

**THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION IN THE NEAR EAST:
ON HENRI FRANKFORT'S APPROACH
TO THE ANCIENT WORLD**

GODFREY LIENHARDT

Edited with an Introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi and Jeremy Coote

Introduction

The piece published below is the script of a talk by Godfrey Lienhardt about Henri Frankfort's book *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (Frankfort 1951a). It was broadcast on the BBC's Third Programme in October 1951 as a sort of 'radio review', and is published here for the first time. It was broadcast under the title of Frankfort's book; we have added the explanatory subtitle.

In the Special Issue of *JASO* edited by us in Lienhardt's memory (which appeared in 1997 as Vol. XXVII, no. 1), we published three radio talks by him, while in the 'Biographical Notes and Bibliography' that also appeared there Al-Shahi briefly discussed Lienhardt's broadcasting career and listed the talks he gave and

We are grateful to the BBC Written Archives Centre (Caversham Park, Reading, RG4 8TZ) for allowing Coote to copy the microfiched copy of the script of Lienhardt's talk held there and for providing him with access to the relevant files (BBC WAC RCONT 1 Lienhardt, Godfrey, Talks 1952–62; BBC WAC RCONT 12 1963–67). All quotations from letters by BBC staff are reproduced with the permission of the BBC. We are also grateful to David Wengrow for his comments on a draft of this introduction, to Mike Morris (Tylor Librarian at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology) for information about the history of books in the Tylor Library, and to Sue Brooks of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, for assistance in preparing the text for publication.

provided details, where applicable, of where they had been published (Al-Shahi 1997: 10–11). At the time the Special Issue was published, we did not have a copy of the broadcast script of the present talk; otherwise we should have published it there. Since the Special Issue was prepared, however, we have obtained from the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham copies of the scripts of all the broadcasts listed by Al-Shahi. Aside from the present one, only one other remains unpublished. The script of that still unpublished talk, entitled 'Dinkas: People of the Southern Sudan', which Lienhardt recorded for the BBC Schools Service in 1953, will be published in a future issue of *JASO*.¹

In all, Lienhardt gave ten talks on BBC radio, as well as contributing to two radio discussions. From the correspondence relating to these programmes held in the files at the BBC, it is clear that BBC producers valued his contributions and that he enjoyed doing the broadcasts. Indeed, as well as responding (not always positively) to suggestions from the BBC, he also made suggestions for possible programmes and series. For example, soon after the talk published here was broadcast, Lienhardt wrote (on 15 October 1951) to Anna Kallin at the BBC that he 'should very much like to do something on primitive poetry', while in June 1956 he submitted to Leonie Cohn two scripts he had prepared under the title 'Idols of Our Time', and in September 1960 he suggested a series on 'The Ordinary Believer'. Unfortunately, nothing came of these suggestions.

We do not want to comment here at any greater length on this aspect of Lienhardt's career, though we think it worth pointing out how the contributions of Lienhardt and his anthropological colleagues (at Oxford and elsewhere) to 'popular' intellectual debate on the radio has yet to be properly assessed in histories of the discipline. In his introduction to the collection *Popularizing Anthropology*, Jeremy MacClancy makes passing reference to anthropologists broadcasting on the radio but claims that 'they were on the whole far more concerned with developing their own discipline than with imparting the results to a wider audience' (MacClancy 1996: 15). Having looked through Lienhardt's files at the BBC, we are unsure that this is a wholly accurate assessment. For example, aside from the evidence necessary for establishing the details of Lienhardt's career as a broadcaster, his file also contains a copy of a letter, dated 12 December 1953, from Evans-Pritchard's secretary Phyllis Puckle to Prudence Smith at the BBC passing on a suggestion from Evans-Pritchard 'that you might like to come down here sometime next term, when everyone will be here, and discuss further anthropological broadcasts'. It seems that there was at least some interest in using the medium to communicate with a wider audience. Certainly, such broadcasts comprise an

¹ Since publishing that list of Lienhardt's talks we have learned of yet another he did for the BBC. Entitled 'The Boundaries of Race', this was the second in a series of talks by various speakers entitled 'Race and Religion' and was broadcast on the Overseas Service on 7 April 1959. No copy of the script of this talk has yet been found at the BBC or in Lienhardt's papers.

aspect of 'popularizing anthropology' that would merit further, detailed research into the broadcasts themselves and into the background to them, the records for which are partially preserved in the relevant files at the BBC. Having said that, however, all we seek to do here is to explain the background to the present talk.

At the time of the broadcast in 1951, Lienhardt was more or less unknown as an anthropologist and writer, let alone as a broadcaster. Between 1941 and 1948, while at Cambridge, he had written a dozen reviews for F. R. Leavis's journal *Scrutiny*, and by 1951 he had begun to review books for such academic journals as *Man*, *Africa*, and *African Affairs*, but he had yet to finish his doctorate (completed in 1952) and was known only within a relatively small circle.² Unsurprisingly, therefore, Lienhardt was not the first person the BBC approached to review Frankfort's book. In fact the BBC had already approached Lienhardt's senior Oxford colleague Professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who suggested Lienhardt as a suitable alternative reviewer (a way of dealing with unsolicited requests that—as we know from personal experience—Lienhardt was himself to adopt later in his career). We have no direct evidence as to why Evans-Pritchard was approached, though it is hardly surprising that the BBC should approach a Sudan specialist and Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford to review a book about Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia by the Director of the Warburg Institute, as Frankfort then was. Moreover, it might have been known to someone at the BBC that Evans-Pritchard had reviewed Frankfort's earlier work, *Kingship and the Gods* (Frankfort 1948) for *Man* (Evans-Pritchard 1949), describing it as 'one of the most important contributions to an understanding of the nature of the institution of kingship which has yet been made' and 'of first importance for the comparative study of primitive kingship' (*ibid.*).

There is little in Lienhardt's file at the BBC about the preparations for the broadcast, though we do learn from a letter from him to Anna Kallin, dated 26 September 1951, that he did not find preparing a script easy: 'This book of Frankfort takes for granted so much of the others, and is such a curious blend of factual detail and "philosophy" that it was difficult to do'—a point that re-emerges in the broadcast itself. As for the style and content of the talk, we will leave it to others to make their own assessments of Lienhardt's attempt to present and discuss Frankfort's ideas, though some remarks may be useful. It seems clear that Lienhardt was already knowledgeable about Frankfort's earlier works. This is hardly surprising since by 1951 Frankfort was well known to anthropologists in general and to Oxford anthropologists in particular. He had, for example, engaged in correspondence with Lord Raglan in the pages of *Man* (Raglan 1949, Frankfort 1949) and in November 1950 had given the Frazer Lecture at Oxford (published as Frankfort 1951b), presumably at the invitation of Evans-Pritchard or at least with his approval. Through these connections, as well as through his reading for the

² For a list of Lienhardt's publications and details of his career, see Al-Shahi 1997.

Archaeology and Anthropology Tripos at Cambridge and his general familiarity with relevant intellectual developments in and around anthropology, Lienhardt had had ample opportunity to become familiar with Frankfort's work.

Lienhardt was clearly sympathetic to Frankfort's interpretative approach and argument. Indeed, with hindsight it is possible to see remarkable overlaps between the interpretative approaches of such authors as Frankfort in archaeology and Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, and others in anthropology. As Lienhardt himself was to point out many years later, in his *Social Anthropology*, there were in the first half of the twentieth century many parallels in the way in which social anthropology and the other humanities developed, particularly in a shared concern for the detailed social context (Lienhardt 1964: 199); while in the broadcast itself he points to the common influence of R. G. Collingwood. In addition to this general congruence of approach, however, it has also been proposed that Lienhardt drew specifically on Frankfort's work in at least one area.

In a recently published essay (to which we are delighted to be able to refer the reader for more information about Frankfort), David Wengrow refers to the 'intriguing relationship between Frankfort's analysis of ancient Near Eastern speculative thought and Godfrey Lienhardt's later ethnographic account of Dinka religion' (Wengrow 1999: 608, n. 100). Referring particularly to *Before Philosophy* (Frankfort's joint work with H. A. Groenewegen, Frankfort, John Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen; Frankfort *et al.* 1949),³ Wengrow summarizes Frankfort's view in a way that will resonate for everyone familiar with Lienhardt's analysis of Dinka religious thought and practice in *Divinity and Experience* (Lienhardt 1961):

The combination of images from mythopoetic thought into a ritual enactment was principally an act of knowledge, engendering a sense of control over the vicissitudes of life. Hence, the many divinities of Egyptian and Mesopotamian religion were perceived, not as a pantheon of gods with fixed attributes, but as a core of potent symbols and signs, among which coherent expression could be found through creative engagement. (Wengrow 1999: 608)

Wengrow (who had access to Coote's copy of the broadcast script of Lienhardt's talk) goes on to describe Lienhardt's broadcast as 'a penetrating and highly appreciative commentary on Frankfort's major works', and he points out how Lienhardt lists Frankfort's earlier work *Kingship and the Gods* (Frankfort 1948) under 'religion and philosophy' in the bibliography in his *Social Anthropology*

³ Intriguingly, one of the two copies of *Before Philosophy* in the Tylor Library at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford (shelfmark A4.25), lacks the Frankforts' 'Introduction: Myth and Reality' and 'Conclusion: The Emancipation of Thought from Myth', the crucial sections for understanding Frankfort's approach to Ancient Near Eastern 'polytheistic thought'. Both sections were cut out, so far as we can tell, many years ago, perhaps even before the copy was purchased for the library in April 1950.

(Lienhardt 1964: 206). Wengrow comments: 'While many archaeologists have been deeply influenced by anthropology, this, to my knowledge, is a unique instance of a major anthropologist drawing significantly upon the thought of an archaeologist' (Wengrow 1999: 608 n. 100).⁴

Certainly there seem to be strong parallels between Frankfort's and Lienhardt's analyses of Ancient Near Eastern and Dinka 'polytheistic' thought, and if there were influence the chronology is clear: it must have been from Frankfort to Lienhardt and not the other way round. However, if Lienhardt drew consciously on Frankfort's work, it is surprising that he made no acknowledgement of it in either his published writings or his D.Phil. thesis (see Al-Shahi 1997 for details). There is clearly room for more research and argument on this point. Nevertheless, whatever might be concluded about the nature of the parallel, the text that follows will be of interest to anyone concerned with the intellectual background to Lienhardt's work, with the history of the study of African thought, or with the relationship between anthropology and archaeology as it developed in the inter-war years.

The version of the talk published here is taken from the broadcast script held at the BBC. This has a number of amendments on it in Lienhardt's hand—presumably made before the broadcast rather than after, as the copy we have worked from is the BBC's copy and not one (if any) that Lienhardt himself kept—and these have been incorporated. Otherwise, we have limited our editing to the occasional clarifying amendment to the punctuation, to correcting minor misquotations, and to supplying the specific references that the modern academic reader expects. The eighteen-minute talk was recorded on Thursday 4 October 1951 and broadcast on the BBC Third Programme at 9.40 p.m. on Saturday 6 October 1951. The broadcast appears to have been well received. Anna Kallin wrote flatteringly to Lienhardt three days later: 'Everyone was delighted with your talk and would very much like to hear you on the air again.' The broadcast was repeated on the Third Programme at 11.35 p.m. on Thursday 27 March 1952.

AHMED AL-SHAHI, JEREMY COOTE

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⁴ More about Lienhardt's response to Frankfort's work might have been gained from an examination of the pencil marginalia—apparently in Lienhardt's hand—in a copy of the book (presumably that supplied to him by the BBC) that he presented to the Tylor Library (shelfmark C3.16). Unfortunately, however, these marginalia have been erased.

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THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION IN THE NEAR EAST

In the last few years, much of my time has been spent in living with an African people, and in trying to understand their ideas. The Dinka are tribes of Nilotic negroes, some of whose beliefs and practices bear some comparison with those of the ancient Egyptians; and a knowledge of uncivilized people gives one a certain insight into the nature of the changes described by Professor Frankfort in his perceptive book *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*.

For primitive people like the Dinka, civilization is not something which was safely accomplished in the past; nor yet is it something which is bound to come in the future. It is not part of some cosmic plan for everybody, a plan which some peoples put into action more quickly and eagerly than others. They cannot, therefore, think of our way of life as having in any way developed from a life as simple as that they now lead. They do not see themselves as part of some evolutionary process which, in happier circumstances, produced us. They do not even allow us

our sense of having 'developed'. They think that we have had our guns, and they have had their spears, since we all received them from God in the beginning. Consequently, they often find our achievements less striking than we may like to consider them ourselves.

It is not surprising, of course, that primitive peoples should be without our modern ideas of social evolution. In their lives there is little evidence of historical change; and thus there is little reason for them to suppose that any direction can be observed in the events of the past. They are not in a constant state of becoming something different. It is easy to see that they are without such ideas; it is always easier to see what people do not have, than to define and grasp the significance of what they have. In this case, what primitive peoples *have* is a conception of time totally different from our own. Professor Frankfort has made this, and other fundamental differences in thought and apprehension, the basis of his studies of ancient civilizations. In doing so, he has had to become aware of the characteristics of our own way of understanding which distinguish it equally from that of modern primitive people and that of ancient civilization. As I have said, one such characteristic is our interest in evolution and development. In his book, Frankfort discusses the way in which this interest permeates the work of two distinguished students of civilization, Spengler and Professor Toynbee. His criticism of them indicates the sort of approach to ancient civilization which Frankfort himself adopts.⁵

Spengler, for example, projects into ancient Egyptian thought that concern for the past and anxiety about the future which he himself felt. Frankfort's interpretation of the evidence is quite different; and it is an interpretation more consistent with the facts. Among the ancient Egyptians, he writes:

The past and the future—far from being a matter of concern—were wholly implicit in the present...the divinity of animals and kings, the pyramids, mummification—as well as several other and seemingly unrelated features of Egyptian civilization—its moral maxims, the forms peculiar to its poetry and prose—can all be understood as a result of a basic conviction that only the changeless is truly significant. (Frankfort 1951: 21)

Spengler unconsciously projects his own ideas into the ancient Egyptians. Professor Toynbee deliberately fits primitive peoples into a modern evolutionary scheme of thought. He compares primitive with civilized societies in a long simile, which perhaps you will remember. Primitive societies are said to be 'like people lying torpid upon a ledge on a mountainside' (*ibid.*: 33, quoting Toynbee 1930: 193), with precipices on each side of them. Civilized societies, on the other hand, are the companions of these torpid primitives, who as he says 'have just risen to

⁵ *Editors' note:* Frankfort refers in particular to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. For recent editions of these works, see, for example, Spengler 1980 and Toynbee 1987.

their feet and have started to climb up the face of the cliff' (ibid.). It would be difficult, I think, to explain to a primitive people like the Dinka the nature of the cliff which we are climbing. First, their country is extremely flat: there is no place in it where one can go on and on, while at the same time going up and up. More important, however, is that there is no place in their thought for such an idea of metaphysical climbing. To this extent, perhaps, we may accept Toynbee's simile, if we accept the philosophy of history which produced it. But if we intend to understand a primitive people as they are in themselves, and not as they fit into a familiar scheme of thought of our own, the simile does not help us. It directs our attention exclusively to those ways in which they seem to have failed to be like ourselves. It denies them their own sort of dignity and achievement. People who are primitive, therefore, will still resent being called 'uncivilized'; for it disregards what they are, and makes them appear merely to have stopped on their way to being something else.

Professor Frankfort's work has been an attempt to study what the first civilizations of the Near East were like in themselves. He has not been content to fit their achievements into our categories of thought. On the contrary, his main task has been to understand the categories in which these ancient peoples themselves thought; and he has regarded their conceptions of the nature of order of their universe as having been their most impressive achievements. It is not easy to consider one of his books in isolation from the others; for his works are all part of a patient reconstruction of the forms of ancient civilizations, and of the manner in which those early peoples apprehended their own world. In his book *Kingship and the Gods* (Frankfort 1948) there is an interpretation of the kingship of ancient Egypt, which the present book takes partly for granted. It will serve as an example of Frankfort's way of understanding ancient and primitive institutions.

Monarchy in modern Europe, and the kingship of ancient Egypt, are both forms of kingship. If it is taken for granted that the essential features of ancient Egyptian kingship are best isolated by comparing it with modern constitutional monarchy, we begin by noting the theoretically unlimited power of the Pharaoh. We may then speak of despotism and tyranny, and the expenditure of wealth and labour for the glorification of the king. We may, in fact, make it appear that Egyptian civilization could have been what it was without this apparently morbid cult of the king and his ancestors. Frankfort, however, shows that the ancient Egyptian kingship was not just a single feature of their civilization, which we can easily detach, in thought, from the rest. The king was not only head of the state, but in some ways at the centre of the universe. He was not only a ruler, but a ruler with some of the attributes of a god. An acceptance of his position and attributes was a condition of Egyptian understanding of their whole world. When we learn that the unification of the Two Lands of Upper and Lower Egypt under a single king was regarded as the beginning of ancient Egyptian history, we are quick to interpret this

as a political development. Frankfort has maintained that its significance was mainly religious and symbolic.

This division of the state of Egypt into two parts, the Two Lands, reflected a deeper dualism in ancient Egyptian thought. Harmony was understood as an equilibrium of opposites; and so if the land of Egypt was to be an harmonious whole, it had first to be thought of as the equilibrium of two complementary parts, the Two Lands. The king held the parts of the Egyptian world, whether the divisions of the kingdom, or the earth and the heavens, in a single comprehensible whole. The alternative to their monarchy was not some other form of government, but real chaos—the absence of differentiation, which would make thought itself impossible. The ancient Egyptians understood the significance of their life ultimately through the king, and he was thought to carry their lives in his.

It may be asked what reason we have to believe that people really did think in this way, and that this re-creation of their thought is not conjecture or fiction, however brilliant. The answer is partly that some such ideas correspond to the facts. Also, however, these conceptions of kingship, and other ideas which Professor Frankfort has studied in the remains of ancient Near Eastern civilizations, are alive in some parts of Africa today. The kingdom of the Nilotic Shilluk, for example, is divided into two parts, which are united in a single kingdom when the king is elected. The Shilluk king himself is held to maintain the order of society and the universe, not by anything he does, but by being what he is. Speaking of him in our own analytic way, we may say that their king is more important as a concept in theology and cosmology, than in political theory. Again, the priest-chiefs of the Dinka tribe are said to carry the lives of their people in their own. They are the carriers of life, and their vitality is also in a sense the vitality of their people and their herds.

These are just a few of the conceptions which are found both in ancient Egypt and in some parts of Africa today. Some primitive Africans would feel at home with the outlook of the ancient Egyptians, in a way that they cannot feel at home with our secular civilization. The difference between primitive people and those of early civilization is not a difference of kind, but of degree. One difference between civilized and uncivilized people is this: that civilized people are able to leave behind them far fuller and clearer indications of the character and range of their thought. The simple communities which preceded the first civilizations did not leave the marks of their deeper imaginative life impressed upon their material remains. But they must have had such a life, just as modern primitive peoples have beliefs and notions of which they cannot leave any record once they themselves are gone. Professor Frankfort has taken into account this continuity of thought between the uncivilized and the civilized, between the early communities of the Near East and the civilizations which followed them. By writing of the birth of civilization he shows how he thinks of it as having been delivered, so to speak, from the way of life and thought of earlier populations

All over the world, simple societies are now in our own time becoming civilized, civilized in our way. Often, people speak of these changes as 'development', or even 'evolution', for that, as I have suggested, is our characteristic way of speaking about social changes. At least, that is how we like to think of those changes which we approve of, and consider inevitable. But, in fact, the civilization which we have exported indifferently all over the world bears little relation there to what has gone before it. According to Frankfort, it was different in the Ancient Near East. There also the change from primitive to civilized life was comparatively sudden and critical; it affected society as a whole, and was not a series of piecemeal developments. Although it happened quickly, however, it was not a complete break with the past. He calls it a birth because, like a birth, it presupposed something of its own kind before it, to give it life—the primitive population of Egypt and Mesopotamia. From the beginning, almost, we are able to recognize two independent forms of civilization, one in Egypt, one in Mesopotamia. Their remains become detached comparatively suddenly from those of the primitive communities before them; but unlike our civilization in Africa now they were implicit in those earlier and less articulate societies.

It is impossible in a short time to give an account of the forms of these civilizations. What Frankfort here means by 'form' will have become apparent. He means what A. N. Whitehead, whom he quotes, calls 'a general form of the forms of thought' (Frankfort 1951: 8, quoting Whitehead 1933: 14). He seeks, therefore, to show how the most profound religious and metaphysical notions of these ancient peoples are reflected in their material remains. For example, one of the main differences between ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia was in the nature of their political structure. Frankfort relates this difference to a difference in their religious and cosmological ideas. Ancient Egypt was a single state, ruled by a king, some of whose attributes I have already mentioned. Ancient Mesopotamia was for long composed of a number of independent cities, often at war with each other. Each was gathered round its own temple, and guided by its own god. Earthly rulers were not divine. This fundamental difference in form, says Frankfort, runs through the details of the facts. 'The earliest written documents of Mesopotamia', he writes

served a severely practical purpose; they facilitated the administration of large economic units, the temple communities. The earliest Egyptian inscriptions were legends on royal monuments or seal engravings identifying the king's officials. The earliest representations in Mesopotamian art are preponderantly religious; in Egyptian art they celebrate royal achievements and consist of historical subjects. Monumental architecture consists, in Mesopotamia, of temples, in Egypt of royal tombs. (Frankfort 1951: 49–50)

In this way, Frankfort's discussion of the forms of thought of those two civilizations enables him to consider them as something more than great collections of material objects. He does so, moreover, without in any way sacrificing an interest

in details, each of which he is able to see as being in some way the microcosm of the world of which it formed a part.

Frankfort's interest in the forms or structures of ancient society brings his work near to that of some students of modern primitive peoples. His abstraction of the forms of the civilizations of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia makes it possible to compare them, to some extent, with other and living societies. In primitive Africa today, for example, we find in a very general way two main types of political structure. One, like the ancient Egyptian state, has centralized political institutions. There the parts of which a tribe is composed are seen as united in relation to some central institution, like that of kingship. The other type of political structure, like that of ancient Mesopotamia at one time, is segmentary. Its component parts are opposed to each other in a regular system. They fight between themselves, but unite against outsiders. Of course, one must be cautious in using analogies. Frankfort, for example, seems to have found no trace of *systematic* oppositions and combinations between the cities of ancient Mesopotamia. Perhaps also he rather underestimates the degree of political organization found among modern primitive people, whom he considers (perhaps with reason) to be 'but diminished shadows of the true primitives' (ibid.: 46). But his devotion to 'true primitives' is also a condition of his understanding of primitive thought generally.

For many who are not archaeologists, Frankfort's book will be as interesting for the method of his interpretation as for the events he describes. Although he does not explicitly formulate any philosophy of history, he has none the less given much thought to the nature of our understanding of historical and foreign societies. He has clearly been influenced by Professor Collingwood. Collingwood writes in his autobiography of how, in walking each day across Kensington Gardens, he became involved in an intense relationship with the Albert Memorial. At first, he found it so hideous that he could scarcely bear the sight of it, but eventually he decided that he must first try to understand the problems and intentions of its designer, problems to which the Memorial was, at first sight, so monstrous an answer (Collingwood 1939: 29–30). Some such attempt to rethink the thoughts of others as they thought them, to be both oneself and unlike oneself, is made now by many students of human societies. Do they therefore, as Nietzsche feared, lose their point of view, sympathizing with any and every way of thought to such an extent that their own loses its definition and direction?⁶ Collingwood did not find so; by understanding what had been thought in the past, he knew that he himself could think it; but he also knew that he himself did not think it. So, for example, Frankfort's sympathetic interpretation of the secure and static world of the ancient Egyptians does not prevent him from recognizing a basic insecurity and anxiety in Ancient Mesopotamia. He has succeeded in being both within, and outside, the ways

⁶ *Editors' note:* Lienhardt was to return to this point in a talk (later published) he gave to students at the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology in 1989; see Lienhardt 1997: 84.

of thought of the people he studies. This is the most difficult, but also perhaps the most rewarding, method of interpretation. It saves us, as far as can be, from seeing in all people everywhere a dim reflection of ourselves.

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