



## 2. The Great Goddess and Dionysus

TEIRESIAS: There are two powers [...] which are supreme. In human affairs: first Demeter—the same goddess is also Earth; give her which name you please— and she supplies mankind with solid food. After her came Dionysus, Semele's son; the blessing he procured and gave men is counterpart to that of bread: the clear juice of the grape.

Euripides, *The Bacchae*\*

### 2.1. Religo

One of the main theses of this book is that the Bataille-Foucauldian discourse may be interpreted as a transliteration of *religious* feeling—religious feeling of a special kind. As known, religion, from the Latin *religare* (to unite),<sup>†</sup> is the professed practice of communing with “the supernatural Other,” the nonhuman

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\* Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Philip Vellacot (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 200.

<sup>†</sup>As an alternative to St. Augustine's *religo*, Robert Graves suggests the

element that is perceived to be looming beyond the illusion of materiality. Thus, a religious understanding of life yields two realms of action: *the sacred and the profane*. The sacred is that sphere of life in which men consummate their “union with the gods,” and beyond the limits of this holy locus begins the realm of the profane, from the Latin *profano* (“out of the temple”).

Thereby, men have established the sacredness of space (venue of prayer), of time (ritual festivities), of bodily conduct (demeanor and meditative care of the body), and of thought (the Word of the Books). For the religious man, everything outside the religious circle is nonsensical, contingent, unhallowed, meaningless, and, ultimately, “unreal.”<sup>†</sup> For the religious man, the world, as he finds it, is a barren field that he must enclose, till, and ward under the watch of his divinity of *election*, because— and here the difficulties begin— there have since time immemorial appeared to be more than a few gods from which to choose; more than a few gods beckoning to the religious individual. Today, the conventional acceptance of “religion” is that of a unitary credo under the austere dispensation of a single, commanding, supernatural Lord: the traditional monotheistic confessions, in brief.

Everything else, it follows, is profanity.

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the etymology *Relligio*, from *rem legere*, that is, the faculty “to choose or pick the right thing” (Robert Graves, *The White Goddess, A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966 [1948], p. 478). Etymology, indeed, whose meaning matches that of the Greek word *hairesis*, the root of *heresy*. Graves’s suggestion may be taken for a half-disguised jibe.

<sup>†</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), p. 96.

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This is a misleading conception, however, which has doubtless been encouraged by the organized Churches to divert their respective communities from any *concrete* idolatrous temptation. To establish themselves, traditional cults have fought long and hard against “rival divinities,” which they have eventually banished as “devilish idols.” When they appeared to have won the match, all “evil” disposition was subsumed under the convenient, single head of the Adversary (Satan), who was cast out of heaven and made thereby the prince of *profane* darkness.

This is the traditional account that Bataille challenged most decisively, and his critique would mark the point of departure for the creation of his “acephalic cult.”

He would claim, aided and supported by solid evidence — scholarly and literary— that practices referred to as “evil” by the Churches were, once upon a time, *sacred* themselves. That is, no less sacred, and religious, than those pertaining to, say, Jehovah or Christ, but of a different, *opposed* polarity. Though “evil gods” and their practices might have been stamped out of collective behavior and erased from the sacred narrative, Bataille reminded us that these orgiastic deities have never ceased throughout the centuries to manifest themselves —in their purity, all the more bloodily and intensely— even as the monotheistic Churches have tirelessly striven to keep them at bay.

And this claim is indisputable. There was indeed a time, before the “God from the desert” (Jehovah) made a comeback, when sacredness was of another nature.

## 2.2. Single Mothers & Overexcited Sons

According to a common myth, the world was originally created during a Golden Age by a celestial supreme being, who eventually came to lose religious currency.

Though he wasn't entirely forgotten, he lost his preeminent place in the cults and drew "farther and farther away from until he became an idle god" (*deus otiosus*).<sup>\*</sup> Into the void he left behind crept other types of divinities, who imposed their other ways. Divinities such as goddesses, who inspired the great Southern-Asiatic matriarchal cults of the megalithic period.<sup>†</sup>

When we compare femininity with virility in material terms such as physical strength, harshness and violent affirmation, it is only natural that the woman, owing to her characteristics of sensitivity, self-sacrifice, and love —not to mention the mystery of procreation—was regarded as the representative of a higher principle; she was even able to acquire authority and to appear as an image of the universal Mother. *Thus, it is not a contradiction that in some instances, spiritual and even social gynaeocracy did not appear in effeminate but in violent and bellicose societies.*<sup>‡</sup>

The mythopoiesis of gynaeocracy spoke of goddesses as mothers who generated without the help of male gods. This was an expression "of the self-sufficiency and fecundity of Mother Earth. Such mythical conceptions [had] their counterparts in beliefs concerning the spontaneous fecundity

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<sup>\*</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.125

<sup>†</sup> Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World* (Rochester, VA: Inner Traditions, 1995 [1934]), p. 207, emphasis added.

<sup>‡</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214–15.

of woman and in her occult magico-religious powers, which exert a determining influence on plant life.”

In the early period of culture, tillage, cattle-breeding, and the parental bent “worked together to bring the women into the chief place in the technological scheme”; the mother-goddess bequeathed upon men “a peaceable culture” sustained by the gift of agriculture.<sup>†</sup> This sort of civilization is designated as *chthonic*, that is, “subterranean” —of the earth— given its sacred emphasis on the powers of generation, which germinate from the underground womb.

Generally speaking, it is possible to establish a relationship between the feminine spirituality and pantheism, according to which ultimate reality is conceived as a great sea into which the nucleus of an individual merges and becomes dissolved like a grain of salt. *In pantheism, personality is an illusory and temporary manifestation of the one undifferentiated substance, which is simultaneously nature as well as the only reality; in the Weltanschauung there is no room for any transcendent order.*<sup>‡</sup>

The peaceable manifestation of matriarchy has also come under the name of “Demetrianism,” after the mother-goddess of fertility, Demeter. In general, during, matriarchal-chthonic festivities, “all men felt themselves to be free and equal; caste and class distinction no longer applied, and could be freely overturned; and a general licentiousness and pleasure in

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\* Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 144–45.

† Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of Industrial Arts* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), pp. 94–101.

‡ Evola, *Revolt*, p. 214, emphasis added.

promiscuity tended to be rather widespread.”\* The Great Mother appeared to have been the tutelary divinity of the Silver Age, until “degenerate” variants made their disconcerting ingress into the mythological record. New cults began to make peculiar demands of their faithful: “Head hunting, human sacrifices, cannibalism were all accepted by man to ensure the life of plants [...]. For the vegetable world to continue, man must kill and be killed; in addition, he must assume sexuality to its extreme limit —the orgy.”† This was no play of lust and no moral perversion in the puritanical modern sense. Sacrifice is literally “the making of things sacred” (from the Latin *sacrum facio*), and the devotees of chthonic, bloody-orgiastic cults took most seriously the performance of such violent paroxysms as these, by all accounts, permitted them to commune religiously with those entities requesting the bloodshed (the holocaust) and to ensure the propagation of human and vegetable life. These religious excesses were given sacred vent under two specular degenerate (and rebellious) mutations respectively of the “orthodox” male and female cults—that is, the (male) celestial being of the Golden Age and the Mother of the Silver Age. The two bloody offshoots were the Aphrodisiac and Dionysian civilizations.

The celebration of the Great Goddess in its violent guise, whereby the mother gives way to the *hetaera* (the whore) —took place during special sacred festivals (saturnalia, Sacchean feasts, Cybele’s Mysteries, etc.), which entailed a variety of liturgies. To name but the most notorious: the slaying of a

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\* Evola, *Revolt*, pp. 215–28.

† Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 103.

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person representing the male regal figure, whom the Great Goddess had loved only for pleasure and not for procreation;<sup>\*</sup> self-castration on the part of priests, who, possessed by the Goddess, sought to transform themselves into the feminine type (e.g., the famous myth of the shepherd Attis, who emasculated himself in a Dionysian trance); and the inversion of sex, whereby (1) statues of the goddesses would display masculine features, and (2) men in the Mysteries would adorn themselves with the clothes of women and women with those of men—all signs that the virile element had “come to be looked down upon as irrelevant,” “as a source of embarrassment.”<sup>†</sup>

Dionysism is the male version of the Aphrodisiac cult. Dionysus, the god of the bacchanalia, drunkenness, abandon, orgiastic furor, musical rapture, and poetic explosion—young Nietzsche’s favorite—is also the personification of erotic power, admittedly one of man’s, but above all woman’s,<sup>‡</sup> most fascinating sources of enthralling energy.

In Dionysism, Eros becomes “sacred frenzy,” mystic orgasm: it is the highest possibility inherent in this direction and it is aimed at undoing the bonds of matter and at producing a transfiguration through frenzy, excess and ecstasy [...]. Dionysus was also represented as a demon of the infernal regions, and was often associated with the principle of water [...]. The ecstatic and pantheistic orientation associated with the sexual element, predominates in the Mystery of the “sacred

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<sup>\*</sup> Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 13.

<sup>†</sup> Evola, *Revolt*, pp. 212–3, 222–23.

<sup>‡</sup> The thrall of woman’s superior sexual endowment is a central theme in the world view of Sade, see Chapter 4.

orgy”; frenzied contacts with the occult forces of the earth and maenadic and pandemic liberations *occur in a domain that is simultaneously that of unrestrained sex, night and death.*\*

### 2.3. Macho Redress

But then, somewhat abruptly, unaccounted migratory patterns, featuring hordes of male-gods-worshipping warriors began to alter the religious map of the West. The Hellenic (Achaean, Ionian, and Dorian) invasions of Greece and Asia Minor early in the second millennium B.C. *effected, in fact, a religious “redress”*: this “redress” caused by the new invasions also signified a direct attack upon the matriarchal triad (of the Goddess in the form of maiden-mother-crone) by the knights of the north to restore the virile cult of the Golden Age. The Achaean and Ionian inroads into the preexistent southern gynaeocratic civilization led to an amalgam between the Aryan worship of the invaders and the local Goddess, who came to accept them as children and providers of sacred kings. “Thus, a male military aristocracy became reconciled to female theocracy”: Zeus took Hera, the shrew-Goddess, as his (recalcitrant) wife. “All early myths about the gods’ seduction of nymphs refer apparently to marriages between Hellenic chieftains and local moon-priestesses; bitterly opposed by Hera, *which means by conservative religious feeling.*” A most revealing myth in this connection is Apollo’s “rape” of Daphne. Contrary to the conventional interpretation, “Daphne was anything but a frightened virgin: her name was

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\* Evola, *Revolt*, pp. 223–24.



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the contraption of *Daphoene*, ‘the bloody one,’ the goddess in orgiastic mood, whose priestesses, the maenads, chewed laurel-leaves\* [which contained cyanide of potassium] as an intoxicant and periodically rushed out at full moon, assaulted unwary travelers, and tore children or young animals into pieces.”† To prevent Apollo from subduing Daphoene, Hera metamorphosed her into a tree. Rather than a sympathetic intervention in favor of “the bloody one,” the transformation symbolized opposition to the restoration of patriarchy. Thus, myth confirms that the Goddess herself was an *intolerant* dispenser of vehement *prohibition*.

As Robert Graves narrated in his *Greek Myths*, “when the Dorians arrived, towards the close of the second millennium,” matriarchy, already weakened, gave way to the institution of patrilineal succession. Hence the pantheon came to be governed by the Olympian family ruled by Zeus, and Hera had to submit unconditionally. However, because “the goddesses, though left in a minority, were never altogether ousted—as they were in Jerusalem,—” ancient Greek culture ended up representing a compromise of sorts between masculine and feminine sacredness.‡ Significant traces of this somewhat uncomfortable cohabitation may be found in

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\* Graves later qualified that the “main maenad intoxicant has been *amanita muscaria*,” which is the technical name of the toadstool, the hallucinogenic fungus also sacred to the Aztec divinity Tlalóc. Dionysus, “sharing too many of [Tlalóc’s] attributes,” must therefore be seen as the European counterpart of the Mexican divinity (Robert Graves, *White Goddess*, 1948, pp. 183, 45).

† Graves, *Greek Myths*, pp. 13–20, emphasis added.

‡ Ibid., p. 19.

ancient Greece's most accomplished Utopian synthesis: Plato's *Laws*. Plato is squarely in the Apollonian camp, yet in the hierarchy he concedes to the "gods of the underworld" (*oi chthónioi*), grudgingly and in passing, a reverential awe that is their due, as well as a special month—the twelfth, Pluto's (Hades, king-god of the nether world)—for their festivals.\* The fate of the mythical king Pentheus, whose tragic end Euripides immortalized in *The Bacchae*, was not lost on the School of Athens: because the Theban monarch refused to acknowledge Dionysus's divinity, he was torn asunder by his own mother, Agauë, a priestess-maenad, in the course of an orgiastic delirium inspired by the god of revelry.

Agauë: Dionysus has destroyed us. Now I understand.

Cadmus (her father): He was insulted.†

Under Plato's *Laws*, no excesses are to be encouraged, but Dionysian power—of drink, music, and dance—if *tamed*, may be used for the glory of Apollo: a circumspect allowance, under the alert eye of Zeus, the One. In sum, the One had married Demeter, disciplined Dionysus, and chained bloody Daphoene in the cellar.

In his famous opus *The Golden Bough*—a vast compilation of ethnography and myth revolving round the lurking persistence of ancient matriarchal and Dionysian worship in the era of patriarchy—Sir James Frazer of Trinity College (1854–1941), said without saying, as Robert Graves phrased it,

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\* Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), see 717a, p. 103, for the worship of the gods of the underworld, and 828d, p. 219, for the related festivals.

† Euripides, *The Bacchae*, p. 238.

“that Christian legend, dogma and ritual are the refinement of a great body of primitive and even barbarous beliefs, and that almost the only original element on Christianity is the personality of Jesus.” Indeed, Frazer acknowledged that at Rome and Athens, male kinship was preceded by female kinship. And in his lengthy and colorful exploration of the social practices of the ancient matriarchies, he dwelt on the centrality of *the sacrifice of the man-god*, that is, on the ritual and periodic slaying of a divine king in his prime. This was done to ensure that the youthful vitality of the king would be captured and suffused throughout the observant community, preventing it thus from suffering weakness and decay. This tradition was clearly pervaded by the belief that the king was responsible for the weather and the crops, and that he might “justly pay with his life for the inclemency of the one and the failure of the other, as a ransom offered to the avenging demons.”<sup>†</sup> In time, kings bent on retaining the privilege to rule, which they acquired by marrying into matrilineal dynasties, would devolve the sacrificial duty upon *their own son*, for no one “could so appropriately die for the king and, through him, for the whole people, as the king’s son.”<sup>‡</sup> “If there were not a symbolic dismemberment, there could never be reintegration of the old parts, and there could be no new life pattern to replace the old one grown anemic *by feeding only*

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\* Robert Graves, *White Goddess*, 1966, p. 242.

† Sir James Frazer, *Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1955 [1922]), pp. 179, 313, 340–41.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

upon goodness.”\*

Under the name Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as god who annually dies and rose again from the dead.<sup>†</sup>

It thus appears that in pre-orthodox mythology, man-god is *cloven*, torn, unfinished: in myth he is split into two halves, a “Spirit of the Waxing Year” (e.g., Osiris), and a “Spirit of the Waning Year” (e.g., Set). Both halves compete for the love of the mother-goddess, who, unlike man-god, is allegedly *a complete, whole divinity*. “She can keep her feet always in the same place, whether in the sky, in the underworld or on this earth.”‡

She tries to satisfy both [Osiris and Set], but can only do so by alternate murder, and man tries to regard this as evidence of her falsity, not of his own irreconcilable demands on her.<sup>§</sup>

The Great Mother is Kali, the Indian goddess of *both* birth and destruction, mother, lover, and reaper, who unites “within her being opposing qualities, virginal and whorish, maternal and destructive.”\*\* She is the White Goddess, “the Mother of all living, the ancient power of fright and lust,” “both lovely and

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\* Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes, *The Wisdom of the Serpent, The Myths of Death, Rebirth and Resurrection* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 21, emphasis added.

† Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 378.

‡ Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 110.

§ Ibid.

\*\* Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London and New York: Arkana, 1985), p. 43.

cruel, ugly and kind.” “As Nut she is the dark, star-studded night sky, circling over the earth, forming with her hands and feet the gateways to life and death.”<sup>†</sup> Of her several embodiments, it is the destructive whore, as will be seen, that would attract Georges Bataille (and Ernst Jünger) the most. Before marriage, in communities where the goddess held sway as Aphrodite or Astarte, “all women were obliged by custom to prostitute themselves to strangers at her sanctuary, and dedicate to her the wages earned by this sanctified harlotry.”<sup>‡</sup> “Marriage [was] considered hateful to the White Goddess.”<sup>§</sup> The archetype of the “whore as Goddess” would indeed give life to some of the most vivid personages of Bataille’s narrative (e.g., *Madame Edwarda*) and of his political economy (*The Accursed Share*), which is based on the notions of squander and dissipation—that is, erotic energy not aimed at procreation.”

The Goddess, as lover and mother, presided over the “alternate” murder and resurrection of the man-god.

The cruel, capricious, incontinent White Goddess and the mild, steadfast, chaste virgin are not to be reconciled except in the nativity context.<sup>††</sup>

The sacred dramas staged in her honor reenacted, as in our modern Christian mass, the sacrificial death and rebirth of the male-hero. As Attis, the heroic man-god was said to be born

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\* Graves, *White Goddess*, pp. 24, 248.

† Begg, *Black Virgin*, p. 44.

‡ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 384.

§ Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 174.

\*\* See chapter 5, subsection entitled “Eroticism,” pp. 117–35.

†† Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 425.

of a virgin, miraculously. As Dionysus, instead, myth recounts that he occupied his father's, Zeus's, throne, and eventually suffered death by dismemberment at the hands of his enemies, the Titans, in the form of a *bull*, which thence came to be worshipped by the religious collective as the most sacred of animals.

To Frazer, all such stories are the mythological expression of the ceremonial sacrifice of divine kings in matriarchal regimes.\* A remarkable manifestation in these civilizations' divine bestiaries, especially for its ambivalent significance, is the *pig*. Seen by many as unclean, the swine was yet untouchable, and this, some thought, was the mark its sacredness.

This difference of opinion points to a hazy state of religious thought in *which the idea of sanctity and uncleanness are not yet sharply distinguished*, both being blended in a sort of vaporous solution to which we give the notion of taboo.†

Bataille had studied Frazer's research attentively. "It is difficult to doubt," Bataille reflected thereafter, "that the passion and resurrection of Jesus are not the extension of sentiments related to the ancient legends of divinities put to death."‡

With the elements he drew from *The Golden Bough*, Bataille would attempt to assemble a synthesis of religious feeling in the modern era—a theological construction that could solve the eternal conundrum of theodicy: that is, the disquieting

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\* Frazer, *Golden Bough*, pp. 401, 403, 449, 451.

† Ibid., p. 546, emphasis added.

‡ Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC), vol. 11, p. 69. For references in Bataille to *The Golden Bough*, see OC, vol. 2, p. 69, and *L'érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957), footnote on p. 136.

presence of reasoned perfidy in a cosmos seemingly ruled by harmonious laws. From the *Golden Bough*, Bataille retained the pattern of a sacrificed god-king, his mutilation and rebirth, the divine effigies of the bull and pig, and the intimation that sacredness, like Kali, might have two faces —a clean countenance and a foul underside. Both polarities being independent of each other, and divided only by the barrier of the taboo, which is periodically broken in the romps of the saturnalia (and, as Bataille understood, in the cyclical holocaust of war).

“Sacred filth” is, say, *menstrual blood*, which has filled men with *dread* for a long time and given rise as a result to a variety of prohibitions (taboos) affecting pubescent females.\* Furthermore, Frazer related how modern “civilized” nations have not entirely given up these rites, as they keep satisfying their archaic craving for scapegoating and solemn murder by executing *criminals* —the ultimate, modern foils for the sacrificial royalty of times long past.† *Crime* and religion thus unite under the sign of “awful sanctity.”‡

In the end, as hinted above, the *Golden Bough* reads like one inexorable debunking exposé of Christianity’s claim to religious originality (if not authenticity). The tale of a sun-king, son of an absent God-the-Father, born of a virgin (like Attis) at the winter solstice (like Dionysus, Apollo, and Mithras),§ who was slain before a lachrymose mother and

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\* Frazer, *Golden Bough*, pp. 694–703.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 666–68.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

§ Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 319.

resuscitated as the Redeemer at Easter, and whose body was transubstantiated into bread (a practice also known to the ancient Mexicans),\* appears to be a popular mythological template upon which the new Judeo-Christian orthodoxy grafted the economic radicalism of a mysterious and seductive Hebrew ascetic: the young teacher Joshua. As shall be seen, this thesis would inspire Bataille, who had begun his spiritual path as a Catholic seminarian, with a number of potent insights on the bloody pull of the Christian myth.

Apparently, holiness, magical virtue, taboo, or whatever we may call that mysterious quality which is supposed to pervade sacred or tabooed persons, is conceived by the primitive philosopher as a physical substance or fluid, with which the sacred man is charged just as Leyden jar is charged with electricity; and exactly as the electricity in the jar can be discharged by contact with a good conductor, so the holiness or magical virtue in the man can be discharged and drained away by contact with the earth, which on this theory serves as an excellent conductor for the magical fluid.†

There might be reason to infer that even from this similitude drawn by Frazer between sacredness and electricity, Bataille derived imagery he would later turn to creative use in conceiving his brand of theology—a theology contemplating the clustering of a congregation around a sacred *core* by means of a peculiar bonding energy.‡ This is indeed the seed of that very conception, which Foucault, in turn, would imitate when he came to draft his academic fiction of Power/Knowledge.

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\* Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 568.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 688–89.

‡ See chapter 5, subsection entitled “Power”, pp. 150–77



### 2.4. Revival

Eventually, after a fierce struggle to subjugate the Goddess, the West came to be ruled by the One God through patriarchal dispensation. However, under the debris of the confrontation, which were rapidly swept under the rug of male rule, commandments forbidding human immolation, and a stratified regime of property, lay smoldering the ashes of the chthonic frenzy.

Such a fury kept erupting ceaselessly and everywhere with vengeful defiance. War, systematic rape, torture, mass sacrifice, fascinated dismemberment of humans by humans, frenetic sexuality, intermittent madness, and mutilation and self-mutilation have always been indelible signs of the West's (and the world's) chronicles of inexplicable "sickness" in its time of masculine, "rational" sacredness. But the striking aspect of all such deplored misdeeds, which pious commentators have systematically ascribed to some confused wickedness of the individual's "poisoned" psyche and faltering heart (a private, psychological affair, so to speak), was that there was a universal, recognizable *method*, often an instinctive, and *unaccountable logic*—a ritual—performed by men in killing or in defiling their fellow men. A method such that it could not have been merely the random, aggressive rush of male animality, of senseless instinct. Initiates, students of religion and of the esoteric, and several others—scholars or otherwise, including Bataille and his followers—have always traced these recurrent and methodical blood orgies to the irrepressible and unconscious drive, inherent in human nature, to join in

sanguinary ecstasy the Dionysian-Aphrodisitic pole.

Bataille wondered:

How could it be that in all places, without concert, men have found themselves in agreement to pursue an enigmatic behavior, that they all have felt the need or suffered the obligation to kill living beings in a ritual fashion? [The “quiet man”] must acknowledge that death, the terror of sacred ecstasy are bound to him; failing to answer [this question], all men have dwelt in ignorance as *to what they are* [...]. This is the key to all human existence.\*

It appears thus that our lust for blood, violence, and domination, as humans, is an urge with long roots, a primordial inclination that traditional monotheistic religions have endeavored to suppress through centuries of catechism and behavioral injunction. So far, Bataille intimated, the results of such an evangelical effort have been mixed at best: the late record of atrocities committed by the united peoples of Christendom is rather staggering, and it stands as a clear indication that the Dionysian beast within us is far from being domesticated. The periodic consummation of holocausts represents humanity’s occult desire to satisfy those very proclivities that were freely and naturally indulged before the “patriarchal redress.” In this connection, the death of a chieftain-king in primitive societies, or the saturnalia and like feasts, in which interdiction is lifted, are cited as the classic illustrations of the armed truce existing between traditional rule and orgiastic manifestation. At these peculiar times—days marking a stark discontinuity in the traditional calendar—

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\* Bataille, OC, vol. 7, p. 264.

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taboos and interdictions are upturned and the primordial powers of chaos may be unleashed (with various degrees of permissiveness).

Anthropologists and historians have reported the savage violence that explodes in such intervals: social order is momentarily suspended, divisions are erased, and, in random order, the desire for intoxication, murder, beatings, rape, theft, ransacking, and promiscuousness is liberally indulged.

The social confusion of the type exemplified by the Saturnalia, erotic license, orgies and so on, symbolized retrogression to the Cosmic Chaos. On the last day of the year the universe was dissolved in the primordial waters. The marine [she-]monster, Tiamat\* —symbol of darkness, the formless, the non-manifested— revived and once again threatened. The world that had existed for a year *really* disappeared. Since Tiamat was again present, the cosmos was annulled; and Marduk was obliged to create it once again [from the monster's dismembered body], after having once again conquered Tiamat.†

Thus, we may say that Bataille, and later Foucault, reckoned with three main spiritual forces that appear to have shaped modernity: (1) a compassionate tradition bound to a belief in transcendence (i.e., that here is something beyond this life, however impenetrable it might be to our hearts and minds), in the sacredness of music, geometry, mutual aid and cooperativeness —this tradition we will classify from now on as “Apollonian”; (2) the technological age of industrial power,

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\* The snake monster of the Zoroastrian tradition, slain by the hero Marduk (St. Michael in the western tradition).

† Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 77–79.

and its associated mentality of thrift and efficiency; (3) and the bloody worship of yore. Buddhism, Platonism and Neo-Platonism, for instance, would fall under the Apollonian category, whereas Christianity appears somewhat torn between the first and the third form of worship: it is indeed compassionate, but, as Bataille would obsessively remark, its myth is deeply rooted in blood and sacrifice (the crucifixion), as well as in its insistent offer of unbounded forgiveness, which, Bataille interjected with reason, implies perforce *the consummation of unbounded crimes*.<sup>\*</sup> This is a central problem, and we shall treat it in detail in our discussion of Bataille's theology.

As for these three spiritual forces, the first Bataille, as a young Catholic seminarian, used to respect, but he subsequently deemed it moribund and defeated, if not entirely meaningless; the second he saw as the *mediocre* usurper of "sacred energy" (i.e., the lifeblood of humanity) —sacred energy which, once it is harnessed to the machines and the logic of profit, becomes vitiated, perverted and assumes the form of what Bataille calls "*power*." The third was in his eyes the authentic path: though the rites of blood sacrifice were shocking, to embrace them was to him the most consistent, honest, and sensible practice if he were to make (non)sense of this world in the face of its endless torment, inexplicable suffering, and the gaping abyss of death.

In other terms, Bataille wished for a new empire of Kali: he longed to reconcile in one creed the blooming of flowers with

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\* Bataille, OC, vol. 10, p. 281.

the ritualized laceration of human flesh. In the face of life's incomprehensible insanity, he howled:

A stupid and cruel sentiment of insomnia, monstrous sentiment, amoral, in agreement with the lawless cruelty of the universe, cruelty of a famine, of a sadism without hope: unfathomable taste of God for the extreme suffering of the creatures, suffering that suffocates and dishonors them. In being one with this boundless bewilderment in which I am myself at a loss, have I never felt more simply human?'

To bring about a revival of the orgiastic cults in the modern era—a revival that, given the prosaicism of our times, can only be “filtered” or variously re-elaborated—Bataille saw but two avenues: either flirt with Fascism (of the Italian sort), which in the Twenties and Thirties he approvingly saw as a triumphal, *sovereign* regime founded on heroic violence; or contaminate the discourse of Liberal society with a view to nesting in its midst with subversive intent. In other words, what could be alternatively attempted (instead of Fascism) was an aesthetic refashioning of language, and hence intellectual activity. A refashioning of language that would dis-habituate the subject to conceal shamefully the bestial within him, and that would loosen those inhibitory fences, which the legislators of rationality, from Plato onward, have been tirelessly erecting within Man since the days of the redress.

After the collapse of Fascism in World War II, only the second alternative remained, which had indeed been the one that Bataille had pursued by necessity, and which the Foucauldians—over the four decades since the death of their

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\* Bataille, OC, vol. 12, p. 279.

master in 1962— would elaborate, instead, into a discursive game of postural defiance.

As shall be detailed in the section devoted to postmodernism, part of this aesthetic transfer conceived by Bataille, and later tested by Foucault, has succeeded, or better said, it has successfully accompanied certain social developments that have played out for the most part on the folkloristic scene. The recent vicissitudes of our lifestyles and intellectual fads, not to mention their late marketability (again a sign that power and controlled “dissidence” ultimately work hand in glove), are evident proof of it. Witness, for instance, the increasingly acrimonious spar pitting males and females in the workplace, and the talk, literature, and body language associated with it; the flood of books written on the feminine divine, the Goddess, and the concomitantly imputed dismal ineptitude of male rule; academia’s tongue-in-cheek appreciation of primitive, holocaust-practicing cultures, which have been thereby promoted to the rank of “civilizations”; “primitive punk” as a line of casual wear, and tattoos and piercings as one of salesmanship’s late ploys to afford the unknowing masses anew a rudimentary system of rank and reputation founded on “fear of losing prestige”;<sup>\*</sup> or Hollywood’s exasperated insistence on sexual ambiguity.

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\* “It is also known to ethnologists that [cosmetic pigments and preposterous garments applied to the person with a view to avoid falling short of the blamelessly best, and practices] of somewhat the same aesthetic value among the peoples of the lower cultures —as, e.g., tattooing and scarification, tooth-filling, nose-boring, lip-buttons— *rest directly and unequivocally on the fear of losing prestige*. And at this point, as indeed at many others, it is profitable to call to mind

## The Great Goddess & Dionysus

What even this brief enumeration indicates is that our society has not truly paused to question itself and its latest patterns, let alone the interminable crimes and failures of its recent experience, in a comprehensive attempt to assess the *nature* of the pernicious forces that pervade it. America and the West show no desire to reflect. Rather, what seems to fascinate everybody these days is the possibility of exploring and dallying with such surrealist lithographs and digital reproductions of ancient matriarchal cults of blood and sacrifice as were dreamt by visionaries such as Bataille. “Doubtless, no one will say,” the latter argued defensively, “that I desire to inaugurate new cycles of holocausts: I am merely conveying the meaning of ancient customs.” He did. And however one wishes to categorize the phenomenon, it is undeniable that the media have been strongly encouraging for years this pop injection and chain-store repackaging of ancient lore, especially through enthusiastic reviews of films, novels, and art exhibits focused one way or another on the fascination that blood, violence and death are often bound to

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that the hereditary human nature of these Europeans and their colonies is still the same as that of their savage forebears was in the Neolithic Age, some ten or twelve thousand years ago” (Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership, and Business Enterprise in Recent Times —The Case of America*, New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923, p. 311, emphasis added). The late penchant for piercing navels and noses, as well as ringing toes, might have its misty foundation in the ancient usage of fastening fish hooks on those parts of the body of a sick man so that “if his soul should try to escape it may be hooked and held fast” (Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 208). The practice of piercing will be mentioned again in connection with Bataille’s important reference to the Aztec culture, see chapter 5, subsection entitled “The Monstrous Archons,” pp. 112-16.

\* Bataille, OC, vol. 7, p. 263.

arouse. Bataille and Jünger attached extraordinary sentimental value to the vestiges of these Aphrodisiac and Dionysian cults, and we shall see how this heretical nostalgia would eventually degenerate into the farcical counter-cultural conceit of the late Foucauldian fans such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In the economy of Bataille's system, this revisitation of Dionysian worship, however, could not have risen to become such a beacon of postmodern inspiration without the shaping of *myth*. Because, ultimately, what we call philosophy in the West is generally nothing more than an abstract rephrasing of one of a limited series of plots or myths, which form the collective anthology of our culture's creeds, beliefs, and superstitions. And the mythological pool from which Bataille would fish the majority of the narrative patterns and cosmogonic incipits for his project was the Gnostic one.