

VISION BEYOND EYESIGHT*

by

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This brief essay makes use of a comparative procedure to explore a recurring symbolic link between blindness and omniscience. First, it considers a common thread running through Scandinavian and Greek mythological stories dealing with loss of eyesight, clairvoyance, and femininity. Then, it proceeds to link this thread to events in the Garden of Eden. Overall, I propose to trace the recurring idea that to “see” in a fundamental sense requires overcoming sensory perception; that, more precisely, to bar from eyesight the distracting influence of manifest reality and to temporarily disembodify, as it were, by sloughing are privileged means of grasping the essence of things.

ODIN AND HEIMDALL

Odin, the complex Scandinavian god, is both one-eyed and clairvoyant. These two properties correlate because Odin actually lost an eye to acquire clairvoyance – this being a clear instance of, in the words of Georges Dumézil, the “general idea of a mutilation paradoxically qualifying a being for the very kind of activity it would appear to preclude in the bodily sense” (1974, 21). Another instance of this concerns Scandinavian god Heimdall, who can see, by night as well as by day, at great distances, “can hear grass growing on the earth and wool on sheep and everything that sounds louder than that” (Sturluson 1995, 25) and has seemingly forfeited an ear for it. Indeed, his “hearing is hidden” in the very same

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place where Odin “hid” his eye: the so-called well of Mimir beneath the great World-Tree (Larrington 1999, 7).

The fact that Heimdall can see as well as hear beyond ordinary limitations for having his hearing hidden in the same waters as Odin’s eye suggests that the two qualifying mutilations are correlative. Indeed, the drinking horn Mimir uses to quaff mead from his source is homonymous with the sound horn Heimdall will use to warn the gods of impending Ragnarök even while Odin obtains similar tidings from Mimir’s severed head. In other words, perception beyond the senses, in both its sound and vision variants, stems from relinquishing the corresponding physical organ at Mimir’s well.

Note an underlying cyclic pattern. Reportedly, Mimir’s well “has wisdom and intelligence contained in it”; Mimir is therefore “full of learning because he drinks from the well,” and Odin was not allowed to quaff the spring’s essence until he “placed his eye as a pledge” (Sturluson 1995, 17). However, it is written in *Voluspa* (27-28) that the waters pour down from Odin’s wager and that Mimir drinks mead every morning from this pledge. The implication is, seemingly, that Odin’s lost eye is the source of omniscience, the very water source that provides knowledge to Odin. This is of course in accordance with the notion that “‘eye’ and ‘[well]spring’ are... interchangeable in the lexical of many Indo-European and Semitic languages” (Puhvel 1989, 194 n. 1; cf. Ivanov 1976, 61). Furthermore, a parallel version has Odin gain knowledge from Mimir’s severed head, and a persistent tradition associates speaking heads to wells and springs (Davidson 1988, 75, 77; cf. Ross 1962). This again suggests some form of identity between Odin – who acquires wisdom at Mimir’s source – and Mimir, the wisdom of whom stems from Odin’s pledge. Note that Mimir means “Memory,” which encompasses both the past and the future in the global sense of omniscience (Boyer 1981b, 215). Moreover, two hypostases of Odin in raven shape are named Memory (*Munninn*) and Spirit (*Huginn*) (1981b, 143, 150; 1986, 36, 39) – as if establishing equivalence between the god’s essence and such omniscient memory as Mimir represents.

As might be expected, the equivalence of the removed eye of Odin with the decapitated head of Mimir underscores this overall confluence within a cyclic pattern. Mimir’s decapitation follows a truce between two factions of the gods: the Aesir and the Vanir. As hostages were exchanged, the Vanir gave their highest men and the Aesir gave in return Hönir, “whom they thought well fitted to be a leader, being a big and handsome man.” With Hönir they sent Mimir, “the wisest of men,” in return for which the Vanir gave Kvasir, “the wisest of their men.” Because, however, Hönir would never make any decision unless Mimir advised him, the Vanir decapitated Mimir and sent his head back to Odin, who acquired the knowledge of “many hidden things” (Sturlason 1990, 3). The duo Hönir/

/Mimir is therefore exchanged against the “highest” adversaries – but the highest Aesir is Odin, which Hönir and Mimir seemingly represent. Furthermore, because in the whole scene wise and advising Mimir is to big and handsome Hönir as a head is to a body, it does make sense that the separation of both be correlative of a decapitation. One inescapable inference – which fits with the noted equivalence of the severed head and the hidden eye whence knowledge comes – is that Odin receives back a representation of his own severed head.

In this, a theme of self-sacrifice (which Dumézil independently points out on a comparative basis – 1994, 50-58) comes to light. Note, in this connection, that another version derives from the blood of wise Kvasir the mead, regularly consumed at Val-hall, that provides poetic inspiration (*Skaldskaparmal* 57).¹ This *mjödr* is the only source of nourishment to Odin (*Gylfaginning* 38), whose very name derives from *ódr* – a word related to the Latin and Celtic words for “soothsayer” and “poet,” meaning “furor” in a broad sense that encompasses foresight, wisdom, and inspiration (Dumézil 1986, 188, 193; 1994, 27, 51; Puhvel 1989, 193). Thus the blood of sacrificed Kvasir, homologous to Mimir as “wisest of men,” contains the essence of Odin. Of course, Odin’s drinking of this corresponds to his quaffing “the essence (‘mead’) of Mimir’s wellspring” (Puhvel 1989, 193). Blood should then underlie the well’s water, too – and, indeed, all the waters on earth come from the blood of the slain primordial giant Ymir (*Gylfaginning* 7-8).

So we are back to the identity of the water source and the eye, which Jaan Puhvel relates to “mythical traditions about fiery substances deep in water... and... speculations about sight as an intraocular form of fire” (1989, 194 n. 1). Bruce Lincoln shows, for his part, that blood can be taken as an alloform of both water and fire (1986, 17). Note too that the Vedic soma, equivalent to the Scandinavian *mjödr*, is “the ‘fiery juice’, simultaneously fire and water,” which Wendy Doniger perceptively relates to the Russian firebird (O’Flaherty 1981, 128) that fairy tales relate to a dragon (see Ralston 1873, 83) – again, fire in water.

Hence, the mead of inspiration, which is Odin’s essence, comes from sacrificial blood; and the prophesizing waters that are blood in essence stem from Odin’s pledge in the source; with which is equivalent the head of Mimir, as well as the blood of Kvasir containing Odin’s essence. It follows that omniscience stems from Odin’s self-sacrifice. Indeed, a fourth version of Odin’s acquisition of omniscience has the god hang from the World Tree, Yggdrasill, pierced by a spear in sacrifice to himself – Odin given to Odin – for nine nights (*Havamal* 138-141).

¹ “Kvasir” means “intoxication” (Dumézil 1994, 52), the name being cognate to Slavic Kvas.

This is, of course, in accordance with the fact that Mimir's well is located under the tree's roots. In both cases, the World Tree is associated with the gaining of clairvoyance. In fact, Yggdrasill was known alternatively as "Mimir's tree" or "Mimir's treasure," that is wisdom, science" (Boyer 1981b, 214). Furthermore, one name given to it could mean, "mead-tree" (Boyer 1981b, 213; Davidson 1990, 195), and a goat grazing on its branches actually produces mead for Vall-hall. Now liquid dripping from the horns of a hart grazing on the same foliage goes into Hvergelmir, a primordial source full of snakes located under the roots of the tree (*Grimnismál* 25-26).² Régis Boyer rightly emphasizes the "great cyclic movement" underlying this representation: the tree nourishes the hart that nourishes the source that nourishes the tree (1981b, 214)... Again, this is the same pattern as Odin sacrificed to himself in symbolic death and resurrection to harness wisdom (Davidson 1990, 145), or else relinquishing an eye out of which he acquires vision. It is well to note that Yggdrasill means "Odin's horse" and that "the gallows was described as a horse on which the hanged man rode, so that Odin may have been thought to ride on the World Tree in the sense that he was represented hanging from it as a sacrifice" (Davidson 1975, 179; cf. Boyer 1981b, 212-13).

One inference to draw from the equivalence of self-sacrifice to the drinking of mead or water, amounting to sacrificial blood, is that he who drinks, in some way, his own blood gains foresight (cf. Fleck 1971, 398-99). In this perspective, a harmony appears between the notion that the blood of Kvasir turns into mjödr, containing the ódr that is the essence of Odin, and the idea that Mimir – homologous to Kvasir (*Ynglinga Saga* 4) – could be Odin's maternal uncle, from whom the god acquires mjödr after his self-sacrifice (Puhvel 1989, 218). What is more, Snorri gives as Odin's origin the frost-giants, and Odin and his two brothers do kill "the ancient frost-giant" called Ymir (Sturluson 1995, 11). This androgynous primordial being, etymologized as "Twin" (Puhvel 1989, 285), corresponds to the Indo-Iranian incestuous twins Yama and Yami, who are in turn "a variant of the androgyne" (O'Flaherty 1981, 247). Moreover, the Scandinavian compound image of Ymir and the three sons of Bor ("Son") is homologous to that of "protoancestor Tuisto ('Twin'), his son Mannus, and Mannus's triple and multiple

² According to Sorri, Yggdrasill actually has three roots, a spring underneath each: the three Norns inhabit one spring, another one is Mimir's well, and the third is the primordial source full of snakes (*Gylfaginning* 15). Foresight is of course the common denominator to Norns, who shape men's lives, Mimir's well, and serpents, the blood of which generally grants knowledge of the speech of birds. Hilda Davidson suggests that the three sources are but one with several names (1990, 194-95). Actually this does not contradict Snorri, since "three" denotes precisely such complexity in unity as the source (conceived as single) clearly contains. On the tree, as well as in the source(s) below it, "Memory" and Fate are clearly interrelated (Boyer 1981b, 213; 1986, 137).

brood” in continental Germanic myth. Again, the killing and dismemberment of Ymir by Odin and his two brothers has “an obvious parallel” in the dismemberment of Vedic primordial being, Purusa (“Man”) (Puhvel 1989, 285), “bound as the sacrificial beast” in an act described thus in the Rig Veda: “With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice” (O’Flaherty 1981, 31). In other words, Purusa “was both the victim... and the divinity to whom the sacrifice was dedicated” (32). Again, this parallel to the killing of Ymir by Odin corresponds to Odin’s self-sacrifice in offerance to himself – which suggests that Odin’s killing of Ymir and his self-sacrifice are two variants of one single prototypical act (cf. Fleck 1971, 129, 411).

A connection between self-sacrifice and dragon slaying is apparent in the case of an Odinic hero, Sigurd. He is the scion of a lineage that descends from Odin, and the god directs Sigurd to kill the dragon Fafnir (Byock 1990, 35-37, 55-57, 63). Moreover, Sigurd’s father is immune to snake venom (44), and the hero himself has “piercing eyes” (55) – note that another Sigurd bears the surname “Serpent’s-eye” (Sturlason 1990, 38, 120) – and claims to know the “nature,” or “kin,” of the serpent (Byock 1990, 57, 116 n. 46).³ Last not least, after the fight, Sigmund appears with “the dragon... illustrated in all his arms... His eyes flashed so piercingly that few dared look beneath his brow... He was a wise man, knowing events before they happened, and he understood the language of birds” (72). In short, the god’s descendants have the nature of the serpent and Sigurd appears, after the fight, imbued with the essence of the dragon as he displays the omniscience characteristic of Odin.

Odin’s snake-natured descendant, acquiring clairvoyance by tasting the blood of a snake under Odin’s aegis, bears then a similarity to Odin acquiring omniscience by self-sacrifice equivalent to the drinking of sacrificial blood. Moreover, Puhvel notes that Sigurd acts out an Odinic role pattern as he quests for the drink of wisdom from Reginn and Sigrdrifa, “even as Odin did from Suttungr and Gunnlödr” (1989, 198 n. 3). Now Meletinsky persuasively proposes, “Mimir and the Norns... correspond to Suttung and Gunnlod” (1974, 69). If one accepts both propositions, it follows that Sigurd’s acquisition of wisdom from the slain dragon is equivalent to Odin’s similar deed as he turns into a snake and an eagle to acquire mjödr from Gunnlod, or, yet, by drinking mead (the essence of which is blood) at the roots of the World Tree. In other words, the killing of the snake by the snake-natured one is seemingly equivalent to Odin’s self-sacrifice. How is one to understand this?

³ In Hungary, too, the dragon in human shape “has a piercing, penetrating look” – and one who would look straight into his eyes would recognize the dragon’s nature (Erdész 1978, 453, 458).

Exploration of this idea demands that we return to Yggdrasil. Here, as we know, the liquid connecting the top and the base of the tree has the same source as the mjödr that Odin gains through self-sacrifice. Consequently, omniscience is certainly involved in the tree's cyclic movement. Indeed, another image for this portrays a squirrel running up and down the tree, taking "many malicious messages" between an eagle that "has knowledge of many things" and the great serpent Nidhogg dwelling in the source below (Sturluson 1995, 18-19). This is no accident, because – according to the version in which Odin acquires mjödr from Suttung and Gunnlod (*Skaldskaparmal* 58) – the god successively turns into a serpent and an eagle. Hence, the classic image of eternal enmity between snakes and birds, in the twofold form of which Odin gains omniscience, encompasses here the tree of Odin's self-sacrifice (cf. Wittkower 1939, 303, 322). Eliade is therefore correct as he links the fight between the eagle and the serpent to the act of dragon slaying (1949, 238-39; 1962, 132). In other words, the perennial strife between opposed halves of one greater entity embodying omniscience on the "Horse of Yggr" (Davidson 1975, 179) reads as yet another image for Odin's self-sacrifice as he "rides" the World Tree in offering to himself. In this sense, one may understand that the words used for describing this scene in *Voluspá* seemingly mean, "he hangs with his skin", 'he has a hanging (badly fitting, shriveled) skin'" (Hamel 1932, 261). Thus, Odin's self-sacrifice on the cyclic tree amounts to the casting dragon – which is, precisely, a bird/serpent figure encompassing the sky, the underground and the watery realms.

Odin is indeed active in these three realms (Boyer 1981b, 137) – he is actually supposed to often change into "a bird or a beast, a fish or a serpent" (1986, 40). Note that "fish" may yet designate the snake, one kenning for which is "the fish that ends all land" (1981b, 195). Moreover, in all probability the "beast" is the wolf, which is a symbol of Odin (see Davidson 1975, 187). The underlying, deep-set identity of Odin and the wolf is expressed in the idea that the god passes on to two wolves all "the food that stands on his table" (Sturluson 1995, 33) while being, nevertheless, the "wolf's enemy" (68) – because, ultimately, "the wolf will swallow Odin" (54). Now to be incorporated by a wolf amounts to donning a wolf skin, that is to integrating a wolf shape (cf. Propp 1983, 299, 319). Odin, one name for whom is "Third" (*Gylfaginning* 20) – being endowed with two obscure brothers who are seemingly other aspects of the god as a complex being – is indeed the model to all who are *eigi einhamr*, "not having one single sheath" (Boyer 1981b, 151; 1986, 40, 46-47, 136; cf. Dumézil 1985, 209). Ultimately, of course, Odin's transformations into a flying creature, wolf or serpent, make sense in the light of a pervasive equivalence of werewolves and dragons in European folklore (see Jakobson and Ruzicic 1950; Pócs 1989, 18, 22-24).

In this light, I will venture to offer interpretation on a twofold problem. It is known, on the one hand, that in one source the dragon Fafnir is named “Reginn” (Puhvel 1989, 218), which is the name for “the gods or powers who are makers of rulers” (Davidson 1975, 184). On the other hand, after the demise of Odin on Ragnarök, the sinking of the earth into the sea and its reemergence “eternally green,” the prophetess in Voluspa announces the coming from above of “the powerful, mighty one [*regindórm*], he who rules over everything.” Then she immediately proceeds to describe the arrival of Nidhogg as a flying dragon appearing both “dark” and “shining” (Larrington 1999, 11-13). Despite the singular banning of this possibility by specialists (see Nordal 1978, 121-22), two consecutive stanzas announcing the coming of the “mighty one” from above and then portraying the actual appearance of the flying dragon entail, I think, that Nidhogg and the *regindórm* are one and the same – by the same logic that has Fafnir be named Reginn. This is, indeed, the same pattern that we have found underlying both the equivalence of Odin’s self-sacrifice to the casting dragon and the tacit homology between Odin’s turning into a dragon and his entering a wolf at doomsday (cf. Propp 1983, 296-319).

One thoughtful commentator who accepts that Voluspa “may retain a cyclic conception of time” and who furthermore finds it easy to imagine that “the one who rules all” will engage in a cosmic struggle with Nidhogg, yet has no doubt that “the new order banishes Odin” (Lindow 1997, 173-74). Alternatively, my argument suggests that a cosmic struggle with Nidhogg in a cyclic setting amounts to the reappearance of a renewed Odin out of an ophidian phase. In light of the overall context of “the resolution of chaos into order and its dissolution back into chaos,” which Davidson likewise recognizes as the leitmotif in Voluspa (1988, 226), one must indeed acknowledge Coomaraswamy’s fundamental insight to the effect that “the deity in the darkness, unmanifested... *ab intra*, is conceived of in forms that are... theriomorphic; and typically in that of a brooding serpent or fiery dragon” (1935, 2; cf. Eliade 1962, 134). In the same vein, Eliade notes after Dumézil the homology of Odin and Varuna and then points out the Vedic god’s “structural relationship” to the dragon Vritra (1991, 99; 1962, 131), just as Jane Harrison eloquently pinpoints Zeus’s ophidian dimension (1992, 13-28; cf. Calasso 1993, 148-49, 199-204, 208). Odin’s relation to the dragon seems then unmistakable, on the basis of both Scandinavian and comparative evidence.

Moreover, this is in accordance with the idea that a symbolic equivalence exists between the head of Heimdall – the name and function of which convey the idea of “world axis, support” – and the serpent’s. In line with this, Boyer proposes the equation Yggdrasill = Midgard serpent = Heimdall, and he notes that the tree itself could be thought of as a vertical serpent – one name for the serpent, *jörmungandr* (“huge magic stick”), being an acceptable kenning for “magic tree” (1981a;

1981b, 194-95, 221-22; 1986, 133; cf. Vries 1955, 257, 262-63, 267).

This is, furthermore, in accordance with the fact that Heimdall's name and function convey the idea of "world axis, support," while a symbolic equivalence exists between the god's head and the serpent's. As Boyer therefore proposes the equation Yggdrasill/Midgard serpent/Heimdall, and notes that the tree itself could be thought of as a vertical serpent – one name for the serpent, *jörmungandr* ("huge magic stick"), being an acceptable kenning for "magic tree" – (Boyer 1981a; 1981b, 194-95, 221-22; 1986, 133), we are back to the tokens of the qualifying mutilation of both Heimdall and Odin at the source under the roots of the tree. So, we are back to the assimilation of the tree of omniscience to the bird/serpent image of the dragon. Furthermore, we may now perceive that the tokens of the "qualifying mutilation" of both Heimdall and Odin are kept in the very source of omniscience from which Nidhogg sends messages to the wise eagle.

GREEK SEERS

The two central themes we came across while examining the correlation between self-sacrifice, sloughing and clairvoyance – the eagle/serpent hostility and the paradoxical mutilation regarding eyesight – are not by any means peculiar to Scandinavia, for they have been recognized in ancient Greece as well (Boyer 1981b, 210; Dumézil 1981, 275). A brief consideration of Greek data could therefore shed some light on this matter.

Let us examine how Teiresias, the famous blind seer, became so. According to one version, one day Teiresias inadvertently sees Athene bathing and is therefore blinded by the goddess who, nevertheless, "taking the serpent Erichthonius from her aegis, gave the order: 'Cleanse Teiresias's ears with your tongue that he may understand the language of prophetic birds'" (Graves 1992, 372). According to another version, Teiresias sees two serpents coupling, kills the female and is turned into a woman for seven years, again meets two coupling serpents, kills the male and regains manhood. Then one day, as Zeus argues that women derive greater pleasure from the sexual act than men and Hera holds that the contrary is the case, Teiresias is called upon to give an expert opinion. When he answers that women have the lion's share in sexual pleasure, the goddess (wroth that the big secret of her sex has been revealed) blinds Teiresias; but Zeus compensates him with inward sight and a life extended to seven generations (Graves 1992, 373; Grimal 1969, 459; Gantz 1993, 528-30).

Two crucial properties link this to examined Scandinavian data. The first is that Teiresias acquires prophetic powers as he becomes blind, and such powers are described both as inward sight and the ability, due to clean ears, to understand

the language of birds. Therefore, inward sight, equivalent to “clean” hearing, correlates with eyes unencumbered by manifest reality. The second such property is that clairvoyance relates to birds and serpents. For, even when it is Hera and Zeus respectively who impose blindness and grant inward sight to Teiresias, these acts stem from a previous meeting with serpents. Another soothsayer, Melampus, acquires the clean ears of omniscience by burning the carcasses of old serpents that someone related to him had killed and, thereafter, rearing the snakes’ offspring. This is, as use of the Greek word *geras* (old age) for slough suggests, a destruction of the old, and protection of the young, aspect of the serpent – in other words, a helping of such regeneration as is supposedly involved in sloughing. Indeed, the fact that Teiresias’s parallel scene of serpent killing happens in a context of mating suggests the equivalence of sloughing and reproduction.

One obvious implication is that the renewed serpent is to the old discarded skin as a youngster is to its ancestor – which explains the pan-European folk-belief that the young adder is bound to kill its father (Róheim 1979, 532). Moreover, the equivalence of sloughing to the killing of the old serpent implies that the serpent-killer is himself like a young snake. Thus, we saw serpent-natured Sigurd displaying, at the peak of his career, the slain dragon’s powers. The same idea is manifest in the fact that Teiresias twice inherits the sex of the serpent he has just slain – that, in other words, at each time he is made the heir to one aspect of the complex, ambisexual nature of the snake. Here we find an implicit equation of sex inversion and metamorphosis. Indeed, the traditional notion of metamorphosis as a conversion of internal shape to external form (Gaignebet and Lajoux 1985, 104) neatly fits with the ancient idea that women are as men turned outside in – and men as women turned inside out (Laqueur 1999, 4, 25-28) – which is to say that metamorphosis and sex-swapping are equivalent modes of conversion. Now this amounts to saying that Teiresias is endowed with the full nature of the snake by the time when, having spent time as a harlot and again as a man, he is made blind and clairvoyant.

This amounts to saying that Teiresias is endowed with the full nature of the snake by the time when, having spent time as a harlot and again as a man, he is made blind and clairvoyant. One important consequence follows. Acquiring the nature of the snake entails getting to know the essence of womanhood, revelation of which in fact qualifies Teiresias as a seer. This leads to note that such sorcery as Odin uses to see into fate and the future induces “lack of manliness” (Sturlason 1990, 5).⁴ In the same vein Scandinavian god Loki, commonly recognized as “a

⁴ As Puhvel puts it, the “shamanic aspect of Odin” includes “intimations of sexual inversions and androgyny” (1989, 194; cf. Boyer 1981b, 145, 162).

kind of shadow to Odin” (Davidson 1975, 190; cf. Boyer 1981b, 132, 151 n. 45), could take on both male and female forms. In both Scandinavian and Greek data, then, clairvoyance implies shedding of blood as self-sacrifice, on the model of serpent sloughing – and this relates, in some way, to femininity.

EVE AND THE SERPENT

The association between the serpent and the moon, based upon the idea that both possess the gift of immortality through perpetual renewal, is a fact of general ethnography. Given furthermore a widespread association between women’s cycles and the moon, it is no wonder to find women “as closely associated with serpents as they are with the moon.” Specifically serpents are often, as Robert Briffault puts it, “regarded as being the cause of menstruation; they thus play the same part in regard to the functions of women as the moon” (1963, 312, 312, 314-15).

This idea underlies the well-known drama of acquisition of knowledge in Genesis, which James Frazer first proposed to read in light of an underlying theme of loss of immortality (1984).⁵ In Frazer’s comparative data, a recurring story blames an old, menopausal woman for the incapacity of present-day humankind to shed skins, and thus rejuvenate, like the serpent (Frazer 1984, 89-91). This story conveys, in its association of menopause with failure to slough, the widespread notion that menstruation is like a change of skins (Coomaraswamy 1945, 397-99; Hugh-Jones 1979, 182-83; Knight 1991, 458; cf. Delaney 1988, 84; Gaignebet and Lajoux 1985, 106-10). The implication being, moreover, that the sloughing serpent is like menstruation, one may expect to find feminine blood at the center of the biblical drama. Indeed, “among the Jews it was a common rabbinical opinion that menstruation owes its origin to the serpent having had sexual intercourse with Eve in the Garden of Eden” (Briffault 1963, 315). Likewise, present-day Turkish villagers say that menstruation was “given to women because of Hawa’s (Eve) act of disobedience against Allah in Cennet (Garden/Paradise)” (Delaney 1988, 79). Furthermore, Gaignebet shows that the tree of

⁵ The gist of his argument is that there is in the Garden of Eden, beside the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life, of which humankind was implicitly permitted to partake. However, writes Frazer, “man missed his chance by electing to eat of the other tree, which God had warned him not to touch under pain of immediate death. This suggests that the forbidden tree was really a tree of death, not of knowledge” (Frazer 1984, 77). Frazer’s interpretation fits with a widespread, cross-cultural notion that sloughing animals gained immortality by depriving humankind of it. The theme of immortality and its loss, as well as its connection to the serpent, is then surely significant. However, the author’s blatant disregard for the role of Eve precludes him from integrating the obvious theme of acquisition of knowledge into his model.

knowledge is represented by Hieronymus Bosch, in his *Garden of Delights*, as a *Dracæna* – also named in Latin *sanguis draconis*, “dragon’s blood” – the red fruits of which Bosch uses to symbolize the canonic six days of menstrual impurity (1990, 378-79, 382-83; cf. Testart 1991, 284-85). This unifies, of course, medieval images figuring the serpent both with Eve’s face in some instances and coiled around the tree in others (see Leach 1980, 151-54).

Indeed, the Hebrew name of the first woman – *Hawa*, which the biblical text explicitly links to “life” (Gen. 3.20) – means also “serpent” (Gaignebet 1985, 14; Testart 1991, 287). Eve is therefore the source of life, the serpent shares this essence, and – according to Lev. 17.14 – blood is the life in every creature. In this light it is understandable that God should doom the serpent’s descendants to bite the heel of women’s descendants (Gen. 3.14) – an act that triggers menstruation, according to tenacious folk-belief – and be in return bruised on the head. If, indeed, the serpent both causes and represents the first implicit spilling of women’s essence onto the ground (as persuasively argued by Testart 1991, 288-93; cf. Gaignebet 1985, 15), it follows that the consequent intimate enmity of women and serpents reads as a depiction of the cyclic onsets of feminine blood and their suppression.

It is in this sense that the events in Eden entail the onset of cyclic time. This means the inevitability of death – menstruation itself being like a temporary death on the model of the “dead” days of the moon. But it also means the actualization of life, for it is after the curse that the first woman is named *Hawa* – indicating that she is to be able to bear life (Testart 1991, 277) – and this she only does after expulsion from Eden (Leach 1970, 58). In other words, the Fall entails an expulsion from “the world as a static (that is, dead) entity,” as Leach puts it, to “the living world (significantly called *Nod*, ‘wandering’)” (1970, 55, 59). Not quite a simple introduction of death and a loss of eternal life, as Frazer would have it, expulsion from Eden is then rather a transition from eternal bliss, where endless life is equivalent to death as a picture of static non-time,⁶ to the sublunary world in which life and death dynamically engender each other. Again, this is the overall meaning of slaying the primordial serpent, the death of which amounts to a first sloughing.

Furthermore, in the sublunary realm where humans have dwelled ever since the Fall, symbolic sloughing goes on through perennial menstruation of the seed of *Hawa*, on the death-and-rebirth model of the cyclic moon. As we saw, from partaking of the fruit of the serpent’s tree, Eve and Adam acquire clairvoyance

⁶ Thus the realm of the dead tends to be conceived, in many cultures, as one of blissful “life-in-death.”

but become mortal. This precludes of course humans from really becoming like divine beings. Humans retain life but this is bounded by death; and, just so, they retain knowledge while tacitly losing clairvoyance. This loss cannot, however, be final, for the essence of the wise dragon, gained from the blood tree, materializes as menstrual blood in women. In other words – since, because the first woman incorporated a bloody fruit, her female descendants must endure a perennial strife with the serpent, women henceforth find in their menstrual connection with the snake a cyclic remnant of the primordial framework whence clairvoyance emanates.

It is in this light, I think, that one is to understand use of the expression *voir*, “to see,” to denote menstruation in rural France (Verdier 1995, 180). The same notion is clear in Russian fairy tales, where a virgin under the full power of her blood – hence of snakes – is a *vedma*, from “the root *ved-*, wisdom, knowledge” (Schatzman 1999, 176). The underlying notion does not of course stem from the biblical text – in fact, it belongs in a broader cross-cultural series. This includes, for instance, the fact that Yurok women supposedly have heightened spiritual powers during their cyclic blood shedding (Buckley 1988), as well as the fact that Australian Aborigine men periodically submit to painful penis “menstruation” in order to acquire and maintain ritual power (Knight 1991, 41-42, 428-29). Likewise, the widespread “Myth of Matriarchy,” to which Joan Bamberger has rightly called attention in unfortunately a narrow functional perspective (1974), clearly posits that menstrual blood is at the origin of all power (see Testart 1991, 37-40, 150-51, 156-57, 226-29; cf. Knight 1991, 421-35). Hence we return to the fact that the sort of magic used by skin-shifting Odin, the omniscient master of metamorphosis, entails sexual inversion (Ynglinga Saga 7. Cf. Boyer 1986, 188-192) – and so does, as we know, Teiresias’s acquisition of clairvoyance.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we noted a persistent connection of clairvoyance to paradoxically qualifying mutilations and to skin change, of which menstruation is one form. We saw, furthermore, knowledge being acquired at the hidden sources – equated to the realm of death – whence continuously springs the phenomenal world. Since, from this metaphysical standpoint, the essence of reality lies beyond empiric perception, to “see” in a fundamental sense requires overcoming sensory perception. To bar from eyesight the distracting influence of manifest reality and to temporarily disembodiment, as it were, by changing skins – metamorphosis, menstruation, and sex swapping being equivalent in this regard – are thus privileged means of grasping the essence of things. For, in this perspective, reality as construed

through the senses has in common with Indian *mâyâ*, as Wendy Doniger portrays it, that “it limits... knowledge to things that are epistemologically and ontologically second-rate” (O’Flaherty 1984, 119).

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