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Mircea Eliade's Ambivalent Legacy

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I

For decades Mircea Eliade enjoyed worldwide fame. A prestigious chair, translations into many languages, honorary degrees, *Festschriften*, monographs dedicated to his work: Eliade received all the usual signs of academic distinction, and much more.¹ He came to be regarded—some dissenting voices notwithstanding—as a leading authority in the domain of history of religions.² In 1987 the multivolume *Encyclopedia of Religion* indirectly confirmed, through the impressive range of its contributors, the leading position of Mircea Eliade, its editor in chief, who had died the year before.³

Today, two decades later, Eliade's public image looks very different. He has become once again a controversial figure, as he had been in his youth. This change took place under the impact of the

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1. For biographical and bibliographic references, see Florin Turcanu, *Mircea Eliade, le prisonnier de l'histoire* (Paris: Découverte, 2003); Natale Spineto, *Mircea Eliade storico delle religioni, con la corrispondenza inedita Mircea Eliade-Károly Kerényi* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2006).

2. Pietro Angelini mentions the critical remarks raised by Leach (1966) and Geertz (1968) in his introduction to Mircea Eliade, *Trattato di storia delle religioni* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), xxviii, xxxiii–xl. See also Jean Bottéro, "Les histoires des religions," in *Introduction aux sciences humaines des religions*, ed. Henri Desroche and Jean Séguy (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1970), 126n15.

3. See the contributors' list in Natale Spineto, "Mircea Eliade: Éléments pour un bilan historiographique," in *Deux explorateurs de la pensée humaine: Georges Dumézil et Mircea Eliade*, ed. Julien Ries and Natale Spineto (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 178–79n167.

“revelations” concerning Eliade’s closeness, in the 1930s and 1940s, to the Iron Guard: the radical right-wing, fiercely anti-Semitic group founded and led by Corneliu Codreanu. (I placed “revelations” in quotation marks because more or less vague rumors concerning Eliade’s political orientation had circulated since 1945).⁴ A large number of books and articles in various languages have addressed this issue from different, often conflicting angles.⁵ The debate about Eliade’s political attitudes has deeply (and inevitably) affected the debate on his scholarly work—sometimes at the risk of simplifying a highly complex issue. I will mention one example. The author of a recent monograph concluded that the gist of the discussion of Eliade’s political engagement boiled down to whether his “writings could, or can, be interpreted as a justification of these supported by the Iron Guard in the past, or by similar movements today.”⁶ If we were to adopt such a narrow-minded perspective, it would be easy to conclude that Eliade’s work and his political commitments were completely unrelated. A broader and more flexible approach is needed.⁷ I will argue (1) that a relationship between Eliade’s interpretive categories and his political attitudes did indeed exist; (2) that the specific forms of that relationship were far from obvious; and (3) that the reception, either actual or potential, of Eliade’s work is not necessarily linked either to the context in which it was produced or to its ideological implications.

II

Beginning in his youth, Eliade felt himself deeply rooted in a culture he perceived as marginal. This ambivalence probably never abandoned him. As a young man he looked for a way out of this Romanian marginality and found it, curiously enough, in Italy (not in France, as one might have expected).⁸ Two prominent intellectual heroes of his youth, Giovanni Papini and Raffaele Pettazzoni—the iconoclastic freelance writer and the learned historian of religions who later became an academic icon—can be regarded, retrospectively,

4. See Pietro Angelini, introduction to Mircea Eliade, *Trattato*, xxxix–xxx, with bibliographic references (I will deal with the early Italian reception of Eliade in a different essay).

5. Bibliographic references in Spineto, “Mircea Eliade,” 142–48. See especially Daniel Dubuisson, *Impositions et pseudo-science: L'oeuvre de Mircea Eliade* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005); Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: L'oubli du fascisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

6. Spineto, “Mircea Eliade,” 153.

7. For an earlier, valuable attempt in the same direction, see Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: Macmillan, 1987), 70–128.

8. Cf. Turcanu, *Le prisonnier de l'histoire*, 75.

as expressions of a different kind of ambivalence, which also ran through Eliade's entire life. But neither his contacts with Italian intellectuals nor his much more important Indian experience provided an escape from Eliade's ruminations on being a Romanian. In *Fragmentarium*, a collection of essays published in 1939, Eliade contrasted history with protohistory, implicitly turning, with a typically nationalist gesture, Romanian marginality into an asset: "It is good to have a great literature, a valuable modern art, a personal philosophy. It is much better to belong to a great spiritual 'tradition' rooted in protohistory, which later has been debased by history."

History was for Eliade the realm of inevitable corruption, as he remarked (with racial overtones). "Belonging to an original race," he explained, was more "glorious" than being one of the "creators of history."⁹ But protohistory was not a durable solution. The real turning point in Eliade's approach to these issues took place between 1941 and 1945, during his stay in Lisbon as press secretary at the Romanian legation. We can follow Eliade's reflections through the diary he kept in those years, available until recently only in Spanish translation.¹⁰ This diary, never reworked by its author, is a truly invaluable document, as Florin Turcanu has shown in his fine biographical account.¹¹ But the intellectual and political trajectory that emerges from the diary—very different from the doctored image of that period conveyed in Eliade's late autobiography—deserves a further, closer look.¹²

III

Here is an entry dated November 17, 1942:

How deeply distorted is our vision of history based exclusively on documents! A medieval town "participates" in history simply because a dozen literate individuals left a few hundred documents, while

9. Mircea Eliade, *Fragmentarium* (Paris: L'Herne, 1989 [Bucharest: Vremea, 1939]), 51–52. This article is also quoted by Turcanu, *Le prisonnier de l'histoire*, 275–76.

10. Mircea Eliade, *Diario portugués*, trans. Joaquín Garrigós (Barcelona: Editorial Kairós, 2001). The edition is exceedingly sloppy. On p. 19 read Lévy-Bruhl instead of Lévi-Strauss; on p. 21 read Panofsky instead of Pankowsky, etc. I checked the relevant passages on the manuscript of the diary, which is preserved at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. There is a recent Romanian edition, which I have been unable to see: *Jurnalul Portughez si alte scrieri*, ed. Sorin Alexandrescu, Florin Turcanu, and Mihai Zamfir (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006).

11. See Turcanu, *Le prisonnier de l'histoire*, 313–42.

12. Angelini's often insightful introduction is weakened by its acritical use of Eliade's autobiographical account: see Eliade, *Trattato*, xv–xvi.

the deep dramas of Eurasian middle ages, the tensions in the Ponto-Baltic isthmus, “are not interesting” and historians dispatch them in a few sentences.

Therefore, a universal history should not be based on written documents but only on spiritual documents, that is, on myths and beliefs. Europe, and especially western Europe, can be compared to the Orient and to nomadic steppes on the basis of myths, not of documents.

For instance, Romanian history can be set on the same level as western history through our myths.¹³

Eliade was rephrasing the opposition between history and protohistory, by contrasting written documents with myths, western Europe with Eurasian nomadic steppes. In this context, Eliade suggested that Romanian history, following the example of Eurasia, could be raised to the level of Western history only through a comparison based on myths. He mentioned a few of them. But in the allusion to the medieval “tensions in the Ponto-Baltic isthmus,” connecting Dantzig to Odessa, one may detect a faint echo of current events. In the next entry of Eliade’s diary the threatening sound of war became distinctly audible:

What makes me mad every time I talk to supporters of the British who react with joy to the possibility that Germany may be defeated, is that, driven by their political passion, they forget the decisive fact of this war: the eruption of Russia into world history. In the past Latins and Greeks joined forces in Constantinople, but allowed the Turks to enter Europe. Three hundred years later [in fact, 500] we, Romanians, must shed our blood to prevent the Turks from entering the heart of Europe. Perhaps this time history is repeating itself.¹⁴

In commenting on contemporary historical events, Eliade referred not to myths but to history. He looked at the present as a possible repetition of the past: the recurrent struggle of the civilized West against the barbarous Orient, this time enacted by Germany and its allies (including Romania) against Russia. The entry in Eliade’s diary is dated November 19, 1942, the very day on which the last stage of the Battle of Stalingrad—the so-called Operation Uranus—had begun. The Soviet troops led by Zhukov encircled the Romanian Third Army, paving the way to the defeat of the German troops—the turning point of the Second World War.

13. Eliade, *Diario portugués*, 59–60 (November 17, 1942).

14. *Ibid.*, 60–61 (November 19, 1942).

For the next two months Eliade, who was following the events from the Romanian legation in Lisbon, refrained from mentioning the war in his diary. Then, on January 28, 1943, three days before the final surrender of von Paulus and his army, Eliade wrote:

I feel the agony, painfully, of those who are in Stalingrad, the agony of Europe. To bear this tragedy I seek refuge within myself, in the book I am writing, in my thoughts, which turn incessantly to the end of our continent. I kept the war out of this journal, to keep from dying of neurasthenia. . . . In the middle of this hell I hear Aeschylus leaving his tomb. He sang the heroic resistance of the Greeks to Asia; now he stands witness to the lame opposition Europe offers to the Euroasiatic horde. Churchill and Roosevelt met in Casablanca. Neither understands that Stalin is toying with them, that they are the victims of the most tragic farce in the history of the world: the Red murderers (who trump the other political murderers, by acting on a huge scale, on the scale of millions) are awaited as the liberators of Europe.¹⁵

Once again, Eliade looked at the present through the past, as a repetition of an ancient model. The heroic resistance that the Greeks made against Asia, celebrated by Aeschylus in *The Persians* as a conflict between freedom and despotism, was reenacted (Eliade believed) in the resistance of Europe—Hitler's Europe—to Stalin's Eurasia. This time Eliade referred to Eurasia not as the domain of myth but as the symbol of political mass murder. He did not mention the mass slaughters perpetrated by the Germans (although he must have heard of them), assisted—in the case of the Jassy pogrom of 1941—by Romanians.¹⁶ But Eliade quickly realized, in the quiet haven of Lisbon, that Stalingrad was the beginning of a historic defeat that would affect him too, sooner or later.

IV

On November 25, 1943, Eliade received a confidential telegram inviting him to apply for a chair in cultural history at the University of Bucharest—it would be his for the asking. Eliade coldly rejected the offer. In his diary he wrote that, having spent two weeks in Paris some time before, he had

15. Ibid., 145. On this passage, see also Turcanu, *Le prisonnier de l'histoire*, 333–34.

16. Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco*, 325.

learned something decisive: one cannot attain a universal scientific level if one remains in the limited sphere of a minor culture. I believe that I will have something *great* to say. I believe that I am not merely an intellectual. My ideas, my methods can have an impact on the framework of European thought, but only if I can make those ideas and methods generally available.

I have decided to “penetrate” into Europe in a deeper and more insistent way than I did in the past with my book on *Yoga* and the journal *Zalmoxis*.

My Romanian period, as far as my essays and scientific contributions are concerned, is over.¹⁷

Behind Eliade’s overconfident tone one perceives the attempt to turn a defeat into a victory. But Eliade must have realized that the Europe he was dreaming of conquering was by that time very different from the one which, a year earlier, he had seen from afar agonizing in the snow fields of Stalingrad. Gone were the days when Hitler’s armies dominated the continent. On January 29, 1944, Eliade noted in his diary: “I would like to write about a terrible subject: *the terror of history*, the fear of men facing men.”¹⁸

This is apparently the first hint of *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (later republished in English under the title *Cosmos and History*). A year elapsed, one in which Eliade’s personal anguish (his first wife, Nina, died in November 1944) painfully mingled with the imminent defeat of Germany and its allies, including Romania. But in Eliade’s journal entry for January 3, 1945, one hears a different, curiously detached note: “This moment in history is so mad that all personal pain feels unreal, weightless. If I think about all this, I feel so far away from my country, from Europe, from 1945! These things seem to be so distant, their tragic dimension so mechanical, so external!”¹⁹

Eliade’s effort to distance himself from a painful present (and a painful past) mingled with his customary narcissism. In an entry from this period he wrote: “I have let my beard grow. This reminds me of my crisis in September 1930. Really, whatever it is, I must reinvent myself as a ‘new man.’”²⁰

The “crisis” to which Eliade was referring was the end of his love affair with the daughter of Surendranath Dasgupta, his Indian teacher, followed by

17. Eliade, *Diario portugués (1941–1945)*, 112–13.

18. *Ibid.*, 119.

19. *Ibid.*, 170.

20. *Ibid.*, 223. See also p. 159 (December 1944) for a parallel between Nina’s death and the parting from Maitreyi, his Indian lover.

his enforced departure from Calcutta.²¹ He determined to emerge from a crisis, which this time was both personal and public, as a “new man.” The entry just cited is dated March 29, 1945—the very month in which Eliade began to write *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, as he noted at the end of the book’s foreword.²²

V

I am not suggesting that the context in which Eliade began to write *The Myth of the Eternal Return* can explain the meaning of the book. What I am suggesting is that in this case, as in many others, personal and public elements, as well as subjective drives and objective constraints, interacted—and sometimes reinforced each other. On August 22, 1945, Eliade noted in his journal that the French visas for him and his stepdaughter had arrived; they were overjoyed. “*Incipit vita nova*,” a new life begins, Eliade commented. Then, a few days later: “Our passports arrived at the consulate. I am delighted to be able to show a passport saying ‘profession: writer’! Diplomatic privileges have (at last!) ended. I got my visa: I went to the counter after standing in line like every other happy mortal. *This is my life. This is the life of all of Europe.*”²³

All of this sounds pretty banal. Even the sentence “to start a new life” looks banal in this context, although Eliade attached a special meaning to it, first by quoting it in Latin (an allusion to the beginning of Dante’s *Vita Nova*), then developing it in quasi-metaphysical reflections: “The ‘past’ which constantly weighs on me is the clearest sign that I am a man, that is, that I am living in ‘time,’ that I have a ‘history.’”

Perhaps Eliade was thinking of Heidegger, whose work he had recently begun to read; certainly he was referring to Berdyaiev. Then he commented: “I must connect this to my remarks concerning the regeneration of man through the suppression of time, through a return to an auroral instant, to ‘illud tempus.’ What is the meaning of *incipit vita nova*? The resumption of Creation. The struggle of man against ‘history,’ against the irreversible past.”²⁴

21. Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Mircea Eliade: The Romanian Roots*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 464ff.

22. In the French original edition (1949) the foreword is dated “Cascaes, mars 1945. Paris mai 1947” (Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* [Paris: Gallimard, 1949], 14). In the Harper Torchbooks edition, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1959), xi, the foreword is dated “Paris, October 1952.”

23. Eliade, *Diario portugués (1941–1945)*, 250–51.

24. *Ibid.*, 253 (September 5, 1943). “*Incipit vita nova*” became the title of the fifth part of Eliade’s memoirs (*Les moissons du solstice*, trans. A. Paruit [Paris: Gallimard, 1988], 97).

“I must connect this.” In fact, the connection was self-evident: it was provided, Eliade himself noted, by “my remarks concerning the regeneration of man through the suppression of time.” Eliade was referring to some notes related to his work in progress, to be entitled *The Myth of the Eternal Return*: a book in which he projected onto a cosmic scale his passionate desire to erase the past—his own past—and to start a new life. So far I have focused on the circumstances that played a role in the book’s making; it is time to approach the book itself.

VI

Le mythe de l'éternel retour was published in Paris in 1949, immediately after the *Traité d'histoire des religions*. The two books were written at approximately the same time; they refer to each other and overlap somewhat.²⁵ The opposition between sacred and profane, between myth and history in the modern sense of the word—the basic categories of the *Traité*—are also the core of *Le mythe*. In both works Eliade, who was never afraid of repeating himself, explained over and over that primitive, or archaic, man echoed in the gestures of everyday life models or archetypes placed outside time. The title and subtitle of the 1949 book—*The Myth of the Eternal Return: Archetypes and Repetitions*—convey in a nutshell Eliade’s fundamental ideas about religion. Repetition of atemporal models allowed primitive man to achieve a return to mythical origins.²⁶

Today one would immediately associate this idea with Eliade’s approach to myth and religion. But the idea in itself was not Eliade’s. Let us open a collection of essays cowritten by Karl Kerényi, the Hungarian-born historian of religion, and Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst, published in German in 1941 and translated into English as *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*. Eliade was familiar with the book, which he mentioned, referring to one of Jung’s contributions, in the essay on the legend of Master Manole published in 1943.²⁷ In Kerényi’s introductory essay Eliade would have come across a passage arguing that mythical narratives “are always set in a *primordial* time. This return to the origins and to primordality is a basic feature of every mythology.”²⁸

25. See Ricketts, *Romanian Roots*, vol. 2, 1119.

26. Mircea Eliade, *Trattato di storia delle religioni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1954), 421 (cap. XI, § 154).

27. See Mircea Eliade, “Commenti alla leggenda di Mastro Manole,” in *I riti del costruire*, ed. Roberto Scagno (Milan: Jaca Book, 1990), 41111. See also Ricketts, *Romanian Roots*, vol. 1, 614–15.

28. Karl Kerényi and C. G. Jung, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 9–10. German edition, Karl Kerényi and C. G. Jung, *Einführung in das Wesen der Mythologie*, 4th rev. ed. (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1951), 8, introductory essay (by Kerényi): “On Origins and Foundation in Mythology.”

Eliade echoed this passage nearly *verbatim*, without acknowledgment, in the very first sentence of his essay on Master Manole.²⁹ It must be noted that in his introductory essay Kerényi had presented the premises for his argument through a series of vivid metaphors:

Thomas Mann, in his essay on Freud, has spoken with good reason of the “quotation-like life” of the men of mythological times and has illustrated this with images that could not be bettered. Archaic man, he said, stepped back a pace before doing anything, like the toreador poisoning himself for the death-stroke. He sought an example in the past, and into this he slipped as into a diving-bell in order to plunge, at once protected and distorted, into the problems of the present. In this way his life achieved its own expression and meaning.³⁰

More than fifty years ago Ernesto De Martino, the Italian anthropologist, quoted side by side Kerényi's aforementioned passage and a passage from Eliade's *Myth of Eternal Return*, implicitly pointing to their striking similarity.³¹ But their relationship was more intricate than De Martino suspected. Kerényi's passage, as quoted by De Martino, did not include the reference to Thomas Mann's essay on Freud, which is missing both in the Italian translation revised by Kerényi and in the German original version of Kerényi's and Jung's *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*. The reference to Thomas Mann was added in the English translation, perhaps by Kerényi himself.³² But in Mann's essay on Freud the passage included also a reference (also missing in Kerényi's text) to Ortega y Gasset's famous book *The Rebellion of the Masses* (1930).³³ The reference was misleading because the two quotations—Mann's and Ortega's—have a different, even opposite meaning. Ortega was not referring to myth; he contrasted

29. Eliade, *I riti del costruire*, 7.

30. Kerényi and Jung, *Introduction*, 5–6 (*Einführung*, 13). In the Italian translation, revised by the author, *Prolegomeni allo studio scientifico della mitologia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1948), the introductory pages are entitled “Prolegomena,” echoing Karl Otfried Müller, *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1825); see also the reprint with an introduction by K. Kerényi (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970).

31. E. De Martino, “Etnologia e cultura nazionale negli ultimi dieci anni,” *Società* 9 (1953): 327; see also P. Angelini, introduction to Mircea Eliade, *Trattato*, xxix. I. P. Culianu commented upon Eliade's use of the word “archetype” referring to Kerényi and Jung's (I. P. Culianu, *Mircea Eliade* [Assisi: Cittadella, 1978], 58). P. Pisi rejected this connection as “absolutely unlikely” for chronological reasons (“I ‘tradizionalisti’ e la formazione del pensiero di Eliade,” in *Confronto con Mircea Eliade. Archetipi mitici e identità storica*, ed. L. Arcella, P. Pisi, and R. Scagno [Milan: Jaca Book, 1998], 43–133, 66–67). Pisi missed Kerényi's echoes, both implicit and explicit, in Eliade's essay on Master Manole. In a similar unperceptive vein, see R. Scagno's introduction to Mircea Eliade, *I riti del costruire*.

32. “Man spricht mit Recht vom ‘zitathaften Leben’ etc.” (*Einführung*, 13).

33. Thomas Mann, “Freud e l'avvenire,” in *Nobiltà dello spirito e altri saggi*, ed. Andrea Landolfi, introduction by C. Magris (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1997), 1378–1404; Thomas Mann, *Freud und die Zukunft* (Wien: Bermann-Fischer, 1936).

ancients with moderns, arguing that Greeks and Romans looked at the present from the point of view of the past in a sort of archaizing mode, with a few exceptions—Julius Caesar, for instance, never looked at Alexander the Great as a model.³⁴ In his brilliant essay “Freud and the Future” (1936), Thomas Mann turned Ortega’s remark upside down, arguing that from archaic times myth often shaped history, acting as a preexisting model: an attitude exemplified by Julius Caesar’s obsession with the legendary image of Alexander the Great.

Myth as an example for the present, but also as a distorted protection against the present: this idea had a deep impact on Kerényi, with whom Thomas Mann corresponded for decades on myth and mythology.³⁵ Kerényi acted as an involuntary link between Mann and Eliade. Myth-as-repetition working as a protection against history-as-repetition: this theme, obsessively repeated in Eliade’s writings, came from Kerényi, and ultimately from Thomas Mann. But Eliade added his own personal twist to it. On the one hand, he presented myth as an escape from history, a defense against the terror of history, a weapon in the struggle of man against “history”; on the other, he saw the invention of history as a Judaic phenomenon that later became part of the Christian tradition. “The Hebrews,” one reads in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, “were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God, and this conception, as we should expect, was taken up and amplified by Christianity.”³⁶ This theme had potential anti-Semitic overtones, as Daniel Dubuisson remarked in commenting upon a passage of Eliade’s edited diary, which argues that the Jews, having invented history, were responsible for their own extermination.³⁷

The trajectory I have been describing has a somewhat ironical overtone. In the early 1940s Thomas Mann wrote to Kerényi that myth should be taken away from Fascist intellectuals and put to a humanist purpose—a remark Mann was so fond of that he repeated it twice, before applying it to his own novel *Joseph and His Brothers*.³⁸ Through Kerényi’s mediation, Eliade turned myth into a strategy for coming to terms with Fascism’s defeat—and his own.

34. José Ortega y Gasset, *La Rebelión de las masas* [*La ribellione delle masse*], trans. Salvatore Battaglia (Rome: Nuove edizioni italiane, 1945), 103–4. Thomas Mann attributed to Ortega the comparison between the archaic man and the toreador, which was in fact his own. During his stay in Lisbon, Eliade met Ortega several times, was duly impressed by him, and read some of his works, including presumably *The Rebellion of the Masses* (see the index to *Diario português, ad nomen*).

35. Thomas Mann and Károly Kerényi, *Romanzo e mitologia . . . Un carteggio*, ed. Károly Kerényi, trans. Ervino Pocar (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1960); Károly Kerényi and Thomas Mann, *Felicità difficile: Un carteggio*, ed. Károly Kerényi, trans. Ervino Pocar (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1963).

36. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, 155; Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 104.

37. Dubuisson, *Impostures et pseudo-science*, 76–81.

38. Mann and Kerényi, *Romanzo e mitologia* 83 (February 18, 1941), 85 (September 7, 1941). See Thomas Mann, “Giuseppe e i suoi fratelli,” in *Nobiltà dello spirito* (quoted by Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra* [Milan: Garzanti, 1979], 39–40, polemically opposing Mann to Eliade).

VII

In the edited version of his diary, published in the early 1970s, Eliade alluded retrospectively to the trajectory that had led him to exile and international fame: "Only after the intense, frantic period that lasted from 1933 to 1940, was I entitled to 'detach' myself from the Romanian perspective and I began to think and write for a wider audience, in a universal perspective."³⁹

Not a single word of this sentence can be taken at face value. The "intense, frantic period" is a euphemism for "my support of the Iron Guard"; the chronology (1933 to 1940) conceals the real turning point, 1942–43; the word "entitled" is part of a clumsy attempt to protect himself against the predictable accusation that he lacked patriotic feelings. Even the reference to the "universal perspective" adopted after the time in exile is ultimately misleading. In the final chapter of *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, entitled "The Terror of History," in which Eliade loosed a fierce attack against historicism, he deliberately left some clues suggesting the specific point of view from which he approached his topic. He spoke of peoples (including, "for example," those of southwestern Europe) "who suffer and are annihilated for the simple reason that their geographical situation sets them in the pathway of history; that they are neighbors of empires in a state of permanent expansion." In the past, Eliade remarked, those sufferings had been accepted because "they had a metahistorical meaning. . . . A very considerable fraction of the population of Europe, to say nothing of the other continents, still lives today by the light of the traditional, anti-'historicistic' viewpoint."⁴⁰ While studying those "traditional societies," Eliade discovered a "revolt against concrete, historical time, [a] nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, to the 'Great Time.'"⁴¹

There is no need to insist on the personal implications of these passages. One could object that because all scientific discoveries take place in a specific context, the circumstances of their genesis, their subjective implications and so forth, do not necessarily affect their objective value. In principle I agree completely. But to what extent was the "ideology" of "primitive" or "traditional" societies posited in *The Myth of Eternal Return* projected by its author? When Eliade speaks of a "revolt against historical time," a "nostalgia for mythical

39. Mircea Eliade, *Giornale* (Turin: Boringhieri, 1976) [*Fragments d'un journal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973)], 320 (May 15, 1963).

40. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 151–52.

41. *Ibid.*, xi. The foreword to this American edition, dated November 1958, declares that the manuscript was begun "in May, 1945." The French original edition (1949) is dated "Cascaes, mars 1945. Paris mai 1947" (Eliade, *Le mythe de l'Eternel Retour* [Paris: Gallimard, 1961], 12–13).

time,” a “terror of history,” is he imposing his own voice over those archaic cultures? The question is rhetorical; Eliade, I suspect, would have dismissed it as irrelevant.

VIII

I would prefer to take a different approach. I will inscribe *The Myth of Eternal Return* in a constellation of works that might be labeled “writings from Year Zero”—in an homage to Roberto Rossellini’s movie *Germany Year Zero*.⁴² Mine is a highly heterogeneous group: Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (written in 1940, published posthumously in a nearly private form in 1942, then in 1950); Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (written in 1942–44, published in 1947); Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (written in 1941 and 1942, published posthumously in 1947); Raymond Queneau, *Une histoire modèle* (written in 1942, published in 1966); Ernesto De Martino, *Il mondo magico* (begun in 1941, published in 1948).⁴³ The format, assumptions, approaches, and conclusions of these works are as different as can be, but all of them (except Eliade’s) emerged from a shared experience: the sense of an imminent collapse of civilization, due to the seemingly irresistible advance of Germany and its allies. How, each of these writers asked, could all this happen? This question, generated in a situation of extreme danger, became a question addressed, either explicitly or implicitly, to history as a whole. Does history have a meaning? The answer was sought in different directions: in a quasi-hopeless messianic perspective; in a remote, conjectural past; in laying bare the supposed logic of historical development, and so forth. Marc Bloch, the only historian in the group, raised some different questions: whether historical knowledge was possible, how, to what end.

The Myth of the Eternal Return was written as a response not to the triumph of Fascism but to its defeat; it was begun not in 1942 but in 1945. However, from a morphological point of view, it would easily fit in the list of writings I just mentioned. The questions Eliade addressed—Is history inevitable? Why history?—were as radical as theirs, since these questions also emerged from a time of extreme danger, of collapse, of destruction: “the Year Zero.”

42. Here I am developing a suggestion I advanced in “‘La fine del mondo’ di Ernesto De Martino,” *Quaderni Storici* 40 (1979): 238–42, echoed by Placido Cherchi, *Il signore del limite: Tre variazioni critiche su Ernesto De Martino* (Naples: Liguori editore, 1994). Pietro Angelini refers to 1940 as “a year zero” for Eliade, a date based on the latter’s misleading self-description (introduction to *Trattato di storia delle religioni*, xxii).

43. On this date, see Carlo Ginzburg, “Momigliano e De Martino,” *Rivista Storica Italiana* 100 (1988): 400–413.

IX

Once inscribed in this constellation, Eliade's book appears in a somewhat unexpected light. Notwithstanding the obvious differences in assumptions, style, and content, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* displays some unexpected intersections with the writings I mentioned earlier. I will limit myself to two comparisons, with Ernesto De Martino's *Il mondo magico* (*The World of Magic*) and Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. These comparisons will immediately throw into relief the heterogeneous character of my list.

Born in 1908 (and therefore one year younger than Eliade), Ernesto De Martino subscribed to Benedetto Croce's version of historicism (*storicismo*). However, in *Il mondo magico*, written during the Second World War, De Martino—who participated in the resistance as a member of a small leftist group, “Partito Italiano del Lavoro”—pushed to an extreme Croce's dictum that “life and reality are history, and nothing else.”⁴⁴ After a detailed discussion of magical powers, De Martino argued that, since “nature is culturally conditioned,” in some societies magic did indeed work. Neither reality nor the presence of man in reality should be taken for granted: they are the result of a long historical process, in which magic played a major role, providing a positive answer to a profound anxiety generated by the risk of losing one's presence in the world—a concept clearly indebted to Heidegger's philosophy.⁴⁵ Was De Martino's radical version of historicism compatible with Croce's philosophy? According to Croce, it was not. Distressed by the master's sharp comments, De Martino recanted, claiming that *Il mondo magico* was a mere extension of Croce's historicism to non-European cultures.⁴⁶

Notwithstanding their political and ideological differences, Eliade and De Martino took a strong interest in each other's work. De Martino reviewed *The Myth of Eternal Return* and wrote introductions to the Italian translations of two other books by Eliade; Eliade, visiting Italy at the very end of his life, recalled his encounters with De Martino, referring with evident relish to Croce's harsh rejection of De Martino's idea that “nature was culturally conditioned.”⁴⁷ Many

44. Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (Bari: Laterza, 1938), 51. On De Martino's youthful years see now Giordana Charuty, *Ernesto De Martino. Les vie antérieures d'un anthropologue* (Marseille: éditions Parenthèses/MMSH, 2009).

45. Cesare Cases, *Il testimone secondario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), 132–67 (first published in 1973 as an introduction to a new edition of *Il mondo magico*).

46. See De Martino's notes published by Gennaro Sasso, *Ernesto De Martino fra religione e filosofia* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2001), 280–82.

47. Mircea Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal, III [1979–1985]* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 234.

factors facilitated the relationship between Eliade and De Martino. Both of them had been influenced, in their youth, by Vittorio Macchioro, the Italian historian of religion who later became De Martino's father-in-law.⁴⁸ They shared a strong antipositivistic attitude—though it became clear, in a public debate they had at Royaumont in 1956, that Eliade was not as willing as De Martino to lay his faith in the reality of magical powers.⁴⁹ But the most important link is provided, in my view, by the conceptual core of *Il mondo magico*: the anxiety generated by the risk of losing one's presence in the world. Was this anxiety an experience located outside history or constitutive of history? If the former, De Martino's radical historicism and Eliade's radical antihistoricism would have partially overlapped.⁵⁰

The case of Walter Benjamin is completely different. To my knowledge, Eliade never mentioned Benjamin and possibly never read his writings. In fact, it is difficult to imagine two works more different than Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return*. But both works include a strong rejection of historicism. In the light of this paradoxical convergence, one might conclude that "historicism" is a broad, vague, analytically empty category.⁵¹ I suspect that this is, on a general level, true. But Benjamin attacked historicism (*Historismus*) on a specific ground: its association with a unilinear, teleological vision of history, that implied a number of theoretical and political consequences. Benjamin referred, on the one hand, to the tendency of historicism to present history from the winner's point of view and, on the other, to the self-defeating belief, characteristic of the German Social Democratic Party, that one was part of an irresistible historical wave.⁵² Benjamin's insistence on a sharp distinction between historicism and historical materialism would have seemed meaningless to Eliade, who regarded historical materialism as an especially vile version of historicism. Still, the grounds for Eliade's rejection of historicism partially overlapped (although at an infinitely cruder level) with those for Benjamin's, since both men identified historicism with a unilinear vision of history. I said "*partially overlapped*" because Eliade developed his

48. Riccardo Di Donato, *I Greci selvaggi: Antropologia storica di Ernesto De Martino* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1999). See also Marin Mincu, *Mircea Eliade e l'Italia*, ed. Roberto Scagno (Milan: Jaca Book, 1987), 238–44 (Vittorio Macchioro's letters to Eliade).

49. See the transcripts of the debate between Eliade and De Martino in Pietro Angelini, *L'uomo sul tetto* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001), 126–39 (formerly published by S. Barbera, *Belfagor* 53 [1988]: 455–65).

50. Here I am expanding a remark I made elsewhere (Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna* [Turin: Einaudi, 1989], 183n70; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991], 203n70).

51. In a feeble footnote added to the revised edition of *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade hastily referred to the various meanings of "historism" or "historicism" (*Cosmos and History*, 150n10).

52. Walter Benjamin, *Sul concetto di storia*, ed. Gianfranco Bonola and Michele Ranchetti (Turin: Einaudi, 1997). This edition includes different versions of the *Theses*, both in German and in Italian translation, and a commentary.

rejection of historicism, which he viewed as the ideological justification of the historical process, into the peculiar notion of “the terror of history,” a manifestation of history as terror. Though he later denied it, for Eliade the rejection of historicism turned into a rejection of history.

X

Today historicism is often regarded as the ideological justification for globalization. Arguments raised against globalized capitalism are often associated with the rejection of historicism, as in Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential book, *Provincializing Europe*.⁵³ Historicism, Chakrabarty argued, implies an idea of uniform development based on a conception of time that is, “in the famous words of Walter Benjamin, the secular, empty, and homogeneous time of history.” Cited in the corresponding footnote, the passage from Benjamin's fourteenth thesis reads a bit differently: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*].”⁵⁴ The word “secular” is missing: it is not Benjamin's but Chakrabarty's. Criticism of a purely secular perspective is a recurrent theme of *Provincializing Europe*, as the following passage shows: “Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks—if not actually ‘died’—in the nineteenth-century European story of ‘the disenchantment of the world,’ the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called ‘superstition’ have never died anywhere.”⁵⁵

Criticism of historicism; rejection of a single, homogeneous historical time; emphasis on a sacred time, and more generally on the persistence of the sacred in our contemporary world—is it possible that these themes had something to do with the work of Eliade, a name that is never mentioned in Chakrabarty's book? In fact, the very title *Provincializing Europe* might recall a passage from the foreword to *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Here is Eliade:

With us, it is an old conviction that Western philosophy is dangerously close to “provincializing” itself (if the expression be permitted): first by jealously isolating itself in its own tradition and ignoring, for example, the problems and solutions of Oriental thought; second by its obstinate refusal to recognize any “situations” except those of the

53. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

54. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 23 and note 68 (see also p. 15 and passim); Benjamin, *Sul concetto di storia*, 44–46.

55. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

man of the historical civilizations, in defiance of the experience of “primitive” man, of man as a member of the traditional societies.⁵⁶

Curiously, this passage seems much closer to Chakrabarty’s perspective than the sentence by Hans-Georg Gadamer placed as the first epigraph to *Provincializing Europe*: “Europe . . . since 1914 has become *provincialized* . . . only the natural sciences are able to call forth a quick international echo.”⁵⁷ Gadamer was noting, and complaining about, a well-known fact; Chakrabarty, on the contrary, is enunciating his plan of attack: “The Europe I seek to provincialize or decenter.”⁵⁸ And Eliade? As we have seen, Eliade identified the self-provincialization of Europe as a danger that could be avoided by adopting a decentered perspective: a move in which, for reasons related to his own biography, India, and particularly Calcutta, played a decisive role. Eliade was also, in his own way, provincializing Europe.

XI

This convergence may be ascribed either to mere chance or to an unconscious recollection. But it points to the potential ambivalence of Eliade’s legacy (and here I am especially thinking of *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, by far his most important book). While the right-wing reception of Eliade’s work is a well-known, amply documented phenomenon, it is hardly unthinkable that the left could find aspects of his work attractive (although I would deeply regret it). This possibility is not related to Eliade’s work, which is devoid of all ambiguity, but to its reception. One day *The Myth of the Eternal Return* might be taken up as an antiglobalization, postcolonial, ecological manifesto.

You probably noted that I spoke of a right-wing and a left-wing reception of Eliade’s work, tacitly dismissing the possibility of a different reading that lacked a strong ideological disposition. In fact, I share the attitude of those—more and more numerous, I must say—who find something deeply problematic in Eliade’s work from an intellectual (not only political) point of view. A long time ago, in a letter addressed to Furio Jesi, Kerényi scornfully wrote: “You succeeded

56. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, xii, “Foreword” (dated Paris, October 1952). This passage was already included in the introduction to the French original edition. See also Dubuisson, *Imposture et pseudo-science*, 62, quoting from Eliade’s *La nostalgie des origines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971): “Une réaction contre ce qu’on pourrait appeler christianisme ‘provincial,’ c’est-à-dire purement occidental.” In 1935 Eliade wrote to Cioran: “The only important thing is that Europe is going to die. . . . I hope that Romania does not belong to this continent which discovered secular sciences, philosophy and social equality” (quoted in Turcanu, *Le prisonnier de l’histoire*, 243).

57. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 3.

58. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

in finding something interesting even in the work of the trivial Eliade.”⁵⁹ Kerényi was apparently a haughty man.⁶⁰ He may have been jealous of Eliade's fame; he probably thought that Eliade had rendered some of his own ideas quite banal; but he also understood that Eliade, a voracious reader and an incredibly prolific writer, was not interested in a critical approach to religion.⁶¹ Eliade preferred to impose his own irresistible categories on a vast amount of (mostly secondhand) evidence. A long time ago historians got rid of the category *homo oeconomicus*; Eliade's *homo religiosus* is equally fruitless.⁶² His work does not help us to understand the largely enchanted, or re-enchanted, world we live in. In order to understand religious phenomena—in fact, all historical phenomena—we need critical distance, not tautologies.

I am well aware that critical distance is (or has become) a contentious notion. The reason is simple: the ambivalence I mentioned in the title of my essay is part of a larger context, in which Left, Right, Enlightenment, and anti-Enlightenment clash, crisscross, and overlap on specific issues. The case I have been dealing with reminds us, in its potential developments, that the age of simple dichotomies is over.⁶³

59. Furio Jesi and Karl Kerényi, *Demone e mito: Carteggio 1964–1968*, ed. M. Kerényi and Andrea Cavalletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1999), 100 (letter dated Ascona June 22, 1967).

60. On Kerényi's personal attitude, see the remarks of his pupil Angelo Brelich in *Storia delle religioni, perché?* (Naples: Liguori, 1979), 62–64.

61. See Dubuisson, *Impostures et pseudo-science*.

62. Bruce Lincoln, a former pupil of Eliade, wrote in his *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 146: “I see only a limited future for the kinds of research he [Eliade] pursued.”

63. See Adriano Sofri in *La Repubblica*, October 14, 2006.

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