversible cluster of formal variability.

Émile Benveniste, a scholar giving an early stimulus to Dumézil's ideas of the Indo-European social organisation (1932), pursued a similar line of inquiry in a work devoted to Indo-European ethnosemantics, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (1969). In this work, however, Benveniste elucidated the genesis of the vocabu-

³ [U]n progrès décisif fut accompli le jour où je reconnus, vers 1950, que l'"idéologie tripartite" ne s'accompagne pas forcément, dans la vie d'une société, de la division tripartite réelle de cette société, selon le modèle indien; qu'elle peut au contraire, là où on la constate, n'être (ne plus être, peut-être n'avoir jamais été) qu'un idéal et, en même temps, un moyen d'analyser, d'interpréter les forces qui assurent le cours de monde et la vie des hommes." Dumézil 1968: 15.

⁴ "Un tel accord donne à réfléchir: le maintien, sur les deux marges du domaine indo-européen, à l'extrême est et à l'extrême ouest, d'un vocabulaire aussi fortement lié à l'organisation sociale, à des actes, à des attitudes ou à des représentations religieuses, n'est concevable que si des fragments importants du système de pensée préhistorique auquel appartenaient d'abord ces notions ont aussi subsisté." Dumézil 1949: 19.

lary of fundamental institutions (such as economy, kinship, society, authority, law, and religion) by examining the common semantic motivation of terminologically differentiated sets in view of their associations, oppositions, and cognates (1969: 9). Benveniste never adhered to Dumézil's procedures whole-heartedly, since he considered those based on indices other than linguistic facts and textual statements (1969: 292). Notwithstanding these separate starting-points, the methodological differences may also pertain to a shift in emphasis: if Benveniste compared contiguous sets of concepts undergoing verbal superposition, Dumézil compared contiguous sets of ideas emanating from an inherited ideology.

Seeing that the priority of systematic constancy is a criterion of Dumézil's strategy, we may contrast the coalescence of duplex sovereignty in India, Iran, Rome, and Ireland suggested by Dumézil (Mitra and Varuṇa; Vohu Manah and Aša; Dius Fidius and Iuppiter, Lug and Nuada) with the formal coalescence of two-part divine names in the cultured circles of India, Anatolia, Greece, Italy, and Ireland (Dyáuṣ pitá; Luv. Tatiš Tiwaz/Hitt. Attaš Šiuš; Zeùs patér; Iuppiter; *deiwos [...] [p]atir).

According to Dumézil, the incontestable consonance of the names Dyaus, Zeus, Juppiter, etc. would be of no use to the mythologist who wants to grasp the internal system organising the mythology of India, Greece, and Rome (1968: 11). Considering the same consonance, however, Calvert Watkins et.al. seem to discern an important aspect of the Proto-Indo-European symbolic culture, e.g. "the chief deity of the Proto-Indo-Europeans" (Watkins 1995: 8). One gets the impression that these angles of approach inevitably ends in the counteracting accentuations of a deep-seated *sensus communis* comprising historically attainable cultures (Dumézil) and a homogenous, yet historically unattainable cultural hypostasis (a "proto-culture"). Since both perspectives call for homogeneity, the emphasis on formal concordances assumes a diffusionist angle, from which historical data must appear as an accumulation of defect imitations in proportion to the prehistoric hypostasis.

Let us start from the simple assumption that a common heritage neither is bound to dissolve in fragments of a common ideology, nor to expose the outlines of an *Urgesellschaft*. In that case we may expect that each culture undertakes a unique decipherment of the common heritage, and that this heritage becomes senseless whenever detached from the magic circle of culture. For the sake of clarification, I will briefly illustrate this circumstance by means of two texts. The first passage is drawn from a Hittite ritual against do-

mestic strife (CTH 404), the second from a Vedic nuptial hymn (10.85), viz. two stanzas concerning defloration and the (woollen) bridal garment (28–29):

A. Then the Old Woman takes a snail and wraps it in blue [ZA.GÌN] and red [SA₅] wool [SÍG], and she brandishes it over the two participants in the ritual and speaks as follows: “Carry aw(ay) /.../, shovelfoot [píd-da-al-li-iš GÌR-aš = pat(a)-aš], the evil tongue (i-da-a-lu-un EME-an). Let it carry it away by its back, and by its tongue let it carry them away, the evil mouth, the evil tongue.”⁵

B. 28. It is dark blue [nīla-] and red [-lohitám], the sorcery [kṛtyā], the entwinement spreads/gets about (therein), prospering its kinsmen. The bride is bound with bonds. [according to the Śāṅkhāyana Grhya Sūtra 1.12.8, this verse is accompanied with the following ritual action: “[h]er relations tie (to the body) a red and black, woollen [?] or linen cord with three (amulet) gems”] 29. Give away the woollen shirt, distribute good to the Brahmans! This sorcery, having acquired feet [padvāti], enters (as) the husband (enters his) wife.

The joint semantic collocation BLUE : RED : (WOOL) : FOOT — in both cases characterised by a metaphorical or figurative use of the isogloss *ped- — does indeed admit of a detachment from the individual contexts. On the other hand, we may well ask if the Hittite ritual and the Vedic nuptial hymn constitute a cultural nexus, or if the information accessible beyond the collocation itself is sufficient (as much as sufficiently concordant) for the extraction of an intercultural significance from the collocation? To complicate the matter further, we may merely notice that verbal collocations and formulae sometimes interact within the same literary stratum, apparently without conveying the same explicit or implicit sense.⁶

The following questions thus arise: are we justified in treating Indo-European religions (on these preliminary conditions) as a marked off field of research? If so, how ought we to carry on this research, and what do we expect to attain thereby? I do not, for self-evident reasons, attempt to give any conclusive answers to these questions here, rather have I tried to prepare a starting-point for alternative issues.

⁵ Translation and discussion in Watkins 1981.

⁶ Cf. for instance Priam’s parabolic statements about Odysseus in Il. 3.192–198 and Hesiod’s portrait of winter in Op. 505–563: πολυβοτείρη | ἐπιπτων (Op. 510–511) = κεῖται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πολυβοτείρη (Il. 3. 195); διὰ ῥινοῦ βοῶς ἔρχεται (Op. 515) [...] δι’ αἶγα ἄησι πανύτριχα: πῶεα (516) = οἰῶν μέγα πῶῦ διέρχεται (Il. 3.198).

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An objection, typical of the critical approaches to comparative Indo-European religious studies, reads: "The reductive tendency of the comparativist approach is inclined to erase the specific characteristics of a culture [...]" (Scheid and Svenbro 1996) Let us retort by slightly exaggerating the consequence of this remark: if the comparativist approach "erases" cultures, what do we perceive therewith? It simultaneously facilitates the penetration of cultures by rendering cultures transparent, and by those means it grazes tradition.

While culture is a tilled land, tradition is a grazing land; tradition answers to the "many tracks" or "signs" (*sémat[a]* [...] *pollà*) on an unborn and imperishable road.⁷ On the one hand we may liken culture to the interpretation and internalisation of these tracks, on the other hand to "something else com[ing] to mind" beyond the outward appearances of the track.⁸ Thus, the tracks — since they constantly await the cultural designation or design (a designation or design by means of culture) — lie ahead of us, yet they belong to a past that cannot be foreseen. Tradition is both *in front of us* and *of old*, it lies *before us*.

The vagueness of the intimate terms "tradition" and "culture" allows us to conceive them both as *action* and *condition*, both as *execution* and *storage*. Culture is the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes and manners; the condition of being thus trained and refined; the intellectual side of civilisation. Tradition is the action of handing over (something material) to another; delivery, transfer; that which is thus handed down; a statement, belief, or practice transmitted (esp.) orally from generation to generation. I have purposely chosen these plain, lexicographic definitions in order to increase the sharpness of their reciprocity. By way of experiment I will bring the characteristics of "culture" together under the heading of "tracing", including as well the condition of being "traced", i.e. definite, designated etc.; "tradition", on the other hand,

⁷ I am once more referring to Parmenides' ΠΕΡΙ ΦΥΣΕΩΣ 8.

⁸ G. Thompson (1995) reminds us of the fact that St. Augustine reunited the concepts of "sign" and "track" by observing that "a sign (*signum*) is in fact a thing which, besides the outward appearance which it presents to the senses, by itself makes something else come to mind. When we see a foot track (*vestigum pedis*), we think that the animal to which the foot track belongs, has passed."

will be understood as “tracking”, i.e. the formation of (conducting) paths, and the “tracks” thus formed.

Viewed from a different angle, tradition stands out as a “compound of signs” or a “semic assemblage”. By that I am not referring to the Saussurean *signe*, nor to the *signifiant*. I am referring to a sign that “requires an act of interpretation, [...] a true recognition of the sign, a true *nósis* of the *sêma*[.]” (Nagy 1990: 203ff.) Culture, in its turn, is accordingly identified with this act of interpretation and the “noemic assemblage” harbouring tradition. The mutual consideration of this duplicity would thus imply the symbiosis of semiotics and phenomenology, since the former approach is occupied with signs and significations, and the latter with designs and designations: viz. the *semic* priority of tradition, and the *noemic* priority of culture.

As is well known, a genetic comparison aims at the origin of things and, fairly often in the case of comparative mythology and philology, at the ideological or semantic apex of cultures and concepts. Such an approach always concerns something significant, something *traced* beyond the cultural peculiarities. Compared to it, a generic comparison — which ultimately concerns the familiarity of things — rather engages in the fabrication of cultural encounters, aiming at the detection of a common traditional track. This track stands out as the subject-matter of cultivation, as something preserving its constancy despite sweeping cultural changes; most likely owing to its interpretative susceptibility. As a matter of course, we ought not to regard it as a mental template. Cultural data, however, may preserve features which, when properly isolated, manifest themselves as traditional bands devoid of cultivation (traditional *residua*): the phonetic or graphic features of words, the recurrent (verbal) features of myths etc.

Just as an etymologist may ignore the “truth” or “true sense” of words, i.e. while observing formal concordances within a wide range of meaning; the mythologist engaged in a generic comparison — since he observes traditional concordances within a wide range of cultural application — may (or must) ignore the single source from which myth passes its meaning along.

The presence of recurring Indo-European formulae and verbal collocations have hinted many scholars at the nodes of once fixed, yet hopelessly disintegrated, narrative strata. Even if the fixed diction or metaphor may play an important part in mythopoeic activity, it is not absolutely bound to carry the story itself; it may even become, as it were, “a familiar music of which the mind is pleasantly aware, but

which it knows so well that it makes no effort to follow it" (Parry 1986: 30).

Furthermore, the essential parts of the formula correspond to graphemes; both are vehicles of value, yet — with reference to the formula or collocation (cf. BLUE : RED : (WOOL) : FOOT (see above)) — the level of lexis corresponds to the level of sound regarding the morpheme or lexeme. In other words the formulaic sense of the formula exceeds the totality of its lexical sense: *k* is to *kléos* (*k-l-é-o-s* → "fame") as *kléos* to *kléos áphthiton* ("imperishable fame" → "poet's pledge-token of reciprocity" (Ibycus (Watkins 1995: 70)). We may carry this simile further by dwelling upon the movement, transformation, and revaluation of a specific grapheme — *A* for instance — in a series of societies (Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan, Italic etc.). At the outset we have gradually become aware of its consistent phonetic value, but while considering the Cherokee system of writing (developed by Sikwayi in the 1820's) we will come to the opposite conclusion: according to this notation — though evidently built on the Roman alphabet — *A* represents the syllable *go*. In both cases, furthermore, we may consider two shades of meaning: 1) the directly or indirectly accessible meaning of written words containing the specific grapheme (without which the phonetic value is indeterminable), i.e. the meaning carried off by means of the grapheme in (and by) individual cultures, and 2) the dormant ideographic value of the same grapheme (Proto-Sinaitic *alpu* "ox").

Needless to say, oral literature is ever in a state of change, for what reason it is justifiable to dismiss any notions of an invariable Nibelungen legend or tale of Troy. It is likewise justifiable, however, to conceive the present versions as compounds of partially fixed modes of speech, albeit components capable of innumerable combinations and interpretations.

In addition to the censorious plea for coincidence with regard to Indo-European religious studies, we may also expect a thematic parallelism to result from individual elaborations of common residua, i.e. similar cultural renderings of contiguous traditions. Thus, while treated as the result of a common stylistic or verbal core, thematic parallels are no longer associated with genetically contiguous theological or philosophical modes of analysis.⁹

⁹ Calvert Watkins draws a similar conclusion while comparing the Orphic *lamellae* with an Old Hittite eschatological text: "I do not want to insist on a thematic connection between the two sets of texts in the two languages. The similarities — even those which are most striking, like the 'singular detail' of the Greek word for muddy water — may belong to the plane of

What may appear as an evident cultural nexus at first sight, viz. the common confidence in these oral traditions, is rather a cultural impetus evoked by tradition itself, perhaps as a consequence of its exceptional position. Not only does this confidence implicate the fusion of poetic and hieratic speech¹⁰, but also the apprehension of the traditional discourse as “marked speech” sanctioned by usage. This attitude, on the one hand, was probably implied in the earliest denotation of the Greek word *mûthos* (“special” as opposed to ‘everyday’ speech” (Nagy 1990: viii)); on the other hand, as is evident from linguistic and ethnological research, “[t]he highlighting of mythological characters through conventional sound shifts is particularly salient when it introduces speech sounds foreign to the usual pattern of the given language” (Jakobson and Waugh 1987: 210): poetry and myth narration are currently distinguished from normal speech. The generic study of concordant traditions — while focusing the recurrence and cultivation of form — may derive advantage from these observations. Since the residua uncovered often recurs within the sphere of markedness, the instance of markedness is obviously participant in the preservation of tradition.

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We cannot grasp the intercultural meaning of recurrent formulae or verbal collocations, which are (and must be) dynamic compounds subordinate to a continuous process of cultural adaptation. The skeletal conformity of Indo-European myths and rituals may not designate..., yet — since we concern ourselves with tracks apt to designation — it remains valuable. When it comes to reconstructed Proto-Indo-European, we may simply consider the proto-forms as “handy formulae for making clear the nature of relationships that

imaginative universals of eschatology. But I do wish to emphasize that speculations very similar to those of the Dionysiac-Orphic and Pythagorean ‘mysteries’, both in content and in the form of artistic verbal presentation, were being made and written down in a geographically adjacent and genetically related language some 1200 years earlier [...]. If we are to believe in an Indo-European eschatology, a common core of inherited beliefs about final things and *a common core of style of verbal expression in the (inherently conservative) service of the dead* (my italics), then it is to such comparisons that we should look.” Watkins 1995: 290.

¹⁰ An idea touched upon by Jacob Wackernagel (1943) in the seminal lecture on Indo-European poetics from 1932 (published under the title “Indogermanische Dichtersprache”). It goes without saying, however, that the synergism of poetry and mythology is a criterion of oral culture, and not an Indo-European peculiarity.

exists between cognate languages" (Beekes 1995: 3); the isogloss thus determines an incontestable point of formal intersection in the texts at hand, not the prehistoric apex. To study such points of intersection is ultimately to study the continuous revaluation of tradition, which itself cuts through the cultural particularities and generalities.

This mode of procedure does not exclude Dumézil's approach, but it does leave out certain presuppositions. While preferring the genetic concordance to the sheer coincidence¹¹, Dumézil underrated the opportunities of phenomenology, which may provide "a universal morphology of the natural world as the common world of people, of any society whatever", a theory of "what we see, grasp, and touch, just as we see, and other people, see them, grasp them, etc." (Husserl 1989: 376, 287) From this perspective, for all that, Dumézil's research must remain a valuable contribution to the phenomenology of religions.

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¹¹ See, for instance, the concluding remark on the first *Esquisse de mythologie*: "Ce parallélisme et cet union du théologème et du philosophème conduisent à une recherche: d'autre Indo-Européens présentent-ils une analyse de la parole selon le même modèle? Si oui, jusqu'où va la concordance? Contient-elle des singularités qui recommandent de l'expliquer par autre chose que le hasard?" Dumézil 1982: 22.

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