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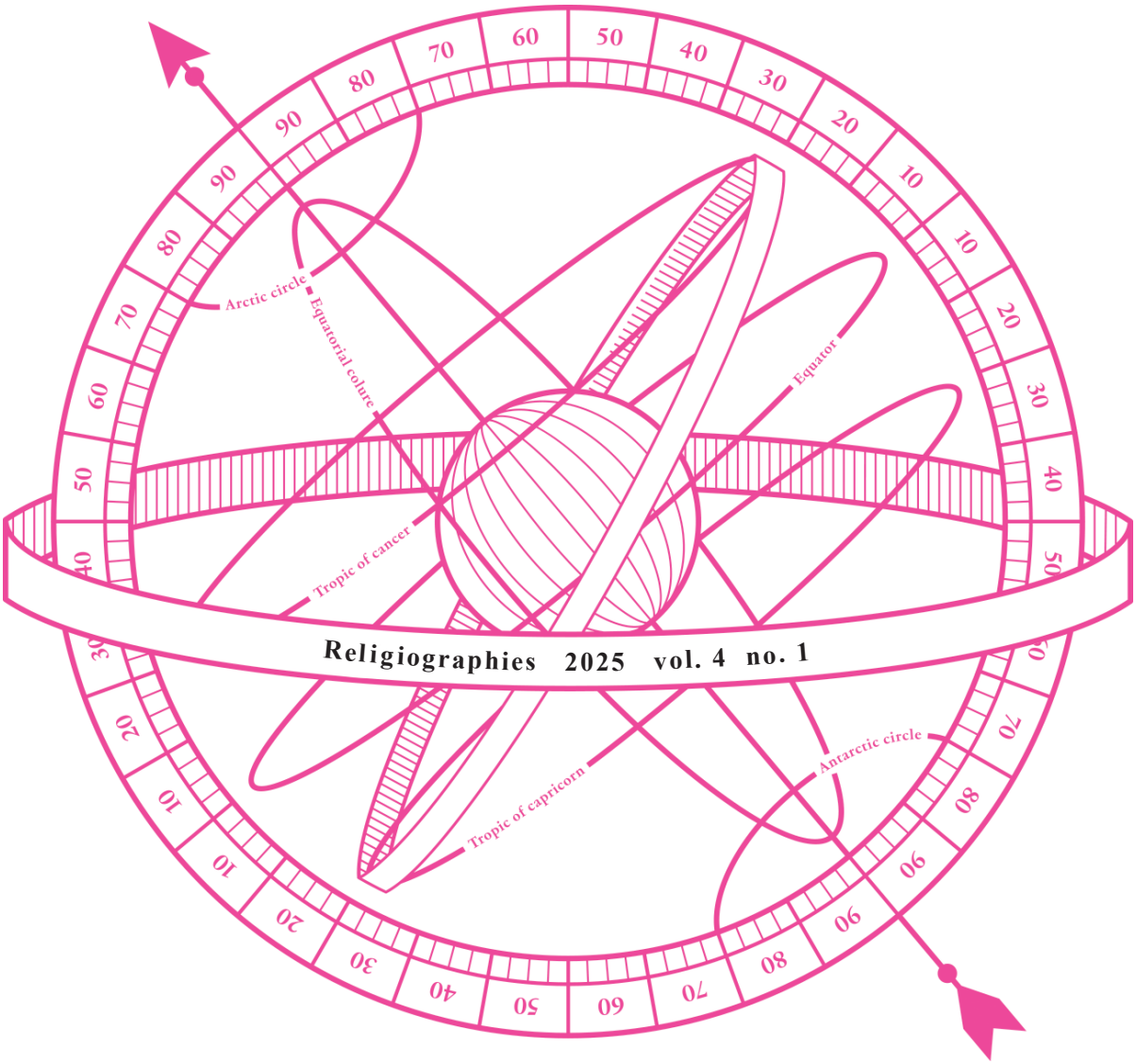

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Vestiges of the Sacred: Mircea Eliade on Desacralization, Modern Art, and Surrealism

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Abstract
This article critically evaluates the historian of religion Mircea Eliade's claim that even (apparently) secular modern art can be considered a locus of survival for the sacred in a desacralized age. It analyzes Eliade's theory of desacralization, arguing that Eliade's writings contain two distinct but rarely explicitly differentiated variants. This article also interprets the implications of Eliade's claim regarding the arts in light of these theories. Subsequently, early surrealism is used as a case study to assess the validity of an Eliadean approach to modern art. In particular, surrealism's interest in the unconscious and its embrace of automatism are read in light of Eliade's theories of desacralization. However, this article asserts that surrealism's creative practice offers considerable critical resistance to Eliade's attempt to include (surrealist) art in the history of religions. Finally, a summary reference to surrealism in Eliade's writings is analyzed, which yields the conclusion that Eliade's particular perspective as a historian of religions, rather than shedding new light on surrealism, blinds him to a number of essentially modern characteristics of the movement.

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Introduction

In a short text from 1978, reflecting on his intellectual development, Mircea Eliade admits—at the risk of disqualifying himself as a "serious thinker"—that his scholarly pursuits and his creative literary writing were never entirely separate:

> I know . . . from my experience that some of my literary creations contributed to a more profound understanding of certain religious structures, and that, sometimes without my being conscious of the fact at the moment of writing fiction, the literary imagination utilized materials or meanings I had studied as a historian of religions.[1]

In Eliade's scholarly oeuvre, the formative importance of literature and the arts is further evidenced by the many references it contains to both classical literature and works of contemporary modernists and avant-gardists, as well as by numerous, usually brief essays on individual artists and artworks. Remarkably, though, the relation between religion and the arts never truly becomes an object of reflection in any of Eliade's major works. A number of relatively marginal remarks make it clear, nonetheless, that Eliade considered artistic and literary creation to be a valid object of inquiry for the historian of religions. More than just a personal source of inspiration, art and literature constitute "an instrument of knowledge"[2] because they capture essential aspects of man's existential situation, including his relation to archetypes, myth, and the sacred.

In this respect, *modern* art and literature are particularly important for Eliade. In a number of places in his work (some of which will be addressed in detail below), Eliade claims that even though in modernity, religion and the arts have gone their separate ways, beneath their secular appearance the arts often retain a relation to the sacred. In an increasingly desacralized age, the arts are thus a locus of survival for the sacred and merit their place in the history of religions, giving Eliade permission to bring his religious erudition to bear on them. In this article, I propose unpacking and critically evaluating this incorporation of (apparently) secular modern art and literature into the history of religions. Two complementary questions will inform my analysis. First, how does Eliade think art can inform us about the hidden presence of the sacred in the desacralized West? And, conversely, what does an Eliadean history of religions bring to the study of modern art? Can we better understand the particularity of art and literature that understands itself as emancipated from religion if we approach it from the perspective of an Eliadean history of religions?

To answer these questions I will first briefly consider Eliade's approach to the sacred, and subsequently, in more detail, how it informs his understanding of desacralization. I will argue that Eliade holds two different, but rarely differentiated theories of desacralization, which have different implications for his claim that the sacred remains "unrecognizably" present in secular modern art. I then propose early surrealism as a test case to evaluate the usefulness of Eliade's approach for the study of modern art. My discussion of surrealism consists of two parts: first, a general analysis of a number of characteristic as-

1 Mircea Eliade, "Literary Imagination and Religious Structure," in *Symbolism, the Sacred & the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Continuum, 1985), 173. [First published in *Criterion* 17, no. 2 (1978): 30–34.]

2 Eliade, "Literary Imagination and Religious Structure," 174.

pects of the movement against the background of Eliade's theories; second, a more detailed critical reading of a single passage by Eliade that addresses surrealism in a context of religious practices and ideas. I conclude that Eliade's desire to include modern art in the history of religions is ultimately more detrimental than beneficial to an understanding of both surrealism and the nature of desacralization.

Eliade's Anti-Reductionism and Phenomenology of the Sacred

Despite the serious and justifiable critiques that Eliade's work and personal life have elicited in recent decades, many scholars of religion grant the importance of his anti-reductionism for the development of their discipline.[3] Like his influential predecessors Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw, Eliade emphasized the importance of studying religious phenomena in their "proper modality, that is to say . . . as something religious,"[4] and he criticized approaches that explain the religious phenomenon away by reducing it to non-religious factors supposedly causing or determining it: "To try to grasp such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art, etc. is to betray it; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it, that is to say, the element of the sacred."[5] By claiming an irreducibility, a sui generis element for the religious phenomenon, Eliade also argued for the autonomy of religious studies, which should employ a proper methodology, in turn irreducible to that of the other sciences.

In the context of the relation between the sacred and modern art, it is interesting that Eliade frequently illustrates the irreducibility of the sacred with a comparison between the religious phenomenon and the work of literature. He often refers, in particular, to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a novel whose critical reception has largely revolved around claims of literary and stylistic irreducibility. Thus, explaining a religious phenomenon by means of non-religious elements would be "as futile as thinking you could explain *Madame Bovary* by a list of social, economic and political facts that are certainly true, but inconsequential for the work of literature in itself."[6] Or, elsewhere, attacking psychoanalytic reductionism: "A myth is 'produced' by the unconscious in the same way in which we could say that *Madame Bovary* is the 'product' of an adultery."[7] Like the autonomous work of art, religion was not to be reduced to, and could impossibly be satisfactorily interpreted through anything outside its "proper modality."

Eliade struggled, however, to clearly and unambiguously define this "proper modality," this "unique and irreducible element" of the religious phenomenon. As many scholars have noted, Eliade wavered between a *realist* (or *ontological*) and a *phenomenological* determination of the sacred, with many passages in his works that can be read either way.[8] The realist approach posits the existence of the sacred on an absolute, ahistorical, and transcendent plane, from which it sometimes descends to "incarnate" in concrete and temporal hierophanies and to become an object of human experience. The phenomenological approach, on the other hand, considers the sacred to be an irreducible intentional structure in human consciousness, a particular "modality of experience" and "being in the world."[9] The sacred, in this view, names an intentionality that allows a relative and temporal object to

3
Especially prominent Eliade scholar Douglas Allen has done much to emphasize this aspect of Eliade's thinking. See, among other publications, *Religion and Myth in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–57; "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005), 194–95, 197. See also Wayne Elzy, "Mircea Eliade and the Battle Against Reductionism," in *Religion and Reductionism*, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 82–94.

4
Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1970), 11.

5
Eliade, *Traité*, 11.

6
Eliade, 11.

7
Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Harcourt: Orlando, 1987), 210. See also Eliade's preface to *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*: *The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper, 1960), 14: "It is when the psychologist 'explains' a mythological Figure or Event by reducing it to a process of the unconscious, that the historian of religions—and perhaps not he alone—hesitates to follow him. At bottom, such explanation by reduction would be equivalent to explaining *Madame Bovary* as an adultery. But *Madame Bovary* has an unique existence in its own frame of reference, which is that of a literary creation, of a creation of the mind. That *Madame Bovary* could only have been written in Western bourgeois society of the nineteenth century, when adultery constituted a problem sui generis—that is quite another problem, belonging to the sociology of literature, but not to the aesthetics of the novel." Eliade used the example of *Madame Bovary* in his university lectures as well; in his journal from 1963, describing a seminar with Norman O. Brown, he writes that he "emphasized, *once again*, the distinction between *Madame Bovary* and adultery . . ." *Journal*, vol. 2, *1957–1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 185. (Emphasis added).

8
For discussions of this ambiguity, and suggested solutions to it, see Allen, *Myth and Religion*, 70–71, 74; Bryan Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 17–25; Randal Studstill, "Eliade, Phenomenology, and the Sacred," *Religious Studies* 36, no. 2 (June 2000): 177–94, esp. 181–84. For a good overview of the difficulties involved in defining phenomenology in the context of religious studies, see Jonathan Tuckett, "Clarifying phenomenologies in the study of religion. Separating Kristensen and van der Leeuw from Otto and Eliade," *Religion* 46, no. 1 (2016): 75–101.

appear as a manifestation of something transcendent, absolute, and eternal (i.e., a hierophany). It is mostly Eliade's ontological claims that have drawn criticism from scholars, who argue that these make him more of a theologian than an "objective" scholar of religion. Eliade-apologists in turn often emphasize the phenomenological aspects of his work to counter such critique.[10] I tend to believe that, like the sacred itself, the ambiguity in Eliade's work is irreducible, and that interpretations of his methodology as "essentially phenomenological"[11] therefore unjustifiably disregard a large number of evidently ontological claims in his writings. Nonetheless, I do think that Eliade's remarks on the decline of the sacred in modern life, to which we will turn now, are most fruitfully approached from a phenomenological angle. While, in the following, I propose a phenomenological reading of a modern desacralization, this should therefore not be understood as reflecting a belief on my part that Eliade's work on the whole is "essentially" phenomenological.

Desacralization as a "Second Fall"

Eliade never wrote the definitive treatment of "the sole, but important, religious creation of the modern Western world . . . the ultimate stage of desacralization,"[12] which he announced in the first volume of *A History of Religious Ideas*. But there are numerous places in his work where he addresses the theme more or less succinctly. The most developed and best-known of these is the final subchapter of *The Sacred and the Profane*, titled "Sacred and Profane in the Modern World."[13] Here, Eliade first describes modern man in terms that place him diametrically opposite *homo religiosus*:

> It is easy to see all that separates this mode of being in the world [i.e., that of *homo religiosus*] from the existence of a nonreligious man. First of all, the nonreligious man refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of "reality," and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence . . . Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.[14]

In his behavior and his beliefs, modern nonreligious man negates everything that, in the analyses preceding this passage, Eliade had identified as essential to *homo religiosus*: a life oriented toward a sacred transcendent pole revealed and instituted by a particular hierophany. However, Eliade quickly points out that this negation, though modern man prides himself on it, is not as complete or definitive as he would like to believe; indeed, for Eliade, modern man "continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied" and he "cannot help

9
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 14. See also Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), xii: "The 'sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness . . ."

10
Both the ontological and phenomenological approaches allow Eliade to take seriously religious phenomena outside the sphere of institutional religions, including various heterodox spiritualities and magical practices. However, his understanding of the sacred as transcendent and absolute—either ontologically or as the correlate of an intentional structure of human consciousness—excludes spiritualities and practices that do not imply a belief in a transcendent reality. In Eliade's view, then, a religious experience of immanence is a contradiction in terms. The implications of this for his understanding of desacralization and secular modern art will be taken up in detail below.

11
Studstill, "Eliade, Phenomenology and the Sacred," 178.

12
Eliade, *History*, xvi.

13
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 201–13.

14
Eliade, 202–3.

preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man, though they are emptied of religious meaning."[15]

Eliade then proceeds to enumerate examples of such "vestiges" to show that the "majority of the 'irreligious' still behave religiously, even though they are not aware of the fact."[16] I will cite but a few examples: in New Year's festivities he discerns a "degraded" ritual of renewal; cinema and literature still employ recognizable "mythical motives"; the great ideologies present "mythological structures" and "eschatological content"; and even a reductionist practice like psychoanalysis preserves an "initiatory pattern."[17] Furthermore, for Eliade, irreligious man remains connected to the sacred in his unconscious: "The unconscious activity of modern man ceaselessly presents him with innumerable symbols, and each of them has a particular message to transmit, a particular mission to accomplish, in order to ensure or to re-establish the equilibrium of the psyche."[18] These symbols are still religious "from the point of view of form" in that "religion is the paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis"[19]; however, they differ from *homo religiosus's* religious and mythical symbolism because they fail to "rise to the ontological status of myths" and are not "experienced by the *whole man*" since modern, irreligious man encounters them only in dreams and reveries.[20]

All those examples serve to illustrate that modern man is religious without being aware of it. The sacred lurks in places modern man considers to be entirely profane. This brings us to Eliade's thesis of modern desacralization: the degradation of the sacred in modern times has less to do with secularization—which, Eliade has suggested, is much less extensive than we would like to think—than with a decreased *awareness* of our religiosity. But this raises a number of questions. First, does this not impute *etic* knowledge of religion to *homo religiosus*? To be sure, a pre-modern religious individual is *consciously* engaging in religious behavior, e.g., he knows very well that he is sacrificing an animal to a god, but this does not imply that he is also *aware of the religious nature* of that activity. He does not necessarily possess the second-order knowledge that allows Eliade to see the similarities between contemporary New Year's celebrations and the rites of renewal analyzed in *Myth and Reality*.[21] Second, and more importantly for our purposes, is the question of whether the similarities, between certain forms of modern secular behavior and religious behavior that Eliade points out, necessarily imply that this secular behavior is still religious. Similarity, after all, does not equal identity. Granted, Eliade does not claim full identity, since modernity is characterized by "degraded" forms of religious behavior, but one still feels that a more precise criterion is needed to determine a given behavior's religious nature. If, for example, a periodic return, as with New Year's celebrations, suffices to qualify something as religious, then this most secular of behaviors—filling in one's tax returns—might also rightfully be termed religious. To be sure, the concept of the sacred, the irreducible "modality of experience" defining man's religious life, could help avoid such overgeneralizations, but Eliade makes surprisingly little use of this concept in the final subchapter of *The Sacred and the Profane*, referring instead to "vestiges" of symbolism and myth in modern life. This raises the more fundamental question of the relation between symbolism, myth,

15
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 204.

16
Eliade, 204.

17
Eliade, 205–8.

18
Eliade, 211.

19
Eliade, 211.

20
Eliade, 210–12.

21
See "Myths and Rites of Renewal," the third chapter in Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1963), 39–53.

and the sacred as an intentional structure of human consciousness.[22] When, for example, Eliade discerns "traces of the 'nostalgia for Eden' "[23] in modern nudism, these traces can only support his thesis of desacralization if their relation to the sacred is explicated. Eliade, however, at least in these pages, does not do so.

Instead, in the final paragraph of *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade introduces a second, more radical version of the desacralization thesis and compares modern nonreligion to a "second fall":

> . . . nonreligious man has lost the capacity to live religion consciously, and hence to understand and assume it; but . . . in his deepest being, he still retains a memory of it, as, after the first "fall," his ancestor, the primordial man, retained intelligence enough to enable him to rediscover the traces of God that are visible in the world. After the first "all," the religious sense descended to the level of the "divided consciousness"; now, after the second, it has fallen even further, into the depths of the unconscious; it has been forgotten.[24]

A first "fall" has separated the sacred and the profane, thus opening up an existential space for *homo religiosus* and making religion possible.[25] A second "fall," which seems to correspond more or less to the arrival of Modernity, deprives man of his conscious relation to the sacred, making modern nonreligion a possibility. If we take seriously Eliade's remark that modern man's religious sense is to be found in "the depths of the unconscious," he is here proposing a different interpretation of desacralization from the one discussed above: there, modern man was said to be *unaware* of the religious nature of much of his behavior; here, Eliade implies that in modernity, religious experience as such has descended into the *unconscious.*

It seems, then, that Eliade holds what one might call a *weak* and a *strong* theory of desacralization. The weak theory, though it may not allow for an entirely satisfactory distinction between *homo religiosus* and modern man, is easily understood within Eliade's phenomenological approach to the sacred. While the sacred first and foremost relates to a particular intentionality of human consciousness, then desacralization is the historical process whereby Western man has lost the language, symbolism, and institutions to differentiate between experiences informed by this intentionality and other, "profane" experiences. If modern man does not think of New Year's celebrations in religious terms, it is because the language and images to do so are no longer available to him; however, this religious aphasia does not preclude religious experience as such. Modern man still has access to a sacred "modality of experience," but it no longer shapes the culture in which he lives, because the language and symbols required for this are no longer widely shared. The sacred is still a part of modern experience, but it has become unrecognizable because it can only be articulated in the all-pervasive language of the profane. In this view, modern man is in essence still *homo religiosus*, but modern culture does not provide him with images and narratives to articulate his religious experiences as being of a different nature than ordinary profane life.

Eliade's strong theory goes considerably further. It postulates that,

22
The question as to whether Eliade's central concepts of the sacred, myth, and symbolism interrelate coherently has been taken up by scholars better qualified than I to do so. See, among many others: Allen, *Myth and Religion*, xiv–xv, 65–66, 129–33, 179–88; Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, esp. 47–78; Stephen J. Reno, "Hiérophanie, symbole et expériences," in *Cahier de l'Herne: Mircea Eliade* (Paris: L'Herne, 1978), 59–74.

23
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 207.

24
Eliade, 212. For the notion of modern godlessness as the result of a "second fall," see also: Eliade, *Journal*, 2:156, and "The Sacred in the Secular World," *Cultural Hermeneutics* 1 (1973): 112.

25
See also Eliade, *Journal*, 2:67, "Religion is indeed the result of the 'fall,' 'the forgetting,' the loss of the state of primordial perfection. In paradise, Adam knew nothing of religious experience . . ."

if modern man no longer thinks of himself as having experiences of a religious nature, this is not because he does not have the *language* available to him to articulate his experiences as religious, but because the sacred has descended into his unconscious and he therefore no longer has truly *conscious* religious experiences. According to this theory, contemporary New Year's celebrations are not truly religious experiences, but "degraded rituals," in that they are only superficially evocative of *homo religiosus's* rites of renewal, but are not informed by sacred intentionality. These "vestiges" of religious behavior still recall man's religious past, but only as empty ruins, as sad reminders of a mode of experience tragically lost to modern consciousness. They are, as Eliade puts it, "empty of religious meaning."[26]

However, Eliade's strong theory, while it allows for a more neatly defined differentiation between modern man and *homo religiosus*, presents a number of difficulties to understanding it. It is important to note, first of all, that even in this theory, modern nonreligion does not imply a complete loss of the sacred. The sacred's retreat into the unconscious does not mean that all contact with it is lost—only that the site of this contact has been relocated: "Modern man's only real contact with cosmic sacrality is effected by the unconscious," as Eliade notes in a footnote in *Myth and Reality*.[27] The difficulty, then, is to reconcile Eliade's phenomenological approach to the sacred—which links it inextricably with hierophany, that is, with *conscious* religious experience—with his claim that the sacred has been relocated to the *unconscious*. In other words, if the sacred is "an element in the structure of consciousness,"[28] how can it become *unconscious* without ceasing to exist in any meaningful sense?

Eliade sometimes suggests that the dream, as a liminal phenomenon between conscious experience and the unconscious, might hold an answer to this question.[29] But at the same time he is clearly aware that the dream, as a locus for the survival of the sacred in modern life, has important limitations: the symbols and narratives encountered there are not "experienced by the *whole man*," and therefore cannot take on a truly religious function. Precisely because they do not constitute a fully conscious hierophanic experience, dreams, like New Year's festivities, are only religious "from the point of view of form"[30]—meaning that they, in fact, *do not* offer real contact with the sacred, but are only reminiscent of it. Ultimately, then, the dream only reaffirms the problem: if hierophany, i.e., conscious experience of the sacred, is precluded, does a meaningful non-hierophanic relation to the sacred remain possible? Or must modern man content himself with mere "vestiges" and profane echoes of the sacred?

26
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 204. Elsewhere, however, Eliade seems to contradict this reading of contemporary New Year's festivities when he remarks that they, "though apparently secular, still preserve a mythical structure and *function*." *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 28.

27
Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 77.

28
Eliade, *History*, xii.

29
Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 77; *Sacred and Profane*, 211–12.

30
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 211.

Modern Art and the Sacred

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade does not explore this question any further, but he revisits it in a short, lesser-known article from 1964, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist."[31] In this text, Eliade investigates modern artistic practice as another potential locus of survival for the sacred in modern times, even if he concedes that the presence of the sacred in modern art is not always immediately apparent. He first articulates this idea along the lines of his weak theory of desacralization:

31
First published in French as "Sur la permanence du sacré dans l'art contemporain," *XXe Siècle* 26 (1964): 3–10. I will be citing the English translation published in Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred & the Arts*, 81–85.

> [I]t is evident that, for more than a century, the West has not been creating a "religious" art in the traditional sense of the term, that is to say, an art reflecting "classic" religious conceptions. In other words, artists are no longer willing to worship "idols"; they are no longer interested in traditional religious imagery and symbolism.
>
> This is not to say that the "sacred" has completely disappeared in modern art. But it has become *unrecognizable*; it is camouflaged in forms, purposes and meanings which are apparently "profane." The sacred is not *obvious*, as it was for example in the art of the Middle Ages. One does not recognize it *immediately* and *easily*, because it is no longer expressed in a conventional religious language.[32]

Eliade here presents the desacralization of modern art as essentially a crisis of religious language, as an all-pervasive iconoclasm. Like New Year's festivities, modern art *seems* an entirely secular affair, because almost nothing in it explicitly evokes religious experience in familiar terms. However, Eliade maintains that the sacred is there, but hidden, "camouflaged." The process of desacralization, as such, does not primarily affect the sacred, but the language and symbolism meant to convey it. But one should not deduce from this that all modern artists are engaged in a "conscious and voluntary camouflage" of the sacred in their works.[33] Artists are not *hiding* their faith behind opaque forms and images. To be sure, some artists—Eliade refers to Chagall[34]—are actively dismantling and repurposing traditional religious imagery to create a new artistic language for their faith, which, to the untrained eye, can seem like "voluntary camouflage." But this, Eliade notes, is not true for the "majority of artists," at least in the sense that they are, unlike Chagall, "not consciously 'religious' " and thus not consciously seeking a new, nontraditional language to convey their relation to the sacred.[35] At this point in the text, and without signaling it explicitly, Eliade's reflections shift from his weak to his strong theory of desacralization. The seemingly unreligious nature of Chagall's work can be explained in light of a crisis of religious language alone: the sacred dimension of his art is not *immediately recognizable*, because it is presented in a nontraditional way, but this does not preclude a hierophanic element per se. Chagall, in other words, might still stand by a *conscious* relation to the sacred in his work. But, when Eliade claims "that the sacred, although unrecognizable, is present"[36] in the works of *not consciously* religious artists, this proposition cannot be adequately defended by a theory of desacralization as a crisis of religious language alone. In these cases, the hierophanic potential of modern art itself is challenged.

Eliade presents these artists, who are not consciously religious, as exemplifications of modern man in general, subject to desacralization according to the strong theory—I cite the passage in full, as it is one of Eliade's most developed treatments of it:

> [M]odern man has "forgotten" religion but the sacred survives, buried in his unconscious. One might speak, in Judaeo-Chris-

32 Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," 81–82.

33 Eliade, 82.

34 Eliade, 82. See also Eliade, "Beauty and Faith," a reply to Marc Chagall's text "Why Have We Become So Anxious" in "A Dialogue with Marc Chagall," in *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts*, 86–92 (91–92 for Eliade's reply).

35 Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," 82. To be compared, however, with Eliade's remark in "Beauty and Faith" that the "revelations of childhood" captured by Chagall in his painting "are most certainly of a religious order—even though the artist is not always conscious of this fact." *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts*, 92.

36 Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," 82.

> tian terms, of a "second fall." According to the biblical tradition, man lost after the fall the possibility of "encountering" and "understanding" God; but he kept enough intelligence to rediscover the traces of God in nature *and in his own consciousness*.[37] After the "second fall" (which corresponds to the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche) modern man has lost the possibility of experiencing the sacred at the conscious level, but he continues to be nourished and guided by his unconscious . . . [I]f what we are saying is true of Western man in general, it is *a fortiori* still more true of the modern artist.[38]

The prototypical modern artist, like the prototypical modern man, no longer experiences the sacred "at the conscious level," but something of the sacred remains present in his unconscious. And Eliade suggests that the modern artist is more in touch than the average man with this unconscious sacred element, because "the artist does not act passively . . . in regard to the unconscious. Without telling us, perhaps without knowing it, the artist penetrates—sometimes dangerously—into the depths of the world and his own psyche."[39] Artists actively, though perhaps unwittingly, seek out the unconscious dimensions of their psyche and draw inspiration from them. Presumably, this "active" relation to the unconscious, engaging "the *whole* man" is what differentiates the creative process from the dream, making the former a potentially more valuable locus for the sacred in modern times.

Where Eliade had previously used Chagall to exemplify the *consciously* religious modern artist, he now turned to his compatriot Constantin Brancusi, who, in light of the passage just cited, we can assume will exemplify the modern artist who is *not* consciously religious, but who nevertheless maintains a connection to the sacred in his unconscious. Eliade evokes Brancusi's creative process in the following terms:

> In certain instances, the artist's approach to his material recovers and recapitulates a religiosity of an extremely archaic variety that disappeared from the Western world thousands of years ago. Such, for example, is Brancusi's attitude towards stone, an attitude comparable to the solicitude, the fear, and the veneration addressed by a neolithic man towards certain stones that constituted hierophanies—that is to say, that revealed simultaneously the sacred and ultimate, irreducible reality.[40]

And a little further on in the text:

> Nothing could convince Brancusi that a rock was only a fragment of inert matter; like his Carpathian ancestors, like all neolithic men, he sensed a presence in the rock, a power, an "intention" that one can only call "sacred."[41]

Like in Chagall's work, the presence of the sacred is not "obvious" in Brancusi's modernist sculptures, but Brancusi's creative practice is nevertheless rooted in a hierophanic experience comparable to that of Neolithic *homo religiosus*.

37
I have italicized what I think is an important addition to Eliade's earlier formulation of the "second fall" in *The Sacred and the Profane*: ". . . the primordial man, retained intelligence enough to enable him to rediscover the traces of God that are visible in the world." Cf. note 36.

38
Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," 82–83.

39
Eliade, 83.

40
Eliade, 83.

41
Eliade, 84.

However, the problem with this example is clear: Brancusi's susceptibility for an "intention" that one can only call "sacred" immediately disqualifies him as an illustration of Eliade's strong thesis of desacralization. Brancusi may not be *aware* that his creative practice recapitulates an "extremely archaic" form of religious experience, but it does not follow that his engagement with the sacred is of an *unconscious* nature. Indeed, in Eliade's description Brancusi exemplifies the weak desacralization thesis even better than Chagall: in his creative practice he consciously senses a sacred "presence in the rock," but, as a modern man, he feels that traditional religious language fails to adequately express this presence. As a consequence, the sacred intentionality is covered up, "camouflaged" by a superficial desacralization—but, in Eliade's description of it, we have no reason to believe that Brancusi's artistic process engages with the sacred in "the depths of the unconscious."[42]

How, then, is one to understand Eliade's claim that the sacred remains present in the works of those artists who have no conscious experience of the sacred? What would an artistic practice look like whereby the artist *consciously* experiences his artistic practice as fully profane, but *unconsciously* taps into the sacred? Eliade does not give his readers any examples that might illustrate his position. It is, however, not so difficult to find artists who considered themselves and their art to be entirely irreligious, and who actively sought to ground their artistic practices in the workings of their unconscious. In the following, I will explore surrealist art as an example of this, in order to get a better sense of what an artist's relation to the sacred might be according to Eliade's strong desacralization thesis, that is, after the "second fall."

Surrealist Automatism, the Unconscious, and the Sacred

It is somewhat surprising that Eliade does not himself refer to surrealism in this context, given the movement's well-known interest in the unconscious and the fact that he knew several of its members personally.[43] This is not to say that surrealism is completely absent from his writings, but Eliade's references to the movement are generally quite summary and tend to group it indistinctively with cubism and dada in an illustration of modern art's collective destruction of traditional artistic and religious language.[44] Surrealism's characteristic interest in the unconscious is thereby largely ignored. This means that Eliade never turns to surrealism as an illustration of his strong desacralization thesis, though the movement would seem to be an obvious candidate. Before we explore this any further, it is necessary to flesh out the surrealist approach to the artistic process. Given the scope of this article, I will limit myself to the early writings of André Breton (1896–1966), the founder and leading theoretician of the movement.

First, it is clear that the young Breton, unlike Chagall, was not *consciously* religious.[45] Eliade's description of modern man in *The Sacred and the Profane* as refusing transcendence, accepting the relativity of reality, and doubting the meaning of existence captures quite well what we know about Breton in his formative years.[46] With regard to religion, his position was unambiguously dismissive. Already in 1922, Breton

42
Whether or not Eliade's description is truthful to Brancusi's actual practices and beliefs is beyond the scope of this article. For a discussion of Brancusi's spirituality, see Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Dover, 2011), 225–46.

43
The personal library of André Breton, founder and *de facto* leader of the surrealist movement, contains various of Eliade's writings, including a 1948 edition of *Techniques du Yoga* and a copy of Laurette Séjourné's *El Universo de Quetzalcóatl* (1962), prefaced by Eliade, both with handwritten dedications by Eliade to Breton. (Scans of these dedications are available on https://www.andrebreton.fr). Eliade mentions meeting Breton, along with Aimé Patri and Michel Carrouges, two surrealist sympathizers, in Paris in 1946 in his *Autobiography*, vol. 2, *1937–1960: Exile's Odyssey*, trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 116. Additionally, in *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Steve M. Wasserstrom points out that Eliade personally knew Benjamin Fondane, a compatriot of Eliade and another early companion de route of the surrealist movement. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 101.

44
E.g., *Myth and Reality*, 190; Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 4.

45
I am aware that this and the following paragraphs are at odds with much of the recent scholarship on surrealism, which has been at pains to show how the movement's postwar embrace of the esoteric was less a "turn" than a continuation of a strand that was already present in the 1920s. While this has generally proven a very fruitful endeavor, which has rescued numerous important surrealist works and artists from oblivion, I disagree with this revisionist reading, with regard to Breton in particular. I do not consider the evidence of a significant esoteric or occult strand in Breton's thinking in the 1920s compelling—and this includes, for me, the call for "occultation" in the *Second Manifesto* (1929). However, given the scope and focus of this article, this is not the place to argue my point. I limit myself therefore to two remarks: first, the argument for an early "esoteric Breton" is certainly not universally accepted, and seems to be limited to anglophone scholarship mostly. Recent francophone studies of Breton are much more sympathetic to the idea of an esoteric "turn" in his work. For example, the catalogue to the *L'invention du surréalisme* exhibition at the BnF (Paris: BnF, 2020), featuring contributions from numerous prominent contemporary surrealism scholars, does not include an entry on esotericism or the occult, and considers the influence of early psychiatry much more informative than that of spiritism or metapsychics for the "invention" of automatism (pp. 56–59). Second, even if esoteric concerns were more decisive in Breton's formative years than I am willing to admit, this would hardly affect

declared in an autobiographical essay, "La confession dédaigneuse" [the disdainful confession], that he considered the "comfort of belief" to be "vulgar."[47] And in his first substantial text on the visual arts, *Surrealism and Painting*, he states that:

> I have always wagered against God and I regard the little that I have won in this world as simply the outcome of this bet . . . Everything that is doddering, squint-eyed, vile, polluted and grotesque is summoned up for me in that one word: God![48]

Even if Breton's anti-religious sentiment most frequently manifests itself as an attack on Christianity, and on Catholicism in particular, it must be stressed that his anticlericalism is grounded in a staunch refusal of transcendence as such. On "surreality," for example, the rather elusive objective of the surrealist enterprise, he writes, also in *Surrealism and Painting*:

> All that I love, all that I think and feel predisposes me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself and would be neither superior nor exterior to it.[49]

This "particular philosophy of immanence"[50] takes shape against the backdrop of a general sense of disillusionment with absolute values and principles. In "Lâchez tout" [drop everything], another short text from 1922, in which Breton declares his departure from dada, he writes, "[T]here are no good and bad ideas, ideas just are . . . Forgive me for thinking that, contrary to ivy, I will die if I attach myself to anything."[51] And again in "La confession dédaigneuse," he cites with approval the observation by Maurice Barrès that "the main issue of the preceding generations was the passage from the absolute to the relative," and claims that "not a single truth deserves to remain exemplary."[52] The world Breton inhabits is one of radical relativity, where meaning and value are not fixed. In a word, Breton's conscious experience is very much that of modern man as defined by Eliade.

This can help to explain some of the attraction that the unconscious activity of the mind had on Breton. If conscious life takes place in a sphere of relativity and homogeneity, lacking an "absolute fixed point"[53] of orientation, exploring the unconscious becomes appealing indeed. A number of techniques were developed by Breton (and others) to tap into the unconscious, the most significant being "psychic automatism," which Breton included in his definition of surrealism in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* from 1924:

> SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.[54]

A few pages later in the *Manifesto*, Breton gives instructions for obtaining

the issue under scrutiny here, i.e., the conceptual (in)coherence of Eliade's claim that the sacred, in his particular understanding of the term, persists in modern secular artistic practices rooted in unconscious activity. Moreover, it should be stressed that the embrace of esoteric themes by modern artists does not *necessarily* endow their works with a hierophanic element (though it certainly can). With regard to Breton's interest in magic, a similar case has been made by J. Edgar Bauer in "L'envers du décor," in *Le Défi magique*, vol. 2, ed. Massimo Introvigne and Jean-Baptiste Martin (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1994), 279–89.

46
Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 203. See note 14 for the full quotation.

47
André Breton, "La Confession dédaigneuse," in Œuvres complètes, vol. 1, ed. Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 194.

48
Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA, 2002), 10.

49
Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 46.

50
In 1932 Breton still stressed that the otherness of the dream is of a "poetic" and not of a "transcendent" order: "No mystery in the final analysis, nothing that could provoke any belief in some transcendent intervention occurring in human thought during the night. I see nothing in the whole working of the oneiric function that does not borrow clearly from the elements of lived life, provided one takes the trouble to examine it: nothing (I cannot state this strongly enough), except for those elements that the imagination uses poetically, that would contain any appreciable residue held to be irreducible. From the point of view of the poetic marvelous, something perhaps; from the point of view of the religious marvelous, absolutely nothing." *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 45.

51
André Breton, "Lâchez tout," in Œuvres complètes, 1:263.

52
Breton, "La Confession dédaigneuse," 194, 197.

53
Cf. Eliade*, Sacred and Profane*, 21: "The hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center."

54
André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1969), 26. (Translation modified.)

this "dictation by thought":

> Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can . . . Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard.[55]

Automatism, practiced by Breton primarily as automatic writing, is thus an attempt to let the unconscious express itself as freely and purely as possible. Breton was very concerned with the "purity" of products of automatism, refusing to correct or otherwise edit automatic texts and chiding other surrealists for meddling with their texts and images to improve their aesthetic appeal.[56] Hence the importance of speed of execution: when writing automatically, the surrealist must write so fast as to be unable to reread or even retain the words that are being written. In this way, they enter only minimally into the surrealist's conscious mind, and censure due to moral or aesthetic personal preferences can be avoided.

This approach to the creative process, with its emphasis on the purity and alterity of the automatic product, has important implications for its relation to the sacred. Even if we suppose, with Eliade, that the sacred remains present in modern man's unconscious, surrealist automatism does not allow it to manifest itself in a way that can be reconciled with conscious experience, that is, with hierophany, since the practice of automatism depends precisely on the extent to which the frontier between conscious and unconscious activity is maintained. The better and the more authentically automatism is performed, the less its practitioner's conscious mind will be aware of the unconscious depths that are expressed through it. To be sure, one could argue that automatism brings to the surface certain "contents and structures of the unconscious," which for Eliade stand in "close relation [to the] values of religion."[57] But once drawn, painted, or written down, these unconscious elements merge with the profane reality of everyday conscious experience and are taken up in its economy of relativity and homogeneity.[58] In automatism, the moment of "revelation," where the sacred would show itself as "something wholly different from the profane,"[59] is by definition eclipsed, so that the surrealist, once the artistic process has reached its end, is left with texts and images that he may not recognize as his own, but which are not necessarily qualitatively "different from the profane." The striking, sometimes disturbing alterity of the automatic product manifests itself *within* the radical immanence of modern life, rather than above it, in the transcendent sphere of the sacred.[60] The experience they elicit are fully "profane epiphanies," to borrow a term from Walter Benjamin.[61] Even if mythical tropes or religious symbolism can be identified in automatic poetry and art, these are not necessarily any more religious than the "vestiges" of the sacred in New Year's festivities.

55
Breton, *Manifesto*, 29–30.

56
See for example, Breton, *Manifesto*, 24.

57
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 211.

58
This can be illustrated by a long footnote in the first *Manifesto*. Breton writes: "I would like to know how the first punishable offenses, the Surrealist character of which will be clearly apparent, will be *judged.* . . . [T]he accused has published a book which is an outrage to public decency. Several of his 'most respected and honorable' fellow citizens have lodged a complaint against him, and he is also charged with slander and libel. There are also all sorts of other charges against him, such as insulting and defaming the army, inciting to murder, rape, etc. The accused, moreover, wastes no time in agreeing with the accusers in 'stigmatizing' most of the ideas expressed. His only defense is claiming that he does not consider himself to be the author of his book, said book being no more and no less than a Surrealist concoction which precludes any question of merit or lack of merit on the part of the person who signs it; further, that all he has done is copy a document without offering any opinion thereon, and that he is at least as foreign to the accused text as is the presiding judge himself." (*Manifesto*, 44.) This passage clearly shows how the automatic (here: "surrealist") product is assimilated by a relative and immanent, rather than absolute and transcendent order. Even if the act of automatic writing places the surrealist temporarily beyond the sphere of moral relativity, the resulting product does not retain this absolute alterity, and can simply be dismissed ("stigmatized") by its author on grounds of its low, and therefore relative, moral value. The surrealist book in this example, though presumably an unadulterated product of the unconscious, does not provide its author with "an absolute fixed point, a center" to mitigate the relativity of his existence.

59
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 11.

60
Hans Blumenberg has defended a similar interpretation of surrealism, usefully summarized by Willem Styfhals: "The artist can change, alter, and reinvent the order of nature by means of imagination and fantasy. In this respect, the prefix 'sur' does not refer to any vertical, mystical transcendence beyond this world; rather, it refers to the new, Surrealistic world that literally 'survives' the artistic decomposition of nature. Therefore, Blumenberg interprets Surrealistic transcendence as a kind of horizontal or immanent transcendence." Styfhals, "The Gnostic 'Sur' in Surrealism: On Transcendence and Modern Art," in *The Marriage of Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Stéphane Symons (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 292.

61
Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: Last Snapshot of

Eliade on Surrealist Nostalgia and the Coincidence of Opposites

This means that we are still no closer to understanding how the modern artist's "active" relation to the unconscious creates a locus of survival for the sacred after the "second fall." I believe this is, in fact, an important blind spot in Eliade's thinking about desacralization, one that, moreover, casts doubt on the usefulness of his concept of the sacred for discussing modern art. To make this point, it will be helpful to consider one more passage from Eliade, the only one, I believe, where he mentions surrealism's specific interest in the unconscious. In "Crisis and Renewal in the History of Religions,"[62] an article from 1965, re-edited as the fourth chapter of *The Quest*, Eliade argues that contemporary artistic experiments can be of interest to the historian of religion, and gives the following example:

> It is not without interest to note, for example, that in their revolt against the traditional forms of art and their attacks on bourgeois society and morality the surrealists not only elaborated a revolutionary aesthetic but also formulated a technique by which they hoped to *change* the human condition. A number of these "exercises" (for example, the effort to obtain a "mode of existence" that participates in both the waking and sleeping states or the effort to realize the "coexistence of the conscious and the unconscious") recall certain Yogic or Zen practices. Moreover, one deciphers in the early *élan* of surrealism, and notably in the poems and theoretical manifestos of André Breton, a nostalgia for the "primordial totality," the desire to effect *in concreto* the coincidence of opposities [*sic*], the hope of being able to annul history in order to begin anew with the original power and purity—nostalgia and hopes rather familiar to historians of religions.[63]

Eliade rightly points out that surrealism cannot be reduced to a particular aesthetic, and that its ultimate objective is to change life itself. However, he also subtly misrepresents the surrealist project in at least two ways, which I believe are indicative of the blind spot I have just alluded to. The first involves the effort he imputes to the surrealists to "realize the 'coexistence of the conscious and the unconscious.' " Quotation marks notwithstanding, this phrase is not a direct citation from Breton (or any other surrealist that I know), but one assumes that Eliade had in mind this often anthologized excerpt from the *Surrealist Manifesto*:

> I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession.[64]

In contrast to Eliade's paraphrase, Breton's *Manifesto* does not mention the "coexistence," "coincidence," or even "resolution" of the con-

the European Intelligentsia," in *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed. Susan H. Gillespie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 19–20, 27, 29.

62
Mircea Eliade, "Crisis and Renewal in History of Religions," *History of Religions* 5, no. 1 (Summer, 1965): 1–17

63
Eliade, *The Quest*, 65.

64
Breton, *Manifesto*, 14.

scious and the unconscious. When the *Manifesto* puts forward the "future resolution" of waking life and the dream state, the latter cannot be equated with the unconscious as such; the dream, as we have pointed out (with Eliade), is a liminal phenomenon, a "spark," so to speak, produced in consciousness by the friction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. To the extent that the dream is an experience, it partakes in consciousness and cannot be aligned with the unconscious. An experience of the unconscious is a contradiction in terms, as Louis Aragon points out in his *Paysan de Paris*: to have "a veritable sense of the unconscious is unimaginable." Surrealism's true objective, then, was to get a "sense of the threshold"[65] between consciousness and the unconscious and to integrate this liminal experience into everyday life, thereby transforming it by opening it up to other impulses and intuitions than those of logic and utility. But surrealism never proposed a "coincidence" of the conscious and unconscious mind, which, in surrealists' understanding of these concepts, is simply an impossibility.

The second misrepresentation concerns the "nostalgia" for a "primordial totality" that Eliade reads in Breton's early writings. The problem lies not with the nostalgia as such, which is indeed a salient feature of much surrealist literature and art,[66] nor with the fact that Eliade immediately qualifies the object of this nostalgia as a "coincidence of opposites." Both of Breton's *Manifestoes* indeed put a *coincidentia oppositorum* firmly on the surrealist agenda.[67] The misrepresentation appears in Eliade's final sentence, where he writes that the surrealist nostalgia is "rather familiar to historians of religion." This phrase implies that the surrealist interest in a coincidence of opposites is in some sense similar to that of *homo religiosus*. The question, then, is to determine the ground of this similarity: do both "nostalgias" betray a fundamental relation to the sacred; or is the surrealist nostalgia for a "primordial totality," like modern man's New Year's celebrations, merely a "vestige" of irrevocably lost religious behavior?

Homo religiosus's attitude toward the coincidence of opposites is defined by his general existential condition. As we have seen, religious man lives in a world that is profane and relative, but in which "traces" of the sacred can still be identified in specific places, narratives, or persons. These hierophanic traces provide *homo religiosus* with an "absolute fixed point" around which to organize his individual life, structure society, and elaborate a cosmology, thus avoiding the overwhelming relativity that characterizes modern man's existential situation.[68] In this context, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, functions as a "minimal definition of divinity"[69]; it is a defining structural element of hierophany, indicating the sacred's "*ganz andere*" nature as compared to ordinary human existence. *Homo religiosus's* nostalgia should be understood in this light. When the "sage" or "the ascetic of the East" strives to overcome the opposites of experience in his spiritual practices, to transcend "pleasure and pain, desire and repulsion, cold and heat, the pleasant and unpleasant, etc.,"[70] it is because he experiences his existence as an exile from the sacred and because he desires to be "*in* the sacred or in close proximity [to it]."[71] He knows, however, that the coincidence of being and the sacred was realized in a mythical past, at the time of Creation or in a Golden Age. *Homo religiosus's* desire for the sacred is therefore articulated with a nostalgic inflection,

65
Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris*, 155–57.

66
For a recent scholarly exploration of surrealist nostalgia for childhood, see David Hopkins, *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2021).

67
Breton, *Manifesto*, 14; *Second Surrealist Manifesto*, 123–24.

68
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 22.

69
Eliade, *Traité*, 352.

70
Eliade, 352.

71
Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 12.

and hierophany—with *coincidentia oppositorum* as one of its defining aspects—is experienced as a reconnection with a primordial situation that lifts the subject above his concrete existence in historical time.[72]

Surrealism, as a modern phenomenon after the "second fall," developed in a different existential situation. If we follow Eliade's strong desacralization thesis, the surrealists' world is devoid of "absolute fixed points," and the sacred no longer pierces through the relativity and homogeneity of the real. We have seen that this corresponds to Breton's assessment of existence, and all of the above has evidently not prevented a sense of nostalgia and a fascination with the coincidence of opposites from developing in surrealism. But the object of nostalgia, as well as the nature of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, cannot remain unaltered in a desacralized age. Most importantly, in surrealism, the coincidence of opposites is dissociated from hierophany and from the foundational past reactualized by the hierophanic moment. The passage from the *Manifesto* cited can illustrate this. There, Breton states his belief in a resolution of opposites that is perhaps evocative of a religious *coincidentia oppositorum*, but from which it differs in two important respects: first, the "absolute reality"[73] that corresponds to this "resolution" of opposites is not presented as *a-historically given*, but firmly and exclusively situated in the future. As of yet, no hierophanic experience corresponds to this *coincidentia*, since neither automatism nor the dream can effect it, as we have seen. Second, one must assume that, even if a hierophanic experience of surreality were to befall Breton, he would still be hesitant to grant it a "world-founding" function, given his conviction that the surreal is "neither superior nor exterior" to reality. This is perhaps the reason why he immediately adds that he will not "find" surreality in his lifetime. Granted, surrealism looks forward to an experience of "resolution," but, unlike *homo religiosus*, it cannot organize its practices and beliefs around it, because the surrealist *coincidentia* does reactualize a sacred foundational past, which surrealism does not recognize or presuppose. The surrealist *coincidentia* is not the mark of a return of the sacred, but an empty protention of an undefined (and perhaps unacceptable) alterity.

It follows that surrealist nostalgia, too, should not too hastily be assimilated with that of religious man. Surrealist nostalgia has many objects: childhood, the Gothic, the primitive, perhaps even the animal and the inanimate, but none of these can univocally be subsumed under a heading of a mythical past or a "Golden Age."[74] To do so would be to neglect the particularity of the context in which surrealism developed, which is that of an age in which those notions have ceased to function as poles for existential and societal orientation. A close reading of Breton's early "poems and theoretical manifestos" would therefore also reveal that there is no systematic association between the various objects of surrealist nostalgia and the *coincidentia oppositorum* put forward as surrealism's objective in those same manifestoes. The surrealist future, in other words, need not be seen as "recover[ing] some 'Great Time' or other"[75] as Eliade all too quickly suggests; instead, it holds the promise of something radically new, beyond the always already given object of renewal.

Eliade, however, disregards these differences between the surrealist and *homo religiosus*. This is when a phenomenological definition of

72
Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1959), 95–86.

73
Breton, *Manifesto*, 14. Cf. note 72.

74
On this see Georges Sebbag's insightful article "La edad de oro de los surrealistas," in *Luis Buñuel y el surrealismo*, ed. Emmanuel Guigon (Teruel: Museo de Teruel, 2000), 81–95. (The original French text can be found on Sebbag's website, at https://www.philosophieetsurrealisme.fr/lage-dor-des-surrealistes/).

75
Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 33.

the sacred, i.e., as conscious hierophany, combines with Eliade's strong desacralization thesis, which posits the sacred's retreat into the unconscious. This results in a blind spot that masks the particularity of the surrealist position, and, perhaps, by extension, that of the modern artist in general. In both "The Sacred and the Modern Artist" and in his scattered remarks on surrealism, Eliade is unable to satisfyingly illustrate his claim that "the sacred, although unrecognizable, is present in [modern art] works,"[76] if one understands this unrecognizability to be the result of the sacred's descent into the unconscious of modern man. His suggestion that the modern artist engages with his unconscious, and thereby re-establishes a relation to the sacred, fails to resolve the issue, as this relation must either abandon art's hierophanic potential or downplay the "unconsciousness" of the sacred in modernity. Unwilling to do the former, Eliade cannot avoid the latter. This is apparent in his misrepresentation of surrealism's nostalgia and its interest in the coincidence of opposites. Eliade's understanding of the sacred as "an element in the structure of consciousness"[77] makes it impossible to fully explore the implications of his claim that the sacred has relocated to modern man's unconscious, and leaves the analogy with *homo religiosus* as the sole, but ultimately unsatisfying way to approach the particularity of the modern artist's existential situation.

76
Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," 82.

77
Eliade, *History*, xii. Cf note 76.

Conclusion

Throughout his writings, Eliade suggests that there are parallels between the religious phenomenon and the work of art or literature. Because of these parallels, religion and art can in some cases "clarify reciprocally,"[78] making the creative process, the work of art, and the esthetic experience all valid objects of inquiry for the historian of religions. Our excursion into surrealism has shown, however, that the "clarification" might be less reciprocal than Eliade believed. In the case of surrealism, the attempt to understand the artistic process as hierophany has effectively obscured some of the movement's distinguishing and most radical characteristics from Eliade's analysis. More importantly, the emphasis on hierophany also undermines Eliade's strong theory of desacralization, rendering it difficult to take up the religious and artistic implications of modernity in an Eliadean framework.

The fundamental question, then, is why Eliade believed it necessary to approach modern art from the perspective of the sacred, especially those works in which, by his own admission, no sacred presence is "recognizable." What drove him to find—or at least presuppose—evidence of the sacred in works that, by his strong definition of modernity, stand out as modern precisely because they lack any engagement with hierophany? Answering these questions would involve making explicit the metaphysical and theological presuppositions behind Eliade's history of religions, a task which I will not take up here.[79] Instead, in conclusion, I want to briefly revisit the analogy between the religious phenomenon and *Madame Bovary*, which Eliade was so fond of. Without exception, references to this novel in Eliade's works serve to illustrate his belief in a *sui generis* quality of the religious phenomenon. Eliade's love for literature and the hard-won yet well-established

78
Eliade, *Quest*, 65.

79
See Bryan Rennie, "The Influence of Eastern Orthodox Christian Theology on Mircea Eliade's Understanding of Religion," in *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions*: *The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, ed. Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 197–214.

reputation of *Madame Bovary* as an autonomous work of art made it an almost obvious analogue. It seems, however, that despite its reputation, the analogy only operated in one direction, and that, in reality, literary and artistic irreducibility for Eliade were subordinate to that of the sacred. For although he was adamant that the sacred should not be approached via the arts (or any other discipline other than the history of religions),[80] Eliade persistently approached the arts via the sacred. At least in the case of surrealism, this led him to misunderstand and misrepresent a number of important characteristics of the movement. This is unfortunate, and one can now only speculate what surrealism might have contributed to Eliade's analysis of "the sole, but important, religious creation of the modern Western world"—if he had granted surrealist art and literature the same artistic autonomy as he did Flaubert's classic novel.

80 Eliade, *Traité*, 11. Cf. note 79.

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