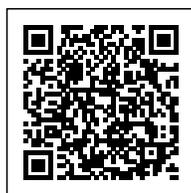
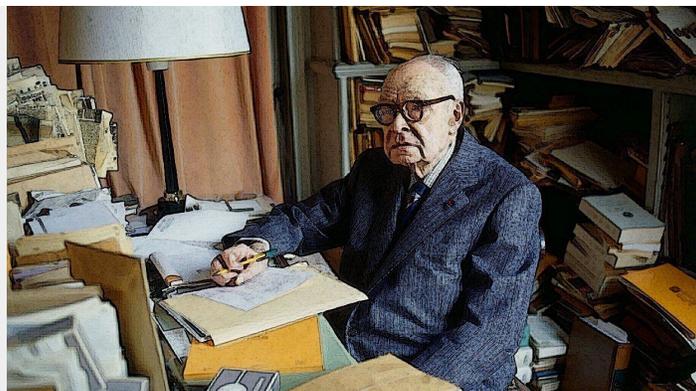


GEORGES DUMÉZIL: DISCOVERY OF THE INDO-EUROPEAN MIND

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Georges Dumézil was born on March 4, 1898. Associated with the Class of Letters (of the Royal Academy of Science, Letters and Fine Arts of Belgium) since May 5, 1958, where he presented two very learned papers, one on July 3, 1961, the other on January 11, 1965. The Academy also published one of his studies.

In his brief eulogy to Georges Dumézil on November 3, 1986, announcing the death of the French scholar, André Molitor, at the time vice-director of the Class, described the deceased in the following way: "He was in France, and one can say in the world, one of the leading figures in the humanities today... His work led him to search for, and then to progressively decipher, what we may call a 'key to understanding' the Indo-European societies of old, which is expressed both in their structures and in their great fundamental myths." Please allow me to elaborate somewhat on these very accurate and very compact sentences.

If we disregard his activity—however important—as a linguist (especially in the field of Caucasian languages and Quechua), Georges Dumézil was essentially a specialist in Indo-European studies, and we can compare his work *mutatis mutandis* with that of the pioneers of comparative grammar. These great scholars of the nineteenth century, we remember, had succeeded not only in demonstrating the indisputable kinship of what were called "Indo-European languages" but also in finding certain characteristics of the mother language, this hypothetical language from which all the others had come by transformation and which was called "Indo-European."

If we want to schematize - with all that schematization has of outrageousness - we will say that Georges Dumézil prolonged, by widening it, the work of comparative grammar. He set out to discover, no longer the language as the great linguists of the last century had done, but the thought, the mental universe of the Indo-Europeans. To do this, he studied and compared the culture of the various ancient peoples descended from the Indo-Europeans, and in particular the privileged manifestations of these cultures, namely the religions, the mythologies and the literatures. This research concerned Nordic societies as well as ancient Rome, the Indo-Iranian world as well as the Caucasus; it was carried out on texts as different (to take a few examples) as the Vedic hymns, the *Mahabharata*, the Iranian *Avesta*, the Scandinavian *Eddas*, the Irish mythological cycle, the Ossetian Nartean epic, or the account of Titus Livius on royal Rome. And the scholar—this deserves to be emphasized—always worked first hand on the texts he used; in other words, he knew (that is, read and deciphered) a good thirty languages.

His method was the comparative method. But where his unfortunate predecessors (for there had already been unsuccessful attempts in the 19th century in the field of comparative mythology) compared proper names, isolated details, relatively minimal facts that only a superficial examination would allow one to believe to be similar, Dumézil attacked, in order to compare them, facts that were homologous in depth, that is to say, different perhaps at first sight, but between which, once these differences had been criticized and analyzed, identical patterns appeared.

For Dumézil was a structuralist. In his work, the comparisons always concerned structured sets of the same meaning, never isolated details. He showed, for example, that it is the same myth, or in any case the same story, Indo-European, that is found at work in four different societies: in Rome (the war and the alliance between the Romans and the Sabines, which, in its origins, founded founded Roman society); in Scandinavia (the fight and the fusion between the Aesir gods and the Vanes gods which, in the Scandinavian mythology, founded the first divine society); in Ireland (the war that led to the fusion of the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomore during the second battle of Mag Tured, and which, in the Irish mythological cycle, opens the history of Ireland); in India (the conflict, then the close association, of the superior gods and the Nāsatya in Vedic mythology). Four stories, profoundly different in their external presentation, and yet homologous in that they have the same meaning and that they are articulated around the same fundamental notions. In reality, they are illustrations, variously updated, of the same original scheme which showed how our distant ancestors represented (we are in the domain of imaginary representation) the definitive constitution of a viable society.

Thus, by means of the comparison of structured sets, significant as sets, and borrowed from civilizations that are all Indo-European, certainly, but sometimes very distant in time and space, Dumézil sought to find, to bring to light, certain aspects of the Indo-European mentality or imaginary, aspects that had—should we say?—completely escaped his predecessors.

Thus, the Indo-Europeans had not only transmitted their language to their descendants; they had also transmitted ideas to them—at times a particular framework of analysis, let us say a certain vision of the world (the famous "ideology of the three functions"), sometimes specific conceptions (on the night and diurnal light, on the conduct of the warrior, on marriage), even at times narrative or epic patterns, "fragments of literature" in some way. This is indeed the fundamental contribution of Dumézil—to have shown that, in the Indo-European societies of old, the Indo-European heritage was not limited to language, that it also included ideas, representations, narrative schemes; and that it was possible to find them.

There is no question here of entering further into the maze for details of Dumézil's work—the fruit of more than sixty years of patient and fruitful work, it includes several hundred articles and some sixty books, from *Le crime des Lemniennes* and *Le festin d'immortalité*, both published in 1924, to *Entretiens avec Didier Éribon*, published in 1987, that is to say, one year after his death.

An immense work that took place on the fringes of the French university proper, like that of Claude Lévi-Strauss—a similarity that Pierre Bourdieu underlines in his *Homo academicus*. Marginal is a characteristic of Dumézil's career. Let us recall some of the major milestones.

He was demobilized in 1918—he was twenty years old at the time—and remained a high school teacher for only six months, living on various means before taking up a series of posts abroad, which enabled him to learn languages and to become acquainted with different cultures.

First, he was a French lecturer at the University of Warsaw. He did not enjoy it, but, as Claude Lévi-Strauss noted, it was a "good opportunity for him to learn Polish and Russian." Then Turkey, where in 1925, Georges Dumézil was giving a course in the history of religions at the University of Istanbul. "Mustapha Kemal," observed the same Lévi-Strauss, "had been told that in France, this kind of teaching had served the struggle against clericalism, and he wanted to try the remedy on his Muslim compatriots. Thanks to him and to , the Faculty of Letters of Istanbul was, for five years, the only one in the world where any degree included a compulsory examination in the history of religions."

It was during this stay that Dumézil discovered the Caucasians of Turkey and the USSR, in particular the Ossetians, the last descendants of the Scythians, whose language and culture he would save.

He left Turkey in 1931 for Sweden, as a lecturer in French at the University of Upsala. For two years, he resumed his "Indo-European project through Swedish, Old Scandinavian and the folklore of Northern Europe."

Finally, he returned to France, but remained still outside the "canonical" university: first to the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1933l then in 1948 to the Collège de France, where he taught for 20 years until his retirement in 1968, as the holder of what would eventually be called the "Chair of Indo-European Civilization."

His work was only slowly recognized, encountering, perhaps even more in France than abroad, the opposition, the hostility even, of certain solidly established figures. It was the Scandinavian scholars (Swedish, Danish, Norwegian) who first accepted his work with warmth, shortly after 1945. The dissemination of his work remained for a long time limited to a narrow circle of specialists, not always benevolent, and sometimes a little outdated. Dumézil had to fight bitterly, even polemically (we will talk about this later), to get his ideas across. But gradually his influence widened. As early as 1968, Pierre Nora regularly included his books in the prestigious "Bibliothèque des sciences humaines," thus putting his work before the eyes of the general educated public. "What readership I do have," said Dumézil, "I owe to Gallimard and to this collection." But Gallimard was not the only one; Payot and Flammarion also published his works in collections for the "educated general public."

Official honors followed: the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, then the Académie Française, where he was received in 1979, along with that other outsider who was also his friend, Claude Lévi-Strauss. International recognition also came to him, in the form of numerous invitations for courses or conferences. In the United States, we can mention the University of Chicago, where his friend Mircea Eliade invited him, the University of California in Los Angeles, the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton; in Belgium, the University of Brussels and the University of Liège.

After scientific recognition, came the supreme recognition of our time—that which comes from the media. In 1984, Pierre Dumayet met Dumézil for more than an hour for the program "D'Homme à Homme," which he presented on TF1. But this was only the beginning. 1986 became the "Dumézil year." Every self-respecting weekly wanted an interview with the scholar (*Magazine littéraire*, April 1986; *Le Point*, June 1986, *Le Vif-L'express*, September 1986). But the apotheosis was the special broadcast of *Apostrophes* that Bernard Pivot devoted to Dumézil, on July 18, 1986, a few months before his death. But Dumézil was not beguiled by this media hype: "Half a century ago, who would have thought of asking Meillet, Sylvain Lévi, for a public presentation of their discoveries on a music-hall stage? With television, we are there, and well beyond."

In any case, Bernard Pivot went to interview him at his home, at 82 rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs in Paris, an apartment that was, it was said, a "cathedral of books." The meeting was memorable, and our colleague André Molitor evoked it in this very room, on November 3, 1986: "Those of us who recently saw on television this 88-year-old man explain his work, with simplicity, were struck and conquered by his strong personality."

And it is true: the image that the scientist gave was endearing; his simplicity, his reserve, his authority, his conviction, the clarity of his presentation, the art with which he was able to convey a particularly difficult subject, all this was impressive and demanded admiration. In fact, practically until his death, he preserved a lucidity and a vigor of spirit.

And then there were those precious interviews with Didier Éribon, which also date from the last months of his life (between February and July 1986). Dumézil, for the very first time, discovered himself in public with simplicity and lucidity, evoking less perhaps his work than his life and his personal path, speaking very freely about his teachers, his friends, his literary and philosophical tastes, his political temptations of youth, life, religion, death.

He died a few months later, on October 11, 1986, at 88 years of age, after having left behind him an immense, innovative, disturbing work, a work also which one is easily characterized as fluid, because it does not present anything fixed; and it is also what sometimes made its access difficult. In fact, as the creator of a new discipline in the field of Indo-European studies, Dumézil had to develop his own method, and when one innovates, trial and error are inevitable. His approach and his thinking were progressively clarified and corrected from one study to the next; and the critics, who eagerly followed his work, were often behind this evolution. The fact, moreover, that he himself disavowed what he had written up to 1938 on the grounds of a methodological flaw, dismayed some who preferred to "wait and see."

I will not say anything here about the political recuperations that some people, in particular in the French New Right, have tried to make of Dumézil's theories, recuperations that have nothing to do with scientific research, and which have at times contributed to the visceral and passionate rejection of his theses.

In any case, this grandiose work is that of a discreet and modest scholar, even if his polemic was bitter, formidable, and full of a ferocious spirit. He had to fight constantly, almost until the end, to have his ideas recognized: "I spent my time," he said, "polemicizing, but only because I was attacked. One can count on the fingers of one hand the offensives that I myself have initiated against someone, without him having first opened hostilities." Dumézil felt that he had nothing to impose on anyone; that he had no right to do so. "I am not," he said, "a master of thought." This was true in the scientific field, where he systematically refused to have disciples, to direct works; it was also true in political matters. He admitted to a brief "political temptation" for Action Française at the end of the First World War, but the

figure of the committed intellectual, so common in the French tradition, was absolutely foreign to him: "I even feel," he confided to his interlocutor, "a kind of repulsion for people who hold this role."

It is because deep down, this enthusiast, author of a work as fascinating as it is impressive, this polemicist who fought ceaselessly to have the importance of his discoveries recognized, this master who unquestionably transformed the field of Indo-European studies, was a skeptic. Someone once compared him to a rationalist of the Enlightenment: "You flatter me," he replied. "I would have liked to be a man of the eighteenth century, but with the feeling that these great minds did not have, for the ephemeral, for the inaccessible." He became a Freemason in a workshop of the Grand Lodge shortly after his return from Sweden (in 1933), and declared more than 50 years later: "I am still a Freemason; initiation is like baptism, irreversible. But I am in sleep, as they say." He was agnostic: "Of this self, what will remain after my death, does not worry me. Most probably, nothing will remain of it."

But perhaps the best example of his "detachment" is his attitude towards his work and the fate it would have after his death. He provides for us an extraordinary lesson.

In fact, when Jean Mistler presented him with his academician's sword in 1979, Dumézil gave an address, in which he emphasized the relative and provisional character of his work: "I know, because it is a law without exception. I know that this work, in fifty, perhaps in twenty, in ten years, will only be of historical interest; that it will be, by putting things at their worst, ruined, by putting things at their best—which is my hope—pruned, re-trimmed, transformed." He took up the same idea seven years later in his *Entretiens avec Didier Éribon*: "Believe me, I have a very strong feeling of the incomplete, relative character of my results. I seem to be modest, but it's true; I think so deeply. The results of our teachers were also relative and provisional—but where would we be without them?"

And *Entretiens avec Didier Éribon* ends in the following way.

Éribon: "One day, you told me: if I am wrong, my life has no meaning."

Dumézil: "My scientific life, yes. But even that is not true: even if I am wrong; it will have had a function; it will have amused me. In any case, today it is too late to do it again. I can no longer escape it. Supposing I am totally wrong, my Indo-Europeans will be like Riemann's and Lobachevsky's geometries: constructions outside the real. This is already not so bad. It will mean changing me from

one shelf to another in the libraries: I will pass into the 'novels' section."

He was sincere in his expression—full of his usual humor—of the provisional and imperfect character of his work. And yet, his influence, in all sectors of Indo-European studies, is considerable today, and we can say, paraphrasing slightly the words of André Molitor, that his work, long disputed, still sometimes discussed, has now acquired the right to be cited.

And I will leave it to Claude Lévi-Strauss to conclude by welcoming Georges Dumézil under the [dome of the Quai Conti](#): "In your person, Sir, we salute a master of more than encyclopedic knowledge, whose genius was able to establish, between fields that were apparently very distant from one another, and that had until then remained the jealously guarded preserve of specialists, connections that upset everything we thought we knew about the distant past, and which also opened up entirely new perspectives on what you call 'the dynamics of the human mind.'"

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[Featured image](#): Georges Dumezil at his office, August 29, 1984.

