

Diana at Her Bath

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The Women of Rome

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d'un Certain Comportement des Dames Romaines
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Diana at Her Bath

Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

*Nunc tibi me posito visam velamine narres
Si poteris narrare, licet.¹*

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III

I would like to talk about Diana and Actaeon, two names that will evoke few things or many in the mind of the reader: a situation, poses, forms, the subject of a painting, though hardly of a legend, since the image and the story, popularized by encyclopedias, have reduced these two names—the first of which was but one of the many that the goddess bore in the eyes of a now vanished humanity—to the sole vision of bathing women surprised by an intruder. Even so, this vision, if not “the best we’ve had,” is in any case the most difficult thing to imagine. But if the reader is not entirely devoid of memories, and of memories transmitted by other memories, these two words may suddenly shine like a burst of splendor and emotion. This humanity that has vanished to the point that the term “vanished” no longer has any meaning—despite our ethnologies, all our museums and everything else—how could such a humanity have even existed? And yet what it daydreamed, what through Actaeon’s eyes it saw in its waking dream to the point of imagining Actaeon’s eyes, comes down to us like the light of constellations which for us are now

¹ “Now you may tell you saw me here unclothed, / If you can tell at all.”
(Translator’s note.)

extinct, forever remote: the exploded star now flashes inside us, in the darkness of our memory, in the great starry night that we carry in our hearts but flee in our fallacious light of day. And there we trust ourselves to our *living* language. Yet at times between two everyday words a few syllables of *dead* languages will slip out, ghost-words that have the transparency of a flame at high noon or the moon in an azure sky. But the moment we shelter them in the penumbra of our spirit they become intensely bright: and thus do the names Diana and Actaeon for an instant give their hidden meaning back to the trees, the thirsty stag, and the pool, mirror of impalpable nudity.

Shall we ask the theologians whether, of all the theophanies that have ever occurred, there is any more disturbing than the one where the goddess presents herself to man, then slips away from him in the alluring guise of the dazzling and murderous maiden? Or should sorcerers, astrologers and midwives, or better yet illuminated huntsmen be instead the ones to interpret for us these emblems so diverse in kind: bow, moon, dogs, torches, stags, pregnant women's gowns, rods for whipping ephebes, hunting spears, flowers of sacred trees? Perhaps they will tell us whether the lesson of so many signs, before leading to certain practices, would enable one to grasp the theophany in all its contradictory aspects: virginity and death, night and light, chastity and seduction. Regulating the ceaseless movement between the lowest regions to which we are inclined to descend and the highest to which we aspire, the virgin's bow guards us against the lowest, where she, however, reigns *possessible*, just as her crescent guides us in our ascent toward the highest regions, where she dwells *unpossessed*. Whosoever devotes himself to one of these aspects immediately brings upon himself the contradiction of the other. Hunters who invoke her, take care not to examine this contradiction too closely: else you shall know a fate too much like that of the prey. The bow you bend is the flexible material of the maiden's sacrament; to each of your desires corresponds an arrow from her quiver; and just as the string slackens upon the arrow's

flight, so does life upon desire's flight. And such is your destiny: if your shafts strike the sighted prey, it is at the cost of your covetous wishes. But when time comes to share your booty with her, be temperate and watchful: the Archer has laid down her bow, and you face the supreme test: in Artemis, Elaphia falls off to sleep, and Britomartis, the sweet virgin with tender smile, appears: fecundatable but not yet fecundated, robust and more alluring than ever, but still inaccessible among the nymphs, hounds and slaughtered game: your supreme test indeed, Meleager, when in the slender form of Atalanta she consents to receive the tribute of your irascible passion. Will you escape the fate of Meleager? May you not be deceived by the sight of the Archer at rest and in closer connivance with the beasts than with the hunters who have joined her pack. O how excluded the hunter feels from the circle of chignons, muzzles and knees at the center of which the maiden doffs her bodice and quiver; she has left us breathless from the chase; pretending to be breathless herself, she pretends to have exhausted our ardor; and to crown all ardor, she now unveils: she reveals a body excited, a body she strokes, and since she is sweating, she will impart her secret to the pool. Aphrodite came dripping wet to offer herself to mortal eyes as the most serene of certitudes. But what is Aphrodite's certitude next to the bitterness we are left with by Artemis in water! The bath that ends Artemis's hunt is the cruelest moment of our chase: we are denied our siesta, which we were hoping to taste in the goddess's arms: and if now she asserts her untouchable nature, it is to convince us all the more of the theophanic reality of her cheeks, her breasts and her buttocks, born of the death of our senses, while the pool envelops with its restless ripples the virgin fleece, the fecundatable womb caressed by the soft palms that tensed the bow, the supple fingers that chose the arrows and now play over the navel and hardened breasts . . .

Is there any vision more mad than the one that greets Actaeon's eyes through the parted foliage? Is he really dreaming so deeply at high noon, to the sound of the horn? Was it chance or groping desire that guided his steps on the path to salvation, in the midst of malediction? Did he really believe the maiden could be seized in her unscizable divinity? Was it he who gave this theophany its forms? Was he its exegete? Would Artemis ever have offered herself to the sculptors if Actaeon had not approached her? Had he wanted to lay a trap of his venatic imagination for his tutelary spirit? How odd to wish to surprise the very principle of one's vocation as if to call it into question! Must one not indeed be mad to presume that the goddess will relax, disrobe and take her pleasure in the pool; to believe that she is bored, so exceptionally bored that she will grant you an exclusive amusement and bless you with a privilege that you will pluck like a wild berry? Had Actaeon had enough of the hunt? Did he sense some deeper meaning in its uselessness? In a word, *to relinquish the prey for the shade*, was this not the secret of all hunters, since the things of this world are the shadow of things to come? But if the Kingdom belongs to the violent, then Actaeon was taking the first step on the path to wisdom when he approached that burning bush, which he parted like the first of the prophets on the march, armed and masked.

Diana and Brontes the Cyclops

The Cyclops provided Diana with her bow and arrows. Does this mean that in porrecting the goddess's attributes he was dissimulating what in fact he procured for her? That the moment Diana tore a few hairs from the furry chest of the Cyclops Brontes, she was *wrestling* with the monster whose force, recovering from the toil in the shadows, was thus pitted, in play, against the litheness of the luminous maiden? Did he not thereby trigger in her the cruel principle of her virginity? She emerged from the Cyclops's arms *confirmed* in her hardness by an attribute undreamed of by the gods and mortals (and reserved for the tongues of her hounds). Withstanding the Cyclops's assaults, she thenceforth became for a caste of initiates the inevitable rival of Aphrodite: jealous of Artemis, Aphrodite seeks in vain to mimic her—the horns of the night-orb's crescent adorning Diana's hair stand as emblem of a rite that informs the blithe chatter of the birds of the forest. But who indeed has ever seriously claimed to understand their language? It took this *heresy* for Diana, invoked by women in labor, to throw the world off the scent and to appear as the tutelary deity of fecundity as well as betrothal: she who shuns all union now receives the solemn vow of the betrothed and punishes their transgressions. But why thrash the ephebes with her lovely hand till she draws blood?

“A harsh, indeed incredible condition”

Actaeon so greatly dreaded the *threat* of Diana's hand only because he doubted the chastity of her fingers. This characteristic of the goddess was for him but a *pose*: she had something that reassured the little people, who saw in her an exceptional example of severity amidst a context of Olympian frivolity, and envisioned in her the grace of divine mercy, descended from an implacably serene sky: a tutelary deity of animal and vegetable life, favorable to betrothal as well as to the fecundity of wives, she formed healthy young girls in her own image and was nonetheless “*a lioness for women*”; she loosed ravaging monsters across the countrysides of kingdoms hostile or indifferent to her altars, as the hunt became more and more a *game* than an economic necessity, as if to remind men that, being a sign of both the dark and serene aspects of the universe, she presided over her wholeness. Now in what respect did this wholeness coincide with her virginal nature, correspond to her chastity? Why did she renounce the emotions that animate the universe? Was she hiding, from the gods as well as the mortals, her other face eternally? Actaeon did not rightly understand that the wholeness of the universe could rest on a *single* deity, nor that a feminine deity, exclusive of any male deity, might express herself in the

singleness of a *closed* nature, sufficient unto herself, finding in chastity the fullness of her essence. Goddess beyond destiny, with whom no mortal, even at destiny's behest, could presume to join in union.

"So the gods are permitted to join in union with mortal women, and men are forbidden to possess goddesses? What a harsh, indeed incredible condition!"² once exclaimed an illustrious despiser of the gods. But Actaeon had told himself the same thing long before. Perhaps he was a misogynist, but by applying the *analogy* of being to his mistrust, mystified by the diverse phases of his tutelary daemon and forthwith resolved to found a sect on the *lunatic* temperament—as well as ambitious enough to want to appear as a jealous heresiarch in the very bosom of the *Ephesian* orthodoxy—he had uncovered, in as banal an expression as *the dogs howl at the moon*, something like the vestige of a secret truth. In the same way cynegetics and astrology, though they were very different sciences, but commonly accepted on account of their pragmatic character, proved to have *one and the same unavowable object*. Except that if cynegetics, strictly speaking, is immanent, here we see it rising up to the transcendence of which astrology, when left to itself, gives such a fallacious and useless interpretation; on the other hand, when rendered serene, as it were, by a sense of cynegetic realities, astrology undergoes a laudable corrective to its reveries, humbly consenting to descend to the level of the *Dog*, which in its turn attains the sublimeness of the stars. For sometimes the crescent moon is the diadem crowning the forehead of Artemis; and sometimes it forms the horns that emerge from her hair; never, however, does the goddess wear the image of the orb at the full. Indeed, in this form, while casting

² A paraphrase of St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, L., III, 3. (Translator's note.)

its silvery charm into the tepid night, it intermingles with her most chaste attractions; invisible, it withdraws into their deepest recesses, into Artemis herself, where the best initiated of her hounds will make it rise anew.

The Silver Bow and Diana's Tree

Diana tests her *silver* bow four times; she tests it against four objects: the first time against an *elm*; the second time against an *oak*; the third time against a *deer*; the fourth time against a *City of the wicked*.

Is this part of her theophany? Or are these instead figures that render explicit the ineffable essence of her divinity? For in Diana, too, divinity must be considered in its "*height and its depth, its breadth and length*"; these four dimensions must always be conformed to: space is nothing more than spirit in its four movements.

Here, it appears, we see Diana occupying the three realms: in the sense that being herself the spiritual realm—the Archer, bearer of light—she manifests affinities with the three realms, but only through the mediation of the mineral (the silver bow) with which she maintains a secret affinity; and as this affinity extends to the *vegetable* realm in the forms of the elm and the oak, and to *animal bestiality* in the form of the deer, the investigation should end there. For can one actually classify the *City of the wicked* in the animal kingdom? Who would dare? Diana's fourth and last act, the fourth and last arrow which she reserves for the city, would therefore indicate a going beyond the three realms she

wishes to integrate into herself: and here she seems to demarcate a fourth realm with which, however, she manifests a negative affinity. For just as her *silver bow*, in the first movement, signified her positive affinity with the mineral realm in its highest and transcendent sense, so now in the last movement, the fourth, Diana indicates an affinity between animal bestiality and the psychic, as well as the *contradictory affinity* of the psychic with the spiritual, in the form of wickedness.

If one considers that the *silver bow*, which is identical to the lunar crescent and thus an emblematic image of the goddess, serves here as an instrument for the exercise of divine power, and that in this operation, *this instrument itself is put to the test*, it becomes clear that, as *silver* (mineral realm) plays an active and transcendent role in relation to the other two realms (vegetable and animal), its highest role is fulfilled in the *moral* domain: the *City of the wicked* whose *disintegrating* character immediately evokes the function, in Art, of the *spirit of sal ammoniac*. For "a bit of mercury thrown into a solution of silver by spirits of sal ammoniac attracts the silver and divides it up into the branches and foliage that represent *Diana's tree*." Thus the *silver bow* and the *City of the wicked* or, more simply, of wickedness (that other mineral), are situated, in their relation to one another, in one same spiritual region—since Diana's arrow-shot must cross the three realms in order to strike its ultimate target. An evolutionary cycle, whose stages Actaeon contemplated passing through in accordance with the acts of his tutelary daemon.

(The respect in which this exegesis of the parable seems most grievously at fault, however, is in failing to consider in any way that the *elm*, the *oak*, the *deer* and the *City of the wicked* are all precisely on the same plane; that they are situated one next to another in space; that

there is no other realm except that of this space, which is mythical; and that far from representing a gradation or progression, these four objects have the same quality in relation to Diana, and constitute the four ends of the four movements which she carries out by developing her "height, depth, breadth and length"—but not in the sense where the *elm* would be the *height*, nor the *City of the wicked* the *depth*: in fact, each of these objects gives rise to the four movements which are repeated four times, because these objects are whole and Diana's act is also whole.)

Diana strikes in succession two trees, the elm and the oak, and this duality (the tree of life and the tree of knowledge or death) involves her double nature: murderous and luminous, or rather, luminous because murderous. Her twofold state: unfecundated but fecundatable, or rather, fecundating because unfecundated. A state of wholeness based on the death of external virility—the latter being suspended as a *threat* to her immortal wholeness, and the loss of virginity here symbolizing death at the very core of incorruptible being. Herself a virgin, she acts, however, as a fecundating principle: for the virility she strikes externally is reborn inside her as the principle of life at the core of death—or as the principle of death at the core of being.

Diana next strikes a deer, the latter being a transition between the dream of desire and waking virility. Indeed, the deer prowls through the forest just as irascibility courses through our veins; yet before it can run wild in man's heart and exacerbate his mind to the point of outrage, Diana assimilates it into herself the very instant she pierces it with her divinity. Thus bestial force, struck by spirit, is taken away from man and becomes a celestial power.

Diana then casts her arrow against the City of the wicked: entirely built and peopled with those *emotions* which the virgin *anathematizes* by the very fact of her principle (chastity), a city which her own theophany *drives to insurrection*—she, the “goddess of the Outside,” becomes the perpetual excitation of the emotions subjugated on the *inside*. In a word, we have here an assembly of beings, men or daemons, who are tortured by these emotions, who know her but, pretending not to know her godly face, *adore her inside out*, since, having penetrated her mysteries thanks to Actaeon’s sacrifice, they practice them openly, outside of any sacred limit or precinct, in corrupt and blasphemous fashion. They figure that if Diana provokes them, it is not without providing a *chance for vocation* to those spirits who aspire to *unveil* her. Thus, they say, Actaeon dreamed under the elm or the oak (under the tree of life or under the tree of knowledge) of something like a premonition of *Diana’s tree* which would bring forth salt from wickedness, ammonia from the defilement that his gaze would inflict on her, the great “*poser*.”

Diana’s bodily needs and care

The quarry Diana brings back from the hunt is destined for the cyclopes as well as for Hercules. This detail, taken literally, belongs to the rationalization of legend. Evidently the gods can eat and drink, but not in the same way that they laugh, get angry, make love or don’t make love. The moment the gods assume a body of their own, they care for it, and have fun caring for it, experiencing the body’s needs rather than experiencing them directly. They do it out of deference to humanity. Diana, like the other goddesses, plays her part as woman to the full. Diana washes herself like the other goddesses; but she has never been known to eat the animals she kills. She feeds with her catch those Olympian “proletarians” that are the Cyclopes, who provided her with bow and arrows. What are these *one-eyed* monsters whom she feeds with her game? Inferior forces, because they are industrious and hard-working, and enslaved to the playful, merry existence of the gods. These forces, if they were not assigned, as it were, a *useful* purpose, might well resume the abominable war of the Titans; in this way they imagine themselves to be indispensable in the work they do for a *useless* Olympus—so useless that it might just as well dispense with itself. On the other hand, these forces live on the virgin’s catch: doesn’t Hercules, the demigod, feast on it with

gluttony? Diana's catch is actually our own blind forces, tamed by the goddess and consumed by the *forces of work*—both of which are diverted by the hunt and by work, under the pretext of need, of usefulness, “for the benefit” of serene uselessness. It is true that this serene uselessness could quite easily do without them. It is the very principle of these forces; but the latter cannot be tolerated as such. The sense of their uselessness would plunge them into sorrow. Only divinity is happy with its own uselessness.

But Diana washes herself after the hunt: not, however, out of the need to clean herself of the sweat and earthen dust covering her body; these are secondary details that might start Actaeon dreaming, and lead him astray. Diana is cleansing herself of the blood spilled, of her contact with blind forces, earthly needs: *she is cleansing herself of a useful activity*; in the pool she recovers her principle of useless serenity, and this is why this nudity of an apparently useful body becomes for Actaeon the cause of his own destruction. He takes all these details, though ritual, in a literal sense; and as a result he finds in them a means for trickery: *to disguise himself as a stag*. He really believes that Diana is “tired from the hunt,” that she “is sweating” and needs to “refresh herself,” that this is the right moment for an irrefutable demonstration of *real presence*, etc.

Identification with the Stag

Actaeon attempts to live as a stag and, espying the “rising of *Arcturus* in the months of *Broedromion* and *Moemacterion*,” the period when does are mounted by stags, he quits the royal palace and goes off alone into the forest, trying hard to study and soon to imitate cervine movements, leaps and bounds, running about, stopping suddenly, attempting to trot, *rubbing his head against the trees, like a stag, and digging holes in the ground until his face and forehead are soiled with earth*. The itch of stags, for him, is a living analogy of his own itch: Diana. He has himself followed by his own hounds, which are trained for this purpose; he imagines himself catching Diana unawares at her bath, having heard her utter the words of metamorphosis; and then one day the thought occurs to him to go into the sacred grove at the bottom of the vale shaded by cypress and pines, to wait in the dark grotto at the source of the spring for Diana to come and wash herself.

What sort of *disturbance* occurred then in the grandson of Cadmus? Some say that Actaeon, having one day entered some pleasure pavilion of the king, there encountered a famous artist, not unlike Parrhasius, who was painting a wall—with an image of Diana. Actaeon is dumbstruck by the composition; a sudden fury comes over him; seizing a stool, he administers a

mortal blow to the precursor of Parrhasius. Some also say that he cried out: "Spy!" or "Traitor!"—as if the artist had been in league with him from the start; but since no one else witnessed the scene except for a little slave who was hardly more than a child and a Hebrew to boot, it may be assumed that the exclamation was ascribed to him after the fact, when strange rumors began to circulate about him, after his tragic end. Be that as it may, at the news of the murder perpetrated by his grandson against the person of his most capable artist, the sovereign apparently became terribly distressed; he interpreted the prince's act as one of grievous impiety and, in expiation, pronounced an anathema against him to placate the goddess's wrath against his kingdom.

An odd *quid pro quo*, if one considers the outcome of this amazing adventure. The very day of the murder, Actaeon gets on his horse, accompanied by his squires and his pack of hounds; he plunges into the forest, never to be seen again. Yet as he goes off to meet his destiny, suddenly in the painting there appears, before everyone's eyes, an as-yet-unknown episode of the legend: Diana mounted by a stag-headed Actaeon. When would so experienced an artist as this precursor of Parrhasius have conceived a composition so contrary to tradition? Was this what the prince had seen? Would he not in such a case have succumbed to righteous anger? The king's officers, however, gave the lie direct to this assumption. Shortly before the prince entered that pavilion, they themselves had led the artist there and had a chance to contemplate the rough sketch of his picture: it presented nothing but what was decent and proper.

Can one expect to see in a painting the things that may happen to us? For this to happen, there would have to be a mysterious conformity between the image and our unforeseeable intentions. Unless the image had

such power of persuasion over us that we became compelled to re-create it in the space of every day. Yet although it is no doubt pleasing to see an artist present us with what our spirits whisper inside to us—and especially to wrest secrets from a rather untalkative deity—between this and hurling ourselves into the intimate sphere of our household daemon there is nevertheless an abyss: What, then, of a painting that represented at once our punishment and our crime? Would it not at least have the virtue of keeping us in our room?

Actaeon and Dionysus

More alluring and plausible to us seems the opinion of those who see in Actaeon's behavior a progressive influence of the cult of Dionysus, the rites of which he supposedly intended to mingle with the cult of the Delian goddess. How does Actaeon fall in with Dionysus? The answer is simple: The god of the vine and delirium, the god who dies and resurrects, is of the very same family as the illustrious huntsman. And one may say without exaggeration that this god tormented that family like a complex before taking earthly root in it. Actaeon is the grandson of Cadmus. In fact, Cadmus had three daughters: Autonoe—she-with-a-mind-of-her-own—mother of our hero; Semele, mother of Dionysus; and Agave, priestess of the god and mother of Pentheus. It is hence perfectly legitimate to call Actaeon the god's "cousin," in a spiritual as well as fleshly sense. Semele, the god's mother, was therefore his aunt; as was Agave, mother of Pentheus. But what befell Semele befalls Actaeon as well, as it were in an analogous but negative form: both perish from their vision. Semele, Agave and Actaeon were all troubled by the same passion: *ecstasy*. It seems this was a congenital passion, an inherited illness of Cadmus's line, who had the gods in their blood. Hence the scorn that the two women, as well as their nephew Actaeon, felt for the accepted liturgy that regulated and

moderated one's contact with the eternity of the gods in everyday life and kept it from any kind of excess. Worship, for them, is identical with destiny, and their religion is *to lose themselves in the god or the goddess*. Semele is not content with clandestine intercourse with the Father of the Gods; she is loath to drown the *life of perpetual divine communion* in the malodors of an adulterous alcove. She aspires to be possessed in full by Zeus in his unendurable aspect. She aspires to *see* him. Consumed, she triumphs: Dionysus is born in order to die and be reborn again. How could Actaeon not have given thought to such a previous occurrence in his family? The strangest thing is that one variant of the legend, related by Stesichore, tells us that he wanted to possess his aunt Semele and that his metamorphosis into a stag was punishment for this offense. Here Semele and Artemis become momentarily merged, and even though this apparently is the result of a confusion of names ("*Selene*" being Diana's lunar epithet), this confusion would seem further to support assumptions favoring an influence of Dionysus on Actaeon. When lastly we consider that Actaeon, son of Autonoe—sister of Agave and Semele, the great mystagogues—had as his father Aristaeus, son of Apollo and of the nymph Cyrene, our hero begins to seem burdened with a weighty heritage: Is he not the nephew of Artemis, his tutelary daemon? What then is the nature of his crime? Is it a desperate effort to reconcile two contradictory aspirations that transcend him? Does he not burn with a fire at once incestuous and mystical?

Actaeon attempts to live as a stag. If it was the mysteries of Dionysus that led him to act this way, one could assume that the inspiration of this god drove him to seek in delirium the audacity needed to violate Artemis. One imagines Semele's "nephew," already tainted by the new heresy, at the moment he plunges into his

meditation on Artemis. An exercise of this sort must perforce be sacrilegious, since it involves overstepping ancient boundaries: because he did it, it was necessary for Actaeon to lose consciousness, to *know* he was losing consciousness, and to experience delirium. Only Dionysus could lead him, support him and absolve him. He prepares his crime as his own self-sacrifice to Artemis; he accepts the goddess's punishment as a revelation: having become a stag, he penetrates the secret of divinity; mauled by his hounds, he prefigures the message of Orpheus. Yet this death, consisting of being torn to pieces in imitation of the Divine Master, is an image of the disclosure and consecration of a secret. And Pentheus, scorner of the new religion, when he was about to be torn apart by his own mother, in remembering this strange adventure, though it seemed to him an aberration, wanted to invoke that incomprehensible martyrdom in his last moment; but at the point of death, he turned to more human sentiments and invoked Autonoe: "*You, sister of my mother, heed the shade of Actaeon.*"

Could Actaeon have known his own legend and wittingly attained delirium? Or rather, *had this legend forever preceded him*, his delirium being too simulated, too studied, too slow for him ever to *catch up* with it? Actaeon was in fact delirious, because he *knew himself to be so*. And because he doubted the chastity of Artemis, he doubted as well his own metamorphosis. Thus Actaeon, fearing he might not be Actaeon, *killed* the stag, cut off its head and donned it himself. And his hounds, having recognized him, turned away from him and left him.

Anticipation

This mountainous horizon, these woods, this vale and these springs, do they thus have no reality except in *her absence*? This clearing where my hounds frolic, this glade where fawns appear all of a sudden, are they only outward signs rendered arbitrary by my decision *to wait for her here*? This group of beech trees, these trembling poplars whose leaves whisper a thousand things to dissuade me or to persuade me to remain yet a while longer, or those willows down there, where she may be hiding—why should they be the thing that makes this space, thus ordered, too commonplace for such an irruption? The more absorbed I become in the appearance of these objects, the better *I see* what the breeze is tracing: *her* forehead, *her* hair, *her* shoulders—unless a more blustery wind is creasing her tunic farther into the hollow of her thighs, above her knees. This sloping meadow where now and then a few poppies lightly quiver and bend, does it not feel the force of her swift steps, does not the speckled grass whip against her golden boots from which rise the curves of her legs? More than ever I experience the dignity of the space as the most reasonable enjoyment of my mind, the moment her forehead, her cheeks, her neck, her throat and her shoulders take shape there and dwell there, the moment her unendurable gaze explores it and her nimble

fingers, her palms, her elbows and legs slice and strike the air. But if the space prefigures her coming, the moment she comes I doubt that these woods will still exist to my eyes, that this vale will seem to me anything but illusory down to its tiniest roots; I doubt that the spring will murmur outside of me, once she draws near to it. But the pool remains peaceful: before skimming it with her toe, the nymph, having cast off her bow, will have separated this pool from my mind.

In the space destined to receive her I am only tolerated, so long as I am simple as these trees. My thought overflows this space, where this thought yet gushes forth like the spring that feeds this basin. *She herself* wants to see these haunts in all their naive appearance. It is I who shift the contour, extol the branches, trouble the pool. . . .

To find the way that leads into this absolute space!

At times it seemed to me I saw, up there on the rock, the back of old Pan, who was also lying in wait for her. But from afar one might have taken him for a stone, or for some stunted old tree trunk. Then he was no longer discernible, though his pipes still rang out in the air. He had become melody. He had passed into the sighing of the wind, where she was sweating, where breathed the fragrance of her underarms and lower body, when she undressed.

Diana's Curiosity

*Haec loca lucis habent nimis, et cum luce pudoris,
Si secreta magis ducis in antra, sequor.*³

Ovid, *Fasti*, VI

Actaeon masks his face with a stag's head and, feeling very clever about his "*larvatus pro Dea*," makes his way toward the spring and goes into the cave to hide. He waits *for her to come*.

All the while, invisible Diana contemplates Actaeon imagining the goddess naked. The deeper he sinks into his reverie, the more Diana assumes bodily shape. At first she desires to see her own body, then to plunge it into the pool. Does Actaeon know *this* too perchance? No doubt he does know it, but is not thinking of it; in fact it is a sign from which his reverie springs, beneath the stag's mask. This sign is suggested by the goddess herself. The desire to see herself is a change of mood that comes over her during the course of the chase. When one has chosen the space in which to hunt unconscious creatures, such as big game—wild boars, bears, stags, which are but entities of needs in which sensa-

3 "Too much light these places have, and with light too much modesty / If you keep great secrets in dark lairs, I shall follow you there." (Translator's note.)

tions of satisfaction and fear alternate—one must limit and localize oneself inside lithe, agile forms, subjecting oneself to the conditions of all moving bodies capable of running into other bodies and sustaining counter-shocks. One submits to their heaviness as much as one gains from their flexibility, and in turn one comes to know fatigue and the need for rest after the excitement. And although, as a deity, one is impassive, one accepts as well the inconvenience or amusement of being seen as a goddess. You do not allow the prey the time to see you; in any case, the prey knows you and fears you. Now the wish to see her own body involves the risk of being defiled by a mortal's gaze, and with this risk the representation of, and then the desire for, defilement enters the goddess's nature. She suddenly experiences that which is contradictory in her nature: she has never wanted to be possessed by another god, and her brother delights in this. She has chosen to take pleasure in the forever unresolved alternative of belonging or not belonging to a male principle. And that is her realm, her universe. She is on the watch, and she herself becomes the object of those who have acquired the habit of lying in wait for her. Does she not have disciples among her worshipers? And the shrewdest of her disciples, the one most endowed with piety and knowledge, does he not become the vilest of her profaners? *"The lover you desire is not exempt from your rigors."* Thus the goddess cannot escape the definition that she herself has given herself. Wishing to rest from her chase, she wishes to see herself resting. And though wishing to see herself at rest, in the pool, she does not, however, stop fighting. She consents to be seen, if it is for the sake of slaughtering and killing some more; but in killing, she surrenders herself. Let one sully her with his gaze, and she will kill; but she will glorify the one who, in dying, will have seen her.

Of course invisible Diana, while contemplating Actaeon as he is imagining her, muses on her own body; yet this body, in which she will manifest herself to herself, she actually borrows from Actaeon's imagination. Diana could have chosen some other visible form: doe, bear or, assuming she wanted to manifest her principle, some form that would have terrified Actaeon and kept him at a distance. But on the contrary, adorable as a goddess, she wants to be adorable also as a woman, in a body which, once seen, will excite the passions of a mortal man. Here one imagines that, as the Twelve Gods are identical in essence but distinct in their persons, no initiative by any one of them can remain unknown to the others, and that the smallest "adventure" by one of the gods or goddesses is at once known by all of them, who constitute but a single essence. The godhead in twelve persons is always making a spectacle of itself to itself; its "life" thus consists in amusing itself with its diverse theophanies in its limitless freedom and inexhaustible wealth. It is no surprise that the gods themselves introduced stage shows⁴ to the world of men. The various modifications of divine thought that are but sheer play in themselves, with no usefulness whatsoever—unless it is the expenditure of energies in ceaselessly renewed forms—and with no other purpose than to prevent all godly servitude to any usefulness at all, even a servitude of divinity to divinity, glorify the mortal beyond his sphere of servitude, since, in their encounter with man, these modifications, these ludi constitute for him an event after which his life, theretofore subject to a faceless necessity, is raised up to the level of legends of similar games. Thus did the gods teach men to contemplate themselves in the spectacle, just as the gods contemplate themselves in the imaginations of men.

4 "Jeux scéniques," from Latin *ludi scaenici*, literally "stage games": cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God*. The "stage shows" were a practice in Rome wherein the often immoral escapades of the gods were represented on stage, allegedly at the behest of the gods, to placate their wrath. (Translator's note.)

Diana and the Intermediary Daemon

Argument: Diana makes a pact with a daemon who intercedes between the gods and humanity, in order to appear to Actaeon. Through his airy body, the daemon *simulates* Diana in her theophany and inspires in Actaeon the desire and mad hope to possess the goddess. He becomes Actaeon's imagination and Diana's mirror.

It is this daemon of Diana who steals into Actaeon's soul, who sets him against his shadow, separates him from his legend and teaches him the notion of divine impassibility. As far as he is concerned, the gods owe this impassibility solely to the fact that they divert their *possible* emotions into the souls of daemons. Daemons thus pay the price for the serenity of Olympus, just as they pay the price for the transfiguration of humans into demigods. Indeed, though humans may die as far as their bodies are concerned, they can attain, in spirit, divine impassibility by their power to die—by diverting, in their turn, the passions that the daemons seek to transmit to them. Enclosed in their airy, immortal bodies, daemons can never escape their intermediary condition by a death that would *transfigure* them. In such extremes, sometimes they pass on to humans that which agitates them, sometimes they ally themselves with humans in order to rise up toward the gods and, like the Titans,

threaten to overwhelm the playful serenity of Olympus with the *seriousness* of passion. But the gods avert this threat by lending color to the *conventional myth* of their stormy passions: it has the virtue of edifying men and pacifying daemons. Indeed, though impassible, the gods have no less a taste for the spectacle they present to themselves through this class of intermediary daemons: they use these latter to explore the emotions which their principle precludes, and thus assume a daemonic body in order to mingle with mortals. In this way they become visible to humans either for the sake of a *theophany*, or else to have intercourse with a woman privileged among mortals. In this sense, the daemons are either mediators between gods and men, or—and this is more often the case—they are only the masks, the mimes that play the part of the gods. In both cases they simulate the gods, and sometimes, when the latter have withdrawn into their impassibility (which in reality they never abandon), indifferent to these beings who for an instant merged with them, these daemonic histrions continue to mimic them. (The impassibility of the gods goes so far that, in this game which they play among themselves in perfectly good faith, the rule is to deceive one's partner, in order to test his or her impassibility: for example, Mars lies with Venus, but one cannot say whether Mars is actually a daemon taking advantage of the goddess, or on the contrary whether Venus is only a female daemon seeking to weaken Mars.) In fact, daemons do not have a clearly defined sexuality: possessing infinitely versatile and subtle bodies, they can lend their forms to a great variety of different gods, and since their bodies are marvelously supple, they are eminently suitable for goddesses.

Such is the daemon's state of mind. He is a voyeur, and he is bored. He finds amusement in taking part in scenes that are shameful and humiliating to the gods as

well as to humans. After having indulged in infamies of this sort, he waits to be appeased, disillusioned. But appeasement is contrary to his nature. Suspended between the serenity of the gods, with whom he shares only immortality through his body, and the passions he suffers together with humanity, he knows only a state of perpetual restlessness. His body is as malleable as it is unperishing and fluid: and as he wearies of lending it to the gods for thankless *theophanies* which in no way change his condition, his preference goes to goddesses, in the single hope of bringing them to prostitute themselves to mortals. Such is how he imagines his role as mediator.

How could Diana, serene goddess, ever have come into contact with such an abomination? By mirroring herself. And Diana, in a more complex sense than Pallas, is one of the theophanies in which divine nature has most mirrored its essence. Diana thus looks into this daemonic mirror and becomes the object of Actaeon's imagination.

What is created in this reflection, if not the joining of Diana's idiom and that of the daemon's? The goddess, impassible by nature, assumes the daemon's passibility as soon as she reflects her feminine divinity in a body that she wants to be visible, but also as *palpable* as it is inviolate, and as violable as it is *chaste*. Suddenly her chastity is confined to the limits of the daemonic body; whereas the mediating daemon, in arrogating to himself the goddess's reflection, invests her in turn with his own lasciviousness, which will promptly extend to the infinite reaches of the goddess's immeasurable nature. The result is a hypostatic union most provocative to mortals, who can no longer figure out, in this indissoluble mingling, to whom belongs the arrogance, and to whom the chastity. Here the responsibility appar-

ently lies entirely with Diana: under the mask of this daemonic body she can surrender herself, or experience incognito the emotions that her immutable principle precludes, including the emotions of chastity. In this way, without prejudice to her essential and invisible body, inseparable from her divine principle, impassible because impalpable, though a spectator (for Diana, more than the other gods, has a taste for spectacle), she witnesses her own adventures—adventures in which her chastity is put to the test.

The Back of Artemis

Look not at Artemis face to face, or you will vanish under her gaze. For if her entire body is visible, it is I myself who envelop her essence; only her gaze I cannot veil: for the rest of you, it means death. On the other hand, contemplate her askance, if you can, or in profile; but preferably from behind. Not that she cannot see you—far be it from me to entertain such folly; but though she might peer at you over her shoulder, she will tolerate you at her back. And who knows, she might just have to suffer you there; for it is through me that she conspires to appear, through me, whose body she has borrowed, that she must make shift and in this union take on, despite her pretentious impassivity, the impulses that spur me and are therefore my own. And rest assured that *my* coquetry, added to *her* chastity, is not the least of the impulses that intrigue her: the more she resists the base emotions that overwhelm us daemons and mortals, the more she is prey henceforth to feelings of modesty, which before was but an idea in her. She does not know that with me she runs the risk of some not very pleasant surprises, yet she dreads them with a curiosity that her impassible essence allows itself to experience: if she is forever running—and here the chase is but a pretext—it is only to forget the visible body I have lent to her, the ravishing body that you know: Look

at that nape below the hair pulled up in a bun and curled about the ears; look at that free, graceful neck, the dorsal line broken by the girdle running under her secreted bosom—more than once have I fled that bust when all my impudent mischievousness became concentrated on one breast or the other, and jutted out. But move farther down: look at those slim flanks, that backside made like a handsome young man's—Oh! in her modesty she did reproach me, on first fitting, for those firm, tight, round buttocks unspoiled by the tasteless abundance exhibited by Aphrodite. . . . I dare say it is here that you have the best chance for success, for here I descend along those thighs, ah, so long and yet so graceful in their abstinence: look at that powerful knee, which crushes the beasts of the forest; those calves, those hams, those heels that wreak havoc, as befits the goddess swifter than the spirit, swifter than lightning and the storm. And then those shoulders and arms; and those long hands, so cruel when they seize the bow, so tender when they stroke the brows of women in the throes of labor. And if I may make so bold as to speak of her thus, you should know there is another weak spot here: the skin of her palms and fingers. As soon as she touches herself in the water, she shudders, astonished upon contact with the forms I have given her, for I have put in her hands all the excitability that I myself suffer from—the fine tendons of her wrists were powerless to free her from Hera's clutches, when the queen of heaven flogged her. Indeed, the truth is that in the palms of her hands, as in the hollows of her underarms, her thighs and her knees, there is more of me than of her impassible nature.

Secrets of Diana's Daemon

The Father of the gods had granted to Artemis the safeguard of an eternal virginity; but no sooner did he confer this upon her than his daughter's demand appeared indeed to put into question the plurality of persons at the heart of the godhead: Artemis identified divine wholeness with chastity. Which amounted, on Artemis's part, to claiming all the godhead for herself and, in so far as she is one among many other goddesses, to making a claim to automonothemism. The Father of the gods certainly never felt any obligation to ponder the indiscretion of his acts or his promises. However, being responsible for the equilibrium of Olympus, if he was not at all concerned with what might appear a contradiction in his actions, he did fall in customarily with destiny and the unpredictability of its inexhaustible nature, and let himself be guided by the counsel that his own discontinuity provided him: suddenly burning for Callisto, Artemis's close companion, who was no less chaste than his daughter, he thus imagined that the best way to take back with one hand what he had imprudently granted with the other would be to seduce the huntress-nymph by assuming the very appearance of his daughter. In so doing he would assert a solemn denial of a conception so narrow as that which claimed to identify divine essence with chastity. With the equilibrium

thus restored, and the imprescriptible nature of divinity once again ensured, Olympian serenity would not be empty words.

But will he, indeed can he act without Artemis's knowledge? The theophanies of the Father of the gods never occur without involving at the same time the common divinity shared by the Twelve Gods. The divine principle requires the presence of all in the acts of each, even when they happen by these acts to oppose one another for a moment, as always seems to be the case to the minds of mortals who, subject to the conditions of the intervals of space and time, could never grasp such contradictory simultaneity. So it is that Zeus sends Hermes to Artemis; and such is the strange proposal that the god with winged feet was charged with presenting to the goddess: The Father of the gods, with great regret, allowed that you should remain a virgin; in return, he asks of you (which, moreover, he is in no way obliged to do, but out of respect for your divine will earnestly requests of you as a token of filial love)—that you permit him to assume your physiognomy for a moment. Artemis is wary of theft. She refuses. Thus Hermes: If you persist in your stubbornness, I can no longer answer for the temper of the Father of the gods; will you drive him to unleash some scandal much more grievous than the very one you hoped to avoid? What matters it to him to violate his oath, to revise the question of your maidenhood, to entertain I know not what sacrilegious venture in your regard, which no retribution on your part will ever undo? Is he himself not the repository of your vow of chastity? Is it not in him that your very *being* resides? Artemis yields—that is, she yields my very self to Zeus, me the daemon who simulates her body in the presence of men. She yields her own theophany to Zeus. And yet did Zeus truly need to assume his daughter's body—the one I lent to him—in order to achieve his

ends? Could he not have taken the form of some docile animal—swan, bull—which at the desired moment, Calisto would have caressed with perfect confidence? But beside the fact that he is loath to use the same expedient twice in succession, he would thus have missed a chance to make his point. When Hermes finally convinced Artemis, however, it was by means of this last argument: Remember, O goddess, that before your birth in Delos, or rather before being born of Leto, in your first state you were and since have never ceased to be the ancient goddess of *fertile* Night, and that the Father of the gods, having possessed you despite your present chastity, made you *mother*, you who begat the god that you have already disowned too many times in your present theophany, a god who, though he be your son, makes you blush at the very mention of his name: Eros, whose maternity you allow Aphrodite so shamelessly to claim for herself.

At these words of Hermes, Artemis, bearer of nocturnal light, seizes her torch and lights it with her father's thunderbolt. By this ritual gesture, she gives sign of her filial submission, but she also means to reaffirm the brilliance of her chastity and seems to rebuke the Father of the gods for the violence he has done to her. Thus unity reigns at the heart of the godhead, even when father and daughter, by virtue of the plurality of persons in the divine essence, give it each a different significance. It is I who teach you this, O Actaeon, I whose external form, malleable to the will of the gods, so well lends itself to espousing their unfathomable intentions in order to give your senses proof of their arbitrary existence. Too often does your spirit doubt this existence, accustomed as it is to mistrusting the reality of invisible things, to admitting only that which falls into its hands. May Diana fall into yours!

Diana Reflected

In the legend, Actaeon is seen walking idly about, hardly expecting to *discover Diana*. Or walking idly about *with the deliberate intention of surprising her*. In both cases it is Actaeon who *is walking*, who progresses in space, who comes to the place where Diana is already bathing when he suddenly appears. Thus Actaeon explores the space in which Diana has just taken her place in one pose or another. In the world of absolute space Actaeon's distance with respect to Diana is as absolute as their contact is sudden and immediate; between their reciprocal distance and their contact there is nothing. It is in this interval that Actaeon's meditation unfolds; a tension is thus created which only the poet can know, which the artist may introduce into the scene he chooses to depict, but which the hero either experiences unconsciously—and we might say that this is precisely what leads him to wander in the sacred wood—or else reconstructs after the fact: but at what moment? When he catches sight of Diana bathing, and knows he is ruined for having seen her so distracted? Or when he feels himself being devoured by his hounds? Or on the contrary when he decides *to wait* in the grotto and anticipate what will happen? (This perhaps is when he falls prey to the intermediary daemon; this daemon, because he is neither god nor man but as it were the *reflection* of

one in the other, himself excluded from the mythic world, inaugurates, from his intermediary position, the manner of seeing and judging of the theologians and metaphysicians.⁵ As of this moment he divides the universe into three realms: that of the gods, who he claims are impassible and immortal; that of his own immortal and passible counterparts; and that of passible mortals. His own immortality, being for him only time without end, becomes an object of experience; in this way he projects into the space of myth the time of reflection; he thus recovers the space of myth, which for him is the outside, in interior or "mental" space, and in his role as mediator between the two worlds—that of the gods and that of the mortals, still united in absolute mythic space before his mediation—he asks himself what is "exterior" and "interior," and finally concludes in favor of the nothingness of pure appearance: thought. Thus does he preside over Actaeon's reverie.)

Diana seems to know no other world than the absolute mythic space in which her chase takes place: hunting, capturing, killing, bathing. Now in Actaeon's adventure, Diana herself is suddenly the hunted one, since the hunter surprises her unarmed and naked. This incident still belongs to the world of irreversible and uninterrupted space: the danger, the risk—like that of the hunt and the bath after the hunt—lies in the fact that the sacred grove of Diana's bath is situated in this same space, and that numerous paths which seem to lead nowhere run into that very place. In this same space, Diana seems forever inaccessible to Actaeon; *the next moment*, I defile her—he says secretly to himself. *The next moment*: it is the intermediary daemon who makes him able to have this retrospective experience of time. And the next moment I am dead. But the daemon enables him to see her, beyond death, and to say to

⁵ See Notes and Explanations, page 82.

himself: "When she is washing herself, that is when the hounds devour me." Indeed, Diana does complete her interrupted bath. What is happening inside her as she washes herself, after she has just changed the man who saw her unveiled into a stag and set the hounds upon him? Does the gaze not survive its abolition, posthumously? And can the pool ever efface the blemish on her, on the body that made the gesture of abolition and effacement? This question is no longer of the world of the absolute space of myth; posed by the daemon, it is peculiar to his morbid curiosity, and this curiosity gives rise to Actaeon's morose delectation. In the space of the mythic world, the question is *out of place*. Now, into the absolute space of myth, which is identical to the irreducible essence of the gods, Diana brings the eternal recurrence of her feminine cyclicity (the crescent moon) and the movement of a circular progression (the hunt, the bath, the return to Olympus, the hunt, etc.). Even a goddess will accept, in her divine condition, the character of femininity that determines her theophany. But this is where the daemon has his opportunity. Diana, feminine deity, would have herself chaste in her theophany. In so doing, she attests to a reflection on her own divinity: it is in a literal sense a reflected divinity, though in the midst of mythic space. By this circuitous route the daemon steals in as the very mediator of her theophany. Not only because he lends her his body for this purpose, but because, as Diana's reflection, he introduces a notion of theophany of a new order: theophany in the theologian's sense—contrary to the space of myth; and this from the very moment of the goddess's *vow of chastity*, the moment of *Diana reflected*. From that moment on, if Diana as a divine principle is impassible, as a goddess who has *reflected her divinity* in a virgin body she has accepted the passibility of the daemon whose body she has borrowed to appear chaste. Thus, through this borrowed body, Diana submits to the time of reflec-

tion; but the reflection of the thought that is a departure from mythic time and from eternal recurrence converts time into mental space; time cannot subjugate the deity who is *one* with mythic time down to its very cyclicity. But through reflected time, the reflection subjugates the *accidents of the body* that the deity has borrowed.

The theophany of *Diana at her Bath* thus has a twofold effect: as light emanating from the divine principle, it suspends time and time's reflection; the space of myth then encompasses Actaeon, and his metamorphosis into a stag takes place. And it is the ecstasy of *an Actaeon who is idly walking about* and bursts into the mythic space in which Diana is bathing. But this same theophany traverses the mythic space; and the very pool bathing Diana then reveals itself to be the mirror of her impalpable nudity: *Diana reflected reabsorbs into her principle her momentarily radiated nudity*. As soon as Actaeon engages in his meditation, he anticipates the ecstasy; also, he is not idly walking, but *waiting* in his mental space, at the back of the grotto, for Her to come and dive into the spring. Between Diana and Actaeon the daemon slips in, commencing his theological indiscretions, and already Actaeon, in thereby intercepting Diana reflected in her reflection, violates the goddess's most intimate simplicity; or else this simplicity eludes him, and the daemon's complexity takes its place.

Alpheus's Admonition

For several days Actaeon no longer heard his daemon. Yet he felt no concern at this; on the contrary it was a welcome repose from that specious chatter. In the breeze, the foliage and stream spoke to him again, gently soothing his spirit with their alternate whisperings. Suddenly the sound of the waters grew more intense and ever more insistent: and Alpheus, with dripping beard, rose up, and, having assumed an intelligible form, addressed the idle hunter: "Suffer me, O Actaeon, to take pity on your predicament; perhaps my long experience with the river will provide you some helpful teaching. All around you there are more opportunities than you suspect. Before you, like so many others before me, I too coveted the unconquerable Huntress, the elusive Maiden: and yet she is divinity, and I am but the god of a river. If in order to speak among themselves the gods like to assume the form they have given you mortals, since it is the image of their essence, in their disputes they sometimes oppose one another in other disguises. Our ruses were not equal in the struggle: when my fluidity became a burden, I had recourse only to the aspect in which you see me now, while she commanded many a magic trick to help her escape my fervent attentions. And yet she, provoking my most secret thoughts, persisted in appearing to me as the lissome girl I would wait for when her

noisy hunting party passed by. And I was foolish enough to see overtures in this, and to take the stubborn form of a man in order to seduce her. One night I stole into a round dance with her nymphs, but she had already foiled my plan with a childish trick: as all of them had smeared their faces with clay, I went from one to the next, looking for her, standing more than once before her as she laughed at me beneath her earthen mask. Having then returned to the bed of my humble origins, I saw her one day in the guise of her nymph Arethusa, drawing near, pausing, undressing and at last surrendering herself to my still slow waters shaded by willows and poplars; it was more than I could bear, and to see her thus naked, though veiled by the tangible nakedness of Arethusa, disturbing with her hands and thighs the fluid calm of my restrained spirits, I succumbed yet again to the senseless need to offer her my manhood in the aspect of a mortal. Then she, stark naked, turns and flees; but the image of her nakedness gives my body the burgeoning impetuosity of my waves, and my breath makes bold to invoke her by her assumed name: *Arethusa*, I cry, *Arethusa, where are you fleeing?* I am overflowing, and the more we cross through vales and plains, between wooded hills and rocky bluffs, the more the landscape submits to my resolve and favors my amorous course; at one moment my breath increases, the next moment my bed grows deeper; I pursue her to the ends of the caverns where she was hiding, out of breath, perhaps waiting for me. Abandoning then the charming appearance that had unleashed my frenzy, she consents to do homage to my true nature; her forms become liquid and transparent, mingling with my own. I now could feel her in the strong current she was imparting to me; but while thus stilling my boiling deep within the earth, she suddenly opens new chasms and through other shadowy caverns flows out all the way to Ortygia, there rises back up to the light, and finds herself again

in all her limpid chastity. Such was, O Actaeon, the happiest lesson of my reckless overflowings: desire dissolves in the vanishing of the form to which it clung; and the power of the gods, in order to return us to our peaceful movement, gives the object of desire a different aspect, but gives to desire itself the virtue of knowing itself in it; desire changes at the same time as that which it pursues; it will seize the object in another form, a form so intimate to this movement that it endows it with the fulfillment of its own law—which is not to hold back nor to cease to spread to the point of stagnating, but to triumph over oneself in a perpetual gushing forth. Thus did I overcome the severest trial to which we river gods must subject our virtue: the danger of drying up into gloomy silence. Victorious, I still roar: and Arethusa is my reward.”

Had Actaeon understood Alpheus’s roar, he would not have stayed a moment longer in the grotto. He would have remembered his squires and hounds, and would have set off on his way, assured of the hunt’s good fortune and walking idly toward the metamorphosis of man into stag. For indeed, Diana at her Bath is an unforeseeable, external event to Actaeon. Diana’s bath is outside: in order to discover it, Actaeon does not have to be in one place or another, but must step out of his own mind; what Actaeon then sees takes shape *beyond* the birth of any words: he sees Diana bathing and cannot say what he sees. Even if he is wandering about with the intention of surprising her, his wandering is like a return to the state anterior to speech: forging ahead, in the woods, and finding himself suddenly before the scene, which is still unexpected even though it was his very expectation that led him to walk in the woods, can be explained thus: the event absorbs what remained still expressible in the apprehension. *What I saw, I cannot say what it was.* Not that what one cannot say, one might not

more fully understand, nor that one cannot see what one does not understand. Actaeon, in the myth, *sees* because he *cannot say* what he sees: if he could say it, he *would no longer see*. Yet Actaeon, meditating in the grotto, confers on Actaeon *suddenly bursting into the sacred grove in which Diana is bathing*, the following remark: *I shouldn't be here, that's why I'm here*. The real experience, however, would boil down to an absurd proposition: *I was supposed to be here because I was not supposed to be here*.

*Venaturam oculis facere . . .*⁶

Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus*, 990

So long as he is engaged in the hunt, Actaeon feels well inside a body in pursuit of other bodies: especially inside that strapping young man's body in pursuit of that lissome, divine girl's body that he has no doubt is Diana's, and which he has no doubt he can possess at the right moment. But when the disillusioned hunter withdraws to the grotto to contemplate the purely apparent body of Diana, the spring, the grotto and the entire landscape must themselves be engulfed perforce by his contemplation. In experiencing the moment of Diana at her Bath—an unexpected moment impossible to situate—as a decisive event of his own mind, was Actaeon, in the manner of the Dionysian cenobites, thinking of initiating an Artemisian eremitism? Perhaps under the stag's mask he is engaging in a practice which in the legend Actaeon, while wandering in the woods, would only have prefigured; the metamorphosis into a stag would therefore only be the final, illuminative degree attained through different mental stages—the purgative and contemplative—along the path that Artemisian asceticism must take: of the hunt itself this meditation retains at least the ruse, in the sense that it

6 "Hunting with the eyes . . ." (Translator's note.)

seems to open out like a net whose prey will be the Huntress, the very *shadow* of Diana's essential body. If the goddess borrows a daemonic body in order to hunt in the visible world, she only heads for the sacred spring in order to end her theophany: the result of Diana's bath is to restore to her the purity of her invisible, essential body. But here too Artemisian asceticism sees only one figure, the Bath itself being but the purging of images that the name of Diana calls forth in one's mind: in order to find the *true spring* where the goddess is bathing, the ascetic must, in the darkness of night, go back to the origin of words, to the starting point of Diana's reflection: it is here that the goddess strips away her apparent body and reveals herself in her essential body. . . . A meditation fraught with ambushes: if the ascetic retains the idea of the net even a little, if he dares to see his exercise as the setting of a trap, everything is compromised: *to relinquish the prey for the shade* becomes again an irksome commonplace, an obstacle to his undertaking, and the reversal of the direction of this proposition, which he was about to bring off, can no longer be justified. He must therefore cease to think of his ruse, shed his still coarse hunter's mentality so that Diana, in her apparent body, may with *perfect confidence* head toward the *pool* with the intention of washing herself—but let the ascetic beware: if he happens even to dream of that intention, he is cheating; that is why the stag's head he has donned, if he does not want it to be the height of trickery, must have the virtue of inciting him to an authentic act at a moment of pure imposture; like the stag's head so empty as to contain his own head, if it really be the cilice under which his dark night is born, let him empty himself of all thoughts, all words, to the point of forgetting the very name of Diana; and as he takes on bit by bit the transparency of the pool, then, in the dark night of his mind, Diana . . . —but never was a stag's head more replete with thoughts;

for even the thought most generously inclined to fade to nothing remains no less watchful of its progressive nothingness, and however deep it may plunge into the night, it remains no less a *gaze* peering into the night—a supreme temptation to interrupt this *Bath*, to suspend, if only for an instant, the separation of Diana from her daemon, of Diana from her visible body; . . . poor hunter in the *dark night*, false ascetic in the *light of day*—for Diana never ceases to reflect her chastity in her apparent body: O vicious circle! . . . It is thus for all eternity that he spies on her, for all eternity that she suffers the defilement of his gaze, for all eternity that she feels the need to wash herself of this defilement—and no stag's mask will ever enable him to contemplate Diana at her Bath with a pure gaze, unless Diana herself, from without, opens within the hunter the eyes of the dying stag. . . .

Hic Dea silvarum venatu fessa . . .

If truth be told, the representation of Diana's physiognomy at the moment when she is about to step into the pool is in itself an alteration of the "legendary" scene. In the event as it is experienced by Actaeon, there seems to be no room for this sort of observation; he sees Diana's physiognomy at once from too far away and too near to imagine some expression or another on the goddess's face.

And yet the poet clearly says:

*Hic Dea silvarum venatu fessa, solebat
Virgineos artus liquido perfundere rore.*⁷

Diana is weary from the hunt: this explains the external cause of the circumstance, a cause that is also a change in mood, in state of mind, which leads her, like a simple mortal, to the limpid waters of the spring gushing out from the grotto. Let us suppose that in his contemplation, Actaeon had suddenly grasped this detail in the expression on the goddess's face, or that precisely while he was contemplating without in any way

⁷ "Here, weary from the hunt, the goddess of the forests would have her nymphs bathe her with the water's balm." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book III. (Translator's note.)

thinking of this detail, the *event* interrupted his contemplation through the very vision of this detail—and this through a slowing down of the scene.

She has just arrived. Is it still he or his reason that survives—survives nothing but the various pleasant sounds of this arrival? I mean the first group of huntress-nymphs and their dancing steps, their chatter, their childlike cries as they get the place ready with some commotion. Then the distant voices: the rest of the approaching train, and suddenly silence, not a breath except perhaps a bird taking wing or the murmur of the spring; and then, like a rushing gust of wind, a flashing reflection in the grotto—it's *she*, there outside.

. . . Everything has happened so quickly—was it this same morning or months ago that Actaeon left his palace? To him it seems he's been there an eternity, dumbfounded and breathless, *looking* at her—she whom he'd always pictured in full stride, now at rest, tall and noble, leaning slightly back, against her elbows, dangling her long legs as two of her nymphs seize hold of them to remove her boots while she holds her head erect, her gaze far away; he is seeing her thus in profile, when with a small movement of the head, the goddess presents that sulking, slightly bored, perhaps expectant expression; Actaeon may not realize that it is he who is giving her this expression, and that this is why he sees the goddess's seeming lassitude, a dangerous and promising lassitude, why Diana seems to him weary from the hunt. Like a mortal she lightly knits her brows, her eyes—*blue* eyes, it seems to him—showing a hint of dark rings around them, her lower lip gently protruding in a pout that vanishes at once in the smile arching the corners of her mouth as though betraying a sated lust, but also a stifled laugh, her chin bent slightly over her

breast; on her serene forehead the eyebrows relax, the eyelids shading her cheeks lower with her gaze toward her companions as they undo the girdle and free her divine flanks.

Actaeon sees, or perhaps only names, the roundness of the shoulders and a bit of the tufted underarm in the angle formed by the arm bent at the elbow; and farther down, the delicate wrist of the long, nimble-fingered hand; the gesture of the other hand relinquishing the bow, the hollow of this idle hand whose fingers slide over her hair and finally join to untie the fillets of her chignon, somewhat eagerly; and again that faraway gaze, as she herself smells the scent of wildflowers rising from all over her body, rising from her, surrounded still by her companions. . . .

The nymphs at last move away: she gets up, tall in her nudity—but who would dare, who would ever have had the audacity to believe. . . . She extends a foot toward the pool, and even before her body is slowly immersed—Ovid tells us that the nymphs cried out in fright at the unexpected sight of a man's face, and then huddled round Diana to conceal her; but this is only a reconstruction for Actaeon, and a baroque anticipation for the poet himself: for when Diana holds him in her gaze, when she herself—who is none other than the *being without life or death*, the negation of the landscape in which she moves and appears, *the very impossibility of a place where he might ever wait for her*—encounters in the renegade hunter's turned-up eyes the life that is dying of the desire to name her, she sees herself at last as the mediator daemon proposed to her that she be seen; she, the *impassible* one, understands the trick of this mediation that so exposes her, that introduces in her the itch to *be seen*; and while the defilement of a mortal man's gaze succeeds in molding her nakedness to the now visible contours that she can no longer disavow, she savors the wicked breach opened in this body's closed being.

"Diana wished she had her arrows ready." But she has laid down her arms. In compensation, her hands, just as they were about to wash her body, now make a sudden gesture of modesty, and in revealing what they conceal, expose a fecundatable womb, below which her palms

now cover the prominent pubis; but then her vulva peers through her fingers, a ruse of the daemon who lent her these visible charms as the most opaque veil for her divinity. Impassible in the state of being where she inhabits an ineffable body made of silence, in her theophany, chaste Diana, subject to the emotions of a body inside of which she knows she is desired, exposes herself to the shame of offering utterable charms; and because she is *impassible*, Diana blushes in Actaeon's eyes, *blushes in her chastity*.

If you can tell at all . . .

The second movement of her unarmed hands is to cup some water and to splash it in Actaeon's face: a ritual, consecratory gesture that effects the metamorphosis of the hunter into a stag. Could Actaeon still hear Diana then utter the words:

*Nunc tibi me posito visam velamine narres
Si poteris narrare, licet?*

Could he perceive the meaning or even the sound of these words at the moment in which he had *ceased to be a man but was not yet a stag*? Uttered by Diana, these words seem to convey the meaning of the ritual aspersion in ambiguous fashion; for they provoke divulgence through language of what has just come about and at the same time show that the metamorphosis renders this divulgence impossible. As soon as one analyzes these words, one notes in them both the provocation and the irony: Now you may tell you saw me here unclothed / If you can tell at all! The provocation: Say it, then, describe Diana's nudity, describe my charms, that no doubt is what you're waiting for, what your fellow men would love to know! The irony: If you can tell at all!

These are words that abolish language in the mythic event, because they are an integral part of the game that is the sole expression of myth, and because this game is myth itself. In this sense Actaeon, under the mask of the stag, with his quest for truth and his need to communicate it, is condemned beforehand, and not exalted; condemned, but not made manifest; thus he does not enter the light he seeks, for all that is made manifest is light (Eph. V, 13). On the other hand the words of the goddess, by way of irony, invite him to describe the scene of *Diana naked before the stag-man* by means of indiscreet or profane language, and to find an intelligible meaning in the mystery by other means than the spectacle in which the mystery is realized. But then the deity need not even have spoken: Diana carries out her act of aspersion in silence, in the silence of pantomime that is myth itself, letting Actaeon draw near to her; she is ready to receive him, to subject him to the rite of the stag. If Actaeon only heard those words in his innermost heart, it is because he deliberately excluded himself from the mystery, acting only upon "*You may tell . . .*"; and by then nothing remained in him but words suitable for recounting—"*if you can*"—for recounting the scene down to its smallest details.

. . . *Nec nos videamus labra Dianae . . .*⁸

"Indeed, Madame, there is no proof that you yourself aren't the Father of the Gods: did he not assume your sweet countenance to persuade the most faithful of your companions? Only a moment ago I saw you holding Callisto in your arms. Only a moment ago, I said—for, don't you know, we can evoke that scene at any time if not forever. But if the divine can thus exchange its fearsome forms for more agreeable ones, and thereby lead the souls of its worshipers to their destruction, would I not have just cause to suspect. . . ." These last words, barely formed, remained at the back of his throat; already the horns were sprouting from his forehead, already his nose and his jaw were growing long; talk became useless for him; his eyes reflected a joy which, however innocent it still might feel, intermingled with an animal terror; and then this terror became imbued with the shame of the bathing goddess, and all that was virginal in this shame turned into an eagerness to flee, to seek refuge in the goddess's fleece; a dying man, wanting to explain himself further, to excuse himself politely, dutifully; but then the decent pose he had assumed, one foot placed slightly in front of the other on the tufts of grass, suddenly became the unseemly tribute of a beast rearing up on its hind legs, offering

8 "*Nor might we see Diana's lips . . .*" (Translator's note.)

itself, its member enormous, menacing the deity with its offering. Did Diana herself thus hope to create cause for astonishment, with her act of metamorphosis? With one hand she had just cast water in his face, but as she was pronouncing the sentence, already she was withdrawing the other hand from the space between her thighs, and whether as of that moment she had initiated Actaeon, or having already initiated him thus admitted him to her final rite, or whether, lastly, she thus put an end to her theophany, by this very gesture she uncovered her vermilion vulva, uncovered her secret lips: Actaeon sees those hellish lips open at the very moment that the spray of water streams over his eyes, blinds him and stands him up. His thought finds its fulfillment in the horns sprouting from his forehead, and the shock of such a realization drives him forward; his arms having become legs, his hands cloven hooves, he's not even surprised to see them resting, in the twinkling of an eye, on the divine shoulders, his whole furry belly quivering against the dazzling skin of the goddess's dripping flanks; and then suddenly the quivering is Diana's own at the moment a man dares to touch her, Diana's quivering when her hand that she knows to be as murderous as it is beautiful, grasps a lascivious beast by the snout and feels the tongue stroking her palm, the waters roiled by the stag-man's stamping feet and the movements of the goddess's long legs closing together and spreading apart, the horned creature panting, the unarmed huntress moaning—she howls through the voices of her nymphs, and laughs in her howling. He knocks her down in his neophyte animal clumsiness, she wriggles away, slips, and he falls back down on her and in her: Ah! to be so close to the goal, yet so far. . . . And the pall of silence thwarting his need to speak sets him on fire.

But Diana's trick is never to complete the metamorphosis entirely, to leave him still with some part of his person: Actaeon's legs, torso and head are now those of

a stag, but while his right arm is no longer but a furry leg and his hand but a cloven hoof, his left arm and hand remain intact, and in this lacuna lies a hesitation on the part of the goddess, and a kind of challenge: how far will his impulse, still dominated by his vision, venture to go while a beastly ardor invades him? The goddess in her nonchalance goes so far as to leave him his hunter's tunic, which floats over his stag-man's limbs, while his hunting-horn, slung across his chest, swings back and forth, striking the thighs of the bathing goddess; in this state his front foot, formerly his right hand, sliding from the goddess's shoulder and along her back, which is turned to him in resistance, tries to lean against her hip and, winding round the flank in little starts and passing over the belly, seeks in vain to reach the pubis, while she, with eyes lowered and a smile lightly curling her tight lips, tolerates it for a moment; and, indeed, with his still intact left hand he grabs, in terror, the breast that he cannot prevent himself from caressing; she, turning right about but as though watching him from the corner of her eye, raises her arm, uncovering the armpit into which he then pokes his muzzle avidly but with a frightened eagerness, his tongue at last licking her nipple; and in the most splendid body she has yet assumed, Diana shudders . . .

... *A great stag, white as snow, separated Actaeon from the deity*; and watching the back of the goddess of the forests, the horned king enters his kingdom. But his reign is brief: the nymphs have welcomed him with jubilation; he approaches them without fear and they stroke him in a thousand ways, caressing him between the horns, on the forehead, along his neck and down his flanks and under the belly; he shakes his head and paws the ground in innocence, and once they've crowned him with laurel, they bring him before the goddess; two nymphs prepare the Huntress, still at rest, and pull her dress up to her breasts: Diana opens her naked thighs; the nymphs bring forward the stag, whose ardor they now have to contain somewhat; and the goddess of the forests at last receives the horned king. But the glorious death of the hero completes its nuptial course: no sooner has he caused the Queen to moan than his pack of hounds has already filled the grotto with their baying; they sink their fangs into his fur and as they are tearing him to pieces, *the king bathes the Maiden's dazzling body with his blood*. The nymphs then come and give the goddess her final ablutions; but Diana's charms melt in the pure light that she emits and soon all that remains of her now invisible brow is the diadem attesting her presence: luminous crescent, it rises above the mountain crests and assumes its place in the twilight's emerald vault.

Reaching for the Moon

Actaeon had dreaded chance: he wanted to anticipate destiny, to become its accomplice, to coincide with destiny with all his willpower, to fulfill, like a vocation, the destiny of stag-man. He had hoped to find salvation, and destroyed his own image. Now it is possible we are not doing him justice here, that we are ascribing to him either too many Dionysiac intentions—to be torn apart and then scattered across the universe; or else too many gross stratagems—she will take me for a stag and I shall act without any hindrances; or, on the contrary, too much tactfulness—she will see that I accept my punishment from the start. Or perhaps his behavior was dictated by a *wager*—if Diana must truly *come*, better to have lived as a *stag* than as a hunter (a *wager* which assumes experience as the foundation of belief), to which the stag might respond that the simplest way to prepare oneself for Diana's coming is to run away. In all these impulses that he may have had, one can in all cases single out the following: a mad overestimation of free will at the expense of grace (to avoid any mention here of the notion of stag-will); a disturbing absence of naiveté, a total incomprehension of the eternal feminine at the heart of divinity, and a perfect misunderstanding regarding the playful nature of the gods. For if Diana is Diana, she is perfectly capable of distinguishing between a living

stag and a stuffed stag, and certainly must know beforehand that there in the grotto, a mask, not a stag, is waiting for her, a man who is masking his lasciviousness. Or does she not know beforehand, and does she not care to know, because in filling up the moment with all of her eternal essence she appears as discontinuous as her Father, and has no more occasion for prescience of the future than for memory of the past? Would Actaeon be right, after all, to foresee everything, all the better to respond to the moods of a nature that seeks to foresee nothing whatsoever? Does this change anything in the course of events? Does he perhaps imagine that in the end she might be able to *forget* that metamorphosis? From whatever angle one may look at this situation, one always finds the same shortcoming; the presumptuous and impious will to appropriate myth through the mediation of language: *Diana unveiled and violable—Diana nude and inviolate*: pure interference or literalistic application of the analogy of being? Ruse of mediating words! Upon *Diana unveiled* he had cast the very veil of *nudity*. *Diana nude*, *Diana blushing*, *Diana defiled*, *Diana washing herself*: all abominable simulacra that had to be destroyed. Which left the final one: the *crescent moon*; and he wanted to give a new *version* of it, to demonstrate the imposture of its fallacious radiance. Actaeon thus mistrusted this facile elevation of a tangible reality to the level of a spiritual truth; unmasked by the deity, Actaeon, for having wished to keep his ability to *speaking*, had to justify his *non-staghood* as a love of truth itself. Neither *hunter* nor *stag*, and having henceforth a horror for image worship, Actaeon becomes an *iconoclast* in Diana's presence, or better yet, when facing the back of Diana, of Diana as the poets describe her to us, as the sculptors represent her. Thus Actaeon now resents this *idol* that sanctified at once his rejection and the object of his passion: there she is again in her short tunic, arms and knees bare, her long legs shod in boots, her left

hand holding the silver bow, the right arm, elbow raised, exposing the underarm, the hand overturned above the shoulder, the long fingers, between nape and chignon, ready to draw an arrow from her quiver. . . . She is ready to spring forward, her head erect, her gaze far away; and the sternness of her untroubled visage, *as though nothing had happened*, the raised hand, fingers playing over the feathered ends of the arrows—Actaeon is sure of it, those fingers are making who knows what sign to him—all this now inspires in our hero a sinister state of mind:

"*Impudent bitch!*" he shouts at her once; but Diana's motionlessness in that running pose is such that he thinks for a moment he is standing before a stone simulacrum; perhaps the illusion of movement, of that suspended stride, is produced by what has just happened and will happen again: she kills, then washes herself, disappears in order to reappear and kills again as though *nothing had happened*. It goes without saying that Actaeon is no longer waiting for the nymphs to undress the goddess; it is now he who must strip away, one by one, the pieces of the frightful idol's apparel.

"*Impudent bitch!*" he shouts again: a hint of a smile lightly puckers the contours of the divine one's cheeks. And here it is as though Diana, without even making a move, had already pierced him with the subtlest of her arrows: with one hand he tears away her silver bow, with the other he seizes by the wrist the hand with which the goddess was reaching for her quiver, and now begins to strike her on the ears with the bow; while she is lowering her head to avoid the blows, her tunic falls, the belt comes undone, the quiver scatters its arrows on the ground, and at last he begins to thrash her buttocks, administering such a flogging as if to break the bow, the silver bow seeming to dance over Diana's nether cheeks by itself; and indeed, from her darkness emerges the

cusps of the luminous crescent whose brilliance she is still hiding with her long, shadowy hands; but the more she spans the redoubles in vigor, the more the crescent lights up; and as the idol's posterior half-opens, Actaeon throws himself blindly at it. He has now fully realized his vocation: forehead flattened, mouth stretched wide, jaws equipped with fangs: a dog himself! . . . between his teeth the crescent flows, slips, escapes and rises to the heights . . . , the slobber drowns the final insults . . . a dog for no reason? He barks—O glorious death of the stag! . . . when *the luminous crescent rises over the mountain crests and assumes its place in the twilight's emerald vault.*

For a long time, by some accounts, his ghost haunted the countryside; he cast stones at those who ventured outside at night, and indulged in I know not what other sorts of misdeeds. Since his remains could not be found, the oracles commanded that a statue to him be erected on the side of a rock, its gaze looking far into the distance; thus he could still spy upon *her*, as though forever frozen in his vision. For one who refused simulacrum, a simulacrum would immortalize his love of truth. . . .

. . . But don't we know that our entire well-being depends on this *industry*? Don't you see that not only at Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia a host of people are convinced that *those made by hand are not gods*? The danger that arises from this is not only that our industry might fall into disrepute; it is also that the temple of the great goddess Diana might be held to be of no account, and even that the majesty of the goddess worshiped in all of Asia and the rest of the world might be reduced to nothingness. . . .

GREAT IS DIANA OF THE EPHESIANS!

Notes and Explanations

Artemis / Diana

The etymology of this Olympian deity remains very uncertain. One might restrict oneself here to mentioning the ones given in Plato's *Cratylus*: "the name of Artemis means 'purity,' *artemes*, and modesty by reason of her virginity. But it is possible that 'knower of virtue,' *aretēs histor*, is the name the goddess received from the nomenclator. It is also possible, on the other hand, that she was known as 'detesting insemination' by man, *aroton mīsesa*—that which a man does to a woman." (*Cratylus*, 405-406.) Other interpretations have been advanced: *artemes*: strong-limbed, whole, intact, virginal; "she who cuts," from *artao* (to cut); and "she who gathers from on high," from *airo* (to seize) and *themis* (poser), etc.

The myth of this strange and complex deity, which is closely associated with the cult of Apollo of Delphi, probably antedates the latter by quite a bit. It should also come as no surprise that while the tradition passed on by Homer specified the virginal physiognomy of the goddess as daughter of Zeus and Leto, born together with Apollo, her twin brother, at Delos, other traditions have survived, such as the one related by Aeschylus, from Egyptian sources, where Artemis is made the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, and sister of Persephone, who is abducted by Hades (Pluto); or where she is identified with Persephone herself, or is made Persephone's daughter, and called *mother of Eros*. This is the same mythic foundation that Kerenyi has explored in his studies on *Kore*, the divine maiden, in whom fecundatable virginity and maternity are held in a state of suspension. (Cf. *Introduction à*

l'essence de la mythologie.) Creuzer, in his *Symbolique*, described the dialectical evolution of the myth of Artemis; according to him, the Letoan Artemis is simply the reappearance of Eileithyia, goddess of the fecund night and of childbirth, and it was in this capacity that Artemis would have assisted Leto when the latter, at the end of her long wanderings, found refuge at Delos and gave birth to the divine twins. Indeed, according to the Homeric tradition, Artemis sees the light *before* her brother, and once born (gods are born fully developed), she helps Leto in the delivery of Apollo. Hence the guardianship that Artemis provided for women in labor. In this way, according to Creuzer, the goddess of Night, bearer of light in the heart of darkness, was reborn as the sister of Day, joining with him as with her opposite. The Homeric tradition, which was, nevertheless, to prevail over all other versions of the myth and definitively establish her physiognomy as archer-maiden, associated her very closely with the myth of Apollo: together with her brother, she kills the Python and the giant Tityus, who wanted to violate Leto. Diverse documents make it possible to confirm the legend of an incestuous union between the divine twins. (Cf. on this subject, the remarkable study by Aimé Patri, "La Lumière noire d'Apollon," in *La Tour Saint-Jacques*, III, 1956.) However, following up on Creuzer, but using different arguments, numerous modern mythographers today concur in seeing a more ancient deity beneath the attributes of Letoan Artemis, Zeus's adulterine daughter, whom Homer shows being whipped by the jealous Hera (*Iliad*, XXI). Probably the tradition revived by Callimachus, according to which the Amazons imported and founded her cult at Ephesus, points to the real source—even though at Ephesus itself, in Callimachus' time, it was Artemis, twin sister of Apollo, that was worshiped, despite great dissimilarities. (Cf. Picard, *Ephèse et Claros*.) And one has only to look to Bachofen's major work on *The Matriarchate* to recognize, in this excessive and final phase of the gynaeocracy that was the Amazonian phenomenon, the organic connections between the cult of the Moon and the prototype of the fierce, armed maiden that one finds elaborated in the way of life of the Amazons. It was from this point forward, apparently, that the goddess's image took wing: in Crete she would soon be combined with *Britomartis*, the "*dulcis virgo*," goddess of the mountains venerated equally by hunters and by fishermen (under the name of *Dictynna*—from *diktus*, "net"); indeed *Britomartis* is one of the most common appellations for Artemis.

As for Artemis of Ephesus, whose cult was still prosperous at the time of Saint Paul, she represents the final synthesis, in the final days of paganism, of all the various nuances that this strange deity had acquired since her beginnings: the nourishing, bestial virgin-mother goddess, with multiple breasts, bringing together in herself all dark and radiant forces, expressed at once in her crowned Madonna's smile, the hieratic gesture of her hands, and a cult of an orgiastic nature.

The Roman domination brought the identification of the Hellenic Artemis with the ancient Italic Diana, who had her sanctuary in the grove of Aricia on the shore of Lake Nemi. Hence the name of the priest assigned to her cult, the *Rex Nemorensis*, whose successor had to strike him down in single combat. In the same way that Artemis represented the feminine equivalent of Apollo, Diana was considered the equivalent of two-faced Janus (*Djana*). According to an interpretation related by Macrobius, Janus corresponds at once to Apollo and to Diana, and unites in himself alone the two deities. Janus supposedly represents the world that goes (*eat*) without stopping, turning round in a circle, starting out from itself only to return to itself. Cicero, on the other hand, did not write Janus, but *Eanus*, from *eundo*. This interpretation would also be valid for Diana who also goes without stopping, according to the cyclicity of her divine nature. No doubt one could comment at great length on the relationship between Janus and *Djana*, on the very duplicity of Diana revealed in this relationship. Ovid, who gave us the most classic and best known description of Actaeon's adventure, though presenting it in its most decent form, imputing no lascivious intention whatsoever to Actaeon—and even putting a few elegiac notes in his portrait—Ovid, an indirect poet if there ever was one, has no scruples about identifying Diana, in his *Fasti*, with the coquettish huntress-nymph Grane, and shows her to us in the charming physiognomy of this latter, being pressed by the fervent attentions of Janus and finally raped by this god who, thanks to his double face, was able to uncover the hiding place in which the nymph hoped to elude him. In return, Janus made her the "goddess of door-hinges."

The myth of Acteon / Actaeon

According to one legend, Actaeon, son of the shepherd Aristaeus and Autoñoë, daughter of Cadmus, was initiated in the hunt

by the centaur Chiron. According to this legend, his own hounds, having devoured him in the form of a stag, began to wander about, looking for their master's face, and were not appeased until they had recognized it on the statue that was erected, at the centaur's behest, on the side of the rock. Here the legend of Acteon-the-hunter seems to merge with that of an Actaeon, rock-god or daemon, who cast stones on travelers, herdsmen and herds. This daemon would only be pacified on the day when a statue was erected to him on the side of a rock, to fix him in its image.

The archaeological and literary documents connected with the myth of Actaeon the hunter, who surprises Artemis (Diana) naked while bathing, are of relatively recent date, and Callimachus (4th century B.C.) is apparently, according to his commentator and translator M. E. Cahen, the first poet to attribute the punishment inflicted on Actaeon by Artemis to the fact of having seen the goddess naked. (Cf. *The Baths of Pallas*; there is no question of this in the *Hymn to Artemis*.) Before Callimachus, other motives are invoked: Actaeon supposedly boasted of being better than the goddess at hunting; or else he had partaken in an orgy in her sanctuary, etc. Indeed, it is predominantly as of the fourth century B.C. that the versions of this myth begin to reveal increasingly erotic nuances and intentions; it is the goddess's chastity, as well as the seductiveness of her charms—which Homer and Euripides, and later Virgil and Ovid, did not fail to extol—that provide the substance of the adventure. Thereafter, the bas-reliefs and paintings, as we know, have presented marvelous visions of this scene. Nevertheless, the theme of *Diana surprised in the nude by Actaeon* is sometimes explained by fate, sometimes by a deliberate intention to rape. The latter explanation is the one given by Hyginus (1st century) in his mythography: *Actaeon Aristaei et Autonoes filius pastor Dianam lavantem spectaculus est et eam violare voluit. Ob id Diana irata fecit ut ei cornua in capite nascerentur et a suis canibus consumeretur.*

These late versions notwithstanding, the myth itself seems to go back to very early antiquity: the king-priest of the pre-Hellenic cult of the stag was torn to pieces at the end of his reign. The goddess would take her bath after the stag was put to death. (Cf. R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*.) One can also imagine the profanation of the cult by some real personage, who would have substituted himself for the sacred animal in some sort of disguise, with the

intention of raping the priestess playing the role of Artemis. According to Lanoë-Villène (Cf. *Le livre des Symboles—Dictionnaire de symbolique et de mythologie*), "This myth seems to have two meanings: Actaeon, at first, must have symbolized, in the eyes of the wise men, the nation of Attica abandoning the social directives of ancient Delphism in order to follow those of the nascent Dionysianism imported to Greece, as was believed, by the descendants of Cadmus." In Lanoë's opinion, it is to Cecrops, the first king of Attica, which was called *Aktaea* and *Aktaia*, that the name of Actaeon harks back, a name that evokes the *shore* or *bank*; hence he is the city's *watchman*. Between Megara and Plataea has been indicated the place where he supposedly saw Artemis naked. In its second meaning, this story seems intended to show us Actaeon as a Delphic priest who, having chanced upon the mysteries of Artemis without ever having been initiated into them, and having thereafter divulged them, felt obliged to take refuge in the innermost recesses of the forest among the Dionysian cenobites (the transformation into a stag), where in the end he was discovered and put to death by the former guardians of his palace (his hounds).

I have adopted as my own the linguistic interpretation given by Lanoë-Villène, according to which *Kerberos* (dog) supposedly derives from *Ker* (horned), and means both *the old horned one* and *the old stag*, a symbol, says Lanoë, of the Dionysian eremite. Actaeon's attempted rape of Artemis would thus result from a rivalry between the Delphic cult (Artemis) and Dionysian cult (Actaeon).

The representation of the rape of Artemis is inherent in the nature of her myth, and the dread of male violence is integral to her entire physiognomy, which is at once chaste and alluring: Actaeon had his precursors: a vase painting shows Artemis defending herself against the giant Otos, who wishes to violate her, according to a legend in the *Odyssey* (XI, ll. 305 and ff.). Orion, the goddess's own hunting companion, also wants to possess her by force, and dies by the sting of a scorpion (Hesiod, *Fragments* XLIII).

Atalanta

Atalanta, daughter of Iasus, king of Argos (often confused with Atalanta, daughter of Schoeneus, king of Scyros) and huntress-maid of Tegea, appears as a manifestation of Artemis in the legend of Meleager, son of Oeneus, king of Calydon, and his

wife Althaia. When the king neglects the worship of Artemis, the goddess brings forth the horrific boar that devastates the countryside of Calydon. Althaia's brothers and her son Meleager, hero of the expedition of the Argonauts, then invite all the illustrious men of Greece to come and try to slaughter the monster: Jason, Theseus, the Dioscuri, Telamon and Nestor (Achilles' father); joining their hunting party is Atalanta, "the light of foot" and the "glory of the grove of the Lyceum," whose demeanor suggests that of "a lad with the grace of a virgin" or that of a "virgin with the severity of a young hero." During the hunt, all these people have a great deal of trouble tracking down the monster, until Atalanta—that is, the goddess herself—smites him mortally with her arrow. Upon this, Meleager, madly taken with the huntress, wants to give her the beast's head as a trophy. Meleager's uncles see this offering to a stranger as an affront, and in the struggle that ensues, Meleager kills them. As soon as Althaia learns of the death of her brothers, she is crushed by the thought of the expiation to which she herself must subject her son. Indeed, when she first gave birth to him, the Parcae had come and tossed a firebrand amid the coals of the hearth, declaring that the child would live only as long as that piece of wood was not burnt up. Althaia withdrew it immediately and doused it in water. Now torn between maternal love and her love for her brothers, Althaia, after a fierce struggle, casts the log into the fire and consigns her son to death. This adventure, in which Artemis uses seduction in order to punish, well illustrates the goddess's provocative character. It is in this same spirit that Suetonius interpreted the famous painting by Parrhasius that Tiberius kept in his collection, which depicted "Meleagro Atalanta ore morigeratur." (Suetonius, *Tiberius*, XLIV).

Callisto / Kallisté

Callisto is the daughter of Lycaon, king of Arcadia, and the hunting companion of Artemis. Seduced by Zeus and disgraced by Artemis, who notices her pregnancy while she is bathing, she is metamorphosed into a bear by a jealous Hera (Juno) for her adultery, then raised by Zeus among the constellations. According to another version, after her metamorphosis into a bear, she was killed by Artemis herself. Pregnant by Zeus, Callisto gives birth to Arcas (*Arktos*: the bear). This legend seems to rationalize an obscure

and more ancient myth. In this sense, in fact, Lycaon would be none other than the Lycian Zeus worshiped by the Arcadians; Callisto would be none other than the double of Artemis *Kallisté* ("the most beautiful"), who was venerated under that name in Arcadia. Since the bear was one of Artemis's emblematic beasts (some actually see her name deriving etymologically from *arktos*), one can detect in this adventure the dark apprehension of an incestuous attack by Zeus against his own daughter Artemis.

Cadmus

Cadmus or Cadmos, son of Agenor, king of the Phoenicians, was sent by his father to look for his sister Europa, who had been kidnapped by Zeus. During his search he comes to Bœotia, and there encounters and slays the dragon, son of Arcs (Mars); at the instruction of Athena he sows the monster's teeth in the soil, and from them springs up a troop of warriors who quickly kill one another. Five, however, survive, and with them Cadmus founds the city of Thebes. Cadmus then marries Harmonia, daughter of Arcs and Aphrodite, and with her sires four daughters: Ino, wife of Athamas, Agave, mother of Pentheus, Autonoe, mother of Actaeon, and Semele, mother of Dionysus.

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Saint Augustine—whose apologetic aim it is to demonstrate the immorality of the gods to whom pagan reaction appealed for authority—proceeds from a given of the Roman tradition, according to which the gods invoked during the ravages of the plague supposedly ordered the institution of stage shows in Rome. The plague subsided, but then a new, almost incurable plague began to rage: the corruption of morals by the theater. In this way Augustine expresses first of all the notion of a bargain: bodily healing in exchange for sickness of the spirit. Indeed, the purpose of the scenic games instituted by the gods is to represent the turpitudes of these same gods, and the representations become intermingled with religious rites. Another notion expressed by Augustine: *these gods bear witness to a contradictory exigency: they want to be worshiped in their most immoral, most shameful behavior. These gods take pleasure in their own shame.* A notion of this sort could only, of course, take shape in the thoughts of a Christian mind that projects the mystery of the incarnation into a theology for which the mythical stage took the place of *incarnation*. The ancient spirit is not conscious of this contradiction; it was too much a part of it, inasmuch as amorality was implicit in the function of the myths. The objections of pagan philosophers to the sacrilegious imagination of the poets were only made from a moral and rational point of view. What is truly original in Saint Augustine is his admission that daemons passing themselves off as deities could *present themselves in the form of gods desiring to be worshiped as evil deities, morally speaking, or suffering from being calumniated as such by the human imagination.*

The gods not only want their turpitudes to be celebrated, they also like to have crimes, even imaginary ones, attributed to them. Having thus driven home the contradictory nature of the *theologia theatrica*, Saint Augustine concludes that the divinity of such gods is false, their demonic essence real. In what way could he make his pagan adversaries realize the dilemma into which he hoped to confine them? (No doubt by reminding them of the inconsistency of Roman laws, which respect the worship of gods and deprive actors of civic honors. Actors were sacred officiants, just like priests. The god was honored, the man who played the god's part was dishonored. In this regard the Romans show inconsistency

and impiety. The Greeks display a much more consistent piety by honoring at once the person of the god and that of the actor who plays him on stage.) Nevertheless, it remains true that in order to be developed, Saint Augustine's argument had to proceed from the Christian representation of the Incarnation, more specifically from the notion of *Kenosis*. And it is quite curious that, with the intention of *refuting, in the name of God incarnate, of the Word made flesh*, the belief in deities who wanted *vices to be ascribed to them*, Augustine goes so far as to reconstruct the nature of these gods from the point of view of their contradictory representation: *and for all that, this representation is only contradictory in his own Platonic and Christian mind: to wit, he who says god, presupposes a good god, since an evil deity is a contradiction in terms—hence the idea that those gods are demons* (although here too, daemons—intermediary deities in Platonic theology—are confused with the demons of the Gospel, which are of an entirely different nature). But assuming that these deities, however evil they may be, are *deities nevertheless*—a deity, in wanting to be worshiped as wicked or corrupt, borrows from men a manner of behavior likely to be judged by men as wicked. Inasmuch as deities, in order to be true deities, are fundamentally impassible, and good because impassible, in the Platonic and Stoic sense of the term, then if these deities were ever to resemble humans, they had to borrow from them the very thing that, by their own nature, distinguished them from mortals: the *passions*. Is it any surprise, then, that in assuming human passions, the gods magnified them to an excessive degree equal to their divine nature, and that the vices adopted by the gods assumed limitless proportions which men could only achieve in their imaginations, since they could not practice them with impunity in their mortal condition? *Why indeed did they set an example of vice instead of virtue? Why did they prescribe no moral laws? Why did they not concern themselves with the morals of their worshipers? Why? Because the gods, precisely by reason of their impassible nature, could not set any sort of meritorious example for man, could not show any virtuousness!*—since the highest virtue, from the point of view of passible and mortal man, becomes confused with impassible immortality. If from man's point of view, the more a mortal individual showed himself to be generous, the more he proved impassible, then from the gods' point of view, from the moment they contemplated—or from the moment they were represented as contemplating—revealing them-

selves to mortals out of divine generosity, they showed themselves to be *virtuous*, humanly speaking, in assuming, though gods, the *most dreadful, most pernicious passions* of human nature. In this way, prescribing man to represent them on stage, not in their impassibility but as prodigiously corrupt natures — as adulterous, incestuous, thieving, lying—debased, as it were, though without letting anyone ever forget that these were gods debasing themselves by the very fact of revealing themselves and making a spectacle of themselves to their worshipers— prescribing this, then, resulted from the stake that these gods, insofar as all this corresponded to pagan Rome's imaginings, had in *becoming incarnate*.

It was, however, an incarnation in the form of the actor's body—as he divulged, through his playing, the secret of the silent gesture of divine states (the *simulacra*, properly speaking).



Sacred and Mythic Origins of
Certain Practices of the Women of
Rome

Translated by Sophie Hawkes



Introduction

Our goal here is to examine several aspects of the world of debauchery in ancient Rome and its relationship to sacred life, religious solemnities and games. These phenomena are generally attributed to the course of decadence; Roman moralists and historians—before the Fathers of the Latin Church—largely contributed to this interpretation. But with the great distance from which we now presume to judge these phenomena, we enjoy a vantage point from which we hope more or less to locate the beginnings of certain structures of life, of diverse origin and inspiration, which contemporaries could not themselves discern in the overly stratified context that such structures formed. Of the prodigious effort made by Varro in this type of investigation, we are left with but a few fragments that reveal enough to make us regret the disappearance of the greater part of this work. And while it is true that our distance allows us better to examine matters, it hardly enables us to situate ourselves in the atmosphere of a vanished world: rather, we tend to project thereupon our own ways of thinking and feeling, responding to our own nostalgias or prejudices. Thus when considering Roman eroticism, that assortment of diverse practices that the Romans themselves deemed depraved, might we not be too easily prone to consider them from the perspective of our own

“depravities”? We seek to know in what ways Roman eroticism distinguishes itself from that of our own epoch: how it took shape and upon what sort of prior foundation.

What holds our attention above all are the sacred solemnities and stage shows in Rome concerning certain gods. Janus is not the only god that has a double face; many other gods and a few goddesses do as well. If they reveal one face in the temples, they show another in the solemnities and stage shows; in other words, they receive a specific form of worship based on one or two aspects of their personal myths; this worship conforms more or less to the moral and social orientation of the state that hoped to benefit from it. On the other hand, there are the stage shows where the foundation of myth reveals an affinity between the deity and the disposition of the people, a kind of profound complicity, either silent or articulated, between the people and the god or goddess, beyond the use made of it by the state religion. This double function that the image of the deity fulfills in rites and games is manifested in the behavior of the worshipers. It contributes to the ambiguity of “superstition” and custom, an ambiguity which for St. Augustine was but an inconsistency that only served to perpetuate these monstrous practices. We suspect the existence of currents and countercurrents; individuals depended on them, obeyed them, developed contradictory habits that disturbed them all the less since the infinite amalgam of images presented in the solemnities satisfied all the more the need to express their inner plurality. As concerns sexuality, the experience itself is limited to the function of the act of procreation; religion, however, integrates it into universal experience; the rites free the act from its monotony and multiply its image; the image frees animality from its function and opens another sphere for it: the games and their various forms, such as the stage shows, which associate it with the secret

gratuitousness of the divine universe. Procreation is useful to the temporal prosperity of the state, but the deities that preside over it and assure fecundity demand sacrifices and, more precisely, the stage shows through which they reveal that not only are they identifiable with procreation but, as its principle, they embody an existence that is inexhaustible because it is eternal, eternal because it is aimless and hence *useless*. This aspect, terrifying to the state which can exist only through the aims it proposes in time and in space, must therefore remain hidden in the form of images ambiguous enough to shield humanity from the vertigo of the uselessness of existence. The appeal of vertigo lies in the sexual act and infinitely transcends it, to the point of assuming the forms of divinity; this equilibrium and this compensation give rise to a twofold manner of behavior with regard to the deity that both dispenses life and threatens to take it away again if it is not wasted in return. In the cults, the state invokes the deity so that the deity may recognize itself in the goals pursued by the state; on the other hand, in the stage shows, it calls its own activities into question, accepting that its subjects imitate that which, in the form of the deity, is contrary to its principles, in order to be reconciled with it. In other words, it buys its own social order by paying tribute to the “disorder” of the gods. The Roman state wanted to choose its gods: *dii selecti*, and gods that hold council: *dii consentes*. But how to recognize them? They are *dii incerti*—they crowd together and change faces; if some are favored, others avenge themselves cruelly. Hence we are faced again with currents and countercurrents, contradictory traditions, amalgamations of diversely interpreted images. We must consider the origins of Rome, the thorny question of Etruscan and Sabine influences, the possible indirect Asian influences, the different religious and social regimes that ensure, in sexual relationships, a subordination of the male principle to the

female principle, or vice versa, under the variable sign of divine hierogamies. Immediately we are confronted with the problem of the matriarchate that has given rise to so many controversies since 1861, when Bachofen propounded his vast survey, which was overly systematic perhaps, but infinitely engaging and at times revealing enough to have attracted the attention of minds as different as Engels and Lewis H. Morgan. Bachofen's great powers of divination regarding the symbolism of images prompts us to refer to some of his findings: for example, the vestiges of sacred prostitution that the matriarchal regimes and their tutelary goddesses left to the Italic peoples—a thesis rejected by a great number of recent historians, but which seems sufficiently defensible to illuminate the erotic aspects of certain Roman customs and practices. Starting with this premise, we shall examine a few cults and religious solemnities as sources of Roman eroticism and its theatrical character as developed in such ceremonies: for example, the role of prostitution and stage shows in their relationship to the images of mythology. It would thus seem that contrary to the customs and the ideas developed in our modern context, licentiousness, debauchery and what is generally called Roman eroticism never ceased to have their references in mythic and religious life. And here again, it would appear that eroticism is but a form of representation.

I Schematic Outline of the "Matriarchate" According to Bachofen

In his vast work on ancient matriarchal laws (*Mutterrecht*, 1861) Bachofen, the archaeologist from Basel, seems to have laid the foundations for a sociology of sexual life in antiquity, taking into account the essential fact that the function of sex was inseparable from religious piety in those vanished societies. The evolution from the matriarchate to the patriarchate,¹ which Bachofen describes from perspectives as nuanced as they are multiple, can be summarized here in very schematic fashion according to the following three *stages*:

The first stage would be that of the tellurian or chthonian matriarchate existing under the sign of subterranean deities, deities of still uncultivated vegetation and swamplands—principally the tellurian Aphrodite. Paternity was an absolutely anonymous condition, the result of the *prostitution of the mother of a family*. This stage, which resembles the system of the hive, would be to some extent a preparation for the matriarchate proper; here prostitution is a ritual act through which a woman identifies herself with tellurian deities.

1 Today this idea of *evolution* is rejected by sociology; rather, the *coexistence of patriarchal and matriarchal regimes is propounded*—and these latter are seen as mere gynaecocracies.

The second stage would correspond to the establishment of an agrarian civilization under the sign of Demeter and Selene (the lunar Artemis); the religious structure that confers on it the worship of these goddesses favors a matriarchal law already based on exclusive marriages but which maintains the legal privilege accorded to the "maternal fold"; children live under the matronymic system and sisters inherit at the expense of brothers. One finds here a coexistence of subterranean deities with those of the higher regions (the myths of Demeter and Persephone; the murder of Clytemnestra, Oedipus and the Sphinx, a matriarchal deity, etc.). But already we find a tendency for the woman to free herself from the chthonian deities under the sign of Selene. Bonds are still formed with subterranean deities, and thus hetairism still retains its sacred nature (which would explain the meaning of the myth of Helen); in other words, little by little matrons cease to unite themselves with many men—to choose many fathers for "fatherless" children as in the previous stage—while *young girls are still led, before marriage, to prostitute themselves in sanctuaries to appease the still threatening chthonian deities*. In this sense the hierodulic courtesans would be a vestige of chthonian religious practices. In certain regions, in the same spirit, custom required that *a young girl settle her dowry by prostituting herself*. Between these two stages, but more or less coexistent with the second one, appears *the phenomenon of the Amazon*: the violations of the rights of women, the exactions of which women were apparently the object—inasmuch as in regions of related civilizations hetairism merged with the sharing of women by men—and certain war migrations of the male population were probably among the causes of this phenomenon (the myth of the Argonauts, Jason and Medea). This sort of insurrection of women, even while laying down the foundations of the gynaeocracy, would have brought this regime to its final extremes, effecting the total subjugation

of men under the sign of lunar Artemis, chaste and armed, prototype of the virgin huntresses (the myth of Omphale and Hercules).

The third stage, which would lead to the absorption of the matriarchate by the patriarchate, is marked by the appearance of *the phallicism of Dionysus*. The god and his followers fought the Amazons, and the result of this battle was the *conversion* of the Amazon to a Bacchante. Even while paving the way for the triumph of the male principle, the Dionysian religion marked a recrudescence of sacred prostitution. "Dionysus, who is no longer a female deity, is the god of women par excellence."

What followed next, under the influence of Orpheus, priest of Apollo, was apparently a double spiritualization of Dionysianism and Amazonianism. And indeed, the decisive transition of matriarchal societies to the patriarchate would be expressed in the triumph of the Uranian deities over the tellurian and infernal divinities through the establishment of the Delphic cult of Apollo and Artemis (both children of Leto, a nocturnal and matriarchal deity), Delian Artemis being but a spiritualization of the Amazonian Aretemis.

As debatable as various aspects of this conception may seem, and indeed it is criticized today for the evolutionary principle it presupposes—that is, that all civilizations followed an analogous development—we believe that it remains valid on the fundamental level of the collective unconscious, in particular for the interpretation it gives of the development of the Roman state and of the mythic, religious and social components of its institutions. Our Western world is still feeling the effects of the long and stubborn efforts that Rome had to make in order to overcome the last Helleno-Asiatic influences and become free of "matriarchal" memories.

At the origin of these memories we apparently find the cult and the myth of *Aphrodite Mylitta*, the name by which the Greeks designated the Assyro-Babylonian Istar, the Anatolian Astarte, and the Aphrodite of Ascalon—so many variants of the Great Mother Goddess of Asia in whom Uranian, Chthonian, and sometime Amazon tendencies were expressed. The myth of Omphale, queen of Lydia and mistress of Hercules, would be but the Hellenized version of the hierogamy of the great goddess with her male principle, Belos-Herakles, the sun god. The relationship between Omphale and Hercules, who was enslaved to the queen by sensuality, would simply represent the subordination of the god, as fecundating principle, to the great goddess and grant to her alone sovereignty and divine creative powers. According to Claeacus,² the Lydians saw Omphale as having established the gynaeocracy as well as the ceremonies during which the hetairistic nature of the goddess was celebrated by the ritual prostitution of women. In fact, herein lies the fundamental feature of the cult of this goddess: she demanded the prostitution of virgins in her sanctuaries and the “sacrifice of chastity” among matrons.

When the “patriarchate” had definitively triumphed in the Roman Republic and the Twelve Tables before finding its highest expression in the imperial principate, the Asiatic myth of Venus, mother of the race of Iulus, still continued to haunt men’s minds enough for Julius Caesar to refer to it in the funerary oration for his aunt Julia, as well as in his personal genealogy.

In countless episodes of Roman history and legend one finds traces of the struggle between the two principles and of the necessity of repeated resistance to the almost obsessive image of the woman and her sovereign

2 Cf. Athenaios, *The banquet of the sophists*. Claeacus, a disciple of Aristotle.

powers; one has but to refer, for example, to the unusual relationship between Nero and his mother, Agrippina the Younger, and to the almost incestuous behavior of this princess toward her son.³ A similar resistance to divine and royal heterae is said to have inspired Virgil in the episode of Aeneas’s rupture with Dido: the queen of Carthage, her female priesthood—sacred prototype of the *Flaminica*—unable to survive either the sterility of her loves or the failure of her attempt to subjugate Aeneas, commits suicide out of spite, having seen her sovereignty shattered by the refusal of her partner, who for his part triumphs over the temptation to subordinate himself to the matriarchal principle. One sees all the symbolic import of this episode: it announces the total and definitive emancipation of Rome from its Asiatic and Oriental origins, which would permit the West to develop its own structures.

Bachofen believed he had uncovered the vestiges of the matriarchate in more or less obscured myths among the neighbors of yet unfounded Rome, such as the Sabines and the Etruscans and, after the founding of Rome, among the Etruscan and Sabine kings of early Rome. This is apparently indicated in the cycles of legends of Tanaquil, the wife of Tarquinius Priscus, and more specifically in those legends surrounding the circumstances of the births of kings Servius Tullius and Tarquinius Superbus. Tanaquil mysteriously presides over the birth of Tarquinius, compelling the beautiful Ocrisia, her slave, to couple with the phallic apparition rising from the embers of the hearth. Tarquinius Superbus owes his royal power to the crimes of his wife Tullia. In the Roman and Livian versions of these legends, Bachofen discovers intentional omissions attributable to the Roman

3 Perhaps the extraordinary incidence of pederasty, notwithstanding the public discredit with which it was viewed in Rome, would be due to a compensatory tendency among Roman men and young males to restore the virile irresponsibility perpetuated by the matriarchate.

aversion to many reprehensible elements; he compares them to other versions and claims to recognize therein a sustained echo of Asiatic representations that were gradually effaced, but whose themes the Etruscan, Tyrrhenian and Sabine peoples supposedly assimilated and thereby furnished a kind of Italic version of these myths, which make a hetaerist deity the source of royal power. In particular, the presence of the statue of Tanaquil with her emblematic accessories in the temple, on the Quirinal, of the god Semo Sancus Dius Fidius—identified with Jupiter—bears witness to a far off Assyro-Asiatic echo in early Rome. In fact, in establishing, with the support of certain texts, an analogy between Semo Sancus Dius Fidius and the Asiatic Hercules (Belos-Herakles), he claims to see in this association of the statue of the queen with the cult of the Sabine god a counterpart, across the ages, of the hierogamy of Belos-Herakles with the Aphrodite Mylitta (Ishtar or Astarte), whose cult, which involved the prostitution of virgins, was accompanied by licentious and profligate ceremonies, mingling masters and slaves—much like the Roman Saturnalias and Floralias—which reached their point of culmination in the ritual coupling, in the eyes of the people, of the sacred prostitute representing the goddess in these ceremonies, and a slave chosen to play the role of her divine partner, Belos-Herakles. The latter, like Hercules himself, would be delivered to the flames of the pyre at the close of the celebration, in a ritual that clearly associates the carnal act with immortalization by fire.

II Aphrodisian Symbols and Emblems in the Statue of Tanaquil

We cannot enter here into all the infinitely complex detail that Bachofen discovers in the course of his investigation; let us limit ourselves, therefore, to recalling the indications on which he bases his idea, namely, that the statue of Tanaquil at the temple of Semo Sancus Dius Fidius, with her emblematic accessories, stood as a "condensation" of sacred and psychic motifs that were in no way eradicated, but rather overcome by the Roman soul. The first such indication is provided by the emblems; the second, by the gradual substitution of the goddess Fortuna for the image of Tanaquil in her relationship with the king Servius Tullius.

Among these emblems there are three types whose Aphrodisian symbolism cannot be doubted: the belt worn by the statue; her sandals; and the implements of spinning, the spindle and spinning wheel. The statue's belt exercised magical powers of a medicinal nature. Bachofen says that the most ancient Asiatic symbolism lends a Uranian significance to the image of the belt; it is the hieroglyph of the starry firmament which, like a "zona," surrounds the universe. According to Lucian,⁴ it

4 *De Dea Syria.*

is the ornament of Aphrodite-Urania; thus Tanaquil would again reflect the image of the queen of the night sky, endowed with the characteristics of the Aphrodite of Ascalon, such as they always flow from this representation of a maternal deity bestowing sensual delight. The Hellenic spirit ended up totally abstracting the image of the belt from its cosmic context and made it an erotic figure of seduction.⁵ On the other hand, the Latin spirit (such as Nonnus, in his *Dionysiaca*), being familiar with Asiatic interpretations, preserved the ability of this emblem of Aphrodite to act upon universal forces such as the Sun, Zeus, or the Ether. It was in this last sense that the Roman tradition, while censoring the sensual tendencies of Asiatic symbolism, retained only its purely Uranian representations. Thereafter Tanaquil's belt becomes a healing and salutary talisman that reflects the purely maternal and nurturing role of the queen in her relationship with king Servius and the Roman people. Tanaquil would in this sense be a purified figure of the Asiatic Aphrodite, the Dea Syria, from whom the austere Roman spirit adopted only the nurturing character.

The same is true of the symbolic value of the sandal, which like the belt belongs to the world of the Uranian goddesses, and more specifically to that of the courtesan. The myth of the courtesan Nitocris, who became the wife of Psammetichus, pharaoh of the sixth dynasty, admirably illustrates this symbolism. One day when the young courtesan was bathing, an eagle swooped down upon her clothes and carried off her sandal, letting it drop in the middle of the counsel of jurists with whom the king was deliberating. Intrigued by the incident, the monarch had the woman to whom the sandal belonged searched for, discovered the beautiful Nitocris, and married her. The relationship that this myth establishes among the world of the courtesan, the heavens and the

5 *Iliad*, XIV, 214.

king's sovereignty (the snatching of the feminine sandal by the eagle and its providential fall into the middle of the royal counsel) is inspired by representations analogous to those of the Aphrodisian "zona."

As for the spinning accessories, the spindle and spinning wheel, the simple fact that they were placed beside the statue of Tanaquil, and not in the queen's hands, would suffice to prove a reference to the myth of Omphale and Hercules, and to the power of women not only to dominate but also to subjugate man; for we know that Omphale in this manner led Hercules to spin wool to please her. But, irrespective of this reference, the spindle and spinning wheel (which immediately evoke the Parcae, chthonian and matriarchal deities before becoming more specifically the goddesses of fate), inasmuch as they are used to work wool, express more generally "that cosmic matriarchalism which engenders and develops all that is only ephemeral and weaves the clothing of the mortal body while inserting therein the thread of death." The working of wool is, among others things, an appanage of courtesans of the Eastern Mediterranean. They are the finest of spinners: the delicacy and transparency of a cloth destined to veil the female body in an ambiguous manner derives from Aphrodisian ritual contrivances; hence the reaction of Roman rigorism, which demanded thick woolen robes for the clothing of the matron, particularly for the Flaminica. Thus the statue of Tanaquil, with magic belt and pair of sandals on the one hand, and accoutrements of a spinner on the other, was but a figure amended from the Asian Mother Goddesses, though retaining the attributes of these deities, which later Roman interpretation would totally drain of their original symbolic contents.

According to the Latin documents pertaining to this statue,⁶ Tanaquil was called *Gaia Caecilia*; *Caecilia* being

6 Verrius Flaccus, *De Verborum significationibus*, cited by Festus.

derived from *caecus*: blind, the "blindfolded eyes," etc. Here one can follow Bachofen in the relationship he establishes between Tanaquil and the goddess Fortuna, independently of the relation the legend attributes to her and king Servius.

III Aphrodisian Role of the Goddess Fortuna in the Myth of Servius

As the Roman spirit developed the matronal type of woman within the framework of its civic institutions and contrasted her to Hellenic-Asiatic hetæerism, it brought some changes to the legend of Tanaquil, or rather this figure herself softened the troubling elements she still retained from earlier matriarchal divinities. At the same time, the mythic connections between the goddess Fortuna and king Servius Tullius gained in importance. Fortuna, as goddess of destiny, presided over the rise of the Roman state; but, on the other hand, she revealed herself to be as ambiguous as possible, possessing all the specific attributes of feminine cunning. Here again, precisely because the people tried to ignore them, the ancient deities avenged themselves to such an extent that the popular imagination actually came to attribute to the goddess Fortuna the behavior of a courtesan accustomed to entering the palace of Servius through a small window; in addition she was said to have had the statue of her lover Servius covered in her temple, admitting and blushing to have slept, she the celestial one, with a mortal man.⁷ As for the small window, according to Plutarch it refers to the one from which Tanaquil

⁷ Ovid, *Fasti*, VI, 375

harangued the people to persuade them to elect Servius king. He himself then supposedly declared that Fortuna had come to him through the window, which thereafter became the gate called *Fenestella*. But here we see the goddess corresponding more to a precise representation than to a simple personification of chance. Whether Tanaquil harangued the people through a window or Fortuna herself slipped through it, Bachofen here sees again an inverted image of the behavior of a courtesan: to wit, that of the prostitute who, through her window, watches out for the first passer-by. The bas-relief that Servius supposedly had sculpted on a Roman door, depicting Fortuna slipping through the window into his palace, would have accredited this legend. According to Ovid,⁸ the goddess announced to the matrons that the day the face of the statue of Servius was unveiled in her temple, all modesty would disappear—a twofold allusion to the commerce that she had had with him and to the circumstances of the king's birth. Upon the order of Tanaquil, Ocrisia, the beautiful slave, received in her womb the phallic sign of Vulcan; and he made her mother of Servius. Of this miraculous birth the king retained the emblem of the crown of bright fire that illuminated his head in moments of sadness, it was said, or while he slept. Here again Ocrisia would appear to fulfill the ritual role of the sacred prostitute celebrating the cult of a matriarchal and Aphrodisian deity of whom Tanaquil, or better still Fortuna, would be but an amended form, and who, thenceforth affecting modesty, was to become the *Fortuna muliebris* of matrons. It is nevertheless true that in her mythic relation with the king Servius Tullius, Fortuna is completely identified with Aphrodite-Porné. From this come all the various agnomina borne by the goddess, which attribute to her the ever-changing moods and all the wiles of a seductive and voluptuous goddess: *Fortuna obsequens* (supple and

8 *Fasti*, VI, 610.

complaisant), *Fortuna suadela* (persuasive), *Fortuna viscata* (ensnaring with her endowments). In this light we see her as *Fortuna mascula*, giving man the phallus, *propitii numinus signum* (sign of the propitious deity), and as *Fortuna virilis* (granting the power of seduction to young girls).

The Ambiguity of Roman Matron Goddesses

To better understand the behavior of Roman women in later centuries, and their temptation to improvise upon hetaerist customs, it is useful to examine to what extent the vestiges of the Aphrodisian matriarchate of Hellenic-Asiatic origin were elaborated by the Roman spirit and re-formed in the crucible of its patriarchal legislation to produce the divine and cultural prototypes of the Roman matron. Goddesses whose prehistory, not belonging to Roman patrimony, was lost in the mists of time, found themselves converted little by little into the tutelary goddesses of wives, such as *Fortuna muliebris*, and they seemed to define the domain of women in relation to men, to preserve it from all "exactions" and all male "despotism." Hence *Bona Dea*. Yet notwithstanding these figures of the matronal principle, who were sufficiently ambiguous in themselves and peculiar to the ruling patrician classes, other figures, deities closer to the plebes and the slave world, such as Acca Larentia, Flora, and Juno Caprotina, similarly perpetuated, in sacred ceremonies, motifs that were at once Aphrodisian and chthonian and derived from Etruscan and Sabine folklore.

The Secret Cult of "Bona Dea"

As regards matronal goddesses, let us again recall the notions set forth by Bachofen: the figuration of these goddesses expresses the passage from the tellurian stage to the "lunar" stage; one sees therein the principle of the feminine deity engaged in a struggle with the sub-

terrestrial forces that had previously defined her: the nocturnal or tellurian deity becomes double and, as a lunar deity, begins to associate itself with the virile, solar deity. Such are the myths of Kore-Persephone, daughter of Demeter, and of Artemis, daughter of Leto, virgin goddesses promised to male possession, if not threatened by it; such is the myth of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, a subterranean deity; such is the safeguarding of the chastity of Artemis, coupled in sisterly fashion with Apollo, a Uranian deity—a tendency which, in the rather complex figure of Athena-Minerva, results in a total liberation from all erotic representation and identifies this goddess with the *ether* as the supreme principle of the cosmos. (Like Artemis, a nocturnal and Aphrodisian goddess before she came to represent virginal chastity, Athena-Minerva had to be purged of her primitive sexual ties with Hephaestus.) Goddesses of this sort, inasmuch as they correspond to the development of a feminine consciousness, undergo as many modifications as were required by the civil conditions imposed upon women by the religions of the State. As concerns the antecedents of a maternal goddess such as *Bona Dea*, Bachofen recalls that the *ius naturale*, corresponding to the tellurian Aphrodite, the stage of uncultivated vegetation, yields to *Demeter thesmophora* and *Ceres legifera*, and thus to an *ius naturale* counterbalanced by the *ius civile*, as befits the stage of organized cultivation of the land (*Ceres laborata*). Henceforth, psychically speaking, the woman must combat her propensity to identify herself with the Tellus, the universal mother who, offering herself for fortuitous fecundation, implies an egalitarianism based on her sharing of herself; in compensation, the woman is called upon to fulfill herself in a conjugal union as the mother of the children of a fixed man in the regime of the property of the *paterfamilias*, upon which the whole Roman social structure rested. And while it fell to the aedile magistrates to exercise the

priesthood of *Ceres legifera*, it was the matron, wife of the praetor or the consul, who would celebrate the cult of *Bona Dea* in her house, in strictly feminine company, to the exclusion of all male presence. Here again we find a compromise with memories of the matriarchate: the celebration of *Bona Dea* by the wife of the praetor or the consul not only proves that the health of the State and the prosperity of the people rested upon a matriarchal deity; the characteristics of the cult, as much as the myth of the goddess itself, also bear witness to a recuperation of the feminine nature, a return to itself of the most ambiguous sort.

Macrobius⁹ tells us that, according to Cornelius Labeo,¹⁰ *Bona Dea* is but another name for the goddess *Maia*, mother of Mercury; that in the sacrifices (in the month of May) she is also called *Magna Mater*, and that she was seen ordering the construction of a temple under the name of *Bona Dea*. The secret rites supposedly show that she represented the earth; while in the pontifical books she was referred to simultaneously as *Bona*, since she provides all nourishment; as *Ops* (another name for the Diana of Aricia) since she sustains life through her succor; as *Fauna* (*favet*), since she assists all living things in their needs; and as *Fatua* (*fando*: to speak), since newborns do not let their voices be heard until after having made contact with the earth. She is depicted holding a scepter in her left hand because she possesses the power of Juno. She has also been compared to Proserpina, the daughter of Ceres (thus Persephone or Kore, the daughter of Demeter), because the sow, an animal that feeds on the harvest, was sacrificed to her. Meanwhile, the Latin myth that makes her the daughter of god and king Faunus depicts her as resisting the desires of the father in love with her; Faunus, seeing her refuse his ardent affections after having tried to in-

9 *The Saturnalia*, Book I, XII, 21-22.

10 Famous scholar at the end of the third century, according to J.C.

ebriate her, strikes her with a myrtle branch; then, assuming the shape of a snake, he succeeds in possessing her. Such are the mythic particulars expressed in the forms and the ritualistic restrictions of the celebration: first of all, no men are admitted to the sanctuary; secondly, it is a sacrilege to bring myrtle branches there; the head of the statue is shaded in grapevines, in memory of the principle method used by her father to seduce her; also, in the sanctuary women offer wine only under the name of *milk*, and the vessel that contains it is called the *honey vessel*; the *snakes* that appear during the celebration "are neither feared nor frightened" by those present, adds Macrobius; that is to say, as symbols of the male organ and its potential violence, they only represent the memory of the threat in a most inoffensive way, almost as a game. For according to Plutarch's description, this matriarchal ceremony does not preclude a kind of entertainment. Recalling that the Greeks identified *Bona Dea* with "that mother of Dionysius whom one dares not name," he writes that such would be the reason the women celebrated her day by erecting bowers made of grape branches and why they placed a sacred dragon beside the image of the goddess in memory of her myth. During the celebration of the mysteries, the women, amongst themselves, indulged in religious practices not unlike the Orphic mysteries. The greatest rites took place at night, and the vigil that went on until dawn was interspersed with games and musical interludes. It was in circumstances similar to these, during the solemnities of *Bona Dea* celebrated by Pompeia, then the second wife of Caesar during his praetorship, that the misadventure of Publius Clodius took place. This young patrician friend of Caesar, whom the latter had intended to admit to the plebs so that he might become the tribune of the people and thus take action against Cicero, "was smitten by Pompeia . . . who was not at all annoyed by this passion. But the apartment of this woman

was carefully watched, and Caesar's mother Aurelia made meetings difficult and dangerous." At the time of the celebration of *Bona Dea* by Caesar's wife, "Clodius, who did not yet have a beard and believed that thanks to this detail he could disguise himself, assumed the garb and the trappings of a female musician to present himself at the house of Caesar. He did indeed look like a young woman. He found the doors open and was safely admitted by the serving girl who was his accomplice. But this girl, who had run off to get Pompeia, was long in returning. Clodius did not have the patience to wait at the spot where she had left him. As he wandered randomly through the house, which was large, while avoiding the lights he ran into a waiting-maid of Aurelia, who, believing she was addressing a woman, entreated him to play a song. Upon his refusal, she pulled him out into the open and asked him who he was and from whence he came. Clodius answered that he was waiting for one of Pompeia's maids, who was called Darling. His voice betrayed him for what he was, and at once Aurelia's chambermaid bounded noisily into the lighted hall where the circle of women was gathered, crying that she had caught a man red-handed. Faced with the general panic, Aurelia ended the mysteries of the goddess and hid the objects of the cult; then she had the doors closed and personally searched all through the house by torchlight for Clodius. He was discovered in the room of the little slave who had admitted him, and to whom he had run for asylum. He was recognized and the women showed him to the door."¹¹ This incident remains quite revealing of the ensemble of complex and indeed paradoxical circumstances in which Roman women in particular, and the popular imagination in general, evolved in regard to the simulacra of such deities. The moment chosen by Clodius must have occurred more than once. The anecdote is less interesting

11 Plutarch, *Caesar*, IX-X.

for the historical personages involved than for the ambiguous nature of *Bona Dea*, whose name would recuperate other analogous goddesses such as *Ops* (the Italic Diana) or better still Demeter, who "in her suffering caused by the abduction of Kore, her daughter, was made to laugh by *aiscrolegein*, or obscene jokes."¹² Once *Bona Dea* comes to represent the Earth Mother, the *Magna Mater*, that which the matron celebrates in her will become less and less conjugal fidelity and more and more the identification of her own feminine nature with the earth and its subjection to a fortuitous fecundation, a kind of return, in this sense, to her availability prior to marriage, and thus to the stage when the young girl and the hetaera were virtually indistinguishable. If the figure of *Bona Dea* appears beyond this stage as a sublimation of these prior possibilities, it is no surprise that her celebration should become in the end, as Juvenal harshly described, a clandestine orgy among women. This was not, however, a degeneration of the cult, but rather a resurgence of its essential motifs: the invocation to Priapus, the soon frenetic states accompanied by the sound of the flute and trumpet in the exasperating absence of intentionally excluded males, the call to the secret lover of one woman or another, or to the first slave available, or lastly, the recourse to an animal, in this case the ass, the fabled expedient of matrons in a frenzy from having drunk *wine* but disavowed it with the name of *milk*.

12 Diodorus Siculus, V. 4, 7.

IV The Cult and Myth of Acca Larentia

Similarly, in this connection the mythic figure of Acca Larentia demonstrates the survival of the model of sacred prostitution in the popular imagination, and the idea of generosity it implies. During the ceremonies of the Larentalia celebrated in her honor, the Flamen Quirinalis would offer a sacrifice to the divine dead (*dii manes*) over her tomb in the Velabrum quarter; according to Pauly-Wissowa,¹³ the goddess *Larenta* at the origin of these rites is the same as *Larunda*, the Sabine deity that Varro says was introduced by Tatius long before; little by little she would be completely replaced by Acca Larentia, whose double myth portrayed her sometimes as the nurse of Remus and Romulus,¹⁴ sometimes as the beautiful courtesan at the time of king Ancus and the mistress of the god Hercules. In the end, the myth of Acca Larentia the beautiful courtesan won out over the myth of the original goddess, whereas the rites retained many elements of the chthonian nature of the early deity. In fact, Pauly-Wissowa notes that contrary to the opinion

13 *Religion und Kultur der Römer*.

14 According to Plutarch, *Romulus* (IV-V), the Roman she-wolf is no more than the legendary sublimation of Acca Larentia, the true wet-nurse of the twins, in as much as the term *she-wolf* applied to women of bad ways: *lupa* hence, *lupanarium*.

even of Roman authors, the site of the rites in question was not the tomb of Acca Larentia, but one of those pits called *mundus*, a cave or subterranean cavern opened only for the ceremonies, and pertaining specifically to the cult of the dead and the infernal powers, the *dii manes*. Thus the physiognomy of the courtesan Acca Larentia, combining the attributes of a deity at once tellurian, Aphrodisian and funereal, again reveals the persistence of themes from the remote age of the matriarchal world where licentiousness, generosity and the world of the dead were closely linked.

As for the idea of largesse that Acca Larentia embodies, it is best expressed in the famous legend which shows us the courtesan offered to Hercules by the guardian of this god's temple, a legend which seems to confirm Bachofen's thesis attributing the myths of such figures to the ceremonies of Aphrodite Mylitta, whose partner was the Assyrian Hercules, Belos-Herakles.

The guardian of the temple of Hercules, finding himself idle and wishing to amuse himself, proposed a game of dice to the god; playing alternately with one hand for himself and the other for Hercules, he stipulated that if he won, he would reward himself a good meal and a beautiful mistress with the money set aside for alms, and if he lost, he would reward these same pleasures to Hercules. Having lost while playing for himself, but having won for Hercules, he prepared a banquet for him and, having requested the beautiful courtesan Larentia, made a bed for her in the sanctuary, shut her in the temple for the night, and told her that Hercules would come share her bed. Later, while she slept, she dreamed that the god made love to her and heard him promise that as soon as she left the sanctuary she would find in the first young man she met her reward for the pleasure she had given him. And indeed, she had hardly left

when she saw the very rich Tarrutius come towards her; he became smitten with her, carried her away, kept her at his side and loved her so much that at the moment of his death he left his entire fortune to her. Thus fulfilled, Larentia, who did not want to appear ungrateful for her divine reward, in turn appointed the Roman people as her heirs, thinking that nothing could be more agreeable to the gods. She disappeared, but her testament was found and, due to her many merits, king Ancus wanted her to receive divine honors.¹⁵ The difference that one sees here between Bona Dea and Acca Larentia is that with the former the underlying myth has to manifest itself in the rites through disorder in order to return to its origins, while with Acca Larentia the myth itself reinstates a form of worship (the courtesan offered to Hercules) and chooses the sanctuary as its stage: nothing could be more comical than a game played between the sacristan and the god. But this pleasantry culminates in a ritual through the offering of the courtesan; the idea of sharing, of divine prodigality, thus inspired the legend of her testament.

The Nonae Caprotinae

Vestiges of sacred prostitution, of the "sacrifice of chastity," were still evident in the myths at the origin of the sacred ceremonies called the Nonae Caprotinae in honor of Juno. According to Plutarch, the etymology of the word *caprotina*, derived from *capra*, indicates a double origin: on the one hand, the word evokes the *goat's bog* where the people's assembly was held, during which Romulus mysteriously disappeared—and, on the other hand, it suggests the *caprificus*, or wild fig tree, upon which a sign of victory was given to the Romans by a young slave woman, in circumstances we shall presently discuss. Since in both cases there was a thronging of

¹⁵ Cf. Plutarch, *Romulus*; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*; Tertullian, *Apologetics*; Saint Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*.

people in which the Romans were calling to one another, it is no surprise that the celebration of these ceremonies reconstitutes both of these details. For this reason, first of all, we appear to be dealing with a very ancient custom, certain details of which would be renewed only in the second circumstance, details which, according to Bachofen, pertain precisely to sacred prostitution or to the sacrifice of chastity among free women, formerly practiced in dire or unusual circumstances. One such circumstance arose under the dictatorship of Camillus, when Rome, having barely recovered from the recent Gallic invasion, had to face another uprising, this time of Latin peoples. It was here that the slave women intervened to save the situation. Livius Posthumius, who led the Latin offensive and had camped his army on the outskirts of the city, proposed as a condition for peace that Rome deliver her virgins and free women without husbands in order to allow for a new fusion of the races as in the time of the Rape of the Sabines. While the Senate was hesitating before the choice of suffering a capture of the city or consenting to turning over the women of Rome—seeing in the latter but a maneuver of Posthumius to procure hostages—a young slave woman named Tutula (or Philotis) devised the strategy of having herself sent to the enemy camp with a troop of the most beautiful slave women, richly clothed so they would pass for free women. This plan was immediately approved and the slave women delivered themselves to the besiegers: during the nocturnal orgy, Tutula, climbing a tall fig tree and unfurling her dress so as not to be noticed by the camp, waved a torch in the direction of Rome, the signal agreed upon by the magistrates. The Roman troops, having remained until then out of the fray, sallied in disorder, each calling to the other, but then descended upon the camp and massacred the sleeping enemy. Dedicated to Juno, the *Caprotine Nones*, which celebrated this event on its

date (July seventh), re-enacted it in the following way: a crowd would leave the gates of Rome en masse, shouting out the most common names, such as Caius, Marcus or Lucius, to imitate the ancient, anxious calls; then the slave women, in superb dress, after a mock battle in which they beat one another and threw stones in memory of the bellicose actions of Tutula's companions, would jostle and proposition any man who might cross their path; lastly, free women and slave women, gathered together beneath a fig bower, would make a sacrifice to Juno and partake in a meal as one, completing the commemoration of this remote event in which the ladies of Rome were replaced by their slaves in a "sacrifice of chastity." It is very probable that the *image* of the *young girl* climbing the *fig tree*, torch in hand, goes back to a much more ancient myth of which we have but an historicized version in Plutarch.¹⁶ No doubt it concerns a combination of symbols: the *young girl* brandishing a *torch*¹⁷ and the *fig tree*, which is counted among various sacred trees. But an analysis of this symbolism would lead us away from our subject here.

The Roman Notion of Chastity

Inasmuch as in pre-Hellenic and Asiatic societies prostitution was a sacred custom practiced compulsorily by virgins and matrons, it constituted an eminently religious act even before it became an expiatory sacrifice; consequently, in no way did it detract from the moral integrity of women. Depending on the variousness of civilizations and their mutual struggles, the notion of virginal integrity and the goddesses representing it (Artemis, Athena) would evolve, at least in the Hellenic world, in a very different direction from that of Roman and Western austerity, later on. The virginal state of the young girl

16 Plutarch, *Life of Camillus*, XXXIII.

17 Cf. Hecate.

appears to have been intrinsically experienced in its purely ontological signification, hence as the *being* revealing itself in the specific physiognomy of *Kore*, the loss of virginity was thus identified with a form of death, as was the case in the mythic abduction of Persephone. The passage from one state to the other, from that of virgin to fecundated woman, presents itself as a dramatic phase of feminine psychism. It is also exclusively in this sense that chastity—inasmuch as the integrity of the being is a value in itself—could become the object of expiatory sacrifice. In the case of sacred prostitution, the hetaera represents the deity itself; in the case of a “sacrifice of chastity,” it is a question of winning the good will of this deity. The sacrifice in no way consists in tolerating public disparagement, a notion that grew out of a new situation, first Roman, then Christian. Contrary to sacred prostitution, but on the same hieratic plane, the chastity of vestal virgins is of an entirely representative nature and their “isolation” identifies them with the “purity” of the fire that they tend. The Roman notion of the moral integrity of women develops in accordance with the notion of personal property, and feminine chastity (implicit in matronal virtue) becomes an integral part of the *possession* of a physical asset; like any expropriation, the passive or active expropriation of the body itself became thenceforth identical to a moral and material downfall, an irreparable humiliation (as the suicide of Lucretia demonstrates). Nevertheless, one can imagine all the psychic “gains” that the individual and collective imagination would draw from this context of notions: from the pleasure of inflicting shame on others and the spitefulness of inflicting it upon oneself, to the representation of deities inflicting “shame” upon one another—hence the “*perversitas*,” in many different guises, of the masochism and sadism that would grow out of Roman mores, notably during the illustrious period of the “twelve Caesars.” It fell to the fathers of the Latin

Church—and to Saint Augustine in particular—to provide the first profound analysis of this; to appreciate this, one has only to refer to his commentary on the rape of Lucretia and this matron’s suicide, and to the comparison he makes between this event and the resigned attitudes of violated Christian virgins. “If sensuality sullies the victim, it is because it is no longer felt by the aggressor alone. . . .”¹⁸

It was, therefore, this very ambiguity which, owing to this confusion between the body itself and the moral good, and owing as well to the progressive “desacralization” of the courtesan, made possible the flowering of what one can henceforth call ROMAN EROTICISM—a naive eroticism as long as it expresses the popular imagination, a perverse eroticism when it becomes individualized. In both cases, however, it subsists on mythological themes which will gradually detach themselves from the cult and from religious ceremonies to become the subject of actual spectacles. In this last phase courtesans become performers of pleasure, while the mythic realities will soon serve as pretexts for what, in the eyes of the Church Fathers, were more or less sacrilegious and always licentious diversions.

18 *De Civ. Dei*, I, 18.

V The Floralia and Stage Shows

Roman legislation, prefiguring in this regard the modern Western conception that would prevail until recent times, conceived and organized "professional" prostitution as an outlet, according to the law of compensations; in spite of this, the courtesans and procuresses still preserved something of the primitive ritual character of prostitution in at least one kind of solemnity, that of the Floralia.

Varro includes *Flora* among the deities that the Sabine king Titus Tatius introduced to Rome. The Roman and already historicized version of her myth, which Lactantius retells, casts her as a courtesan whose testament, like that of Acca Larentia, supposedly endowed the Roman people generously and instituted these solemnities. According to the testimony of Juvenal, in these rites the courtesans would display themselves completely naked, competing for the prizes of the race and the dance, and fighting with weapons like gladiators amongst themselves or with men, also nude. From this we may infer, according to Bachofen, the survival of Amazonian rites belonging to the cult of a warlike and hetaeristic Sabine goddess. No doubt the use of courtesans in such solemnities, far from being fortuitous, constituted on the

contrary an integral part of the cult; thus it should not necessarily be ascribed to the particularly dissolute era—from Nero to Hadrian—from which dates the *Scholie ad Juvenalem*,¹⁹ which concerns these details. And although Lactantius tells us that it was upon popular demand that the courtesans appeared totally naked in the stage shows, Livy had already reported long before that they represented the Rape of the Sabines in this fashion, and then prostituted themselves to the spectators after the performances. Valerius Maximus narrates that “Cato the Censor, when witnessing the Floralia, became aware that his presence bothered the spectators and left to their applause.”

Cases of Deliberate Prostitution among Roman Women and Their Theatrical Exhibition

One could draw a parallel between the slow desacralization and secularization of courtesans and the emigration of myths out of the temples and into the circuses and theaters through the agency of the stage shows; one would then see how certain dissolute practices in Rome seem to derive at once from liturgy and from performance and to waver between free improvisation and ritual order. As this would require too broad an investigation, we must limit ourselves to a few examples, furnished by Suetonius, of the impact this process had on the conduct of Roman women and on certain measures of which they were the object. The erotic attraction that the stage shows held for them would explain the edicts of the Caesars—which were at times restrictive and at times lenient, depending on the temperament of each of these sovereigns—concerning the presence of women at the circus and theater spectacles; Augustus not only was anxious to separate women from men during the *munus*, the gladiator fights, but he also allowed them to watch high up from a place sufficiently raised

19 Sat. VI, 250.

and remote from the arena. On the other hand, he admitted vestal virgins and assigned them reserved places. He even had the actor Stephanus whipped on three successive stages and then exiled from Rome for having been served at table by a Roman matron disguised as a boy with close-cropped hair. Suetonius does not tell us the punishment he dealt to the free woman, who must have participated willingly in this game. As for the gladiator fights, Nero and Domitian, on the other hand, introduced torch-lit fights at night among Roman women of senatorial rank. Concurrent with the exhibition of courtesans in the Floralia, the appearance of Roman women in stage shows of a new genre, the mimes, cannot be underestimated. Unlike the popular Atellan comedies in which actors, shod in buskins, were always masked and where the female roles were played by young boys, mime required acting with one's physiognomy. The actors, wearing flat shoes, wore makeup and their entire performance was based on expression and gesticulation. Most importantly the female roles were played by actresses. One can easily see the importance of this innovation: although many young boys had shone in female roles, henceforth the Romans would follow the vicissitudes of this heroine or that goddess in the guise of such famous artists as Arbuscula, Cytheris, Dionysia and Tertia, who performed at the time around the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire. Domitus Ahenobarbus, Nero's father, had already, as consul and as praetor, organized public performances of mimes which included society women. This constituted a shocking exception to, if not a serious departure from, the law, when one remembers that, for men, appearing on stage implied a fall from equestrian or senatorial rank. The spectacles at that time were so popular that under Tiberius young noblemen willingly renounced their civic rights to devote themselves to the arts of the stage. At the same time, we learn that matrons often renounced

all their prerogatives and had themselves entered into the civil registers as procuresses so they could give themselves over to debauchery in the *lenonia* without fearing the rigors of the law.

To begin with, what do these two examples of disorder have in common, if not that they attest in different ways to a state of corruption? Suetonius cites them in the same paragraph²⁰ as examples of the subterfuges to which compromised women and young men resorted in order to bend the laws, subterfuges which Tiberius thought to thwart by imposing exile on those who were guilty of them. These two types of subterfuge, however, are two phenomena closely bound to the same complex; escape into lower social standing, rejection of positions of respect, and dishonor by choice do not only correspond to the satisfaction of pleasure. Who cannot see the relationship between the sharing of one's own body and theatrical exhibitionism, considered a form of prostitution at that time? Or the relationship between the exhibiting of oneself and the need to make tangible or even to embody certain invisible realities? The woman who prostitutes herself conforms to an *image*, as does he who seeks contact with her; this falls within the scope of fiction. The *lenonia* are simply its substitutes. Theater, which is fiction itself, implies likewise the sharing of one's own body by virtue of embodying an invisible reality to the eyes of all.

The need to display oneself, to exhibit oneself—and thus to represent—remained absolutely inseparable from the presence of the gods in the cults and sacred games: the need to *see* the deities, to give them a physical aspect, a body, to imagine them attractive to one another, and the feminine need to exhibit oneself or the virile need to *exhibit the woman*—all this derives from the *same source*.

20 *Tiberius*, 35.

VI Simulacra and the Theatrical Nature of Gods and Goddesses

The eminently spatial conditions of the mythic world, and the role of the localization of a sacred and awesome event, would contribute to the plastic and theatrical expression not only of the worship of divinities, but also of that which is usually called the world of Roman debauchery.

To understand the full significance of this, it is useful to remember that early Rome was barely familiar with the figurative representation of its deities; as it imported and adopted the cults of neighboring peoples, especially those of the Hellenic divinities, *simulacra*, or statues, began to appear and thereby determined the sexuality of the gods: their hierogamies and the theogonies ensuing from their amorous legends were situated in space. When St. Augustine spoke of the "maleficence of statues," he was alluding precisely to the spatial and tangible sight of divine figures in their anthropomorphic guises.

I will not broach here the very important question that is raised by the originally androgynous nature of many deities: among others, Eliade insists on the fact that the hierogamies were often due, at a later stage, to

the separation of an originally androgynous deity into a god and a goddess; that with the appearance of the great tellurian goddesses one sees the male principle, as a fecundating principle, subordinated to the fecundatable goddess; that in more cases than one such a goddess herself retains an androgynous character; and that on the whole this androgynous character is identified with the power of creation as the sovereign attribute of the deity. Without lingering on the countless emblems and symbols that call to mind this androgyny in the statues of these goddesses, I shall keep to the obviously later stage where the sculptors definitively cast gods and goddesses into shapes of masculine and feminine form. But let us return to the "maleficent" influence of this dramatic presentation. Since this refers to the divine simulacra, conceived by the masters of ancient statuary and often copied, which peopled the visual space, let us briefly examine the psychic role played by this "explication" of divinity in the form of gods and goddesses pursuing, opposing and doing violence to one another, coupling, seducing one another and giving themselves over to pleasure. But first a few words on the ritual role of statues.

We know of the ritual of the *bath*, of which the statues of certain goddesses were the object. Here I emphasize not the essentially purifying nature of this ritual nor the properties of the waters in which the image of the deity regained its powers; rather, I call attention to the theatrical emphasis given to the statue. Another example: there is a kind of *divination* determined by the particular *movement* of statues of gods carried in procession. The bearers, says Macrobius, allowed themselves to be guided "by the breath of the god" toward the place where the statue led them; at Antium the statues of the *two Fortunae* moved by themselves to communicate oracles. The need to represent divine figures is expressed

more specifically in the rite of the *lectisternes* (from *lectus*, bed, and *sternere*, to lie down or recline, as was the custom for meal-taking). Livy recounts the inauguration of the first lectisterne, a meal offered to the *twelve gods*, where their simulacra, forming six couples of gods and goddesses reclining on their *pulvinaria* (pillows), were exhibited for a week before the people. This custom, which likewise took place at funerary ceremonies, became one of the most sacred of rites; the simulacra of gods were adorned, painted and decked out. At what point this too passed onto the theatrical plane of amusement Suetonius tells us in his *Life of Augustus*, where we find a mysterious *Table of Twelve Gods*—meaning a group of dinner guests brought together by that prince, and each one, travestied as a god or goddess, played the part of a deity while Augustus himself assumed the role of Apollo. The following anonymous epigram, cited by Suetonius and circulated at the time, pretended to divulge what took place during that secret gathering:

*As soon as the table of initiates welcomed the choirmaster
Mallia saw six Gods,²¹ and six Goddesses;
And when in an impious parody Caesar ventured to play
Phoebus,
Regaling his guests with new adulteries of the Gods,
All the divinities turned away from earth,
Jupiter himself fleeing far from his gilded throne.*

21 *Mallia*. According to some, this may be the name of the place itself where the feast occurred; according to others, the name of the "choir master"; *choragus* would not designate Augustus in the role of Phoebus. Apparently what we have here is a parodic reconstruction of a "lectisterne" (*lectus-sterno*).

VII
Myth as the Liberation of the Gods
from Their Veneration

It matters little here whether the hubbub echoed in the preceding epigram has any basis in truth or not; let us simply focus on the idea expressed in the third verse, namely, that Caesar regaled his guests with the most recent adulteries of the gods. For there to be adulteries among the gods, it was necessary for there to be "legitimate" unions among them, namely the hierogamies of which the most traditional are those of Jupiter and Juno, Venus and Vulcan, etc. Similarly, the most famous "adultery" is that between Venus and Mars, and the countless ones of Jupiter. "Divine adultery" has no meaning outside an already established context of myths with definitive characters. It is more than likely that these "adulteries" were actually no more than the memory of past hierogamies, and that the union of Venus and Anchises, from which issued the race of Iulus, is but a late and touched-up elaboration of a hierogamy of the tellurian Aphrodite with her subordinate male principle. The fact remains that in the mythology of the twelve Hellenic gods transmitted to Rome, the idea of hierogamic couples favors—by virtue of the survival of earlier myths—the rational idea of infidelities and divine deceptions. It is thus possible that these "adulteries" are

but reworked hierogamies. And yet the myth of such "adulteries," fortuitous unions compared to the definitively fixed hierogamies of the prior mythology, reveals that these divine figures have a tendency to throw off their sacred functions.

The purpose of a cult—with its expiatory, propitiatory sacrifices which serve to intercede with a deity in order to avert his anger, gain his assistance, or remind him of favors granted in a given situation—is to bind the god to his functional role; and yet the function he fulfills and by which he is identified does not *prevent* the deity from being imagined apart from this function or from the need it responds to in man. In such a case, he no longer appears as belonging to any particular aspect of existence, but to the most universal aspect of his particular function. He becomes independent of it, free at any moment to detach himself from it, capable of knowing fortuitous situations in his encounters either with other deities or with mortals. And this is where myth begins, inasmuch as it recounts that which befell such god or goddess "one day," in accordance with an infinity of possibilities, that is, in accordance with the universal play that each god and each goddess represents. It is also in this respect that they appear most terrifying: Livy recounts that during the ravages of the plague the oracles consulted demanded new solemnities: *the stage shows were instituted to ward off their unpredictable moods*. Now in order for these solemnities to retain a *propitiatory* quality, they needed to evoke such and such a legend, unacknowledgable even from the point of view of the State and its civil institutions, with the aim of satisfying the incomprehensible nature of these gods in its totality. Here we see the ambiguity of Roman religion and the equilibrium it sought; based on a respect for matrimonial rights and duties and thus on conjugal "fidelity," it worships deities in whom, in another connection,

it is no less keen to celebrate actions that transgress and violate its own laws. In this sense the stage shows reserved for the divinities a sphere in which they manifested themselves not in actions beneficial to civil society, but in the sovereign and purely gratuitous pleasures of these gods. As we mentioned earlier, the state redeemed the *moral order* that it wanted to prevail by paying its tribute to the immorality of the gods; the degree to which this redemption originally inspired terror in the defenders of Roman austerity, and the extent to which the sacred obligation to celebrate on stage the adulteries of the gods troubled the spectators' consciences, is well expressed in the following passage from Saint Augustine:

Those crimes are represented in speech, in song and in action in the stage shows; and these shows are put on in honor of the gods, and are classed among "Divine Matters" by the most learned authorities. How is this? Cicero ought on this point to cry out, not against the poets' fictions, but against the traditional institutions established by his ancestors. But those ancestors would have cried out, in reply, What have *we* done? It was the gods themselves who clamored for these exhibitions in their honor, who demanded them with fearful threats, promising disaster if they were withheld, punishing any omission with the utmost harshness, and showing themselves appeased when the omission was repaired. Among the miraculous demonstrations of their power, the following story is told. A Roman peasant named Titus Latinius, the father of a family, was told in a dream to inform the senate that the Roman games must be restarted, because on the first day of the games a criminal had been ordered to be led to execution before the eyes of the assembled people, and this command had displeased the gods; no doubt because the divinities looked for cheerful entertainment at those shows. The man who had received this warning dream had not the courage to fulfill the order the next day; and on the second night he was given the same injunction, in stricter terms. He did not obey; and so he lost his son. On the third night he was told that a heavier

punishment awaited him, if he disobeyed. When his courage again failed him, even after this threat, he fell seriously ill with a fearful disease. Then, on the advice of his friends, he did inform the magistrates and was carried into the senate on a litter. There he recounted his dream; and immediately he was restored to health and left the senate house on his own legs, completely cured. Astounded by this miracle, the senate voted to recommence the games, with a fourfold increase of the subsidy.²²

Like all religious solemnities, the stage shows required the suspension of capital punishment. But this detail is all the more striking as the celebration of the gods' "misdeeds"—and hence their injustice—thus suspended the exercise of justice among men.

²² Saint Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, IV, 26. Translator's note: All subsequent translations of Saint Augustine's *City of God* are taken from the Henry Bettenson version, Penguin Books, London, 1972.

VIII The Stage Shows and the Mischievousness of Roman Eroticism

We have to believe that people lived with and tolerated this situation—which was paradoxical in itself and born of the fear of these gods—but not without a kind of complicity in their power unleashed in the mirth of the stage shows, where the subject was the “adulteries” and the “turpitudes” of the gods. On the rational plane, however, Roman philosophy, stoic and skeptical, could not extricate itself from this paradox except by attributing the origin of the scandalous myths to the poets. Only an erudite man like Cornelius Labeo could express the foundation of this religious economy by accepting the necessary coexistence of “bad” deities “supplicated through murders and lugubrious prayers,” and “good” deities supplicated with joyous homages such as the stage shows and *lectisternia*. Obviously he is not referring to the “twelve gods” when he speaks of “bad” deities, but probably to some subterranean deities who nevertheless lent part of their substance to some of the Olympian figures.

Cicero, on the other hand, allows his uneasiness to show, and the satirists Persius and Juvenal cry scandal. A whole tradition of Roman austerity, beginning with Salustius, prepared in advance the extremely rationalist juridical and moral arguments which the Fathers of the Latin Church would in their turn use to destroy the religious amalgam of the old Roman order and refute the claims of pagan reaction.

The great rhetors Tertullian and Saint Augustine judged and condemned, first in the name of reason and then in the name of faith, the last vestiges of paganism still subsisting in the form of customs whose symbolic content had long since been forgotten. More than this, as consummate rationalists they ridiculed that which shocked good sense and accused the last champions of the old myths of bad faith and demonic mischief.

If one considers the distinction that Varro strove to establish between the various aspects of the cults and their foundations in order to rescue them from their contradictory contents—classifying the myths peculiar to the poets as fabulous theology, the myths associated with solemnities and games as theatrical theology and the cults upon which depended the health of the Roman state as civic theology—one immediately understands that the mythic world spilled out well beyond the rituals of the temples, flowing out in torrents into the circuses and onto the theater stages. And it was here that the Fathers of the Latin Church, Tertullian at the time of the persecutions and Saint Augustine at the time of the pagan reaction, attacked the edifice of the waning religions. It was precisely by beginning with an incrimination of the theater and its theology that Saint Augustine intended to refute the arguments of paganism's last defenders, since the latter tried to attribute the crumbling of the Empire to the propagation of the Christian faith.

Inasmuch as the mimes were inspired by mythological themes, they depicted the most scandalous episodes. Aside from a few brief scenes of this genre in Terence, next to nothing has come down to us, at most a few fragments and titles of works by mime writers and the more famous Atellan writers such as Naevius, Pomponius, Laberius and Lentulus. On the other hand, though lacking texts, we do have the accounts of many witnesses that tell us as much about the nature of their contents as about the immense popularity these spectacles enjoyed among the people—accounts such as the repeated indignation of certain Roman authors, above all the vehement objections of the likes of Tertullian and Lactantius, before those of Saint Augustine. It is all summed up best perhaps in the following assertion of Arnobius: in the mimes the *personae* of very sacred gods are made to appear amidst the worst obscenities, in such way as to incite the mirth of the carefree spectators. The deities are insulted, are covered with ridicule; the theater resounds with shouts and stands up as one, the better to see, amid the din of the applause and the approval of the crowd. As for the stage shows, says Valerius Maximus, for the most part they consist of acts of debauchery; Minucius Felix finds that the adulteries furiously portray the gods' turpitudes, which the actor exposes, demonstrates and acts out, and in this way he penetrates the spectators' souls. Meanwhile, Tertullian—accusing the persecutors of Christianity of bad faith—informs us, with a few titles, of the uses made of mythology. "The authors of your farces only entertain you by covering your gods with disgrace. . . ." "In these mimes, in these jests, do you think that you're laughing at the actors or at the gods when you stage *Anubis the Adulterer*, *The Moon Man*, *The Flagellation of Diana*, *The Testament of the Late Jupiter*, *The Three Starving Hercules*?" Quite different is the much more profound, more convincing critique made by Saint Augustine. Far indeed from inferring

either that the scandalous myths were the creation of poets, or that licentious representations were due to popular impiety, he demonstrates that any god whose cult professes to be salutary in the temples reveals his true nature in the sacred solemnities and especially in the theater. Making a case from the tradition according to which the gods themselves instituted the stage shows, he succeeded in establishing their contradictory nature: if they exacted through the worst sorts of threats the theatrical celebration of their turpitudes, it is because they take pleasure in being adored for their most shameful behavior; the more they are slandered and accused of crimes, true or false, the more delight they take in it. But such deities, themselves sacrilegious, are but a perverse absurdity for a rational theologian, the mischief of demons who make all mythology a vast enterprise of demonic imposture. Here is the world of inconsistency itself, having attained the omnipotence of its erotic efficacy. These demons have but the masks of gods; thus do they give the impression that such villainy has the divine authority of the heavens that impart the example thereof to earth.

With a great deal of sarcasm that across the ages seems to prefigure the outbursts of Nietzsche's hilarity, Saint Augustine at times does not hesitate to comment on the mythological "adulteries" in such fashion as this: "*The gods, we are to suppose, are not jealous of their wives; so they are even content to share them with human beings. . . . Is it allowed for gods to have intercourse with women, but forbidden for men to mate with goddesses? This would be a harsh or rather incredible condition . . .*"²³ What this Father of the Church, who is also the true father of the Western conscience, expresses in the form of a colossal joke concerns no less than a reality of the most serious sort on the level of religious representation: clearly the dis-

23 *De Civitate Dei*, I, III, 3.

appearance of sexually determined divine figures, which were replaced by monotheism's conception of asexual divinity, did not occur without causing a shock, a profound imbalance in humanity's psychic economy, of which we apparently have not yet by any means felt the final repercussions.²⁴ Still, Augustine's ridicule remains no less two-sided: Aurelius Augustinus, in whom the world of myths died, and in whom all the first premises of our most recent problem were awakened, suffered bitterly from the impressions of his pagan adolescence. Bound up with the Hellenic-Latin culture that blossomed in his own genius, he vomited out the world from whence it came; but such as he was, no matter how detestable he felt himself to be in this respect, he still belonged to this world, even in the kind of sarcasm he demonstrated regarding the gods of his childhood. For in so doing he borrowed the forms and the very tone of these fantastical farces. Indeed, the bishop of Hippo's style of joking not only derives from the spirit of the stage shows he condemns; it also reflects the mischievousness of Roman eroticism itself—an eroticism nuanced as much by "liturgical" conduct as by buffoonery, without the one ever excluding the other. Yet it would take two thousand years of Christian inwardness to judge the meaning of the inwardness at the heart of which this erotic mischievousness had managed to spring up: and it was from such a distance that this mischievousness was seen as the "sovereign laughter of the gods," that laughter from which "gods die and are born again," as Nietzsche experienced it.

We are spanning here an entire evolution, from the cults of the Asiatic Mother Goddess to the staging of divine "adulteries," from the celebration of the hierogamy of goddesses in the form of sacred prostitution to

24 This is said without prejudice to today's accepted conception of a primordial and universal monotheism.

the theatrical exhibition of courtesans in the representation of "infamous" myths.

The hetaera, who in the service of the Aphrodisian Mother Goddess officiated in a manner both liturgical and theatrical, "embodied" the divinity. The Roman courtesans who, in the theater, "simulated" the loves of goddesses, and who first enacted the Rape of the Sabines and then prostituted themselves at the end of the show, offered nothing more than a carnal simulacrum, to each individual, of what everyone, merged in the multitude, had seen and applauded as a mythic reality and as a visible fiction of an invisible reality. That the cults of the great Aphrodisian goddesses ultimately became transferred into a ritual elaboration of libidinal pleasures and into the specific forms of erotic fantasies, and that moreover the initiation into the secret of the sanctuary was carried over into the secret of the individual imagination, Saint Augustine teaches us in his description of the cult of *Virgo Caelestes* in Carthage.²⁵ The ambiguity of her cult was manifested at that time in the fact that, in the secret of the sanctuary, the neophytes were supposed to be initiated to "chastity": this probably involved revealing the image of the fruition of immortality—a theme peculiar to the initiatory cults of the Eleusinian, Ephesian and Isiac mysteries—in libidinal pleasures; but in the outward ceremony, once the anagogical meaning of sensuality had been taught, the mystery became enveloped in obscene spectacles.

25 "Tanit, the Eastern Astarte, the 'great lady' specially honored in Carthage, was assimilated after the Roman conquest into Juno, the Magna Mater, Cybele, the goddess of Mt. Berecynthus in Phrygia. . . . According to a custom long practiced in Rome, on March 27 a ritual bath was administered to the statue of the goddess, among great rejoicings and obscene exhibitions." (P. de Labrille, *Saint Augustine, Cité de Dieu*, notes to book II.)

"I do not know where or when the devotees of the goddess Caelestis heard any counsels of chastity. But we had a good view of her image standing in front of her temple; there were crowds converging from all directions, everyone taking the best position he could find, and we watched the acted shows with the closest interest. We divided our gaze between the procession of harlots on one side, and the virgin goddess on the other. I saw prayerful worship offered to her, and indecent performances enacted before her. I saw no sense of shame in the mimes, no trace of modesty in any actress—all the duly prescribed obscenities were punctiliously performed. It was well known what would please the maiden goddess; and the exhibitions would enable the matron to leave the temple for home enriched by her experiences. Some of the more modest women averted their eyes from the indecent postures of the actors, and yet by furtive glances they made themselves familiar with the techniques of vice. In the company of men they were ashamed to pluck up the courage to observe those indecorous gestures with open eyes, but they had still less courage to condemn, in the purity of their hearts, the rites offered to the deity they revered. There was teaching publicly presented at that temple which no one would have put into practice without at least first seeking out a secret room in his house: though a person of human decency (had any such been there) might have been vastly surprised that men should have any reserve in their human misconduct, when they learned of these enormities in a religious setting, and in the presence of gods who would be enraged if men neglected such exhibitions."²⁶

The figures of the mythic world are subject to a constant interpretation of existence, beginning with the libido: a speculation occurs (in the sense of a vision in the mirror), which increasingly separates sensuality from its purely animal function; procreation, with its original reference to the cosmos, to the power of creation, yields to the experience of agitation, of ecstasy; in the mysteries,

26 *De Civ. Dei*, II, 26.

the contents of myth, the images of orgasm, associated with those of death and resurrection, become premonitory symbols of immortality. Such is the unforeseen revenge of the Asiatic deities; the stage shows that these deities inaugurated in Rome brought about, in the end, a double liberation: the liberation of erotic pleasure coinciding with the liberation of their sacred function. The Olympian gods, in their definitive identities, sufficiently "ripe" to put the order of the universe into question with their games, do not appear in the theater except in the infinite fortuity of their amorous adventures. The stage shows sanctify their gratuitousness and the apotheosis of "useless" sensual pleasure.