

Review

The Genius of Our Lady Nature. Pierre Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis. Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de Nature*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

We cannot mention 'veil' without thinking of nakedness. In the same way nature and especially 'the natural' have often been seen as something immodest. In his 'essay on the history of the idea of nature' entitled *Le Voile d'Isis* [The Veil of Isis], Pierre Hadot, an eminent specialist in ancient philosophy, brings us a rich harvest of very modest yet suggestive ideas, which are occasionally slightly puzzling and even subversive if we consider the afterthoughts aroused by the long historical fabric of his narrative, which stretches from antiquity (around 500 BC) to the start of the 20th century.¹

Artemis and Heraclitus' book

It may seem surprising that the Egyptian goddess Isis, wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, should have given her name to a book whose starting point is in Ephesus, with another goddess called Artemis. In fact Pierre Hadot's research immediately raises the issue of the convertibility of ancient deities. This is an excellent exercise in ecumenism, which probably began as early as the Hellenistic period in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria. In accordance with this principle of comparative theology, we just have to study the attributes and characteristics of a particular deity from somewhere else in order to assimilate it to the one 'here' that most resembles it. Names do not matter, since in any case we are dealing with a more or less immanent expression of the same transcendent principle that is manifested in the diversity in the appearance of things. A remarkable lesson in tolerance. Added to that the fact that, in the prehistory of the Mediterranean basin, and probably well beyond, there was such a cultural and theological cross-fertilization that the ancients could rightly assume some kinship between this or that family of deities.

Artemis or Artamis, sister to Apollo and daughter to Zeus and Leto, originally seems to have been one of the many variants of the 'Mother Goddess', like, for example, Demeter, the Romans' Diana, or even Ishtara or Astarte, a Semitic fertility goddess of Babylonian origin. The fact that she was also described, by Homer for instance, as a fierce virgin, gives her the paradoxical status of a goddess who is both 'virgin' and 'mother'. A connection with the virginal motherhood of Danaë or even the Virgin Mary often comes to mind, but it is never an explicit topic in Pierre

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Hadot's book, which suggests many things, incidentally or deliberately, without always unveiling them completely. In that sense he remains faithful to Heraclitus' motto which forms the starting point for his quest: 'Nature loves to conceal itself' (*phusis kruptesthai philei*). This fragment is part of a book that Heraclitus deposited, as tradition reports,² in the temple of the famous Artemis of Ephesus. A book reputed to be obscure and without a title, in which he is supposed to have summed up all his knowledge. The statue at Ephesus must again probably have given a glimpse of a definite similarity to those matriarchal cults of prehistoric origin (such as the Willendorf Venus, for example, or the well-known statues found in Malta). In this case we have a black wooden idol with a bare bosom and sometimes up to three rows of breasts, whereas the lower part of the body was enclosed in a narrow sheath decorated with various animals and other diverse ornaments (according to the copies discovered: trees, plants, stags or other wild beasts which she fed and protected). In short one of the most ancient representations of Dame Nature.

Heraclitus' aphorism 'Nature loves to conceal itself' is the first theme of Pierre Hadot's narrative. The first eight chapters of his book analyse, in their historical context, the many meanings of that enigmatic phrase. Starting from a study of the context of Heraclitus' thought, he demonstrates that he probably did not mean the same thing as those who quoted him later. Rather, Heraclitus seems to have meant something like 'what appears tends to disappear' or 'what causes to be born tends to cause to die'. The first interpretation fits well with the antithetical nature of his thought. And it fits with the ambivalent character of Artemis: creating and destroying, like nature, she gives and takes away, she gives birth and leaves to die; and then causes a new cycle of life to be born.

Known citations of Heraclitus' aphorism

Five centuries later, around the start of the Christian era, it was given another meaning because the sense of the word *physis* had evolved considerably and then because the idea of nature's secret had developed. Five centuries about which we know very little due to the fire at the famous Alexandria library and following other similar events. We should remember that of Heraclitus' book there remained only fragments, quoted in other more recent books.

The first explicit citation we still possess of Heraclitus' aphorism appears in a fairly marginal context as regards the perspective of Greek tradition. In fact it was in the Jewish hermeneutic, associated with God's appearance to Abraham at the Mamre oak,³ that Philo of Alexandria (c.13–c.AD 54) applied it to the allegorical sense of tree: 'According to Heraclitus the tree is our nature which loves to conceal itself.'⁴ Mention of the tree may seem surprising since it does not figure in the fragment of Heraclitus we have. Of course this may be due to a mistake in the translation from Greek to Armenian. But it is also possible that it comes from the context of the Heraclitus fragment, which Philo may have known but we no longer have. Furthermore, knowing the cult of Artemis was also practised on an altar sited under a sacred tree (like Abraham under the Mamre oak or similar to what we know of the Druids), this kind of connection cannot be dismissed. We have to admit that at that

period it does not seem there was an unbridgeable gulf between Judaism and paganism, and Philo's work represents a remarkable effort to reconcile the orthodoxy of the Hebrew Law (*Thorah*) and Hellenism. As regards Heraclitus' aphorism it is interesting to note that for Philo nature (*physis*) has become synonymous with truth (*aletheia*). All things considered, this approach is right and enriching.

From the 3rd century AD Porphyry (234–c. 305) also employed the same aphorism in a commentary on the *Timaeus* which we know of only indirectly, thanks to Macrobius' *Commentary on Scipio's Dream*. According to him mythical forms and corporeal forms are envelopes necessary to the inferior realities of the realm of nature, whereas the supreme God and the intellect that was engendered by him are above and can be grasped only in an analogical fashion. Thus the supreme deity is hidden from us not by a veil but in fact by the absence of the veil of perceptible forms. What makes nature visible to physical eyes is precisely what makes it invisible to the eyes of the soul.

In general Neoplatonism gave a new meaning to Heraclitus' aphorism, i.e. 'Nature loves to envelope itself.' But if it conceals itself by doing so, this is not because of its transcendence; quite the reverse, it is because of its weakness and inferiority. Originally the life of the soul was non-corporeal and spiritual. But as it descended, and by virtue of Circe's magic or Calypso's enchantment – which, according to Olympiodorus, symbolizes 'imagination with its long veils' – it begins to cover itself with layers which correspond to its psychic tendencies. Moving from the first bodies drawn from the ether and astral matter to that visible physical body that on earth we call life.

However, exegesis of the myths concerning nature had to remain shrouded in mystery. In thoughtlessly unveiling the mysteries of Eleusis, that is, by interpreting them rationally, the philosopher Numenius was supposed to have seen in a dream the goddesses of the sanctuary prostituting themselves dressed as courtesans in front of the open door of a brothel. It is striking to see that in the sacred field nakedness is modest, while immodesty wears a courtesan's dress. In fact nakedness, which is very often a criticism of pagan religion, is immodest only in the eyes of the uninitiated, who see the goddess as a whore. Italian Renaissance artists echoed this thought. For instance, Titian's painting *Sacred Love, Profane Love* (1515) shows a naked woman and a richly dressed woman. An uninformed viewer would doubtless say that the richly dressed woman represents sacred love. Panofsky and Wind, quoted by Hadot, have demonstrated brilliantly that the opposite is the case.⁵ In that picture the modest nakedness of Sacred Love is at the opposite extreme to Baubô hitching up her robe, which became a kind of emblematic figure of repulsive immodesty. Although that suggestive gesture itself once had a sacred significance in the context of the fertility rites performed in honour of the goddess Bastet or Isis Bubastis. Such innocence vis-à-vis what today is seen as immodest must have been very widespread, since the Celtic goddess Sheela na Gig shows herself naked in an unequivocal posture revealing her genitals. That did not even shock the first Celtic Christians, since we can find her, with her appealing, ironic little smile worthy of the Mona Lisa, on the walls of some Irish churches.

Understanding this, an impartial observer will probably say the opposition between Christianity and paganism is merely the result of a crude misapprehension.

Forgetting, not understanding and a certain bad faith motivated by desire for pantocratic hegemony in all likelihood did the rest. In renouncing traditional cults, as Christians to a certain extent did, the possibility of an 'orphic', empathetic or simply contemplative knowledge of nature was lost. According to Pierre Hadot, Heraclitus' aphorism is the key to a similar approach. Following Porphyry, the emperor Julian (331–63, called 'the Apostate' by Christian historiographers because he was in favour of a pagan renaissance) and Themistius (318–c.88) are said to have quoted Heraclitus with the aim of defending religious tolerance that supported the 'genius of paganism'. In fact to say that 'Nature loves to conceal itself' means that it is not possible to be certain where religion is concerned. All human attempts to honour the deity are of equal value. In the same spirit the Roman prefect Symmacus again said in 384:

We look at the same planets, Heaven is common to us, the same world surrounds us. What does it matter which path to wisdom each person takes in the search for truth? We cannot attain to such a great mystery by a single path.⁶

As Pierre Hadot quite rightly says, this admirable text deserves to be written in gold letters in the places where all the world's religions assemble at the start of this third millennium, which is opening under the sombre auspices of religious feuds.

The decline of Isis-Artemis and her variants

Starting from the period when Heraclitus deposited his book in the temple of Artemis (around 500 BC), an event that marks the beginning of Pierre Hadot's book, we can say that the cult of Artemis and her variants lasted about another 1000 years. We know St Paul came into conflict with the Ephesus artisans, who feared his preaching might put an end to the trade in the little silver temples they made. But the cult of Artemis did not disappear all of a sudden with Christianization.⁷

In this context there is some little-known evidence that deserves to be recounted in detail here. In AD 585 Gregory of Tours was staying in Koblenz with King Childebert. About eight miles from the town, at the top of a mountain called the fort of Yvoy, he met Deacon Walfroie. The latter boasted of having destroyed, on that very spot, a statue of Diana (Isis-Artemis) before building his monastery there. Here is part of his story: 'Then I came to the territory of Trier and, on the mountain where you now are, built with my hands the habitation you see here. Not without finding here an image [i.e. a statue] of Diana, which this incredulous people used to worship as a deity.'⁸

It may seem surprising to find a sanctuary of Diana in such a spot in the 6th century AD. But Tacitus (c.55–c.120) had already recorded that a number of the Suebi followed the cult of Isis. Wondering how the cult had reached such a far-off region, he presumed that it was by sea and river, for the symbol of the goddess resembles a boat (a motif that somehow prefigures Christ's symbol, a fish).⁹ Reading Tacitus, we realize that this deity could also have had a name other than Diana, Isis or Artemis. By virtue of a principle already mentioned, which here is called *interpretatio romana*, Tacitus in fact gives the Roman equivalent to the name of a barbarian deity when-

ever it has similar attributes. For example, Hercules instead of Donar, Mercury instead of Wodan, or Mars instead of Zio. Knowing that, Deacon Walfroie's name is perhaps a sign too: in accordance with a widespread custom the man would have chosen to bear as a trophy the name of the sanctuary he conquered. The fact that he boasts of his action to the visitors tends to reinforce this hypothesis. Consequently the old name for this 'Diana of Yvoy' was perhaps Walfreya. In any case she was a deity similar to Isis-Artemis, to whom an important Artemis-type sanctuary had been built there.

To emphasize the heroic character of his exploit, Deacon Walfroie added that there were still more images or statues that were less resistant to destruction. The big statue alone must have been huge because he had, by preaching many times (perched atop a column like Simeon Stylites), to win the assistance of a large number of men with ropes. But even those repeated efforts were not enough, he said, for he had to return to the basilica once more and pray and appeal for divine help, then go back, probably with a great crowd, whom we can imagine burning with iconoclastic fervour, to 'topple that enormous statue, which my strength alone had not succeeded in shifting'.¹⁰ Even when it had fallen and shattered into pieces he was not satisfied. Probably out of fear that supporters of Artemis, followers of the old cult, might come to collect the remains of the goddess's symbolic body, it was reduced to dust with iron mallets. Readers will agree that what was seen in the past as good for the salvation of souls is today regrettable from the point of view of archaeology.

That fateful destruction reported by Gregory of Tours gives an idea of what probably happened to the majority of sanctuaries from antiquity, in particular that of Artemis of Ephesus, whose original statue has never been found. It is regrettable and even quite worrying that in other countries similar acts have occurred yet again. But if we think of the Bâmiyân Buddhas, which were blown up just before the 11 September 2001 attacks, we may perhaps be consoled by recalling that the message of those Buddhas was the impermanence of forms. Paradoxically, Buddhism is the best answer to what happened to the stone statues. In the same way we could seek consolation for the disappearance of the cult of Artemis in remembering, with Heraclitus, that everything is impermanence and transition, that everything that exists is fated to disappear. Of course these consolations by no means excuse those acts of vandalism and profanation.

Pagan myths in the contemporary world

Even if at first sight the Neoplatonics' attempt to save pagan rites failed, they nonetheless ensured the survival of a kind of Platonism into the Christian world. Pierre Hadot excels at summing up in these pages the importance of that mystical philosophy:

The Neoplatonics tried to protect traditional religion against the invasion of the Christian religion, for they sincerely believed that the cult of the gods was connected with the action of the Soul of the world, which preserved the universe. Thus they came to turn Heraclitus' aphorism into the slogan of pagan reaction. Nietzsche said Christianity was a Platonism for

ordinary people. For the Neoplatonics pagan myths and rites were also a Platonism for ordinary people and, still more precisely, a hidden physics.¹¹

Of course paganisms, in particular the Greco-Roman versions, of which the cult of Artemis or Platonism are merely one expression among others, did not survive as religions. However, from the Middle Ages¹² up to the Renaissance – even penetrating into the residences and private gardens of popes and cardinals – and *a fortiori* as far as Romanticism (especially in Rousseau, Nerval, Novalis, Goethe and Schiller), a certain pagan religiosity reappeared, particularly as a poetic language that enabled one to talk about nature. Starting from that thought, Pierre Hadot devotes ten chapters of his book (chapters 9–18) to tracing the historical development of the theme of unveiling nature's secrets. In other words we have here a narrative of the genesis of the modern technosciences. In this area Hadot distinguishes two strands or attitudes: Orphic or Promethean.

The Promethean attitude consists of unveiling nature's secrets with technology, not holding back from doing violence to nature. Referring to Rousseau and Goethe, for instance, he shows how this attitude can be criticized. The criticism can be found in our contemporary fears about the decline and death of nature, or again about the 'demystification of the world', to which we might add more recent fears concerning genetic manipulation in the plant, animal and even human world with the rise of the biotechnologies. In this sense Pierre Hadot's book provides a valuable historical backdrop to recent controversies around bioethics.

The Orphic attitude to unveiling nature's secrets, on the other hand, is very much more favoured by the author, even though it would probably bring a smile to the lips of more than one Promethean-type scientist. Art, poetry and theoretical discourse are its means of expression. However, all fundamental research, which involves in particular developing theories, is also part of the Orphic approach, which could be called contemplative, meditative or intuitive. As regards Orphic knowledge it is also interesting to note that Pierre Hadot refers to Roger Caillois, the founder of the journal *Diogenes*.¹³ In *Esthétique généralisée* Caillois outlined both a theory of modern art, particularly *art brut*, and a philosophy of nature: for him 'Art is a particular case of nature'; 'in this essay which gives much food for thought', Hadot notes, 'I shall pick out just one lesson: it is advisable for humans to remember always that they are themselves natural beings, and that nature in its varied manifestations often does things that would seem to us to fall within the realm of art, that there is therefore a profound continuity between nature and art'.¹⁴

Especially typical of Pierre Hadot's philosophy is the chapter devoted to studying nature as a spiritual exercise. Talking about poetry and the hieroglyphic language of nature, which he then compares to the enigmas of the Sphinx, the author proceeds to wonder whether there is a mysticism of nature that is not connected with a religious practice.

At this stage in his book (between the 18th and 19th chapters) Pierre Hadot's historical and scientific quest once more leads to the question of religion. Like a revelation at the end of a long journey the veil is lifted, not this time on Artemis, mentioned at the start of the book, but on nature personified behind the veil of Isis with the attributes of Artemis. We have already seen that this identification was

possible because of the principle of the ancient deities' convertibility. However, this identification is also attested in late antiquity, in particular by Macrobius, describing the statue of Isis according to the attributes of Artemis: 'Isis is either the earth or nature, which is under the sun. That is why the whole body of the goddess is covered with a multitude of breasts close together, because all things are fed by the earth or nature.'¹⁵ So, after disappearing for a long while this type of allegorical representation of nature resurfaced at the Renaissance, with a slight development perhaps. Whereas the ancient Roman version of Artemis of Ephesus did not wear a veil (which does not mean that she was not covered with a veil according to circumstances), the representations that re-emerge in the 16th century always seem to show Artemis wearing the veil of Isis. This is especially the case with Raphael who in 1508 painted Philosophy sitting on the throne of nature (*Stanza della Segnatura* in the Vatican). The two supports for the throne are formed by two statues of Artemis wearing the veil of Isis. Since the name Isis means 'throne', we can only deduce that Raphael's emblematic iconography is very well documented.

Pierre Hadot gives a number of examples with full commentary and finally comes to the image that started him off on his research forty years before. This is an engraving by Bertel Thorvaldsen for the page with a dedication to Goethe from a book by Alexander von Humboldt. The book was first published in 1805 in French with the title *Essai sur la géographie des plantes*, and reappeared in 1807 in German, accompanied by the afore-mentioned engraving, which shows Apollo as the genius of poetry unveiling the statue of Isis-Artemis, the symbol of nature. The comments Pierre Hadot makes on this image in fact sum up the message set out in the last five chapters of his book (chapters 19–23): 'Looking at this allegorical engraving, which in itself is very beautiful, we can measure how far we are from the spiritual world in which scholars, artists and poets were still living at the start of the 19th century.'¹⁶

By raising somewhat the veil of Isis-Artemis, Pierre Hadot has also shown that we are all children of religions of nature. Assuming many forms, this is indeed a memory common to all humanity. But becoming aware of those spiritual worlds, which seem so distant from the world we live in, does not necessarily imply going back to the past. It is not by turning back that humanity will succeed in recovering the Golden Age. There is no other choice but to move forward, taking on board if we can the whole of our rich and varied heritage. As if we were looking at the living bust of Isis-Artemis, we should receive as a grace the earthly and spiritual food from the many breasts adorning her generous bosom.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Henceforth abbreviated to *PHI*.
2. *PHI*, p. 19; n. 1, p. 323; Diogenes Laertius, IX, 6, p. 1050.
3. Genesis 18, 1–2.
4. *PHI*, p. 61; n. 20, p. 329; Philo, *Quaestiones in Genesim*, IV, 1 (pp. 144–5 in French trans. by Mercier and Petit).

5. *PHI*, p. 79, n. 19, 20; E. Panofsky (1939) *Studies in Iconology; Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, p. 332 (French trans. 1967, pp. 223–33). E. Wind (1958) *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (French trans. 1992, pp. 157–66).
6. *PHI*, p. 86; n. 13, p. 333: Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum*: §10, Relatio Symmachi (French trans. by M. Lavarenne, 1992: *Psychomachie. Contre Symmaque*, Paris, p. 110).
7. *Acts of the Apostles* 19, 23–40. Referring to this passage Goethe is supposed to have posed ironically as a worshipper of Artemis of Ephesus. See *PHI*, p. 262.
8. Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* (partial French trans. by C. Clerc, 1980: *Calamités et Miracles. Récits tirés de l'Histoire des Francs*, Paris, p. 122).
9. Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *De origine et situ Germanorum Liber*, chap. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
11. *PHI*, pp. 89–90.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 241–2; note 17, p. 359: Macrobius, I, 20, 18.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 223, 227, 355; n. 22–5, 356; n. 46, 47.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 241–2; note 17, p. 359: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, I, 20, 18.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.