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## The Birth of the Western Eye

Mythology begins with cosmogony, the creation of the world. Somehow out of the chaos of matter comes order. The plenum, a soupy fullness, divides itself into objects and beings. Cosmogonies vary among societies. Earth-cult admits the priority and primacy of nature. For Judeo-Christianity, a sky-cult, God creates nature rather than vice versa. His consciousness precedes and engulfs all.

Hebrew cosmogony, in the polemical poetry of Genesis, is lofty in its claims. Creation is rational and systematic. The evolution of forms proceeds majestically, without carnage or cataclysm. God presides with workmanlike detachment. The cosmos is something constructed, a framed dwelling for man. God is a spirit, a presence. He has no name and no body. He is beyond sex and against sex, which belongs to the lower realm. Yet God is distinctly *he*, a father and not a mother. Female-ness is subordinate, an afterthought. Eve is merely a sliver pulled from Adam's belly. Maleness is magic, the potent principle of universal creativity.

The book of Genesis is a male declaration of independence from the ancient mother-cults. Its challenge to nature, so sexist to modern ears, marks one of the crucial moments in western history. Mind can never be free of matter. Yet only by mind *imagining* itself free can culture advance. The mother-cults, by reconciling man to nature, entrapped him in matter. Everything great in western civilization has come from struggle against our origins. Genesis is rigid and unjust, but it gave man hope as a man. It remade the world by male dynasty, cancelling the power of mothers.

Jehovah exists somewhere outside his creation, beyond space and time. Most ancient cosmogonies begin with a primeval being who embraces all opposites and contains everything that is or can be. Why should any eternal, self-sufficient god add to what already is? Whether out of loneliness or a craving for drama, primeval deities set off the

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motion-machine and add to their own troubles. My favorite such god is Egyptian Khepera, who gives birth to the second stage of existence by an act of masturbation: "I had union with my hand, and I embraced my shadow in a love embrace; I poured seed into my own mouth, and sent forth from myself issue in the form of the gods Shu and Tefnut."<sup>1</sup> Logically, primeval hierarchs must dig into themselves to continue the story of creation. Jehovah, as much as Khepera, multiplies by self-compounding.

Virtually all cosmogonies but ours are overtly sexual. The primeval deity may be hermaphroditic, like Egypt's mother goddess Mut, who has both male and female genitals. Or there is wholesale incest, the only sex possible when the in-group is the only group. Developed mythologies ignore the incest or edit it out, as Genesis does in discreetly passing over the question of whom Cain and Abel must marry to get on with history. Similarly, Greek myth stresses Hera as Zeus' wife but makes little of the fact that she is also his sister. In Egypt there never was so stringent a purification of sacred texts, and primitive motifs lingered on to the end. Isis and Osiris are distinctly sister and brother as well as wife and husband. Egyptian gods are tangled in archaic family romance. The mother goddess Hathor, for example, is eerily called "the mother of her father and the daughter of her son." As in Romanticism, identity is regressive and supercondensed. The sexual irregularities of fertility gods are intrinsic to the dark, disorderly mystery of sexual growth.

Judaism, though ascribing artfulness to God, is inhospitable to art in man. Earth-cult's lurid sexual symbolism contains a psychic truth: there is a sexual element in all creation, in nature or art. Khepera eating his own seed is a model of Romantic creativity, where the self is isolated and sexually dual. Khepera bent over himself is a uroboros, the serpent eating its own tail, a magic circle of regeneration and rebirth. The uroboros is the prehistoric track of natural cycle, from which Judaism and Hellenism make a conceptual break. Later in this book, I will argue that Romanticism restores the archaic western past, divining lost or suppressed pagan myths. Incest, erotic solipsism, is everywhere in Romantic poetry. Masturbation, subliminal in Coleridge and Poe, boldly emerges in later Romantics like Walt Whitman, Aubrey Beardsley, and Jean Genet, libidinous solitary dreamers. Khepera is the androgyne as demiurge.

The supreme symbol of fertility religion is the Great Mother, a figure of double-sexed primal power. Many mother goddesses of the Mediterranean world were indiscriminately fused in the syncretism of the Roman Empire. They include Egyptian Isis, Cretan and Mycenaean

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Gaia and Rhea, Cyprian Aphrodite, Phrygian Cybele, Ephesian Artemis, Syrian Dea, Persian Anaitis, Babylonian Ishtar, Phoenician Ashtarte, Canaanite Atargatis, Cappadocian Mâ, and Thracian Bendis and Cottyto. The Great Mother embodied the gigantism and unknowability of primeval nature. She descended from the period before agriculture, when nature seemed autocratic and capricious. Woman and nature were in mysterious harmony. Early man saw no necessary connection between coitus and conception, since sexual relations often preceded menstruation. Even today, pregnancy is unpredictable and takes months to show. Woman's fertility, following its own laws, inspired awe and fear.

Though woman was at the center of early symbolism, real women were powerless. A fantasy dogging feminist writing is that there was once a peaceable matriarchy overthrown by warmongering men, founders of patriarchal society. The idea began with Bachofen in the nineteenth century and was adopted by Jane Harrison, that great scholar's one error. Not a shred of evidence supports the existence of matriarchy anywhere in the world at any time. Matriarchy, political rule by women, must not be confused with matrilineage, passive transmission of property or authority through the female side. The matriarchy hypothesis, revived by American feminism, continues to flourish outside the university.

Primitive life, far from peaceable, was submerged in the turbulence of nature. Man's superior strength provided protection to women, particularly in the incapacitating final stages of pregnancy. The polarization of sex roles probably occurred rather early. Men roamed and hunted, while women in their gathering forays ventured no farther from the campsite than they could carry their nursing infants. There was simple logic in this, not injustice. The link between father and child was a late development. Margaret Mead remarks, "Human fatherhood is a social invention."<sup>2</sup> James Joyce says, "Paternity may be a legal fiction."<sup>3</sup> Society had advanced when the male contribution to conception was acknowledged. Both sexes have profited from the consolidation and stability of the family.

The myth of matriarchy may have originated in our universal experience of mother power in infancy. We are all born from a female colossus. Erich Neumann calls the first stage of psychic development "matriarchal."<sup>4</sup> Therefore every person's passage from nursery to society is an overthrow of matriarchy. As history, the idea of matriarchy is spurious, but as metaphor, it is poetically resonant. It is crucial for the

interpretation of dreams and art, in which the mother remains dominant. Matriarchy hovers behind art works like the *Venus de Milo*, *Mona Lisa*, and *Whistler's Mother*, which popular imagination has made culturally archetypal. We will examine the way Romanticism, as part of its archaizing movement, restores the mother to matriarchal power, notably in Goethe, Wordsworth, and Swinburne.

The autonomy of the ancient mother goddesses was sometimes called virginity. A virgin fertility seems contradictory, but it survives in the Christian Virgin Birth. Hera and Aphrodite annually renewed their virginity by bathing in a sacred spring. The same duality appears in Artemis, who was honored both as virgin huntress and patron of childbirth. The Great Mother is a virgin insofar as she is independent of men. She is a sexual dictator, symbolically impenetrable. Males are nonpersons: Neumann elsewhere speaks of "the anonymous power of the fertilizing agent."<sup>5</sup> Thus Joyce's sensual Great Mother, Molly Bloom, sleepily mulls over all the men in her life as "he," implying their casual interchangeability. The Great Mother did not even need a male to fertilize her: the Egyptian goddess Net gives birth to Ra by parthenogenesis or self-fecundation.

The mother goddess gives life but takes it away. Lucretius says, "The universal mother is also the common grave."<sup>6</sup> She is morally ambivalent, violent as well as benevolent. The sanitized pacifist goddess promoted by feminism is wishful thinking. From prehistory to the end of the Roman empire, the Great Mother never lost her barbarism. She is the ever-changing face of chthonian nature, now savage, now smiling. The medieval Madonna, a direct descendant of Isis, is a Great Mother with her chthonian terror removed. She has lost her roots in nature, because it is pagan nature that Christianity rose to oppose.

The masculine side of the Great Mother is often expressed in serpents, wound about her arms or body. Mary trampling the serpent underfoot recalls pagan images in which goddess and serpent are one. The serpent inhabits the womblike underworld of mother earth. It is both male and female, piercing and strangling. Apuleius calls the Syrian goddess "omnipotens et omniparens," all-potent and all-producing.<sup>7</sup> Energy and abundance on so vast a scale can be crushing and cold. The fluid serpent will never be converted to friend.

The goddess' animal fecundity was cruelly dramatized in ritual. Her devotees practiced castration, breast-amputation, self-flagellation or slashing, and dismemberment of beasts. This sacrificial extremity of experience mimics the horrors of chthonian nature. Today such be-

havior survives only in sexual sadomasochism, universally labeled perverse. I think sadomasochism an archaizing phenomenon, returning the imagination to pagan nature-worship. Lewis Farnell says whipping in vegetation-rites was meant to increase fertility or, more often, "to drive out from the body impure influences or spirits, so that it may become the purer vehicle of divine force."<sup>8</sup> In the Roman Lupercalia, depicted in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, youths ran naked through the streets and struck matrons with leather thongs to stimulate childbearing. Newlyweds are pelted with rice to drive off evil spirits and fertilize the bride. Blows mark a rite of passage into maturity. The kneeling knight is struck with sword on shoulder by his lord. At Catholic Confirmation, the kneeling adolescent is slapped by the bishop. The Orthodox Jewish girl at first menstruation is slapped by her mother. In *Stover at Yale* (1911), the lucky initiate to Skull and Bones is ambushed at night and slammed on the back. Blows are archaic magic, punishing marks of election.

Castration in the mother-cults may have imitated the reaping of crops. Only stone tools could be used for ritual castration; bronze or iron was forbidden, indicating the custom's prehistoric origins. Edith Weigert-Vowinkel endorses the view that the Phrygians borrowed castration from the Semites, who altered it over time to circumcision, and that the celibacy of Catholic priests is a substitute for castration.<sup>9</sup> The halolike tonsure of Catholic monks, like the shaved heads of priests of Isis, is a lesser self-mutilation. By castration, the devotee subordinated himself to the female life force. Contact with the goddess was dangerous. After making love with Aphrodite, Anchises ended up crippled, so that he had to be carried from burning Troy by his son Aeneas. The story that he was punished for boasting of his tryst is likely a late addition. H. J. Rose says of Anchises' handicap, "The business of fertilizing the Great Mother was so exacting as utterly to exhaust the strength of her inferior male partner, who consequently, if he did not die, became a eunuch."<sup>10</sup> Maleness is obliterated by shocks of female power.

Self-castration was a one-way road to ritual impersonation. In the mystery religions, which influenced Christianity, the devotee imitated and sought union with his god. The priest of the Great Mother changed sex in order to become her. Transsexualism was the severe choice, transvestism less so. In ceremonies at Syracuse, men were initiated in Demeter's purple robe. In ancient Mexico, a woman representing the goddess was flayed and her skin put on by a male priest. The Great Mother's eunuch priest was called *she*. Thus after Catullus Attis castrates himself, the pronouns shift from masculine to feminine. To-

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day, etiquette requires one to refer to the urban drag queen as "she," even when he is in male dress.

Spiritual enlightenment produces feminization of the male. Mead says, "The more intricate biological pattern of the female has become a model for the artist, the mystic, and the saint."<sup>11</sup> Intuition or extra-sensory perception is a feminine hearkening to the secret voices in and beyond things. Farnell says, "Many ancient observers noted that women (and effeminate men) were especially prone to orgiastic religious seizure."<sup>12</sup> Hysteria means womb-madness (from the Greek *ustera*, "womb"). Women were sibyls and oracles, subject to prophetic visions. Herodotus speaks of Scythian Enarees, male prophets afflicted by a "female disease," probably sexual impotence.<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon called shamanism migrated northward to Central Asia and has been reported in North and South America and Polynesia. Frazer describes the shaman's stages of sexual transformation, which resemble those of our candidates for sex-reassignment surgery. The religious call may come as a dream in which the man is "possessed by a female spirit." He adopts female speech, hair style, and clothing and finally takes a husband.<sup>14</sup> The Siberian shaman, who wears a woman's caftan sewn with large round disks as female breasts, is for Mircea Eliade an example of "ritual androgyny," symbolizing the *coincidentia oppositorum* or reconciliation of opposites.<sup>15</sup> Inspired, the shaman goes into a trance and falls unconscious. He may disappear, either to fly over distant lands or to die and be resurrected. The shaman is an archaic prototype of the artist, who also crosses sexes and commands space and time. How many modern transsexuals are unacknowledged shamans? Perhaps it is to poets they should go for counsel, rather than surgeons.

Teiresias, the androgynous Greek shaman, is depicted as an old man with long beard and pendulous female breasts. In Homer, Circe tells Odysseus his quest for home cannot succeed until he descends to the underworld to consult the seer. It is as if Teiresias, in the underworld of racial memory, represents a fullness of emotional knowledge fusing the sexes. The masculine glamour of the *Iliad* is gone. When we first see the hero of the *Odyssey*, he is weeping. The ruling virtues of this poem are female perception and endurance, rather than aggressive action. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Teiresias is the hero's double. Teiresias and Oedipus are involuntary initiates into an uncanny range of sexual experience. At the start, Teiresias holds the key to the mystery of plague and perversion. He alone knows the secret of Oedipal family romance, with its inflamed multiplicities of identity: Oedipus is husband and son, father and brother. At play's end, Oedipus has literally become Teire-

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Teiresias, a blind holy man who pays the price of esoteric knowledge. In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot, following Apollinaire, makes Teiresias the witness and repository of modern sexual miseries.

How did Teiresias become an androgyne? On Mount Cithaeron (where infant Oedipus was exposed), he stumbled upon two snakes mating, for which he was punished by being turned into a woman. Seven years later, he came upon the same sight and was turned back into a man. The tale confirms the terrible consequences of seeing something forbidden to mortals. Thus Actaeon was torn to pieces by his hunting dogs for finding Artemis at her bath. Callimachus claims Teiresias was blinded for accidentally seeing Athena bathing. Hesiod says: "This same Teiresias was chosen by Zeus and Hera to decide the question whether the male or the female has most pleasure in intercourse. And he said: 'Of ten parts a man enjoys one only; but a woman's sense enjoys all ten in full.' For this Hera was angry and blinded him, but Zeus gave him the seer's power."<sup>16</sup> The oldest part of Teiresias' story is the meeting with mating snakes, a chthonian motif. The uncanny or grotesque in myth is evidence of extreme antiquity. The bantering comic tone of Zeus and Hera's domestic dispute marks it as later ornamentation. Charm in myths is a coming in from the chthonian cold.

I adopt the name "Teiresias" for a category of androgyne, the nurturant male or male mother. He can be found in sculptures of classical river gods, in Romantic poetry (Wordsworth and Keats), and in modern popular culture (television talk-show hosts). I take one more model from Greek prophetic transsexualism, the Delphic oracle. Delphi, holiest spot of the ancient Mediterranean, was once dedicated to female deities, as the priestess recalls at the opening of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. W. F. Jackson Knight asserts that "Delphi means the female generative organ."<sup>17</sup> The delta has been found to symbolize the female pubes in societies as far as the Brazilian jungle. The Delphic oracle was called the Pythia or Pythoness after the giant serpent Pytho, slain by invading Apollo. Legend claims the oracle was maddened by fumes rising from a chasm above the decaying chthonian serpent. But no chasm has been found at Delphi.

The oracle was Apollo's high priestess and spoke for him. Pilgrims, royal and lowly, arrived at Delphi with questions and left with cryptic replies. It was after descending from Delphi that Oedipus collided with his father at the crossroads—a spot in the Greek pastureland still unchanged after three thousand years of ghostly legend. The prophesying oracle was the instrument of the god of poetry, a lyre upon which he



played. E. R. Dodds states, "The Pythia became *entheos, plena deo*: the god entered into her and used her vocal organs as if they were his own, exactly as the so-called 'control' does in modern spirit-mediumship; that is why Apollo's Delphic utterances are always couched in the first person, never in the third."<sup>18</sup> This resembles the ventriloquism Frazer ascribes to entranced shamans. Michelangelo uses the Delphic metaphor in a madrigal comparing a Renaissance virago, intellectual and poet Vittoria Colonna, to the oracle: "A man in a woman, indeed a god, speaks through her mouth." The Delphic oracle is a woman invaded by a male spirit. She suffers usurpation of identity, like the mental sex-transformations of great dramatists and novelists. I designate as "the Pythoness" another category of androgyne, of which my best example will be the sibylline comedienne Gracie Allen.

The Great Mother is the master image from which split off surrogate subforms of female horrors, like Gorgon and Fury. The vagina dentata literalizes the sexual anxiety of these myths. In the North American Indian version, says Neumann, "A meat-eating fish inhabits the vagina of the Terrible Mother; the hero is the man who overcomes the Terrible Mother, breaks the teeth out of her vagina, and so makes her into a woman."<sup>19</sup> The toothed vagina is no sexist hallucination: every penis is made less in every vagina, just as mankind, male and female, is devoured by mother nature. The vagina dentata is part of the Romantic revival of pagan myth. It is subliminally present in Poe's voracious maelstrom and dank, scythe-swept pit. It overtly appears in the bible of French Decadence, Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884), where a dreamer is magnetically drawn toward mother nature's open thighs, the "bloody depths" of a carnivorous flower rimmed by "swordblades."<sup>20</sup>

The Greek Gorgon was a kind of vagina dentata. In Archaic art, she is a grinning head with beard, tusks, and outthrust tongue. She has snakes in her hair or around her waist. She runs in swastika form, a symbol of primitive vitality. Her beard, a postmenopausal virilization, turns up on the witches of *Macbeth*. She is like a jack-o'-lantern or death's-head, the spectral night face of mother nature. The gorgoneion or "bodiless head of fright" antedates by many centuries the Gorgon with a woman's body.<sup>21</sup> The Perseus legend obscures an ancient prototype: the hero seizes a trophy that cannot be severed or slain (fig. 1).

Men, never women, are turned to stone by gazing at Medusa. Freud interprets this as the "terror of castration" felt by boys at their first glimpse of female genitals.<sup>22</sup> Richard Traister feels the staring mechanism involved in male consumption of pornography is a compulsive





1. *Perseus Cutting Off the Head of Medusa*, from the metope of Temple C at Selinus, Sicily, ca. 550–540 B.C.

scrutiny or searching for the missing female penis. That female genitals do resemble a wound is evident in those slang terms “slash” and “gash.” Huysmans calls the genital flower a “hideous flesh-wound.” Flower, mouth, wound: the Gorgon is a reverse image of the Mystic Rose of Mary. Woman’s genital wound is a furrow in female earth. Snaky Medusa is the thorny undergrowth of nature’s relentless fertility.

The Gorgon’s name comes from the adjective *gorgos*, “terrible, fearful, fierce.” *Gorgonos*, “fierce-eyed, terrible,” is an epithet of Athena, who wears the Gorgon’s head on breast and shield, a gift from Perseus.

It is an apotropaion, a charm to ward off evil spirits, like the giant eye painted on prows of ancient ships. Jackson Knight says of the gorgoneion, "It occurs on shields, on the brow-bands of war-horses, and on the doors of ovens, where it was meant to exclude evil influences from the bread."<sup>23</sup> Jane Harrison compares the Gorgon's head to primitive ritual masks: "They are the natural agents of a religion of fear and 'riddance'. . . . The function of such masks is permanently to 'make an ugly face', at you if you are doing wrong, breaking your word, robbing your neighbor, meeting him in battle; for you if you are doing right."<sup>24</sup> Apotropaic charms are common in Italy, where belief in the evil eye is still strong. Gold hands and red or gold horns dangle from necks and hang in kitchens next to chains of garlic to drive away vampires. The Mediterranean has never lost its chthonian cultism.

I use the apotropaic gorgoneion in two major ways. Art and religion come from the same part of the mind. Great cult symbols transfer smoothly into artistic experience. Solitary or highly original artists often make apotropaic art. The *Mona Lisa*, for example, seems to have functioned as an apotropaion for Leonardo, who refused to part with it until his death at the court of the French king (hence its presence in the Louvre). Ambiguous *Mona Lisa*, presiding over her desolate landscape, is a gorgoneion, staring hierarch of pitiless nature.

A second apotropaion: Joyce's dense modernist style. Joyce has only one subject—Ireland. His writing is both a protest against an intolerable spiritual dependency and ironically an immortalization of the power that bound him. Ireland is a Gorgon, in Joyce's words "the Mother Sow who eats her children." Knight compares the mazelike meander design on Greek houses to "tangled thread" charms on British doorsteps: "Tangled drawings are meant to entangle intruders, as the tangled reality of a labyrinthine construction at the approach to a fort actually helps very much to entangle attackers."<sup>25</sup> Language as labyrinth: Joyce's aggressive impenetrability is the hex sign of Harrison's "religion of fear and riddance'." We will later examine the creator of the first impenetrable modern style, Henry James. There we return full circle to the Great Mother, for my theory is that James's Decadent late style is the heavy ritual transvestism of a eunuch-priest of the mother goddess.

My third apotropaion: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a novel as ghost dance, as invocation and exorcism. From Woolf's diary:

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 Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; and  
 could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mer-  
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cifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books—inconceivable.

I used to think of him and mother daily; but writing the *Lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act.)<sup>26</sup>

An apotropaion bars encroachment by the dead. The ghost of Odysseus' mother, let us recall, is thirsty for blood. Unsentimentally, Woolf wishes for no longer years for her father. Contest for life is a Sadean power struggle. *To the Lighthouse* is filled with *imagines*, ancestor masks. The Romans put them in the atrium to keep them out of the bedroom. As family romance, *To the Lighthouse* is the gorgoneion on the oven door, which must be shut to make a room of one's own. The novel has a second ritual pattern: the Eleusinian *heuresis* or "finding again" of Persephone by Demeter. In *To the Lighthouse*, mother and daughter reunite, but only to bid farewell.

Now my other major use of the gorgoneion. The ugly staring Gorgon is *the daemoniac eye*. She is the paralyzing animal eye of chthonian nature, the glittering, mesmerizing eye of vampires and seductresses. The tusked Gorgon is *the eye which eats*. In other words, the eye is still bound to biology. It hungers. I will show that the west invented a new eye, contemplative, conceptual, the eye of art. It was born in Egypt. This is the Apollonian solar disk, illuminating and idealizing. The Gorgon is the night eye, Apollo the day. I will argue that the origin of the Greek Apollonian is in Egypt. Greek ideas are creatures of Egyptian formalism. It is untrue the Egyptians had no ideas. There are, I said, ideas in images. Egyptian images made western imagination. Egypt liberated and divinized the human eye. The Apollonian eye is the brain's great victory over the bloody open mouth of mother nature.

Only the Sphinx is as symbolically rich as the Gorgon. There are benign male sphinxes in Egypt, but the famous one is female, born of the incest of half-serpent Echidna with her dog-son Orthus. The Sphinx has a woman's head and bosom, a griffin's wings, and a lion's claws and rump. Her name means "the Throtter" (from the Greek *spiggo*, "strangle"). The riddle by which she defeats all men but Oedipus is the ungraspable mystery of nature, which will defeat Oedipus anyway. The Gorgon rules the eye, while the Sphinx rules words. She rules them by stopping them, stillborn, in the throat. Poets appeal to the Muse to stave off the Sphinx. In Coleridge's *Christabel* one of the great horror stories of Romanticism, the Muse and Sphinx merge, changing the poet's sex and

making him mute. Birth is taking first breath. But the Sphinx of nature throttles us in the womb.

Other subforms of the Great Mother cluster in groups. The Furies or Erinyes are avengers. Without fixed shape in Homer, they first gain one in the *Oresteia*. Hesiod says the Furies sprang from drops of blood falling to earth from Uranus' castration by his son Cronos. They are cruel chthonian emanations of the soil. The motif of seminal splashes recurs in Pegasus' birth from drops of blood from Medusa's severed head—suggesting the Gorgon's half-maleness. In early ritual, throats were cut or blood poured directly on the field to stimulate earth's fertility. The ugly, barbaric Furies are first cousin to Aphrodite. She comes from another seminal splashdown, from the foam cast up by Uranus' castrated organs hitting the sea. It is her arrival on shore, by convenient seashell, that Botticelli depicts in *The Birth of Venus*. Aphrodite is therefore a Fury washed clean of her chthonian origins. Aeschylus gives the Furies a doglike rheum: their eyes drip with pus. They are the daemonic eye as running sore, the impacted, putrefying womb of nature.

The Harpies are servants of the Furies. They are "the Snatchers" (from *harpazo*, "snatch"), airborne pirates, befouling men with their droppings. They represent the aspect of femaleness that clutches and kills in order to feed itself. The archetypal power of Alfred Hitchcock's great saga of malevolent nature, *The Birds* (1963), comes from its reactivation of the Harpy myth, shown as both bird and woman. Keres resemble Harpies as female carriers of disease and pollution. They are smoky intruders from the underworld. Greek art and literature never did crystallize a shape and story for them, so they remain vague. The Sirens, on the other hand, made it into the erotic big time. They are graveyard creatures who appear in Archaic art much like Harpies, as birds with female heads and male beards. Homer's Sirens are twin singers luring sailors to destruction on the rocks: "They sit there in a meadow piled high with the mouldering skeletons of men, whose withered skin still hangs upon their bones."<sup>27</sup> The Sirens are the triumph of matter. Man's spiritual trajectory ends in the rubbish heap of his own mother-born body.

Some female monsters shifted from plural to singular. Lamia, a bisexual Greek and Roman succubus who kidnapped children and drank their blood, was once one of many, like the child-killer Mormo. Joseph Fontenrose calls the Lamiai "*phasmata* that rose from earth in woods and glens," while the Mormones were "wandering *daimones*."<sup>28</sup> Gello, another child-stealer, remains part of Greek superstition today.

The night-stalking vampire Empusa devoured her prey after the sex act. These examples catch myth midcourse. Spooks and goblins, who run in packs in the primeval murk, begin to emerge as personalities. But they must be condensed and refined by the popular imagination or by a great poet.

Circe owes everything to Homer. An Italian sorceress living among pigs has been gorgeously enhanced with cinematic glamour. Lordly in her cold stone house, Circe waves her phallic wand over her subject males, grunting in the slop of infancy. She is the prison of sex, a tomb in a thicket. Circe's Hebrew counterpart is Lilith, Adam's first wife, whose name means "of the night." Harold Bloom says Lilith, originally a Babylonian wind-demoness, sought ascendancy in the sex act: "The vision men call Lilith is formed primarily by their anxiety at what they perceive to be the beauty of a woman's body, a beauty they believe to be, at once, far greater and far less than their own."<sup>29</sup> Like Aphrodite, Circe and Lilith are the ugly made beautiful. Nature's Medusan hag dons her magic mask in the hall of art.

Sexually dominated by him, Circe warns Odysseus of future dangers. Her description of Scylla has relish, for Scylla is her outdoor alter ego, a cliff monster with twelve feet, six heads, and triple rows of teeth who plucks sailors off ships. Like the Harpy, she is a Snatcher, a gnawing female appetite. Scylla's female companion, Charybdis, is her upside-down mirror image. Sucking and spewing three times a day, the killer whirlpool is the womb-vortex of the nature mother. It is probably into Charybdis that Poe's hero sinks in *Descent into the Maelström*. Ovid's Circe stunts Scylla's legs and girds her belly with a pack of wild dogs with "gaping mouths."<sup>30</sup> Scylla becomes a vagina dentata or sexual she-wolf. At the gates of Hell in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, she is Sin, the torso of a beautiful woman ending in a scaly serpent with a scorpion's sting. Her waist is ringed with screeching hellhounds that kennel in her womb. The dogs are insatiable, ulcerating lusts, like the Indian man-eating fish. Sexual disillusion leads to Scylla and Charybdis. King Lear, hanging a white beard on his witchy daughter Goneril, sees woman as animal-loined, a stinking "sulphurous pit" sucking men to hell (IV.vi.97-135). Attraction is repulsion, necessity bondage.

The Great Mother's main disciple is her son and lover, the dying god of Near Eastern mystery religion. Neumann says of Attis, Adonis, Tammuz, and Osiris, "They are loved, slain, buried, and bewailed by her, and are then reborn through her." Maleness is merely a shadow whirled round in nature's eternal cycle. The boy gods are "phallic consorts of the Great Mother, drones serving the queen bee, who are killed off as soon

as they have performed their duty of fecundation." Mother-love smothers what it embraces. The dying gods are "delicate blossoms, symbolized by the myths as anemones, narcissi, hyacinths, or violets."

The youths, who personify the spring, belong to the Great Mother. They are her bondslaves, her property, because they are the sons she has borne. Consequently the chosen ministers and priests of the Mother Goddess are eunuchs. . . . For her, loving, dying, and being emasculated are the same thing.<sup>51</sup>

Masculinity flows from the Great Mother as an aspect of herself and is recalled and cancelled by her at will. Her son is a servant of her cult. There is no going beyond her. Motherhood blankets existence.

The most brilliant perception of *The Golden Bough*, muted by prudence, is Frazer's analogy between Jesus and the dying gods. The Christian ritual of death and redemption is a survival of pagan mystery religion. Frazer says, "The type, created by Greek artists, of the sorrowful goddess with her dying lover in her arms, resembles and may have been the model of the *Pietà* of Christian art."<sup>52</sup> Early Christian and Byzantine Christs were virile, but once the Church settled in Rome, Italy's vestigial paganism took over. Christ relapsed into Adonis. Michelangelo's *Pietà* is one of the most popular works of world art partly because of its pagan evocation of the archetypal mother-relation. Mary, with her unmarked maiden's face, is the mother goddess ever-young and ever-virgin. Jesus is remarkably epicene, with aristocratic hands and feet of morbid delicacy. Michelangelo's androgynous dying god fuses sex and religion in the pagan way. Grieving in her oppressive robes, Mary admires the sensual beauty of the son she has made. His glassy nude limbs slipping down her lap, Adonis sinks back to earth, his strength drained by and returned to his immortal mother.

Freud says, "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother."<sup>53</sup> Incest is at the start of all biography and cosmogony. The man who finds his true wife has found his mother. Male mastery in marriage is a social illusion, nurtured by women exhorting their creations to play and walk. At the emotional heart of every marriage is a *pietà* of mother and son. I will find traces of the archaic incest of mother-cults in Poe and James and in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*, where a queen mother, ruling a brutal primeval garden, marries her homosexual aesthete son, who is ritually slain and mourned. Female dynamism is the law of nature. Earth husbands herself.

The residual paganism of western culture bursts out full flower in

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modern show business. An odd phenomenon, over fifty years old, is the cultishness of male homosexuals around female superstars. There is no equivalent taste among lesbians, who as a group in America seem more interested in softball than art and artifice. The female superstar is a goddess, a universal mother-father. Cabaret parodies by female impersonators unerringly find the androgyny in the great stars. Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Eartha Kitt, Carol Channing, Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross, Joan Collins, Joan Rivers: all are self-exalting females of cold male will, with subtle sexual ambiguities of manner and look. Judy Garland inspired mob hysteria among male homosexuals. Media reports speak of uncanny shrieking, mass assaults on the stage, blinding showers of bouquets. These were orgiastic eunuch rites at the shrine of the goddess. Photos show posturing men making sensational entrances in Garland's glittery costume, just like transvestite devotees of the ancient Great Mother. Such spectacles became rarer in the Seventies, when American homosexuals went macho. But I sense a return to imaginative sensibility among younger men. Cultishness still thrives among homosexual opera fans, whose supreme diva was tempestuous Maria Callas. I interpret this phenomenon, like pornography and perversion, as more evidence of men's tendency toward sexual conceptualization, for me a biological faculty at the roots of art. One result of the disease claiming so many lives is that homosexuals have been involuntarily rewired to their shamanistic identity, fatal, sacrificial, outcast. To make sexual ideas out of reality, as they did in their fevered cult of the female star, is more profitable to culture than to act out such ideas in bar or bedroom. Art advances by self-mutilation of the artist. The more negative homosexual experience, the more it belongs to art.

Our first exhibit from western art is the so-called Venus of Willendorf, a tiny statuette (height  $4\frac{3}{8}$ "") from the Old Stone Age found in Austria (fig. 2). In it we see all the strange laws of primitive earth-cult. Woman is idol and object, goddess and prisoner. She is buried in the bulging mass of her own fecund body.

The Venus of Willendorf is comically named, for she is unbeautiful by every standard. But beauty has not yet emerged as a criterion for art. In the Old Stone Age, art is magic, a ritual recreation of what-is-desired. Cave paintings were not meant to be seen. Their beauty for us is incidental. Bison and reindeer crowd the walls, following rock ridges and grooves. Art was invocation, a summoning: mother nature, let herds return that man might eat. Caves were the bowels of the goddess, and art was a sexual scribbling, a pre-impregnation. It had rhythm and



2. *Venus of Willendorf*,  
ca. 30,000 B.C.



vitality but no visual status. The Venus of Willendorf, a cult-image half-molded from a rough stone, is unbeautiful because art has not yet found its relation to the eye. Her fat is a symbol of abundance in an age of famine. She is the too-muchness of nature, which man longs to direct to his salvation.

Venus of Willendorf carries her cave with her. She is blind, masked. Her ropes of corn-row hair look forward to the invention of agriculture. She has a furrowed brow. Her facelessness is the impersonality of primitive sex and religion. There is no psychology or identity yet, because there is no society, no cohesion. Men cower and scatter at the blast of the elements. Venus of Willendorf is eyeless because nature can be seen but not known. She is remote even as she kills and creates. The statuette, so overflowing and protuberant, is ritually invisible. She stifles the eye. She is the cloud of archaic night.

Bulging, bubbling, Venus of Willendorf, bent over her own belly, tends the hot pot of nature. She is eternally pregnant. She broods,

in all senses. She is hen, nest, egg. The Latin *mater* and *materia*, mother and matter, are etymologically connected. Venus of Willendorf is the nature-mother as primeval muck, oozing into infant forms. She is female but not feminine. She is turgid with primal force, swollen with great expectations. She has no feet. Placed on end, she would topple over. Woman is immobile, weighed down by her inflated mounds of breast, belly, and buttock. Like Venus de Milo, Venus of Willendorf has no arms. They are flat flippers scratched on the stone, unevolved, useless. She has no thumbs and therefore no tools. Unlike man, she can neither roam nor build. She is a mountain that can be climbed but can never move.

Venus is a solipsist, navel-gazing. Femaleness is self-referential and self-replicating. Delphi was called the omphalos or navel of the world, marked by a shapeless holy stone. A black meteorite, a primitive image of Cybele, was brought to Rome from Phrygia to save the city in the last Punic War. The Palladium, a Zeus-sent image of Athena upon which Troy's fate depended, was probably such a meteorite. Today, the Kaaba, the inner sanctuary of the Great Mosque of Mecca, enshrines a meteorite, the Black Stone, as the holiest relic of Islam. The Venus of Willendorf is a kind of meteorite, a quirky found object, lumpish and mystic. The Delphic omphalos-stone was cone, womb, and beehive. The braided cap of Venus of Willendorf is hivelike—prefiguring the provocative beehives of French court wigs and shellacked swinging-Sixties towers. Venus buzzes to herself, queen for all days, woman for all seasons. She sleeps. She is hibernation and harvest, the turning wheel of the year. The egg-shaped Venus thinks in circles. Mind under matter.

Sex, I said, is a descent to the nether realms, a daily sinking from sky-cult to earth-cult. It is abdominal, abominable, daemonic. Venus of Willendorf is going down, disappearing into her own labyrinth. She is a tuber, rooted from a pocket of earth. Kenneth Clark divides female nudes into the Vegetable and the Crystalline Aphrodite. Inert and self-communing, Venus of Willendorf represents the obstacle of sex and vegetable nature. It is at her shrine that we worship in oral sex. In the bowels of the earth mother, we feel but do not think or see. Venus dwindles to a double pubic delta, knees clamped and cramped in the sharp pelvic angle of the wide-hipped childbearing woman, which prevents her from running with ease. Female jiggle is the ducklike waddle of our wallowing Willendorf, who swims in the underground river of liquid nature. Sex is probings, plumbing, secretions, gushings. Venus is drowsing and dowsing, hearkening to the stirring in her sac of

water.

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Is the Venus of Willendorf just to female experience? Yes. Woman is trapped in her wavy, watery body. She must listen and learn from something beyond and yet within her. The Venus of Willendorf, blind, tongueless, brainless, armless, knock-kneed, seems a depressing model of gender. Yet woman is depressed, pressed down, by earth's gravitation, calling us back to her bosom. We will see that malign magnetism at work in Michelangelo, one of his great themes and obsessions. In the west, art is a hacking away at nature's excess. The western mind makes definitions. That is, it draws lines. This is the heart of Apollonianism. There are no lines in the Venus of Willendorf, only curves and circles. She is the formlessness of nature. She is mired in the miasmatic swamp I identify with Dionysus. Life always begins and ends in squalor. The Venus of Willendorf, slumping, slovenly, slutish, is in a rut, the womb-tomb of mother nature. Never send to know for whom the belle tolls. She tolls for thee.

How did beauty begin? Earth-cult, suppressing the eye, locks man in the belly of mothers. There is, I insisted, nothing beautiful in nature. Nature is primal power, coarse and turbulent. Beauty is our weapon against nature; by it we make objects, giving them limit, symmetry, proportion. Beauty halts and freezes the melting flux of nature.

Beauty was made by men acting together. Hamlets, forts, cities spread across the Near East after the founding of Jericho (ca. 8000 B.C.), the first known settlement in the world. But it was not until Egypt that art broke its enslavement to nature. High art is nonutilitarian. That is, the art object, though retaining its ritualism, is no longer a tool of something else. Beauty is the art object's license to life. The object exists on its own, godlike. Beauty is the art object's light from within. We know it by the eye. Beauty is our escape from the murky flesh-envelope that imprisons us.

Egypt, making a state, made beauty. The reign of Chephren (fl. 2565 B.C.) gave Egyptian art its supreme style, a tradition to last until the time of Christ (fig. 3). Pharaoh was the state. The concentration of power in one man, a living god, was a great cultural advance. A king's emergence out of feuding tribal chieftains is always a step forward in history, as in the medieval era with its quarrelsome barons. Commerce, technology, and the arts profit when nationalism wins over parochialism. Egypt, the first totalitarian régime, made a mystique out of one-man rule. And in that mystique was the birth of the western eye.

A king, ruling alone, is the head of state, as the people are the body. Pharaoh is a wise eye, never blinking. He unifies the scattered many.



3. *Chephren*, from the pyramid complex at Giza, ca. 2500 B.C.

The unification of upper and lower Egypt, a geographical triumph, was man's first experience of concentration, condensation, conceptualization. Social order and the *idea* of social order emerge. Egypt is history's first romance of hierarchy. Pharaoh, elevated and sublime, contemplated life's panorama. His eye was the sun disk at the apex of the social pyramid. He had *point of view*, an Apollonian sightline. Egypt invented the magic of *image*. The mystique of kingship had to be projected over thousands of miles to keep the nation together. Conceptualization and projection: in Egypt is forged the formalistic Apollonian line that will end in modern cinema, master genre of our century. Egypt invented glamour, beauty as power and power as beauty. Egyptian aristocrats were the first Beautiful People. Hierarchy and eroticism fused in Egypt, making a pagan unity the west has never thrown off. The eros of hierarchical orders, separate but mutually intrusive, is one of the west's most characteristic perversions, later intensified by the Christian taboo upon sex. Egypt makes personality and history numinous. This idea, entering Europe through Greece, remains the principal distinction between western and eastern culture.

A black line on a white page. The Nile, cutting through the desert, was the first straight line in western culture. Egypt discovered linearity, a phallic track of mind piercing the entanglements of nature. The thirty royal dynasties of Egypt were the cascading river of history. Ancient Egypt was a thin band of cultivated land an average of five miles wide but six hundred miles long. An absolutist geography produced an absolutist politics and aesthetics. At its height in the Old Kingdom, pharaonic power created the pyramid, a mammoth design of converging lines. At Giza are remnants of the elevated causeway leading up from the Nile past the Great Sphinx to the pyramid of Chephren. Long causeways, for construction crews and religious processions, were highways into history. Egyptian linearity cut the knot of nature; it was the eye shot forward into the far distance.

The masculine art form of construction begins in Egypt. There were public works before, as in the fabled walls of Jericho, but they did not cater to the eye. In Egypt, construction is male geometry, a glorification of the visible. The first clarity of intelligible form appears in Egypt, the basis of Greek Apollonianism in art and thought. Egypt discovers four-square architecture, a rigid grid laid against mother nature's melting ovals. Social order becomes a visible aesthetic, countering nature's chthonian invisibilities. Pharaonic construction is the perfection of matter in art. Fascist political power, grandiose and self-divinizing, creates the hierarchical, categorical superstructure of western mind.

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Pyramids are man-mountains to rival nature, ladders to the sun of sky-cult. Colossalism, monumentality. The ideal human figure in Egypt is a pillar, an element of architecture and geometry. The gigantism of procreative nature has been masculinized and hardened. Egypt had little wood but lots of stone. Stone makes an art of permanence. The body is an obelisk, square, phallic, sky-pointing, an Apollonian line defying time and organic change.

Egyptian art is glyptic, that is, carved or engraved. It is based on the incised edge, which I identify as the Apollonian element in western culture. Stone is obdurate, unregenerate nature. The incised edge is the line drawn between nature and culture. It is the steely autograph of the western will. We will find the sharp Apollonian contour in psychology as well as art. Western personality is hard, impermeable, intractable. Spengler says "the brilliant *polish* of the stone in Egyptian art" makes the eye "glide" along the statue surface.<sup>34</sup> The west's armoured ego begins in the shiny stone idealizations of Old Kingdom Pharaohs, *objets d'art* and *objets de culte*. The green diorite statue of enthroned Chephren from Giza is a masterpiece of smooth, glossy, Apollonian definitiveness. Its hardness of surface repels the eye. This masculine hardness is an abolition of female interiority. There are no warm womb-spaces in aristocratic Egyptian art. The body is a shaft of frozen Apollonian will. The flatness of Egyptian wall-painting and relief serves the same function, obliterating woman's inner darkness. Every angle of the body is crisp, clean, and sunlit. Sagging maternal breasts of the Willendorf kind usually appear, oddly enough, only on male fertility gods like Hapi, the Nile god. Egypt is the first to glamourize small breasts. The breast as vernal adornment rather than rubbery milk sac, outline rather than volume: Apollonian Egypt made the first shift of value from femaleness to femininity, an advanced erotic art form.

Chthonian internality, as we shall see, was projected into the world of the dead. But Egypt also translated inner space into entirely social terms. Egypt invented interior décor, civilized living; it made beauty out of social life. The Egyptians were the first aesthetes. An aesthete does not necessarily dress well or collect art works: an aesthete is one who *lives by the eye*. The Egyptians had "taste." Taste is Apollonian discrimination, judgment, connoisseurship; taste is the visible logic of objects. Arnold Hauser says of the Middle Kingdom, "The stiffly ceremonial forms of courtly art are absolutely new and come into prominence here for the first time in the history of human culture."<sup>35</sup> The Egyptians lived by ceremony; they ritualized social life. The aristocratic house was a

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cool, airy temple of harmony and grace; the minor arts had unparalleled quality of design. Jewelry, makeup, costume, chairs, tables, cabinets: from the moment Egyptian style was rediscovered by Napoleon's invaders, it has been the rage in Europe and America, influencing fashion, furniture, and tombstones and even producing the Washington Monument. Artifacts from other Near Eastern cultures—the golden bull's lyre from Ur, for example—seem cluttered, bulky, muscle-bound. In their cult of the eye, the Egyptians saw *edges*. Even their stylized gestures in art have a superb balletic contour. The Egyptians invented *elegance*. Elegance is reduction, simplification, condensation. It is spare, stark, sleek. Elegance is cultivated abstraction. The source of Greek and Roman classicism—clarity, order, proportion, balance—is in Egypt.

Egypt remains unabsorbed by humanistic education. Though its art and history are taught, it is taken far less seriously than Greece. The thinness of Egyptian literature keeps it out of core curricula. The superstition of Egyptian religion repels the rational, and the autocracy of Egyptian politics repels the liberal. But Egypt's power to fascinate endures, alluring poets, artists, actresses, and fanatics. Egyptian high culture was more complex and conceptual than has been acknowledged. It is underestimated because of the moralistic obsession with language that has dominated modern academic thought. Words are not the only measure of mental development. To believe that they are is a very western or Judeo-Christian illusion. It stems from our invisible God, who talks creation into existence. Words are the most removed of human inventions from things-as-they-are. The most ancient conflict in western culture, between Jew and Egyptian, continues today: Hebrew word-worship versus pagan imagism, the great unseen versus the glorified thing. The Egyptians were visionary materialists. They began the western line of Apollonian aestheticism that we see in the *Iliad*, in Pheidias, Botticelli, Spenser, Ingres, Wilde, and Hollywood cinema. Apollonian things are the cold western eye cut out of nature.

Egyptian culture flourished relatively unchanged for three thousand years, far longer than Greek culture. Stagnancy, a stultifying lack of individualism, says the humanist. But Egyptian culture lasted because it was stable and complete. It worked. The Apollonian element in Egypt is so pronounced that the idea of "classical" antiquity should be revised to contain it. Egypt and the ancient Near East were also the source of the Dionysian countercurrent in Greek culture. In Greece Apollo and Dionysus were at odds, but in Egypt they were reconciled. Egyptian culture was a fusion of the conceptual with the chthonian, the form-

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making of consciousness with the shadowy flux of procreative nature. Day and night were equally honored. Here alone in the world were sky-cult and earth-cult yoked and harmonized.

Fertility religion always comes first in history. But as the food problem is solved, nature's moral and aesthetic incoherence gradually becomes apparent. Egypt evolved into the sun-worship of sky-cult without ever losing its orientation toward the earth. This was because of the Nile, center of the Egyptian economy. Each year the river flooded and receded, leaving a plain of rich black mud; each year the hard went soft, earth turned liquid. John Read says alchemy probably began in Egypt, since Khem was the ancient name of Egypt, "the country of dark soil, the Biblical Land of Ham."<sup>56</sup> Metamorphosis is the chthonian magic of shapeshifting Dionysus. The fertile muck was the primeval matrix, with which Egyptians came into annual contact. The Apollonian is chaste contour, borderlines: the Nile, transgressing its borders with majestic regularity, was the triumph of mother nature. Egypt's ideology of sun and stone rested on chthonian ooze, the swamp of generation I identify with Dionysus. The oscillations of the Egyptian calendar produced a fruitful duality of point of view, one of the greatest constructs of western imagination.

Chthonian mysteries are the secret of Egypt's perennial fascination. The gross and barbaric proliferated. A dung-beetle, the scarab, was worshipped and worn as a gemstone. The scarab was minister of nature's decay, the bath of dissolution. Egyptian literature was undeveloped because internality was preempted by the death-cult. There was only one ethical principle, justice (*maat*), a public virtue above ground or below. Spirituality was projected into the afterlife. The Book of the Dead was daemonic thought, ruminations, earth-chawings. The mummy, swaddled like an infant, returned to nature's womb for rebirth. The painted tomb was cave art, prayers to daemonic darkness. Egyptian culture was both earth-tending and earth-rejecting. Herodotus reports Egyptian men urinated like women. Egyptian gods were incompletely emerged from prehistoric animism. They were monstrous hybrids, half human and half animal or animal joined to animal. E. A. Wallis Budge says the Egyptians clung to their "composite creatures" despite the ridicule of foreigners.<sup>57</sup> One god had a serpent head on a leopard body, another a hawk head on the body of a lion and horse; still another was a crocodile with the body of a lion and hippopotamus. Chthonian energy, like the Nile, is overflow and superfetation. The logic and rigor of the Apollonian eye had to defeat Egypt's fuzzy tribal fetishism.

The Egyptian synthesis of chthonian and Apollonian was of enor-



4. Stele of the Overseer of Magazine of Amon, Nib-Amun, and his wife, Huy, Eighteenth Dynasty.

mous consequence for western tradition. It was in the interplay between earth and sky that idealized form began. Western personality is an Egyptian *objet d'art*, an exclusive zone of aristocratic privilege. The cartouche, a closed oval, surrounds a hieroglyphic name. In early Egyptian art, a *serekh* or square palace façade signified kingship. Cartouche and *serekh* are symbols of hierarchic sequestration, a closing in of the holy and royal to exclude the profane. They are a *temenos*, the Greek word for the sacred precinct around a temple. The reserved space of the cartouche is analogous to the *wedjat*, the apotropaic eye of Horus studding so many amulets and hieroglyphic displays (fig. 4). The Egyptian eye is synonymous with western personality. Because the soul was thought to reside there, the eye is always shown full face, flounderlike, even when the head is in painted profile. The eye is licensed in Egypt.

That is, it is released but ritually bound. The glamorous black-tailed outline of Egyptian eye-makeup is a hieratic accent, both fish and fence. It contains and blocks out. Egypt honored the earth but also feared it. The pure, clean Apollonian contour of Egyptian art is a defense against chthonian muck and muddle. Egypt created the distance between eye and object which is a hallmark of western philosophy and aesthetics. That distance is a charged force field, a dangerous temenos. Egypt created Apollonian objects out of chthonian fear. The western line of Apollonian thing-making, from Homer's bronzed warriors to capitalist cars and cans, begins in the Egyptian caged eye.

One of the most misunderstood features of Egyptian life was the veneration of cats, whose mummified bodies have been found by the thousands. My theory is that the cat was the model for Egypt's unique synthesis of principles (fig. 5). The modern cat, the last animal domesticated by man, descends from *Felis lybica*, a North African wildcat. Cats are prowlers, uncanny creatures of the night. Cruelty and play are one for them. They live by and for fear, practicing being scared or spooking humans by sudden rushings and ambushes. Cats dwell in the occult, that is, the "hidden." In the Middle Ages, they were hunted and killed for their association with witches. Unfair? But the cat really is in league with chthonian nature, Christianity's mortal enemy. The black cat of Halloween is the lingering shadow of archaic night. Sleeping up to twenty of every twenty-four hours, cats reconstruct and inhabit the primitive night-world. The cat is telepathic—or at least thinks that it is. Many people are unnerved by its cool stare. Compared to dogs, slavishly eager to please, cats are autocrats of naked self-interest. They are both amoral and immoral, consciously breaking rules. Their "evil" look at such times is no human projection: the cat may be the only animal who savors the perverse or reflects upon it.

Thus the cat is an adept of chthonian mysteries. But it has a hieratic duality. It is *eye-intense*. The cat fuses the Gorgon eye of appetite to the detached Apollonian eye of contemplation. The cat values invisibility, comically imagining itself undetectable as it slouches across a lawn. But it also fashionably loves to see and be seen; it is a spectator of life's drama, amused, condescending. It is a narcissist, always adjusting its appearance. When it is disheveled, its spirits fall. Cats have a sense of *pictorial composition*: they station themselves symmetrically on chairs, rugs, even a sheet of paper on the floor. Cats adhere to an Apollonian metric of mathematical space. Haughty, solitary, precise, they are arbiters of elegance—that principle I find natively Egyptian.

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5. *Cat Goddess with One Gold Earring*, Late Dynastic.

Cats are poseurs. They have a sense of *persona*—and become visibly embarrassed when reality punctures their dignity. Apes are more human but less beautiful: they posture but never pose. Hunkering, chattering, chest-beating, buttock-baring, apes are bumptious vulgarians lurching up the evolutionary road. The cat's sophisticated personae are masks of an advanced theatricality. Priest and god of its own cult, the cat follows a code of ritual purity, cleaning itself religiously. It makes pagan sacrifices to itself and may share its ceremonies with the elect. The day of a cat-owner often begins with the discovery of a neat pile of mole guts or mashed mouse limbs on the porch—Darwinian mementos. The cat is the least Christian inhabitant of the average home.

In Egypt the cat; in Greece the horse. The Greeks did not care for cats. They admired the horse and used it constantly in art and metaphor. The horse is an athlete, proud but serviceable. It accepts citizenship in a public system. The cat is a law unto itself. It has never lost its despotic air of Oriental luxury and indolence. It was too feminine for the male-loving Greeks. I spoke of Egypt's invention of femininity, an aesthetic of social practice removed from nature's brutal female machinery. Aristocratic Egyptian women's costume, an exquisite tunic of transparent pleated linen, must be called *slinky*, a word we still use for formfitting evening gowns. Slinkiness is the nocturnal stealth of cats.

The Egyptians admired sleekness, in greyhounds, jackals, and hawks. Sleekness is smooth Apollonian contour. But slinkiness is the sinuous craft of daemonic darkness, which the cat carries into day.

Cats have secret thoughts, a divided consciousness. No other animal is capable of *ambivalence*, those ambiguous cross-currents of feeling, as when a purring cat simultaneously buries its teeth warningly in one's arm. The inner drama of a lounging cat is telegraphed by its ears, which swerve round toward a distant rustle as its eyes rest with false adoration on ours, and secondly by its tail, which flicks menacingly even while the cat dozes. Sometimes the cat pretends to have no relation to its own tail, which it schizophrenically attacks. The twitching, thumping tail is the chthonian barometer of the cat's Apollonian world. It is the serpent in the garden, bumping and grinding with malice aforethought. The cat's ambivalent duality is dramatized in erratic mood-swings, abrupt leaps from torpor to mania, by which it checks our presumption: "Come no closer. I can never be known."

Thus the Egyptian veneration of cats was neither silly nor childish. Through the cat, Egypt defined and refined its complex aesthetic. The cat was the symbol of that fusion of chthonian and Apollonian which no other culture achieved. The west's eye-intense pagan line begins in Egypt, as does the hard persona of art and politics. Cats are exemplars of both. The crocodile, also honored in Egypt, resembles the cat in its daily passage between two realms: hefting itself between water and earth, the spiky crocodile is the west's armoured ego, sinister, hostile, and ever-watchful. The cat is a time-traveller from ancient Egypt. It returns whenever sorcery or style is in vogue. In the Decadent aestheticism of Poe and Baudelaire, the cat regains its sphinxlike prestige and magnitude. With its taste for ritual and bloody spectacle, conspiracy and exhibitionism, the cat is pure pagan pomp. Uniting nocturnal primitivism to Apollonian elegance of line, it became the living paradigm of Egyptian sensibility. The cat, fixing its swift predatory energy in poses of Apollonian stasis, was the first to enact the frozen moment of perceptual stillness that is high art.

Our second exhibit from western art is the bust of Nefertiti (figs. 6 and 7). How familiar it is, and yet how strange. Nefertiti is the opposite of the Venus of Willendorf. She is the triumph of Apollonian image over the humpiness and horror of mother earth. Everything fat, slack, and sleepy is gone. The western eye is open and alert. It has forced objects into their frozen frame. But the liberation of the eye has its price. ~~Autarky~~ and truncated, Nefertiti is western ego under glass.

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6. *Nefertiti* (copy).

The radiant glamour of this supreme sexual persona comes to us from a palace-prison, the overdeveloped brain. Western culture, moving up toward Apollonian sunlight, discards one burden only to stagger under another.

The bust, found by a German expedition at Amarna in 1912, dates from the reign of Akhenaten (1375–57 B.C.). Queen Nefertiti, wife of the Pharaoh, wears a wig-crown peculiar to the eighteenth dynasty and seen elsewhere only on Akhenaten's formidable mother, Queen Tiy. The bust is painted limestone with plaster additions; the eye is inset rock crystal. The ears and uraeus, the royal serpent on the brow, are broken. Scholars have debated whether the piece is a studio model for court artists.

The Nefertiti bust is one of the most popular art works in the world. It is printed on scarves and molded in necklace pendants and coffee-table miniatures. But never in my experience is the bust exactly reproduced. The copyist softens it, feminizes and humanizes it. The actual bust is intolerably severe. It is too uncanny an object for domestic display. Even art books lie. The bust is usually posed in profile or at an angle, so that the missing left pupil is hidden or shadowed. What happened to the eye? Perhaps it was unnecessary in a model and never inserted. But the eye was often chiseled out of statues and paintings of the dead. It was a

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7. *Nefertiti*, ca. 1350 B.C.

way of making a hated rival a nonperson and extinguishing his or her survival in the afterlife. Akhenaten's reign was divisive. His creation of a new capital and efforts to crush the powerful priesthood, his establishment of monotheism and innovations in artistic style were nullified under his son-in-law, Tutankhamen, the short-lived boy-king. Nefertiti may have lost her eye in the wreck of the eighteenth dynasty.

As we have it, the bust of Nefertiti is artistically and ritualistically complete, exalted, harsh, and alien. It fuses the naturalism of the Amarna period with the hieratic formalism of Egyptian tradition. But Amarna expressiveness ends in the grotesque. This is the least consoling of great art works. Its popularity is based on misunderstanding and suppression of its unique features. The proper response to the Nefertiti bust is fear. The queen is an android, a manufactured being. She is a new gorgoneion, a "bodiless head of fright." She is paralyzed and paralyzing. Like enthroned Chephren, Nefertiti is suave, urbane. She

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gazes toward the far distance, seeing what is best for her people. But her eyes, with their catlike rim of kohl, are cold. She is self-divinized authority. Art shows Akhenaten half-feminine, his limbs shrunken and belly bulging, possibly from birth defect or disease. This portrait shows his queen half-masculine, a vampire of political will. Her seductive force both lures in and warns away. She is western personality barricaded behind its aching, icy line of Apollonian identity.

Nefertiti's head is so massive it threatens to snap the neck like a stalk. She is like a papyrus blossom swaying on its river reed. The head is swollen to the point of deformity. She seems futuristic, with the enlarged cerebrum foreseen as the destiny of our species. The crown is filled like a funnel with a rain of hierarchic energy, flooding the fragile brain-pan and violently pushing the face forward like the prow of a ship. Nefertiti is like the Winged Victory of Samothrace, garments plastered back by the wind of history. As cargo, Nefertiti carries her own excess of thought. She is weighed down by Apollonian wakefulness, a sun that never sets. Egypt invented the pillar, which Greece would refine. With her slim aristocratic neck, Nefertiti is a pillar, a caryatid. She bears the burden of state upon her head, rafters of the temple of the sun. The golden brow-band is a ritual bridle, squeezing, constricting, limiting. Nefertiti presides from the temenos of power, a sacred precinct she can never leave.

Venus of Willendorf is all body, Nefertiti all head. Her shoulders have been cut away by radical surgery. Early in its history, Egypt invented the bust, a portrait style still in use. It may have been a robust double, the *ka* that enters and exits through false doors. The shoulders of the Nefertiti bust have shriveled to become their own pedestal. No physical force remains. The queen's body is bound and invisible, like a mummy. Her face gleams with the newness of rebirth. Tense with self-creation, she is a goddess as mother-father. The pregnancy of Venus of Willendorf is displaced upward and redefined. Willendorf is chthonian belly-magic, Nefertiti Apollonian head-magic. Thinking makes it so. Nefertiti is a royal highness, propelling herself like a jet into sky-cult. Forward thrust. Nefertiti leads with her chin. She has "great bones." She is Egyptian stone architecture, just as Venus of Willendorf is earthen ovals, woman as quivering poached egg. Nefertiti is femaleness made mathematical, femaleness sublimized by becoming harder and more concrete.

I said Egypt invented elegance, which is reduction, simplification, condensation. Mother nature is addition and multiplication, but Nefertiti is subtraction. Visually, she has been reduced to her essence. Her

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sleek contoured face is one step from the wizened. She is abbreviation, a symbol or pictogram, a pure idea of pagan pictorialism. One can never be too rich or too thin, decreed the Duchess of Windsor. I said the idea of beauty is based on enormous exclusions. So much is excluded from the Nefertiti bust that we can feel its silhouette straining against the charged atmosphere, a combat of Apollonian line. The name Nefertiti means "The Beautiful One Cometh." Her haughty face is carved out of the chaos of nature. Beauty is a state of war, a frigid blank zone under siege.

Nefertiti is ritualized western personality, a streamlined *thing*. She is forbiddingly clean. Her eyebrows are shaved and redrawn with male width and frown. She is as depilated as a priest. She has the face of a mannequin, static, posed, self-proffering. Her *knowingness* is both fashionable and hieratic. The modern mannequin of window or runway is an androgyne, because she is femaleness impersonalized by masculine abstraction. If a studio model, the Nefertiti bust is as much a mannequin as the royal dummy of a London tailor shop. As queen and mannequin, Nefertiti is both exposed and enclosed, a face and a mask. She is naked yet armoured, experienced yet ritually pure. She is sexually unapproachable because bodiless: her torso is gone; her full lips invite but remain firmly pressed together. Her perfection is for display, not for use. Akhenaten and his queen would greet their court from a balcony, the "window of appearance." All art is a window of appearance. Nefertiti's face is the sun of consciousness rising over a new horizon, the frame or mathematical grid of man's victory over nature. The idolatrous *thingness* of western art is a theft of authority from mother nature.

Nefertiti's mismatched eyes, deliberate or accidental, are a symbol of Egyptian duality. Like the cat, she sees in and sees out. She is frozen Apollonian poseur and Gorgonesque daemonic seer. The Greek Graiai, three old divine sisters, had one eye that they passed from hand to hand. Fontenrose connects this to the double pupil of a Lydian queen: "What she had, it seems to me, was a removable eye of wondrous power. It was an eye that could penetrate the invisible."<sup>58</sup> Nefertiti, the half-blind mannequin, sees more by being less. Mutilation is mystic expansion. Modern copyists suppress the missing eye because it is fatal to popular canons of beauty. Maimed eyes seem mad or spectral, as in the veiled vulture's eye of Poe's *Tell-Tale Heart*. Nefertiti is a mutant and visionary materialist, a thing that sees. In Egypt, matter is made numinous by the first electricity of mind. In the Egyptian cult of seeing, Nefertiti is thought in light from its origins.

From Venus of Willendorf to Nefertiti: from body to face, touch to

sight, love to judgment, nature to society. Nefertiti is like Athena born from the brow of Zeus, a head-heavy armoured goddess. She is beautiful but desexed. She is hieratic decorum and reserve, her head literally a reservoir of containment and curtailment, like her stunted torso. Her ponderous, ostentatious crown is the cold breeding ground of Greek categorical thought. Her tight brow-band is stringency, rigor, channeled ideas. The miasmatic cloud of mother nature has lifted. Nefertiti's imperious jutting face is the cutting edge of western conceptualization and projection. In her profile, all roads lead to the eye. From the side, diagonals converge in peaking vectors of force. From the front, she rears up like a cobra head, woman as royal intimidator. She is the eye-intense west, the overenlargement and grandiosity of head-culture. The bust of Nefertiti is eye-pleasing but oppressive. It looks forward to Bellini's androgynous *Doge Loredan*, to Neapolitan silver reliquary busts, to Fifties fantasy drawings of smiling armless women in chic evening gowns. Authority, good will, aloofness, asceticism. Epiphany as a totem of vibrating passivity. With her welcoming but uncanny smile, Nefertiti is western personality in its ritual bonds. Exquisite and artificial, she is mind-made image forever caught in radiant Apollonian freeze-frame.