

## Preface

The following essays were written one each month for about two years, from 1954 to 1956, on topics suggested by current events. I was at the time trying to reflect regularly on some myths of French daily life. The media which prompted these reflections may well appear heterogeneous (a newspaper article, a photograph in a weekly, a film, a show, an exhibition), and their subject-matter very arbitrary: I was of course guided by my own current interests.

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.

Right from the start, the notion of myth seemed to me to explain these examples of the falsely obvious. At that time, I still used the word 'myth' in its traditional sense. But I was already certain of a fact from which I later tried to draw all the consequences: myth is a language. So that while concerning myself with phenomena apparently most unlike literature (a wrestling-match, an elaborate dish, a plastics exhibition), I did not feel I was leaving the field of this general semiology of our bourgeois world, the literary aspect of which I had begun to study in earlier essays. It was only, however, after having explored a number of current social phenomena that I attempted to define contemporary myth in methodical fashion; I have naturally placed this particular essay at the end of the book, since all it does is systematize topics discussed previously.

## MYTHOLOGIES

Having been written month by month, these essays do not pretend to show any organic development: the link between them is rather one of insistence and repetition. For while I don't know whether, as the saying goes, 'things which are repeated are pleasing', \* my belief is that they are significant. And what I sought throughout this book were significant features. Is this a significance which I read into them? In other words, is there a mythology of the mythologist? No doubt, and the reader will easily see where I stand. But to tell the truth, I don't think that this is quite the right way of stating the problem. 'Demystification' - to use a word which is beginning to show signs of wear - is not an Olympian operation. What I mean is that I cannot countenance the traditional belief which postulates a natural dichotomy between the objectivity of the scientist and the subjectivity of the writer, as if the former were endowed with a 'freedom' and the latter with a 'vocation' equally suitable for spiriting away or sublimating the actual limitations of their situation. What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth.

1957 - R. B.

\* 'Bis repetita placent': a paraphrase, used in French, of Horace's saying 'Haec decies repetita placebit' (*Ars Poetica*).

of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light. She herself knew this: how many actresses have consented to let the crowd see the ominous maturing of their beauty. Not she, however; the essence was not to be degraded, her face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection, which was intellectual even more than formal. The Essence became gradually obscured, progressively veiled with dark glasses, broad hats and exiles: but it never deteriorated.

And yet, in this deified face, something sharper than a mask is looming: a kind of voluntary and therefore human relation between the curve of the nostrils and the arch of the eyebrows; a rare, individual function relating two regions of the face. A mask is but a sum of lines; a face, on the contrary, is above all their thematic harmony. Garbo's face represents this fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from an essential beauty, when the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal faces, when the clarity of the flesh as essence yields its place to a lyricism of Woman.

Viewed as a transition the face of Garbo reconciles two iconographic ages, it assures the passage from awe to charm. As is well known, we are today at the other pole of this evolution: the face of Audrey Hepburn, for instance, is individualized, not only because of its peculiar thematics (woman as child, woman as kitten) but also because of her person, of an almost unique specification of the face, which has nothing of the essence left in it, but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions. As a language, Garbo's singularity was of the order of the concept, that of Audrey Hepburn is of the order of the substance. The face of Garbo is an Idea, that of Hepburn, an Event.

## Wine and Milk

Wine is felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own, just like its three hundred and sixty types of cheese and its culture. It is a totem-drink, corresponding to the milk of the Dutch cow or the tea ceremonially taken by the British Royal Family. Bachelard has already given the 'substantial psychoanalysis' of this fluid, at the end of his essay on the reveries on the theme of the will, and shown that wine is the sap of the sun and the earth, that its basic state is not the moist but the dry, and that on such grounds the substance which is most contrary to it is water.

Actually, like all resilient totems, wine supports a varied mythology which does not trouble about contradictions. This galvanic substance is always considered, for instance, as the most efficient of thirst-quenchers, or at least this serves as the major alibi for its consumption ('It's thirsty weather'). In its red form, it has blood, the dense and vital fluid, as a very old hypostasis. This is because in fact its humoral form matters little; it is above all a converting substance, capable of reversing situations and states, and of extracting from objects their opposites - for instance, making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative. Hence its old alchemical heredity, its philosophical power to transmute and create *ex nihilo*.

Being essentially a function whose terms can change, wine has at its disposal apparently plastic powers: it can serve as an alibi to dream as well as reality, it depends on the users of the myth. For the worker, wine means enabling him to do his task with demiurgic ease ('heart for the work'). For the intellectual, wine has the reverse function: the local white wine or the beaujolais of the writer is meant to cut him off from the all too expected environment of cocktails and expensive drinks (the only ones which snobbishness leads one to offer him). Wine will deliver him from myths, will

remove some of his intellectualism, will make him the equal of the proletarian; through wine, the intellectual comes nearer to a natural virility, and believes he can thus escape the curse that a century and a half of romanticism still brings to bear on the purely cerebral (it is well known that one of the myths peculiar to the modern intellectual is the obsession to 'have it where it matters').

But what is characteristic of France is that the converting power of wine is never openly presented as an end. Other countries drink to get drunk, and this is accepted by everyone; in France, drunkenness is a consequence, never an intention. A drink is felt as the spinning out of a pleasure, not as the necessary cause of an effect which is sought: wine is not only a philtre, it is also the leisurely act of drinking. The *gesture* has here a decorative value, and the power of wine is never separated from its modes of existence (unlike whisky, for example, which is drunk for its type of drunkenness - 'the most agreeable, with the least painful after-effects' - which one gulps down repeatedly, and the drinking of which is reduced to a causal act).

All this is well known and has been said a thousand times in folklore, proverbs, conversations and Literature. But this very universality implies a kind of conformism: to believe in wine is a coercive collective act. A Frenchman who kept this myth at arm's length would expose himself to minor but definite problems of integration, the first of which, precisely, would be that of having to explain his attitude. The universality principle fully applies here, inasmuch as society calls anyone who does not believe in wine by *names* such as sick, disabled or depraved: it does not *comprehend* him (in both senses, intellectual and spatial, of the word). Conversely, an award of good integration is given to whoever is a practising wine-drinker: knowing how to drink is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchman, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control and his sociability. Wine gives thus a foundation for a collective morality, within which everything is redeemed: true, excesses, misfortunes and crimes are possible with wine, but never viciousness, treachery or baseness;

the evil it can generate is in the nature of fate and therefore escapes penalization, it evokes the theatre rather than a basic temperament.

Wine is a part of society because it provides a basis not only for a morality but also for an environment; it is an ornament in the slightest ceremonials of French daily life, from the snack (plonk and camembert) to the feast, from the conversation at the local cafe to the speech at a formal dinner. It exalts all climates, of whatever kind: in cold weather, it is associated with all the myths of becoming warm, and at the height of summer, with all the images of shade, with all things cool and sparkling. There is no situation involving some physical constraint (temperature, hunger, boredom, compulsion, disorientation) which does not give rise to dreams of wine. Combined as a basic substance with other alimentary figures, it can cover all the aspects of space and time for the Frenchman. As soon as one gets to know someone's daily life fairly well, the absence of wine gives a sense of shock, like something exotic: M. Coty, having allowed himself to be photographed, at the beginning of his seven years' presidency, sitting at home before a table on which a bottle of beer seemed to replace, by an extraordinary exception, the familiar litre of red wine, the whole nation was in a flutter; it was as intolerable as having a bachelor king. Wine is here a part of the reason of state.

Bachelard was probably right in seeing water as the opposite of wine: mythically, this is true; sociologically, today at least, less so; economic and historical circumstances have given this part to milk. The latter is now the true anti-wine: and not only because of M. Mendès-France's popularizing efforts (which had a purposely mythological look as when he used to drink milk during his speeches in the Chamber, as Popeye eats spinach), but also because in the basic morphology of substances milk is the opposite of fire by all the denseness of its molecules, by the creamy, and therefore soothing, nature of its spreading. Wine is mutilating, surgical, it transmutes and delivers; milk is cosmetic, it joins, covers, restores. Moreover, its purity, associated with the innocence of the child, is a token of strength, of a strength which is not repulsive, not congestive, but calm, white, lucid, the equal of reality. Some

American films, in which the hero, strong and uncompromising, did not shrink from having a glass of milk before drawing his avenging Colt, have paved the way for this new Parsifalian myth. A strange mixture of milk and pomegranate, originating in America, is to this day sometimes drunk in Paris, among gangsters and hoodlums. But milk remains an exotic substance; it is wine which is part of the nation.

The mythology of wine can in fact help us to understand the usual ambiguity of our daily life. For it is true that wine is a good and fine substance, but it is no less true that its production is deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread. There are thus very engaging myths which are however not innocent. And the characteristic of our current alienation is precisely that wine cannot be an unalloyedly blissful substance, except if we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation.

## Steak and Chips

Steak is a part of the same sanguine mythology as wine. It is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength. The prestige of steak evidently derives from its quasi-rawness. In it, blood is visible, natural, dense, at once compact and sectile. One can well imagine the ambrosia of the Ancients as this kind of heavy substance which dwindles under one's teeth in such a way as to make one keenly aware at the same time of its original strength and of its aptitude to flow into the very blood of man. Full-bloodedness is the *raison d'être* of steak; the degrees to which it is cooked are expressed not in calorific units but in images of blood; rare steak is said to be *saignant* (when it recalls the arterial flow from the cut in the animal's throat), or *bleu* (and it is now the heavy, plethoric, blood of the veins which is suggested by the purplish colour - the superlative of redness). Its cooking, even moderate, cannot openly find expression; for this unnatural state, a euphemism is needed: one says that steak is *à point*, 'medium', and this in truth is understood more as a limit than as a perfection.

To eat steak rare therefore represents both a nature and a morality. It is supposed to benefit all the temperaments, the sanguine because it is identical, the nervous and lymphatic because it is complementary to them. And just as wine becomes for a good number of intellectuals a mediumistic substance which leads them towards the original strength of nature, steak is for them a redeeming food, thanks to which they bring their intellectualism to the level of prose and exorcize, through blood and soft pulp, the sterile dryness of which they are constantly accused. The craze for steak tartare, for instance, is a magic spell against the romantic association between sensitiveness and sickness; there are to be found, in this preparation, all the germinating states of matter: the blood mash and the glair of eggs, a whole harmony of soft and life-

giving substances, a sort of meaningful compendium of the images of pre-parturition.

Like wine, steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized. It figures in all the surroundings of alimentary life: flat, edged with yellow, like the sole of a shoe, in cheap restaurants; thick and juicy in the bistros which specialize in it; cubic, with the core all moist throughout beneath a light charred crust, in haute cuisine. It is a part of all the rhythms, that of the comfortable bourgeois meal and that of the bachelor's bohemian snack. It is a food at once expeditious and dense, it effects the best possible ratio between economy and efficacy, between mythology and its multifarious ways of being consumed.

Moreover, it is a French possession (circumscribed today, it is true, by the invasion of American steaks). As in the case of wine there is no alimentary constraint which does not make the Frenchman dream of steak. Hardly abroad, he feels nostalgia for it. Steak is here adorned with a supplementary virtue of elegance, for among the apparent complexity of exotic cooking, it is a food which unites, one feels, succulence and simplicity. Being part of the nation, it follows the index of patriotic values: it helps them to rise in wartime, it is the very flesh of the French soldier, the inalienable property which cannot go over to the enemy except by treason. In an old film (*Deuxième Bureau contre Kommandantur*), the maid of the patriotic *curé* gives food to the Boche spy disguised as a French underground fighter: 'Ah, it's you, Laurent! I'll give you some steak.' And then, when the spy is unmasked: 'And when I think I gave him some of my steak!' - the supreme breach of trust.

Commonly associated with chips, steak communicates its national glamour to them: chips are nostalgic and patriotic like steak. *Match* told us that after the armistice in Indo-China 'General de Castries, for his first meal, asked for chips'. And the President of the Indo-China Veterans, later commenting on this information added: 'The gesture of General de Castries asking for chips for his first meal has not always been understood.' What we were meant to understand is that the General's request was certainly not a vulgar

materialistic reflex, but an episode in the ritual of appropriating the regained French community. The General understood well our national symbolism; he knew that *la frite*, chips, are the alimentary sign of Frenchness.

All this would be commonplace if we were dealing with the traditional hero, whose whole value was to fly without forgoing his humanity (like Saint-Exupéry who was a writer, or Lindbergh who flew in a lounge-suit). But the mythological peculiarity of the *jet-man* is that he keeps none of the romantic and individualistic elements of the sacred role, without nevertheless forsaking the role itself. Assimilated by his name to pure passivity (what is more inert and more dispossessed than an object *expelled in jet form?*), he reintegrates the ritual nevertheless, thanks to the myth of a fictitious, celestial race, which is said to derive its peculiarities from its ascetic life, and which effects a kind of anthropological compromise between humans and Martians. The *jet-man* is a reified hero, as if even today men could conceive the heavens only as populated with semi-objects.

## The *Blue Guide*

The *Blue Guide* \* hardly knows the existence of scenery except under the guise of the picturesque. The picturesque is found any time the ground is uneven. We find again here this bourgeois promoting of the mountains, this old Alpine myth (since it dates back to the nineteenth century) which Gide rightly associated with Helvetico-Protestant morality and which has always functioned as a hybrid compound of the cult of nature and of puritanism (regeneration through clean air, moral ideas at the sight of mountain-tops, summit-climbing as civic virtue, etc.). Among the views elevated by the *Blue Guide* to aesthetic existence, we rarely find plains (redeemed only when they can be described as fertile), never plateaux. Only mountains, gorges, defiles and torrents can have access to the pantheon of travel, inasmuch, probably, as they seem to encourage a morality of effort and solitude. Travel according to the *Blue Guide* is thus revealed as a labour-saving adjustment, the easy substitute for the morally uplifting walk. This in itself means that the mythology of the *Blue Guide* dates back to the last century, to that phase in history when the bourgeoisie was enjoying a kind of new-born euphoria in *buying* effort, in keeping its image and essence without feeling any of its ill-effects. It is therefore in the last analysis, quite logically and quite stupidly, the gracelessness of a landscape, its lack of spaciousness or human appeal, its verticality, so contrary to the bliss of travel, which account for its interest. Ultimately, the *Guide* will coolly write: '*The road becomes very picturesque (tunnels)*': it matters little that one no longer sees anything, since the tunnel here has become the sufficient sign of the mountain; it is a financial security stable enough for one to have no further worry about its value over the counter.

Just as hilliness is overstressed to such an extent as to eliminate all other types of scenery, the human life of a country disappears to the exclusive benefit of its monuments. For the *Blue Guide*, men

exist only as 'types'. In Spain, for instance, the Basque is an adventurous sailor, the Levantine a light-hearted gardener, the Catalan a clever tradesman and the Cantabrian a sentimental highlander. We find again here this disease of thinking in essences, which is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man (which is why we come across it so often). The ethnic reality of Spain is thus reduced to a vast classical ballet, a nice neat commedia dell'arte, whose improbable typology serves to mask the real spectacle of conditions, classes and professions. For the *Blue Guide*, men exist as social entities only in trains, where they fill a 'very mixed' Third Class. Apart from that, they are a mere introduction, they constitute a charming and fanciful decor, meant to surround the essential part of the country: its collection of monuments.

If one excepts its wild defiles, fit for moral ejaculations, Spain according to the *Blue Guide* knows only one type of space, that which weaves, across a few nondescript lacunae, a close web of churches, vestries, reredoses, crosses, altar-curtains, spires (always octagonal), sculpted groups (Family and Labour), Romanesque porches, naves and life-size crucifixes. It can be seen that all these monuments are religious, for from a bourgeois point of view it is almost impossible to conceive a History of Art which is not Christian and Roman Catholic. Christianity is the chief purveyor of tourism, and one travels only to visit churches. In the case of Spain, this imperialism is ludicrous, for Catholicism often appears there as a barbaric force which has stupidly defaced the earlier achievements of Muslim civilization: the mosque at Cordoba, whose wonderful forest of columns is at every turn obstructed by massive blocks of altars, or a colossal Virgin (set up by Franco) denaturing the site which it aggressively dominates all this should help the French bourgeois to glimpse at least once in his life that historically there is also a reverse side to Christianity.

Generally speaking; the *Blue Guide* testifies to the futility of all analytical descriptions, those which reject both explanations and phenomenology: it answers in fact none of the questions which a modern traveller can ask himself while crossing a countryside

which is real *and which exists in time*. To select only monuments suppresses at one stroke the reality of the land and that of its people, it accounts for nothing of the present, that is, nothing historical, and as a consequence, the monuments themselves become undecipherable, therefore senseless. What is to be seen is thus constantly in the process of vanishing, and the *Guide* becomes, through an operation common to all mystifications, the very opposite of what it advertises, an agent of blindness. By reducing geography to the description of an uninhabited world of monuments, the *Blue Guide* expresses a mythology which is obsolete for a part of the bourgeoisie itself. It is unquestionable that travel has become (or become again) a method of approach based on human realities rather than 'culture': once again (as in the eighteenth century, perhaps) it is everyday life which is the main object of travel, and it is social geography, town-planning, sociology, economics which outline the framework of the actual questions asked today even by the merest layman. But as for the *Blue Guide*, it still abides by a partly superseded bourgeois mythology, that which postulated (religious) Art as the fundamental value of culture, but saw its 'riches' and 'treasures' only as a reassuring accumulation of goods (cf. the creation of museums). This behaviour expressed a double urge: to have at one's disposal a cultural alibi as ethereal as possible, and to maintain this alibi in the toils of a computable and acquisitive system, so that one could at any moment do the accounts of the ineffable. It goes without saying that this myth of travel is becoming quite anachronistic, even among the bourgeoisie, and I suppose that if one entrusted the preparation of a new guide-book to, say, the lady-editors at *L'Express* or the editors of *Match*, we would see appearing, questionable as they would still probably be, quite different countries: after the Spain of Anquetil or Larousse, would follow the Spain of Siegfried, then that of Fourastié. Notice how already, in the *Michelin Guide*, the number of bathrooms and forks indicating good restaurants is vying with that of 'artistic curiosities': even bourgeois myths have their differential geology.

It is true that in the case of Spain, the blinkered and old-fashioned character of the description is what is best suited to the latent

support given by the *Guide* to Franco. Beside the historical accounts proper (which are rare and meagre, incidentally, for it is well known that History is not a good bourgeois), those accounts in which the Republicans are always '*extremists*' looting churches - but nothing on Guernica - while the good 'Nationalists', on the contrary, spend their time '*liberating*', solely by '*skilful strategic manoeuvres*' and '*heroic feats of resistance*', let me mention the flowering of a splendid myth-alibi: that of the *prosperity* of the country. Needless to say, this prosperity is 'statistical' and 'global', or to be more accurate: 'commercial'. The Guide does not tell us, of course, how this fine prosperity is shared out: *hierarchically*, probably, since they think it fit to tell us that '*the serious and patient effort of this people has also included the reform of its political system, in order to achieve regeneration through the loyal application of sound principles of order and hierarchy.*'

\* Hachette World Guides, dubbed 'Guide Bleu' in French.

## Ornamental Cookery

The weekly *Elle* (a real mythological treasure) gives us almost every week a fine colour photograph of a prepared dish: golden partridges studded with cherries, a faintly pink chicken chaud-froid, a mould of crayfish surrounded by their red shells, a frothy charlotte prettified with glacé fruit designs, multicoloured trifle, etc.

The 'substantial' category which prevails in this type of cooking is that of the smooth coating: there is an obvious endeavour to glaze surfaces, to round them off, to bury the food under the even sediment of sauces, creams, icing and jellies. This of course comes from the very finality of the coating, which belongs to a visual category, and cooking according to *Elle* is meant for the eye alone, since sight is a genteel sense. For there is, in this persistence of glazing, a need for gentility. *Elle* is a highly valuable journal, from the point of view of legend at least, since its role is to present to its vast public which (market-research tells us) is working-class, the very dream of smartness. Hence a cookery which is based on coatings and alibis, and is for ever trying to extenuate and even to disguise the primary nature of foodstuffs, the brutality of meat or the abruptness of sea-food. A country dish is admitted only as an exception (the good family boiled beef), as the rustic whim of jaded city-dwellers.

But above all, coatings prepare and support one of the major developments of genteel cookery: ornamentation. Glazing, in *Elle*, serves as background for unbridled beautification: chiselled mushrooms, punctuation of cherries, motifs of carved lemon, shavings of truffle, silver pastilles, arabesques of glacé fruit: the underlying coat (and this is why I called it a sediment, since the food itself becomes no more than an indeterminate bed-rock) is intended to be the page on which can be read a whole rococo cookery (there is a partiality for a pinkish colour).

Ornamentation proceeds in two contradictory ways, which we shall in a moment see dialectically reconciled: on the one hand, fleeing from nature thanks to a kind of frenzied baroque (sticking shrimps in a lemon, making a chicken look pink, serving grapefruit hot), and on the other, trying to reconstitute it through an incongruous artifice (strewing meringue mushrooms and holly leaves on a traditional log-shaped Christmas cake, replacing the heads of crayfish around the sophisticated bechamel which hides their bodies). It is in fact the same pattern which one finds in the elaboration of petit-bourgeois trinkets (ashtrays in the shape of a saddle, lighters in the shape of a cigarette, terrines in the shape of a hare).

This is because here, as in all petit-bourgeois art, the irrepressible tendency towards extreme realism is countered - or balanced - by one of the eternal imperatives of journalism for women's magazines: what is pompously called, at *L'Express*, *having ideas*. Cookery in *Elle* is, in the same way, an 'idea' - cookery. But here inventiveness, confined to a fairy-land reality, must be applied only to *garnishings*, for the genteel tendency of the magazine precludes it from touching on the real problems concerning food (the real problem is not to have the idea of sticking cherries into a partridge, it is to have the partridge, that is to say, to pay for it).

This ornamental cookery is indeed supported by wholly mythical economics. This is an openly dream-like cookery, as proved in fact by the photographs in *Elle*, which never show the dishes except from a high angle, as objects at once near and inaccessible, whose consumption can perfectly well be accomplished simply by looking. It is, in the fullest meaning of the word, a cuisine of advertisement, totally magical, especially when one remembers that this magazine is widely read in small-income groups. The latter, in fact, explains the former: it is because *Elle* is addressed to a genuinely working-class public that it is very careful not to take for granted that cooking must be economical. Compare with *L'Express*, whose exclusively middle-class public enjoys a comfortable purchasing power: its cookery is real, not magical. *Elle* gives the recipe of fancy partridges, *L'Express* gives that of

*salade niçoise*. The readers of *Elle* are entitled only to fiction; one can suggest real dishes to those of *L'Express*, in the certainty that they will be able to prepare them.