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## SYMBOL AND MYSTERY

*Tremendum et fascinans*—this celebrated phrase of Rudolf Otto sums up admirably our normal reaction in the presence of Mystery. On the one hand it seems profound, transcendent, beyond the reach of ordinary experience, unknown and unknowable. One is reduced to wordless wonder before it, unable to say anything more than *neti neti*—not thus, not thus. Face to face with the mysterious Absolute, even the words of Śṛuti can only be relative, inadequate and provisional. The Mystery is *tremendum*. But this same Mystery is also very dangerously attractive—*fascinans*. One experiences in oneself a deep desire to experience that. One seems to have a fleeting glimpse of it now and then. Its power is sensed to be active in human life and history. More has been written about it than about anything else. Taking these two aspects together, Mystery seems to be something we are constantly approaching and which, all the time, keeps eluding our grasp.

In what follows an attempt is made to show that this complex experience of Mystery is mediated to man through symbols; that these symbols are rooted in his personal and social experience; that it is only in and through symbols that man, not only approaches, but shares in the Mystery; that these symbols are not merely rational, but also imaginative (myth), and active (rite); that this symbolic activity is prospective, progressively seeking to realize the mysteric Utopia here and now.

### I

#### The World of Symbols

At the outset of this discussion it is essential to have a clear idea of what a symbol is and how it functions. It is a term with

a very wide connotation extending from mathematical symbols to the symbols that are part of dreams, deep and hidden in the unconscious. Hence it is necessary to specify the precise sense in which the term is used here.

A certain four-footed animal is called "cow" in English, "vache" in French and "Kuh" in German etc. All these words refer to the same animal and correspond to a concept which men have of it. The words are linguistic "signs". The concept to which the words correspond is the "signified". The animal is the "object" referred to. The relationship between the sign and the signified is quite arbitrary. There is no special reason why this particular animal should be called by a particular word. Each language has its own word for it and one word is as good as another. To make communication possible within a given linguistic area and special community, however, social convention demands that a certain animal should be denoted by a certain accepted word, such social conventions for in the basis of language.

In a predominantly pastoral society, milk and milk-products are sources of nourishment and wealth. The cow which gives milk becomes a "symbol" of wealth, of prosperity, of fertility, of motherhood, of generosity, of life itself. The number of cows owned by a chieftain becomes an index of his wealth and abduction of cows constitutes an act of war. The relationship between the cow and plenty is not, however, arbitrary: as a source of milk the cow is naturally a source of nourishment and wealth. Thus explains the motivation for the choice of the cow as a symbol. There is an analogical or logical link between the symbol "cow" and the "plenty" that it symbolizes. It is not the word "cow" that is the symbol, but the total reality of the cow and its role in man's life.

Thus, in Indian tradition, the cow has understandably become a powerful symbol. The symbol has retained its value and evocative power even when wealth has assumed a variety of other forms, because the cow still remains closely linked to man's life.

### **Process of Symbolization:**

The process of symbolization by which the cow becomes a symbol involves three elements: experience, insight and tradition. It requires an experience of abundance and of the role of food in nourishing life, not only in the form of milk and milk-products

but also in other forms. It also requires, evidently, the recognition of the cow and its role in man's life. To an urban child, who has seen milk only in bottles, the cow as a symbol would mean nothing. Its insight links these two experiences, thanks to a perception of the analogy between them. In a pastoral society the relationship is even causal, not just analogical. With experience and insight the cow could have remained merely at the level of poetic metaphor. But Hindu religious tradition, by making the cow a symbol not only of material life and abundance but also of spiritual life, has provided depth and power to that symbol. This power is attached even to its urine and dung. The ashes obtained from burning the dung play an important role in Saivite spiritual practice. It is not our purpose here to show the how and the why of this complex and powerful symbol. It is rather the phenomenological one of pointing out the structure and process of symbolization.

In the process of symbolization the primacy is not given to the symbol but to the symbolized. One has an experience of plenty and one finds in the cow an apt symbol to express this experience. Other symbolic expressions for the same experience are also possible: e.g. an overflowing pot of boiling rice during the harvest festival in Tamil Nadu. A significant experience may not be adequately represented by a single symbol—a group of symbols may be required.

The process of symbolization is the same as the process of metaphor in poetry. A poet may say "fire" to connote "love" thus placing the emphasis on its ardour and warmth. The starting point of the process is the experience, not of the fire, but of love. The poet then finds in fire a suitable symbol to connote certain aspects of his experience of love. He may find other aspects of love conveyed by other symbols like the moon, the flower or the gentle breeze. He may find fire an apt symbol for representing other elements of experience in some other contexts like anger, destruction etc.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of the "double structure" of symbolic signification. Unlike in a simile, where two things independently known are compared, in a symbol one thing leads to another. Fire is an object available to normal human experience and when the poet says fire and means love our experience of fire leads us to grasp certain aspects of the experience of love. A thing already known leads us to the knowledge of another thing. This is the double structure. What is special about this double structure is that nor-

mally a symbol unveils aspects of reality and experience that are not otherwise accessible. The power of poetic metaphor lies precisely in the fact that pages of abstract description cannot equal the evocative power of a single well-chosen symbol. The poet uses the symbol fire to evoke the experience of love only because non-symbolic language cannot really communicate the experience he wishes to share with the reader. So he uses symbols. He multiplies them and succeeds in evoking for the reader or hearer, at least a part of his own experience. Even when the poet uses a multiplicity of symbols, no one symbol can be just replaced by another. Signs can be conventional and so are interchangeable. But symbols are not. This is what gives them their special power.

Paul Ricoeur has analysed well this double meaning structure of symbol:

The symbol conceals in its aim a double intentionality. Take the "defiled", the "impure". ...The literal meaning of "defilement" is "stain", but this literal meaning is already a conventional sign; the words "stain", "unclean", etc., do not resemble the thing signified. But upon this first intentionality there is erected a second intentionality which, through the physically "unclean", points to a certain situation of man in the sacred which is precisely that of being defiled, impure. The literal and manifest sense, then, points beyond itself to something that is *like* a stain or spot. Thus, contrary to perfectly transparent technical signs, which say only what they want to say in positing that which they signify, symbolic signs are opaque, because the first, literal, obvious meaning itself points analogically to a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in it. This opacity constitutes the depth of the symbol, which, it will be said, is inexhaustible.

But let us correctly understand the analogical bond between the literal meaning and the symbolic meaning. While analogy is inconclusive reasoning that proceeds by fourth proportional—A is to B as C is to D—in the symbol, I cannot objectify the analogical relation that connects the second meaning with the first. It is by living in the first meaning that I am led by it beyond itself; the symbolic meaning is constituted in and by the literal meaning which effects the analogy in giving the analogue. Maurice Blondel said: "Analogies are based less on notional resemblances (*simili-*

*tudines*) than on an interior stimulation on an assimilative solicitation (*intentio ad assimilationem*).” In fact, unlike a comparison that we *consider* from outside, the symbol is the movement of the primary meaning which makes us participate in the latent meaning and thus assimilates us to that which is symbolized without our being able to master the similitude intellectually.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation has been long. But it is important to grasp clearly the process of signification of the symbol. It is because of its double intentionality that symbol is able to reach out to Mystery.

### Symbol and Social Experience:

Because symbols are not just conventional media of communication like signs but depend for their power on human experience, psychological and sociological factors that condition human experience also condition the choice and use of symbols as well as their depth. We have seen above that sin is often perceived as a stain and forgiveness in this context as a process of cleansing it. Washing with water is a universal symbol of purification from sin. Part of the symbolism of water lies in its cleansing properties. But sin is also perceived as a transgression—as disobedience of a law. The world is visualised as governed by a cosmic law and sin becomes non-conformity to this law. Forgiveness then comes to signify expiation and satisfaction. Order has been violated; justice has been thwarted and so justice cries out for propitiation. Sin is also interpreted as guilt, as a refusal to love or as a personal offence. Forgiveness viewed against this background involves conversion, a change of heart, self-surrender and grace.

Here we have proposed three symbols for sin and forgiveness. All of them have the double meaning structure. They are mutually complementary bringing out three aspects of the experience of sin. One may employ as appropriate, one, two or all the three symbols. But each one of them belongs to a different world view. The first implies a world view that is cosmic or physical. God's power is perceived as operating in the form of natural forces. This is the Vedic religious experience which finds a more sophisticated

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1. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: 1967) Pp. 15-16.

philosophic expression in the Advaita Vedanta. Before an impersonal Absolute the world is reduced to a mere cosmic system, with a subordinate, if not an illusory, role. The second supposes a world that is ruled by Dharma. It is a rigid world dominated by action—reaction: the law of Karma. Only appropriate punishment can expiate sin. The third vision is that of a God of love. Here personal relationships are predominant.

It is not our task here to discuss which of these three world views and corresponding symbols are closer to reality. Such an evaluation is, probably, not even possible. All three world views and symbols contribute to make up a total vision. What is important, however, is the fact that the choice of one or other symbol is dictated by one or other world view.

Studies by sociologists have shown how these world views themselves correspond to particular ways of organizing social relations. To take just one example, Mary Douglas in her *Natural Symbols*<sup>2</sup> brings out this correlation clearly. She works along two co-ordinates: in *Group* the situation of man in relation to the social group may vary from complete personal autonomy to complete control by the structures of the group; in *Grid* the expressive capacity of man may vary from an absolute creative facility in the handling of media to total control by conventions. The human situation results from a mixture in varying degrees of "grid" and "group". Where man is totally autonomous, without any social control whatever and with a great facility for self-expression, he will be alone and disoriented, free from all social control and structure. At the other extreme of absolute 'group' and 'grid' control man will be condemned to play a role without any individuality whatever. A combination of individuality and conformity to conventional means of expression will lead to classicism whereas a combination of social conformity with a personal gift of creative expression will result in romanticism.

Allowing for a constant interplay of 'grid' and 'group', it is possible to work out a typology of social groups and their modes of self-expression. For our purpose here it is sufficient to refer to the suggestions of Douglas herself:

With high classification (i.e. group), piety and sacralized institutions, strong boundaries between purity and impurity;

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2. (London: 1970), Pp. 77-92.

this is the prototype original Durkheimian system in which God is Society and Society is God, where all moral failings are at once sins against religion and the community. With a small group there is less confidence in the power of God to protect the faithful, a dualistic cosmology reckons with the power of demons and their allies; justice is not seen to prevail. Strong grid tends to a pragmatic world view, sin is less understood than shame for loss of personal honour, face or solvency. In the first type a profit and loss calculus applies to the spiritual economy of the whole community; strong grid focuses on the honour of the individual, the number of supporters he can summon up, the control he has over his women folk. Strong grid divides between the heroic society of the Big Men, and the recurrent millennial tendencies of their subjects. Finally the positions near and around zero should be specially noticed. When public classification and pressure are withdrawn or cast aside, the individual left alone with himself develops a distinctive cosmology, begins and unritualistic.<sup>3</sup>

One may or may not agree with the details of this analysis and classification. But one cannot but accept the general thrust of the hypothesis. The kind of symbols that a man creates depend, of necessity, on the conditions of his existence in society and the kind of world view that he builds up. These conditions do not obviously explain the sacred. But they do influence his perception and symbolization of the Mystery. I shall say more about this aspect later.

### Personality and Symbol:

In an excellent synthesis of his approach to the unconscious C.G. Jung writes: "When we attempt to understand symbols, we are not only confronted with the symbol itself, but we are brought up against the wholeness of the symbol-producing individual."<sup>4</sup> The symbol is not only a manifestation of the meaning or experience which the symbolizer communicates but also unveils his personality. The reasons for this are well summarized by Rollo May:

3. *Ibid.* P. 91.

4. Carl G. Jung et al., *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1968), pp.81-82

An individual's self-image is built up of symbols. Symbolizing is basic to such questions as personal identity. For the individual *experiences himself as a self* in terms of symbols which arise from three levels at once; those from archaic and archetypal depths within himself, symbols arising from the personal events of his psychological and biological experience, and the general symbols and values which obtain in his culture.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that of the three levels May mentions, the third refers to the sociological conditioning to which a reference was made in the previous section the other two involving the psychological depths of the individual himself, either as strictly individual or as human and therefore archetypal. No one today would deny that the meaning of a symbol reaches out far beyond what is consciously intended to the depths of the unconscious. A realization of this saves us from the trouble of pretending to explain everything when we are talking about symbols and their meanings. It is at the same time an affirmation both of the rootedness of the symbol in human, even personal experience, and of the possibility of its reaching out to depths beyond conscious experience.

## II

### Symbolic Experience of the Mystery

It is in and through symbols that man touches, experiences, and lives Mystery. This second section attempts to show how this happens in the three main symbolic areas of symbols, myths and rites. It is not our purpose here to demonstrate that there is Mystery and that it can be experienced and communicated. Adopting a phenomenological approach, these are taken for granted and our task is to show only the inter-relations between symbol and mystery. Our exploration into the process of symbolization should make this task easier.

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5. "The Significance of Symbols" in *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, edited by Rollo May (New York: 1960), p.22.



### Mystery and Human Experience:

Our first observation is that man can experience and express Mystery only in and through symbol. It is easy to accept the view that man can "express" Mystery only in and through symbol. As soon as we start to express any experience we are obliged to do so in one or other medium: language, line and colour, form and shape, movement or sound. The expression of our experience of mystery is no exception to this general rule, though it might demand symbols with a double meaning structure rather than signs. What is not so easy to understand, however, is that even our experience of Mystery is symbolic. The reason for this is man's being spirit-in-body. This duality-in-Unity (*advaita*) which characterizes man's being marks all that is human. Man's experience even of his own self is mediated through symbol. Symbol is not a communication tool that man handles. Symbol is what he is. These affirmations need to be explained.

Man is not a spirit that rests in a body as in a container and uses it as an instrument, so that it can have experiences and activities of its own independently of the body. The human body itself is not primarily the material-physical component of man, separated from him at death. Phenomenologically the body is a whole system of relationships in and through which man experiences his situation in the world of men and matter. The body plays a limiting role in so far as it establishes the individuality of the person by rooting him in space—time experience and in differentiating him from others. But it is also in and through the body that man is present to the world. It is in entering into relationship with others that man differentiates himself from them. The body then becomes the individual's self-expression in the material and human world.

The relationships that characterize human existence in the world are made possible through symbol. The symbol too, like the body, is at once limiting and leading to unexplored depths. The body itself is a symbol or a tissue of symbols. Just as the symbol through a primary level of meaning leads us on to a second level of meaning which can be reached only in and through the first level, so too in and through the body we reach the spirit, not as something different that can be reached independently through some other means, if necessary, but as a deeper dimension of itself which is its *raison d'être*. The human spirit experiences itself, becomes conscious of itself only through the body, which is its

self-expression. Thus the symbolic dimension structures the very being of man.<sup>6</sup>

What has been said so far is not a philosophic meditation on human existence. In Rollo May's words, "Clinical data supports the thesis that man is uniquely the symbol-using organism, and is distinguished from the rest of nature and animal life by this fact."<sup>7</sup> Patients with brain lesions who lost their capacity to relate to themselves and their words in terms of symbols "could no longer experience the self over, against, and in relation to, a world of object." Studies in the psychology of children have also shown that "symbols are the language of this capacity for self-consciousness." When the central symbols that structure man's world break down they rise to an increase in neurotic patients.

To say that all human experience is symbolic would shock only those who have a naive view of symbol as something opposed to reality. On the contrary, symbol is one way of being—the human way. That is why we can say that the experience of Mystery, if it is a human experience, is symbolic. This shows the intimate link between symbol and Mystery in human experience. This implies two things. Man really experiences Mystery. The symbol is an open structure: It hides more than it reveals. But what is inaccessible at the conscious level may still be available at unconscious and, perhaps, super-conscious levels. Man can still be touched by it without being able to give an adequate account of it. This is what makes Mystery attractive, *fascinans*, un-satiating. But if the symbol is open, it is also opaque. It is rooted in man's personal and social history and is thereby conditioned. It is this opacity that makes reality mysterious, "tremendum". Even a multiplicity of symbols may not exhaust the riches of the Mystery.

### Symbol and Void:

It is needless here to demonstrate the symbolic nature of religious experience. It is evident. Only the phenomena of negative theology and of the experience of the void, beyond "name and form", whether in Advaita or in Buddhism, need an explanation. Our first observation is that the task of the void remains

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6. Terry Eagleton, *The Body as Language* (London: 1970).

7. For this and the following two quotations cf. R. May, *art. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

at the conceptual level and does not go deep enough to the level of experience and symbol. Name and form are purely limiting elements that do not have the openness of the symbol. Negative theology only affirm negatively the essential openness of the symbol. The experience of the void or *sunya* is an experience not of "nothingness" but of Mystery beyond the mere limitations of names and forms. The experience of the void is still an experience. It finds expression in a new orientation, a new system of relationships, a new view of the world. There is a total transformation, not annihilation.

Anyone who speaks of a peak experience in terms of void and nothingness is not speaking about a different experience but is only speaking of a different language. His view of man is dualistic, that of a spirit imprisoned in a body and which can act independently of the body under certain conditions. The world for him is an illusory one without substance. Such a view of man and the world leads to a radical depreciation of the nature of symbol. It isolates Mystery from man and symbol. Its experience of Mystery is not a "human" experience. It is obvious that what we have here is not two types of experience, but two different world views and two different languages. We cannot escape the symbolic dimension of human experience and expression.

### Myth and Mystery:

Though we have been speaking so far of symbols in a general way, actually man's religious life revolves round not isolated symbols but myths and rituals. It is therefore necessary to see how myths and rituals are related to Mystery. Paul Ricoeur has described myth as follows:

(Myth is) not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world.<sup>8</sup>

The first thing that strikes us about a myth is that it is a narrative or story. Thus in place of an isolated figure we have an event, an action, a happening. This introduces a dynamic element into the

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8. Op. cit., p. 5. Cf. also Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and paradigms* (London: 1974).

process of experience. A symbol like water or fire can only unveil the quality of a reality. But only an act like washing can symbolize purification.

Myths are set not in ordinary, historical space and time, but in primordial times—that is to say, at the origins beyond the beginning of time. Viewed in this light, it is not speaking of a historical event that happened once but of a pattern that is valid for all time. Adam is every man.

Myths are not the creations of a single gifted individual. They are the creations of a whole community. They belong to a tradition. They embody the quest of a community inspired living faith for an answer to the mystery of life. They justify the established order; they confirm belief; they maintain traditional behaviour. They keep alive their common hopes and provide a meaning and a goal to their life. According to May, myth is “man’s way of expressing the quintessence of his experience—his way of seeing his life, his self-image and his relations to the world of his fellow-men and of nature—in a total figure which at the same moment carries the “vital meaning” of this experience”. Thus, in the Christian tradition, the myth of Adam is “not just a tale of a man in paradise who eats an apple in disobedience to a command, but a story by which we confront the profound problem of the birth of human consciousness, the relation of man to authority, and moral self-knowledge.”<sup>9</sup>

Working on similar lines, after a brilliant analysis of the Indian epic *Rāmāyana* R. Antoine concludes:

The pivot around which everything revolves is the power of the Word. The Word of Brahmā, infallible and irreversible, sustains the whole cosmic order. The Word of gods, sages and men gives a structural consistency to the whole action of the epic. Within this cosmic and temporal structure, the redemptive power of Vishnu is gradually revealed. On the human level, the Word operates as the agent of immanent retribution. On the cosmic level, through the discernment with which Brahmā confers his boons, the Word brings about the conflict between Good and Evil and leads to the final victory of Good. Both the human and the cosmic levels are sublimated and integrated into the redemptive purpose

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9. For these two quotations see May, *art. cit.*, p. 34.

of Vishnu: they are the necessary medium through which Vishnu expresses and fulfils his designs.

Hence the *Rāmāyana* can be understood on three different levels, according to the perception of the listener... The human level does not lose its reality when integrated with the cosmic level, but its limited truth is transcended. The cosmic level remains valid when subsumed under the redemptive level, but its meaning is transfigured.<sup>10</sup>

Here we notice again some of the basic features which have been underlined above. The myth is essentially an open structure, open to Mystery that gives meaning to life. This exploration into Mystery is solidly grounded in human existence and experience. The process of symbolization involves multiple levels of signification.

Another important element that emerges from the analysis of the *Rāmāyana* presented above is what has been called the "progressive function" of myth. The myth is not satisfied with simply explaining the conflict between good and evil that reflects the experience of man. It also points to a new synthesis in the redemptive power of Vishnu, where both good and evil are transcended.

Symbols and myths are means of discovery. They are a progressive revealing of structure in our relation to nature and our own existence, a revealing of new ethical forms. Symbols thus are "educative"—*e-du-catio*—and by drawing out inner reality they enable the person to experience greater reality in the outside world as well.<sup>11</sup>

This prophetic vision of a higher and richer integration is a call to realization and action. Ritual is the form that this action often takes.

### Ritual and Mystery:

Ritual may be described as a symbolic action of a community. The symbolic nature of the ritual action<sup>12</sup> needs no explanation.

10. Robert Antoine, *Rama and the Bardsh Epic Memory in the Rāmāyana* (Calcutta: 1975), Pp. 101-102.

11. Rollo May, *art. Cit.*, P. 45

12. Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Religious Rite as Symbol", *Jeevadhāra* 29 (1975), Pp. 319-328.

Enough has also been said about symbols. We now proceed to examine how rites mediate Mystery.

At a purely human level, rites are socially integrative. They structure social life by regulating inter-communication in society at key moments of its ongoing life. The life of the group is closely interwoven with the life of each individual member. That is why important stages in his life become socially significant too. His birth, entry into adulthood, marriage and death are all accompanied by rituals.

All these rituals have a religious, mysteric dimension. Man's search for a key to the meaning of life leads him beyond human and social relationships to a cosmic and divine order. This dimension is present in every ritual. It is not something separate and added on to the human and social reality. It is felt to be an integral dimension of this reality. When a neophyte is initiated into adulthood, and this initiation is perceived as a new birth, the reference is not merely to his entrance into the society of adults. This integration implies a spiritual transformation because the community, whose member he becomes now, is a spiritual fellowship. His entry into the fellowship and his re-birth are two sides of the one ritual—symbolic—act. In this manner we see again the same pattern appearing again. The Mystery that gives meaning to one's life is not experienced by itself in some abstract, objective heaven. It is lived as a deeper dimension of normal human existence through symbols that reach out to these depths thanks to their double meaning structure.

There are some rituals that seem to reach out even further in a prophetic way towards a new humanity. The Vedic sacrifices aimed at maintaining cosmic order. This experience of cosmic integration was kept alive in the idea of *loka samgraha* and in the daily practice of the *pancha yajña*. In the Tantric tradition *sādhana*, whether in the form of temple-worship or in the form of *yoga*, it is a lived experience of integrative involution. Both the temple and the body were symbolic and microcosmic. This integrative process takes on a social dimension in festivals like the Holi, and in pilgrimages like the ones to Sabarimalai in Kerala and to Pandharpur in Maharashtra. On these occasions all social distinctions, divisions and stratifications disappear. There is a utopic community of joy, freedom and equality which offers us a

prophetic foretaste of a new humanity.<sup>13</sup> The symbolic nature of this mysteric experience is too evident to require any detailed explanation or elaboration. We find a parallel experience in the Christian Eucharist. This is an experience of community symbolically lived in a common meal reaching out to divine depths by having Christ's own body—again symbolically—as food being shared and realizing the reality of communion. The communion is not permanent, but moving constantly towards permanence.

Here we have reached the highest point of symbolic experience reaching out to Mystery.

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13. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: 1969).