

Johan Huizinga and Leo Spitzer: The notion of “*Stimmung*” revisited

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In December 1972 Groningen University commemorated the hundredth birthday of Johan Huizinga, its former student and erstwhile professor. A five-day conference with a panoply of scholars, among whom were Gerhard Oestreich, Philippe Ariès, Ernest Gombrich and Jean-Claude Margolin, covered the major themes and intellectual affinities of the preeminent Dutch historian.

Among the Dutch contributors was Jan Kamerbeek Jr, Professor of Comparative Literature at Amsterdam University. He discussed the “affinity”, as he romantically called it, between the historian Huizinga and the philologist Ernst Robert Curtius. This affinity was to him “ein Datum intuitiver Evidenz”, a fact of intuitive self-evidence.

Kamerbeek, a brilliant scholar, used to roam as a reader on a different compass from ordinary academic travel. A sense of quality he called it, and he shared it with Huizinga: thinking not just *about* but *with* literature, both feeling and critical acumen, a sort of “talent” but then for readers.¹

Kamerbeek (1973, 175–192) focused on four essential interfaces between the two scholars, who had never met and were unfamiliar with each other’s work. He concentrated on the shared formative influence of Symbolism, their common interest in the Middle Ages, and the fact that they were both not only philologists but critics of culture as well. Four vastly different topics, forming nevertheless a heterogeneous unity, a unique constellation of attitude to life and a life’s work.²

In another context I have tried to shed some light on a comparable connection between Huizinga and Romanic philology in Germany in general, the inspired family of readers that considered Friedrich Christian Dietz and Leopold von Ranke as its founding fathers. It blossomed at the beginning of the 20th century with scholars such as Curtius, Spitzer and Auerbach (Otterspeer 2016, 19–28; Gumbrecht 2002).

Like Kamerbeek I focused on four similarities: an assumption, an experience, an analysis and a tool. Their common assumption was that culture was defined by harmony, by the unity and inseparability of the hearts and minds of its participants. This unity gave culture its metaphysical aura, a musical harmony of the individual soul with the cosmos. They believed that this harmony once existed and that it, quite recently, had been radically disturbed.

The feeling of unity that they cherished with respect to culture provided them with a very specific methodological assumption, which can best be described as a form of

homeopathy. Where everything was linked, a secret affinity arose, and those who could sense it, were able to find it again in every given thing, down to the smallest detail.

The insight into this connectedness often came in the form of an epiphany, a shock or a flash. Theirs was a theory of essential details or privileged aspects, the insight into a mysterious economy of part and whole that cannot be taught. “Sie müssen einem aufleuchten” in the words of Curtius (1925, 16–17). It was all about “the inner click”, according to Spitzer (1967, 7).

It was, above all, the ability to see the abstract in the concrete. They used, in the happy phrase of Spitzer, “warm abstractions”, abstractions that are felt and, rather than being used to sever our bonds with life, are organic and remain close to the body. The connection between part and whole, between detail and totality, intrigued them.

And all of them assumed a fairly similar description of that relationship in their definition of “form”. Curtius used the notion of “intellectual constitution”, Spitzer that of “inner form” and “inner life centre”. “The lifeblood of poetic imagination is everywhere the same,” says Spitzer, “whether we are tapping the organism for ‘language’ or ‘ideas’, ‘plot’ or ‘composition’” (Kowal 1973, XIII; quoted by Spitzer 1967, 18).

This quotation is the “inner click” of this essay. The nucleus of Huizinga’s oeuvre, the seed from which everything else grew, can be found in the “Introduction and Proposal for a Study of Light and Sound”, a plan for a dissertation that he submitted in 1896. He had prepared it in Leipzig, where he had been enrolled for six months – the winter semester of 1895–96 – after graduating from Groningen University.

This plan proved to be deceptive and Huizinga later on would choose a less ambitious subject – a study of Sanskrit theatre. Nonetheless, the proposal contained a number of brilliant ideas about nothing less than the origins of language. In Huizinga’s view, language came into being in the same way as poetry: as a lyrical mixture of sensory impressions.

Still, this directly felt, sensory language had a tendency towards erosion. In his proposal, Huizinga quotes the 19th-century German novelist Jean Paul, who calls language “a dictionary of faded metaphors”. Born in poetry, language became utilitarian. Only in literature did it regain its old splendour. But from those eroded forms you could still deduce the earliest associations: amid those dusty cinders, the original spark still burned.

And it is here that the young graduate wrote something strikingly similar to what Spitzer half a century later intended: “I therefore consider it justifiable, to equate a metaphor that occurs somewhere in Aeschylus, say, with an expression from everyday life in another, arbitrary, language, that is based on the same association, and thus to show that the lyrical function is the same everywhere” (Huizinga 1996, 51). For Huizinga as well as for Spitzer this lyrical function was *Stimmung*, a notion that I now want to turn to for the rest of my contribution.

Recent publications – I refer to the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Anna Katherina Gisbertz – show the contemporary importance of this aesthetic notion. The publication of the 2013 volume *Stimmung und Methode* by Frederike Reents and Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek is especially important. It’s a reminder not only of the

recurrent relevance of the notion, but also of how traditional scholarship, in the practice of philologists like Huizinga and Spitzer, can be surprisingly modern.³

The affinity between Huizinga and Spitzer may be a fact of intuitive evidence; however, this does not apply to their personalities. Anyone who compares the biography Anton van der Lem wrote about Huizinga with the long essay by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht dedicated to Spitzer must be struck by the great personal differences between the two scholars.⁴

Whereas Huizinga was all tact and taste, Spitzer was often rude; while Huizinga was a man of peace and a great friend, Spitzer was a polemicist by nature, who cherished his enemies. Huizinga was level-headed and in control of himself; Spitzer was unbalanced and capricious. For Huizinga marital fidelity came naturally, while Spitzer was a devoted womanizer.

Huizinga was a man of intimacy, a real amateur; Spitzer was all bravado, a real virtuoso. Huizinga had the patience for great syntheses; Spitzer would become famous for the variety of his essays. They both cherished harmony, but while Huizinga's character, life and world view were *wohltemporiert* to a degree, for Spitzer harmony was, in the words of Gumbrecht, "eine existentielle Situation, welche er nie erlangen sollte" (2002, 122).

Yet, both men were gifted language animals, speakers of many languages, although Huizinga would never brag about it as Spitzer did. Both were deeply influenced by the development of Sanskrit studies, by the relationship of all Indo-European languages. And although they felt the influence of modern positivist linguistic study, they both cherished the connection between language and thought, between literature and history.

They both wanted to combine *strenge Wissenschaft* with *Erlebnis* and *Nachfühlung*, severe criticism with *Fingerspitzengefühl*. For both reading was direct contact, history was real presence. Historical understanding was for both philological reenactment. In the words of Goethe: "to think again what has once been thought" (quoted by Spitzer 1963, 3).

In 1963 Spitzer published his *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*. The book dated back to two learned articles in *Traditio*, from the end of the Second World War.⁵ Its subtitle was *Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung"*. It was a stunning little book, half text, half critical apparatus, *Begriffsgeschichte* as philological reenactment, a mosaic of quotations from all the languages of our civilization about the elusive notion of cosmic harmony and the *musica mundana* that inspired both the stars and the hearts of men.

To give the reader a "feel" of the complex notion of *Stimmung*, Spitzer (1963, 6) quotes from *Die Französische Kultur*, the book Curtius wrote about France in the 1930s. It is an evocative passage about Paris, its mixture of past and present, its juxtaposition of the common and the extraordinary, the small and the monumental:

All these contrasts are gathered in a united atmosphere and mood in which the grace of cheerful gardens, the intimacy of street life, the rhythm of the Seine bridges, the grey water of the powerful stream, the geometry of the *immeubles*, the specific character of the *quartiers* harmonize together (1975, 152).

This is precisely what Huizinga tried to convey when he referred to *stemming*.⁶ He too was particularly evocative in his description of Old Dutch towns, their plain architecture, “consisting of a *je ne sais quoi* of [architecturally] highly modest formal rhythm, and an inward-looking privacy”. The beauty of Dutch towns was not purely a matter of architecture. A town was a *Gesamttheater*, a total spectacle, comprising urban structure and the surrounding area, location and life, indeed, even the carillon sounding over the red roofs.

According to Huizinga, a very precise sentiment or mood permeated the entire intellectual and religious life of the Republic. He situated that life in the merchants’ houses in the cities and the country houses just outside them, in the atmosphere of “the agreeable country life, celebrated by Vondel with the song of blackbirds and nightingales”. Amsterdam in particular, with its concentric canals lined on both sides with stately mansions, “grand and yet simple”, and that far outshone Versailles in architectural value, represented Dutch culture at its richest and most intimate. “If the atmosphere of the century has been preserved anywhere, it is along the Amsterdam canals on a Sunday morning in spring, or in the late light of a summer evening.”⁷

It is in the introduction to *Classical and Christian Ideas* that the intellectual affinity between Spitzer and Huizinga reveals itself for the first time. In his study of *Stimmung*, he wanted, Spitzer said, to recreate a concrete linguistic-historic continuity from ancient Greece and Rome via the Christian Middle Ages to our modern secularized era. In doing so, he preferred to focus on synthesis more than analysis, on continuities more than on differences.

Yet he was well aware, he said, of the dangers such a synthetic attitude implied, “doubly so,” he emphasized, “in a study on *musica mundana* to which no mortal ear can ever boast to have been coldly objective; for world music is, perhaps, what a German coinage could express: *der Seelenheimatlaut*, the music of man’s nostalgia yearning homeward – heavenward!” (Spitzer 1963, 4)

For Huizinga continuities too counted more than change and for that reason, change often turning into downright loss, nostalgia permeated his work. He found it in the change of seasons as much as in Dutch city life. Many Dutch cities had kept their 17th-century charm until the end of the 19th century, he wrote. “An elegiac lament about the loss of beautiful city views and natural scenery should not be dismissed as the reactionary grumbling of an old man,” he says *en passant*. “The younger generations do not know, nor can they know, the beauty of which they have been deprived, beauty that the older generations of today have known and enjoyed until quite recently” (1948b, 441–442).

But there is more. “And yet,” Spitzer continued his introduction,

too intellectual an attitude toward one of the most heart-inspiring cosmic conceptions ever imagined would be an unnecessary, if not an impossible, sacrifice to scholarly impassivity. We have in our republic of letters too many scholars whose abstract coolness is due largely to their lack of belief in what they have chosen to study, and I feel that the scholar cannot adequately portray what he does not love with all the fibers of his heart (and even a “hating love” would be better than indifference: I side with Phaedrus in the *Symposium*, speaking of Eros: ὁ γὰρ χρῆν ἀνθρώποις ἡγεῖσθαι παντός τοῦ βίου (1963, 4).

Huizinga could have written this. Saints and heroes, history was full of them, at least in Huizinga's eyes. His work is populated by people he admired, events he celebrated, and phenomena with which he identified. Time and again he repeated that modern man lacked the wherewithal to comprehend the past in all its passion. "Modern men are generally incapable of imagining the unbridled excess and inflammability of the mediaeval mind." "The Middle Ages knew none of the emotions that have made our own sense of justice fearful and faltering. [...] Where we, in our hesitancy and semi-contrition, apply lenient sentences, mediaeval justice knows only two extremes: the full measure of cruel punishment and clemency" (Huizinga 1949a, 19, 26).

And although passion was both hate and love, love was the prime mover in Huizinga's cosmos, a typical blend of ardour and convention, of passion and harmony. And he found it in its purest form in the Middle Ages he studied, the formalized love he found in Dante. Dante was the first to develop an ideal of love "with a negative tonic" – that of loss and deprivation – which Huizinga calls "one of the most significant changes in the mediaeval mind". For Huizinga love was defined by a dialectic of carnal knowledge and sacred knowledge; the precise wording he found in the oxymorons of Alan of Lille: "Pax odio, fraudique fides, spes iuncta timori / Est amor et mixtus cum ratione furor": "Love is peace joined to hatred, loyalty to treachery, / hope mixed with fear, and fury with reason" (1949a, 128–129; 1949b, 36).

For Spitzer *Stimmung* was an untranslatable notion, a word with two distinct etymons, a definite sentiment with two semantic threads: "the unity of feelings experienced by man face to face with his environment (a landscape, nature, one's fellow man)". It comprehended and welded together "the objective (factual) and the subjective (psychological) into one harmonious unity". "From fugitive emotionalism to an objective understanding of the world", such was the range of the German word (1963, 5–6).

It endowed the universe with human feelings: "sympathy (the human capacity of suffering with one's fellow man) is attributed to the stars in a kind of cosmic empathy". It contrasted "the concord of the elements, of nature, and the animals with the egotism (pleonexia) of petty man and his communities". It tried to catch the sympathetic harmony that welded together man and nature, the individual soul and the cosmos.

The word had a strong musical connotation, due to its origin in the Pythagorean and Platonic tradition of both scientific quantification and religious inspiration. Its semantic texture consisted mainly of two threads according to Spitzer, "well-tempered mixture" on the one hand, "harmonious consonance" on the other. As such it suggested both a changing, temporary condition, the fleeting "mood of the moment" as well as the stable "tunedness" of the soul (7).

A "dialectics of integrated contrasts", such seemed the best way to catch the complex character of both form and content, linguistic and semantic history of the word. "Harmony dominates, but a harmony which comprehends strife and antagonism as a synthesis." It is the triumph of concord over the discordant, the thinking-together of two antagonistic forces of harmonious unification and discordant manifoldness (9).

This definition, "harmony dominates, but a harmony which comprehends strife

and antagonism as a synthesis”, is an adequate description of Huizinga’s view both of culture in general and the function of historical research in particular. Integrated contrasts can be said to summarize his method.

Huizinga’s use of contrasts was a deliberate choice. History could only be perceived coherently, he wrote, “by resolving events into a dramatic scheme”. A cultural phenomenon could only be truly comprehended “by defining it within an equilibrium of continuing oppositions”.

Huizinga used oppositions of this kind for their highly ethical as much as for their highly dramatic content.

Dramatic – since people always perceive great tragic contrast in an inevitable lack of mutual understanding: the benightedness of the conservatives and the hubris of the innovators. Ethical – since people always share a respect for what is dead and beautiful, and a love of what is young and alive. Once an observer takes sides, the opposition is assigned a place as an episode in the cosmic struggle between light and dark, good and evil (1950a, 251–252).

These contrasts were more than a way of underpinning an argument or enlivening an image. Huizinga was convinced that they were embedded in the past reality itself. That was what made history so concrete, so vivid: the fact that it almost always manifested itself in terms of oppositions. “Clashes of arms, clashes of opinions, these are the constant themes of the historical narrative” (1950b, 137).

History according to Huizinga was essentially epic or dramatic. Whether fact or fiction, historical representations did not acquire clear contours until brought into a conscious play of opposites: “Athens does not become intelligible to us until it is contrasted with Sparta, we comprehend Rome through contrasts with Greece, Plato through Aristotle, Luther through Erasmus, Rembrandt through Rubens” (1949b, 397).

This is precisely what Spitzer does when he tries to understand and illustrate the two different semantic threads of *Stimmung*, contrasting the polyphony of Ambrose and to the monody of Augustine in a very effective way.

Whereas it is the practice of Ambrose to show the ordered richness and plenitude of the world, and his choirs are the polyphonic responses of a spatially immense universe filled with grace, with Augustine the emphasis is on the monodic, on the one pervading *order* of the richness as it reveals itself in the linear succession of *time* (1963, 28).

Stimmung, *stemming*, “mood”, was no doubt the most important concept in Huizinga’s work. It was both prescriptive and descriptive; it applied to both scholarship and culture. Like Spitzer he opposed a one-sided, rational approach to language. Like Spitzer he advocated the fusion of philology and history into a rich mixture of humanist learning. Like Spitzer he emphasized the combination of “the greatest attainable objectivity” with “strong subjective emotion”.

Huizinga used all kinds of different words for *stemming*. In his book about the United States, *Man and the Masses in America*, he had called it “insight”, meaning “that immensely lucid perception of the innermost quality of things, that sense for what transcends mundane reality”. In *The Waning of the Middle Ages* he called it “symbolism”, “the mystery of the mundane”. In his book about 17th-century Dutch culture he called it “realism”, “a belief in the essence and significance of things”. “It

corresponded to his innermost sense of piety, that all of this should be appreciated as God-given” (see Otterspeer 2010, 113–128).

The notion of *Stimmung* is also central to *Homo Ludens*. The qualities that transcend the immediately discernible reality manifest themselves pre-eminently in play. Huizinga writes that the heart of play, the ritual act, the sacred deed, is

more than a seeming actualization, more even than a symbolic actualization. In the spectacle, something invisible assumes an inexplicit, beautiful, actual, sacred form. The participants are convinced that the ritual brings about a certain salvation, and activates a higher order of things than the one in which they usually live (1950a, 41–42).

The affinity between Huizinga and Spitzer is not only a matter of content, but also of form. This can be recognized in the stylistic devices they used. One of the ways in which they tried to solve the problem of contrast for instance was the use of a figure of speech, the oxymoron. In the oxymoron two opposed concepts are yoked together, a device Huizinga once called “ostensible absurdity that resolves itself into irony” (1948b, 467).

Spitzer had a definite predilection for this trope, for instance when he, in his criticism of the aloofness of modern scholars, speaks of “hating love” instead of “indifference”. His key witness, Ambrose, used to invoke his *sobria ebrietas*, his sober drunkenness, to describe his oceanic feeling of the unity of nature and man. Ambrose was, according to Spitzer, a conservative revolutionary; Dante was a traditional modernist, an example of the “mystery of clarity”, “so dear to the Latin poets” (1963, 23–24, 94).

The oxymoron was also one of Huizinga’s favorite tropes. He saw the American political parties as “vast cliques”, and defined American society as “organized individualism” and “giant-sized parochialism”. Huizinga uses the phrase “conservative revolution”, trying to come to terms with both the 17th-century Netherlands and the modern United States. The visual arts were “silent speech”, he knew “formless form” and “genuine imitation”. He minted notions such as “surface civilization”, “middle-class aristocracy”, and “armchair shepherd” (see again Otterspeer 2010, 113–128).

Another device is their use of synesthesia. “Synesthetic apperception”, Spitzer writes, “always bears witness to the idea of world harmony.” “All the senses converge into one harmonious feeling.” Ambrose and Dante are his best witnesses, both for the harmony of their polyphonic richness, “welding together, not only the spheres of the Beyond with those of this world, but also the techniques of modern humanity and the beliefs of antiquity,” finding the exactitude of time in architecture, poetry, music and dancing (1963, 24, 94, 133–134).

For Huizinga synesthesia was the cradle of language. It was in the creative unity of impressions encapsulated in mood, in the collaboration of the senses, that words were formed. A word was created in the fusion of a tone and a feeling, the German *Gefühlston* came closest in describing it, and that was why he used the equally synesthetic word *stemming* (1996, 51).

The same goes for their shared identification of the beautiful and the good in the Greek notion of *kalokagathia*. This fusion of the “kalos” and the “agathos”, defining the Greek ideal of harmony and courage, became according to Spitzer, through Neoplatonism and Christianity, a most influential metaphor. About Ambrose, Spitzer says: “This Christian knows how to weave into the ‘goodness’ of the biblical text the

Greek kalokagathia without letting his community forget the Creator: indeed this beautiful and good world leads toward the transcendental God” (1963, 14, 21, 34).

Huizinga made the connection explicit in *Homo Ludens*. “A straight line runs from the knight through the *honnête homme* of the seventeenth century to the modern ‘gentleman’”. For him this was an inheritance of the Greek notion of “kalokagathia”: “In its cult of the life of the noble warrior, the Latinate West also incorporated the ideal of courtship, wove it through its fabric so tightly that in the course of time, the weft concealed the warp” (1950a, 133).

It was a primitive ascetic emotion with the same religious overtones it had for Spitzer. For both philologists this religious inspiration was associated with the philosophy of Plato and with Platonism. It was the identification of individual soul with world soul, with world harmony, prompted by the Pythagorean myth, and endorsed by Plato.

Another deep affinity can be found in their shared notion of mysticism. Spitzer opposes the mysticism of boundless enthusiasm to a mysticism of order, passion no longer represented as *perturbation*, as in Stoicism and Epicureanism and earlier dogmatic Christianity, “but as a positive, a good thing” (1963, 96).

Huizinga makes the same distinction when he discriminates between the negative and the positive, the drunk and the sober mysticism, mysticism *en gros*, and mysticism *en detail*. The first variant was marked by contempt of the world and sought to quantify God and salvation. The latter found the mystery of the union with God in the simple acceptance of nature – a mysticism that did not make culture redundant, but contributed to it.

Huizinga and Spitzer were hardly aware of each other’s work. There is only one reference to Spitzer in Huizinga (not in his work but in his letters, Hansen – Krul – Van der Lem 1990, 493) and none to my knowledge to Huizinga in Spitzer, although I cannot imagine that Spitzer had not read *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. But there is a deep affinity in their mental make-up, only to be described as a “family resemblance”. But for those who do not want to take refuge in Wittgensteinian imagery, there is the more apt image of *concordance*, of an agreement based on tunedness. On *Stimmung*. Their minds simply were in *consonance*.

In my book *Reading Huizinga* I emphasize the essentially anti-modernist character of Huizinga’s work, which can only be understood in grasping his view of humanity. This view was to a large extent determined by the role he accorded to the emotions, to love and loyalty, friendship and faithfulness. To comprehend Huizinga’s position, we must place his views in the context of the transformation that passion underwent in the course of time. This transformation is best described by Max Weber and his notion of the “Entzauberung der Welt”. And it is precisely this notion that Spitzer uses when he wants to explain why the field of meaning associated with the word *Stimmung* no longer existed.

The history of the disappearance of this field – the combination of world harmony and well-temperedness – is, writes Spitzer, “simply the history of modern civilization, of the Weberian ‘Entzauberung der Welt’, or dechristianization” (1963, 75). That is why he, like Huizinga, wanted to introduce a new periodization of occidental history.

For Spitzer the destruction was completed in the 18th century; for Huizinga it

was a century later, but for both of them the great caesura was the epoch of dechristianization. It was in that period in which the field of *Stimmung*, according to Spitzer, was radically destroyed. “At the end of the eighteenth *Stimmung* was crystallized, that is, it was robbed of its blossoming life” (76). A very appropriate, essentially “Huizinga-esque” imagery.

NOTES

- ¹ For a recent plea, see Cave 2016.
- ² In an earlier essay “Huizinga en de Beweging van Tachtig” (1954, 145–164), Kamerbeek had assessed the extent to which Huizinga’s view of the world and his pattern of thought were determined by antinomies of Dutch thinking in the 1880s and 1890s, a framework of passionate discussions about reason versus passion, form versus content, individual versus community, art versus society. See also my essay *Eén druppel wijn. Lezen en werk van J. Kamerbeek Jr.* (Otterspeer 1993, 52–76).
- ³ See Gumbrecht 2011 (English translation 2012. *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung. On a Hidden Potential of Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press); Gisbertz 2009; Gisbertz 2011; Reents – Meyer-Sickendiek 2013.
- ⁴ See van der Lem 1993; Gumbrecht 2002, 72–151.
- ⁵ *Traditio* 2 (1944): 409–464 and *Traditio* 3 (1945): 307–364.
- ⁶ I summarize here the findings of the sixth chapter, “Harmony”, of my book *Reading Huizinga* (2010, 113–128).
- ⁷ “Nederland’s beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw” (Huizinga 1948a, 441).

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Johan Huizinga and Leo Spitzer: the notion of "Stimmung" revisited

Huizinga. Spitzer. "Stimmung".

Huizinga was a readers' writer, and as such part of a long tradition. As a writer, he was a member of a relatively small philological circle, consisting of the readers in the most important languages of Ancient Europe, and in this way the re-creators of the ancient unity of the Latinitas from which colloquial Latin had originated. These readers were forced to acknowledge that that which had once split into different languages was now disintegrating further as a result of specialization. One of the most important branches of this family was Romanic philology in Germany, with Friedrich Christian Dietz and Leopold von Ranke as its founding fathers. It blossomed at the beginning of the 20th century with scholars such as Vossler, Curtius, Spitzer and Auerbach. In my contribution I will concentrate on Leo Spitzer. I will focus on four things he had in common with Huizinga: an assumption, an experience, an analysis and a tool. Their assumption was that culture was defined by harmony, by the unity and inseparability of the hearts and minds of its participants. This unity gave a culture its metaphysical aura; it was a musical harmony of the individual soul with the cosmos. They believed that this harmony once existed and it was their common experience that had been radically disturbed.

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