

CORRESPONDENCE

ON FONTENROSE'S REVIEW OF *THE CULT OF THE SERPENT*

Mr. Joseph Fontenrose (*Asian Folklore Studies* [Book Reviews] 42: 292) praises my ability as a writer of English prose and characterizes my work *The Cult of the Serpent*, as "competent and interesting, valuable to biologist, folklorist and humanist alike. It is equipped with a good bibliography and indices as well as with many figures and tables." "Its complete information about all aspects of the cult," he says, reveals "a great deal of learning, in general expertly handled."

Be this as it may, I must comment that these words of praise are part of a conspicuously lop-sided review. For, though my viewpoint is iconoclastic enough and unprecedented in championing an eclectic and interdisciplinary analysis, F. completely side-steps the *theoretical* questions raised by my approach. He was free to support or reject my views incisively, yet he does not even convey a message which I have repeated plainly; *viz.*, that there are severe methodological constraints inherent in any analysis that depends upon the narrow foundations of a single subdiscipline—be this one of the sciences, sociology, ethnology or the humanities—and that these constraints affect the credibility of structuralist hypotheses of the *origins* of one or another facet of culture and its roots in human emotion.

My book draws no special attention to the latitude for Procrustean speculation available in comparative mythology, nor to the sweeping and far-reaching structural generalizations it has occasionally prompted. Instances of this tendency, however, are well attested by critical humanists themselves, including those who, in other respects, see merit in F.'s own *Python* (reviewed in *American Journal of Archaeology* 65: 404 [see also, *ibid.*, 66: 189]; *American Journal of Philology* 83: 109; *Classical Journal* 57: 33; *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 81: 193; *Western Folklore* 21: 284). Thus, I cannot avoid drawing the conclusion that my plea for a syncretistic methology and my pointed disapproval of psychoanalysis have touched a chord.

Forsaking the opportunity for terse counterargument or specific fault-finding affecting my theoretical position, F. superciliously dismisses any scepticism of Freudian claims as "unfriendly," "sometimes mistaken," and "superficial." The fact remains that I mention Freud on at least eight pages, not counting pages where his ideas are implicitly questioned—hardly a poor representation in a book that is not a disquisition on psychoanalysis. When I do "lump" together the psychologies of Freud, Jung, and Adler, it is not because I am unaware of differences between their schools (this is clear enough from my narrative) but merely because I am intent on showing that their claims frequently share a common, nonsensical foundation, particularly with regard to serpent symbolism. Contrary to F.'s sanguine assertion that Freudians "are willing to accept [my] findings and interpret them," it is evident from the literature that they are a remarkably resilient lot, quick with protective disclaimers and qualifiers in reiterating their baffling brand of logic. My chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6 (especially p. 273), reveal through quotations and literature citations that I do not disavow psychology dogmatically but espouse experimental psychobiology for reasons as unequivocal as those given for viewing psychoanalysis warily.

It is proper to ask why F. transmits my ideas so causally. Let us contrast my range of data and interdisciplinary approach with his own method and assertions in *Python*. In this work he considers no independent bodies of evidence, other than mythological, when he compares the combat myths of civilized societies so disparate and complex as those of the ancient Near East, India, China, Japan and, forsooth, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Primitive aboriginal societies have no place in his scheme. In the preface of his 1980 edition he denies that this scheme is, as one critic put it, "a pre-arranged framework" for far-fetched analogies, and he disavows any resemblance between his brand of structuralism and Lévi-Strauss's. He confidently insists that there are striking similarities in those combat myths—similarities, moreover, which allegedly betray their "genetic relationship to one another and the descent of each with modifications from a common original." This kind of subjective diffusionist claim may have been seductive a quarter of a century ago when *Python* was first published. Today semiologists, ethnoarchaeologists and scientists (*sensu stricto*) tread ground such as this with extreme caution and feel bound to demand far more data, rigorous reasoning, and substantiation than diffusionist-mythologists have provided so far in hypotheses as accommodative as F.'s.

About the *origins* of his elementary combat theme F. is silent, though he proclaims in *Python* that "a pattern of themes [as he constructs it] must have a single origin." Strangely, he is silent about Rank and Jung though the latter's notion of "archetypes" is highly pertinent to any hypothesis of origins of cultural traits that are rooted in deep emotional sensitivities. Nevertheless, he gives a fleeting hint of his psychoanalytical leaning when he extols and corroborates Freud as "the first to formulate, albeit tentatively [*sic*], between life instincts and death instincts . . . the central principle of all living organisms from the beginning . . . But in life the two kinds of instincts, though opposed, are always mingled. Thus do the fantasies of myths disguise the fundamental truths of the human spirit." These sentiments, which I quote almost in full, appear in the *concluding* paragraph of his book; and it is the *only* place where he dwells on Freud, though he has a footnote reference (p. 8) to Freud's interpretations of dreams. Dreams per se and their determinative influences on culture and sacred myths, however, are never discussed in *Python*; nor does F. consider the word 'dream' important enough to be indexed. By contrast, he does not tell readers of his review that my *Cult of the Serpent* contains extensive treatments on the normal aspects of dreams and dreaming vis-à-vis drug-induced subconscious states and their psychobiological and cultural repercussions in both primitive and civilized societies worldwide.

How extraordinary it is, then, that F.—who ignores aborigines but builds an entire edifice that hinges upon the deepest recesses of human emotionality and "the fundamental truths of the human spirit"—nowhere explains his slavish invocation of Freud (or reasons for ignoring Jung) in his own book but faults mine for its "superficial" critical evaluation of psychoanalytical tenets!

I am not at all surprised that he expatiates on scattered "blemishes" in my book. None of these is so serious that it affects the thrust of my complex theme, and he does not say they do. I gratefully acknowledge his detection of genuine errors, but these are very few and so minor that they can be easily rectified in a new impression. However, he also rakes up, at times rather hyperbolically, points that are debatable, moot, or inconsequential.

He is irritated by certain words—such as "involve (involved, involving)," "area," "items," "surface (verb)," and "feature (verb)"—which, in *his* estimation, are used excessively. Readers should judge this for themselves, keeping in mind a stricture on repetitious usage or words: According to the lexicographer H. J. Fowler, "the first

thing to be said is that a dozen sentences are spoilt by ill-advised avoidance of repetition for every one that is spoilt by ill-advised repetition . . . faulty avoidance results from incapacity to tell good from bad, or servile submission to a rule of thumb—far graver defects than carelessness.” F. does not show in what way I am careless (which, on occasion, I may be) but only expresses an inconsequential bias.

F. disdains certain other words. They are, in his opinion, substandard. For example, when in neurobiological contexts he encounters the word “parameters,” he suspects that I really mean “factors.” But, thank you, “parameters” is exactly what scientists (whose findings I paraphrase) and I intend it to mean! He does not like the word “feedback.” It is, he says contemptuously, a computer metaphor. Perhaps so, but the King’s English has no precise alternative that conveys the sense of a phenomenologically narrow range of quantifiable effects studied by biochemists and neurophysiologists, who are not irritated by “feedback” and, indeed, use the word frequently. Moreover, as it first appears in a quotation (p. 217), I was obliged to retain it subsequently for the sake of uniformity.

F. opines that (on p. 267) I should have used the expression “on the contrary” and not “to the contrary.” The *OED* defines the latter phrase as “in opposition to, or reversal of, what is stated.” What I represent and clearly state in the relevant paragraph is biological thought. In opposition to, or reversal of, this thought, stand Neumann’s extravagant pseudo-biological, psychoanalytical pronouncements, which I quoted and flatly rejected. I used “to the contrary” intentionally to signify the perverseness (and this quality precisely) of Neumann’s lofty claims, rather than to convey a bland sense of contradistinction suggested by the trite “on the contrary,” F.’s predilection notwithstanding.

Let us consider a few other points: P. 67. F. tells us presumptuously that I may be unaware that, in Greek, *drakon* means “serpent.” Very well, but what does this have to do with the fact that, to most readers, “dragon” simply connotes a fantastic, pot-bellied or serpentine quadruped; whereas the truly ophidian lineage of the bizarre hybrid creature, the Mesopotamian *mus-hus*, is bound to remain unsuspected unless they are reminded by picture and word (pp. 2, 249 n. 3, fig. 36) that the prefix *mus* literally means “serpent”? F. misleads readers at my expense.

P. 61–62. One of the meanings of the Sanskrit word *āṣi* is “blessing.” This meaning is not found in Monier-Williams’s Sanskrit Dictionary. As an epithet, *āṣivīṣa*, true enough, means “serpent” and “a serpent’s fang”. However, in Sanskrit, combinant words are often employed as puns, or for sarcastic effects—which is what I see in *āṣi* plus *vīṣa*, and so, translate freely as “poisoned blessing.” Likewise, it seems to me that the distinction between “going on the breast/breast-going” and “going over the breast” is a thin one in the light of the hymn I quote immediately before introducing the words *urasgāmin*, *uraṅg*, and *urag* (*uraṅga*, *uraga*). Incidentally, the word *ag* (*aga*) means not only “to wind, curl, move tortuously or in a zig-zag way” but also “unable to walk, not going.” Quite specifically, *ag* (*aga*) also means “serpent.” My authority is the Hindu Sanskritist Apte’s dictionary (which I listed), specifically pp. 9, 264 (central column) and 340 (central and right hand columns) of the 1890 edition.

P. 69. I agree with F. that I mistakenly equate Astarte with Asherah. About Matronit, however, I know nothing other than what I learnt from Rafael Patai (cited), whose scholarship I respect. F.’s difference of opinion is with him rather than with me.

P. 299. n. 15. Yes, I have gone overboard in thinking that ‘sons of’ is a common Semitic expression that indicates abundance. However, in the Ugaritic charm

I discuss (lines, 74 and 75, strophe XIII, as translated by Astour, whom I cite), this expression can have no meaning, as far as I can tell, other than the metaphorical one I favor.

P. 182. Contrary to F.'s statement, my rendition of the French word "androgyné" is quite correct. It means "androgynous," "hermaphrodite," "bisexual." This is exactly what I meant, and exactly what fig. 106a reveals. F. overlooks this connection. To call a divinity (or an image) that simultaneously exhibits male and female sex organs a *god* ("dieu androgyné") is a contradiction in terms. F. unnecessarily depreciates my sceptical attitude towards psychoanalytical views on sexual symbolism which, to him, apparently are *de rigueur*.

Preceded by the remark that he regards me as "a competent biologist who knows the meaning of biological terms," F. points to yet another "blemish" without indicating the page: I often seem to use the word "species" inexactly, he says, when I should be using "suborder," "family," and "family" for serpents, bears, and toads, respectively. I only hope that readers of my book will be less fastidious, for it is not a zoological treatise on taxonomy and nomenclature. When occasionally I am "inexact" it is clear from the contexts that I employ the word "species" in the simple, colloquial sense of "creatures." I have, of course, used taxonomic terms with discrimination where this was mandatory.

To sum up: F. has combed through my book assiduously and, on the whole, said very kind things about my effort. I am quite disappointed, however, that his expatiation on "blemishes" (which is his right) is not matched by sensitivity to, or any statement on, theoretical questions, particularly vis-à-vis symbolism and the cultural facets of emotionality that form the core of my analysis. To the extent that I isolate the probable *causes* of the elementary manifestations of ophidiophobia as an emotion, both individual and societal, my theme transcends the serpent as a mere cult object. Mingling the biological sciences, experimental psychology, ethnology, archaeology, art and the humanities, I asked new questions, pursued new ways, and assailed cherished theories that rely almost wholly on speculative insight—especially theories of the unrestrainedly imaginary variety.

Defending his theory against S. N. Kramer's trenchant, humanistically-oriented criticism of the structuralist-diffusionist formulations in *Python* (*American Journal of Archaeology*, see above), F. made this concluding remark: "The scholar in mythology must be bold and venturesome . . . He must have imagination and insight [and make] imaginative reconstructions which contain an element of uncertainty."

There is not a hint in F.'s review that my *Cult of the Serpent* repeatedly draws attention, directly and indirectly, to the severe hazards structuralists court by adopting this attitude.

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REPLY TO BALAJI MUNDKUR

With Mr. Mundkur's interdisciplinary method I am in full sympathy; this is at least implied in my review. He comments that in *Python* I did not go into the social structures of Greece, Canaan, Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, etc. That is, I should, he thinks, have written a different book.

I very much agree with Mr. Mundkur that a writer should disregard the super-

stitution about repetition of words. I heartily approve Fowler's statement on that. What I object to is constant recourse to counterwords (like "item(s)"), usually imprecise, instead of finding the precise word needed. Writers have recourse to "one(s)" to avoid repeating a noun and then repeat this substitute any number of times.

Would Mr. Mundkur point out to us just one "physical parameter" of higher primates' fear of snakes (p. 210) and tell us how one measures it? Here, in view of pages 218-229, to which he refers us, I gather that he means responses. On these pages, I notice, "factor" is used a great deal. Tables 5-7 do not seem to measure parameters. I still think that "parameter," as used in this sort of discourse, is nothing more than a vogue word (see Fowler).

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