Synkrētic N°5 (Jul. 2024), 1-3

EDITORIAL

The word and the world

Synkrētic was conceived as a home for reflection on the Indo-Pacific's philosophies, literatures, and cultures. That process is carried on not only in the minds of living thinkers and writers, but also in the pages of books once deemed pinnacles of knowledge, now become mere artefacts of the endless quest for insight into the world and ourselves. These records of past theorising on cross-cultural encounter must be read anew by each generation, there can be no final reckoning, no conclusion to a process which lives in the pursuit. No man ever steps in the same river twice, and no man ever opens the same book twice. Yet how easily we render judgment on 'the past' and call bygone eras which, from another standpoint, are contemporary with our own. For every past lives only in the here and now, in the thinking—not the thought—of those who, wandering through the cultural graveyard, are determined to give an account of it, if only to themselves.

In this spirit, *Synkrētic №5* proffers to its readers' contemplation several historical texts, some in new translation.

Opening the issue is an exchange of letters between the Vietnamese philosopher Trần Đức Thảo and French philosopher Alexandre Kojève. The correspondence, which centres on the philosophers' divergent readings and appropriations of Hegel, was set in motion by Trần's review in *Les Temps Modernes* of Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As translator Hayden Kee explains in his introduction, this brief exchange affords us a glimpse into the 'ardent and precocious mind' of Trần, who for reasons of history and nationality knew a different fate from and has not enjoyed the same reputation as his contemporaries Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty.

In new translation, extracts from Carl Strehlow's *Myths, Sagas, and Tales of the Aranda* tell of the eternal, emu-footed Altjira whose abode is the sky, and of the *rella manerinja* or 'fused men' who lived on the side of the mountain Erálera. In considering these blackfellastories retold in whitefellatongues, we must ask ourselves to what extent the cultural and professional background of Strehlow, a German Lutheran missionary, informed and shaped this work, even while we must doubt the integrity of whatever answers we propose. For if what we know of the Aranda and their thought-life has come to us through 'our' own intellectual equipment, how do we correct for the distortion of those instruments? How do we find 'the true Aranda' from which to reckon our deviations? And do we not already kid ourselves by supposing an homogenous culture on that side of the encounter—and this?

Edward Sapir, anthropologist and linguist, reflects on the meaning of religion, which he locates not in the formal institution of a church or authoritative scripture but in 'man's never-ceasing attempt to discover a road to spiritual serenity across the perplexities and dangers of daily life.' In Sapir's day, this definition, which sees religion as rooted in the soil of human feeling and behaviour, did justice to the widespread recognition of its ubiquity across cultures; not just 'the more sophisticated peoples' but also 'primitive and barbaric folk' had religion, because they each in their own way sought to turn 'omnipresent fear and a vast humility paradoxically ... into bedrock security.' Sapir's definition still has value in our own day, when under motley banners many who confound atheism with irreligiosity cleave to new pieties in pursuit of the old mission to turn dissenting heathens into bleating denizens of their flock.

In his discussion, Sapir references Edward Burnett Tylor's attempt to trace all forms of religiosity back to animism, and we have reproduced in this issue a selection from the relevant work. The reader who can think her way past (ahistorical) indignation at Tylor's vocabulary will find in the text cultural reports which, in their own right, continue to fascinate. She may also discern a still commendable motive to reckon with cultural differences in a framework of common humanity, even if she cannot endorse an account

which ranks cultures by an intuitive and self-serving standard of progress as high or low in 'the scale of humanity'.

From the *Asiatic Researches* comes an account of the life and teachings of Avyar, a Tamil philosopher whose 'origin and birth, as well as the era in which she flourished, are lost in fable' and whose teachings here take the form of precepts timeless in their simplicity.

Fritz Mauthner, through an analysis of the concepts of 'Primitive Philosophy' and 'Religion', reminds us of language's instability and inconsistency across time and place. Salient in the context of Tylor's contribution is Mauthner's remark regarding Wilhelm Wundt's essay 'The Origins of Philosophy and the Philosophy of the Primitive Races', that he 'espouses that dangerous principle of historical scholarship which equates, on one hand, the beginnings of a cultural domain and, on the other, the relevant circumstances of the so-called primitive races of the present day.' In his *Dictionary of Philosophy*, from which his contribution to this issue has been drawn, Mauthner catalogues the word-trove of philosophy and shows it to be filled with what Hobbes before him deemed 'wise men's counters' but 'the money of fools'. Mauthner's skepticism of language perhaps grew too extreme, but his disenchanting reflections on it—which piqued the interest of Beckett, Joyce, and Wittgenstein—are salutary in a species prone to mistaking words for the world.

The ghost of Mauthner animates the concluding contribution from Australian poet Ruth Aarker. Short but cogent, *Logomania* warns against the perils of theory, how words too often serve our selfish ends, and reminds us that, difficult though it may be to locate, there is yet a distinction between the world and what we write, think, and say about it.

Christian Romuss