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August 31, 2009: Is Everything Mysterious Vacuous?

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Title: Is Everything Mysterious Vacuous?

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8/31/2009—I came across an odd, but perhaps revealing criticism of Teilhard de Chardin in a July 2, 2009 letter to the New York Review of Books by Edward Oakes, a Catholic Priest who teaches at the University of St. Mary of the Lake. Oakes' criticism of Chardin—the precise context does not matter, I think—was that “Teilhard's writings are a farrago of Bergsonian vacuities” referring to Henri Bergson, presumably. (farrago is a medly: I just looked that up). Oakes quotes Peter Medawar's description of Chardin's work *The Phenomenon of Man* as “tipsy, euphoristic prose-poetry” that “creates the illusion of content”. Now in part this criticism of Chardin is humorous because, as Joyce Carol Oates responds in the New York Review, she is unable to “perceive significant distinctions” between the vacuity of Chardin and the vacuity, again I presume, of transubstantiation, which of course Oakes must believe not to be vacuous. But there is a more serious matter here. Both on the left—the hard materialists of netroots nation—and on the right—the First Things crowd (Oakes writes for the magazine)—there is agreement that anything beautiful or mysterious is bull. I was asked after the convention, for example, to define meaning, something I would have thought no human being could live without and thus would not need a definition of. Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit paleontologist, and by all accounts a good scientist. If someone like Chardin is struck by the fact that matter tends to life and then to consciousness, maybe that is something worth pondering. Maybe matter really is mysterious. Maybe reality itself really is mysterious.