

significance, and why the dragon, ancient Chinese symbol of the Word, awakens only 'diabolical' ideas in the minds of modern Westerners?²¹

23 § On the Significance of Carnivals

IN connection with a certain 'theory of festivals' formulated by a sociologist, we have pointed out¹ that this theory has, among other deficiencies, the weakness of wanting to reduce all festivals to a single type, that of what may be called 'carnival' festivals, an expression which seems to us clear enough to be understood by everyone, as in fact carnival represents what is still left of festival today in the West; and we said at that time that this kind of festival raises questions which can call for a more thorough examination. In fact, the impression that emerges from them is always and above all else that of *disorder*, in the most complete sense of this word. How then does it happen that they are to be found, not only in our time, but also and even with a more ample development, in traditional civilisations with which they seem at first sight incompatible? If they pertained specifically to our own times, they could be considered simply as one of the numerous manifestations of the general disequilibrium.

We may as well give here some definite examples, and we will mention first certain truly strange festivals which were celebrated in the Middle Ages: the 'feast of the ass' where this animal, whose distinctly satanic symbolism is well known in all traditions,² was even brought into the very choir of the church where it occupied the place of honour and received the most extraordinary tokens of veneration; also, the 'feast of fools', wherein the lower clergy gave themselves up to the worst improprieties, parodying both the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the liturgy itself.³ How is it possible to explain that in such a period things whose most evident characteristic is incontestably that of parody and even of sacrilege⁴ were not only tolerated but even given an as it were official sanction?

21. *Ibid.*, ch. 30, 'The Inversion of Symbols', pp. 245-47.]

1. See *Etudes Traditionnelles*, April 1940, p. 169.

2. It would be wrong to maintain that this is contradicted by the part played by the ass in the Gospel tradition, for in fact the ox and the ass placed on either side of the manger at the birth of Christ symbolise respectively the totality of benefic and malefic forces. These are to be found again at the crucifixion, in the form of the good and bad thief. On the other hand, Christ mounted upon an ass at his entry into Jerusalem, represents the triumph over the forces of evil, a triumph whose realisation constitutes precisely the 'redemption'.

3. These 'fools' wore a headdress with long ears, obviously intended to evoke the notion of an ass's head; and this feature is not the least significant from our point of view.

4. The author of the theory to which we have alluded recognised well enough the existence of this parody and of this sacrilege; but, linking them to his general conception of 'festival', he attempts to make of them characteristic elements of the 'sacred' itself—something that is not only too much of a paradox but, let it be said plainly, a contradiction pure and simple.

We will also mention the Roman Saturnalia from which, moreover, the modern carnival seems to have been directly derived, though in fact it is no longer anything but a very diminished vestige: during these festivals, the slaves ordered the masters about, and the masters served the slaves.⁵ One then had the image of a truly 'upside down' world, wherein everything was done in reverse of the normal order.⁶ Although it is commonly claimed that these festivals were a reminder of the 'golden age', this interpretation is clearly false; for there is no question here of any kind of 'equality' that could strictly be regarded as representing, insofar as is possible in present conditions,⁷ the primordial indifferenciation of social functions. It is a question of the reversal of hierarchies, which is something completely different; and such a reversal constitutes, generally speaking, one of the plainest characteristics of satanism. We must therefore see here something that relates much rather to the sinister aspect of Saturn, an aspect which certainly does not pertain to him as god of the 'golden age' but, on the contrary, insofar as he is now no more than the fallen god of a bygone and finished period.⁸

It can be seen by these examples that there is invariably a sinister and even satanic element in such festivals; and it should be noted in particular that this very element is precisely what pleases the mob and excites its gaiety. There is something here, in fact, that is very apt—and even more so than anything else—to satisfy the tendencies of fallen man, insofar as these tendencies push him to develop the lowest possibilities of his nature. Now it is just in this that the real point of such festivals lies: it is a question of somehow 'channeling' these tendencies, and of thus making them as inoffensive as possible by giving them an opportunity to manifest themselves, but only during very brief periods and in very well defined circumstances, and by thus enclosing this manifestation within narrow limits which it is not allowed to overstep.⁹ Otherwise these same tendencies, for want of the minimum satisfaction required by the present

5. Festivals of this same kind are even encountered in many different countries, when they went so far as to confer temporarily on a slave or on a criminal the insignia of royalty with all the power that goes with it, only to put him to death once the festival ended.

6. In this connection, the same author speaks also of 'reverse acts' and even of a 'return to chaos', which contains at least a part of the truth; but by an astonishing confusion of ideas, he seeks to assimilate this chaos to the 'golden age'.

7. We mean the conditions of the *Kali-Yuga* or the 'iron age', of which the Roman period, as well as our own, was a part.

8. That the ancient gods became demons in a certain manner is a fact quite generally established, and the attitude of the Christians towards the gods of 'paganism' is merely a particular case, but one which never seems to have been explained as it should; we cannot insist on this point here, which would lead us too far from our subject. It is, of course, to be understood that this is related solely to certain cyclic conditions, and does not affect or modify in any way the essential character of these same gods insofar as they symbolise, beyond time, supra-human principles. Thus side by side with their accidentally malefic aspect, the benefic aspect always exists in spite of everything and even though it is completely unrecognised by 'men outside'. The astrological interpretation of Saturn can be taken as a very clear example in this respect.

9. This relates to the symbolic 'enframing' to which we propose to return [see below, 68].

condition of humanity, would be at risk of exploding, so to speak,¹⁰ and of spreading their effects everywhere, collectively as well as individually, causing thereby a disorder far more serious than that which is produced only during some few days specially reserved for this purpose, and which is all the less to be feared for being thus 'regularised'. For on the one hand these days are placed outside the normal course of things, so as not to exert any appreciable influence upon it, while, on the other hand, the fact that there is nothing unforeseen in these festivals 'normalises' as it were the disorder itself and integrates it into the total order.

Apart from this general explanation, which no one who is prepared to think about it can fail to understand, it will be as well to say something in particular about the 'masquerades' which play an important part in carnivals themselves, and in other more or less similar festivals; and what we have to say will confirm still further what we have just said. In fact, carnival masks are generally hideous and most often evoke animal or demonic forms so that they are like a figurative 'materialisation' of the inferior and even infernal tendencies, which are allowed to come to the surface on these occasions. Besides, each one will quite naturally choose from among these masks, without being fully aware of it, the one that best suits him, that is, the one which represents what is most in conformity with his own lower tendencies—so much so that one could say that the mask which is supposed to hide the true face of the individual, on the contrary reveals to the eyes of everyone that which he really carries within himself but which he is habitually obliged to dissimulate. It is well to note, for this throws further light on the masks, that we have here a kind of parody of the 'reversal' which, as we have explained elsewhere,¹¹ takes place at a certain degree of initiatic development; a parody, we say, and a truly satanic counterfeit, for here the reversal is an exteriorization, not of the beings spirituality but, on the contrary, of its lowest possibilities.¹²

10. At the end of the Middle Ages, when the grotesque festivals of which we have spoken were suppressed or ceased to be held, there resulted an expansion of sorcery out of all proportion with what had been seen in previous centuries. These two facts are by no means unconnected although this connection is not generally noticed, which is all the more surprising in that there are several quite striking resemblances between such festivals and the 'witch's sabbath', where everything is done 'in reverse'.

11. See 'L'Esprit est-il dans le corps ou le corps dans l'esprit?' [in *Initiation et réalisation spirituelle*, ch. 30].

12. In some traditional civilisations there were also special periods when, for analogous reasons, 'wandering influences' were allowed to manifest themselves freely, all due precautions having been taken. These influences naturally correspond in the cosmic order to what the lower psychism is in the human being; and consequently between their manifestation and that of spiritual influences there is the same inverse relationship as between the two kinds of exteriorization we have just mentioned. Moreover, in these conditions it is not difficult to understand that the masquerade itself seems in a way to represent an apparition of 'larvas' or of malefic spectres. ['... there is here, in fact, a certain similarity with the "exhaustion of lower possibilities", but in this case the "exhaustion" takes place as it were collectively' (letter from the author, 18 December 1945, to Michel Vâlsan). On the question of 'exhaustion' cf., *L'Esoterisme de Dante*, ch. 6, 'Les trois mondes' and *Aperçus sur l'Initiation*, ch. 26, 'De la mort initiatique'.]

To end this survey, we will add that if the festivals of this kind are more and more rare and if they even seem hardly able any longer to arouse the interest of the crowd, it is because, in a time such as our own, they have become truly pointless.¹³ In fact, how can there still be any question of 'circumscribing' disorder and of containing it within rigorously defined limits, when it has spread everywhere and is manifested constantly in all domains of human activity? Thus although, considering only externals and from a purely 'aesthetic' point of view, one might be tempted to welcome, on account of their inevitable garb of ugliness, the almost complete disappearance of these festivals, this disappearance can on the contrary be seen, by going to the roots of the matter, as an exceedingly unreassuring symptom, because it bears witness to the irruption of disorder into the whole course of existence and to its having become generalised to such a point that we could really be said to live in a sinister 'perpetual carnival'.

24 § Some Aspects of the Symbolism of the Fish

THE symbolism of the fish, which is to be found in numerous traditional forms, including Christianity, is exceedingly complex and has many aspects which need to be clearly distinguished one from another. As to the earliest origins of this symbol, it seems to be of Nordic or even Hyperborean provenance. Its presence has in fact been verified in North Germany and in Scandinavia,¹ and in these regions it is in all likelihood nearer its starting-point than in Central Asia where doubtless it was brought by the great current which, issuing directly from the Primordial Tradition, was later to give birth to the doctrines of India and Persia. It is to be noted moreover, generally speaking, that certain aquatic animals figure above all in the symbolism of Northern peoples: to give just one example, the octopus is particularly widespread among the Scandinavians and the Celts, and is also found in archaic Greece as one of the chief motifs in Mycenaean ornamentation.²

13. That amounts to saying that there are no longer, strictly speaking, anything but superstitions, in the etymological sense of this word.

1. Cf., L Charbonneau-Lassay, 'Le Poisson' in *Regnabit*, December 1926.

2. The arms of the octopus are generally straight in the Scandinavian figurations, while they are wound in spirals in Mycenaean ornaments. In the latter, one also sees very frequently the *swastika*, or figures that are manifestly derived from it. The symbol of the octopus relates to the zodiacal sign of Cancer, which corresponds to the summer solstice and to the 'depth of the Waters'. It is easy to understand from this that it could sometimes have been taken in a malefic sense, the summer solstice being the *Janua Inferni*.