

Mythic Patterns in the Art of Gustave Moreau: The Primacy of Dionysus

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“A ceux que j’aime, je recommande de visiter le musée [Gustave Moreau], d’aller s’enfoncer dans cette pénombre où flottent les constellations de pierres précieuses venues du gouffre des hantises érotiques et scatologiques, comme autant de promesses d’une rédemption archangélique” (L. Pauwels, *Les Passions selon Dali*, 1968; quoted in Mathieu 1991, 13).

“Il peint ses rêves, non des rêves simples et naïfs comme nous en faisons tous, mais des rêves sophistiqués, compliqués, énigmatiques, où on ne se retrouve pas tout de suite.” (E. Zola, “Salon 1876”; quoted in Chaleil 110)

Gustave Moreau, “grand maître de l’imaginaire décadent” (Pierrot 315), is not featured among the painters that Gilbert Durand discusses in his *Figures mythiques et visages de l’œuvre: De la mythocritique à la mythanalyse*. It is nonetheless fitting that Moreau’s *Le Poète voyageur* should grace the cover of the 1992 edition. Durand, a disciple of Gaston Bachelard,¹ founder of the *Centres de Recherche sur l’Imaginaire* and one of France’s most distinguished myth critics, has ventured beyond traditional *mythocritique*, the branch of thematic criticism that elucidates individual authors’ works through the mythical images that recur in them. Durand coined the term *mythanalyse* to describe his ambitious project: analyze the obsessive, repetitive myths embedded in artistic and literary works, in order to “decode” particular cultures or “moments historiques” (*Figures* 7-8). Durand’s mythanalyse stems from exhaustive mythocritiques of particular periods and places. The myths that incessantly reappear in literary and artistic works are a compelling way, he argues, to characterize the general orientation of a cultural period. His theory is persuasive, and suggests an answer to some key questions that concern myth critics: “How does myth in, or as, literature evolve historically? Does a single governing myth, a ‘monomyth,’ organize disparate narratives and dominate literary form?” (Reeves). And does myth extend beyond literature, as Northrop Frye implies in *The Critical Path* (103), to “ultimately connect with a larger theory of culture” (Reeves)?

“L’art est phénomène de culture,” writes Durand (*Figures* 126). Like literature, it is not a purely individual endeavor: it is a culmination of a “trajet anthropologique” (Durand, *Structures* 38), the constant interaction between a particular human imagination and its historical milieu. Individual artists thus shape and are shaped by the dominant myths of their times. In *Figures mythiques et visages de l’œuvre*, Durand applies his theory to nineteenth-century France, and concludes that the mythic pattern of that century is woven primarily by three fundamental myths. Early French Romanticism is dominated by the heroic, diurnal Prometheus, who yields first to the decadent, nocturnal Dionysus, and then at the century’s end to Hermes who, as god of travelers and conductor of souls (Hermes Psychopompus) symbolizes the rite of passage that leads to spiritual fulfillment and redemption (Durand, *Figures* 264-65, 268-69, 308-10).

A myth analysis of the work of Gustave Moreau, whose life (1826-98) spans three-quarters of the century, reveals that his career follows a mythic pattern not unlike the one that Durand attributes to the entire period. Promethean at the outset, Dionysian and Hermetic during his later stages, the painter’s artistic evolution is in a sense a microcosm of his culture. Yet, I would suggest that Moreau’s work never embraces Hermes as fully as it does Dionysus. His late Hermetic phase, its fervent Christian essence apparent in the painter’s lengthy commentaries, strives to accept the

spiritual, redemptive figure of Hermes. Moreau fails in this attempt, however, and never escapes the irresistible erotic pull of Dionysus. In order to argue for this interpretation of Moreau, I will view each of the three stages of his art through the prism of several nineteenth-century writers: Victor Hugo for the Promethean phase, Emile Zola and J.-K. Huysmans for the Dionysian, and Charles Baudelaire for the Hermetic.

Moreau's early Promethean penchant is illuminated by a consideration of Victor Hugo's characteristic use of antithesis. Pierre Albouy (86) and Durand (*Figures* 27-28) study the imagery of Prometheus in poems such as "L'Expiation" (*Châtiments*), in which Bonaparte, defeated and exiled on Elba and later Saint Helena, assumes the titanic proportions of Prometheus, bound to a "roc hideux," "[l]e vautour Angleterre . . . lui ronge[ant] le cœur" (Hugo 314).² "Napoléon-le-Grand" (Bonaparte) versus "Napoléon-le-Petit" (Napoleon III) is but one example of Hugo's famous antitheses, which recall the trenchant dualism of what Durand calls the "diurnal regime" of the imagination. Here, we see structures of the "heroic" or "schizomorph" type, where poetic images clearly distinguish light from darkness, heroes from monsters. The hero's choice of weapon is the sword (one of the four minor arcanum from the Tarot deck),³ which for Durand symbolizes the diurnal regime and the cutting, separating images that characterize it.

This structure of the imagination recalls the confrontational narratives we see in many of Moreau's early paintings. In subjects such as St. George and the dragon, Hercules and the Hydra, and Apollo and Python, Moreau depicts typical diurnal images, in which a solar hero, armed with a blade, slays a "monstre femelle et chtonien" (Durand, *Structures* 179). The relatively young painter of *St. Georges et le dragon* (1858; copied from the early Italian Renaissance painter Carpaccio) is clearly Promethean.⁴ Objects are sharply delineated: Moreau has not yet developed the distinctive dreamy, mystical style that will characterize a watercolor in 1869 and an oil painting in 1890 on the same subject. As in other early paintings, he portrays few characters and paints "in a fairly tight and dry linear style" (Kaplan 52). In his *Prométhée* (1868) Moreau depicts the prototypical hero of Romanticism bound to a rock in the Caucasus, his liver being devoured by a vulture (*Figure 1*).⁵ As opposed to the many androgynous male figures that Moreau will compose in his Dionysian paintings, Prometheus is an unmistakably masculine, diurnal hero: his muscular physique and chiseled features communicate the stubborn, optimistic resolve that made him a symbol of the progress of the human race, armed with the mastery of nature that science brings. Julius Kaplan notes that Moreau chose to paint an alert, strong, and heroic figure rather than a suffering one (Kaplan 48). For this critic, Prometheus represents Moreau's belief "that man is an ideal figure who must combat the sensuousness and brutality of matter" (50). Moreau embraces a philosophy that is essentially Neo-Platonic, aiming, through a mystical art, to comprehend the pure absolute. He believes, as did the French Academy, that art can direct our mind "to lofty realms of grandeur, purity and the ideal" (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts*; quoted in Kaplan 9). In his notebooks, Moreau writes that the artist must "elevate himself to this superior region where even the most terrible passion, the most ardent forces free themselves from base sensualities to take on this divine and abstract character that ennobles and transfigures the soul. This is what one calls art" (Moreau, *Notebooks* III 120; quoted in Kaplan 7). One can also identify his ideas as "Gnostic-Manichaeism, a system of belief which stresses the conflict between light and darkness, and the inherent evil of matter that the individual constantly strives to overcome" (Kaplan 86). Thus a strict dualism—in which the good soul and the corrupt body are clearly separate—dominates Moreau's early, Promethean period.

Yet, together with the heroic, extroverted, conquering myth of Prometheus, which corresponds so well to this era of scientific and industrial progress, coexists a subversive, mystical,

introverted or “intimist” movement that ultimately, in the latter half of nineteenth-century France, finds its expression in the myth of Dionysus. The severing sword of Hugo’s antitheses gives way to the combinatory, chemical weapon of Baudelaire’s oxymorons, where flowers and evil enjoy an uneasy coexistence in the poetry of this “parfait chimiste” (Durand, *Figures* 272). The god of wine dominates Zola and the decadent writers who follow Baudelaire: their characters, often sexually ambiguous, stumble through a haze of alcoholic and orgiastic excess. Gustave Moreau participates fully in this movement: the decadents praise him as one of their own. Joséphin Péladan, for example, calls Moreau a “merveilleux poète qui conçoit comme un Goethe français avec une palette de Delacroix” (*L’esthétique à l’exposition décennale*, 1883; quoted in Chaleil 89). Huysmans marvels at this “artiste extraordinaire, unique. . . . Abîmé dans l’extase, il voit resplendir les féeriques visions, les sanglantes apothéoses des autres âges” (“Salon officiel de 1880”; quoted in Chaleil 38). As many critics have noted, the androgynous nature of the male characters he paints during his middle and late periods reveal a decadent aesthetic; moreover, many of his paintings express a powerful Dionysian desire, evident in works such as *Bacchanale* (1850), *Messaline* (1874), the *Salomé* series (1876), *La Débauche* (1893-96), and *Pasiphaé* (1897).

One is struck by the number of Moreau’s works that portray the mysterious horrors of monstrous love, the “titanic shame” (as he writes in his description of *Pasiphaé*, quoted below) of the early generation of Greek divinities—offspring of the Earth goddess Gaea—whose “crimes and misfortunes” were then superseded by the great deeds of following generations of patriarchal gods and heroes, brought to Greece by invading nomads around 2000 B.C., displacing the goddess cults by what Joseph Campbell calls the “priestly device of mythological defamation” (80).

The confrontation between these two diametrically opposed divine races—the nocturnal and menacing Titans against the luminous, heroic Olympian deities—is evident in paintings such as *Œdipe et le Sphinx* (1864), *Hercule et l’hydre de Lerne* (1876), *Apollon vainqueur du serpent Python* (1885), and *Le Poète et la sirène* (1893). The four monsters all represent the ancient matriarchal order: the Greek Sphinx, amalgam of a lion, bird, and woman, is a child of Echidna; the Lernean Hydra is a giant nine-headed serpent born to Typhon and Echidna, two monstrous reptilian offspring of Gaea; Python is a serpent or dragon born of Gaea; and finally, the sirens are daughters of Hercules’s adversary Achelous, eldest of three thousand river gods, and son of Ocean, the eldest Titan. These monsters of a matriarchal past battle Oedipus, Hercules, and Apollo (who exemplify the patriarchal order that followed the reigns of the goddess and the Titans); and the poet (whom one could assimilate to Orpheus, divine poet and musician, son of Apollo). This opposition in Moreau’s paintings pits the titanic divinities—feminine because born of the Earth—against the masculine gods and heroes of Greece. And just as in early Greece worship of the Earth goddess and her progeny (Titans, Giants, Cyclops, Erinnyes, Typhon, Echidna, etc.) was usurped by the cults of masculine gods and heroes, so Moreau’s later work, as we will see in the section on Hermes, strives to illustrate the triumph of Christianity over polytheism.

Indeed, Moreau considered his masterful *Jupiter et Sémélé* (1895) a representation of the overthrow of Greek mythology by Christianity; but it is difficult to agree with this interpretation of the painting, which to most observers is more a bewildering “mythological frenzy” of Greek divinities (Mathieu 1977, 182) than a Christian apologetic. The central portion of the canvas depicts the birth of Dionysus from Semele, struck dead when she gazes upon Jupiter, the father of her child (*Figure 2*). In the foreground sits Pan, his dark wings stretching up to Jupiter’s throne. Covered with tiny homunculi, it is he, rather than the Christian God, who appears as the creator of humankind. Critics have pointed to the tragic representation of Dionysus, who appears to be flying out of Semele

into the abyss, and perhaps taking paganism with him. But Moreau seems less a Christian mystic than, in the words of J.-K. Huysmans, a “mystique païen” and creator of “cruelles visions, ... féeriques apothéoses des autres âges” (149). Kaplan would appear to agree. He observes that “some of Moreau’s remarks, for instance, those concerning Bacchus’s destruction and the Christian nature of the picture, do not appear in the visual imagery. His commentary, while clarifying his intentions, also reveals his failure to translate them completely into pictorial terms” (Kaplan 85). If this painting is indeed “the summing up of [Moreau’s] whole doctrine of art” (Mathieu 1977, 20), one must agree with Kaplan that it is in one sense a “failure,” for it serves less to illustrate the aging Moreau’s obsession with Christian redemption than to prove the inevitability of the Dionysian—and the Panic—in his painting.

For Dionysus is a god of contradictions who partakes of the infernal and the celestial, the monstrous and the sublime that clash in so many of Moreau’s paintings. A latecomer to the Greek pantheon, he arrived from Asia Minor, and so symbolized the other, the barbaric stranger, and in Greek art is more often depicted outside rather than inside the city walls (Detienne, “Dionysos”). In some ways, he has more in common with the terrifying children of the earth mother than the Olympian divinities. Marcel Detienne writes that Dionysus is the incarnation of man’s bestial, instinctual, and savage appetites. “Chasseur sauvage, Dionysos n’est pas seulement le ‘mangeur de chair crue’ . . . ; l’omophagie qu’il impose à ses dévots les entraîne aussi à se livrer, comme de vraies bêtes sauvages, à l’alléophagie la plus cruelle” (*Dionysos mis à mort* 150). In other words, Dionysus’s worshipers were required to eat raw animal flesh (*l’omophagie*), and so developed a taste for human flesh (*l’alléophagie*), and began to practice cannibalism. Detienne goes on to cite various anthropophagous Dionysian rituals.

One can observe throughout Moreau’s career a troubling fusion of violent bestiality and eroticism. The year before he died, Moreau completed the erotic *Pasiphaé* (1897), a symphony in white depicting the forbidden embrace between the queen and the bull sent by Poseidon (himself the father of many giants and monsters, including the Cyclops Polyphemus). The bull coquettishly lifts his forelegs to meet Pasiphaé, whose skin is as snowy white as his. The collections catalogue of the Musée Gustave Moreau describes this oil canvas in the words of the painter:

Pâles et grandes figures terribles, sombres et désolées, fatales amantes, mystérieuses condamnées aux hontes titaniques, que deviendrez-vous? Quelles destinées seront les vôtres? Où pourront se cacher vos formidables amours? Quelles tristesses immenses stupéfiées vous éveillez chez l’être humain appelé à contempler tant de hontes, d’horreurs, de crimes et d’infortunes. (Moreau, quoted in *Peintures, cartons, aquarelles* 51)

The color of purity becomes, in Moreau’s hands, the pale “titanic shame” that will be visited on the descendants of Pasiphaé by the birth of a monster, the Minotaur.

Œdipe et le sphinx (1864) similarly portrays a scene of erotic violence. According to one legend, the sphinx that terrorized Thebes was a creation of Dionysus, a maenad whom he drove insane. Moreau was inspired by Ingres’s *Œdipe explique l’énigme du sphinx* (1808), but whereas Ingres’s sphinx appears as a marble, static figure with animal-like udders on the belly, Moreau’s sphinx is more obviously feminine and aggressive, clinging to Oedipus in an intimate embrace, “as if whispering a secret to him” (Lacambre, *Magic and Symbols* 45). Her attitude calls to mind Cocteau’s sphinx in *La Machine infernale* (1934), who falls in love with Oedipus and reveals the answer to the riddle, thus precipitating her own destruction. Moreau may have been influenced by “Atta Troll,” a “morbid erotic poem” by the German poet Heine, in which “a stone sphinx, both terrifying and

alluring, comes to life, embraces [a man] and consumes him in a kiss before finally rending him with its claws” (Mathieu 1977, 82). Sex and death go hand in hand “in this sketch of a monstrous coupling between man and beast, the latter’s lips parted and ready for a deadly kiss” (85).

The fusion of Eros and Thanatos is of course commonplace in the decadent movement, and has been well documented in works such as Mario Praz’s *The Romantic Agony*, and more recently, Rudolph Binion’s *Love Beyond Death: The Anatomy of a Myth in the Arts*. And Georges Bataille finds a fatal eroticism in Moreau that is distinguished from the “fiery and dramatic” (Praz 289) passion of a Delacroix by its stillness:

La violence de Moreau est contenue. Une sorte d’immobilité est lourdement tendue dans le calme relatif des personnages: la mort, le désir de tuer, l’agonie les possèdent. Moreau est en effet un peintre de la passion. [...]

Subissant l’attrait de l’érotisme, il ne peut se détacher de la mort. Il oppose au fracas d’un art qui se libère une sorte de lourdeur, de sommeil. (Georges Bataille, “Gustave Moreau, l’attardé précurseur du surréalisme,” *Arts*, 7 June 1961; quoted in Mathieu 1991, 13)

Three paintings will serve to illustrate Bataille’s observation that death and desire—the Dionysian couple—are couched in the still torpor of Moreau’s art. At first glance, Susanna in *Suzanne et les vieillards* (1897) seems, as Mathieu states, “to have no other justification but that of wearing the precious stones with which the artist covered her” (1977, 178). She would seem to fit Mario Praz’s appreciation of Moreau’s *œuvre* in general as “cold and static,” a depiction of “attitudes” by an artist who is not a painter, like Delacroix, but a “decorator” (289).⁶ And it is true that Susanna seems to be posing: Moreau does not show the attempted rape by the elders as other painters have. But nevertheless the painting is tinged with an erotic tone that arises from the threat of violence and death embodied by the two voyeuristic old men, barely visible in the upper right corner, silently peering out of the darkness at the young woman in her bath. The Book of Daniel recounts how the chaste Susanna rejects the advances of the two elders, who then accuse her of adultery; she is saved from execution by the intervention of Daniel.

Galatée (1880) bears a striking resemblance to *Suzanne*. The eye is first drawn to the bright, pearly nudity of the sea nymph asleep in her cave, reclining amid a profusion of exotic marine flora and fauna (*Figure 3*). Then we notice the Cyclops Polyphemus—his one enormous eye wide open above two useless sockets—gazing menacingly at Galatea through the mouth of the cave. In an 1896 version of this picture, Moreau portrays the Cyclops as a shepherd carrying panpipes, thus linking him to Pan, the personification of the earth (Lacambre et al. 259). As in *Suzanne*, the threat of violence disturbs a tranquil scene, and Moreau describes the love of the beast for the beauty as an attraction of earth to water: “The large eye of the astonished and troubled earth remains fixed on this pearl of limpid and pure waters” (256).

I would thus disagree with Natasha Grigorian, who writes that “the darkest and most violent aspect of the painter’s art”—the Salomé series—“is fully counterbalanced and even eclipsed by Moreau’s fascination with elevated, chaste beauty” (287), as evidenced by paintings like *Galatée*. Violence, though painted peripherally in *Suzanne* and *Galatée*, is nonetheless central to the erotic narratives of these paintings. Indeed, when they see Galatea reclining amidst the luxuriant foliage of her sea cave, readers of Zola might recall the famous greenhouse scene in *La Curée*. Both narratives—the pictorial and the literary—recount a monstrous, criminal passion, simmering amid water and strange, beautiful plants.⁷ Yet, whereas the eroticism of the painting lies in the still tension between Polyphemus and Galatea, Zola’s scene is a flurry of movement. He evokes the wild folly of

Renée and Maxime, incestuous lovers whose desire even the plants and water seem to share: “La serre aimait, brûlait avec eux. Dans l’air alourdi, dans la clarté blanchâtre de la lune, ils voyaient le monde étrange des plantes qui les entouraient se mouvoir confusément, échanger des étreintes. . . . A leurs pieds, le bassin fumait, plein d’un grouillement, d’un entrelacement épais de racines” (201). We have already noted the sexually ambiguous nature of many of Zola’s and Moreau’s characters. In *La Curée*, Zola underscores the androgyny of the lovers: Renée is a “monstre à tête de femme” and her stepson Maxime is a “fille manquée” (200).

The watercolor entitled *L’Apparition* (1876) is one of several paintings Moreau did of Salomé’s dance, a favorite and oft-studied subject of decadent writers and painters that bears mentioning here. As a reward for her dance, Salomé, obeying the will of her mother Herodias, requested the head of John the Baptist, held prisoner by King Herod. The Bible makes no mention of the nature of her dance, other than to say that it “pleased” Herod. This “blank” in the scriptures intrigued numerous artists and writers of the period.⁸ Salomé is the epitome of the phallic and castrating femme fatale; for some she personifies syphilis, that feminine peril that is, in French, a feminine noun, *la grande vérole*. For Helena Shillony, Salomé is a fin de siècle literary and artistic representation of the prostitute. A victim, eliciting sympathy in earlier nineteenth-century works like Balzac’s *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838-47) and Dumas’s *La Dame aux camélias* (1848), prostitutes are more often depicted as malevolent and destructive in the second half of the century, as prostitution becomes rampant in Paris: like Zola’s *Nana*, in the 1880 novel, they are threats to the health and fortunes of their male victims. At a time when France is still reeling from its 1871 defeat at the hands of Prussia, Salomé—female, foreign, and Jewish—is a triple threat to a weakened country:

Dans l’art comme dans la littérature de l’époque, les Salomés . . . représentent une peur de la femme dont les sources sont complexes: femmes fatales, courtisanes corrompues et maléfiques, elles sont aussi des femmes libres, rebelles à l’autorité masculine, et enfin des étrangères, des Juives dans la plupart des cas, qui menacent l’identité nationale et virile. (Shillony 79)

Moreau paints Salomé in *stillness*. The frenetic movements of her dance have subsided, and she is now like a statue, an idol, petrified with fear before the apparition of John’s severed, bloodied head (*Figure 4*). Huysmans describes *L’Apparition* at length in his decadent novel *À rebours*. The painting hangs in the study of his protagonist, Des Esseintes, who considers it the pinnacle of the art of watercolor. He finds that Salomé’s immobility betrays her fright and renders her more human, only heightening the eroticism of the scene:

Dans l’insensible et impitoyable statue, dans l’innocente et dangereuse idole, l’érotisme, la terreur de l’être humain s’était fait jour; le grand lotus avait disparu, la déesse s’était évanouie. . . . Ici, elle était vraiment fille; elle obéissait à son tempérament de femme ardente et cruelle; elle vivait, plus raffinée et plus sauvage, plus exécration et plus exquise; elle réveillait plus énergiquement les sens en léthargie de l’homme, ensorcelait, domptait plus sûrement ses volontés, avec son charme de grande fleur vénérienne, poussée dans des couches sacrilèges, élevée dans des serres impies. (148)

The troubling eroticism of Susanna, Galatea, and especially Salomé brings to mind Roland Barthes’s essay “Strip-tease.” For Barthes, dancers at cabarets like the Moulin-Rouge, hiding behind their exotic costumes, are not erotic. The movement of the dance, like the costume, “cache la nudité” (*Mythologies* 149), transforming the professional dancer from a woman into an art object. True eroticism is found in the “strip-tease amateur,” where the awkward performer is “sans cesse guettée

par l'immobilité." For the erotic lies in silence, in stillness: "Contrairement au préjugé courant, la danse, qui accompagne toute la durée du strip-tease, n'est nullement un facteur érotique. C'est même probablement tout le contraire: l'ondulation faiblement rythmée conjure ici la peur de l'immobilité" (148).⁹

Huysmans recognizes the erotic power of stillness in Moreau's art. That is why Des Esseintes prefers *L'Apparition*—in which the nearly naked Salomé, helplessly human, is paralyzed by the horrific vision of John's grisly head—to the oil painting *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* (1876), where a sumptuously dressed and bejeweled Salomé begins her "lubrique danse" (*À rebours* 143). For in the latter painting the dance and the hieratic pose negate Salomé's eroticism, which is more evocative than provocative (Kaplan 66-67), conveyed by such symbols as the multi-breasted statue of Diana of Ephesus above Herod's throne, or the black panther—an animal consecrated to Dionysus (Detienne, *Dionysos mis à mort* 96)—toward which Salomé dances. Freud used the term "Eros" to represent the life instincts, but here Salomé's dance for Herod evokes a fearsome divinity of death,

qui rompt l'énergie, fond la volonté d'un roi, par des remous de seins, des secousses de ventre, des frissons de cuisses; elle devenait, en quelque sorte, la déité symbolique de l'indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie, la Beauté maudite, élue entre toutes par la catalepsie qui lui raidit les chairs et lui durcit les muscles; la Bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible. (*À rebours* 144-45)

Let us now turn to the Hermes myth, which an aging Moreau struggles to bring out of the shadow of Dionysus and into the light. The restoration of Hermes in the late nineteenth century coincides with a renewed interest in the alchemical metaphor, in which the mysterious Hermes (Mercurius) is ubiquitous. Like Dionysus, Hermes flourishes in the poetry of Baudelaire, who considers himself not merely a chemist, but a verbal alchemist as well:

O vous soyez témoins que j'ai fait mon devoir
Comme un parfait chimiste et comme une âme sainte
Car j'ai de chaque chose extrait la quintessence,
Tu m'as donné ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or. ("Epilogue," preface intended for *Les Fleurs du mal*;
quoted in Durand, *Figures* 272)

In "Alchimie de la douleur," Baudelaire laments that the science of Hermes appears to lead not to life, but to death:

Hermès inconnu qui m'assistes
Et qui toujours m'intimidas,
Tu me rends l'égal de Midas,
Le plus triste des alchimistes;
Par toi je change l'or en fer
Et le paradis en enfer.
Dans le suaire des nuages
Je découvre un cadavre cher. (Baudelaire 90)

The "Grand Œuvre" at the obscure center of alchemy involves a "mystical unification" (Durand, *Figures* 273) in which the separate becomes one. These realizations of the *coincidentia oppositorum* are images in which opposites, rather than clashing together in a Dionysian blur, harmonize. They "éliminent tout choc, toute rébellion devant l'image, même néfaste et terrifiante,

mais au contraire harmonisent en un tout cohérent les contradictions les plus flagrantes” (Durand, *Structures* 400).

Hermes, the central figure of alchemy, is the mediator and initiator who permits the mystical union with the other. Durand names him the “divinité de la problématique de l’altérité” (*Figures* 309), “*le Médiateur* par lequel les contraires, les altérités se joignent—comme chez Hermaphrodite ou dans le Caducée—et enfin *le Psychagogue*, le *Seelenführer*, l’initiateur type qui joint en un ‘parcours’ un monde à un monde autre” (310). What we may call Moreau’s hermetism appears primarily in his late paintings, and it is deeply Christian. This is not a contradiction, for Hermes does in fact have a remote connection to Christianity. We have already described Moreau as “Gnostic.” The ancient Gnostics believed that Hermes Trismegistus authored the writings that formed the basis of Gnosticism, a heresy that viewed the God of the Old Testament—creator of a depraved physical world—as an evil demiurge, and the God of the New Testament as good. Gaining knowledge of the divine *pneuma*, through the secrets of Gnosticism, is man’s only chance at redemption. In his late period, Moreau is obsessed with Christ, a Hermetic figure who, like Hermes Psychopompus, guides the believer to the afterlife, helping the Christian come to terms with death, “l’altérité terrible, ... absolue” (314).

The old artist of *Jupiter et Sémélé* (1895), *Le Grand Pan contemple les sphères célestes* (1897), and *Les Lyres mortes* (1898) is unmistakably Hermetic in his intentions, which are to describe the triumph of Christianity over the religions of antiquity (Mathieu 1977, 173, 182). The 1897 commentary that Moreau sent to the purchaser of *Jupiter et Sémélé* states that the subject of this large, intricate painting (*Figure 2*)—which we have considered more Dionysian than Hermetic—is “la mort terrestre et l’apothéose dans l’immortalité.” He continues:

Des atomes, des parcelles de Christianisme apparaissent dans cette composition: cette mort des sens, cette ruine de l’être matériel pour entrer dans la vie immortelle. Cette allégresse des êtres à l’apparition de la lumière divine, au contact de l’idéal divin, tout cela sent son Christianisme. Le Paganisme est flétri dans son essence par un renversement, une déviation de son symbolisme. (Mathieu 1994, 209)

The “luminous ideal,” which for Grigorian (282) dominates Moreau’s work, is quite evident in the painter’s words, but it is very difficult to locate among the dizzying mythological figures of the painting itself.

In the charcoal drawing *Le Grand Pan* we see the phallic god of fields and woods sitting on a cloud, uncharacteristically pensive, surrounded by haloed figures, and watching helplessly what appears to be the end of terrestrial life. The scene is dominated by an obviously Christian form arising out of the zodiac, its arms in the form of a cross.¹⁰ Pan, clearly out of his earthly element, is humbled by the realization that his reign is over. André Breton, who admired Moreau as one of Surrealism’s great predecessors, nevertheless was skeptical of the significance of *Le Grand Pan*, viewing it as merely a sublimation of repressed eroticism: “Tout un univers intérieur se transmute en idoles somptueuses, et quand le peintre veut se décrire lui-même, retenu à la ‘matière’ par une sensualité inavouée, il évoque *Le Grand Pan contemple les sphères célestes*” (Breton, *L’Art magique*; quoted in Mathieu 1994, 220).

The intention of *Les Lyres mortes*, one of Moreau’s last paintings, is “to illustrate the submersion of pagan antiquity, the death of the great god Pan, the symbol of paganism, and the rise of Christianity emerging from the chaos” (Mathieu 1977, 173). As in *Le Grand Pan*, a cross dominates various pagan forms. Moreau’s own commentary concludes: “Le grand Océan des siècles antiques entraîne dans un puissant reflux ces astres naguère brillants, qui s’éteignent dans les eaux

sombres, et tous ces mondes de pensée, de poésie terrestre, disparaissent submergés par le flot justicier, vengeur et rédempteur de l'Idéal divin" (*Peintures, cartons, aquarelles* 108).

This brief mythological study leads us to conclude that Gustave Moreau, in the remarkable diversity of his art, does mirror the three dominant literary myths of his time. His evolution, in both style and content, clearly reflects the nineteenth-century French literary movements that Gilbert Durand astutely links to Prometheus, Dionysus, and Hermes. His career begins with the relatively simple and sharply defined contours of the heroic Promethean, and ends in a misty, indistinct Hermetic vision—"glowing surfaces" featuring countless details with thick splashes of paint that "appear to be jewels embedded on the surface" (Kaplan 91)—in which the painter christianizes Hermes's role as guide to the underworld. Moreau's late paintings convey a key Hermetic theme—the need for a mediator to overcome the unthinkable otherness that is death—and thus coincide with the "retour d'Hermès" (*Figures* 268-340) that Durand identifies with the close of the nineteenth and the dawn of the twentieth century. This critic perceives in the "faune humaine" (308) that populates an *œuvre* like Proust's, for example, a Hermetic obsession with the other. Durand also detects in authors of this period an attempt to impose some sort of order following the Dionysian chaos that resulted from the debacle of the Franco-Prussian war: not the divisive, dualistic system of Prometheus, but a pluralistic order that accepts the contradictions of Hermes. Nevertheless, despite Moreau's obvious intentions to communicate this order, which he finds in Christianity, the artist never quite frees himself from the grip of Dionysus, and it is above all this myth that returns again and again in his art. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* unmistakably senses the overwhelmingly Dionysian, orgiastic splendor of Moreau's "corruption antique," "[ses] œuvres suggestives le jetant dans un monde inconnu, . . . lui ébranlant le système nerveux par d'érudites hystéries, par des cauchemars compliqués, par des visions nonchalantes et atroces" (*À rebours* 141).¹¹ And Bataille, like Huysmans, understands Moreau better than does Praz: lurking beneath the "cold and static" (Praz 289) beauty of his characters is a monstrous desire, an ecstatic profusion of color and passion. What Bataille calls an "effervescence tropicale" (Quoted in Mathieu 1991, 13) is the shadow of Dionysus that haunts Moreau even as he vainly tries to proclaim the victory of Christianity and the defeat of Paganism. The "rédemption archangélique" promised by Moreau—according to Louis Pauwels in the epigraph to this essay—never materializes out of the jewel-covered images of the painter's "hantises érotiques."

Annexes

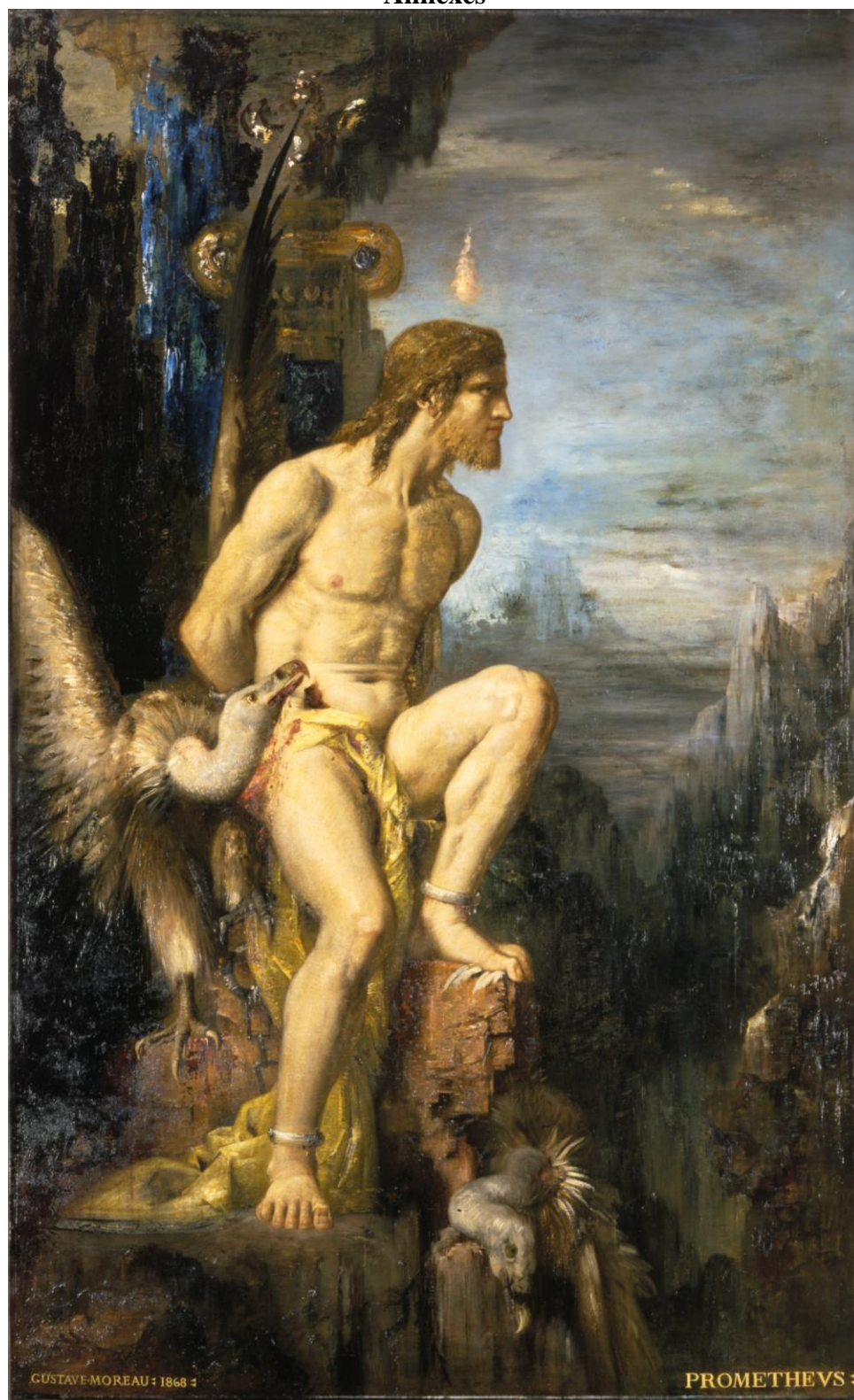


Figure 1: *Prométhée*, 1868. Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris.
Photo Credit : Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY



Figure 2: *Jupiter et Sémélé*, 1895. Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris.
Photo Credit : Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY



Figure 3: *Galatée*, 1880. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Photo Credit : Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

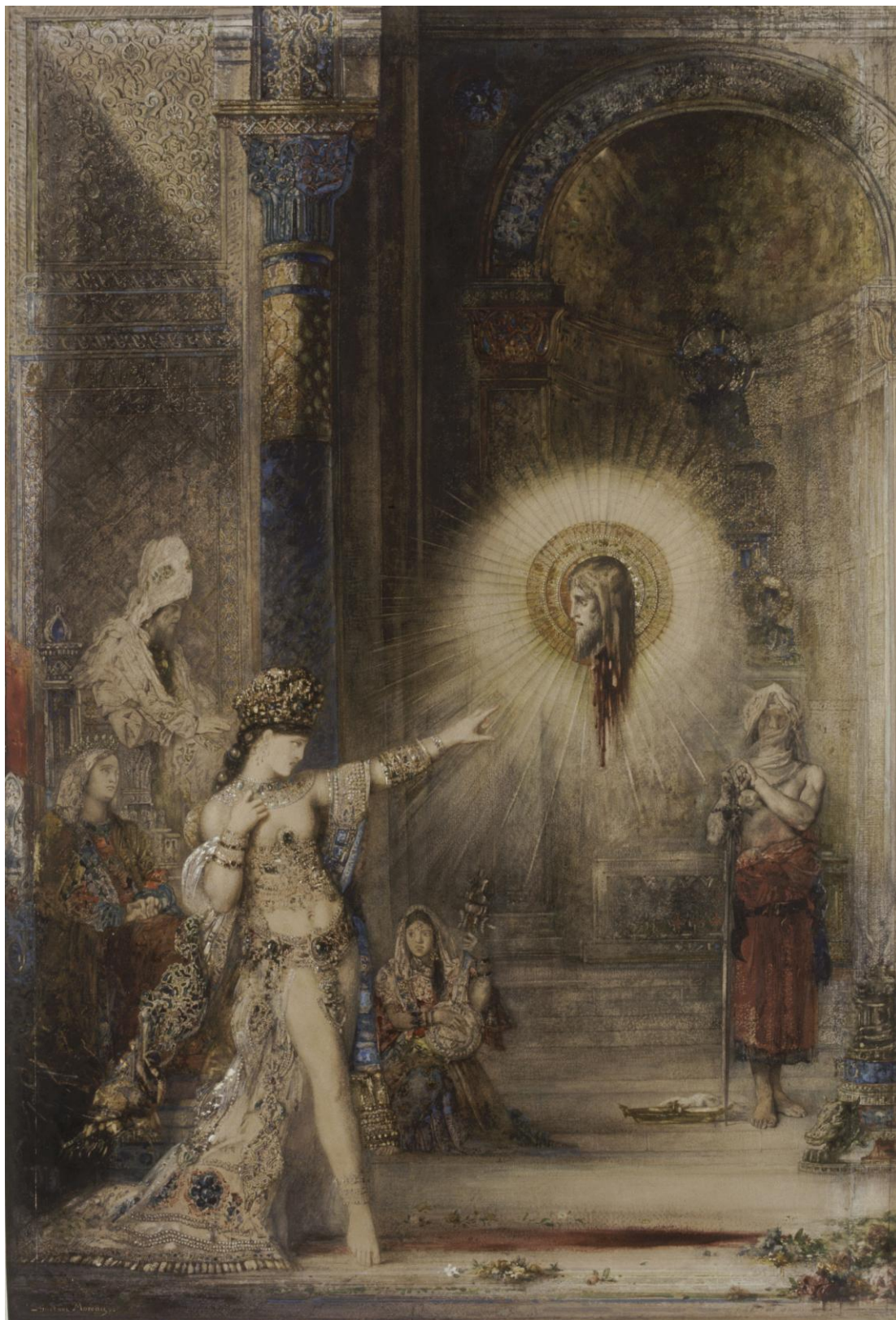


Figure 4: *L'Apparition*, 1826. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Photo Credit : Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

Notes

¹ Bachelard is generally considered the father of French thematic criticism. His books on earth, air, fire, and water, analyzing the inspirational role of these substances for the poetic imagination, suggest that the images populating our dreams and daydreams are as much matter as form.

² A lesser known poet of Hugo's generation, Edgar Quinet, also links Prometheus to Napoleon in his epic poems *Napoléon* (1836) and *Prométhée* (1838). For Quinet, both are mythical heroes who suffered to advance human progress. See Albouy 85-86, 163; Detalle 208-14.

³ In *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Durand employs the Tarot's four suits—swords, cups, coins, and wands—to portray mankind's various attempts to deal with time and mortality. The sword symbolizes the diurnal "regime of the antithesis" (69), in which one seeks to aggressively defy or combat the monster that is time. The other suits represent the "nocturnal regime" of the imagination, and their shapes suggest alternative ways to cope with mortality. The cup, with its softly descending sides, refers to comforting, sheltering symbols like the womb, the home, or the cradle. The circular form of the coin represents a way to "tame" time by depicting it as an ever repeating cycle, through symbols like the calendar, the wheel, or the moon. Finally, the straight line of the wand recalls symbols like the tree, the son, or the messiah that overcome our fear of time by invoking an optimistic myth of progress.

⁴ In her excellent essay on Moreau and the novelist J.-K. Huysmans, Natasha Grigorian observes that this tie to the Renaissance distinguishes Moreau from fin de siècle decadent writers and artists: "Moreau's art is indebted to the more conservative tradition of painting, which is still organically linked to the heritage of the Renaissance by the late nineteenth century" (283).

⁵ Illustrations appear at the end of the article.

⁶ Gauguin once commented that Moreau was more an engraver than a painter: "De tout être humain il en fait un bijou couvert de bijoux" (Quoted in Chaleil 120).

⁷ Jean Pierrot remarks that this fusion of water and plants—often in underwater scenes like *Galatée*—is a recurrent theme in decadent art and literature.

⁸ Literary adaptations include Mallarmé's "scène" "Hérodiade" (1869), Flaubert's short story "Hérodiade" (1877), Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884), Lorrain's poems "Salomé" and "Hérodiade" in *Modernités* (1885), and Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* (1893). Mireille Dottin reports that artistic representations of the Salomé myth were even more numerous: "Durant toute la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle, la peinture dite 'littéraire' et les textes décadents ou symbolistes se livrent à un incessant dialogue; le Salon de peinture et sculpture présente une bonne centaine de *Salomé* de 1870 à 1914" (1181).

⁹ In his fascinating analysis of *Salomé* (much of which holds true for *L'Apparition* as well), Peter Cooke remarks that Moreau's paintings of this highly dramatic scene are "counterbalanced . . . by anti-theatricality, by what Moreau once called 'the contemplative immobility of the human body.' This inaction in the midst of high drama is one of the most disconcerting elements in Moreau's poetics" (533).

Cooke and other critics agree that the immobility of a secondary character—Herod—probably holds political significance for Moreau. In his annotations for *Salomé*, Moreau calls Herod devoid "of majesty and dignity," an "exhausted and dozing oriental mummy" (Moreau; quoted in Cooke 534). Cooke concurs with Ursula Harter, who believes that Moreau saw in the debauched and pathetic tetrarch "both the symbol of a narcissistic society worshipping money and its own incarnation in the figure of Napoleon [III], and the representation of the emperor whose fall the Catholics considered a divine punishment for having betrayed the Pope and the Church" (Harter; quoted in Cooke 534).

¹⁰ Plutarch makes a similar connection between the rise of Christianity and the demise of Pan, "the universal god, the Great All," recounting "how in the reign of Tiberius a mariner sailing near the Echinades Islands heard a mysterious voice call out to him three times, saying: 'when you reach Palodes proclaim that the great god Pan is dead.' This was the exact time that Christianity was born in Judea. The coincidence had always seemed strange" (*Larousse* 161).

¹¹ Like Huysmans, many contemporaries of Moreau were fascinated by the Dionysian aspect of the painter's work. One of the most effusive was Jean Lorrain, who called Moreau his "maître-sorcier" (Chaleil 53). This decadent writer perceived "ecstasy and mystery"—attributes of Dionysus—in Moreau's paintings: "Gustave Moreau, l'homme des symboles et des perversités des vieilles théogonies, le poète des charniers, des champs de bataille et des sphinx, le peintre de la Douleur, de l'Extase et du Mystère, l'artiste, entre tous les modernes, qui s'est approché le plus de la Divinité et l'a toujours évoquée meurtrière?" (Lorrain; quoted in Chaleil 54).

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