

Broken Memory, Then Nothing

by Edith Lyre

...you stare into the vacuum of his eyes

And say do you want to make a deal?

— Bob Dylan

In exegetical complement to her novel, *Cassandra*, the East German novelist and essay-critic Christa Wolf dwells on the aesthetic origins of the Greek pantheon and, deepening her search, of what gods may predate them. By Achaea through Mycenae and Minoa, aided in part by indirect archaeological reference/anecdotal tourism, and provoked to meditation by Goethe's Faustus, she muddles the Minoan mytho-religious matriarchy (so she identifies it) with an other-point where the fade is into Mystery and the 'Mothers' (per Goethe). The Mothers — to accelerate matters for the reader living in 2019 or further forward — are the same as Lovecraft's *old gods*. Wolf: 'Mephisto tries to describe the indescribable emptiness, the nothingness, which Faust must traverse (and

where Faust hopes to find “the All”). Then he hands him a key. “Follow it down, ’twill guide you to the Mothers”” (Loc. 4013, *Cassandra*). So too reveals Goethe’s Mephisto:

MEPHISTO: Loth am I now high mystery to unfold:

Goddesses dwell, in solitude, sublime,

Enthroned beyond the world of place or time;

Even to speak of them dismays the bold.

These are the Mothers.

Wolf refers to a literary project called ‘the way to the Mothers’ (Loc. 3448). (This ‘way’ is a specialist descriptor for the task of, by literary device, recovering an underlying ‘real’: that key focus of the modernist project.) In Wolf, the old gods (all female) shift loose from a *matriarchal primordial* — from the blind, nameless Mothers — to move through an ‘earthy-fruitful hodgepodge, [an] undisciplined tendency to merge and change into each other, this thing which it was hard to put a name to, this throng of women, mothers, and goddesses which it was hard to classify and to count’ (Loc. 3968). This hodgepodge includes a list of goddesses and prophets (not all women), i.e., ‘Hecate, Selene, Helen, Helenus, and Cassandra’ (Loc 3960). Wolf offers this list as an example of moon-linked mythic figures. ‘By the way,’ she writes, ‘prophetic power was once closely linked to the moon deity.’ She objects — versus Homer — that the gift of prophecy, he being ‘the god of light and the sun,’ and being *male*, shouldn’t have been Apollo’s to give. ‘*He* is much younger than Hecate, Selene, Helen, Helenus, and Cassandra, and is a mythological reflex of the patriarchal revaluation of values’ (*Ibid.*, italics in original). Apollo, Wolf will tell us, stole the prophetic mandate; he usurped it by illegitimate means.

The fun comes when Wolf guesses at the first beginnings of women’s displacement from that status of clerical dominion. ‘At first,’ she writes, ‘men had identified with women, mimed the birth process, castrated themselves so they could become priests (it is claimed that even Apollo

did this); wormed their way into the office of priestess dressed in women's clothing (Apollo is said to have done this, too)' (Loc. 4110-4118). Well— Upon whom, ever, was Apollo's larcenous gift bestowed? 'Iphigenia, Antigone, Clytemnestra, Electra, Medea, Hecate, the Trojan women, were all men in women's dress, wearing buskins, slender-limbed no doubt, pretty, possibly homoerotic — but men' (Loc. 3968). It's only natural to mistrust *The Transsexuals*TM, but we can talk aesthetics: Who better to give these image-women the prophetic gift than their own, secret deity, the crossdressing castrato, the usurper Apollo? Like Wolf says, recounting an epistolary dialogue between Thomas Mann and Karl Kerényi:

Kerényi... dedicates to the 'highly esteemed Mann,' as an opening gift, the idea of the 'wolfish,' the 'dark' Apollo... The two men have in common their burning interest in the 'deeper psychic reality' behind myth (a word which among the Greeks meant nothing other than 'the true word,' 'the facts,' later 'the facts about the gods'). So, there was a 'dark' underground and background to the 'god of light.' (Loc. 3412)

Why, that night, was Apollo transformed into a wolf, and why did he spit in Cassandra's mouth when she refused to fuck him? And 'how,' asks Wolf, 'is it that Apollo, a male, "young" god, can confer the gift of prophecy on a woman?' (Loc. 3212). From the deal's first existence, it's already of no comfort that the transsexuals' dark god was a john. But then, (reluctantly) installing the Olympian psyche and Achaeans' norms, the question — I have to admit — is not *why did Apollo spit in Cassandra's mouth when she refused him?* but why (per Achaean mores, as in, I mean, they let Ajax) did he not just rape her? It's an abrasive presentation, but the question provokes well: Was it restraint or inability? (Again, installing the aforementioned psyche, castration was to Achaean men equivalent with 'inability'). If inability, if the cost could not, as he'd told Cassandra, be sex, then what deal, in fact, was Apollo trying to make? As late as Aeschylus, Wolf observes, Cassandra is still being written into a cosmology that is emergent from a *matriarchal primordial*: 'Aeschylus,'

Wolf writes, 'is still conscious that, in the beginning, the world was ruled "by the tri-form Moirae and the fidelity of the Erinyes"' (Loc 4101). Apollo, by deceit, delivered this matriarchal disorder to the control of Zeus's pantheon, to his patriarchal order and hierarchy. But the Mothers remain, nonetheless, 'beyond the world of place or time,' where 'even to speak of them dismays the bold.' Beyond here, disorder reigns. Dark Apollo knows as much. Better than any other, he can't forget. Has Zeus forgotten? Apollo despairs, because Zeus won't speak of them. If Apollo asks, the all-father only blinks, as well had Apollo coughed or groaned or uttered nothing, none but the emptiest sounds. He is alone with his memory. His body, its *inability*, won't let him forget. As Mephisto would give Faust, Apollo offers Cassandra the key to the Mothers. A first thread to pull on, toward describing the indescribable, the 'horrifying' (a repetition in Wolf as in Lovecraft) *nothingness*, communicated by failed sexuality, the revealed castration, proof of a dark history, a way to the Mothers. As such is how he confers the gift of prophecy (which is not men's to give). Apollo the castrato is a dark wound in the skin of Olympus.

Look through the wound to see the future.